

# FORAGING FOR MURDER

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A MARQUESS OF MORTIFORDE MYSTERY - BOOK 2

SIMON WHALEY

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THE MARQUESS OF MORTIFORDE  
MYSTERIES

Blooming Murder

Foraging for Murder



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## CHAPTER ONE

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Aldermaston peered through the camera's viewfinder, as his finger caressed the shutter button in anticipation. Rays of October early morning sunlight fingered their way perfectly through the trees.

“Come on, my beauty.” His tongue moistened his lips, his left hand grabbed the bottom corner of his lucky camouflage jacket, and his thumb stroked the hem from where a four-inch square piece had been ripped during a failed hit-and-run attempt. Originally, the jacket had earned its lucky status because of the wildlife photos he'd captured whilst wearing it. His wife, Lady Mortiforde, couldn't understand why he still called it his lucky jacket. The fact he'd survived a hit-and-run attempt seemed a pretty good reason in Aldermaston's eyes.

He rubbed its rough edge, as if conjuring up a genie to help him snare the image for which he was so desperate. There, sticking out from behind a tree in the densely forested Mortiforde Woods, about a hundred yards in front of the camouflage hide in which he was concealed, was a bottom. A bottom and two legs. Yet this was no ordinary bottom. It was hairy. To be precise, it was a long-haired hairy bottom. For

these were the hind quarters of the rare, and unique to Mortiforde Woods, long-haired fallow deer. For the first time in ten years, since starting his quest to capture images of this shy creature, he was moments away from his goal. He just needed the doe to take a few steps backwards, and come out from behind the thick Douglas fir trunk. A shaft of soft, amber dawn sunlight was ready to spotlight her among the browning autumnal bracken.

“Come on, girl,” he whispered. “Let’s see your face.”

His finger half-depressed the shutter button. The camera focussed for the moment that was about to come any second—

Crack! A twig snapped.

The deer bolted.

“No!” Aldermaston hissed. “Come back.”

He zoomed out wide, scouring the dense regimented Douglas fir trunks for any signs of the deer, or the idiot who’d frightened it.

“Lord Mortiforde! You in there?”

Startled, Aldermaston jumped from his folding stool, hitting his head on the hide’s plastic frame, long before his own six-foot frame was upright. His thinning brown hair offered no cushion against the hide’s harsh, plastic skeleton. He fell back onto his stool, rubbing the top of his head, and watched the hide’s doorway unzip.

“Good. You are here, Your Lordship.” A head pushed forward, topped by a green woollen cap, and sporting a white bushy handlebar moustache with ornately curved tips that looked strong enough to suspend a couple of fully-stocked bird feeders. “Jock Trotter said he’d seen you setting up your hide here the other day.”

Aldermaston sighed. What sort of camouflage hide was this when half the bloody town knew where he was? “Come in, Seth.” Aldermaston beckoned to an empty corner.

Seth Shepherd zipped up the hide’s door behind him and



pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his cracked and heavily creased Barbour jacket. “This has to stop, Your Lordship. Can’t you or the Borderer’s Guild do something? I will *not* be intimidated.” He thrust the note into Aldermaston’s face.

Since unexpectedly acquiring the title of Marquess of Mortiforde nearly two years ago, he’d become used to his time being taken up by the local townspeople as and when they had a problem. Even if it was at seven-thirty on a Friday morning, deep in the heart of Mortiforde Woods.

He unfurled the document and switched on his head torch. His middle-aged eyes were grateful.

***You have blood on your hands. The time has come for retribution.***

Aldermaston looked up at the septuagenarian butcher stooped over him. Seth’s white moustache and eyebrows gave added vibrancy to his sapphire eyes and the broken scarlet veins in his cheeks. “Who sent this?”

Seth waved his hand in the air. “Got to be that bloody Tibby Gillard from the Vegetarian Society. She’s been giving us all grief recently.”

“All?”

“Me. The Trotters. And Peggy Farmer.” Seth shuffled awkwardly. “Jock Trotter was cursing Tibby the other day, and Peggy Farmer happened to mention Tibby was making her feel guilty about doing an honest day’s work. We’re butchers, Your Lordship. We’ll always have blood on our hands. It’s part of the bloody job. I’ve nothing against vegetarians. Just those who want to stop me earning a living as I have a right to.”

Aldermaston folded the note and offered it back to Seth.

