

REGENCY + THRILLER

TITLE: STRYCHNINE

To say that Bridget Cadogan was upset would be an understatement. Today marked the second death of a member of her sewing circle in less than a month and it was starting to become a problem. This was her *fourth* sewing circle this year and she was *not* about to track down a fifth one— not this year, not in this frigid weather, and certainly not before she learned how to properly sew a French seam. Of course, learning that would prove difficult considering that the woman who had promised to teach her, Mrs Ballinger, was *dead*. Now there was no one else to teach her, as all the other women were much too preoccupied gossiping about the deaths. Not Bridget, though, who was furious. Simply incandescent with rage and just barely stopping herself from stabbing her perfectly threaded needle (which only took her *three* tries to do today) into Miss Lavinia Huxley's doe eyes.

“Mrs Cadogan, you must be upset about the death of Mrs Ballinger.”

It took nearly all of Bridget's willpower to not throw her manners to the wind and launch herself at Miss Lavinia. Instead, she managed to school her features into something resembling pity. “Indeed, I'm sure we are *all* mourning the loss of Mrs Ballinger quite deeply.”

Bridget gave herself a silent congratulations for not falling into another of Miss Lavinia Huxley's poorly concealed attempts at provoking her.

“Of course, I simply meant to convey my condolences. You two were close, weren't you?”

Bridget eyed the girl. There was a certain gleam in Miss Lavinia's eyes that she wasn't particularly fond of. What was this insipid little girl up to?

“The death of a friend is always difficult— especially so soon after the death of your husband. It's nearly been a year since he died, it must be painful to now mourn a second death so close to the anniversary of his own death.”

Ah, there it was. If there was one thing Miss Lavinia loved more than gossiping, it was reminding Bridget of the fact that she had been widowed so young and so recently. The girl couldn't even disguise her delight at the attempted dig. That certainly wouldn't do.

“Your concern is kind, Miss Lavinia—”

(it was not)

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“I’m sure it’ll be appreciated by your future husband. This upcoming season is your third, is it not?” Bridget had to swallow a cackle at the sour twist to Miss Lavinia’s lips. “Third time’s the charm, or so they say.”

Mention of the upcoming season seemed to catch the other girls’ attention and they were quick to steer the conversation from such gruesome talk of death. She was thankful for the reprieve and, rather than join in, refocused her efforts on recalling what little she had managed to learn from Mrs Ballinger about French seams before her untimely passing. Bridget would be lucky if her seam ripper saw only five uses today.

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The very next Wednesday, Miss Lavinia Huxley was found dead in her bed. Newspapers and relentless gossipers said she was discovered by the maid, who had promptly fainted at the sight of her mistress's lifeless body and blue-tinged lips. It seemed to everyone that Miss Lavinia had passed in her sleep from asphyxia, caused by something unknown at present. Official reports called it a tragedy. Anyone with more than two brain cells to rub together called it foul play. Whatever it was, though, prompted the family to send the maid away on a leave of absence. Everyone was quite upset by the news and a steady line of mourners and well-wishers had persisted for the latter half of the week.

Meanwhile, Bridget Cadogan was stewing alone in the oppressive silence of her too-large terraced house. One death in her sewing circle was unfortunate. Two was a tragic coincidence. Three deaths, however, were downright suspicious. Even worse, though, was that the death of Miss Lavinia had prompted the circle to put their meetings on an indefinite hold. Ideally, Bridget would be searching for her fifth sewing circle of the year, but she was so irate by this turn of events that she simply couldn't. Something was going on and she was going to find out what it was.

Which is what led her to convert her late husband’s office into a mock detective room. It was by no means professional, but it would do for her purposes. What she needed was just a way to visualize everything that had happened so far. She didn’t know much, just that:

1. The first victim, Mrs Thorn, was a 65-year-old widow. She was found in bed by her older sister, a spinster, whom she had been living with. Gossip suggested she had been poisoned, but official reports from Scotland Yard said it was a heart condition.
2. The second victim, Mrs Ballinger, was a 30-year-old married woman. She had been found in the bath by her husband. Official reports said she had drowned. Her husband said he still had night terrors of the horrible grimace on her face.

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3. The third victim, Miss Lavinia, was a 20-year-old unwed woman. She was found in her bed by the maid, who reported the corpse to have blue-tinted lips. It was some sort of poisoning, though the question was *what* exactly.

Bridget sighed and sipped her tea— there were three women from her sewing circle dead and none of them had even bothered to die in the same fashion. It made things a bit trickier, but it was, and she hated to admit this, clever. While she may not get anywhere with her little detective stint, at least she was challenging her mind. And, luckily for her, she knew just the person to give her more information about the cases.

