

"A TREAT FOR FANS OF DOWNTON ABBEY." —DEANNA RAYBOURN

DEATH OF A  
*Dishonorable*  
GENTLEMAN



A MYSTERY

TESSA ARLEN

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# Death of a Dishonorable Gentleman



MINOTAUR BOOKS  
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To Chris—the love of my life

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# Contents

Title Page  
Copyright Notice  
Dedication  
Acknowledgments

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-one  
Chapter Twenty-two  
Chapter Twenty-three  
Chapter Twenty-four  
Chapter Twenty-five  
Chapter Twenty-six  
Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-nine

About the Author

Copyright

# Chapter One

On the morning of Lord and Lady Montfort's annual summer ball, their housekeeper, Edith Jackson, was up, washed, and almost dressed by six o'clock. She unraveled her long bedtime plait, brushed out her hair, and, with a mouth full of hairpins, swept the thick auburn swath into a twist at the nape of her neck, deftly securing it in place. The glance she cast into the looking glass was brief, made only to reassure that she was presentable. Then she rang for the third housemaid to bring breakfast up to her parlor.

As Mrs. Jackson sat down to eat her bacon and eggs, she mentally prepared herself for a day that would be packed with complicated, overlapping timetables and countless calls on her patience and tact. She was quite certain the house was ready for the greatest event of its year, but she did not allow herself to be complacent about her ladyship. The countess often awoke to her best ideas on the morning of the ball. In past years, dancing by the lake or midnight supper in the ruin of the old moated castle were inspirations that had struck Lady Montfort only at the last moment. Mrs. Jackson knew from long experience that it did not pay to be overconfident about readiness where her ladyship was concerned. *Don't tempt fate*, the housekeeper told herself, *not until after your meeting with her at nine o'clock*.

She finished her second cup of tea and washed her hands before leaving the sanctuary of her rooms to descend three flights of stairs to the servants' hall. Walking past the kitchen, she increased her pace as she heard the strident voice of the cook harrying her kitchen maids to greater efforts. She was careful not to turn her head in case she caught Mrs. Thwaite's eye; an early encounter with Cook, who was of a garrulous nature, would certainly slow her down. Fortunately, Cook was wholly absorbed in straining a large copper pan of veal stock, and Mrs. Jackson made her escape out of the scullery door, unnoticed.

Once outside, she rounded the tall laurel hedge at the edge of the kitchen yard. The house and its gardens lay before her, glorious in the morning light. These hours in the garden, when the day was fresh and new, were a favorite time for Mrs. Jackson. The only movement was the swoop and flutter of birds as they caught insects and drank fountain-water, the only sound the jubilant trill of their early morning song. She stopped, turned her face up to the sun, closed her eyes, and took a slow breath. The air was fresh with the earthy fragrance of rainwater and the sweet, rich scent of freshly mown lawns and scythed meadow grass. She allowed herself a few moments to enjoy the peace and solitude of the garden, a brief respite from the clamor belowstairs in the house. Glancing at her wristwatch, she saw that it was nearly seven o'clock and set off at a fast clip along the drive. *Whatever you do now*, she told herself, *don't fritter away your time, or you'll lose the day*.



When she stepped through the green, arched wood door in the brick wall of Iyntwood's kitchen garden she was transported from the empty, smooth lawns, groomed parterres, and shrubberies of the house into a different world altogether, but one she found just as pleasing in its own way. Abundant ranks of vegetable, fruit, and flower beds stretched before her, bristling with frames, trellises and bamboo stakes supporting the lush crops of early summer. An orderly vegetable garden never failed to gladden her practical heart; there was comfort in the sight of such well-tended profusion.

In the middle distance she saw Ernest Stafford chest-deep in rows of vivid blue delphiniums. He was obviously ready to wait on her in the cutting garden rather than the elderly head gardener, Mr. Thrower. Momentarily confused, she came to a halt and became engrossed in the list of instructions in her hand, to give herself time to adjust to this change in plans. When she moved forward she was conscious to keep the tenor of her meeting with Mr. Stafford formal; their past few exchanges had left her with the distinct impression that he was one of those men who didn't pay quite enough attention to the importance of social convention. He was often direct with her, which she had no objection to, but on occasion his demeanor bordered on unwelcome familiarity.

In Mrs. Jackson's limited experience, men who worked in the open air were often withdrawn and not given to conversation. But Ernest Stafford was a cut above the average gardener: he was a landscape architect, which presented a puzzle to her rather hierarchical cast of mind and stern regard for social distinctions. That he was an educated man who held a job where his hands were often dirty no doubt contributed to Mr. Stafford's disconcerting social manners, she thought. And most certainly his success with the new sunken garden, and Lady Montfort's entranced enthusiasm for everything he had accomplished there, had rather gone to his head.

Mrs. Jackson allocated exactly twenty minutes to spend in the kitchen garden before she moved on to the more important tasks of her day, and as a result she was a little brusquer than she intended to be as she said good morning.

