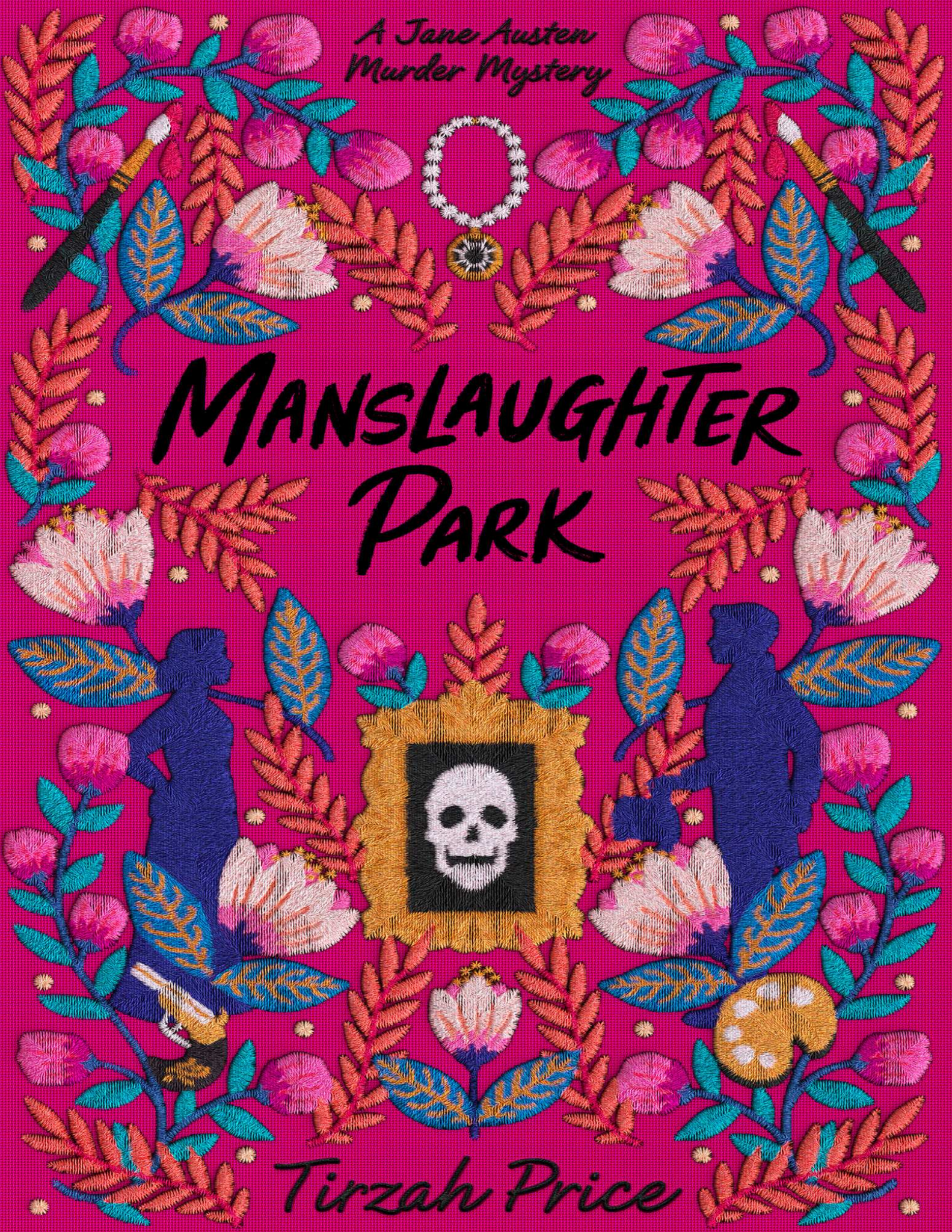


*A Jane Austen  
Murder Mystery*

# MANSLAUGHTER PARK

*Tirzah Price*





# MANSLAUGHTER PARK

A JANE AUSTEN MURDER MYSTERY

TIRZAH PRICE

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# Dedication

*To all the readers who think that Fanny Price deserved better.*



## Epigraph

“I was quiet, but I was not blind.”

—Fanny Price, *Mansfield Park*  
by Jane Austen

“Never tell all you know—not even to the person you know best.”

