

FLAMING MURDER

THE MARQUESS OF MORTIFORDE MYSTERIES
BOOK 3

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THE MARQUESS OF
MORTIFORDE MYSTERIES

Blooming Murder
Foraging for Murder

CHAPTER ONE

“I knew you’d be a NIMBY, Lord Mortiforde.” Abigail Mayedew’s finger jabbed across the table as each word fired from her mouth.

Aldermaston pursed his lips as Borderlandshire District Council’s Chief Executive continued her attack. At least she was sitting twelve feet away at the opposite end of the table in the Buttermarket’s upstairs community meeting room. Otherwise, her jabbing finger could do some serious damage. Or rather, her fingernail. It was so heavily painted that it wasn’t her nail at risk of breaking, but her finger.

“This Borderers Guild is your feeble attempt to dictate what goes on in this town. You’re clinging on to some nostalgic, whimsical, outdated belief that because King George IV gifted the title of Marquess of Mortiforde to one of your ancestors in 1820, or whenever, that makes you Lord of the Manor.”

Aldermaston’s eyes closed. Not *this* again.

Stella Osgathorpe from the Historic Borders Agency interrupted. “That’s how the British peerage system works, Ms Mayedew. When William the Conqueror invaded in 1066, he awarded his loyal supporters—”

“I’m not here for the history lesson!” Abigail snapped. “I’m here to drag this town into the twenty-first century with a project that could revolutionise Mortiforde’s economic fortunes.”

Cissy Warbouys’ clattering size eight knitting needles paused. “What’s a NIMBY?”

“N-I-M-B-Y,” whispered Gerald Lockmount. “Not in my backyard.”

Cissy tutted and resumed knitting. “Nobody could call Lord Mortiforde’s three-thousand-acre estate a *backyard*.”

Abigail ran her slender fingers through her stylishly tousled ash-blonde hair without somehow snagging her fingernails, and then slammed her flattened hand on the table. “Can we get back to the matter at hand, please?”

Aldermaston crossed his arms. “You want to drag us into the twenty-first century.”

The Chief Executive opened a beige paper file on the table in front of her. “Page three of the document before you shows how the waste incinerator Rinde Industries plans to build on Mortiforde Meadows would not only burn waste material destined for landfill, but also generate enough electricity to power Mortiforde and several surrounding villages. It’s a win-win for Mortiforde.”

Stella Osgathorpe flicked through the document. “It’ll desecrate the scenically outstanding meadows, the incinerator chimney will dominate the skyline for miles around, completely dwarfing St Julian’s twelfth-century church tower, and it’ll throw a poisonous cocktail of fumes across the Mortiforde Castle ruins. The Historic Borders Agency can’t have tourists choking on incinerator smoke as they explore the medieval remains of one of Britain’s iconic border castles.”

Abigail sneered. “There is no smoke because the incinerator uses such high temperatures.”

Aldermaston perused the document. An artist’s impression

conveyed a modern-looking building with architectural curves and futuristic metal cladding, behind which a narrow, drainpipe-like, three-hundred-feet tall chimney punctured the sky. It looked so tall that NASA scientists were probably recalculating satellite orbits to avoid any collisions.

Dotted around the rest of the meadows, young families picnicked in the sunshine, swans slipped along the River Morte's sedate waters, and a buzzard soared in the pure blue sky. Yet inside the incinerator, its one-thousand-degree-centigrade inferno could nuke a dustcart within three milliseconds.

"Ms Mayedew," Aldermaston began. "You say Mortiforde needs dragging into the twenty-first century. Which century do you think we're in currently?"

Abigail snorted. "The early seventeenth century, judging by the way this Borderers Guild operates. Although looking at the styles of women's clothing in some of Mortiforde's stores, the 1950s may just be around the next corner. Then again, Mortiforde's decidedly dodgy mobile phone signal means we could be in the Dark Ages when it comes to communications. I'm surprised you don't all send messages via smoke signals."