"I know what's on your mind," he said in his easy way, oblivious to her stiffening back. "The delphinium—no need to worry, they are perfect despite the rain and should open up completely by this afternoon, once you have them inside. But I think we need something for contrast; lime-green amaranths would set off those stunning blues beautifully, don't you agree?" She nodded, and couldn't help but admire Mr. Stafford's unerring sense of balance when it came to color; Mr. Thrower would undoubtedly have suggested a commonplace and insipid pink. Mr. Stafford's creative eye for composition awoke all sorts of possibilities and she eagerly asked which roses were at their best.

An unhurried litany on flowers took place between them, of which colors, scents, and contrasting foliage choices were the only topic. On safe and familiar ground, Mrs. Jackson regained her composure. With decisions made for all the rooms in the house, she finally lifted her chin and, without turning her head in his direction, risked a tentative glance. It was difficult to judge the expression on his face, as his eyes were hidden by the shadow of his hat brim, but she noticed that the set of his mouth was good-humored and relaxed.

Mrs. Jackson was tall for a woman, almost as tall as Stafford. She carried herself well with an upright, quiet dignity that was accentuated by the simple cut of her clothes. Now in her middle thirties, she believed that once, when she was young, she might have been quite a good-looking

woman. She certainly didn't think she was now.

Emerging from her moment of introspection, she was embarrassed to see Mr. Stafford watching her, as if he knew what she had been thinking. She swallowed slightly and felt a complete fool.

“The lads will carry them all up to the house for you immediately, Mrs. Jackson. I'd better go and help Mr. Thrower.”

She heard Mr. Thrower's cracked old voice, clearly audible even at this distance, lifted in cries of alarm and impatience from the direction of the vegetable beds in protest against the clumsy handling of tender lettuce and purslane.

Set at ease by everyday ritual and past the worst of her anxiety, she realized their time had come to an end. She thanked Mr. Stafford for his help and watched him turn and walk back down the path toward the men in the vegetable garden. She noticed that he held himself upright: back straight, broad shoulders squared, when most gardeners were often round-shouldered and stooped. She ran her hands down the front of her skirt to smooth its folds, fixed her attention firmly forward to the business of the day ahead, and set off back the way she had come.

When she entered the kitchen courtyard, she saw the first of the wagons from the dairy parked outside the kitchen door. She called out a greeting to the driver, and walked through the doors and down the steps to the orderly and familiar world over which she held dominion: the storerooms, pantries, larders, laundries, and the servants' hall, which stretched in a subterranean maze beneath the ground floor of Iyntwood, Lord Montfort's country house.

\* \* \*

The private rooms of Clementine Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Montfort, were situated in the west wing of the house and looked out over the rose garden. Her bedroom was spacious and airy with tall windows on two sides; the walls a deep Wedgwood-blue silk damask, the furnishings in soft grays and silvers. It was in these elegant and supremely comfortable surroundings that Lady Montfort awoke to her day, and on this particular day, long before her breakfast tray was brought up by her maid Pettigrew.

Her first groping thought as she emerged from a deep sleep was whether it was raining, and with this concern she was immediately awake. It had been drizzling off and on throughout the preceding afternoon and evening, and she had gone to bed praying it would clear in the night. She sat up, swung her legs out of bed, walked to the nearest window, pulled back the heavy velvet curtains, and gazed out onto a sun-drenched lawn. Perfect! She turned her gaze upward—not a cloud in sight. Even better! Elated that somehow she had cheated the weather, which was so often unpredictable in June, Clementine clapped her hands together and turned to face the day with even greater energy and resolve.

Through the open window the sweet morning air poured into the room and she felt a momentary thrill of eager expectancy, like waking up on Christmas morning when she was a child with the prospect of a huge treat in store. She would forgo her morning ride, she decided, as there was far too much to do in preparation for the ball tonight.

She rang for her maid, but when Pettigrew arrived with her tray, Clementine was too charged to

linger over breakfast. She distractedly nibbled toast and marmalade, her attention focused on last-minute plans. Having had a moment to think over all that must be done as she sipped her tea, her mood of anticipation and pleasure at the prospect of tonight's magnificent ball was intermittently eroded by underlying anxieties that would be hers until she met with her housekeeper and was reassured that no problems had emerged since their meeting the evening before.

Clementine planned the festivities for her annual summer costume ball with scrupulous care. It was a significant social occasion and stood for something a little more momentous than the opportunity to get together to enjoy good food and dancing in the company of their friends and family. It was important to remind their friends and neighbors that despite whatever new economic upheavals might be imminent in their twentieth-century lives, the Talbots' wealth was copious, their holdings and estates were plentiful and productive, and their place in society was therefore secure. Unlike the many brash *arrivistes* who had bought their way into upper society, Clementine was careful to ensure that her ball did not smack of vulgar ostentation but displayed the elegant, understated style that stood for the effortless security of coming from an ancient family entrenched in the county for centuries.

