

**A Rose Before Dying**  
*A Second Sons Mystery*

By  
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## Chapter One

*Friday, July 8, 1821, London*

Lord Charles Vance, Earl of Castlemoor, hesitated at the steps leading to the glossy black door of Second Sons, Discreet Inquiries. He prayed his uncle's valet was wrong. His uncle's private affairs were just that. *Private*. He had no business interfering. However, Sir Edward was his uncle, so if interference were warranted, he'd interfere.

However, as he reached to rap on the door, it opened. A stocky, black-haired gentleman strode out, nearly pushing him off the stoop. With a nod, Charles backed down the stairs and waited with patient curiosity.

When he caught sight of him, the gentleman laughed harshly. His heavy brows projected fiercely over a bulbous nose. His face was pale with some strong emotion and his jaw worked for a full minute before he said, "Lost your cook, have you?"

The witticism about the competition between the wealthy for the few decent cooks in London and the rage-induced hiring of inquiry agents to find cooks lured away mere hours before an important dinner party fell flat on the walkway between them.

"Cook? Good Lord, no, I..." Charles paused, unwilling to discuss his purpose with a stranger, and a belligerent one at that.

"Well, I doubt you'll find what you're looking for here." He barked out another sharp laugh.

A tall man dressed entirely in black moved into the open doorway. He considered Charles for a moment. "May I help you?" When Charles didn't respond immediately, he added, "I'm Mr. Gaunt."

"Yes—it's a pleasure—" He stepped to the edge of the walkway to let the stocky gentleman pass. Despite his care, the man brushed his shoulder, pushing him onto the damp grass as the stranger stalked toward the gate. Charles stared after him in surprise.

The man stopped with his hand on the iron railing and glanced back. "You're making a mistake, Gaunt. As I informed you last week."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Phillips," Mr. Gaunt said. "As I mentioned at the time, I don't believe either of us wish to continue under these difficult circumstances. I'm sure you'll agree when you've had time to consider."

Mr. Phillips didn't bother to respond. He threw the gate open and walked away in silence, his legs and back as rigid as a marionette's.

Finally, Mr. Gaunt glanced again at Charles. "I beg your pardon—bit of difficulty. Won't you step inside?"

Charles's gaze followed Phillips's rapidly retreating form before he stepped back onto the walkway. Again he hesitated, his reluctance heightened by the brief unpleasantness. "Thank you, however—"

"Please. I assure you Mr. Phillips won't return." Mr. Gaunt stepped aside, holding the door open. "Would I be mistaken to assume you are Lord Castlemoor?"

The tall, somber owner of Second Sons Inquiry Agency evidently felt the need to prove he was not completely incompetent, despite the brief scene with Mr. Phillips.

Chuckling in acknowledgement, Charles followed Mr. Gaunt inside. "Have we met?"

"No. Your uncle is here. He mentioned you might join us."

“His valet was most insistent.” He removed his hat and glanced around the narrow entryway.

A man Charles took to be the butler moved forward to shut the door and take the earl’s hat. Preliminary courtesies addressed, Mr. Gaunt turned sharply to the right. He waved Charles forward into an austere furnished office.

Dark, gleaming wainscoting paneled the lower walls. The deep cherry was echoed in a large desk and chair situated in front of a double window. The surface of the desk shone, and the faint scent of beeswax and lavender lingered in the warm air. Nothing broke the gleaming perfection of the desk’s surface except a small, matching rectangle of wood supporting two crystal pots of ink, a narrow pen holder sporting a single feather pen and an odd-looking bundle of flowers. Apparently, Mr. Gaunt kept his papers neatly locked away, or had no need of records.

Charles thought about his own cluttered desk, piled high with various books and papers, and hummed under his breath. In his experience, the neater the desk, the more arrogant and irritating the man. Then he remembered the gentleman who had bumped into him and wondered if that scene was proof that his uncle’s valet was right to beg him to extricate his uncle from the inquiry agency. Whatever difficulties beset him could be handled by the two of them.

His uncle had rescued him enough times when he was a lad. Now, he could return the favor.

Sir Edward Marlowe, his uncle, sat stiffly upright in the sole chair in front of Mr. Gaunt’s desk. He twitched a spray of smallish yellow flowers out of a cone of thick white paper and fiddled with them.

“Please, come in my lord.” Mr. Gaunt gestured for him to enter the room. Then he glanced over Charles’s shoulder toward the butler hesitating in the doorway. “Bring another chair, Sotheby. Please, my lord, take mine.”

“Yes, sir. Very good.” The butler disappeared, his stiff shoes briskly tapping away down the hallway.

“Looking for employment, Sir Edward?” Charles smiled as he strode forward, hoping to break the tense atmosphere with a joke.

“I have quite enough to occupy my time, thank you, nephew!” Sir Edward’s ebony walking stick slashed through the air as if writing the words.