—*The Secret Adversary*  
by Agatha Christie

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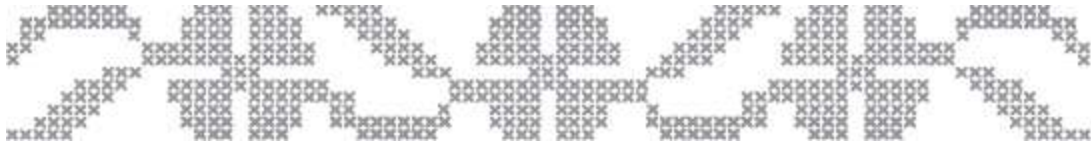
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# One

## *In Which Fanny Price Engages in a Little Light Eavesdropping*



**“FANNY!”**

Fanny Price’s paintbrush slipped at the sound of her own name, leaving a streak of brown paint across the canvas.

“Dash it all!” she muttered, careful not to raise her voice. She cast a furtive look over her shoulder anyway, as some habits were hard to break. Mansfield Park, her home for the past nine years, was an estate of five square miles with a spacious manor house, multiple stables and outbuildings, and a large storehouse that housed the family business, Mansfield Emporium. One would think that with so much space, it shouldn’t be difficult for Fanny to carve out one small corner of said storehouse for a bit of peace and quiet.

One would be wrong.

“Fanny Price! If you’re in here, come out this very instant!”

Fanny hurriedly wiped her paintbrush and set to work feathering out the brown streak she’d left on the canvas. If it dried, it would be impossible to cover up or blend into her painting without having to start from scratch, and Fanny was too proud of the work she’d done thus far to set herself back. Of course, that meant ignoring Aunt Norris, who was sounding more and more cross—and closer and closer—by the second.

“If you’re ignoring me, girl, then there is extra sewing as punishment!”



Fanny tried not to shudder—she had almost finished blending the line of paint. For as patient as she could be making tiny brushstrokes in front of a painting, sewing was not one of her strong suits, and Aunt Norris knew it. She swished the paintbrush back and forth, carefully inspecting the pigment of the paint and then stepping back to get a fuller look. There. Hardly visible anymore.

A creak sounded behind her as someone approached, and she whirled around, an excuse wrapped in an apology already flying to her lips. But the person standing behind her wasn't Aunt Norris at all.

"Edmund!" she exclaimed in a whisper.

"Fanny Price!" Aunt Norris shouted once more, exasperated.

Edmund lifted one finger to his lips, which were twisting in a delighted grin. Fanny bit her lip to keep from asking him what he was on about as he turned around and shouted, "She's not here! Go bellow for her somewhere else!"

"Why, I never!" Aunt Norris exclaimed, and then in a louder shout she added, "Is that any way to speak to your aunt, Edmund Bertram?"

"Hardly *my* aunt," Edmund said in a whisper to Fanny. But he shouted back, "We're trying to work here and you keep disturbing our progress!"

There was some muttering and stomping and then the sound of retreating footsteps. Fanny's shoulders sagged in relief. "You didn't have to do that," she said, but she could hardly hide her smile.

"Oh, I know. But I wanted to. Vexing her is so much fun."

*For you, perhaps,* Fanny wanted to say. Edmund could sass Aunt Norris all he wanted and never face more than a withering gaze or mild admonishment from their uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram. However, there would be hell to pay for Fanny when she finally faced her aunt, and it would be even worse for her if Aunt Norris found out that Fanny had been holed up in the loft of the Mansfield Emporium storehouse all along.

But that was future Fanny's problem. For now, she had a measure more of freedom, and Edmund was smiling at her in a way that made her pulse quicken. "Well, thank you for the distraction."

"My pleasure," he said, and Fanny shivered at his choice of words. Ever since Edmund had returned home from his time at school, Fanny felt as though something had shifted between them. His looks felt more significant, and she dwelled on every sentence he spoke, searching for

deeper meaning. “I have been meaning to venture up here and see if you’ll show me this mysterious painting you’ve been working so diligently on.”

“Oh!” Fanny suddenly remembered her canvas, which now sat in plain view. “It’s not finished!”

“It looks finished enough,” he protested, stepping closer. “Come on, I just want a peek!”

