



A Murder, a Marquess, and Miss Mifford (Regency Murder and Marriage Book 3)

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Category: Historical

Description: All Emily wants is to survive her first season in London. She doesn't anticipate another lady failing to survive it – and being blamed for her death...

The only ambition Miss Emily Mifford holds for her first season in London, is to endure it without completely humiliating herself; a difficult task when one has a mother with no sense of propriety, and one's own unfortunate habit of saying precisely the wrong thing.

After clashing publicly with the odious Lady Hardthistle, Emily soon learns that there are worse things than being embarrassed – like being accused of murder! When the belligerent baroness is found strangled to death at a ball, the finger of blame points at Emily. Keen to exonerate herself, Emily sets out to solve the mysterious murder, with a little help from a very handsome – and highly conceited – marquess.

Frederick Chambers, Sixth Marquess of Highfield thought he would never meet a woman captivating enough to distract him from his own reflection, until he meets Miss Mifford and is instantly besotted. When the object of his affections is accused of murder, Freddie is desperate to help – for what could a lady love more than a white knight to dash to her rescue?

The mystery of who murdered Lady Hardthistle, however, is not as easily solved as he first imagines. A double-crossed young-buck, a cheated squire, and a lady's maid set to inherit a fortune; the list of people who wished the baroness dead is lengthy indeed...

As Freddie and Emily work together to try solve the mysterious murder, Freddie finds himself falling madly in love with Miss Mifford. Can he help to clear her name? And, more importantly, can he convince her to become his marchioness?

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Chapter One

The Mifford family had been in London for a week when the time came for their patriarch, Mr Mifford, to return home to the village of Plumpton.

"My flock needs me," Mr Mifford said firmly, when his eldest daughter raised a last-minute objection to his departure.

"I should hardly think they've missed you at all; they're probably enjoying the lie-in on a Sunday morning," Mary, Duchess of Northcott--who was many things, but not at all tactful--replied with a petulant sigh.

"Then it is my duty to save their souls, for slothfulness is one of the seven deadly sins," Mr Mifford replied mildly, though when Mary's back was turned, he offered a discreet wink to his third daughter, Emily.

Emily hid a smile, for she knew that her father wished to return to Plumpton so that he might enjoy some peace and quiet in a house that was usually bursting with at the seams with feminine activity. Fate had gifted Mr Mifford with four daughters, and though two--Mary and Jane--were now married, their marriages had not taken them far from home, and they called daily to Primrose Cottage.

In the absence of his wife and daughters, Mr Mifford would probably spend the next few weeks in a state of masculine bliss, eating things like pickled tripe and crumbed lamb's brains--which none of the girls would touch--and sitting in the parlour room with his boots on the silk ottoman and a glass of brandy in hand.

No wonder he looked so eager to leave.

"I'm not certain that I have packed everything," Mrs Mifford, the family matriarch, bellowed as she tottered down the stairs to the entrance hall.

"Crabb House is only around the corner, Mama," Mary rushed to assure her mother, "If you have left anything behind, you can send a footman to fetch it."

Mary, Emily noted, was as eager to be rid of her mother as she was for her father to stay.

"I might do just that," Mrs Mifford replied, her eyes alight at the idea that there would be a fresh set of footmen in Crabb House to do her bidding. When she had married Mr Mifford, Emily's mother had married "down", a fact which greatly irked her. Now that two of her daughters had married well--to a duke and a viscount respectively--Mrs Mifford was fully committed to enjoying the luxuries she believed she was long overdue.

"I am sad to leave you, Mary," Mrs Mifford continued, turning to her eldest daughter, "But as Jane rightly pointed out, it is not fair if I spend all my time here in Northcott House. I will divide my time between the two houses, so that all my daughters get to share me."

Mrs Mifford's belief that her presence was a blessing to all in its receipt was so great that she was utterly oblivious to the fact that her daughters had concocted a plan to share the burden of hosting her rather than the privilege.

"I will return in a week or two," she finished, smiling benevolently unto Mary and her husband, who both struggled to hide their disappointment at the news.

A few minutes of faffing ensued, as Mr Mifford realised that he had left his reading

glasses upon his bedside locker, along with his best handkerchief. A footman was sent off to fetch them, and Mrs Mifford turned to her two daughters with faint despair.

"I worry that your father will be lost without me," she said, as though her husband was not standing beside her, and as though it was not he who had recalled the missing items himself.

For his part, Mr Mifford remained conspicuously quiet.

The footman returned with the missing spectacles and kerchief, then another footman appeared at the front door and cleared his throat politely.

"The carriage is ready, your Grace," he said, when Northcott nodded for him to speak.

"Come along now, my love," Mr Mifford said, ushering his wife towards the door. The carriage would take Mrs Mifford to Crabb House, on the far corner of St James' Square, before departing for the Cotswolds with Mr Mifford.

"Northcott, my thanks for your hospitality," Mr Mifford called, as his wife fluttered and fretted beside him.

"I am sad to be leaving," Mrs Mifford repeated once again, as she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Jane has had decorators in all week," Mary reminded her mother, "Crabb Hall is likely now more grand and comfortable than even this house."

"Grander, you say?" Mrs Mifford murmured, the well of her tears running miraculously dry, "Well. Cheerio, my loves. I might return a little later than first

anticipated.”

With that, Mrs Mifford turned on her heel and followed her husband down the steps to the waiting carriage--without so much as one glance back at Northcott House.

Emily, Eudora, Mary, and Northcott stood at the door to wave the carriage off, and once it had rounded the corner of the square, they retreated inside with relief.

”I am sorry about my mother,” Mary whispered to her husband.

”I beg you don’t apologise for yours, for it means I will have to apologise for mine,” Northcott replied, referring to his mother Cecilia, who though more subtle was equally as meddling as her counterpart.

The newlywed couple smiled at each other, as though Emily was not there. Northcott’s gaze was soft and gooey--like the yolk of a three-minute-egg--and he reached a hand out to touch his wife’s increasing belly.

Emily reddened, for she realised the duke and her sister had forgotten her presence--something which happened to her frequently with most people, for she was the quietest of the four Mifford girls. She made haste to slip away discreetly, but unfortunately, she tripped on the hem of her new gown and went flying into a potted Ficus.

”Emily,” Mary’s cheeks were pink, as the noise alerted her to her sister’s continued presence, ”Where are you off to? I hope you’re not trying to evade Sylvie.”

Though she was a duchess, and as such held the title of one of the highest peerages in the land, Mary dropped her voice to a nervous whisper as she uttered the name of her lady’s maid. The young French woman--who had come highly recommended by the ton--terrified not only Mary, but her three sisters, and the Duke of Northcott too--

who, being tall and broad, was not a man who scared easily.

"Do we have to go to Lady Collins' musicale?" Emily answered, avoiding the question with one of her own, "We've been out every night since I was presented; couldn't we just stay in for once?"

"Once you've come out you can't go back in," Mary admonished, conveniently forgetting that after her own disastrous come-out, she had returned to Plumpton and declared that she would never leave the village again.

"I don't want to go back in forever," Emily countered, "I'd just like an evening to myself to read, or paint, or even stare at the wall in silence for a few hours."

"Get talking to one of Lady Collins' daughters," Northcott advised, dryly, "Their conversation is about as stimulating as staring at a wall."

"Hush, Henry," Mary chided, though a smile played about her lips.

The pair of love-birds shared another three-minute-egg gaze, and Emily once again made to slip away--though this time her retreat went unnoticed.

It was nice to see that Mary and the duke were so besotted with each other, but sometimes Emily wished that they would be a little less flagrant with their contentment. Not only did it make things a tad awkward--for one could not help but feel awkward in a grouping of three when two participants insisted on making cow-eyes at each other--but it had also made Mary determined that her sisters should have the chance to experience the happiness she now felt.

Her intention to give her sisters a come-out so that they might find husbands was admirable, but slightly misguided--as Mary's intentions were often wont to be.

Emily was not the type of lady a London gentleman would seek out for a wife, even if she was garbed in fine new gowns and afforded a hefty dowry courtesy of Northcott and Lord Crabb.

The ladies of the ton were charming and witty, and knew just what to say and when to say it. Emily, on the other hand, possessed neither charm nor wit, and had an unfortunate habit of saying the wrong thing, to the wrong person, at the wrong time--a skill which would not nab her a husband.

Not that she wished to nab one, anyway, for Emily was quite content to finish the season and return to Plumpton unwed--another point that Mary refused to acknowledge in her hare-brained scheme to see her sisters marry.

As Emily tripped up the staircase to her bedchamber, where she wished to read for the afternoon, she vowed to do as much as she possibly could to foil her sister's plan to see her partnered off, not--she admitted, with a reluctant smile--that it would take much effort.

All Emily had to do was remain her entirely un-marriageable self, and try not to draw any attention her way. How difficult could that be?

Lord and Lady Collins, along with their two daughters, occupied a grand house in Grosvenor Square. When Emily, Mary, and Northcott entered the large music room, they found that the others had already arrived before them.

"We were beginning to think you'd cried off on us," Ivo, Lord Crabb, muttered, as the trio came to join the group.

"Wouldn't let you suffer such an odious fate alone, old boy," Northcott answered, as he gestured for Emily and Mary to take a seat beside their mother, Jane, and Eudora--the youngest of the Mifford girls.

"We're just going to slip out for a cheroot, before the performance begins," Emily heard Northcott whisper to his wife, before he and Lord Crabb disappeared to the library.

"I did not think Lord Crabb smoked," Eudora commented, once they had left.

"He doesn't," Jane was dry, "But even I'd take it up, if it meant I could skip the performance. I hear tell the talent of the lovely ladies of household can be likened to the sound of cats being tortured."

"You're one to judge," Mary sniffed, for Jane had no talent for music.

"True, but I don't invite people to come listen to me play and call it entertainment," Jane replied, offering her sister a smile which looked sweet, but which Emily knew was far from it.

"The music does not matter," Mary whispered, refusing to be drawn into a squabble, "What matters is that Lady Collins has invited every eligible gentleman in town to come this evening, in the hopes that one of them will offer for one of her daughters."

"And you're hoping that a couple of the invitees get distracted by your own single charges?" Jane guessed, to which Mary beamed.

"I hardly think Lady Collins would be best pleased, if she knew that's why we're all here," Eudora commented, frowning over the brim of her wire-spectacles--which she wore merely for show, "It hardly seems sporting."

"Oh, hush. Don't be so saintly, Eudora," Mary retorted, but she was interrupted by Mrs Mifford, who had paid no attention to her daughters' chatter.

"Goodness, is that Lady Jacobs?" Mrs Mifford cried, her voice far too loud to be

considered intimate, "She came out the same year as I did--hasn't she gotten fat?"

"Mama," Emily winced, as several heads turned their way.

"Enormous," Mrs Mifford continued, oblivious to her daughter's embarrassment, "I nearly mistook her for the pianoforte."

Mercifully for the sisters, and for poor Lady Jacobs, Mrs Mifford was unable to offer any further insults, for Lord and Lady Collins announced that their daughters were about to begin playing.

"Northcott and Ivo have yet to return," Eudora hissed, as the room fell to silence.

"I rather think that was their plan," Emily murmured in response, and settled back into her chair to enjoy the performance.

The Collins sisters were quite as bad as Jane had predicted, but Emily rather enjoyed the performance. She adored music--even badly played--and though the two Collins girls were often out of key, they played with a certain enthusiasm that Emily found charming.

A half-hour, two sonatas, and a round canon--which had threatened to repeat into perpetuity--later, the two girls made their bows to polite applause and a few sighs of relief.

"Do we go home now?" Emily whispered to Mary, as the crowd rose to a stand, who shook her head in response.

"No," the duchess frowned formidably, "Now we mingle."

The double doors of the drawing room had been thrown open to reveal a large parlour

room, in which stood a long table bearing a supper buffet. Several gentlemen, including Ivo and Northcott, already occupied the space, and the crowd flocked inside to quench their thirst and sate their hunger.

Mary and Jane made for their respective husbands, leaving Emily and Eudora with their mama.

"Awful music," Mrs Mifford commented, as she nibbled on a French-fancy, "But what delightful food. Oh, Isabelle! I didn't see you there, would you believe? You're difficult to miss..."

Lady Jacobs, Baroness of Basildon--if Emily had her Debrett's right--smiled patiently as she waited for Mrs Mifford to brush the crumbs from her fichu.

"Why Honoria," the baroness smiled, "I thought that was you when I spotted you earlier; though I couldn't be certain, it's been so long since I've seen you in town. Tell me, how are your sisters? I recall them all fondly from our season out, though one--if I remember correctly--did not make quite as good a match as the others."

There was a strained silence as Mrs Mifford flushed with indignation, for it was she who had made the poor match--as Lady Jacobs well knew.

"My eldest daughter is now a duchess," Mrs Mifford replied, in answer to a question which had not been asked. "And my second eldest a viscountess."

Emily watched in fascination as the two women eyed each other speculatively, like pugilists in the ring. Both had weathered a blow, both still stood; would one throw down their gloves in defeat?

"You must call on me, dear," Lady Jacobs eventually replied, "So that we can have a proper catch-up."

"That sounds marvellous," Mrs Mifford beamed, and the baroness took her leave.

"How lovely it is to be reunited with my dear, dear friend," Mrs Mifford commented to her daughters, as though the exchange between the two women had been tender rather than fraught.

Emily stifled a sigh; this was precisely why she was not fond of London, everyone was so false. In Plumpton, one knew one's neighbours, their history, and their entire family intimately, so one knew where one stood with a person. In London, people said one thing and meant another--it was tiring.

"I'm just going to fetch a plate of food," Emily said to her mother, before making for the supper table.

Handsome footmen, decked out in fine livery, stood behind the table, assisting the many guests. Emily gratefully accepted a plate from one and began to move down the length of the buffet, stocking up on cold cuts of meat, strawberries, and cheeses.

As she leaned over to ladle a dollop of Sauce Isigny onto her plate, she could not help but overhear the conversation between the two young ladies beside her.

"It's indecent, if you ask me," a pretty girl with a slightly upturned nose, whom Emily knew from Almack's to be Lady Francesca, sniffed. "Their scheming ways worked twice in the countryside, and now they're in town to see if they can do it again."

"I'm certain they manipulated those poor men into compromising positions," her companion, plainer but no less bitter, added, "How else can you explain a duke and a viscount offering for a vicar's daughters?"

Emily dropped the ladle with a clatter, as she realised that the two ladies were

discussing Mary and Jane. The noise drew the attention of the pair of clawed tabbies, who both exchanged nervous glances as they realised that they had let their tongues loose beside a member of the family they had just been slandering.

"Why, Miss Mifford," the second girl said, her voice syrupy-sweet, "Do be careful with the cutlery--you wouldn't want to ruin your pretty dress."

She and her companion then scuttled off, giggling hysterically, as though insulting a person's family was a great lark.

Emily took her plate of food, and made for the far corner of the room, though her appetite had now deserted her. A large fiddle-leaf fig tree in a brass urn offered some privacy, as she poked at her plate with her fork.

How dreadful London was, she thought, as she speared a strawberry. This would not have happened in Plumpton. Not that the village residents were any more virtuous than the people of London, they were simply far too accustomed to looking over their shoulder before slandering someone--for in Plumpton, the likelihood of that person being nearby was quite high.

As Emily began to munch on her food, she heard the sound of two people approaching the far side of the fig tree, their voices low but clearly upset. Curious, she cast a glance through the gaps in the foliage and spotted an older woman--with a very ample bosom--in the company of a white-haired gentleman.

"Dash it, Lady Hardthistle," the gentleman sputtered, "The mare is barren. It's been two seasons and she is yet to foal. When I purchased her, you assured me that she was a brood mare--you assured me that she would produce more winners."

"Well, Sir Cadogan," Lady Hardthistle sniffed, "When I sold her, Astrid Star, was a brood mare. Whilst in the care of my stables, she produced several winners--

including Anderida, who if you recall, won at Ascot in '09. I fear, my dear man, that the problem isn't with my mare, it's with the quality of the ejaculate you are trying to impregnate her with."

"I beg your pardon," Sir Cadogan stuttered, as Emily blushed a little at the terms, "There is nothing the matter with the quality of my ejaculate."

"I beg to differ," Lady Hardthistle replied, her tone one of amusement, "You men are always so keen to blame the female when these things go awry. I suggest you take a look at the sires you're using; you might want to attempt it with a different one. I'd be happy to fix you up with some of my own champion stallions, for a price."

Her offer was followed by silence, and as Emily peered through the leaves of the fig-tree, she saw Sir Cadogan's face turn an alarming shade of puce.

"If we were not in public, my lady," he eventually replied, his voice strangled and high, "I would wrap my hands around your neck and squeeze until there was not one drop of air left in your lungs."

"Even if we were alone, I would not be frightened by such an empty threat," Lady Hardthistle laughed, much to Emily's surprise, for Sir Cadogan had sounded most serious in his intent. "I have it on good authority that it's not only your stallions who are impotent, sir. Your threats hold no water with me."

Sir Cadogan made a noise, which reminded Emily of her cat, Socrates, when someone accidentally trod on his tail, before turning on the heel of slipper and storming away.

"Silly old fool," Lady Hardthistle muttered to herself, as she glanced around to see if anyone had heard their exchange. Her eyes alighted on Emily, still peering through the leaves of the tree, and she gave an unhappy growl of annoyance.

"You, there," she said, beckoning for Emily to join her, "Show yourself. If you will insist on eavesdropping, I will insist on knowing who you are."

"I wasn't eavesdropping," Emily protested, as she scurried from her spot on the far side of the tree to join her. "I just couldn't help but overhear..."

"As excuses go," Lady Hardthistle retorted, so indignant that the feathers of her turban quivered in time with her three chins, "That was miserable. What's your name, girl?"

"Miss Mifford," Emily replied, feeling suddenly nervous--would Lady Hardthistle now slander her the length and breadth of the country? "Miss Emily Mifford."

The baroness did not reply for a moment, as she assessed Emily with beady eyes. She was quite terrifying up close; tall, with a regal bearing, an aristocratic nose, and thin lips--which were currently pressed together so firmly that they were almost invisible.

"One of the chits from the Cotswolds, out to snare another member of the ton," she replied, her lips quirking into a sneer, "I should have guessed it would be one of you. I have a distant cousin in Plumpton, Mrs Canards, and she wrote to inform me about you lot."

"That's hardly fair, my lady," Emily protested, feeling aggrieved on behalf of her sisters more than herself--and doubly irritated that the awful Mrs Canards was capable of spreading her vitriol so far and wide.

"Hardly fair?" the lady replied, in mock horror, "To observe that a girl of dubious background has dubious manners? Eavesdropping is frowned upon by most people, Miss Mifford, you would do well to remember that. You're lucky your sisters married so well, or you'd be facing the cut. Off with you; I have had enough miserable conversation for one evening."

If Lady Hardthistle had spoken to Mary or Jane like that--even before they had married--she could have expected a spirited reply. But Emily possessed little of her sisters' bravery and, as usually happened when she became involved in direct confrontation, she felt tears begin to well in her eyes.

Unwilling to allow Lady Hardthistle think she had upset her--for Emily's tears were not of upset, but rather anger--she stalked away, determined to find a quiet place that she might calm herself. Once outside the drawing room, she rushed down the hallway, hoping to find the ladies' relieving room, where she would certainly be afforded a modicum of privacy.

Unfortunately for Emily, when she opened the first door she came across, it revealed a couple in a passionate embrace, rather than a chamber-maid waiting to assist her.

"What the--?"

A young man turned at the sound of Emily's shocked gasp, revealing his partner in passion to be Lady Francesca of the upturned nose.

"I saw nothing," Emily blurted, hastily slamming the door shut upon the offending scene.

She instantly took back all the mean thoughts that she'd had about Mary and Northcott; three-minute-egg gazes were far more tolerable than witnessing that expression of love.

Feeling a little queasy, Emily continued her hunt for a quiet room, at last finding one at the end of the corridor. She slipped into what she presumed to be Lord Collins' library and threw herself down onto one of the leather Chesterfields with a sigh of relief.

What a horrid place London was, she thought mournfully, as she stared into the fire. Mrs Canards, Plumpton's resident gossip and cousin to Lady Hardthistle, had always disparaged the city as a place of anger and vice. Though Emily rarely, if ever, felt inclined to agree with Mrs Canards, tonight she decided the old busybody had hit the nail firmly on the head.

Oh, for the season to end, so that she might return to the peace and quiet of Plumpton, she thought, as she plucked at the material of her skirts with anxious fingers. She was not cut out for London life; she was a country mouse, not a city one.

Emily allowed herself a few moments to mourn her current circumstances, but after a few minutes of wallowing, she gave herself a wobble. She was dressed in a fine gown, in one of the grandest homes in England--others had suffered far worse fates.

With a renewed determination to find some fun in the evening, Emily stood up from her seat, intent on returning to the drawing room.

Just as she stood, however, the door to the library opened, and a handsome man of about six feet entered, all artfully tousled hair and razor-sharp, Bond Street tailoring.

"What-ho?" he said, more to himself than to Emily, as he caught sight of her, "Do forgive me, ma'am, I did not realise the room was occupied."

"Oh, it's not," Emily answered, suddenly flustered, for now that the gentleman had stepped into the light, she could appreciate just how terribly attractive he was. As well as a tall, athletic frame, the gentleman also possessed locks of spun gold, eyes of sea-blue, and a face which put Emily to mind of a Greek statue.

"I mean, it won't be, in a moment," she continued hastily, dropping her gaze to her feet for she realised she was staring, "I'm returning to the fray; I just needed a moment to compose myself."

"Overcome by the performance?" the interloper queried, arching an eyebrow so perfectly that Emily guessed that he must have practiced the move for hours in the mirror before unleashing it in public.

"The young ladies" playing moved me," Emily replied, stubbornly refusing to be drawn into mocking their hosts' daughters, though she rather feared she sounded like a pious sacristan, for the performance had truly been an insult to music.

"Moved you to hide in the library," Emily's companion observed, his tone neutral but his eyes dancing with amusement.

"That's not what I said," she replied, a hot flush of annoyance staining her cheeks.

"No, I inferred it," the gentleman agreed, with another amused glance at her, "Which makes me the wicked one. Your goodness remains assured, Miss..?"

"Mifford," Emily replied, though inside she wondered at the appropriateness of introducing herself to a gentleman whilst alone in a library.

"Miss Mifford," the gentleman sounded her name out, as though thoroughly delighted by it, "Very pleased to meet you, very pleased indeed. And though I would like to continue our flirtation, I believe it would be remiss of me to delay you any further."

"Our flirtation?" Emily could not help but blurt out, confused by his choice of noun.

"Yes," the handsome gentleman smiled, a little patronising this time, "We are flirting, Miss Mifford."

"Are we?" Emily tried to hide her confusion but failed miserably.

"We are," came the slightly irritated reply.

"I wasn't aware," Emily frowned, "Forgive me, sir, if that's the impression I gave, for it was not what I intended."

"I find it hard to believe that you were not as active a participant in our flirtation as I was," the gentleman grumbled, giving every impression of a man trying to conceal a feeling of insult.

"I expect that's because you're so handsome," Emily rushed to assure him, demonstrating her natural instinct for kindness alongside her unfortunate habit of always saying the wrong thing.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well," Emily explained patiently, "A man as handsome as you must be so accustomed to having ladies flirt with him, that after a while he assumes every lady to be flirting, even when she is not."

There was a silence as Emily's unexpected intimate digested her statement.

"So, you are accusing me of conceit?" he deduced, a smile playing at the corners of his generous mouth.

"I suppose one could logically infer that," Emily answered, realising her words had been clumsy, "Though I did not mean to be cruel. I was just trying to explain why you might have believed me to be flirting when I wasn't. Now, if you will excuse me, I must return to my mother."

"And I shall not attempt to stop you," the gentleman drawled in reply, taking a theatrically large step back so that Emily could pass him.

Feeling a little aggrieved, for it was he who had begun the whole silly interaction,

Emily pointed her nose to the air and flounced from the room.

Honestly, she thought, as she stalked down the hallway, men's egos were a frightfully fragile thing. People always said that girls were more delicate, but having grown up with three sisters, Emily knew it to be patently untrue. She could mistakenly insult Mary, Jane, or even Eudora, most egregiously and none would bat an eyelid. They'd simply shrug it off with a smile, deliver their own drubbing-down in response, or decide that the insult had bestowed on them the liberty to "borrow" a pair of her best stockings.

Most likely they would all decide on the latter, Emily thought, even though one was now a duchess and the other a viscountess. In Emily's recent experience, titles and peerages did not remove the idea from a lady's mind that her sister's stockings were fair game for pilfering.

As she neared the door to the parlour room, Emily tried to calm herself, for it would not do to return to under the eye of the ton in foul spirits. She took a deep, steadying breath, and was about to open the door, when it was opened from the other side.

"Have you taken up a position as a footman, Miss Mifford?" Lady Hardthistle sneered, as she caught sight of Emily standing sentry in the hallway.

"No," Emily replied shortly, before adding a reluctant, "My lady."

"Well, you give the appearance of a footman," Lady Hardthistle sniffed, "Especially with those shoulders. Now, out of my way, I am in need of the ladies' relieving room."

The baroness barged past her, with a weak-looking lady's maid following in her wake and took the same route that Emily had taken earlier.

I hope she bumps into my friend, Emily thought with a smile; never had two people been more deserving of each other's company.

Mary fell upon Emily the moment she entered the drawing room.

"Where were you?" the duchess hissed, "I checked by all the large potted plants, for that's usually where you can be found hiding, but you weren't there. I did find Sir Cadogan muttering ominously to himself about double-crossing, hatchet-faced wenches; he assured me his comments were not aimed my way, but at someone else--though he would not share who, which is most unfair."

"Lady Hardthistle sold him a barren mare," Emily helpfully supplied, "He was most put-out; he threatened to wring her neck."

"I don't think anyone would blame him, even if they didn't know about the mare," Mary grimaced, "She's an odious creature--but I don't wish to talk to you about that horrible old bat--I wish to discuss Northcott's friend, Lord Chambers. He's the opposite of odious."

"Lord who?" Emily blinked, startled by her sudden volte-face.

"Lord Frederick Chambers, Marquess of Highfield," Mary sighed, happily, "He's handsome, single, and one of Northcott's chums from Eton, so he can introduce you both. Oh, look! That's him there, just come through the door. Tell me, what do you think?"

Emily's stomach flipped as she glanced in the direction that Mary was nodding in and caught sight of Lord Chambers. The marquess was none other than her friend from the library.

"I think I'd sooner marry one of the potted plants," Emily answered, turning her gaze

away from the dashing marquess.

"At least you are now agreeing to marriage of some kind," Mary, ever optimistic, replied cheerfully, as she linked her arm through Emily's, "That's progress of sorts, though I do think we can aim higher than a philodendron. Come, if even a sinfully handsome marquess cannot tempt you this evening, then let us see if any of the desserts can. I spotted a raspberry blancmange earlier; it was wobbling so much it put me to mind of our departed Mr Parsims. Do you recall how his jowls used to wobble when he was upset? Lud, but I am hungry."

Emily could only conclude that Mary's professed hunger, after such an unedifying description of the blancmange, had something to do with her being in the family way. Still, despite her own lack of desire for the cake, Emily was glad to accompany her sister to the buffet table, for food was certain to distract Mary from her matrimonial machinations for quite some time. And then, once she was finished eating, the dyspepsia would kick in and she would force Emily and Northcott to accompany her home.

"What are you grinning at?" Mary asked, as she caught sight of Emily's happy smile.

"Just that a woman in your state would well deserve two helpings of pudding," Emily answered innocently, as she handed her sister a plate.

"You are a dear sister," Mary smiled so gratefully at her, that for a moment Emily felt guilty.

But as the duchess turned to the buffet table, her skirts whirling, and Emily caught sight of the familiar clocks which decorated the ankles of her stockings, and felt her guilt dissipate completely.

"Thief," Emily murmured to herself, causing Mary to turn her head.

”What was that?”

”Nothing,” Emily replied sweetly, as she added a slice of spiced-lemon cake to her sister’s plate, ”Do eat up.”

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Chapter Two

Frederick Andrew Xavier Chambers, Sixth Marquess of Highfield, frowned as he glanced around the ballroom of number sixty-three Grosvenor Square.

He was not entirely certain why he was there.

Of course, Lord and Lady Albermay had sent him an invitation, which he had accepted, which was why he was there, but what Freddie could not understand was why he was standing in the ballroom with a sense of anticipation fizzling in his stomach.

He had an awful feeling that it had something to do with the lovely Miss Mifford, who had poured a charming sort of scorn atop his efforts at flirtation in Lord Collins' library. But Freddie did not wish to admit that to himself, for to do so would be to admit to a streak of self-flagellation which Freddie did not think he possessed.

His ego was too robustly healthy--as Miss Mifford had so rightly observed--to allow him to engage in mooning over a lady who had demonstrated a complete lack of interest in--or appreciation of--him.

The great and good of the ton had descended on Grosvenor Square to witness the new Lady Albermay's first attempt at hosting since she had married into the title. As the new viscountess was an American heiress, Freddie heard a few sharp whispers of complaint as he moved around the room.

"She's gilded everything, I see. So ostentatious, but what did we expect?" he heard

one lady whisper, "I wager if I venture into the water-closet, I'll find the seat is gold too."

"If only she'd been able to paint the viscount in gold leaf," came the arch reply, "It might make him slightly more tolerable to look at."

Freddie hid a smile, for the observation was very true. Lord Albermay, Viscount Hillsop, was a gentleman as old as time; white hair spouted from his ears and nose, his jowls fell past his cravat, and his teeth had abandoned him several decades before. His sudden marriage to the vivacious Lady Albermay, was a typical joining of money and title.

"Highfield!"

Freddie turned his head at the salutation, and spotted his good friend, Lord Robert Delaney, Baron Bloomsbury, standing with two other young gentlemen with whom Freddie was not acquainted.

He joined them, glad for the distraction they offered, and Rob introduced his two companions as Mr James Fitzgibbons, third son of the Earl of Rundell, and his handsome friend, Mr Victor Bunting, fourth son of Baron Mannix.

"What do you think?" Rob asked, nudging Freddie with his elbow as he gazed around the room, "Lady Albermay must have spent a pretty penny bringing the place up to scratch."

"It's uncouth to discuss money in company, Delaney," Freddie reminded him, though his comment was more for the benefit of Mr Fitzgibbons and Mr Bunting, who were green as any miss just out of the schoolroom and might inadvertently pick up the baron's bad habits.

"Especially in front of fellows who don't have any," Mr Fitzgibbons added, with a wry smile, "We both took an ill-judged punt on a horse at Kiplingcotes; he was hotly tipped but he came in second. My quarterly allowance only lasted a sennight and Bunting did not fare any better."

"Which horse was it?" Freddie queried. He was a keen horseman and might be able to offer the lad some words of wisdom when it came to betting--the first being, don't bet what you can't afford to lose.

"Lightning," Mr Fitzgibbons replied, rolling his eyes at the now inappropriate name, "He had won everything all year--from Hamilton to Fontwell--then he lost to a young stallion that hadn't placed since last year..."

