Something Wicked This Way Comes

by ChancellorGriffin

Summary

After a car accident, a snowstorm and a sudden telephone outage leave ten guests trapped in their hostess' house for the night, none of them can imagine this dinner party possibly getting any worse . . . until an entirely unexpected corpse turns up in the parlor.

Inspired by Agatha Christie.

Notes

SETTING
Arcadia, the isolated country estate of Diana Sydney, six miles outside the village of Mount Weather
October, 1925

THE HOST
Diana Sydney, a celebrated tragic actress with a penchant for wild parties
THE GUESTS

Lady Abigail Griffin, a wealthy widow and the village’s last remaining nobility
Clarke Griffin, her daughter, just back from several years studying art in Paris
Major Kane, a retired military officer newly returned from North Africa
Vera Kane, his mother, who works at the church
Mr. Pike, headmaster of the village school
Bellamy Blake, tutor of history and classics at the village school
Octavia Blake, his sister, games mistress and girls’ athletics instructor at the village school
Reverend Thelonious Jaha, minister of the village church
Doctor Jackson, a young physician, newly arrived in the village from London

THE STAFF

Reyes, the chauffeur/mechanic
Miller, the butler
Lincoln, the gardener and man-of-all-work; American
Harper, the housekeeper
Monroe, the cook

David Miller, father of Young Miller the butler; village constable
Detective Inspector Shumway, Scotland Yard
"What's Past Is Prologue"

Chapter Notes

**Second Witch:**
By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes. [Knocking]
Open locks,
Whoever knocks!

[Enter Macbeth]

**Macbeth:**
How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!
What is't you do?

**Three Witches:**
A deed without a name.

--Macbeth by William Shakespeare (Act 4, Scene I)

MORNING

“Out, damned spot!”

Harper, with the keen eye of a trained servant, looked sharply up from the mountain of unpolished silver heaped on the table in front of her and began to move towards the door of the breakfast-room at the sound of her mistress’ voice. Miller, the butler, waved her back to her seat without even looking up.

“No, it isn’t a housekeeping emergency,” he said dryly. “She’s only rehearsing.”

“Rehearsing?”

“She goes on next month as Lady Macbeth at the Lyceum. It’s all we’ve been hearing for weeks.”

“I’d rather have Shakespeare than that terrible comedy where they all had French accents,” Raven the chauffeur muttered from across the table. The entire domestic staff had been drafted to help get the silver ready for tonight’s dinner – all save Monroe the cook, who was commanding her army of part-time scullery help downstairs in the kitchen – giving Harper a welcome respite from the solitary work of dusting and cleaning. Even Lincoln, the groundskeeper and man-of-all-work, who rarely set foot in the main house, had agreed to lend a hand, and sat buffing the tarnish off Miss Sydney’s coffee service, listening to them with quiet amusement.

“The French accents were dreadful,” Miller agreed, “but I’d rather have that than her wandering about at night practicing madness and wailing about murder. After a few weeks, it begins to take its toll on the nerves.”
Harper McIntyre’s new position was not off to an auspicious beginning. She had arrived at the vast, opulent stone estate in the midst of manic preparations for a dinner party full of elegant London guests – friends of the mistress, who apparently worked in the theatre. Not two days had gone by before the housekeeper and upstairs maid both handed in their notice (Miss Sydney was, apparently, a rather taxing employer), leaving Harper – who’d arrived to inquire about the vacant downstairs maid position and been hired on the spot with no interview – the de facto housekeeper, with no time to hire on permanent help before guests were due to arrive for the weekend.

Miller was as much help as he could be, but he’d landed here in roughly the same position – taking a job as footman and finding himself accidentally promoted after Miss Sydney threw a shoe at the butler one too many times. Zoe Monroe, the Scottish girl who ran the kitchens with an iron fist, was young too, but she’d arrived here on her own merits, poached from the kitchens of the Savoy Hotel where her cooking was famed throughout London. None of the three were older than twenty-five, yet they comprised the entirety of the house staff. It was exhausting, demanding work, but they’d never been paid this well in their lives, and Miss Sydney liked having young people around; so far, she hadn’t thrown a shoe at any one of them. She’d dumped a pitcher of water out the window at Raven once, but that appeared to have been in fun; surely she wouldn’t scandalize the village by keeping a lady chauffeur, of all things, if she hadn’t genuinely liked having the girl around. Or, for that matter, the near-equal scandal of an American gardener. Lincoln was big and broad-shouldered and quiet, with an air about him that the village of Mount Weather seemed disposed to interpret as menace, but Harper didn’t agree. It looked to her a great deal more like sorrow. She wondered what secrets he was hiding.

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of the breakfast-room bell, and she sighed. “That’s your cue,” she told Miller. “Enter stage right, a young butler, menu in hand.” BUTLER: ‘My lady, here is tonight’s menu.’ LADY OF THE HOUSE: ‘Excellent. Here are half-a-dozen changes I will add at the last possible moment in my ongoing attempt to drive Monroe to the edge of complete insanity.’”

“I believe I’ve seen this play,” murmured Lincoln in that low, somber voice of his, which always gave them a moment’s pause before realizing he was making a joke. Miller retrieved the draft menu from the sideboard and made his way to the breakfast-room.

“Screw your courage to the sticking-place,” quoted Raven dryly (they’d all taken to tossing lines of Lady Macbeth dialogue at one another behind their mistress' back for amusement). Miller grimaced back at her and heaved a great sigh as the dining room door swung closed behind him.

He found his mistress in a tense, snappish mood, fidgeting restlessly her coffee.

“Would you like to go over the menu for this evening?”

“Oh, who gives a damn about the menu when there’s no one to impress,” she snapped, with an irritated yet world-weary air Miller faintly remembered watching her perfect for the role of an heiress dying of consumption.

“I’m sure your friends from London will be very impressed, ma’am, Monroe has put together quite a – “

“There won’t be any guests from London, you simpleton, that’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Miller took a deep breath, held it for three seconds, and released it, struggling not to lose his temper.

“If the dinner is canceled, ma’am, I should go and alert the staff – “
“Lord, no, it’s not canceled, I’m not wasting good food I’ve already paid for.” She looked down at her coffee as if suddenly recalling its existence and took an exasperated sip. “Ridley’s keeping the entire company in London to rehearse the final act. None of them can get away for the weekend. So I’ve rung around the village and scrounged up some last-minute guests.” She made a carelessly elegant gesture with one hand that was simultaneously a dismissal of these guests as entirely unimportant, a demand that Miller approach closer with the menu, and a request for more coffee, which he obliged.

“May I ask who will be attending?” Miller asked in a carefully neutral tone. “Only Harper and I will need to make out place cards and go over the seating arrangements again.”

“Well, Lady Abigail, obviously,” she sighed. “One must. I don’t find her particularly invigorating company, but I suppose you can get away with being tediously self-righteous when you look like she does. The daughter too. She’s back from three years in Paris. Maybe while she was there, she accidentally became interesting.”

Despite her dismissive tone, these words caused Miller to exhale with relief. The Griffins, mother and daughter, were Mount Weather’s last surviving aristocrats, beloved by everyone in the village, and Miss Sydney should thank her lucky stars they’d agreed to such a grotesquely last-minute invitation, as their presence would convey an air of respectability that her usual raucous parties tended to lack.

“Lady Abigail and Miss Griffin,” he said. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, and talking of people recently returned from foreign parts, Major Kane is back from North Africa,” she added, with a casual air that didn’t fool him. She’d been hunting the man since she first bought this house five years ago. “I invited his ghastly mother, too. Of course I’d rather not – religious people bore me so dreadfully – but we’d have uneven numbers of women and men without her, so needs must.”

“I’m sure she’s honored to be included, ma’am,” he said politely through gritted teeth. Vera Kane had been his father’s godmother, and few people in the village were more respected. “That’s five, plus yourself.”

“Goodness, who am I forgetting? That’s all the women. Oh! I’ve invited the new doctor. He’s handsome enough, and I thought it might be pleasant for Miss Griffin to have someone her own age. A trifle stiff, you know - difficult to tell whether he’s dull or simply shy - but maybe Miss Griffin can coax some personality out of him. And then, now, Miller, don’t be cross, but I’ve also invited Mr. Pike.”

“Mr. Pike the headmaster?”

“I know, I know, he was your teacher and you were none too fond of him at school. And believe me, he’s hardly my first choice either. There’s something rather hard about the man that I don’t quite like. A bit dangerous, you know, but not in a charming way. Still, there’s a finite number of respectable men in this godforsaken hamlet, and while heading a school isn’t on a level with the gentry – or even the military, or the church – it’s not quite trade, so he’ll have to do.”

“Oh!” she gave a sudden, peculiar little laugh that he didn’t quite like. “I almost forgot. I’ve invited the reverend as well.”

Miller’s polite, professional demeanor shattered completely, and he stared in open astonishment,
though his employer seemed hardly to notice.

“You hate Reverend Jaha.”

“Of course I do,” she sighed impatiently, as though this were obvious, “everyone does. But inviting the clergy to dinner is what one does in the country, and I’ve been putting it off and putting it off. Of course when it’s only a week-end house and you don’t really live here, you can escape the chokehold of social niceties. But I’ve been spending more time here lately, and I believe after five years the village rather looks on me as one of their own” (this was wildly inaccurate, but Miller didn’t bother) “so I suppose I must just bite the bullet and get the thing over with. With all these other people to distract him, and a twelve-course dinner to put away, I suppose this is as painless as it will ever get.”

“I’m sure it will be a very pleasant evening.”

“Of course it won’t, Miller, don’t be an idiot, it will be misery, but fortunately once I’ve fed these people I won’t be expected to feed them again for at least another year and we can all go on pleasantly ignoring each other. Now for God’s sake, give me some good news. What has Monroe been up to all week?”

Miller pulled out the menu and immediately became all business.

“For the first course, we have Canapé à l’Amiral,” he began, and she nodded approvingly.

“Is that the one with the bits of cucumber we had for the author luncheon last month?”

“No ma’am. Toast rounds topped with shrimp butter and roe.”

“Fine. We’ll want a different vintage for each course, so be thorough on your visit to the cellar. Reverend Jaha’s rather a bore about wines.”

“Already settled, ma’am, we’ve selected a wine for each course. We’ll be serving a white Bordeaux with the canapés.”

“Very good. Do go on.”

“Second course will be clear turtle soup à la Royale, with salted almonds and olives to follow. Sherry to drink. Then for fish, a Sole Meunière.”

“Wine?”

“A dry Moselle, I think. Then soufflé au fromage with a red Bordeaux.”

“Very good. Lady Abigail doesn’t eat turtle, but that’s no reason to deprive the rest of us. Have Monroe make up a veal broth for her. Next?”

“For our first entrée, she’s prepared a roast of venison in cherry compote to be served alongside asparagus Polonaise and potatoes Anna, with a Beaujolais. Sixth course, a white lemon sorbet.”

“Thank God. We’ll need it.”

“For the seventh course, duckling à l’Orange, and would you prefer a white or a red to drink with that?”

“Is there enough left in the case of ’98 Burgundy to go around?”

“Yes, ma’am.”
“Good. That ought to buy me some goodwill from the reverend. That one with the duck.”

“Very good, ma’am. That will be followed by a salad of endive with champagne vinaigrette for the eighth course, and *Pâté de Foie Gras* for the ninth, with Sauterne to drink.”

“Please tell me this finally brings us to dessert.”

“Yes, ma’am. Monroe has made a lovely *Charlotte Royale* and paired it with a good sweet Muscatel. And for the last course, she’s laid in a very good wedge of Stilton and a Camembert, with fresh fruits.”

“Nothing with stones in it, mind you, it's impossible to eat a plum elegantly.”

“It will be berries with sliced pears and apples, ma'am. No stone fruits. Will you be wanting champagne with that?”

“I suppose it’s only proper. Have some brandy and port ready in the parlor after dinner as well, with the coffee. The more of this night I spend with a drink in my hand, Miller, the easier it will be to pretend my guests are interesting.”

“Port and brandy in the parlor. Yes, ma’am.”

“Chocolates, too, I think, for the ladies. Vera Kane likes chocolates. And the men will want cigars.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This had better fulfill my social obligation to these people for at least a year, Miller, don’t you think?”

*Maybe if you had invited them with more than twelve hours’ notice,* he thought but didn’t say, seething inwardly at this avalanche of casual disdain aimed at some of the most respectable inhabitants of Mount Weather. But he could not lose this job, so he bit his tongue, bowed politely, and made his way back to the dining room to break the news to everybody else.

Diana Sydney did not watch him go – had, in fact, entirely forgotten his existence the very moment he stopped talking. Her attention was now entirely absorbed with reading and re-reading the letter in a bright blue envelope which had arrived in this morning’s post.

She turned it over and over again in her hands, considering her options, before she finally rang the bell in the breakfast-room again.

“Miller returned swiftly, braced for more dinner party disasters, but was knocked sideways when he heard her request.

“I need you to telephone to a friend of mine, Miller. You’ll find his information in the leather book in my top desk drawer.”

“No, it’s ‘Et in Arcadia ego,’” Charles Pike repeated again patiently, for the sixth time.

Constable Miller shook his head. “Still don’t follow.”

“Loosely translated, it means, ‘Even in Arcadia, here I am.’”

“What kind of nitwit puts ‘Here I Am At My House’ over the door to her house? Good Lord, these theatre people.”

“It’s from Virgil.”

“I don’t care if it’s from the Bible,” the constable retorted, “it’s still a damn fool thing to carve over your own blasted front door.”

Mr. Pike, who privately agreed with this sentiment, had no response to this.

Miller waved down the bar towards Maya, the innkeeper’s daughter, for another pint of bitter. The Thirteen Swords was the sole pub in the village of Mount Weather, rather conveniently located directly next door to the police station. In a sleepy village like this one, where the most egregious crimes of note tended to involve livestock, the locals were by this point accustomed to treating the Swords like the constable’s second office.

Maya set a foaming pint down in front of the constable and lingered a bit to eavesdrop as she wiped down the scratched mahogany surface with her rag. It was no secret that Miss Sydney had finally deigned to invite some of the village’s inhabitants to dine at her house - albeit at the last minute, by telephone, and with no pretense of concealing how very much they were her second choice - and Mr. Pike was one of them. None of them had ever been invited to Miss Sydney’s before - Maya had never even spoken to her - and she was on fire with curiosity.

"Another pint for you, Mr. Pike?" she asked him hopefully, but he shook his head.

"You know and I know that if I knock on her door smelling of porter she'll just send me around back to the servant's entrance."

"She might do anyway." Miller retorted. "My son says she's just a tremendously odd woman. Don't forget to ask her for me what on earth she's ringing Scotland Yard for. I'm not offended, mind you," he added hastily. "Just curious."

"Scotland Yard?" exclaimed Maya, eyes as wide as saucers, and the constable nodded.

"She got a letter in the morning post and told Nate to telephone some detective inspector friend of hers. He's driving up in the morning from London, apparently."

"What on earth does she want with Scotland Yard when we've a perfectly good police station right here?" Maya demanded, indignant on Constable Miller's behalf, but he shrugged with equanimity, refusing to be bothered by the peculiarities of city people.

"I've no earthly idea," he told her, "but drinks are on me for a week if Charles can find a way to get it out of her in between those fifty-nine courses."

"Only twelve," Maya corrected him with a laugh. "I know because I sent both my girls up to lend a hand to Monroe, which is why we're serving only cold pies today. They were so knackered when they came home I sent them straight to bed after tea. Twelve courses, with wines for each.”
“Good Lord.”

“There’s fried soles for fish, I know that, and duck and venison. Asparagus polonaise, cheese soufflés – you can’t touch Zoe Monroe’s soufflés, light as air they are – and a Charlotte Royale for pudding.”

“Hope you didn’t eat lunch,” Miller commented. “It all sounds rather . . . theatrical.”

“Seems a bit wasted on Lady Abigail and a few gents from the village,” Pike agreed, “but rich people do funny things with their money, I suppose.”

“What were you telling the constable about the name of her house, Mr. Pike?” asked Maya curiously. “I saw Lady Abigail’s cook at the butcher’s and she told me that Mrs. Kane told her that Miss Sydney renamed it when she moved in. I thought it a pity, I liked the name Stonebridge – but Arcadia sounds ever so much more exotic.”

“Rather the opposite of exotic, in fact,” Pike corrected her with amusement. “That was its appeal. In Ancient Greece, the Arcadians were shepherds who lived a rural, pastoral life; the Greeks of the larger cities envied them and thought of Arcadia as a kind of paradise.”

“All right, now that sounds like Diana Sydney,” Miller grumbled. “Swanning in with her loud London theatre friends, talking like Mount Weather is some medieval hamlet instead of a perfectly respectable twenty-two miles from Nottingham.”

“Of course, I’d be surprised if she knew its real meaning.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s generally interpreted as a memento mori,” Pike explained. “As though the line is being spoken by Death himself. ‘Even in this paradise, where you least suspect it, I – Death – am here.’”

He said it perfectly innocently, lapsing without even thinking into his professorial reading-aloud voice, but it changed the air in the room somehow as his rich, deep voice spoke the foreboding words. Against their will, both Constable Miller and young Maya felt a shiver pass down their spine, though they told themselves it was nothing but the cold.

“Well, I’d best be off,” said Pike, clapping the constable on the shoulder and pulling his overcoat down from the hook. “A man can’t show his face at Diana Sydney’s house without going home first to dress for dinner.”

“Wear boots,” said Maya firmly. “It smells like snow.”

“It smells like snow,” Maya insisted, then impulsively exclaimed, “do be careful.”

Pike looked at her curiously – there was something rather odd in her voice he couldn’t altogether place – but he shook off the strange sensation, pulled on his hat and coat, and made his way out into the frosty evening air.

Constable Miller departed shortly after, leaving Maya with his customary warm handshake and generous tip, and with that the Thirteen Swords was empty.

“Not likely to see many more faces tonight,” observed Maya’s father Vincent, leaning in the kitchen
doorway, "with no guests staying upstairs and such a cold wind blowing." Maya nodded her agreement as she ran her polishing cloth absently over the wood of the bar. "The village will be staying in their own parlors tonight, I think," he went on, more to himself than to her. "I'll bring dinner upstairs for us, we may as well close up early."

Outside the inn, Charles Pike turned left, crossed the bridge over the pond, and made his way down the lane to his rooms over the schoolhouse. Through the frosted glass of the windowpanes, Maya watched him go.

The sun was just setting, turning the afternoon sky from a crisp icy blue to a warm violet streaked with rose, burnishing the duck pond across from the Thirteen Swords with glints of copper. Just an ordinary, peaceful night in an ordinary, peaceful village, where nothing ever happened. *You're being silly,* she told herself firmly, shaking off Virgil and Charles Pike. *There's nothing to be afraid of.* *The worst you have to fear tonight is cold sheets.*

She stood at the window for a long time. Far away across the hills, she could see the lights on in Lady Abigail's house, where both ladies were no doubt having their hair styled and selecting their jewels. And if she craned her neck she could see down the lane to the parsonage, where Reverend Jaha was just returning home after evening prayers to dress for dinner as well. All was well indeed. It was quite silly to be afraid.

Reassured, Maya reached up to draw the blinds closed for the night when she was arrested by an unexpected sight. A car screeched to a halt just outside the inn, stopped abruptly in its tracks as Emerson, Maya's father's dog, loped slowly across the lane to go sniff at the ducks. Maya pressed her nose up against the glass to see who was driving and was startled to see the Blakes - sister and brother, who taught at the village school. Bellamy was at the wheel, his sister Octavia in the passenger seat, and they appeared to be in the middle of a vicious quarrel. This, in itself, was hardly unusual - they were famed in the village for their hot tempers, and when they went at it hammer and tongs it was a sight to see - but as Maya looked more closely, she realized with a start that this was no ordinary argument. This was something odd. Octavia, turned away from the window towards her brother, was gesticulating with unrestrained fury, but Bellamy - barely acknowledging her - stared straight ahead in silence, hands clenching the steering wheel.

Maya had seen siblings bicker before, but something about this brought back the chill down her spine, and she felt a shudder of fear course through her whole body.

Octavia Blake looked furious, but her brother looked *afraid.*

Surely she was imagining it, this sinister feeling of foreboding. Perhaps it was the arrival of Halloween in a few weeks. Perhaps it was the weather.

Or perhaps it was the words of Charles Pike, the low rumble of his voice echoing over and over again in her mind as she looked out onto the darkening winter streets of the village.

*"Where you least suspect it, I – Death – am here."*

She drew the blinds with trembling fingers, heart pounding, then pushed home the bolt on the door.
"A Little More Than Kin, and Less Than Kind"

THE BLAKES

The Blake siblings were entirely unaware of Maya Vie’s eyes upon them, and only just noticed the dog.

They were too busy being furious with each other.

“You had no right,” Octavia was in the midst of saying – or rather, shouting – as the roadster screeched to a jolting halt in front of the Thirteen Swords to let Emerson lope casually across the street to the duck pond. “I’m twenty years old, Bellamy! When will you finally start letting me live my life?”

“What part of the life you want am I not letting you live, O?” he fired back, taking his frustration out on the gas pedal as they sped off down the lane. “Tell me. I would love to know.”

“You treat me like a child.”

“Only when you act like one!”

“That is not.”

“How in the world did I become the villain of this story? Have I oppressed you in some way? Or is this all just because you know you haven’t a leg to stand on?”

“You know exactly what you did, Bellamy!”

“Yes, and you know exactly what you did!” he exploded. “You kept something from me you should never have kept secret, Octavia, you lied to me for months, and the only reason you’re this angry at me for discovering the truth is because you know you ought to have told me from the beginning.”

“I was taking care of it just fine before you barged in and took over!”

“Barged in and took over?” Oh, that's rich. You have a lot of gall, Octavia, lecturing me for the minor infraction of entering your bedroom without permission, when you’re the one who’s been receiving blackmail letters and never told me.”

His tone was so ice-cold with fury - and the contrast between what he had done and what she had done so stark, when put in those words - that some of the fight went out of her. She deflated a little, glaring at him sullenly.

"I was handling it, Bell. And now you’ve just stormed in and made it your problem, the way you always do."

"It's our problem. It's mine as much as yours. If they wrote what you said they wrote, then it hardly matters that it was only addressed to one of us. You can't keep me out of something this important. This person could be dangerous. And it could be anyone."
“That’s why I was taking care of it myself!” Octavia exclaimed defensively. “You seem so sure Constable Miller can help solve this; well, what if he’s not trustworthy either? The only safe thing to do was what I was already doing.”

“Paying off a blackmailer without telling me?”

“It was only fifty pounds, you’re acting like it was our life savings . . .”

“Fifty pounds is a lot of money for us, Octavia. And since when don’t you trust Constable Miller?”

“I don’t want anyone else involved in this, Bellamy! I put the money in an envelope like the letter said, I left it on the bench like I was supposed to, I followed all the directions they gave me, it’s over. We’re fine. Our secret’s safe.”

“Goddammit, Octavia, you don’t get it!” Bellamy exploded. “This means someone in the village knows. You think they’ll stop at fifty measly pounds? They own us now. They know you paid to keep this quiet once which means you’ll probably do it again, and you burned the only decent piece of evidence that might have helped the police find who did it. Two burned square inches of blue paper I had to fish out of your damned fireplace grate isn’t much to go on. And if I hadn’t come into your room without knocking, which you’re so cross about, we wouldn’t even have that much.”

He slammed on the brakes so suddenly that Octavia jolted forward in her seat; they’d both lost all track of where they were and nearly careened past their actual destination, the whitewashed storefront on the edge of town that served the village of Mount Weather as both post office and general store.

“You still shouldn’t have come in without knocking,” said Octavia sullenly.

“You shouldn’t have been burning that letter.”

“You should trust me to take care of my own problems.”

“You should have told me someone in the village was blackmailing us.”

“You should have – “

“All right,” he sighed, interrupting her, “we could do this all day. Can we please just go inside, get the mail, do the shopping, and finish this argument in our own parlor like civilized people?”

Octavia did not answer, but stormed out of the car and slammed the door behind her, stomping with barely-suppressed anger into Sinclair’s General Store.

Bellamy sighed and let her go, entering through the side door to the south wing of the cottage which housed what passed, in Mount Weather, for a post office. Nygel the postmistress was just closing up, but she grudgingly relented (in exchange for a pound note slipped discreetly across the counter) and disappeared to the back to fetch the Blakes’ post. He didn’t like indulging Nygel’s transparently dishonest behavior; but their rent was due tomorrow, and the monthly cheques they received from the late Aurora Blake’s widow’s pension, though not generous, were necessary.

And since apparently they’d lost fifty entire pounds to a blackmailer, they really couldn’t afford to wait another day to cash this one.

“Tell your sister her secret admirer is stepping out on her all over town,” Nygel drawled in that dry, unpleasant voice that always seemed just on the edge of outright mockery, as she handed him a thin packet of envelopes, bound with string.
“What are you talking about?”

Nygel pointed to the middle of the stack, where a corner of bright blue stationery peeked out amongst the others. “I’ve been seeing blue envelopes like that all month long,” she said. “So whoever he is, whatever he’s saying to her, he’s saying it to quite a number of other ladies besides. And not only just the young ones,” she added with a malicious little chuckle. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Bellamy stared, the true significance of her words – which seemed lost on her – crashing down on him with all the force of an avalanche.

“Nygel, who else in the village has been getting these letters?”

“Well, now, I don’t know as how I can say I quite remember,” she said with elaborate casualness. “You might be able to jog my memory, though.”

“I don’t have any more cash on me.”

“Then you’d better come back when you do,” she replied evenly. “Now get out of here. We’re closed.”

* * *

“Did the cheque arrive?” asked Octavia, who was setting a box of groceries - salt, flour, soap, coffee - on the floor of the roadster’s backseat. Bellamy watched her for a long moment as she dusted off her hands, stood and closed the door, then turned to see him regarding her with great intensity. She bristled a little. “What?”

