

THE KILLER'S DASTARDLY INTRIGUE

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERIES

BOOK SIX



PATRICIA RICE



ONE



OCTOBER 1816

FORTESCUE: WEDNESDAY

"Mr. Birdwhistle, sir, if you might leave your students to their lesson, we are having a . . . consultation. . . and require impartial opinion." Lavender Marlowe, the youngest female in the late Earl of Wycliffe's household, clutched her hands until her knuckles whitened.

Struck by about the unlikelihood of anyone in this household consulting anyone, much less a mere tutor, "Birdwhistle," set down his book. Anything that upset Miss Lavender, upset him. "Of course, Miss Marlowe."

With an excess of the Wycliffe family's blond beauty, the young modiste wore wispy side curls, delicate muslin, and a lacy fichu that almost concealed her sumptuous bosom. She'd be an Incomparable had she graced London's ballrooms. Her thick, long eyelashes were artfully designed to conceal or widen big, silver-blue eyes, had she been inclined to flirtation.

Like the rest of the late Earl of Wycliffe's eccentric family, however, Miss Marlowe had little patience with idle dalliance.

Generally, she was too busy to give him the time of day. Oddly, her indifference was what appealed.

Unfortunately, as the youngest son of the Duke of Castlefield, Lord Terence Fortescue Dacre, commonly known as Birdwhistle, would lose his head if he did more than admire a Wycliffe by-blow.

Fort instructed his mathematical geniuses on their assignment and followed Miss Marlowe into the dark attic. Down the corridor, in one of the manor's medieval towers, the children in the public schoolroom chanted their multiplication tables.

At nine, Fort's talented students were well beyond simple mathematics, but he feared he had failed to accomplish his goal of teaching them to adequately socialize—as well as anything else he'd intended in the year of anonymity he had given himself. It was time to move on. To what. . . he didn't know.

In the nursery under construction, Fort made his bows to the chamber's other occupants.

"We have a dilemma." A classic beauty, Miss Dorothea Talbot was slender, well-curved, with champagne-blond hair, vivid pansy-purple eyes—and an heiress. She was just the sort the duke expected Fort to be courting.

He had about as much interest in Thea as he did in law, religion, or the military, which was to say, zero. Thank the heavens, his five older brothers had already established themselves in those professions far better than he could.

The lady handed over an expensive sheet of stationery.

"We have a *disagreement*," Miss Talbot's constant companion, the Comte Arnaud Lavigne growled.

Not part of the late earl's extended family, Arnaud was nearly twice Fort's breadth and a head taller. A war survivor and artist, he and the heiress had apparently come to an arrangement that did not involve marriage. Priory Manor accepted almost every eccentricity except crime.

Conscious of the beautiful modiste's anxiety, Fort unfolded the creased paper and recognized the ridiculously poor handwriting at once. Eyebrows raised, he scanned the hurried message.

Attacked by assassins in riot. Need physician, safe place to recover.

Directed farm wagon to Priory. It was signed *Weston* and dated late yesterday.

Monty? *Assassins*? His eldest brother, the very proper Montague, Earl of Weston, the duke's *heir*. . . No. Just no.

Choking on shock, Fort belatedly realized the others watched him anxiously. They thought him a tutor. How could he even explain. . .

"This is the noble who has brought the misfortune on us once before!" Arnaud growled, snatching back the missive. "We are a household of women and children. All the gentlemen are away and the ladies wish to extend the invitation to rebellious mobs!" The solitary artist did not often speak and his English slipped when agitated.

Fort did a quick mental inventory of Priory Manor's inhabitants and realized with alarm that Arnaud was quite correct. Captain Huntley had taken their lawyer and several other of the gentlemen to Birmingham. They had learned it would be simpler to have Gravesyde legally recognized as a village if the late earl's estate were annexed by its neighbor, Worcestershire, rather than remain isolated as a medieval exclave of Shropshire. The isolation had invited villainy for too long.

Those gentlemen not consulting with magistrates were visiting their own estates to oversee harvests or were taking final journeys before winter set in. Arnaud, as a French emigre, had no estate in England and nowhere else to go. Fort was the only other gentleman in residence.

Thea Talbot hastily added, "Arnaud is being ridiculously cautious, but if you believe we are in any way endangering the boys, we thought you should be consulted."

Normally, with his experience as a French aristocrat, Arnaud was more than sufficient to stand in his English cousin's place as head of household. They had no reason to consult a mere tutor.

