

THE BOOTMAKER

AN ASHMEAD CHRISTMAS



CAROLINE WARFIELD

Copyright 2021 by Carol Lynn Roddy writing as Caroline Warfield

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

ISBN and ASIN to be determined upon publication, if any.

✿ Created with Vellum

DEDICATION

***The Bootmaker** was written to order for Linda Brugger, in
gratitude for her interest in my stories.
She won the right to specify some elements
of this one.*

I hope her bootmaker doesn't disappoint.

PROLOGUE



Spring, 1816

Sylvia Denman handed her last mug to Jamie Wilcox who sat at the far end of the table and let her tray, firmly held, drop to her side. She sank against the pantry door where she could hover and listen. If she didn't lurk, she wouldn't know what they were up to.

There were six of them in her mother's kitchen, engaged in their usual attempt to outdo, outtalk, and outshine one another. The proprietors of Ashmead's primary businesses, as the members of the group liked to think of themselves, met periodically to plan, influence, or lament the future of their little village. That the actual leading light, Old Robert Benson, owner of The Willow and the Rose, didn't come made their pretense all the more absurd. Old Robert had better things to do. His fine ale, the best in the shire, served as his representative.

"Three boarded up now, and no incomers in sight." Sylvia found Warner Simmons's morose tone of voice annoying. The long-time grocer had a perpetually pessimistic view of life..

Sylvia didn't budge from where she stood, though her feet

hurt after a day of work, and bit back a response. God knew these men wouldn't give her a seat at the table. Women, in their view, served ale. They didn't make business decisions.

When Howard Griggs, the butcher, said, "None are likely unless we invite 'em. Who's to know where Ashmead is if we don't make some noise?" Heads nodded.

Not Warner Simmons. He growled, "Who would come?"

The others ignored him. They began to argue about what sort of businesses Ashmead needed. None of them ask Sylvia for an opinion. Pity. She had firm ideas on the subject.

The economy of their village had been in decline for several years. The former Earl of Clarion and his countess had been unreliable supporters of local business for some time. When the old earl's will stripped his heir of all that wasn't entailed or nailed down, things got worse. Folks at the Hall employed as many as they could, but far fewer than in the past. Their custom in village businesses was steady but too small to help.

When young Isaac Norton suggested they try to recruit a jeweler or a fancy French modiste, someone who might improve the culture of the village and bring in traffic from over in Nottingham, the others almost laughed him out of the room. *Thank goodness!* she thought. That would be ridiculous.

"No one in Nottingham is going to come to Ashmead for their gewgaws," Simmons jeered.

They agreed on one thing. None of them needed competition. One grocer was sufficient, as were one butcher and one haberdasher. Isaac swore there was barely enough work for one carpenter.

She bit her tongue to keep from asking what she thought was an obvious question, "What do the good people of Ashmead and surrounding farms actually need?"

They argued various businesses that might take over some of the empty buildings, Sylvia sympathized with the

need to fill empty stores. Charley Granger had inherited them when the old earl scandalized the valley by leaving bits of unentailed property to his...

Bastards, Sylvia. Say the word. Charley sold his bequest and drank up the proceeds; the new owner, a consortium of strangers, raised the rents, and there were no takers.

Opinions flew until Doctor Farley finally gave voice to Sylvia's question.

"Times are hard. What do folks around here need and can afford to buy?"

Ellis Corbin, owner of the stables, cleared his throat and spoke for the first time. "Well, we could use a harness maker. Someone who can work leather. I get farmers looking for new harness or repairs in all the time. I dearly wish I could help them. Might bring in some trade from the farmers and estate tenants."

There was some arguing about the suggestion, but it was halfhearted. They all knew a sensible suggestion when they heard one. In the end they agreed to put a notice in the London papers, because, after all, there were so many people there, one was bound to be an unemployed leather worker. It took a bit more, but they also agreed to contribute funds to pay for it.

Sylvia slipped out of the room to fill a pitcher with the ale she knew they would demand next.

CHAPTER 1



Six months later

Fletcher Hadden considered that he may not have lost his mind after all. He had endured ten years in London's filth, fetid air, and unfair dealings in order to learn his trade. The fresher air and finer scenery of Ashmead and the valley around it fed his soul as well as his body. When he quit a perfectly good position to take up a place in a village no one had heard of or could find on a map, his fellows had pronounced him insane. They were the fools. Aside from a few inconveniences, this place suited him down to his boots.

Gazing across the dining room at The Willow and the Rose, he studied one more reason the move pleased him. Sylvia Denman leaned over to say something to a young girl he assumed to be a sister, and the two of them laughed. Sylvia's chestnut hair, perpetually cheerful demeanor, and trim figure caught his eye right after he wandered into town asking for Ellis Corbin.

"A man shouldn't eat alone, Mr. Hadden." Bernice Simmons, swaying her hips, sauntered up to his table bold as brass, and cooed her words. She and her sister Penelope had been sniffing after him since the day after he arrived. They

weren't the only ones. There appeared to be a shortage of well-employed eligible men in Ashmead. The Simmons girls, Eunice Norton and some of the others had been dogged in their pursuit. They didn't worry him overmuch. Fletch had deflected far more devious attempts to snare him into marriage in London after he finished his apprenticeship. Avoiding leg-shackles had become a way of life. Remaining taciturn and grim usually did the trick.

"What makes you think I plan to be alone?" he asked, with no effort to sound pleasant.

Bernice blinked.

Got you there, didn't I. He glanced across at Sylvia and caught her frowning in his direction. She glanced away quickly, and Fletch bit back a grin.

Bernice, still hovering, caught the byplay. "I hope you don't have your eye on Sylvia Denman. She has a mannish attitude, tart tongue and no bosoms. Destined to spinsterhood, that one."