“The cheque,” he repeated. “The cheque is what you’re worried about.”

She looked surprised. “Weren’t you?” she queried, puzzled. “The rent’s due tomorrow, or haven’t you forgotten?”

He watched her face carefully as he pulled it out of the pack of letters in his hand and held it out to her. She froze, looking from the letter to him and then back again, over and over. Her shock was entirely sincere, he realized; she genuinely had never expected to see another blue envelope.

“No,” she whispered finally. “No, it can’t be.”

“Octavia –“

“I paid them! I did everything they told me to do!”

“That isn’t how this works,” he reproached her mildly. “They set a trap, and you’re inside it now. The walls are closing in. They were never going to stop at one.” Octavia didn’t answer, hands clenched tightly into fists at her side, and stared ahead out the windscreen of the car towards the outskirts of town, where the main street disappeared into low, empty moors rolling off into the distance. “I’d like to read it,” Bellamy went on gently, sensing her profound distress, all her anger at him now transmuted to panic.

Octavia didn’t answer.

Bellamy put his hand on her arm, and she tensed up beneath his touch but didn’t pull away. “Is that all right with you? I’d like to see for myself.”
She waved off the question as if immaterial. “Go ahead,” she said bitterly. “But I can already tell you exactly what it says.”

He placed the rest of the post in Octavia's handbag, lying on the seat between them, and set the blue envelope down on the back seat of the car, careful only to touch it by the edges. She watched him in silent comprehension, the meaning of his movements finally becoming clear, and then she nodded.

“All right,” she conceded. “All right. Tomorrow we’ll go see Constable Miller.”

“We’ll need to pay a visit to Nygel first,” he amended. “And we’ll need to bring something to trade.”

“Whatever for?”

“Because you’re not the only person in this village being blackmailed, Octavia,” he said grimly, and watched her face slowly turn white with horror. “Nygel wouldn’t tell me who, but it’s definitely more than one.”

“But then . . .” She stopped herself suddenly, turning to him with big dark eyes, wide with horror. “But then, Bellamy, it must be someone here. The postmark is only London to cover their tracks. If it’s not just me – if it’s people all over the village – it must be someone here doing it. Someone we know.”

“Yes,” said Bellamy. “I’m almost certain that it is.”

Octavia shivered. “Let’s not go home just yet,” she said abruptly, turning to Bellamy.

“What?”

“Let’s go for a drive.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Let’s just drive about for hours and hours. I don’t care. Let’s go into Polis to the cinema. Let’s drive way out to the Silver Raven and have a drink. I just . . . I just can’t bear to be here, right now.”

Bellamy looked over at his sister and watched her in silence for a long moment. Octavia Blake did not frighten easily, and even the presence in their home of vicious anonymous letters had been greeted with nothing but her trademark pragmatism – along with a dash of annoyance at Bellamy for his high-handed interference.

She hadn’t been frightened then, but she was frightened now.

If somebody had stumbled upon the Blake family’s most closely-held secret, and wanted to make a bit of money off it, that was one thing. Ugly and sordid, certainly, but a straightforward matter for the police.

But if Nygel was telling the truth . . .

If there were blue envelopes in post boxes all over the village . . .

Bellamy felt a shiver overtake him, and suddenly he did not particularly want to linger this evening in Mount Weather either.

“The cinema it is,” he pronounced firmly, and only as he floored the gas pedal and sped them both
down the road, leaving the village behind them, did he finally see his sister release the breath she had been holding and lean back in her seat.

As Octavia began to relax, Bellamy did too, and soon the night became almost pleasant again. Within minutes, they had entirely forgotten about the letters.

They thought they were leaving trouble – for the night, at least – behind them.

They had no idea it was patiently biding its time, concealed in a little blue envelope sitting in the shadows, speeding along through the October night right behind them on the back seat of the car.

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THE KANES

On the other side of the village - across the duck pond, down the very end of the high street, up the hill, nearly two miles from the pub where Maya Vie was at this very moment watching the quarreling Blakes drive away - a second family was engaged in a quarrel of an entirely different nature.

“Mother, it is cruel enough that you are forcing me into white tie and tails to attend an interminable dinner party with a woman we both detest, on an evening where I had already made very important plans to sit in front of the fire and do nothing until bedtime,” Marcus Kane called into the hallway from the floor-length mirror in his bedroom, where he was buttoning the waistcoat that mercifully still fit after spending over a decade hanging unused at the back of the wardrobe. “But I absolutely draw the line at a flower on my lapel.”

“But dinner jackets look so plain without them,” Vera Kane complained from her own room across the hall.

“Simple, mother. ‘Simple’ is not ‘plain.’”

“Now, Marcus – “

“If you think I, at the age of forty-four, am too old to throw a tantrum,” he continued, “by all means continue to force this garish carnation onto my person and see what happens.” He lifted the massive red blossom from his dressing table and regarded it with distaste.

“I don’t want us to arrive underdressed to Miss Sydney’s house.”

“We owe Miss Sydney no courtesy whatsoever,” he fired back. “I may have been out of England for most of the past fifteen years, Mother, but I do remember that the very most basic of social protocols dictate that one does not invite guests to one’s home with no more than an afternoon’s notice and demand formalwear while informing them they were one’s second choice after everyone better changed their plans. I know you’re very keen to meet the woman in person and that you’d sell your own teeth to get a glimpse inside that garish monstrosity house; and while I do not judge you for your peculiar tastes, I am only going because you are going, and I refuse to put in a whit of additional effort beyond what is required to avoid embarrassing you. I don’t give a damn about being underdressed for Miss Sydney.”

“That’s a very nice speech, dear,” Vera said mildly from his doorway before joining him at the mirror, reaching around his strong broad chest to smooth wrinkles which apparently only she could see out of his crisp, starched white shirt. He sighed - but with great fondness - and permitted her to fuss at him as long as she liked, straightening his jacket and retying his bow tie. Marcus had spent his entire adult life in military uniform and had rather hoped that one boon of his early retirement would be once again taking charge of his own choice of clothing; but he was reckoning without
Vera Kane, who was so pleased to have her son back at home after so many years' absence that he suspected her of attempting to consolidate fifteen years' mothering into the past two months. It had made his return rather more exhausting than he had imagined it, all those lonely nights in the North African desert, haunted by the shadows of the things he had done, dreaming about rain and tea and green things and England and his mother and wishing to be back home in Mount Weather more than anything else in the world.

But she was his mother, and this was home, so here he was - in a tailcoat he had not worn more than twice in the past decade - so she could finally get her long-awaited look inside Diana Sydney's house.

The things we do for love.

"You look quite handsome," she finally pronounced, after she had fussed over everything that could possibly be fussed over, from his shoes to his hair.

"And you look lovely," he said with great warmth, leaning down to kiss the soft, dry, wrinkled skin of her cheek. She'd aged in his absence, in ways he hadn't expected, and every once in a while it broke his heart. But she looked like the Vera Kane he remembered tonight, hair dressed neatly in smooth auburn-gray curls tucked in at the back with a glittering jeweled comb. (The jewels were only paste, something he knew would make her anxious in front of Miss Sydney, but the pearls at her throat were her grandmother's and quite genuine.) She had on her best black evening frock, beaded with jet at the hem and collar, and the mink she never had the opportunity to wear anymore smelled faintly of mothballs - one afternoon's notice wasn't time enough to air everything out the way she'd have liked - but looked entirely presentable.

Marcus looked down at his mother, and read on her face the hesitant vulnerability of a woman who was always just a bit worried she was about to say or do the wrong thing, and in that moment he loved her so much that he very nearly gave in to the carnation.

He offered her his elbow, with a comically elaborate show of gallantry that made her laugh as merrily as a young girl, and then escorted her down the stairs. Their home was modest, set back quite a distance from the heart of the village, out in the surrounding farm and forest land where the laborer-class lived, and their finery felt a bit out of place against the faded wallpaper and scratched wooden furniture. Diana Sydney would never set foot across the threshold of a house like this - a fact of which both Kanes were excruciatingly aware, though only one of them really minded.

Marcus Kane could not give two figs for Diana Sydney's opinion. There was a realness to his mother's house, to these four walls that encompassed his entire history within them, that lent every place his restless, wandering life had subsequently taken him an air of transience. He had spent fifteen years on the move from place to place, wherever England sent him, and had never lived anywhere long enough for the word "home" to attach itself. This house held ghosts of its own, certainly, but it was the only place Marcus Kane had ever really lived, and even for the most elegant manor in all the county he could not imagine trading it.

He went to retrieve his good wool coat from the wardrobe in the back hallway (it was hardly as formal as his mother would have liked, but it was warm, and he had insisted to his mother that it smelled like snow). As he made his way to the front door, he was arrested by the peculiar sight of Vera, standing stock-still at the narrow marble-topped entryway table where the maid had left the evening post. She was holding a blue envelope in her hand and staring at it with a strange, shadowed expression on her face.

"What's that?" he asked, and was surprised to see her start as though she'd entirely forgotten he was there. "Mother, are you all right?"
"Perfectly," she said easily, regaining her composure so swiftly that he was not, after all, sure he hadn't imagined the whole thing.

"What have you got there?"

She set the letter down with a dismissive gesture, pulling open the door and waving him out. "Oh, nothing at all. Just a note from an old friend, with very colorful taste in stationery. Now don’t dawdle, or we’ll be late."

There was an odd note in her tone that made Kane want to press her further - and there'd been something in her eyes, in that split-second before she'd heard him coming, that had looked to him almost like fear - but as she steered him out the door, closing it behind them, she pulled out the red carnation once more, a pleading look on her face, and for the rest of the drive, all else besides the blasted lapel flower was forgotten.

THE GRIFFINS

The only estate in Mount Weather larger and more opulent than Diana Sydney’s house was Walters Hall, and Diana Sydney knew it. She had spent five years and thousands of pounds converting what had once been a rather plain, boxy Edwardian manor into a gaudy Italianate monstrosity of sculpture gardens, fish ponds and marble façades in an attempt to outdo in grandeur the village’s one remaining aristocratic home. The fact that Walters Hall and its lady remained forever spoken of throughout the village as the absolute last word in effortless elegance infuriated Diana at some deep, primal level she could scarcely have articulated to herself. It was like expending all one’s energy running a race at top speed for miles and miles, only to lose to someone who had no idea she was even competing.

Lady Abigail Griffin, the mistress of Walters Hall, was the second-to-last living member of one of England’s oldest families. The estate had, of course, long been entailed in the male line, but Abigail had been her father’s beloved only child and his will established the arrangements in her favor. When she died, the house and the land would pass on to her only daughter, Clarke, now just nineteen years old and newly returned from three years in Paris.

Clarke – who had more than a little in common with Major Kane on this particular evening – thought it rather hard that on only her third evening back home, she should be forced to accompany her mother to a stuffy old dinner party. Her interest in Diana Sydney, the village’s local celebrity, was not insignificant; but even for the chance to wander around the house of a famous actress, twelve interminable courses surrounded by her old headmaster, the wretchedly unpleasant reverend, and a young doctor she had never met (but who was clearly intended by Diana to be her companion for the evening) seemed hardly worth the sacrifice. The only one of the party she liked was Vera Kane, but she could see Vera any time she liked without having to endure all these other boring people twice her age.

But “You can wear one of your new Paris frocks,” her mother had told her cheerfully, and – as predicted – that had done the trick.

“It’s a great deal of work being a Walters,” Clarke grumbled from her dressing table where Fox, the lady’s maid, was just finishing her hair. “I don’t know how you bear it so patiently. All these interminable social obligations, and one can never say no.”

“The people in this village were very kind to us when your father died, Clarke,” said Lady Abigail from the full-length gilt mirror on the other side of Clarke’s dressing room. She was fastening a glittering jade-and-diamond pendant around her throat which matched the gems dangling from her
small, neat earlobes. (Lady Abigail’s jewels, and the effortless ease with which she wore them, were an unceasing source of jealous torment to Diana.)

“Miss Sydney wasn’t. She didn't even live here then.”

“Well, no. That’s true.”

“We don’t owe her anything.”

“We owe her good manners.”

Clarke sighed glumly. “I suppose if it’s rude of Miss Sydney to invite us with only eight hours’ notice, it’s even ruder of us to cancel with less than one.”

“Very rude,” agreed Lady Abigail, turning back around, arms folded, to shoot a stern look at her daughter. “I did tell you, darling, that you could say no if you liked.”

“Of course I’m coming with you,” Clarke insisted firmly. “I’m not forcing you to endure this alone.”

Her mother laughed. “Gracious, you make it sound as though we’re marching off to certain death.”

“Well, it does feel rather as though we’re headed into a lion’s den.”

“France has made you very dramatic,” said Lady Abigail dryly. “Though you certainly do justice to its couture. You make me look positively old-fashioned.”

“Don’t be stupid, you’re lovely,” said Clarke, and meant it.

Lady Abigail was a petite woman, slight of stature but unfailingly elegant of bearing. Her rich chestnut-brown hair was still very nearly free of gray; Fox had braided it with thin ropes of pearls and knotted it at the nape of her neck with soft waves framing her delicate face, showing off the jade earrings that became her so well. For all her self-deprecatory remarks, she wore her London gown no less elegantly that Clarke wore her French one; Lady Abigail’s frock was a fluttering seafoam green, threaded with gold and overlaid with tiers of chiffon, which Clarke privately thought made her mother look rather like a mermaid. It was not a daring gown – nothing like Clarke’s boldly sleeveless ruby satin which fell shockingly above her ankles – but it was the exact right gown for the occasion, selected with the same effortless ease with which Lady Abigail Griffin absolutely always knew the exact right thing in every situation. The right gift for every christening or birthday, the right words of comfort in any time of distress, the right dish for every visiting guest’s dinner. She was the kind of woman whom elderly noblemen would regard with a depressed little sniff and remark to one another that they simply did not make them like Lady Abigail anymore, a trait which in most people would be off-putting in the extreme. But there was something so unrelentingly genuine about Lady Abigail that it was rather impossible, most of her acquaintance largely agreed, not to fall at least a bit in love with her.

Clarke – struggling once to describe to her Paris friends exactly what kind of person her mother was – had explained that Lady Abigail was the type of woman who would remember, even after only one visit, exactly how you took your tea, and in a way that summed it up rather perfectly.

Fox stepped back from the dressing table, admiring her handiwork. Clarke’s return from Paris with four trunks of the latest fashions gave the lady’s maid an opportunity for a degree of boldness in her hairdressing that she never got to try out on Lady Abigail, and the crisp “Marcelle” waves framing Clarke’s cheekbones suited her chic red gown and boldly made-up face admirably. She had been a girl when she left for Paris - all soft curves and pink-and-white skin - but had returned a woman, which caused oceans of conflicting sensations in her mother, ranging from nostalgia to pride. She’d
grown several inches, chopped her lush golden curls into a stylish bob, and the stubborn
determination with which she'd always carried herself had matured into an elegant self-confidence
she'd never had as a girl. The old Clarke would never have worn red satin to a dinner party full of
strangers. She would certainly be a sensation this evening, a thought which amused her mother. It
would be rather fun to watch Diana cope with the horror of being only the second best-dressed in her
own house.

“If I forget to thank you for coming with me,” said Lady Abigail, “so that I know I have at least one
person to talk to, I hope you know I am always thinking it.”

“I don’t know what on earth you’re complaining about,” Clarke retorted. “You’ll have three men to
talk to. I only have one.”

“You cannot possibly be counting Reverend Thelonious.”

“Two, then.”

“Charles Pike I don’t mind,” said Lady Abigail, considering. “He can be a great deal of fun on the
topic of literature.”

“That’s if you find literature ‘fun.'”

“But I don’t believe I’ve spent more than five minutes with Major Kane since he went off to school.”

“He’s nice-looking,” said Clarke, rising from the dressing table to toss the velvet wrap Fox handed
her carelessly about her shoulders. “I saw him the other day in the village. Much too tall for you,
but nice-looking anyway.”

“Too tall for me to what? To nod at politely when we pass on the street? Because that’s the most I
have to offer at this point in time.”

“If you marry him, Vera Kane would be your mother-in-law, which would make her my grandmother. That’s a great point in his favor.”

“You’re forgetting one crucial point,” said Lady Abigail dryly, as Fox helped her into her furs.
“Major Kane was not invited to this dinner for me. Major Kane has a tag sticking out of his back
labeled ‘PROPERTY OF DIANA SYDNEY.’”

“Then you should steal him anyway, even if you don’t want him,” said Clarke. “For the fun of it.
Just to watch her squirm.”

“That’s it,” said Lady Abigail firmly. “Absolutely no more French novels for you.”

Clarke, laughing, picked up the beaded drawstring evening bag from her bed and sailed out the
dressing room door, followed by Fox and Lady Abigail, into the airy rose-and-white expanse of her
bedroom. She paused at the gilt-and-glass table beside the door, for a fraction of a second, resting
her right hand on the surface as though for balance while she adjusted her shoe with her left. It was
so deftly done that neither Fox nor Lady Abigail spotted the corner of a bright blue envelope just
barely peering out from in the middle of a stack of books, or noticed Clarke discreetly slide it back
out of sight before straightening her skirts and making her way out into the hall.

If you are keeping count, Dear Reader, that brings us now to four.

One – the very first of its kind – tucked in a stack of books on Miss Griffin's glass table, sandwiched
between *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

One tossed with deceptive casualness on a stack of post, where Vera Kane would later retrieve it with trembling fingers and stash it with its twin in her locked desk drawer.

One, its two predecessors turned to ash in the grate, following Octavia and Bellamy Blake as they drove faster and faster in a vain attempt to outrun it.

And one locked away with three fellows in Diana Sydney’s dressing case, inside the grand stone mansion towards which all these people were making their way, carrying their secrets with them.

They ought, perhaps, to have stayed home.

They could have remained in front of their own fireplaces, surrounded by their whiskey decanters and books and dogs. They could have passed a warm, merry evening in the Thirteen Swords, down in the heart of the village where lights blazed and people walked about, shaking off the chill in each other’s company and giving Maya the chance to cook something more than cold rabbit pie.

But instead, here they all were, making their relentless way towards the fate that awaited them, through the forest and up the hill and over the four miles of cold, forbidding road that led them all inexorably towards their point of convergence at that lonely house with Death’s own words carved over the door:

*Et in Arcadia Ego.*

They had no way of knowing, yet, that the door spoke nothing more than the truth.
The Kanes were the last to arrive, pulling up into Diana’s curved gravel drive as the others were making their way up the sweeping granite stairs leading up to the grand front entrance. They were by no stretch of the imagination late, though Vera was profusely apologetic anyway. The reason for the delay, however, once explained, mercifully redirected the conversation away from her fear of a social faux pas, and towards a far more significant topic.

Between Arcadia and the rest of the village lay several dozen acres of thickly-forested park, sloping down the steep hill on all sides toward the fields below. If you left the estate and turned right, the road would take you through the woods for three and a half miles or so before depositing you at the far end of Mount Weather’s high street, and you would emerge in the heart of the village. This was the direction from which the other guests had come. The Griffins, of course, had a driver, for whom they would ring after dinner when they were ready for him (or perhaps, as Clarke fervently hoped, they would be escorted back by Diana’s; she was rather keen to meet the lady chauffeur). Doctor Jackson, who had his own car, had given a lift to both Mr. Pike and Reverend Jaha, who did not. All of them lived near the high street and had come from the north. But the Kanes, who lived quite two miles closer to Diana on the south side of the village, had attempted to come from that direction – only to discover that the wooden bridge which linked Diana’s property to the fields below it over the Luna (the narrow but deep and fast-moving river that divided the village into east and west) had inexplicably washed out, forcing them to turn around and make their way back through town to the high street and come round again the long way.

“Washed out?” Pike repeated doubtfully as Major Kane made his apologies for their late arrival (which really was not late at all). “That thing’s been sturdy as stone for the past sixty years.”

“They built it for men and horses sixty years ago,” Lady Abigail observed. “It was never designed for automobiles. It’s a wretched inconvenience to the village, but I suppose it was bound to happen one day.”

“Inconvenient indeed,” Diana said rather carelessly, waving them all out of the drive and up towards the house, “though of course I never use it myself. But I suppose it may prove a nuisance to the tradesmen.”

“What a mercy you weren’t on it when it happened,” said Clarke anxiously, embracing Vera Kane.
with enormous fondness and succumbing with very good grace to all her effusive exclamations about how much the girl had grown. This reminded Diana very suddenly that she was the hostess and had a role to perform, and she subsequently undertook the introductions — though not with particularly visible enthusiasm. They were largely fruitless, of course, most of those gathered having known one another since birth, but it gave everyone something to do. Major Kane and Miss Griffin being newly returned from abroad provided enough general conversation for the cocktail hour, while Doctor Jackson's recent move to the village from London got them more or less through their brief tour of the main wing of the house. But by the time they were all ushered into the ostentatiously formal dining room and suddenly recalled with a sinking sensation in their hearts that they were about to be served the first of twelve courses, every last whit of small talk had been dispensed with, and there appeared nowhere else to go.

The Griffin ladies were impeccably well-bred and did their best to keep up a genial stream of light chatter, with a noble assist from Vera Kane, but they were hindered rather dramatically by making up less than half the table. Major Kane had greeted the Griffins politely, asked Clarke a few friendly questions about Paris, admired Lady Abigail noticeably enough to ruffle Diana Sydney’s feathers, and then fallen mostly silent. Doctor Jackson was a very nice young man, and in other circumstances could be pleasant company; but in the presence of Diana Sydney at one end of the table and Reverend Jaha at the other, he retreated into himself, and for the first hour they got hardly five words out of him altogether. The reverend himself was stiff, chilly and silent, and only the connoisseur’s enthusiasm with which he attended to his food and wine marked him as even human.

Meanwhile, their hostess was visibly bored. Lady Abigail and Mrs. Kane’s joint attempts to catch up their respective children on the latest village news was not a conversation in which Diana could muster even a pretense of interest, and any attempts to engage her were met with an absent-minded, “Hmm? Oh. That’s interesting” before she lapsed once more into silence.

Charles Pike was perhaps the most difficult to read.

He admired Lady Abigail and Mrs. Kane a great deal, and was their only real source of support in desperately attempting to fill the lengthy, uncomfortable pauses. Still, while the others who remained stubbornly unhelpful in forwarding the conversation did so for clearer reasons — Diana’s boredom, the doctor’s shyness, the reverend’s disdain for humanity in general, and Major Kane’s rather passive-aggressive refusal to indulge Diana Sydney’s incivility by expending any effort to charm her — there was a curious quality to Mr. Pike’s silence that Lady Abigail found troubling. He seemed to be, not uncomfortable, but watching; it appeared, almost, in a rather sinister way, as though he were waiting for something to happen. She was grateful for his polite conversation, but on the whole he made her rather uneasy.

Still, in the end — after the canapè and turtle soup had been gotten through, the fish course consumed, the piping-hot cheese soufflé plated and served, and all hope of a pleasant evening very nearly dead to them all — it was in fact Mr. Pike himself who finally managed to launch them in a direction approaching real conversation.

It began, predictably, with a compliment to his hostess.

“I’m very much looking forward to your Lady Macbeth,” he informed her, quite sincerely. Mr. Pike was a great lover of Shakespeare. “Have you begun rehearsals yet?”

This was the first opportunity Diana had received to talk about herself (apart from some desultory remarks about her house) and she received it with enormous pleasure, lighting up and becoming positively charming.

“Aren’t you sweet,” she murmured, with a cultivated air of artificial humility as she sliced into her
Major Kane, whose frequent bouts of insomnia were not improved by the screeching wails of loud jazz music which could be heard from his bedroom two miles away during those weekends of “peace and quiet,” looked like he might perhaps have some thoughts on this topic, but was silenced by his mother’s repressive hand on his arm. Lady Abigail raised her eyebrow at him from across the table, amused by the wordless exchange, and swiftly steered the topic into safer waters.

“Lady Macbeth at the Lyceum,” she said to Diana. “That’s quite an achievement.”

“It must be tremendously exciting,” added Clarke, who rather hoped that this might be her opportunity to extract from Diana some interesting celebrity gossip.

Pike agreed with her. “They had a couple up from London at the Thirteen Swords last week-end,” he informed them, “and the gent told Maya the first month of performances are quite sold out.”

Diana made a gracious gesture that confirmed the accuracy of his words, accepted the compliment, and lightly conveyed a perfectly-calibrated sense of embarrassment at this abject flattery, all at the same time. Major Kane, seated beside her, reflected privately that if she were capable of convincing anyone at this table that she had any sense of humility whatsoever, she was more than equal to portraying the most iconic woman in all of Shakespeare.

His eyes met Lady Abigail’s once more as he reached for the pitcher of water, and the look on her face suggested her thoughts were running along much the same course.

“I must admit,” said Doctor Jackson, piping in suddenly and surprising them all (including, it appeared, himself), “I’ve yet to see a production of Macbeth I thoroughly enjoyed. Or King Lear either.”

“Is it the comedies you like better?” Clarke asked, but he shook his head. Lady Abigail, however, answered for him.

“I rather suspect I know the answer to this,” she said, voice warm and amused. “Those two plays have one rather large thing in common, which I could quite imagine the doctor finding far too painful to watch.”

“What?” asked Major Kane, intrigued in spite of himself.

“I imagine it’s the mad scenes,” she said. “I feel the same sometimes when I go to the cinema. Clarke and I both picked up a great deal when we opened our home for the war hospital. And of course once one knows anything about the medical profession, it gets under one’s skin and positively itches to watch actors depict it incorrectly. On stage, it looks nothing like the real thing at all.”

“That’s it exactly,” Jackson agreed gratefully, his tense, shy discomfort finally beginning to ebb away.