Assassins, on the other hand, with two wealthy heirs at risk. . .

He needed time to think, but the others waited expectantly. An heiress, an artist, and a seamstress. . . None of them had the knowledge he did but they had no reason to know that.

By Jove, how could this. . . Fort tried not to rip the letter from

Arnaud and shout for a horse. Damnation, he'd thought the danger was *here*, in Gravesyde. Instead, he should have been in London all this time?

Wide-eyed, young Lavender gripped her fingers in a form of anxious prayer. "Surely, we must offer Lord Weston our protection? Captain Huntley would expect it."

As much as he'd love to fall under her spell and agree. . . Fort couldn't. The captain would quite sensibly agree that entertaining an injured earl with a mob on his trail was insanely dangerous in an unprotected household.

The captain's *wife*, on the other hand, like Thea and Lavender, was one of the late earl's heirs, and she would agree with her soft-hearted cousins. They might ask, to be certain of her response, except Clare Huntley had just produced the captain's son and should not be disturbed.

All Wycliffe's descendants were female except the two boys across the hall. They could not inherit the title, but they were the future heirs of the earl's trust, which included the manor. Until then, the ladies were essentially in charge—which meant Thea and Lavender, not the Frenchman.

Fort met Arnaud's glare with assurance. "Normally, I would agree with Monsieur Lavigne. Gravesyde has not suffered the riots afflicting so much of the kingdom because we are too small and have no authority worth protesting. Inviting revolution to our doors. . ."

And here he must throw off his cloak of invisibility and reveal his cowardly deception. His year was more than up. He'd hoped to settle the boys in school and quietly depart, but. . . If he must be cast out, he might as well do it for good cause.

Hiding a wince of regret, Fort gestured at the letter. "I fear the reason the Earl of Weston is requesting aid is that, as his brother, he trusts me to provide it." He bowed to the ladies. "Lord Terrence Fortescue Dacre, at your service."

Arnaud crossed his arms and glowered. The Frenchman had experience in not trusting. The ladies. . . appraised him with suspicion.

The beautiful modiste did not appear pleased. She drew away as if he'd introduced an obnoxious odor. Fort sighed in regret.

"Not Birdwhistle? Of course not. No one is called *Birdwhistle*." Thea, the sophisticated London heiress, was the first to speak. Outside of the dowagers, she was the only one of the late earl's otherwise impoverished descendants who had ever set foot in society and might know Fort's family.

The other Priory inhabitants knew the Duke of Castlefield, his elderly father, as a bibliophile and occasional visitor, but even the duke was unaware of his youngest son's presence at the manor. Now was not the time to explain the reasons Thea had never met Fort in London's social whirl.

"Weston is nearly twice your age," she added. "You bear no resemblance."

Fort laughed dryly. "Not precisely twice. He would resent that. I am son of wife number three. I resemble the duke in his youth. Weston, however, resembles his maternal grandfather, a six-foot Scotsman. He was already out of university and terrorizing society by the time I was born. We scarcely know each other, but he wrote my recommendation for this position."

"A young pup like you. . ." Arnaud expressed his doubt better with a Gallic gesture.

"Please, ask Minerva Upton. She has recognized me." Minerva's father was the duke's steward. As the curate's wife, she had questioned his presence. As the daughter of a former army officer, she kept silent at his request.

His audience's eyes widened at the mention of the manor's petite but formidable librarian. One of them would be at the parsonage within the hour. Fort had to convince them that secrecy must be maintained before that happened.

"We are much the same age, Miss Talbot," Fort continued. "I was scarcely twelve when I tutored one of my older brothers and Weston's. . ." He could not say bastards in front of the ladies. The duke's rages often erupted because none of his sons had produced *legitimate* heirs. "Children. I was a poor student, suffering the same social afflictions as the boys." He nodded toward the schoolroom

containing the geniuses. "But I lived for books and was able to help my brother and Weston's sons, who suffered the same reading difficulty as Miss Marlowe."

Lavender blushed but continued to eye him as if he were an insect. Everyone knew he'd been trying to teach her to read, but they seldom had enough time. His fault. He had little experience with females and did not dare linger in her presence for fear of making an ass of himself.

"Because I suffer a similar impairment to that of the boys, I recognized their difficulty, although I have outgrown much of mine with practice. People often think us stupid and slow. We are not. We simply function *differently*." Although this was probably more than he'd said to anyone in a year, he'd had lots of practice in explaining.

