

# MURDER BY CHOCOLATE

The Violet Carlyle Mysteries



# BETH BYERS

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A VIOLET CARLYLE MYSTERIES

BETH BYERS

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## SUMMARY

### **July 1925**

Lady Violet is Mrs. Wakefield now, and she's settled rather comfortably into her life. During a trip to her country house, she meets a chocolate artisan, and she decides that nothing else will suit than an evening at home—with chocolate—as a married woman.

When she invites her friends to her house, she little expects her home to be christened not by chocolate but by murder. Yet again, Vi, Jack, and friends are dragged into a murder investigation. Just who would commit the crime of poisoning chocolate? And why?

*For Tessa*

## CHAPTER 1

“No chalkboards,” Violet said, crossing her arms over her chest at Denny.

He giggled. She lifted a brow and he giggled even harder.

“I said no,” she told him, glancing at Lila, who just shook her head and sipped her cocktail.

“Why am I arguing about this?” Violet looked to Jack who also shook his head. “We’re considering a swimming pool, not a...a...murder room.”

“It’s easy to get under your skin, Vi,” Denny told her with another giggle. “Honestly, my darling Vi, it makes my life so much shinier.”

Violet propped her feet up on the ottoman in front of her. “You’re dismissed as a friend, my good sir.”

“But we have dinner reservations,” Lila said idly. She tucked her golden hair behind her ear and examined her complexion in her compact. As usual, she looked lovely.

“After dinner,” Violet amended.

“We’re going dancing after that, aren’t we? I shall need him to accompany me so I don’t have to be the woebegone flower on the wall without a partner.”

“Fine,” Violet moaned, “he’s dismissed after that.”

Denny’s giggling morphed into a snicker and then he scowled at his cocktail. “Where is Victor when I need him? Off cavorting in the country and leaving a fella to make his own cocktails.”

“It *is* hard to be you,” Violet told Denny. She was happy enough with her solitary glass of ginger wine. There was, she thought, something very



delightful in drinking her favorite drink with her friends in her own house.

She and Jack had bought the house before they'd married. It had needed rather a lot of updating, which had been more fun than she'd anticipated. She ran her fingers over the red satin fabric with oriental dragons woven in. She had seen the fabric across the shop and swanned through the displays to demand it be turned into something for her. The result was, if she said so herself, extraordinary.

She glanced again around the room, taking in only Jack, Lila, and Denny. They really had lost too much of their party over the last few days. First Violet's twin, Victor, had determined that his expecting wife must have fresh air and left London to begin their slow journey to the south of England. That departure had been followed by their friend, Rita, and Lila's devil sister departing on a foreign adventure. That had been followed—very significantly—by Hamilton Barnes taking a case in Leeds.

"Are we leaving tomorrow morning?" Denny asked. He groaned as he heaved himself to his feet and crossed to the bar again.

"You're getting squishy about the middle again," Violet told him, just to watch him blush and pat his belly. "But no, the day after. We are, however, having a family dinner while we're there," Violet told the others significantly. "Jack's father is not the head of the Wakefield family, and I don't think any of them are prepared for this lot, so we'll have to put on our best play-acting faces until they get used to us."

"Then we'll drop the act and they'll realize the cuckoos they've let into the nest?" Lila's lazy voice was punctuated by a slight half-smile as if she couldn't be bothered to smile with both sides of her mouth.

"Jack's father is the head of this family, I'd say," Denny said as though he met James Wakefield more than a time or two at large events. "Don't you think?"

Jack laughed. "My father might be honored by that. He adores Vi, so anyone or anything associated with her—like myself—suddenly looks better."

"Tell me about these blokes who call themselves your family," Denny said. "Any looney ones? Any black sheep?"

"I'm the black sheep," Jack said. "Working for Scotland Yard, sullyng our name in the media, generally horrifying the family with my associating with killers and working folk."

“I was under the impression that your family wasn’t as highbrow as Vi’s,” Denny said.

“They aren’t,” Jack agreed. “They’re solidly middle class for generations, running a business that did well for decades but benefited greatly by the Great War. It was run mostly by my grandfather, father, and uncles.”

“So they raked in extra bullion during the war?” Denny groaned. “I wish my family had done that. They’ve been splitting apart the same fortune for centuries. My kids might actually have to work.”

“You had to work,” Violet told him, “until your aunt saved you.”

“True,” Denny agreed and then shuddered. “I prefer not to recall those dark times.”

Jack leaned back. “The business was growing before the war but after they got government contracts, everything changed.”

Lila lifted a brow. “They’re the bourgeoisie? Gasp,” she said idly. “We’ve been slumming this whole time with this working interloper.”

“My stepmother did try to tell us.” Violet had to bite down on her bottom lip to hold back her laugh.

“She did,” Jack agreed. “It’s a wonder you married me.”

“I’ve always been an obstinate child, as I’m sure she said time and again. It’s possible I married you just to be disagreeable.”

“She did,” Denny agreed. “I heard that treasure during one of the times I eavesdropped on her scolding you.”

“I’d be tempted to dismiss you if you weren’t already on notice.” Violet straightened her dress sleeves and then her overlapping long strand of black pearls. The dress was blush pink on the edges with the rest showing a deep grey. Detailing in the form of embroidery and tiny glass beads added texture and shininess to the dress. Her black silk stockings and diamond buckled shoes completed her look if you didn’t count the excess of jewelry. She tended towards too much jewelry, but she did love a good diamond and gold bangle and dangling earbobs with a matching headpiece. That evening’s head piece was more tiara than headband, but it still held her short dark bob back from her face.

She was tall, slender like an elf, with sharp features and witty eyes. Her grin was always at the ready, and she flashed it at her husband as he scowled at both of them.

“No one made Vi marry me,” he huffed, sipping his G&T.

She bit down on her lip again as Denny told him, “But you might have if she’d put up a fuss.”

Only the corner of Jack’s mouth twitched, and you had to know him well to know he was amused. He was one of those stoic-faced gents, generally even in both expression and tone. His broad shoulders adjusted a little as he shifted and then stood, holding out his hand for Violet. “We’re going to miss our reservations if we don’t move.”

Violet took his hand and let him pull her to her feet, then glanced at Denny, who set aside his freshly made cocktail with a groan and pulled Lila up as well. He deliberately pulled her too hard, so she stumbled into him, and then he caught her, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

“So who is the patriarch of your family, Jack?” Denny asked as he helped Lila into her coat.

“My grandfather, of course,” Jack said as if Denny were a bit slow. The man had, after all, met Jack’s family, who’d come up for the wedding only a few months ago. “My grandfather, then my oldest uncle, Anderson Wakefield, next is my father, and then my uncle Herbert. There is also my Aunt Hyacinth.”

“Ah,” Denny said. “Tell me this aunt of yours is childless with a vast fortune?”

Jack grunted as he opened the door to the auto and seated Violet, following her in while Denny and Lila took the other side. “The Savoy.” To Denny, Jack said, “My aunt has nine children.”

“Nine!” Lila said, sounding fully awake for the first time that evening. “That is unacceptable.”

“It is my Uncle Anderson who is the childless—yet wealthy—man.”

“Oh ho,” Denny said with a giddy grin chased by a giddy giggle. “Tell me your cousins are in an endless circle of a hubbub over who the heir should be.”

Jack tensed enough that Violet leaned away from him with a gasp. “No! Say they aren’t.”

“Well,” Jack said, shrugging. “A bit of a hubbub. My cousins Liam and Frank work in the business and have done since they finished school. Family rumors state that at least one feels it should be his. Aunt Hyacinth—their mother—agrees.”

“Is your grandfather a dynastic type?” Lila asked. “Where does Liam fall dynastically?”

“I believe”—Violet’s smirk was hidden by the darkness of the auto as they travelled—“that it is Jack who is the heir as far as dynasty goes.”

Jack put his hand over her mouth and she bit down on his finger. His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “Technically, after Anderson comes my father. I don’t believe my grandfather will leave his business dynastically. I believe he’ll leave it in the hands of the one most likely to keep the business successful.”

“Oh ho.” Lila’s voice was meaningful as she sing-songed, “Viiii.”

“No,” Violet said. “Of course they wouldn’t give the money to Jack.”

“Not Jack,” Denny teased, “you.”

Violet would have kicked him, but she couldn’t quite see and didn’t want to half get Lila. “It does seem to be the grounds for a bit of a...ruckus. How up in arms is your family about the will? Your grandfather *does* have a will, right?”

Jack laughed. “He’s not a fool. He’s a savvy businessman. They’re all worrying over making their argument, but I can promise you—the will has been made.”

Violet sighed as the auto stopped. Their driver opened the door for Jack, who stepped out and then handed her out of the auto. They made their way inside the famous restaurant and were seated.

“I am hoping for a ruckus,” Denny said with his grin. “Otherwise Lila will expect to me to go on rambles, row, swim, and generally be active.”

“You’re too fat,” Lila told him flatly. “It’s not healthy. Your cheeks shouldn’t be red like they are. You got winded the other day walking up the stairs. Cry if you need, my lad, but you need to lose at least a stone if not two.”

“Can you believe this?” Denny groaned and glanced at Jack, who held up his hands.

“I exercise daily, my friend.”

“Daily?” Denny gasped. “Even if you...ah...overindulge?”

Very dryly, Jack said, “I don’t.”

Violet couldn’t hold back her own giggles at Denny’s aghast face.

“Never?” Denny demanded.

Violet lifted a brow, remembering a time or two on their honeymoon when he’d overindulged, slept the day away, and woke only just in time to lie in the sun.

“Almost never,” Jack amended.

“Perhaps, however, today,” Violet said with a sigh. “As we can’t go on tomorrow’s train, and Lady Eleanor has insisted on tea.”

Jack’s even expression finally failed and he said, “But I don’t have to do that, do I, to get out of it?”

Violet and Denny laughed, although Violet’s low chuckle was drowned out by Denny’s high-pitched hyena laugh.

“No, no,” Violet said, thinking of her stepmother. “Only I have to suffer.”

“By Jove!” Denny told Jack. “You better lay it on thick tonight, Jack, just in case. Or not touch a drop. Stay in bed or escape before the sun rises, if you don’t want to be caught there at teatime.”

## CHAPTER 2

Lady Eleanor arrived precisely five minutes before their arranged time. Her hair was covered by a turban with a large pearl broach. Her beautiful face was smoothed into an expression of even politeness and her gaze flicked about Violet's parlor, judging each piece.

"You really shouldn't have so many oversized lounging chairs, Violet. It encourages one to linger. Or even, heaven forbid, slip right into sleep in the middle of your tea."

"Mmm," Violet said. "Was Isolde coming with you?"

"Tomas is dropping her on his way to his club or some other such manly nonsense. I suppose Jack is working." She might as well have said digging trenches, or joining the chain gang, or meeting his highwayman crew.

"Jack got up quite early," Violet said, "to assist Denny."

"Whatever does that layabout need assistance with? *He* certainly isn't working."

Violet could hardly tell her stepmother the truth—that Jack had agreed with Lila to haul Denny with him to get the blood moving and the body sweating. So Vi vaguely shook her head and switched subjects. "How is Father?"

"Quite well," Lady Eleanor snapped. She sounded like a dragon whose cave had been invaded.

Violet blinked, keeping her expression without nuance. Her mind, however, was racing. Just what was going on with her father and his wife? Had he finally put his foot down about something? As far as Violet had been able to tell, Lady Eleanor had endlessly gotten her way. And yet—

Violet realized in a snap that Lady Eleanor only truly got upset over her children. Violet was sure all was well with Isolde, so....

“And how is Geoffrey?”

Lady Eleanor looked as if she'd bitten into a bad apple as she lied, “Quite well.”

Violet's youngest half-brother was a wart of boy if ever there was one. She hid her grin at the idea that Father had finally decided to step in and see if he could straighten out the lad. Violet's only concern was that it was too late.

Violet lied in return. “Of course he is. Hasn't the weather been lovely?”

“It's stifling,” Lady Eleanor retorted. “Tomas should take Isolde to the country before she faints from the heat and loses the baby.”

“They only just returned from traveling,” Violet said.

Lady Eleanor scowled as though she wanted to lay into Violet when Isolde, Vi's half-sister, entered the parlor. “Vi! Hargreaves is here?”

Violet laughed. “Victor decided to save poor the last fellow from my ways and sent Hargreaves over who understands me.”

“Do you mean to say that you and your twin have...have...swapped butlers?” The disgusted expression was back on Lady Eleanor's face.

Merrily, Vi replied, “We did indeed.”

“Because of *your* behavior?”

“Well it wasn't Jack's,” Violet said happily just to watch her stepmother scowl.

“You had so many excellent spouse options,” Lady Eleanor bemoaned.

Isolde crossed to Violet, pressed a kiss on her cheek, and breathed, “Courage, dear one.”

“It's not courage I need,” Violet whispered back. “It's the patience and fortitude of a saint.”

“Stop whispering. My goodness Vi, are you going to send for tea?”

“Hargreaves will bring it,” Violet said easily, taking a seat in her favorite chair while her stepmother and half-sister sat side-by-side on the chesterfield.

“Vi!” Isolde said as she looked about. “The final things have come in, have they? It does look lovely in here.”

“It's too modern,” Lady Eleanor complained. “None of this will be in style in five years and you'll be throwing money away to correct your choices.”

Isolde answered before Violet did. "It's a good thing then, isn't it, that's Vi's disgustingly rich. She could re-do her house every year and not wince. Violet! Your guess about Cypress was so right. I loved it. Are you and Jack going to go soon?"

"I think we'll stay here until Vi Junior is born and then see where Kate wants to go."

"You'd think that they wouldn't be in each other's pockets so much after marrying," Lady Eleanor said archly. "I can't imagine either Kate or Jack loves being smothered by the twin."

Isolde laughed as Violet bit her lip.

"Both of them knew what they were getting in their spouse," Isolde said, "and I know with certainty that Kate adores Violet. Whether Jack adores Victor as equally, I cannot guess."

Violet adjusted the hem of her dress. It was a bit of a cross between soft pink and nude with many layered hems and a scooped neck. She moved from fiddling with her dress to her wedding ring as she tried to hold her tongue.

"Yes. Well." Lady Eleanor scowled deeply. "Your father seems to think that it would be good for Geoffrey to spend more time with you, Victor, and Jack. Your father wants you to bring Geoffrey with you to the country."

Violet froze as Isolde pressed her lips together to hold back what was certainly a burst of giggles. "*With us?*"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" Lady Eleanor snapped. "I don't agree. A boy needs his mother."

Violet blinked rapidly and then cleared her throat before she dared to answer. "I..."

"How long do you expect to leave him with Vi?" Isolde asked, certainly just to give Violet a moment to catch her balance.

"I don't know, do I? I can't read your father's mind, and we certainly don't agree on this nonsense."

"Why me?" Violet finally asked flatly.

Lady Eleanor scowled. "Your father says that there isn't enough money to support the estate and allow Geoffrey the life he deserves. Your father says Geoffrey should spend time with those of our class *who also* work as we cannot expect you to take inheritance away from your children to leave to your poor brother who does not, I am sure, have the nature to be another....another...working stiff!"



Violet and Isolde glanced at each other. They didn't look very much alike, with Isolde taking after Lady Eleanor with her blonde hair, lusher figure, and blue eyes. They both, however, had the same shocked, wide eyes as their gazes met and then turned to Lady Eleanor.

She scowled at the two of them. "Don't look at me like that. I'm sure I don't know why you couldn't help your brother. As greatly as you've been blessed."

"Perhaps," Isolde said rudely to her mother, "because the funds that Violet inherited from her great aunt were not funds that came from our shared side of the family. Perhaps because Violet will certainly have children of her own. Perhaps because Violet owes nothing to a brother she barely knows. Violet and Victor both worked before they inherited from their Aunt Agatha, and there is nothing about Geoffrey that says he should be the prince of this family and get part of what everyone else has."

Violet gaped at Isolde, who dabbed her eyes as her mother stared in mounting fury.

"Don't look at me like that," Isolde snapped. "I am tired of seeing you be mean to Violet and Victor. Treating them as they're somehow less than the rest of us. They aren't, you know."

"Well, I never!"

"You should never." Isolde threw the words back at her mother. "You know what gives me comfort carrying this baby? That Violet would raise my baby for me with the same love and care she'd give her own children. You didn't do that for Lady Penelope, and you should have. Thank goodness for Aunt Agatha. Thank goodness for the woman who stepped in when you should have. Your children don't deserve one single halfpenny from what Agatha earned."

The door to the parlor opened in that moment and Hargreaves rolled the teacart in slowly. He must have felt the tension in the room as Lady Eleanor and Isolde stared daggers at each other; all the while, Isolde was dabbing her eye with her handkerchief and sniffing.

"Tea, madam," Hargreaves said smoothly.

"Thank you, Hargreaves," Violet said as smoothly, "that'll be all."



“SHE DIDN’T!” Lila stared as Violet nodded. Her secretary, Beatrice, had stopped her usual work to pack for Violet, but Beatrice was staying behind to deal with much of the business that Violet preferred to avoid. Beatrice’s gaze was wide, her expressions flashing, but she kept her eyes on what she was doing while she tried to hide her reactions.

“Isolde said those things?” Lila looked shocked.

“She did,” Violet said. “It ended with Isolde asking me to stand as godmother of the child and Lady Eleanor leaving in a rage that *any grandchild of hers* would be raised by a good-for-nothing bright young thing who wastes her time writing trashy novels, drinking too many cocktails, and marrying good-for-nothings.”

Lila laughed and leaned forward to pick up her cocktail. Violet shook her head.

“Speaking of,” Violet said meaningfully, “you drink too much.”

Lila gasped.

Violet put her hands on her hips and lifted a brow. “That and chocolate is why Denny is fat. You had better be careful or your clothes won’t fit anymore.”

“Denny also eats fish and chips with the boys, naps daily, and generally tries not to move,” Lila said idly, then slowly added, “I move.”

“You just stop eating when your clothes get tight.”

“I eat,” Lila lied. She thought about it for a moment. “Fruit, greens, sometimes a bit of chicken or fish.”

“Mmm,” Violet said, having noticed that Lila had become a little rounder in the face, which was very rare for her friend. Her loose dress didn’t show a wider bottom, but Violet felt certain Lila had moved into her plump clothes and would be a nightmare in the coming days once she decided to deal with the extra weight. “Which is why Denny always looks scared when you’re slimming.”

Lila grinned wickedly. “It’s better if he appreciates me as I usually am. I don’t want him to take advantage of my good nature.”

“He already says you’re a dangerous creature.”

Lila sniffed and then shot back, “Perhaps. But you’d do well to follow my good example and give Jack reason to fear you.”

Violet laughed. “I don’t think Jack is the kind to fear his wife.”

“Perhaps not,” Lila agreed and then paused as they heard a giggle.

They both turned to Beatrice, who was covering her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Beatrice gasped. “I’m sorry. It’s just...Mr. Jack...oh!” Her giggles burst out.

Lila grinned. “Get this woman a cocktail. She’s one of us.”

Violet laughed and went through her jewelry, pulling out the pieces they’d have traveling with them. Lila rose and poured another cocktail from the cocktail shaker, handing it to the secretary.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Beatrice said.

“You could,” Lila insisted.

“You can,” Violet added, “but you don’t have to. Leave her be, Lila.”

Lila scowled and then shrugged. “You’re probably right. Later today, I’ll have a pre-dinner nap, eat dinner, and then go back to bed to rest up for our trip tomorrow. Beatrice, will you be working further?”

“Ah.” Beatrice glanced at Violet. “Well, I am writing some letters for Lady Violet and then I have accounts to balance and I need to read the reports from the auto company to summarize for Lady Vi.”

“Oh!” Lila shuddered. “I will sleep better just thinking about doing all of that.”

### CHAPTER 3

“*B*ut why did you say yes?” Jack asked. They were sitting in the auto outside of Carlyle House and Geoffrey had yet to appear.

“To make her stepmother upset,” Denny suggested. He giggled, but it was caught off by a huge yawn.

It was so early that the skies were still dark, but they wanted to hit the early train. They had a family dinner that evening at Grandfather Wakefield’s house. They needed to get there, rest up, and be ready to interact with the family while on their best behavior. Violet was a bit worried about her relationship with Jack’s family. They very rarely came to London, so she’d barely met them. But someday these folks would be her children’s cousins and great uncles. She wanted things to go swimmingly.

Violet lifted her brows and then smiled just enough at Denny to reveal the truth—torturing her stepmother was *exactly* why she’d said yes about taking Geoffrey. The righteous part of Violet also hoped that Geoffrey wasn’t as much of a wart as he’d seemed and hoped that taking him would reveal a brother she could stand.

She sighed. It was very early and thankfully the servants had taken their things to the train. They only needed to get Geoffrey, and the boy wasn’t coming out. “I’ll go get him.”

Jack shook his head. “If your father wants the influence of other men on Geoffrey, then we’ll have to do the dirty work. Come on, Denny.”

Violet watched as Jack and Denny walked inside the house. “Do you think we should go observe?”

“Yes,” Lila said immediately.

The two of them got out of the auto and hurried up the steps just as the door opened, and they both came to a complete stop. It was a sheer cacophony. Jack was carrying a struggling, wailing Geoffrey over his shoulder. Denny was just behind and laughing so hard he had a hard time standing. He clutched at the stair banister, only half-standing. Lady Eleanor, on the other hand, was competing with Geoffrey in her wailing.

The earl looked on from the top of the stairs. He was so far past calm that Violet would have run the other way as a child. Geoffrey—if he even noticed—was clearly entirely unafraid. The fool.

“How could you?” Lady Eleanor shouted, muffling her shrieks with the handkerchief that was fisted into her mouth. She was, Violet saw, legitimately upset. Those were real tears and real bloodshot eyes. Vi would have felt a smidgeon of empathy if she didn’t lay the entirety of this madness at the woman’s feet. “How could you send our baby away?”

The earl didn’t answer. He was breathing in slowly through his mouth, and Violet watched as he held his breath for a moment and then let it slowly out. He noticed her in the doorway, nodded once, and disappeared into the depths of the house. Violet would not be surprised if he was ordering his man to pack his bags for an extended stay at his hunting lodge.

Violet bit down on her bottom lip to hold in her reaction, but Lila had no such compunction. Her giggles were drowned out, however, by Geoffrey shouting, “I said I don’t want to go.”

“Oh my baby!” Lady Eleanor wailed. “My baby, my baby.”

“You’d think we were shanghaiing him,” Violet muttered to Lila. “Or selling him into white slavery in the....I don’t know. Wherever the legends say that happens.”

Jack reached the bottom of the stairs and set Geoffrey down. He immediately tried to run, but Jack grabbed hold of Geoffrey by the back of his shirt. Geoffrey tried to go boneless and slithered half out of his shirt before he was caught by his own clothes. He was, Violet saw, still in his pajamas.

“Enough!” Jack roared. Geoffrey froze and Lady Eleanor’s mouth snapped shut. Even Denny and Lila stopped laughing. “You may choose, boy. To walk out this door on your own feet or to be bound and muzzled. Either way, you will be silent.”

Geoffrey gaped and then stuttered, “Y-y-you can’t treat me like this. My father is an earl.”

“He put you into my care. I assure you, I can. Are you nearly a man or an infant?”

Geoffrey snuffled and wiped his nose on his hand.

“By Jove!” Jack growled. “Lesson one.” He slapped a handkerchief into Geoffrey’s hand. “Use it. Go wash your hands. You have one minute and if you try to flee, I will muzzle you like a rabid dog and drag you through the train station by your ear.”

Geoffrey’s mouth closed slowly, but his bottom lip trembled. His face was flushed with red, whether from anger, embarrassment or sadness, Violet could not tell. Her too pale brother turned to her, pleading silently.

She shook her head in reply to the begging in his gaze. He turned to Lila, who was too glee-filled to provide hope, and then to his mother.

“Mama?”

She wailed.

“Please, Mama,” he begged with a mewling voice.

“Enough,” Jack said. He walked Geoffrey to the bath and watched as the boy washed his hands. “Your face.”

Geoffrey washed his face.

“His coat,” Jack told the butler, who nodded and got it silently.

“He’s not dressed!” Lady Eleanor cried.

“That is the choice he made,” Jack told her flatly. “I suggest you tell your son goodbye, my lady.”

Her gaze narrowed on Jack and she hissed, “You’ll regret this.”

“I already do,” Jack told her flatly.

She spun on her heel and chased up the stairs after her husband. They heard the sound of her pounding on the bedroom door moments later.

Vi met Jack’s gaze and as one they turned for the auto.

“That did get my blood up, Lila darling,” Denny announced. “I feel certain that qualifies as my exercise for the day.”

“Perhaps, laddie, if you were the one hauling him down the stairs. We’re going to miss our train if we don’t hurry.”

Jack took Geoffrey by the arm, and they walked down to the auto. Denny got in first, Jack nudged Geoffrey after, and then took the seat next to him, so Geoffrey was bound in by the two gents. Lila and Violet took the seat opposite.

As the auto started, Jack checked his watch. “It’ll be close. We’ll need to hurry through the station.”