"Red Rum," Freddie supplied the name of the winner himself, for he had read it in the papers.

"That's the one," Mr Fitzgibbon agreed, his brow drawn into a frown.

"I'm afraid," Freddie sighed heavily, as he surveyed the two young men, "That you have both fallen for one of the oldest tricks in the book. Lightning and Red Rum both hail from Lady Hardthistle's stables."

The two young men nodded, though their faces showed no sign of comprehension.

"Lady Hardthistle--and she has done this many times, as any seasoned punter will tell you--would have raced Lightning all year as though he was her favoured champion. He would have been jockeyed by the lightest and most able of riders, while Red Rum was probably saddled with some lump of a groomsman. Each time Red Rum placed bottom, the odds of him winning the next race decreased. Lady Hardthistle must have decided, by the time Kiplingcotes arrived, that the odds were now in her favour--helped by the addition of Lightning to the racing card, another mark against Red

Rum--and ordered him be ridden to win. I wager she had a friend place a hefty bet on Red Rum and walked away, not only with the prize money from the race, but a large winning's pot too."

There was a silence, as Mr Fitzgibbons and Mr Bunting exchanged looks of outrage.

"That's not fair," Mr Fitzgibbons spluttered, his colour high, "She can't do that."

"She can, and she did," Freddie drawled, amused by his outrage. Horse racing was as crooked and corrupt as any other industry, it was good for them to learn it young.

"Why, if I ever see that old nag again, I'll wrap my hands around her neck and wring it until she breathes her last," Mr Fitzgibbons growled, so vexed that he clear forgot he was amongst company.

"Talk of murder is just as uncouth as that of money," Delaney interjected lightly, quick to cut the lad off before he disgraced himself any further.

"And talk of murdering a man's aunt--albeit through marriage on the maternal side--is also frowned upon," Freddie added, his tone heavy with warning.

He felt about as warmly towards Lady Hardthistle as Mr Fitzgibbons did, but honour dictated he make some sort of threatening remark, even if he did think the woman deplorable.

"Yes, that's enough, Gibbs," Mr Bunting, added, nudging his friend so sharply that he stumbled a little, "Apologise to Lord Chambers."

Mr Fitzgibbons muttered a grudging apology, which Freddie accepted easily. Fitzgibbons was not the first man to have insulted Lady Hardthistle in his presence, and he doubted he would be the last.

With the mood now changed somewhat from its earlier joviality, the two young-bloods excused themselves to go sniff around the white dressed débutantes.

"As the spare heirs, we are beholden to marry well," Mr Fitzgibbons commented mournfully before they left, "Though Mr Bunting will probably do better than me, for he is the better looking."

"Your pedigree far exceeds mine," Mr Bunting assured his friend, with a smile that even Freddie could acknowledge was devastatingly charming.

"I wish you good hunting," Delaney said, more to get rid of them than an actual care for how their mission might proceed.

Once the pair were out of earshot, Delaney turned to Freddie and offered him an apologetic smile.

"Forgive me," he said, "I am vaguely acquainted with Fitzgibbons through his older brother, I did not think they were so fresh to town."

"Pray do not apologise for the calf's outburst," Freddie brushed away the apology with a gloved hand, "It's hardly your fault--"

Freddie broke off as a flash of auburn hair on the dance-floor caught his eye. It was Miss Mifford, in the arms of Lord Huxley. He felt a jolt of something in his stomach, which he might have sworn was jealousy, but quickly quashed it down.

When Freddie turned his attention back to Delaney, he found his friend's brown eyes were alight with amusement.

"I take it that's her?" the baron said, as he ruffled a hand through his dark curls.

"Who?" Freddie's answer was peevish.

"Miss Mifford. You might recall that you spent the entirety of our ride in Green Park this morning grousing about her."

"I did not," Freddie began, but at Delaney's knowing glare, reluctantly corrected himself, "I did not spend the entire time grousing about her. If you recall, we spoke at length about the waistcoat I purchased from Weston's."

"Ah, yes," Delaney gave a sigh, "What a riveting morning that was. Now, dear boy, you'll have to excuse me, for I have sighted your beloved aunt headed your way, and though I am fond of you, I'm not that fond."

Delaney offered him a bracing slap on the shoulder, before departing at great speed. A few moments later, Freddie was joined by Lady Hardthistle, dressed in her customary black and trailed by her insipid maid, Ethel.

"Highfield," Lady Hardthistle boomed in greeting.

"My lady," Freddie offered her a short bow, "A pleasure to see you, as always."

"If it's always such a pleasure to see me, then why do you never call on me?"

There was a pause, as Freddie grappled for an answer that wasn't the truth--that he would rather poke out his own eye than spend time with the baroness. Lady Hardthistle appeared to sense his discomfort and her thin lips drew into a contented smile. There was nothing the old nag liked more, than making people uncomfortable.

"Seeing as your mother has insisted upon locking herself away in the countryside for the season, I feel I must take on the yoke of responsibility for the line and help you find a wife."

"There's really no need," Freddie replied smoothly, whilst wondering why on earth he had censured Fitzgibbons' murderous rage--the woman was a menace to society.

"With a mother as selfish as yours, I feel I must," Lady Hardthistle brayed, as Ethel nodded in agreement beside her.

"Mama is attending to my sister, who has just given birth," Freddie reminded her, through gritted teeth, "Baby James is the first grandchild in the family, it's natural for her want to be with him."

"Baby James is the heir to nothing, your mother's interest in him is excessive for the station he was born into," the baroness interjected, her thin eyebrows dropping to a scowl, "Now, stay quiet a moment, and I shall tell you just which ladies meet the standards expected in a marchioness, and which most definitely do not."

Before Freddie could object, Lady Hardthistle barrelled on, loudly listing off the ladies present, and pointing them out for good measure.

"That's Lady Francesca," she finished, with a nod to a pretty young woman standing across the room, conversing with Mr Bunting. "She's the youngest daughter of the Viscount of Bridgefoot and pretty as a picture--but the father is near destitute and I have it on good authority that she's soon to become engaged to Mr Bunting."

"Whose authority?" Freddie questioned, for he had just heard told that Mr Bunting, like his friend Fitzgibbons, required a chit with a dowry.

"Mine," Lady Hardthistle answered smugly, though her smile faltered as she caught sight of yet another one of the guests.

"Who is that?" Freddie could not resist prompting, even though he already knew the answer.

"Miss Mifford," Lady Hardthistle made a face which looked like she had just sucked a lemon, "Awful girl. Awful family. Pushy and grabby--and that's just the mother. The eldest two snared husbands through the most deceitful means--I would stay away from Miss Mifford, if I were you, unless you wish to find your hand forced."

"Don't hold back, my lady, do tell me how you really feel," Freddie answered, unable to keep the amusement from his tone. Lady Hardthistle's painting of Miss Mifford's character did not marry well with Freddie's memory of her from their encounter the previous evening.

Obviously, she was a few pence short of a shilling to not have realised she was attracted to him, but she had conceded he was handsome, which meant she wasn't all mad.

As for her subtle accusation that he was conceited? Even Freddie had to admit that she hadn't been too far off the mark; he could admit that when he entered any room, he usually considered himself the best looking--and best dressed--gentleman there. If that was what Miss Mifford considered to be conceit, then Freddie was guilty as hell.

"I'm warning you, Chambers," Lady Hardthistle cautioned, as she noted that Freddie's gaze was still trained on Miss Mifford, "Steer well clear of the Miffords. Now, I must leave you; I have to see a man about a horse. Come, Ethel."

In a flurry of feather plumes and noxious perfume fumes, Lady Hardthistle took off, bouldering her way across the room with great determination. Several people squawked with consternation, as she thwacked them with her cane in order to get them to move aside, but none raised further argument--the whole of the ton knew better than to call Lady Hardthistle out publicly.

Freddie, who had been wondering how he might excuse himself from her company, heaved a sigh of relief that she had done the hard work for him. He remained in the

same spot for a moment, watching her progress, and only moved when he was certain her attention was elsewhere.

The baroness' warning to avoid Miss Mifford as though she was a plague carrying animal, had the opposite effect for which she might have hoped. Freddie, who had been content to observe Miss Mifford from afar, now felt an overwhelming urge to go speak with her. Just like when he was a child, and his governess had told him to stay away from the fire, Freddie's obstinate nature told him to ignore such cautious advice--he wanted to poke at the flames.

Not that he would actually poke Miss Mifford, of course, for he was no longer five and he did think the young lady might raise an objection to be prodded, even by a handsome marquess.

Squaring his shoulders, which sported a dark dinner jacket of fine merino-wool, Freddie made his way toward the gathered Mifford clan. Miss Mifford stood in the company of an older woman with fading blonde hair, wearing a rather gaudy dress, and a diminutive elderly lady in a mob-cap and spectacles. Freddie was wondering how he might insert himself into their circle--for though he had conversed with Miss Mifford, they had not officially been introduced--when the Duke of Northcott and his new wife materialised at their side.

That would do, Freddie thought cheerfully; he was acquainted with Northcott from both Eton and their shared club, White's.

Just as Freddie was pondering how he might insouciantly draw the duke's attention, his wife elbowed him in the ribs and nodded her head, quite obviously, in Freddie's direction. Northcott first winced, for the duchess had put enormous effort into elbowing him, then turned and caught Freddie's eye.

"Lord Chambers," Northcott drawled, as Freddie neared, "Nice to see you amongst

polite society for a change.”

”One has to venture outside White”s every now and then,” Freddie agreed, ”Lest one forgets what is and isn”t acceptable behaviour in front of the ladies.”

Both men guffawed a little, amused by their true masculine nature, until the duchess cleared her throat impatiently.

”Ah, yes,” Northcott--to Freddie”s surprise--looked chastised; the duchess must crack a hard whip, he surmised, ”Allow me to introduce my wife, Lord Chambers. I don”t think you”ve met?”

The duke introduced his new duchess, followed by her mother--who fluttered her eyelashes and smiled manically at him--then the duchess” two sisters, Miss Mifford and Miss Eudora Mifford.

Freddie did a double-take at the final name offered to him, for from a distance he had assumed the youngest Mifford girl--who wore a mob-cap over her hair, was bundled up in several heavy shawls, and was carrying a cane--to be an elderly lady.

”My sisters are experiencing their first season in town,” the duchess said, once the lengthy introductions had been made. She smiled, slightly less manically than her mother, at Freddie and waited for him to respond.

”Is that so?” Freddie glanced at Miss Mifford, who looked rather mutinous at having to engage in polite conversation with him, ”Then it behoves me to ask them both for a dance.”

”Oh,” the duchess rushed, ”You don”t need to ask them both, Emily will do.”

The duchess gave her sister an indiscreet shove, and Emily stumbled forward.

Northcott, Freddie noted, was trying to hide an amused smile behind his gloved hand, but was failing miserably. His wife's matchmaking machinations were about as subtle as a knock to the head from Gentleman Jackson, but there was an honest earnestness to the duchess that Freddie found endearing--as though she simply wished everyone to be as happy as she so obviously was.

"Miss Mifford," Freddie bowed elegantly, "Shall I lead the way?"

"Please," Miss Mifford replied in the affirmative, though her tone told a different story.

Freddie gallantly promised the group that he would return the young lady in one piece after the dance--causing Mrs Mifford to swoon at his gallantry--and led the young lady away to the dance-floor.

"You do not seem best pleased, Miss Mifford," Freddie observed, as they waited by the side of the floor for the current set to come to an end.

"Of course I'm not," she answered, with surprising honesty, "If you had an elder sister and she pushed--literally pushed!--you in front of a gentleman whose head was already swollen enough, without having ladies thrown at him, would you be best pleased?"

"My head is not swollen," Freddie replied, though he did allow himself a rueful smile, "Well, it's not that swollen. It was clear as day that you did not wish to dance with me, so do not worry that I think you in love with me--you made it very clear last night that you are not."

"Emphatically not," Miss Mifford confirmed, before frowning a little as a thought struck her, "If you knew that I did not want to dance with you, then why did you ask me?"

"Because I wished to dance with you," Freddie smiled, for it was the truth, "And it delights me a little to torture you. I don't know what that says about my character, but I suppose that is of little concern when you already hold me in low regard."

Miss Mifford opened her mouth, as though to chastise him, but the set they were watching had come to an end, and there was a kerfuffle as the next set of dancers sought to replace them. Glad that the commotion meant he would not have to listen to another lecture on his own hubris, Freddie took Miss Mifford's hand and led her to a trio of couples whom they would join for a Quadrille.

The dance was a quick one, with much interchanging of partners, which further saved Freddie from any of Miss Mifford's ire. Her annoyance with him vanished the moment they began to dance; Miss Mifford gave the impression of someone who was having tremendous fun, and she smiled generously and laughed often as she was whirled from partner to partner.

She was, Freddie guessed, when not in his company, a very cheerful and pleasant soul.

Her enjoyment was charming, for the fashionable set usually made a great show of finding everything--even dancing--tired and dull. Amongst some members of the ton, expressing ennui was a competitive sport.

When the music ended, Freddie felt a pang of regret, but he held out his arm for Miss Mifford to take and returned her to her family as promised.

"Until we meet again, Miss Mifford," Freddie said, holding those blue eyes a fraction longer than was entirely proper.

Not that the duchess or Mrs Mifford minded his mild impropriety, both women were all pink blushes as they bid Freddie goodbye, only Miss Eudora scowled at him

owlishly from behind her spectacles.

Freddie took his leave and returned to aimlessly circling the ballroom, stopping occasionally to speak with acquaintances. He kept one eye on Lady Hardthistle at all times, but she was mercifully occupied, speaking with the other grand doyennes of society, or occasionally harassing the young folk, like poor Mr Fitzgibbons and his friend Mr Bunting.

As the night wore on, Freddie became increasingly restless. His dance with Miss Mifford was to be, he feared, the highlight of his evening. Even the thought of escaping for a sneaky tumbler of brandy and a cheroot at his club could not pull him from the vague feeling of emptiness which had settled upon his soul.

Luckily, just as Freddie had decided that bed was the only solution for his suffering, the music came to an abrupt stop and the butler--looking faintly mortified--bid the guests join Lord and Lady Albermay in the gardens to enjoy a firework display.

"I thought we were at a ball, not Vauxhall Gardens."

"I'd expect no less from an American; garish decor, garish entertainment. We're lucky she hasn't arranged for us all to trek down to the docks and throw some chests of tea in the Thames."

As Freddie followed the flow of the crowd out to the gardens, he heard many similar grumblings from the guests. Poor Lady Albermay had not guessed that on her debut as a hostess to London's stuffy society, she had been expected to conform to social norms, not upset them.

For his part, Freddie found the whole thing entirely diverting. Outside in the fresh, spring air, his mind felt clearer and he bagged himself a nice spot by a magnolia tree--close to Miss Mifford, who had become separated from her clan.

Unfortunately, the cosy spot that they had both chosen, was invaded by a very unwelcome interloper--Lady Hardthistle.

"Silly Americans and their perverse ideas of fun," Lady Hardthistle grumbled loudly to herself, as she trekked across the soggy spring lawn, "And that silly maid, where has she got to? Ahoy--who's this?"

In the semi darkness, Lady Hardthistle's eyes had spotted Miss Mifford, for she near glowed in the darkness, dressed as she was in debutante-white.

"Miss Mifford, I should have expected no less from you," the baroness bellowed, causing several people standing close by to turn and gawp, "Out skulking in the darkness, trying to entice some poor chap into your net, eh?"

Freddie at once stirred to defend Miss Mifford, then wondered if by defending her his presence--also alone, also in darkness--might implicate her further in the baroness' eyes. As he dithered, Miss Mifford rose to the occasion and defended herself--rather loudly, rather forcefully, and rather stupidly.

"Don't you dare speak to me that way," she cried in response, "You are an odious woman, and one day soon, you will suffer the consequences of your unkindness."

Miss Mifford was either very brave, Freddie thought, or--more likely--completely unaware that Lady Hardthistle had the social force--and viper's tongue--to ruin her season completely.

Several heads had turned their attention away from the firework display, which was just beginning, to stare at the bickering duo. Included amongst them, Lady Francesca, who, to Freddie's mind, looked far too pleased with the unfolding drama.

"Don't threaten me, girl," Lady Hardthistle growled, her eyes shifting to the crowd as

she became aware that she was now involved in a scene.

"You threatened me first," Miss Mifford retorted, displaying a rudimentary-but perfectly acceptable--defence, "If I have sunk low, it's only because you set the bar. Oh, I hate London."

This last remark was delivered in a voice with a faint quiver, and Miss Mifford turned on the heel of her slipper and ran from the scene, into the darkness of the vast garden.

"Awful girl," Lady Hardthistle huffed, for the benefit of the watching crowd, "Now, where has my maid got to? I shall need to return home to rest after suffering such an obnoxious assault. Ethel! Ethel!"

Lady Hardthistle too disappeared into the darkness of the garden, and Freddie wondered if he should follow her. He did believe that she was off to find the missing Ethel, but he was also worried that, when found, the maid would be used as a second in a duel, should Lady Hardthistle bump into Miss Mifford again.

As the London skyline was set ablaze with exploding colour, Freddie fretted and fretted over Miss Mifford. After about ten minutes of anxious internal debate, he had just decided that he would seek her out--appearances be damned--when a terrified wail filled the night.

"Murder, murder!" a voice cried, so loud that it could be heard over the explosions of fireworks.

Freddie, who was nearest to the spot where the cry came from, raced into the darkness of the garden. He ran across the lawn and down a set of steps, which led to a sunken garden. Here, he followed the box-hedge lined path to a trickling fountain, and found Ethel standing over a dark mass upon the ground.

As a particularly large Catherine-wheel exploded, lighting up the night sky, it illuminated the mass on the ground, revealing it to be Lady Hardthistle, and by the looks of things she was dead.

Very, very dead.

Even in death, the expression on her face was one of anger and annoyance--though Freddie did not blame her for that, for who would not feel annoyed upon being murdered--and her skin was a violent shade of purple.

Freddie took a step back in horror, then a step forward, for he realised he should do something, but his sudden movement caused Ethel to wail even louder.

"Murder!" she cried again, her last plaintive wail finishing just as the crowd arrived.

People swarmed about, pushing Freddie forward so that he now stood right beside Lady Hardthistle's cadaver. He hastily whipped off his coat to cover the deceased, as more and more people arrived to the scene. The crowd's whispers built to a crescendo, accompanied by several screams as some in the fray realised just what it was that Freddie was standing guard over.

"A little calm, please," Freddie called, surprised that his voice sounded strong and assured. He had never marshalled a crowd clamouring to see a dead body before, but he was apparently quite gifted at it, for the herd of people fell silent.

"I must ask you all to return inside," Freddie continued, confident now in his own authority--and a little annoyed with himself for having ever doubted it, "I'm afraid there has been a bit of an accident--"

"Not an accident," Ethel interrupted, her thin voice carrying, "It's murder. Can't you see my lady was choked to death? Oh, who would want to murder such a gentle

soul?”

The crowd at once fell into frenzied whispers, and Freddie briefly closed his eyes, for he realised that his control had been lost. They flew open again when a female voice spoke up.

”I know who killed Lady Hardthistle,” Lady Francesca called, wrinkling her upturned nose in disgust, ”It was her!”

Along with everyone else, Freddie glanced in the direction that the young woman was pointing in, and he bit back a groan as he saw just who it was that Lady Francesca was accusing.

Her finger of blame was pointed at none other than Miss Mifford.

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Chapter Three

If only the ground would open up and swallow her whole, Emily thought, as Lady Francesca pointed an accusing finger her way.

The crowd had fallen silent, all staring as one with a mixture of horror and fascination, at Emily, who stood slightly apart from their midst. She had never felt more alone in her life, and her eyes sought out her family but she could not spot them amongst the swarm of people.

This can't possibly get any worse, Emily thought, as anxiety bubbled in her stomach.

But, of course, it could.

"I overheard Miss Mifford arguing with Lady Hardthistle mere minutes ago," Lady Francesca continued, her high voice carrying on the night air, "She threatened her, she said that soon, Lady Hardthistle would suffer the consequences of her unkindness. She meant to murder her!"

As the crowd fell into frenzied whispers, Emily found that she could not entirely blame Lady Francesca for her supposition. Emily had, indeed, said those very words to the baroness, but the consequences that Emily had imagined Lady Hardthistle suffering had been spiritual rather than physical. Well, perhaps, not only spiritual; she had also hoped that the odious woman might ingest a bad egg and spend a week confined to the water-closet, but now really wasn't the time to share that.

The crowd continued to whisper and murmur to each other, but this reaction evidently

was not enough for Lady Francesca, who glanced around with visible annoyance.

"She's a murderer!" the young woman cried again, this time much louder and with a definite note of hysteria to her tone.

"That's enough."

Lord Chambers' voice cracked like a whip, silencing the crowd completely. The marquess glowered at Lady Francesca, an act which left Emily with a rather giddy feeling in her stomach.

He radiated strength and power, but now was really not the time to feel smitten, Emily chastised herself. A woman lay dead on the ground.

"You cannot silence me," Lady Francesca retorted, evidently not as taken by the marquess' display of masculine authority as Emily was, "She's a murderer. Miss Mifford is a murderer!"

"He said," another voice boomed, "That's enough. Someone take Lady Francesca inside; she's hysterical. In fact, everyone inside--NOW."

Emily breathed a sigh of relief as Northcott came striding forward, tailed by Mary. The duke stood head and shoulders above everyone else--apart from Lord Chambers--and he glared down imperiously at the crowd. He exuded ducal authority and power, and Emily noted that Mary's cheeks were rather pink as she watched her husband take command of the situation.

Under Northcott's orders, the crowd at last began to disperse, though several people remained; Jane and Ivo, who stood beside a jibbering Mrs Mifford and a yawning Eudora, the marquess, Ethel, and Lord and Lady Albermay.

The latter made an odd coupling; the elderly Lord Albermay's eyes were half-closed, as though he was indulging in a brief nap, while his wife--all flaming hair and buxom curves--near vibrated with excitement.

"How can anyone think Miss Mifford a murderer?" Lady Albermay commented, in her strange accent, "Why, look at those arms! She's so scrawny. There's no way she could strangle a woman to death with those chicken arms."

Emily was not entirely certain if she was being defended or insulted, but she decided to settle on the former and offered Lady Albermay a grateful smile.

"We shall have to summon the runners," Lord Chambers stated, ignoring Lady Albermay's unhelpful contribution, to which Northcott nodded in agreement.

"I'll send one of the footmen," Lady Albermay offered, keen to be involved, "And perhaps another one to come take my husband inside; he's quite overcome with the excitement of it all."

On cue, Lord Albermay gave a loud snore, which confirmed that he was indeed indulging in an upright nap--quite the feat, Emily thought with admiration. Lady Albermay disappeared into the house to fetch the footmen, and once she was out of earshot, Mary stepped forward.

"Now, Ethel," Mary said, all business, "You must tell us what happened and how you came to find Lady Hardthistle."

"I think that is a question we might leave to the runners," Lord Chambers interjected, with a confused glance at the duchess. It was not usual for a lady, let alone one of such high rank, to indulge in such a menial task as interrogating a servant--especially over something as gruesome as a murder.

Mary, who was something of a veteran of murder investigations--having solved one before, in Plumpton--scowled at the marquess, but her husband intervened.

"He's right, dear," Northcott soothed, "There is no need to involve yourself this time; the runners are far more capable of solving this mystery than Mr Marrowbone."

Mr Marrowbone was Plumpton's reluctant constable; a man so workshy and lazy that he might be replaced by a bucket and no one would notice the difference. Emily highly doubted that the famed Bow Street Runners shared the same work ethic as he, given their reputation for capturing all sorts of villains. The only thing that Mr Marrowbone was capable of catching was a cold.

Mary pouted a little at this news, and Jane made to object, but even Lord Crabb could not be tempted to adventure.

"Northcott is correct," Ivo said, with a stern glance at his wife, "Best leave this to the professionals. London is not Plumpton; it's far more dangerous. Who knows what type of mischief befell Lady Hardthistle. I think it's best if I bring you all home, and leave Northcott and Lord Chambers to attend to matters here."

Mary and Jane gave a few grumbles, but when Mrs Mifford declared that she too would like to remain--so that she could imbibe some medicinal wine for her nerves--they quickly changed their tune. Lady Albermay's ball was already a disaster, the poor countess did not need to add a tipsy Mrs Mifford to her list of woes.

"There's no need for you to remain either, Northcott; I shall look after things here," Lord Chambers said, once the plan for the family to return home had been agreed upon, "Lady Hardthistle was my aunt, so it behoves me to stay. You attend to your family; I dare say that Miss Mifford is a trifle overwrought after having suffered such a public slandering. I have a fair idea of who might have committed this barbaric act, so have no fear, her name will be cleared by the morning."

Something stirred in Emily's mind at his words; the marquess might have an idea of who had killed Lady Hardthistle, but so too did she--Sir Cadogan. Only last night she had overheard him threatening to strangle the baroness, and now tonight she lay dead on the ground. He had to be the perpetrator, for how likely was it that anyone else had been struck by an urge to murder Lady Hardthistle in the intervening hours?

"I think--" Emily began, but she was cut off by Mary.

"Yes, you do look a tad wan, dear," her elder sister commented with concern.

"Pale as a ghost," Jane added, offering her a sympathetic glance.

"Are we going to stand here all night, or is someone willing to bring me home? Won't someone think of my nerves?"

"Your nerves are ever forefront in our minds, Mama," Eudora answered, with a roll of her eyes. Unfortunately, thanks to the thick spectacles she wore--but did not need--this act was magnified tenfold, and spotted by Mrs Mifford.

A small squabble broke out, during which the Mifford matriarch accused her four daughters of having no care for her feelings. Not wishing for their mother to disgrace them in front of Lord Chambers--which Emily thought rather silly, for she had already been accused of murder in front of him, which was far more disgraceful--Mary hastened the family's departure.

"Goodbye, Lord Chambers," the duchess called gaily, as though they were at a village fete and not the scene of a murder. She herded the family toward the house, with the enthusiasm of a boisterous collie. Such was her haste to hide Mrs Mifford away from the marquess that Emily half expected her to start nipping at their heels.

Inside the house, which had emptied of revellers--murder being next to running out of

wine on the list of things which will instantaneously end a party--Mary and Northcott sought out Lady Albermay, to tell her that they would be leaving.

"Given his connection to the deceased, Lord Chambers has taken charge of matters. I think it's best if you wait inside, while he deals with the runners," Northcott counselled the countess, who looked disappointed that the fun was coming to an end.

"Of course I'll stay inside, your Grace," Lady Albermay answered, in a tone which suggested she was merely humouring the duke and intended to do the opposite, "Thank you so much for all your help. Goodnight--I hope you're all able to get some sleep after all this excitement."

Emily, who did not feel that being accused of murder was all that exciting, attempted to speak up again about Sir Cadogan, but was cut off by Mary.

"Honestly, Emily," the duchess sighed, "Now is not the time for idle chatter. It's impossible for anyone to get a word in edgeways when you're around."

Aggrieved by the injustice of that statement, Emily followed Northcott and Mary to the carriage in a cloud of sulky silence. Such was her annoyance, that she did not even bid her mother and the others goodbye, as they clambered into their own vehicle which would bring them to Crabb House.

On the short journey home, Mary and Northcott murmured quietly to each other, occasionally casting concerned glances Emily's way. From their worried expressions, it was obvious that they were not completely convinced by Lord Chambers' assertion that he would clear Emily's name.

Nevertheless, when they at last arrived home, Mary offered Emily a bracing smile.

"There's no need to worry about anything, Emily, everything will be just fine," Mary

assured her, as she shrugged off her shawl and handed it to the waiting footman.

Emily, whose attention had been focused more on feeling vexed with Mary than worrying about Lady Francesca's outlandish claim, instantly began to fret at her words. When someone sought to assure a person that everything was fine, in that strange high-pitched way, it usually was not.

"Your sister is correct," Northcott added, in a deep voice, "And, you have the protection of the ducal seat behind you; I would never allow any harm to come to you, or your reputation."

Northcott looked formidable as he spoke, and exuded so much confidence and power, that despite her nerves, Emily almost believed him. Mary also appeared to be very taken with her husband's forceful declaration, for she stood watching him with her mouth slightly open for a moment, before she snapped it shut with a blush.

"Er," Mary said, as she absently twisted a strand of her hair, "Yes. Northcott is right. Everything will be fine; you'll see in the morning. Goodnight, Emily. Don't stay up too late. Northcott--I shall need a hand taking off my slippers."

"Don't you have a maid for that?" Northcott queried, raising an amused eyebrow.

"I'd rather you help me," Mary answered pointedly, and for some reason which Emily could not quite fathom, the duke blushed like a schoolgirl.

"Of course," the duke cleared his throat, "Er. Goodnight, Emily."

With that, the pair disappeared up the staircase, leaving Emily to make her own solitary journey to her bedchamber, where she was certain sleep would evade her.

Inside the dressing room which adjoined the bedchamber, Emily disrobed and

unpinned her hair. She washed her face in the bowl of water upon the armoire, then threw on her nightrail--a soft, wool one she had brought with her from Plumpton--and crawled into bed.

Despite her belief that sleep would be hard to come by, the instant that Emily rested her head on the goose-feather pillow she began to feel drowsy. A chamber maid had left a warming pan at the bottom of the bed, and a low fire burned in the grate, and Emily could not help but be lulled to sleep by such comforts.

I'll tell Northcott tomorrow about Sir Cadogan, she decided, as her heavy eyelids drooped to a close. The old squire had to be the person who killed Lady Hardthistle; who else would want the baroness dead?

The next morning, Emily awoke far later than usual, and after washing and dressing, she hurried downstairs to the dining room.

There, she found Northcott and Mary already seated at the table, both sipping tea and reading through the morning's papers.

"Is there anything about Lady Hardthistle?" Emily asked, as she slipped into a vacant chair.

A footman immediately stepped forward and filled her cup with steaming hot-chocolate, before discreetly withdrawing again. The servants in Northcott House were far more attentive than Nora, the maid of all work in Primrose Cottage, who could be counted upon to maliciously burn the sausages if she felt that she had been at all slighted. As Mrs Mifford had the unfortunate habit of slighting anyone who crossed her path, Emily and the rest of the family had become accustomed to gnawing on charred pieces of meat and weak tea most mornings, under the dark cloud of Nora's ire.

"No," Northcott called to her, from over the top of the paper, "They would have been gone to press by the time it happened. I expect that there shall be some mention of it tomorrow."

"Will my name also be mentioned?" Emily ventured, nervously nibbling on her lip, "Or do you think that Lord Chambers has already apprehended the villain? Did he send word at all?"

"No, you will not be mentioned," Northcott lowered the paper and answered her first question with an emphatic shake of his head, "And as for Lord Chambers, he has not yet sent word. I expect that when he has some news, he will update us."

"Good," Emily tried to sound cheerful, for she did not want to let her sister and Northcott know just how worried she was. What if there was no way of proving that Sir Cadogan was guilty? Would she forever be viewed with suspicion by the rest of the ton?