He frowned up at Bernice. Glowered in fact. Fletch had perfected that glower. "Tart tongue? I've never heard her say an unkind thing about anyone." *Unlike you, you spiteful cat.* Confusing intelligence in a woman with mannish tendencies was a common mistake. As to Miss Denman's bosom, Bernice was far off the mark. Fletch knew that for certain. He'd made a study of it.

Still not discouraged, Bernice huffed, pasted on a smile, and tried a different tack. "There will be an assembly on Friday. With Advent coming on Sunday, it will be our last chance for some fun until after Christmas. You must come."

Must I? I'd be hunted like a rabbit. Paul Farley, the physician, pulled up a chair and spared Fletch a response. "Well met, Hadden. Sorry to have kept you waiting." He hadn't; they had no such appointment. Farley looked pointedly at Bernice.

The girl retreated with one last shot. "Friday, Mr. Hadden. Don't forget."

Farley sat down with a rueful grin. “You looked like you need rescuing.”

“Thank you. They aren’t all that blatant, but a few of them have been persistent. I best avoid that assembly.” Fletch drank his ale, his eyes wandering to Sylvia Denman without conscious effort on his part. She had risen and was chatting with Mr. Benson, the innkeeper.

“I disagree,” Farley said. “They hunted me in a pack after my wife died.” Fletch murmured regrets for that but Farley waved it away. “It was three years ago. My point is, I found hiding didn’t work. Ignoring them in public is more effective. If one of them—Bernice most likely—deserves it, an outright snub may be called for. They give up eventually.” Farley darted a glance between Sylvia and Fletch. “Unless, of course, you’re in the market for a wife.”

“I’m not.” At least, he hadn’t been. Something about this place made a man yearn for more than a solitary life. Maybe he should think about it. It wasn’t marriage itself he objected to, he realized, but that offers of sex and housekeeping in exchange for bed and board felt like business propositions. Bernice was no different. He yearned for more, a true partner to share his life with, the sort he remembered his parents enjoying.

The lady who caught his eye made her goodbyes and followed her family out the door. Fletch rose. “I best be getting home. Thank you again for your timely rescue.”

Farley chuckled. “Watch your back.”



Sylvia stepped out into the cold night. The temperatures had dropped this week. Winter approached for certain. Her Papa stayed behind to chat, he said, with Howard Griggs, the butcher, and Isaac Norton. To diddle Isaac out of paying for more drinks, more likely. *Isaac’s sister Eunice will have six*

kinds of fits tomorrow if he rolls in drunk with empty pockets. She stifled a sigh. At least Papa never spent money they didn't have.

"Did you hear there's an assembly Friday, Syl?" her mother asked.

"I can hardly miss it, everyone chatting about it as they were," Sylvia responded.

"We're going, aren't we?" Sarah asked. At eleven, Sylvia's sister was just old enough to take an interest. Village assemblies welcomed whole families, children and all.

"That we are, Sweet. But only the early part. We'll get you home to bed on time," Sylvia said, smiling at her sister.

"Good evening, Mr. Hadden," her mother chirped, startling Sylvia. Sure enough, the incomer, Fletcher Hadden, had joined them. Or attempted to walk past, more likely. Her mother pinned him in place with a pointed smile.

"Are you well settled now, Mr. Hadden," Mama asked.

The man could hardly walk on now. "Well enough, Mrs. Denman. Well enough," he said, making no effort to walk on ahead of them.

They strolled on past the bridge toward Corbin's stables. Mama elbowed Sylvia, a blatant and irritating hint. Sylvia refused to flirt; she tossed about for something to say. "Ellis Corbin told me your business has been brisk," she managed eventually, drawing a frown from Mama, who still believed commerce shouldn't sully her daughter's tongue much less her brain.

"That it has, Miss Denman." Laugh lines on the corners of Fletcher Hadden's eyes testified to his good humor. "There are harnesses, halters, and belts aplenty in the shire that have needed repair for a good long time. I'm working long hours to catch up. I hope by spring this will slow."

Sylvia ignored her mother's warning frown. "Does an artisan ever hope for less business?" she asked.

"Steady income matters, but he might wish for shorter

days and a chance to try something different,” the man responded with a soft smile that warmed her innards.

They paused at Corbin’s. Everyone in Ashmead knew he rented rooms above it, but Mama stated the obvious, cutting off anything further Sylvia might have said about business or, worse, questions she longed to ask about what else he might wish to do.”

“I understand you’re boarding over Corbin’s stables, and taking your meals at The Willow,” Mama said.

“That I am, Mrs. Denman. It suits me fine. Ellis Corbin made space for my work as well so I don’t have to rent one of those overpriced storefronts, at least until I get my business off the ground. I live simply.” He glanced up at the window.

Sylvia suspected the need to build a new business accounted for those long hours as well. Fletcher Hadden appeared to be a wise businessman.

“But a man must yearn for the warmth of a hearth and a home-cooked meal now and again. You might join us for dinner on Sunday after church. Our Sylvia has a nice touch with roast lamb and rosemary.”

Mama is about as subtle as Bernice Simmons, Sylvia thought squeezing Sarah’s shoulder to fend off the outright denial that was sure to come out of the little girl’s mouth. Sylvia avoided cooking when she could and had never roasted lamb in her life.

“Mama forgets that Advent begins on Sunday,” Sylvia said.

“Pish tosh. That doesn’t mean we can’t feed a hungry neighbor forced to take his meals in a common tavern,” Mama said.

As if The Willow were some low-class place. Didn’t we just come from there?

“I can’t possibly accept, Mrs. Denman, as it might offend your daughter’s delicate Christian sensibilities.” The wretch

was teasing her! She could see it in the gleam in his eye and the twitch of his lips.

Mama just looked flustered. She rallied. “Perhaps in that case, you might join us Friday evening before the Assembly. You are going, aren’t you?”