The stick almost gave the butler a black eye when he entered with the requested chair. He fended off the cane with the chair’s legs and then placed the seat next to Sir Edward. Keeping his gaze fixed firmly on the older man’s cane, he exited swiftly to avoid any inadvertent thumpings.

“So I see, uncle.” Charles placed a hand on the back of the chair. “Your valet indicated you’ve been exceedingly active, despite your injury. Too active.”

“I suppose he told you where I was, too, the damn fool! I warned Gaunt you’d turn up if you made your usual morning visit to my house. Well, I’ve no need of your assistance! Injured or well, I’m capable of handling my own affairs!”

“My thoughts exactly.” He caught his uncle’s gaze. “Perhaps we could discuss it, however? Since I’m here.”

“Might as well.” Sir Edward slapped his cane against the seat of the empty chair. “Sit. My lord.”

“Thank you,” Charles replied with mild irony as he judiciously moved the chair out of reach of his uncle’s impatient swings. He nodded to Mr. Gaunt and his uncle

before taking his seat. "How's your ankle?"

"Lame as ever!" Sir Edward swore and slammed the tip of his walking stick against the wooden floor. "And gout, by God! As if it weren't enough to break the damn thing!"

"I'm sorry," Charles murmured. "However, you'll recall your physician recommended bed rest—"

"A man can't stay abed forever! You wouldn't do it—why should I?"

"Particularly when there are so many females yearning to be impressed?"

His uncle chuckled, although his shaggy brows still jutted over his eyes, deepening the shadows bruising his gray skin. His notoriously foul temper had grown worse over the last few months after a series of misadventures that plagued him. First, he had broken his ankle while helping his lady love mount her ill-trained horse, and then a resurgence of gout tried his temper further. As a result, the smallest hint of disagreement set him off, railing against fate and mankind alike.

Not that Charles could blame him. Continual pain could make even the most sweet-tempered man irritable.

His uncle's brief flash of amusement didn't last long. He punished the floor with his stick again and continued, "So that fool, Hoopes, sent you after me."

"Your valet mentioned something—"

"Well, he had no business doing so."

"He was justifiably worried."

"Nonsense." He slammed his cane down on the desk before he leaned forward to poke the stick at the paper shrouding the flower. He stared at it thoughtfully. "Well, you're here now."

Mr. Gaunt hastily picked up the spray before the cane destroyed it. "Perhaps we ought to discuss your uncle's concerns. He brought this, along with a note—"

"She's dead, Charles!" The words burst from Sir Edward's throat, raw and hard. He clenched his jaw and swallowed, once, twice, as he repeatedly hit the side of Mr. Gaunt's desk with his cane. After several minutes, he mastered himself enough to grind out, "Lady Banks. Dead."

Charles stared at his uncle in disbelief. Sir Edward's closest friend—mistress according to some accounts—dead? She was only thirty, barely three years older than Charles. No wonder his uncle's valet was frantic with worry. "How—what happened?"

"Murdered, God's teeth! And the bastard sent those bloody flowers—taunting me..." He choked again and stared down at his trembling hands, clenched over the brass knob of his walking stick. Bowing his head, he rhythmically tapped the cane against the floor with a soft, controlled beat that was, in its way, far more frightening than his previous flailing. The sound carried such a deep sense of grief that Charles glanced away, unable to watch.

"I'm sorry," he said at last through a tight throat. His gaze shifted from his uncle's bowed head to the spray of flowers. He'd never known Lady Banks, but anger filled him as he watched his uncle wrestle with the pain. How could anyone murder a woman? It was unthinkable. "What did the note say?"

Mr. Gaunt handed him a calling card. There was no name engraved on it. However, the small white square displayed an arrogant scrawl of thick black script reading, "Roses die quickly when cut."

"That was the first one," Mr. Gaunt said.

“The first?” Charles glanced up from the card.

“Some bloody-minded bastard sent it to her Sunday morning. Along with a cluster of those damn yellow flowers,” Sir Edward interrupted in a harsh voice. His face crumpled. Raising a shaking hand, he covered his eyes as if the pressure of his palm could hold back the anguished tears. “She thought...thought I sent them to her, for God’s sake. She laughed when I tried to tell her otherwise.”

Charles rose to stand behind his uncle’s chair and grip his trembling shoulder. As Sir Edward fought for control, Charles caught Mr. Gaunt’s dark, sympathetic gaze. “What happened?”

“Shot. The local constable thought it was an accident. Some poacher hoping to bag a rabbit for Sunday supper. At first. But...” Sir Edward’s voice drifted away, strangled by grief.

“But there was the note.” Charles studied the note. A small, useless bit of paper filled with deep, threatening taunts. “And undoubtedly, the servants heard Lady Banks tease you about sending her the flowers. So they assumed you sent them.”