Aldermaston's eyebrows rose. "A three-hundred-foot smokeless chimney will be of little use to us, then."

Abigail tutted. "Your Lordship. In the short time I've been in post, I've seen little evidence of Borderlandshire's industries adopting modern working practices."

"That's not true," Cissy interrupted. "Farmer Bell's got one of those robotic milking machines." She waved her knitting needle in a circular motion, tangling her wool into another knot. "The cows come in when they want to be milked, and the robot does everything. It even plays them classical music."

Stella shuffled in her chair. "Rachmaninoff would turn in his grave if he knew cows' udders were being stimulated to the rhythm of his semi-quavers."

Aldermaston checked his watch. Time to draw this evening's meeting to a close. "Isn't this rather academic, Ms Mayedew? This joint project between the local authority and Rinde Industries doesn't have Sir Hugo Rinde's support. And he owns Mortiforde Meadows."

"He didn't use to," Stella muttered.

Aldermaston looked at her quizzically, but she ignored him and continued scribbling notes. He returned to his point. "Sir Hugo's son Rupert might run the company, but Sir Hugo is against any development of *his* meadows."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the mahogany table. "And according to the latest audited figures, Borderlandshire District Council's ten million pound contribution is still half a million pounds short. I don't understand why you tabled this project on this evening's agenda. It's up in smoke before it's been lit." He closed the file.

Abigail shuffled her papers. "Your Lordship, the small funding shortfall is resolvable within months, not years. Rupert says he'll talk his father round. Sir Hugo only opposes the project because he's hoping to be selected tomorrow by the Socially Liberal Conservative Party as their next candidate for Westminster. Endorsing Rupert's waste incinerator project now would be political suicide."

She smirked. "Change is coming to Mortiforde. The sooner the community has a sensible, grown-up conversation about this project, the better."

"Let's put this to a vote," Aldermaston suggested. "Those in favour of the waste incinerator project raise their hands."

Abigail's hand shot up first, followed by those of Gerald Lockmount and four other Guild members.

Cissy prodded Gerald's rotund stomach with a knitting needle. "What are you doing?"

"It'll do wonders for house prices, Cissy. The waste incinerator will need a highly skilled workforce, who'll pay at

least twice the price for the new executive units on the bypass estate.”

Aldermaston counted the raised hands. “Six votes. And those against.” He counted Cissy and Stella’s hands, and three more. “That’s five, and I, too, am against the development, which means six votes, too.”

Abigail squealed. “A tie was better than I had hoped.”

“Not so fast, Ms Mayedew,” Aldermaston’s hand slipped into his Radnor green Harris tweed jacket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. He cleared his throat.

“I, Sir Hugo Rinde, instruct His Lordship to record my vote at this evening’s Borderers Guild with those who are against this project. I am deeply opposed to any such development on Mortiforde Meadows.”

Aldermaston looked around the room. “Sir Hugo’s decision is clear. That’s six votes in favour and seven against. I declare the Borderers Guild officially against the waste incinerator project development.”

He refolded Sir Hugo’s note and handed it to Lisa Duddon, sitting behind him, taking the minutes.

Abigail threw her hands in the air. “Do you think that stops the project? The council decides on planning issues, Lord Mortiforde, not this trumped-up community group.”

Stella slipped her reading glasses into her bag. “You’re correct, Ms Mayedew. The Borderers Guild has no jurisdiction over the council’s planning process. But it is a respected community stakeholder, and the Borderers Guild carries tremendous influence. You would be wise to remember that.”

She stood. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Mortiforde, I have another meeting to attend, but I’d like to chat with you soon on a related matter.”

Aldermaston nodded.

The other Guild members, realising the meeting was over, collected their things.

Aldermaston opened the door for everyone. Their faces lit up when they realised the Marquess was holding open a door for *them* rather than the other way around. He stifled a smirk. His father had taught him this was the quickest way to clear a room when needed.

Abigail remained seated.