That threw him. Sylvia could have sworn he didn’t plan to attend. With Bernice and her pack—not to mention Mama—after him, she didn’t blame him. He studied her carefully.

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. Denman. I would be honored to accept.” With a tip of his hat, he went up the outside stairs.

“Well. Now that is how it is done. We have him for dinner. That will keep those Simmons girls from stealing a march on you.”

Sylvia groaned, dreading Friday.



Fletch closed the door with a grin, and a jaunty whistle escaped him spontaneously. He looked forward to Friday, if only to watch Denman’s very sensible daughter contend with her matchmaking mother.

CHAPTER 2



“**W**hat’s your rush, Gert. I’ve not had a morsel of that fine cake you baked.” George Denman, a bluff, ruddy faced countryman, growled at his wife. She blushed, and Fletch had a pretty good idea why.

Little Sarah rolled her eyes, and it was all Fletch could do to keep from laughing out loud. The meal truly had been tasty, but glances between the sisters suggested that something in their mother’s profuse praise of Sylvia’s cooking was a spot off. Now that their father had announced the mother did the baking, he’d all but caught her in a lie.

The lady of the house hissed her response in hushed tones. He sighed. “I’m needed to set up at the Assembly rooms, Hadden. If we’re to have a rational conversation, we’ll have to do it over a pint at the Willow.” He leaned over and winked. “Though I expect some of the boys will get up a conversation outside the assembly later.” He went on his way as ordered.

“Sylvia, see to Mr. Hadden’s tea, if you would. Sarah will help me tidy up,” Mrs. Denman said. Sarah glanced at her sister in appeal, but Miss Denman simply raised her brows. The mother hustled the little one to the kitchen leaving her

daughter in the parlor with a single man. If she hadn't had the sense to leave the door open, Fletch would have opened it himself. He liked Sylvia Denman, but he had no desire to be trapped or to have the lady forced into a union not of her choosing. She appeared embarrassed as it was, and he wasn't certain how to make her comfortable.

Miss Denman reacted more quickly. Back straight as a poker, her eyes on a spot over his left shoulder, she said, "Well enough, though slower than a few years back."

"I beg your pardon?" He had no idea what she meant.

"Our business. You asked Papa how we were doing." She dared a glance at his face. "A bit better since you arrived. Those as have come into town for your leather work, stop for groceries, or a bit of linen from us. Better."

"Corbin explained that business had been slow," he responded.

"Slow but not fatally." Relaxing into the topic, she provided an intelligent and well thought out analysis of business in Ashmead. She astonished him. He wondered if her father realized what an astute businesswoman he had on his hands. He feared not.

The mother allowed them the fifteen minutes—likely the limit she believed she could permit them to be alone—bustled in, and frowned when she caught the end of their conversation.

"...with the rents on those three stores excessive, you were wise not to let one," Sylvia finished, glancing down and away—anywhere but at Fletch—when her mother glowered at her.

Fletch felt sorry for the mother's flustered attempt to turn the conversation. She would do better to praise her daughter's business sense. A man with a business to run might well find those skills more attractive than cooking. He took pity on her.

"May I bespeak a dance this evening, Miss Denman?" he

asked, pleasing Mrs. Denman at least. Sylvia blushed and agreed, though whether with pleasure or embarrassment over her mother, he couldn't say.



Sitting on her narrow bed under the eaves, Sylvia stared at her footwear. Her dancing slippers, the ones she sometimes wore to church, were not only too small, they had developed a very definite hole in the sole, and it had grown wider than she recalled. Even slipping a piece of oil cloth wouldn't make them wearable and would hinder any attempt to dance. That left her day shoes, the ones she worked in every day, worn and scuffed as they were. Reluctantly she slipped them on and began to lace them up. Mother wouldn't wait much longer.

She met them at the door, where mother promptly manipulated their guest into offering his arm. *Don't be unfair, Sylvia*, she thought. *He might have offered you his arm without her machinations.* A woman could hope an attractive man might wish to escort her, but how could she tell when her mother interfered?

A ripple of excitement fluttered through the church activity room when they arrived with the newcomer, exactly as Mama hoped. Tonight's assembly, as most, was held at the same modest sized space next to Saint Morwenna's used for meetings, flower arranging, and children's events. The little room appeared packed to the walls, more people than usual being drawn, no doubt, by the arrival of a newcomer.

Holding on to Fletcher Hadden's arm, Sylvia felt all eyes on her and wished to sink into the floor. Blessedly, Ellis Corbin strode up to greet the newcomer, and Sylvia was able to slink away. She felt glares from Bernice Simmons, her sister Penelope, and Eunice Norton on the back of her neck, but she made her way to a quiet corner near the back as was

her custom, leaving them the field as it were. The gentleman would have to defend himself alone.

Ashmead had once boasted a true assembly room, but the village offices and the room above them had fallen into disuse. No one thereabout had the energy for the cleaning and repairs needed for the occasional get togethers. The church's room had to do. A few tables had been pushed against one wall, where ladies deposited their baked goods. Sylvia sat near the old piano, a small square example of the instrument that church members struggled to keep in tune. It had been dusted and polished for the occasion, and, no doubt for the children's Christmas pageant. Rehearsals would begin soon.

Maud Styles, the vicar's wife, sat down next to her. "That was quite a coup, Sylvia," she teased.

Sylvia groaned. "Bernice will be casting darts at me for a month," she said.

Maud grinned at that. She raised an eyebrow. "So. What is he like?"

"He has a solid head for business," Sylvia answered. "Steady and —"

Maud's laughter to put a period to that line of description. "So, no thoughts on the brown eyes, all that curly hair and—" She dropped her voice to a whisper, "Those broad shoulders." This time she actually wagged her eyebrows. If Sylvia didn't know Maud was twice Fletcher Hadden's age and besotted with the Reverend Mr. Styles, she might have suspected her friend of having an eye on the man herself.