She walked to the west windows and looked down on the rose garden, which had been carefully tidied to remove all traces of yesterday's rain. She watched several men from the estate stringing pretty, painted, paper Japanese candle-lanterns across the garden and into the surrounding trees. Immediately below on the terrace, she was pleased to see that every potted palm, scented shrub, and small flowering tree had already been carted up from the glasshouses and the dowager's conservatory and were now being arranged to create intimate bowers on the terrace for her guests to sit out and enjoy supper. She hoped this would transform the terrace from an austere blank of gray flagstone into a fairyland found only in the balmy, soft nights of the Mediterranean, or perhaps, she thought with a little stab of apprehension, the set of Gilbert and Sullivan's production of *The Mikado*. They must be careful not to overdo the paper lanterns.

As Pettigrew withdrew after helping her mistress dress, Clementine was already running her eye and pencil down one of several lists that her maid had brought up on her breakfast tray. She stopped work for a moment and threw down her pencil. She rather wished that Althea, their middle daughter, who was on a walking tour in Switzerland with friends, and their eldest daughter, Verity, married and living in Paris with her young family, were able to join Iyntwood's festivities this year. This would be the first time since the girls had come out that they would miss the fun. It just wouldn't be the same, she thought, without the shared silliness of getting ready for the ball together with her grown-up daughters.

Harry would be with them, of course, as he was coming home today from Oxford for the long vacation, and Harry was tremendous company. But sons, she had reluctantly come to realize as their children had grown, who were so much more independent than daughters, somehow had the knack of staying in a house without actually being present.

A new thought crossed her mind, and, discarding her lists, Clementine wandered into her dressing room to take a good long look at her costume for the ball. She had taken the idea from the little Sèvres porcelain figure, in the library, of an eighteenth-century French milkmaid. Holding her dress up against herself, she gazed critically at her reflection in the looking glass. It was certainly very elegant,

she thought, as she twisted from side to side to take in all angles. The jade-and-ivory silk of the skirt à la polonaise was finely embroidered, and the flat, rolled-straw hat would look quite the thing and rather chic with curled and powdered hair falling about her shoulders.

She transferred her attention away from the dress and leaned in to gaze thoughtfully at her reflection in the glass. Large gray eyes with delicate, dark brows stared back; her rich brown hair was still glossy but it was beginning to show gray at her temples. She peered closely at fine lines gathering in the corners of her eyes. She knew she wasn't considered pretty by the rather lush standards of the day; her elegant, slender frame was far from that of a pouter pigeon, and she liked to think hers was a lean and intelligent face that would bear up over the coming years. Bone structure was a valuable asset, she reminded herself, as she turned herself sideways and spread the skirt of her dress around her slender hips.

Her reverie was interrupted by the welcome arrival of her housekeeper, Mrs. Jackson, who was holding several lists of her own and appeared fully in charge of her day. Jackson, always self-possessed, looked positively rigid with intention this morning, which caused Clementine to shed most of her anxieties about Iyntwood's preparedness. She was always reassured by her housekeeper's composure and equanimity; Jackson was such a soothing individual and so extraordinarily capable. George Hollyoak, Iyntwood's butler and majordomo, was a faultless person, but she saw her housekeeper as Iyntwood's internal-combustion engine, propelling a household, with upward of sixty rooms and a staff of fourteen resident servants, resolutely forward to meet each day with unfailing and dedicated service.

"Morning, Jackson, how are things?" Mrs. Jackson was standing at a respectful distance by the door. "Yes, do come in. Have you seen Mr. Thrower this morning? Please, before anything else, tell me the rain hasn't ruined the flowers."

"Not at all, m'lady, everything is at its best."

"Well, that's a relief. Anything horrid I should know about, any last-minute surprises?"

Clementine seated herself in a comfortable chair by the window and Mrs. Jackson took two steps toward her so that she wouldn't have to raise her voice. There *was* a surprise, Clementine thought. She could tell by her housekeeper's hesitation, but she knew Mrs. Jackson would have a solution to go with it, as no problem was ever mentioned without one.

"Mr. Evans of the Market Wingley orchestra sent a message over last night: his first violinist has sprained his wrist and is unable to play."

"There's *always* something at the last moment, isn't there? How many violinists do they need, for heaven's sake?" Clementine did not allow herself to overreact, but patiently waited for Mrs. Jackson's way out.

"The Market Wingley usually plays with three, m'lady. I sent Dick over to Mr. Simkins, as the schoolmaster is a very accomplished player, and he sent word this morning he would be happy to join the orchestra tonight." Mrs. Jackson produced her perfect resolution to the problem with pacific calm, and Clementine made sure it was properly acknowledged.

"Oh, well done, Jackson, five steps ahead as always. I thought we had a real problem on our hands for a moment. Mr. Simkins? Why, that's Violet's father. If she's up-to-the-moment on her duties, will

you make sure she spends some time with him?” Clementine relaxed and then tightened up again. “What about oysters—did we manage to get some?”

“A bit difficult at this time of year, m’lady, but we were fortunate. They arrived from Billingsgate on the early train with the other fresh fish this morning. We are completely prepared in the kitchen.”

“Well, it appears we are on top of things. I’ll join you and Hollyoak after luncheon for a quick walk-through, if you are sure you will have the flowers done by then.”

Mrs. Jackson assured her that she would.