Emily took a bite of her toast, but it tasted like sawdust in her mouth. She placed it back on the plate, and took another sip of hot-chocolate, savouring the warm comfort it offered.

She remained silent for the rest of breakfast, as Mary and the duke shared tit-bits from the papers they read. Emily was glad of their gentle comments on the latest news scandal--an escaped lynx from The Royal Menagerie, last spotted in Hyde Park--and ton gossip.

"Lord Charmer cut a dashing figure in the Green Park, yesterday morning," Mary read aloud, "Where no doubt he has taken up riding to avoid the longing stares of the ladies on the Row, who wish to capture his heart. Will the ever elusive--and ever stylish--marquess finally take a bride this season? This author has it on good authority that Lord C. has several ladies in mind to take as a bride."

Emily bristled a little, as she realised that the thinly disguised lord to whom the author was referring was Lord Chambers. No wonder he had such an inflated sense of his own self-importance, when the papers wrote guff like this about him, she thought irritably.

"I did not take Lord Chambers for a polygamist," Emily commented, picking up her toast to take a sharp bite from its corner.

"They do make it sound like he is about to set up a harem," Northcott chortled, though he quickly rearranged his amused expression into something more sombre at Mary's warning glare.

"I suppose it does not matter who Lord Chambers chooses to marry, Emily," the duchess commented, with faux-innocence, "As you have previously declared a potted plant to be a more suitable candidate for a husband than he."

Emily swallowed the piece of toast she was munching, surprised that it did not stick in her craw and choke her. There was no one more infuriating in the world than a sister who thought herself right when she was, in fact, very wrong.

"I do not care who Lord Chambers decides to marry," Emily answered, with slightly more passion than someone who had just professed not to care might possess. "I simply commented that the author made it sound as though he was about to marry all seven ladies on his purported list of brides."

"Of course," Mary demurred, but her tone was less than convincing.

Emily was about to open her mouth and point out that she had suffered enough already, without having to endure her sister's condescension, when Northcott--now an expert in judging sisterly-relations--interrupted.

"The price of wheat is set to increase again," he observed, shaking his paper with more vigour than necessary, "I expect we shall discuss that in The House later, along with Sidcott's proposal to examine the fiduciary duties of the Crown purse."

As Northcott had, perhaps, guessed, both Emily and Mary's eyes glazed over at the mention of the dull activities of The House of Lords. Mary stifled a yawn, before taking a large sip of coffee, while Emily glanced at the half-finished toast on her plate and wondered how she might escape.

"Well, I'd best get ready for my callers," Mary said, with a bright smile to her husband, "Come, Emily. I expect Sylvie wishes to poke and prod at us before she allows us be viewed by anyone."

Emily duly followed her sister upstairs to Mary's large dressing room, where the French maid dressed their hair and added a dash of *élégance* to their appearance.

"Ah, your Grace," Sylvie sighed happily, when she was finished, "You are a vision of perfection."

Mary preened with pleasure, and the lady's maid turned her eye to Emily, who awaited similar comment.

"Miss Mifford," Sylvie's pretty mouth twisted into a pout, "You are..."

Emily waited a moment for the maid to add an adjective, but when it became apparent that none was forthcoming, she decided she would have to settle for merely having her existence confirmed.

"I am," Emily nodded, standing from her chair, "And, I am going downstairs to read my book."

"I'll join you shortly," Mary called after her, "I just need a few minutes to try get my feet into my new slippers. I swear, they have shrunk since I bought them."

Emily made no comment, instead she slipped from the room and downstairs to the front drawing room--an elegant chamber, with ceiling height sash-windows which gazed out over St James' Square. Once there, she settled herself in the plush Queen Ann by the fireplace and extracted the Minerva Press novel that she had secreted away under the cushions. She passed a pleasant half-hour reading, until Mary joined her.

"I'm glad no one called while I was otherwise occupied," Mary chirped, as she swept into the room, "Honestly, I did not expect that being a duchess would involve receiving so many callers. I received none, when I was simply Miss Mifford."

Before becoming a duchess, Mary had been the daughter of a country vicar, so it was no surprise to Emily that her callers had increased ten-fold now that she was a duchess. Every morning, between the hours of eleven and three, Mary was besieged by callers keen to affirm their acquaintance with her.

Mary settled herself in the chair nearest to the window, picked up her needlework, and awaited the first of her callers, while Emily settled herself back into the chair and continued to read.

The Gothic-tale in her hands was so absorbing, that Emily did not quite register the passage of time until the clock on the mantelpiece struck noon.

"Is it that time already?" Emily glanced over at her sister in surprise.

Mary, she now saw, wore a worried expression on her pretty face, and her blue eyes were focused on the square outside and not her embroidery hoop.

By this time, the duchess would usually have received at least three sets of visitors, and Emily could not help but wonder if the murder had anything to do with her sudden drop in popularity.

"I expect that people are calling on Lady Albermay first," Mary assured her, "Given that she was last night's hostess. Enjoy your book while you can, we shall be busy pouring tea in no time."

Emily nodded and returned her attention to her book, but the words on the page swam before her eyes. The lack of callers, and the lack of news from Lord Chambers could mean only one thing--that Lord Chambers' suspect had been proved innocent and the ton believed Emily had murdered Lady Hardthistle.

Her despairing belief was further confirmed as the clock struck one, and then two, with no sign of any visitors to Northcott House.

"It must be the inclement weather that's keeping people away," Mary declared at half-past two, as she stood from her chair. Unfortunately, as soon as she finished speaking, her figure was illuminated by a sudden burst of sunshine through the window, and from the hallway a passing maid loudly proclaimed the beauty of the day.

"I'm not without some brains, Mary," Emily chided, as she too stood from her seat, "There must be some connection to your lack of callers and my being accused of murder."

"Nonsense," Mary brushed her concern aside, but--as she always did when she was worried or anxious--she lifted her hand to neck to fiddle with her necklace.

"Don't molly-coddle me," Emily began, but the rest of her sentence was cut-off by a knock on the door.

"Come in," Mary bid, and the door swung open to reveal a footman holding a silver tray with a calling card upon it.

"Lady Albermay is wondering if you are at home, your Grace?"

"Oh!" Mary's expression brightened, "Yes. Of course I am. Send her in, and tell the maids to bring in a tray of tea and French fancies."

The footman disappeared and Mary smoothed down the skirts of her dress nervously, as they awaited the appearance of the countess.

Lady Albermay burst into the room, moments later, in a flurry of perfume fumes and loud exclamations. In her strange accent, she loudly complimented Mary's dress and the furniture, before declaring herself famished and seating herself on the sofa without being invited.

By Emily's count, the countess had broken at least three rules of etiquette in less than five seconds, but her disregard for decorum only made her more likable.

Mary and Emily both perched themselves on the opposite sofa to the countess, and waited for the maid--who had arrived just after the countess--to pour the tea. Once everyone had a cup, and the maid had retreated to a respectable distance, Lady Albermay spoke.

"I came to offer you my assurance, Miss Mifford, that you have my full support," Lady Albermay said sincerely, as she set her cup down on the table before her.

"Thank you," Emily was touched by the earnestness of her statement, even if she was a tad confused, "Er; your full support in what matter, might I ask?"

There was a moment of silence, as Lady Albermay shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Why," she drawled, blushing a little, "With the murder accusation. Lord Chambers" suspect turned out to be something of a dead-duck, and as there was no one else under suspicion, I'm afraid that the ton have reverted to thinking you the culprit."

Emily gulped; her earlier fears had not been unfounded; the conspicuous lack of callers could be attributed to the ton believing her a murderess.

"It's a ridiculous notion, of course," the countess stressed, with a kind-eyed smile to Emily, "To think that an itty-bitty thing like you could have choked a woman to death. Lord Chambers was of the belief that Mr Fitzgibbons was the guilty party, given that he had earlier been heard professing a wish to strangle Lady Hardthistle over some issue about fixed horse races. But, as his good friend Mr Bunting was able to vouch for his whereabouts, I'm afraid that idea was quashed fairly quickly."

For a moment Emily was astonished to learn that, in such a short space of time, not one but two people had verbalised their wish to kill Lady Hardthistle. Then, when she thought on it a bit longer, she decided it really wasn't that astonishing at all. The baroness had been a harridan of the highest order--it really was a wonder that the list of suspects in her murder was so few.

Though, the only person who knew that there was a second person on the list was Emily.

Emily opened her mouth to share her suspicion that Sir Cadogan might be the murderer, when Mary spoke, interrupting her.

"You are kind, my lady," Mary said, her eyes misty with emotion--a frequent occurrence, since she had announced she was expecting, "To offer your backing to poor Emily. I fear that not everyone will be as good as you. I must speak with Northcott, and decide what we must do next."

"His Grace is well connected," Lady Albermay answered, cheerfully, "No one would dare give Miss Mifford the cut, if they knew that they risked the censure of the duke and his esteemed associates."

"You're correct, my lady," Mary agreed, nodding her head thoughtfully, "I shall task Northcott with rallying support, at once."

"If I can be of any assistance, do let me know," the countess replied with a wide smile, "I'll leave you both to your planning, but if you require anything--anything at all--my door is always open."

With that, Lady Albermay rose to a stand and swept from the room, leaving only her floral scent behind her.

"What an unexpected new friend," Mary commented, as the door sounded shut, "It was so good of her to call, so that we know what we are faced with. Never fear, Emily; Northcott will fix matters with the ton."

"Perhaps if we were to find out who killed Lady Hardthistle ourselves, then Northcott would not need to fix anything," Emily answered, though Mary was not listening.

As usual, once she had decided on a plan, Mary was deaf to all else but her own thoughts. As though Emily had not spoken, the duchess stood from the sofa, her brow drawn into a frown of concentration and her mind patently elsewhere.

"Yes, finish the cakes Emily, while I sort out matters," she said absently, before making her way to the door.

"No, that wasn't what I said," Emily called after her, but it was too late--she was already gone.

"Nobody ever listens to me," Emily grumbled, aware of the irony of her statement as she was now alone and speaking to herself.

Mary and Northcott, having solved their own murder mystery, appeared to have no wish to assist Emily with solving hers. Smoothing over matters so that Emily's season would continue unimpeded by murder accusations was not Emily's idea of a satisfactory conclusion to Lady Hardthistle's death. No, she would have to find out just who it was who had strangled the unlikeable baroness. There must be someone else with an interest in solving the mystery...

Lord Chambers!

The marquess had taken command of last night's ghastly situation, and had even suggested his own suspect. If there was anyone in the world who cared as much about solving the murder, it was he.

True, he was so big-headed that he would no doubt claim that he had discovered the perpetrator alone, but that did not matter to Emily, as long as the true murderer was found.

She just needed a way to get in touch with the marquess; a note perhaps? Or would it be considered scandalous for a young, unwed lady to write to a man she was barely acquainted with?

As Emily pondered how she might circumvent society's complex rules and make contact with the marquess, the door burst open and Mary reappeared.

"I have the answer," she cried, her eyes alight with triumph, "Lord Chambers!"

"What about him?" Emily queried, while secretly marvelling at the fact that the marquess appeared to be the answer to everyone's problems.

"I shall send Northcott to ask the marquess to show his support for you publicly, tonight at Lady Stanton's ball," Mary explained, with an air of impatience at Emily's lack of telepathy. "As well as being one of the ton's most celebrated bachelors, he is also Lady Hardthistle's nephew--albeit through marriage. His backing of you shall be sure to silence wagging tongues."

Mary finished speaking and waited expectantly for some sort of objection from Emily, but none was forthcoming.

"Capital idea," Emily offered, causing Mary to frown suspiciously. Her ideas were not usually so well received by her younger sisters.

"I'm glad you think so," Mary said cautiously, and once she was certain that it wasn't a trap, and that Emily was agreeable to her plan, she smiled.

"I don't think you could have come up with a better plan," Emily assured her, for it was the truth. Thanks to Mary's intervention, she would soon be able to converse with Lord Chambers, and the investigation could begin in earnest.

Chapter Four

Freddie had hoped that by the next time that he and Miss Mifford met, that she would regard him as the hero of the hour--the man who had single-handedly cleared her name. Alas, thanks to the alibi that Mr Bunting had afforded Mr Fitzgibbons, the man that Freddie had thought most likely to have killed Lady Hardthistle had been exonerated of any guilt.

In the eyes of the Runners, at least.

Freddie still harboured suspicions about Mr Fitzgibbons. The Runners might not think to question the word of two gentlemen, but Freddie was not as blinded by title and privilege as they. A gentleman's word was not all that, especially when the gentleman had earlier professed a wish to kill the victim--and, when the man offering the alibi was his closest chum. In the absence of any proof, however, there was little that Freddie could do except bide his time and try to figure out a way to prove that Mr Fitzgibbons had killed Lady Hardthistle.

And while he was doing that, the Duke of Northcott had afforded him a different way into Miss Mifford's affections--as her protector.

Northcott had approached him in White's that afternoon and had explained that Freddie's public support of his sister-in-law would be greatly beneficial in protecting Miss Mifford from society's censure. Freddie had listened politely as the duke had plead his case, though inside he had been desperately fighting against the delighted smile which had tugged valiantly at the corners of his mouth.

"I should be glad to lend Miss Mifford my support," Freddie had replied when Northcott had finished saying his piece, his voice laced with appropriate level of gravitas for his statement.

Both gentlemen agreed that Freddie would begin his quest that evening, at Lady Stanton's ball, and Freddie now stood in front of the mirror in his dressing-chamber, surveying his chosen outfit for the evening. His valet, Farley, hovered anxiously beside him, as Freddie inspected every element of his appearance--from the top of his golden head, right down to his slippered toes.

"Are you certain a white cravat is appropriate?" Freddie questioned once again, to which the valet nodded his head furiously.

"I consulted The Mirror of Graces and several other works on manners and etiquette, my lord," Farley said, as he stepped forward to brush an imaginary speck of lint from Freddie's shoulder, "As well as confirming that I was right with two valets--both from the most esteemed households--whom I met in Weston's when I was collecting your waistcoat. Full mourning is not necessary, as Lady Hardthistle was not a blood relative; you are, however, expected to dress somewhat sombrely."

"Then this is perfect," Freddie commented, as he glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He wore a black tailcoat of fine merino-wool, over his newly acquired charcoal-grey waistcoat and dark trousers. Usually, he employed far more flair and colour when he dressed, but he was not too put-out by the austerity of his outfit--in fact, he believed he looked more dashing than usual.

"Do you know, Farley?" Freddie mused, as he adjusted his coat one last time, "I do believe black is my colour."

"It is, my lord," Farley beamed, "Though we could say that about almost any colour."

"Now that's not true," Freddie replied, modestly, Miss Mifford's assertion that he was big-headed forefront in his mind, "You know that beige does not become me."

With one last glance in the mirror to make certain that everything was in order, Freddie took his leave, instructing Farley to have his room ready for his return at midnight. He would not stay long at Lady Stanton's, for he was due to travel early the next morning to Faversham, for Lady Hardthistle's funeral.

The journey to Grosvenor Square was uneventful but slow, and Freddie tapped his foot impatiently against the carriage floor as it trundled slowly through the evening traffic. Finally, after a half-hour--twice the time it would have taken him to walk--he arrived at Stanton House.

"Lord Chambers, what a surprise!"

The wide eyes and slight flare of nostrils that accompanied Lady Stanton's greeting confirmed that his presence was, indeed, a surprise. The countess gave a quick, nervous glance over her shoulder to the ballroom, where Freddie presumed Miss Mifford already was. Evidently, she was worried he would be insulted by the young lady's presence.

"I was not going to attend, given the sad events of yesterday evening," Freddie answered, smoothly, "But it has come to my attention that some members of the ton are labouring under the assumption that poor Miss Mifford had some part to play in Lady Hardthistle's death, and I want everyone to know that I stand behind her."

"You do?" Lady Stanton's mouth was a perfect "o" of surprise.

"I do," Freddie confirmed, and the countess visibly shivered with delight at being given express permission to share such a juicy morsel of gossip.

"Do enjoy yourself, Lord Chambers," Lady Stanton answered, with a distracted air. Her eyes were already glancing over Freddie's shoulder to the next arriving guest, with whom no doubt she wanted to share her news.

Freddie gave a short bow and made his way from the entrance hall to the ballroom beyond. Dozens of heads turned to peer at him, as he strode into the room, and he spotted several ladies whispering to each other, before pointedly glancing to the opposite side of the room.

Freddie followed the direction of their gaze and his eyes fell upon Miss Mifford, who looked resplendent in a gown of frothy white. She stood beside her sister and the duke, as well as Lord Crabb and his wife. Freddie smirked, glad for once for the gossiping tabbies, who had helped him find Miss Mifford with ease.

Squaring his shoulders, Freddie crossed the crowded ballroom in long, confident strides, until he arrived before the group. The crowd had fallen silent, perhaps expecting some sort of confrontation, and there were a few audible sighs of disappointment as Freddie dropped into a low bow before Miss Mifford.

"How charmed I am to see you again, Miss Mifford," Freddie drawled, before offering his greetings to the others. They all made polite conversation for a short while, about the orchestra, the refreshments, and the balminess of the evening, before enough time had passed to allow Freddie politely steal Miss Mifford away.

"Would you care for a dance, Miss Mifford?" Freddie queried.

The duchess did not have to prod her sister to reply this time, for Freddie had barely finished speaking before Miss Mifford blurted a quick "yes" in response.

His ego somewhat pleased by her eagerness, Freddie offered the petite miss his arm, before escorting her towards the dancefloor.

"I would like to thank you for offering me your support," she began, but Freddie cut her off with a wave of his gloved hand.

"I do not require your thanks," he answered, with a shrug, "I know that you are not guilty of murdering Lady Hardthistle. The only thing I know you to be guilty of, Miss Mifford, is failing to fall in love with me--and that is not a crime, merely a sign of questionable taste."

Beside him, Miss Mifford visibly bristled, and Freddie found himself delighted by the flush of irritation which stained her cheeks. She muttered something under her breath, which Freddie did not quite catch, before taking a deep breath and turning her blue eyes his way.

"My lord," she began, her voice a hurried rush, "I have reason to believe that I know who might have killed the baroness--Sir Cadogan. I heard him arguing with Lady Hardthistle on the night of Lady Collins' musicale; he believed that she had deliberately sold him a barren mare. He was most agitated, and he threatened to wring her neck. It is possible, is it not, that Sir Cadogan is the culprit? He was also present at the ball, and I do not recall having seen him in the gardens for the firework display."

Freddie stilled; he had been so fixated on believing Mr Fitzgibbons to be guilty, that he had not considered that someone else might have had reason to kill Lady Hardthistle. A foolish assumption, for she had been a truly terrible woman when she lived.

"My sisters have some experience with solving mysterious murders," Miss Mifford continued, oblivious to Freddie's surprise, "And they always say that there are only ever two reasons for murder; money or lust."

"We can safely rule out the latter," Freddie snorted, forgetting for a moment that he

was in the presence of a lady.

"If that is the case," Miss Mifford flushed again, delighting Freddie once more, "Then we can say that Sir Cadogan is our prime suspect. He had the motive; we just need to discover if he had the means. I will try to subtly question the other guests who attended Lady Albermay's ball, to see if they can recall seeing him around the time she was murdered."

"And I shall question the man himself," Freddie added, "Once I return from Faversham; Lady Hardthistle is to be buried tomorrow and her will read, and my presence is required for both."

"Then we shall exchange notes upon your return," Miss Mifford decided, and Freddie found himself faintly thrilled that he and Miss Mifford now had a shared interest. Granted, it was usually customary for courting couples to find commonality in their enjoyment of literature or the arts, but Freddie would take whatever olive-branch Miss Mifford offered.

For he was courting her, he realised with a slight start. His interest in helping her had not sprung from a well of altruistic intentions, but rather self-interest. Freddie found Miss Mifford charmingly beautiful, irritatingly immune to his charms, and utterly beguiling. As the only other person to have ever beguiled him so completely was himself, Freddie knew that he was on to a winner--or a wife.

He just needed to convince Miss Mifford to view him in a similarly flattering light.

The music came to an end, and the usual scramble to trade places with those on the dancefloor ensued. Freddie took Miss Mifford's hand and led her to the centre of the floor--where they could best be viewed and admired--and they were then joined by three other couples for a French cotillion. The dance was a lively one, with much skipping, hopping, and changing of partners, and Freddie could not help but resent

each gentleman he was forced to hand Miss Mifford off to.

Freddie's attention was so taken by Miss Mifford, that he did not realise their dancing had attracted so much notice until the music came to an end.

"Look how many people are staring," Miss Mifford whispered, a little breathlessly, as she took Freddie's proffered arm, "Thank you, my lord; no one can doubt your support now."

"Er, ye," Freddie replied stupidly, still a little dazed by her.

The whole room was indeed staring at them, and as Freddie led Miss Mifford back to her clan, he felt dozens of pairs of eyes follow them. He puffed out his chest, for both the audience and Miss Mifford's benefit, and handed her back to her family with a flourishing bow.

"Your servant, Miss Mifford," Freddie said, and as he rose to a stand and impulsive impishness came over him, and he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

It was Miss Mifford's turn to look a bit dazed, and her blue eyes met Freddie's in a flash of confusion and--what Freddie hoped to be--desire.

"Until we meet again," Freddie said, and with a nod to the duke, duchess, and Lord and Lady Crabb, he took his leave.

He could still feel the eyes of the crowd upon him as he crossed the room, and several fellows tried to catch his attention, but Freddie paid them no heed. He could not remain in the room without being near Miss Mifford, and as his presence--in his state of almost-mourning--was already somewhat questionable, he did not wish to bring further censure on her by behaving in a scandalous manner.

There would be other balls, though, he consoled himself. Other balls in which Freddie might dance attendance on Miss Mifford, claim her hand for the waltz, and peacock about her so that every young-blood within a three-mile radius might know to keep away lest they wished to earn his ire.

But, first, he had a murder to solve.

Following the death of her husband, Lady Hardthistle had taken up residence on a small estate in Faversham, called Nettlebank. The house itself was not much to look at--an old, rambling cottage from the Tudor period--but the grounds surrounding it housed the finest of stables, which, in turn, housed some of England's most pedigree bloodstock.

The worth of Lady Hardthistle's stable was difficult for even Freddie--a keen horseman--to quantify, though one might be able to judge its value by the number of distant relatives who had slithered out of the woodwork for the funeral.

"Really going to miss the old girl," Mr Lorcan Bubarry commented, as the group of men who had attended the burial made their way from the small village church back to Nettlebank.

"Were you close?" Freddie raised a brow, as he struggled to hide his surprise.

"Not physically," Bubarry cleared his throat, "Or even emotionally, but spiritually we shared a love of the flat that I am certain her ladyship appreciated, in her own way."

Mr Bubarry was obviously hoping that Lady Hardthistle's appreciation of their shared love of the flat, might be reflected in her will.

"Not to speak ill of the dead," Lord Hardthistle, the nephew who had inherited the title when the former baron had passed and Freddie's maternal cousin, interrupted,

"But I for one won't miss the old bag. She funnelled most of the estate's funds into creating these stables, so when it came time for me to inherit, I received little more than the title and Hardthistle House."

"Outrageous," Mr Bubarry breathed, though Freddie himself could not see the outrage in a woman securing her financial future by making certain the stables she had built were not entailed for another's benefit.

A few souls populated the drawing room of Nettlebank Cottage when they returned, including a woman with such similar bearing to Lady Hardthistle, that Freddie did a double take.

"Lord Chambers," the stout, sour-faced woman called him over, when she spotted him glancing her way, and Freddie was forced to join her.

"Mrs Canards," the woman offered both her name and hand to Freddie.

"I am a cousin of the late Lady Hardthistle," she continued, mercifully aware enough to realise that Freddie had no clue who she was, "She was a true lady; proud, principled, and truculent until the end. I owed it to the strength of her character to come all the way from Plumpton to pay my final respects."

Freddie, who had been momentarily distracted by the use of the word truculent as a compliment, blinked in surprise as Mrs Canards mentioned the small, Cotswolds village from which Miss Mifford hailed.

"Plumpton?" he repeated, and his companion scowled in reply.

"I'm afraid the reputation of the village has been sullied somewhat by one of our inhabitants," Mrs Canards sniffed, as a black clad Ethel, and a wispy woman with a pinched face approached, "Miss Willard has informed us that one of the Mifford girls

is suspected of carrying out the barbaric act. I cannot say that I am surprised, given that the eldest girl also found herself mixed up in a murder, and the second as well. Those girls have a predilection for scandal, my lord. Ah, Mrs Wickling, there you are--no, I did not ask for brandy, I specified tea. What will the marquess think of me, imbibing alcohol at such an early hour?"

Freddie hid a frown; it was not Mrs Canards' consumption of alcohol before noon which he was inclined to judge, rather her slandering of the Mifford clan.

"Miss Mifford played no hand in Lady Hardthistle's murder," Freddie answered, as calmly as he could, "There is another suspect, whom I am confident will soon be brought to justice."

Ethel gasped as Freddie revealed this and brought a lace-gloved hand to her chest. She was dressed in full mourning, in a heavy, expensive looking, black-bombazine gown and matching mob-cap drawn low over her brows.

"I can't think of anyone else who might wish to kill Lady Hardthistle," she cried, dabbing at her cheek--which was noticeably dry--with a handkerchief, "She was too gentle to have had any enemies. No, I cannot believe it."

"Believe it you must," Freddie countered, refusing to bow to histrionics, "Miss Mifford is innocent--and I shall prove it."

He then bowed his head to the lady's maid, and Mrs Canards and her companion, before turning on the heel of his Hessian and making for the far side of the room, where a parlour-maid and footman stood, offering refreshments.

"A brandy, please," Freddie bid the footman, who duly disappeared to fetch him one.

As Freddie waited for the lad to return, he surveyed the room's inhabitants. Most, he

assumed, were Lady Hardthistle's neighbours; country folk dressed in their Sunday-best, uncomfortable and itching to leave. He spotted a few distant cousins on his mama's side, garbed in far finer clothing than the villagers, but wearing a similar look of impatience on their faces, as well as the vicar--who was guzzling his second glass of brandy--standing alongside a country-squire type.

The footman returned with his brandy, and Freddie sipped on it gratefully for a few minutes, until the gathered masses decided it was time to leave. Lord Hardthistle became the object of attention, as the guests streamed toward him--the most official of the baroness' distant relatives--to offer their condolences and goodbyes. At last, there was only Freddie, Lord Hardthistle, Mr Bubarry, and a Mr Hillcrest--another distant cousin--left standing, and the gentleman that Freddie had presumed to be a country-squire cleared his throat.

"Gentlemen," he said, with a deep Kentish twang, "If there are no objections, I think now is as good a time as any to read her ladyship's last will and testament--don't you agree?"

"Most definitely," Mr Bubarry answered, with haste.

"As you wish," Lord Hardthistle--to whom the comment had really been directed--added, with far more restraint.

Thus, the men made their way to the library, where Mr Osbourne began the laborious task of reading the will. The young footman kept the gentleman topped up with brandy, as the solicitor read through the usual lengthy and detailed stipulations about servants' pensions, taxes, and tithes to the church, before finally getting to the meat of the matter.

"To my treasured nephew, Matthew Bubarry," Mr Osbourne intoned, causing the aforementioned to bolt upright from his snooze, "Who so shared my love of the flat, I

bequeath my first edition copy of Morrell's A Compendium of Flat Racing in The British Isles."

"Is that it?" Mr Bubarry spluttered, glancing around the room in disgust. Mr Osbourne, who presumably had great experience with such ill-mannered outbursts, ignored him and continued.

"To my nephew, Lord Hardthistle, I bequeath the paintings and portraits of Nettlebank, which were collected by his uncle and hold some monetary and much sentimental value," Mr Osbourne droned on.

"It's better than nothing," Freddie heard the baron mutter under his breath.

"And finally," the solicitor drew a large breath, "My remaining monies, jewels, properties, and property--including bloodstock--shall be left to..."

Freddie wasn't entirely certain, but he was nearly sure that Mr Osbourne's pause was for dramatic effect--possibly the only bit of theatrical fun to be found in the law profession.

"...Miss Ethel Willard, my fast and firm companion in my last decades of widowhood."

The gentlemen of the room gasped in surprise and displeasure, and much muttering ensued. But while the others were thinking themselves hard-done-by, Freddie was thinking of something that Miss Mifford had said.

That the two motivations for murder were usually lust or money.

Which meant that out of everyone, Ethel was the person who had gained the most from her mistress' death. Was it possible that the lady's maid had played a hand in

Lady Hardthistle's violent death?

Freddie racked his brains and recalled that on the very night of the murder, the baroness had ventured into the gardens in search of Ethel..and, it was Ethel who had found the corpse!

Motive and means, Freddie thought to himself, as his feet itched to get back to London so he could share his news with Miss Mifford.

Chapter Five

As Eudora was bearing the brunt of Mrs Mifford's company and fussing, Mary decided that it was only fair that Emily take her place on a jaunt along the Row, while Mary brought their youngest sister for a spot of shopping on Bond Street.

Emily was not entirely certain how it was fair that she make the sacrifice to take Eudora's place, rather than Mary, but she did not argue, for one had to choose one's battles when dealing with an eldest sister who always thought herself in the right.

While the jaunt would force her into the extended company of her mother, it would also afford her the opportunity to spend some time with Jane, who was--it was universally agreed--the sanest member of the clan.

As the barouche drove towards Hyde Park--hood down, so that they might be better admired--Jane kept up a steady stream of conversation which, in turn, kept Mrs Mifford occupied and out of mischief. Alas, when the vehicle reached the gate to the park at Hyde Park Corner, Jane's plan came to a sudden halt as the matriarch of the family began to firmly ignore her and focus her attention on the other riders and vehicles making their way toward the Row.

"Oh, look," Mrs Mifford called loudly, elbowing Lord Crabb so forcefully that he winced, "There's Lady Jacobs and her daughter. A-hoy, a-hoy!"

To Emily's horror, her mother leaned over the side of the carriage and waved frantically in Lady Jacob's direction.

"Mother, sit down," Jane hissed, pulling her mother back into her seat, "We are not on a boat."

"No," Mrs Mifford agreed, as she straightened her bonnet petulantly, "We are in a gleaming new barouche, and I should like for her to see it and compare it to her own vehicle--which is rather shoddy, I think you'll agree."

Beside Mrs Mifford, Lord Crabb stifled a smile--for, mercifully, he found her antics amusing--while Jane and Emily breathed sighs of annoyance.

"Mama," Jane adopted a stern tone, "You must be on your best behaviour, for Emily's sake. We cannot have people saying that she is both a murderess and from an uncouth family."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs Mifford sniffed, "No one would ever think me uncouth."

"But they do think me a murderess," Emily interrupted, "Look at how people are staring."

She waved her gloved hand--kid skin, to match her ankle boots--outside the carriage, where several people were gawping at her from their vehicles. One grande-dame was so intrigued, that she actually lifted a pair of quizzing glasses to her eyes so that she could get a better look.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs Mifford sniffed again, "People are looking because they think you the next Marchioness of Highfield. I don't know how I raised such thin-skinned daughters."

