

Excerpt from Chapter 4

“Tell me what you know of these murders,” Darcy insisted.

He and Cowan followed Matlock’s coach in Darcy’s Town carriage. “In truth, not much more than what I read in the newsprints.”

“I am only aware of what you shared a few moments prior,” Darcy admitted with a flare of unease. “I rushed from Derbyshire to Witney when I received Georgiana’s missive and then traveled on to London. I barely glanced at a newsprint in well over a week.”

Cowan’s expression hardened with practiced authority.

“The Vaughn family from the first murder ran a bakery near Wapping. Vaughn was until of late a mate upon a German sloop. The authorities identified no motives for the Vaughns’ deaths. Nothing appeared missing from the bakery shop. A locked box held what was likely the man’s take for the day.”

“Who discovered the bodies?”

He and Cowan had but a short journey to Bow Street, and Darcy meant to possess as many details as possible before Welch questioned Fitzwilliam.

“One of the Vaughns’ suppliers called early on during the middle of the night. The man claimed he found the door to the shop unlocked, but he could rouse no one, and so he hailed a night watchman. The sentry entered the establishment to discover Vaughn’s body behind a storage room door. Mrs. Vaughn and the child were on the third storey in the child’s nursery.”

“What of the sword?”

Cowan frowned.

“It was my understanding the authorities found the sword, but Richards and Parker acted as though they still searched for the weapon.”

Darcy’s heart gave a little stutter.

“You think they practice some sort of duplicitous means to trick the major general into an incriminating admission?”

The shadows of doubt darkened Cowan's eyes.

"I would despise to consider such a possibility, but a healthy outcry for the authorities to know an end to their investigations exists."

Darcy recognized Cowan to be rare among those employed by the various parishes and magistrates: Thomas Cowan held a heightened sense of honor.

"And the second murder?"

"An older couple several streets from the first," Cowan recounted. "Owners of a tavern. Well respected in the neighborhood. As with the first incident, their throats were slit, but the tavern owner's head was bashed in. It was the only major difference in the events. The newsprints are calling the culprit the 'East Side Slayer.' Both attacks were very violent crimes, executed by someone quite angry with the world."

Darcy considered his words before asking, "Someone...such as my *cousin*?"

Cowan's tone was full of pity.

"This questioning will not go well for the major general. Fitzwilliam's leaving his young wife to come to London, where he spent more than a week drinking away his sorrow will prove incriminating. As you expressed on more than one occasion, the public will not understand how a man of Fitzwilliam's reputation would desert his wife and child for no apparent reason. In addition, the major general's fight with the impression gang will exacerbate the situation. It is not often one man can fight off four well-trained abductors. Your cousin's expertise at fighting and killing will play against him."

Trepidation laced Darcy's tone.

"Then I must be present to protect the major general."

Cowan weighed his response.

"You must manage the earl's ire and protect your cousin while divining the truth. It will require all your wit. Welch will bar me from the session."

"I understand."

Cowan's warning hung heavy in the space between them.

“While you are within, I will determine if Welch’s men possess loose tongues,” Cowan assured.

* * *

Welch waved his hand in dismissal of the earl’s most recent objection.

“Richards tells me you hold no idea of the whereabouts of your sword. Is that correct, Major General?”

Edward glanced to Darcy. It took all of Matlock’s influence for Welch to permit Darcy’s and the earl’s presence.

“My cousin did not recall seeing it in my quarters when he discovered me at the Sephora.”

“Did you carry it with you when you departed Oxfordshire?” Welch asked in speculation.

Edward spoke with earnestness.

“I dressed in my uniform after I departed Yadkin Hall. I did not wish to alert Mrs. Fitzwilliam as to my plans to seek a new commission. I reasoned my rank would prove beneficial to my purpose, but I failed in my search. With the current peace, my skills are no longer in demand.”

“And what skills would those be, Major General?” Welch asked succinctly.

Darcy wagged his head to warn his cousin to guard his response.

“What any officer does,” Edward said with an unnatural strain in his voice.

“Make critical decisions. Take raw farmers and tradesmen and turn them into skilled soldiers.”