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It took Bridget three days to track down her eldest brother, an overly protective buffoon who was the only one in her family stupid enough to choose life as a policeman over something simpler like farming or the priesthood. His choice had cost him a walloping from their Mam and a year of silence from their Da, but at least he'd finally prove useful to Bridget. Fortunately for everyone, her brother was less temperamental than their parents and more like a dog— a big, dumb, loyal dog.

Currently, he was living up to his dog-like personality and devouring an entire plate of mince pies like it was his sole purpose in life. Bridget watched in mild horror and kept her hands firmly wrapped around her teacup for fear of losing a finger to his ravenous hunger. At this rate, though, she'd be out of mince pies before she could get an answer and they were her only bargaining chip. So, Bridget braced herself and, faster than she thought herself capable of, she snatched the plate of food from her brother.

“Ewan, as lovely as it is to see you inhale food without chewing, I did ask you here for a reason.”

The burly man before her pouted and swiped a hand across his face.

“Aye, all right,” he grunted. “What’s it this time? New suitor? Roof leak? Deciding to apologize for telling Mam I broke the fence when it was you?”

She rolled her eyes so hard she swore she saw all of Hell for a moment. “I’d sooner remarry than apologize to you and we both know I can take care of suitors on my own.”

She paused to think.

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“The roof may need patching. It’s dreadfully damp in the attic and a family of sparrows has made a nest in the rafters.”

Ewan grumbled and reached for the mince pies. Bridget smacked his hand.

“I want to know about Miss Lavinia Huxley’s death. You could tell me about Mrs Thorn and Mrs Ballinger’s too, while you’re at it.”

Her brother went still.

“Did you receive a parcel, Bridget?”

She tipped her head, brows knit, and considered his question. A parcel? Did those women receive a package before they died? Her silence seemed to startle Ewan because he suddenly was on his feet and stomping around, looking in every nook and cranny of her home.

“For God’s sake, Bridget, did you get a parcel or not?”

She watched as he overturned an empty basin and rummaged through her cupboards. It was only as he began to make his way to the stairwell that she spoke up.

“Is that in, then? Someone’s been sending packages to women and then they end up dead?”

Bridget tapped her nails against her teacup and sighed when Ewan didn’t immediately respond. Like some sort of hound, he was singularly focused on finding a non-existent parcel in her home.

“No, Ewan, I haven’t received any suspicious mail. Just the usual nonsense from suitors and letters from our parents. I even received something from Gregor just the other day— his cows broke through the bloody fence again and now one’s gone and gotten pregnant.”

She had hoped that her words would reassure her brother, but the stillness that settled over him was almost unnatural. He refused to speak further and gathered his coat from where it hung near the door. Bridget followed behind him and was surprised when he grabbed her by the shoulders. She was tempted to break his fingers for wrinkling her dress but was dissuaded by the look in his eyes. Ewan was many things— her older brother, a godforsaken policeman, a dumb yet loyal dog, but he was never afraid. The way that he looked at her now, though, had a cold tendril of fear gripping the base of her spine.

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“Promise me that you’ll tell me if you get an unmarked parcel.”

“Ewan—”

He shook her shoulders hard enough that a coil of her hair fell from her bun.

“Promise me, Bridget.”

She nodded.

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Honestly, Bridget had truly meant to tell Ewan about the unmarked package that showed up on her doorstep a day later. Unfortunately, seeing the unassuming box had caused her to fly into such a rage that she may have, possibly, definitely by accident, lobbed it right into the roaring fireplace. *Fortunately*, she regained her senses and fished it out with the poker. By then, though, the wrapping had almost completely burnt away to reveal the wooden finish of the box inside. The exterior was a bit charred but otherwise intact.

Currently, it sat on her kitchen table, where it had been since the fireplace incident. Bridget didn’t trust herself to touch it, for fear that she’d throw it somewhere worse than a fire if she did. It took another day for her to quell her anger enough to even set eyes on the thing without wanting to screech. When she could finally look at it, she did notice a few particular things about the box. It was, first and foremost, small— no bigger than her hands put together side-by-side and made of some sort of untreated wood. The box wasn’t held together by nails, which she found odd, and seemed almost entirely seamless. Bridget assumed it must have been a puzzle box of sorts and that thought had her wondering if it had anything to do with the other women’s deaths. Mrs Thorn’s eyesight hadn’t been the best, Mrs Ballinger wasn’t fond of puzzles, and there was just simply no way that Miss Lavinia was that smart.