“I can certainly see that,” conceded Mr. Pike. “Though I’d hesitate to blame Shakespeare himself for it. I find his works on the whole to be quite psychologically shrewd, and I’d venture to say he more than anyone else I can think of has the trait that makes a good writer into a great writer . . . which is, of course, that one must be deeply interested in people. One could make a case that the words on the page are not at all an implausible depiction of particular cases of mental illness. Lady Macbeth, Lear, Ophelia . . . But I can empathize with the good doctor if he finds it rather excruciating to watch
actors play mad onstage.”

Now that her guests – primarily, of course, Lady Abigail, the only one who socially outranked her – had weighed in with their agreement, Diana did not quite dare to contradict this sentiment as openly as she liked, though she was clearly put out by the slight towards her profession. She chose, however, to take it graciously.

“Of course, most actresses do overplay the role,” she conceded loftily, “but we’re going in quite another direction, I assure you. I’ve always thought the mad scene should be played very quietly. Mad people don’t always realize they’re mad, you know; often they’re quite firm in their belief that it’s the rest of us who have lost our senses, while they’re the only ones left who are quite sane. I agree with the doctor, of course, one hates to see a Lady Macbeth rant and rave and tear at her hair. I shall play it a great deal more composed. A little too sane, if you know what I mean.”

"I wonder," said Clarke thoughtfully, "in a real murder case, if the insanity defense would get her acquitted. If it happened now, that is. I wonder which of them would be hanged?"

“For killing the king? Both, I should imagine,” answered Doctor Jackson.

“Not if Macbeth had a good lawyer,” Pike retorted, making them all laugh.

“But a husband and wife can’t testify against each other, can they?” Clarke pressed. “So Lady Macbeth’s lawyer would be able to keep him out of court. And besides him, there weren’t any other witnesses to incriminate her.”

"True," agreed Pike. "The only one who could point the finger at her would be him."

"Exactly. By the end, of course, with the Birnam Wood business, Macbeth’s declared war, they all know it’s him who did it. But before it’s a war – back when Lady Macbeth is just a hostess whose guests keep dying one by one – nobody seemed to be looking at her at all.”

“That’s the play’s great flaw, in my opinion,” Vera agreed unexpectedly. “That she didn’t get away with it.”

“Good Lord, Mother, what a sinister thing to say,” Major Kane exclaimed in a tone of mingled horror and amusement.

“I don’t mean she deserved to, darling, I just mean it seems likely that she would have.”

“I completely agree with Vera,” said Lady Abigail cheerfully. “If a woman had written this play, it would end quite differently.”

“If a woman had written Shakespeare, I’d have a great deal more work,” Diana remarked.

“It’s the most implausible part of the entire story,” Lady Abigail went on, as all the ladies nodded in enthusiastic agreement. “Not the ghost of Banquo, not the three witches, but the notion that a woman like that would all of a sudden completely lose her head.”

“Maybe the guilt finally caught up with her,” offered Jackson.

Clarke disagreed emphatically. “Typical female character written by a man,” she said, gesturing with her fork, and Doctor Jackson – who was already rather intimidated by her red silk Parisian dress – argued the point no further. “Shakespeare’s women – even the great ones – can only be powerful for so long before the fundamental weakness of the fairer sex reveals itself.” She shook her head. “No real-life Lady Macbeth would crumble that easily.”
“This may be a controversial opinion,” Major Kane ventured, finally making his first substantive contribution to the dialogue as Miller set a gold-rimmed plate of venison and asparagus on a bed of delicate, crisp-fried potato slices in front of him. “But I’ve always been rather of the belief that the Macbeths have the best marriage in all of Shakespeare.”

“Good God, man,” chuckled Pike, “no wonder you never married.”

The others joined him in his laughter. But Major Kane suddenly grew very busy with slicing up his venison, and Lady Abigail was arrested suddenly and sharply by a fleeting, unguarded expression flickering darkly across his handsome face. There were shadows somewhere in Major Kane’s past, and she found herself wondering for the first time what had happened to prompt a man with such a successful career to retire unexpectedly in his forties and return abruptly home.

"Perhaps Major Kane has only seen the children's version of the play," she chirped brightly, diving in to rescue him by forcibly bringing the subject back onto neutral ground before Diana could manage to trap him into a conversation about marriage.

"A children's version of Macbeth would be three minutes long," Pike quipped. "Just three witches dancing about a cauldron and chanting in rhyme about eye of toad and tongue of newt. You'd have to cut all the rest of it."

“I don’t know if we’re thinking of the same Macbeths,” Lady Abigail went on, her voice light but her eyes on Major Kane keen and watchful. “But the pair I remember kill practically a dozen people before intermission.”

“Oh, they’re not healthy people,” Kane agreed, and though his smile was perfectly easy she could see gratitude in his warm brown eyes as he regarded her across the table. “But think of the other marriages we see in Shakespeare. They’re all horror stories.”

“Othello goes mad with jealousy and kills Desdemona,” Jackson offered. “And Gertrude is married to her husband’s killer.”

“Kate and Petruchio are obviously out,” said Clarke with disgust. “I wouldn’t wish a husband like that on my worst enemy.”

“And Oberon and Titania quarrel so much they cause destruction across all the land,” Diana chimed in. “They reconcile at the end of the play, but I don’t think we’re meant to believe anything’s really changed between them. I think they just go on fighting and making up for eternity.”

“Oh, Posthumous and Helena from *Cymbeline* are worse,” Pike added, rather pleased to have made the most obscure reference thus far. “Posthumous essentially dares his friend to seduce Helena. The friend doesn’t succeed but convinces Posthumous he did, and Posthumous tries to kill Helena. Yet somehow they end up reconciling anyway. One can't help but wish Helena would simply shove him down a well and collect his life insurance. I rather think a jury would take her side.”

"Well, these are all dreadful," agreed Clarke. "But we haven't even *touched* on the worst case by far. Find me one couple in all of Shakespeare with a more disastrous marriage than those idiots, Romeo and Juliet."

"Oh Lord, you're right," said Pike with a laugh. "Miss Griffin wins. They're the worst by far. Dramatic, irresponsible children whose recklessness causes bloodshed left and right."

"It lasts a week and ends in a double suicide," pronounced Clarke. "For the life of me I can't understand why anyone on *earth* finds it romantic."
“My goodness, Mrs. Kane, are you all right?” asked Jackson suddenly, his worried voice cutting like a knife through the easy laughter that followed Clarke’s comment. The whole table suddenly turned to see a creeping red stain blossoming across the white linen where Vera had abruptly spilt her glass.

“I’m perfectly all right, thank you,” she said rather tightly, as Diana rang for Miller who rushed in with a cloth to make sure Mrs. Kane’s dress was unscathed. “Miss Sydney, I’m terribly sorry about your tablecloth.”

“Darling, don’t give it another thought,” said Diana with a dismissive hand wave. “Harper will take care of it in the morning. Good as new.”

“You must really hate Romeo and Juliet,” Pike said, smiling, making a gentle joke, but Vera’s answering smile appeared forced.

“I do, rather,” she agreed in a stiff voice that made her son and Lady Abigail regard her with a shared puzzlement and concern.

Diana’s answering laugh had a hint of incredulity, bordering on rudeness. “So do I, darling, but I’ve never spilled a glass of Beaujolais over it. Those two insipid adolescents aren’t worth the waste of good wine. That suicide scene alone – ”

“Oh, I don’t dispute the disastrous ending,” he said, smiling. “But for a rather lengthy portion of the story they’re a united front working towards one shared goal, and we don’t see that anywhere else in Shakespeare. A bloody, violent goal, to be sure, but it’s a partnership nonetheless. I simply find that a thing worth noting.”

“I think you rather enjoy being shocking,” said Lady Abigail.

“I think you’re the first person I’ve ever met who’s found me interesting enough to be shocked.”

“There’s a lot in that theory,” observed Diana in her most alluring voice, forcibly interjecting herself back into the conversation before it could proceed any further without her. “Perhaps that’s the one new thing left to do with Lady Macbeth after all. Something nobody’s yet tried. Play . . . a happy marriage.”

“I saw a great deal of Shakespeare when I was in Paris,” said Clarke. “And I always rather thought, if I were ever to direct a production of Macbeth, that the great trick would be to portray them as perfectly ordinary people.”

“That’s it exactly,” agreed Pike. “They only managed to kill Duncan and get away with it because everyone in Scotland believed the Macbeths were far too respectable to be mixed up in something so bloody. If he’s a sinister villain in a black cape and she’s a vengeful harpy, and they live in a crumbling gothic tower with ravens cawing on the battlements all the live-long day, the story ceases to make any kind of narrative sense. They might as well go about with signs round their necks saying ‘I Am a Murderer.’”

“Today they’d be a wealthy couple in Mayfair,” Clarke suggested. “Husband in business, wife known for her charity work.”
“Or in a country house, in some remote village like this one,” Major Kane chimed in. “Where everyone knows everyone. They’d give excellent dinners and fund church renovations and their staff would be the best-paid in town.”

“Yes, and when King Duncan turns up dead in their guest bedroom,” Pike chuckled in agreement, “the entire village would rise up in revolt against the notion that their beloved lord and lady could possibly be involved.”

“They’d be shooing newspapermen out of the village with cricket bats,” Jackson agreed. “How dare they print such slander!”

“Ah, you’re underestimating the love of village spinsters for salacious gossip,” Lady Abigail reminded them dryly. “For a pair of modern-day Macbeths to escape unnoticed as long as those two bloody Scots did, they wouldn’t just have to appear pure as the driven snow; they’d have to be . . . dull.”

“Forgettable,” her daughter agreed. “The kind of people everyone likes, but no one remembers particularly. That’s much more believable.”

“Believable, certainly,” chuckled Major Kane beside her as Miller circulated the table with delicate silver bowls of sorbet. “But a great deal less fun for the actors, I would imagine.”

“Just a different kind of challenge,” Diana countered, catching Major Kane’s eye with a bold and heated stare. “Something actresses, on the whole, tend to enjoy.”

The major flushed uncomfortably and busied himself with his sorbet while Lady Abigail politely concealed a laugh.

“It might not play as excitingly onstage,” Pike countered, “but it seems a great deal more efficient, if you really want to get away with a crime.”

“‘Bear welcome in your eye, your hand, your tongue,” came a low, somber voice from the far end of the table, giving them all a violent start. “Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.’”

Reverend Jaha had not spoken a word since they sat down to dinner, and even the pair sitting closest to him – Mr. Pike and Mrs. Kane – had very nearly begun to forget he was there. That he should choose to reenter the conversation after over an hour of silence by quoting those sinister words of Lady Macbeth’s, delivered with complete seriousness in that commanding baritone voice, cast a shadow over the entire room and brought the convivial Shakespeare chat to a crashing halt. Even Diana looked uncomfortable.

“It is worth considering,” he went on smoothly, heedless of the way the others suddenly busied themselves with hastily finishing their sorbet, “that this particular work may be considered a cautionary tale. Our faith teaches us that it was through woman that sin first entered the world.”

Now it was Major Kane’s turn to swoop in for the rescue, as he felt Clarke at his side stiffen with repressed irritation while across the table her mother clenched her jaw tightly and busied herself with her sorbet. “Your faith may teach you that, Thelonious,” he fired back, an unexpected sharpness filtering into his tone, “but mine certainly doesn’t.”

Reverend Jaha was unfazed. “There is only one true faith, Marcus,” he said simply. “Neither its existence nor its tenets depend upon your choosing to acknowledge them.”

“You weren’t nearly this unpleasant when we were at school,” Kane retorted. “What happened to you?”
This was an uncharacteristic breach of decorum for an otherwise well-bred man, but Major Kane was the only one in the room who had both known Thelonious Jaha since childhood and currently could do no wrong in the eyes of Diana Sydney, which meant there was no one else present who could possibly have challenged Jaha aloud. It did no good, particularly – the reverend simply lifted his head, regarded Kane thoughtfully, and said nothing – but it did endear him to Clarke Griffin for life.

The hush that fell over the table was broken only by the entrance of Miller, an eternity later, to serve the roast duckling, though it did nothing to restore the evening’s equilibrium. For several interminable minutes, the only sounds around the table were the clinking of glassware, the scrape of knife and fork, and the creaking of chairs as eight diners shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

They had plummeted from very nearly enjoying themselves into an excruciating silence that was, if possible, even worse than before.

Suddenly - just as Clarke found herself counting backwards and realizing with desperation that this was only the seventh of twelve courses, and that she would still be forced to endure a salad, a cold dish, a sweet, a cheese tray, and the mandatory adjournment to the drawing-room for coffee and port before she could escape – the oppressive hush of the dining room was shattered by two deafening sounds, one after the other: a heavy dull crash that seemed to reverberate into the very bones of the house, followed by a sharper, almost metallic one only a few seconds later.

“Good God!” exclaimed Pike, as Diana rang and rang for Miller. “What on earth was that?”

“It sounded like a ceiling caving in,” Clarke murmured, looking rather fearfully about the room.

“I hope everyone’s all right,” murmured Vera worriedly.

Jackson patted her hand. “I have a medical kit in my car,” he said with great reassurance. “I always carry one with me, just in case.”

The room was in sudden disorder, half the group standing, half sitting, but all staring at either the dining room door or each other, uncertain how to proceed. Only Reverend Jaha sat calmly in his seat, eating his roast duckling, as though nothing had happened.

A heavy pounding on the front door startled them all yet further, and none of them could deny that the evening’s talk of murder gave a frightfully sinister air to that hard, heavy knock.

Diana, rather frantically, rang and rang and rang again for Miller.

_Et In Arcadia Ego_, Charles Pike thought to himself uncomfortably, remembering the words chiseled in stone above the very door where some unexpected guest was now standing. _I, Death, am here._

At the other end of the table, Lady Abigail watched the headmaster swallow hard and take a long swig of wine, and wondered - both about his peculiarly watchful silence from earlier in the evening, and about what was going through his mind just now that had suddenly flustered him so.

They all felt their hearts begin to pound as the sound of voices was heard in the hallway outside, moving closer and closer, until the door to the dining room swung noiselessly open and Miller finally appeared.

“There’s been an accident, ma’am,” he said with no preamble. “Doctor Jackson, I think you’d better come.”
Doctor Jackson rose and instantly followed Miller out of the dining room. Lady Abigail followed him, and Major Kane followed her, a fact which did not escape Diana’s attention, causing her to leap to her feet and stride along behind as though she had intended to all along. Doctor Jackson’s mild attempts to obtain details from Miller were drowned out by the instincts of an actress deciding that now would be an excellent time to play a bit of a scene, diving with great relish into the role of Hostess Bearing Tragedy With Remarkable Fortitude.

“What has happened, Miller?” she demanded as they made their way out of the dining room and cut through the adjacent parlor to the wide, cavernous hallway which led to the foyer.

“There was an automobile accident in the lane, ma’am. Crashed right into the front gate, they did.”

“Who did? Who could be driving down my lane at this hour of night?”

“It’s the Blakes, ma’am.”

“Who on earth are the Blakes?”

“Bellamy and Octavia Blake, from the village school,” answered Lady Abigail with little attempt to suppress her irritation at Diana’s lofty tone. “You’ve met them half a dozen times, Diana, they’ve lived in this village all their lives.”

“Oh, that tall, angry-looking freckled creature one sees always in the pub with Mr. Pike? I’d no idea there were two of them, good Lord. And now they’ve crashed their motorcar in front of my house.”

“But are they all right, Miller?” demanded Lady Abigail, with an insistence bordering on rudeness which endeared her to everyone within earshot who was not Diana Sydney.

“Yes, my lady,” he answered as they entered the hallway, stressing the third word ever so slightly in a manner calculated to infuriate his mistress. “It was Miss Blake at the door. Harper took the liberty of putting her in the library with a glass of brandy. She looked a bit shaken up and has a few cuts that should be seen to.”

Doctor Jackson nodded, all business. “Lady Abigail, there’s a medical bag on the back seat of my car,” he said as he made his way to the library. “Would you please bring it inside?”

“Of course. Where is Bellamy?” she asked Miller.

“Still outside in the lane, my lady, with the motorcar. I’ve rung downstairs for Raven to come have a look.”

“Very good, Miller,” said Diana in her powerful, stage-trained voice, forcibly wresting control of the situation back from Lady Abigail, as they passed into the sweeping grand foyer where the massive front door stood wide open, and two sights immediately arrested their attention.

First, on the other side of the circular gravel drive with its ostentatious central fountain, in the lane which ran past the gates of Arcadia, a square-nosed Lincoln roadster was bellowing smoke from where it had smashed its front end into the high stone walls that separated the lane from Diana’s property. Beside the car stood a forlorn Bellamy Blake, arms folded tightly around his torso against the cold, which was when they all noticed the second thing – which seemed then so much less significant than the first, yet became, with everything that happened afterwards, so staggeringly
immense in hindsight.

It was snowing.

They’d been at dinner for three hours already, and the crisp clear chill of evening they’d all encountered on arrival had been replaced by a heavy blanket of white pouring softly out of the sky, already beginning to stick heavily to the ground. Bellamy hadn’t dressed to stand outside; his thin wool coat was little protection from the elements, and there was a glittering frost of snowflakes in his thick black hair.

Diana, wary of damage to her delicate silk-soled shoes, remained in the doorway, Miller obediently beside her. But Major Kane, who had trusted the weather report, and Lady Abigail, who had a bag of medical supplies and a freezing-cold boy to retrieve, had more practical footwear and no such compunctions.

“Bellamy! Come inside, dear, it’s freezing!” called Lady Abigail as she opened the back door of the dark blue Ford parked beside the fountain and pulled the medical bag out of the back seat.

Bellamy turned, noticing for the first time that he was no longer alone, and looked up towards the house, squinting in the darkness.

“Lady Abigail? Is that you?”

“Come in, you’ll catch your death of cold. Octavia’s in the library, we’ll get you something to drink and let Doctor Jackson have a look at you.”

“I’m all right,” he called back flatly, and didn’t move, wrapping his arms around himself even more tightly.

“It’s snowing and you haven’t a warm coat.”

He didn’t answer.

Lady Abigail sighed, handed the medical bag to Miller, then made her way over the snow-covered gravel, heedless of her elegant shoes, to join Bellamy where he stared miserably down at the damage to his car. Major Kane followed her.

“Come inside, and we’ll ring down to the pub,” he called to the boy. “Vincent will run up and give you and your sister a lift home.”

“I’m afraid not,” said Bellamy, something curious in his voice, and as they passed through the gates and arrived beside him he pointed wordlessly down the lane from whence the car had evidently come. Instantly the meaning of his somber tone – and the first, earth-shattering crash which had rattled the dining room walls – became clear.

Across the lane lay the remains of an extraordinarily massive, gnarled elm tree which had clearly toppled over from the forested parkland across from Diana’s property. Branches as tall as a grown man lay shattered on the road around it, and its trunk sealed off the lane as neatly as if it had been an iron wall.

“Good God,” murmured Major Kane, as the other two watched him walk the mere fifty or so feet that separated it from Diana’s property, examining the tree. “It must have just missed you.”

Bellamy nodded, the shaken expression on his face now making perfect sense. “We’d been to the cinema in Polis, and by the time we returned it was snowing. Still, Octavia didn’t quite like to go
home just yet, so we decided to go for a bit of an evening drive.”

“Wasn’t that awfully risky?” asked Lady Abigail, and a hint of good humor glinted through the boy’s melancholy expression.

“That’s what I told her,” he agreed. “But my sister rarely takes no for an answer. We caught a slick patch as we were coming up the lane, and skidded a bit, which rather made our hearts stop, so we slowed down nearly to a crawl. And that’s when we heard the creaking sound.”

Lady Abigail was horrified. “My God, you poor things.”

“It took us a moment to catch on,” Bellamy confessed. “Though, the wind’s rather picked up over the last hour or so. Or maybe the branches were covered in snow and weighing it down.”

Major Kane, hearing them, shook his head furiously. “This tree’s been threatening to topple for years,” he said, real anger rising in his voice, and Lady Abigail nodded her agreement.

“The Major is right,” she told him, as they both watched the man pace up and down and examine the monstrous arboreal wreckage. “The village council told Miss Sydney in April that she ought to have it down.”

“Well, she has it down now,” said Bellamy grimly. “Once we realized what was happening, Octavia screamed – although, don’t tell her I told you that – and I sped up to try and clear it. We hit another patch of snow along the lane and skidded, and frankly, I was too shaken up by the tree to have as good a hold of the wheel as I ought. Next thing I knew we were smashed up against Miss Sydney’s gate.” He looked up at the house, brow furrowed. “I’ve never dared even to speak to Miss Sydney in the village,” he confessed. “I don’t find myself delighted by the idea of being forced to beg her hospitality. Especially not tonight, when she’s obviously having a party.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lady Abigail dryly, “you weren’t interrupting anything fun.”

“And if it’s any consolation,” Major Kane added as he made his way back to them, “I rather believe we’ll all be forced to beg Diana Sydney’s hospitality for the night.”

Bellamy stared at him blankly. “What on earth do you mean?”

“The bridge,” whispered Lady Abigail, suddenly realizing. Major Kane nodded grimly.

“We discovered it when on our way here a few hours ago,” he explained to Bellamy. “The bridge that comes up from the south side of the village washed out this morning. If you’d kept going along this road in the dark, you might very well have ended up in the river.”

“So we’re trapped here?” Bellamy asked irritably. Lady Abigail’s head snapped up at him, eyes wide. Something about hearing it in those blunt, straightforward words sent a shiver down her spine.

“So it would seem,” said Major Kane, meeting her eyes and sharing a look. “We ought to go break the news to our hostess.”

“Yes, come inside,” Lady Abigail urged Bellamy, steering him away from the car and through the gates. “Let Doctor Jackson have a look at you.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are, but humor me. And then we’ll make sure you both get something to eat. Just come out of the cold. There’s nothing more that can be done tonight.”
Nobody had mothered Bellamy Blake in quite some time, so he was wildly unprepared to resist the relentless Lady Abigail as she took him by the shoulder and steered him firmly away from the car, through the gates, and along the gravel drive, informing Diana Sydney in a tone that brooked no argument, “The Blakes will be joining us for the evening.”

Major Kane followed them back to the house. As they climbed the steps, he found his eyes drifting upward to those carved stone letters above the doorway – of whose true meaning he was no less aware than Mr. Pike. And as he watched Lady Abigail lead Bellamy Blake into the floral-scented warmth of Diana Sydney’s foyer, he found himself reflecting darkly upon the thing which only he had seen:

A suspiciously clean break between the base of the fallen tree trunk and the stump it had left behind.

Diana Sydney had scarcely been able to countenance inviting the school’s headmaster to her dinner party, so a lowly junior classics teacher – not to mention his sister, the games mistress and ladies’ athletics instructor – were unlikely to be found anywhere on her preferred guest list. But the role of gracious hostess amused her tonight, and of course a car accident in the lane which personally impacted her in no way was an enjoyable scene in which to engage in some light dramatics. Not to mention, of course, that Lady Abigail’s calm insistence that the pair be welcomed left Diana little room to resist. All things considered, she welcomed the young pair with very good grace and, after Doctor Jackson had pronounced them both uninjured, insisted that Miller bring them both something to eat. “Tell Harper to make up the Rose Room for Miss Blake and the White Room for her brother,” she said briskly as she ushered her new guests into the dining room to join the others. “We’ll have Raven go take a look in the morning and get them on their way.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Major Kane said rather apologetically, and as the others stared in astonishment, he explained – as mildly as possible, and omitting his worrisome suspicions – about the fallen tree which had blocked off the only road back to the village from Miss Sydney’s house.

“That tree’s been threatening to come down for the past twelve years,” said Charles Pike, brow furrowed. “I can’t believe it chose tonight of all nights.”

“I don’t know that it had much say in the matter,” Lady Abigail replied dryly. She had quite recovered her composure now that there were two stranded young people in need of looking after, and on the whole - given that the monstrous inconvenience to all parties also included herself - she was taking the entire fiasco extremely well.

“What does one do in such a situation?” Diana mused as the unflappable Miller set delicate plates of salad of endive in front of the guests – with the exception of the Blakes, for whom he had rapidly added two seats to the table and brought forth an assortment of covered hot dishes. Octavia, seated between Lady Abigail and Doctor Jackson, was currently helping herself to the venison, while Bellamy – across from her, between the Major and Clarke - tucked into a roast duckling. With food in front of them and hearty glasses of Bordeaux in their hands, the siblings both seemed much more themselves. “I mean to say, what is one’s responsibility for fallen trees in public places?”

“The forest on that side of the lane is within your property line, Miss Sydney,” Major Kane informed her brusquely. “I’m afraid the removal of the tree is an inconvenience which falls entirely at your feet.”

She sighed. “Miller, ring down to your father,” she said, “and ask if he can round up some men from the village to come clear it.”

“I don’t know that this is a police matter, Diana –” Lady Abigail began, but her hostess waved her off.
impatiently.

“Good Lord, what else has the man to do? Constable of a village where nothing ever happens? A cat could do his job. He’ll be grateful for the employment, I’m sure.”

“I’ll telephone him right away, ma’am,” said Miller, his face impressively neutral. Major Kane met Lady Abigail’s eyes across the table and they shared a look of weary amusement. After decades of an acquaintance that dated back to childhood yet had never been intimate, it came rather as a surprise to find the ice definitively broken by this shared exasperation towards Diana Sydney, and the mutual weariness with which they accepted the inevitability of spending an entire night imprisoned in her home.

The only person unapologetically enjoying herself was Clarke Griffin, who had been rescued from a night of adult tedium by the sudden and dramatic arrival of two persons near her own age. She knew the Blakes rather dimly but had never spent an evening in their company, and her mother was quietly amused to see how instantly the girl perked up at their arrival.