“The train will be late,” Denny said idly. “It always is. We’ll make it.”

Jack huffed, and they all seemed to unitedly decide to pick a window and turn their gaze outside. They weren’t half-way there when the traffic came to a complete stop. Lila groaned and Jack got out to see what the issue was. He returned a few minutes later and said, “A truck full of veg has overturned.”

Violet sighed and Lila simply shrugged and snuggled into the side of the car, closing her eyes. Jack ordered the driver to take the next turn and attempt to go around.

“How upset will your grandfather be if we’re late for the dinner?”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Jack said grimly in answer.

Violet looked at Jack and realized that his grandfather would be very upset indeed. This was Vi’s fault. She shouldn’t have agreed to take Geoffrey. Without him, there would have been no question that they’d arrive in time.

As it was, their time in the country would be colored by Violet’s bothersome wart of a brother. She sighed and glanced back out the window. A few moments later, she slid into sleep while they crawled through London’s streets.

Violet woke when Jack got out of the auto. Denny also got out, and then before Violet could even shift, Geoffrey dove towards Denny and shoved past him to run down the street outside of the train station.

Jack cursed and Violet hurried out of the auto.

“Help!” Geoffrey screamed. “Help! Kidnapping!”

Violet’s jaw dropped as Jack and Geoffrey were swarmed with station attendants and the local bobbies.

“What’s all this now?” one of the bobbies asked. He had his hand on his club, and Violet was about to murder her brother in front of the crowd.

“Help!” Geoffrey cried. “Help me, please.” He gestured to his pajamas covered by his coat. “I’ve been taken from my bedroom while sleeping. Please, my good man. Please.”

Jack held up his hands as the blokes turned on him, and Violet hurried to them. “Stop!” She blocked her husband from the police.

“Vi, you’ll get hurt,” Jack said, placing his hand on her stomach and pulling her against him. No doubt he intended to shove her behind him if things went south.

“She’s in on it!” Geoffrey wept.

“I am,” Violet said. She paused long enough to get the attention on her instead of Jack. “Lady Violet Carlyle-Wakefield. This spoilt brat is my younger brother. We’re taking his protesting, rotten, ridiculous self to the country to see if we can do something about the snot he’s become. I don’t have a lot of faith in our luck.”

“Isn’t that Detective Wakefield?” one of the bobbies asked.

The other inserted, “Heard he married an earl’s daughter.” That fellow had his hand on his club, but he let it go and relaxed. Violet also relaxed.

She raised her hand. “Me. Earl’s daughter.” She jerked her thumb towards Geoffrey. “Earl’s devil spawn.”

“I’m not! I’ve been kidnapped! My father will have your jobs.”

“Your father,” Violet snapped, turning on her brother, “will have your hide! If”—she grabbed his ear—“you survive that long.”

She glanced at the two bobbies and the station attendants and lifted a brow. “If you’d like to keep him and return him to the earl, you’re welcome to do so. We are, however, catching our train.”

It was as though she’d set them afire. They jumped back and hurried to their posts. Violet glanced at Geoffrey and then at Jack.

“I’ve got this thing.” She referred to Geoffrey, who tried a whimper.

“He’s a fighter,” Jack warned.

“He doesn’t want to be tackled to the ground by a woman wearing heels, jewelry, and makeup. If I have to teach him a lesson, we’ll find a photographer and send the documentation to Father. Would you like that, pumpkin?”

“Don’t call me that,” Geoffrey snuffled, trying to twist away.

Violet let her fingernails dig into his skin and he yelped.

“Let me go, please,” he begged. “I won’t run.”

“I expect you won’t,” Violet said amiably. “This isn’t to keep you from running. It’s punishment.”

“What did I do?”

Violet yanked him to a stop to breathe in deeply and let it out slowly. She turned her enraged gaze on Geoffrey. “Those bobbies were caressing their billy clubs at my husband.”

Geoffrey shrugged. “He’s fine.”

She twisted his ear and then hissed into his face. “Through no help of yours!”



He tried twisting away again, and she kept hold of his ear with one hand and smacked the back of his head with her other hand.

She took off at a quick pace and Jack hurried beside her, pausing only to take Violet's satchel for the train ride from Lila. He nodded to their driver and then rushed ahead to lead the way through the train station. By the time they reached their platform, the train had been gone for five minutes.

"It was on time?" Denny gasped to the employee.

The fellow nodded unsympathetically.

"But they're never on time."

Violet shoved her brother onto a bench. "If you move a muscle or run, I will ensure that Father cuts off your allowance for the entirety of the next school year."

"Mama will give me money," Geoffrey said with a wicked smirk. All sign of tears were gone, as if he'd finally accepted that sympathy would not be coming his way when he cried like a baby.

"Father will send your mother to Antarctica if necessary to keep you from being a milksop. My little flower—" Violet leaned into his face. "This is step one. You can turn it around and start thinking something like, 'What would Father have me do?' before you try one of these shenanigans or you're going to find that Father sends you to work for someone who will be thrice as mean as me and Jack."

"Maybe Gerald will be next."

"I assure you," Violet told Geoffrey and smirked. "Our oldest brother has already said no. Father would never ask Jack before Gerald."

"He probably just thought a working bloke like Jack was used to assignments."

Violet's gaze narrowed on her brother, and his grin went from smug to happy at her reaction.

"Why don't we just clobber him?" Denny asked. "We'll beat him daily until he fears us."

Geoffrey scoffed.

Violet glanced at the others and then let her disgust appear on her face. "We'll do what we can. If he wants to spend the rest of his life as a combination of a flower and wart that no one likes, that's his choice. Eventually his mother will go, and he won't be able to sponge off of her. He'll be left with nothing and no one who is willing to cater to him. Our oldest brother has already declined. Tomas won't let Isolde. Victor isn't a

likely candidate for a sponge when we at least tried to take care of ourselves before we inherited. He'll have already burned his bridge with us, and the heiresses with buckets of the green are far less likely to put up with his whiny ways. If he could even garner some attention as weak and woebegone as he is."

At that Violet looked back to her brother. "Leave if you will. We aren't going to chase you down again, but if you think Father won't come up with something worse, you don't know him very well."

## CHAPTER 4

“*H*ow is it that our train was on time and this one is so late?” Denny demanded. “I’m wasting away here.”

“Good for you, laddie,” Lila told him without looking his way. She shifted on her seat and sighed. “I would have put my novel in your satchel if I had realized we would be sitting here so long.”

“Why can’t I change?” Geoffrey asked. He sat with his arms crossed over his chest, his legs crossed, and a look of agony on his expression, but he’d yet to run again.

“Your clothes made the train that you didn’t,” Violet told him for the third time. “No one has anything for you to put on. Shut your trap about it.”

“I feel like a fool.”

“You should,” Jack told him. “Men get up and get dressed even when they don’t want to do what is before them.”

Geoffrey rolled his eyes and grunted.

Violet gritted her teeth to keep herself from slapping the back of his head again. She glanced at Jack in apology for possibly the hundredth time, but his expression told her he didn’t blame her for what was happening.

“What are our thoughts?” Lila asked. “Shall we attempt to make this dinner or just send our apologies?”

“It’ll depend on how late we are,” Jack said. “I sent a telegram to my father, so he’s prepared either way.”

The train arrived before Violet could entirely lose her mind. They found seats and before Violet had even taken off her coat, Denny had disappeared to order tea and whatever vittles could be found.

“How long is the journey?” Geoffrey asked. It was a hot day, and the train sitting in the station was stifling. He adjusted his coat, and gazed longingly at the window. It was open, but no air was coming in.

“Too long,” Jack told Geoffrey. With a look toward Vi, Jack said, “We should have just motored down.”

Violet glanced at Jack and back at the clock. The journey from the train station to the country house was adding to the pressure, and then there was still the journey to the family house. Jack’s father, James, had purchased his home deliberately far away from his brothers and sister when he’d distanced himself from the business as well.

Jack smiled, but it was tight, and Violet realized—for the first time—that his family made him tense. Why, she wondered. Was there some story there he hadn’t told her, like the time he hadn’t told her about being engaged previously? She’d just stumbled across the history and then been hurt by the things he hadn’t shared.

Now, she thought, was the time to work out her feelings about him having a life before her and not thinking to share things with her. She knew, without question, that he loved her. Because of that, she told herself, he deserved the benefit of the doubt when it came to whatever was happening with his family.

“Would you like to walk?” Jack asked her. He sent Geoffrey a look that said to run and hide if he dared.

Violet agreed and tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. There was noise inside and out, with the trains coming and going past them, the people hurrying to reach their seats or their destinations, the general bustle of many humans all engrossed in their own business.

“My family isn’t like yours,” Jack said after a man in a suit squeezed past them in the aisle. “They aren’t impressed with my work.”

“Why?” Violet demanded, instantly outraged.

“They think I should have gone into the family business.”

Violet snapped her mouth shut. Jack must have journeyed the thought process a thousand times before. He didn’t need her rehashing. Instead she said, “I disagree and am proud of you.”

To that Jack pressed a kiss to her forehead. “They won’t be impressed by your family. If anything, they’re—ah—anti-nobility.”

“Not fans of old, established money?”

“Decidedly not. Especially when the money is so old no one seems to recall where it originally came from.”

“Mostly hops and apples and trade agreements,” Violet answered immediately. “With too rather a ridiculous amount of things like cattle and horses and, of course, investment ventures that turned out rather well. I come by my business acumen rather honestly, you know.”

Jack blinked, and Violet laughed. “*We* know, of course. And more of us have done nothing at all to deserve it, but I don’t see how that’s any different than any other rich family. We just have more generations of folks who have done nothing more than sit about on their laurels with their noses pointed to the sky.”

Jack’s eyes were amused but his mouth twisted. “They won’t let themselves be impressed by that.”

“Does your father feel that way?”

“My father likes you more than me,” Jack said with an amused huff. “You are, however, the placeholder for the grandchildren he intends to adore.”

“That’s all that matters then. I can deal with your Lady Eleanors and Geoffreys if you can deal with mine.”

“I’ll be counting on that.”



“WHERE DID HE GO?” Violet asked after the train had been rolling for about twenty minutes. She glanced around and then groaned. “That little wart is going to wake every night to me dumping water on his head.”

Jack snorted. “I don’t think we should hunt him down. He’ll come when he comes.”

“Maybe he jumped train. Then we’d just be wandering about for nothing.” Lila bit into the scone that Denny had purchased and then scowled. “These taste like they were baked a week ago.”

Violet sighed and stood. “If he did jump train, I want to be able to tell Father I looked for him.”

“I’ll come with you,” Jack said, starting to stand.

Violet shook her head. “Drink your coffee, Jack. I’ll take care of this.”

Violet walked through the train car and then started towards the caboose. She figured if she didn't find Geoffrey before she reached Jack again, she'd stop for another cup of coffee before she bothered checking towards the front of the train.

She wove her way through the first class section without sight of her brother. In the second class section, Violet spied him trying to talk some kid out of his second pair of clothes. Rather than argue with Geoffrey—who was probably promising that Violet would pay—she took an empty seat and scowled at her brother.

He didn't see her.

"Hello there," a woman said across from her.

"Hello."

"Is that boy in pajamas yours?"

"My brother objected to being sent out of London for the holidays."

"He needs a good spanking," the woman said. Violet met her gaze and noted the golden brown eyes fixed on the two boys. The one with a suitcase in his lap was shaking his head over and over again, while Geoffrey attempted to wheedle.

The other woman had dark curled hair tucked about her head under a quite fetching cloche hat. She was older than Violet by a good two decades, but her hair was either hennaed or she was exceedingly blessed. Her figure had just edged past lush to plump, but she was so lovely, Violet felt certain she still caught every roving eye.

"I'm tempted," Violet admitted. "Never mind that he's approaching manhood."

"Manhood is more than an age."

"Agreed," Violet said, grinning. "He needs to work or something. Do manual labor. Discover he's only the shining star of the world to his mother."

"Mmmm," the woman agreed. "But what business owner would want to hire such a clearly useless lad?"

Violet snorted in laughter at the wry tone in the woman's voice.

"I certainly wouldn't," the woman added.

"What kind of business do you own?"

"A chocolatier."

Violet gasped and leaned in. "Where is your business?"

"In Lading."

Violet's eyes widened and she held out her hand. "I am so very glad to meet you. Do you have samples?"

The woman's eyes shone with humor. "With me?"

Violet nodded.

"I do, actually, as I was trying to get a loan to expand my business."

"For what?"

"Shipping," the woman said. "The bank cared little that my chocolates and baked goods will melt in your mouth and transport you to heaven."

"I'm Violet Carlyle," Violet said. She paused and then laughed. "Wakefield."

"Mrs. Mariposa Jenkins." Her eyes sharpened as she asked, "Violet Wakefield of the Lading Wakefields?"

Vi grinned happily. "Jack Wakefield is my husband, but those are his people."

The woman's expressive eyes widened. "The earl's daughter?"

"Sadly."

"You aren't what I thought an earl's daughter would be like."

Violet laughed again and then her head tilted. "What did you imagine?"

"Well," Mrs. Jenkins said merrily, "rather like your brother"—she nodded at Geoffrey—"but in a skirt."

Violet nearly brought herself to harm as she both snorted and laughed at the same time. She held a hand to her face. "He is the most horrible wart."

Mrs. Jenkins stood and pulled a basket from the overhead compartment. She opened it and Violet caught the scent of chocolate as though carried on angel's wings. The woman pulled a white box from the basket and handed it to Violet. "Enjoy."

Violet breathed a thank you and opened it. Inside were perhaps a dozen small squares covered in a light-colored chocolate, with white dollops of either white chocolate or frosting and topped with curls of a deeper chocolate. She pulled one out slowly and bit down. The creamy sweetness hit her mouth first, followed by the taste of orange. Violet closed her eyes and let the flavor linger in her mouth until it revealed all of its layers.

Violet swallowed and opened her eyes. "Do you know where Jack lives?"

Mrs. Jenkins nodded.

"Come in two days with your business plan at ten in the morning. Do you do events?"

She nodded again and then said, “No one wants anything more than a delivery.”

“I want a display table. The best of everything you have. Trays of chocolates, petit fours, layer cakes, all of it. Whatever you can do. I want it to be jaw-dropping.”

“I can do that,” Mrs. Jenkins said with no hesitation.

Violet smiled at the confidence. “If you can pull it off and pull it off well, *and* you have the business plan to show you aren’t a fool, I’ll buy into your business.”

“Why?” Mrs. Jenkins demanded.

“This, my friend,” Violet told her seriously, “is chocolate gold, and I do like money.”

Mrs. Jenkins’s eyes filled with tears. “Are you serious? You aren’t playing games with me?”

Violet reached out and took Mrs. Jenkins’s hand. “I am in earnest.”

“You have the money? I thought the nobility was nothing more than bankrupt echelons of the past.”

“Not all of us,” Violet said, “though that’s true enough of yon Geoffrey.”

He was walking towards Violet. He whined, “Tell the poor boy you’ll pay for my clothes. I can’t wear pajamas like this. It’s...it’s ridiculous. You’ve made enough of a fool of me.”

“But I won’t,” Violet told him. “You made your choices, and you’ll have your clothes again when we get to the house.”

“Everyone can see me looking like a fool.”

“They’ve all *already* seen you as a fool.” Violet carefully closed the white box and told Geoffrey coldly. “*You* made your choices. You chose not to get dressed thinking you’d escape your fate by refusing to get clothes on. Jack told me he asked Father if he wanted you to be hauled out or left behind. Father made his choice as you did.”

Geoffrey’s too-pale skin flushed a brilliant red. He frowned fiercely at Violet. “My mother will hear of this.”

“All right,” Violet said agreeably. “If you want to be a tattling boy hanging on his mother’s skirts, that’s your choice as well. It’s of little import to me.”

“You—you—you!” He just stopped short of calling her a terrible name, but Violet could read his lips, and she’d have boxed his ears if he said it



aloud.

Violet smiled and chucked him on the shoulder. “Look at you. Making good choices. You’ll see, Geoffrey. As soon as you accept that only your mother thinks you hang the moon and no one else is all that impressed with your existence, especially as spoilt as your mother has made you, you’ll be the better for it.”

“My mother didn’t...”

Violet held up her hand. “Most mothers think their children are wonderful, Geoffrey. No one begrudges you having one who does. It’s just no one else has the same love-colored vision for you. She can’t be your protector forever. Sooner or later you have to grow up and speak for yourself. Why not try being something other than a blister?” Her voice was nice enough, but the words left him flushed with anger again.

“She’s right you know,” Mrs. Jenkins told him as gently. “You can only get away with letting your mother smooth your path for so long. Once that day has passed, if you’re not careful, you’ll find you’ve burned all your bridges.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I have three sons,” she told him flatly. “And I’m the only person in the world who loves my second son. Sooner or later, I’ll die and then he’ll have no one.”

Geoffrey scoffed at her and Violet kicked him. “Don’t be rude.”

“To the help? These people are all servants, Vi.”

“That’s Violet to you,” Violet told him. “Preferably just madam. This woman is a scrapper who created her own business out of her talents. What have you done?”

## CHAPTER 5

They were certainly going to be late. They might, in fact, be so late they shouldn't go. Jack's jaw was clenching and releasing, and Violet wasn't sure if she should ask him if they should not go or if she should race through throwing on her evening gown.

When they arrived at the house, Jack's father was dressed and smoking his pipe in the parlor. He rose as they entered. "Grandfather knows there was travel trouble and says to come anyway and *not worry* about being late." James Wakefield's tone was sarcastic at best, and Violet assumed that he didn't buy his father's assurance that being late was forgivable.

Jack glanced at Violet, probably taking in her pale skin and dark under-eye circles after their day of traveling and fighting with her brother.

"Oh wonderful," Violet lied. "I have been looking forward to getting to know the family better, and even late—it'll be better to have the chance now."

Jack's father rose and took Violet by the hand. "You do look tired. I can send our regrets?" It was clear by his face that he didn't want to send regrets, but he would if she needed it.

"No," Violet said, "but my brother will stay home and rest." The look she gave Geoffrey told him not to argue. To her shock, he didn't. She felt sure that they'd regret leaving him behind, but that was a problem for her future self. Her present self needed to wash her face, brush her hair, and throw on a dress and some powder.

Jack led the way to their shared bedroom, and Violet found a dress already set out. She hurried through a quick bath, brushed her hair, threw on a headpiece, and then dabbed powder under her eyes.

She dropped her dress over her head and then turned to find Jack just finishing with his tie. She grinned at him. “You’re a handsome man.”

“I expect this day to end torturously because of my family.”

“It started torturously because of mine.”

Jack’s shout of laughter made Violet feel better, and she glanced at him. “You’re a good man, Jack. What is the problem with your family?”

Jack shrugged his coat on and handed her the beaded silk wrap that was set aside for her. “Everyone expected me to come home and work in the family business after the war, but...bloody hell, I was good at catching killers, and everyone associated with manufacturing—even if no one in my family really works in the business directly—it just seemed so...so...pointless after watching my friends die for years. Not when I could do something meaningful with my life.”

Violet took his arm as he opened the door.

“It was just so stupid. Spending the rest of my life working on something that didn’t matter to me when I could do something more with my life. I’d just think of those I lost, and I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

“Jack,” Violet told him gently as Denny and Lila stepped into the hall to join them, “I am proud of you being true to who you are. We *are* safer because of what you chose to do after coming home. Killers have been put away, families have found answers to why they’ve lost their loved ones, you’ve been the shield between folks like us”—Vi gestured to herself and her friends—“and folks that would hurt us. You made the right choice. If your family can’t see how great you are, well...”

“They’re fools,” Denny inserted, clapping Jack on the shoulder. “I always feel like I’m in short pants when I go home. It doesn’t seem to matter what you’ve accomplished—not that I’ve accomplished anything—they always see the grubby little kid they knew once.”

Violet squeezed Denny’s arm, loving him more at that minute than she ever had before. Jack grinned at Denny, and whatever was making Jack feel so blue faded.

“It’s like what you said, Denny. I suppose that returning to being a child in their eyes leaves me in a bit of a mood.”

They reached the great hall and Jack’s father rose from the parlor and crossed to them. “The auto is ready.”

“Wonderful,” Violet lied. She had started the evening with two aspirin in the bath when Jack was occupied with getting dressed so he wouldn’t see

and worry.

“A bit of a warning,” James said. “The family has been fighting rather a lot more about the will and the inheritance lately. My father is declining.”

Violet shook her head. “Why don’t people just make the will, tell the others what is in it, and then hold firm? I don’t understand why families must turn on each other like rabid animals over the scraps of the previous generations. There’s nothing fair about a dynastic will, but at least you’re raised knowing what to expect.”

“It does rather bring out the worst in mankind.”

“So who is the heir? Do you really not know?” Denny asked. He blushed when all gazes turned to him. “When it was Violet’s family wondering who the heir was, we had a betting book. Do you have a betting book?”

“I remember that betting book,” James said. “I was rather appalled by it.”

“So you should have been. It was in poor taste,” Violet said. “I suppose it seemed funny before she died. Now though—” Violet looked away. Her eyes misted with tears. “Now I just miss her and wish that she was back. I’d give it all away to have her back.”

James pressed a kiss to Violet’s temple and said, “She loved you. When she asked me to bring Jack to help with the attempts on her life, she refused to remove you as a suspect, but she told me that if it were you or Victor, she would spend the rest of her life second guessing her every opinion.”

Violet sniffed again but then said brightly, “Aren’t we supposed to be rushing to this family dinner?”

“We are indeed, my dear. It’ll take a while to get there, and they won’t hold dinner.”

Violet felt certain that they should have rescheduled another dinner. There was plenty of time since Jack and Vi didn’t have a date when they were returning to London. Kate was having the baby nearby, and Violet would have to be pried away from Vi Junior. Jack might take cases while they were in the country, but their base would be here rather than London for the foreseeable future.

“It seems ridiculous, I know,” James said as if reading her mind. “My father has a quarterly dinner for anyone who can reasonably attend. He never reschedules. He says if you bend on it, suddenly everyone has an

opinion and you're fending off the excuses of a dozen people whose inanities are thrown at his feet."

Violet blinked rapidly, taking in the idea. Grandfather Wakefield had seemed a bit of a hard man, but she'd never have expected that. She glanced at Jack, but his face was enclosed in shadows. They were motoring to a village an hour away when the meal time had already started.

"Father will give an update on the different family interests. It's when he introduces new family members or acknowledges family accomplishments he finds noteworthy."

"He must have talked about you rather often," Lila told Jack. "All those killers you found."

"Ah," Jack said, "no. Grandfather Wakefield expected me to join the family business when I got back from the war. All the things I've done since then have been a long spiting of him."

Violet felt a rush of rage. She hadn't realized how much her stepmother's reaction to Jack's work must have been maddening after his own family's opinion.

"How did we not know this?" Denny asked in that way of his. "How is it that you don't work for your father, Papa James?"

Violet's gaze jerked to Denny and then to James. He grinned at Denny. "Papa James?"

"Violet told us you weren't the head of your family. I said you were the head of ours. I was just trying it on for size."

James's expression was filled with humor. "My father would hate that name."

Vi groaned as James looked at her with a question in his face. "It's cemented now," she warned him. "Denny delights in tormenting those who don't appreciate our...ah...ways."

Denny grinned affably and admitted, "It's all true."

"Would you like to be Papa James?" Violet asked.

"I suppose there is a part of me that is spiteful enough to not object. I had, perhaps, imagined something different."

Denny giggled and rubbed his hands together. "Jack, I should have known your father wouldn't blink at us. Papa James it is. So...how did you avoid the family noose?"

"I married far better than I deserved," James said. "Jack's mother was the end of a line of those who'd been well off. They had properties,

investments, and such to manage, and they were so happy to have my help. In my father's business, I'd never have been anything other than another minion. My brothers were happy there. I had another way open before me. I took that road. The house we have, all of that, it's from her family who accepted me as a son they'd always wanted. We were quite happy. Happier, I think, than my siblings working with my father. He's not a bad man, you know. Just very business focused. Business before all else, really. It was *how* he showed his love, putting all of his focus into something that would support us all. He worked for us, but in doing so, he alienated us as well."

Violet frowned at that and then glanced at Jack. What would he be like as a father? Would he show his love? Violet hadn't had much love from her own father as a child. It was only looking back that she realized he'd cared at all. Vi wanted something more for her children.

"If the business is an expression of the love he has for his children, surely he'll leave it fairly among them? Not this dynastic thing where one child wins and the rest continue on in want?"

James shook his head and Violet realized she couldn't quite do it. Papa James...it wasn't respectful enough. Perhaps Father James would do better. "I have no idea. My father saw me rejecting his business as a personal rejection. It was, I suppose, in a way."

How strange it was to see this man who was old enough to be a grandfather himself worried about his relationship with his father. The things that family associations did to each other. The love, the hate, the memories; all of it was so messy so often.

The house the auto arrived at was the personification of new money and Violet hated herself a little for thinking it. While it had large iron gates and a curving drive with hedges sculpted into animals like many of the ancient houses, it was glossy in its newness. Just how wealthy was Jack's family? A house like this wasn't something most could build in a generation. The earl's residence had been built over several generations.

