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# A Lady's Guide to Mischief and Mayhem

Of all the  
crime scenes in  
all the world,  
she walks into his.  
*Twice.*



MANDA COLLINS

*A Lady's Guide to  
Mischief and Mayhem*



*Manda Collins*



FOREVER  
New York Boston

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**FOREVER**



## Prologue

*London, 1865*

If Sir Horace did not desist from his asinine talk about what constituted appropriate conversation for a lady, she would do one of them an injury, thought Lady Katherine Bascomb, hiding her scowl behind her fan.

She was quite fond of his wife, Millie, who'd been a friend since the two ladies had made their debuts together, but it really was hard work to endure the company of Sir Horace Fairchild as a condition of seeing her friend.

Kate had allowed herself to be persuaded away from the evening she'd had planned of catching up on the latest news of the murderer who was currently roaming the streets of the metropolis, the so-called "Commandments Killer," in order to make up the numbers for Millie's dinner party.

A decision she'd regretted as soon as she was ushered into the Fairchild townhouse on Belgrave Square and saw that the guests were among the most stiff-rumped in London.

She'd suffered through dinner, where she'd politely listened to a member of Parliament drone on about the need for something to be done about the coarseness of language in the English press—it never having occurred to him that she was, herself, owner of one of those newspapers. (Or perhaps it had but he did not care. Men were far less prone to diplomacy in their conversation than ladies, in Kate's experience.)

Then, thinking to find some more sensible conversation when the ladies withdrew to leave the gentlemen to their port, she'd been trapped in a corner of the drawing room with Mrs. Elspeth Symes, who'd talked of nothing but purgatives and remedies for digestive ailments for nearly a quarter hour without pausing for breath.

The reappearance of the gentlemen had given her a chance to escape

Mrs. Symes, but no sooner had she accepted a cup of tea and a plate of what looked to be delicious biscuits than Sir Horace began to speak.

If this was what one had to endure to maintain friendships, Kate thought crossly, then really it was better to remain at home alone.

“Not if I do him an injury first,” said a voice from beside her. And to her horror, Kate realized she’d spoken aloud.

Turning, she saw that a dark-haired young woman had taken the seat beside her.

“Caroline Hardcastle.” She offered her gloved hand. “My friends call me Caro. We met before dinner, but really, anyone who is capable of remembering names after one introduction is not worth knowing, don’t you agree?”

Kate blinked. Miss Hardcastle was a tiny creature with large dark eyes and a pointed chin. She was exactly what Kate’s mind would have conjured if she’d tried to imagine a woodland sprite in exquisitely tailored silk.

“These are quite good,” Miss Hardcastle continued, biting into a biscuit. “I detect a hint of lemon, but it’s not enough to overpower. And the shortbread is exceptional. There’s not enough butter, but one can’t have everything, I suppose.”

“I’m Lady Katherine Bascomb.” She felt as if she should say something, and there were so many options that Kate decided to go with the most obvious.

“Oh, I know who you are.” Caro discreetly brushed the crumbs from her hands. “I read your column in *The Gazette* religiously. I’m something of a writer myself, but my work is mostly about cookery. I was pleased to learn you would be a guest tonight, so I could meet you.”

Kate opened her mouth to demur at the compliment, then Caro’s words sank in. “Caroline Hardcastle. You don’t mean to say you’re C. E. Hardcastle, the cookbook author? I think you’re too modest! There’s not a housewife in London without one of your recipe books in her home.”

But Miss Hardcastle waved away the praise. “It’s little more than trial and error coupled with writing down observations. I daresay anyone could do it if they felt the inclination.”

It was the sort of modesty that was expected of ladies, but Kate disliked seeing someone as obviously talented as Miss Hardcastle so dismissive of her own talent. “Your books are more than just recipes, though. There are

bits of history and cultural notes. I've read all of them, and I only set foot in the kitchen to give instructions to my cook."

Flags of color appeared in Caro's cheeks. "Thank you. Coming from you, that's praise indeed."