“Now here are my lists, no real changes.” Regardless of how unnecessary she knew it was, she went about the task of updating her long-suffering housekeeper with her annotated lists of last-minute needs and wants. Her annual summer ball must always surpass the spectacle of luxury and the cachet of previous years and nothing must be overlooked. But what Clementine did not foresee was that it would become one of the most talked-about events of the season.

## Chapter Two

Ralph Cuthbert Talbot, the 6th Earl of Montfort, did not share his wife's unrestrained enthusiasm for their ball. Lord Montfort was tucked away from the commotion of preparations in the house and was enjoying the solace of the morning room. Sunlight poured in through the leaded panes of the large stone-mullioned windows, creating a comforting pool of warm light where he sat at the table. One of the casements was open a little, and he briefly became aware of the pleasant sound of bees working sturdily among the wisteria blossoms in the quiet of the room. He was enthusiastically applying himself to a large and substantial breakfast of the sort that was referred to in Europe, and especially by the French with a slight shudder, as the "Englishman's breakfast."

The thought that half of London society would turn up at his house this evening dressed in costumes so ridiculous that it would take days for him to eradicate them from his memory caused him to snort with irritation. He firmly believed that costume balls had the tendency to make fools out of most of his friends. *All the more reason*, he said to himself as he stretched his legs out under the table, *to enjoy this quiet hour and the luxury of uninterrupted thought*. Lying open on the table to his right was a copy of *The Times*. He read ominous reports of the ferocious opposition by Ulster Unionists against the latest Home Rule Bill, as he champed stoically through a plate of the fried, the grilled, and the scrambled. On his left, a neat pile of the morning's first post awaited his attention.

As James poured a second cup of coffee, Lord Montfort turned with irritation from a particularly depressing editorial on trade unions and opened the letter on the top of the pile. It was from the proctor of Oxford University, Dr. Everard Bascombe-Harcourt.

As he cast his eye over Bascombe-Harcourt's opening lines, the day quite lost its beauty. The initial flash of alarm and anger as he took in the sentence that began, "I regret to inform you..." was replaced with the dull and miserable acceptance he often experienced when he was informed of the more distasteful exploits of his ward and nephew, Teddy Mallory. He read on to the foot of the page, conscious of a twinge in his stomach where his grilled lamb chop and sautéed mushrooms had landed with such contentment a few moments ago.

The warm, sunny room pleasant five minutes earlier now felt confined and airless. With the beginnings of severe indigestion and memories of Teddy's past indiscretions, Lord Montfort felt trapped and suffocated. He got up from the table, stuffed the letter into his coat pocket, and left the house, walking briskly toward the stable block. He always did his best thinking on the back of one of his horses.

Less than an hour later, he crested the ridge of Marston Downs astride his favorite hunter, Bruno. A stiff southwest breeze picked up and he jammed his hat down tightly on his head. His horse's ears

pricked back, asking if he was ready. Lord Montfort leaned forward and gave him the go-ahead and felt the animal's stride lengthen in a powerful thrust of muscle and intention. All thoughts were mercifully blanked from his mind in a rush of cold air as his horse stretched out in a long, measured gallop. Horse and rider raced along the top of the ridge as one in the pure physical enjoyment of the moment, without a thought between them. Ahead was a wide ditch brimming with rainwater, followed by the fallen trunk of a beech tree, and, farther on, to the right a hedge with a barred gate. Lord Montfort usually slowed his horse for these obstacles, but today he felt reckless, and his horse, familiar with them all, covered the ditch, took three strides, cleared the log, and went on to lift effortlessly over the five-bar gate. "Now that," Lord Montfort said to the horse as he clapped him on the shoulder, "is more like it."

Half a mile on, his mind returned to Dr. Bascombe-Harcourt's regretful letter. He knew there was nothing he could do about his nephew's present dilemma; Teddy had apparently run the full course of his self-destruction. And really when it came down to it, what was there to do, except maintain as much dignity as he could in the face of his nephew's coming ostracism and disgrace? The proctor's letter had been formal and to the point, but his son, Harry, when he arrived for luncheon would be able to fill him in on Teddy's latest fiasco. And more than likely Teddy was also on his way to Iyntwood, so he had that interview to look forward to as well. There was no point in ruining his wife's enjoyment of her ball, so he decided to wait until Monday before he told her, if he could. He turned his horse and they cantered back along the gallop.

Returning to his house, he chose to enter the park by the southeast gate. He trotted his horse alongside the drive, passing under the spread of immense chestnut trees with their white candles still in bloom, the filtered shade of beech, and the deeper shade of elms. At the edge of the park they broke clear of the woodland, and his horse briskly increased the pace, snorting rhythmically down his nose in anticipation of oats.

When they came to the south edge of the lake, which curved in a crescent up and around the base of the gardens and the northeast side of the house, he slowed Bruno to a walk and crossed the bridge where the lake narrowed into a shallow bed of water lilies fringed with flag iris. And here the principal facade of his house came into view: sunlight glinted on the handsome Elizabethan stone mullioned windows which formed such a feature of the house. At the sight of the familiar mellow stone walls glowing against a backdrop of dark Lebanon cedars, Lord Montfort halted his horse to enjoy the contentment this scene always instilled within him. The sun was warm on their backs as horse and rider cantered forward, followed by a flock of swallows skimming along the surface of the turf behind them to catch the insects that flew up from the grass disturbed by Bruno's hooves.