The Blakes, conversely, seemed at first uncertain what to make of her. They were both suddenly self-conscious of their clothes, for one thing; they had not changed for dinner since leaving the schoolhouse so both were in their work clothes – Bellamy in well-maintained but faded gray tweed trousers with a wine-colored jumper, and Octavia in a sleek plum-and-black knit dress four seasons out of style, fraying ever so slightly at the collar and cuffs. Bellamy's hair was slightly too long, curling rather untidily against the collar of his white shirt, while his sister wore hers pulled back in a simple twist without even a hat. They wore spectacles, very sensible (albeit scuffed) shoes, and no jewelry save for a simple black leather watch on Bellamy's wrist and a tiny silver pendant in the shape of a butterfly at Octavia's throat.

In short, they looked like exactly what they were: respectable, intelligent young people with almost no money.

Beside Miss Griffin in her scarlet Paris dress, however (not to mention her aristocratic mother across the table), they were instantly ill at ease and responded at first with only a prickly defensiveness. But the Griffins’ charm proved, in the end, impossible to resist, and inevitably they softened under the persistent and clearly genuine concern of the two women’s inquiries.

“How fortunate that you’re both all right,” said Clarke to Bellamy, who attempted to respond before a cutting look from his sister reminded him that he was not in his own home and should not address a gentleman's daughter with a mouth full of potatoes. “What a terrible experience for you.”

“And how providential that, if you were to be stranded, you were at least in front of a house,” added Lady Abigail. “I shudder to think of you trapped at night on the forest road.”

“I don’t generally think of myself as the kind of woman who screams in fright,” said Octavia frankly, “but when I heard that tree begin to come down, I shrieked like an absolute banshee. I think I frightened Bellamy more than the tree did.”

“Etiquette would probably suggest, then, that you pay for repairs to the car,” quipped Mr. Pike from the other end of the table.

“Well, we both work for you,” she retorted, “so technically you’ll be the one paying for it.”

This made everyone at the table laugh. But whatever amused reply the headmaster was forming died his lips as Miller returned, grim-faced and somber, to murmur something in Diana’s ear.
“Is everything all right?” Clarke asked as Miller disappeared back through the doorway again, leaving their hostess looking, for the first time all evening, as though her carefully-rehearsed composure had finally begun to fray.

“The telephone is out,” she said flatly (and it was a mark of how rattled she was that she simply said the words aloud without even attempting to perform them). “Miller seems to think when the tree in the lane came down, it took the wire with it.”

Silence fell.

Major Kane looked up sharply at Diana as she made this pronouncement, dark fears whispering in the back of his mind, and caught a glimpse of Lady Abigail’s face, brow furrowed in worry. Nobody spoke for a long time, all of them looking at each other or down at their plates or staring at their hostess. Even Reverend Thelonious, still busily working away at his endive salad, looked faintly disturbed by this ominous pronouncement.

“Trapped in a house overnight with no escape and no phone,” said Clarke Griffin, finally breaking the silence with an awkward laugh. “My goodness, we’re having an adventure.”

“How fortunate that we all know each other,” agreed Vera Kane, “or this would be positively frightening.”

Lady Abigail seemed struck by this, and looked down abruptly at her plate, biting her lip ever so faintly, the way Major Kane suddenly remembered she used to do as a child. But she said nothing.

“Well, the house is stocked with food, and plenty of liquor, and I have enough nightclothes in the guest wardrobe for all of you and then some,” said Diana, attempting to recover some semblance of good humor. “So I suggest we simply proceed with dinner.”

“An excellent idea,” said Doctor Jackson, forcing a smile, and leaned over to compliment Vera on the pearls she was wearing. Mr. Pike eased the Blake siblings into conversation, Clarke asked Diana about her recent tour of *Antony and Cleopatra* on the Continent, and slowly a sense of warmth and humanity began to flow back into the room, pushing the foreboding darkness away. Even Reverend Thelonious was prompted, after a few minutes, to engage in a forced kind of conversation with Vera Kane.

Only Lady Abigail sat silent, toying with the salad on her plate and pushing it about with her fork, neither speaking nor eating.

Major Kane watched her in silence for a few moments before she looked up and caught him watching her.

“You’re staring,” she said quietly.

“Observing,” he corrected her.

“It amounts to the same thing.”

“Are you all right?”

“Perfectly,” she said, forcibly shaking off whatever cloud appeared to hover over her, and smiled up at him. “It’s nothing at all.”

Perhaps aware that she’d somehow awakened his interest, she was careful for the rest of the dinner to perform a bit more cheerfully, talking pleasantly to Doctor Jackson and the Blakes and her daughter...
though not, Major Kane could not help noticing, to him.

She smiled politely and chatted with almost-believable ease for the rest of the dinner. Still, he watched her, and he thought about the way her hands had gripped the stem of her wineglass so tightly the knuckles turned white at Miller's news, and he thought about trees and telephone wires and bridges and crashed cars, and how very coincidental it was that four such disasters should occur on the very same night . . . leaving them all entirely trapped.
By the time the salads, the pâté de foie gras, the dessert of charlotte royale, and the cheese course had been consumed, the nine guests and their hostess had all more or less tacitly agreed to take the evening for what it was and accept their improbable situation with good grace. Very good food and ever-replenished glasses of wine can cure many ills, and the absurd side of their adventure eventually began to assert itself. Encouraging them not to stand on ceremony as at a formal dinner, but rather, to make themselves at home as they would if they were weekend houseguests, Diana invited them all to find their own entertainment after dinner however they pleased, and the group slowly began to divide rather naturally into like-minded clusters, spread all over the main wing of the house.

It was nearly eleven by the time they left the dining room, though no one was tired. They adjourned first to the parlor, where Miller had laid out sherry, coffee, cigars and chocolates as Diana had requested, and soon the idea of a game of bridge was suggested by Mr. Pike. Doctor Jackson concurred, with Vera and Diana joining them, and the four sat down at the card table to play. Major Kane and Bellamy Blake made their way to the billiard room, while Reverend Thelonious took himself for a solitary tour of the portrait gallery upstairs. Miss Griffin and Lady Abigail took their coffee into the drawing room, where the fire was rather better, and cordially invited Miss Blake to join them.

An hour or so passed this way. The sense of menace that had greeted the Blakes’ rather dramatic arrival had long since passed, and the camaraderie of shared disaster was beginning to assert itself.
None of these guests had been Diana’s first choice for company (a fact of which they were all painfully aware) and the Blakes had not even been invited; yet the resilient good nature of Doctor Jackson and Mrs. Kane, the impeccable graciousness of Lady Abigail, and the young people’s collective ability to find amusement in anything that appeared to be an adventure, buoyed the rest of the party until collectively they were all, in their own ways, very nearly enjoying themselves.

It was the Griffins who suggested the game.

Perhaps running out of conversational topics with people she barely knew, Miss Blake – returning to the parlor for more coffee with the Griffin ladies accompanying her – drifted over to watch the bridge players and commented, rather absently, what a pity it was that she did not know the game, and that anyway it was only for four players and well underway.

“I’m sure there’s a game we could all play,” suggested Miss Griffin so swiftly that her mother, politely concealing a smile, suspected her daughter of being as bored of Polite Adult Conversation as Miss Blake was.

“Here’s a rather mad idea,” said Lady Abigail, pouring herself another coffee from the silver tray on the sideboard. “It is a rather dark and stormy night, and very nearly Halloween, and none of us have ever been to this house before. What about Hide and Seek?”

The girls agreed with such instant, noisy enthusiasm that Diana felt obligated to concede. Doctor Jackson and Mr. Pike, highly amused by the notion, seemed perfectly pleased to set down their cards and join in, and even Vera Kane – who could be positively childlike at heart in unexpected moments – agreed readily on the condition that Lady Abigail convince her son to join in the game too.

“He’s playing billiards with my brother,” said Miss Blake. “Bellamy will play too, I’m sure. He has a great love for exploring old houses.”

“I’ll send Miller to fetch them,” said Diana.

“What about Reverend Jaha?” asked Doctor Jackson, with seeming reluctance, and they all hesitated. On the one hand, it seemed patently bad manners to willfully disinvite him. On the other, it was impossible to deny that the evening’s increased levity was due in no small part to the fact that he had wandered off on his own shortly after dinner and removed his oppressive presence from their company, and the group was silently unanimous in their conviction that including him would quite spoil the fun.

In the end, however, as Miller was dispatched to retrieve the gentlemen in the billiard room, a sighing Diana halfheartedly bade him look in on the portrait gallery upstairs to inquire if the reverend should like to join the rest of the party in the parlor for a game.

“It’s a very large house,” said Doctor Jackson, “so we ought to set the rules before we begin.”

“No going outside,” Miss Blake said promptly. “Or downstairs to the servants’ quarters.”

“Main floor only,” agreed Miss Griffin. The two young women appeared to have taken charge, and the adults were now on their turf. “The parlor will be Start. Whoever is ‘It’ first will count to a hundred from in here, with the door closed.”

“And are we allowed to move about after, or not?” asked Mr. Pike. “Shall we play the way where all of us try to sneak back to the parlor before you catch us, or the way where we remain in our hiding place and whoever you find last wins the game?”

“The first is rather too much like tag,” said Lady Abigail dryly, “and I haven’t the right shoes for
that. Why don’t we simply stay in one place until found. It’s a simple game, don’t let’s complicate it unnecessarily.”

Miller returned just then with Bellamy Blake and Major Kane in tow.

“Did the reverend say whether he’d like to join us?” asked Diana.

“He wasn’t in the portrait gallery, ma’am. Would you like me to look – “

“That won’t be necessary,” Diana said hastily, as the rest of the party breathed a rather guilty sigh of relief. “Thank you, Miller. Has Harper turned down the beds?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then you’re all dismissed for the night. We’re going to play a game of Hide-and-Seek and then I’m sure we’ll take ourselves off to sleep, but everything else can wait until morning.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said with a nod, “goodnight to you all.” And with that he disappeared.

“Hide-and-Seek?” asked Major Kane doubtfully. His mother laughed.

“Now, Marcus,” she chided, “these girls have been bored silly all night long listening to us old folk chatter on, and they’ve asked for a game. Don’t tell me you’re too proud to oblige two very nice young ladies with such a simple request.”

“I’ll hide with you, if you like,” said Lady Abigail lightly, a faint hint of teasing in her voice. “In case you’ve forgotten the rules.”

“I don’t believe pre-planned stratagems are permitted,” said Major Kane, his voice stern but with a hint of a laugh behind it.

“That puts you at rather a disadvantage, then. I don’t imagine you to be the reckless, fly-by-night type.”

“Now you’ve done it, Lady Abigail,” chuckled Pike. “You’ve set him a challenge. He won’t rest until he’s found the best hiding place in all the house and won the game.”

“Major Kane is the tallest of the party by quite a number of inches,” said Lady Abigail archly, “only Mr. Blake excepted. If he happens to win, despite the drastically diminished number of comfortable hiding places available to a man of his stature, I’ll congratulate him indeed.”

Their eyes met for a moment, and Major Kane saw a sparkle of life and amusement setting her face aglow that made her look twenty years younger. His heart began to beat a little faster, though he was still perfectly sane enough to see and recognize the folly of it. But it was there nonetheless.

Because this woman, slowly emerging over the course of this long and rather astonishing evening, was not at all the Lady Abigail he had hitherto believed he knew.

That woman – the one known by everyone in the village – was a leader, a composed and serious woman known for bearing trouble with determined, resilient strength. Generous and warm-hearted always, but not merry, not like this. He had only seen her a handful of times in the past decades since he left the village for military service, and those were mostly in passing – at church, or in the village square, or amidst the crush of bodies at her annual Christmas ball. But as she looked on, laughing, while her daughter and the Blakes drew straws to see who would be “It” first, he found himself unable to cease wondering what the real woman was like behind closed doors, without the
trappings of name and title and the tragic history all of them knew.

Not least among the many surprises of this very surprising night was the way he had slowly begun to see Lady Abigail in a very different light altogether. He had always admired her, from a remote distance, but he suddenly wondered if perhaps he might actually like her, too.

Nothing could ever come of it, of course. But still. There it was.

“Miss Griffin is ‘It,’” announced Doctor Jackson, out of whose hand the three had drawn straws, bringing Major Kane forcibly back to the present just in time to see Bellamy lean down to whisper something in his sister’s ear. Apparently, he had already decided on their hiding place for the first round. Octavia’s eyes lit up with all the fiery delight of a determined winner, and the others found themselves uncomfortably wondering what on earth they’d gotten themselves into, taking on a competition against the Blakes.

“All right, everyone, into the hallway,” Clarke ordered them firmly, and shooed them out to close the parlor door behind her.

The game had begun.

Bellamy seized his sister’s hand and they immediately took off running, instantly ratcheting up the difficulty of the game by switching off every light in the hall as they went and plunging the others into abrupt darkness, until their eyes could adjust to the light of the moon.

Diana Sydney, who had begun inching rather closer to Major Kane from the moment he returned from the billiard room in the transparent hope of finding herself alone in a hiding place with him, was thwarted by an inquiry from Doctor Jackson, which distracted her long enough for Kane to slip away. By the time Clarke reached twenty he was long gone.

Lady Abigail lingered for a moment in the hall to offer her assistance to Vera, who declined with great exuberance. “I believe I’ve come up with something no one else has thought of,” she whispered. “But I rather imagine it will be more fun to let the Blakes win the first round, and then try it on them in the second. I shall stay in the hall to be caught first, to throw off suspicion.”

“Why, Mrs. Kane,” Lady Abigail laughed. “I do believe this is the most I’ve ever seen you enjoy yourself.”

“I haven’t played a game of Hide-and-Seek since I was twelve years old,” Vera confessed, “but there was a time when no child in this village could outwit me at it.”

“Forty-nine, fifty!” called Clarke from inside the parlor, and Vera gave Lady Abigail a nudge. “Go,” she whispered, “you’ve only fifty left. If you’re out first, your daughter will never let you forget it.”

“That’s true enough,” she agreed, and as Mrs. Kane took up a transparently visible hiding place behind the grandfather clock in the hall, Abigail began to swiftly consider her options. Everyone else had long since vanished, leaving her seemingly alone save for the comforting sound of her daughter’s voice, counting loudly from behind the parlor door. The drawing room and library she dismissed right away; adjacent to the parlor, they were certain to be the first place Clarke would check. So she decided to make her way stealthily down the wide passage, away from the parlor and the brightly moonlit front windows, through the grand foyer and into the shadows of the rest of the house.

She arrived first at the music room, door standing open, full of places to hide. The faint shafts of moonlight slicing in through the gap between heavy curtains illumined a massive grand piano, rows
of chairs and an ornately carved spinet in the hallway. It seemed, all in all, like a sensible choice. But as a sound startled her from somewhere in the distance, she turned and caught, out of the corner of her eye, something moving in the shadows, off to her left at the end of a seemingly infinite hallway. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she found herself suddenly reminded of the chill of foreboding she’d felt hours before when Miller had entered to inform them about the telephone.

But when she looked again, there was nothing there.

Oh, grow up, Abby, she chided herself. It was a snowy midnight in October and they were playing a children’s game, and if they were frightened it was the safe kind of frightened, because they’d chosen to be. She had nothing to fear from a silhouette disappearing into the dim, distant shadows of the south hallway, when the servants were all downstairs and she knew everyone else in the house.

Still, she found herself taking the rather cowardly way out and bypassing the sinister darkness of the moonlit piano to duck into the merry, brightly-lit warmth of the billiard room next door. The Blakes, in their ruthlessly competitive spirit, had clearly not made it this far, since no one had turned off the lights, and she was rather ashamed of herself at how profoundly that put her at ease.

Diana’s billiard table was a masterpiece of Italian craftsmanship, which Miller had informed his father who had then informed Maya at the Thirteen Swords who had then informed Lady Abigail, had taken ten men to move. Rather than resting on four ordinary legs, the long sides of the table’s base were elaborately hand-painted with ornate Roman frescoes on planks of mahogany as solid as the walls of a house. Lowering herself to her hands and knees, Abigail crawled over the thick, velvety carpet to conceal herself from view beneath the surface of the table – only to discover, to her astonishment, that someone had beaten her there.

“I’ll have you know,” said Major Kane crossly, “that I was rather proud of this hiding place. And if you make a sound and we get caught, I shall never forgive you.”

“If we get caught, it won’t be on account of me,” she retorted. “I can be quite stealthy when I like.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, with a smile, then followed rather unexpectedly with, “would you like a drink?”

Abigail looked up from the complicated process of adjusting her skirts around her to sit comfortably on the floor, and saw a bottle of champagne in the Major’s hand.

“What on earth are you doing with that?”

“Young Mr. Blake pilfered it on his way back here before our game, and I insisted he share,” said Kane. “He left it here when Miller came to fetch us back to the parlor.” He took a long swing straight from the bottle, leaning back against the wooden panel behind him – high enough that even his tall, angular body fit beneath it rather comfortably – then passed it to Abigail beside him.

“Rather intimate, sharing a bottle with no glasses,” she murmured breezily as she took a sip, and was vastly amused to see how the remark discomfited him. She passed the bottle back, then turned towards him, resting her head on the smooth cool wood. “What a peculiar night we’re having.”

“I can’t remember when I’ve ever had a stranger one,” he agreed emphatically as she passed the bottle back.

“And to think,” she said dryly, “none of us actually wanted to come.”

He shook his head, amused and skeptical. “I only agreed because of my mother,” he pointed out. “You don’t have that excuse.”
“I’m a Walters, of Walters Hall,” she reminded him, in a curious tone he couldn’t entirely place. “There are things one does simply because one does them.”

“Like say yes to odious dinner party invitations.”

“And host the church fete,” she sighed, “and endure the reverend’s tedious sermons, and open my home every Easter for tourists.” She took another long swig of champagne. “Not like you,” she said, her voice tinged with something that might have been envy. “Seeing the world, exploring, going anywhere you like . . .”

“Hardly that. I was in military service, I went where they sent me. And it was often - ” He stopped himself, suddenly unwilling to give too much of himself away. “Difficult,” he said finally, and she nodded with perfect comprehension, as though that were all she needed.

“Of course,” she said. “Still. You’ve been places. You’ve done things.”

“You’ve done things too.”

“I married the first boy I ever loved and I never left the village where we were born,” she told him, almost as though it were a confession. “I’ve never lived in a house that wasn’t Walters Hall.”

“Is that why you sent Clarke to Paris?” he asked, with a swiftness of comprehension that took her by surprise. She hadn’t expected him to be so observant.

“I wanted her to have . . . freedom, I suppose,” she said slowly. “The chance for a different kind of life. To breathe different air, to meet people who weren’t us. I could never have done such a thing at her age; my parents wouldn’t have stood for it. But I want Clarke to know the world in a way I never could.”

“You remind me so much of my mother,” he said, almost without thinking, then flushed and looked away, realizing as he said it how odd – or perhaps insulting – it might sound. But he was reckoning without Lady Abigail.

“What a lovely thing to say,” she laughed, visibly delighted. “I like her very much. I always have. And I like how much you like her.” Kane looked at her with a raised eyebrow, and suddenly it was Lady Abigail’s turn to flush slightly. “You’re patient with her,” she explained. “You’re kind. You didn’t want to be here tonight, and you’re forty years old – “

“Forty-four.”

“. . . so she couldn’t make you come. But you did anyway, because it meant something to Vera, and you love her.” She took the bottle of champagne back from him, leaning in to reach out her hand, and only then did she realize how very little distance separated them as they sat side by side with the wood panels at their backs. Their knees were nearly touching, and they bumped shoulders ever so slightly as she took the champagne bottle out of his hand.

“I wonder how long we have until Clarke finds us,” she murmured as she took a drink and passed the bottle back, looking up to meet his eye with something warm and vibrant pulsing in her voice.

“Why?” Major Kane asked softly. “Did you have something in mind to kill the time?”

“Do you know,” she mused thoughtfully, “I rather suspected you were flirting with me tonight, and now I’m sure of it.”

His mild shrug was acknowledgment without apology. “I won’t deny that. But you definitely
“I started it.”

“I what? I did not.”

“You absolutely did, Lady Abigail.”

“ Lies! Calumny! Slander!” she retorted, but her attempt at an accusatory expression was deflated rather by the half-smile she could not quite conceal.

“I’m a gentleman,” he murmured. “I would never go where I wasn’t invited.”

Lady Abigail felt her cheeks grow warm and flushed, and she bit her lip again ever so slightly, but didn’t look away. They regarded each other for a long, long time before the thunder of footsteps tearing down the hallway jolted them apart with an almost physical sensation of shock.

“I can see your shoes, Mr. Kane,” came Clarke Griffin’s triumphant voice. “Come out from the table, and bring my mother with you.”

A laughing Kane crawled out on his hands and knees, dusted off his slacks, then knelt down to help Lady Abigail – still carrying the champagne bottle – up onto her feet.

“Have we won?” he asked Clarke, who gave an exasperated sigh.

“Nearly,” she said, plucking the bottle from her mother’s hand as she pushed them out the door. “But I positively cannot find the Blakes.”

“Elementary deductive reasoning,” declared the Major as the three of them made their way back into the hallway. “The Blakes have never been to Miss Sydney’s house. Since their arrival, they have only set foot in the east hall and the north wing of the main floor. Yet Bellamy had already thought of a hiding place before the game began, which means it must be located in a room where he’s been. And if it wasn’t the billiard room, where you found us, and it wasn’t the parlor, where you were counting, then I can only think of one other place that’s worth a look.”

Three minutes later, when – thanks to this impeccable logic – they had located the pair crouched beneath the snowy draped cloth of the dining room table, both Griffins were forced to admit that Major Kane was better at Hide-and-Seek than either of them would ever have suspected.

They returned to find the crowd in the parlor flushed and giddy, everyone bubbling with excitement and discussing the places they’d found to hide. Chocolates were passed around, plans whispered, and a brief dispute was had regarding whether it was altogether fair for both Blakes to be “It” at the same time. Clarke pointed out that this doubled their chances of finding the hiders, which was hardly fair since she’d had to do it all herself; Vera Kane, however, countered with the excellent point that it would also very likely halve the length of the round, allowing them to fit in a third before bed.

This was agreed to by all parties, and as Octavia and Bellamy covered their eyes at the mantel to count, the others made their way out into the hallway – with the exception of a positively gleeful Vera, who crept noiselessly back into the parlor. Major Kane and Lady Abigail watched, fascinated, as she tiptoed past the backs of the oblivious Blakes to conceal herself entirely from view behind a vast mahogany breakfront desk in the corner of the room.

“She’s been saving that,” Lady Abigail whispered to Major Kane. “She was really very pleased with herself.”

“I wouldn’t mind getting caught first so we can see the look on the Blakes’ faces when they realize she was right behind them all the time,” he murmured back, as they watched Doctor Jackson dive
behind the heavy damask hallway drapes and Mr. Pike disappear into the library. Seeing she was unlikely to get another crack at the major this round, Diana took charge of Miss Griffin and led her off by the hand towards the ballroom.

As they heard the Blakes reach thirty, Major Kane looked down at Lady Abigail with a raised eyebrow.

“We did rather well for ourselves last round,” he said politely, “shall we stick together?”

“I think that’s very wise,” she smiled up at him. “But you chose the first, so now it’s my turn.”

“Lead the way,” he conceded agreeably, but his smile turned quickly to puzzlement as he watched her duck into the narrow space between the curved grand staircase and the door to the music room.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, watching her run her hands along the high wooden wall that comprised the side of the staircase, then stared in astonishment as she hooked her fingertips into a concealed panel and pulled open an entirely unexpected door beneath the stairs, waving him inside.

“Get in,” she whispered impatiently.

He ducked his head low and stepped through the opening – which was barely tall enough even for Abby to enter without stooping – as she closed the door behind them, sealing them in a pleasantly cedar-scented darkness. Once inside, there was plenty of room to stand, though very little space to move without hitting his head on the underside of the stairs – which he did, twice, before Lady Abigail took him in hand, planted him in place and ordered him to hold still or he’d give them away.

“Where the devil are we?” he exclaimed in a whisper, once they were settled in. “How on earth did you know this was here?”

“I was here once for a Christmas party as a child,” she told him, “back when Lord Wallace lived here. They played Hide-and-Seek then too, though of course they wouldn’t let the girls play. Only the boys. But I remember Lord Wallace’s son opening up a door beneath the stairs and boasting to the other children that the house was full of secret passages and hiding places. He was rather exaggerating, of course – this is the only one, as far as I know, and it was hardly a passage, just a place where his father’s butler stored crates of glassware. But it was rather magical when I was nine.”

“I would imagine so,” he said, smiling in the darkness at the little sparkle of delight he could hear in her voice at the memory. He started to say something else, but was hushed by Lady Abigail’s soft little hand pressing suddenly against his lips as two pairs of footsteps came thundering down the hallway.

The hunt, it seemed, was on.

The Blakes did not appear to know about the hiding-place beneath the stairs, careening right past it as they raced through the foyer. “They’re gone,” Lady Abigail whispered as the footsteps faded in the distance, but her fingertips lingered quite a bit longer than strictly necessary against the soft, dry warmth of his lips, and they both became simultaneously aware of their extraordinary physical closeness, and aware of the other’s awareness of it.

Major Kane swallowed hard, and shifted his weight almost imperceptibly towards her, pressing his mouth ever so faintly against her fingertips in something that was so very nearly a kiss that he was shocked at himself. Lady Abigail was a noblewoman, miles above him in social status, and the list of reasons why she was therefore not for his pursuing was extensive. But it was very difficult to recall any of them, there in the cedar-scented darkness beneath the stairs, as her fingers pulled back
just enough to brush lightly over his bottom lip before she took her hand away.

“Lady Abigail,” he murmured, his voice barely louder than a breath, and as his eyes began to adjust to the darkness he could see her small pale face tilted up at him, eyes shining.

“Alone in the dark with a strange man,” she said in a low voice, pulsing with a strange vibrancy. “My goodness.”