Clearly uncomfortable with the discussion of her own writing, Caro changed the subject. "It seems we were both captured by less than entertaining conversationalists before we found each other." She cast her eyes in the direction of their host, who was speaking to the room at large. "And now we all are forced to listen to this lecture on propriety from a man who is known throughout the *ton* for his affairs."

That was news to Kate. Poor Millie. She'd known Sir Horace was a rotter; she just hadn't realized how much of one he was.

"He is a bit hard to take, isn't he?" Caro said, watching as the man continued his monologue.

"And really, how dare he suggest that any topic should be off-limits for ladies?" Kate scowled. "After all, we ought to know what's going on in the world around us. We are the ones who are most often preyed upon by unscrupulous, and even deadly, men. I, for one, would even go so far as to say that if ladies were encouraged to speak openly about the things that most frightened us, we would all be the safer for it. One cannot protect against a danger that's completely unknown."

As she spoke, Kate's voice rose and, as sometimes happens, did so during a lull in the other discussions in the room.

"I must protest, Lady Katherine," said a portly gentleman with walrus-like whiskers. "Ladies are not constitutionally strong enough to hear about the harshness in our world. It is our job as fathers, brothers, husbands, to protect you from the knowledge of such things. Why, I know of one young lady who went mad from hearing about such awfulness."

Before she could respond to the criticism, Kate heard a sound that was partway between a train coming into the station and a kettle on the boil. To her amusement, it had erupted from Miss Hardcastle's mouth.

"Mr. Symes, please acquit us with some degree of sense. I know very well you're speaking of your niece, Miss Ruby Compton, and everyone knows that she was and is far from mad. She simply chose to fall in love with a fellow neither you nor her parents found smart enough and you had her spirited away to Scotland. The story of her madness and fictitious

institutionalization might very well fool some people, but I knew Ruby at school and had the full story from another school friend.”

It was quite difficult to watch the man’s mouth open and close, rather like a fish removed from a stream, without laughing, so Kate decided to speak instead.

“I agree with Miss Hardcastle. It does no one any good to be wrapped in cotton wool and protected from the things that pose the most danger. I don’t suppose you would agree that it was perfectly acceptable to tell your daughter that arsenic is safe to eat, Sir Horace? Or you, Mr. Harrington, would you tell your sister that your prize bull poses no danger to her?”

Not waiting for them to respond, Kate continued, “Only a mile or so from here, there are girls as young as five years old who know more about the dangers posed by the predators of London than a gently raised young lady of eighteen. Why should an accident of birth mean that we should be kept in ignorance?”

“Well said,” Caro agreed from beside her.

“I think Katherine’s right.” Millie’s voice was a bit shaky, but she pressed on. “There are dangerous things, and men, in the city and yet you would protect us to such a degree that we wouldn’t recognize the devil himself if he crossed our paths.”

Kate rather suspected Satan counted disguise as one of his specialties, but refrained from pointing it out.

“An excellent point.” Caro gave a smile of encouragement to Millie. “And since Scotland Yard hasn’t managed to capture the likes of the Commandments Killer as yet, then we need every tool at our disposal. And knowledge happens to be the most readily available.”

At the mention of the murderer whose string of killings across the capital had even the most confident of men looking over their shoulders, a murmur went through the room.

“Now, Miss Hardcastle, you go too far,” said Sir Horace. “The superintendent of police is a good friend of mine, and he’s got his best man working on the case.”

At the mention of the man leading the investigation, Kate couldn’t stop her own sound of skepticism. “If you mean Inspector Andrew Eversham, Sir Horace, then I fear your confidence is misplaced. He’s been leading the investigation for months now and hasn’t brought forth one reliable suspect.”

“There was a hint in *The Chronicle* that Eversham was fixated on the theory that perhaps the killer was a tradesman because he was so easily able to move through the streets,” a matronly lady with graying gold hair offered. “But I think perhaps a hansom cab driver could just as easily elude capture.”

“What about a servant?” asked Mrs. Araminta Peabody. “They’re always around, but one doesn’t notice them, does one? Why, you there”—she gestured to a footman who was collecting the tea things—“you might be the Commandments Killer and we’d never even know it.”