Lisa swept her jet-black hair behind her ear as she made to leave. "Need to talk about the Bonfire Night celebrations. Daniel texted during the meeting. Someone has stolen Mortiforde Millie."

Aldermaston frowned. "How do you steal a fifteen-foot-tall effigy?"

Lisa shrugged.

Aldermaston checked his watch. "I'll pop round to yours when I'm finished here. Ask Daniel to join us, too."

Lisa nodded and left.

Cissy Warbouys grabbed Aldermaston's arm. "We mustn't let this dreadful waste incinerator go ahead, Your Lordship. It's just not Mortiforde, is it?"

Aldermaston patted her hand. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Cissy smiled. "Your father would be proud."

"Thank you." He encouraged her out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Abigail stood, collected her paperwork, and then headed towards him.

"So, Your Lordship. You'll do whatever it takes, will you? Sounds like fighting talk to me."

Aldermaston leaned against the door. "Abigail, you've been here what - six weeks?"

"Five."

"I thought after the food festival's little kerfuffle that you understood we do things differently in Mortiforde. Perhaps a little more time getting to know us might help. You're right. I have no legal jurisdiction over the town whatsoever. After

nearly two years, I'm still finding my feet as the Eighth Marquess. But my father always believed a community that works together stays together. We achieve more as a collective. That's what partnership working is all about, isn't it? It's why the council allows Lisa to be the Guild's administrative support, even though she's a council employee. It might only be a couple of hours a week, but we'd struggle without her."

Abigail pursed her thick, peach-pink lips momentarily, then looked along her elongated nose at him. "I might review Lisa's support of the Guild. Is it a good use of local taxpayers' money?" She sneered. "Mortiforde's yokels are so insular. You can't ignore the outside world because there are thirty miles to the nearest major town and forty to a motorway. Waste incinerators are the way forward. There's money to be made burning other people's rubbish. Several London boroughs send their household waste abroad for processing. Our waste incinerator could offer them a cheaper service, and provide us with a regular income."

She stepped closer, her nose barely inches from his. "Surprisingly, Your Lordship, we both share the same goals. We want to make Mortiforde a better place to live, work, and play. Think what Borderlandshire District Council could do with its share of that waste incinerator income. We could invest in decent community services."

Aldermaston's nose twitched. He smelt something, but it wasn't sincerity.

"By fighting the waste incinerator project," she sneered, "you're campaigning *against* more investment in Mortiforde. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not, but—"

Abigail pushed him aside and pulled the door wide. "I haven't spent thirty years in local government pandering to misplaced community opinion. It takes vision, determination, and guts to make changes for the community's benefit. And

when a community doesn't have that vision, you build it so they can see it for themselves. I will get this project built, Your Lordship. And the sooner the bulldozers move onto Mortiforde Meadows, the better."



Felicity handed a cup of coffee to their guest. He was admiring the display of swords, crossbows, and daggers neatly arranged in circles and criss-cross patterns on Tugford Hall's armoury wood-panelled walls.

"Sugar, Sir Hugo?"

He patted his dark yellow waistcoat, struggling to contain his fine-dining paunch. "Better not. Isabel worries that if I win the by-election, I'll put on more weight in Westminster's subsidised bars and restaurants."

He took the sugarless bone china cup and saucer and pointed to a gap in the wall's medieval dagger display. "So frustrating when you don't have a complete set, isn't it?"

Felicity scrutinised the medieval daggers arranged in a circular display, their points meeting neatly in the circle's centre while their metal cross-guards and hilts fanned out like a clock face. Except there was a gap at the six o'clock position.

"Cartwright's probably cleaning it. Or Basildon's using it as a letter opener. You know what His Lordship's half-brother is like." She gestured to the gathered crowd of seated guests. "Shall we?"

Sir Hugo nodded, and they took their positions.

Felicity tapped her teaspoon against her china cup. The rich, high-pitched tone bounced off the armoury's metal surfaces. The room held enough weaponry to equip an entire army, which it once did when the original Borderers Guild was the Lord of the Manor's private defence force. A hush descended.