Fanny realized she’d shifted herself in front of the painting so that she was blocking it, and her arms stretched out as if she could stop Edmund. He hesitated and Fanny wavered. “Fine,” she relented, lowering her arms. “But you mustn’t laugh.”

“I would never!” he said in mock outrage, bringing a smile to Fanny’s lips despite her nerves. Edmund had in fact laughed at some of her more childlike attempts at art over the years, but he was never cruel, unlike their shared cousins. Now he assumed a contemplative pose that might have made her giggle if he’d been examining anyone else’s work.

“I can’t watch this!” she said, and made to turn and flee. But Edmund’s hand closed around her elbow before she could run from whatever humiliation was about to unfold.

“Stay,” he implored, so gently that Fanny’s pulse resumed its galloping beat.

So she did. The painting she’d been working on wasn’t her original work, but rather a copy of her favorite acquisition of her uncle’s from the past year. It was unlike his usual fare of pretty landscapes and still life paintings that were popular for society drawing rooms, nor was it a depiction of the more famous personae of Greek or Roman mythology. Instead, the painting was of a domestic scene, a family receiving a caller in their modest yet comfortably middle-class drawing room.

The family consisted of a mother and father, three sisters, and a brother. The caller in question was male, and he was clearly a suitor of the oldest daughter. His hat was in his hands, and the mother stood, welcoming him. The father and brother looked bored and curious, respectively, and the oldest daughter’s eyes were downcast and demure. The youngest daughter, no more than a child, was watching the suitor approach with eagerness.

But it was the middle daughter’s face that Fanny had been unable to finish. In the original painting, her brown eyes were unreadable. Searching, but not emotionless.

Fanny couldn't quite put a finger on what they were trying to say, much less how to paint them.

"This is . . . ," Edmund began, and Fanny nearly fell over in anticipation.

"A modest attempt, and nowhere nearly as good as the original, I know," she rushed to say. "It's not meant for other eyes, really. I do love the original, though, and it was a good opportunity to practice my shading skills."

"I was going to say it's rather good," Edmund said, casting her a surprised glance. "And that it wasn't what I was expecting."

"Oh." Fanny knew without having the benefit of a mirror nearby that her cheeks were turning pink. Her features were unremarkable, her hair a plain light brown, but her skin was pale and very clear, and it betrayed her every time she felt even the slightest bit flustered. "That's kind of you to say."

"It's the truth," he added, emphasizing the word as if doing so could convince her. "Although it is on the unconventional side."

"Isn't it?" Fanny was happy to divert the conversation away from her own talents and to discussing the painting that had inspired her. "Sir Thomas found it in a small gallery in London. Not much is known about the painter, a Mr. Millbrook, but he paints the most intriguing scenes of domestic and everyday life . . . or, that is, to my knowledge he does. I've only seen this painting and one other Uncle brought back with him, but he sold the other one."

"How could he?" Edmund asked in horror.

Fanny rolled her eyes and elbowed him good-naturedly. "I know, sometimes I wish . . ." She stopped herself before she could go too far. There wasn't a point in wishing that all of this art were hers. Not when she was so lucky as to get to be around it day in and day out. Wishing that Mansfield Emporium were a museum rather than a business, that all of the wonderful art she encountered could stay for her to take in rather than be sold to pay for their living, was not just greedy. It was *impractical*. And when you were the penniless ward of a gentleman who had a son, two daughters, and another nephew for a ward, the very last thing that Fanny could afford to be was impractical.

Edmund didn't press Fanny to finish her sentence. Instead, he eyed her painting and said, "I daresay that our uncle will be selling your paintings to



his clients soon enough.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that!”

“Why not? You’re clearly very good.”

His praise made Fanny’s cheeks grow even warmer. She was suddenly very cognizant of the fact that they were quite alone in this corner of the storehouse. And while they’d grown up alongside each other on this great estate, Edmund the son of Sir Thomas’s deceased younger brother and Fanny the daughter of Lady Bertram’s disgraced younger sister, they were very much grown now. And *technically* unrelated.

Fanny was saved from having to puzzle out a response to Edmund’s compliment by the sound of shuffling footsteps behind them. She turned to find her uncle himself, Sir Thomas Bertram, meandering through the aisles of shelved art and miscellaneous paintings, looking about as if he had lost his way.