"What a lovely house," Violet said, taking in the way every window was lit.

Jack's lips twitched enough to let her know he wasn't fooled, but James didn't seem bothered, which was what concerned Vi.

"It's so big," Lila said as they stepped out. It was *huge*. It made castles look small.

Violet took Jack's hand as they walked up the steps to the house. The door was opened by a uniformed Indian man. He nodded once and said nothing as they entered and then he clicked his heels together and led them to the dining room.

The door opened to the sound of shouting, and Violet pressed her lips tightly together to keep from saying something.

"—it! What have you done to—" The shouter snapped his mouth closed as James stepped into the room followed by the rest of them.

"Ah, James, how good of you to appear." Grandfather Wakefield seemed unperturbed. "I would have rescinded the invitation if not for Lady Violet arriving for the first time."

'Lady' was said with enough emphasis to make her uncertain whether it was mockery or respect. She didn't think she desired either, so Violet replied merrily, "I prefer Mrs. Wakefield, but Vi will do for family."

It was the right thing to say as far as James and Jack were concerned. Their matching dark gazes lit with appreciation as they were led to their seats. As they sat, Violet saw that dinner had already been cleared away. Port had been poured and the air was clouded with those indulging in their particular tobacco vices.

Vi was famished, but she took the offered glass of wine and sipped it without concern while no one else spoke a word.

"Perhaps it's time to clear this up and go into the drawing room," Grandfather Wakefield said. "We'll have coffee and tea brought in, Lady Violet, along with some nibbles for those of you stuck on the train."

"Lovely," Violet said happily.

This whole affair was utterly ridiculous. As they left the dining room, she whispered to Jack, "Who was shouting?"

"One of my cousins, I think," Jack whispered back. "The ones who work for Grandfather feel they have a right to the company."

Vi lifted her brows and didn't comment. She was a twice-over inheritor and didn't have room to comment. Her mother had inherited money and left it to Violet and Victor. Then, when they'd lost Great Aunt Agatha, Violet had been financially blessed again. She managed Aunt Agatha's investments these days, but Vi hadn't done anything to earn them, and how well she knew it.

## CHAPTER 6

“Who are you now?” Grandfather Wakefield asked of Denny. “Denny Lancaster,” Denny said happily, entirely unbothered by the daggered glances being thrown his way. “A longtime friend of Violet and Victor. A newer friend of Jack. This is my wife, Lila.”

“Don’t you have a house?” Grandfather Wakefield asked.

“Two actually,” Denny agreed. “Lila and I tend to stick close to either Violet or Victor. We’re here for the baby.”

“The baby?” Aunt Hyacinth asked.

“My brother’s,” Violet answered. “He or she will be here any day.”

“This is the baby that made your brother have to marry so quickly?”

Violet blinked and Denny didn’t bother to hide his evil chuckle. Lila simply leaned back and crossed her legs while Jack shot his aunt a quelling look.

“Hyacinth,” James cut in, “you’re looking well.” Before she could answer, James continued, “Father, I believe you prefer to make your updates.”

“Of course,” Grandfather Wakefield said. “Does anyone have anything to report? Other than Jack marrying, of course.”

“To an earl’s daughter,” one of the younger crew said. They weren’t impressed. Violet realized in that moment that Jack’s family was—perhaps—as horrified as her own at their connection.

“And an author,” another one said. This was a young man who nodded at Violet. “Supported yourself for a while by your writing, I think.”

“It certainly helped.”



“Until you inherited a business you didn’t work in. The money should have gone to Davies’s nephew.”

“Leave Violet be,” Jack snapped.

“Tell us about your latest murder,” Aunt Hyacinth said scathingly. “Showing up for a piece of the pie after abandoning the business and the family work and then thinking you can slide in at the last minute with your hands out. I suppose the earldom or whatever you call the coffers is bankrupt.”

“Let’s leave us out of this battle you have going,” Violet said idly, channeling Lila’s most bored voice. “I am an earl’s daughter, Jack is a very good detective. We aren’t here to squabble over your business or what you’ve built, Grandfather Wakefield.”

“Are you saying you absolve yourself of any right to the fortune?”

Violet glanced at Jack, letting him answer. “Aunt Hyacinth,” Jack said, trying for patience, but Violet could see the fury on his face.

“Hyacinth,” James cut in. “Neither of us have worked in Father’s business.”

“I am a daughter,” Hyacinth retorted.

“Enough.” Jack scowled. “We don’t want your money, Grandfather Wakefield. We had the poor idea that we might simply spend time with family. I can see it will have to continue to be with Violet’s family.”

“Oh, so the earl welcomes you with a happy heart? Tell me another whopper.” Hyacinth’s gaze was narrow, her lips were pursed, and her cheeks were flushed.

Violet gazed up at the ceiling and took in a deep breath. Her head had started to hurt with the hunger and now they were at this ridiculous family dinner. This was, however, Jack’s family.

“Jack old man,” Denny said happily, “they don’t appreciate you, do they? You really should have set lower expectations. My father’s just glad I’m not touching him for a quid every time I see him.”

Jack met Denny’s gaze and then, to Vi’s shock, he laughed. He crossed to Violet, took a seat at her side, and leaned back. “I’ll make this up to you.”

“Cypress, I think,” she told him, winding their fingers together.

Both of them turned to Grandfather Wakefield, who was silently frowning at the group. “Are you quite finished?”

No one replied.

“As I have said before and as I will say again, the will has been made for years, and it won’t be changed.”

“But Liam works so hard for you!” Hyacinth cried.

“He gets paid quite well, Hyacinth,” Anderson Wakefield, James’s older brother said. “Better than his peers at the company to be honest. He does good work, and he’s appreciated.”

Violet had to see the men together—Jack and all his cousins and uncles—to realize how much they looked alike. Frank and Anderson seemed to have the very same eyes as Jack while Liam and Herbert both had Jack’s great bulk.

Hyacinth seemed to growl. “You don’t understand the worries of a parent. You aren’t connected in the same way.”

Violet watched as Anderson rolled his eyes and sighed. He popped a white pill into his mouth and glanced at his father and then at James. “Perhaps I don’t.”

“Let alone the worries of a widowed mother.”

Anderson closed his eyes and pressed his finger against his eyeball. The way the sister was playing on the feelings of her siblings was masterful, Violet thought. And mean.

She glanced at Jack whose jaw was clenching and unclenching. He had the look of a man who wanted to strangle everyone present. Lila was leaning into Denny’s side and she’d closed her eyes. Violet bit down on her bottom lip to hide her reaction to Lila being too bored by Jack’s family antics to bother staying awake.

Denny glanced down a moment later, and his face softened as the sight of his sleeping wife. Usually he’d have nudged her awake, but he left her be.

“Oh my heavens,” Vi breathed. Both Jack and James looked at Violet and then Jack followed Violet’s gaze to Lila.

“Realized, did you?” he asked evenly.

“You knew?”

His aunt and uncle were snapping at each other again, but Violet was entirely encompassed by the sight of her friends.

“Guessed.”

“But you didn’t say anything?” Her gaze narrowed on him.

“I realized on the train and then I was distracted.”

“How?”

“She made too many trips to the ladies, and Denny looked concerned every time.”

“She has the look,” James said, and Violet’s jaw dropped. He grinned at Violet, who slowly closed her mouth and shook her head.

“Did you have something you wanted to add, James?” Grandfather Wakefield interrupted.

“Father,” James said with a sigh, “I believe we’re pushing the children to their limit.”

“I am retiring,” Grandfather Wakefield announced. “Stepping entirely away from the company. Anderson will carry on in my stead. As he’s been doing for quite some time.”

The room fell silent except for a soft snuffle from Lila.

“Anderson doesn’t have any children,” Hyacinth said. “Herbert hasn’t worked for some time. Surely my Liam is a better choice. Anderson, don’t you want to retire before your heart gives out?”

Anderson glanced at Hyacinth. “You propose that Liam take over the business and both Father and I retire?”

“Why not?” Hyacinth asked stubbornly. “Only Liam and Frank have worked in the company. My girls can’t, obviously. My boys didn’t turn away from what Father made like the rest of them.”

“If Liam wishes to run the company someday,” Grandfather Wakefield said, “he’ll need to work his way into position. There are many men with more experience and know-how than your boy.”

“He could do it,” Hyacinth said, “and he has the blood.”

“As does Neville if we’re using that argument,” Uncle Herbert said. His wife glanced at him, shook her head, and sipped her tea.

Jack rose suddenly. “I’m taking my wife and our friends home. I apologize for abandoning this, but I find that the usual family argument has grown tiresome.” Jack crossed to his grandfather and shook his hand. “I hope you enjoy your retirement, Grandfather. I fear our family isn’t well-inclined towards not working. Violet is planning a dinner at our house with a whole array of chocolate puddings. Why don’t you come and talk with her friends about ways to spend your new free time. They know rather a lot about enjoying life, I’ve discovered. It’s a bit of a distance between this house and Father’s house. Stay with us, why don’t you? Maybe we can learn to get along.”

Hyacinth shot Jack a look that told him his interference was unwelcome, as was his judgement on the argument.

“Do they know so much about not working?” Grandfather Wakefield didn’t seem as disgusted by the idea as Hyacinth. His gaze flicked to Violet and she winked at him, prompting a smile. “I shouldn’t mind learning how to enjoy myself a bit. I was thinking of just fishing some.”

“They do indeed know rather a lot about not working. There’s an art to not being busy all the time, Grandfather. To allowing your thoughts to linger on other things. It’s hard to suddenly stop being consumed by business.”

“What would you know about that?” his Uncle Herbert asked, not unkindly. “Have you stopped working?”

Jack glanced at his uncle and grinned. “Not I. I have, however, learned how to enjoy not working as much as I enjoy working.”

“How you can enjoy catching criminals I’ll never know,” Herbert’s wife, Matilda, said. She smiled sweetly at Jack. “I suppose it’s like Holmes and the chase or the puzzle or whatever it was that he liked so much.”

“I believe that was drugs,” Denny said. “I had been comparing my sweet Vi to Holmes, but she’d never succumb to drugs and she’s not quite as clever.”

Denny’s comment woke Lila, who simply opened her eyes and glanced about as if she’d never been asleep.

“Drugs! Don’t all you bright young things drink and indulge in cocaine and set things on fire?” Hyacinth’s sour voice rose again, and Violet felt the nearly overwhelming desire to gag the woman.

“Surely not,” Denny answered as Violet yawned, echoing Lila. “I suppose there aren’t so many of us spoiled good-for-nothings as it might seem, but I think if we were all setting things aflame, we’d have burned London down by now.”

“I suppose you spend every night dancing and having parties in Hyde Park?” Hyacinth said, as though those things were the same as robbing banks and breaking into houses.

“Violet is known to work many a night, I fear.” He leaned into a stage-whisper. “I once caught her working late reading a business report and then rising early to go to a meeting. It was shocking!” He adjusted his coat at the expression on Hyacinth’s face and gave her a lascivious gaze that had her blushing. “I confess to being a man who has both danced all night and

attended an all-night party in a park. In fact, I have danced all night in a park. And, to be perfectly transparent, I rather enjoy a good bottle party or an evening on the Thames on someone else's yacht."



"HYACINTH IS the one with the nine children?" Lila asked as the auto headed away from the monstrosity that was Wakefield house.

"Lila is the woman with a secret," Violet said, eyeing her oldest friend.

Lila simply adjusted her hands in her lap and lifted a brow.

"You're rounder, but you're not slimming. You never get so round in the face."

"Maybe I've given up now that I'm settled."

Violet's gaze narrowed and she hissed, "You're too vain for that."

Father James chuckled.

Violet glanced at him. "Father James says you have the look."

"The look?" Lila examined her fingernails. "Of a woman?"

"Of a breeder!"

"Surely he didn't call Lila a breeder?" Denny said with a bright-eyed gaze. "I win, darling Lila."

"Win?" Jack asked. "You wagered that Violet wouldn't figure it out?"

"She didn't figure out Kate," Denny said happily. "Violet isn't as clever as you'd think. It's why she's not Holmes. She's some sort of lesser detective. Still, I gave her a chance that she'd figure it out this time."

Lila yawned, then met Violet's gaze.

Vi's head slowly tilted. "You lost a bet with Denny about when I would realize you were with child?"

"He has an over-inflated sense of your wit," Lila said sourly. "I am not so overcome."

"But I won, darling Lila," Denny crowed. "I won and you lost and I won."

"You probably gave me away," Lila told him, crossing her arms over her chest. "I don't care if you won, I am not having the lying-in with your mother hovering over me."

"I promised her," Denny told Lila. "They already think you're barren."

Violet glanced at James, who was watching the couple argue with a smile on his face, and then at Jack, who had lost the look of utter irritation on his face. He had calmed down into his normal demeanor; perhaps he was even happy given the smile hovering just about the edges of his lips.

“You probably gave me away, so it doesn’t count,” Lila insisted.

Violet could have told Lila that falling asleep had given her away, but kindness was required for those growing babies. “It was the look on his face,” Violet lied.

“See,” Lila told Denny. “You’ve forfeit your prize. I’m staying with Violet and Kate when I have the baby.”

“You have to give her the win,” Violet told Denny, who was examining Violet for lies. “Women suffer in childbirth even without their mothers-in-law hovering. What Lila wants, goes.”

Denny frowned at Lila and then at Violet. “My mother will never let me hear the end of it.”

“Better your mother than your wife,” Lila told Denny without an ounce of sympathy. “She treats me like the whore of Babylon that stole her baby away.”

Violet yawned and then told Denny, “Cheer up, laddie, you can always lie and say the doctor told you that Lila couldn’t travel again once you get where she wants to be.”

“Oh,” Denny said brightly. “That’s a good one.”

“Your wife is alarmingly good at lying,” James told Jack. “She might be able to pull the wool over your eyes.”

Denny’s evil laugh chased Violet into sleep and she didn’t wake again until Jack placed her on their bed. She yawned hugely, threw off her evening gown and decided her slip was good enough to sleep in. A moment later she was asleep, though she half-woke when Jack tugged her close and wrapped her in his arms.

## CHAPTER 7

Violet woke the next day and realized only then that the room had been redone for them. She knew it was one of the possible master bedrooms in the house, but now the walls were covered with new paper that looked hand-stamped with fleur-de-lis of a slightly darker shade of red.

“Your father had our room redone,” Violet told Jack and then lay back down, settling her face on his chest. He tangled their fingers together, and she smiled up at him and then breathed in the scent of him. There was something ineffably comforting in the feeling of him holding her, his scent, the sound of his heart beating near her ear.

“He did.”

“What a lovely gift.”

“He was worried you’d want to do it yourself,” Jack said. “But also worried that you wouldn’t feel welcome if it were the grubby room used by my mother’s parents for decades.”

Violet sat up and looked at him with lifted brows. “Look at you with your secrets. First this family madness, then Lila and Denny’s baby, plus the decorating. You’re a man with worlds behind those eyes.”

Jack grunted and then tangled his hand in her hair, drawing her down for a breathless kiss.

She pushed back afterwards to look down at him. “Are you all right?”

He knew, of course, she meant about the family stuff. They hadn’t even greeted him. Not really. They’d gone about their tired family argument as though Jack hadn’t brought friends and a new wife.

“Father had said they’d gotten bad. He’d told me he’d been ‘out-of-town’ for as many of those family dinners as possible, but I confess I didn’t expect them to just go on with their argument as though we weren’t watching.”

Violet sighed and asked him, “Are you all right?”

He nodded.

“You aren’t bothered by being the bad grandson?”

Jack glanced past Violet and then looked her in the eye. “Yes, I am bothered by it. Of course I am. There’s nothing wrong with following a different path from the family business. My father has been the lesser son since he married my mother. I’ve been the lesser grandson. It mattered to me quite a lot when I was a boy.”

“And now?” Violet asked, pushing some of his thick hair off of his forehead.

“Now? It hasn’t mattered since the war, Vi. Everyday I’m grateful just to be alive. Everyday I’m grateful that I wasn’t one of the poor fellows in the trenches. I am lucky, Violet Wakefield. I was lucky before I met you and now? Now that Lord Carlyle’s daughter picked me when she could have had anyone? Now I’m the luckiest fellow in England.”

Violet leaned down and pressed a kiss against his forehead. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and spend the day with him, but the worry of just what Geoffrey had done while they were gone was pressing against her mind, along with the determination to have a delightful dinner for when the cousins came to visit.

“How long are they staying for?” Violet asked Jack.

“We’ll just invite them for a weekend,” he said. “My grandfather is too old to motor over and return the same day. We might as well invite them all. He’s an old man, Vi.”

“I’m happy to do whatever you’d like,” Violet smiled at him. “You should take him fishing, Jack. Try to build something with him that isn’t connected to his business.”

Jack’s head tilted and Violet could see the hesitation in his face. She wondered if somewhere in the back of his mind the boy version of Jack was remembering being rejected. If that were so, Violet would hardly blame him.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.



“If there’s anything I have learned,” Violet told him, “it is regretting not being closer to my family before they die. He doesn’t have long, Jack. Make a relationship with him.”

There was a knock on their bedroom door before Jack could reply.

“Vi,” Denny called. “Vi, you need to come out here.”

Violet and Jack’s gazes met and then they both stepped out of bed. Violet grabbed her kimono and Jack stepped into the bath.

“It’s Geoffrey.” Denny’s expression was solemn enough that Violet sighed as she stepped into the hall. “He got drunk off of Papa James’s cognac.”

Violet closed her eyes.

“Then he decided to slide down the banister.”

Violet opened her eyes again, waiting.

“He got himself up and collapsed into a random bedroom. However, he has broken his arm and given himself a rather spectacular black eye.”

Violet took in a slow breath and let it out. She was coming to truly and abidingly despise this brother of hers.

“How did you find him?”

“Well, it seems your sweet Rouge and Holmes curled up with the lad. Perhaps you realized they were missing?”

“I thought they were with a maid,” Violet admitted, feeling immediately guilty about not thinking of her dogs since she’d sent them to the train with the servants.

“They took it upon themselves to yip just often enough to wake Lila this morning, who woke me, and I found the lot of them. I got the lad to a bedroom, but he’s moaning rather dramatically.”

“He’s an idiot,” Violet told Denny. “Do you think we could pawn him off on Victor?”

“Yes,” Denny said immediately. The glint in his eye was evil as he replied, “But you won’t.”

She would, Violet thought. Then she immediately remembered her sister-in-law ready to burst with the baby and knew she wouldn’t.

“The things we do for love, eh?” he asked with a grin as Jack stepped into the hallway fully dressed.

“What have you done for love?” Violet demanded.

“Gave Lila my stash of chocolates in the middle of the night. She ate the whole lot!” He sounded disgusted. “She just shoved them in and didn’t even

savor them. She could have had any old chocolate for that, but she wanted mine.”

Violet laughed at the woebegone expression on Denny’s face and then explained to Jack what Geoffrey had done.

“His arm is broken?”

Denny nodded. “You can see it. Turned my stomach to be honest, and I’m ready to eat a horse.”

Violet agreed with that statement. She was going to throw on the first likely dress and make her way to the breakfast room. She glanced at Jack and he said, “I’ll take care of it.”

Violet nodded and then went back into their bedroom. Normally, she’d have lingered in a bath, but she needed a cup of Turkish coffee and something to eat rather desperately. It only occurred to her as the memory of her favorite coffee formed in the back of her mouth that they hadn’t brought the coffee themselves and that Jack’s father probably didn’t serve it. He was probably, she thought with horror, a regular coffee man or even a black tea only man.

Violet sighed as she placed a blush nude dress on, slid her feet into a pair of brown shoes, and dabbed her lips and cheeks with her favorite pot of rouge. Violet found her way to Lila and they went down to the breakfast room together. To Violet’s shock, Anderson Wakefield was in the breakfast room with James.

When Vi and Lila entered, both men stood. Violet greeted them, glanced at Lila, and the two crossed to the buffet. Vi nearly wept when she found Turkish coffee, and she made a gargantuan plate with a very full cup of coffee and then joined the men. She made a mental note to give Beatrice a very large raise if she could arrange Violet’s favorite coffee while also writing her business letters.

“Is Jack still sleeping?” James asked with a look of doubt on his face.

“He’s dealing with my brother,” Violet told them. “I fear Geoffrey’s ability to be a nuisance has yet to reach its limits.”

Lila laughed lazily and took the seat next to Violet. Both ladies sipped their coffee, eyeing the other as they waited for Jack’s uncle to explain his presence.

“I wanted to apologize to all of you at once,” Anderson said. “I—”

Violet took a bite of her fried potatoes before she said, “Think nothing of it.”

Anderson sighed. "I've never been as inclined to be personally offended as my father at the children's desires to work in other places. I suppose it's because I was so very offended when James left me to deal with Father on my own. I carried a grudge about that for years. Stupid really. It almost ruined my friendship with my brother forever."

Violet pressed her lips together to keep from saying anything. She was still at the headache end of hungry and needed to eat, drink her coffee, and hold her tongue.

"Father, I think, could let James go because I was right there and Herbert was coming along behind me. When I never married, however, Father seemed to look about and realized that the only grandchildren who were interested in working for him didn't carry his name. That's when he turned a bit bitter about it all. I was the failure son who'd never married. James only had Jack—who neither needed the business nor wanted it. Then there was Hyacinth who was having a slew of grandchildren who didn't carry his name, and Herbert who married late as well."

James grunted. "Poor Father. He'd worked so hard to create something that lasted for his family and we didn't see it for what it was."

"What was it?" Violet asked softly.

"It was his great act of love. He worked long hours, he missed our childhoods really, he skipped vacations and holidays to keep the business going only to realize it was all for us, and Herbert's boy is only ten years old. Right now he wants to do what Grandfather does, but the rest of the boys...they don't."

Violet bit down on her lip and then said quietly, "I'm very sorry that Grandfather Wakefield didn't think to enjoy his life and children along the way, but I don't believe that excuses treating Jack as some sort of lesser grandson because he didn't choose to spend his life as his grandfather wanted."

"No," Anderson agreed. "No, you're right. That's why I'm here. I suppose I pinned my hopes on Jack too. I knew what Grandfather wanted, and I lost the woman I loved to the influenza. I didn't want to marry again. Jack choosing the family business would have made things so easy, you know?"

Violet shook her head. "I'm afraid you don't understand."

Mr. Wakefield lifted his brows.

“Jack’s work isn’t a pursuit. It isn’t a puzzle. It isn’t a way to alleviate his boredom and show his brilliance.”

Anderson cocked his head. “I’m not sure I ever described it as any of those things, but what is it?”

Violet was angry, and she knew it was with the wrong people. Even still, her voice was waspish as she said, “It’s a calling, Anderson. And it’s how Jack deals with the guilt of surviving the Great War when so many he cared about did not.”

Anderson cleared his throat as what she said fully registered in his mind. “He has no reason to feel guilty.”

“I’m closer of age than you to those who went to war,” Violet told Anderson. “So perhaps it seems more obvious to me. Feeling guilty for surviving is not logical or rational. Being haunted by those who you lost isn’t fair. What did they do wrong, but get lucky?”

Anderson shifted, but he nodded at Violet when she met his gaze.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s logical. What matters is that they are haunted. Jack is haunted. Hamilton Barnes, Jack’s best friend, is haunted. My childhood friend sees his ghosts so strongly, he can’t always tell what is real and what is not. It doesn’t matter if Jack *shouldn’t* feel guilty. He does. So, he takes his gifts and he makes the country his friends died to keep safe—safer.”

“I—”

Violet shook her head. She didn’t want to hear the apology that should have been Jack’s years ago. She sighed as she pushed her barely touched plate away.

“So,” she said brightly, lying with her smile, “are you all a fan of chocolate?”

Anderson examined her face for a moment. “I believe most people enjoy it to a degree. What’s this I hear about a chocolate party?”

“I believe we shall have a weekend of it,” Violet said. “I’m rather thinking of investing in a local woman’s chocolatier. The weekend is, shall we say, a trial run to ensure her talents are up to snuff.”

“Is this Mariposa Jenkins?”

Violet nodded.

“I don’t believe you’ll be disappointed. I’m sure we’ll all enjoy it quite nicely. I shall spread the word among the family.”

“Wonderful,” Violet said and then sipped deeply of her coffee, pretending that her reply hadn't been sarcastic in the extreme.

## CHAPTER 8

Violet kissed Jack on the cheek as they stepped onto the great stone porch outside of his country house. Unlike his grandfather's house, the country house was old and it reflected money, but not mountains of it. The house was smaller than their London home, but the garden was quite a bit larger. It had once had property for the gentlemen farmers of Jack's mother's side of the family.

"Good luck," she told him. "You and your father should go fishing even if your grandfather declines to come and stay. No reason not to have fun."

"We will," Jack told her and then pressed a kiss on her forehead. "Even if he says no, I'll know that I tried."

James glanced between them and then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jack. We should have tried harder before this. I could have made the attempt to help him see that you choosing to investigate wasn't you turning away from him. Honestly, I suppose I just didn't think anything of it. He was never affectionate."