"Weston has children?" Lavender finally asked, dismissing his painful explanations in her concern for his brother's family.

Also dismissing his explanations, Thea looked appalled at his nod of agreement. In unison, the ladies turned on the glowering Frenchman. "The earl has *children*! He cannot endanger his family by going home!"

"You rather he endangered *ours*?" Arnaud demanded, sensibly. He turned to Fort. "You understand, do you not? The manor, it is full of women and infants! Surely he has other places he might go."

Fort gestured at the letter. "One, he is badly injured and already on the way. Two, it is precisely because few are aware of his connection to the Priory that he is safe here. Three, he knows I am a tactician and can conceal his presence. And four, he knows we have a superb physician on call because she's saved his life before."

"Tactician?" Lavender asked, as if he'd just called himself a magician.

Fort hoped her astonishment was admiration, but it would evaporate with reality. His brothers had called his obsessive mind far worse. "When you have five older, much larger, brothers who insist on war games, you learn tactics to survive."

Much as Lavender had survived the circumstances of her birth, but he didn't offer to explain. He was already formulating a plan.

"What, precisely, has an assassin to do with a riot?" Arnaud demanded. "Rioters do not normally follow a target far."

Fort gestured at the letter. "He had no time to explain. We must take his word."

Thea took the simmering Frenchman's arm and patted it. "After what you have suffered, Arnaud, we understand your loathing of revolution. If we are to avoid the same in England, we must work to avert it. Weston is one of the good landlords. He'll be duke some day, in a position to institute change. This is our opportunity to make a difference."

Despising politics, Fort had only thought of his brother's welfare, but she'd found the key to her consort's heart.

Reluctantly, Arnaud nodded and pinned Fort with a black glare. "Before I send the letters to the others, demanding their return, what do you suggest?"

"A bad case of measles."

TWO



ARNAUD

AFTER YEARS OF PRISON AND DEPRIVATION DUE TO REVOLUTION, ARNAUD had lost all confidence in society. He wasn't any more social than the heirs or the tutor—a *duke's* son!

The mild-mannered, undistinguished tutor working in a dismal attic in the middle of rural nowhere—the son of a duke! Why wasn't the lackwit carousing the streets of London, wenching and gambling like all the other useless aristocrats?

Arnaud had once been one of those worthless gentlemen. He almost had to admire this runt, except what the devil did Birdwhistle—*Lord Terrence!*—think he could make of himself as a miserably paid tutor? That didn't speak highly of his tactical talents.

But his lordship's decision to declare a quarantine and remove himself and the boys from the household had been impressively fast thinking. Measles killed. An epidemic might wipe out half the village. It could kill the new babe. No one would come near them for days.

Rolling up the boys' mattresses, Arnaud had to approve as the young tutor spouted orders that had the recalcitrant child geniuses and the independent females obediently packing books and papers.

"Carry the cots to the empty east wing," the duke's son commanded, while packing his valise. "We can maintain the illusion of quarantine by using the rear tower stairs and banning everyone else from them. They are seldom used anyway."

An experienced interior designer accustomed to rearranging furnishings, Thea pointed Arnaud toward the necessary schoolroom items, then nodded and looked around. "Lord Weston is a large man. He will need more than a cot. How do we move a bed without the maids questioning why we need it?"

"Tell them the guest bed is easier to carry than mine," Tactical Terrence suggested.

Lord Terrence Fortescue Dacre. Arnaud snorted again as he tied mattresses. Deuced good thing his lordship wasn't large and didn't require more than a cot that could be carried with the ones belonging to the children. "Claiming the east wing for the boys is one thing. How do you plan on smuggling in *le earl* without the entire village knowing?"

The duke's son, apparently having already considered this, wasn't fazed. "The service entrance under the east wing. The letter says he's traveling by farm cart. His driver can haul him in the kitchen door as if he's a load of potatoes. I'll take him upstairs—if he can walk. If not, I fear I'll need your assistance, Comte Lavigne."

"*Arnaud*, please. Formalities do not suit subterfuge." Arnaud hefted his load and waited for the ladies to finish folding clothing.

"Fort, then, please. Dacre covers too many of us, and I despise being called Terry." The tutor shut his battered valise.

Lord Fortescue fit him better, but Arnaud didn't argue. "Where comes the Birdwhistle?"