“Oh, hello,” Sir Thomas said, seemingly unperturbed to have interrupted what was shaping up to be a *moment* between Fanny and Edmund. “I didn’t know you were stashed away up here. Fanny, your aunt Norris has been looking for you.”

“Has she?” Fanny’s tone was all innocence, except for a slight nervous pitch.

But he was thoroughly distracted by the canvas behind Fanny. “Have you made much progress?”

“She’s being shy,” Edmund said, raising his eyebrows at her as if daring her to disagree.

Fanny did not. She *was* shy. It was difficult enough for her to admit that she enjoyed sketching and painting when she lived with her Bertram relatives, who were well-known in upper society for being art dealers and connoisseurs. To have her work judged by her uncle . . . it was almost enough to make her faint.

“Let’s have a look,” he said, adjusting his spectacles so they sat more firmly on the bridge of his nose.

Fanny did not allow herself to faint. It might have been daunting to hold her chin up as her uncle raked his eyes over her canvas, comparing the two paintings, but Fanny was no wilting flower. Besides, Fanny had requested that she be allowed to take the Millbrook painting up to her corner of the storeroom and practice replicating it. She’d been so enchanted by it, and she wanted to somehow capture just a whiff of the same artistry and intrigue

that had gone into the painting. She'd been surprised when Sir Thomas had acquiesced to her unusual request—no painting hung in his storeroom a minute longer than necessary, and the next buyer was always lined up.

Fanny tried very hard to brush away the hope that Sir Thomas's willingness to let her try her hand at replication meant something.

"Hm," he said finally, and Fanny darted a glance at Edmund. Was that a good hm, or an *I am fishing around for a proper comment because this is actually terrible* hm?

Edmund shrugged.

"Very good," he finally pronounced, and Fanny felt the breath whoosh out of her lungs. She hadn't realized just how tense she'd grown in the few moments that had passed.

"Really?" she asked. "You aren't just saying so?"

Sir Thomas's spectacles slid down his nose, and he pushed them back up and cast a reproving look at Fanny. "Now what would be the point of that?"

She gulped. "Oh, well, I—"

"I see no benefit in flattering you, Fanny. You have some measure of talent. That is a matter of fact. The replication is quite good, although unfinished. I look forward to seeing the finished result. If you apply yourself, who knows . . ."

He let his sentence dangle, and it had the effect of holding out a crust of bread to a hungry beggar. Fanny nearly fell forward in her excitement. "You mean to say that perhaps my paintings . . ." She could hardly get the words out because it felt like an impossibility, as if he were offering her the chance to one day *fly*.

"Let's not be too hasty," he said, but a small smile tempered the words. "You'll need to practice quite a bit, and perhaps lessons . . ."

Fanny looked to Edmund, who was grinning at her. The full force of his happiness mingling with her own elation made Fanny feel curiously light-headed. As though she might faint, but out of happiness, not because she wanted to disappear. It was a curious sensation.

A curious sensation, shattered by the sound of a newcomer's voice. "Who needs lessons?"

They all turned to find Sir Thomas's eldest daughter, Miss Maria Bertram, standing framed between an overcrowded shelf of ceramics and a flimsy wall bearing the weight of stacked paintings. She had crept upon

them on cat feet, so quietly that Fanny hadn't heard her until she spoke. Now, much like a cat, she looked upon them with vague suspicion and disdain.

"Fanny," Sir Thomas answered. "If she wants to improve her skills."

"What skills?" Maria demanded. "Just because she dabbles about in pots of paint and spare canvases doesn't mean she's an artist."

"I'd say she does a fair bit more than dabble," Edmund interjected.

"Oh, Fanny, you know what I mean!"

Unfortunately, Fanny did. Maria did not like it when someone was better than her at something, and so she'd diminished Fanny's artistic skills since she was ten and could draw horses that looked like actual horses and not goats on stilts, like Maria's drawings. She swiftly placed a quieting hand on Edmund's arm, to keep him from defending her artistic talents any further.

"Of course," she said. "I am no professional artist. And I'm very grateful to you, Uncle, for allowing me this space and the chance to improve myself."