“Eversham is a good man, dash it,” said Sir Horace, his florid face growing redder. “I won’t have his name or that of Superintendent Darrow sullied in this way. This is just the sort of conversation that I was warning against earlier. See what’s happened already? The lot of you women have grown overexcited. I daresay you’ve grown feverish, you’re so overcome by all this talk of mischief and mayhem.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass, Horace,” said the man to the left of him. He was a doctor, but Kate couldn’t have recalled his name at pistol point. “This talk is no more dangerous for ladies than it is for men.” He turned to Kate. “I think the Commandments Killer is a woman, myself. Remember that a posy was found on the body of the second victim. It’s possible it was from a man’s buttonhole, but I don’t know many men who would wear forget-me-nots.”

At the doctor’s words, the room erupted into chaos.

Under cover of the din, Kate turned to Caro.

“I know we’ve just met, but I’ve an idea for my paper and I think you might be interested. What would you think about our writing a column together about this sort of thing?”

“About men trying to stop us from commonsense understanding of the world around us?”

Kate laughed. “Not quite. I had something else in mind. A column about our thoughts on the kind of crimes typified by the Commandments Killer. Two of the victims have been women, after all. These are the sorts of things ladies find of interest but are discouraged from speaking about.”

Caro tilted her head, a grin widening on her face.

“A sort of lady’s guide to murder, you mean?”

“Yes, but I think we should call it *A Lady’s Guide to Mischief and Mayhem*.”

“A tribute to Sir Horace?” Caro tittered.

“Exactly right.” Kate glanced over to where that gentleman was holding forth on more of his notions of propriety. “He deserves it, don’t you think?”

# Chapter One

## *One Week Later*

And this is my office,” Kate said, ushering Caro into her refuge at *The London Gazette*.

It was unusual for a woman to spend time in what was generally considered to be a male sphere, even more so for her to carve out space there. But she’d made it clear to the publisher, managers, and editors when she’d assumed ownership after her husband’s death that she intended to write for the paper and to give her input when she thought it necessary.

“Have a seat,” she continued, gesturing toward an upholstered chair, then moving to take her own seat behind the large cherry desk that grounded the room. A thick Aubusson rug covered the floor, and gas lamps abolished the gloom of the fog beyond the window. “My secretary, Flora, will bring us some refreshments in a moment and then we can discuss our ideas for the column.”

Caro, who was outfitted in a deep green silk gown with a matching hat perched rakishly atop her dark curls, looked around her with wide-eyed interest. “You’ve created a refuge for yourself here. I approve.”

They’d started the morning with a tour of the premises, moving from the basement, where the printing presses and typesetters were housed, and making their way up to the floor where the executive offices were located. Kate’s office was a corner one and offered a view of the city that was unparalleled—or it would have done if the fog ever lifted enough to allow it. “It wasn’t without controversy.” She leaned back in her chair. “I may have been the new owner, but none of the men in positions of authority were keen on having a lady on the premises day in, day out. But they eventually came around.”

She was understating things a bit. The manager and several of the editors

had expressed their disapproval of her plans in no uncertain terms. When she'd made it clear that they were welcome to find employment elsewhere, however, these objections had mysteriously evaporated. After a few years they'd all learned to work together, and if the men still had complaints, they at least kept them away from her ears.

"I can only imagine." Caro frowned. "There is little men dislike more than having a woman disrupt what they consider their own personal territory."

Kate removed a notebook from a desk drawer and took up the fountain pen lying on the blotter. "Now, let's talk about our first column. It should be about the Commandments Killer, yes?"

Removing her own notebook from the little purse she carried at her wrist, Caro agreed. "As two of the victims have been women, I think it's more important than ever that we offer a female perspective on the case. Women are frightened. And rightly so."

Deciding they'd better get a handle on the case itself before they wrote about it, Kate asked, "What do we know about the investigation so far?"

"There have been four victims, two men and two women." Caro read the names of the victims from her notebook, where she'd already written them down. "Each has been left in a conspicuous location, with a note bearing one of the Ten Commandments left somewhere at the scene."

