

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

DEATH OF A
Dishonorable
GENTLEMAN



A MYSTERY

TESSA ARLEN

TESSA ARLEN



Death of a Dishonorable Gentleman



MINOTAUR BOOKS
A THOMAS DUNNE BOOK
NEW YORK



The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at:**

us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.

To Chris—the love of my life

Acknowledgments

I first described my idea for this story to my husband in 2009, and he told me to stop talking and start writing. Without his unwavering belief that I am a writer there would be no book.

It is with deepest gratitude that I thank Chris Arlen; my daughters, Chloe Nichol, Toby Horvitch, and Georgia Arlen; my sister, Deborah Bell, and my dear friend Sandy Kirsopp—their willingness to read many iterations of my original manuscript and offer me nothing but encouragement to continue was kindness unto itself.

Kevan Lyon, the most diligent and generous of agents, took me to the next step and deserves my greatest thanks. Without her help and professional guidance I would still be pestering my family to listen to yet another chapter.

At St. Martin's Press, grateful thanks to: my talented and insightful editor, Toni Kirkpatrick; her hardworking editorial assistant, Jennifer Letwack; David Rotstein, who gave me the book jacket I hoped for; and to my publicist, Shailyn Tavella.

Thanks also go to Lindsay Spence, Deanna Raybourn, Anna Lee Huber, and Christine Trent for the generosity of their time and the kindness of their words; and to Lisa Samuelson of Samuelson Communications, who initiated me into the mystifying world of social media, and to Jen Pennington of Rhizome Designs and James McGrath of McGrath Media for my beautiful Web site.

And last of all to my parents. Thank you for my outstandingly eccentric childhood and for teaching me, quite unintentionally, to be independent and open to new experiences no matter what they were, and for the valuable quality of emotional resilience. May I remain forever an optimist!

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 downstairs 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 Lyntwood'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