"Ask Minerva," the lordling replied in disgust.

The curate's wife had a lot of explaining to do.

"Food." Lavender Marlowe, the ambitious, nineteen-year-old modiste who had started her own sewing manufactory, closed the bag she'd packed without disturbing a single piece of her delicate frippery. "Two small boys do not require as much food as a very large earl. Won't the kitchen wonder?"

Arnaud had worked for months in the same ballroom as Laverder. The intelligence behind her blond curls didn't surprise him.

"Starve a cold, feed the measles," Thea suggested, with a grim smile.

"*Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and caldron bubble.*" Young Oliver quoted the text he'd been monotonously reading earlier.

"*Fire burn, caldron bubble!*" Thea cried, prodding them on. "Beware of witches and spirits that walk the night!"

Chunky Davy Talbot scowled at his sister. "That is not how it reads."

Arnaud had his arms full or he'd hug Thea. Her family had starved her young brother at one point, before attempting to have Davy placed in an institution for not being the charming heir they wanted. In the security of the Priory and his sister's care, the lad had almost stopped his habit of keeping food in his pocket to eat whenever situations became taxing. Arnaud knew Thea fretted over this episode setting him back. Davy didn't adapt well to change.

"Since Lady Elsa has left for her estate, her kitchen staff is in such a *panique* that they will scarce notice should we walk out with the side of beef." For the sake of the children, Arnaud tried to be reassuring, even though he thought they were all mad as hatters. But then, Wycliffe descendants had a pattern of abnormal behavior over the centuries. "*Très bien*, boys, lead on, show the way."

Determined and unsmiling, the two youngsters gathered up their boxes. The attics were their favorite playground, and they knew their way around the medieval garret overflowing with centuries of discarded rubbish. At the rear of the square Priory keep, the garrets opened into a connecting hall between two heavily traveled, 17th century tower staircases.

Crossing that hall, the boys entered the unfamiliar territory of the new east wing, added in the late 1700s by the last viscount. Maids slept on the attic level, but the manor didn't have many servants living in, and the ones they had stayed busy during the day. No one was about as they carried the schoolroom's contents past sleeping cubicles to the new, rarely used tower at the rear. The rear towers were only built as staircases.

The mostly unfurnished east wing had been abandoned since the death of the late viscountess—Arnaud's great aunt—years ago. The housekeeper hadn't wasted much time here. They left footprints in the dust of the tower's attic landing. Arnaud descended first, so his hair caught any cobwebs. At least this staircase, unlike the old ones, had glazed windows for light.

They took the stairs past the family floor wing where Clare and his cousin Hunt had established a suite on the far end. Disturbing Clare and the new infant was to be avoided at all costs.

"Put the boys in one of the rooms facing the drive," the tutor ordered as they tramped down. "Activity on the drive will deter intruders, but the household can see them working and know they're well. The guest bed needs to go into a room on the courtyard side, where our presence won't be noticed. We'll ask about locking the courtyard gate and keeping hounds in there."

The normally quiet teacher was snapping orders like a general. Arnaud snorted and accepted the task of beast of burden.

"I wish to notify Rafe." On the ground floor landing, Arnaud hefted the mattresses to his other shoulder and made his demands. "An innkeeper, he will notice strangers. And we must ask for increased patrols."

"The bailiff is an honest man." Terrence the Tactician wrinkled his smooth brow, slowly appraising this change to his plot. "Perhaps tell him we have received threats or messages that insurrectionists might be using our unpaved lanes to conceal their progress? I hate to force him to lie if anyone asks about Weston, but he'll do everything possible to protect the boys."

"Fair, for now. Your brother may be out of danger now. In my experience, the revolutionaries find new targets hourly." Arnaud spoke with the cynicism of experience.

Earlier, Thea had run down to the kitchen to retrieve the butler's keys, but her efforts to unlock access to the unused wing proved futile. Arnaud had to take the key and jam it harder into the ancient lock, while kicking the old door open. Fire safety wasn't a concern on this unused floor, intruders were.

With new regions to explore, the boys dumped their boxes and

sped down the wide, dusty corridor. The housekeeper didn't allow this wing to become cobweb-ridden like the tower, but she didn't have sufficient staff to adequately maintain unused chambers.

While the young ones explored, Thea more sensibly and knowledgeably chose rooms. Using her talent for designing interiors, she had scavenged much of the scarcely-used furniture the wing had once possessed to employ elsewhere.