"Father," Jack told him, clapping his hand on his father's shoulder, "I've never expected anything else. We're doing this so Violet won't worry over it. It'll bother her until I try."

Vi grinned at both of them. They were giving her matching long-suffering looks. "You're stopping at a pub, aren't you?"

Jack's laugh told her they were.

She smirked. "Enjoy your pint and your chips."

The autos were delivered to the front of the house as the door opened behind Violet. She turned to find Geoffrey coming out. He was wrapped in

plaster from his shoulder to his wrist and scowling at her as if she'd poured the cognac down his throat.

"I don't want to go," he told her. "My arm hurts."

Violet ignored his whine and let Jack hold the auto door open for her.

"It's not safe for women to drive," Geoffrey told her. "I won't do it. You'll kill me with the auto."

The look she gave him was so cold and so furious that he slowly got in and slammed the door behind him.

Violet grinned at Jack, who tapped the top of the auto twice. Violet put it in gear and drove down the drive.

"We're going to die," Geoffrey muttered over and over again.

"You might," Violet told him flatly.

He gave her scathing look. Violet pulled the auto over. "Did you want me to send you back to Father to see what he has in store for you if this doesn't work out?"

Geoffrey's eyes widened.

"Perhaps he'll send you to some remote part of the world. You know our Victorian relatives used to send their unwanted sons to India. Fail or thrive but so far away that they didn't have to be involved. I'm sure Father could find the modern equivalent if you push him."

"Mother won't let him," Geoffrey said with that same scathing look. "She'd never let him do that to me."

"It's interesting that you don't doubt Father is tempted," Violet told Geoffrey gently. "You know she wasn't very successful in stopping Jack from hauling you down the stairs and out of the city."

Geoffrey snapped his mouth shut and stared out the window. He sniffed. For a moment she was afraid he was crying, but no. Not the blighter Geoffrey.

Violet wanted to slap the back of his head. She wanted to shake sense into him. She wanted to somehow share all of the things that she'd learned about living when you didn't have a mother to take care of every little thing. He seemed to truly believe that he could behave however he wanted and everyone would just keep accepting it.

Instead of acting on any of her fantasies, she just sighed and pulled the auto back onto the road. "Geoffrey, no one can make you stop being a wart. If you want to risk Father's wrath, keep being impossible. I assure you that Jack and I have our limits and will eventually throw you back to Father."

Geoffrey didn't answer and Violet stopped focusing on him to focus on the direction between her country house and her twin's. Victor's house was on the other side of the village near the river while Jack's was tucked into the hills and closer to the thickest part of the wood.

Violet parked the auto outside of Victor's house and saw her brother walking with Kate along the side. She got out of the car, leaving Geoffrey behind, and threw herself at her twin. He swung her around and then dropped her back on her feet as she exclaimed over Kate. The baby had gotten so big, Kate seemed as though she might burst. There was an uncomfortable expression on her face, and Violet gently kissed both of Kate's cheeks.

"Hello, my darling love," Violet told Kate, who smiled.

"What's this?" Victor asked as Geoffrey finally got out of the car. He walked towards the twins with such utterly expressive moroseness that Violet felt as though he could be the living personification of Oizys, goddess of Misery. "How did you get saddled with him?"

Violet glanced at her twin with such a meaningful look that he snorted. "I don't know how it happened. It's all a blur."

"Hello there, Geoffrey. Nice to see you, old man." Victor held out his hand to be shook, but Geoffrey just scowled at it as though it were a snake.

"You don't like me any more than Violet does," Geoffrey told Victor flatly. "You both hate my mother and you're jealous of me."

Victor blinked. "Well, all right then. Did you want to go tell yourself sad tales in the garden or did you want to go inside?"

Geoffrey seemed offended at Victor's light voice. "You don't deny it?"

"I've long since learned the futility of arguing with a child," Victor said. "I can see that you're determined to be difficult. I don't intend to play games with you."

"I'm not a child," Geoffrey snapped. "I'm not playing any game."

"Of course, you're behaving just as a man does." The mockery in Victor's voice made Geoffrey flush, but he didn't leave. He just backed off enough to listen without having to fully interact.

"We've come to invite you over on Saturday." Violet took Kate's hand. "Don't feel as though you must come. I don't want you to be miserable. We're going to have Jack's relatives over and they're rather a pack of blighters," Violet told Kate honestly. "You should feel free to stay home. If you want to come, I'm going to do a sort of chocolate-themed evening."



“Oh chocolate,” Kate said with a moan. “It makes my heart burn now. How I miss it!”

Violet noted a wince on Kate’s face, and Violet wanted to ask if the baby was on the way, but it she didn’t want to send Victor in a spiral if it was happening. Instead she said, “I’ll buy you the biggest box you’ve ever seen once Vi Junior arrives.”

Kate smiled, and Violet tucked her arm through Kate’s. “Tell me everything.”

They wandered towards the house and into the parlor where they continued chattering. When Geoffrey finally fell asleep, no doubt from his night of excess and morning of pain, Victor asked, “How did you get Geoffrey?”

“Father is hoping that you and Denny and Jack will be a good influence on him. Father’s worried.”

“So am I,” Victor said softly. He shook his head. “His mother doesn’t have money, not like ours did, Vi, and we barely made it with our allowance, the money from Mama, and our book sales. Especially since we shared expenses. Gerald will let Geoffrey live at the house, but what man wants to live off of his brother?”

“Maybe you should give him money,” Kate suggested softly. Her motherly gaze landed on Geoffrey with a sympathy that neither Violet nor Victor could muster. “You could afford to give him an allowance too.”

Victor shook his head. “We can’t do that with Aunt Agatha’s money. She didn’t do it for us. It would dishonor her. It would be one thing to bring him traveling with us, but to actually support him, she’d never have approved.”

“Father will see to it that Geoffrey is educated,” Violet said. “He’d be able to work if he wanted to. Any position that you can get with an education, along with his allowance from Father, would be enough to live well.”

“You two lived so poorly before your aunt’s money that you forget,” Kate reminded them. “Didn’t you say your rooms smelled?”

Violet laughed and then admitted, “Oh, they did! They were so awful. Dark and dank.”

“We did spend rather a lot of money dancing and going to dinner,” Victor said. “He should be able to as well.”

Kate sniffled. "I can understand Lady Eleanor's worry. She wants her son to have what his father provided."

"None of us are getting that," Violet told Kate with a laugh. "Only Gerald, and it won't be the same. With death duties and a smaller fortune, Gerald's children will be in the same spot as Geoffrey is. The days of living off the past are mostly gone."

"It's a whole new world," Victor agreed. "For better or worse. Maybe Geoffrey will find a passion in school and it'll be easy for him to know what he wants to do. He'll be like Denny's brother, who went off to dig up the past, or like Jack, who was always meant to find criminals."

They stayed past tea, which they woke Geoffrey to take, and when Violet returned to the house with Geoffrey, she found Anderson Wakefield and Grandfather Wakefield sitting in the parlor. They were ensconced in the most comfortable chairs, and Violet watched from the doorway for a moment. Jack was telling his grandfather a tale that—to her surprise—was the one where they'd met Kate. It hadn't ended well. They'd caught the murderer, but both Violet and Kate had been rather beat up.

She didn't realize Geoffrey had stayed with her until he asked, "Is that true? You were hurt that badly?"

Violet looked over her shoulder at Geoffrey. "Well...yes."

"Why did you interfere again? Why do either of you interfere in the deaths?"

Violet's head tilted and she told him honestly. "Lots of reasons. You can't let killers get away with their crimes. I'm enraged on behalf of the victim. Someone else I care about is in danger."

"Why does Jack let you?" Geoffrey demanded. "Father would have been devastated to lose another child."

Violet blinked rather rapidly to keep a rush of emotion away at this flash of humanity in her brother. Violet tucked her arm through Geoffrey's good one and smiled at him. "I fear I've never been very obedient. I suppose we have that in common."

Her wart of a brother grinned at her. "I still don't want to be here."

"Well, what did you want instead, boy?" Grandfather Wakefield demanded.

Geoffrey glanced over at Jack's elderly grandfather in surprise. "I don't know. Not this."

"If you don't know what you want, what does it matter where you are?"

Geoffrey glanced about and then said sullenly, "I suppose it doesn't matter all that much."

"How is Kate?" Jack asked to change the subject, Violet was sure.

"She's quite ready to be done, I think," Violet admitted. She let Jack seat her near the teapot and she poured herself a cup, freshening everyone else's cup as well.

"Will she be coming to your chocolate night?" Uncle Anderson asked. "I am quite looking forward to it. Even Hyacinth seemed intrigued when I told her of it. Her and the children."

Violet shook her head and then turned to Jack. Denny and Lila weren't about, but Violet was guessing that they were either sleeping off the long day of traveling or had decided to escape into a ramble rather than listen to Jack's family fight again. It seemed, though, when you had the patriarch and his eldest son, no one wanted to argue.

Perhaps it was because those two, at least, understood each other. Violet wondered if Anderson was aware of what was in this all-secret will. He hadn't embraced Hyacinth's plan for him to retire as well, but Violet had seen him take a small white pill several times now. Maybe Hyacinth was right, maybe Anderson should retire as well. Surely he didn't want to work his way to the grave?

## CHAPTER 9

“She put the local woman who supplied her into the business plan,” Violet told Jack two evenings later as she placed her diamond and gold bangles on her wrists. “The clever creature.”

“She took your measure well. Would you have offered to help a random male on a train?”

Violet laughed and then admitted, “I wouldn’t have ended up talking to one. My husband might have caught me.”

“He seems like a terrifying fellow,” Jack told her as he handed her the case for her pearls.

“Oh, he is. A mountain of a man. Big enough to toss some fellow from the train and no one the wiser.”

“That sounds like the plot of one of your books.”

“I might just do that,” Violet said with a grin. “Is it just me or did Geoffrey become almost tolerable?”

“I was wondering if you’d given him a talking-to and somehow convinced him to start behaving.”

Violet shook her head, rising. It was a summer’s evening, and her dress was a white shimmery sheath that reached her ankles, flaring out around her hips. A long slit up the back allowed her full movement. She adjusted her pearls around her neck and kissed Jack before she put on her lipstick.

“He fell asleep,” Violet said. “Maybe he isn’t so bad when he’s rested up. Or the pain medication for his arm is calming him down.”

Jack didn’t seem to think that was the case, but Violet couldn’t account for it any other way. She shook her head and made her way down to the

dining room. They were serving a light dinner to counteract the flood of sweetness that would come at their guests with the chocolate evening.

Mariposa was wearing a simple black dress and arranging cakes on tiered trays. Next to her was a tray of small cakes, each different, each with a family member's name written in chocolate on it. Violet gasped as she looked them over.

"What a fun idea," Violet said, "I feel certain you'll need to come to London for one of our parties with these. Can't you see it, Jack? Rollerskating in the ballroom, personalized cakes on the buffet with potted shrimps and pat  sandwiches."

Jack had tangled their smallest fingers together as they oohed over the display. Violet took one of the chocolate-covered cherries and popped it in her mouth. Jack started to speak but Violet held up a hand and closed her eyes, savoring the chocolate as Denny intended.

The family had arrived that afternoon, but Violet had been engrossed in her book. She'd objected to leaving her work, but she'd made conversation, sent tea trays to bedrooms, and ensured that everyone had what they needed before she escaped back to her typewriter. She and Victor had laid out their current book before he'd left London, and she needed to hand over her pages that evening. Kate had sent him along and stayed home herself.

She and Jack entered the parlor where Victor was chatting with a nearly cheerful Geoffrey. Certainly it had to be the medication. Violet greeted Jack's family and made her way to her brothers. As she approached, she heard Victor say, "There's an art to it. Good gin goes down easier than terrible gin, but it's always better when you mix it. Mixing is where the fun comes. Vi, darling, I've brought you chocolate liqueur."

To Geoffrey, Victor said, "Vi loves ginger. This is a little ginger beer, a little chocolate liqueur, and a little gin." Victor let Geoffrey sip a swallow from one glass while he poured Violet another glass.

She sipped. "I think that might be better with some juice, Victor love. How is my Kate?"

Violet handed her drink to Jack and let him sip. He shuddered a little. "I could go with an old-fashioned. My grandfather prefers just whiskey."

Violet grinned at Grandfather Wakefield. "Are you certain you don't wish to be a little more adventurous?"

There was a bit of a dare in her voice, and he scoffed, "With ginger beer?"

Vi shrugged. "The dare is in combining ginger and chocolate."

Grandfather Wakefield accepted the drink and Violet grinned as he sipped it. He shuddered and then set the glass to the side. "That's like a dessert that burns."

Violet laughed. "I blame Victor. Using bad gin."

Victor grinned at Violet's teasing. "I save the good stuff for myself. Geoffrey and I are conserving in case you get out of hand, Vi. Then we'll muffle your madness with gin."

Violet faked a gasp, placing her hand over her heart. She faced Geoffrey, who had been almost decent lately. "I understand you caught some trout today, Geoffrey. Despite that arm of yours."

He nodded with a little blush.

"I, however, caught the most," Grandfather Wakefield. "I still have my touch from my boyhood."

"Come now, Father," Anderson said, grinning at his father. They had, both of them, lost a bit of the tenseness that they carried incessantly. "I believe I was only a fish behind you."

"Whereas I," Jack said, "failed miserably. I only got babies."

Violet laughed at the consternation of Jack's face.

"We'll go again after the baby," Victor told Jack. "Geoffrey is going to need more practice once he gets past his beginner's luck."

Violet only just heard Geoffrey ask Victor, "You'd take me?" It felt like a weighted question or maybe Violet just wanted it to be.

Regardless, Victor answered. "Of course I will. Lionel and Peter took me and Vi a few times, you know. Violet refused to bait the hooks, and she fell asleep almost every time."

Violet gaped. "Oh, I'd forgotten! They'd catch the train down to Aunt Agatha's over the holidays and take us fishing for a few days before they went to lark about with friends."

"I don't remember them," Geoffrey said low.

Violet's eyes and nose burned.

"Who are Peter and Lionel?" Hyacinth demanded. "We don't know all your friends."

"They're our brothers who died during the war," Victor answered since he could see Violet struggling. She pressed her lips with her fingers for a moment and then pasted on a bright smile.

"I wasn't aware the nobility sent their boys off."

Violet clenched her jaw shut to keep herself from snapping.

“And yet we did,” Victor said, adding too much bitters to a drink for Hyacinth and handing it over. “Sent them off and lost them just like everyone else.”

“You survived,” Hyacinth snapped and then blushed when she realized everyone was staring at her.

“I just missed the war,” Victor said.

Violet glanced at James, who was staring open-mouthed at his sister. To her utter relief the dinner gong rang. Violet glanced at Jack, who hadn’t bothered to hide his disgust with his aunt. Even her children who had been listening to Victor teach Geoffrey how to mix drinks were staring at their mother.

“Oh,” Violet said brightly, though she wasn’t sure she pulled off the merriness. “Dinner. Shall we go in, Father James?”

“Father James?” Hyacinth said, a little scathingly. But she pretended her own laugh and added, “What a sweet nickname.”

“I prefer Papa James,” Denny announced happily and without pretending at all. He was probably semi-gleeful at the way Hyacinth had arrived already upset. “More frivolous. Rather like us, eh Vi? Or did you work the day away?”

She knew what he was doing, but she decided to let it pass. “I confess to being utterly useful today.”

“Reading business plans?” Denny demanded brightly.

She nodded.

“Sending Beatrice instructions on what to do about that auto company fiasco?”

Violet nodded again, taking James’s arm while Jack helped his grandfather to the right of his father. “I did.”

“Agreeing to the funding for the orphanage from Mama Lancaster?”

Since they had never referred to Kate’s mother that way, Violet stumbled a little at the image of how Kate would reply. “Not today. Though I did write to my sweet Ginny.”

“Your ward?” one of Hyacinth’s daughters asked. “I believe I met her at the wedding.”

“Our ward,” Victor answered. “Just because Violet does all the parenting side of it, interacts with the teachers, persuades Ginny to work

hard, and generally sees to her every need does not mean I don't send her money and take her out for ice cream."

Geoffrey sniffed and Violet thought she might have caught a jealous flash on the boy's face. Could he...could he want their attention?

Before Violet could think on it, she took her seat with Jack's cousins, Liam and Frank, on either side of her. She glanced at Liam and inquired, "What is it that you do for your grandfather's company, Liam?"

He glanced at her. "Generally I see to the supplies. Getting them in place, making sure they're quality, but we're getting good prices. It's all rather complicated." He said it with the tone that she wouldn't understand and she immediately replied with a noncommittal, "Mmm."

To Jack's slightly younger cousin, Frank, she didn't bother to say more than, "Wasn't it a lovely day?"

He snorted a laugh and glanced at her with a similar penetrating gaze. "Don't want to have to bite back another scathing reply. What we see here, gentlemen," he said low, "is the nobility in the wild. Note how the veneer of manners masks her true thoughts."

Violet arched an eyebrow. "What's all this? You don't have a half-insulting comment to throw my way?"

"About your judgement in choosing my cousin over me? Not even that," Frank said with a grin. His eyes twinkled at her and she noted the way he, too, had a grin that seemed to hover at the edge of his lips.

Violet laughed, for once not pretending.

"I understand we're having a chocolate extravaganza. Uncle James said you were thinking of investing in Mrs. Jenkins's chocolatier?"

"I am indeed," Violet agreed. "It's all but done."

"You're giving money to Mariposa?" Liam demanded, cutting in with an air of disgust. "For *chocolate*?"

"This is a man who doesn't understand chocolate, Vi," Denny said from across the table.

"Few understand it like we do, Denny my lad," Violet told Denny with the same airiness. Violet's gaze met Victor, who was near Jack. They both looked as disgusted as Violet felt. The good news, she told herself, was that they'd never need to do this again.

Their simple dinner ended early, and they rose as a group.

"We'll have drinks and Violet's sweets in the parlor," James said, gesturing with the laziness that said this was a family dinner. Jack helped



his Grandfather while Violet took the arm offered by Uncle Anderson.

"I am quite fond of chocolates," Uncle Anderson said. "What a delightful idea you've come up with, my dear. Tell me what we'll be having."

"Cakes, dipped shortbread, hot chocolate. I confess to having snuck a cherry cordial, and it was delightful."

"I've always loved chocolate cake," he told her. "Especially with nuts."

Violet described some of the shops she visited in Belgium with her sister as they entered the parlor and found a uniformed servant attending the display. White plates rimmed in silver were stacked with treats. There was even a chocolate rose that seemed to have been dusted with gold.

"I see why you would be willing to invest," Uncle Anderson said. "If it tastes as good as it looks, you'll be creating chocolate-dipped money."

Violet agreed and left him to find a plate while she stepped back to watch Jack's family come in and ooh and ahh over the treats.

"This is well done, Vi," Victor said. "I can see already that we'll be doing it again."

"Again and again," Denny agreed. Lila yawned into her palm while a servant presented them a tray with small glasses of hot chocolate and flutes of champagne.

Violet took the champagne and glanced at her twin. "I missed you. I think we should sell both of our country houses and find something massive."

"How did you know I love pistachios?" Anderson asked Violet as he took a seat nearby. Hyacinth's children were still loading their plates as Violet glanced at Uncle Anderson.

She grinned at him. "That, my friend, is beautiful luck. I had no idea. I didn't even tell her to personalize the cakes, but I am discovering that Mariposa Jenkins is clever indeed."

He grinned at her with a square jaw that reminded her very much of Jack's. Leaning in, he sniffed the cake and then winked at Violet as he took a bite.

"That is..."

Violet looked over when he paused for too long. He cleared his throat and then looked at her in a bit of alarm. Vi handed him her flute of champagne. Had he swallowed wrong?

A moment later, his plate full of chocolates flipped out of his hand. Violet jumped up from the side of the chair where she was sitting and bent down to meet his gaze.

“Are you choking? Jack!”

Jack pulled Violet back as his uncle slid from his chair on the floor. There was a scream, but Violet’s gaze was fixed on the large man whose body was spasming. There was white foam at the edge of his mouth, and his gaze had gone blank.

Violet gasped and turned away, and Victor was there to wrap her in his arms while Jack shouted. “Stop eating!”

Another scream, another crash, and Denny groaned as he set his untouched plate aside.

“Call the doctor, Father,” Jack said. She felt his familiar touch on the base of her spine and closed her eyes against Victor’s chest when Jack added, “And the constables. This was murder.”

## CHAPTER 10

“Of course it wasn’t murder,” Aunt Hyacinth said.

Violet pressed her fingers against her eyes. She wanted to scream, but she couldn’t speak at all. It was terrible seeing someone die. Of seeing the light in their eyes fade as their spirit left their body. It was worse—it was so, so, so much worse when those eyes were the same color and shape as your love’s eyes. Violet felt as though she’d seen the foreshadowing of what Jack would look like dead, and she was trying not to think at all.

“Anderson had a bad heart. His heart failed him. We aren’t engaging in...in...in your desire to make yourself important in front of Grandfather!”

Violet stood, crossed the room, and slapped Hyacinth hard. The force of it stunned Hyacinth into stupefied silence.

“Listen to me, you fool woman.” Violet barely recognized her own voice, twisted as it was by horror and outrage and shock. “Your brother is dead. He was murdered. Bad hearts don’t end with all the tell-tale signs of arsenic poisoning.”

Hyacinth stared at Violet, who leaned in and added slowly, evenly, and coldly, “Jack and I neither want nor need your father’s money. Shut your mouth, sit down, and don’t speak again until you are spoken to.”

Violet stared Hyacinth down until the woman relented first, bowing her head to look at her hands. Vi returned to her brothers, Denny, and Lila. She glanced at Jack and saw his worry. By Jove, she told herself, look at the light in his eyes. It’s still there. He’s fine.

It wasn't enough. She sat next to Victor and held out her hand for his handkerchief. He pressed it into her hands gently, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. The doctor arrived a moment later with the constables as well.

"Captain Jack!" the local bobby said, holding out his hand. "I'm sorry to see you under such circumstances."

Jack replied, but she felt his gaze on her. Violet little cared that they had an audience when she pulled her legs under her, and pressed her face into Victor's bicep.

"Violet," Victor said gently, "Violet darling, why is this one worse?" He knew her all too well.

She shook her head, closing her eyes as she breathed in and out. She didn't allow herself to think. To imagine or remember. Instead she forced her mind blank and counted. She had reached four hundred and twelve when Jack lifted her.

She knew it was him. She knew his scent and the feel of his arms on her body. She knew the way his heart beat against his chest when she pressed her ear. Violet wrapped her arm around his neck as he carried her up the stairs. She heard Victor say something and Lila reply, but Violet listened only to the sound of Jack's heart against her ear.

He set her down on the bed and turned her face up. His voice was gentle when he asked, "What's happening, Vi?"

She couldn't speak for long minutes, but Jack waited patiently.

"He had your eyes."

Jack nodded, understanding, and he leaned down, pressing his chin against her. After a few minutes, he said, "I have to go help."

"All right," she said, though it wasn't. Nothing about this was all right. She knew, without doubt, that she'd have nightmares about what she'd seen for weeks to come.

"Victor is going to get Kate and bring her back here."

"There's a killer in the house!" Violet snapped. "He can't bring her here."

"He can't leave her, and he won't leave you. Kate will be safe enough."

Violet shook her head frantically. "Victor!" Violet called, knowing he'd be within earshot, and he opened the door to her bedroom. "If you bring my baby and my Kate into this house, I will be the one doing the killing. You keep my Kate and my baby safe!"

"Violet," Victor said, his gaze as tortured as hers. "I can't—"

“You can,” she said, not needing him to say he couldn’t leave her. “You will.”

He shook his head, and the silent argument began. They stared at each other in their wordless, intense battle, neither relenting. She could tell that there were those who were watching in the hallway. She wasn’t alone and the knowledge gave her strength. Victor, however, was wavering with the thought of Kate being alone. Finally, Victor gave in with a weak nod.

“Take Geoffrey too,” Violet told Victor.

“No,” Geoffrey answered, stepping inside the bedroom. “If Victor is leaving you, I won’t leave you too.”

Violet blinked and Victor clapped Geoffrey on the shoulder. “Good man.” That seemed to act as permission for Denny and Lila to join them.

“I’m fine,” Violet lied. “Everything is fine. It’s just...” She couldn’t say it, so she just shook her head.

“We need to find out where the poison came from,” Jack said. “We need to find out why Uncle Anderson was the victim. Maybe someone else was the target?”

Violet took a deep breath in. “It had to have been the cake.”

“Why?”

“Nothing else was personalized and no one else is dead, Jack. I didn’t tell them to make Anderson a cake with pistachios. Why did Mariposa do that? Who told her to?”

“Do you think it was Mariposa?” Denny asked, shocked.

Violet scoffed. “In a family arguing over an inheritance? Of course not. She’s just another unwitting victim.”

“I’ll have the doctor test that cake,” Jack said. “I’ll ask Mariposa. Listen,” Jack glanced around. “Stay together. Geoffrey, I’m entrusting you with Violet while I work. Denny, don’t try to lead Violet into trouble.”