Gaunt held up another small card between his long fingers. “And not just the one. A second note was delivered with another spray of these same yellow flowers.” His mouth tightened briefly. “Clearly intended to mock Sir Edward—or whoever read it.” He read the second card aloud. “The rose speaks for the doomed.”

“The rose?” Charles repeated. His gaze alighted on the spray of one-inch flowers shaped like yellow pom-poms. “That’s a rose?”

“Yes.” A brief smile glimmered over Gaunt’s face. “Your knowledge of horticulture is on par with mine, my lord. However—”

“She grew them—her namesake.” Sir Edward interrupted. “That’s the ‘Lady Banks’ rose.”

“Then he has left us an unintentionally informative clue,” Charles said with a tight smile. “He knows at least a modicum about roses. And he’s literate enough to compose those notes. Or well-heeled enough to pay someone to write for him.”

“Reasonable assumptions.” Gaunt’s eyes glittered with an intelligence that lightened the grimness of his expression. “You’re more adept at this than many inquiry agents, my lord.”

“Such as Mr. Phillips?”

“Indeed.”

Charles leaned forward and considered the wilting flowers. “I fail to see—”

“We must find the man responsible!” Sir Edward’s cane pounded the floor with angry grief. “Those buffoons on Bow Street believe I did this! That I sent the flowers and shot her! They think I hid the firearm—they spent an entire day searching for it in the garden behind Lady Banks’s house—the fools.”

“That’s absurd! The notes—”

“They think I wrote the bloody things—not caring I couldn’t write in that sprawl if I tried. They think—bloody hell—who knows what those nodcocks think!”

“Rest assured, Sir Edward, we’ll do our best to find the guilty party,” Gaunt replied.

Charles eyed him. “And yet you must be short of staff since Mr. Phillips left, and you know as little of roses as I.”

“The roses may not be that important, and there are inquiries...” Mr. Gaunt said, clearly weighing each word as he spoke.

“You find him—you must!” Sir Edward raised his head, staring at Charles with haggard, red-rimmed eyes. His voice wavered. “I was a fool to come here. Charles—please—help me! For her sake? I was with her when she died. I loved her but those fools questioned me! *Me!* They think I’m a murderer! How could I do such a thing?”

“You didn’t. Never fear, Sir Edward. Mr. Gaunt is your friend, and I’m sure he’s competent.”

“Perhaps, but...” He clearly regretted his hasty decision to rely on his friendship with an inquiry agent to prove his innocence.

“But not now?”

Gaunt straightened. “I assure you both, I’ll do my utmost—”

“No doubt. But do you have our best interests at heart? *My* best interests?” Sir Edward raised a hand when Gaunt frowned. “We’ve known each other for years. You’ll certainly *try*, but face facts, it means little to you if you fail.”

The stiff set of Gaunt’s shoulders told Charles that he was not immune to Sir Edward’s criticism, but he controlled himself. “I’ll discover the truth. I could do no less for a friend.”

“And I...” Charles stopped. He’d been about to admit that the truth might not be what was required.

That would not do. Not at all. The truth was important, but so was his uncle’s reputation, and Charles did not want to see his uncle suffer further.

Unfortunately, he’d held his title for less than two weeks and had only come to London to set up his own establishment. He had little time to devote to an investigation. But in the brief silence cocooning his words, he sensed the fear and grief hollowing his uncle.

Mr. Gaunt might do his best as an impartial agent and Sir Edward’s friend, but he wouldn’t have the same incentive Charles had to prove his uncle’s innocence.

“I’m sure his lordship has other interests to pursue,” Mr. Gaunt said. “He’s new to the title. There are many responsibilities...”

“Please, Lord Castlemoor.” His uncle looked at him with barely concealed panic, for once remembering to use his nephew’s new title. “If the authorities choose to misinterpret my friendship with Lady Banks...”

Sir Charles rarely asked anyone for anything. He demanded, or he did it himself. The fact he begged Charles spoke to the depth of his grief and physical incapacity. Charles had watched with dismay as his uncle’s physical condition deteriorated over the last few weeks, but Sir Edward had refused all offers of assistance. He pushed Charles away and struggled to maintain his appearance of hearty good health despite his crippled foot and constant pain.

And he mostly succeeded in making everyone believe in his indomitable strength. Until now.

Looking at his bowed head, Charles could not refuse the first opportunity presented to him to grant his uncle some measure of aide.

“I may be new to the earldom, but I’m far from overwhelmed,” Charles interjected smoothly. “As you indicated, Mr. Gaunt, we’re both amateurs when it comes to botany. There can be no harm in both of us applying our expertise to solving this difficulty.”

Gaunt didn’t look happy, but he was wise enough to avoid an argument with an earl, even a newly minted one.