On closer inspection, Bridget found that the box had no identifying marks. Besides the charring from the fire, it was smooth and a cursory brush of her hand across the surface yielded no splinters. She was eventually able to make out that the box did have seams. The pieces of the box just fit together so well that it almost seemed as though it was a single block of wood.

Finally, on the fourth day of the box taking up space on her table, Bridget smashed it to bits with a hammer. An inelegant solution, but she wasn’t one to play mind games with anonymous senders of puzzle boxes. She took her trusty hammer to the box and cracked it like it was a mere egg, shoved the wooden splinters off her table, and finally laid eyes on what had once been inside.

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A crystal vial of clear liquid was sitting before her, jostled from its blue velvet bag, and miraculously intact after her hammer usage. There was no label indicating what it was. She picked it up and examined it with a closer eye. The only thing she could note was that the liquid truly was clear— there were no floating particles or discolouration to be seen. She even uncorked it and gave it a cautious sniff, only to find the liquid to be odorless. She recorked the vial and after a moment, she set it down and turned her attention to the blue velvet bag it had been in.

The bag itself was just large enough to hold the vial. It was a deep blue, which wasn't entirely unusual and had a silver drawstring. She couldn't identify that fabric as anything beyond velvet, since Mrs Ballinger had not only died before teaching Bridget how to do a French seam but *also* before showing her the difference in types of fabric. Just as she was about to toss the bag back onto the table, she felt the corner of a stiff card poke her finger.

“Oh, joy, a note from a potential killer. How thoughtful.”

Bridget mumbled an ancient curse, hoping for some reason that it would help her when it never had before, and pulled the card from the bag. It was simple, plain, and a trendy cream color that she would've expected of an invitation to a ball. Written on the card in black ink was:

7 January 1813  
Alban Cadogan  
Death by Strychnine

The card slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the floor. A feeling of cold despair gripped Bridget. Just as quickly as it arrived, the despair left and was replaced with an intense anger that made her shriek. An answering squawk from the family of sparrows in her attic answered. She felt herself overcome by a singular desire.

Bridget Cadogan was going to murder someone.

*Again.*

—

Bridget McNair was wed at eighteen years old on a Tuesday in April of 1811. It was a small ceremony and went by faster than her Mam would have liked (she'd always had grand dreams of a long, drawn-out wedding for her daughter). The only tears shed were by Bridget

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twenty minutes before she entered the small church in her mother's wedding dress. She mourned what once was and what could have been, but never would.

Her second oldest brother, David, officiated the ceremony and, to this day, she's still not quite forgiven him for it. Perhaps if he had refused things would have been different. The eldest McNair sibling, Ewan, couldn't look Bridget in the eye and the youngest, Gregor, had been banished outside after throwing a fit worthy of a toddler, despite being only a year younger than her. Her Da *and* Mam walked her down the aisle and, for a moment at the altar, it felt like neither would let her go. In the end, they did and a mere hour after entering that small church, she left as Mrs Alban Cadogan.

It wasn't until the following spring, after Alban had to sell the country house to settle a debt, that things went from mildly uncomfortable but survivable to Bridget wishing nightly for someone to set her free. To everyone on the outside, the Cadogans were a fine enough couple—he was older than her by nearly two decades, but they were polite. If anything, people thought they were a bit removed from society since they didn't attend many social functions. Alban always had a reason though, primarily saying that Bridget “needed time to adjust”, but never specifying *what* she had to adjust to. It was neither her new social standing, nor the city air, nor even to her life as a newlywed. She needed to adjust to the new cracks in her ribs, the bruises on her stomach, and the welts on her back.

“Such a clumsy girl!” They'd say when a burn would appear on her arm.

“From the stove,” she'd demure and avert her eyes.

(It was not from the stove. It never was.)

1812 marked the year that Bridget had had enough. Alban Cadogan may have been a doctor, but he was almost laughably stupid and had no idea that his little wife from the country could read. After all, he had spun the narrative that he had plucked her from the muck— her being able to *read* wasn't something that had even occurred to him. And so, on the days and nights he was out gambling, Bridget was reading. Her husband had countless medical texts, nearly all of which were covered in a layer of dust. Alban hadn't practiced since his father died and left him, the sole heir, his estate. Bridget read and read, and then read some more. When she wasn't bedridden, she was in the garden tending to the kinds of plants that a sweet, obedient wife ought not to be tending. It was amazing what batting her eyelashes and flashing some money could get her. Even more amazing was Alban not realizing that it wasn't the alcohol and the gambling that would kill him, but his pretty and obedient little wife from the country who was tired of burns and bruises, broken bones and belts butchering her back.