It was a mystery, Emily agreed to herself, how she and her sisters had managed to avoid inheriting their mother's misplaced--but rather admirable--sense of self-assurance. Mrs Mifford's skin was as thick as a rhinoceros' hide, and she never once

doubted that anyone might not be as charmed by her presence, as she herself was.

"I am not going to be the next Marchioness of Highfield," Emily cautioned carefully, "I pray that you won't say that to anyone, or people will believe I have ill-advisably set my cap at Lord Chambers--and I will be left humiliated when he runs off and marries some moneyed-chit with a mute mother."

"You have not set your cap at him," Mrs Mifford replied, affronted, "Rather the other way around. He was most dogged in his determination to dance with you at Lady Stanton's ball--he had eyes for no one else."

"Don't be absurd," Emily rolled her eyes, before glancing to Jane for support. But her elder sister did not join her in mocking her mother's fantasy, instead, she nodded in agreement. Confused, Emily glanced to Ivo, who wore a rather knowing smirk on his handsome face.

Fit for Bedlam, Emily thought nervously, they were all fit for Bedlam. Obviously, extended time alone with Mrs Mifford had addled Jane's usually sensible brain. Lord Chambers had no interest in Emily, apart from their joint involvement in investigating Lady Hardthistle's murder. And, even that interest was miraculous, considering that Lord Chambers likely took little notice of anything bar his reflection in the mirror.

Yes, Emily assured herself, as she settled back into her seat, everyone was completely mad. There was as much a chance of Lord Chambers being romantically interested in Emily, as there was of she having an interest in he...

Emily forced her attention outside of the carriage, where the great and good of the ton were parading, all kitted out in their best wears. The young ladies all wore extravagantly decorated bonnets, whilst the gentlemen wore tightly-cut riding coats in various bright colours. A few of Ivo's acquaintances hailed him as they passed, and

several other ladies waved to Jane, for she was--as Emily kept forgetting--a viscountess, and much in demand socially.

Mrs Mifford, her bonnet festooned with half the contents of the plumassier's, waved a regal hand at nearly everyone who passed--as though she were Queen Charlotte herself. For a moment, Emily felt embarrassment down to the tips of her toes, but as a carriage approached, bearing the familiar face of Lady Francesca, Emily found herself drawing courage from her mother's unshakable confidence.

Lady Francesca sat beside her friend, Miss Amelia Gardner, the young lady who had joined in the insulting of the Mifford clan at Lady Collins' musicale all those nights ago. While Miss Gardner looked radiant, clad in the finest of clothes--as one would expect from the daughter of a wealthy industrialist--Lady Francesca appeared so wan, that Emily almost felt a stab of pity for her.

Then, she recalled that it was Lady Francesca who had loudly and publicly accused her of murder, and Emily felt her pity melt away.

Lady Francesca had not yet spotted their carriage, and Emily steeled herself for some sort of outburst when she did, but, mercifully, two white knights rode to the rescue.

"Mr Bunting and Mr Fitzgibbons," Mrs Mifford whispered, as she spotted whom Emily was observing, "Mr Fitzgibbons has designs on Miss Gardner, but by all accounts she is leading him on something of a merry dance. As for his companion, Lady Francesca has her beady eye on him, but her family's fortune is not sufficient enough for him to offer for her. I do wish someone would tell her, for it's painful to watch her so obviously mooning over the lad."

Usually, Emily ignored malicious gossip, but the news that Lady Francesca's affections were not returned by Mr Bunting gave her a momentary sense of satisfaction.

It is not kind to derive pleasure from the misfortune of other's, Emily reminded herself sternly, in an attempt to quash the feeling--though it still persisted.

Mercifully, Jane was on hand to distract, and she tut-tutted loudly.

"Honestly, mama," she said, rolling her eyes, "You are an incorrigible gossip. You state all that as though it is fact, when it is likely merely drawing room whispers."

"I can see the truth with my own eyes," Mrs Mifford grumbled, nodding in the direction of the handsome pair.

The two gentlemen had brought their steeds to a halt alongside the Gardner's carriage, and Mr Fitzgibbons was chatting with great animation to Miss Gardner and her mama. Mr Bunting, however, looked most uncomfortable, and though Lady Francesca batted her eyelashes and fiddled with her bonnet, he did not direct his gaze her way.

There was something familiar about Mr Bunting, Emily decided as she observed his profile. Then, as though he had heard her thoughts, the young gentlemen turned his head her way, and Emily gave a gasp of recognition.

He was the fellow whom Emily had spotted sharing a passionate embrace with Lady Francesca at Lady Collins' musicale. Mr Bunting gave a frown, as he tried to decipher just where he knew Emily from, but thankfully, as the carriage continued along the Row, she was soon out of sight.

Emily fidgeted nervously with her gloves, as a wave of guilt washed over her for her earlier mean-spirited thoughts towards Lady Francesca. No wonder the poor girl had looked so wan; the young lady must have been expecting a proposal after being so generous with her favours, now Mr Bunting would not even look at her. What a rake he was!

As Emily pondered the cruelty some men were capable of, her mother kept up a running commentary on everyone who passed.

"There's Lady Hickletrough and her eldest daughter. She never did manage to marry her off and one doesn't struggle to guess why."

"Oh, there's Lady Archer. She's found herself a new dressmaker, I see. I must ask her for their name, so I know to avoid them."

"Oh, doesn't Sir Cadogan look pleased with himself? I can't imagine why with that unfortunate nose."

While Emily had ignored most of her mother's acerbic comments, she glanced up at the mention of Sir Cadogan's name. Mrs Mifford's observation that Sir Cadogan looked pleased with himself was true, the squire wore a very satisfied smile which near eclipsed his bulbous red nose.

"Cadogan, old chap," another rider called out as he passed him, "You look like the cat that's got the cream."

"I've just had some very good news, Boyne," the squire called back, his words sounding a little slurred to Emily's ears, "Truly marvellous."

Emily longed to join in the conversation and shout out to ask Sir Cadogan what this wonderful news was, but the rules of propriety did not allow young ladies to hang out of carriages bellowing at gentlemen they did not know. Which was a pity.

Sir Cadogan, who was riding in the opposite direction, soon disappeared from view, and Emily settled back into her seat, as Mrs Mifford resumed her running commentary on everyone her beady eye happened to land upon.

The family spent another half hour parading along the Row, until Mrs Mifford was satisfied that they had been seen by enough people.

"What fun that was," she exclaimed, as they drove through the far gate onto Serpentine Road, "Wasn't that fun, girls?"

"Thrilling," Jane replied, dryly.

Her brown eyes wore a glazed look, and Emily guessed that her sister had spent a large portion of the ride daydreaming that she was elsewhere. Ivo, too, looked bored and restless, and was distractedly tapping the heel of his Hessian boot in time with the horses' clapping hooves. They were, Emily thought, as she glanced between them, a couple most unsuited to the rigidity of London society.

"We must hurry back," Mrs Mifford continued, "And dress for Lady Wilcox's gala."

"Oh, yes, we wouldn't want to be late for that," Jane agreed, though as she caught Emily's eye she winked conspiratorially.

London could be chaotic, confusing, and cruel, but Emily was glad that no matter how far from home they travelled, her sisters would never change.

"Is that my new reticule?" Jane queried suddenly, and Emily's fondness for her sister's consistency of character vanished.

"Honestly, between you, Eudora, and Mary, it's a wonder I have a stitch of clothing left to my name. Whoever said sisters were a blessing did not have to deal with you lot," Jane began, and continued her diatribe against her thieving siblings the whole way back to St James' Square.

Lady Wilcox's opulent home in Belgravia was bursting at the seams with the great

and good of London society. Under the glittering chandeliers of the ballroom, couples dressed in silks and satins--and that was just the men--danced to the music provided by an orchestral quartet in the corner. The smell of beeswax, expensive perfumes, and flowers filled the air, and as Emily wandered from room to room, she could not help but be mesmerised by the sheer glamour of the evening.

In the corner of one room, she spotted Mrs Sarah Siddons--the best tragedienne to have ever walked the stage--holding court with the thespian set. In another room, she spied Mr Wilberforce--the esteemed politician and trumpeter of abolition--in deep debate with several egalitarians. And, then, much to her delight, Prinny stalked past, trailed by a courtier, complaining loudly about the food.

Emily was so starstruck at having seen the Prince Regent at such close range, that she did not hear Lord Chambers sneaking up behind her, until he pointedly cleared his throat.

"A-hem," he said, somehow managing to convey in two syllables his utter surprise that his glittering presence had not immediately caught her eye.

"Lord Chambers," Emily turned and dropped into a quick curtsy to hide the confusion she felt at seeing him again. A kaleidoscope of butterflies appeared to have taken up residence in her stomach, and when she rose from her curtsy and caught a glint of amusement in the marquess' sky-blue eyes, they took flight again.

"I hope the funeral went well," Emily said, clearing her throat in an attempt to sound more serious than she felt.

"As well as these things can," the marquess answered easily, watching her with an indecipherable gaze.

"Did you learn anything in Faversham which might aid our investigation?" Emily

continued brusquely, feeling more than a little flustered by him. He was behaving as though they were intimates, rather than two strangers thrown together by fate and a mystery.

"I did," Chambers agreed, raising his eyebrows in mild surprise at her tone, "If you would care to take a walk with me, I will divulge what I learned."

Lord Chambers proffered his arm, and there was little that Emily could do but take it. She reluctantly placed a gloved hand on his forearm--which was hard as a rock beneath his soft merino coat--and allowed him to lead the way.

"My mama is in the card room," Emily said, hoping to supply a destination for their walk.

"Avoid card room, understood," the marquess answered, drawing her from the parlour room towards the French doors which led out to the gardens.

"No, that wasn't what I meant," Emily protested, but there was little conviction to her tone and she allowed him lead the way.

Outside, the sky had turned from dusk to dark, though a few faint traces of pink remained on the horizon. It was a clear night, and a sliver of a crescent moon hung low in the sky, small but bright.

"The funeral was a quiet affair," Lord Chambers continued, once they were alone in the quiet air, "However, the reading of the will brought a rather interesting revelation."

"Oh?" Emily held her breath, as she waited for him to reveal what that was.

"Lady Hardthistle left everything to her maid, Ethel. If ever a motive existed for

murder, it is the chance of inheriting a large fortune, is it not? And, Ethel did not much seem upset by her mistress' death," the marquess finished with a flourish, then waited for Emily's response.

It was unusual for a member of the aristocracy to bequeath their fortune to a servant, Emily internally agreed, but was there perhaps more to it than Lord Chambers imagined?

"While that's very interesting, it does not necessarily mean that Ethel is the guilty party," Emily answered, in an attempt to reason with him, "Lady Hardthistle had no offspring, and, perhaps, Ethel is a distant relative? She was more of a companion to her than a maid, after all."

"How do you explain how unaffected she was by her mistress' death?" Lord Chambers countered.

"You are assuming that Ethel liked her mistress," Emily could not help but laugh, "You may not believe it, my lord, but just because a servant feigns respect for you, it does not actually mean that they feel it."

"Of course they do," Lord Chambers snorted, his confidence that he was adored by all unshaken.

What a difference money made, Emily thought with a smile. The Mifford's own maid, Nora, was not paid enough to conceal how irritating she found her duties--and the people she performed them for--to be. If Mrs Mifford was to suddenly expire, it was doubtful that Nora would shed any tears.

"We shall have to agree to disagree on that score," Emily reasoned, but as she noted the slight gleam of hurt in his eyes, she allowed him one concession, "Though you are correct that the contents of the will has marked Ethel as a suspect--however

unlikely.”

”You are forgetting that on the night in question,” the marquess interrupted, determined to have his say, ”That Ethel was nowhere to be found--and Lady Hardthistle only ventured into the gardens to look for her. It’s entirely possible that, after a lifetime of service, she decided she could wait no longer, snapped, and strangled her mistress to death.”

As Emily pictured the frail maid in her mind, she could not help but allow her disbelief show. There was no way that the reed thin woman had possessed the strength to overthrow the considerably sturdier Lady Hardthistle and then strangle her to death.

She voiced this thought to Lord Chambers, who was momentarily staggered.

”She had an accomplice, then,” he replied, after a second’s pause.

”Perhaps,” Emily agreed, though her teeth were gritted--the marquess was like a dog with a bone over Ethel, ”However, I do think that we should remain focused on our other suspect; Sir Cadogan.”

In hushed tones, Emily explained that she had seen the squire earlier that day, looking most pleased with himself.

”He said that he’d had some good news,” she finished, triumphantly.

In the silence which followed, all that could be heard was the distant sound of the guests from inside the house, while Lord Chambers’ thick eyebrows were drawn together in disbelief.

”That’s hardly as startling a revelation as my one about Ethel,” the marquess finally

replied, his bottom lip pouting.

"It's not a competition," she huffed in response, "We are supposed to be working together as partners. I should have guessed that your ego was too large to allow anyone else have an opinion or an idea opposite to your own."

Feeling vexed, by both his attitude and the luscious curve of his bottom lip, Emily spun on the heel of her slipper, determined to stalk away. Having come of age in a house with four other females, Emily knew well how to make a dramatic exit, which adequately portrayed her annoyance, and she stuck her nose in the air and prepared to stomp away.

Lord Chambers, however, had other ideas; he reached out a gloved hand to grab her wrist, and spun her around gently to face him.

"Forgive me."

"I--I beg your pardon?"

"I apologise," he replied, his blue eyes dancing, "You are correct, my ego got in the way of our investigation. While it's vaguely possible that Ethel is the true villain, Sir Cadogan is the man we should be focusing on."

Emily blinked, unable to comprehend such a swift and sincere apology, for she usually never received any apology when she fell out with her sisters.

"Oh," she answered, for want of anything better to say. She paused, and allowed herself a few seconds to gather her thoughts, "I suppose, if you see if you can learn anything about Sir Cadogan's movements on the night, I can try find out if there's anything we need to know about Ethel. Servants are always gossiping, I'm certain if there's any scandal attached to Ethel that some of the staff in Northcott House

already know it.”

”How clever,” Lord Chambers smiled, ”I would never think to ask a servant.”

No, Emily agreed--though she did not say it aloud--he wasn’t the type of man to spend an afternoon conversing with his staff.

A harmonious silence fell between them, and Emily pondered what she might say next. She wasn’t terribly adept at small talk, and she suspected that attempting any with a man as handsome as the marquess would not go well. True, she found him highly annoying, but even she could not deny that he was the most handsome gentleman in all of London--perhaps, even all of England.

Lord Chambers’ grip on her wrist had now loosened, but he did not let her go. Instead, his hand slipped down to her own and held it gently--though for all his gentleness, it still felt to Emily as though her skin beneath her glove was burning.

She glanced up at him, with some confusion, and found that his blue eyes--usually twinkling with amusement--were now as dark and tumultuous as the sea before a storm. Her breath caught in her throat, and as Lord Chambers tugged her towards him, Emily realised that he intended to kiss her.

More startlingly, she realised that she wanted him to.

Her lips parted in an ”o” of surprise, and she braced herself for the feel of his mouth against hers--

”If you’d all like to follow me to the pond, you’ll have a chance to glimpse my rare night-blooming water lilies, found on an expedition to the Americas--which I generously sponsored.”

Emily jumped in fright at the sound of Lady Wilcox's booming voice sounding out across the night air. The countess was an avid collector of rare botanicals, and had obviously corralled a number of her guests into a tour of the gardens.

"The lilies lasted longer than the peacock," Lady Wilcox continued loudly, "Poor thing didn't survive the winter."

"We shouldn't be seen out here alone together," Emily whispered nervously to the marquess, as she realised the party would soon pass by them. "You remain here, and I will return the way we came."

"Allow me to escort you--" he began to protest, but Emily hushed him with a wave of her hand.

"No, no need," she said, her voice so high-pitched that it was a wonder he could hear her, "Er, we shall just continue with our agreed plan, and reconvene if we learn something interesting. Goodnight, my lord."

Without waiting for a reply, Emily fled the scene, her mind awash with confusion. The Marquess of Highfield had attempted to kiss her--and, worse, she had wanted him to.

Had he truly wished to share a passionate embrace with her, or was he just an opportunistic rake?

As she raced from the parlour room, towards the card room, Emily racked her brain to see if she could recall any gossip about Lord Chambers, but she could come up with none. The marquess' reputation was as immaculate as the starched white cravat he wore at his neck.

Still, she could not allow herself to attribute their shared moment to anything other

than a mild insanity, brought on by the balmy night and the excitement of the murder mystery.

Lord Chambers had no real interest in her, Emily assured herself, as she smoothed down her skirts before she entered the card room. It wasn't possible--for it would mean that her mama had been right about something, and she could not allow that to happen, or she'd never hear the end of it.

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Chapter Six

Freddie waited for a few moments after Miss Mifford's swift retreat, before he too returned inside. He debated whether he should return to the fray of the gala, but found the thought of watching Miss Mifford from across the room--and being unable to touch her--too much to bear.

Curses, he thought to himself, as he stalked towards the entrance hall, he was in deeper than he had first imagined.

Not once in his life had Freddie found a woman more interesting and absorbing than he found himself, and he was uncertain how he was supposed to proceed. The memory of Miss Mifford's hand in his, her sweet scent as he pulled her close, and her plump lips ripe for kissing, filled his mind, and when the footman at the door questioned if he should summon his carriage, Freddie was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Yes," he eventually replied, clearing his throat to disguise his embarrassment, "Yes, do."

His driver and carriage arrived in record time and as Freddie clambered into the compartment, he instructed the driver to take him to White's rather than home.

He had no idea why, as he was usually content in his own company, but tonight he felt he needed to hear the comforting chatter of men, while he nursed a large brandy.

White's, one of London's most exclusive gentleman's clubs, was situated at the top

of St James” Street in an imposing building made of Portland stone, with a grand Palladian facade. Freddie”s carriage stopped just at the front door. He disembarked and swiftly climbed the steps to the entrance, where he was ushered inside by a sombrely uniformed footman.

Given the early hour, the club was not too busy. The married male members had no doubt been corralled by their wives to attend this ball or that, leaving the dining room half-empty.

As Freddie made his way through the door, a bunch of young-bloods seated at the famed bow-window glanced up nervously. They occupied the seat usually reserved for the most esteemed club members, and Freddie”s arrival meant that this no longer included them.

Freddie had no wish to quibble over titles, nor command the attention of the room, so he merely ignored them and made for a cosy Queen Anne by the fireplace.

”A brandy,” Freddie bid the footman, who materialised at his side the moment his bottom hit the cushion of his chair.

”Actually--make that a decanter,” he called, as the footman scurried away.

He was feeling contemplative and one glass of brandy would not do.

The servant returned in the blink of an eye, bearing a tray with a crystal tumbler and a large decanter of the finest brandy a man could wish for. Freddie poured himself a large measure, took a deep sip, and settled back into his chair to mull over his encounter with Miss Mifford.

He hadn”t intended to try kiss her--the urge had overcome him suddenly, as he had held her hand in his. If Lady Wilcox hadn”t interrupted them, perhaps he would now

be reliving the taste of her soft lips and the warm feel of her body pressed against his.

Alas, they had been interrupted, and now all Freddie was left with was a sense of longing and mild insecurity--a completely foreign experience for a man of his confidence.

Miss Mifford had dashed off faster than a hot-blood at Ascot; had it been nerves, or had she snapped out of her daze and realised that she found Freddie repulsive?

Freddie took another deep sip of his brandy and tried to talk himself down of the cliff of despair upon which he stood.

Miss Mifford could not possibly find him repulsive; The Belle Monde, that arbiter of fashion and beauty, had only last month described him as London's most handsome bachelor. The gossip columns in several news-sheets had already declared him the best dressed man of the season. And, just that very evening, as Farley had assisted him into his coat, the valet had professed that he believed Freddie to be the living embodiment of Adonis himself.

No, Freddie assured himself, she could not possibly be repulsed by his looks.

Was it his personality?

Freddie snorted a little at this idea, and dismissed it--there was nothing more charming to women than a self-confident man. He was being utterly ridiculous; Miss Mifford's flight had nothing to do with him, and more to do with her own nerves, that was all.

"Have you finally given into insanity, Chambers?" a voice called out from behind him, "I did not expect to find you here, giggling to yourself in the corner."

Freddie turned his head and found Delaney, dressed in dark evening attire, standing behind him, his face a picture of amusement.

"Is it a crime to find oneself amusing?" Freddie replied, with a wave of his hand, "If so, lock me up and throw away the key."

"If it was a crime to laugh at one's own jokes, half the members of this club would be in Newgate," Delaney replied, as he slipped into the chair opposite him, "Now, where's the footman got to? When I have a bit of brandy in me, I usually find you as amusing as you find yourself..."

The footman appeared, without having to be asked, with another glass for Delaney. The baron helped himself to a large measure of brandy, and settled himself into his chair, before launching into a long, detailed account of his night at the theatre.

"Of course, if Mother had told me that she had invited Miss Hunt, I never would have agreed to join her," Delaney finished, with a grumble, "There's nothing worse for starting marriage rumours than spending the evening on display in a box with an unmarried chit."

"Surely, at this stage in your life, the tabbies of the ton know that it's not you who is marriage minded, but rather your mother?" Freddie answered, with a snort of laughter.

Lady Delaney had been trying to marry her son off for at least a decade, but to no avail. The baron was a hopeless bachelor, who was happy to have his title pass on to one of his younger brothers.

"They probably do," Delaney agreed, "Though, it would be helpful if they could inform my mama. Tell me, how went your evening? Not very well, I'd hazard to guess, if you've found yourself here at such an early hour."

Freddie hesitated before answering, as that strange feeling of insecurity crept over him again. What if he shared his feelings about Miss Mifford with Delaney, and then she rejected him outright? Would his friend forever tease him about his unrequited love?

Unfortunately for Freddie, Delaney--as his oldest friend--knew him better than most, and instantly guessed that something was amiss.

"Lud," he cleared his throat, and set his glass down upon the table, "You were chasing after that Mifford chit, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," Freddie spluttered in response, unable to meet his friend's eye.

"Don't fob me off, Chambers," Delaney replied, cheerfully, "You got yourself all dressed up for some party, in the hopes of chasing Miss Mifford, and when you failed to catch her, you retreated to here to lick your wounds."

"You make it sound as though she doesn't even know who I am," Freddie answered, feeling highly offended, "If you must know, Miss Mifford and I have joined forces, in an effort to try solve Lady Hardthistle's murder--"

--"But you would like to do more than solve mysteries with the lass?" Delaney guessed, with a chuckle.

"She is a very accomplished and beautiful young woman," Freddie cleared his throat, "Any man would admire her."

"And is this feeling of admiration reciprocated?"

When Freddie did not reply, Delaney gave another chuckle. Freddie watched as his

friend took a large sip of his brandy and regarded him thoughtfully.

Delaney had the look of a man who was about to impart some great words of wisdom, but wanted to take his time about it.

"Spit it out, man," Freddie grumbled, after a full minute of this carry-on. Delaney could be insufferable, when he thought himself right.

"If you want to make her your wife, you need to make your intentions clear," the baron answered, with a shrug.

"In what way would a man do that?"

"The usual; call on her, dance with her, take her for a ride along the Row, or to the theatre, send her flowers, " Delaney listed, before continuing with a pointed glance, "And be humble whilst you're doing it."

"Confidence is one of the most attractive traits a man can possess," Freddie argued, though he did see some merit to Delaney's suggestion--Miss Mifford had mentioned his inflated ego several times. While Freddie did think that a large amour propre was an essential attribute in a gentleman, he did not wish to have one so large that it got in the way of things. He might be able to reign in the worst of it, he decided.

"Now, enough about courting," Delaney continued, with a vague look of distaste as he uttered the word, "Tell me about your investigation--I didn't realise you'd taken sleuthing up as a hobby. Do you have any suspects in mind, apart from Miss Mifford, that is?"

"Miss Mifford is innocent," Freddie clarified, before he launched into what they had so far learned.

"So, Mr Fitzgibbons was given an alibi by his good friend, Mr Bunting," Delaney surmised, once Freddie had explained all, "Which is rather suspicious, but Sir Cadogan has emerged as another likely contender?"

"Yes," Freddie confirmed, with a nod, "It's hard to believe that two people threatened to strangle Lady Hardthistle in such a short space of time."

"Is it really?" Delaney muttered, but as the remark was barely audible, Freddie let it slide.

"My money is on Mr Fitzgibbons," Delaney decided, as though there was a wager running in White's famed betting book, "Hot headed young man, with money woes. He saw her alone and he snapped, just like that!"

Delaney snapped his fingers to emphasise his point.

"Sir Cadogan also has money worries," Freddie pointed out, "And he's fond of a drink; a drunk man is as likely to snap as a young man."

"So, you agree it was a man, and not Ethel?" Delaney prompted, and Freddie was forced to nod in agreement.

Miss Mifford was correct in thinking that no female was capable of strangling a person to death. Freddie had seen Lady Hardthistle's corpse, and her mottled purple face; whoever had killed her had done so with violent, brute force that no woman was capable of.

"It most likely was not Ethel," Freddie agreed, though he could not help but add, "Even though inheriting the whole of Lady Hardthistle's fortune is a rather strong motive to murder her."

"So we return to Sir Cadogan," Delaney sighed, before blinking in surprise at something he saw over Freddie's shoulder. Delaney's seat was facing the door, whilst Freddie's faced the fire, so he could not see what it was that had shocked his friend.

"Well, don't look now, but look who has just walked in," Freddie continued, in a whisper. "Only the gentleman himself. I had heard that he'd not been keeping up with his accounts here, but perhaps that was just a rumour."

Freddie casually turned his head and sighted Sir Cadogan, with a mustard vest straining against his rotund stomach, making his way across the dining room to one of the tables in the corner.

"Fate has spoken," Freddie sighed, offering his friend an apologetic look, before standing up from the comfort of his chair. He could not allow the opportunity for a quiet word with Sir Cadogan slip through his fingers.

Freddie picked his way through the tables and chairs, to Sir Cadogan's spot in the corner. The squire was examining a newspaper--the Evening English Herald, which offered the best racing news--and only looked up when Freddie cleared his throat.

"Lord Chambers," Sir Cadogan blinked in surprise, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I would like a word, old chap," Freddie answered, slipping into the seat opposite without being asked.

"Of course, of course," Sir Cadogan blustered, setting the news-sheet aside, "In the market for a filly?"

Just like Lady Hardthistle, Sir Cadogan was in the business of horseflesh. Unlike the late baroness, however, the squire's stables were not nearly as illustrious.

"No, but I did wish to discuss the mare you purchased from Lady Hardthistle," Freddie answered, thinking to dive into matters straight away, "I'm told she sold you a barren mare?"

Sir Cadogan scowled, and nodded his head so furiously that his jowls continued to jiggle for several moments after he had finished.

"Did she get you too?" he growled, banging a clenched fist against his thigh, "The old witch--I'd like to buy whoever strangled her a drink. They did the world a great favour."

Freddie, who had not been expecting such a strong outburst, paused for a second before he replied.

"The night before Lady Hardthistle's murder, you were overheard threatening to strangle her," Freddie commented, keeping his tone mild, "Might I ask where you were that night, during the firework display?"

A stunned silence greeted him, as Sir Cadogan turned a rather alarming shade of purple. He looked, Freddie thought, to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit. Freddie knew of a physician in Harley Street, who could perform miracles with bloodletting leeches, but perhaps now was not the time to mention it.

"I have never been so insulted in my life," Sir Cadogan eventually replied, opting for outrage rather than answers.

"As a man who frequents this club, I highly doubt that," Freddie replied, with feigned joviality. The members of White's were notorious for their high-jinx and brandy-fuelled excesses; on some nights it reminded Freddie of his years at Eton, such was the level of maturity shown.

"Never so insulted in my life," Sir Cadogan repeated, belligerently.

"Where were you during the firework display, Sir Cadogan?" Freddie pressed, determined to have an answer.

There was another silence, in which the squire scowled murderously across the table, as Freddie waited for his answer.

"I do not have to justify myself to you," Sir Cadogan eventually replied, snatching up his copy of the Herald and pushing back his chair, "I shall be writing a strongly worded letter to the board, my lord. You cannot just go around accusing other members of murder, willy-nilly."

"It's hardly willy-nilly when you were heard threatening to strangle the woman days before she was strangled," Freddie replied, cheerfully, but Sir Cadogan had already left.

Once the older gentleman had gone, slamming the door behind him, Freddie let out a sigh.

His quiet word with Sir Cadogan hadn't gone as well as he would have liked, but his refusal to answer was rather revealing.

If Sir Cadogan was innocent, he would have been able to offer an explanation as to his whereabouts on the night. It was looking more and more likely that the old squire was the guilty party--Freddie just needed more proof.

"That didn't go well from the looks of things."

Freddie had been so lost in thought, that he had not noticed Delaney approaching until he was standing right in front of him.

"Better than it appeared," Freddie replied, "But not as well as I would have hoped."

"There's always tomorrow," Delaney consoled him, "And, speaking of which, I'd best be off. I have a meeting with my man of business in the morning, and for some reason the chap thinks I get up before noon."

"How you suffer," Freddie responded drolly, and waved his friend off.

He sat for a few minutes, pondering Sir Cadogan's telling refusal to answer his question, until a large group of braying young-bloods entered the room. Their shouts of laughter were a tad distracting, and threatened to get only worse, so Freddie decided he'd had enough of White's for one night.

He made for the door, but as he approached it, a pair of familiar young gentlemen blocked his way.

Mr Bunting and Mr Fitzgibbons--the former supporting the very drunk latter--paused mid-step, to prevent a collision.

"Lord Chambers," Mr Fitzgibbons slurred, as he caught sight of Freddie, "Here to accuse me of murder again? I should have called you out for that, you mangy cur."

Freddie raised a bemused brow; Mr Fitzgibbons had reached the piratical stage of drinking, by the sound of things.

"He doesn't mean that," Mr Bunting whispered, as he struggled to keep the stumbling Mr Fitzgibbons upright, "He's just in his cups. Please accept my apologies on his behalf, I shall remind him tomorrow of what he said, so he remembers to feel remorseful."

"He's lucky he has such a good friend in you, Mr Bunting," Freddie answered

evenly, before neatly sidestepping the pair and making for the front door.

A footman summoned his carriage and driver, and Freddie was soon ensconced safely inside for the short journey back to Pall Mall, where his family had kept a town house since the street's inception in the sixteenth century.

Farley was waiting up to assist him with undressing, and Freddie allowed his mind to drift as the valet chattered on about this and that. The murder investigation should have been at the forefront of his mind, but it was Miss Mifford who kept his thoughts occupied.

It was going to be a long night, Freddie thought with a sigh.

"Is there anything else I can get for you, my lord?" Farley queried, as he gently placed the dinner jacket on a hanger and began to brush it down.

"No," Freddie yawned, longing for the comfort of his bed--but then a thought struck him.