"Here." Kate moved to where a slate like those found in most schoolrooms lay propped against the wall. Lifting it, she hung it on a blank bit of wall from a hook on the back. Taking a piece of chalk, she neatly wrote the names of each victim in one column, the location of the body in another, and the Commandment that had been left with each body in the last. "Now, what can we conclude from this list?"

"The Commandments are out of order," Caro said after staring at the list for a moment. "Nate Slade, the first victim, was marked with the Tenth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods,' but the second victim, Martha Peters, was left with the Fifth, 'Honor thy father and thy mother.' And so on."

"Good point," Kate said thoughtfully. "I wonder why."

"It's possible the killer selects his victims based on things they've said or done and so chooses the Commandment to fit the victim and not the other way round," Caro said. "I read in an article about Slade that he was known



for his jealousy of his brother's boots, which he himself could never have afforded on his wages. He'd complained rather vocally about them in his local pub the day before he was found dead."

"Oh!" Kate began shuffling through a stack of newspapers on her desk. When she found what she was looking for, she said with triumph, "Here it is. The fourth victim, Betsy Creamer, was overheard at a chophouse, near where her body was found, declaring that she'd not been to church in over a year. She was marked with 'Remember to keep holy the Sabbath.'"

It took them some time, but after the two ladies had read through the accumulated stories about the four victims, they found associations between each of the victims and something they'd done or said that went against the Commandments that had been left with their bodies.

"This is important." Kate shook her head in disbelief. "But we've had our best reporters on this story for weeks, and they've heard nothing about Scotland Yard making this connection."

"It's possible they've already come to the same conclusions we have and haven't told the public about it," Caro said. "It's my understanding that they don't especially care for the press."

"But there should be some sort of warning," Kate said. "People are in danger from this killer, and there's been no warning about this."

"To be fair," Caro said, "I wouldn't know how to phrase such a warning and I've written four books. They were about cookery, mind you, but I'm not unfamiliar with words. Not to mention the fact that a great many people in London break the Commandments on a daily basis."

"I suppose that makes some degree of sense. We don't wish to sound as judgmental as the killer, after all." But Kate still believed the Yard could be doing a better job of getting the word out about the possible motives behind the killings. "And perhaps our column can do something to warn those at risk."

Quickly, they agreed on a basic outline for what they wished to convey in their first foray into writing as a team. Both thought it would be best to give an outline of who had been killed so far, a sketch of their ages and occupations, and whom they'd left behind. Neither wished to dwell on the "sins" that the killer had deemed serious enough to warrant death, so they kept their discussion of the notes and the Commandments to a paragraph at the end, where they issued a general warning that until the culprit was

apprehended, the population at large should be very careful about whom they interacted with.

It took them nearly two hours, but finally the two ladies had a sheaf of pages comprising the inaugural *A Lady's Guide to Mischief and Mayhem* column.

"I know it's probably inappropriate to get pleasure from such a dark subject." Caro smiled ruefully. "But that was fun."

"Life is hard enough that I think we must take our pleasure where it is offered," Kate said pragmatically. "Thank you for agreeing to my mad invitation. Not only because this *was* fun but also because I think we can do some real good with our column."

"I hope so." Caro stood and stretched her back. "At the very least we'll be offering a feminine perspective on what has thus far been a very male-centered discussion."

"And if our writing can spur Scotland Yard into doing a better job and perhaps even catching the killer?" Kate asked. "I for one would not mind that in the least."

"Hear, hear." Caro gathered up her things.

"I know it's early to talk about our next column," Kate said, rising from her own chair, "but I think we should do a bit of investigating for it. Perhaps talk to the people at the places where the female victims were last seen."

Caro beamed. "It's never too early to talk about writing. And I think we will get along capitally, because I was just about to make the same suggestion. When shall we start?"

Kate turned back from locking her office door. "Is tomorrow morning too soon?"

\* \* \*

"There it is, up ahead," Kate said the next morning as she and Caro, accompanied by Caro's very large footman, made their way through the heart of Spitalfields. "The White Hart."