“Ladies of the Legion,” she began. “Welcome to this evening’s meeting.”

She paused briefly, taking in the women’s expectant, beaming faces. She’d relished speaking in front of a large group of people in her previous life as a marketing consultant. But as the Eighth Marchioness of Mortiforde, and President of the Mortiforde Ladies’ Legion, gatherings like this made her nervous. She’d never expected to become Marchioness with all of its community trappings. Would the ever-present knot in her stomach at these events ever untangle itself?

“Please welcome tonight’s special guest, Sir Hugo Rinde.”

A polite applause smattered through the thirty women seated in the three rows before them. Sir Hugo nodded his appreciation. As he did so, the light from the crystal chandelier above reflected off his forehead, just above the small red birthmark beside his left eyebrow, and highlighted a dour woman in a Gainsborough painting hanging on the wall.

Felicity picked up her bullet-pointed notes.

“I first learned of your marvellous project, *Verdant Endings*, when you kindly graced me with the position of president. Prior to that, I’d never considered how environmentally damaging our funeral services could be. Whether it’s the energy required for cremation and the associated carbon dioxide emissions, or the precious wood resources we use to bury our loved ones in the ground, after we’ve pumped them full of contaminating embalming fluids. We can’t continue in this way.”

Her assembled audience nodded, apart from someone in the back row. A large-brimmed straw hat shielded the wearer’s face. Despite Mortiforde being a small market town, there were still some faces in the Legion she didn’t recognise.

“When I learned of your plans to create an environmentally friendly burial ground for Mortiforde, it made so much sense. Being able to offer the community a beautiful

place where they can lay their loved ones to rest in coffins made from bamboo, wicker, wool, or even cardboard, means they still have somewhere to come and remember their family and friends, give them a wonderful service to celebrate their life, and do it in a way that doesn't kill the planet."

"Hear, hear," cried a woman in the second row.

Felicity smiled. She recognised Diya Parmer's petite circular face and cropped black hair.

Diya returned the smile.

"Our stumbling block," she continued, glancing at her notes, "has been finding a suitable location. The committee has visited several sites across the country for inspiration, because getting it right is so important."

Her audience nodded.

"We want somewhere families can go for remembrance, but still enjoy the environment and the surroundings. It shouldn't be a place of sadness, but somewhere to enjoy, too."

"Exactly," cheered Margaret Hillbrow in the front row. "A burial ground should be a place to celebrate that we're still alive, not just remember those who've passed on."

A wave of approval washed across the room.

"This evening, ladies," Felicity continued, "our wonderful guest, Sir Hugo, would like to say a few words on the subject."

Another smattering of applause welcomed Sir Hugo as he stood. Felicity returned to her seat.

Sir Hugo placed his cup and saucer on the table, shoved one hand into his brown corduroy trousers pocket, and cleared his throat. His jowls wobbled. "Your Ladyship, and wonderful women of the Ladies' Legion," he began. "This," he gestured around the large room with his free hand, "is far more enjoyable than sitting in one of those boring Borderers Guild meetings."

He turned to Felicity. "Not that your husband is boring, Your Ladyship!"

Her nose wrinkled. "Try living with him."

The assembled women giggled.

Sir Hugo continued. "Ladies, I wish to support your project. An environmentally friendly burial ground is exactly what this community needs."

He picked up his brown leather briefcase, placing it on the table beside him. With a couple of resonating clicks, he opened it and extracted a framed document.

"If I may, My Lady?" He offered her the document.

Felicity stood and took hold of the frame.

Sir Hugo turned to the audience. "I hereby grant Mortiforde Ladies' Legion the legal right to use Mortiforde Meadows as the town's first environmentally friendly burial site."

An enormous cheer erupted from the audience. Margaret Hillbrow dabbed the corner of her eye with a lace handkerchief, then gave Felicity a double thumbs up.