"Actually, Farley," he said, wrapping his silk banyan tightly around him, "Could you check which play is showing in The Theatre Royal tomorrow?"

Farley's eyebrows knitted together in surprise, but he was too well trained to ask just who his employer would be attending the theatre with.

"Of course," the valet replied, smoothly, "I'll let you know in the morning."

"Thank you," Freddie nodded his head in gratitude, before slipping from the dressing room to his bed chamber--where, no doubt, a night of tossing and turning awaited him.

Chapter Seven

Emily's plan to interrogate the staff of Northcott House was not going as well as she had expected. It was, she knew, mostly her own fault for having expected them to behave as Nora did at home.

While the Mifford's maid would take any excuse to stop working and gossip over a cup of tea, the staff of Northcott House were far more dedicated to their tasks.

Even Sylvie, who Emily found hiding in Mary's dressing room, flicking through a copy of *La Belle Assemblée* had no wish to speak with her.

"I do not fraternize with the other servants," the pretty French maid huffed, following Emily's woeful attempts at interrogation. "I do not know what they do, nor do I care. Though I do care, Miss Mifford, that you appear to be wearing my mistress' best day-dress."

"She told me I could borrow it," Emily lied, before beating a hasty retreat to the drawing room, in case Sylvie demanded she change.

There, she found Mary, with her slippers feet propped up on a silk cushion, snacking on a plate of brightly coloured macaroons.

"I was just having a short rest," Mary said defensively, as Emily entered, "I was rushed off my feet all morning."

"If I was a duchess, I'd stay in bed until noon and eat only bonbons," Emily

answered, evenly, "I am not Mama, I do not care how you spend your mornings."

"Well, I was very busy," Mary continued, in a slightly martyred air, as she sat upright, "Going over menus with Mrs Finch, writing a list of guests for the ball Northcott wishes to host, and then listening to Cecilia witter on about baby names. Did you know that the Northcotts have a long history of naming their sons Baldwin? Cecilia thinks I should take up the tradition again, though she conveniently skipped over it for her son."

"Baldwin's not so bad a name," Emily offered, unconvincingly. She was certain it meant something nice like "brave one", but it did unfortunately bring one to mind of "bald one" instead. One didn't want to tempt fate with by bestowing an unfortunate aptronym upon the poor babe.

"I am not carrying a child for nine months, then birthing it, only to bestow it with a horrid moniker to satisfy my mother-in-law," Mary answered, with such ferocity that Emily made a conscious decision to offer her elder sister absolutely no opinion whatsoever on baby names for the remainder of her confinement. Mary looked so ferocious, that Emily decided, actually, it might be best not to have an opinion on anything for the next few months.

"Did you have many callers or just Her Grace?" Emily queried, as she took the seat opposite her sister. Mary had placed the plate of macaroons down upon the table, and they looked most tempting, but she did not dare reach out to take one in case she angered the duchess, who was still scowling darkly.

"No," Mary conceded, then reached out to push the plate of macaroons closer to Emily, "Though I pray that you won't fret; with each day that passes, more people will forget that you were accused of murder. Soon, no one will think it at all when they hear your name!"

The macaroons did not look nearly so tempting, now that they were being offered in consolation, but Emily still reached out and took one, for it would be a shame for them to go to waste.

"Actually," Emily began, with a resolute nonchalance to her voice, "Lord Chambers and I are working together, to try figure out who the true culprit is..."

This news was met by startled silence from Mary, though after a moment, a rather smug looking smile began to bloom on her lips. Her joy at having instigated a match, however, soon turned to concern, and Mary cleared her throat.

She was, Emily realised, about to deliver an older sister's speech.

"As marvellous as it is that you are spending time with Lord Chambers," Mary began, "I do not think it seemly for you--an unmarried young lady--to spend so much time investigating a murder with a bachelor."

"That's exactly what you did with Northcott," Emily huffed, outraged by the hypocrisy of it all.

"Yes, but we did that in Plumpton," Mary replied, "Without the eyes of the ton upon us. And, besides, I am older than you."

"I will accept your first argument, but not your second," Emily responded, evenly, "And to counter your first argument, I must stress that Lord Chambers and I have never been alone together. Any interactions we have had, have taken place in drawing rooms or ballrooms, all under the watchful eye of the ton. We have behaved with the utmost propriety."

"Oh, really?" Mary sounded rather disappointed.

"Yes," Emily lied, for she was not about to tell Mary about the almost-kiss in Lady Wilcox's garden, "And we are quite close to finding out who it truly was who killed Lady Hardthistle."

"Really?"

This time Mary's tone was one of definite excitement, and Emily knew that while her sister liked to play the part of a staid and steady duchess, she was still an excitable Cotswolds' girl at heart.

In a rushed whisper, Emily explained all that they knew so far. That both Mr Fitzgibbons and Sir Cadogan had professed a wish to strangle Lady Hardthistle, but only the former had an alibi. That Lord Chambers was convinced Ethel had something to do with it all, but that Emily was of a mind to think the squire the culprit.

"So, now, I am waiting for Lord Chambers to return and tell me what--if anything--he has learned from Sir Cadogan, whilst I am charged with finding out any gossip I can about Ethel. I tried to ask the servants here if they had heard any sorts of rumours or gossip, but they were no help."

"Yes," Mary wrinkled her nose in annoyance, "They're a rather boring lot. They've too much respect for Northcott to indulge in idle gossip. Hmm, I wonder..."

Mary waved her hand toward the plate of macaroons, and Emily pushed it across the table to her. She bit into one and chewed thoughtfully for a few minutes, until at last a thought struck her.

"Lady Albermay!" Mary exclaimed, turning her eyes to Emily, "Her servants might have noted something on the night of the ball."

"Do you think?" Emily whispered, to which Mary shrugged.

"We'll never know, unless we ask. Come, help me up!"

Mary held out her hand and Emily duly obliged by hopping from her own seat to assist her sister to a stand. Mary's bump had grown progressively larger over the past few weeks, and soon it would be difficult to conceal.

"Fetch a pelisse and summon the carriage," Mary instructed, as she dashed towards the door, "And fetch me a shawl while you're at it."

"Where are you going?" Emily called after her.

"The water closet," came the faint reply.

Fifteen minutes later, the two sisters were ensconced inside a cosy carriage, which was trundling its way through the early afternoon traffic, on its way to Grosvenor Square. When the carriage drew up outside Albermay House, Mary sent a footman to the door with one of her calling cards. They were outside of what was usually considered acceptable calling hours, but the footman returned a few minutes later to inform them that Lady Albermay was "at home" to them.

Once inside, the Albermay's stoic butler led them to the drawing room, where the countess awaited them with a wide smile and tray laden with tea and French fancies.

"How kind you are to receive us, Lady Albermay," Mary stated, as she took a seat on an opulently upholstered chaise longue.

"How kind you are to call," the countess replied brightly, as she began to pour the tea, "I don't get many visitors--old Alby says it's because I'm American, and if he hadn't married me, he'd avoid me too. Tart?"

Lady Albermay proffered a slice of apple-tart on a plate at Emily, who took it, grateful to have something to do with her hands. The countess' directness was rather unusual for an English drawing room, though Emily supposed it was better than polite chit-chat.

"Husbands can say the most tiresome things," Mary offered, sympathetically.

As Northcott near-worshiped the ground that his wife walked on, Emily supposed that her sister was just being polite, and trying to smooth over the countess' social faux-pas.

"I've said too much," Lady Albermay frowned, as she finally took a seat, "Gemini! I do let my mouth run away with me. Let's change the subject; how goes your murder investigation? I've been reading the news-sheets every morning in the hopes that I'll read the perpetrator has been found."

"That's one of the reasons we came," Mary answered, her eyes shining, "We were wondering if any of your staff might have noticed anything on the night?"

"The Runners did question them," the countess answered, frowning slightly as she tried to recall the events of that night, "And, from what I can remember, they didn't learn anything of note."

"Perhaps the Runners weren't asking the right questions," Emily interjected, keen to take the reins back from Mary, who had--as usual--placed herself in charge. In a rushed whisper, Emily explained about Sir Cadogan and Ethel, and how she and Lord Chambers were trying to find information on either.

"I suspect if there's any gossip about Ethel that the servants will know it," Emily finished, to which Lady Albermay gave a delighted laugh.

"And, I suspect I know which one of my servants will be in possession of said gossip," she answered, before reaching over to the small table beside her chair for a bell. She gave it a loud ring and a maid appeared seconds later.

"Fetch Mrs Gordon," Lady Albermay instructed the footman who answered her call.

A few minutes later, a stout woman of about fifty years arrived, wearing the severe black uniform of a housekeeper.

"Do sit, Mrs Gordon," Lady Albermay bid the woman, who nervously perched herself on the edge of a chair. "Her Grace and Miss Mifford have some questions they would like to ask you, about the night of Lady Albermay's murder."

The housekeeper gave Emily and Mary a wary glance--as though she feared they might accuse her of having carried out the heinous act.

"Well, we're more interested in knowing if you think that there's anything of note that we might need to know about Ethel, Lady Hardthistle's maid," Emily clarified, keen to put the woman at ease.

Her plan worked, for Mrs Gordon's rigid posture relaxed at once, and she clucked with disapproval.

"Strange, whisp of a lass," Mrs Gordon answered, in a broad Scottish brogue, "Acted so pious all night, haranguing the maids for special teas for her mistress, as well as blankets and shawls...then, the minute the firework display was announced she disappeared into the garden to..."

Mrs Gordon trailed off, her cheeks flushing pink.

"To do what?" Emily pressed, trying to hold her impatience in check.

"I took some time away from my duties, to enjoy the firework display for a moment," Mrs Gordon began, with a careful look to her mistress, who smiled with encouragement for her to continue.

"I was standing at the window of my bedchamber, on the third floor," Mrs Gordon elaborated, "So I had a bird's eye view of the gardens, and who did I see in the darkness sharing a passionate embrace with a gentleman? Only the high-and-mighty Miss Ethel Willard, that's who!"

"Goodness!"

Mary was the first to react to this morsel of gossip; her blue eyes were alight with excitement and she bounced up and down in her seat.

"Did you happen to see who the gentleman was?" Mary pressed, to which the housekeeper shook her head regretfully.

"It was too dark," she commented, "I could only guess it was an older gentleman; portly and stout, so he was."

That wasn't very helpful, Emily thought, from what she could tell, most gentlemen over forty would match Mrs Gordon's description.

"They were quite far away, too," Mrs Gordon defended herself, though no one had chastised her, "I only knew it was Ethel because she'd spent half the night following me about, complaining. They weren't the only kissing couple in the garden, for that matter; such scandalous goings-on amongst the aristocracy!"

"I never knew the English could be so interesting," Lady Albermay drawled, with a slight twinkle in her eye.

"We don't get any of that carry on in Scotland, I can assure you, my lady," Mrs Gordon answered at once, keen to prevent her fellow countrymen from being tarred with the same brush.

"If you were at the window for the firework display, how was it that you did not see the murder taking place?" Emily wondered aloud.

Mrs Gordon clucked in annoyance, and rolled her eyes before she answered.

"One of the chamber maids broke the crystal punch-bowl holding the ratafia, and I was summoned to the rescue. The whole house would fall apart, if it were not for me."

"Indeed it would, Mrs Gordon," Lady Albermay agreed, causing the Scots woman to blush again.

"Did you happen to see Sir Cadogan, at all?" Emily continued, not wishing to drift from the topic at hand.

"I'm not familiar with Sir Cadogan, I'm afraid. We had nearly two hundred souls to feed that night; I can't be expected to know each person who waltzed through the door. Will that be all?" she finished, brushing down the apron of her skirts, "The butcher will arrive soon, and if I'm not there to supervise, cook will have hidden all the best cuts for himself."

"That will be all," Emily answered, offering her a grateful smile, "Thank you so much for your help, Mrs Gordon. It has been most illuminating."

The housekeeper took herself away, and as the door closed behind her, Lady Albermay turned to her two guests with excitement.

"Why," she exclaimed, "If Ethel was carrying out an affair, perhaps she convinced her lover to murder Lady Hardthistle? The hope of marrying into a fortune could induce any man to murder."

"It could," Emily agreed, thoughtfully.

Lord Chambers had been correct to suspect Ethel, after all. Emily owed him something of an apology, for she had berated him sternly for trying to focus their attention away from Sir Cadogan. While the squire was in no way removed from the list, he was now not the only one left upon it.

If only they knew who it was whom Ethel had taken up with.

"If only we knew who the gentleman was," Mary said aloud, echoing Emily's very thought.

"I expect Ethel is in Faversham, on her newly inherited estate," Emily answered, with a sigh. As a single young lady, she could not very well trek down to Kent and hide in the bushes outside Ethel's new home, in the hopes of discovering who this mysterious beau was.

Lord Chambers, on the other hand...

Emily was just wondering how she might convince the marquess to spend a night or two hiding in bushes, when Lady Albermay spoke, interrupting Emily's plotting.

"Are we certain she remained in Kent?" the countess mused, aloud, "If I had spent a lifetime in service and had just inherited a fortune, there's no way I'd squirrel myself away in the countryside. I'd be in London, buying myself lavish gowns and taking ices in Gunter's."

This comment was met by stunned silence from her two guests, for both were thinking just how right she was. When Mary had first come up to town, after marrying Northcott, she had spent the entirety of the Little Season--and a good chunk of the duke's fortune--shopping on Bond Street, and dashing into every coffee shop or patisserie she passed. It was very possible--and highly likely--that Ethel was indulging in just the same manner.

"I wonder where Lady Hardthistle kept residence in London?" Emily mused, aloud.

"Belgravia, or perhaps Mayfair," Mary answered with certainty, "The old family seat would have gone to whoever inherited the title when her husband died, so I would assume her to be in a newer part of town. Lord Chambers will know--you might ask him, the next time you meet."

The last part was said in such a pointed, knowing manner, that Emily could not help but scowl at her sister. Until, that is, that she recalled they were in company and she assumed a more neutral expression which concealed her mutinous thoughts.

"This is all so exciting," Lady Albermay gave a wistful sigh.

Emily was filled with a sudden rush of sympathy for their hostess; though she lived in palatial splendour, it was clear that she was lonely and bored. And who could blame her, living as she was in a foreign land, with only a crotchety, elderly husband for company?

"As soon as we learn anything, we will call on you to tell you," Emily assured her.

"Even if we don't learn anything, we shall be calling soon," Mary added, as she swallowed down a second French fancy, "Your cook might be a thief, but he bakes a delicious fancy."

"Though your company is far preferential to the cakes," Emily elbowed her sister discreetly, and Mary gave a furious nod.

"Yes, of course it is," the duchess hastened to add, "The cakes merely accentuate your wonderful demeanour."

Given her way with words, there was a very real danger that Mary would soon to turn into their mother, Emily thought with a sigh. Luckily, Lady Albermay appeared to find their behaviour more amusing than insulting, and she gave a delighted laugh.

"Oh, I cannot claim to be more enjoyable than one of cook's fancies," she smiled, "Though I do hope you call again."

The trio chatted for a few more minutes, then--given the hour--Mary and Emily were forced to take their leave. They departed with a cheery wave to the countess, and returned to St James' Square on a high.

They were in jubilant spirits when they arrived back in Northcott House, and the duke--hearing their giggles--came to meet them in the entrance hall.

"You're in fine fettle," he commented, as he bestowed a kiss upon Mary's cheek.

"What's that you've got?" Mary queried, as she pulled away, with a nod to the sheaf of paper the duke held in his hand.

"It's an invitation," he replied, darting an amused glance Emily's way, "It arrived moments before you."

"Who is it from?" Mary asked, as she shrugged off her pelisse and handed it to the hovering footman.

Northcott cleared his throat and glanced again at Emily, who felt a strange flutter of anticipation in her belly. There was no one in London who would invite her anywhere, especially so formally. Unless...but, no, that was a ridiculous thought...

"It's from Lord Chambers," Northcott answered, concealing a smile as Mary turned her head Emily's way so quickly that it was a wonder it didn't pop off her neck.

"He has invited us, or more specifically, Emily, to attend the theatre tomorrow evening. A comedy."

"A farce, more like," Emily muttered to herself, though no one paid her any heed. She was rather put-out that the marquess had given her no hint of his next move; she would now be forced to spend the evening listening to Mary predict a marriage proposal.

A proposal which would not materialise, for Emily suddenly realised that Lord Chambers must have issued the invitation because he had something urgent he wished to share with her about their investigation.

Yes, that was it, Emily told herself, as she absently watched Mary flutter about in a panic, that was the only reason he could have for such a bold move.

Yet, despite her assurances, Emily could not help but allow the memory of Lord Chambers' hand holding hers fill her mind. And for one, wistful moment, she wished that she was wrong.

Chapter Eight

Farley took more care than usual, the next evening, as he assisted Freddie with dressing for the theatre. The valet was all a dither as he attempted to tie the starched, white cravat at Freddie's neck, into an extravagant knot...for the seventh time.

"This won't do, it just won't do," Farley murmured to himself, as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, "The trône d'Amour is supposed to look austere, not floppy. It is a mess--I am a mess. I am afraid, my lord, that I must tender my resignation at once; I am not fit to even polish your boots, let alone tie your cravat."

As Freddie was accustomed to the occasional emotional outburst from Farley—who, though highly-strung, was terribly good at his job—he simply raised an eyebrow and waited for the valet to calm down.

"Fetch a fresh cravat," Freddie instructed, once the other man's breathing had resumed a normal pace, "And attempt a ballroom knot; far simpler, but no less elegant."

"Yes," Farley nodded, his eyes brightening, "A purist's choice; very good, my lord. I should never have attempted anything so fussy and showy. You are not a dandy, but a Corinthian. A man of your stature and good looks does not need to add any garish embellishments to draw the eye--you draw it naturally."

The valet rushed over to the dressing table, to find a fresh cravat, and Freddie mused that perhaps he didn't employ Farley merely for his valet skills, but for his good taste too.

Farley returned, and in a few minutes had tied the cravat into an elegant Ballroom knot.

"Very good," Freddie said, as he took a step back to appreciate his reflection in the mirror.

His clothes were dark, as befitted the evening. He wore an exquisitely tailored plain, black coat, over black, snugly fitting pantaloons, complimented by a brocade waistcoat of ruby red. He looked, Freddie thought with satisfaction, every inch the Corinthian that Farley had earlier professed him to be.

"Your guest will be most impressed," Farley stated shyly, as he brushed a stray speck of dust from Freddie's shoulders.

Ah! Freddie hid a smile, no wonder poor Farley had been in such a state; he had wished Freddie to look immaculate for his lady friend. That was perhaps also why his housekeeper, Mrs Hiddlestone, had earlier decided to clean out the room which had once been Freddie's nursery...

One could have no secrets, when one had servants.

"I think they shall," Freddie agreed, as he gave his reflection one last glance.

Miss Mifford, while immune to some of his charms, was not blind. Even she could not fail to agree that Freddie cut a dashing figure, and was as handsome an escort as any lady might hope for.

With a whistle on his lips, Freddie tripped down the stairs--taking the runners two at a time--to the entrance hall, where a footman was waiting with his cane and top-hat.

"The carriage?"

"Awaiting you outside."

"Excellent."

Freddie's jubilant spirits continued for the duration of the journey from Pall Mall to Drury Lane. Anticipation had his nerves thrumming and humming so pleasantly that he barely minded the heavy traffic, or the spring rain which lashed down upon the roof.

The carriage eventually drew up outside the Theatre Royal, where Freddie disembarked into a sea of glittering socialites. He made for the lobby, found himself a spot where he could best see the door, and waited.

After what seemed like an interminable length of time--but according to his fob-watch was only five minutes--Freddie finally spotted the duke and duchess, with Miss Mifford trailing behind them.

"Northcott," Freddie hailed the duke, striding across the lobby to shake his hand. He then bowed to the duchess, and offered his arm to Miss Mifford.

"You look ravishing," Freddie whispered to her, for she did.

Miss Mifford's auburn hair was pulled into a soft up-style, with several tendrils framing her face and a scattering of a few flowers placed here and there to decorate. Her evening dress was of the Empire style; a soft pink satin at the bodice, which gave way to flowing silk skirts.

"You look like a May Queen," Freddie added, as he imagined her dancing with a ribbon around a maypole.

"Thank you," Miss Mifford offered him a shy smile, "Mary did tell me try look as un-

murderess-like as possible for the evening.”

”I’ve never seen anyone look less murderous than you,” Freddie replied, gallantly, though afterwards he wondered if it was perhaps the most bizarre compliment that he had ever offered anyone.

The quartet climbed the stairs to the first floor and followed the corridor to the private box that Freddie rented annually. He was not a great connoisseur of the theatre, but when his mother and sister were in town, he obliged them by attending whatever play they wished to see.

”Northcott and I shall sit here,” the duchess decided, her tone rather bossy, ”And you sit there, Emily. Lord Chambers can take the seat beside you.”

”Very good,” Freddie answered, before Miss Mifford--who looked as though she might object--could reply.

The duchess had very obviously arranged things so that Freddie and Miss Mifford--or Emily, as he now liked to think of her--might sit side by side. As Freddie had hoped for this outcome, he was rather pleased with the set up.

”Forgive my sister,” Emily whispered as she sat down, ”She forgets that she is not everyone”s elder sibling.”

”I do not mind,” Freddie gave an easy shrug, ”I wished to sit beside you anyway.”

A blush bloomed on Miss Mifford”s cheeks, and to save her embarrassment, Freddie made a great fuss of taking off his hat and storing it safely away.

”I have something to share with you about Ethel,” Emily continued, once he had settled himself down into the chair.

”Oh?”

”On the night of the murder, she was sighted in the garden sharing a passionate embrace with an unidentified male.”

”Ethel?” Freddie could not help but incredulously exclaim. He could not imagine the ghost-like, pious maid engaging in any scandalous act, but then again, a few weeks ago he could not have imagined he would be investigating a murder. Anything was possible in life, he conceded.

”If we can try to find out who her beau is,” Emily continued, stumbling a little on the word beau, ”Then we will be better able to judge if Ethel should remain on our list of suspects. It’s possible that whoever this gentleman is, might have killed Lady Hardthistle so that Ethel might inherit her fortune. Have you any news of Sir Cadogan, my lord?”

Freddie blinked in surprise at her brusque manner; he was labouring under the assumption that Miss Mifford would view their jaunt to the theatre as a romantic one, but she was business as usual.

”I confronted him in White”s about his whereabouts on the night,” Freddie answered, ”But he said that he would not justify such questions with an answer.”

”Highly suspicious.”

”Yes,” Freddie agreed, but he did not wish to discuss murder anymore, but rather bring her attention back to the present.

”Oh, look,” Freddie said, leaning out of his chair to peer out at the theatre, ”There”s Mr Brummell, stylish as ever.”

Emily followed his gaze to the box on the far wall, which contained the stylish Beau Brummell. The whole theatre was packed to the gills with great and glittering members of the ton, while below, in the stalls, the general public thronged together. It was quite the sight, and Freddie was glad to see Emily's eyes alight with excitement and interest.

"I have only ever been to the theatre in Cirencester," she said, referring to the largest market town in the Cotswolds, "And it was not nearly as grand as this. Oh, look! Lady Caroline Lamb; Jane adores her work."

Freddie glanced down to the box which Emily was gazing at and sighted the infamous Lady Lamb seated beside her long-suffering husband. Mercifully, there was no sign of Lord Byron, with whom Lady Lamb had conducted a much-publicised affair, which meant that the only theatrics they could expect tonight would be played out on the stage.

"Is that..?" Emily frowned and peered down at another box, which contained none other than Mr Fitzgibbons. He was seated beside Miss Gardner, the heiress he had been wooing--or attempting to woo--since the beginning of the season.

Freddie felt a stab of dislike, as he watched Mr Fitzgibbons smile smugly around the theatre. There was something very unlikeable about the young man, who appeared more concerned with being seen than attending to the lady he was seated beside.

"And there is Mr Bunting behind him," Emily whispered, sounding dismayed, "With a young lady who is not Lady Francesca."

"I thought they were to be engaged," Freddie, who had no idea how he knew this morsel of gossip answered, "Though young men can be fickle."

"Poor Lady Francesca," Emily sighed, much to Freddie's surprise. He did not think

he would be as capable of sympathy were he in Miss Mifford's shoes--the girl had, after all, accused Emily of murder.

There was no time to press her on the matter however, for the gas-lights on the walls began to flicker, announcing the beginning of the play.

"Hush now," the duchess called over, as they settled back into their chairs.

"Is she always this bossy?" Freddie asked, leaning over to whisper into Emily's ear.

"She's usually worse--you might not believe it, but this is her attempting to impress you, my lord."

As she leaned over to whisper her reply, Emily's scent filled Freddie's nose, rendering him near intoxicated. It was not cloying, nor heavy, but simple and light--like the spring air after a soft rain.

"Please," he replied, his voice thicker than he had intended, for his brain was addled by her, "Call me Freddie."

The half-strangled mewl which Emily offered in reply, gave Freddie hope that she too was as overcome by their closeness as he. Alas, the heady atmosphere was broken somewhat by the duchess, who hushed them sternly again.

Freddie forced his attention toward the stage, where the opening act was taking place. The play was a comedy, a new work featuring the much-esteemed Mrs Dorothy Jordan, and though it sounded amusing--judging by the roars of laughter from the audience--Freddie could not concentrate on it.

His attention was riveted by the woman beside him, who radiated heat and energy. Their elbows, as they rested on their seats, could not help but touch, and Freddie

found himself embarrassingly aroused by something so tame.

He was a gentleman of experience, yet the innocent Miss Mifford was driving him to distraction.

Freddie spent most of the first half of the play debating as to whether he should take Emily's hand in his. Was it too forward? Would she be upset? Or would she simply bat his hand away and hush him with the same ferocity as her sister?

He was still debating the unknowns, when the gas-lights flickered and the curtain fell on the stage for the intermission.

"La! What a riot that was," the duchess called to them both, "The mix-up between the plumassier and the poulterer--oh, I've never laughed so much as when I heard the clucking coming from Mrs Jordan's bonnet. Don't you agree?"

Freddie, who had no idea of what the duchess was speaking, mumbled incoherently in agreement. As did Miss Mifford, whose expression was as dazed as Freddie assumed his own to be.

"You were both riveted to silence," Northcott noted, with a knowing smile Freddie's way. The duke then turned to his wife, who was glancing between them both with confusion, and placed his hand on the small of her back.

"Come, my dear," the duke instructed, "Why don't we fetch the refreshments; I'm certain you need to stretch your legs after that."

"I don't actually," she replied, but her husband did not listen and frog marched her out the door.

"Did you enjoy the first half?" Freddie ventured, once they were alone.

Emily turned her eyes to him, and for the first time since they had met, she looked almost shy.

"In truth, I found that I could not pay proper attention to the goings-on on stage," she confessed, and Freddie's heart filled with hope.

Could it be that she felt the same way as he?

Perhaps noticing his hopeful expression, Emily flushed, as though she regretted having shared her state of distraction with him.

"I mean," she cleared her throat awkwardly, "Who could pay attention to a play, when we have a real-life murder mystery on our hands?"

A silence fell between them, during which Freddie experienced a cascade of differing emotions. Despair moved to sadness, then to insecurity--a feeling Freddie had no time for--until he finally settled on indignation.

"Codswallop," Freddie challenged, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

"I--I beg your pardon, my lord?"

"Freddie," he corrected her, before continuing, fuelled by indignation, "I am not about to sit here and listen to you tell me that your state of distraction was caused by our investigation."

"Oh, and what do you think it was caused by?" Emily retorted, folding her arms stubbornly across her chest. She was not a woman who liked someone telling her how she felt, but, nevertheless, Freddie was about to do just that.

"By me," Freddie waved an arm casually over his athletic form, "By our closeness,

by the romance of an evening at the theatre with a handsome marquess. I refuse to believe that the only thing that moves you, Emily, is murder--"

"Perhaps it was your big-head, my lord, which prevented me from enjoying the show," she answered, her irritated tone a perfect match for his own, "It is so enormous, that it obstructs the view."

"I am not big-headed," Freddie answered, struggling to keep his tone even, "I am a realist. It is not untrue to say that I am one of the more handsome men present, nor is it untrue to note that you are the most beautiful woman in the room."

Emily opened her mouth to interrupt him, but as Freddie was on something of a roll, he continued.

"Thus, it is not big-headed of me to assume that you have been as driven to distraction by me, as I by you. Though, perhaps, given that you are more beautiful, I might have been slightly more affected."

Emily opened her mouth to reply, but snapped it shut again, unsure of how to respond to such a passionate outburst.

"I should like to kiss you," Freddie finished, "Not now, not here, but soon."

"My lord, I--"

Whatever Emily's reply was to be, it was lost as the duke and duchess returned, the latter in a state of high excitement.

"Emily," she exclaimed, as she plonked herself down in her seat, "You'll never guess who is here--Mrs Canards!"

The name sounded slightly familiar to Freddie's ear, though he could not place it.

"What on earth is she doing in London?" Emily answered, glancing at her sister, then out over the audience in the hopes of spotting the woman.

"She's here with Ethel," the duchess answered, in a rushed whisper, "They met at Lady Hardthistle's funeral--did you know Mrs Canards was her distant cousin?--and by the sound of things, Mrs Canards invited herself up to London to help her new friend adjust. Poor Ethel, even if she did murder the baroness, having Mrs Canards as a house-guest is the cruellest of punishments."

Freddie suddenly recalled the stout, curmudgeonly woman from Lady Hardthistle's funeral, and found himself in agreement with the duchess. A spell in Newgate would be far easier to endure than having to eat three meals a day sitting opposite such a sour-puss.

"I wonder where they're sitting," Emily squeaked, leaning her arms on the balustrades of the balcony, as she searched for a glimpse of Ethel and her guest.

"The Upper Circle, I should think," the duchess replied, peering up at the large balcony which catered to those in society who could not afford the extravagance of a box, but did not wish to mix with the rabble in the stalls.

"Yes," the duchess handed her quizzing glasses to Emily, who held them up to her eyes and peered up, "There they are, on the left. And they have the awful Mrs Wickling with them too."

Freddie watched as Emily let out a sigh of disappointment--she had obviously been hoping that Ethel's mysterious gentleman might also be present.

The gas-lights on the wall began to flicker, signalling the beginning of the second

half, and the four occupants of the box slipped back into their respective seats.

"I wonder where it is that Ethel is staying?" Emily whispered in Freddie's ear, as the actors took to the stage.

"Most likely in Lady Hardthistle's house, just off Berkley Square," Freddie answered, absently, once more overcome by her closeness.

"Don't think to go spying on her," he cautioned, as he noted her thoughtful silence.

"I am but a country mouse, my lord," she answered, all innocence, "I would not know how to even get to Berkley Square."

Freddie harrumphed in reply, for he did not truly believe her. There was little he could do at that moment, however, to dissuade her, so he did the next best thing. He reached out, took Emily's gloved hand, and held it tightly through the remainder of the play.

Her hand felt at home in his, fingers laced, palms touching, and when the curtain came down for the final call and the lights illuminated the hall, Freddie was reluctant to let go of her.