Arnaud dropped the mattresses in the room she chose for the boys. All the ceilings had been elaborately plastered, gilded, or painted so it was impossible to tell what any of the chambers had originally been, but they were all public. The private rooms were upstairs, where the the captain and his wife slept. The late viscount had gone bankrupt before the new wings been fully furnished. At least this room had draperies, however moth-eaten.

"I told Nettie to spread the word about the boys having measles." Thea darted across the hall to the courtyard side. "I'm fairly sure she doesn't believe me but she'll tell the staff."

Nettie was Mrs. Upton, the housekeeper and curate's mother, but much of the household followed the curate's habit of addressing his stepmother familiarly. It helped the staff separate her from Minerva, the curate's wife and noisier, younger, Mrs. Upton.

"That will mean Minerva here in two minutes," Arnaud said dryly. "What do you tell her and the other ladies?"

Grimly, the tutor studied the chamber Thea chose for the earl. "I know Minerva well. If we must tell her, she will spin webs of deceit even I cannot match. We'll leave her to decide how much to say. You are aware her father was not only a colonel, but one of Wellington's spies?"

Arnaud was not aware. He'd spent a great deal of effort trying not to be aware. It generally saved time and trouble when all he wished to do was paint. "That explains much. And your brother, he knows she is here?"

Fortescue shrugged his slender shoulders. "It's hard to say how much Weston knows about anything. The reason people shoot at him is for his propensity to stick his rather large nose in where it does not belong."

"He's been shot at before?" Miss Marlowe exclaimed in horror.

"He's the eldest and dictatorial, which made him a target for family and friends. We've regularly brutalized him at one time or another. He's been shot at a time or two at dawn by men he doesn't call friends." His lordship, *le* tutor, checked the window and shutter locks. "Assassination, however, is new."

"And inexplicable, if he is one of the good landowners, as you say," Arnaud was forced to point out.

"Yes, that's been bothering me," the tutor admitted.

Having had enough of this subversive comradery, Arnaud returned to the matter at hand. "Thea, show me the bed to steal, and I shall take it apart." He'd been a hermit too long to emerge himself in a cadre of young do-gooders who were bound to end up in trouble. He was starting to feel old.

His sympathetic inamorata laid a hand on his arm, knowing how to gentle his irascibility. Understanding he was being a curmudgeon, he let her lead him out of the new wing, into the old manor, and up to the family and guest floor, where wide stairs made furniture moving easier.

Thea was an ethereal creature unlike anyone he'd ever known. He should never have taken her to his bed. Only, being the contrary female she was, she'd practically shoved him into it. She hadn't had to push hard. In all his misbegotten life he'd never encountered anyone or anything so extraordinary as Thea.

For very many reasons, the complications of her family and wealth prevented marriage until she was twenty-five. He did his best to resist her. Unfortunately or not, now that they worked in the gallery together, he was finding it increasingly difficult to resist. Only the constraints of time and family kept them apart.

"You are having second and third thoughts, aren't you?" Thea led him past the usually occupied family bedchambers. With so many traveling, the corridor seemed silent and empty at this hour. Only the dowagers appeared to be at home.

"I reserve judgment until I meet this earl. I would like more confirmation of insurrection and assassination. And I am not fond of deceit." Arnaud knew he sounded as grumpy as his cousin Hunt.

But he was well out of his element here. He preferred the seclusion of his tower studio.

"I'll write to a few friends, find out what I can. I am still in shock at Mr. Birdwhistle's—Lord Fortescue's—revelations. I sensed that he wasn't quite what he ought to be, but the boys adore him, and he seems so sensible. . ."

"There is a story there." Arnaud traipsed into the hall in the gentlemen's guest wing, startling a maid with a feather duster.

"Best stay away from us," Thea called. "The boys have measles. Have you had them before?"

The maid shook her head in alarm.

"Lord Greybourne's brother died when he brought measles home. It is a quite terrible disease. Best not to take chances. Wait until we're gone before finishing your task here." Thea unlatched the door to an empty chamber as the maid dashed for the service stairs.

"That should spread the rumors far and wide. We shall be fortunate if half the staff does not decide they are ill and stay home." Arnaud eyed the massive tester bed. "I am to take *this* apart?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his jaw. "I can think of better uses."

He growled, torn between tossing her on the bed or out the door.

The Killer's Dastardly Intrigue

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