\* \* \*

Just before luncheon, Clementine was on alert to the arrival of their son, Harry. She heard the rough purr of the two-seater Bugatti long before the butler came to announce that Lord Haversham had just arrived and to ask if they would need to hold luncheon.

She said no, she felt sure that Lord Haversham and Mr. Ellis would be quite ready to eat at one o'clock, and walked out to greet her son as he pulled up at the east portico of the house with a spray of

gravel and a shout of greeting.

Used to her son's habitual energetic exit from his motorcar, she was surprised to see him open the door and climb out with what appeared to be the burdened weariness of a middle-aged man. Intrigued, she immediately glanced at Ellis Booth, whom she regarded as a steadying influence on her son's often exuberant and unchecked disposition, but Ellis's round and rather placid face was studiously noncommittal. There was a brief, muttered exchange between the two young men as they divested themselves of caps, goggles, and the huge gauntlet gloves they insisted on wearing whenever they traveled in Harry's open motorcar, and she caught a rather admonitory glance pass from Ellis to Harry before her son walked up the steps toward her.

She noticed that as he grew older Harry resembled his father more closely. They were both tall men, athletic in build, and had the same high-crowned shape to the head and the dark, almost-black hair of the Talbot family. But most of all she realized that they shared the same air of authority that riches, rank, broad acres, and ancient lineage bestow on men with the providence to be born first in line to the right family. Harry certainly resembled his father, she thought, but there the similarities ended. Her son differed from his father's entrenched traditional views, and like many young men of his generation he had a fascination for the modern world and a love of mechanized speed and motorcars; whereas her husband viewed all change with concern and, if given time, with some sort of reluctant acceptance.

"Well, here you are, and so admirably early." They were already half an hour late. "You look like you were certainly spanking along in that motor of yours, what's it called again?" She could never manage to remember the stupid thing's name.

"A Bugatti T-22, Mother. It goes like the devil, did close to sixty the other day up the Great North Road." It didn't take much to restore Harry's good humor, she thought. But goodness, why were they both so disheveled and dusty with their hair all over the place? She laughed as if she approved of Harry's rather dangerous love of speed, which she didn't, as she was determined not to appear too critical when he had only just arrived.

"We are taking luncheon outside by the lake, so we can keep out of the way of the final flurries to get us ready for the ball tonight. Join us when you've had a moment; your father is outside already." She knew he would understand her polite code for *Don't keep him waiting; cut up to your room for a wash and brush-up, and be quick about it.*

When Harry and Ellis came down to join them they were almost on time for luncheon. Clementine was sitting under the loggia, enjoying the business of doing nothing as she watched her husband encourage his Labrador to retrieve a small tree limb, twice the dog's length, from the center of the lake. At her feet lay Harry's old dog, Percy, asleep with the sun on his belly, his feet twitching as he dreamed of past quests for game birds.

Lord Montfort turned to greet his son with a welcoming, "Harry, well here you are." He placed an affectionate arm across his son's shoulders and walked with him to the loggia to say hello to Ellis.

"Good drive down?" he asked them both. "You're on time for once, must have been cracking along! What's that new motor of yours again?" Harry and Ellis rushed to interrupt each other as they related the glories of the motor and what it was capable of, until Hollyoak bent to inform Clementine



that their luncheon was ready.

When they had finished their meal, she was pleased to see that all three men were relaxed and enjoying the afternoon. There seemed no trace of the ill humor Harry had displayed upon his arrival, or of her husband's grim preoccupation when he had returned to the house after his morning ride. If their son seemed a little inattentive, his father seemed not to mind. He had glanced in Harry's direction several times during their meal, obviously as happy as she was to have him home for the summer.

"Always feel I might be in Valtravaglia when we eat out here; we should perhaps go back there." Her husband turned to look at her as he sat back in his chair and reached for a delicate peach from the estate's glasshouses.

"I'd love to. Let's make a plan for next spring. It will be beautiful then," she said as the butler bent to speak in her ear. "The first of our guests have arrived, sadly too late to join us. Teddy and Oscar Barclay are being given something to eat in the house; I'll pop in on them later."

At the mention of his cousin's arrival, Harry came out of the preoccupied state he had fallen into since they had finished their meal. "Father, perhaps I could have a word before tea?"

"Yes of course, why don't you walk over with me to the estate office. I have an appointment with our new agent, Archie Pommeroy, and it would be a good time for you to meet him. Ellis, what about you, want to walk along?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll run up to the house and say hullo to Mallory and Barclay." Ellis was already on his feet.

Their luncheon over, her husband and son left in the direction of the estate office in the stable block and Ellis wandered off in search of Teddy Mallory and his friend Oscar Barclay, leaving Clementine to join the butler and housekeeper for one last walk-through of the house.