“You’ve known me all your life.”

“I’ve never been trapped in a closet with you during a game of Hide-and-Seek,” she pointed out, a barely suppressed laugh in her voice, and there was something in the bubbly, youthful glee with which she was transparently enjoying herself that unaccountably did something to his heart.

Oh no, a dim, distant part of himself thought in dawning horror. Oh, Marcus. What have you done?

Three hours ago she had been Abigail Griffin, his aristocratic neighbor and acquaintance, lady of the manor, village patron and the best horsewoman in three counties. A figure to be respected and admired from a safe distance by men like him, whose fathers were bricklayers instead of lords. And yet suddenly, he was struck almost dumb by two overwhelming thoughts colliding in his mind at the same time –

How very much he would like to kiss her . . . and how very much it appeared she wanted him to.
A stampede of footsteps thundered back down the hallway just then – at least three people, it appeared – startling them both and causing a faint whisper of a gasp to escape Lady Abigail. They froze in the silence, straining to see if anyone had heard. But the coast was still clear. From the loud voices laughing as they entered the parlor, it appeared that Bellamy had located Miss Griffin and Diana, while Octavia had captured Mr. Pike. Jackson, concealed in the draperies across from the parlor door, was next to be spotted, and conceded with good grace as he returned to the rest of the party.

“I believe it’s only us and your mother left,” Lady Abigail whispered. “I would so love her to win.”

“I think we can arrange that,” he whispered back, and then – as the crisp little footsteps of Octavia Blake’s heels came tap-tapping along the parquet floors, he knocked with his fist against the wooden floorboards overhead, beneath the stairs.

“What was that?” they heard her call sharply to Bellamy.

“What was what?”

“The stairs are off-limits. The Kanes wouldn’t dare.”

“Well, behind the stairs, then.”

“I don’t believe there is a way behind them.”

“Well, help me look, would you?”

“Wait a moment, I believe there’s someone in the parlor. You look behind the stairs.”

“Quick,” whispered Abigail, “we’d better do something fast before Bellamy finds your mother.”

Hearing Miss Blake's footsteps move closer, Major Kane helpfully nudged the concealed door panel a fraction of an inch out of its snug frame to make it visible. It worked; only a few seconds later, the door flew open to reveal the girl beaming with great triumph. “It’s Major Kane and Lady Abigail!”

“And I found Mrs. Kane!” Mr. Blake called back to his sister as the two climbing out of the stairs grinned at each other like conspiratorial children.

“Last round,” said Major Kane as they entered the parlor. “Congratulations, Mother, I believe you’re It.”

Vera’s mild-mannered, placid triumph were enormously endearing, and as neither Major Kane nor Lady Abigail had any interest in chasing people all over the house, the sacrifice of once more coming in only second was entirely worth it.

Vera turned her back away from the door and began to count as the rest of the group made their silent way out of the parlor and into the hall. Lady Abigail found herself drifting very naturally to Major Kane’s side, and he found himself very naturally lingering to wait for her as the others scattered, both of them unable to stop themselves from imagining what might happen if they found themselves alone in the dark together a third time.
Lady Abigail looked up at Major Kane, a lighthearted quip on the tip of her tongue, but it died off abruptly at the intensity of his warm brown eyes as he gazed down at her. She thought about the startling intimacy of feeling the glass rim of the champagne bottle still warm from his mouth, and the way his lips had felt beneath her fingertips as they stood there in the dark beneath the stairs, and how plainly he had been thinking of kissing her, and she felt the ground suddenly and violently give way beneath her, as though she were falling from a dizzying, vertiginous height.

She felt the cold silver pressure of Lord Jacob’s wedding ring on its filigree chain where it hung beneath her dress, resting cold and insistent against the soft white skin between her breasts, her heart pounding against it like a martial drum.

They were inching towards the edge of a cliff, with nothing waiting for them on the other side of it but disaster.

How, she thought desperately, had this happened to her so quickly?

Major Kane’s uncanny ability to read every expression of her face did not fail him now, and she watched him take a respectful step back from her, the earnest intensity of his eyes disappearing behind a polite and well-bred smile.

“Shall we compete against each other this round?” he said in a perfectly-calibrated tone of casual friendliness, and she felt her entire body ease, gratitude coursing through her.

He knew, and he understood, and he was too much of a gentleman to make her say it.

The moment was salvaged. They were back, finally, on solid ground.

She smiled back warmly. “May the best man win,” she said, holding out her hand companionably, and she shook it with perfect decorum before making her way down the hallway, and she could feel him letting her go without following. She looked back over her shoulder only once, as she turned the corner and left the main wing of the house behind, but by then he was already gone. She was not quite sure whether to be glad or sorry.

To avoid accidentally running into him beneath another table and being a once more unable to behave herself, Lady Abigail parted ways with the rest of the group. The general trajectory of all parties searching for hiding places mostly encompassed the rooms ringing the grand foyer – the drawing room and library on one side, the billiard and music rooms on the other, or the vast double doors to the ballroom in the middle. These afforded plenty of hiding places which could be reached swiftly by anyone who wanted to ensure that they were well and truly concealed by the time the seeker reached one hundred. She had not seen Major Kane leave, but she knew he had headed that direction, so she took herself the opposite way instead.

Turning left past the side door to the library took her away from light and warmth and human contact and even windows, leading her into a long dark hallway with no doors. Another left took her into an even darker, more desolate hall, and only catching sight of the ladies’ powder room indicated that she was still in the main north wing.

This part of the house was unused during the evening hours, and she found herself shivering . . . both from the chill which seemed to seep up through her bones from the very floor, and also, perhaps from the oddly heavy quiet. The walls must be very thick, she realized, finding herself rather surprised and uneasy at how quickly all voices and sounds from the vicinity of the parlor vanished altogether, leaving her with the curious sensation of being alone in an empty house.
She knew, of course, that this was silly. Downstairs, there were servants lighting bedside lamps and climbing into bed, perhaps accompanied by a book and a brandy. Somewhere above her, though too far away to hear, the reverend no doubt continued his solitary tour of the impressive portrait gallery Diana had inherited from the estate’s last owners, and in which no one but the reverend had ever been interested. And scattered throughout the rooms all around her were her friends and her daughter, hiding under tables and behind draperies with the enthusiastic glee of children.

But from where she stood, she could hear nothing. The house felt entirely deserted.

The peculiar sense of foreboding that had crept into her mind from time to time over the course of the evening reared its head again, but she squared her shoulders and shook it off. *It’s just a game,* she chided herself, as she tiptoed down the parquet floors. *Don’t be stupid, Abby. It’s just a game.*

And she’d made the correct choice, after all, in attempting to build a little distance between herself and the Major. This was a very small village, and people would talk. As amusing as it had been at dinner to watch Diana seethe every time Kane addressed Abigail rather than herself, there were limits.

She had loved one man, and lost him, and if there had not been a small child in her care she would have let the grief swallow her up entirely. She could not do that again. The Major was very handsome and very kind and there was something shadowy in the depths of his warm brown eyes that intrigued her — something, perhaps, to do with that wave of sorrow that had washed over him, unseen by everyone but herself, when Pike teased him about not being married. But he was not for her, and she was not for him, and in the long run it was safer to give herself a bit of an innocent fright wandering the halls of Diana’s house than to risk Vera Kane pulling open a cupboard door to see Lady Abigail kissing her son.

She meandered a bit, turning left and then right before finding herself in a long hallway full of closed doors that seemed to be a dead end. The layout confused her profoundly, and though it was hardly possible for her to really consider herself *lost,* she’d had no inkling the house went on as far as it did. Vera must have long since stopped counting, and Abigail found herself hoping against hope that the woman would stroll up behind her and call her name; at this moment she would happily consent to being the first one out of the game in exchange for the presence of another human being.

With no windows in the hallway to orient herself by catching a glimpse of the grounds, she found herself wondering in genuine perplexity where she was. Rather uneasily, and with a faint apprehension of trespassing, she pushed open one of the closed doors on her left, and found herself in a small sewing room, papered all over with yellow flowers that were probably very cheerful by day but looked sickly and poisonous in the pale glow of moonlight that seeped in through the white lace curtains.

It seemed, however, as good a place to hide as any, so she closed the door behind her (leaving it a bit ajar as a hint for Vera) and made her way through the darkness towards the window to get her bearings. The main entrance of the house was to the west, and she suspected she had made her way around to the east, where the breakfast and morning rooms looked out over the vast, expansive grounds that Diana’s American gardener kept in such pristine condition.

Peering out the window into the darkness was a rather eerie experience. The snow still poured down heavily, blanketing the terrace and lawns in an unbroken expanse of white which gave off an unearthly glow in the moonlight. Sure enough, Abigail could see below the terrace the crescent-shaped rose garden, the snow-covered orchards stretching out behind it like a silver-frosted wall, and Diana’s spacious, well-appointed stables (Lady Abigail was the best horsewoman in three counties and the quality of Arcadia’s equestrian equipage was the only part of the property she genuinely
envied; she’d toured them twice before, subjected both times to a barrage of casually insulting remarks about her own stables at Walters Hall being “cozy”). Looking the other direction, she could just crane her neck and make out the glittering glass walls of the conservatory, which jutted out in an angular dome on the northeast corner. She was on the southeast corner of the house, it seemed – as far from the parlor as she could possibly get, which explained the unsettling silence. There seemed no point in ducking beneath a table or inside the sewing-closet, so she simply sat herself down in the delicate upholstered chair in the corner to watch the falling snow and wait for Vera to find her.

She sat there for several minutes – she had no idea how long – before it slowly began to dawn on her that something in the picture before her, framed neatly by the white-and-yellow windowsill, was wrong.

She sensed it before she was quite able to place it, but when she finally did, she felt all the breath leave her lungs as her heart began to thud desperately in her chest.

The glittering white blanket stretched in a sleek, untouched expanse across the grounds before her, unmarred by even a single footprint, indicating that no one – very sensibly – had gone outside since the snow began.

So why was there a light moving inside the stables?

Abby leaped swiftly out of her chair and moved out of the window’s line of sight, pressing her back up hard against the wall beside it, blessing the long thick curtains and pitch-black room which hid her from view. All the light came from the moon, on the other side of the window, leaving her surely concealed; still, when she finally dared to peer carefully around the edge of the curtain to take a second look, her heart was pounding so hard that she was halfway afraid someone might actually be able to hear it.

The stable doors were closed, preventing her from being able to see inside. But as she squinted to see more clearly, she realized the light was coming not from the ground floor, where the horses were kept, but from the tack room and attic overhead, which she dimly remembered was reached by a narrow ladder beside the hayloft. The movement of the light, which had startled the life out of her, now appeared to be caused by the swinging of a lantern hanging from a ceiling hook.

It certainly could be harmless – a lantern left to burn out, forgotten when Lincoln came through on his rounds to extinguish the others before tending to the horses for the night. She wanted very, very much to believe that it was.

And yet . . .

You’re being stupid, Abby, she told herself firmly, and finally decided she’d had enough of this game altogether. She would simply make her way straight back to the parlor, even at the risk of being caught by Vera straightaway. If pressed (or mocked by her daughter), she would feign a headache and claim the need for a brandy. But this wandering about in the dark was doing sinister things to her head.

It occurred to her suddenly that the opposite wall of the hallway might well be the back side of the ballroom, and if she could find an unlocked door she might save herself more wandering through darkened hallways and make her way direct to the foyer from there. Arcadia's vast sunken ballroom was Diana’s pride and joy, the shining jewel of the whole house; from the double doors that opened onto the foyer, a gilt staircase of lush red carpeting descended a dozen or so steps to the ornate black-and-white tiled dance floor. But on the east side, there was a small orchestra stage, framed by an elaborately carved proscenium arch, curtained in jet-black velvet and covered all over with cupids and flower garlands painted in silver leaf. It was just possible, she thought, that the unprepossessing
wooden door in the hallway across from the sewing room might in fact open onto the stage, allowing her to cut straight through.

Still feeling the need to tiptoe, for some reason which felt more connected to the light in the stables than to evading Vera Kane, she crept stealthily into the hallway and opened the door, stepping unexpectedly into a terrifying infinite blackness.

Disoriented and confused, she almost reached for the handle to turn back before she bumped into something soft and heavy and realized she was merely in the wings of the stage, surrounded by its black velvet draperies. It was rather a maze to find her way out of them, reaching out her hand in the dark to feel for an opening in the tangled walls of thick fabric that now seemed rather to be closing in upon her from all sides. Finding her way through one curtain, she found herself trapped inside another one. The smell of velvet, dust and wood wrapped around her, and though at any other time she might find it pleasant it was somehow suddenly stifling, and her desire to flee grew even stronger. Fingers frantically scrabbling in the pitch black and meeting nothing but unbroken fold upon fold upon fold of velvet, stretching on into infinity, she swallowed hard to fight down what she began to recognize as the faint distant warning signs of a panic attack.

Then she heard it.

Footsteps.

Her entire body froze, silent and still, suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude for the heavy muffling weight of the black drapes that hid her from view on all sides. Because this was not a lamp swinging on a hook, tormenting her overheated imagination with sinister implications when it was very probably harmless.

This was very, very different.

There it was again, the thing that had struck her at the sewing-room window – the sense that something here was wrong.

This was not Vera Kane’s sturdy, sensible gait, moving comfortably about the halls and searching for hidden guests with great good humor. Nor was it the sound of a pair of giggling hide-and-seek players, whispering and shushing each other as they scampered down the halls. No, these footsteps moved silently with great purpose, swift and muffled as though someone were making their way through the house in stocking feet.

*It’s just one of the servants,* she told herself firmly, hands balled into fists at her side, willing her heart to stop pounding. But this time she could not quite believe it herself.

It was impossible to tell, from her hiding place, from which direction the footsteps came, or to where they were bound when they disappeared. But the moment the sound faded she resumed her frantic tearing at the velvet curtains, hunting for an opening, until her fingers met a slit in the fabric and she realized she was free.

She tugged the draperies apart to see a deserted, brightly-lit ballroom, and she took off running at a sprint towards the far side of the cavernous, empty space, racing down from the stage and across the black-and-white floor to the double doors which would take her back to the foyer and Clarke and the Major and safety.

She took the red velvet steps of the ballroom’s grand staircase two at a time until she arrived, breathless, at the gilt landing and seized the handles of the double doors.
They were locked.

“No, no, no,” she whispered frantically to the empty room, that same sense of claustrophobic terror rising up inside her again as she stared around her wildly, hunting for another exit. “No, please, please, I have to get out.”

There was no other exit on the landing, and she could not quite bear the tangle of curtains again – even though from this side, in the light, they looked entirely harmless. But on the north wall of the ballroom, just below the steps, she spotted a telltale vertical crack in the white paneling which made her heart leap in her chest and raced down the stairs and over the tiles towards it.

Sure enough, there it was – the same design as the storage compartment beneath the main staircase. A door in the wall which opened up into a dark hallway, in which she could hear the blessed, glorious, magnificent sound of human voices. Flinging open the first door she happened upon, she burst through what turned out to be the rear entrance to the parlor.

Breathless, disheveled, and pale with fright, she had begun to prepare a speech in her head to explain away her peculiar appearance, but she was not given the opportunity.

“Oh, thank God,” exclaimed Major Kane with startling fervor, sweeping her out of the doorway and into his arms with such astonishing speed and force that she suddenly knew, deep in the pit of her stomach, that her premonitions of fear had not been unfounded. “Thank God. When we couldn’t find you – “

“What on earth,” she began, but was interrupted by a red-and-gold shape flying towards her as Clarke crashed into them and flung her arms around her mother. The Major stepped back immediately to allow the two women more space, but stayed close beside them. “Clarke, what is it?” she murmured into the girl’s soft golden hair, stroking her back and feeling her shoulders trembling. Clarke was murmuring something she could not quite make out, so Abigail pulled back ever so slightly to look at her – and, in so doing, caught her first sight of the rest of the room.

She had come in through a door in the rear corner, behind the table where earlier in the evening the four had played their game of bridge. Clarke and the Major had rushed toward her, but the rest of the group appeared to be gathered on the other side of the room, staring down at something on the carpet in front of the fireplace, partially obscured from view by the graceful lines of the blue velvet Chesterfield sofa which sat beside the coffee table.

Lady Abigail looked at Major Kane.

Major Kane looked at Lady Abigail.

“It is . . . not a pretty sight,” he cautioned her, and the moment he spoke the words she knew.

A force more immutable than gravity drew her slowly, hesitantly, away from Clarke and the major until the vast dark shape in front of the fireplace began to resolve itself into a series of smaller shapes.

A hand, resting palm-up on the ornate Turkish carpet.

A pair of black triangles, the tips of dress shoes pointed straight up to the ceiling, revealing the scuffed soles their owner was no doubt accustomed to keeping hidden.

A pretty gold cross, studded all over with jewels that glittered in the firelight, that seemed suspended in air at a most peculiar angle before it revealed itself to be the hilt of a knife buried neatly at the heart of the very odd thing at which Lady Abigail was now staring, which had so very recently been a living breathing person and now was nothing at all.
“Dead?” she murmured, without turning back to look at Major Kane. She felt him move towards her, his comfortingly solid bulk like an anchor holding her to reality.

“Yes,” he said simply, with no need to varnish the undeniable truth she’d realized by now anyway. “We need to wake the servants and find a way to reach the constable. We can’t wait until morning to tell him.”

“What on earth shall we tell him?” she said, a little blankly, still desperately trying to force all the pieces of the spectacularly improbable scene in front of her into a pattern that made any kind of sense.

“The truth,” he said grimly. “That there’s been a murder.”
Lady Abigail had stared Death in the face before, more than once, but never like this. Jacob had died abroad, in the war, and been sent home for burial in a sealed coffin, depriving her of anything that felt real or solid about his death. One day he was absent from home with the promise of returning, and the next he was absent from home forever. He simply vanished into thin air, and she could not bring him back again. Like trying to catch smoke in your hands. Perhaps it was that - the yearning for some kind of concreteness in her grief - that led her to open up Walters Hall after the war to serve as a convalescent hospital for returning soldiers.

The news had come as rather a surprise to the village - the Walters family were known for being charitable, and Lady Abigail was very well-liked, but she had no experience with the medical profession, which was generally considered to be outside the realm of a well-bred gentleman's daughter. The doctors and nurses assigned to them had very naturally expected the ladies of the house to remain confined to their private wing, politely declining anything to do with the bloody, messy work happening downstairs. They were all astonished, therefore, when both mother and daughter turned up on the very first day in homespun dresses and aprons, sleeves rolled up, ready to work.

Her first death had been a young man – a boy, really, they were all just boys to her – with a shrapnel wound in his thigh that had gone septic. Abigail had stood by the old doctor's side while he removed the jagged shard of metal with a long pair of forceps and dropped it with a brutal, deafening clank into the blood-spattered tin bowl she held out for him. She'd helped clean the wound and change the dressings every few hours, but by the next morning it was clear they'd been too late. The infection had taken hold, and there was nothing they could do.

He was her first dead body, but not her last.

Over the course of those months, Lady Abigail and Death came to know each other with a startling intimacy. She learned to recognize his face, and the signs of his coming. She stood side-by-side with him, staring down at the cots of sweating, bleeding, whimpering soldiers, wondering which of them would prevail in the battle today. Pneumonia, influenza, gangrene, shock. Surgeries gone wrong, amputations come too late. Time and time again they faced each other. Sometimes Death won, and sometimes Lady Abigail, and they soon established the camaraderie of familiar old enemies; by the time the last soldier was sent home and the nurses left Walters Hall, she was not afraid of him anymore.

But this was different.

The dying men in the hospital existed in a kind of dull, sweat- and urine-scented, green-and-gray fog that was almost devastating in its ordinariness. No matter what they might have imagined when they enlisted, there was nothing exciting or glamorous about the way war looked to Abigail. From her vantage point, it was all agonizing, messy work which frequently ended in heartbreak. It was all horribly, depressingly real.

But as she stared down at the motionless body of Reverend Thelonious Jaha – somehow even colder and more rigid in death than in life, a thing she could not have imagined possible – sprawled awkwardly on Diana Sydney’s imported Turkish carpet, the sight before her possessed the
sensationally macabre artificiality of a stage play. She stood frozen for a long moment, mesmerized by the scarlet stain blossoming slowly around the gold hilt of the dagger protruding horribly from the once-crisp white of his dress shirt, and for a moment she wondered in astonishment if it was all some kind of bizarre theatrical experiment. It really was so much more like *Macbeth* than the men in the hospital. It did not feel real to her at all.

And yet, of course, it was.

He was really, actually dead. She had seen enough corpses in her lifetime to know when she was in the presence of one; and as wildly implausible as it seemed, here was one now.

In the fog of her reverie, that final word Major Kane had spoken aloud in his low, somber voice tolled like a bronze bell, filling the air with an almost electric tension and snapping Abigail back into focus.

*“Murder.”*

It had been said, and could not be taken back. Despite how immediately clear it was at first sight that of course this death could have taken place no other way – still, the word itself carried a shocking, terrible weight. Lady Abigail turned back to look at the major, and in doing so, caught her first glimpse of the others.

The Blakes stood on the other side of the fireplace, arms wrapped around each other. Octavia’s head was buried in her brother’s shoulder, though she was not crying; Bellamy stroked her back gently in a futile attempt to comfort her. There was no one, of course, to give comfort to Bellamy, who was not after all so very much older; but he seemed to expect none. His muscles were coiled tight as a spring, jaw clenched with distrust and apprehension. Mr. Pike, who Bellamy knew best in the room after his sister, had carefully stationed himself at the Blakes’ side, leaving enough distance to avoid intrusion while remaining near enough to anchor the boy as best he could. It was a subtle, astutely perceptive tactic, and Lady Abigail blessed him for it.

Clarke had remained where she was when her mother moved to examine the body, unwilling to get any closer to it. She stood alone on the far side of the fireplace, arms wrapped tightly around herself, shivering a little, though not from cold. There was nothing she could do for Thelonious, and her daughter needed her, so she turned to move back towards Clarke when, *“Don’t,”* exclaimed the major, striding suddenly forward. He seemed, at first, to be addressing Abigail, and his abrupt fervor startled her as appearing to come rather out of nowhere. But as she watched him in puzzlement, his meaning became clear; he brushed past her altogether and made his way to the other side of the sofa, and Abigail suddenly realized she had failed to observe the rather heartbreaking sight of Vera Kane, who had carefully lowered herself on creaking, stiff knees to the carpet beside the reverend to murmur a prayer over his body. Her son had, it seemed, permitted her to finish her words of blessing in peace, but called out to stop her when he saw her reach out a hand to the reverend’s body, intending to fold his arms respectfully over his chest. “Mother, I don’t think you ought to do that.”

*“But it’s so undignified, him lying on the carpet like this,”* she said worriedly. *“He’s a man of the church. It doesn’t seem proper.”*

“I understand, but this is a crime scene,” he reminded her. *“A man has been killed. We can’t touch him until he’s been examined by the police and – “*

*“The doctor,”* Pike exclaimed suddenly, as everyone in the room turned to him in unison. Even Octavia looked up. *“Where the devil are Jackson and Miss Sydney?”*

*“Diana,”* whispered Abigail, horrified, heart pounding in her throat. In the chaos of fear followed by
shock, she had entirely failed to register that two of the party were still missing.

“Oh dear,” murmured Vera, struggling back up to her feet. “I didn’t – I was going to look for them
next, when we came back here, only then, you know, we saw – and then I forgot – “

“They’re still hiding?” Kane pressed her, and she nodded. He turned to Pike. “We have to find
them. And wake the servants. We need to come up with some way to contact the village and get
Constable Miller up here.”

“And we need a search,” Bellamy added, slowly drawing strength from Pike and Kane's
purposefulness and calm and beginning to shed his air of near-panic. “Whoever did this could still
be in the house. If we hurry – “

“You all go,” Lady Abigail ordered them. “Right away. I’ll stay here with Vera.”

“Thank you,” said Kane gratefully, with a concerned look over at his mother, who was still staring
down at the reverend in a kind of sad puzzlement. “Miss Blake, Miss Griffin, I think the stairs
behind the dining room go to the servants’ quarters. Find Miller and tell him to wake the others.
We’ve got to make sure everyone’s all right and we’ll need their assistance to search this house top to
bottom. Charles, Bellamy, you’re with me. We’ve got to find Miss Sydney and the doctor before . . .
" He trailed off. "We've got to find them right away.”

Until this moment, it had not occurred to Lady Abigail precisely what it meant that Marcus Kane had
spent his life as a military officer. It had simply been the thing that gave him his title. But now she
saw that he wore the weight of leadership like a second skin – swift at decision-making, taking
charge with the effortless ease of a man who was wholly comfortable giving orders. A palpable
sense of relief swept through the room at the thought that, however out of their element they all might
be, here was at least one person who knew what to do, and all of them obeyed without question.
Clarke and Octavia disappeared swiftly out the rear door towards the dining room as Bellamy and
Mr. Pike made their way out into the hall, calling loudly for Doctor Jackson and Diana.

Major Kane moved to follow, but Abigail stopped him at the door, tugging at his sleeve and

“When?”

“During the third round. A lantern, hanging from the ceiling in the hay loft. It gave me a bit of a
fright so I decided to come back, but as I cut through the ballroom I heard something that sounded
like footsteps.”

“Good God,” he whispered. “So he could be still in the house.”

She nodded. “Be careful, Major. And find our friends quickly. Anyone wandering on their own
could be in danger.”

"That fallen tree might have done us a favor, then."

"The tree,” Kane whispered, startled, as if suddenly remembering something. "Damn it all. This is
my fault, Abigail, if I had said something - "

"Kane, are you coming?” Pike called from the hallway, and Abigail prodded him the door, bringing
him back to himself.
“Go,” she told him firmly. “I’ll look after your mother. Just find Doctor Jackson and Diana.” He looked as though he was about to say something more, but stopped himself. “We’ll be fine,” she said reassuringly, reading his unspoken thoughts and laying a comforting hand on his arm. “I promise. Go.”