It was their second stop of the day, which had begun with a trip to The Queen's Arms in Whitechapel, where their questions had been met with blank stares and a decisive reluctance to answer them. Though they'd both

donned their oldest, most unfashionable gowns for their errand, their cultured accents marked them as outsiders. That they'd also identified themselves as members of the press only made their task that much harder.

Undaunted, they'd hailed a hansom cab and had him drop them a street away from their destination so that they could get a feel for the neighborhood.

What they'd discovered so far was, in daytime at least, a lively area teeming with people. There were children playing games in the street, a few of whom watched the unfamiliar faces with unashamed curiosity. A beggar, to whom both Kate and Caro gave a few pence each, greeted them as they reached the corner.

There was nothing that marked the area as any better or worse than other locations in the nation's largest metropolis. And yet the body of a murdered woman had been found only yards away last week. Unable to help herself, Kate glanced toward the alley where Betsy Creamer's body, riddled with stab wounds, had been found with a note about keeping the Sabbath day holy propped against her.

"You're to remain out here while we go inside, James," Caro said to the tall young footman who seemed to be more aghast at their surroundings than the ladies he was accompanying.

"But Mrs. Hardcastle made me promise," the young man protested.

"What my mother doesn't know won't hurt her," Caro said sharply. "Besides, I've brought my pistol."

If anything, the man's face turned more alarmed.

Taking pity on him, Kate said, "I'll make sure she doesn't come to any harm, James. Wait for us here on the corner. We won't be long."

James nodded at her assurance and turned to stand near the corner outside the chophouse.

"Thank you," Caro said in an undertone. "I didn't realize how fastidious he'd become since he was elevated to footman. I used to be able to rely upon him not to take Mama's threats too seriously when he was just a groom."

Kate felt a pang of pity for the young man. He very likely didn't wish to lose his position. And who could blame him?

"Shall we go inside?" she asked Caro instead.

Together they neared the door of the bustling chophouse, where

customers brushed against them as they exited the establishment and entering patrons crowded together as they made their way inside.

The smell of grilled meat and unwashed bodies met them as they stepped into the dim interior, lit with gas lamps on the walls. It was clear at once that speaking with the barmaids would be difficult since even at this hour the place was crowded.

But Kate had an idea.

Taking Caro by the arm, she led her toward the back of the room where a door opened into the alley behind the building.

“I was hoping to at least get a chop out of this visit,” Caro said as she followed Kate into the lane.

“We were never going to be able to speak to anyone in there.” Kate shrugged as she scanned the narrow area for signs of life. Just to their right, a young woman wearing similar clothing to that of the servers inside The White Hart stood leaning against the back wall. “Look,” she whispered to Caro.

Her eyes lighting up, Caro followed Kate as she walked toward the woman.

“Is it always this crowded before noon?” Kate asked as they approached.

The girl had obviously been working for some time if the dampness of her hair and the grease stains on the front of her skirt were anything to go by. The cap she wore over her copper-colored hair was slightly askew and her eyes looked as if they’d seen far more in her young life than she should have.

Those same eyes, a watery blue, looked on the two newcomers with suspicion. “Factory shift ends at ten, and today was payday.”

“That makes sense,” Kate said agreeably. “We’re from *The Gazette*. Would it be all right if we asked you a few questions?”

If anything, the girl’s eyes narrowed even further. “’Bout what?”

Kate decided to go ahead and ask without preamble. “Were you working the night Betsy Creamer was here?”

“Worked most nights when Betsy was here. She was a regular customer.”

“So, you knew her well, Miss—?” Kate left the question dangling in the hopes that the girl would give her name.

She was not disappointed.

“Lizzie Grainger.” She frowned. “No ‘Miss.’ I ain’t puttin’ on airs.”

“And I’m Kate and this is Caro.” Kate gestured to her friend, who had taken out her notebook and pencil from some hidden interior pocket of her gown. “Do you mind if we take notes?”

“Suit yourself.”

Thanking her, Kate continued her questioning. “So, Lizzie, you said that Betsy ate here frequently? Did you know her well?”