\* \* \*

With her inspection complete to her utmost satisfaction, Clementine decided to take a stroll before her guests arrived at five o'clock. She put on her hat and set off in the direction of the lime walk to spend a happy hour with Mr. Stafford, discussing under-plantings for shade and to see what was happening with the new garden before she had to change for tea.

On her way back to the house she chose the path that came from the lake through a dense shrubbery of tall rhododendrons and azaleas. Their somber, heavy foliage concealed her approach as she came up to the back of the boathouse building. But as she drew closer she heard, quite distinctly, voices lifted in anger. She stopped, uncertain for a moment what to do. She listened as the shouting started again and was surprised when she recognized one of the voices as Harry's. Walking forward, she could clearly see into the boathouse garden while remaining well hidden among the tall shrubs.

Standing on the back steps of the building were Harry and Teddy. Teddy had his back to her, but she saw Harry's face and he was furious. She had never seen her son so angry before.

She watched Harry haul Teddy toward him by his shoulder and shirt collar with both hands. Harry's face was red and distorted with anger and at that moment he appeared immense, almost unrecognizable. He shook Teddy so hard that his cousin would have fallen if he had not been held in

such a strong grip. Seeing them close together, she realized how much taller and heavier Harry was than his cousin; his anger seemed to have increased his size. His hostility was so palpable that she felt a thump of adrenaline surge in her stomach. *He's going to hit him!* she thought. *This simply can't be happening.* But it was happening. In one lunging, stiff-armed push, Harry shoved Teddy down the boathouse steps and onto the lawn. Teddy sprawled on the grass, drew up his legs, and raised his arms over his head. He cringed as Harry bore down on him from the top of the steps. Harry pulled him to his feet and started to shake him again. He was even angrier now and gave Teddy a shove back toward the path leading into the orchard.

In considerable alarm, Clementine withdrew into the shrubbery and retreated down the pathway. What on earth was happening? This was quite awful. Harry's voice was so magnified by rage that even at this distance she clearly heard some of the words he was shouting.

“... Get out of here ... you bloody little swine ... I'll break your damn neck...”

Despite her horror and disgust, Clementine couldn't help but walk forward to see what was happening. Harry was at least making a supreme effort to pull himself together: he had turned from his cousin but was still beside himself with rage. She watched Teddy brush grass and dirt from his trousers, saw him shrug his shoulders back into his coat and reach into his pocket for his cigarette case, bending his head to light a cigarette. He threw a nervous look at Harry and, reassured that his fury had passed, sauntered off through the boathouse garden-gate into the orchard and disappeared in the direction of the adjoining stable block as if nothing in the world had happened. Clementine was aware that her heart was beating rapidly and her throat felt tight and dry.

She was not so naïve that she didn't understand that young men sometimes fought, but she imagined that by their early twenties they would surely have outgrown adolescent posturing and moments of mad violence. She was frightened to see her considerate and civilized son behave so brutally, and couldn't begin to imagine how Teddy could have had such a profound and ugly effect on him. Something had gone quite terribly wrong between them. She stood still for a moment, trying to make sense of what she had seen. She fervently hoped this was the end of their quarrel and not the beginning of something more disturbing.

## Chapter Three

When Clementine came downstairs to join their guests before dinner, the red drawing room was thronged with glossy, glittering, and impressively attired men and women, all of them the product of the minute attentions of their valets and maids. She briefly tuned in to her husband's conversation with Colonel Jack Ambrose and Sir Hugo Waterford—on Purdy's or Holland's for guns—and quickly walked farther into the room.

There was an exclamation and a shout of laughter from her son, Harry, and she turned to see him with Oscar Barclay, Ellis Booth, and Lucinda Lambert-Lambert in a tight group at the far end of the room, having the time of their lives. How loud they were! What on earth could they be drinking? She signaled to Hollyoak not to serve them any more. At the rate they were going, they would be pickled by midnight.

Turning away, she crossed the room to where Lady Agatha Booth sat in a low chair, her large square head supporting a heavy Victorian tiara of dingy diamonds. On her lap she clutched a little dog of the sort of breed that had a squashed and crumpled face, and on either side of her stood her eighteen-year-old twin daughters. Pansy and Blanche were casting yearning looks in the direction of Harry and Oscar but not daring to leave their mother's side.

"Clemmy darling, how lovely..." Constance Ambrose, pretty, diminutive, and all shining gold curls, looked up gratefully at Clementine's arrival and patted the sofa next to her. Lady Harriet Lambert-Lambert, large, stately, and handsome, turned her dark head and shot her a look of exaggerated resignation. Clementine assumed that she had interrupted one of Lady Booth's pronouncements.

"... I simply won't go to that dreadful play, it's ridiculous and unbelievable; a cockney barrow-girl can't be coached to act and speak like a lady. These things cannot be taught, they are bred-in." With a large gloved hand Lady Booth indicated her daughters and the generations of marriage to cousins they represented. Clementine could see out of the tail of her eye that Harriet's shoulders were shaking.

"I nearly wore my new Fortuny this evening, deep yellow, such a gorgeous shade." This from Constance, who was no doubt anxious to divert from a lecture on well-bred young girls, thought Clementine.