She grinned back. "Well, he does have some lovely laugh lines around his eyes. Good humor is a precious quality in a man."

Bernice and Eunice interrupted them. "When will the dancing start, Maud? Mr. Hadden has promised me a dance." She cast a smug glance at Sylvia.

Eunice poked Bernice with her boney elbow. "Me as well,"

Maud glanced ruefully at the room. "It wouldn't hurt to start a little prelude. It might help them clear the floor. Shall we fetch a cup of tea and some cake first, Sylvia?" she asked. Sylvia suspected some imp had Maud trying to provoke the others. If so, she succeeded, judging by their groans.

"Perhaps at the interlude," Sylvia said, shooing Maud toward the piano. Bernice and Eunice scurried off and soon enough the dancing began.

Sylvia's eyes followed Fetcher Hadden as he was almost dragged to the floor by Bernice Simmons. After what appeared to be a ferocious frown, he settled his features into bland endurance, or so Sylvia thought. If he appeared to cast glances her way at every opportunity, perhaps that was Sylvia's imagination.



He spied her in the corner too late, and was waylaid by Bernice and her crew as a result. Luckily the patterns of the country dance kept them separated as much as together. He settled his features into simple indifference. Glowering at the chit's inappropriate flirting would only draw more gossip. Farley had that right.

The interminable dance ended, but another one, Eunice something, cornered him next. So, it went. By the third he managed to maneuver their position so that, when the dance ended and he bowed over the girl's hand, he was near the piano. And Sylvia. Even at that he pretended not to notice the next hopeful galloping his way.

"Miss Denman, may I have the next dance?" he asked. He feared he sounded desperate, because he suspected that he saw laughter in her eyes.

She took his hand and rose. "Not well done, Mr. Hadden. You've crushed Ilsa Briggs who was eyeing you next."

Definitely laughter. His attraction to the woman

increased. Not only did she have a sense of humor, she refused to take the competition—one that existed only in the minds of Bernice and the others—seriously.

Still holding her hand, he whispered to the pianist, who he recognized as the vicar's wife. "Is the waltz danced in Ashmead?"

The good lady's lips twitched. "Rarely. But I think Mr. Styles will allow it." She played a brief interlude as he led his partner to the floor.

Sylvia whispered in his ear. "I don't know how to waltz."

He smiled into her eyes, enjoying their stormy blue.

"Simply follow me.

The chords began, he took her in arms, and the room went still. So be it. He pulled her into the steps, simply at first then more fluidly.

The lady proved to be a fast learner, gradually relaxing and melting into the pattern of the dance. She fit in his arms with perfection, while her eyes held his and she got lost in the music. If it was possible to fall in love in the course of one waltz, Fletch believed he might have done so. He didn't dare hope she felt the same.

One or two couples who knew the steps joined them, and gradually others did too, mimicking the steps. When they reached the place where he expected the music to come to an end, it went on. The woman at the piano had started over.

Does she plan to play it through a second time? God love her!

She would get no argument from Fletch. The woman in his arms glanced at her friend and back up at him, eyes twinkling. Dancing with Sylvia Denman in flickering candlelight had magic about it.

All good things come to an end, however, and so did their dance. He took her hand to lead her—where? Could he lead her outside and steal a kiss?

"They're laughing at me." Her words were a cold-water bath to his rising libido.

“Who?”

“Your admirers. They kept pointing to my feet,” she said.

“Your steps were perfect.” He glanced over at Bernice Simmons’s smirking face. *How could those cats think otherwise?*

“Not my steps; my shoes.” When he gazed down at them, she hissed, “Don’t, please. Just walk me to my seat.”

One thing Fletch knew well was shoes. She had just floated through a waltz wearing scuffed and worn day shoes, most likely the ones she wore in her father’s store. In fact, rummaging through memory of his visit to their place of business soon after he arrived, he was certain of it. She wouldn’t have worn them if she had another.

Another young woman, plain and plump, hovered near the piano when he escorted Sylvia back to where she had been sitting.

Sylvia turned her head up to whisper to him, “Do dance with Ilsa. She really is a good-hearted person and the others will tease her mercilessly if you don’t.”

Good humored, fair, and kind as well. Not to mention a lush armful. Sylvia Denman is a treasure.

CHAPTER 3



Advent services, a bit more austere than other times of year, always pleased Sylvia. Hope dominated the readings, the music, and Mr. Styles words. Ashmead needed hope, and so, she admitted, did Sylvia.

This year, something else added to her pleasure. Her skin tingled with awareness. Fletcher Hadden had joined the gathered villagers. He sat two pews back across the aisle, and Sylvia felt his eyes on her throughout the service, though she would be hard pressed to explain how.

She hadn't seen him since Friday night. She had left early to make certain Sarah got to bed. Mama's objections had been halfhearted, muted by the glorious triumph—Mama's words—of that waltz. Papa had pulled Fletcher out the back with some of the men, no doubt for a tipple. She didn't say good-bye.

The final blessing echoed through the church and Maud's little organ wheezed to life for a rousing verse of "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus." Sylvia let the words seep into her soul for a moment, turned on a sigh, and came face to face with Fletcher Hayden smiling down on her. Her cheeks

warmed, and the knowing gleam in his eyes told her they glowed pink as well.

The sight of Bernice skidding to a stop in her obvious march to greet him first, dampened Sylvia's joy.

"Good morning, Miss Denman. I missed your departure Friday. I apologize for not escorting you home. May I make up for it this morning?" He offered his arm.

Mama hissed in her ear to accept and that she could manage Grandma Ingleby on her own. Sylvia glanced at Mama, Bernice, Penelope who frowned behind her sister, and back at the handsome man in front of her. She stepped out into the aisle and took his arm. "I would like that very much, Mr. Hadden."