“Violet leads me into trouble, my good man,” Denny said, with a laugh and then looked immediately apologetic for his joke. “I’m sorry. I—”

Jack simply nodded and left, Victor following and closing the door behind them after a final, silent gaze for his twin that was both worry and warning. Violet glanced at the others. “Someone killed Jack’s uncle in our country home.”

Geoffrey shuffled. He was naturally too pale and after the death, he was out and out ghostly. “You have to stay out of this, Violet. It’s not safe.”

Violet shook her head. She rose and paced. She wasn't thinking. She wasn't trying to figure out who had killed Anderson, who wasn't hurting anyone. She wasn't doing anything more than pacing and trying to calm down. She was trying to box up the memory of Anderson dying and the way the light faded from his gaze. The way he'd met her eyes as he died, as he tried to make sense of what was happening to him.

She wiped away a tear and glanced up. Denny, Lila, and Geoffrey were watching as Violet paced herself calm.

"Feeling better?" Denny asked.

Violet shook her head.

Denny nodded and then glanced at Lila. "Why kill the uncle?"

Violet shook her head again.

"We need chalkboards," Denny said.

"No," Violet snapped. "No!"

"How are you going to figure it out?"

Violet shook her head a final time. Her mind was raging, but it was entirely undirected. She didn't have a thought process. It was just random madness. A scattering of thoughts that were too wild to control.

She glanced outside. It was full dark, she saw. She fiddled with her wedding ring and paced. She wanted to talk to Mariposa Jenkins.

Violet glanced at the others and then said, "Mariposa Jenkins is step one."

"Why?" Geoffrey demanded.

"Regardless of who killed Anderson or why, they used Mariposa to do it. She was their unwitting weapon, and knowing how she did it is necessary."

Before Violet could get the others to come with her to find Mariposa, there was a knock on the door. Denny rose and answered it and found a constable. "Captain Aina was wanting to talk to Mrs. Wakefield."

"That's me," Violet said from behind Denny. She nodded at the policeman and held out her hand. He lifted both brows but shook her hand. "Ma'am."

"You are?"

"Bennet Hutchins, ma'am."

She nodded and followed him through the house. It was odd, she thought, to follow a bobby through her own house. She pressed her lips together and told herself to gather up her thoughts. She followed the

policeman into the library, noting her typewriter on the desk near the window.

She glanced over and found the man who had referred to Jack as Captain. Violet crossed to him as he rose to greet her.

“Ma’am,” he said. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

She nodded, eyeing him. He had a bad leg, she noticed. She noted the scar on his jaw and the way he looked at her gently. This man was one of Jack’s soldier brothers. Violet shook her head a little as he met her gaze. Jack had layers and layers of secrets, she thought with a sigh.

“The captain said you were quite upset, but if you could answer my questions it will help me get started.”

Violet nodded, pressing her fingers against her eyebrow. She went to the desk a moment later and dug through the bottom drawer, pulling out the bottle that was hidden there. Violet flashed a weak grin at Jack’s friend. “What is your name?”

“Nielsen Aina, ma’am.”

Violet poured herself a measure of the alcohol and then dug around until she found a bottle of aspirin. “I’m afraid Jack told me of his father’s stash. Did you want a glass?”

Aina shook his head.

“You knew Jack in the war?”

Aina nodded. “One of the boys in my regiment died. It was a murder. I’m afraid I was the main suspect. Jack saved my life.”

Violet smiled just a little. “He does that.”

“He does,” Aina said gently, eyeing her as though she were going to collapse into tears.

She didn’t think she would, and she rather hated how much she felt like a damsel in distress. She was stronger than this, she told herself, but the memory of Anderson’s gaze as he died crossed her mind again, and she shuddered.

“You know,” she told Aina conversationally, “I write books.”

“I’ve heard,” he said gently as she swallowed the aspirin and added another dollop of alcohol to her glass and crossed to him.

“Writing fiction cultivates the imagination. It’s like your mind becomes practiced at creating scenes in your head. I’m rather afraid that my mind keeps replaying poor Anderson’s death.”

Aina sat as Violet did.

“Did you tell Jack you were questioning me?”

“I did,” Aina said. “I asked him if he objected to me questioning you alone, though, and I can send for him if you need him.”

She smiled sardonically, actually amused for a moment. “I believe I can answer a few questions.”

“Why was Anderson Wakefield staying here?”

Violet sighed and then admitted, “It’s my fault.”

“How so?” Aina asked, his gaze fixed on her face. He had perfected that trustworthy expression and gentle questioning that would lead a stupider person to confess their crimes, thinking they had a friend in him.

Violet, fortunately, had done nothing wrong. “It seems in the Wakefield clan there’s a bit of...ah....resentment towards those who chose to not partake of the bounty contained in the family business.”

Aina frowned. “What do you mean?”

“James and Jack,” Violet told Aina. “James married and helped with the wife’s properties rather than the business his father built. Then Jack chose to pursue Scotland Yard. They’re the black sheep. Can you imagine?” Her disgust was clear and it seemed she’d surprised Aina.

She sipped the drink and then shuddered at the way it burned her throat and stomach. “Oh, that’s strong.” She rubbed her brow as she sighed. “Grandfather Wakefield is old, Aina. He’s old and he’s going to die in the coming years, and I hoped that Jack could invite his grandfather to our home and have one good memory. It seems I am a romantic fool.”

Aina made a note and then asked, “Why did Anderson come?”

“He was there. Jack invited them both when he went to invite his grandfather.”

“He didn’t invite them to try to persuade them to change the will?”

Violet laughed meanly. “I can see you’ve been talking to Hyacinth. No, we don’t care about the money or the business.”

“Are you aware of how rich Anderson Senior is?”

Violet shook her head and then admitted, “Well, I hadn’t really thought about it. But I did see the house.”

Aina huffed a laugh.

Violet’s mouth twisted. “It’s possible they have more money than I do. Given the house, I’d say probable.”

Aina waited.



“It’s just—there’s a point where more money is just keeping score. As arrogant as it sounds, that is where Jack and I are. We have more money than we will spend and enough for whatever children we might have.”

“That house is something extraordinary,” Aina said. “Many a person would covet a house like that.”

“I was raised in mansions,” Violet told Aina. “My father’s country estate is an actual castle. Jack and I have a villa on the Amalfi Coast, a hunting lodge in Scotland, and a house in London. I suppose a shiny new mansion might hold some appeal. Not for us.”

Aina leaned back. “It’s rather hard to believe from my perspective as well.”

Violet shrugged. “We’re obvious suspects because the murder happened in our home using an avenue that I put together. I understand why you’d be suspicious.”

“So why shouldn’t I suspect you?”

Violet huffed. “Because we didn’t do it?”

“Who knew that you were going to have this chocolate evening?”

“I have no idea,” Violet told him. “No one was surprised. It wasn’t a secret. I believe that Anderson said he told some of the family. I don’t know which of the family was there when he mentioned it.”

Aina nodded and scratched a few notes into his notebook. He looked up and met her gaze as he asked, “How did you arrange things with Mrs. Jenkins?”

“I told her I wanted a variety. I wanted to sample it all. I wanted it to be beautiful. I wanted to see what she was capable of.”

“What about the cakes?”

Violet sipped her drink. “It was the avenue of the poison, I assume?”

“We tested it on a rat,” Aina said. “It died immediately.”

“Poor blighter,” Violet sighed. “I didn’t arrange for the cakes. I hadn’t thought of it, but I loved them once I saw them. Small cakes with names? Each decorated differently? Those are the excessive touches that makes something memorable. I was thrilled to see them. I thought if Mrs. Jenkins was that clever my investment would repay itself time and again.”

“Or stand as bribery,” Aina suggested. “A way to get her help.”

“Clearly she wouldn’t have done it if she didn’t think the order for the cakes came from me. She was working for me, and she wanted my

investment so she could grow from supplying the local teashop and bakery to her own establishment.”

“She did think the order came from you.”

Violet wasn’t surprised, and she wasn’t worried. The constabulary wouldn’t be able to tie her to this case, and she didn’t have a real motive. “The order came with pistachios as well?”

“And an order to use every scrap of them for the cake because Anderson was greedy with pistachios.”

Violet shuddered. “I didn’t know that, you know. I had no idea that Anderson Wakefield loved pistachios.”

“Jack could have known.”

“Perhaps,” Violet agreed. “No jury will believe it and you don’t have real evidence.”

Aina nodded. “Not yet.”

“You don’t think it was us either.”

Aina didn’t agree with her there, but she didn’t need an answer to know it was true.

## CHAPTER 11

Jack was waiting for Violet when she left the library. She lifted her brows at him and asked, “Did you get removed from the case?”

“I got a shadow to back up whatever I might do.”

Violet glanced beyond Jack to a bright-faced, young uniformed officer who was bone thin. She winked at him, and he blushed brilliantly.

“Clever,” Violet said as she walked to Jack and pressed her face against his chest. She didn’t care if Jack’s shadow was watching her every move. “Aina gets your help both with the case and training this young lad.”

Jack didn’t laugh like he would have any other time. She pulled back and looked up at him. She saw his jaw clenching and there was a rage in his gaze that she’d rarely seen. “They did this in our house.”

She nodded, her expression as frustrated and upset as his. Their gazes met and they both could see that growing sickness in the other’s stomach. Violet sighed, fighting another rush of tears. He was alive, she told herself. Just because Anderson had similar eyes and had looked to her for help didn’t mean anything when it came to Jack.

“Father said Anderson had a bad heart, Vi. He didn’t have all that long left. Why steal what was left to him?”

Violet didn’t answer. Money, of course, blighted money. Perhaps power, but certainly money. Instead she just pressed her face into his chest again.

“It must do with the will,” Violet said.

“Father insists that Grandfather Wakefield has never said what was in it. Uncle Anderson and Father talked about it recently.”

Violet sighed. "Maybe someone just thinks they know. Maybe someone broke into the solicitor's office or bribed a clerk or just assumed."

Jack didn't answer, and why should he? There wasn't an answer. They had no idea what the killer had been thinking. If they had been able to work that out, they'd already know who the killer was.

"If this wasn't your family," Violet asked Jack suddenly. "Who would you think did it?"

Jack paused and then admitted, "Not us, of course. We have too much money to be real possibilities. Victor, Denny, Lila, and Geoffrey are automatically out. Without some other reason, all of Hyacinth's daughters aren't likely."

A throat cleared behind them, and they found Grandfather Wakefield. His mouth was moving as though he were chewing, but he wasn't. His eyes were bloodshot, his jaw firm, and his gaze as enraged as Jack's.

"I was going to change my will."

Violet gasped. "Who knew that?"

"Only Anderson. He was the one who wanted me to do it."

Jack glanced meaningfully at his youthful shadow. "You have to tell Aina."

"I'm telling you."

"I'm a suspect," Jack told his grandfather, who cursed. "We all are, especially us younger ones."

"You didn't kill Anderson."

"Of course he didn't," Violet snapped. "Why would he?"

"Aina still has to proceed as though I might've," Jack said flatly. "Let's talk to him together."

Grandfather Wakefield led the way into the library where Aina was glancing over his notes. "I have information."

Aina gestured to the chair. "I'd prefer to speak to you alone."

"I'm not speaking to you, Aina. I'm speaking to my grandson. He's one of England's best investigators, and I'll be damned if you sideline him. You can listen in since he demands it."

Aina didn't argue further, and Grandfather Wakefield took his seat. "Anderson didn't have children. With death duties and such, he wanted me to leave him out of the main will. He's always been wise with his money. Anderson wanted both himself and James left out of the will."

"My father as well?"

“Do you object to that?” Aina asked, but the expression on his face said he had to ask the question

“I just wonder if Father knew.”

“Even if he didn’t,” Grandfather Wakefield said, “Anderson had a good point. James doesn’t need money. He and your mother inherited from her family, and I’d always given him an allowance like I have all my children. James let his friend Agatha Davies invest his money.”

“I didn’t realize,” Violet said and glanced at Jack, who shook his head. As usual, the thought of Aunt Agatha brought a bittersweet sadness to her mind, but Violet didn’t let it linger.

“James didn’t need the money,” Grandfather Wakefield continued. “Anderson said the old ways weren’t good for anyone. He said that Hyacinth and Herbert were counting on the business. Their safety and future were wrapped up in it. Anderson was convinced that James would understand.”

“He would,” Jack agreed. “He hates the fighting around the business. Everyone feeling as though they had a bigger right. He told me when Agatha died that money brought the mongrels out in people who should love each other. They fight like jackals over the scraps and forget that they once cared more about the other person.”

Violet agreed with that assessment and the memory that brought it up—the murder of her great aunt, the woman who had raised Violet—oh, it never stopped being painful.

Grandfather Wakefield had that growl to his voice that Jack got when he was enraged, and Violet shivered as Grandfather Wakefield said, “One of those fiends Anderson was trying to help killed him.”

Violet rubbed her brow and echoed his growl. She wanted to curl up into her bed in London with Jack wrapped around her body. She wanted to feel safe, and this house didn’t feel it anymore. She didn’t feel safe in the home where she intended to raise her children, and she had a fierce desire to revenge herself and Anderson against the person who killed him.

Grandfather Wakefield demanded, “Do you object to my removing your father-in-law from the will?”

“I object to the fact that Aina has to consider me and Jack as suspects and you just gave him a reason to move us up the suspect list. If you succeeded in your plan, well, now we have a modicum of a motive. I object to the fact that Anderson had the same eyes as Jack, and I watched those

eyes fade from life to death. I object to the nightmares I'll have tonight and for months after. I object to the fact that my twin is currently battling himself about leaving me here and going home to his pregnant wife. I object to the fact that my little brother is worried for my safety in my own house. I object to the fact that—yet again—humanity is lost among those I claimed as my own. All so we can grapple in the dirt for filthy lucre, entirely forgetting that the things that make life worth living aren't gold-trimmed plates or new gowns, it's our families. It's the people we love. I object to everything about this *except* for the fact that we were being removed from the will. Bloody hell, man, keep your money."

Violet was breathing heavily as she finished. She hadn't shouted. It had been a cold, fast diatribe, but it hadn't been loud. She met Jack's gaze and saw his fury. The protector in him had been out already, but if he were a knight—his sword would have been drawn.

Grandfather Wakefield seemed fascinated. It took him a minute to reply. "I wasn't taking Jack out of the will. Only James. I was going to split the money evenly between all of my grandchildren with a controlling interest of the company for Herbert, my only son who would continue to work for the company. The will favors Herbert some, but not overly.

"Did anyone know the details of what you were going to do?" Violet asked. Her head was pounding, and the late evening had turned to full night. She wanted to go to bed, but she knew she wouldn't sleep without Jack.

"I ordered the appointment made after a board meeting at the company. All the boys who work for the company could have heard me mention it. They might not have known why I wanted to talk to my solicitor, but it would have been possible to guess."

"That explains why the argument about the inheritance was so fierce when we arrived at your house, Grandfather," Jack sighed. "Someone must have heard. Someone must have mentioned it."

Grandfather Wakefield snarled at the idea. "Whoever it was stole my boy from me. I'll take it all from them. I'll deconstruct that business and tear it brick from brick. I'll leave them with nothing. *Nothing.*"

"Calm down," Violet snapped at him, not bothering to hide her disgust. "You are going to ruin everything you've done due to one of them?"

"What are you saying? You think they should get it after what they've done?" Grandfather Wakefield demanded.

"How many grandchildren do you have?"

“Fourteen.”

“You spent the entirety of your life working for those fourteen grandchildren and four children. You sacrificed endlessly for them, and some of them are deserving of that love and care. Why don’t we just find the rotten one? He’ll hang, and the rest will continue to be deserving.”

“Your wife consigns my grandchild to an easy hanging,” Grandfather Wakefield told Jack.

“She isn’t at her most gentle when someone dies in her drawing room.” Jack tangled his fingers with Violet’s. “We have, both of us, seen too many murders. It’s difficult to scrounge up all that sympathy for someone who will face the same fate they enacted. This wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t even an act of sudden rage. It was a cold, planned murder.”

Violet rose and began to pace. She felt the men turn their gazes to her and she said, “I wonder why they feared so greatly you changing the will? Why Anderson? He was ill, wasn’t he?”

“He’s had heart trouble for some time,” Grandfather Wakefield admitted. “He wasn’t given a good prognosis, but no one knew the extent. He could have gone on forever with his heart pills, at least as far as anyone knew.”

“So they might have feared that you were going to adjust in his favor.”

“We had been spending a lot of time talking together,” Grandfather Wakefield admitted. “He had thought to retire and go to the sea. Somewhere warm. He wanted to eat fresh fish and lay in the sun for his final months. He said, if he was very lucky and very calm, he might steal a year or two.” Grandfather Wakefield’s voice cracked and he wiped away a sudden tear. “He was always such a good son.”

They gave him a few minutes to gather himself and then Jack said, “They must have feared you were going to favor me. I married, I have the last name, my children will be Wakefields. What’s in your current will?”

“It’s split equally between my four children.”

Violet rubbed her finger over her mouth. “What about the house?”

“Currently? Anderson.”

“And if you changed it?”

Grandfather Wakefield sighed and then said, “Hyacinth.”

Violet glanced at him, surprised at his answer.

“Herbert said it was a monstrosity.” Grandfather Wakefield shifted uncomfortably when Violet laughed. “James likes his house where he raised

his boy and lived with his wife. He'd never have appreciated it. Hyacinth helped me decorate it. She enjoyed it more than I did, really."

Vi went back to pacing. "But they must have been afraid that you would leave the money to Herbert. Your grandchildren are smart, they must know you think they don't have the experience to run the company."

"They don't," Grandfather Wakefield said. "I'm not sure about Herbert either, but those who have the demeanor don't want it." There was a telling look to Jack, who just lifted a brow.

"Who do you think killed him?" Aina asked Violet.

She glanced at Jack, who nodded. "Hyacinth or one of her sons. The fools didn't realize things would work out better for them with the change. They must have been concerned that Jack and I were arriving."

Jack nodded. "Aunt Hyacinth made a big deal of you being an earl's daughter."

"Successfully keeping the Davies inheritance making money is of far more interest to me," Grandfather Wakefield said. "I'd be more impressed if I thought you were helping keep that fortune strong," he said to Jack.

"Violet doesn't need my help," Jack told his Grandfather. "And quite frankly, I have nothing to offer her in that arena."

Violet met his gaze with an amused glance. She took a deep breath and then told Grandfather Wakefield, "You didn't create this business for me to dabble in. You created it for your children and grandchildren."

Grandfather Wakefield nodded. "What about the grandchildren you are going to give me someday? They'll be Wakefields, and they'll have a mother to teach them the ways and hows of business."

"Investing is quite different from running a company, I think," Violet said, "as do you. Quit teasing me and Aina."

Jack took a long breath in. "What a disgusting fiasco! Could anyone else have benefited from Anderson's death? Anyone who wasn't family?"

"A last ditch effort to not have another murderer in the family?" Aina asked, glancing at Violet. "Your cousin killed your aunt, didn't she?"

"She did," Violet said and then looked to Jack. "We're cursed."

"So it seems," he agreed darkly.



## CHAPTER 12

Violet woke with a gasp. She sat up and then glanced over and saw Jack's gaze fixed on hers. He'd left the light on in the bath, and she could see the worry in his gaze.

"The cure for nightmares seems to have stopped working."

Violet felt tears burning as she laid back down, placing her ear right over his heart. "It seems even the best things become familiar."

Jack ran his fingers through her hair as she slowed her breathing. "Tell me something wonderful."

There was too long of a pause before Jack said, "I adore you."

She closed her eyes and breathed him in. "I love you too."

"You're going to be an aunt soon."

That did make Violet smile. A moment later, she lifted her head and asked, "Is this world too wicked to have children? Maybe we shouldn't bring them into such a terrible place."

"You're in it, Vi. How could it be terrible?"

She scoffed and then ran her finger over his chin, marveling at the prickles against her fingers. She met his gaze. "I'm not special."

"Right now, there is a girl in a ladies school preparing for college because you decided to love her."

"Anyone could love Ginny. She's delightful and she helped me save Isolde when she didn't know me at all." Violet placed one of her arms over her eyes while Jack played with the other one.

Jack pressed a kiss to the tips of her fingers. "There's an illegitimate baby adored by her adopted parents in the country because of you."

“They would have found someone to give them a baby who needed to be loved eventually. They were always good people.”

“And they’re in this world too, with you,” Jack told her. “They’re here and they’re making the world a better place. There are the orphans who have plenty of food and a good education because of you. There’s Kate, who would have been murdered by Robert. There are many wonderful things because of you, and someday Violet Junior will look up to her aunt and make the world a better place too.”

Violet’s mouth twisted and she turned onto her back, keeping their fingers tangled. “There’s you.”

“There’s Victor,” Jack added. “Kate, of course.”

“Denny and Lila.” Violet’s tone made it clear she wasn’t sure they qualified, but they weren’t there to hear her teasing.

“Ham and Rita and Ginny.”

Violet felt tears burning in her eyes and nose. “Isolde and Tomas and their baby.”

“Once Victor and Violet’s baby is here, will we be calling that one Violet Junior as well?” Jack asked.

Violet shook her head. She adored Isolde and Tomas, but no one was like Victor.

“Gerald and our fathers,” Jack continued. “If we decide to really stretch the boundaries of what we qualify as adding good to the world, there’s Geoffrey and Lady Eleanor.”

Violet laughed until she cried, but the laughing tears made her feel far better than anything else had. “Shall we catch ourselves a killer?”

“And then persuade Kate to go to Cypress with us. The most important part, Vi my love, is that we don’t let this evil ruin what we have. We could spend the rest of our lives seeing only the darkness. Who could blame us given what we’ve seen?”

Violet was glad she’d turned onto her back, so he didn’t have to see her tears.

“We could linger in those feelings.”

She heard the worry in his voice. She did tend towards the grey days. She tended to wallow in the feelings or—perhaps not wallow—perhaps she just couldn’t shake it. She’d been trying so hard to stay out of the greyness. She had been journaling and moving her body regularly when she realized those things had been helping.

She had been active in charity work and looking for chances to do good since she realized that helped. She felt better in general, and much of the time it worked. Jack didn't want her to lose track of feeling better, and neither did she.

"You're right," she said, twisting in his arms to face him. "We could linger in the greyness, but we won't. I'll help you out of them, and you help me out of them."

"Deal," Jack said and kissed her fiercely.

A while later, Violet fell asleep to the lullaby of his heartbeat.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, the agreement was that Violet would track down Mariposa Jenkins and find out how the poison had been delivered while Jack approached the business to discover the feeling of the employees. Both of them felt certain that the underlings would have a far better idea of who might have known what. Violet swore that she would avoid the entirety of his family except for James.

Jack swore that he would stay with the young, bright-eyed policeman, who further promised Violet in a very solemn tone to keep her beloved alive and safe. Jack kissed her on the forehead, tapped the top of the auto, and Violet started the day by delivering Lila and Denny to Victor's home. Geoffrey, however, refused to leave Violet.

"It's not safe. They might...might...jump out from behind some...some...chemist shop and kill you too, Vi." His pale skin had browned up just a little while he'd been fishing and with the redness of concern on his cheeks, he seemed *almost* healthy looking. Or maybe it was just in comparison. Even his plastered arm no longer seemed to bother him.

Given that Geoffrey so very rarely cared about anything other than himself, Violet agreed to let him join her.

The chocolatier's home was not what Violet expected. She wasn't surprised to find it a small row house. She wasn't surprised to find it clean and tidy. She was surprised by the several small children in the yard.

Violet knocked on the door with Geoffrey at her side. His gaze, like hers, was fixed on the little ones. They were, all of them, neat and clean.

They were all bright-eyed and round. They were a little too timid and pale, but unlike Geoffrey, it didn't seem to be the normal look for them.

Mariposa opened the door, her eyes red, and Violet suddenly understood why the children were so upset. Their mother had fallen apart. Her hair was in a messy knot at the back of her head and her clothing wrinkled.

Her gaze landed on Violet and she demanded, "Did you murder someone with my cakes? With the only way I have to support my family?"

"No," Violet said gently. "Are they yours?" Her gaze turned to the children again. Three girls and one boy, they were all younger than Violet would have expected for the middle-aged woman.

Mariposa Jenkins nodded, her gaze focusing on them with a fury of worry.

"They're lovely children."

"They are," Mariposa said. "God bless them for I've done what I can. Who will buy cakes from someone who killed with chocolate? How will I feed my babies if no one will buy the one thing I can do?"

Violet turned back to her from the children. "Where is your husband?"

"Dead," Mariposa answered sourly. "He promised me a happy-ever-after and snatched it all away when he died. I've been trying, but...I can't do this alone. Not now."

"I thought you had three sons," Violet said.

"From my first marriage." Mariposa sniffled. "They can't help me. They didn't want me to remarry. They never liked my husband. They're trying to support themselves. I shouldn't have started another family. I'm too old for these babies, and I'm all they have, and now...I had three orders canceled along with my regular delivery for the bakery. She said people were asking if my items were included in what she was serving and changing their mind on what they wanted."