“Keep it. Can’t the Guild have a word with the council? They’ll listen to you. Environmental Health regulations apply to vegetarians just as much as us.” Seth snorted. “Peggy tells

me the Vegetarian Society is entering the Best Borderlandshire Burger competition this year. A *vegetarian* burger! Whatever next?"

Aldermaston slipped the note into his jacket pocket. "Her Ladyship and I occasionally eat vegetarian meals. You don't have to be one or the other. Look, Seth. I'm sure Environmental Health check every stall taking part in the food festival, and if the Mortiforde Vegetarian Society meet all the food safety criteria then there's nothing I can do."

He checked his watch. It was approaching eight. Blast! He was supposed to be dropping Harry off at school today. "Sorry Seth. I have to go. This is probably Tibby Gillard just winding you up. With your longevity in the butchery business, I'm surprised you're even worried by a vegetarian burger."

Seth sneered. "Depends how poncey that celebrity chef is who's opening the food festival. We get inundated with tourists from down south when we get a celebrity chef. Bloody clueless them southern softies. There's one London restaurant that charges fifty pounds for a cauliflower steak. Fifty quid for that stalk bit that most people throw away!"

Aldermaston chuckled. "And those Londoners buy a lot of your produce."

Seth winked. "That they do. And I charge them three times the price I charge locals, too."

Aldermaston grinned. "Just remember, without that huge influx of tourists, we wouldn't attract the celebrity chef. The festival is a huge economic boost to Mortiforde."

Seth nodded. "And for that, Your Lordship, we are forever grateful. Particularly to your father, God rest his soul. Amazing how it's grown over twenty years." He paused, then looked over both shoulders.

Aldermaston frowned. They were the only ones in the hide. "Rumour has it," Seth whispered, "this year's celebrity chef

is looking for suppliers. He's been awarded the catering contract for the Royal Garden parties."

Aldermaston rose from his stool, mirroring Seth's hunched position. "Bœuf Boucher has the catering contract for Buckingham Palace?"

"The garden parties," Seth clarified. "Think of the honour if Mr Boucher gave me a contract for my new burger I'm launching today. I could tell the world that Royal teeth regularly nibble my award-winning meat."

A sharp, ear-piercing squeal penetrated the hide, followed by a loud, frantic snorting. Suddenly, the bottom zip of the canvas door rose, as a quarter of a ton of Gloucester Old Spot pig forced its way in.

"Maisie, I told you to stay outside!" Seth grabbed the leather collar around the black-spotted, pink pig's neck and pulled her to a halt, but not before her nose had ploughed its way through half the woodland floor of Aldermaston's hide, knocking his tripod, camera bag and stool.

Aldermaston caught his camera in both hands just before it hit the floor. "Why have you brought a pig with you, Seth?"

"This is no pig."

Aldermaston frowned. It looked like a pig. It sounded like a pig. He pinched his nose.

"This is Maisie," Seth declared, patting her smartly on the side of her rump. "She gets me out in the fresh air every morning. Clever animals, pigs." He tapped the side of his nose with the same hand he'd slapped Maisie's rear quarters. "There's more to pigs than bacon, you know. Come on, lass. We'd better let Lord Mortiforde get on. Cheerio."

Aldermaston stared in disbelief as Seth Shepherd walked Maisie out of his hide on a lead. He surveyed the churned up soil. Something glistened between the decaying leaves. He bent down and picked up a wide-angle lens that Maisie had trampled over. Broken glass dropped from its housing and fell

between his fingers. Aldermaston seethed. He squinted at the butcher and pig waddling away through the woods and imagined a set of Royal teeth sinking into Maisie's hind quarters. He retrieved Seth's note from his pocket and reread it. His stomach gurgled. Breakfast was calling. Or was it a sense of foreboding?



“Bugger!” Felicity stared at the blackened contents of the pie dish on the oven shelf.

“Mummy, you swore!” sang seven-year-old Harry, before nibbling the crust of his granary toast in a clockwise direction.

Cartwright cleared his throat behind her. “Is everything all right, My Lady?”

Felicity swivelled on the spot, concealing her charred creativity. Their butler, with his white-gloved hands held behind the back of his neatly-starched black, pin-striped jacket, diplomatically averted his gaze. His eyes latched onto a cobweb hanging from the ceiling of their private kitchen.

Felicity fixed her Marchioness of Mortiforde grin to her face. Despite nearly two years of practising, her cheek bones still ached whenever her face contorted in this manner.