Sir Thomas waved a hand, as if it were no bother. To him, maybe. But Fanny knew better than ever that while Sir Thomas might not have cared if she spent all day covering every canvas she could get her hands on in paint, other members of the Bertram household did care. And they had an awful lot more sway on Fanny's day-to-day happiness than her uncle did.

"Father, I need to speak with you," Maria said, clearly already moving on. "And Fanny, Aunt Norris is looking for you."

"Oh really?" Fanny's attempt at nonchalance was somewhat tempered by the waver in her voice.

"Better run along now," Sir Thomas said, as if she were eight and not eighteen. "Don't want to keep Aunt Norris waiting."

There was a moment of silence, as if all four of them were thinking upon the horrors that would await them if Aunt Norris had to go a single step out of her way.

"Of course," Fanny said, making a move to gather up her brushes and palette.

"Leave them," Maria said coldly.

Fanny looked to her uncle for guidance. If she left them, and the paint dried, they'd be ruined. But that must have been a trifling concern compared to whatever Maria needed to say, for she was waved off. Edmund



took her arm and pulled her along, leaving behind her paints and the unfinished canvas.

“Is it my imagination,” Edmund whispered as they wended through the aisles of shelving and partial walls hung with paintings, “or has she gotten more insufferable in my absence?”

“Not your imagination,” Fanny confirmed with a whisper. “She can’t be married soon enough.”

“Uncle still hasn’t consented to the marriage?” Edmund asked, surprised.

Fanny shrugged. No one shared details with her. “I suppose not, although he did give his blessing for them to become engaged.”

“Why do you think he’s dragging his feet?”

Because Maria’s fiancé, Mr. Rushworth of the neighboring estate of Sotherton Hall, was insufferable and boring, and he had poor taste in art. It was obvious to anyone that Maria was marrying him only for his money, but no one would actually say that part aloud.

“I’m sure he has his reasons,” Fanny said instead. “And I’m sure Maria will do her level best to badger him out of them.”

Edmund’s laugh was a quiet almost-snort, and Fanny smiled to hear it again. “I’m glad you’re home,” she said.

He squeezed her arm once. “Me too,” he said after a beat.

The moment felt weighted with promise, and Fanny felt her pulse speed up once more, but before she could decide on what to say next, Edmund asked, “Any other family secrets I ought to know about?”

“Oh, well . . .” Fanny didn’t normally like to gossip, but there was hardly ever anyone she could gossip with. And it was Edmund, who was, technically, family. “Aunt Bertram is prone to taking sherry for her nerves.”

Edmund snorted once more. “Right, for her nerves.”

Fanny continued, “And Aunt Norris makes a decent effort at acting as if she doesn’t wish to just move into the house and abandon her cottage.”

“Is she still pocketing candles and whatnot?” Edmund asked.

“Yes,” Fanny confirmed. “And the occasional provisions from the kitchen. She says it’s so nothing goes to waste.”

Edmund guffawed. “More like she doesn’t want to waste her own income on such trivial things as food and candles.”

Fanny was getting into the gossiping spirit now. “Don’t you know that when she shuffles off this mortal coil, all of her worldly goods must be

divided up among her dear nieces and nephew? And she must be economical so as to benefit their future happiness?"

"You mean Tom and Maria and Julia? What use will they have for her money?"

"Everyone always has use for money," Fanny admonished. "Especially money that's given to them rather than earned."

"You know what I mean. They won't *need* it. They've got the Bertram fortune, the Bertram estate, and Tom will have his father's title. You're her niece, too. And your siblings . . ." Edmund trailed off, and she studied his face in the flickering light. So, he hadn't completely forgotten how things were, then. "I'm not her blood relation, so I don't have any reason to expect anything. But the way she and Maria treat you . . ."

Fanny felt a swell of feeling—gratification that he recognized the unfairness, mixed with anger. She pushed it aside. It was no use getting angry at things she could not change, and if she dwelled too long in her feelings, she might not be able to push on.

"Yes, well, never mind that. Aunt Norris is not the only one known to take something that doesn't belong to her."

It did the trick of distracting him as they came to the open railing looking out over the first floor of the storehouse. "What! Who?"

"Julia," Fanny whispered, naming their youngest cousin. "There's a reason the shopgirls down in the village keep a close eye on her, you know. And it's not because they offer impeccable service."