"That was wonderful," the duchess called, as the occupants of the box stirred back to life.

Emily's hand slipped from Freddie's, as she turned to face her sister, and he somehow managed to hold back a mewl of disappointment.

"Such a lark," Emily agreed, before turning back to offer Freddie a shy smile, "My thanks, my lord, for inviting us."

"The pleasure was all mine," he answered, but could not resist offering her a discreet wink, which sent her blushing and confirmed that the pleasure of the evening had not solely been felt just by him.

Northcott led the way from the box, his wife on his arm, followed by Freddie and Emily. There was no opportunity to exchange flirtatious chatter or interesting on-dits, given the flow of people streaming towards the door, but Freddie relished the feel of Miss Mifford's hand upon his arm.

At the front door, Freddie waited for his guests' carriage to arrive, and once the duke had assisted his wife in, he held out a hand to help Emily up.

"I will call on you in the morning," he promised, then--before she could object--he brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it.

"Goodnight, my lord," she whispered in response, her cheeks aflame.

"Freddie," he reminded her sternly, before taking a step back so the footman could close the door.

Miss Mifford would have to learn to become comfortable with using his given name, Freddie thought, as he waited for his own carriage to arrive. After all, she could not continue to call him "my lord" after they were married--which would happen soon, if Freddie had anything to do with it.

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Chapter Nine

Emily awoke late the next morning, to a house in chaos.

Mrs Mifford had arrived before the occupants of Northcott House had even risen, incensed to have learned of the previous night's outing from the gossip columns.

"Nobody told me," she wailed, as Emily entered the dining room.

"Told you what?" Emily queried blearily, in response.

She had not slept well, having spent the night tossing and turning, with thoughts of Lord Chambers running through her head, and she had not the energy to humour her mother speaking in riddles.

"Nobody told me about your jaunt to the theatre with the marquess," Mrs Mifford answered, waving a folded-up newspaper manically in the air.

"I was forced to endure the dullest of evenings, when I could have been at the theatre, basking in the triumph of my daughter making one of the best matches of the season," she continued, with evident displeasure.

"My dinner party was not dull," Jane--who had followed her mother across the square--objected, at the same time as Emily exclaimed, "Lord Chambers and I are not going to be married."

"Dull in comparison to Emily's night, dear," Mrs Mifford offered her second eldest a

half-hearted apology, before turning back to Emily, "Now, tell me everything about Lord Chambers. When do you expect he will propose? I do hope it's before Mary's ball, for I'd like to have something to crow over to Lady Jacobs--her youngest recently became engaged to an earl."

"Coffee, please," Emily called to the footman who was hovering in the corner; if she was to deal with her mother, she would need something more stimulating than a cup of hot-chocolate.

"Lord Chambers is just a friend," Emily said, once she had a steaming cup of coffee before her, "Mary thought it would be beneficial for me to be seen with him after the murder accusation, and he agreed to offer me his support. In his mind, our outing was not romantic but altruistic."

"How clever your sister is," Mrs Mifford breathed, hearing only what she wished to hear, "To throw you together like that. Tell me what he said, and what he did--I have a gift for reading men, and can divine from even a twitch of the eye if one is about to propose."

Emily bit back a groan; her mother frequently decided she was bestowed with supernatural gifts, and could rarely be deterred from this belief, unless something came along to distract her...

"Mrs Canards was there," Emily exclaimed, suddenly, "And Mrs Wickling. They're staying with Ethel, Lady Hardthistle's maid, who inherited her mistress' fortune."

Mrs Mifford's eyes instantly narrowed in annoyance; she and Mrs Canards shared a mutual dislike of each other, and both were constantly vying against the other for the imaginary position of leader of The Plumpton Parish Ladies' Society.

"That old shrew," Mrs Mifford grumbled, forgetting that she was almost the same

age, "And with Lady Hardthistle's maid? No doubt she is fishing for gossip on you, Emily, and will return to Plumpton to tell everyone about you being a murderess."

"I am not a murderess, Mama," Emily gently reminded her.

"Of course you're not, dear," Mrs Mifford responded, in a tone which sounded remarkably dubious.

Emily took a sip of her coffee, to keep her mouth occupied, for she felt an irritated outburst coming on. Mercifully, distraction arrived, in the form of Eudora and Mary.

"You're all here," Eudora called accusingly, as she stomped into the room, "I woke up to find the house empty, then I arrive here to find you're all sharing a jolly breakfast--I'm never included in anything!"

"I was not invited, either, Eudora," Mary--who had followed the youngest Mifford into the room--said, sounding equally as petulant as her younger sister.

"It is an impromptu gathering," Jane called, cheerfully, "Mama read about Emily's trip to the theatre with Lord Chambers, and could not wait to discuss it."

"Yes, I'm very annoyed with you, Mary," Mrs Mifford added, forgetting that just moments ago she had been singing her praises, "You should have invited me to come with you."

"I couldn't," Mary grumbled, "Lord Chambers invited us, I couldn't demand that he bring you too. I wouldn't want him to think us unreasonable now, would I? And I do not have the mental faculties to deal with you being vexed with me today; I have to call on Cecilia to discuss the final plans for the ball and I'm so nervous--what if it all goes wrong, and I end up the laughing stock of London?"

"I didn't want to say, Mary," Mrs Mifford replied, with the air of someone who was about to be most unhelpful, "But I couldn't help but notice that you keep pear soap in the water closet--it's so old fashioned, this year the fashionable scent is rose. You'll have to change it, before the ball, you don't want your guests laughing at you, or casting up their accounts at having to endure such an out of style scent."

"It's a disaster," Mary wailed, throwing herself into the chair at the head of the table, "I was not cut out to be a duchess! I cannot possibly host a ball. I shall have to--I shall have to--"

Emily, her sisters, and their mother, waited with bated breath to hear Mary's plan to get out of hosting the ball. When she got an idea into her head, the eldest Mifford girl was wont to lose all sense of reason.

"I shall have to fake my own death," Mary said firmly, confirming Emily's suspicions that her plan would be mad, "There's nothing else for it. Northcott can visit the baby and I in Plumpton, but during the season he will have to play the part of the grieving widower, so as not to give the game away."

"You are not faking your own death," Jane interjected, sounding remarkably reasonable in the face of such madness, "And no one shall give a fig about what type of soap you have in your water-closet--isn't that right, Mama?"

"I suppose," Mrs Mifford sighed, "Though, we really should change them..."

"No one will care," Jane repeated, with a warning glare to her mother.

"No one will care," she echoed, petulantly.

"You're certain?" Mary glanced around at her guests, her blue eyes misty with unshed tears.

"Most certain," Jane assured her.

She must have stomped on Mrs Mifford's foot under the table, for, after giving a yelp of pain, Mrs Mifford offered her own assurances on the matter.

"Why don't we come with you to see the duchess?" Jane then suggested, "That way you have more people to help you with your planning."

If there was one woman who could frighten Mrs Mifford into submissive silence, it was Cecilia, Dowager Duchess of Northcott. There would be no more talk of unfashionable soaps, once Cecilia had put her seal of approval on things.

"Oh, thank you," Mary beamed, with a grateful smile to her sister, "I should like that very much."

Sensing an opportunity to be alone--an almost impossible task in a family as overbearing as the Miffords--Emily spoke up.

"I think I shall rest, if you don't mind, Mary. I feel a migraine coming on."

Eudora narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, and Emily feared she might be about to remind her that she did not suffer from the migraine, but instead she offered to stay and keep Emily company.

"Northcott has a copy of the first edition of The Encyclopedia Britannica in his library, which he said I might read," Eudora added, so that everyone might know her motives weren't entirely altruistic.

With that settled, Jane, Mary, and Mrs Mifford set off for Mayfair, where the dowager duchess kept a townhouse for the season. Once the door had closed behind them, and she was certain that they were out of earshot, Eudora turned to Emily with

a frown.

"You don't suffer from migraines," she accused her.

"I have never once heard Northcott give you permission to read that book," Emily countered.

"He never explicitly said so," Eudora agreed, with the practiced reasoning of a youngest sister, "But by mentioning that he had a copy and where it could be found, implicit consent was given. Now, tell me what you are up to. I shan't tell anyone, for I never get to be part of a secret."

Emily hesitated for a moment, before deciding Eudora could be trusted. In a rushed whisper, she explained everything; the investigation, Lord Chambers' offer to help, as well as Ethel's mysterious lover and how identifying him might help solve the mystery of Lady Hardthistle's murder.

"Who else knows all this?" Eudora queried, once she was done.

"Mary knows some, Jane none," Emily answered, which elicited a smile from her sister.

"I'm not the last to know," Eudora said, smugly, "Very well. I suppose there's not much you can do now, except try and identify who this chap is."

"Oh, thank you, Eudora," Emily exclaimed, reaching across the table to squeeze her sister's hand, "If Mary and the others return, try fob them off for as long as you can-- though I think they'll be hours going through all the details."

"What time should I expect Northcott to return from the House of Lords?" Eudora questioned, obviously not as certain of his implicit consent as she had previously

expressed.

"Well after noon," Emily assured her, "Might I take your shawl? That way I can slip out the servants' entrance without being seen."

Eudora reluctantly handed over the tartan shawl she wore around her shoulders, and Emily threw it on over her dress. It was a day dress she had brought from Plumpton; practical and plain, the perfect outfit for a young lady who did not wish to be noticed.

"Wish me luck," Emily called, before darting out the door--a woman on a mission.

Outside on the square, Emily kept her head down as she scuttled towards St James' Street, then on towards Piccadilly. Once there, she hailed down a passing hackney cab, and instructed the driver to take her to Berkley Square.

Inside the cab was dank and musty, a far cry from Northcott's fleet of fine carriages, but as the Mifford's own vehicle in Plumpton was an old gig, she was not too perturbed by it. Comfort and luxury were a novelty, not an expectation.

The old carriage trundled along for what felt like an age, but at last it drew to a halt in a leafy green square. Emily jumped from the cab to the footpath, and paid the driver--a wizened soul with very few teeth--with coins from the pin money Mary had gifted her on her arrival to London.

Once the hackney had pulled away, Emily glanced around, keen to establish her bearings.

The square was lined with grand buildings, which faced onto a formal garden, whose boundary was marked with black, wrought-iron railings. On one side of the square--Emily well knew--lay Gunter's, London's famed confectioner, as well as several other high-end stores. Keen to avoid being spotted by anyone from the ton, Emily

made for the opposite side, which was lined with residential homes.

As she walked past the austere, towering buildings, Emily realised that there was one major hurdle in her plan to spy on Ethel--she had no idea which house the maid occupied. She could not very well knock on doors, asking for her, and her chances of spotting the maid were low if she did not know which house to linger outside of.

Feeling defeated, and a little overwhelmed, Emily beat a retreat to the gardens, hoping that the green space might soothe her frayed nerves.

The gardens were larger than those in St James' Square; a formal path, in the shape of a cross, divided the immaculate lawn, while benches shaded by towering bay trees offered respite for tired feet.

Emily duly placed herself on the first bench she encountered, her eyes drawn by a nursery maid chasing her charge across the grass. She felt a momentary pang of longing for Plumpton, where the village square was always filled with friendly faces. Her thoughts then drifted, not to Ethel or her mission to spy on her, but to Lord Chambers.

When he had held her hand last night, his grip had been strong, warm, and reassuring. For all his pomp and swagger, Emily sensed that beneath his expertly tailored shirt, lay a good heart. A kind heart.

Emily blushed a little, as her treacherous mind travelled slightly off course, to wonder what else lay beneath Lord Chambers' tailored shirt--a thought unworthy of a vicar's daughter, but rather exciting, nonetheless.

She cleared her throat, shifted her weight on the bench, and attempted to bring her attention back to the present. She did not have much time and she could not waste any precious minutes mooning over Lord Chambers--she needed to find Ethel!

As though summoned by her very thoughts, a reed-thin figure dressed in black appeared at the far gate to the park--Ethel!

Emily held her breath as the former lady's maid cast a fearful look over her shoulder--as though worried that someone was following her--and dashed across the park to the far gate. Not wishing to lose sight of her, Emily rose from her seat and followed behind at a discreet distance, pulling her mob-cap low over her eyes to further disguise herself.

Ethel moved fast, ducking and weaving so quickly through the other pedestrians on Bruton Street, that Emily nearly lost sight of her several times. At last, she slowed somewhat, and turned into the old graveyard of St George's Church, on Hanover Square.

Though it was not a large graveyard, the towering, old headstones of bishops and clergy long passed, offered Emily some cover, as she followed Ethel on her path.

Ethel's progress was definite, indicating that she knew exactly where she was going and not simply taking a morning jaunt, and for a moment Emily wondered if she was, in fact, going to visit the grave of a relative or friend.

A call of hello, however, indicated that the friend Ethel was visiting was very much alive.

Emily came to a halt, hidden from view by a towering granite tablet, decorated with a macabre skull and crossbones--a popular memento mori from the previous century, to remind all who passed that death would come to them too.

She gingerly poked her head out from behind her hiding place, to see where Ethel had got to--for the graveyard had fallen silent--and when she caught sight of her target, she had to clap a hand over her mouth to keep from gasping.

Ethel was sharing a tender embrace with none other than Sir Cadogan!

Emily quickly ducked back behind the headstone, as she grappled with what she had just witnessed. Two of the main suspects in the murder investigation were lovers! Lord Chambers had been correct to suspect Ethel, all along.

"You kept me waiting."

Emily stilled as Sir Cadogan spoke, the pair had obviously broken apart from their embrace.

"I'm sorry, but it's impossible to escape that awful woman," Ethel replied, her tone annoyed, "She follows me everywhere like a shadow, and behind her is her own shadow, Mrs Wickling. A more noxious pair I have ever known; they're constantly complaining about the food, the draught, and the staff. Everything annoys them, they are never happy."

"Ask them to leave, then," Sir Cadogan replied, irritably, "You have spent a lifetime serving cantankerous women, I don't see why you should continue to do so now."

There was a pause, during which Emily held her breath as she waited for them to continue. The graveyard was so quiet, that any sound she made would surely be noticed. The skull and crossbones which adorned the headstone, looked more menacing than ever as she waited for Ethel to make her reply.

"Mrs Canards is right on one score," came her eventual answer, "I am a woman of great fortune, alone in the world. If I cannot have the protection of a husband in my home, at least I have the protection of two vipers."

"Ethel," Sir Cadogan chided, "Not this again; you know I want to marry you. We just have to wait, though. If that ruddy marquess had not poked his nose in where it

wasn't wanted, and accused me of murdering Lady Hardthistle, we'd already be wed. Even you have to admit how suspicious it looks..."

"No more suspicious than that wretched Miss Mifford wishing death upon her ladyship mere moments before she died," Ethel retorted, followed by a wistful sigh, "I cannot wait forever, Stanley..."

"Nor can I, my love."

Emily's ears were then assaulted by the sound of moans of passion from the pair, which set her stomach churning. What a wretched couple they were--and how silly Ethel was, to not suspect Sir Cadogan at all when he was quite obviously the murderer!

Careful not to make too much noise, Emily traced her path back through the scattering of headstones, and down the steps back to Barton Street. She had achieved what she had set out to do, but now she was left with more questions than answers.

How could she prove that Sir Cadogan was the murderer? She would have to confront him with what she knew, and draw a confession from him.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the very idea that Emily could frighten a confession from a grown man gave her cause to laugh out loud--earning herself a few strange looks from her fellow pedestrians.

Blushing, she cast her eyes back to the ground, and continued on her path back to Berkley Square. She would have to enrol Lord Chambers' help, she realised, if she was to extract a confession from the squire. But could she explain how she had discovered the identity of Ethel's lover, when the marquess had expressly forbid her to go spying?

It was a conundrum, but one which was to be soon solved. As Emily turned off Barton Street, back onto Berkley Square, a grand carriage bearing an unfamiliar coat of arms drew up beside her.

The covering upon the window snapped up, revealing a very unhappy looking Lord Chambers, who leaned forward, opened the door, and gestured for her to climb in.

She was, Emily realised, in trouble.

Chapter Ten

Freddie had awoken, if not revitalised, then certainly energised following his night at the theatre with Miss Mifford.

She had allowed him to hold her hand, she had not balked when he had kissed it, and she had offered to receive him for a morning call. It was all very promising.

Farley, still as matrimonial minded as any mama, attended to his morning ablutions with slightly more zeal than was usual. This same enthusiasm was applied to choosing out his clothes for the morning, polishing his boots, and trying his cravat in a jaunty knot--so much so, that it was almost noon by the time Freddie reached the breakfast table.

He took only a coffee and a slice of brioche bread, before ordering a footman to have his horse readied. A moment later, having glanced out the window and spotting a threatening grey sky, Freddie re-summoned the footman and asked for his carriage instead.

It would not do to turn up on the front step of Northcott House rain-sodden and dripping. If that made Freddie vain, then so be it.

His care to his appearance, however, was somewhat wasted, for when he arrived at Northcott House, and sent the footman to the door with his calling card, the lad returned moments later with an apology that Miss Mifford was indisposed.

"Indisposed?" Freddie growled, "In what way?"

"I did not ask, my lord," the footman stuttered--the correct response, for it was not a servant's place to ask such things.

"The earache?" Freddie mused, worried now, "Influenza? A bout of whooping cough, perhaps?"

"I do not know, my lord," the footman repeated, shifting with discomfort at having to discuss a lady's health with his master.

"I will offer the assistance of my apothecary on Jermyn Street," Freddie decided, already halfway out of the cab, "He's the best there is."

With little thought to the rules and diktats of polite society, Freddie hurried up the steps to the austere, black front door--very ducal, his own was green--and rapped the brass knocker, in the shape of a lion's head, loudly until it was opened.

"I am Lord Chambers," Freddie said, to the butler who peered out at him, "My footman tells me that Miss Mifford is indisposed; I wish to offer the services of my druggist to speed her recovery."

The butler, typically stoic as befitted a gentleman of such a position, remained blank-faced as he tried to think of a reply to Freddie's offer. He was spared having to supply an answer, by the arrival of the youngest of the Mifford girls, Eudora.

"Who's that, Bentley" she called, as she sauntered into the entrance hall from an adjoining room.

"A caller for Miss Mifford," Bentley informed her, in a deep rumble, "Lord Chambers, Marquess of Highfield."

"Oh," Miss Eudora's face dropped, and she cast Freddie a nervous glance, before

turning back to Bentley, "Thank you, Bentley. I shall speak with Lord Chambers for a moment."

Bentley's bushy eyebrows drew together in surprise for one brief moment--for it was not the done thing to receive a marquess on the front doorstep--but he kept his counsel and slipped away.

"Emily is not here," Eudora whispered, her brown eyes large and excited behind her spectacles, "If the others return, I am supposed to say she is indisposed with a migraine, but she is really gone to Berkley Square to spy on Lady Hardthistle's maid."

"Did she tell you to tell me this?" Freddie wondered, for he had expressly forbidden Emily to go spying.

"No," Eudora was certain, "She told me not to tell Mary, Jane, or Mama, but she did not mention that I should not tell you."

There was a moment of silence, as Eudora puzzled over this, and her expression turned suddenly worried.

"Gemini, do you think I shouldn't have told you?" she asked of Freddie, "I always do the wrong thing..."

"You were perfectly correct to inform me," Freddie assured her, omitting that it was only he who would think her confession correct, "I shall go to fetch her at once. I hope she had the sense to take a maid with her."

Eudora's pained silence was all the answer Freddie needed. He bit back a sigh, for it was not Eudora's fault, and she had been most helpful, before touching the brim of his hat and bidding her goodbye.

"Maybe don't tell her I sent you," Eudora's nervous call followed Freddie back to his carriage.

"I won't," he called back, before instructing his driver to take him to Berkley Square.

"Circle the square, until I tell you to stop," he instructed, brusquely.

As the carriage trundled from St James' Square, towards their destination, Freddie mulled over which punishment would be most fitting for Miss Mifford's reckless disregard for her safety. His thoughts then turned to worry, as he imagined what terrible fortunes might have befallen her, then back to anger.

This cycle of emotion repeated itself numerous times, as the carriage made its way up Piccadilly, so by the time they reached Berkley Square, Freddie was fit to burst.

He scowled, as his gaze swept over every person on the footpath, trying to spot Emily amongst the crowds. Finally, having circled the square thrice, he sighted her, strolling along without a care in the world.

"Pull up here," Freddie called, rapping on the roof of the carriage with his cane.

As the carriage drew to a halt beside the footpath, Freddie snapped up the screen on the window, cast Miss Mifford a glare--so she would understand just how much trouble she was in--before reaching over to open the door.

Miss Mifford scrambled in without his assistance--for Freddie did not wish to cause a scandal, by risking being seen bundling a young woman into his vehicle--and sat herself primly on the bench opposite him.

"I know you said--" she began, but Freddie had no patience for excuses.

"Do you know how much danger you put yourself in?" he growled, "This is not the Cotswolds; London is filled with villains, thieves, and footpads. You could have been assaulted, or robbed, or kidnapped."

"Yet none of these things occurred," Emily answered, with a forced mildness to her tone, "What I do is none of your concern, my lord. Besides--"

Again, Freddie did not wait to hear her excuses before interrupting her, such was his anger.

"Your safety is my concern," he retorted, scowling across at her.

She opened her mouth to protest again, and Freddie's willpower snapped at the sight of her plump mouth, petulant and sulky.

He moved swiftly, crossing the carriage to sit beside her, before drawing her into his lap, and covering her mutinous lips with his own. She gave a slight gasp, and he braced himself for a slap, but none was forthcoming.

Instead, Emily melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck to steady herself, and giving a quiet mewl of pleasure as Freddie kissed her thoroughly.

His senses were assaulted by her; her soft lips, her warm curves against his body, her sweet floral scent. His hands on her back pulled her closer against him, as Freddie was filled with a deep longing for her--for all of her.

It was only when the carriage hit a pot-hole and jolted them apart, that Miss Mifford was saved from being thoroughly ravished in a moving vehicle.

"Forgive me," Freddie said, as she glanced up at him with nervous eyes, "I seem to have left myself off the list of those things that are dangerous to you..."

"You're not dangerous," she replied, and Freddie was touched by how much she trusted him.

The carriage turned, and Freddie realised that his driver was headed towards Pall Mall. Miss Mifford might trust him, but even Freddie knew better than to bring her within a furlong of his home and bedchamber.

"St James" Square," he called, rapping on the roof.

"Oh, we're nearly there," Emily blinked, still a little stupefied from the passion of their embrace, "My lord, I must tell you--"

"Freddie."

"Freddie," she corrected herself, leaving Freddie to marvel at how sweet his name sounded upon her lips--like a heavenly chorus of angels.

"I know you did not wish me to spy on Ethel," she continued, "But I'm very glad I did. You see, I followed her from Berkley Square to the graveyard beside St George's."

Freddie bit his lip to keep from growling with displeasure at the news that Emily had spent all morning traipsing across the whole of London alone, and not just Berkley Square.

"And you'll never guess who she went there to meet--Sir Cadogan," she revealed, not giving him a chance to guess.

"You're certain?" Freddie squawked, startled into gaucheness by the news.

"Most certain," she nodded, her eyes gleaming, "And, she wants to marry him, but

Sir Cadogan is insistent they wait, for it would look most suspect.”

”He said that?” Freddie breathed, for it was tantamount to a confession of guilt.

”He mentioned that you had accused him of having played a hand in Lady Hardthistle’s death,” she explained, ”And that to marry so soon, might draw further attention upon him.”

Not an exact confession, Freddie conceded, but near enough.

”I think we must confront him,” Emily added, her eyes sidling to his to assess how he felt about this.

Freddie, who was quite pleased by the use of the pronoun ”we”, nodded in agreement.

”Somewhere public would really put him on the spot,” he said, thinking aloud, ”It might shock a confession from him.”

”That’s what I was thinking,” Emily sounded awed by the synchronicity of their thoughts, ”Mary and Northcott are holding a ball--it would be easy enough to add Ethel and Sir Cadogan to the list of invitees. We could confront them there, together.”

There it was again, the use of the word ”we”, that left Freddie with a feeling of pleasure in his stomach. He hid a smile, as he imagined Emily using it in other sentences.

We were pleased the wedding went so well. We enjoyed our honeymoon in the Lake District. We look forward to the birth of our first child...

”Freddie?” Emily interrupted his daydreams, glancing at him queerly, ”Are you

alright? You seem to have drifted off.”

”Ahem,” Freddie cleared his throat, importantly, ”Yes, I was just thinking of the best way to go about it but leave it with me--I shall think of a plan.”

He added a masculine harrumph to the end of his sentence--more for his benefit, than hers--and Emily rolled her eyes.

”Well, do remember to include me in it,” she grumbled, averting her eyes.

Freddie reached out and gently turned her face toward his, so that she was looking at him fully.

”You are in all my future plans, Miss Mifford,” he said, addressing her formally for what felt like a very formal declaration of his intent.

Again, she flushed, her green eyes awash with longing but also fear. Something was holding her back from admitting that she wanted him too, but Freddie could not for the life of him work out what it was.

It wasn’t his looks, personality, or style--for he had already dismissed those notions as absurd--but, rather, something else...Freddie just needed to discover what that something was.

The carriage turned on to St James” Square and Emily gave a nervous glance out the window.

”I think it”s best if we stop here, I shouldn”t like to cause a scandal by being seen exiting your carriage,” she said.

A scandal would necessitate a proposal, which would suit Freddie just fine, but he

nodded in agreement--for when he proposed, he wanted her "yes" to be given freely.

"Stop," he called, rapping on the roof of the carriage.

His driver pulled in at once, and Freddie smiled apologetically at his companion.

"I'm afraid I cannot help you out," he said, "But I want you to know that the wish to do so is there."

"I would never doubt your gallantry, my lo--Freddie."

My Freddie? Things were looking up already.

Freddie reached over to open the door, and Emily slid past him, hopping elegantly down to the pavement. She paused, offered him a shy smile, then set off at a quick trot towards home.

Freddie allowed himself a moment to savour the memory of their kiss--all the more vivid for the floral scent which still lingered--before rapping on the roof of the carriage.

"White"s," he called--he had a very acute need for a brandy, following the morning's high-jinx.

The club was filled with thirsty gentlemen, just released from the confines of The House of Lords. Freddie had no wish to join the boisterous fray at the bow-window, who sounded intent to continue an earlier debate, and instead made for a quiet corner. There, he ordered a brandy, and sat back to mull over Miss Mifford's confusing reluctance to admit that she liked him.

She did like him, of that Freddie was certain. No woman, especially an innocent one,

could feign such passion and warmth. There was something holding her back though, and Freddie needed to work out what it was--for he could not very well drag her down the aisle, though it was a tempting thought.

"Brooding silently in the corner again--I take it you have recently encountered Miss Mifford? Lud, I ought to send her a bouquet of hot house flowers, as thanks for her service to my ears--I can't recall the last time I was forced to endure one of your lectures on matters sartorial."

Delaney, displaying his customary charm, sat down uninvited in the chair opposite Freddie, and waved down a passing footman to fetch him a drink.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to capitalise on your silence and take a moment to grumble," he continued, with a sigh, "Mostly about the female of the species."

"Had your heart broken?" Freddie asked, with a note of surprise, "I didn't think you had one."

"Just because I'm not keen to get leg-shackled, does not mean that I do not have a heart," Delaney harrumphed, "But no, this is nothing to do with women I am romantically interested in, rather women who I am obliged to suffer because of blood relations."

"Your mother?" Freddie guessed, feeling more certain he was correct.

"And my sisters," Delaney sighed, "They're ganging up on me, and they're rather formidable when they have a shared cause."

"The cause being to torture you, and, by default me, who has to listen to you?"

"A-hur-hur-hur," Delaney met Freddie's sarcasm with some of his own, "How you

suffer. No, Mother has gotten it into her head that she would like to take up residence in Bath near Amelia.”

”Understandable,” Freddie conceded, for Delaney’s sister had only recently given birth.

”Which has led to Nancy demanding I rent her an apartment there too,” Delaney continued, rolling his eyes, ”Which in turn led to Frannie demanding one for herself, so she’s not left out.”

”Can their husbands not facilitate these demands?” Freddie raised a brow.

”Apparently they’re unwilling to indulge their wives’ aching need to be close to their sisters, but as their brother I should understand better--even though I haven’t been invited to join the coven.”

”You’re just here to fund them, Delaney,” Freddie agreed, ”Don’t get ideas above your station, like joining in. One must know one’s place.”

”Sisters,” came the dour reply, ”Who’d have them?”

From the resignation in his voice, Freddie guessed that Delaney had already decided to yield to the demands of his siblings. No wonder the poor chap had no wish to marry, he was already hen-pecked as it was.

His woes, however, had inspired an idea in Freddie.

”Do Lord Crabb and Northcott both have residence in the Cotswolds?” Freddie queried, suddenly.

”Three minutes,” Delaney looked at his pocket watch, ”I got three minutes before you

brought the topic round to the Mifford chit. And don't be pedantic and claim you didn't mention her directly. To answer your question, yes, both their estates are very close by; they border the same village."

"Plumpton," Freddie sounded out the name of the village Emily had mentioned numerous times.

"That's the one," Delaney agreed, finishing his drink in one gulp, "Are you of a mind to set up there, in the hope of winning Miss Mifford's hand?"

Delaney's tone had been teasing, but when Freddie did not immediately reply in the negative, he gave a whoop of laughter as he realised that he had hit the nail on the head.

"You're in much deeper than I had thought," he said, with a kind smile to his friend, "As a man with sisters, I will concede that you're on the right path. The bonds of sisterhood are too strong to break for any man."

"And if you can't beat them, join them," Freddie finished, with a grin.

"Indeed," Delaney, who had refilled his glass from the decanter on the table, now lifted it in toast to his friend. "Here's to admitting that we are powerless in the face of women, and to accepting our fate as nothing more than their devoted subjects."

Freddie raised his own glass in recognition of such a fine--and apt--speech. He was, he feared, completely lost to reason when it came to Miss Mifford. The only other thing capable of inspiring such devotion in him, was the fine tailoring at Weston's, and he'd even give up his exquisite collection of dinner jackets, if it meant a chance at having Emily's hand.

"Where would a man go about procuring an estate in Plumpton?" Freddie mused,

having finished his second glass of brandy.

"Are you going to buy the estate before she agrees to the marriage?" Delaney gawped at his confidence.

"What makes you think she will not consent to the marriage?" Freddie frowned, "I have gone through all the reasons why Miss Mifford might refuse me, and I have ruled out that she might object to my looks, my clothing, or my personality--all are wonderful, as you well know. The only objection I can think she might have, is being separated from her family--a problem I can easily solve."

"If you're certain you won't end up master of an expensive folly," Delaney exhaled the breath he had been holding, "Then Chesterton in Kensington is your man--he knows every bit of land for sale south of the Tyne, and he'll arrange things for you, for a fee."

Freddie, who was always glad to delegate tedious tasks to a paid underling, gave a smile of satisfaction.