“Yes, Cartwright. Everything's fine, thank you. Just a slight disagreement between me and the oven.”

Cartwright's gaze caught hers. “If there's anything you need me to do, My Lady, you only have to ask.”

The corners of Felicity's mouth dropped to a comfortable, natural smile. “Thank you, Cartwright. But I think the Mortiforde Ladies Legion would think less of their President if she delegated her Bake Off entry to her butler.”

Cartwright nodded. “In that case, I'll be in the West Wing attending to His Lordship's brother.”

Felicity's nose wrinkled. "Dare I ask about Basildon's latest wheeze?"

"Canapés for tonight, Your Ladyship."

Felicity crossed her arms. "How does he think canapés will get him a job with the Secret Service?"

Cartwright turned. "Something to do with survival of the fittest in a post-apocalyptic world, My Lady." He slipped silently away.

"Mummy, what's post apocalyptic?" Harry snatched a second slice of toast from the silver rack.

"Something catastrophic." Felicity looked once more at the oven's contents. Whatever it was, it was charred and smouldered. And post-apocalyptic.

She reviewed the recipe for a clue as to where she'd gone wrong. It should have been a succulent example of the local delicacy, Boor Pie. This seventeenth century dish originated from Mortiforde Wood's plentiful wild boar population, hence the Middle English spelling of *Boor*. She'd followed the recipe, which involved marinading the meat in cider, then mixing it with sugar, diced apple, onion and turnips, and encasing it in pastry before cooking it.

She stared at the smouldering rock before her. Perhaps it wasn't meant to be eaten. Perhaps it was some sort of late-medieval weapon of mass destruction.

"Bugger!" Felicity dropped the recipe on the table. She'd have to start again.

"Mummy! That's the second time you swore." Harry nibbled the crust off his second slice of toast in an anti-clockwise direction.

"How many times have I told you? Do what Mummy says, not what she does."

Harry stopped nibbling. "But you said b—"

"Don't even go there!" She held up a finger without looking at him. Why were seven-year-olds too clever for their own

good? She plucked a stray grey hair dangling in front of her blue eyes, and winced. Closer examination suggested it wasn't grey, just blonde and covered in flour.

"That's not tonight's dinner, is it?" Harry stared at the black brick.

Felicity shook her head. She checked her watch. Eight o'clock. "But it's all your father is having tonight, if he's not back from his dawn photo shoot to take you to school in the next two minutes."

She slipped her hands into the oven gloves and clamped them round the smouldering charcoal brick. Her face grimaced and reddened as she struggled to lift it out of the oven. Straightening her back, she clutched the pie close to her stomach. It was only five steps to the kitchen bin.

Suddenly, the kitchen door flew open with a flourish. Felicity flinched. The pie fell from her clutches, landing squarely on her left foot, crushing it. The resulting high-pitched scream shattered her favourite cut glass vase in the cupboard under the sink.

Harry clapped both hands over his ears, in preparation for more swearing.



As Lisa Duddon approached her office at Borderlandshire District Council her smartphone rang. She pulled it from her royal purple trench coat pocket and saw who was calling.

"Morning, Aldermaston. You're doing well, I'm not at my desk yet."

"Do us a favour. Check with Environmental Health that the Mortiforde Vegetarian Society has passed all the necessary food regs for their Food Festival stall. Seth Shepherd's been bending my ear this morning."

"Will do. Where are you? You know you're supposed to be

here in ...” she checked the time on her phone’s display, “... ten minutes to meet Jillian Jones.”

“I’ll get there as quick as I can. I’ve just been attacked by Seth Shepherd’s free-range Gloucester Old Spot pig.”

“Pardon?” Lisa twisted her office door handle.

“Tell you later,” Aldermaston muttered, then hung up.

Lisa checked her reflection in the glossy screen of her mobile, and titivated her jet black hair as she stepped into her office.

“Good morning!”

A glamorous woman sat at Lisa’s desk, wearing a black open-neck dress with a ruffled collar that fanned behind her neck like a peacock’s tail. Her ash blonde hair was stylishly tussled, but long enough to cover her ears and the nape of her neck. She smiled, broadening her thick peach-pink lips, and lifted her head, so she could scrutinise Lisa along her elongated nose. Although sitting in Lisa’s chair, the woman’s long, slender legs rose at an angle and were crossed at her ankles as they rested on the edge of Lisa’s desk. The black figure-hugging dress stopped just below the knee. Then there were the heels. All four inches of them.