Sir Hugo leaned closer to Felicity. "There are a couple of minor clauses you need to abide by, but nothing onerous." He tapped the framed document. "It's all on here."

Felicity nodded. A flash startled her as Tugford Hall's butler, Cartwright, captured a photo of her and Sir Hugo gripping the framed document.

As a prospective candidate for the town's next member of parliament, Sir Hugo's sixth sense for spotting a photo opportunity contorted his facial muscles into a gurning grin milliseconds before the flash had rebounded off his bald spot. For a second time, the dour woman in the Gainsborough painting was dazzled. She wasn't impressed.

A high-pitched, ear-splitting shriek shattered the celebratory atmosphere, along with Sir Hugo's bone china coffee cup, and two crystals in the chandelier. Margaret Hillbrow collapsed into her chair, desperately trying to assess

her hearing aid damage, while those around her clasped their ears tight.

“This is a smokescreen!” yelled a voice that sounded two octaves higher than it was used to speaking. “Sir Hugo doesn’t care about your project. Tomorrow, the Socially Liberal Conservative Party might choose him as their candidate for Westminster. This is just a vote-buying publicity stunt, isn’t it, Sir Hugo?”

Felicity peered around the chaotic ladies, still recovering from the auditory assault, to see the large-brimmed straw hat owner now standing and holding aloft a personal alarm.

“Nonsense!” Sir Hugo waved the framed document emphatically in the protester’s direction. “The waste incinerator will NEVER happen. My son has two problems. First, he’s working in partnership with the local council, which doesn’t have all its money in place. Second, I own Mortiforde Meadows, not him. So the council will need a compulsory purchase order first. A waste incinerator on Mortiforde Meadows? Over my dead body, ladies!”

The protester stepped into Felicity’s view, but was concealed by an oversized beige macintosh and an enormous straw hat.

“Be careful what you wish for, Sir Hugo,” sang the falsetto voice. The protester spun round and dashed to the door, their white trainers squeaking against the parquet flooring.

They slammed the door shut with such force that the bang echoed like gunfire, exciting the displayed weaponry lining the walls, and sending the Gainsborough crashing to the floor.



Aldermaston cut through the deserted traders’ stalls in Mortiforde’s Market Square. A place so often bustling, even on a cold, foggy November day, yet at seven-thirty on a crisp,

foggy November evening, it was eerily quiet. The local youths preferred the warmer confines of the local pizza outlet, whose windows glistened with the condensation of teenage troubles.

He recoiled when a piercing firework squeal shattered the still air as it shrieked high into the night sky. Bonfire Night was still a couple of nights away yet.

He quickened his pace. He passed the cordoned-off wooden platform by the castle's main entrance, where the town would burn Mortiforde Millie at the stake during their Bonfire Night celebrations, and entered Castle Avenue, a meandering road following the castle's imposing Norman perimeter wall. He pressed the doorbell at Lisa and Mark's bed-and-breakfast establishment.

"We're in the snug," greeted Lisa. She led him through to their establishment's rear private quarters, then smacked the sofa's arm. "Come on, you. Off!"

Aldermaston ruffled the top of Esme's head as the golden retriever's tail beat an excited rhythm against the cushion. "You're fine, Esme. Just budge up." He forced himself between Esme and the sofa arm.

A mug of coffee appeared. "There you go." Mark threw a tea towel over his shoulder. "You'll have to excuse me. We've a couple of guests dining with us tonight."

Aldermaston watched Mark in his black-and-white chequered chef's trousers and white, short-sleeved jacket disappear through the door.

Lisa slipped into the green-winged armchair opposite, clasping a mug in her hands.

"Got many guests?" Aldermaston sipped his coffee.

"We have two occupied rooms. They're here for Friday's Bonfire Night celebrations and Mortiforde Millie's parade through town."

The snug door swung wide as Aldermaston's personal

assistant, Daniel, dressed in jeans and a navy marl funnel neck overcoat, entered. "Got here as quickly as I could."