They turned to the door and Sylvia feared the Simmons girls would block their way. "Good morning, Bernice, Penelope. I hope your Sunday is a good one," she said.

Bernice blinked; her mouth opened and closed like a beached fish. Penelope wisely pushed the disappointment off her face and responded. "You as well, Sylvie. It is good to see you at Saint Morwenna's, Mr. Hadden."

Sylvia half expected him to say, "Of course, it is my parish now." But, instead, he said, "Mr. Styles provides an inspiring service, does he not?"

The Simmons girls sputtered their agreement. When Griggs the Butcher growled at them to get moving and stop blocking the aisle, they turned and flounced out of church, but didn't go far, hovering near when Fletcher greeted Mr. Styles.

Sylvia introduced him to her grandmother, Mrs. Ingleby, who commented that she always took Sunday dinner with the Denman's, with an invitation and hint as broad as Mama's.

"I'm expected at the Willow, this week I fear." His eyes twinkled with humor. "Perhaps after Advent."

Grandma Ingleby grumbled about an excess of piety, but

the moment passed. Mama suddenly remembered she had left her cake plate in the assembly hall. For some reason she needed Sarah and Grandma to help fetch it. Papa chuckled, tipped his hat, and professed a need to speak to Ellis Corbin.

"I'm so sorry. My family is so—" Bernice's avid stare made her turn her shoulder away from the gaggle of gossips and drop her voice. "Obvious."

"It isn't your family's company I sought, Miss Denman. If you aren't in a hurry, I thought perhaps you might show me more of the village."

The church lay at the far end of the village, so they set out down the main road. The Simmons girls loped along on their heels and Eunice seemed to have joined them. Sylvia could hardly tell them to go away, for their homes lay in the same direction. The truth was, Ashmead had little to show. Most of it strung out along the coaching road, with a half dozen side streets, residences mostly, cut into it. Sylvia searched her mind for something that might interest him.

"Would you like to walk along the river? Even in approaching winter, it is beautiful," she suggested.

"Lead on!" Sylvia hoped what she saw in his face truly was delight.

They didn't get far. She led him past Saint Morwenna's graveyard and crossed the street to turn on Rabbit Run. They had reached the path along the river when her foot caught on a the edge of a rock. She might have fallen, but a firm arm came around her to steady her. She bit down on her lip.

"Are you hurt?" he murmured.

"Embarrassed," she answered.

He urged her to a nearby boulder and knelt in the path without permission nor concern for his Sunday clothing.

"I'm well, truly," she said, gasping when his hand, warm on her ankle, probed for injury. He lifted her foot and slipped off the shoe.

"Your ankle appears fine. Not so your shoe I fear." He held

up the damaged object. The heel dangled back and forth. It had come loose and pulled some of the sole from the upper as well.

Tears, unbidden, choked her. "I hope Papa can fix it. It is my only pair. I need them to work in the store. I'm on my feet all day there. He promised me another after Christmas."

The compassion in his eyes almost unleashed another torrent. "Miss Denman, Ashmead now has a resident leather worker. I can repair this little thing today." As if anticipating her next concern, he went on. "Your family can repay me with one of your mother's delicious dinners."

There was no choice really. She put the shoe back on and hobbled back the way they came to get home as quickly as possible, assuring him she had slippers that would do in the house, but not for work.

The Simmons girls stood at the corner of Goose Lane in what Sylvia suspected was the longest conversation they'd ever had with Emma Corbin in her life, hoping, no doubt, to confront Fletcher Hadden when he left Sylvia off.

At the sight of her hobbling along with a flapping heel, the spiteful laugh could be heard all the way across the street. To Sylvia's astonishment, even that couldn't dampen spirits buoyed by Fletcher Hadden's tender concern.



Fletcher carried the bundle Sylvia Denman handed him to his workshop. If there was one thing he knew, it was shoes. He'd responded to an ad for a harness maker, eager to leave London behind. He hadn't felt the need to mention to the good shopkeepers of Ashmead that he learned to work leather apprenticed to Hoby, London's premier bootmaker, for seven years. Full long enough to know the pace of London's commerce was no more for him than its fetid air.

With his term of service complete, he had been eager to break out on his own.

Hoby may be best known for gentlemen's boots, but the best shops in the city sold ladies shoes and ankle boots from the Hoby workshop. Apprentices—including Fletch—usually began working with ladies' shoes. The repair should be a simple matter.

He unwrapped Sylvia's battered shoes on his work bench and shook his head. Poor workmanship to begin with, and sadly worn to shambles. She worked in her father's establishment daily, he knew that much. How she managed to do so poorly shod baffled him. If he had his way, the shoes with their dry cracked leather, weakened seams, and open holes would be cut up for scrap leather. He set to work, sewing the remnants of the sole to the upper as neatly as he could, a task made more difficult by the condition of the material. It required a patch before he could complete the stitching and glue the heel in place.

Fletch considered the results. He'd been unable to disguise the patch, and the paper-thin soles needed to be replaced. On both of the shoes. Even if he managed that much, such a pair never reflect well on his work. Worse it wasn't what Sylvia Denman deserved.

Still, he could do nothing else for the woman who had caught his fancy; at least it was all he could do that day. Fletch set to work cut two pieces of leather to glue over the soles. He could stitch the edges in place, and have it to her by sundown. The glue would dry overnight.

He glared at the results until a plan began to form in his mind. It had been gratifying to discover that, as he hoped, Ashmead lacked a resident boot and shoe maker. He already had a plan to expand his business in the spring, hoping to have built up sufficient trade to find affordable space and enlarge his workshop. This repair would certainly give potential customers the wrong impression. A well-made pair

of boots, on the other hand, would draw the attention of the village, attention he needed. One that eased Sylvia Denman's life would gratify him even more.