“Morning,” Lisa finally replied. “I’m sorry, do we have a meeting, only I don’t appear to have anything in my diary.” She swiped her smartphone, checking her appointments.

“You are Lisa Duddon, Democracy Support Officer?”

Lisa nodded.

“Excellent.” The visitor swung her legs and planted her feet securely on the floor. Then she rose from the chair: all six feet four inches of her, albeit the final four from her shoes.

“That dress is stunning,” Lisa admired, as the woman stepped out from behind the desk.

“Thank you.” A sleek hand at the end of a long arm thrust forwards. “Abigail Mayedew.”

Lisa shook it. It was a confident, authoritative handshake.

Abigail looked late forties, but this was a woman who knew how to knock seven years off her age with the right make-up.

“You don’t remember, do you?”

Lisa took off her coat, and hung it on a hook behind the office door. “Sorry. Brain’s not in gear yet.”

Abigail smiled. “I’m you’re new—”

“Chief Executive!” Lisa finished. She hooked her black hair behind her left ear. “But you’re not due until Monday.”

“I’m keen to get to know everyone before I start.” She crossed her arms and paced the room. “Looking through my predecessor’s files, before he was imprisoned for fraud, I see that the Authority’s Chief Executive sits on a community group called the Borderer’s Guild. What exactly is that?”

Lisa switched on her computer and pulled the blinds at the window. Sunlight flooded the office. “Lord Mortiforde can tell you more about that. I’ve just got off the phone from him. He’ll be here soon.”

Abigail stared at her. “You’re the administrative support, aren’t you? Why don’t *you* tell me what it’s all about?”

Lisa sat in her chair. It was still warm. A sense of unease stirred within her. “The Borderer’s Guild is a historic community organisation, dating back to the mid-eighteenth century when it was reformed by the First Marquess of Mortiforde. Its origins go back to the Norman Conquest, when the local Lord of the Marches, the King’s representative, had a private army.”

“A private army?”

Lisa nodded. “Skirmishes and attacks between the English and Welsh along this border region were common as recent as five hundred years ago. Things have calmed down a bit now. Although market day still has its moments. So, the private army became a ceremonial feature.”

“That’s comforting to know.”

“When the title of Marquess of Mortiforde was first



bestowed upon the local Lord of the Manor, the First Marquess adapted the Borderer's Guild into an army of good for the community. Comprising representatives from various groups and businesses, it fights for the town's prosperity. This weekend's food festival, for example, is organised by the Guild."

Abigail sighed. "Sounds like a load of historical, sentimental claptrap to me. I can see this is all a waste of time and money. Not the sort of thing a modern local authority should be involved with." She crossed her arms. "You say the current Marquess of Mortiforde is in charge of the Borderer's Guild?"

Lisa nodded. "Lord Mortiforde is the Eighth Marquess of Mortiforde."

Abigail perched her bottom against Lisa's desk. "And the council, through you, acts as administrative support?"

Lisa bit her bottom lip and nodded.

"And you say Lord Mortiforde is due here soon?"

Lisa tried smiling, but her teeth still gripped her lower lip.

"Good. He needs to know I'll be introducing some changes at this authority. No longer shall we pander to the whims of an aristocratic twat and his private army."

Lisa gulped.



"Lady Mortiforde, are you all right?" A slender, but muscular young man in a dark suit and light blue shirt hurried across the kitchen floor and dropped to his knees. He pulled at each suit jacket cuff in quick succession, and then placed his long, slim fingers around the Boor Pie. The tendons in his lower arms strained, standing proud of his smooth, pale skin, as he lifted the black weight off Felicity's foot.

Felicity bit hard on the chequered tea towel she'd placed in

her mouth in an attempt to muffle any further profanities from Harry. As soon as Daniel heaved the weight high enough, Felicity whipped her foot out from underneath and hopped around the kitchen, clutching her painful toes in both hands.

Harry giggled.

“Let me look.” Two hands grabbed her arm and pulled her down onto a kitchen chair.

Felicity watched her husband’s personal assistant kneel at her feet, slide her fern-coloured suede slipper off her left foot, and carefully cup her bare heel in his soft-skinned hand. His fingertips traced her instep towards her toes. As he lifted her purpling toes for closer examination, an excruciating pain shot through her foot and up her leg.