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Bridget Cadogan had been a widow since January 7th, 1813. She had lived in her too-big terraced house in the city by herself for almost a year. She enjoyed having the bed to herself, taking afternoon tea how she wanted, and tending to her garden. Her recent pursuit of sewing as a hobby was slow work and she abhorred conversation with the tittering girls who didn't know the ache of broken ribs or the feel of leather splitting skin. It was why she had gone through three sewing circles before settling on her fourth one.

Bridget's fourth sewing circle had a good mix of older and younger women. Some were married, some were widowed, and some were unwed. She liked that she was able to mostly avoid the never-wed girls, even though she was usually closer in age to them, and seek advice from the older women. It was nice. Mrs Ballinger had been nice and they'd even had tea together outside of the sewing circle on a few occasions. Mrs Thorn and her had even had some talks about grief, though Bridget got the sense that Mrs Thorn probably hadn't poisoned her husband with strychnine. They got along nonetheless and often swapped book recommendations. Miss Lavinia Huxley she never cared for, she was loud and too determined to undermine Bridget for no discernible reason. Despite that, her death has been the turning point for the sewing circle's "indefinite hold" on meetings.

Needless to say, Bridget was not about to let someone ruin all that she had managed to accomplish in a year. She *refused* to take this lying down. There wasn't a single thing in the world that would keep her from preserving her peace.

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The wooden puzzle box and the remains of its burnt wrapping were ashes in Bridget's fireplace. The vial and card were once more in the blue velvet bag, which she had tucked into her reticule along with Alban's old pistol and a few bank notes. There wasn't much room left in her little bag and she had yet to learn how to sew pockets into her dresses since pockets *in* dresses had long since fallen out of style (something she was sure everyone would regret in a few years and, she hoped, would return to implementing).

It was nearly noon and Bridget stood outside an upper-class home just outside the city, as the instructions on the back of the card in the velvet bag had said. The omnibus driver she had flagged down to take her to the address had looked at her strangely when she'd told him where she was going. She'd pressed him no less than three times about the location before giving up and assuming it was because she was a woman. Nevertheless, she'd slipped him a few extra coins for going out of his way and he'd left so fast that she was beginning to wonder if she'd

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made some sort of mistake. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to dwell on that long when the door swung open.

The person at the door was an older gentleman, with sideburns she assumed some men would be jealous of, and she could immediately tell that there was a gun strapped to his person. That should have worried her, but considering she had her pistol and was specifically told to come here, she was feeling more annoyed at the theatrics than anything. The older gentleman peered at her like she was an oddity in her pretty pastel dress and pinned-back curls.

“Are you going to let me in or not? I haven't got all day, sir,” she grouched at him and he seemed surprised at her tone. Rather than say anything, he merely stepped aside and gestured for her to come inside.

The man, who eventually introduced himself as Stewart (no indication of whether that was his first or last name), led her into the home. If the outside of the home screamed upper-class, then the interior nearly said royalty. The difference rubbed her the wrong way, but she said nothing of it and allowed herself to be taken to what must have been considered a waiting room. She was directed to sit on a couch that was far too comfortable for the confrontation she was expecting to have. Once Bridget was settled, Stewart cocked an eyebrow at her and crossed his arms. He inspected her like she was some kind of strange specimen and she nearly snapped at him. Instead, she glared at him which seemed to amuse the man. Their contest of wills was short-lived, though, when a different man entered with a clap of his hands.

“Right, then. Let's get down to business, love.”

This man was far too smooth and far too handsome and Bridget decided that, on principle, she hated him. Stewart, however, seemed to bow to his presence and took it as his cue to leave. When it was just her and the other man, he turned to her with a broad grin.

“Whisky?”

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His name was James Rookwood and he was a cad of the highest degree. He plied her with fine Scotch whisky that reminded her of her Da and told her that her late husband had been something of a thorn in his side. A thorn to the tune of nearly 10,000 pounds.

“I'm not giving you money, Mr Rookwood,” she quipped as soon as she heard the number.

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“I hadn’t thought you would, Mrs Cadogan. Especially considering you murdered the last three men I sent your way to collect.” That grin of his seemed permanently etched into his face, even as he spoke casually of three murdered men.

Bridget tapped her nail against the crystal glass she held and narrowed her eyes at Mr Rookwood. He was clever, she’d give him that. As far as she knew, no one else knew about the three bodies buried in her little garden that was killing her grass but causing her clovers to grow unchecked. Rather than deal with that, she decided to pivot the conversation and set her empty glass on the table.

“Did you kill those women in my sewing circle, Mr Rookwood?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

He cocked his head and smiled at her. She supposed some might call it charming, but she was more concerned with her life potentially being at stake.

“It seemed only fair. You killed three of mine, I killed three of yours.”