As an image formed in his imagination, a smile spread across his face. He knew just where to get the special material he would need. He added careful measurement of Sylvia Denman's shoes to his notebook, wrote letters to two colleagues, and left for dinner at the Willow with the missives and sufficient money to pay the Mail. He whistled as he walked.

CHAPTER 4



“**Y**ou best be careful where you walk, Syl. Patch those shoes anymore and they’ll fall apart.” Penelope Simmons sounded as snide as her sister.

“Flour and salt, please.” Sylvia addressed her words and her attention to Warner Simmons, not his unpleasant daughter.

“Do you have money for the sugar she ordered?” he demanded.

She didn’t blame him for wondering. Sugar was a luxury, for certain. Money for sugar was money that could have bought a new pair of ankle boots, but Mama liked to bake. Her cakes—small ones at least—went into the basket’s Maud Styles and the ladies’ guild distributed to the neediest on Christmas Eve. “I do indeed,” she replied.

“As much as we like your coin, yer mam would be better served buying you shoes,” Penelope said. Simmons ignored his nasty daughter. So did Sylvia. Mama needed to bake, and shoes had been promised after the New Year began. Sylvia would have to be patient and hope the new ones were better made than the pair on her feet had been.

She accepted the package from Simmons, still refusing to

acknowledge Penelope, only to encounter Bernice coming in the door. She stood aside for Sylvia to exit hissing, "Best be careful Syl, lest you walk right through those shoes and you show your bare toes to the world. Fletcher Hadden has enough to do without rescuing your footwear every week."

The man himself certainly didn't seem to mind. He'd gotten the repaired shoes to her by evening, resoled and better than before. He had come back two days later to inspect the results, or so he said. He seemed intent on inspecting the fit. He'd checked again a week later. To her growing list of his attractions, she had added unrelenting kindness.

Stepping out of the Simmons grocery and down a level, Sylvia smiled. Fletch, as he suggested she call him when they were private, had walked her home two more Sundays, told her mother with a wink that perhaps they could overlook Sylvia's "delicate Christian sensibilities" about Advent now that he was a family friend, and managed to finagle invitations to dinner. The previous Saturday he had returned the favor, treating them to dinner at The Willow.

Fletcher Hadden's attention to Sylvia had been sufficient to raise her hopes. Sufficient to cause talk in Ashmead, most of it approving. Smiling broadly, she gave a little skip in her shoddy shoes. She felt a little sorry for Bernice.



"Come for your package, Mr. Hadden? Give me a moment." Old Robert Benson returned from his office carrying one good sized bundle and a smaller one. He gave the larger a sniff. "Leather all right. I thought you usually bought local. This came all the way from London."

"I have a project in mind that needed something different," Fletch said.

"Fancy harness for the earl?" the old man asked.

Fletch chuckled. “Not quite. You’ll know when you see it. The whole village will.”

The good-humored older gentleman raised both brows. “I’ll look forward to that,” he said with a grin.

It had taken three weeks, but Jem and Henry hadn’t failed him. At least Fletch hoped not; he hurried to the privacy of his workshop where he could make certain and unwrapped the larger of the two packages, his heart pounding in his chest. It had to be right. He had it planned.

He lifted the final layer of paper and drew a breath of sheer relief. He’d gotten what he asked for, a roll of top-quality shoe leather, thin, butter soft, and scarlet red. The other package would also contain leather—thicker, however, for crafting a supple sole. His ankle boots would be a masterpiece; they would leave the people of Ashmead with no doubts about his skill. Concerns haunted him, however. Only one person’s reaction really mattered. Sylvia Denman’s.



Fletcher didn’t come for dinner the fourth week before Christmas. In fact, he was least in sight. Sylvia missed him terribly and worried she had caused offense. Perhaps she had hoped prematurely.

“Has your admirer deserted you, Syl?” Eunice asked after church on the fourth Sunday in Advent. “You were close as thieves two weeks ago.” Not as nasty as Bernice Simmons, Eunice Norton still had a jealous streak.

Sylvia swallowed; she feared— But she refused to doubt him. “He’s had extra work to do, with the holidays coming,” she answered. He had meant it when he told her so. There had been a light in his workshop the past four nights. She had checked.

“Maybe so,” Eunice replied skeptically.

Sylvia opened her mouth to say he was promised for

dinner on Christmas Eve. He also promised he would escort her to services. She left all that unsaid. She didn't need to defend herself to Eunice Norton.

She trudged home with only Sarah for company. *Besides, Sylvia, Fletch hasn't declared himself. It isn't as if he is beholding to you.*

CHAPTER 5



“He’s late.” Sarah knelt on the settee staring out the window.

“Stop that right now, Sarah. He’ll come or he won’t, and you’ll embarrass the family hanging at the window.”

“Why? I’m not the one who has been walking out with him. It isn’t as if...”

A knock at the door cut off her words. Sarah dashed to the door while Sylvia tried to still her hammering heart. She breathed deeply and clasped her hands tightly together. Fletch had come.

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Hadden!” Sarah grinned up at him.

“Happy Christmas, Miss Sarah.” Fletch’s eyes flew directly to Sylvia’s. All would be well. She knew it in her bones.

He greeted her parents politely, however much his gaze wandered repeatedly to Sylvia. “Your home certainly feels festive—holly above the hearth, candles in the windows. And is that cinnamon I smell wafting from your kitchen?”

Mama preened under his praise. “There’s mistletoe over the entrance as well.”

Sylvia groaned at Mama's forwardness. Fletch peered back at the door. "So, there is. I shouldn't have moved so quickly into the room, or S— Sarah would owe me a kiss."

"Ye appear to be burdened with packages," Papa said. "Put them down and come and sit."