"I avoid yellow, such a strident color and only looks well with a swarthy complexion. Oh my dear, what has Gertrude Waterford got on, she looks quite half dressed!" Lady Waterford was a favorite of Clementine and she quickly glanced over to see what her friend could have done to cause such an exclamation from Lady Booth.

Gertrude Waterford, who always looked to Clementine as if she were made of alabaster, ivory, and

silver-gilt, was wearing a magnificent narrow dress of filmy, indigo silk that elegantly but clearly whispered *Paul Poiret*. It was cut so low at the bosom and back that it was evident she could not possibly be wearing a corset of any kind whatsoever. She reclined against the cushions on her sofa, eyes half closed, as Lord Albert Booth broke away from his conversation and bent over her to light her cigarette in its amber quill. If Gertrude was surprised by such close proximity in public she made no sign, and Clementine could have sworn that Lord Booth's hand brushed lightly against Gertrude's upper arm. Lord Booth, usually ebullient with charm and charisma, was uncharacteristically subdued this evening, Clementine thought, as she watched him seat himself at a respectable distance from Gertrude on her sofa and start a conversation about a mutual friend who was interested in buying his mare.

Clementine smiled to herself and looked across the room in time to see Teddy Mallory's late arrival. Sleek and well groomed as always, she thought, as she watched him saunter across the room to talk to Lady Shackleton. *How do some people do that?* she asked herself. *Behave as if nothing has happened at all, when they have been given a thorough trouncing just a few hours ago.* Teddy was standing with his fair head bowed as he listened to Lady Shackleton's account of her recent dinner party; Clementine was close enough to hear Olive quite clearly.

"He was just about the dullest man you could possibly imagine, so dreadfully reserved, it was an awful disappointment."

"What? Who was?" It seemed that Teddy was unimpressed. He made no effort to conceal his boredom. In fact he almost yawned. *How impertinent he could be sometimes,* thought Clementine. She rose to her feet as Olive answered.

"Kenneth Grahame, you know, *The Wind in the Willows*. He ate a tremendous amount at dinner and seemed quite disinterested in all of us." Olive Shackleton laughed good-naturedly at her failure to recognize a dud in lion's clothing.

"Probably speechless because he was shot at three times in his bank." Teddy was obviously enjoying his own inner joke, and Clementine decided to make sure it remained that way. She steered Harriet across the room toward Olive.

"Teddy dear, how on earth do you know a thing like that?" Olive Shackleton exclaimed as they joined her. "Was he shot at because of the book?"

"Well, I hardly think so. No, this was a socialist demonstration of some sort at the Bank of England. I think he just happened to get in the way." Teddy looked around for someone else to talk to and had already turned away as Clementine and Lady Harriet joined them.

"I simply loved *The Wind in the Willows*." Clementine narrowed her eyes at Teddy, touching him on his elbow, insisting he turn back into the conversation. "An utterly enchanting poem to pastoral England; Althea and I had such fun deciding who among our friends were Ratty, Moley, Badger, and Toad. The Wild Wooders of course are all up in London shooting at people in the Bank of England." Clementine laughed, inviting them to play the game with her.

"Oh ... I see ... well, that's easy," said Teddy, and he lifted his voice to include everyone within earshot. "Lord Booth is the Badger with his silver-and-black hair, and those terrifically broad shoulders; but, there again, perhaps not. Badger was an uncouth, old country bachelor and Lord Booth

is evidently not interested in ... bachelor ways.”

Clementine glanced over at Lady Waterford on her sofa, exhaling a thin stream of smoke over the top of Lord Booth’s head as Teddy, far too pleased with himself, continued.

“Sir Wilfred Shackleton is Mole—dreaming of adventure on his dig in Egypt.” Olive nodded her head in agreement. “So who is Ratty? The poet, the true countryman, immersed in his love of the bucolic paradise that is England?”

Teddy lifted his voice to be heard and Clementine discerned a slight sharp edge: “Well of course, my uncle, Lord Montfort, is undoubtedly Ratty,” Teddy laughed, “which leaves us with Lord Booth as Badger—at heart a dedicated bachelor.”

There followed one of those natural pauses that sometimes occurs among large gatherings, and Clementine was horrified that Teddy’s voice had carried clearly across the room.

“And you, Teddy, undoubtedly you are the Toad.” This came from Lady Waterford, reclining on her sofa. “A conceited, puffed-up, and naughty little Toady.” Uncertain laughter greeted this, and Teddy made an acquiescing bow, but the expression in his eyes was not kind, and neither was there a smile on his face.

Clementine was utterly grateful when Ellis Booth lifted his voice to distract attention from his father and fill an awkward gap.

“Did any of you hear about the Derby today? Apparently, some deranged woman, wearing the suffragette flag wrapped around her middle, threw herself under the king’s horse at Epsom this afternoon.” This news had inevitable reactions.

“Which horse ... oh, surely not Anmer?”

“Mind you, that horse didn’t have a hope of winning!”

“What’s wrong with these ruddy women?” Lord Booth’s fruity tones were dropped in favor of an outraged male bellow, but he was careful to stand up and rejoin Lord Montfort and Jack Ambrose.