"Okay, what's going on?" Aldermaston watched Lisa pour Daniel a mug of tea.

Daniel removed his thigh-length coat and threw it over the sofa arm. "Has Lisa not said?" He took the offered mug and sat, crossed-legged, on the floor beside the snug wood burner.

Lisa returned to the armchair. "I was waiting for you, as you have the note."

"Note?" Dread cartwheeled through Aldermaston's stomach.

Daniel rummaged in a coat pocket. "Here." He handed Aldermaston a folded sheet.

"Where did this come from?" Aldermaston unfurled it.

"No idea." Daniel cradled his mug. "I nipped out of the office for five minutes, and it was on my chair when I returned."

Aldermaston held it aloft. "This was hand-delivered to our office inside Tugford Hall?"

Daniel nodded. "Cartwright knew nothing about it. Too busy setting up the armoury for Felicity's meeting."

Aldermaston panicked. Who was wandering around Tugford Hall unchecked, hand-delivering notes? "When did it arrive?"

"Just before I left at seven. That's when I messaged Lisa."

Aldermaston read the note.

To the Marquess of Mortiforde, Defender of the Establishment,

We've stolen Mortiforde Millie. We've saved her from the heat.

History likes the reminder: make her, burn her, repeat.

But Millie was a hero. She helped Guy's fellow plotters.

You should be the ones to burn, you landed-gentry squatters.

There's a revolution coming, Lord Mortiforde. Come Bonfire Night, the truth will out. It's time for the Establishment to burn.

BANG!

Daniel shuffled closer to the wood burner. "I've seen a few crank emails in the short time I've been your assistant. But this seems different." He shuddered. "Finding it on my office chair spooked me."

Aldermaston reread the note. "It's typical BANG. And if Mortiforde Millie is missing, then stealing a fifteen-foot-tall puppet is exactly what BANG would do." He paused. "That last statement." He sucked in air between his teeth. "That's different."

"BANG is a group?" Daniel placed his mug on the table.

"Borderlandshire Against Nefarious Government," Lisa clarified. She turned to Aldermaston. "I thought they were more about daft publicity stunts than anything serious."

"Usually," Aldermaston confirmed. "They launched five years ago and declared Borderlandshire an independent state on a May bank holiday. Caused chaos on the bypass, demanding to see caravanners' passports. They've turned away holidaymakers from their holiday homes, too. Infuriating publicity stunts, but I always thought their heart was in the right place."

"What do you mean?" Lisa took the note from Aldermaston.

"They've always highlighted rural inequalities. Second homes price local families out of the housing market. We don't get the same public transport investment that cities do. Then there are lower wages, the disproportionate cost of fuel, that sort of thing."

Lisa held the note in the air. "But this is not just about a

Bonfire Night effigy being stolen. This is a direct threat. This says the Establishment is going to burn. That's you."

Aldermaston pondered. *Defender of the Establishment*. He'd never been called that before. Nor had he ever considered himself a landed-gentry squatter. But as the Eighth Marquess of Mortiforde, he was now part of the Establishment. Whether he liked it or not.



Peredur swigged some beer from a bottle and collapsed into his living room's threadbare armchair, exhausted from his evening run. The bottom hem of his combat trousers rose above the cuffs of his black combat boots, which he'd changed into from his trainers. He caught a bead of sweat running down his forehead with the back of his hand, smudging his camouflage face paint.

He surveyed his room's furnishings in his small, two-up, two-down terrace. A wooden drop-leaf table, once rescued from a skip, sat in front of the window opposite, with one semicircle leaf balancing precariously on a wooden strut. An arc cut through what little carpet was left, where the table leg had scored its travels. A single wooden chair sat at one end. Two laptops dominated the tabletop.

In a corner, a forty-inch television screen crowned a salvaged, four-foot-tall, one-hundred-and-twenty-gallon wooden whisky barrel. Between that and Peredur was an open fireplace housing a portable fan heater. Behind him, an energy-saving eleven-watt bulb, perched naked on a tall wooden standard lamp base, was dribbling barely enough light across the room's corner. It was enough to read the dog-eared letter, though.