She huffed and considered throwing something at him. “I would hardly call them ‘mine’ and they didn’t deserve to die.”

“My men did?”

“They threatened me.”

Mr Rookwood seemed to find that endlessly hilarious. It took nearly an entire minute for him to stop chuckling. She watched the entire time and wondered if she’d be able to shoot him before he tried to kill her. Her aim probably wasn’t very good, though, and Stewart was likely lurking nearby.

“I’ll tell you what, love. I think we can settle this quite easily. How does a duel sound?”

“Terrible, I much prefer poison.” She pulled the vial from her reticule and gingerly set it on the table in front of her. “Strychnine, I presume? Boiled with alcohol to make a liquid. Pour it into one glass and leave the other alone. You lose if you die.”

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It irritated her that he didn't even seem surprised she had the vial with her. What bothered her even more was that he simply refilled both of their glasses and called Stewart into the room. Stewart took the glasses and the strychnine away with him and returned a few moments later, set the glasses on the table, and then left. Mr Rookwood gestured for Bridget to take a glass. She eyed both and, without further preamble, selected one. The man across from her took the other.

“To us, Mrs Cadogan.”

“To us, Mr Rookwood.”

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It was the 7th of January in the year 1815 when Bridget Cadogan remarried. She was twenty-two years old and it was a long drawn-out ceremony that had her Mam over-the-moon. The only tears shed were by her Mam and her little niece, who was tucked into Gregor's arms as he fretted over her and his wife watched in amusement. Bridget entered the grandiose church in a new wedding dress and, for just a moment, mourned that she'd soon have to share a bed and ask someone else how they took their tea.

Her second oldest brother, David, officiated the ceremony and, at this point, she supposed that he was forgiven. If he had refused, she may have tossed him into the ocean with weights tied to his feet. The eldest McNair sibling, Ewan, was less-than-pleased with the whole situation, considering *who* Bridget was marrying, and the youngest, Gregor, was doing his best to keep an eye on his toddler boy, his new baby girl, and his sister all at once. Her Da walked her down the aisle while her Mam sat in the front pew bawling her eyes out and, when they got to the altar, he squeezed her and quietly whispered that she could do worse (which had her chuckling considering she *had* done worse). The whole affair felt like it took ages and, by her new husband's request, there was, of course, an entire event following it at their country house.

Bridget was currently standing on the balcony of her home, cursing the very idea of a winter wedding. She was damning her husband for suggesting it and herself for even entertaining the idea for a moment because that was all the time it took for him to convince her with his stupid smile. Her peace on the balcony was disrupted by a set of heavy footsteps and she contemplated throwing her shoe at whoever had dared to disturb her. Before she could turn to confront them, a suit jacket was laid over her shoulders and a crystal glass of what she *knew* was a fine Scotch whisky was pushed into her hands.

“If this has strychnine in it, I will personally gut you.”

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Her husband, in all his far too handsome glory, chuckled and slid an arm around her shoulders. He twisted her to face him and tapped her chin.

“Seems a bit harsh, Mrs Rookwood.”

She scoffed and dug her nails into the soft skin of his neck. James was undeterred by the threat and just smiled that stupid smile that got her into this mess to begin with.

“I was perfectly happy being a widow, you know. I’d gladly do it again. Perhaps bury *you* in the garden this time, since you refused to die last time.”

“What can I say? It would’ve been terribly embarrassing to die in front of such a beautiful woman with the tongue of a viper.”

He clinked his glass of whisky against hers. She grumbled and took a sip when he did. Perhaps if she was lucky, Stewart kept that vial of strychnine and had *actually* used it this time. The twinkle in James’s eyes suggested otherwise and she conceded that, perhaps, her new husband wasn’t as annoying as she pretended. He had even gotten her her very own sewing tutor, though she had quickly lost interest after perfecting her French seam technique.

“You’re a cad, James,” she muttered petulantly. “You’re lucky I haven’t killed you yet.”

“Not for lack of trying on your part, love. You were quite stubborn the entire time we courted. I must have dodged at least twenty bullets and avoided five different poisons.”

“It was seven poisons and I’m still upset you set fire to my *Atropa belladonna* plant. I worked *extremely* hard to grow that.”

He shrugged and tapped her on the nose. She scowled at him and attempted to bite his finger off, but he was quick to quell her annoyance with a press of his lips to her temple.

“Easy, love. Save it for when the guests leave, eh?”

Bridget was definitely going to kill him before the year was over, even if she ended up dying in the process. There was simply no way a man was allowed to enchant her so much. Unfortunately, James chose that moment to gently rock them from side to side in a simple dance and she found her resolve waning.

There was always next year for murder.