The tea towel fell from her mouth. “DANIEL!”

“You need A&E. You might have broken a couple of toes. I’ll get His Lordship.” Daniel stood.

“He’s still hiding somewhere,” she moaned.

Daniel checked his watch. “But he’s supposed to be meeting the Chief Archivist at eight-thirty.”

Felicity looked at Daniel’s angular face. He’d shaved yesterday and, therefore, had arrived earlier this morning because he didn’t need to shave again until tomorrow. The paleness of his skin accentuated the darkness of his brown hair and eyebrows.

“He’s supposed to be dropping off Harry at school on his way in.”

Daniel pulled his car keys from his suit trouser pocket. “We’ll do it.”

“Sorry?”

“Come on.” Daniel motioned Felicity to stand. He draped her arm around his neck. “Lean on me for support.”

Felicity trembled as she placed her weight on her right foot and then leant into Daniel’s youthful body. She caught a whiff of his sensual earthy deodorant. After several hours in his

camouflage hides, Aldermaston's aroma was earthy with a strong hint of animal dung.

"Harry. Are you ready for school?" Daniel called.

"Coming!" Harry, already dressed in his yellow school sweatshirt, grey trousers and black shoes, jumped down from the kitchen table, grabbed his school bag, and headed for the door.

Daniel placed an arm around Felicity's waist. "We'll drop him off at school, on the way to A&E."

Felicity seethed. Being Lord and Lady of the Manor was more work than either of them had realised. Aldermaston's appointment of an assistant a few months ago was so he could delegate some of his administrative workload and spend more time with his family. Yet all Aldermaston had managed so far was delegating his fatherly and husbandly duties to his assistant.



With Lisa on the case, Aldermaston slipped his smartphone into the side pocket of his khaki camera rucksack, buckled up the leather strap and then swung the heavy load onto his back. Standing upright, he surveyed the busy Market Square before him. With no mobile phone signal in Mortiforde Woods, he'd cut through the forest, crossed over the River Morte, and wandered around the side of Mortiforde's Norman castle, climbing to the centre of town where there was a signal ... albeit when the wind blew in the right direction.

In front of him, four regimented rows of blue-and-white awninged stalls bustled as traders prepared for the annual food festival. As well as the regular food market traders, there were specialist, artisan food producers. Multi-seeded loaves and baguettes jostled for space with fresh local vegetables, perrys and ciders, oak-smoked sunflower seeds, rustic flapjacks, hot

chilli dips, chutneys, marmalades, and succulent meat joints. The aromas of freshly roasting coffee beans, frying onions and beef burgers, and the sickly sweet fragrance of candyfloss assaulted Aldermaston's nose. Traders shouted panicked expletives as they readied themselves for the festival's official opening in under two hours' time. He could also hear *The Dam Busters'* theme tune.

"Oh heck!" Aldermaston threw his rucksack back onto the pavement and unstrapped the pocket to retrieve his phone. It was Daniel.

"Daniel. I'm running late. Can you—"

"I'm at the hospital with Felicity," Daniel interrupted. "She's broken a couple of toes, and we're just waiting for—"

Daniel's voice trailed off. Suddenly, Aldermaston's ear was mugged with Felicity's irate tones.

"Aldermaston?"

"Yes, dear. Are you all—"

"No, I'm not! My foot's in agony! Where are you? You were supposed to be home ages ago. It's a bloody good job Daniel turned up when he did, otherwise Harry wouldn't have got to school on time and I wouldn't be here getting the urgent medical treatment I need."

"Sorry, dear. I was waylaid on Guild business and—"

"Sod the bloody Guild!" she screamed.

Aldermaston heard her pause and take a deep breath.

"You know I fully support your sense of family duty, but ... sometimes I think you're more worried about the townspeople of Mortiforde than you are of your family."

Aldermaston looked at his feet. "How can I make it up to you?"

Felicity sighed. "You can start by going to Trotters and getting a kilo of diced wild boar."

"Diced what?"

"Wild boar. And if you don't, I'll—"

Aldermaston lost all sound from his ear, and checked his phone's screen. No signal. The wind direction had changed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His earlier gut reaction was right. It was going to be one of those days.

He turned and faced the warmth of the sun, hoping to encourage the frustration to drift away. Instead, it tapped him frenetically on his shoulder.

“Lord Mortiforde! I want a word with you.”

He turned around and opened his eyes. It was Tibby Gillard.