Fletch started as if he had forgotten what he carried. "My yes. I come bearing a gift." He handed the smaller package to Mama with a slight bow. "My thanks for your hospitality, Mrs. Denman. Your dinners have given joy to the winter dark."

Mama blushed several shades of pink, accepted the package, and blustered about the gospel and kindness to strangers. Papa managed to herd them all into seats in the tiny sitting room, and Sarah urged Mama to unwrap her gift.

"Wine! My goodness. Our dinner will be as fancy as ones at Clarion Hall." Mama always held up the earl's nearby estate as the height of all that was fashionable, though Sylvia doubted that was true. "Is it the custom in London, then?"

Fletch smiled at Mama. "In some houses."

Sarah bounced in her seat. "What is in the other package then?"

"Ah, yes." He held it up as if to display it. "This is business."

Sarah's crestfallen face tickled Sylvia. *What is he up to?*

"First let me explain. I accepted the business association's invitation to come here in good faith, and I told absolute truth about being an experienced leather worker. I can see why you all thought a harness maker to be a vital business for the valley. Work has been steady and my business has prospered. Ellis Corbin's kindness has enabled me to save the bulk of my profits. Added to funds I brought with me; I should be able to expand in the spring. I plan to rent one of the smaller shops, with a home above it." He spoke to Papa, but his eyes were on Sylvia.

"It was wise to be careful at first. You couldn't have

known how well you would do.” Sylvia felt her smile wobble, wondering what he was about.

Fletch took a deep breath. “There’s more about me than I said at first. I have indeed been working in leather for several years, but not as a harness maker. I apprenticed as a bootmaker.”

“Bootmaker?” Sylvia asked. “That’s why you were able to repair my shoes so thoroughly.”

“It is indeed. At Hoby’s repair work often went to the apprentices.”

Papa’s brows flew up. “Hoby’s?” Even in Ashmead they had heard of England’s premier bootmaker.

Fletch inclined his head. “Hoby’s. The very one. ‘Bootmaker to their Royal Highnesses Sussex, Cumberland and Cambridge,’ as they proclaim. Oh! And Princess Charlotte as well, and her dead this past month, God rest her.”

The Denmans murmured “God rest her,” right after him. The passing of the princess saddened the entire country. Fletch went on, “I apologize for raising that sad event, but I mention her for a reason. Hoby’s may be known for gentlemen’s boots, but we made shoes and boots for ladies as well. If I’m to work in Ashmead, I’ll need to make a whole range of boots and shoes. Which leads me to this.” He handed the package to Sylvia; his eyes wary.

She stared down at the bundle. “What does this have to do with me?”

“I’ve come to beg a favor. Now that the people of Ashmead and surrounding trust me as their harness maker, I want them to seek me as their boot and shoemaker. First, I need their attention. You’re holding a sample of my work. If you were to wear them, it would bring attention to my skills.”

His eyes held hers, and what she saw there warmed her to her ill-shod toes. *He made what is in this package for me. A man can’t give a woman a gift of clothing. It is too personal. But he can*

ask a favor. He made this for me. She rubbed a hand across the package and cleared the lump in her throat.

“Open it, Syl! Open it before I burst.”

“With your permission, Mr. Denman, I would like to ask Sylvia to wear the boots in that package. As a favor. For my business,” Fletch said.

“Open ’er Sylvia. The man needs your help,” Papa said.

Sylvia pulled back the brown paper and gasped. She peered down at a pair of exquisitely made ankle boots. Bright red ankle boots. “But these are—”

“Perfect?” Fletch teased but his tense shoulders and the crinkles around his eyes told her he worried about her response.

“Fashionable. Emma Corbin and I saw a pair like this in the London papers last month. Mr. Benson has newssheets at The Willow.” She turned the wonderful boots with their soft leather, sturdy little heels, and tiny bows on each toe around in her hands studying every inch. “These belong on the feet of a grand London lady,” she whispered.

“Our Mr. Hadden is shrewd, Syl,” Papa said. “I put my better bits out front to attract folks, but the workaday sales are my bread and butter. He won’t sell many o’those boots. Leather alone cost a pretty penny, I’ll warrant. Folks here-about can’t afford them. But they’ll buy their regular shoes from a man who apprenticed with Hoby with pride. Count on it. Put ’em on. You’ll attract every eye in church tonight.” He cleared his throat. “For our friend’s benefit o’course.”

Every eye in church... Panic at the thought died when she looked into his face—wary, insecure, and begging her to say yes. “I will,” she said.

In a twinkling, Fletcher Hadden knelt at her feet. “Let me help you,” he said. He began to unlace her old shoes.

At the feel of his fingers, she wondered just what she’d agreed to. She barely heard Mama send Papa outside to fetch

wood to the kitchen, or Sarah's grumbling when she was ordered to help prepare dinner.

Just like that they were alone, and the man she loved gently removed her shoes, his hands warm on the arch of her feet a moment longer than need be when he murmured, "Perfect. As I knew they would be." He slipped the boots on and the fit was indeed exactly right.

She watched the top of his head and his graceful fingers wide eyed, while he laced the boots past her ankles and onto her calf, smoothed the leather, and let his fingers wander an inch or so above the top before tying the laces with a flourish.

When he looked up at her, her heart stuttered. "Perfect," he repeated. He took a deep breath and spoke. "Business be damned, Sylvia. I made them for you. You know that, don't you?"

Overcome, she could only nod.

He rose and took her hand, pulling her toward the door. *Does he want to leave?* She glanced back toward the kitchen.

He paused and peered up. Mama's sprig of mistletoe dangled above their heads. His warm gaze returned to her, filling her heart as he lowered his mouth to hers. "Happy Christmas, my love," he murmured before he took her lips in a searing kiss.