Peredur took another swig of beer. The Lockmount Estate Agency logo dominated the letter's top right corner.

*Mr PG Jones
42 Brominster Way
Mortiforde
Borderlandshire
MF1 3TF*

Dear Mr Jones,

*Notice requiring possession of a property in England, let on an
Assured Shorthold Tenancy.
Housing Act 1988 section 21(1) and (4) (as amended)*

*Further to our earlier letter of 1st September, and your subsequent
written correspondence of 8th October, I'm writing to inform you
that, having discussed your tenancy with my client, the Section 21
Notice seeking possession of 42 Brominster Way remains
effective.*

*As per the attached Form 6A, your tenancy agreement will end,
and you must vacate the premises by 9 o'clock on 5th November to
allow the property owner to take full possession.*

*Should you be interested in viewing any of our other available
properties, please call into our office at your earliest convenience.*

*Yours sincerely,
Gerald Lockmount
Lockmount Estate Agency*

“Pompous, self-centred, free-market-loving prat. You’ve no idea, have you?” Peredur screwed the letter into a ball and hurled it across the room. “All I want to view, Mr Lockmount, is the look on your face when you realise what’s coming to you.”



Rupert Rinde sat by the roaring fire in Knowton Manor's drawing room, drinking brandy. The mantelpiece clock chimed nine. Only the flickering flames illuminated his thinning blonde hair, angular face, and familial small red birthmark above his left eyebrow. His upturned hand drew gentle circles in the air, swirling the brandy around the glass. His other hand clasped a phone to his ear.

"As you say, Abigail," his baritone voice carrying far into the room's shadows, "seven to six against is better than I ever imagined."

He sipped some brandy. "Business is all about upsetting people."

A door creaked. "Hang on." Rupert glanced into the darkness and clutched his phone to his chest. "Farrington?"

A woman in her late seventies stepped into the fire's ambient glow. She tucked her flaxen hair behind her ears, allowing her ruby earrings to glow in the firelight.

"Mother, I'm busy." He waved his phone in the air.

Isabel steadied herself against a sideboard. "Have you heard from your father?"

Rupert scoffed. "Why would he talk to me? I'm ruining his business, apparently."

"He's not contacted you?"

Rupert stared at her. "Was there anything else?"

Isabel shuddered. "He's an hour late, and he's not answering his phone."

Rupert waved a dismissive hand at her. "Probably at The Nooseman's Knot canvassing for votes for his new political career, if he's selected tomorrow. Now, go. I'm trying to run a business here."

Isabel turned and disappeared into the darkness.

"Hang on," Rupert called. "Did Farrington let you in?"

Isabel stepped back into the light. “He saw I was worried about your father.”

Rupert threw the brandy glass into the fireplace. A mini fireball exploded up the chimney as glass fragments shattered across the logs. “I categorically told him not to let you in. He can pack his bags in the morning. Go back to The Lodge, Mother. Close the door on the way out.”

He stared into the darkness until he heard the door latch click. He relaxed again as he stood. “Sorry, Abigail. Where were we? Oh, yes. I must say how refreshing it is to have someone with vision leading the local authority. Borderlandshire’s previous Chief Execs have been somewhat myopic when it comes to long-term planning.”

Rupert leaned against the pink marble mantelpiece, the flickering flames adding a warm glow to his grey eyes. “But when Rosemary told me all about you, I knew you were different. Yes, Rosemary Sedgewicke. Your Director of Finance. We go way back. Nearly thirty years.” He paused. “We were close. Once.”

He glanced at the mantelpiece clock. “I mustn’t keep you. Delighted with what you’ve achieved already, Abigail. I’m confident life in Mortiforde is about to become extremely interesting.”

He cut the call and stared into the fire’s flaming heart as a broad grin cut across his strong jawline.