Violet reached out to her. "Neither of us are guilty. So let's figure this out, shall we?"

"You can't make people buy cakes from me, Mrs. Wakefield. There's nothing to be done."

Violet frowned fiercely. "You have everything you need for a business to be successful. You have the skills, the imagination, and a solid business plan. I have the money to get you started. We'll do whatever it takes."

Mariposa took a long breath in. "I won't take charity."

“Yes,” Violet told her flatly, “you will to keep those babies of yours safe and fed. However, you won’t need to. Tell me how the instructions came for the cake.”

It was clear that Mariposa didn’t quite trust Violet, but the poor woman didn’t have much choice. Before the murder, Mariposa had needed help to truly be successful. Now, however, she needed help just to survive. Violet was going to make sure both things happened.

“I got a letter with the pistachios. It said to use them all because Anderson loved them to an excess. I had pistachio. My goodness, I almost used my own. They looked fresher, but the note said something about them being his favorite. I could have tasted them and died. My children could have tried a nibble. Do you know how often that happens?”

Violet could guess and the idea made her as enraged as it did sick. Violet closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. “Do you have the letter?”

Mariposa nodded and let Violet into the house. Geoffrey, shockingly, stayed outside with the children, who had been watching with wide, frightened eyes.

She led the way to a small desk in the parlor and dug through it until she found the letter. “It came with the pistachios in a small tin. I already gave that to the constables. They brought me home last night so I could hand it over.”

“They didn’t ask for the letter?”

Mariposa shook her head. “I suppose we didn’t really discuss it. I might have said that I received instructions. They were focused on where the pistachios came from rather than *how* I got the instructions.”

Violet’s mouth twisted as she took the letter and looked it over. It was a simple typewritten note that was signed with a ‘V’ and a scribble. It looked nothing like Violet’s signature, but the point was to get the poison into play. The best that could be said of the letter was that it included what could now be read as a warning that the nuts were ‘special’ and must be used in full, without tasting or adjusting, for the cake. The note said that they were Anderson’s favorite treat and he could always tell the difference between the nuts.

It was, Violet thought, a little ludicrous, but not unsurprising of the spoiled rich.

Violet unintentionally crumpled the letter in her hands as she read it again. “Thank the good Lord that you’re trustworthy.”

Mariposa had peeked over Violet's shoulder as she re-read the letter. "It would have been so easy for the victim to be me or one of my children."

Violet examined the paper itself. The note was typed on official letterhead with an elaborate 'Wakefield' embossed at the top. She took the envelope as well, noting that it had been stamped with the Wakefield name and the address of—she thought—the business. It was the type of stationary that would be used by a business such as the one Grandfather Wakefield ran.

## CHAPTER 13

Violet wasn't very comfortable navigating the village where the country house was as they hadn't visited enough. She was even less comfortable with the journey three towns over where the Wakefield house and family business were located. Geoffrey sat in the passenger seat with the map on his lap that Jack had drawn while Violet carefully backed the auto away from Mariposa's house.

"I think you need to turn left here," Geoffrey said. He sounded so uncertain that Violet pulled to the side of the road and looked at the map with him. When they agreed, Geoffrey asked, "Why do you care about her?"

Violet started to snap at him but instead she made herself stop and think. Once they were on the road again, Violet answered more calmly. "You know we're just lucky, right? Being an earl's child is only a random accident of birth. We could have been her. Or her kids. My mother died just like those children's father died. It's just sheer luck that we've been given what we've been given."

"You don't think it is an act of God?"

He didn't sound obstinate and rude, so Violet didn't give him the scathing look that comment deserved.

Instead she said, "I don't believe in the divine right of kings or earls or their children or any version thereof. There's nothing special about me versus Mariposa Jenkins. I think she's working far harder than I do to ensure her children are safe and happy. Isn't that a sad story? Having to stand alone like that?"

"How does she do it? She doesn't have a nanny or anything."

The fact that Geoffrey both saw that and realized it made Vi's heart outright sing with joy. She gave him an approving look and he flushed. "I imagine," Violet said, "she works from the moment she wakes up through the moment she goes to bed, and she probably doesn't get enough sleep as well."

Geoffrey glanced out the window and then gasped. "You need to turn there, Vi."

This time Violet turned where he said and then suggested, "We'd do well motoring across England having an adventure, I think."

He gave her a startled glance. "But you don't like me."

She started to answer but she wasn't sure how to go about explaining that she wanted to like him but she mostly found him intolerable with flashes of hope. Instead she said, "Tell me what you like to do."

Geoffrey tried to cross his arms over his chest, was stymied by his arm-cast, and so settled on folding his hands together. He sighed, "I don't know."

"What about your friends?"

He blushed furiously and didn't answer. She glanced at him again and then turned where he pointed as she wondered if he had any friends at all. She thought about how he'd been behaving and then imagined Victor, Denny, and Tomas at the same age. They'd have despised Geoffrey and wouldn't have had nearly the same patience for him then as they did now, which still wasn't probably enough for a boy of his age and lack of maturity.

"What about books?"

"I like your books," he said.

"You enjoy the great V. V. Twinning?"

He nodded, blushing. "Sometimes I write some."

She gasped and begged, "May I read them?"

Geoffrey shook his head frantically.

Violet eyed him and then turned again where he pointed again. She found the business, which was a huge building that didn't have nearly enough windows. Violet drove around until she found the auto that Jack used and parked hers next to it. She and Geoffrey made their way to the factory and were stopped before they could even enter.

"No visitors," a man said. He was wearing dark overalls, thick boots, and a rather kindly expression despite his flat order.



“Violet Wakefield,” she said with a grin, holding out her hand and not flinching at his thick work gloves. “I believe my husband is here.”

The man studied her, then gestured for her and Geoffrey to follow.

“Heard about old Anderson,” he said. “That’s just not right. Is it true he was murdered?”

Violet nodded and the man cursed. “That just isn’t right. He was a good old bloke. Good fellow to work for. A right good man.”

“He was,” Violet agreed quietly. “I quite liked him.”

The man eyed her sideways, and he had to be wondering why she was here. She returned the look before speaking. “There’s a bit of a family hubbub over who the elder Mr. Anderson Wakefield’s heir might be.”

The man scoffed at her. “We all knew old Mr. Wakefield was changing the will. Figured it had something do with that.”

“Did you?” Violet glanced at Geoffrey, who was trying and failing for an even expression. He really should spend some time with Jack practicing that enigmatic gaze.

“They’re good men to work for. The older Wakefields. No offense to the younger ones.”

“New to the family, myself. I can’t say this has been a good impression.”

The man was leading the way around the building and towards, what Violet saw was a secondary, much nicer entrance. “This is where you can enter.”

Violet stopped him. “Tell me about Herbert Wakefield.”

“I like all the older Wakefields,” the man repeated.

“And the others?” she pressed, but he didn’t answer.

“Liam and Frank seem a bit iffy to me,” Geoffrey said. “They remind me of these brothers who go to my school. They’re always in a competition.”

The man glanced at Geoffrey as if seeing him for the first time. “Can’t speak to that. I work under Mr. Herbert, and I’m glad of it.”

The glance he gave Violet seemed to confirm Geoffrey’s supposition without him actually saying a thing against the men. Violet nodded as they entered through the doors and were directed to a clerk behind a large front desk.

The clerk eyed her askance and then asked, “May I help you?”

“Jack Wakefield, please.”

“And you are?” He was young and careful.

Violet appreciated his attitude immediately. She winked at him because it was fun to make him blush. “His wife.”

“Ah.” The blush turned deeper and even Geoffrey seemed to find the fellow amusing. “This way, please.”

They followed him through lushly carpeted hallways to a quad of offices. The names on the doors read: Anderson Wakefield, both junior and senior, Herbert Wakefield, and finally Frank Wakefield. There was also, Violet saw, another row of offices down another hallway. That was the way they went, and they found Grandfather Wakefield sitting at a conference room with Jack next to him, a stack of papers before them.

“Is no one else here?”

“They’re not allowed to leave the house,” Jack told Violet. He rose and crossed to her, and Violet only noticed his shadow then. “It turns out that Aina doesn’t believe you killed Uncle Anderson, since he’s keeping everyone else at the house, while he continues to investigate.”

“I’d prefer if they left,” Violet said flatly. “Surely he can’t really keep them there?”

“I would also prefer they left,” Jack agreed. “They could throw a fit, I suppose, but Grandfather told them all they weren’t welcome at the company until we discovered what happened to Uncle Anderson. Aunt Hyacinth maintains it was Anderson’s heart, her children simply state that they have nothing to benefit. The girls are crying quite a lot, and no one saw anything because the whole murder was preplanned and ready to go before they arrived.”

Violet sat down next to Grandfather Wakefield. “How are you feeling?”

“Furious,” Grandfather Wakefield snapped. His hand shook as he turned the pages. “Seems everyone knew what was in my first will despite the fact that I never told a soul except for Anderson.”

“If they knew, did they guess why you were changing it?”

Grandfather Wakefield sighed. “Herbert knew. Anderson told him directly, but when I asked him, he told me he wouldn’t have killed over it.”

“Why?” Violet asked. “What *are* the exact details?”

“Twenty-five percent of the money for him with control over the business. The house was going to Hyacinth with enough to let her live easily, which made things nearly even in value between the youngest two of

my children. The rest of the money was split evenly between the grandchildren.”

Violet considered what he said. “So really, you were taking the money from Anderson and James and splitting it between the grandchildren. That had to give most of the money to Hyacinth with her nine children, but Herbert came out ahead because of the money going to his four children.”

Grandfather Wakefield nodded. “Because Herbert knew that, even if he were inclined to murder his oldest brother, he didn’t have any reason to do so.”

“Did anyone else know what you were going to do with the money?”

Jack was the one who answered. “The rumors about the business were rampant, but the prevailing opinion was that Anderson had persuaded Grandfather to keep the business together and given to one person—him. It was why everyone was so upset. People assumed it was me, as the oldest heir from this generation. They were obsessed with the fact that you’re an earl’s daughter.”

Violet’s mouth twisted. “We already knew it had to be an heir. We already supposed it was likely someone from the Hyacinth side of the family given that Herbert’s children are young.”

Violet handed over the letter with the instructions and explained about Mariposa Jenkins working out of her home with her children nearby.

Jack cursed while Grandfather Wakefield frowned fiercely.

“Those little ones could have died,” Geoffrey said when Violet finished. The underlying fury to his tone surprised Violet, but she said nothing to remark upon it other than to nod in agreement.

“Of the two grandsons, Liam and Frank,” Violet asked, glancing at the young constable, “which is more likely to think they might inherit?”

“That’s of no account,” Jack said. “If they’ll kill an uncle, they’ll kill a brother. Those two aren’t close. It could easily be either one. Give it five more years and a seeming accident—and suddenly one of them gets everything.”

“Herbert’s in danger,” Violet declared. “Probably not with the constables swarming the house, but soon enough. Him and his children.”

The three men, each of a different generation, turned to her in horror.

“My guess,” Violet said, hating that it felt so right, “is that whoever this person is, they want to avoid the death duties. They know they’re not the

main heir, but they're thinking...I could be. Why pay repetitively? You leave the elder fellow alive—you, Grandfather."

"Then," Jack said, "you get rid of the in-between heirs first before they have to pay death duties. It's why they started with Anderson—the rumored heir—before they'll get to you. Maybe whoever it is will let you live your life out."

"It's less suspicious that way," Geoffrey said. "If it were me, I'd start with Victor and then move to Gerald. Gerald would have to look like an accident, but Victor—with enough time—it could be a murder. As long as I wasn't the suspect. Murder Victor first. Make Gerald look like an accident later. Let Father die of natural causes with enough time in between as possible. Then we just look like a cursedly unlucky family instead of one person."

Violet was staring at Geoffrey in sheer horror and he blushed brilliantly. "I *wouldn't* do that. Of course I wouldn't. But in theory. Theoretically only. I like Victor all right."

"All right?" Violet asked, eyeing her little brother. "If you murder him, I'll filet the skin from your body and leave you alive and suffering."

"Would you do the same to him if he murdered me?" Geoffrey asked curiously.

Jack surprised them all with a laugh. "She'd probably help bury you and then provide Victor an alibi. Twins aren't like regular siblings, Geoffrey. You can envy their relationship and wish you had a twin of your own, but anything else is futile."

"Well," Geoffrey said, sounding a little happier, as if somehow the answer made him feel better, "if I suspected that Victor were murdering folks in our family and knew he'd be too smart to confess, I'd set a trap."

"A trap?" Grandfather Wakefield asked, staring at Geoffrey

"Of course," Geoffrey rubbed his hands together, which was not nearly so dastardly looking when one of them was half-encased in plaster, and then leaned in—almost happy in the diabolical plotting. "You should announce to the family that you don't trust them. That they're a bunch of hangers-on and the worst thing you've ever done. Then announce that of those left—the only one who can keep the business surviving is Herbert. Tell them that the rest of them are out. Herbert will take over, and you care little for their opinion on the matter."

“Then, either Herbert or Grandfather would have to die next,” Jack said. “Preferably Herbert given death duties.” He faced Geoffrey. “You take naturally to trapping someone in their crimes. You don’t look like Vi, but you think like her.”

To Vi’s shock, Geoffrey grinned as though he’d been given a gift.

## CHAPTER 14

Grandfather stood in front of the fireplace. It framed him, leaning on a cane that he generally didn't use as he looked out over his progeny. There were three remaining children and ten grandchildren, for Herbert had sent his four children away. There were spouses like Violet, a few others like Denny, Lila, Geoffrey, and the constable, Aina, but his attention was fixated on those who carried his blood.

He looked them over, one-by-one, as though he were sucking on lemons. His lip actually curled. "Useless."

He let the word hang for long, long moments.

"Hangers-on."

Again, the word lingered in the air until they could almost see it.

"Leeches." Less time passed this time. "Sycophants."

Hyacinth finally found the ability to speak and she almost whimpered. "Father!"

"Freeloading, whining, entitled sponges." Grandfather Wakefield cleared his throat. "I will say this but once."

"Father!" Hyacinth said this time, in a plea. "Don't say these things. Not now."

"Anderson wanted me to change my will."

Herbert said nothing. Grandfather Wakefield had insisted he know of the trap, and Herbert agreed immediately and quietly. He had silently sent his children to the seaside with his wife and said nothing until they were gone. Only Aina had known, and he also hadn't said a word.

“We know!” Hyacinth snapped. “We know. He wanted it all for himself.”

“What he wanted,” Grandfather Wakefield thundered, “was for me to remove himself and James from the will entirely.”

Jack’s father hadn’t been warned, but he didn’t turn a hair. His even expression and his dark gaze proved he didn’t need to be told that a trap was being set.

“Then it was James!” Hyacinth said shrilly. “James killed my brother because Anderson was good and kind.”

“That isn’t what you said this morning,” James said, deliberately feeding the drama. “You said that he was a conniving thief who deserved what he got.”

Violet blinked in shock and had to bite down on her bottom lip.

“I was upset!”

“So that allows you to speak ill of the dead?” James demanded. “You are a viper!”

“I am a mother!” she shouted back. “I am looking after my babies. Any mother would do the same.”

James growled. “Jack doesn’t need the money, and unlike the rest of you, I’ve never done anything more than set aside my allowance for Jack. Who paid for that dress of yours, Hyacinth? It wasn’t your husband.”

“He’s dead!” she cried, sniffing into her handkerchief. “He’s left us alone and I do what I must.”

“Mother!” Frank snapped, looking at her in horror. “You’re making it look like you killed Uncle Anderson.”

Violet turned to stare at him when one of his sisters cried out. “Don’t say that Frank! Mother would never.”

“Frank!” Liam snapped. “Bloody hell, man.”

“That’s what Grandfather thinks. Look at the old man.”

“The only one of you I can trust is Herbert,” Grandfather announced. “He knew what was in the will. Unlike the rest of you, he simply asked Anderson what the change was going to be.”

There was actual pain on Hyacinth’s face and real tears as she stared at her father in horror. Her gaze flicked from him to James to her children. “Father...we need you.”

“You needed Anderson and”—he was roaring now—“*one of you killed him!*”

“Father,” James started. “I cannot imagine losing Jack. I...” James shook his head. “Do what you need to do. I am behind you and do not want your money.”

“So you say now,” someone muttered. Violet thought it must have been one of Hyacinth’s two sons, but they were standing one in front of the other and they were both looking equally upset.

“Get out,” Grandfather Wakefield said. “Get out and get out again. None of this is under discussion. It will be done in the morning. Herbert gets it all.”

Hyacinth wailed as Grandfather Wakefield left the room through a side door and then she turned on James. “He won’t! He won’t do that to me, to my babies? Please say he won’t.”

James had to have guessed at least some of what was happening. Especially with the way the detective was in the back of the room, and his experience with Jack. James only shook his head and followed his father out of the room.

“He wouldn’t,” Hyacinth said. “He wouldn’t.” She got up and rushed from the room herself with her daughters following. They were a pack of school girls and echoed their mother with their weeping. Only one remained when the rest had gone, and she glanced about and then also shook her head, leaving silently.

Violet immediately liked that one, who didn’t run and wail even though she was facing the same ruin as the others. She glanced at Geoffrey and whispered, “The last one. The one that didn’t weep. That’s the kind of girl to look for.”

He scowled at her, and she winked.

“Is this funny to you?” Liam demanded, catching only Violet’s wink and smirk. “The earl’s daughter watching the rest of us fall to ruin?”

Violet’s head tilted at him, but before she could reply, Jack stepped in front of her.

“That’s my wife,” Jack said. “This is our home. Speak with respect or discover the limits of my patience.”

Liam faced Jack, but he didn’t have the same height, so he turned and stormed away. Violet giggled into her hand and said to Denny and Geoffrey, “Did you hear that?”

“Sounded almost as stiff and ridiculous as those books you write,” Denny told Violet. “It was fabulous.”



“This is a joke to you,” Frank snapped. “We’re going to lose everything. We don’t have earl daddies who give us money like you or the rich aunt who dumped her fortune on you.”

Geoffrey was the one who snapped next. “How is what you want any different? You didn’t earn the fortune you expect from Grandfather Wakefield any more than Violet earned the money from her aunt. We’re all beggars. You included.”

“I have a job,” Frank said. “I work for my money.”

Geoffrey shoved up out of his seat. “You work for an inheritance.”

“Grandfather will see reason. He might have favored Anderson, but my mother is his comfort and peace. She sees to his needs, she takes care of him. No one looks after a father like a daughter.”

Violet’s brows lifted at that, and she knew that she probably failed on that front. Was she a bad daughter? She glanced at Jack, who said, “You’re like a book sometimes, Vi. Your father doesn’t need from you what Hyacinth does for Grandfather. He’s old, he’s widowed, he’s alone. She makes sure the servants make his favorite food and the doctor looks after him.”

Violet sighed, thinking of Hyacinth. What would a mother do for her sons? Violet considered an idea. Would Violet murder her brother—perhaps Gerald or Geoffrey—for her children? And then go about seeing to her, and their, father’s needs while he grieved?

Violet couldn’t imagine it. That took evil to a new level. She could, perhaps, see killing a brother to save her child. There was very little she couldn’t imagine doing to protect the baby Kate was about to have. The safety, however, the life—not the ease of existence. That was the difference. Violet had never really thought that Hyacinth was the killer, but now she was sure.

She nodded at Jack and slipped out the door and found that Lila had followed.

“You’re up to something,” Lila told Violet dryly. “I know you well enough to see that flash of understanding in your gaze.”

Violet looked beyond her and found Geoffrey following, who seemed to have realized the same. He glanced back and then whispered, “Jack isn’t coming. He didn’t notice that look on your face. He was baiting Frank and Liam instead. I believe he mentioned something about possibly working for you once Herbert fired them both.”

Violet had to bite down on her bottom lip to hide her shout of laughter.

"I can see why Denny stayed," Lila muttered. "But what are you up to?"

"Would you murder me to save the life of your baby?" Vi asked her.

"Yes," Lila said immediately, "but I wouldn't have to. You'd save my baby almost as quickly as you'd save Victor's."

"Would you murder me knowing I've put something in my will so your baby could have money from me?"

"No, I fear my little one is going to have to work for a living. The poor mite. He's coming to such idle parents and then will have to have a true position. Especially as Denny and I will certainly spend all of what we've been given."

Violet laughed, then placed a finger over her lips and hurried up the stairs. The other two followed her and they moved towards the bedroom that Hyacinth took for the weekend.

"What are we doing?" Geoffrey asked.

Lila placed a hand over his mouth as she whispered. "If Violet is sneaking, we're sneaking."

Grandfather Wakefield had been placed in the one bedroom that didn't require him to climb stairs. Violet headed back down the servants' stairs and towards that back bedroom. The bedroom door had been left cracked and she tiptoed towards it as Hyacinth asked, "Why must you be so stubborn?"

Grandfather Wakefield humphed as Hyacinth told him, "I know you, Father. I know you don't think I killed Anderson. You know I loved him."

He just harrumphed again.

"You think one of my boys did," Hyacinth said. She took a seat next to her father, holding his hand. "Why?"

"Someone did, Hyacinth."

"It was his heart," she moaned. "It was his heart."

"It was poison," Grandfather Wakefield told her gently, taking her hands. "It was poison, my daughter. One of your boys thought Anderson was manipulating me into giving all of the money to Anderson and took his chance."

She shook her head over and over again. "No. No, I don't want to believe it. I won't believe it."

"Do you think I want to?" Grandfather Wakefield demanded. "Do you think I don't remember the days they were born? Do you think I don't recall

those early birthday parties or them learning to walk or read or the way they looked at me as though I were some sort of god come to earth, just at the sight of my face?"

"It could be Jack," Hyacinth tried, still weeping.

"Jack's bride offers far more."

"Perhaps his pride does not allow it." Hyacinth knew she was grasping at straws, but what mother wouldn't?

Grandfather Wakefield gave his daughter a look and shook his head. "If he wanted the money, all he needed to do was come work for me. You and I both know it. I am old-fashioned enough for that. A brilliant grandson who carried my name? Even now, it is Herbert who benefits the most. Herbert and his son, young Carter."

Hyacinth bit down on her bottom lip. "No! No!"

She rose and fled the bedroom, never even looking towards the servants' stairs. Violet glanced in at Grandfather Wakefield and asked, "Are you all right?"

He nodded.

"Do you worry that they'll come for you?"

"It is too late if they do. Solicitors are not required. Nothing is required but witnesses and the right words."

He looked beyond Violet to Geoffrey and Lila.

"You should, perhaps, be a little more forthcoming about what is in your will than I or your Aunt Agatha were."

"I left it all to Jack and Victor."

"None for your little brother?" Grandfather Wakefield asked.

Violet glanced at Geoffrey and shook her head.

"Don't trust him?"

Violet shook her head and gave Geoffrey a smile, surprised she was happy that he was with her. That he might hear it from her and understand her choices. "Aunt Agatha built the fortune. Not me. I'm just the steward, and as much as I might care for Geoffrey, he was no one to her."

"What do you do with it then?" Grandfather Wakefield frowned at her.

"Help people like Mariposa Jenkins or orphans. I do spend too much money on clothes and shoes, but Aunt Agatha knew I would."

## CHAPTER 15

“How was Kate?”

“Uncomfortable,” Lila said as they walked back to the front of the house. “She looks like someone is twisting her spine into knots and moves like she has bricks chained to her ankles.”

Violet gave Lila her most wicked grin. “That’s going to be you.”

“And you,” Lila countered. “I can see that look in your eye.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Violet told her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about either,” Geoffrey said, looking between the two of them.

“Go to bed,” Violet told him. She paused for a moment and then took a deep breath and with an edge of horror added, “Lock your door.”

Geoffrey glanced at her. “I’ll be fine. Why would anyone want to hurt me?”

“It’s not you we should be worried about,” Lila told him. “It’s Vi we should worry about. You have a broken arm and someone was killed in the house. Your mother is going to slaughter Violet slowly.”

Violet shuddered and Geoffrey, to Violet’s shock, giggled. “She really is going to bring it up for the rest of your life.”

“It won’t even matter,” Violet muttered, “that you got drunk and decided to be a fool. It’ll still be my fault.”

Geoffrey looked fully amused when he said, “You left me alone. I’m just a child. What did you expect?”

Violet gasped as Lila rubbed him on the top of his head and told Violet, “I don’t know what you were talking about. We should have known he was just as much of a demon as you.”

Violet laughed and then found Jack was watching them. "What's this?"

"Another devil," Lila told him.

"Denny said if I found you first I was to send you to your room."

"He said what?" Lila sounded fully scary.

Violet oohed. "There's the dangerous creature Denny fears."

"He also said," Jack continued, "to immediately add that he adores the ground you walk on, and only wants you to be safe from my murderous family, any of whom could rob him of the only joys his life has to offer."

Geoffrey glanced between them. "You all are so strange."

"You really do need to make sure that you're safe," Violet told Lila, then she faced Geoffrey. "We're focusing on the frivolous because the rest is too horrible. Did you learn anything?" She added this last to Jack.