Fletch could feel every eye on them when he walked down the aisle at Saint Morwenna's, with Sylvia on his arm, and that was before they had time to take in the boots. He knew his attention the past month was enough to raise expectations. The boots amounted to an announcement of betrothal, and that suited him just fine. He still needed to ask the lady, though. Maud Styles, he noticed, beamed at him from her place at the organ.

Soon enough the children took center stage, reenacting the age old story. The singing, joyful and robust, filled his soul, and Mr. Styles' sermon, while predictable, gave him hope. Fletch held Sylvia's hand, hidden in her skirts, throughout the service, her firm grip giving him even more hope.

By the time they filed out, glances at her feet became so noticeable, they spread. No one could resist a peek. Fletch kept their pace steady, worried that he may have overstepped, that the woman he loved may have hated being made a spectacle. He began preparing an apology.

"Happy Christmas, Mr. Styles." Sylvia appeared cheerful enough, smiling at her pastor.

"And to you Sylvia. You seem to have brightened our services tonight," the vicar said with a pointed glance down and a twinkle in his eyes. For a brief moment, Fletch feared Styles might demand to know his intentions, but they moved on so the vicar could greet others.

"Those are some gaudy boots, Syl." Bernice, singularly lacking in holiday cheer, looked as if she had bitten into a lemon.

Fletch held his breath. He needn't have worried. Sylvia lifted her skirt a bit and held out her right foot. "Aren't they wonderful? They are exactly like a pair Emma Corbin and I saw in the London papers. Our Mr. Hadden made them as a sample of his work. My father says it is a shrewd way to demonstrate his skills as a bootmaker."

Warner Simmons came up to his daughters. "I thought we hired a harness man."

Sylvia gave Fletch no time to answer. "You did indeed, Mr. Simmons. You hired one of the most skilled leather workers in England, one who apprenticed with Hoby himself. How clever of you!"

Simmons, momentarily discomfited, couldn't take the

complement at face value. “Not much call for fancy in Ashmead,” he muttered.

“Of course not,” Sylvia said, glancing up at Fletch, humor bright in her beautiful eyes. “As my father says, a shrewd man puts his fancy work out front, but the practical product is his bread and butter. Our Mr. Hadden will continue to do harness work, but he’ll be here for shoes and boots of all types. Just you wait.”

Her business acumen delighted Fletch. *What a partner she will make!*

Simmons had no answer for that. He rubbed his jaw. “Might bring in more trade at that.”

Fletch spoke at last. “That’s my hope Simmons. More business for all of us.” Half the village stood in earshot, some nodding at that sentiment, some puzzled, some—mostly ladies—grinning at Sylvia.

“Merry Christmas to you then,” Simmons murmured, herding his sour-faced daughters away.

“I see you finished that project of yours, Hadden. I can see why you sent to London for leather. You’re a clever man,” Old Robert Benson beamed at him.

“Isn’t he just.” Sylvia’s proud response meant the world.

Fletch need a moment alone. He tried to move toward the little garden on the far side of the church, but everyone in Ashmead seemed eager to give Christmas greetings, inspect the famous boots, or comment on business. Eventually the crowd thinned out as folks wandered toward home, and Sarah called, “See you at home, Syl!”

He ushered her around the side of the church then, next to dormant lilacs and the statue of a cherub, into beams of candlelight shining through the colored glass windows. “I won’t keep you in the cold long. I—”

She turned into his arms, resting her forehead on his chest. “I’m not cold.”

He gently cupped her chin with one hand, while his arm

came around her waist. “You will make a brilliant business partner,” he whispered.

The woman in his arms stiffened, bristling at his words. “Is that all I am to you?”

Fletch chuckled, pulling her closer. “Oh no, as you can probably tell. But I want you to be that. That and so much more. Will you marry me, Sylvia Denman?”

She had tipped her head up, so close she whispered her reply against his lips. “Yes, oh yes, I will.” She stood on the toes of her beautiful red boots and accepted his kiss, and then another.

With only the stars for witnesses, Fletcher Hadden felt his life fall into place. He would live all of it in Ashmead with this woman at his side.

EPILOGUE



June 1817
Maud Styles took her place at the organ, filled with joy for the couple making their vows. All of Ashmead crowded into Saint Morwenna's to witness the wedding of Sylvia Denman, daughter of Ashmead, and Fletcher Hadden, incomer. Most members of the congregation were happy for two of their favorite people. A few were merely curious. Some, Maud knew, saw the end of their ambitions.

Throughout the winter, Bernice and her competitors had continued to shoot pointed darts at Sylvia and make half-hearted attempts to draw Fletcher Hadden's attention. Sylvia pretended it didn't hurt. Hadden jokingly called them forlorn hope attacks—the sort that men made in war trying to breach walls fruitlessly, knowing they wouldn't succeed. All of Ashmead knew he and Sylvia were courting, and public attempts by Bernice and the others to draw his attention brought public censure.

The red shoes had continued to cause talk, but both Hadden and Sylvia had welcomed it, using gossip as an excuse to point out his workmanship. They had worked side

by side to set up his shoe and boot emporium in a small shop in early April, and business boomed as they hoped. Maud assisted his efforts to set up a home above it as well, one he could bring a wife to. She looked the other way when Sylvia, also assisting him in that endeavor, paused with gratifying frequency for kisses full of promise.

Maud sighed with relief. The wedding should put a firm end to all the manipulation and jealous caterwauling from the Simmons girls and their friends. Of course, Ashmead's single ladies now had other quarry in their sight. The Benson brothers had returned.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I offer this little story as a Christmas gift to my readers and hope you enjoyed *The Bootmaker* and this visit to Ashmead. If you wonder about the fate of the Benson brothers, find the answer in *The Wayward Son*, Book One of the *The Ashmead Heirs*.