"My thanks," he said to Delaney, before standing up from his seat, "I shall go now to see him, before he closes for the day."

"Aren't you going to sleep on it?" Delaney blinked in surprise at his eagerness.

"What's there to think about?" Freddie gave a Gallic shrug.

He had found the woman he wished to marry, and if a pile of bricks in the Cotswolds was what it would take to make her his, then Freddie would not rest until he owned every brick he could lay his hands on.

Chapter Eleven

When Emily returned to Northcott House, she was acutely aware that she had just been kissed, and felt that everyone would know just by looking at her.

Surely they would note her bruised lips, which tingled with delicious warmth? Or her hair, tousled and in disarray after Freddie had run his hands through it?

Her very being hummed with excitement and she felt thoroughly different from the girl who had exited the house mere hours ago. It was impossible that anyone could fail to notice the change in her.

"Oh, you're back," Eudora looked up with disinterest from her book, as Emily stepped into the library.

Emily paused, waiting for her younger sister to note her seismic transformation.

"Are you going to stand there all day? You're letting a draught in," Eudora called, without lifting her head from the page.

Emily's shoulders slumped, perhaps her transformation had not been as great as she thought.

"Did you discover any of Ethel's secrets?" Eudora queried, as Emily sat herself down on one of the leather Chesterfields by the fire.

The library was Northcott's domain, and was furnished with heavy, leather furniture,

and decorated in dark, masculine colours. It might, Emily thought idly, benefit from a potted plant or two--and the painting which hung above the fireplace could do with being changed from a gory battle scene, to something more palatable. A still life, perhaps.

"Oh, only that Ethel's secret lover is none other than Sir Cadogan," Emily answered, with deliberate lightness.

"What?"

Her words had done what her presence had not, and Eudora wrenched her attention from her book to her sister.

"I followed her from Berkley Square to St George's," Emily confirmed, glad to finally have an audience, "Where I saw the pair share a very amorous embrace."

"Yuck," Eudora made a face.

"Ethel wishes to get married, but Sir Cadogan wants to wait, for he fears it would look suspicious, given that Lord Chambers has already questioned him about the murder."

"And what did Lord Chambers have to say to that?" Eudora asked, before clapping a hand over her mouth in a futile bid to keep herself out of trouble.

"Did you tell him where I was?" Emily allowed herself a moment's outrage, "I told you not to tell anyone where I was going."

"No," Eudora answered, keen to defend herself, "You said not to tell Mama, Jane, or Mary. You said nothing about Lord Chambers."

"It was implied," Emily retorted, but without much conviction. If Eudora had not told Lord Chambers where she was, then they would not have shared such a magical moment.

Eudora, who had been expecting a firmer reprimand, frowned suddenly. She took off her spectacles--which she wore just for show--and eyed Emily curiously from top to toe.

Emily, who had thought herself in the clear, flushed under her sister's scrutiny.

"You kissed him!" Eudora gasped, leaping from the chair behind the desk with excitement, "Lud, Emily. Tell me everything. Was it divine? Are you going to be married at once? Oh, Mama was right--you will be a marchioness!"

"He has not asked me to marry him," Emily clarified, hastily.

"But you think he will?"

Emily nodded, as a gnawing anxiety filled her stomach. When she had left Plumpton, she had intended for her season to be nothing more than an exciting few weeks, which she might remember fondly over the course of the summer. She had not set out to find a husband, nor a new home, and she did not think she was prepared for such a big change. Plumpton was where her heart lay, not in Sussex, where Lord Chambers' marquessate lay. Yet now, at the thought of losing Lord Chambers, Emily found that her heart ached and she knew that whatever choice she made, some pain would accompany it.

If her father was there, he would tell her something wise. That change always brought some pain, but even more joy. That she would make a new home, and new memories with Lord Chambers. That there would always be a place for her in Primrose Cottage, no matter how far she strayed.

As it was, Eudora was the only one present to offer pearls of wisdom, and she wasn't very gifted in that field.

"Can I have your bedroom if you marry the marquess?"

"Would you take my grave as quick?" Emily stuttered, aghast that she was being erased from Primrose Cottage before she had even left.

"It's just, I will miss you terribly," Eudora adopted a pained look, "And my suffering might be eased, if I was surrounded by all your things."

"I suppose, if I was to be left alone with Mama, I might also need to be consoled by material objects," Emily agreed, and Eudora's face fell.

"I didn't think of that."

The sisters' tête-à-tête came to an abrupt end with the return of the very woman of whom they had been speaking. Mrs Mifford's voice called out for them both from the hallway, and the two girls reluctantly went to find her--though only after Eudora had carefully placed Northcott's book back in the place she had taken it from.

They found Mary, Jane, and Mrs Mifford standing in the entrance hall, though only Mary had removed her pelisse and gloves.

"There you are, Eudora," Mrs Mifford gave an exasperated sigh, as though she had been searching high and low for her for hours, "The carriage is waiting to take us to your dress fitting."

"Is Emily coming?" Eudora cast her sister a jealous scowl at not having to endure being poked and prodded by a seamstress for hours.

"Her fitting is at five o'clock," Mary answered, struggling to conceal a yawn, "Madame Rousseau is impossible to get an appointment with--we're very lucky she managed to squeeze you both in, so no sulking."

"I never sulk," Eudora pouted, before flouncing towards the door. Mrs Mifford and Jane followed her, though the latter dawdled a bit, and once she was sure their mother was out of earshot offered Mary a supportive smile.

"I shall write to Papa, to request he travels down at once," Jane whispered, before turning to take off after the other two.

"How did things go with Cecilia?" Emily asked, as she followed Mary across the hall towards the stairs.

"We finalised the guest list," Mary waved the sheafs of paper she held in her hand, "Somehow we managed to whittle it down to acceptable numbers. Mama insisted it would be neighbourly to invite Mrs Canards and Mrs Wickling, seeing as they are in town, but I can't help but feel she simply wishes to show off the splendour of Northcott House"

"I'd well believe that her motivation is more about inspiring sour grapes, than true neighbourly affection," Emily agreed.

"She won out, in the end," Mary frowned, looking down at the paper in her hands, "I just need to give this to Bentley then he will write the invitations--he has a most elegant hand--and send them out with the footmen. Where has he got to?"

The butler, Emily guessed, was in his office on the far side of the house. As Mary gave a wide yawn, Emily realised that now was as good a time as any to add Ethel and Sir Cadogan to the list, without having to explain anything to her sister.

"You look tired," Emily said, truthfully, "Let me do that. You take yourself upstairs and have Sylvie fetch you a warming pan."

"If you're certain?" Mary's eyes were almost closed already, and she did not wait for Emily to answer in the affirmative, before handing over the list and drifting away to bed.

Feeling like a thief, Emily stole down the hallway to the library, where she had earlier spotted a pot of ink on the desk. A quick rummage through the top drawer of the Davenport desk produced a quill, and with a deft hand, Emily scribbled Ethel and Sir Cadogan's names at the bottom of the list. She waited a few moments for the ink to dry, then waited a few more for prosperity, before setting off in search of the butler.

The plan to unsuspectingly lure Sir Cadogan into making a confession was going so smoothly, that Emily felt a momentary pang of worry that it would not work. She quickly pushed the thought aside, for there was no way the plan could fail with luck and Lord Chambers on her side.

Madame Rousseau kept a shop on Upper King Street, in a few finely appointed rooms, decorated in lush splendour. It was rumoured that the modiste had twenty seamstresses at her disposal, and part of her popularity amongst the ton was the speed with which she could produce a gown, as well as her beautiful designs.

After discussing the new gown with the French woman, who spoke in heavily accented English and possessed the same level of charm as Sylvie, Emily was then whisked off to a dressing room for her fitting.

The small seamstress helped her take off her dress, then slipped a muslin mock dress over her head, which she began to deftly adjust. The tiny woman was silent as she poked and prodded at Emily with pins, and Emily's attention was caught by the sounds of other clients chattering in their respective dressing rooms.

"Take it in more about the waist," a voice boomed from the adjoining dressing room, traveling easily through the silk curtains which divided them, "I shan't have my daughter looking dowdy on her wedding day."

"Oh, hush, Mama," a light female voice replied to the fussing.

"I won't be hushed. I want you in a dress that reminds Mr Bunting how lucky he is to be marrying into beauty as well as wealth."

Mr Bunting?

Emily recalled the young lady that she had seen with the young gentleman at the theatre. Their relationship must have progressed quickly, if they were now engaged. A brief, unkind thought flittered across her mind, as she wondered if Mr Bunting had expedited the engagement, by acting as amorously with this young lady as he had with Lady Francesca--but she quashed it. It was none of her business.

"Mr Bunting is not marrying me for my wealth, Mama," the light voice chided, "He is marrying me because he loves me. If you wish to tar someone as a fortune hunter, then turn your brush onto Mr Fitzgibbons. I cannot believe Amelia was so silly as to accept a proposal from a man with such a penchant for gambling. He will ruin her, mark my words."

Mr Fitzgibbons had finally clinched himself a wealthy bride, Emily thought, with astonishment. Miss Gardner was, indeed, a fool to have accepted a proposal from such a reckless young-blood, but as her family's fortune was from industry, society would approve the union between money and pedigree.

"Miss Gardner's father's pockets are deep enough to fund the lad," came the snorted reply, "Don't worry about that."

Their voices dropped to low murmurs, as they began to discuss the length and fit of the gown. Emily's own seamstress, who though quiet was extremely industrious, was nearly finished her work.

"All done, miss," the woman said, after a few more minutes of pinning, "It will look wonderful when it's finished. Now, why don't we get you dressed."

Emily removed the mock-dress, and the seamstress assisted her back into her day dress. Once she was presentable, she made her way from the dressing room to the front of the shop, where Mary sat on a satin covered duchesse brisée sipping jasmine tea and eating from a plate of brightly covered macaroons.

"Finally," Mary exclaimed, holding her hand out so that Emily could help her from her seat, "I'm exhausted after that."

Mary's bump was growing bigger every day, and everything made her tired. Emily was beginning to doubt that she would last the season, such was the change in her over the past few weeks, but she kept her counsel. Mary was nervous enough about the ball, without having the added worry that she might go into labour whilst the canapés were being served.

"How was the fitting?" Mary asked, as she waved for the footman--who was holding several paper-wrapped parcels--to lead the way outside. Exhausted Mary might be, but she was never too tired for shopping.

"It went well," Emily answered, with a shrug, "We shall see when the dress is done. Did you know that Miss Gardner and Mr Fitzgibbons are engaged?"

"Yes, I think I read something about it in the papers," Mary answered, as she clambered into the carriage with help from another footman.

Once she was settled, Emily took the footman's hand, and stepped in with ease.

"I miss that," Mary commented, sadly, "Being able to walk instead of waddle."

"Ducks waddle, duchesses..." Emily trailed off as she tried to think of a word to describe the way Mary now moved, but came up short for waddle was quite apt.

"Apparently he has a reputation as a reckless gambler," Emily continued abruptly, deciding it was safest to continue their previous topic, "It does make one wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"If, perhaps, he did kill Lady Hardthistle?" Emily shrugged, unsure as to why she was now doubting Sir Cadogan's guilt.

The squire had means and motive, and was the most likely of all the suspects to have murdered the baroness. Perhaps it was just nerves on her part, about the plan to confront him, which had Emily doubting herself.

"Are you still investigating the murder?" Mary asked, with a frown in her direction.

"I am not," Emily lied, having forgotten that Mary was not up-to-date--nor would she approve--of Emily's adventures.

"Lord Chambers is investigating matters and he is keeping me informed of how things are progressing," Emily finished, which earned her an approving smile from Mary.

"I hear wedding bells," her sister sighed, her blue eyes dreamy.

"If you're experiencing auditory hallucinations, I can have Northcott send for a

doctor when we return.”

The sisters spent the rest of the journey bickering between themselves, but despite this, Emily’s mind kept drifting.

Not to Sir Cadogan, or even Mr Fitzgibbons, but to Lord Chambers.

Despite all her worries and reservations, Emily could not help but feel that Mary was correct, and that the bells of St George’s would soon be ringing out in celebration for her marriage--if she could work up the courage to leave her family behind.

Chapter Twelve

Freddie was kept busy in the days which followed the kiss, but just because Emily was absent from his sight, did not mean she was absent from his thoughts.

She was in them constantly; in fact, part of the reason for Freddie's unusually packed schedule, was his search for a house in the Cotswolds.

Charles Chesterton had proved a font of information regarding which of the aristocrats between Evesham Vale and Severn Valley, were in the market to sell their estates. Given the market, as well as the popularity of the gaming-hells in the likes of Pickering Place, there were quite a few titled gentlemen in need of funds.

In between sessions of Parliament, Freddie read over descriptions of manor houses in Tetbury, Tudor piles in Chipping Norton, and even a castle in Winchcombe, but none sounded right--nor were they close enough to Plumpton for Freddie's liking.

He had nearly given up hope, when, just a few days before the ball that was to be held at Northcott House, a servant arrived from Chesterton's with a missive from his master.

My lord, I have had news that a Mrs Lacey, of Wynding House, just outside your preferred village of Plumpton is seeking to sell the house she inherited from her late husband. The lady in question is keen for a quick sale, as she is due to remarry and it is not certain that her husband-to-be will survive much longer. If you have an interest, send word with my lad, and I shall have an agent meet you there this evening.

"Tell your master to go ahead and send the agent down to Plumpton," Freddie instructed the young lad, who bobbed his head, then left.

Freddie, who had taken the message in the entrance hall, turned to a lingering footman and instructed him to have his carriage readied.

"Then, tell Farley to pack me an overnight bag," Freddie added, for by the time they reached Plumpton, it would be nearly dark.

Filled with excitement, Freddie made for the library and wrote a short note to Emily, to explain that he would be out of town for the evening. He had expected to spend the evening at Lady Hubbard's ball, which Emily was also due to attend, and regretted that he would be forced to spend another evening without glancing upon her.

It was for the greater good, however, and when the footman returned to tell Freddie that everything would be arranged within the half-hour, Freddie gave a broad smile. The future was within his reach; in just a few more days, Emily's name would be cleared, he would have a house to offer her in Plumpton, and she would have very few reasons to refuse his proposal.

The journey from London to Plumpton took the best part of the day. Though the weather was fine, and the road in good condition, the length of the journey necessitated several stops to change horses. At last, the postillion who had travelled with them since the first stage, gave a shout that The King's Head Inn was in sight.

"Thank heaven for that," Freddie called back. His posterior had taken a battering, despite the luxury of the coach.

At the Inn, Freddie was shown to the grandest room, which overlooked the town of Plumpton. He freshened up, with the basin of warm water a chamber maid had brought for him, before setting straight back downstairs to have a chaise readied for

him.

"In which direction does Wynding House lie?" he questioned the young groomsman assisting him.

"Over yonder," the lad waved a hand in an eastward direction, "Take the bridge to Lower Plumpton and follow the road past the church and Northcott Hall, then you'll come to a crossroads and you take the left. It's behind a big set of gates, with some ornamental pineapples on 'em."

"Of course it is," Freddie hid a smile; pineapples had been the status symbol of the previous century, and even today to have one as a centrepiece at a dinner-party was considered the height of fashion.

Mrs Lacey's late husband must have made his wealth in importing from the new world, Freddie deduced, as he clambered upon the chaise.

With a neat flick of the reins, the two horses took off, turning from the courtyard to the main street. Plumpton was a quaint village; nearly every building had a thatched roof, and the numerous shops sported mullioned windows and brightly painted doors.

As Freddie drove on, he noticed the townsfolk staring openly at him. Outside a pub, which--according to the sign outside--was called The Ring'O'Bells, several gentlemen, holding half glasses of ale and enjoying the late evening sun, gawped at him passing.

Glad to offer some entertainment, Freddie tipped his hat as he passed, and the gentlemen in turn raised their hands in salute--even though none knew him. Plumpton, Freddie guessed, was the type of small village where a perceived slight might be remembered for decades. Best to wave at everyone, just in case.

The road curved slightly, and Freddie sighted the low stone bridge which crossed the stream. He followed the road on further, past the church, past the gates of Northcott Hall, reaching the crossroads in jig-time. There he took a left, until he found himself outside the gates of Wynding House.

They were made of black, wrought iron, and decorated with gold leaf pineapples, as the groomsman had said they would be. Freddie guided the chaise through them, up the long winding path, to a fine house in the early Georgian style.

The yellow bath stone glowed warm in the evening sunlight, and the perfectly symmetrical windows reflected the pink of the gathering sunset. A climbing rose, with a few early pale blooms, framed the doorway in a charming disarray.

Before he had even entered it, Wynding House had Freddie smitten.

Mr Waters, the agent from Chesterton's met Freddie at the door, while a handsome groomsman took charge of the horse and chaise.

"My lord, I am honoured by your presence," Mr Waters gushed, revealing himself as a potential sycophant.

Freddie, who quite liked being adored, beamed in reply.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said, as he strode into the entrance hall followed by the agent, "You have an easy sale on your hands, I am already very taken by the outside of the house."

"A man of great taste--which one could easily guess from your attire alone, if you don't mind me saying so, my lord."

"I don't mind at all."

"If you are taken by the exterior, then I can assure you that you will be just as delighted by the interior," Waters continued, "If you'd like to follow me?"

Freddie followed the agent, who began the tour on the third floor, where the servants were quartered. From there, they viewed the bedchambers on the second floor--all bright and airy, with floor to ceiling windows.

On the ground floor, Freddie was shown the kitchens, then the dining room, parlour room, drawing room, and library, before finishing the tour in the long room, which ran the length of the house and doubled as a ballroom.

"Is this the mistress of the house?" Freddie queried, gesturing to a large portrait of a woman of about forty years, above the mantelpiece.

"Er, yes, that is Mrs Lacey," Mr Waters confirmed, his ears pink.

It was not usual for one to display one's own portrait so ostentatiously, but Freddie rather admired Mrs Lacey's confidence that her likeness demanded adoration.

"The stables have eight bays," Mr Waters continued, "With room for three vehicles. They are fully staffed at present; in fact, Mrs Lacey can offer you a full retinue of servants--barring her lady's maid--if you so wish."

"Excellent," Freddie nodded, "My wife shall probably like her own."

"I did not know you were married, my lord," Mr Waters smiled, as though he was glad to learn that he was.

"I'm not, but I intend to be," Freddie's admission slightly disarmed the poor agent, but he recovered quickly.

"It would be a foolish lady, indeed, to say no to you, my lord," Mr Waters said, with such conviction that Freddie half-thought he was offering himself for the position.

"Have any necessary papers sent to my solicitors, Nelson and Son, on Sloane Square," Freddie finished, offering his hand to Mr Waters so they might shake and make it a gentleman's agreement.

"Of course, my lord," Mr Waters' eyes lit up, no doubt imagining his share of the commission for such an easy sale, "I must say, this was an absolute pleasure."

With the formalities over and done with, Freddie made for the entrance hall, to request a footman ready his chaise.

He rocked backwards and forwards on the heels of his boots, as he waited for his vehicle to be brought round. As he hummed a jovial tune, he heard a set of footsteps upon the stairs, and turned to find Mrs Lacey--easily recognisable from her portrait--smiling down at him.

"Congratulations, my lord," she said, flashing him a pearly white smile, "Mr Waters has just informed me of your intention to purchase the house."

"A fine home it is too," Freddie bowed his head, "I'm certain you'll miss it."

"My late husband and I shared many happy memories here," Mrs Lacey agreed, her voice rather devoid of emotion, "However, I should not wish to enter into my new marriage encumbered by another man's estate."

Freddie hid a smile; money was far easier to hide than property, and he would hazard a guess that Mrs Lacey had no intention of telling her new husband that she had profited from the sale of Wynding House.

"Mr Shufflebotham, my husband to be, owns a grand estate in Norfolk," Mrs Lacey continued, "His mind will rest easier knowing that he is leaving it to a woman with no other obligations."

"Indeed it will," Freddie answered, politely. Mrs Lacey spoke of her husband-to-be as though he already had one foot in the grave--which, he probably did.

They were interrupted by the footman, who returned to inform Freddie that his chaise was waiting.

"My thanks, Mrs Lacey," Freddie said, hiding his relief that he could now leave.

"I will be in London next season," the dashing widow replied, eying him speculatively, "Perhaps our paths will cross then."

Freddie, who did not wish to be added to Mrs Lacey's list of prospective next husbands, gave a noncommittal reply, before dashing through the door to safety.

Outside, the sun was setting, casting the bucolic countryside in a warm glow. Freddie hummed to himself as he guided the chaise along the winding country lanes towards Plumpton. Birds chattered in the hedgerows, in a distant field a cow was lowing, and the occasional hare scampered across his path.

It was idyllic, but there was one thing which would make it even more perfect--Miss Mifford seated at his side.

As Freddie rounded the corner, into Lower Plumpton, he felt a strong urge to celebrate his good fortune in life. He guided the chaise up through the main street and brought it to a halt outside The Ring "O" Bells.

"I've sixpence for you, lad," he called to a young boy loitering nearby, "If you guide

my carriage back to the stables at The King's Head."

The lad hopped to attention and pocketed the coin, with a cry of thanks, before taking the reins to walk the horses and chaise to the coaching inn.

Freddie, so thirsty he could almost taste ale on his lips, quickly ducked inside the warmth of the pub. When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he found a scene similar to most country pubs; a low ceiling, criss-crossed by wooden beams, a flagstone floor in need of a good wash, and a suspicious gentleman behind the bar.

"Aye," the man acknowledged Freddie's existence with a nod, still eying him with suspicion.

"Pint of your finest," Freddie replied, taking a seat on one of the stools by the bar.

"Ain't none of them fine, but they do the job," a small, squat man, seated at the other end of the bar called, earning himself a few guffaws of laughter from the other customers.

"Quiet Marrowbone, or I'll call the constable to have you ejected," the barman grumbled, as he poured a pint for Freddie.

This remark earned a few more laughs from the customers, though the squat gentleman rolled his eyes.

"It was funny the first five hundred times, Angus," he grumbled into his pint, "But it's now gone rather stale."

"Like your tenure as constable," Angus agreed cheerfully, as he placed a frothy pint of hoppy mead before Freddie.

Freddie took a coin from his purse and pushed it across to Angus, who pocketed it with a wink. "That'll cover your next one," he advised, "We don't do change here."

"No, I didn't expect you would," Freddie answered, thinking that the pub had probably looked the same since its inception a few hundred years before.

"You down from London?" Marrowbone called, as Angus moved away.

The whole pub fell silent, as they waited for Freddie's answer. Guessing that the arrival of a strange face in their midst was probably the most exciting thing to have happened to the pub's patrons this week, Freddie duly obliged them by answering loudly that he was.

"I have just agreed to buy Wynding House," he added, for good measure, "Mrs Lacey wishes to sell before she marries."

"Poor bugger," another gentleman chimed in, a farmer by the look of him, "Her husbands have a nasty habit of dying off quite soon after marriage. Regular Mary, Queen of Scots, so she is."

"Mr Lacey's unfortunate demise was ruled as an accident," Mr Marrowbone interjected, crossly.

"Only because you were too lazy to investigate it," the farmer replied, scowling across at the constable.

"How dare you," Marrowbone, who was--Freddie guessed--deep in his cups, stood from his stool in outrage. He swayed a little on his feet, before judging the effort too much, and sitting back down with a thud.

"I am something of an expert when it comes to solving murders," the constable called

to Freddie, keen to save his reputation, "Over the past few months our little village has witnessed not one, not two, but three murders--all solved by yours truly. You can ignore Mr Fielding's comments on my work ethic; the citizens of Plumpton rest easily at night, knowing their safety is in my hands."

A few muted laughs followed this statement, but Mr Marrowbone paid no heed.

"Yes, if I wasn't such a gifted sleuth, poor Miss Mifford--I mean, Her Grace--would still be living under a dark cloud of suspicion. Her sister, now Lady Crabb, has also benefited from my expertise--Lord Crabb was thought to have murdered the last viscount, you know, until I proved otherwise."

"You're stretching the truth a bit there, Marrowbone," Angus chuckled, "And if you're so gifted at solving murders, then why don't you take yourself to London and help out there? Mrs Canards wrote to my missus, to say that the other Mifford girl--Emily or Eudora, I can't remember which--has found herself accused of strangling a baroness to death."

"I have no jurisdiction in London," Mr Marrowbone clarified, with great haste, just as Freddie interjected to defend Emily.

"Miss Mifford was wrongfully accused--Mrs Canards should not be spreading such malicious rumours."

"I think you'll find that spreading rumours is Mrs Canards' specialty," Angus guffawed, taking Freddie's, now empty, pint glass to refill, "No one believes a word that comes out of her mouth."

"I do not like to hear that Miss Mifford's reputation is being besmirched," Freddie sniffed, "Even if it is well known the source is not credible."

"If Mrs Canards told me the sky was blue, I'd still look out the window to check that she was telling the truth," Angus called cheerfully, as he set a fresh pint before Freddie. Angus then gave Freddie an appraising glance, his eyes twinkling with mischief, "Tell me, sir, is there a reason you have such an interest in Miss Mifford's reputation?"

The pub fell quiet again, as everyone awaited Freddie's answer. Thinking to give them something to really talk about, Freddie nodded his head, and proudly proclaimed, "Yes, I intend to ask her to become my wife."

"Well, I think that news calls for a round of pints for the whole pub," Mr Marrowbone cried, as the other patrons burst into a round of applause--for the romance or the pints, Freddie wasn't quite sure, though he guessed the former.

"You paying?" Angus raised a brow at the constable.

"As our new friend is the one celebrating, I think it's customary that he pays," Mr Marrowbone cleared his throat, awkwardly.

"You called it, you pay for it," Angus threatened, but Freddie waved a lazy hand to interrupt.

"It's on me," he said, "What better way to introduce myself to my new neighbours, than with a pint?"

"And your new father-in-law," Mr Marrowbone guffawed, as the door to the pub opened, "'Ere he is now--I say, Vicar, there's a man here who wants to marry one of your daughters."

Mr Mifford paused in the doorway; he was a tall man, with a shock of white hair and a neat beard, and bright, inquisitive eyes.

"Which daughter?" he called cheerfully, as he ambled towards the bar.

"Emily," the constable answered, with a wink to Freddie, "Though perhaps he's open to negotiation."

"I am not," Freddie frowned at the very idea, before turning his gaze towards Mr Mifford, "A pleasure to meet you, sir. I am Freddie, Lord Chambers."

"A lord, is it?" Mr Marrowbone squawked, but Freddie ignored him, gesturing for Mr Mifford to join him at the bar.

Angus, who already knew what his customers wanted before they did, set a pint of stout before Mr Mifford and another pint of ale before Freddie.

"You have come from London?" Mr Mifford asked, after he had taken a sip of his pint, "Tell me, how goes the investigation? My second eldest, Jane, wrote to tell me of Lady Hardthistle's unfortunate demise, and Emily's equally unfortunate association with it. She also said that you had taken on the yoke of investigator."

"I am nearly certain that I--I mean, that we--have discovered who the perpetrator is," Freddie answered, glad to have good news to impart. In a rush, he explained about Sir Cadogan, his declaration that he would strangle the baroness, and his association with Ethel, which provided perfect motivation.

"It sounds promising," Mr Mifford agreed, once Freddie had finished, "Though I do caution you; not everyone who declares a wish to murder someone is necessarily a murderer. My good wife professes a wish to kill me at least six times a day, yet I'm still here."

Mr Mifford took another, thoughtful, sip of his pint, before continuing with a rueful smile, "Though, I suppose, if my battered corpse is one day discovered, she'd be the

most likely suspect.”

Freddie, who was not accustomed to such dry humour, choked a little on his ale.

”My daughters have an unfortunate habit of becoming embroiled in murder mysteries,” Mr Mifford continued, with a faint look of pride in his blue eyes, ”And what I have learned, is that the true culprit is quite often the person you least suspect--the man who said nothing at all.”

”That”s very helpful,” Freddie answered, politely, ”Though, in this case, I rather think we have our man.”

”I bow to your superior knowledge on the matter,” Mr Mifford raised his glass in toast, ”Now tell me, what did my daughter say when you asked for her hand?”

”I have not yet asked her,” Freddie, despite his confidence, felt his ears burning, ”I wished to procure a house in Plumpton first, to try sweeten the offer.”

”I take it you have not spent much time in the company of Mrs Mifford?” the vicar queried, innocently, ”Though it is admirable of you to wish for Emily to be close to her sisters.”

”I am told it is the best way to keep a woman happy,” Freddie shrugged, ”Now, all I need, if you don”t mind me asking, is your permission.”

”My permission?” Mr Mifford”s bushy brows disappeared into his hairline, ”My lord, I have raised four daughters and having spent over two decades in a house full of women, let me offer you this piece of advice.”

Mr Mifford paused, for dramatic effect.

"You are not in charge. You might think you are, the world might tell you that you are, but--believe me--you are not."

"Understood," Freddie lifted his pint in salute of his advice, before taking a very large sip.

"Good," Mr Mifford smiled, "Life is much easier when you know your place. Now, the next drink is on me--I rather think you'll need it after that."

Mr Mifford hailed Angus, who supplied both men with another round of drinks, and continued to do so until the bell was rung and last orders called.

After parting ways with Mr Mifford, Freddie returned to his rooms at The King's Head, content that his mission to Plumpton had been something of a success.

He had the house, he had met the neighbours, he had even ingratiated himself with his potential father-in-law; now all he needed, was for Emily to say yes.

Chapter Thirteen

Emily had not expected to feel Lord Chambers' absence quite so keenly, but in the days which followed their kiss, she found herself longing for his presence, as well as mulling over why it was that he had disappeared.

Was it possible that he was a rake, after all? Had he snatched one kiss and given up the chase?

He had written her a short note, to explain that he had been temporarily called away from town--but was that just a ruse?

Emily had little experience with men--well none, in fact--but despite this, she could not believe that her assessment of Lord Chambers' character could be so far off the mark. True, he was arrogant and too handsome for his own good, but the earnestness with which he had attended to her had seemed so genuine.

He was a good man, she knew it, she just rather wished he would arrive at the door and prove it to her.

With the return of Mr Mifford to London, Mrs Mifford had once again taken up residence in Northcott House. As Emily attended to her preparations for the ball, her mother insisted on popping in and out, every few minutes, to offer unhelpful comments.

"I do wish you'd chosen mint over pistachio for the gown," she sighed, during one interruption.

"There's very little difference between the two," Emily replied, through gritted teeth, "And there's very little I can do now, the ball is in a few hours--I can hardly have a new dress made."

"Are you wearing your hair like that?" she gasped, after Sylvie had spent an hour dressing Emily's hair, "It's not very flattering."

"It will have to do," Emily snipped, "There's no time to do anything else with it."

"Well, at least try and look cheerful," Mrs Mifford responded, with a sigh, "Anyone would think you're not looking forward to the evening."

"I can't think why," Emily muttered, as she wondered if it might be possible to lure her mother into the cupboard and lock her inside for the evening.

Luckily, Mr Mifford--demonstrating his almost telepathic ability to tell when his wife was being irritating--appeared at the door.