Darcy was grateful that Edward did not mention “killing,” but Darcy’s muscles flinched when Welch asked his next question.

“You never responded to my previous question. Did you wear your sword with your uniform?”

“If my recollections are to be trusted, then yes. Such matters are instinctive after so many years of service.”

“Yet, you are not certain. Am I correct, Major General?” Welch pressed.

Scowling, Edward expelled a sigh of irritation before favoring the Bow Street leader with a quelling glare.

“Permit me to answer all your questions at once, Welch. Mrs. Fitzwilliam did not know of my plans to depart for London. I acted upon impulse. Unfortunately, I overestimated my usefulness to the military. Afterwards, I buried my bruised pride in more drink than I should, and I possess only sketchy knowledge of what occurred after the first day. As I customarily wear my sword with my uniform, I will make the assumption I did so on the day I departed Oxfordshire. Perhaps, you should ask General Leigh-Hunt. He was my contact regarding a possible commission.”

Welch gestured to one of his men to record Leigh-Hunt’s name, but before the Bow Street leader could ask another question, Darcy interrupted.

“It is my understanding the authorities found a sword at the scene of Mr. Vaughn’s murder. Mayhap you could produce it and permit my cousin to identify whether it is his.”

Confusion crossed Edward’s features, but he followed Darcy’s lead. It was the way of them: a mutual trust in the other’s honor.

“My weapon was engraved at the tip—a gift from my brother, Viscount Lindale.”

Welch chastised with a faint hint of pique.

“The blade discovered at the Vaughns’ address was missing the bottom three inches. The attacker broke it against the door behind which Vaughn’s body was established.”

Matlock found his voice.

“If the culprit left the sword behind at the Vaughn household, what is this nonsense of a second attack? What weapon do you name, Welch?”

Welch bristled, and Darcy suspected the man planned to use the secreted information to manipulate the major general.

“The Thornes’ murders hold some differences,” the Bow Street leader admitted, “Yet, we are certain there is a connection between the crimes. The attacker is the same.”

The earl did not display the slightest relief: Bridled with resentment, Matlock expressed his opposition.

“Then what is the status of this investigation? It would appear Bow Street holds no jurisdiction over the Vaughns’ attacks, and I am assuming none exist for the second one.”

Darcy cringed. From what he knew of Saunders Welch, the man held a pronounced pride in his accomplishments and was not receptive to criticism of the Runners, a name the organization did not officially recognize.

“It is my understanding, Uncle, that there is some pressure from the Home Office and Lord Sidmouth,” Darcy offered in explanation.

Darcy watched in relief as Matlock heeded the warning in Darcy’s tone. Rather than continuing with his confrontational stance, the earl spoke with more control.

“It is important to discover the truth, Mr. Welch; yet, I know concern for my son’s reputation. I realize you showed great restraint in this matter; I am also aware if the major general was anyone less than my son, he would already be in custody.”

“Several others were jailed, questioned, and released,” Welch admitted.

Darcy spoke before his uncle could continue.

“And will my cousin join those who know such close scrutiny?” Exercising the perfect stall, Welch shuffled through a stack of papers on his desk.

“It would be unconscionable of me to permit the major general his freedom simply because Fitzwilliam possesses influential family and friends. Neither the Home Office nor the public would approve. If nothing less, the Shadwell police and those of the River Thames Office should possess the opportunity to ask their questions. I will have Richards and Parker escort the major general to Shadwell. “

Darcy nodded, more from acceptance than because he did not expect this outcome. His cousin's breathing shallowed. Darcy regarded their small gathering for several elongated seconds.

"If charges are brought, I assume the major general would be housed in Shadwell."

The thought of such a scheme sent Darcy's heart reeling.

"Shadwell claims dominance in this matter, but as the son of an earl, if incarcerated, the major general would be detained at New Prison."

With intent, Darcy kicked his uncle's ankle to warn against the protest upon Matlock's lips. Welch continued matter-of-factly.

"A coroner's inquest already sat for evidence in the Vaughns' incident."

Darcy asked the question resting on all their lips.

"And the verdict?"

"Willful murder by persons unknown."