He nodded and made his way out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

The sudden quiet following the departure of the others was disconcerting, though Abigail was comforted by the far-off sound of their voices, however distant they might be. She looked over at Vera, who had seated herself in a high-backed armchair beside the fire and was staring down at the reverend’s dead body with a forlorn expression. “Let me pour you a drink,” she offered, but Vera didn’t answer. She seemed to have entirely forgotten anyone else was there.

Abigail made her way to the sideboard and filled two heavy crystal tumblers with Diana’s best brandy, then wove gingerly around the body on the floor – carefully lifting her skirts away from the spreading pool of blood – to kneel beside Vera’s chair and place the glass in the woman’s limp, unresisting hand. “Drink this,” she suggested gently. “It will help.”

“He wasn’t a good man,” Vera said unexpectedly, something rather odd in her voice. Abigail looked up at her sharply, startled by this non sequitur. “Or rather, he was, but not in the right way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there are many ways to call yourself a Christian, you know,” she observed thoughtfully. “And certainly one way is to pride yourself on following God’s law to the letter. You know what I mean. The kind who, when faced with a problem, know exactly which passage of Scripture to quote and firmly believe that will solve it. I don’t doubt the reverend was a morally righteous man. Correct, you know. Proper. I never saw him drink liquor or raise his voice or look at a woman in a way that he shouldn’t. Always in line with the law. But I don’t think that’s goodness, not really. Do you?”

“Vera –”

“There was no kindness in his heart,” she explained to a perplexed Abigail, continuing on exactly as though she hadn’t spoken. “I don’t believe the Lord expects his servants to be perfect people, but I would think, wouldn’t you, that he would at least want them to be kind.”

This was so very much what Lady Abigail had always felt about Thelonious Jaha that she felt a bit disoriented – not merely by the unsparing accuracy from such an unlikely source, but by what a very queer thing it was for such a pious woman to say over the body of a man so freshly dead that the scarlet stain of blood on his white shirt was still spreading.

“Don’t let’s upset ourselves by talking about it,” Abigail said uncomfortably after a rather-too-long pause, pressing the glass more firmly into the other woman’s hand and rather wishing the others would hurry back.

“I’m perfectly all right,” said Vera a little distantly, taking an obedient sip of brandy. “I’m sorry for him, that it came to this in the end – so undignified, you know, and it must have been terribly painful – but do you know, there’s a part of me that feels I ought to be more surprised.”

Abigail stared at her, feeling a shiver run down her back. “Yes,” she said slowly. “I rather think you’re right.”

“Of course it’s a dreadful thing, under any circumstances, and what a terrible position it puts poor
Miss Sydney in,” she went on. “It’s such a horrid violation of hospitality.”

Some of Lady Abigail’s numbness began to wear off and bubble over into shock, and there was something in Vera’s concern for the murderer’s bad manners that struck her, in the moment, as screamingly funny. She could not control her outburst of wild, slightly terrible laughter, tears streaming down her eyes as she rested her head against the arm of Vera’s chair, shoulders trembling, all the tension and fear of the evening boiling over into uncontrollable hysterics.

Vera’s eyes on hers were kind and compassionate, free of judgement, and as Abigail’s shaking sobs of laughter subsided, Vera returned her favor and pressed her to take another drink of brandy, which she finally did. “Oh God, I’m sorry,” she gasped, fighting for breath as the hysteria subsided. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. I expect it’s shock.”

“Very natural,” said Vera, patting her hand. “It’s all quite extraordinary. Shock is only to be expected.”

Abigail rose from the carpet and returned to the sideboard to refill her drink. “The others have been gone rather a long time,” she said uncertainly, feeling a wave of apprehension rush over her.

Vera nodded. “It was clever of Marcus to send them out in twos and threes,” she pointed out almost casually, sipping her brandy. “Much safer that way. Especially now, of course, while we still don’t know which of us did it.”

The glass slipped out of Abigail’s hand, plummeting heavily to the floor. It bounced harmlessly over the thick soft carpet, spilt brandy darkening the crimson embroidery and the hem of Abigail’s dress. But she didn’t notice.

“Vera, what on earth do you mean?”

Vera stared at her in confusion, as though her meaning were perfectly obvious. “I mean which one of us killed him, darling,” she said patiently. “I haven’t quite been able to work it out.”

“That’s impossible,” Abigail insisted. “There was an intruder. I saw a light in the stable. And I heard someone walking about – someone who didn’t sound like any of us.”

“Well, it’s been snowing for hours,” said Vera reasonably, “so if someone has gotten into the house, there will be footprints, and that will solve that.”

“There will be,” said Abigail with more confidence than she felt. “Someone broke in. It can’t possibly have been one of us.”

“We’ll know soon enough, either way,” said Vera, sipping her brandy with perfect composure. Abigail, in contrast, felt a hurricane of emotions rush violently through her and could hardly stand still, so distressing were Vera’s calm, sensible accusations.

“We still don’t know which one of us did it.”

She poured another glass of brandy and downed it in one go, feeling suddenly sick.

A dark and terrible question began to simmer in the back of her mind, moving closer and closer to the surface, causing her pulse to race and her heart to hammer inside her chest as she looked at Vera. As she felt the words she scarcely dared speak aloud finally begin to make their way to her lips, she was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream from somewhere in the house, ripping through the silence with volcanic force.
Vera looked up sharply, eyes wide, seemingly rattled for the first time. Both women stared at each other, uncertain how to proceed.

It had not sounded like Clarke.

It had not sounded like Clarke.

_But what if it was Clarke?_

She had promised Major Kane she would not leave his mother alone, and she could not bear to break that promise – not in a room with a dead man lying on the floor – but somewhere in this house was a mysterious person who had already killed once, and what if her daughter had –

“I’m all right,” said Clarke’s voice out of nowhere, and Lady Abigail felt her entire body collapse in relief as her daughter rushed into the room. “That wasn’t me, Mother,” she said, reading her mother's face with unerring precision as Abigail ran to her and seized the girl in her arms. “I’m all right, I promise. Only Mr. Miller says we ought to move into the drawing room, so as not to disturb the -” She swallowed hard. “. . . the reverend. I mean, for the police.”

Abby nodded. “Vera, we’d better go into the other room,” she said, helping the older woman up from her chair and holding out her arm. “There’s nothing to be done for the reverend now. And Miller is right; we’ve already disturbed this room enough, we had better not touch anything else. Come, let’s go join the others.”

They made their way through the adjoining door into the drawing room, and Abigail was astonished at the instant wave of relief that overcame her at having the reverend’s body safely on the other side of a wall. Inside, the drawing room was alive with chaos. Doctor Jackson, mercifully alive and unharmed, brushed past her in a rush, medical bag in hand, to examine the reverend’s body. The Blakes were assisting Pike and the servants in sorting the contents of several crates full of lanterns and mackintoshes which had been piled rather unceremoniously in the corner of the room.

“We heard a scream,” said Vera Kane to her son as he deposited Miss Sydney with the barest minimum of delicacy onto the velvet chaise in the corner.

“Yes,” he said rather tightly. “And then she fainted. With impressive professional skill.”

“Is she all right?”

“She’ll be fine. Is Jackson with the body now?” Abigail nodded. “Good. We need to search this entire building, and the grounds, and do it methodically. God knows there are hundreds of places in the house this fellow could be hiding, and we’ve no way of knowing whether he’s armed.”

“Lincoln took care of that, sir,” said Miller, and they all turned to see Diana’s tall, soft-spoken gardener carrying a case full of Diana’s hunting rifles.
"Guns?" Abigail asked dubiously, unable to help herself. Octavia Blake seemed to share her concern, watching with a furrowed brow as Lincoln and Bellamy began distributing the contents of the crate.

"Major, are you sure about that?" asked Octavia, looking not at Kane but at her own brother, face drawn tight with worry.

"No one will shoot unless they have to," he said firmly. "That’s an order," he added to the rest of the room. "We’ll break up into groups of three and four, for safety, and to cover more ground. Doctor Jackson is still examining the body, so we’d best leave him to it. Miss Sydney is still unconscious, and on the whole I think remaining here on the sofa might be the best thing for her. Harper," he said to the young housekeeper, "may I ask you to remain here with your mistress and the doctor? Someone will need to tend to her if she wakes up, and the doctor may need some kind of assistance."

The girl nodded, her face drawn and pale but fighting admirably through her fear. He must have been good at this, Abigail thought suddenly, watching the major give the housekeeper gentle orders that she received with something like reassurance, grateful for something to do, for someone to make sense of this madness, and she wondered again what had prompted him to walk away from a career for which he seemed so ideally suited.

"Charles," he went on, "take Miss Blake and Mr. Lincoln with you and canvass the second and third floors of the house. Spread out to cover more ground if you must, but don’t lose sight of each other. Mr. Blake, you and Mr. Miller and – are you the cook?" he asked the wiry, red-haired young woman standing in the back corner of the room.

She nodded. "Monroe, sir."

"Your dinner was extraordinary," he said warmly and sincerely, surprising a smile out of the girl, and she bobbed her head in silent acknowledgment. It worked. Some of the tightly-coiled tension eased out of her, and Abigail could see her too responding to Major Kane’s confident, practiced leadership. "Monroe, will you please go with Miller and Mr. Blake to cover this floor, and also the servants’ quarters?"

"The servants’ quarters were locked from the inside," Miller pointed out. "The door rattles when it’s windy, so I latch it as a habit after we’re all in for the night. There’s no way someone could have gotten down there."

"Well, search it anyway, just so we know we’ve done it," Kane told him, and the butler nodded. "Lady Abigail, Miss Griffin and Miss Reyes," he added, "I know it’s a great deal to ask with the weather as it is, but would you mind very much coming with me to search the grounds and the outbuildings? Everyone else can join us after they’ve finished indoors, as I do believe it will take all of us to cover the entire property, but we can begin with the orchard and the stables."

Abigail met his eyes, fear coursing through her, but his eyes were encouraging and warm. "The stables?" she asked, unable to keep the concern out of her voice.

"I'd like you to show me where you saw the light," he said. "And I'll feel more comfortable if you and your daughter are where I can see you. Is that all right?"

"We'll be fine," said Clarke immediately, before her mother could answer, and she was already pulling on a pair of heavy rubber boots and tying up the skirt of her red satin dress before Abigail could stop her.

"We'll be fine," Abigail agreed hesitantly, not quite sure she meant it, but preferring the company of
Major Kane and her daughter to anyplace else in the house, no matter how hard it was snowing. And though on the whole she detested firearms, when Mr. Blake pressed a small, pearl-handled revolver into her hands, she did not say no.

"I'm sure you won't need it," he said, "but just in case."

Abigail slipped it into the pocket of the mackintosh her daughter handed her and crooked a sardonic half-smile at the boy. "Only if they get past you," she said dryly, and he smiled back.

“Pike, Bellamy,” said Major Kane, “I’ll leave the veranda door open when we go outside. Call if you need assistance, or if you find anything. Don’t shoot unless you have to, but for God’s sake, no one be a hero. We don’t want a second death on our hands, just to turn this bastard over to Constable Miller and let the law do its job. Understand?”

They nodded grimly, leading their teams out the door. The Major and his group followed, and so the search began.

Major Kane led the Griffins out of the parlor, accompanied by Diana’s lady chauffeur. They performed hasty introductions as they walked, and Raven seemed as willing as all the rest of them to accept Major Kane as their de facto leader. She was a slight, dark-haired girl, wearing a too-big overcoat hastily thrown over the white cotton men’s pajamas she’d been roused from bed in. She looked to Abigail, like everyone who worked for Diana, impossibly young. Too young, she thought, to have to face something like this. But youth is resilient, and anyway Raven was unlikely to have possessed any great love for the vicar, so she could be forgiven for expressing a range of emotions a bit closer to enthusiasm than shock.

Major Kane had assigned the servants to each search party for specific reasons. He had guessed – correctly – that it would be Monroe and Miller who knew every inch of the servants’ floor like the back of their hands, and if any clue were to be hidden belowstairs they would find it. Lincoln, the groundskeeper, ought perhaps have been the best suited to accompany Major Kane on his search of the grounds; but after the major, Lincoln was the group’s second-best shot. Miss Blake detested guns, and seemed anxious about the notion of her brother having to use one; so it seemed, all in all, that it might be in everyone’s best interest to split up the siblings for a short while and send her instead with both Mr. Pike – the person she knew best in the house apart from Bellamy – and the one person in the group whose skill with a rifle came close to matching Kane’s own.

And Raven – who knew the grounds of the property very nearly as well as Lincoln did – was, very importantly, familiar with every nook and cranny of the outbuildings. If a stranger had passed through them, she would know.

They neared the end of the corridor and turned right, and Abigail was startled to find herself once again in that sinister hallway where only a few minutes ago (though now, of course, it seemed like years) she had taken such a fright. It was no less eerie than before, but the choking grip of terror she had felt before did not return now that Major Kane and her daughter were by her side.

The major pushed open the doors to the veranda – taking care, they all observed, to touch the knob only with his handkerchief in the perhaps-vain hope of preserving a fingerprint or two for the constable – and left them standing open behind them as he’d promised the others, frosty breezes swirling inside the doorway and dusting the parquet floors with white. The house was massive and the groups disconcertingly separate from one another; but with the doors open, Kane felt a faint hope that if someone called out for help, he would hear.

The snow still poured down in heavy soft clouds, which made their task nearly impossible. Not only
was it difficult to see clearly at any kind of distance, but all hope of a promising lead vanished as it
dawned on them how very little time it would take in this weather for a footprint to be obscured
altogether. They began with a methodical search of the veranda which wrapped around nearly the
entire house, examining every possible entrance, but found nothing of use; and by the time they
returned back to where they had started, even their own footprints were beginning to fill up again
with snow and blur softly away.

“It’s no good,” said Raven irritably. “This is a waste of time. We’ve got nothing.”

“That’s not true,” the major corrected her, his lantern still diligently sweeping the snow as the group
made their way down the veranda steps and across the broad sweep of white-blanketed lawn. “The
absence of something can be useful information as well. What did you notice about the doors?”

“There was nothing to notice. If there were footprints, the snow has already covered them over. It
was perfectly flat.”

“Exactly,” agreed the major. “It was perfectly flat.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Clarke. “You mean to say that all the doors we’ve passed open outward. If
someone had come in or out that way, it would have pushed the snow in front of the door all up in a
great heap.”

Major Kane nodded. “Every door we’ve spotted leading into the house from the grounds is
undisturbed. That leaves three options. Perhaps the murderer left through the front entrance, whose
door is covered beneath a ledge and has no snow in front of it to disturb. Perhaps he has some way
out of the house we don’t know about, or haven’t considered.”

“Or perhaps,” said Lady Abigail with a faint shiver, “he’s still somewhere inside.”

“Precisely. So there are three possibilities,” he said as they reached the orchard and began to search
the narrow lanes of densely-packed fruit trees, “which point to two very different kinds of criminal.
So we may not know yet why this fellow wanted Thelonious Jaha dead so badly or how he escaped
or where he’s gone, but we’ve begun, perhaps, to learn something that may be just as useful to the
constable. We’re beginning to understand what kind of murderer he is.”

The three women stared at him in confusion. “What do you mean?” Clarke asked. “I understand
about the doors, but I don’t see how that tells us anything more.”

Major Kane was silent for a moment, and they could feel him composing his thoughts, attempting to
sort through a tangled, complex thing and smooth out the threads for them to make it clear. But his
beginning was, to say the least, unsettling.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, “whether any of the three of you have ever been in a position where
you were compelled to take someone else’s life. Though I would consider it as the greater likelihood
that you have not. I would imagine that, to you, it appears to be an unfathomably enormous thing.
An act the doing of which changes the doer’s life forever. And you would be right.”

“Have you?” asked Raven, and the major’s face changed suddenly, his expression darkening as if
unable to push back a troubling memory that was fighting to rise to the surface.

“I was a military officer,” was all the answer he finally gave, after a long pause. “In my line of work,
it wasn’t a thing one could escape.”

“And did it change you?” Clarke asked him.
“Yes.”

“The major’s personal history is his own,” Lady Abigail chided her daughter gently, seeing that Clarke’s interest had been piqued and she appeared on the cusp of pressing him further. “We all have experiences in our past we would prefer, perhaps, not to discuss.”

Major Kane did not answer her, but as he reached for the door handle of the small shed at the far end of the orchard and pushed it open, she thought she saw his shoulders slump with something like relief.

Clarke looked from her mother to the major and back again, thoughts spinning inside her brain, but wisely elected to say nothing.

“This is where Lincoln keeps all his tools,” said Raven as they shone their lanterns around the interior of the cramped, dark space. “He ought to come back in daylight with the constable, just to make sure, of course, but it doesn’t look to me like anything’s missing or greatly disturbed.”

Lady Abigail didn’t hear. She was kneeling in front of a square of pegboard several feet wide, which held an array of gardening axes neatly lined up by size in a precise, even row, and considering why the largest of them appeared to be ever-so-faintly off-kilter, as if it had been replaced in a hurry. Even on very slight acquaintance, Lincoln had struck her as the least-hurried man she’d ever met, and the toolshed bespoke the mind of someone who valued organization and efficiency. It was all straight lines and right angles, the work surfaces spotless, the metal surfaces of each tool cleaned and sharpened like new.

“You didn’t happen to use an axe today, did you?” she quipped over her shoulder to Raven, and was startled when the major dropped what he was doing to rush to her side.

“Nothing,” said Abigail, rather surprised at his tone of urgency. “Only that, see here, the others are all lined up in the pegs at a perfect vertical, with two columns of pegs separating each one. But this one here is three rows from the next largest, and it’s at a bit of an angle. I supposed it leaped out at me because everything else here is so pristine.”

“That’s Lincoln,” agreed Raven. “He’s an artist at heart and takes his tools very seriously. We all know better than to touch anything in here without asking. He can be very cross when someone fusses with his system.”

“So nobody in the house but Lincoln is likely to have used this,” said the major.

Raven raised her eyebrow. “Good Lord, no, what should the rest of us need an axe for?”

Kane didn’t respond right away, but ushered the women out of the shed, closing the door behind him (and using, they all noted, extra care with his handkerchief on the door handle). He did not immediately explain his abrupt interest in the gardening axe, but resumed their previous thread of conversation as they made their way over the vast rolling lawn towards the stables.

“I said to you before,” he went on, “that the taking of a life is something which, for most men and women, is not an act undertaken lightly. It is certainly true that there are madmen in the world who kill for sport and pleasure, whose consciences do not operate the way that yours and mine do. But most murders are not committed by frenzied lunatics. Most murders are committed by very ordinary people who want something very very badly and are compelled to kill in order to get it. And while it may not be a comforting thought, tonight of all nights, I imagine that in the right circumstances there
are very few of us who would not be capable of arriving at that point. Most of us have something, or
someone, in our lives we would die for. We also very probably have something we would kill for.
You may not know what it is – pray God you never have to know – but in nearly every human heart,
it is there.”

“What a horrid thought,” said Raven, eyes wide with shock. But the Griffin women did not offer
any protest, both of them privately agreeing – with more than a little discomfort – that if it came
down to it, neither would hesitate to kill to protect the other. The major’s words made a dark, terrible
kind of sense.

“I’m rather of the opinion,” Kane went on, “that there are two possible categories of murderers. And
like I said to you before, about the doors, I believe we’re beginning to close in on which of the two
our criminal is. You see, on the one hand, there are those who commit a violent crime impulsively,
in the heat of some passionate emotion – love or hate or fear – and then afterwards they panic. The
act itself was rash, unconsidered, and so their response to it is rash as well, once once it occurs to
them what they’ve really done. And so they neglect the details. They forget about fingerprints, or
leave traces behind, or their alibi falls apart once you begin to look at it more closely. Because, and
this is the important thing, they had no idea the murder was going to happen until it happened. So
everything they do to cover it up, to conceal themselves, happens afterward. These are the
murderers the police often find far easier to catch.”

“That’s what you meant about the doors,” said Clarke suddenly. “You said the fact that none of the
doors had been opened meant either the murderer went out the front, or went out some secret way, or
was still in the house. And that it had something to do with what kind of killer he was.”

“Yes.”

“If we were looking for this kind, then, it might make sense for him to simply bolt out the front door
the moment the deed was done,” she observed, considering. “Or dive under a tablecloth in a panic
with no idea what to do or where to go.”

“So that’s who we’re looking for, then?” queried Raven, curiosity in her voice. “I would say that
stabbing a reverend in the middle of a dinner party qualifies as ‘rash.'”

But the major shook his head. “No,” he told them. “Because that doesn’t explain the axe.”

“What about the axe?”

“I don’t think we’re hunting for that kind of murderer,” he said. “I think we’re looking for the other
kind.”

“What’s the other kind?” asked Abigail, drawn in in spite of herself.

“The kind who deliberately bypassed the veranda doors because he knew the snow would give him
away if he opened them,” he told her. “The kind with a way in and out of the house we would never
notice, or think to suspect. Not a hot temper, but a cool head. The first sort aren’t clever, you
understand. They’re merely desperate. But there’s a very keen brain behind all this, make no
mistake. The reverend was killed by someone calculating and resourceful and very, very intelligent.
Someone who entered this house, entered that room, knowing exactly what he was going to do.”

Abigail shivered.

“But how do you know?” pressed Clarke. “How can you be sure of something like that?”

“Several things this evening have struck me as damned odd,” he said thoughtfully. “And that axe
confirms the first of them. When we first went outside after we heard the crash and found Bellamy Blake in the lane, I walked over to take a look at the tree. Now, that thing is halfway rotted through, and as Lady Abigail explained earlier, the village council has been on Diana to have it down for years. It’s a blasted hazard and she’s lucky it didn’t do any more damage than simply taking out the telephone wires. But if a tree falls under its own weight — if one day, it simply snaps — you’d expect the break in the trunk to be rough and uneven. This one wasn’t. The bark was jagged in some places, but not in others. The break was too clean.”

“Someone else used that axe,” Abigail whispered, and he nodded.

“That tree had help,” he agreed. “Someone wanted it to fall, and wanted it to happen tonight. Perhaps it was meant to hit the Blakes and they missed. Perhaps it was meant only to block the lane, or to take out the telephone wires in a way that appeared accidental. I don’t know. But since Diana was as shocked as anyone when it fell, it seems clear she never asked Lincoln to do anything about it. In point of fact, she seemed surprised the tree even belonged to her. I don’t know that Diana even knows where her own property line is; she simply waves her hand and Lincoln takes care of things.”

“That’s about the size of it, yes,” agreed Raven with a trace of scorn in her voice.

“So the tree was deliberate,” Clarke interjected. “Somebody used that axe on it and then put it back, but they were in a hurry and didn’t line it up quite right.”

Major Kane nodded. “Someone knew the bridge was out, and they knew the reverend would be here for dinner tonight, and they knew that without road access or a telephone he would be stranded, and they did not want him able to make it back home.”

“Good God,” breathed Abigail, his foreboding words causing her to shiver.

“You said ‘several things,’” Clarke prompted him, and there was a distant part of Lady Abigail that could still be faintly amused at the way her daughter had come alive with curiosity. Major Kane spoke to her like an adult. He did not treat her like a child, he did not dismiss her because of her blonde curls and satin dress. He listened with care and he took her seriously. He afforded the same respect to Raven, too, where another man might have taken opportunities to remind the girl that he was a guest and she was a servant. Someone like Diana or Thelonious certainly would have. But the bizarre and macabre tragedy of the evening had shuffled the deck somehow and redistributed everyone on equal footing, leaving the major calmly discussing the human nature of criminals with two aristocrats and a chauffeur as though all of them were peers. It was astonishing how different he made her feel. It was as though all her life she’d been a lady, and suddenly she was a person.

That electric charge crackling between them, the panicked awareness of which had pulled her back just in time from following him to a third hiding place, had gone nowhere in the wake of this new horror. On the contrary, she was very much afraid she was coming to admire him even more.

“What were the other things?” Clarke pressed the major.

“Well, we’re all on the hunt for signs of how the murderer somehow made his way into that room undetected,” he pointed out. “But I’m just as confounded by the question of how the reverend got there.”

“Oh,” Clarke exclaimed. “My goodness, I hadn’t even thought of that. We were all wandering about the foyer; he could never have made his way down the front steps without one of us hearing or seeing him.”

“There’s a back stairway,” Raven informed them. “The one the staff uses. It opens out above the
butler’s pantry, by the ladies’ powder room. He certainly could have come that way.”

“But could he have found it from upstairs in the portrait gallery,” asked Abigail, “if he hadn’t known it was there?”

“No, ma’am,” said Raven firmly. “The door is at the back of a side hallway which runs down past the bedrooms. Unless he was keen to snoop, he’d never have stumbled upon it by accident.”

“And why on earth should he have taken the back stairs anyhow?” asked Clarke, puzzled. “When we all saw him use the proper stairs to go up after dinner. Why would he not just come back the way he went?”

“He’d have used the back stairs if he were trying not to be seen,” said Raven. “I mean if he were sneaking about for some reason.”

Kane nodded. “He could never have made his way to the library undetected if he’d come by the front stairs. But I’d imagine he certainly could have if he’d used the back one. He might have lingered until he heard my mother leave the room and then crept in through the parlor’s rear door. Not a one of us would have seen him then.”

“Yes, but why?” pressed Abigail. “Why should he behave in such a dreadfully underhanded fashion? If he wanted to visit the parlor, why on earth would he not simply walk down the stairs and into the room like an ordinary person?”

“I have a theory about that,” said Major Kane as they arrived at the stables. “I rather wonder if perhaps he had an appointment to meet someone.”

“To meet someone?”