Clementine glanced over at Hollyoak. There passed between them the silent understanding that perhaps there had been enough parlor games on empty stomachs for one evening, and Hollyoak announced, “Dinner is served, m’lady!”

Lord Montfort offered his arm to Lady Booth, and Clementine took a quick look around to make sure their procession into dinner observed precedence, and saw Lucinda Lambert-Lambert standing at the far end of the room, her back to everyone.

She walked across to her and put her arm lightly around the girl’s waist. “Lucinda, dear, are you unwell?” She looked searchingly into Lucinda’s face. Had the girl had too much to drink? Lucinda straightened herself in the traditional schoolroom response to authority.

“So sorry, Lady Montfort, quite all right, thank you.” The expression on her face conveyed distress and hurt. Clementine was reminded of the stunned expression of a child who has been too harshly chastised.

“My dear, you need some fresh air straightaway, so stuffy in this room when the weather is this close.”

Even as she said this, Clementine hesitated over the wisdom of handing Lucinda over to Teddy, who was waiting to take her in to dinner; the girl was clearly upset and Teddy had rather a cruel

streak. *Oh dear, she thought, this is unfortunate but there's no one else and I must go in.*

“Teddy, take Lucinda outside for a moment for some air, she'll be fine then, won't you, my dear?” The girl nodded her reassurance, and Teddy tucked her arm into his as he escorted her from the room.

Walking behind them with Lord Booth, Clementine heard Teddy say as they walked across the hall, “Poor old Lucy, such a dreadful shock, come and tell me all about it,” and watched Lucinda jerk her arm free of Teddy's and cross the hall ahead of him, ignoring him completely when he caught up with her to open the door to the terrace.

*Well now, Clementine said to herself. This is certainly rather interesting. Is everyone upset with Teddy today?*

## Chapter Four

After dinner the Iyntwood house party reassembled in full costume and crowds of guests arrived to join them for the ball, filling flower-laden rooms with a shifting carnival of colors. Standing in the hall with her husband, Clementine's sense of occasion was completely gratified as they welcomed their friends, dressed in a vivid array of flamboyant outfits representing half the world's monarchy, at one time or another, as well as their more infamous subjects. Music cascaded from the ballroom, and she reminded herself to tell the orchestra to include more modern dances. Pretty paper lanterns were lit to illuminate gardens, pavilions, and hidden walks to the lake. Hollyoak and his brigade of footmen offered champagne throughout the house and on the terrace. Amid flickering golden candlelight, the creamy scent of roses and the chatter of voices lifted in greeting and delighted laughter, the Talbots' summer ball was fully under way.

\* \* \*

After the ball, Clementine turned over in bed just as dawn was breaking, barely an hour since she had come up to her room. The new day was obscured behind heavy clouds and she heard the rattle of rain outside her open windows. As the ball had drawn to an end, heavy black clouds had started to roll in from the southwest, sealing in the thick, humid night air. Clementine usually enjoyed untroubled sleep and she wondered what had awakened her as she lay listening to the rain.

There was a blue-white flare of lightning, and out of childhood habit she counted, one-one thousand, two-two thousand, followed by a heavy crackle and thump of thunder as the storm moved rapidly toward them. She hopped up and stood in the window closest to her bed. As if the thunder had been a signal, the rain tripled its efforts and smashed straight down, hitting the terrace with the force of a monsoon.

"Poor roses, they'll be a mess tomorrow," Clementine said as she closed the casement window, scrambled back into bed, and snuggled up to her sleeping husband.

Another flicker of lightning lit the room and this time the crash of thunder was immediate as the storm moved in overhead. She was vaguely aware of a sense of foreboding, as if she had forgotten to take care of something. The greatest social event of her year had exceeded all her expectations and she should have slept soundly, delighted with the outcome. But Clementine didn't feel particularly elated, or even complacently relieved at its success, instead there was a restless unease and she found herself anxious and wakeful. To distract herself as she waited for sleep to come, she settled back among the pillows with her arms crossed behind her head and sought to replay the highlights of her ball. It had been a resounding success. An event fit for London's society columns to gush over the details; an

invitation to her summer ball had become one of the most sought-after occasions of the season. Smiling to herself in the dark, she remembered Constance Ambrose in a ravishing costume, representing strumpets through the ages, surrounded by admirers. Lord Booth as Bluff King Hal, whirling partner after partner, except for Gertrude Waterford, who, with her inevitable élan, had chosen to dress as la Dame aux Camélias, obviously inspired by Sarah Bernhardt; Lady Staunton got up in her favorite costume, which was supposed to be an accurate reproduction of Madame de Pompadour from Boucher's portrait, and miraculously for once not wearing her famous diamonds; and with an inward giggle she remembered Lady Booth as Britannia, a gleaming bronze Corinthian helmet clamped firmly down over her eyes, champing slowly and deliberately through a generous plate of lobster salad.

Clementine relaxed her jaw, let her shoulders sag, and consciously slowed her breathing as she drifted back into a deep, dreamless sleep.