"Frank and Liam both accused each other and then Frank said Hyacinth would do anything for Liam. Liam punched Frank and went to check on his sisters, who refused to let him enter. Then Liam punched a hole in the wall of the hallway and said we've all gone mad."

The foursome exchanged telling looks, then parted for the night, Geoffrey escorting Lila to her room.

Violet and Jack went to their bedroom where Jack locked them in.

"Who is with Herbert?" Violet asked.

"Aina is sleeping on the floor in his room."

Violet told Jack about Hyacinth and then asked, "Are we really just going to let Grandfather Wakefield be unwatched?"

"Please," Jack told her, "don't be silly. There's a constable outside of his room. He saw you. You really should look behind the stairs before you eavesdrop. Someone could be eavesdropping on you."

Violet gasped. "You were having me followed, weren't you?"

"Violet Wakefield," he told her, those penetrating eyes fixed on her. He seemed to know her more fully than anyone else ever could have. "Of course I was. You are completely troublesome and I will lose everyone and everything before I lose you."

"That's disturbing," she told him flatly, but he wasn't bothered. "You are entirely unrepentant."

"You would do the same if it were me." Jack turned her face to his and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

"Are you all right?"

He paused before answering. "They're younger than I am, so I don't know them, not the same way you know your cousins. It's nowhere near like you and Victor. Or even you and Isolde."

He was lying. She could see it in his gaze and the way his eyes turned to the side. Violet laid her head on his chest, but she knew it wouldn't make him feel better. Even now, she didn't feel better about Meredith killing Aunt Agatha, and Violet had had years to think on it. There was no making him feel better now.

Instead, she waited up all night with him for someone to try to kill Herbert, but no one did. The next morning, Violet looked at Jack with burning eyes and told him, "I'm having gin in my Turkish coffee."

"I understand," Jack said.

"We need to just remember something," Violet told him, not able to hide her growing fury.

"What's that?" Jack's lips twitched at her irritation.

"This fiend is related to you, and I've seen a ridiculous amount of evidence that they're *almost* as brilliant as you."

Violet dressed, unable to shake her mood. She deliberately put on a black dress. It was fabulous, with layers of sheer fabric laying over each other, but it also matched her mood. She wanted nothing more than to kick all of his family out of her house and tell them to take the fortune they were fighting over with them.

The breakfast room only contained Frank, Liam, Herbert, and James. Violet and Jack entered, and then James said, "Denny, Lila, and Geoffrey left this morning. I sent them to your brother's house."

Violet sighed. "We know it wasn't James," she began without greeting. She probably should have gotten her coffee first. "We know it wasn't Herbert because he knew what was in the will, and we know it wasn't Hyacinth because she just put her father to bed, weeping over knowing it was one of you two." She fixed her gaze on Liam and Frank.

"That's not true," Liam said. "We wouldn't...I wouldn't...there's no way. How could Mother think that?"

Frank look at Liam, then back at Violet. "Of course we wouldn't. My goodness, how can you even say this? What are we supposed to do, lie and confess?"

"To be honest," Violet said to him, "I don't really care."

"Violet," Jack said, glancing at her. "What are you up to?"

“Me?” Violet demanded. “I don’t like them. They should leave.”

“I didn’t like Meredith,” he shot back. “I barely like Denny.”

Perfect, Violet thought, knowing that he realized she was stirring the pot. “Every time we go somewhere, we find another body, someone else who is killing over money. I’m just tired of it all.” Violet shook her head and then hurried out of the room. She found Aina in the hall. “You know Jack.”

He nodded. “Quite well during the war.”

“He’s smart. He’s observant. He’s intuitive.”

Aina agreed, “He is.”

“I suspect he comes by it naturally.”

Aina laughed and nodded. “They’re cagey, all of them. From the elder Wakefield to those little girls.”

Violet nodded. “The trap isn’t going to work. It’s not worth trying for Herbert when everyone is watching. The consequences are too great.”

“Maybe you should go see your brother. Take a step back.”

“You haven’t removed me or Jack as suspects,” Violet told Aina, lifting a brow.

“I see why Jack fell in love with you. It’s the combination of cleverness and bluntness.”

Violet winked at him. “Don’t lose your heart to me, lovey. I’m taken.”

He shook his head. “The amount of money that you and Jack would have lost isn’t enough to commit this kind of crime, and you both have a long history of solving murders, not committing them. I talked to Scotland Yard. They laughed at me when I said you were a suspect. It wasn’t even Barnes.”

Violet grinned and curtsied and then sobered. “I hate that one of these people killed the uncle I liked the best and that they’re eating my food and living under the same roof as my little brother.”

Aina nodded. “I don’t believe that your family is in danger.”

“Not *my* family.” Violet looked at him. “Jack’s remaining nice uncle.”

“We’ll follow the evidence to realize who did it.”

“We need a confession,” Violet told Aina. “Somehow, we need a confession.”

“I don’t believe you’ll get it. If the killer were Jack, he would never confess.” Aina’s doubt reflected Violet’s and she groaned.

“If Jack were the killer,” she told Aina, “he would set someone else up. If the killer is *as* clever as Jack, he’d have a plan.”

Aina looked at Violet and was very gentle as he said, “Perhaps you give Jack more credit than he deserves?”

Violet’s smile was as gentle as she told him, “Perhaps.”

“You know him quite well. You could trap Jack. You could guess what he would do. He isn’t infallible. Neither is the killer.”

Violet paced as she considered. “Usually there are too many suspects.”

She paused in her frustration and glanced at him. With a wink and a grin, she said, “You’re right. I should go see my brother.”

She called for an auto and told Jack she was going to see Victor. She drove through the village with her mind on the problem. She couldn’t wrap her head around how to catch someone who had planned so well.

Violet tried to push the thoughts of the murder aside as she arrived at Victor’s house. Kate had one hand on her stomach, rubbing back and forth, and Violet could see her sister-in-law wasn’t comfortable. She tried being cheery, but it didn’t help Kate.

She finally asked, “What can I do?”

“There’s really nothing to be done,” Kate said, “until this baby arrives. Distract me.”

Violet rose and paced as she spoke. “I can’t figure it out. How would you catch someone as smart as Jack?”

“You find their weakness.” Kate tried to shift her body again, but it wasn’t enough to make her comfortable.

“How?” Violet groaned. “I didn’t sleep last night, waiting for someone to try to kill Herbert. I’m frustrated. This was supposed to be the baby celebration.”

“You need details on the brothers. You know who would be able to take Victor down? Without even trying?”

Violet stared at Kate. “Me.”

“Without question.” Kate pressed her hand to her back and then sighed. “I could too, though I might have to try a little harder since I can’t read his mind like you can.”

Violet glanced at Victor and saw the worry and concern over Kate in his face. She reached out and took his hand. “Women have been having babies for centuries. Kate will be fine.”



Kate grinned at Victor. “You better hope that our one...maybe two... children are as close as you and Vi, because if they aren’t...”

“Oh my goodness,” Violet said. “You know who could break down those brothers? Their overlooked sisters. They locked the boys out of the room they were sharing. They guessed. Or one of them did. Those clever girls. I need to talk to them.”

## CHAPTER 16

Violet slipped back into the house unobserved. She and Geoffrey entered through the kitchens, took the servants' stairs, and used the master key to let themselves into the bedroom. The sisters looked up in horror with several squeaks.

Violet glanced at Geoffrey. "That one." Violet pointed to the one sister who stood quietly.

"Me?" she asked.

"Nan?" one of the sisters squeaked. "Not Nan!"

The quiet sister glanced at the one who cried out. "Not Nan? What are you talking about, Ursula?"

"They must think you're the killer," Ursula said. Violet immediately repeated the name in her head. She was very concerned she'd only ever remember Nan's name. Perhaps she'd be able to recall Ursula for being stupider than the rest.

"Why would they think that?"

"So we won't be homeless now that Grandfather changed his will?" another sister suggested. "To save us."

"We've discussed this," Nan said patiently. "Uncle James has never been interested in the company, Uncle Anderson is dead, Mama would never, and Uncle Herbert's children are benefited more by the changes in the will *and* he knew the contents of the will."

"But what if he didn't?"

Nan sighed and leaned towards Ursula, "Collect yourself. The secretary overheard. He told Grandfather."

"What if he's lying?"

“Why would he? He could lose everything. He isn’t a member of the family.”

Violet watched the back and forth until Ursula said, “I don’t want it to be our part of the family.”

“No one does,” Violet said. “We all want it to have actually been Uncle Anderson’s heart.”

Ursula nodded and Nan scoffed. “Our brothers were nearly hysterical about the changes to the will. They were *convinced* Uncle Anderson had finally persuaded Father not to break the business apart.”

Violet sighed. She really should have talked to the girls directly from the beginning. They were never suspects, but they knew far more than Vi would have guessed.

“You have it all figured out, don’t you?”

Nan met Violet’s gaze and then glanced at her sisters. “We have an idea.”

“Which brother do you think it is?”

Ursula groaned and then hissed, “We don’t know!”

“But you have an idea.”

Ursula covered her face, and Nan said flatly, “Frank is meaner than a snake.”

One of the youngest girls squeaked and another groaned. “If you’re wrong, Frank will never stop punishing us.”

There was actual fear in that whisper, and Violet closed her eyes.

“Are you afraid of him?” Geoffrey asked. He sounded so gentle that Violet’s eyes burned. She knew she was more emotional because she was so tired, but...the difference in Geoffrey when he was away from his mother was astounding.

None of the girls answered.

Violet took a seat. “Your brothers are smart.”

“We know.” Nan sat across from Violet on the bed.

“Wicked clever, even. They’re both biding their time.”

“No they aren’t,” Nan said. “Liam doesn’t want to believe Frank is the killer. Liam is searching for another reason and probably clinging to the idea that it was Uncle Anderson’s heart.”

“How would you trap Frank? Because we’re failing.”

Nan started to shake her head and then she stopped. Her gaze narrowed upon the wall and her mouth twisted.

“Those pistachios came from our house,” Nan said.

“Nan!” Ursula hissed.

“We kept them for him when Uncle Anderson visited. We’d add them to his sweet if they made sense.”

“Nan! Stop! He’ll find out.”

Nan stared Ursula down. “We have to get rid of him. He’s mean, Vi. He likes to torment us, and there’s a reason we don’t have pets.”

Violet shuddered and Geoffrey gasped. “Your pets?”

“We had the sweetest little...” Nan started and one of the little girls started to cry. “Never you mind.”

Violet felt that she was certainly going to be ill. She placed a hand on her stomach and thought that she was a breath from sicking up.

Geoffrey rose and paced among the girls before speaking to Nan. “You can do this. You can help us.”

Her gaze narrowed on Geoffrey. “Us?”

“And yourself. Why are you his victim? Why didn’t you tell your other brother or your grandfather or one of your uncles?”

“No one would believe us,” Nan hissed back. “They never do. We always look like hysterical little girls who are upset because our doll broke.”

“Jack would have believed you,” Geoffrey told them fiercely.

Oh, Violet thought, oh my goodness. That act of faith in Jack was the best gift Geoffrey could have given her.

“We were just holding on,” Nan said. “We go to school and are gone for much of the time. During the holidays, we stay together. And Jack? He’s never here. We don’t have any reason to know him or trust him.”

Geoffrey scowled and glanced back at Violet. “So help Vi. She believes you. She can catch your brother. What about the pistachios? Why do those matter?”

“Because someone would have to have delivered them. He would have. He’s controlling.” Nan looked at Geoffrey like he was an idiot.

“No one saw,” Geoffrey told her, giving her the same scathing look.

Nan sighed, relenting. “This is what you do,” Nan said.

Violet and Geoffrey leaned in as Nan laid out her plan.



THE NEXT MORNING, Violet watched silently as Aina announced, "We can't keep you here any longer, but we know it was one of you, and we *will* find the evidence. To the killer, enjoy the last measure of freedom. It is going through your fingers like sand through an hourglass. To the rest of you, you're free to go back to your homes."

"That was dramatic," Denny told Lila. "We really should convince this Aina fellow to come to London. It would be endless entertainment."

"Are you trying to be funny?" Herbert asked Denny. With a disgusted glance at Jack, Herbert said, "I don't like your friends."

"My feelings would be hurt," Denny told Lila. "If I cared."

Aina shook his head and then said to Jack, "Be careful."

Denny giggled and Lila advised, "You should probably muzzle it, laddie."

"By Jove, please do!" Liam groaned.

A moment later Grandfather Wakefield rose. "James, I need you."

"Father," Hyacinth closed her eyes and added, "Be careful."

"The mother has realized," Denny told Lila.

"I said to muzzle it."

Grandfather Wakefield eyed the room and muttered, "You're all found wanting."

Jack glanced at the others. "Don't feel as though you need to rush out." He grinned a little as he added, "But leave."

Hyacinth rose woodenly and glanced at her sons. "I need to get the girls out of here. Boys..." Her eyes welled with tears as she looked between them, "...I'm taking the girls to the seaside. We need time to recover from what has happened."

"Mother," Frank snapped, "don't be ridiculous. If Grandfather is really going to disown us, you don't have the money and..."

"I don't need your permission, Franklin." She stared at him and then at Liam before she left the room, mouth trembling.

"She thinks it was one of us," Liam told Frank. He glanced at Herbert and at Jack before he looked back to Frank. "They all do, and it wasn't me."

"It wasn't me," Frank growled back. "You aren't going to pin this on me."

Liam paled as he stared at Frank. The poor man, Violet thought. If she hadn't realized it was Frank already, she'd have known in that moment.

Liam had—up until this moment—been clinging to the useless hope that it wasn't his brother.

Liam looked green as he turned to Herbert. "Is Grandfather really going to dismiss us from our positions and disown Mother?"

"I believe so," Herbert told Liam. "You both know him. He's probably going to leave here and go straight to the solicitor."

"I didn't kill Uncle Anderson," Liam said, almost pleading. "I wouldn't have."

"Well *I* didn't." Frank shoved himself to his feet and then thrust his hands through his hair. "I don't deserve to be disowned because you messed up."

Liam shook his head, almost helplessly. "No. No, I didn't do anything."

"Of course you didn't," Frank agreed, but his tone was mocking.

"Oh my god," Liam breathed, gazing around with his eyes landing on Frank. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Frank said. "This whole time I've been trying to help you. Just be quiet. Keep calm. You're going to give yourself away."

Liam stared at Frank, head shaking. "*What did you do?*"

It could have been Jack's emotionless gaze that landed on Liam. Only, it was Frank. Frank with the cold, even gaze and that familiar twitch at the edge of his lips. If you knew those eyes as well as Violet did, you might have seen the way the very back of his gaze seemed satisfied. Frank was like an exultant Jack when Jack was trying to hide his feelings.

He was, Violet thought, like Jack—when Jack knew they were about to catch the killer and didn't want to let the killer know he was on to them. She shivered. It had been bad seeing someone with Jack's gaze die. It was nearly as bad to see someone with Jack's eyes be so evil.

Geoffrey hurried into the room then, just as they'd planned. "Jack!"

Jack lifted a brow.

"Where is that Aina fellow? I need him!"

"Why?"

Geoffrey shook his head. He glanced at the room, somehow making himself pale as he saw the two brothers. "I can't say."

"Where have you been?" Jack demanded.

"I was..." Geoffrey snapped his mouth closed and then said, "I delivered that *paperwork* for Violet. She told me I needed more sun, and I

bicycled over. I..." Geoffrey gave Jack quite a meaningful glance and then stage whispered, "I can't speak of it here."

Liam snorted and then he told his brother coldly, "Looks like you weren't as clever as you thought. The boy knows something that he needs to tell the constable. I bet it has to do with you." Liam wasn't as clever as Jack and Frank, but he wasn't stupid either. "Who would get paperwork from Violet?" Liam's grin was slow and fury-filled as he said, "I bet it was the chocolatier. Violet knows Mariposa Jenkins was just your tool. Violet wouldn't abandon the woman. She has little ones."

Frank glanced at Geoffrey, who squeaked.

"We need the constable, Jack."

Jack rose slowly, eyeing the two brothers. "Aina did say the evidence would out. It always does."

Liam giggled at that and Denny joined in. Lila eyed them all askance. "I admire the fortitude of your family murderer, Jack. So many try to run or..."

Frank rose slowly. "I think we're done with your games here."

"Off to find the chocolatier and see what she knows?" Liam demanded, laughing. "Off to murder her too and then try to pin that on me as well? What was the plan, Frank? Was it to kill me and make it look like a suicide? Was it to wait until things had calmed down and then do a better job of poisoning me? You think you're so clever."

"Your hysterics won't convince them that you didn't do it," Frank told Liam.

"I don't need to," Liam laughed, wiping away a tear. "You might be smarter than me, but you know what? No one likes you. Not even Mama. You'd have had to get rid of me too. You'd have to kill me too, but you didn't take into account the widowed chocolate-maker. It makes sense, doesn't it? Thinking you're smarter than everyone and then failing when it comes to a poor woman just trying to keep her children in a home."

"Shut up," Frank said. "You—"

"How did he know?" Geoffrey asked Jack. "How did Liam figure out that one of the children saw who brought the nuts?"

Frank paused just long enough that Violet realized their gamble had paid off. He wasn't in the clear if someone had witnessed that, and now he was worried.

“Uh oh,” Liam laughed. “You really are the monster the girls claim, aren’t you? You killed Anderson and you were wrong the whole time! Now we’ve lost everything because you were so worried that Anderson would do what *you* would do. You judged Uncle Anderson by your own measure. You should have given him more credit. How many more times are you going to mess up?”

Frank turned on Liam and shouted, “Shut up! One of the brats saw? Of all the...”

“Calm down,” Jack said and Frank turned on Jack. Frank’s cold, snake gaze narrowed and in a breath he lunged. He didn’t go for Jack, though, he went for Violet. She gasped as Frank took her by the hair and neck.

“Oh now!” Denny said. “Let’s not be hasty.”

“If I have to lose,” Frank told Jack. “Maybe you should lose too.” He dug his fingers into Violet’s throat, and she felt something cold and sharp at her neck. Her gaze met Jack’s. She saw the panic there.

“Let her go,” Jack commanded Frank. Jack’s gaze was fixed on Violet’s and she felt his love encompass her. Then she looked beyond Jack to Geoffrey. He looked nearly as terrified as Jack. She tried to smile at both of them, but Frank grasped her hair again and she gasped instead.

“Why should I? We should both lose. You let yourself be captured by a *woman*. I see how you look at her. Let me set you free.”

Violet closed her eyes as she felt the bite of the blade into her neck. She gasped as Jack shouted, “Don’t.”

“Stay where you are.” Frank pulled Violet towards the exit of the room. He held her still with one hand digging the blade into her neck while his second hand grappled for the door knob.

“Let her go,” Jack said again. “This won’t help you.”

A moment later, the door opened and something slammed into her. Jack grabbed the wrist at her neck, and yanked her away, and they turned as one to see what had happened.

Nan and Ursula stood in the doorway, eyes wide, Nan held Grandfather Wakefield’s cane like a champion cricket player and the old man leaned against Ursula.

“Got him,” Nan told Ursula. “I told you he’d try something.” The last statement was directed at Geoffrey. “You should never have let him get near Vi. I told you he was a snake.”

“I...” Geoffrey’s too pale skin flushed and he stared open-mouthed.



“I told you,” Violet said, wrapping herself around Jack while pressing a hand to her neck. “That’s the type of woman you want.”

She laughed weakly into Jack’s chest as Geoffrey seemed to defy what was possible and blush even more deeply. They, all of them, turned on Frank, who lay stunned on the ground, holding the back of his head.

“I got you,” Nan told him with disdain. “You never were going to win in the end.”

He stared at her, hatred and stupefaction in his eyes.

“You think you’re so smart, but you always overlook the girls. Violet, Ursula, me, even Mama. We all knew what you were. All we had to do was wait and you’d hang yourself.”

“Nan?” He stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“It was always you,” she told him. “I knew it as soon as Uncle Anderson died. Thankfully, Violet listened and she knows about being a sister too. I told her just what to say to make you think you’d been caught.”

“You did this?” Frank growled. If he weren’t surrounded by Liam, Jack, and Aina—who had never left—he’d have wrung her neck.

“I promised you when you killed Kitty I would help the world see what you really are. You should have listened.”

## CHAPTER 17

When Violet arrived at Victor's house, he was pacing in the garden alone. She took one look at him and demanded, "Kate?"

"Violet Junior is coming," he said, hands shaking. His hair was askew, his eyes were wild, and he looked unhinged. "Vi...what if I lose her?"

Their gazes met, twin to twin, and it said something about his state of mind that he didn't notice the bandage at her neck where Frank's blade had cut her.

"You won't," she swore.

"What if I do? I can't...I can't go on without her."

She glanced at Jack, who pulled a cigar out of his coat. "Let's pace, old man. Violet is going to take care of Kate and everything will be fine."

"Stop lying to me," Victor snapped, running his hands through his dark hair. "I...I..."

Jack lit the cigar and handed it to Victor, who stared at it blankly.

"Put it in your mouth," Denny told Victor, who obeyed woodenly.

Violet raced up the stairs to the bedroom where she found Kate holding onto the post of her bed as a calm midwife looked on.

"Kate?"

Kate turned to Violet and snarled, "You!"

"Me."

"This is your fault." She groaned deeply and then leaned over to pant.

"I don't see what Violet had to do with it," Lila said merrily. "But I approve of your general meanness."

Kate groaned again and Lila asked, “Do you think it would be amiss if I had a drink?”

“I’ll kill you when this is over,” Kate told Lila, holding her stomach. “Get this beast out of me.”

“I do like this version of Kate,” Lila told Violet.

“Muzzle it,” Violet told Lila, crossing to Kate. “Surely you’ve read all about this?”

Kate gasped then caught her breath. “I have. Reading doesn’t prepare you. My...my...southern area is on fire.”

“I told you to lie down and push,” the midwife told Kate.

“I don’t want to.”

Violet pulled the covers back on the bed, took Kate by the hand. “I almost got murdered today.”

“Don’t make this about you.”

“This is worse,” Violet added consolingly, pushing Kate onto the bed and lifting her feet up. “It’s so much worse.”

Kate groaned again and then huffed rapidly.

“This is what we’re going to do,” Violet told her. “You’re going to get that thing out of you.”

“Don’t call my baby a thing,” Kate snapped.

“Then I’ll help you make a eunuch of my brother.”

Kate laughed and her gaze met Violet’s. “He’s so scared.”

“He loves you more than anything.”

Kate’s eyes welled with tears and she gasped, “I love him too. The stupid bastard. Bloody hell, it hurts. Don’t have a baby.”

“I’ll just borrow yours sometimes,” Violet agreed.

“She needs to push,” the midwife told Violet.

“She doesn’t want to,” Kate yelled and then she groaned.

“But she’s going to,” Violet told Kate flatly. She took Kate’s hand. Their gazes met and then Kate nodded.

Violet wasn’t sure how much time passed but when the squall filled the air, Kate dropped back onto the pillows, and Violet wanted to do the same. They all leaned in as the slime-covered, bloody baby cried out. The midwife wrapped the baby in a blanket and then handed it to Lila.

“My baby,” Kate moaned, “I want my baby.” She told Violet, “Never have a baby.”

“You aren’t done yet, love.” The midwife glanced at Violet and then back at Kate. “Once more.”

Kate’s gaze met Violet’s with horror, and she whispered, “I hate your brother.”

“The fiend,” Violet agreed and then gasped as Kate squeezed Violet’s hand hard. A moment later, a duet of crying filled the air, echoing Kate’s gasping. “You’re a hero.”

Kate dropped back onto the pillows. “Never again.”

Violet glanced up as Lila placed the first baby in Kate’s arms while the midwife handed Violet the second baby. She gazed down in shock as she saw the little person. Had there ever been anything more beautiful or perfect?

“What are they?” Kate asked as she wept onto the face of the first twin. Together Violet and Kate glanced at the midwife.

“Girls.”

Violet gasped and realized she was crying. There was something magical in meeting the little person in her arms. Seeing those first breaths, realizing that the baby felt familiar. She felt like someone Violet had been missing, someone who had always belonged in that spot in her heart.

“Hello beautiful creature.” A moment later, Violet ordered, “Tell Victor Kate is all right.”

“They’re wonderful,” Lila said and hurried from the room, crying herself.

“I demand jewelry,” Kate laughed. “And chocolate. I need a cocktail or a dozen.”

“Whatever you want,” Violet agreed, joining Kate on the bed to gaze upon the first twin. “Would you look at these beautiful things?”

Kate was sniffing as she reached out and slowly caressed the face of her youngest and then turned back to her oldest. “Say hello to little Agatha.”

Violet had been crying before but at that name, the tears became a waterfall. She couldn’t speak. She could hardly breathe.

“She’s perfect. They’re perfect.”

“And,” Kate said with a laugh as Victor rushed into the room with wild exultant eyes, cutting her off.

“You did it,” he called and then rushed across the room. “Two. My god, woman, you miracle worker. One would have been enough.”

Violet laughed and cried as her brother sat on the other side of his wife and stared at his daughters. His hands were shaking as Kate handed him the first baby.