Kane nodded. “It’s only a guess, mind you,” he said. “But someone hated Reverend Jaha enough to kill him. And it’s possible – it’s just possible – that he might have known who that person was. Might have had an enemy, for example. Or someone who wanted something from him, badly enough to kill. Someone who found out where he would be tonight, who said they had to speak to him urgently, and who told him to find a room alone in the house at such and such a time.”

“But we were playing Hide and Seek all that time,” said Clarke. “Anyone could have come back into that room at any moment.”

“But he didn’t know that,” said Abigail, suddenly realizing. “Remember? Miller couldn’t find him when he went upstairs. He may very well have seen nothing more than the parlor standing empty.”

“My God, that’s a risk,” exclaimed Raven. “Why would he not arrange to meet outside? Or sneak down to the cellar or something?”

“I don’t know,” Kane admitted as they reached the main door to the stables. “It seems damned stupid on the face of it. The whole thing makes no sense.”

Raven unlatched the stable door and pulled it open, revealing the warm, hay- and animal-scented darkness inside, with the whuffling breath of sleeping horses filling the air around them. “They won’t wake up,” she said, answering the unspoken question. “They’re show horses, they’re used to Miss Sydney trotting random visitors through to admire them at all hours. Very well-trained, and don’t spook easy.”

“So if an intruder had come into the stable, it’s not necessarily a given that the horses would have made noise or caused a disturbance.”
“They might if they sensed fear,” said Abigail thoughtfully. She knew horses as well as she knew people, and she knew Diana’s horses personally. “They’re deeply intuitive creatures. Someone creeping about who wasn’t supposed to be here might raise some alarm, but not necessarily.”

Major Kane looked over at her as she stared into the darkness, thinking. “Lady Abigail, if you’d prefer not to go in – “

“We’re all going in,” she said firmly, with more confidence than she felt. It was true that the sight of the stables struck her with something like terror, even though the lantern she had seen in the upper window had long since gone out. But she felt safer with the three others than waiting out here alone, and she was certainly not going to let Clarke go in without her. So she took a deep breath, steeled herself, and followed Raven into the dark.

The stairs to the shadowy hayloft, and the tack room where she had seen the telltale lantern, were off to the left; to prove – more to herself than the others – that she was not afraid, she immediately made her way towards them and climbed up to the half-mezzanine that wrapped around the second story of the stables. Kane followed her, leaving the girls downstairs to search the main floor, shining their lanterns behind hay bales and inside horse stalls, but found no trace of disturbance. True to Abigail’s expectations, the horses bore it patiently; they were used to Raven’s scent, and seemed largely unfazed by the proceedings.

Kane and Abigail examined every inch of the hayloft before making their way to the tack room, which appeared entirely undisturbed. The lamp still hung on its hook, and a small side window left open sent a cold breeze swirling into the room which more than explained the fact that from a distance, and through the fever of her frenzied imagination, it had swung back and forth and appeared to her to be moving.

“It was nothing,” she said quietly. “It was nothing.”

Major Kane was not sure whether she wanted to be reassured that she had been right to fear it in the first place, or reassured that she was right not to fear it now, so he said nothing. But as he gestured her back towards the stairs leading down to the horse stalls, she felt his hand alight at the small of her back, guiding her through the darkness.

Even through the heavy oilcloth of her mackintosh, she could feel that his hand was warm.

Raven and Clarke shook their heads as they descended the staircase, indicating they’d found nothing of use as the group stepped back outside and into the snow to continue their search. The rose garden next proved fruitless, and the garage as well, and they were making their way across the lawns to the winter gardens when the others joined them out on the veranda.

“There’s no one in the house,” Mr. Pike called to them as he led the group down the steps. “We’ve been over every inch of it. Filthy beggar must have bolted immediately.”

“If he’s made it to the woods already, we’ll never catch him,” said Lincoln. “It’s true that an automobile can’t pass around that fallen tree, but a single man on foot could, if he didn’t mind doing a bit of climbing and he knew his way. It’s rocky but it could be done, and he’d be on the road to Polis before anyone could catch him.”

“And since we can’t ring down to the village,” said Bellamy grimly, “we’ve no way to tell the constable to keep an eye out for anyone he doesn’t recognize making his way out of town.”

“What on earth makes you think it would be someone the constable wouldn’t recognize?” his sister retorted. “The real problem isn’t that we’ve missed out on warning the constable to watch for
mysterious cars speeding away. The real problem is that whoever did this is probably home and in bed by now. For God’s sake, Bellamy, what if this is connected to — “

“Shut up, Octavia,” he hissed under her breath, and she shut up, as if suddenly remembering for the first time that there were a dozen near-strangers listening in on this conversation.

“Connected to what?” asked Pike.

Bellamy shook his head. “It’s nothing,” he said roughly. “It’s stupid. It’s nothing. Why are we all standing around on the lawn, shouldn’t we be searching the grounds? Maybe we can at least see which direction he’s gone.”

Pike looked for a moment as though he were about to press further, but the major caught his eye and shook his head warningly. Bellamy had changed the subject with great insistence, and it did no good to push him if he’d chosen not to talk.

“All right,” said the major. “Half of you go left, half of us go right. Sweep every inch of the property up to the forest line. We’ll meet up in front of the house by the Blakes’ car. The footprints on the veranda belong to me, Miss Reyes and the Griffins, but if you find anything beyond that, take note and call for the rest of us. Now go.”

The group split up, with Octavia and Lincoln joining her brother’s group to make their way towards the south side of the property, and Pike joining Kane, Raven and the Griffins to head in the other direction, past the conservatory and the gardens to the as-yet-unexplored north side of the grounds. Clarke hung back a bit as they made their way through the snow, lagging behind as the three others went on ahead. When Kane caught up to her, she naturally fell into rhythm walking beside him in a way that indicated she’d been waiting to catch him for a moment alone.

“The way I look at it,” she said as they walked, “your theory is the only explanation. I mean that someone followed him here to meet with him in secret. Because there simply isn’t any way it could be one of us. He wasn’t in the parlor when we began the third round, but he was there five or ten minutes later, however long it was, when we came back. So it happened within that time. It must have. He was still bleeding.”

Major Kane looked down at this peculiar, remarkable girl striding through the snow at his side – at the man’s army-surplus mackintosh she’d thrown over her expensive French gown, which was knotted up around her knees above green wellington boots two sizes too big for her, the moment he’d said there was a search to be done. She hadn’t hesitated, hadn’t worried about her shoes getting wet or her dress being damaged. She and her mother had simply put on borrowed coats, stepped into Lincoln’s old boots, and made their way into the snow to hunt for a murderer in the stables.

He’d never met anyone like them in all his life.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “About the bleeding. That’s a very astute thing to have noticed.”

She beamed a bit with pride as they walked. She could have had no great love for the reverend as a person, and her shock of earlier in the evening was wearing off. The fear was still there, he could detect it simmering below the surface, but it was submerged for the moment beneath this quizzical expression. There was a puzzle in front of her and she was trying to solve it.

She bit her lip, thinking hard, and Kane felt his heart stop beating.

“You’re so much like your mother,” he said, before he could stop himself, and Clarke’s keen ears did not miss the bright ribbon of emotion he was unable to mask entirely. He had not meant to reveal
quite so much – certainly not to her daughter, of all people – but the absentminded gesture had unstitched him and he had seen the young girl Abigail Walters used to be looking up at him out of her daughter’s face and suddenly everything was sideways.

A father would be lucky, he thought to himself – suddenly overcome with melancholy at the abrupt realization that Lord Jacob had not been given the chance to see Clarke grow past the age of twelve – to have a daughter like this.

“Thank you,” she laughed. “I’m assuming that was a compliment.”

“It very definitely was. Go on with what you were saying.”

“Well, the way I see it, if the reverend was killed by someone who set up some kind of secret assignation with him in the library, that lets out every one of us. During the third round of the game, I do believe everyone was hiding with a partner. That means there’s at least one person who can vouch for everybody else.”

“What about the servants?”

“I asked Raven, when we were in the stables. She shares a room with Harper and Monroe. They were all in bed reading – or, the others were reading, Raven was tinkering with some piece of machinery or such – but they were all still awake. And Miller and Lincoln were in the servants’ parlor, playing cards. So everybody was seen by somebody else from the moment Miss Sydney dismissed them and they all went back below stairs. So they’re all out of it, don’t you see? Everyone has an alibi.”

“It would seem so, yes.”

“And then as for us, well, I went to hide with Mr. Blake in the music room, and by the time we arrived, Mr. Pike was already there. And the reverend was nowhere to be seen when we left the parlor. So that lets us out too. We all alibi each other. And then you were with Miss Blake in the – where did you say again?”

“The library.”

“Right, and we all saw you come in together when you heard the commotion. So you’re in the clear as well, since you both saw each other. And then of course you and Mr. Pike found Doctor Jackson and Miss Sydney in the conservatory, so that lets them out as well.”

“Everything you’re saying is exactly how the constable will see it,” he said, and Clarke looked pleased. “But my dear girl, I’m not quite sure you realize how dangerous this line of thought is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your subconscious is showing,” he told her, something like fondness creeping into his voice. “There are fifteen people in this house – well, fourteen now – two of whom you’ve already determined cannot possibly have done it. So you’ve omitted them entirely from your list. And while I appreciate your reasoning – and quite happen to agree with your instincts, by the way – still, the constable is unlikely to see it in that light. You’ve overlooked what any decent detective will spot straightaway, which is that those two you’ve already pronounced innocent happen to be the only people in the house for whom no one can provide an alibi.”

“Oh God,” Clarke murmured, eyes wide with horror. “Oh God, I forgot.”

Major Kane nodded somberly. “This is why I warned you this line of thinking comes with its own
dangers,” he said darkly. “Because the only two people who nobody saw during the third round of the game were my mother . . . and yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi friends! This week you get an extra-long chapter to make up for the fact that there may only be one update this week; I'm going to try to get you a second chapter this week around Wed/Thu like usual, but I also have to finish my fic for the Kabby Halloween fic exchange so you may have to wait until next weekend SORRY GUYS but also not that sorry because I'm evil and I love leaving you with cliffhangers.
HI I'M BACK I promise I'm going to try to get this finished in the next couple of months and get back on more regular updates, I AM SO SORRY IT'S BEEN LITERALLY A YEAR BUT I SWEAR I REMEMBER HOW THIS IS SUPPOSED TO END AND EVERYTHING

(cw: abstract talk of possible past suicide just fyi)

It was a cold, silent, and profoundly unsettled group that finally trudged back towards the drawing room, hanging their wet coats on the hooks beside the back door and stomping the caked snow off the soles of their borrowed boots. Most of them, if they were truly honest with themselves, had known better than to expect that they would really find anything conclusive. No bloodstained intruder hiding in the woodshed, no train-ticket to a robber’s hideaway dropped conveniently on the stairs. Real life was rarely as tidy as mystery novels. Still, to return so entirely empty-handed left everyone badly shaken.

It was as though a wraith had slipped in through the walls of the house, murdered the reverend, and
then evaporated into the ether as quickly as he came, leaving nary a trace.

By the time the last of the party had made their way back to the room which had become their unofficial headquarters of sorts, Miss Sydney appeared to have recovered herself to a degree. Young Harper was assisting her in taking a turn about the room, albeit forced to support her mistress’ elbow quite a bit more than seemed strictly necessary. From the enthusiastic relief with which both the girl and Dr. Jackson greeted the returning expeditioners, Lady Abigail privately observed that both housekeeper and physician must have found the lady of the house much more bearable unconscious. Still, she appeared tolerably composed. Vexed, and visibly rattled, true, but at least she was no longer performing, and that was a vast improvement.

The silver pot of coffee had kept reasonably warm in the interim; Miller and Harper handed round steaming cups, liberally splashed with brandy from the sideboard, and everyone took a few moments to let the warmth soak into their chilled bones while they collected themselves, mostly in silence. Shortly, however, all eyes bean to shift expectantly towards Major Kane, who had more or less taken charge of the gathering and from whom apparently they all awaited their next instructions.

For the thousandth time that evening, Lady Abigail found herself overwhelmingly grateful that he was there. The composed, focused calm in his dark brown eyes made the incomprehensible, terrifying insanity of this unfathomable situation they found themselves in feel ever so slightly more manageable. His voice, when he finally spoke, was steady and honest, somehow unsparing and comforting at once.

“It’s no good pretending we don’t all fully understand the situation we’re in,” he began frankly. “A man’s lying dead in the next room, the murderer appears to have escaped entirely, and we’re without any means of telephoning the police. We are all in a very precarious position, though not dangerous in the precise way you might be thinking.”

“What the devil do you mean by that?” asked Bellamy Blake rather crossly, and Lady Abigail almost, almost smiled. Young people always thought they were so clever at hiding their fear under masks of irritation and short-temper, but Mr. Blake did not fool her. There are no tricks left in the world to pull the wool over the eyes of the mother of a twenty-year-old girl.

Major Kane’s impassive expression did not change; Lady Abigail suspected he, too, understood the boy rather better than the boy had realized.

“How can you know that?” asked Monroe the cook, a bit nervously. “I don’t imagine the reverend thought he ought to fear being stabbed in the chest either, and yet there he is with a sheet over his face.”

Major Kane hesitated before answering. “I don’t mean to advise any of you,” he began slowly, “that we ought not to be on our guard. We must, and should. What I mean to say is this: someone arrived at this house tonight intent upon murder, and then fled without a trace once the deed had been done. If the murderer had a second target, they too would have been dispensed with before he left the house. Leaving, then coming back a few hours later, would be damned stupid. And that, I assure you, this criminal was not. On the whole, I do believe we are safe from harm in our beds tonight.”
The entire room exhaled in relief as one. Even Lady Abigail let out a long breath she had not realized she had been holding, as Clarke squeezed her hand tightly.

“There are, however,” he cautioned them, “a number of very pressing concerns with which we must reckon immediately. The first is that, under even the best of circumstances, we cannot reasonably expect the police to arrive before the morning, which places the burden on all of us to preserve whatever evidence remains until they arrive. Harper, how many keys are there to the parlor doors?”

“Only two, I believe,” she told him. “I have one, and Miller has the other. All three parlor doors have the same lock, so the keys are the same.”

“Give them to me, please,” said the major. “Now that Dr. Jackson has made his examination, no one ought to go back into that room until the police come. There’s little we can do about the disturbance we’ve caused all over the house and the grounds by searching, but at least we can keep the crime scene intact.”

Butler and housekeeper obediently pulled jangling clusters of keys from their pockets and plucked one small brass key apiece from the ring to place in his outstretched hand. Major Kane opened the door connecting the parlor to the drawing room and stepped inside; from her seat, Lady Abigail could see the tip of the reverend’s shoes still sticking out from behind the sofa, now draped in one of Miss Sydney’s second-best linen sheets. Major Kane locked first the door that led from the parlor out to the foyer, then the rear door into the smaller hallway through which Lady Abigail had come running after she fled the ballroom. Then he stepped back into the drawing room, closed the door behind him, locked it, and dropped both keys into his breast pocket.

“Good,” he said approvingly. “That’s the first bit of business settled, at least. Now, onto the second. Mr. Miller, Mr. Lincoln, boots back on, I’m afraid. The three of us are going to take a bit of a stroll.”

“Marcus, don’t be daft,” said his mother worriedly. “You cannot possibly mean to venture out into the snow, at this time of night, with a criminal on the loose.”

“I have to,” he said, hands spread wide in a gesture of resigned apology. “There’s no way down to the village except on foot, and someone must fetch Constable Miller. If we don’t mind a forest detour, we should be able to make it down to the village and back before dawn, or a bit after. The snow might not be quite so impassably thick under the cover of the trees as it is along the roads.”

“You stay,” said Mr. Pike rather unexpectedly, and all heads swiveled to face him. “I’ll go with the lads down to the village. That’s a straightforward enough job, at least. Anyone with stout boots and the strength for a long walk could do it. But I should think we would all feel quite a bit easier if you remained here, in case anything else should happen.”

“It’s quite all right, Mr. Pike,” said Miller. “Lincoln and I can manage between ourselves. You’re both guests; no need for anyone else to brave the distance and the cold when two can do it just as well. We’ll fetch my father, the rest of you stay here together, where it’s warm and safe.”

Major Kane shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” he said evenly. “No groups of fewer than three, for safety. You’ll need at least one more person with you. At all times. That goes for everyone.”

“What on earth difference could it make,” muttered Miss Sydney irritably. “Two people, three people, it’s all the same, isn’t it?”

Mr. Pike and the Major exchanged a look Lady Abigail could not quite read.
"No," said Mr. Pike finally. "It wouldn't be the same, if one of us was the murderer. He means until we know what happened, it's dangerous for any one person to be alone with anyone else."

"Precisely," said the major. "Until the constable has arrived and taken our statements and cleared everyone of suspicion, it's prudent for us to remain in groups as much as possible."

"Don't be absurd, Major," Miss Sydney sighed, "you're talking as though one of us did it."

Her words were tossed off rather like an afterthought, but they landed heavily and silenced the room. Those to whom this thought had already occurred, like Clarke and Vera, were frozen still, wondering how the Major would answer her. Several of the others, the Blakes in particular, were clearly encountering this thought for the first time, and drew a little apart from the rest of the group almost involuntarily, suspicion lighting their matching pairs of sharp dark eyes.

Lady Abigail watched the Major carefully to see how he would respond. He appeared to consider for a long moment before deciding that, on balance, he was too fatigued to step into this particular patch of conversational quicksand just at present, so he gritted his teeth and let it go.

"Be that as it may," he replied patiently, "it is also a vital matter for the benefit of the police. And for each of us, as well. Constable Miller will ask each of us for our whereabouts over the whole course of the night. It will make all our lives a great deal simpler in the long run if we stick together as much as we can; the more witnesses to verify a particular story, the less trouble we shall have convincing the police. Groups of no less than three at all times."

"That ought to make the question of sleeping arrangements rather exciting," Lady Abigail could not stop herself from murmuring under her breath, and the faint chuckles which accompanied this, sweeping through the room, did a great deal to ease the worried tension brewing throughout the room.

The Major raised his eyebrow at her in amused reproach, but said nothing.

"When the constable arrives, he may wish to take statements immediately," he informed them. "Even if it's the middle of the night. I would suggest we all take the opportunity to get a few hours of sleep while we can. It will become rather more difficult once the house has become an active site of investigation."

"Poor Constable Miller," said Vera sympathetically. "His first murder."

"I should think he'll send for Scotland Yard," said Dr. Jackson. "Mount Weather hasn’t the resources – all due respect to your father, of course, Miller – to handle a case like this. Theft of bicycles and lost cats, certainly, but nothing like this. Not here."

"I shouldn’t think he’ll have to send for them," Miller remarked, startling the room into silence, "as they’ll already be here."

The dark look on his mistress’ face would have shattered glass, but the young butler wisely elected not to see it.

"Who will?" asked the doctor, brow furrowed.

"Scotland Yard, sir. My lady sent for her detective friend earlier today regarding . . . an unrelated matter. We shall be expecting him on the morning train."

All eyes turned slowly to Diana Sydney.
“Well,” said Major Kane, his voice stern, his brown eyes sharply fixed on hers. “I must say, Miss Sydney, if you are already embroiled in some kind of criminal trouble, you might have thought to bring it up a bit earlier than this.”

“It’s nothing to do with the reverend,” she snapped, rather evasively. “It’s a private matter I do not wish to discuss.” Major Kane said nothing, only continued to fix his unwavering stare at her. “His name is Shumway,” she went on, rather defensively, “and he’s known in the theatre world, a bit, and I had a spot of mischief I wanted dealt with, quietly. And without wishing any offense, I felt a great deal more confident in the discretion of a London detective than one from a village the size of a postage stamp where everyone knows everyone’s damned business. Let alone one who happens to be my own butler’s father. I summoned him because I felt more at ease confiding in a near stranger than someone I should be forever running into at the pub, but I give you my word I certainly did not murder Reverend Jaha in order to give the detective something more interesting to do.”

“A private matter?” the Major repeated in disbelief. “Miss Sydney, I don’t know that you comprehend exactly how much trouble we have found ourselves in. You have evidently never been party to a police investigation, but I can assure you there are no such thing as ‘private matters’ where a murder is concerned. You will certainly be ordered to come clean about it when the police interrogate you later.”

“The police may ask me about it if they wish,” she said with a rather dismissive gesture. “Until then, it is simply no one else’s business.”

“How can you possibly be so certain your matter and the reverend’s death cannot be connected?” Lady Abigail demanded. “We haven’t the faintest idea what the motive could have been; if another crime, of any sort, has been committed in your vicinity –“

“My dear Lady Abigail, this is quite evidently a burglary gone wrong.” Miss Sydney interrupted her rather frostily. “As the other matter is neither a murder nor a burglary, I cannot see how they could possibly have any connection.”

“A burglary?” the other woman repeated, disbelief etched all over her lovely face. “Diana, surely even you are not so naïve as that.”

“They cannot have any connection,” Diana repeated pointedly, and refused to elaborate any further. Finally, Kane and Lady Abigail, united in their utter exasperation, sighed and yielded, letting the subject drop, and permitting their hostess to sweep to her feet and begin ushering her guests up the stairs to bed.

“Thank you, Miller,” said Major Kane. “I don’t know yet if that will turn out to be useful but I’m
very grateful to know it. If you think of anything else important, make sure you relay every bit of it to your father on the way."

“I will, sir.”

The Major shook hands with the boy, with Mr. Lincoln and with Mr. Pike, and walked them to the front door.

He watched them make their way across the snowy drive, past the wreckage of the Blakes’ car, and turn down the road blocked off by the felled tree, to make their way into the forest around it. He stood there until they were out of sight, wondering if he ought to have told Charles about the tree trunk, and not quite sure why he hadn’t.

By the time he bolted the door and turned back towards the stairs to make his way up to bed, everyone else had disappeared.

He had not seen the two shapes frozen in the shadows on the landing halfway up the stairs, listening intently with pounding, panicked hearts to his exchange with Miller about the blue envelope, nor seen the twin expressions of horror on their young faces.

“Miss Sydney,” Octavia had whispered to her brother, swallowing hard. “That’s two. How many did Nygel say?”

“She didn’t.”

“Should we tell him?” Octavia asked, looking down at the tall, strong back of Major Kane, looking out the door into the snow. Bellamy shook his head.

“A man’s dead, O,” he murmured, leading her away upstairs. “We can’t trust anybody.”

Diana’s theatre parties turned into rambunctious weekend-long benders so frequently that the house was more than amply stocked for every eventuality. Each of her guests, excepting only the self-sacrificing Mr. Pike, found themselves directed by Harper to an opulent bedroom which had been aired and dusted, with a merry fire blazing, clean sheets, and night-clothes laid out on the snowy white counterpane for them all.

They might dislike her manner, but they were forced to concede the thoroughness of her hospitality.

Each of them followed more or less the same routine: first, an all-too-brief stop in one of the clean, cheerfully-lit bathrooms to wash up, lingering wistfully for as long as possible (on the second floor of Diana’s house, these were the only rooms fitted up with electric lights) before hurrying back to their bedrooms, where they conducted as thorough a search as candlelight would allow before locking doors and windows behind them with trembling fingers, stoking up the fire as bright as possible, and climbing nervously into bed, only to start violently back awake at the slightest hint of a sound.

Major Kane followed suit, though he had foreseen the difficulty of sleep on such a night as this, and stopped by the library after he had finished washing up to select a weighty, tedious volume of Roman history he hoped might bore him into some semblance of slumber. After two hours, however, it had accomplished nothing except to inform him that apparently in the hands of the right author, even Caligula could be dull. Finally he gave up, pulled a dressing gown over his borrowed pajamas (scarlet-and-cream striped satin, far too flamboyant for his personal taste but unfortunately preferable to sleeping in his clothes), and padded softly back down the stairs to see if he could scrounge up anything resembling a nightcap.
But the servants had cleared the dining room after dinner, so the wine was put away, and even for Diana’s best brandy he could not bear setting foot into the parlor again, with Thelonious Jaha’s white-sheeted corpse still stretched out in the middle of the floor. He was just debating whether it was worth settling for the bottle of champagne he’d left in the billiard room – no doubt unpleasantly flat and warm now, after sitting out for hours – when he suddenly remembered having seen a tray with whiskey, glasses and a siphon on the library desk. It had appeared more ornamental than anything else, a bit of theatrical staging; every proper library desk ought to have a decanter, so a decanter there was. But if the whiskey was real, he did not much care if it was of a quality Diana had deemed only fit for set decoration.

He could see as he approached that the door was ajar and the room still glowed as it had before with warm orange light; the fire was still blazing merrily in the hearth. Suddenly the notion of sitting up all night in a comfortable armchair (in a windowless room with only one entrance and nowhere to hide) struck him as far more preferable to another fruitless attempt to doze off upstairs with the wind howling on the other side of the glass.

He pushed the door open as quietly as he could (he was too far from the guest wing to be heard, but some innate sense of hesitation made him cautious anyway) and closed it noiselessly behind him.

Then “Come in and have a drink,” came a low voice from the shadows, startling him so badly he almost stumbled, and he turned to see Lady Abigail curled up on the chaise beside the fire. “I imagine you need one as badly as I did.”

She’d fared better in the borrowed nightwear department than he had; while his loud satin pajamas and accompanying robe made him feel a bit like he was playing the role of a French cad in a musical revue, Lady Abigail was clad in an ensemble Kane instantly – and entirely accurately – appraised as one the flamboyant Miss Sydney had deemed too dull for herself. But it became its wearer perfectly. A voluminous, snow-white cotton nightdress, edged at the hem in lace, fell in billowing folds along the seat of the wine-red chaise, where she’d tucked her legs up on the cushion beside her, with a soft rose-colored dressing gown tied at her waist. It was all a few sizes too big for her; Diana was several inches taller, and more statuesque in build than the petite brunette now wearing her clothes. Both dressing-gown and night dress were ever-so-slightly threatening to slip off one shoulder, a fact of which Lady Abigail seemed unaware, though for several moments Major Kane could think of little else.