"You look wonderful, Emily," he said, before turning to his wife with a frown, "Have you seen my cuff-links?"

"Must I do everything?" Mrs Mifford huffed in response, as she stormed out the door with the air of a suffering martyr.

Emily waited a few beats, before grinning at her father.

"I believe you're already wearing your cuff-links, Papa," she observed.

"Look at that," Mr Mifford replied, with feigned surprise, "So I am. Well, while I go find your mother, why don't you finish getting ready in peace? I often find that a moment of solitude, before a big event, can calm the nerves."

With that sage advice, Mr Mifford departed, leaving Emily alone in her room. She checked her appearance one final time in the mirror and found that, without her mother's critical voice in her ear, her reflection was quite becoming. Her red hair was worn high, with loose tendrils framing her face. Her gown, pistachio in colour and trimmed with lace, highlighted her slim frame and complimented her hair.

She was no ogre, she thought cheerfully.

Happy that she would not frighten anyone, Emily made for the window, which overlooked the square. She peeked out through the drapes and saw that there was already a line of carriages snaking around the square; an invitation from the Duke and Duchess of Northcott was not one that anyone would ignore.

Downstairs, Emily found Mary and Northcott in the entrance hall, awaiting the first of their guests. Mary looked almost regal in a gown of navy blue, which contrasted her light hair beautifully and hid her bump. Northcott was his usual tall, dark, and handsome self, as he muttered words of reassurance to his wife.

"Everyone will be intimidated by you; you are a duchess, there's no need to be nervous. And, no, if something goes wrong, I will not allow you to fake your own death..."

Sensing that her sister was on the verge of hysteria, Emily simply offered her a sincere compliment on her dress, then made straight for the ballroom. There, she helped herself to a glass of ratafia, and idled by a large potted plant to await the first guests. She was soon joined by Eudora who, having been dressed by Sylvie, looked every-inch the blushing debutante.

"Where are your spectacles?" Emily queried. Though she knew well that Eudora only wore them for show, she was so accustomed to seeing her in them that it seemed strange to find her not wearing them.

"Sylvie confiscated them," Eudora replied, her expression mutinous, "Along with my feathered turban, my fox stole, and my cane. She said I had the style of a tragic, elderly spinster."

"Your style is not tragic," Emily assured her, though she was rather in agreement on the elderly spinster part. As the youngest sibling, Eudora had always wanted to appear older, but she rather overshot the mark at times. It was not unusual for someone to mistake Eudora for an aged grandmother from afar, as had happened on several occasions.

Cecilia was the first official guest to arrive, resplendent in a ruby gown, embroidered in gold stitching. Upon her head, she wore an imperial toque headdress, composed of ruby satin which matched her dress, with a gold tiara at its front and a plume of ostrich feathers at its crown. She looked like an empress of old; beautiful and intimidating, and the plume of feathers was so high, that she was certain to dwarf even the tallest of men.

Mr and Mrs Mifford followed in her wake, the latter looking slightly put-out at having been out-shone by her rival. A stream of guests then followed, amongst them Mrs Canards and Mrs Wickling, whom Mrs Mifford pounced upon at once.

"Allow me to show you around, ladies," Mrs Mifford cried, her voice--unfortunately--carrying, "I know you are unaccustomed to mixing in such circles, and I do like to be charitable where I can."

Emily rolled her eyes; her mother was trying to dull her feelings of inferiority to Cecilia by making her guests from Plumpton feel equally inferior. If it had been anyone other than Mrs Canards, Emily would have felt pity towards them.

As it was, Mrs Canards scowled unhappily, and allowed herself to be led away by a buoyant Mrs Mifford. Emily's attention was then drawn by the arrival of more guests

to the ballroom, which was rapidly beginning to fill.

She spotted Ethel, garbed as theatrically as the dowager duchess; her lack of confidence in her silks and satins, however, marked her out as nouveau riche. Near Ethel, stood Miss Gardner and her mama, both preening contentedly as Mr Fitzgibbons attended to them. A little further away from them, standing with her parents was Lady Francesca, her expression most unhappy. It was no wonder she was sad, at midway through the season, there were no rumours yet that the young lady might find herself a husband--despite her having tried very hard to snaffle Mr Bunting, who was also present. The target of Lady Francesca's affections was making a beeline for the French doors, an unlit cheroot already in hand. It was early in the night to abscond to the gardens to smoke, but perhaps Mr Bunting wished to avoid the ballroom until there were enough guests to separate him from the lady that he had disappointed.

Emily's eyes scanned the room for Lord Chambers, but she saw no sign of him. Luckily, Lady Albermay's arrival distracted her from her disappointment.

"Well, don't you both look as sweet as a pair of ices from Gunter's," Lady Albermay drawled, as she arrived at Emily and Eudora's side. Her description was rather apt; for both girls were dressed in shades of pastel.

"And you look as delicious as a..." Eudora scrunched her nose, as she tried to think of a food which could best describe Lady Albermay's purple ensemble, "...as a pickled beet."

"I'm most partial to a pickled beet, so thank you," Lady Albermay smiled, unshaken by such a clumsy compliment.

Her husband appeared at her shoulder, the lines of his face even more pronounced as he frowned at his wife.

"It is not the done thing to loiter when one first enters the room," he grumbled, ignoring Eudora and Emily, "We must circulate and be seen. I swear, if I had known marrying an American was akin to marrying a child, I would not have bothered. Lord Ackenhurst is over there and we must not be seen to ignore him; he has offered to lend support to my bill in the House of Lords. Come."

Emily concealed her look of horror, but Lady Albermay appeared well able to handle her husband.

"You married me for my wealth, not my social nous, dear," she tartly reminded her husband, before offering the sisters an apologetic look, "I hope to speak with you again later."

Once the pair were out of earshot, Eudora turned to Emily with a scowl.

"What an odious man," she grumbled, "He was rude to his wife, and he did not even acknowledge us."

"We are unmarried young ladies," Emily reminded her, with a shrug, "We're not worth acknowledging, in some men's eyes. Come, I see the footmen bringing in trays of syllabub."

Emily linked her arm through her sisters, and they traipsed across the ballroom together, smiling politely at the other guests. She procured them both glasses of the delicious ices, and they returned to their potted plant to happily munch away in peace.

"Oh look," Eudora elbowed Emily sharply, "That's Sir Cadogan, is it not? I did not think that Mary would invite him. Who's that he's with?"

Eudora squinted across at Ethel, who looked out of place as she fiddled with the feathers of her turban, and glanced around nervously at the other guests.

"That's Ethel," Emily tried for nonchalance, but her sister was not to be fooled.

"Why on earth did Mary invite...?" Eudora began, before trailing off as realisation dawned.

"You invited them!"

"Hush," Emily thwacked her sister's arm with the spoon she held, "Don't draw attention."

"I'm not drawing attention," Eudora responded, with her usual defensiveness, before continuing on in a lower voice, "How exciting! Are you hoping to draw a confession from the pair?"

"Lord Chambers is hoping to," Emily agreed, "If he ever shows up. I have not heard from him, since our kiss."

Confiding one's problems in one's sister was often unpredictable. One never knew if she would sympathise, chastise, or advise of her desire to commit violence on one's behalf.

Eudora chose the latter.

"The fiend," she huffed, running an agitated hand through her brown curls, half-destroying Sylvie's work in the process, "How dare he steal a kiss and abandon you after? I will run him through with a sword when I next see him. Oh, look--there he is!"

Eudora glanced around, her eyes searching for something to use as a weapon, but the ballroom was, thankfully, devoid of any decorative arms. Fearing that she might use the glass which had held her syllabus as an improvised missile, Emily plucked it

from her hand and waved down a passing footman to take it away.

"Don't say anything, Eudora, I beg you," Emily whispered to her sister as Lord Chambers sighted them, and gave a wave, "I'm certain there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for his absence."

"It would want to be reasonable," Eudora muttered darkly, as Lord Chambers--accompanied by a friend--made his approach.

"Miss Mifford," Freddie greeted Emily with his usual warmth, and, despite her annoyance at him, she could not help but smile back.

"This is my good friend, Lord Delaney," he continued, turning to his companion, "This is the famed Miss Mifford, and her charming sister, Miss Eudora Mifford."

Freddie's voice faltered a little as he realised that the "charming" Eudora was glaring daggers at him.

"A pleasure, Miss Mifford," Lord Delaney bowed in Emily's direction, "Though we have just met, I feel I know you intimately, given how often Chambers speaks of you."

"Ahem," Freddie cleared his throat pointedly, his ears pink.

"He's incessant," Lord Delaney continued, appearing to delight in his friend's discomfort, "Day in, day out, from morning to night, all he speaks of is you."

Emily could not help but feel a curl of pleasure at his words; Lord Chambers had not forgotten her, after all.

"Now," Lord Delaney turned his attentions to Eudora, his brown eyes alight with

interest, "Tell me, how is it that we have never met?"

"We have," Eudora was dry, "We were introduced at Lady Albermay's ball."

"An impossibility; I would not have forgotten a lady as charming as you."

Emily stifled a smile; Eudora looked far more charming this evening, without a mob cap and spectacles to hide her beauty. The only thing which marred her otherwise becoming appearance was the frown which furrowed her brow as she glared at Lord Delaney. She was clearly not as taken by him, as he of she.

Lord Delaney was not deterred, however, and he held out his arm to Eudora, "Perhaps you will agree to step up with me for the next dance, and we can become reacquainted?"

For a moment, Eudora looked as though she would refuse him, but then she glanced at Emily and Freddie, and seemed to decide they needed a moment alone.

"Very well," Eudora sighed, as though she was agreeing to walk to the gallows.

She placed her hand on Lord Delaney's arm and allowed him to lead her away, leaving Emily and Freddie alone.

"Sir Cadogan is here," Emily whispered, with a discreet nod in the squire's direction, "And Ethel too. How do you propose we confront them?"

"You are all business," Freddie replied, sounding faintly disappointed.

Irritation flared within, which Emily did not even attempt to quash. He had kissed her and abandoned her, and now he had the temerity to complain that she was cold?

"Your prolonged, unexplained absence left me in no doubt as to where I stand with you," Emily sniffed, tilting her chin stubbornly.

Lord Chambers' face clouded over with confusion, before understanding dawned.

"Oh," for the first time since Emily had met him, the marquess appeared flustered, "Goodness, I didn't consider the optics when I..."

"When you..?" Emily challenged him, placing her hands on her hips, "When you seduced me in a carriage and disappeared for days after?"

Lord Chambers' face was pale and he shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"I did not think that it would look like that," he answered, "Though now that you have said it, I feel that I was rather stupid to take off without first calling upon you to explain myself."

He did look rather contrite, Emily conceded, though before she had a chance to ask him what exactly he had been up to, they were interrupted.

"There you are, Emily," Mrs Mifford cried, before turning to Lord Chambers as though astonished to see him--though her acting skills were somewhat wanting, "Why, Lord Chambers, I did not see you there. Might I introduce you to Mrs Canards and Mrs Wickling--both up from Plumpton to see how the other half live. Ladies, this is the Marquess of Highfield--a particular friend of Emily."

Mrs Mifford could not contain her air of smugness, as she smiled triumphantly at her guests. Mrs Canards, however, looked far from cowed, instead, her lips curled into an unpleasant smile.

"Lord Chambers and I have already met," Mrs Canards replied, much to Mrs Mifford's chagrin, "At Lady Hardthistle's funeral. Tell me, Miss Mifford, did they ever find the true culprit of the baroness' horrendous murder, or does the finger of blame still point at you? I must say, trouble does tend to follow you Mifford girls about."

Emily found herself stunned into silence by such an audacious remark, but there was someone on hand to defend her.

"Miss Mifford is innocent," Lord Chambers answered, his voice even, though his eyes flashed with anger, "She did not kill Lady Hardthistle."

"Oh no?" Mrs Canards made no effort to keep her voice down, and was drawing the attention of some of the other guests, who inched closer to watch the entertainment--including Ethel and Sir Cadogan, "Then tell me, if not she, who killed Lady Hardthistle?"

"Yes, who?" Ethel joined in, casting a glare Emily's way.

When they had discussed confronting Sir Cadogan, Emily had not imagined that they would be doing so in front of a hostile audience. From the rather uncomfortable look on Freddie's face, she guessed that he had not either.

Still, he squared his shoulders, glanced coolly at Ethel, and replied.

"I believe it was Sir Cadogan."

Those guests who were watching gasped, and began to whisper amongst themselves, which attracted even more attention from those who had not noticed the ensuing fracas.

Emily squirmed a little, as all eyes turned towards Lord Chambers, who was staring Sir Cadogan down, visibly willing him to wilt under pressure.

"I am afraid, Chambers, that you have gone too far this time," Sir Cadogan boomed, when he eventually found his voice, "How dare you accuse me of murder? I should call you out."

"You were sighted in the gardens of Albermay House," Freddie retorted, "Alongside Miss Willard there. When she returned to the house, you lingered, so as not to be seen together. On your way back to the party, you stumbled across Lady Hardthistle, with whom you had argued the night before. Sensing a chance to not only get your revenge, but to inherit her fortune by marrying Miss Willard, you struck! You strangled her to death, sir."

Freddie's outburst was met with stunned silence by the crowd. All eyes turned to Sir Cadogan, whose face had turned an alarming shade of purple.

"My lord, I did no such thing," he eventually spat out, "When I parted ways with Miss Willard, I did indeed stumble across someone--or rather two people--who will attest to the fact that it would have been impossible for me to murder Lady Hardthistle in the time-frame given."

Emily's stomach sank, as she realised that their sleuthing skills were not as sharp as they had first believed.

"Oh," Freddie blustered, his voice far less confident now, "And who's that?"

"That would be me."

Mr Fitzgibbons stepped forward, sheepishly raising his hand. More murmurs from the crowd accompanied his confession, but they were cut short by the arrival of Northcott

and Mary to the ballroom.

"What's going on?" Mary squeaked, with a petrified look at the crowd.

"Lord Chambers is attempting to exonerate your sister of murder, by accusing me instead," Sir Cadogan answered, with an irritable shake of his jowls.

Mary's face paled; her fears that the ball would be a disaster were realising before her very eyes. Acutely aware that his wife was on the verge of hysteria, Northcott took charge.

"Chambers," he said, his voice calm, "Sir Cadogan; why don't you both join me in the library?"

"I expect I'd best come too," Mr Fitzgibbons added, cheerfully.

"Very good," Northcott answered, before waving to attract the attention of the orchestra, "A little music, please."

The four men filtered out of the room, and once they were gone, Cecilia took charge, for Mary was too shocked to move.

"Come," the dowager duchess called, gaily, "Let us dance and be merry!"

The guests obeyed, no doubt keen to discuss what had happened amongst themselves. Only Emily remained rooted to the spot, a sense of dread growing steadily in her belly.

Their plan had failed spectacularly. Not only did Sir Cadogan appear to be innocent, but their next suspect too. Instead of exonerating Emily, they had merely implicated her further.

"I must say Mrs Mifford," Emily heard Mrs Canards say, as she moved away, "It's been a wonderful night, so far. I cannot wait to share with the villagers how triumphantly your daughters have conquered London."

Nausea overwhelmed Emily, as she realised that she would never overcome this social failure. There was no way that Lord Chambers would ever have her as his wife, after this scandal. Unable to bear the pitying looks from the other guests any further, Emily picked up the skirts of her dress, and fled for the safety of the gardens.

Chapter Fourteen

Freddie felt a fool.

He had wished to rescue Miss Mifford, to ride in on his white horse and vanquish all her troubles, but he appeared to have made things worse.

In Northcott's library, all dark panelled wood and leather chairs, he quickly explained his reasoning for thinking Sir Cadogan guilty.

It all sounded very plausible, until the squire interrupted and explained just why it could not possibly be he who had killed Lady Hardthistle.

"Ethel and I went our separate ways," Sir Cadogan cleared his throat awkwardly, his ears pink, "And on my way back to watch the fireworks, I stumbled into a pair of lovers."

"Miss Gardner and I," Mr Fitzgibbons explained, with a faint note of pride, "Gave us quite the fright. It would have been jolly awkward, had we not been interrupted by Miss Willard's screams."

"You told me that you and Mr Bunting were together?" Freddie replied, narrowing his eyes in dislike at the young buck.

"He offered to vouch for my whereabouts, so Miss Gardner would not be caught up in a scandal," Mr Fitzgibbons shrugged, "It was an attempt at gallantry on his part."

"And I did not tell you that I was with Ethel, for I did not wish to embarrass her," Sir Cadogan added, glaring fiercely in Freddie's direction, "But that appears to have been a waste, for you have done it for us."

Freddie felt his cheeks flame; he was a fool of the highest order. Why had he believed himself capable of solving a murder? He should have left well enough alone.

"Now, Sir Cadogan," Northcott interrupted, his voice soothing, "I understand your upset, but Lord Chambers is a man in love, and he believed that he was rescuing the object of his affections from scandal. We cannot berate him too harshly; smitten men do the strangest things."

Like marrying beneath their title for money.

Northcott did not say it, but the implication was there. He was offering Sir Cadogan a pass should he marry Ethel; social acceptance for a former maid, from one of the highest ranking men in the country. It was not an offer to be sniffed at.

"I would like a public apology," Sir Cadogan said, after a moment's deliberation. He did not look pleased to have been strong armed into forgiving Freddie, but as he wasn't in the best of shape, this was a better result than a duel to defend his honour.

"Naturally," Northcott bowed his head, to hide the smile which tugged at his lips. Sir Cadogan had been easy enough to manipulate.

"I should like one too," Mr Fitzgibbons interrupted, "I was also falsely accused."

"With good reason," Freddie could not help but retort, "You threatened to kill the woman, then you provided a representative of the law with a false alibi. All this might not have happened, had you been honest from the off."

"I was protecting my beloved's reputation," Mr Fitzgibbons replied, with a pout, but

he did not force the matter further.

With everything wrapped up neatly, Northcott gave the three gentlemen a smile.

"Shall we return to the ball? I know my wife will be eager to see matters resolved."

Guilt pierced Freddie at this statement; he had ruined not only Miss Mifford's night, but her sister's too.

Freddie followed the other men from the room, back to the ballroom. As they entered, there was a slight lull in conversation, and all eyes turned to them.

"My apologies, sir," Freddie said loudly, offering his hand to Sir Cadogan, "I was mistaken, and you are most magnanimous to forgive me."

Sir Cadogan took Freddie's hand and gave it a rather limp shake--though he did preen at being called munificent by one of his betters. Once he had decided that Freddie had debased himself enough, he let go of his hand and disappeared into the crowd.

"Don't look too glum," Northcott whispered in Freddie's ear, "Your heart was in the right place."

"It's just my brain that wasn't," Freddie snorted, but offered the duke a smile of thanks nonetheless.

"I had best go in search of my beloved, there's no telling what she might have decided to do to distract from the drama," Northcott muttered, looking somewhat worried. The duchess, Freddie deduced, could be something of a loose cannon.

Northcott hurried off and Freddie waved down a passing footman. His tray held glasses of sparkling wine, but Freddie's nerves required something stronger.

"Is there any chance you could find me something with a bit more bite?" he queried, palming the young lad a coin.

"Of course, my lord," he replied, and quickly disappeared.

He returned in jig-time, bearing a double brandy, which Freddie received with thanks. Not wanting to cause further scandal, by being seen drinking such hard liquor after his disastrous performance earlier, Freddie made for the French doors on the far side of the room.

Outside, he found the terrace empty and the night air cool. Freddie strolled quietly towards the steps which led down to the formal gardens, and at the bottom of them he found a secluded bench where he might drink in peace.

He took a deep sip of his brandy, then another, and once the tension of the last few minutes had left his body, he allowed his mind to wander.

His list of possible suspects for the murder contained no names now that Sir Cadogan and Mr Fitzgibbons had been eliminated from it. He might never discover who it was that had murdered the baroness, which meant that poor Emily would always bear the brunt of people's suspicion.

Unless...

Something niggled at the back of Freddie's mind, and he took another deep sip of his brandy to see if that might summon it to the fore.

Both Sir Cadogan and Mr Fitzgibbons had been heard professing a wish to murder Lady Hardthistle, but what was it Mr Mifford had said?

Quite often the culprit is the man who had said nothing at all.

Mr Bunting.

Freddie's mind raced, as he recalled the night of the murder. Just like Mr Fitzgibbons, Mr Bunting had lost money by taking a large punt on the wrong horse. Also, according to Mr Fitzgibbons, Mr Bunting was as beholden as he to find a bride with deep coffers...but Lady Hardthistle had suggested that an engagement between he and Lady Francesca was imminent, despite the lady's lack of a family fortune.

Was it possible that Mr Bunting was the true villain of the piece? His offer to vouch for his friend's whereabouts might have appeared as gallantry to Mr Fitzgibbons, but was it really so he could hide his own secrets?

Feeling suddenly energised, Freddie jumped to his feet and retraced his steps back to the ballroom. Inside, he searched in vain for any sight of Emily. If anyone could tell him that his hunch was more than just that, it was she.

Freddie paced the length of the ballroom, his eyes peeled, but he could not spot her. He did, however, find Eudora.

"Have you seen your sister?" he pressed.

"Which one?"

"Emily," Freddie replied, struggling to keep the note of impatience from his voice.

"The last I saw of her, she was headed for the gardens. I presume for a little weep, after all the embarrassment of earlier," Eudora answered, plainly.

Freddie, who was not accustomed to discussing emotions so openly, blinked in surprise.

"Oh," Eudora caught his shock, "One of us is always crying; I wouldn't fret. Papa

always says that God should have provided him with an endless supply of umbrellas when he gifted him four daughters.”

”So, you think she is outside?” Freddie clarified, afraid that Eudora would take off on another tangent.

”Almost certain,” she agreed, and Freddie gave her a nod of thanks, before turning to make for the gardens once again.

He pushed his way through the heave of people that filled the room, until he reached the French doors. He cast one glance back at the room, to be certain that Emily was not amongst the crowd, when a pale, frightened face caught his eye.

Lady Francesca.

Their gazes met and Freddie suddenly knew that his hunch was correct. He began to pivot direction, to move towards her, but found that she was already on her way to him.

”Do you think it was Mr Bunting who killed Lady Hardthistle?” Freddie asked, wasting no time on niceties.

”I have suspected for quite some time,” the young lady agreed, her voice hoarse, ”When I raised it with him, he threatened to ruin me...”

Freddie bit back a biting retort, to ask did she not care if Emily’s reputation was ruined instead. He needed Lady Francesca on side, for the time being.

”Have you seen him?” Freddie pressed, his anxiety filling him with agitation. He needed to be in action, not making small talk in a ballroom.

”He went out for a cheroot, but did not return,” Lady Francesca answered, gesturing

towards the garden.

Fear filled Freddie at her words, as he realised that Emily might have found herself alone with a murderer.

"Fetch Northcott," Freddie instructed her, harshly, "Tell him to follow me, and bring Lord Crabb too."

Freddie did not wait for her to confirm that she would follow his instructions, instead, he took off into the gardens at breakneck pace.

"Emily," he called, once he was out in the fresh night's air, "Emily, are you out here?"

Freddie raced to the steps, down into the ornamental gardens, still shouting Emily's name. He did not care for propriety, he just needed to be certain she was safe.

Ornate topiary bushes cast dark shadows as he crunched along the path, which wound itself past flower beds, towards a trickling fountain. Beyond the fountain, Freddie saw that the path led towards a tall, ivy-covered fence, which no doubt screened the kitchen garden from view.

Picking up his pace, Freddie rushed forward, still calling Emily's name. He found the handle for the gate to the gardens, concealed by masses of ivy, and pushed it open.

They lay empty, but beyond the neat rows of vegetables, by the far wall, a gate which led beyond the property swung open.

"Emily," Freddie called again, and this time he heard a reply.

"Freddie, help!"

His blood thundered in his ears, as he raced towards the sound of Emily's voice. Outside in the alleyway, the surrounding mews buildings lay in darkness, the servants otherwise occupied in the main house.

"Freddie!" Emily's voice called again, and Freddie turned his head in the direction of her voice.

There she was, at the end of the alleyway, being dragged along by a deranged looking Mr Bunting.

"Give it up, Bunting," Freddie roared, "I am carrying a pistol and I'm a crack shot."

Only one of his claims was true, but the confidence of his tone caused Bunting to hesitate. Sensing his distraction, Emily wriggled free from Mr Bunting's grasp, and sprinted towards Freddie.

Her captor gave a roar of annoyance and made to follow her, but quickly rethought his decision, and instead fled into the dark shadows of the night.

Freddie made to follow him, but his progress was impeded as Emily flung herself into his arms.

"You saved me," she sobbed, pressing her body against his, "Oh, Freddie. I knew you would come for me."

As Mr Bunting had already gained a considerable head-start, Freddie decided it would be rather pointless to chase him. That task was best delegated to the Runners, who would apprehend the culprit in no time.

Feeling almost weak with relief, Freddie pulled Emily against him, inhaling her scent deep into his lungs.

"Are you hurt?" he whispered, stroking her hair away from her face so that he could see her properly.

"Just shaken," she assured him, her eyes meeting his.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Freddie could not help but feel a surge of desire for the woman in his arms. He pulled her against him again and brought his lips crashing down on hers.

Their kiss was raw, filled with a frenetic energy that Freddie was uncertain he would be able to control. He gave a growl of desire, as he claimed Emily's lips with his, lost to the pleasure of his senses.

"Ahem."

Freddie and Emily immediately sprung apart, at the sound of the new arrival. They turned and found Northcott and Lord Crabb, both with their gazes turned to the night sky.

"Gentlemen," to hide his embarrassment at having been caught so unaware, Freddie greeted both men in a deep baritone, which sounded most unlike his natural voice.

"We have discovered the true killer," Freddie continued, "Mr Victor Bunting, son of Baron Mannix. He attempted to kidnap Emily, but I interrupted him mid-act. He fled on foot, in the direction of the river."

"Why would he have attempted to kidnap you?" Lord Crabb queried of Emily, and Freddie was glad he did, for he had been wondering the same himself.

"I stumbled across Mr Bunting engaged in a scandalous act with a young lady at Lady Collins' musicale," Emily explained, "Where they were also sighted by Lady Hardthistle. The baroness wished to force Mr Bunting into proposing to the young

woman, but as she had no fortune, he was rather disinclined.”

”Rather disinclined?” the duke echoed, his eyes dancing, ”That”s something of an understatement.”

”I was in the gardens, recovering from the earlier drama,” Emily continued, a blush staining her cheeks at the memory, ”When I bumped into Mr Bunting. He must have recognised me, for he went rather queer. Before I knew it, he was dragging me down the garden path and threatening to throw me in the Thames.”

Freddie felt his blood run cold, as he realised the grave danger that Emily had faced. He rather regretted his decision not to pursue Bunting, for there was nothing Freddie now wanted more than to pound the living daylights out of the slimy pilchard.

”Luckily,” she finished, turning to Freddie with bright eyes, ”Lord Chambers was here to come to my rescue.”

She reached out and placed her hand in Freddie”s, and it was in that moment that he understood that they would be joined together for their lifetime, and for whatever lay beyond.

”Capital job, Chambers,” Northcott saluted him.

”I got there in the end,” Freddie agreed, with a self-aware chuckle, ”Though, not before taking a few wrong turns.”

”What say we return inside?” Northcott decided, ”I shall summon the Runners, and send them out in search of Mr Bunting.”

They were all in agreement, though as they traipsed through the garden, back to the house, Northcott suddenly halted.

"Er, is there any way we could do this quietly, do you think?" he asked, with a nervous glance through the windows. The duchess was clearly visible, laughing and smiling with some of her guests, and Freddie immediately understood that he did not wish to upset her party for a second time.

"Leave matters to me," Lord Crabb offered, "I'll dash across the square and have my servants set things in motion."

"I'll follow you over," Freddie told the viscount, before addressing the duke, "Return inside to your wife, your Grace, we have stolen you from her for long enough. Lord Crabb and I can handle matters for now."

Looking rather relieved, Northcott acknowledged his statement with a nod.

"Very good," he said, "I shall come over when the last of the guests have gone."

Northcott turned for the house, while Lord Crabb indicated with his thumb that he would leave by the gate at the end of the garden.

Once both men had gone, Freddie took Emily's hand in his once again.

"I wish to explain my absence," he began, but she cut him off.

"I don't care that you live in Norfolk half the year," she said, turning her green eyes towards him, "I wish to be by your side, always. Even if it means spending my winters bound in by snow and ice."

"Norfolk's not that far north," Freddie could not help but laugh, "I shall buy you a map, my dear, to hang on the wall of my--I mean, our--new house in Plumpton."

"W-what?" Emily stuttered, clearly confused.

"Norfolk"’s not that far north," Freddie repeated, deliberately misunderstanding her for his own amusement, "It"’s easterly, more than northerly, in fact."

"No, you beast," she said, as Freddie earned himself a slight thwack on the chest, "What did you mean when you said that you own a house in Plumpton?"

"Just that," Freddie smiled, proud of himself, "I realised that you might be reluctant to accept my proposal, if it meant that you might be separated from your family. So I remedied matters."

"You bought the house before I said yes?" Emily raised a brow, "That"’s rather presumptuous of you."

"If you had not gathered by now, my dear," Freddie grinned, snaking an arm around her waist to pull her close, "I"’m a confident sort of chap."

"Arrogant, even," Emily corrected him, her eyes glinting with amusement.

"What say you then?" Freddie cleared his throat, "I won"’t presume you"’re agreeable to the idea of shackling yourself to me, unless you say you are. I"’m not that arrogant."

Emily paused before answering--it was her turn to tease him now. Freddie tried to hide the brief feeling of panic, as he momentarily wondered if, perhaps, he had completely misread every interaction they had shared.

Mercifully, Emily noted his unease, and gave a delighted laugh.

"Of course I will," she said, allowing him to wrap his arms around her, "There"’s nothing I want more."

As they were not completely alone, the kiss that Freddie bestowed upon his wife-to-

be was rather chaste, but thrilling none the less. So thrilling, that Freddie realised he could not wait three weeks to have the banns read--he wished to marry her at once.

"What say I nip over to Canterbury Palace, and see if the archbishop is home?" he whispered, as he gently stroked her hair, "If I procure a special license, we could be married by noon."

"That does sound like a dream," Emily agreed, "But aren't you supposed to be in Crabb House, assisting in the capture of a murderer?"

So he was. Dash it, but she was awfully distracting.

"Er, yes," Freddie conceded, with a rueful smile, "Perhaps we should hold that thought until tomorrow."

"I'll still be here tomorrow," she assured him, "And you'll find my mama less hysterical if she's given notice of the wedding. She would be most put out if she did not get a day or two to gloat over our engagement to anyone who'll listen."

"Ah-ha," Freddie laughed, but he faltered somewhat, when he realised Emily was being factual.

"You might yet regret offering to move so close to my family," Emily smiled, giving his hand a squeeze, "Though I will shield you from the worst of it, I promise."

"We will protect each other," Freddie agreed.

And then, even though he really should have been on his way, Freddie kissed her again.