“This is Agatha.” Victor nodded and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “She’s perfect. She’s wonderful. You’re wonderful.” Those tears on his face were just what Violet needed to see. That utter adoration and love in his gaze. The fierce lion coming out to greet his daughters. There was no spaniel when the mantle of fatherhood fell on Victor. He was all protection and care, and it was magical to see.

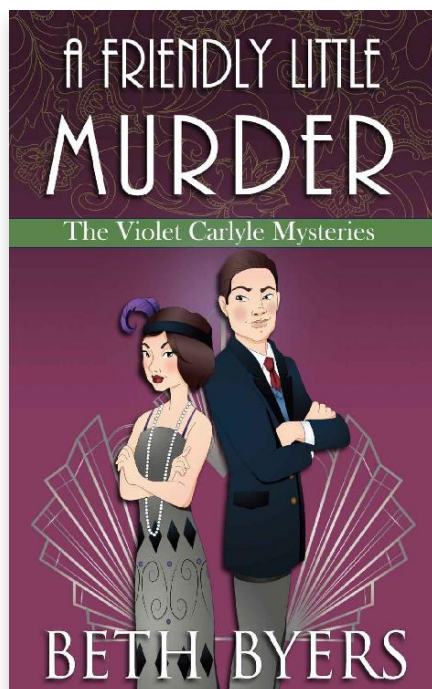
“And this,” Kate told Violet, lifting her younger daughter and greeting the baby. “This is Violet Junior.”

The END

Hullo, my friends, I have so much gratitude for you reading my books. Almost as wonderful as giving me a chance are reviews, and indie folks, like myself, need them desperately! If you wouldn’t mind, [I would be so grateful for a review.](#)

THE SEQUEL TO THIS BOOK, [A Friendly Little Murder](#), is available for preorder now.

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## August 1925

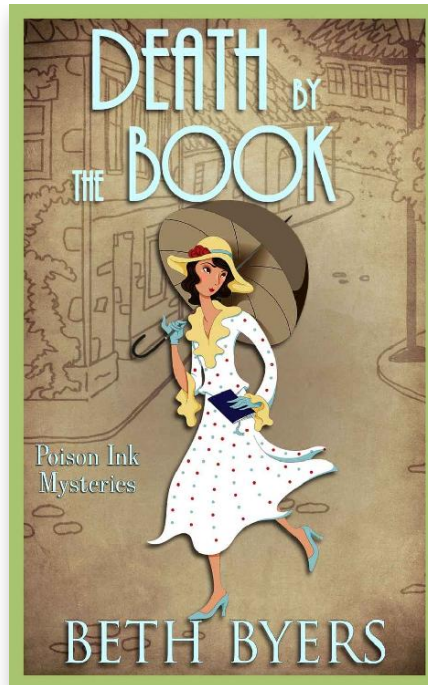
After a slew of cases for Jack, a new book and a series of business meetings for Vi, and an excess of Violet's stepmother for them both, Vi and Jack determine to flee to a lodge in the woods. A little fresh air, a ramble or two, afternoon naps, lingering mornings over a cup of Turkish coffee and perhaps all will be aright again.

Only one morning walk ends with a body and yet again, Violet, Jack and their friends find themselves involved in a mysterious death. The main suspects for the killer are none other than the victims long-time friends. Just why do you turn on a long-time friend? And if you've done it once, will you do it again?

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*Inspired by classic fiction and Miss Buncle's Book. Death by the Book questions what happens when you throw a murder into idyllic small town England.*

## **July 1936**

When Georgette Dorothy Marsh's dividends fall along with the banks, she decides to write a book. Her only hope is to bring her account out of overdraft and possibly buy some hens. The problem is that she has so little imagination she uses her neighbors for inspiration.

She little expects anyone to realize what she's done. So when *Chronicles of Harper's Bend* becomes a bestseller, her neighbors are questing to find out just who this "Joe Johns" is and punish him.

Things escalate beyond what anyone would imagine when one of her prominent characters turns up dead. It seems that the fictional end Georgette had written for the character spurred a real-life murder. Now to find the killer before it is discovered who the author is and she becomes the next victim.

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## DEATH BY THE BOOK PREVIEW

### CHAPTER ONE

#### GEORGETTE MARSH

Georgette Dorothy Marsh stared at the statement from her bank with a dawning horror. The dividends had been falling, but this...this wasn't livable. She bit down on the inside of her lip and swallowed frantically. *What was she going to do?* Tears were burning in the back of her eyes, and her heart was racing frantically.

There wasn't enough for—for—anything. Not for cream for her tea or resoling her shoes or firewood for the winter. Georgette glanced out the window, remembered it was spring, and realized that something must be done.

Something, but *what?*

"Miss?" Eunice said from the doorway, "the tea at Mrs. Wilkes is this afternoon. You asked me to remind you."

Georgette nodded, frantically trying to hide her tears from her maid, but the servant had known Georgette since the day of her birth, caring for her from her infancy to the current day.

"What has happened?"

"The...the dividends," Georgette breathed. She didn't have enough air to speak clearly. "The dividends. It's not enough."

Eunice's head cocked as she examined her mistress and then she said, "Something must be done."

"But what?" Georgette asked, biting down on her lip again. *Hard.*



## CHARLES AARON

“Uncle?”

Charles Aaron glanced up from the stack of papers on his desk at his nephew some weeks after Georgette Marsh had written her book in a fury of desperation. It was Robert Aaron who had discovered the book, and it was Charles Aaron who would give it life.

Robert had been working at Aaron & Luther Publishing House for a year before Georgette’s book appeared in the mail, and he read the slush pile of books that were submitted by new authors before either of the partners stepped in. It was an excellent rewarding work when you found that one book that separated itself from the pile, and Robert got that thrill of excitement every time he found a book that had a touch of *something*. It was the very feeling that had Charles himself pursuing a career in publishing and eventually creating his own firm.

It didn’t seem to matter that Charles had his long history of discovering authors and their books. Familiarity had most definitely *not* led to contempt. He was, he had to admit, in love with reading—fiction especially—and the creative mind. He had learned that some of the books he found would speak only to him.

Often, however, some he loved would become best sellers. With the best sellers, Charles felt he was sharing a delightful secret with the world. There was magic in discovering a new writer. A contagious sort of magic that had infected Robert. There was nothing that Charles enjoyed more than hearing someone recommend a book he’d published to another.

“You’ve found something?”

Robert shrugged, but he also handed the manuscript over a smile right on the edge of his lips and shining eyes that flicked to the manuscript over and over again. “Yes, I think so.” He wasn’t confident enough yet to feel certain, but Charles had noticed for some time that Robert was getting closer and closer to no longer needing anyone to guide him.

“I’ll look it over soon.”

It was the end of the day and Charles had a headache building behind his eyes. He always did on the days when he had to deal with the bestseller

Thomas Spencer. He was too successful for his own good and expected any publishing company to bend entirely to his will.

Robert watched Charles load the manuscript into his satchel, bouncing just a little before he pulled back and cleared his throat. The boy—man, Charles supposed—smoothed his suit, flashed a grin, and left the office. Leaving for the day wasn't a bad plan. He took his satchel and—as usual—had dinner at his club before retiring to a corner of the room with an overstuffed armchair, an Old-Fashioned, and his pipe.

Charles glanced around the club, noting the other regulars. Most of them were bachelors who found it easier to eat at the club than to employ a cook. Every once in a while there was a family man who'd escaped the house for an evening with the gents, but for the most part—it was bachelors like himself.

When Charles opened the neat pages of 'Joseph Jones's *The Chronicles of Harper's Bend*, he intended to read only a small portion of the book. To get a feel for what Robert had seen and perhaps determine whether it was worth a more thorough look. After a few pages, Charles decided upon just a few more. A few more pages after that, and he left his club to return home and finish the book by his own fire.

It might have been early summer, but they were also in the middle of a ferocious storm. Charles preferred the crackle of fire wherever possible when he read, as well as a good cup of tea. There was no question that the book was well done. There was no question that Charles would be contacting the author and making an offer on the book. *The Chronicles of Harper's Bend* was, in fact, so captivating in its honesty, he couldn't quite decide whether this author loved the small towns of England or despised them. He rather felt it might be both.

Either way, it was quietly sarcastic and so true to the little village that raised Charles Aaron that he felt he might turn the page and discover the old woman who'd lived next door to his parents or the vicar of the church he'd attended as a boy. Charles felt as though he knew the people stepping off the pages.

Yes, Charles thought, yes. This one, he thought, *this* would be a best seller. Charles could feel it in his bones. He tapped out his pipe into the ashtray. This would be one of those books he looked back on with pride at having been the first to know that this book was the next big thing. Despite

the lateness of the hour, Charles approached his bedroom with an energized delight. A letter would be going out in the morning.



## GEORGETTE MARSH

It was on the very night that Charles read the *Chronicles* that Miss Georgette Dorothy Marsh paced, once again, in front of her fireplace. The wind whipped through the town of Bard's Crook sending a flurry of leaves swirling around the graves in the small churchyard and then shooing them down to a small lane off of High Street where the elderly Mrs. Henry Parker had been awake for some time. She had woken worried over her granddaughter who was recovering too slowly from the measles.

The wind rushed through the cottages at the end of the lane, causing the gate at the Wilkes house to rattle. Dr. Wilkes and his wife were curled up together in their bed sharing warmth in the face of the changing weather. A couple much in love, snuggling into their beds on a windy evening was a joy for them both.

The leaves settled into a pile in the corner of the picket fence right at the very last cottage on that lane of Miss Georgette Dorothy Marsh. Throughout most of Bard's Crook, people were sleeping. Their hot water bottles were at the ends of their beds, their blankets were piled high, and they went to bed prepared for another day. The unseasonable chill had more than one household enjoying a warm cup of milk at bedtime, though not Miss Marsh's economizing household.

Miss Marsh, unlike the others, was not asleep. She didn't have a fire as she was quite at the end of her income and every adjustment must be made. If she were going to be honest with herself, and she very much didn't want to be—she was past the end of her income. Her account had become overdraft, her dividends had dried up, and it might be time to recognize that her last-ditch effort of writing a book about her neighbors had not been successful.

She had looked at the lives of folks like Anthony Trollope who both worked and wrote novels and Louisa May Alcott who wrote to relieve the stress of her life and to help bring in financial help. As much as Georgette

loved to read, and she did, she loved the idea that somewhere out there an author was using their art to restart their lives. There was a romance to being a writer, but she wondered just how many writers were pragmatic behind the fairytales they crafted. It wasn't, Georgette thought, going to be her story like Louisa May Alcott. Georgette was going to do something else.

"Miss Georgie," Eunice said, "I can hear you. You'll catch something dreadful if you don't sleep." The sound of muttering chased Georgie, who had little doubt Eunice was complaining about catching something dreadful herself.

"I'm sorry, Eunice," Georgie called. "I—" Georgie opened the door to her bedroom and faced the woman. She had worked for Mr. and Mrs. Marsh when Georgie had been born and in all the years of loss and change, Eunice had never left Georgie. Even now when the economies made them both uncomfortable. "Perhaps—"

"It'll be all right in the end, Miss Georgie. Now to bed with you."

Georgette did not, however, go to bed. Instead, she pulled out her pen and paper and listed all of the things she might do to further economize. They had a kitchen garden already, and it provided the vast majority of what they ate. They did their own mending and did not buy new clothes. They had one goat that they milked and made their own cheese. Though Georgette had to recognize that she rather feared goats. They were, of all creatures, devils. They would just randomly knock one over.

Georgie shivered and refused to consider further goats. Perhaps she could tutor someone? She thought about those she knew and realized that no one in Bard's Crook would hire the quiet Georgette Dorothy Marsh to influence their children. The village's wallflower and cipher? Hardly a legitimate option for any caring parent. Georgette was all too aware of what her neighbors thought of her. She rose again, pacing more quietly as she considered and rejected her options.

Georgie paced until quite late and then sat down with her pen and paper and wondered if she should try again with her writing. Something else. Something with more imagination. She had started her book with fits until she'd landed on practicing writing by describing an episode of her village. It had grown into something more, something beyond Bard's Crook with just conclusions to the lives she saw around her.

When she'd started *The Chronicles of Harper's Bend*, she had been more desperate than desirous of a career in writing. Once again, she recognized that she must do something and she wasn't well-suited to anything but writing. There were no typist jobs in Bard's Crook, no secretarial work. The time when rich men paid for companions for their wives or elderly mothers was over, and the whole of the world was struggling to survive, Georgette included.

She'd thought of going to London for work, but if she left her snug little cottage, she'd have to pay for lodging elsewhere. Georgie sighed into her palm and then went to bed. There was little else to do at that moment. Something, however, must be done.

## DEATH BY THE BOOK PREVIEW

### CHAPTER TWO

GEORGETTE MARSH

Three days later, the day dawned with a return to summer, and the hills were rolling out from Bard's Crook as though being whispered over by the gods themselves. It seemed all too possible that Aurora had descended from Olympus to smile on the village. Miss Marsh's solitary hen with her cold, hard eyes was click-clacking around the garden, eating her seeds, and generally disgusting the lady of the house.

Miss Marsh had woken to the sound of newspaper boy arriving, but she had dressed rather leisurely. There was little to look forward to outside of a good cup of tea, light on the sugar, and without cream. She told herself she preferred her tea without cream, but in the quiet of her bedroom, she could admit that she very much wanted cream in her tea. If Georgie could persuade a god to her door, it would be the goddess Fortuna to bless Georgie's book and provide enough ready money to afford cream and better teas. Was her life even worth living with the watered-down muck she'd been forced to drink lately?

Georgette put on her dress, which had been old when it had been given to her and was the perfect personification of dowdiness. She might also add to her dream list, enough money for a dress or two. By Jove, she thought, how wonderful would a hat be? A lovely new one? Or perhaps a coat that

fit her? The list of things that needed to be replaced in her life was near endless.

She sighed into the mirror glancing over her familiar face with little emotion. She neither liked nor disliked her face. She knew her hair was pretty enough though it tended towards a frizziness she'd never learned to anticipate or tame. The color was a decent medium brown with corresponding medium brown eyes. Her skin was clear of blemishes, for which she was grateful, though she despised the freckles that sprinkled over her nose and cheeks. Her dress rose to her collar, but her freckles continued down her arms and over her chest. At least her lips were perfectly adequate, neither thin nor full, but nothing to cause a second glance. Like all of her, she thought, there was nothing to cause a second glance.

Despite her lackluster looks, she didn't despise her face. She rather liked herself. Unlike many she knew, the inside of her head was not a terrible place to be. She had no major regrets and enjoyed her own humor well enough even if she rarely bothered to share her thoughts with others.

Georgette supposed if she had been blessed with liveliness, she might be rather pretty, but she knew herself well. She was quiet. Both in her persona and voice, and she was easily ignored. It had never been something that she bemoaned. She was who she was and though very few knew her well, those who knew her liked her. Those who knew her well—the very few who could claim such a status—liked her very well.

On a morning when Georgie was not worrying over her bank account, she could be counted on entering the dining room at 9:00 a.m. On that morning, however, she was rather late. She had considered goats again as she brushed her teeth—no one else in Bard's Crook kept goats though there were several who kept cows. Those bedamned goats kept coming back to her mind, but she'd rather sell everything she owned and throw herself on the mercy of the city than keep goats. She had considered trying to sew clothing while she'd pulled on her stockings and slipped her shoes on her feet. She had considered whether she might make hats when she'd brushed her hair, and she had wondered if she might take a lodger as she'd straightened her dress and exited her bedroom.

All of her options were rejected before she reached the base of her stairs, and she entered the dining room with an edge of desperation. As she took her seat at the head of the table and added a very small amount of sugar to her weak tea, her attention was caught by the most unexpected of



sights. A letter to the left of her plate. Georgette lifted it with shaking hands and read the return address. Aaron & Luther Publishing. She gasped and then slowly blew out the air.

“Be brave, dear girl,” she whispered, as she cut open the envelope. “If they say no, you can always send your book to Anderson Books. Hope is not gone. Not yet.”

She pulled the single sheet of paper out and wondered if it was a good sign or a bad sign that they had not returned her book. Slowly, carefully, she unfolded the letter, her tea and toast entirely abandoned as she read the contents.

Moments later, the letter fluttered down to her plate and she sipped her scalding hot tea and didn’t notice the burn.

“Is all well, Miss Georgie?” The maid was standing in the doorway. Her wrinkled face was fixated on her girl with the same tense anticipation that had Georgette reading her letter over and over while it lay open on her plate. Those dark eyes were fixated on Georgette’s face with careful concern.

“I need cream, Eunice.” Georgette nodded to her maid. “We’re saved. They want *Chronicles*. My goodness, my *dear, wonderful* woman, see to the cream and let’s stop making such weak tea until we discover the details of the fiscal benefits.”

Eunice had to have been as relieved as Georgette, but the maid simply nodded stalwartly and came back into the dining room a few minutes later with a fresh pot of strong tea, a full bowl of sugar, and the cream that had been intended for supper. It was still the cheapest tea that was sold in Bard’s Crook, but it was black and strong and tasted rather like nirvana on her tongue when Georgette drank it down.

“I’ll go up to London tomorrow. He wants to see me in the afternoon, but he states very clearly he wants the book. We’re saved.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch, Miss Georgie.”

“By Jove, we aren’t just saved from a lack of cream, Eunice. We’re saved from goats! We’re saved my dear. Have a seat and enjoy a cuppa yourself.”

Eunice clucked and returned to the kitchen instead. They might be saved, but the drawing room still needed to be done, dinner still needed to be started, and the laundry and mending were waiting for no woman.



WHEN MISS MARSH made her way into London the following day, she was wearing her old cloche, which was quite dingy but the best she had, a coat that was worn at the cuffs and the hem, and shoes that were just starting to have a hole worn into the bottom. Perhaps, she thought, there would even be enough to re-sole her shoes.

On the train into London from Bard's Crook, only Mr. Thornton was taking the train from the village. When he inquired after her business, she quite shocked herself when she made up a story about meeting an old Scottish school chum for tea. Mr. Thornton admitted he intended to meet with his lawyer. He was rather notorious in Bard's Crook for changing his will as often as the wind changed direction. An event he always announced with an air of doom and a frantic wagging of his eyebrows.

Mr. Thornton had married a woman from the factories who refused to acknowledge her past, and together they had three children. Those children—now adults—included two rebellious sons and one clinging daughter. He also had quite a slew of righteous nephews who deserved the acclaim they received. Whenever his wife bullied him too hard or his sons rebelled too overtly, the will altered in favor of the righteous nephews until such time as an appropriate repentance could be made.

Georgie had long since taken to watching the flip-flopping of the will with a delighted air. As far as she could tell, no one but herself enjoyed the changing of his will, but enjoying things that others didn't seem to notice had long been her fate.

The fortunate news of the inheritance situation was that Mr. Thornton's nephews were unaware of the changing of their fortunes. The clinging daughter's fortune was set in stone. She never rebelled and thus never had her fortunes reversed, but she clung rather too fiercely to be a favored inheritor.

Mr. Thornton handed Miss Marsh down from the train, offered to share a black cab, and then left her without regret when she made a weak excuse. Miss Marsh selected her own black cab, cutting into her ready money dreadfully, and hoped that whatever occurred today would restore her cash in hand.



## CHARLES AARON

“Mr. Aaron,” Schmidt said, “your afternoon appointment has arrived.”

“Wonderful,” Charles replied. “Send him in with tea, will you Schmidtty?”

“Her, sir.”

“Her? Isn’t my appointment with an author?” Charles felt a flash of irritation. He was very much looking forward to meeting the author of *The Chronicles of Harper’s Bend*. He had, in fact, read the book twice more since that first time.

Schmidt’s lips twitched when he said, “It seems the author is a Miss Marsh.”

Charles thought over the book and realized that of course Mr. Jones was a Miss Marsh. Who but a woman would realize the fierce shame of bribing one’s children with candies to behave for church? Charles could almost hear the tirade of his grandmother about the lack of mothering skills in the upcoming generations.

“Well, send her in, and tea as well.” Charles rubbed his hands together in glee. He did adore meeting new writers. They were never what you expected, but they all had one thing in common. Behind their dull or beautiful faces, behind their polite smiles and small talk, there were whole worlds. Characters with secrets that only the writer knew. Unnecessary histories that were cut viciously from the story and hidden away only to be known by the author.

Charles rather enjoyed asking the writers random questions about their characters’ secret histories. Tell me, author, Charles would say, as they shared a cup of tea or a pipe, what does so-and-so do on Christmas morning? Or what is his/her favorite color? He loved when they answered readily, knowing that of course so-and-so woke early on Christmas morning, opened presents and had a rather spectacular full English only to sleep it off on the Chesterfield near the fire.

He loved it when they described what they ate down to the nearest detail as though the character’s traditional breakfast had been made since time

immemorial rather than born with a pen and hidden behind the gaze of the person with whom Charles was sharing an hour or two.

Charles had long since become inured to the varying attitudes of authors. Thomas Spencer, who had given Charles a rather terrible headache that had been cured by Miss Marsh's delightful book, wore dandified clothes and had an arrogant air. Spencer felt the cleverness of his books justified his rudeness.

On the other hand, an even more brilliant writer, Henry Moore, was a little man with a large stomach. He kept a half-dozen cats, spoiled his children terribly, and was utterly devoted to his wife. In a gathering of authors, Moore would be the most successful and the cleverest by far but be overshadowed by every other writer in attendance.

Miss Marsh, Charles saw, fell into the 'Moore' category. She seemed as timid as a newborn rabbit as she edged into his office. Her gaze flit about, taking in the stack of manuscripts, the shelf of books he'd published over the course of his career, the windows that looked onto a dingy alleyway, and the large wooden desk.

She was, he thought, a dowdy little thing. Her eyes were nice enough, but they barely met his own, and she didn't seem to know quite what to say. Her freckles seemed to be rather spectacular—if one liked freckles—but it was hard to anything with her timid movements. Especially with her face barely meeting his own. That was all right, he thought, he'd done this many times, and she was very new to the selling of a book and the signing of contracts.

"Hello," he said rather cheerily, hoping that his tone would set her at ease.

She glanced up at him and then back down, her gaze darting around his office again. Mr. Aaron wondered just what she was seeing amidst all of his things. He wouldn't be surprised to find she was noting things that the average fellow would overlook.

"Would you like tea?"

Miss Marsh nodded, and he poured her a cup to which she added a hefty amount of cream and sugar. He grinned at the sight of her milky tea and then leaned back as she slowly spun her teacup on the saucer.

"Why Joseph Jones? Why a pen name at all?"

Miss Marsh blinked rather rapidly and then admitted, "Well..." Her gaze darted to the side, and she said, "I was rather inspired by my

neighbors, but I would prefer to avoid their gossip as well. Can you imagine?" A cheeky grin crossed her face for a moment, and he was entranced. "If they discovered that Antoinette Moore wrote a book?"

"Is that you?"

"Pieces of her," she admitted, and he frowned. The quiet woman in front of him certainly had the mannerisms of the character, but he couldn't quite see Miss Moore writing a book and sending it off. She was such an innocuous, almost unnecessary character in the book.

Was Miss Marsh was a literary portraitist? He grinned at the idea and wanted nothing more than to visit Harper's Bend or wherever it was that this realistic portrayal existed in real life. What he would give to have an afternoon tea with the likes of Mrs. Morton and her ilk.

Mr. Aaron glanced over Miss Marsh. Her old cloche and worn coat were not lost on him, and he supposed if he'd met her anywhere else he'd never have looked at her twice. Having read her book, however, he suddenly felt as though she were far more charming than she'd otherwise have been.

Her gaze, with ordinary medium brown eyes, seemed to have untold depths, and her freckles seemed to be an outward indicator of a woman who could look at her village and turn it into a witty caricature, acting as a warning that this was a woman who said nothing and noticed everything.

He grinned at her. "I read your book, and I liked it."

Her eyes flashed and a bright grin crossed her face, and he realized she was a little prettier than he'd noticed. It was that shocked delight on her face that made him add, "I like it quite well indeed."

Miss Marsh clasped her hands tightly together, and Mr. Aaron did not miss how her grip camouflaged the trembling of her hands.

"Tell me about it," he said kindly. "Why did you write it? This is a portrait of your neighbors?"

It was the kindness that got Miss Marsh to open up, and then she couldn't seem to stem the tide of her thoughts; they sped out. "Well, it was my dividends you see. They've quite dried up. I was struggling before, but they'd always come in and then they didn't, and I was quite—" Miss Marsh trailed off and Mr. Aaron could imagine the situation all too easily. "at my wit's end. Only then I thought of Louisa May Alcott and the other lady writers, and I thought I might as well try as not."

The world was struggling and Miss Marsh, who may have escaped the early failing of things, had eventually succumbed as so many had. As she said, her dividends had dried up. He could imagine her lying awake worried and uncertain or perhaps pacing her home. There was something so unpretentious about her revelation that Mr. Aaron was even more charmed. She'd come to the end of things, and she'd turned that worry into the most charming of stories. Not just a charming story, but one filled with heart and delight in the little things. He liked her all the better for it.

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