“Well enough. She didn’t deserve what happened to her, that’s for sure.” For the first time, Lizzie’s face showed real emotion. “She was a good girl. Who cares if she didn’t go to church? Not many around here that does.”

“Were you working the night before she was found?” Kate asked again. “It’s just that there was a story in one of the other papers that noted she’d said something about not having gone to church on Sunday in over a year?”

“Aye, I were here.” Lizzie scowled. “I even saw the fella she left with, though nobody from the police ever asked me about it.”

Kate and Caro exchanged a glance. There had been nothing in the papers about Betsy having been seen with a man the evening before her death.

“Can you describe him for me?” Kate asked.

“He was a looker,” Lizzie said thoughtfully. “His clothes were fancier than we see around here, too.”

She gave a speaking glance toward Kate and Caro’s gowns. “Like yours.”

So much for their attempts to blend in. Kate realized now how foolish they’d been to think anything from their own closets would work. The gowns were several years out of fashion, but there was no disguising they’d been crafted by London’s finest modistes.

“What about his hair?” Caro asked. “Light, dark?”

“It was a bit lighter than yours.” Lizzie nodded at Kate. “And he was about as tall as you, too.”

“Did he have a beard?” Kate asked. “Or side-whiskers?”

Lizzie shook her head. “No, his face was clean.”

Kate asked a few more questions, but it was clear that Lizzie had told them all she knew about the man’s appearance.

“So, you said Betsy left with him that evening,” she said. “Was there anything unusual about that? Did Betsy often leave with men?”

Lizzie scowled. “She weren’t no lightskirt. I told you she was a good girl. You’re like all the rest trying to make it sound like she was asking for

it.”

Kate realized her error and did her best to make amends. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply your friend was asking for what happened to her. I only wish to find out if this was the first time you’d seen her leave with this man.”

“It was the first and last time I seen the man at all.” Lizzie seemed to accept Kate’s apology. “And what worried me about it was the fact that Betsy was almost falling down. I knew that gal for years and I never seen her drink enough to make her that bad off.”

Could the man have poisoned Betsy’s food or drink?

Tears shone in Lizzie’s eyes. “I should have gone after her. I would have if I wasn’t up to me ears in customers and I need this job. But still I should have gone after her. If I had, she might be here now.”

Kate reached out a hand to touch the girl’s shoulder. “You had no way of knowing what would happen. And if you had followed them, he might have killed you, too.”

Caro offered the girl her handkerchief and Lizzie blew her nose loudly into it. “Keep it.” Caro’s tone rose an octave when the barmaid tried to hand the soiled cloth back to her.

“Would it be all right with you if we put this information you’ve shared in the paper?” Kate asked. She would, of course, give the description of the man Betsy had left with to Scotland Yard. “We won’t use your name if you don’t want. But it would probably be a good idea for us to give your name to the police so that they can talk to you.”

At the mention of the police, Lizzie scowled. “You didn’t say you worked for them.”

“We don’t,” Caro explained, “but if they haven’t spoken to you before now, it probably means they don’t know about the man or what you saw. It might help them find Betsy’s killer.”

Grudgingly Lizzie nodded. “I s’pose it won’t do no harm.”

Thanking her, Kate and Caro asked a few more questions about how long Lizzie had worked at the chophouse and some information about her background.

By the time they made their way back through The White Hart and out the front door, they’d been gone for nearly an hour and the look of relief on James’s face when they emerged was almost comical.

When he'd gone to hail them a cab, Caro turned to Kate with a gleam in her eye. "How did we find a bigger clue in this case than the Yard has found in all these months?"

"I don't know." Kate shook her head. "But we're going to add this interview with Lizzie to our first column. Even if this man she described isn't the killer, at the very least he was the last person to see Betsy alive. And if he is the killer, then I for one look forward to having something concrete to warn the vulnerable women of London about."

"And if the police object?"

"They missed their chance to interview Lizzie Grainger themselves," Kate said firmly. "We'll give them the information she gave us once we go to print, but they have no authority over me or my newspaper. And if they ask, I'll tell them so."