Edmund let her take the stairs first, so she wasn't next to him as he muttered something behind her, but she did pick out the word *thieves*. Before she could say anything more, he said, "And what about Tom?"

"What about me?"

Fanny and Edmund startled to find Tom just a stone's throw away from the bottom of the stairs, sitting on a workbench, jacket off and boots up on a cherry end table that Sir Thomas had recently acquired from Thomas Hope himself. Next to him stood his friend Mr. Yates, a skinny fellow with a tendency toward dramatically cut black jackets and bright cravats. Today's was a plum color.

"Nothing," Fanny said. "Edmund was just wondering what you were up to, is all."

"Working," Tom said with a sardonic smile. "Can't you see, cousin? I am hard at work."

“Clearly,” Edmund agreed, not even trying to hide his sarcasm.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that, did I?” Edmund’s tone managed to sound both congenial and biting at the same time, which Fanny had to admit was a special trait of the Bertram family.

“Yates and I are brainstorming new clients,” Tom said with a touch of defensiveness. “We might know a fellow who would be interested in this end table.” He indicated the one where the heels of his boots sat.

“Not if you scratch it,” Edmund muttered.

Luckily, Tom didn’t hear him. “What are you doing to aid in the family business today, Edmund?”

“Sir Thomas asked me to tune the pianoforte,” he said.

“Hmph,” was all Tom had to say, for who could argue with such usefulness? “By the way, Fanny, Aunt Norris—”

“Is looking for me, I know.” Fanny heaved a sigh and turned to go. “Time for me to meet my judgment. I’ll see you at dinner, Edmund?”

“I’ll walk you back to the house,” he said, and Fanny felt something in her melt a little.

“Egads, the two of you look like suitors, smiling at each other like that!” Tom proclaimed.

Fanny spun back around to face Tom. “Don’t be absurd, Tom!”

But her cousin and Mr. Yates were laughing and exchanging knowing looks. It was enough that Fanny almost wanted to reveal that she did indeed know a secret of Tom’s—that she had observed him sneaking out of Mr. Yates’s room in the early hours of the morning, before the maids were even awake. But there was some unnamed instinct that told her this secret wasn’t wrong like the others . . . just private.

“I forgot my sketchbook,” she announced, suddenly remembering that it sat upstairs near her easel, and besides, she was desperate for a retreat that took her away from Tom and Mr. Yates, and didn’t leave her having to face Edmund just yet. “I’ll be right back.”

She stomped back up the stairs, trying to leave behind Tom’s knowing smirk. The worst part about it was that Tom was right. She *did* like Edmund. She’d never liked anyone but Edmund. He’d been the only one to be kind to her when she first arrived at Mansfield Park nine years earlier, and the two of them had become fast friends, bonding over being fellow outcasts. But then Edmund had followed Tom to school, because despite



being an orphan he was still destined to be a gentleman. He had only just returned home, and now Fanny was finding it harder to pick up where they'd left off at thirteen. There were moments when Edmund treated her just as he always had when they were children, but then he'd offer his arm and treat her like a true lady . . . .

Was he being courteous? Or was there something more to it?

Fanny had quite forgotten about Maria wanting to speak with Sir Thomas, until she caught the sound of Maria's voice, quick and insistent. "You cannot simply decide that!"

Fanny stopped abruptly, not wishing to intrude any further. She knew she ought to forget about her sketchbook, but something rooted her to the spot. The small part of her, perhaps, that hoped that Sir Thomas was putting his foot down for once. It was so rare that Maria got her comeuppance, and Fanny wouldn't mind witnessing it. It would surely keep her going for another six months, in fact.

She picked out some indiscernible whispering, and then Maria's voice rose again, laced with venom. "—will thwart everything!"

"You don't have a say!" Sir Thomas shot back, not much quieter.

Fanny crept forward a few more steps, allowing an elaborate wooden screen with mother-of-pearl inlay to shield her from sight. She peeked around it and spotted Maria and Sir Thomas about ten paces away. Maria certainly didn't appear to be chastised in any way—her hands were raised and one was curled in a fist. Her uncle's arms were folded, but his posture was slouched.

"I do," Maria insisted. "You have no idea what you're doing. You must let me—"

"It's not your place to question me. I'm your father, and I say we shall speak no more on this matter—"

"We *must*. He's expecting a response, and thanks to you I've kept him waiting for far too long!"

"And he'll keep waiting," Sir Thomas snapped, a note of finality in his tone. "I won't talk about this any longer."

"Father, we must—"

"I mean it, Maria, do not press me on this."

Sir Thomas's show of strength was not in the force of his voice but in his immovability. Her uncle was not a man who often sought out arguments or picked fights, especially not where his family was concerned. It was how

Aunt Norris and Lady Bertram had convinced him to take on one of their sister's poor children and Fanny had come to live at Mansfield in the first place.

And he was clearly putting his foot down now.

"You'll regret this," Maria insisted.

"My dear, when you reach my age you'll see that regrets are inevitable. But this is one I can safely live with."

The creak of footsteps was the only warning that Fanny had before her uncle appeared around the screen, purposefully striding back to the front of the storehouse. He didn't notice Fanny's hiding spot, but Maria followed him just a moment later, and she did. "You sneak!" Maria hissed, reaching out to grab Fanny by the arm. "Father! Fanny's been eavesdropping again!"

Sir Thomas turned around wearily. "Maria, let go of your cousin. She's not harming anyone."

"But—" Maria protested at the same time Fanny said:

"I was just fetching my sketchbook—"

"Girls, can't a man have a moment of peace without being challenged?" His voice took on a jagged, aggravated edge. "Fanny, run along and see to your aunts. You've lingered here long enough. Maria, I don't want to hear another word of protest if you plan on staying."

Maria let her go, but not before getting in a savage little pinch at Fanny's inner arm. Fanny knew better than to rub at the spot while still in Maria's presence, and she knew better than to protest. "Yes, Uncle," she whispered, and she made for the door, sketchbook forgotten.

Sir Thomas closed himself in the little office at the top of the stairs, and Fanny didn't linger to see where Maria went. She hurried down the stairs, where Tom and Mr. Yates were still lounging about.

"I think the Grecian statues would do better with the likes of Doyle's social circles," Mr. Yates was saying as she reached the bottom of the stairs. She looked around for Edmund, not spotting him.

"Looking for your beau?" Tom asked.

"No!" Fanny replied hotly, but found herself unable to come up with the sort of searing retort that might have wiped the knowing grin off her cousin's face. She might have lingered a moment or two to figure it out, had she not heard Maria's steps on the stairs behind her.

"Who is Fanny's beau?" she demanded.

Egads, but she was being tested today! “No one!” Fanny proclaimed quite emphatically, and started to march toward the door. She tuned out the sound of Mr. Yates laughing and Tom’s voice. Perhaps after all this, tending to Aunt Norris would be a mercy.

Well, probably not.

She’d made it almost to the door when she heard Edmund call out, “Fanny! Wait!”

Which was why she was perfectly poised to witness what unfolded next. Tom, Mr. Yates, and Maria were gathered near the workbench just a few strides from the bottom of the stairs, laughing at something, most likely at Fanny’s expense. Edmund was on the other side of the open storeroom, emerging from between two large crates. It looked as though he’d been back in the receiving area beneath the second floor, where they stored packing materials and the workmen built and broke down crates to ship the wares.

Above them all was Sir Thomas, emerging from his office. He wasn’t paying them any mind at all as he strode toward the stairs, but his feet caught on something unseen. He tripped, but this was no mere stumble—Sir Thomas fell headfirst.

If he’d been anywhere else, he might have fallen flat on his face and there would have been nothing more to say. But he was at the top of the stairs, and so he tumbled down with a loud crash that made Fanny shriek. His body seemed to go limp as he kept falling, finally coming to a slump at the bottom.

Fanny rushed toward him. Everyone else beat her to Sir Thomas, so at first all she could see were Tom, Mr. Yates, Maria, and Edmund huddling about. And then she saw his spectacles, cracked and lying on the rough-hewn floorboards. She picked them up, and her hands felt something wet.

Edmund looked up from where he was crouched beside Sir Thomas. “Fanny, you need to run for help!”

Fanny looked at her fingertips, eyes not quite believing what she was seeing. They were red.

“Fanny!”

She looked at Edmund. His face was white, and she’d never seen such panic before. “Fanny, *run!*”