Her thick glossy tresses were bound into a single loose braid which hung over that same shoulder, and he found himself suddenly struck by the realization that he hadn’t seen her with her hair down in more than twenty years. She always wore it pinned up or under a hat, elegant and respectable, and all his life he’d simply thought of it simply as “brown.” But up close, he suddenly realized how wrong he was. There were a hundred different colors in it, this close to the firelight – copper and gold and coffee and amber and chestnut, glowing and flickering as if lit from within – and he had an extraordinary, unaccountable urge to touch it.

“You’re staring,” she said mildly, though it was more an observation than a reproach. But he flushed nonetheless, and looked away.

“You startled me,” he said, a trifle more accusingly than he meant.

“I’m sorry.”

“I came for a drink. I assumed the room would be empty.”

She seemed to take no offense to this, and made no move to leave the room, which seemed as much an invitation as any for him to join her. She remained perfectly still on the chaise, white skirts draped
over her like snowdrifts, rose-colored satin slipping off her shoulder, and watched him with great interest as she sipped her drink. “I thought everyone had gone to bed,” he went on, rather superfluously. “And those that hadn’t would likely . . . not care to linger in this part of the house.”

“Well, they’re more superstitious than I am,” she said, watching in approval as he poured himself an extremely generous three fingers of whiskey. “And anyway, this is where the liquor is.”

“Thank God for that.”

“Though I do believe we’re in violation of your very strict rule about threes,” she remarked rather dryly. “Shall I go wake Diana?”

“Have mercy,” he sighed wearily, sinking into the chair opposite her. “It’s been a very long day.”

“None more so,” she agreed. “And only getting longer.”

“Couldn’t you sleep either?”

“Not a bit,” she admitted frankly. “The moonlight was blinding off the snow, for one thing, it’s nearly bright as day outside my window. And our room was quite at the farthest end of the hallway from the stairs; it’s the grandest room in the house, she felt obligated to offer it to me and I felt obligated to take it, but the isolation was rather eerie. Particularly without Clarke.”

His head snapped up suddenly, eyes wide with alarm. “What do you mean, without Clarke?”

She laughed. "My goodness, how did you miss the great debacle over the rearranging of beds? It was quite an ordeal. Miss Sydney decided she could not abide sleeping alone in her big drafty chamber, so she ordered Harper and Monroe to make up cots on her floor to sleep beside her. Your rule of three," she remarked, raising a wry eyebrow, "will not have gone over well with either of those two poor girls."

"God help them," he sighed, "they'll never get a wink of sleep with Diana's theatrics all night long. I'm sure she'll wake up screaming and announce she's seen Jaha's ghost at the foot of her bed."

"She very well might," agreed Lady Abigail. "Anyway, that left Miss Reyes as the only person sleeping downstairs, and she was feeling none too comfortable about that notion. So Clarke and Miss Blake, who have both taken rather a shine to her, decided to take Harper and Monroe's beds for the night so she wouldn't have to sleep alone. Well, you'd think that would be enough upstairs downstairs nonsense for the evening, but then of course Miss Blake told her brother and he took to the notion of her sleeping two floors away from him about as well as you might expect. Which is to say, not well at all. So then, because apparently none of this was complicated enough, he and Dr. Jackson decided to take Lincoln and Miller's beds for the night, or at least until they return with the constable and demand them back."

"Good Lord, what a hullabaloo."

"Isn't it? So now Diana is alone upstairs, with two poor servant girls no doubt sitting up all night tending to her nerves, and all the young people are sleeping in the servants' quarters."

"Is that wise?"

“I’ve no idea, though I can hardly say as I blame them; the rooms are smaller, better lit, and closer together. One doesn’t feel quite so isolated. I imagine under ordinary circumstances I should pay a steep social cost for permitting my daughter to share a room with a schoolteacher and a chauffeur, let alone with two young men next door, but one can only hope my neglectful parenting slips past
unnoticed with a far greater drama for the village gossips to discuss.”

“So instead of passing the night alone in a dark frightening room, you preferred to do so in a smaller room with better light.”

“Very well played, Major Kane. You have read me correctly once more. I was a little hungry, but I didn’t quite like to go wake Monroe to root around her kitchens without permission, and it felt disrespectful to step over Reverend Jaha’s body to get to the chocolates. So I wandered a bit and ended up in here. Nothing to eat, but the whiskey’s very good.” She took a long slow sip of her whiskey and regarded the man across from her with shrewd, thoughtful eyes. “Do you know, I’ve known you since I was six years old and I’ve never seen you in pajamas,” she said, looking him up and down with amusement. “I certainly would never have pictured anything quite so . . . daring.”

“They’re not mine,” he said, a little defensively, and she laughed.

“Very good thing we’re not snowed in at my house,” she murmured, amused, “or you’d all be sleeping in your white tie and tails. Clarke and I certainly don’t keep enough pajamas lying around for ten people.”

“Nine,” he corrected her almost without thinking, and as one they both found themselves turning towards the wall behind the fireplace, on the other side of which that long, white-sheeted bulk lay waiting for Constable Miller.

“Nine,” she said softly. “Of course. I’d forgotten.” She stared down into her drink for a long moment before she spoke. “I’ve known him all my life,” she said pensively. “I didn’t like him, but forty years of living in the same small village is quite a bit more than nothing, as far as relationships go. And now he’s dead. Horribly so. I should feel something, shouldn’t I? But I don’t. There’s no grief, no sadness, nothing.”

“Perhaps it’s shock,” he suggested, but she shook her head, without looking up, as though whatever she was looking for might be waiting at the bottom of that glass.

“It isn’t shock,” she said. “It won’t be different tomorrow. He’s simply . . . gone. And I can’t seem to feel anything, except guilt that I don’t feel more.” She looked up at him then and met his eyes boldly, as though daring him to judge her. “Is it very awful of me?” she asked. “That I’m not sad he’s dead?”

Kane shook his head. “You don’t seem frightened either,” he observed, but it wasn’t a criticism and she didn’t take it as one. She bit her lip, ever so slightly, like a worried child, and shook her head in disagreement.

“You’re wrong there,” she said quietly, “I’m frightened as badly as anyone in the house. But the thing I’m afraid of isn’t what’s in the other room.” She took a long, long drink of whiskey. “Thelonious Jaha can’t hurt anyone now,” she said, a curious pulse of emotion in her voice. “There’s nothing left to fear from him.”

He watched her for a long moment in silence. The firelight danced and flickered on her thick, copper-and-chestnut braid, casting a warm orange glow on her white cotton nightdress and turning the pink satin of her dressing gown the flaming rose-gold of a sunset. Her brow was furrowed in thought, and she did look worried and puzzled and weary, but she’d spoken true; he did not believe she was afraid of the white-sheeted corpse in the room next door.

“You’ve seen violent death before,” he said suddenly, and it wasn’t a question. She looked up at him sharply, one eyebrow raised. “You were very level-headed in the parlor when we found the
body. You were as calm as Doctor Jackson was. More, even.”

“After the war, we opened up the estate as a convalescent home,” she explained. “For returning soldiers.”

He nodded. “My mother told me. It must have been terrible for you.”

“We lived through a war, Major. It was terrible for all of us.”

“Still, that the things you saw, the suffering you witnessed . . . Death and disease in every corner of your home, surrounding you at all times. All those men in pain. I imagine it would have been unusually difficult for someone like you.”

She arched one perfect eyebrow at him over her glass of whiskey. “I don’t think holding a man’s leg steady while a doctor amputates it is particularly more difficult than being the one having his leg amputated,” she said rather crisply. “I think that’s what war looks like. Whichever side you’re on. Whoever you are. That’s what war looks like, and it’s difficult to watch. It wasn’t more difficult for me just because I’m a woman.”

“No,” he agreed. “I didn’t think it was. I meant that it must have been more difficult for you because you’re kind.”

That stopped her abruptly, and the retort she had been forming died on her lips. They looked at each other for a long moment before the question that had been tapping lightly at his brain, just out of reach, for hours and hours, finally coalesced into a thought in his mind.

“Jackson is a medical man,” he said, ticking off his fingers, “and you ran a hospital with Clarke. I was in the military, and so was Charles Pike.”

“Was he? I didn’t know that.”

“Years ago, when he was very young. Discharged with a leg injury and sent home. That’s how he became a teacher. So that’s five, out of the nine, who have some experience seeing violent death up close. Who’ve learned not to be afraid of it.”

“Diana Sydney obviously hasn’t,” Abigail commented, the faint whiff of disdain she was unable to suppress entirely made him laugh.

“No,” he agreed, “definitely not. She fell apart exactly as you’d expect, from someone whose bravado is all show. Underneath the posturing she’s just a spoiled, badly-frightened woman who’s never encountered violence off the stage. Entirely human reaction. And the Blakes as well,” he added. “They’re level-headed and remarkably resilient, but they’re young. They’ve only known one death in their lives, and it traumatized them badly. You saw how Bellamy kept a hand on Octavia the entire time. In any crisis, his instinct is to protect her.”

“Major –”

He waved her off with the ghost of a laugh. “We survived a Diana Sydney dinner party and a violent murder, Lady Abigail,” he said, “I think you’d better start calling me Marcus.”

“Then for the love of God,” she retorted, “don’t call me ‘Lady Abigail.’ I think under the circumstances it’s safe to let the social protocols slide. I’m Abby to my friends.” He looked at her with a faint, amused question in his eyes, and she smiled. “We’re drinking whiskey at two a.m. in the nightclothes of strangers, in a room next door to a dead body,” she observed. “Yes, I think we’re friends.” He leaned out of his chair, reaching his glass over to clink hers amicably before settling
back into his seat. “Anyway,” she went on dubiously, “I’m not sure what the point of this exercise is, unless it’s simply to go down the list and explain how everyone in the room behaved exactly the way you thought they would.”

“One person didn’t,” he said quietly. “That’s my trouble.”

She looked up at him sharply. “Oh,” she murmured, comprehending immediately. “Oh. I see.”

“My mother is the gentlest person I know,” he said, rather helplessly. “I’d have expected her to react the way Octavia Blake did. Calm, in her own way, you know, not panicking like Diana, but unable to look at it or remain too long in the same room. And yet she knelt down beside you and Doctor Jackson like she’d been doing it all her life. She reacted, in fact, the way everyone else in the room did who had witnessed a violent death. She reacted like all the rest of us to whom a man lying still in a pool of blood was not, in fact, the first terrible thing we’ve ever seen. And that was more frightening to me than the death itself,” he confessed, “because it makes me feel that I don’t know my own mother at all.”

“Marcus,” she said softly, setting down her drink and sitting up on the chaise to lean forward and look him in the eye. “I think you do know.”

His hand froze midair, lifting his glass to his lips, and lingered there for a long moment, unable to move. Something inside her calm warm voice made his heart pound with alarm, and he suddenly couldn’t look at her anymore.

“My father’s death was an accident,” he said stubbornly. Abby didn’t say anything, just looked at him in compassionate silence. “It was,” he insisted. “He was coming home from the Thirteen Swords and he stumbled on the bridge. They found him the next morning in the duck pond.”

“I remember,” Abby said, nodding. “We were, what? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

“Fourteen,” he said. “I was away at school.”

“Your mother is a very pious woman,” she pressed him gently. “No matter how cruel he was, no matter how relieved she might have been, she would still have wanted him to be buried in the churchyard.”

“What are you saying?”

“You saw her at dinner,” Abby reminded him. “She had no objection to laughing along with the rest of us at Gertrude and Claudius, or the Macbeths. It was only Romeo and Juliet that upset her.”

“Abby – “

“He left the pub alone, and nobody saw it happen,” she went on. “But if he’d left a note before he went to the pub that night, and your mother found it and destroyed it – “

“Don’t.”

“Then there would be no one to say it wasn’t an accident. They could never have kept your mother from burying him in hallowed ground.”

“My father didn’t kill himself,” said Marcus, but there was no conviction in his voice anymore, and his hands were shaking. Abby took his heavy crystal tumbler away and set it down, reaching across the carpet to take his hands in both of hers.
“She was protecting you,” she told him, voice low with compassion. “That’s what mothers do. She wanted to spare you that pain. That’s why she never told you. But it’s the only thing that makes sense to me. And after surviving that – after the suffering she endured from her husband, the pain of knowing he’d taken his own life, years of lying to hide it to protect the son she loved – yes, I can surely imagine that a woman that strong would have little to fear from the reverend’s dead body. After what she’d been through, nothing could be worse.”

Marcus looked down at Abby’s hands, steady and strong, holding his own. Her skin was soft and delicate, the pale skin flickering gold in the light of the fire, and he wanted very, very badly to lift one and press his lips against it, but he held himself back. She might have given him the courtesy of her Christian name, but in position, in status, in standing, she remained Lady Abigail.

"She was the first one to say it aloud," Abby went on, voice low and heavy. "When we were alone. She said, *I wonder which of us did it.* I didn’t believe her at first, but she hardly even appeared surprise. As though some part of her had been expecting something like this. I pushed the thought away as long as I could, but I can’t anymore."

"She knows the reverend better than most of us," he said. "If anyone would know who might have a reason to kill him, it very well could be her." Abby nodded; the thought had evidently occurred to her as well. "She was right," he added bluntly. “You understand that, don’t you? Whoever killed Thelonious is either walking through the snow down to the village, or still in this house.”

She shivered at this, a little, but didn’t flinch. “Yes,” she said finally. "I know."

“And yet you’re sitting here alone with me, in a room so far away from the guest wing that you’d have to scream to be heard. I could pin you down and smother you with a pillow and no one would ever know.”

“You poured yourself a drink from the sideboard at my suggestion,” she countered, “in a room where I’ve been sitting alone for an hour. That’s more than enough time for me to have put absolutely anything in it. And no one would ever know.”

“Fingerprints on the glasses,” he pointed out.

She shook her head. “Cut crystal would be nearly impossible to take a good print. And even if I’d forgotten to do it then, Constable Miller won’t be here for hours. Plenty of time to do this,” she added, wiping off the glass with her silk sleeve.

“Détente, my lady.”

“*It appears so.*”

They regarded each other thoughtfully for a long, silent moment, each of them uncomfortably facing the same peculiar, rather sinister realization:

That if one were weighing, not the *likelihood* of having done the deed, but the *capability* of it, here in this room sat the two most levelheaded, rational and intelligent minds in the house, who were both far and away the most likely candidates to commit a murder and get away with it.

Lady Abigail was the one who finally brought it up first. “I was alone when he died,” she said evenly. “You have no way of knowing if my story is true, and no reason whatever to trust me. About the light in the barn, about where I was during the third round, about any of it.” Her brown eyes were somber. “If you got up and left,” she added quietly, “If you didn’t want to be alone with me again, I would not fault you.”
Major Kane rose from his chair.

Lady Abigail’s face collapsed so nakedly that he felt his heart leap into his throat – it was impossible for such a palpable sadness not to mean something. But the furrow in her brow cleared, to be replaced by a look not of betrayal but of puzzlement, as he moved not towards the door but across the small empty square of carpet between them, and seated himself beside her on the sofa.

She looked at him in silence for a long moment. “That might have been a very stupid thing to do,” she cautioned him, but he shook his head.

“I would rather believe in your innocence and be naively wrong,” he told her, “than to doubt you and be proven right.”

She flushed a delicate rose-pink and busied herself with the lace hem of her nightgown cuffs, tugging absently at a thread. “You are rather romantic in your notions this evening, Major Kane.”

“Marcus,” he said softly taking her hand, startling her back to him. “Please.”

“Marcus, then.”

“I have no proof that would hold up in a court of law,” he said to her, “but upon my life, I cannot believe that you murdered Thelonious Jaha.”

“Well, thank you,” she said, a little wryly. “And for what it’s worth, I cannot believe that you did it either. So now at least we know where we are.”

“The trouble is,” Marcus went on thoughtfully, “that it seems so extraordinarily impossible that it was anybody.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I know what you mean. I can believe anyone in the house might want to, certainly – he was the kind of man you’d just naturally assume to have plenty of enemies – but I can hardly conceive that anybody would.”

“Not like this, certainly,” he agreed, rising from his chair to refill both their glasses. “Snowed in with nowhere to hide and a houseful of witnesses. When he’s a man who lives alone, and whom anyone in the village could concoct a plausible excuse to visit.” He shook his head. “What a damned foolish way to commit a murder.”

“The trouble I’m having,” said Abby frankly, leaning her head wearily back against the cushions, “is that all the evidence points so clearly to Diana that my instinct is to mistrust it immediately.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, think about it. We spent the whole bloody night – oh, God, no horrible pun intended, I promise you – talking of the Macbeths.”

“God, don’t remind me,” he shuddered, handing her back her glass and returning to the sofa. “How horrifically morbid, in hindsight.”

“Yes, but think about it,” she insisted. “It’s the same crime all over again. Or it was carefully made to look that way. The first murder in that play was a crime of opportunity and quick thinking, remember. I’m sure they’d rather have killed King Duncan anywhere but in their own house, but it was the only place they could get at him.”

“That’s true.”
“Well, Diana loathed the reverend, and she didn’t go to church. Say it really was her. Say she needed him dead, and quickly. What better opportunity would she ever find to get close enough to him without raising any kind of suspicion? This would be perfect. Concoct a fictitious London dinner party, order an elaborate menu, then cancel at the last minute so you’re forced to finally deign to invite a few of the locals to dinner for the first time. It’s rude enough to be perfectly in character, yet she also made it fairly impossible for any of us to say no.”

“There’s something in that,” Marcus conceded, turning her words over and over in his mind.

“But the trouble is that it’s too perfect,” she exclaimed in frustration. “For God’s sake, the man was stabbed in her home with the knife she’s using to rehearse her Lady Macbeth scenes! If Diana wanted him dead, and tonight was her only chance to pull it off, why on earth would she sign her own name to it so boldly? She could have slipped some discreet little poison into his sherry when she was handing the tray around, or into the bottom of his water glass before we came into the dining room. She could have excused herself to check on the next course and dashed outside to tamper with the brakes of his car. She had a hundred chances to pull it off more discreetly, and instead Lady Macbeth’s gilt-handled stage knife is sticking out of the man’s chest in Lady Macbeth’s own house. She can’t possibly be so stupid. It’s what a child would do.”

“Or someone attempting to frame her.”

“That,” said Abby grimly, “is precisely what I’m afraid of. Which forces us to ask some questions about who Diana’s enemies might be too. And what on earth she wanted with Scotland Yard.”

Marcus sighed. “That puts us back at square one, then,” he said wearily. “Nine guests and five servants. Which one of us did it?”

“One wants it to be the servants, of course,” she said thoughtfully. “Which is a terrible thing to say. But next to Diana’s obviously nonsensical burglar theory, it’s the second-best option for keeping murder at arm’s length, isn’t it? The girl is new, the cook and the gardener are foreigners. It feels safer somehow.”

“But the fact that they’re more removed from it just makes it less likely that any of them could possibly have a motive.”

“Exactly,” said Abby. “It must have been one of us, mustn’t it? I mean there’s no other explanation. Someone in that dining room murdered Thelonious Jaha.”

“Yes,” Marcus agreed softly. “I believe they did.”

“And we’ll all have to take our turn giving our stories to the police,” she sighed wearily, “and I haven’t one. How I wish you and I had remained together.”

“So do I,” Marcus said in a low voice humming with something warm and electric inside it, and Abby flushed rose-pink again. “But I’m inclined to agree that unfortunately, the process will be a bit more complicated for you and my mother. On account of the absence of alibi.”

“If Vera killed Reverend Jaha, then Reverend Jaha deserved it,” said Abby emphatically. Marcus laughed, a little, but it was hollow and there was no mirth in it.

“Maybe so, but the courts wouldn’t see it that way,” he pointed out. “We’re talking about murder, Abby. She would still be hanged.”

Abby froze, all the color draining out of her face, staring at him with wide dark eyes. “Oh God,” she murmured hoarsely. “I didn’t think about that. I never even . . . good Christ, Marcus, one of us is
He nodded soberly. “Sheds rather a different light on the whole thing, doesn’t it?” She shivered a little and knocked back the rest of her whiskey with trembling hands. “So if we’ve ruled out you and me and Clarke and Vera,” he said, “that’s four of the nine suspects. And if we’re ruling out Diana now, too . . .”

“I know.”

“Then we’re down to Charles Pike, Doctor Jackson, and the Blakes,” he said grimly. “Someone murdered Thelonious Jaha. And someone’s going to the gallows for it.”
Lady Abigail and the major were hardly the only members of the party struggling to find anything resembling sleep. Upstairs, the mistress of the house tossed and turned in her grand, stately bed, and the two unfortunate servant girls commanded to sit up all night and keep watch fared no better. Meanwhile, the three men crunching diligently through the snowy woods in anxious, uncomfortable silence were all too aware of the sinister implications of Kane’s precaution about groups of three, and their minds were far from easy.

The young people belowstairs, though no nearer to sleep, were at least in less gloomy spirits. They’d dutifully made their way down to the sleeping wing of the servants’ quarters and changed into nightclothes, but it became immediately apparent that none of them had any wish for bed; it was not long, therefore, before the entire party soon found themselves congregated in the cozy servants’ parlor with whiskey and sandwiches and tea, where currently they were deep in the midst of discussing the night’s events. The members of this group had little love for the reverend, and with the optimism of youth seemed very little concerned that anything like tragedy could touch them directly. Down here, the grisly murder, which had so unsettled the adults who had seen violent death before, felt more like a fascinating puzzle to be solved.

Doctor Jackson, seated in a faded armchair in a borrowed pair of Miller’s pajamas, had just finished giving them something resembling an autopsy report, describing the body’s current state in detail. It was perhaps irregular for him to be so forthright about such details with others before he’d given the report to Constable Miller, but he had found a few items of rather surprising interest during his investigation and was quite eager to talk them through out loud. The positioning of the wound, for example, raised several questions, as did the lack of any signs of struggle. He’d told them everything he had observed, at which point young Miss Griffin had picked up the thread of the narrative and recounted to the rest of the group, with occasional assistance from Raven, the curious conversation they had had with Major Kane.

“Well, I think you’re a fool then.”

“Well, I don’t much care what you think.”

“Oh, hush, Bellamy,” sighed his sister, who sat curled up in the corner, moody and preoccupied. She had remained largely silent until now, lost in thought, so her interruption was startling. “If the reverend was murdered during the third round, the major is in the clear. He was with me all the time. Unless you’re saying I’m a liar.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Well then, for what it’s worth, Major Kane’s the only one I’m willing to clear altogether,” she informed him tartly. “Since I can vouch for his whereabouts myself.”
“Yes, but everyone was seen by someone, so where does that leave us?” the doctor retorted. “I was with Miss Sydney in the conservatory, and neither of us even emerged from our hiding places until we heard you calling our names. I’ll happily cross her off my own list of suspects, as the room only has one door, but I’m hardly prepared to give such assurances to anyone else.”

“And we were all belowstairs until you found the body,” Raven added. “I can confirm myself that no one opened that door. My bedroom’s nearest, and the bolt makes a hell of a noise.”

“And I had both Mr. Blake and Mr. Pike in my sights all the time until Vera Kane found us and we all came back to discover the body together,” said Clarke helplessly, “so we’re nowhere.”

Something in her words startled Octavia into looking up sharply at the girl. “How long was it?” she demanded, sitting up straight.

“How long was what?”

“How long were you hiding, before you were found?”

“I’ve no idea. Why?”

“Because you were first,” she told the other girl insistently. “The three of you were the first ones she found. You all returned to the room together and saw the body. Then the major and I heard you scream, and came running in together, then Lady Abigail, and then we sent out the search for Mr. Jackson and Miss Sydney, and then the servants were fetched. So however many minutes it was before Vera arrived to find you in the music room, she was entirely alone, with no witnesses.”

“Don’t be stupid,” snapped Clarke, “Mrs. Kane had nothing to do with this.”

“She was alone, and she was in the parlor,” Octavia repeated. “The reverend could have come in to meet her there on purpose, or perhaps wandered in by accident. Then she stabbed him quietly, left him there, and continued with the game to ensure she had witnesses when she discovered the body.”

“Mrs. Kane is the most pious woman I know,” said the doctor a little stiffly, indignant on her behalf.

“Pious women do dreadful things sometimes.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Blood hell,” Bellamy exploded, startling everyone in the room, “is no one going to mention the most obvious suspect? Have we all simply decided out of some kind of antiquated reverence for the aristocracy that we’re simply going to refuse to say the blasted thing out loud until the police arrive and say it for us? You’re a pack of damned fools, that’s what you are.” He turned to face Clarke Griffin. “I’m sorry, but it’s got to be said,” he told her flatly, and waited for her to scream at him or burst into tears or throw her glass of whiskey at his head in fury.

Instead, she startled him by receiving his words with a cool, unfazed nod. “You’re perfectly right,” she said. “Major Kane already pointed it out to me while we were searching the grounds, he and I...”
being rather in the same uncomfortable position with regard to our mothers. But the fact of the matter is that we’ve only her word to account for where she was, and I do see that that makes things rather more difficult. Though you needn’t have been quite so accusatory about it,” she added mildly, causing him to flush a bit and look down at the floor. “It’s quite plain you don’t trust anyone in the world except your sister, but you don’t really know my mother yet. When you do, you’ll understand.”

“She didn’t seem terribly fond of the reverend,” Bellamy muttered, a little defensively.

“No one was,” pointed out Doctor Jackson. “But Lady Abigail is not a murderess.”

“Well, then we’ve exhausted every option and made no progress,” sighed Octavia. “A fine lot of detectives we are.”

“I still don’t trust the major,” said her brother darkly, causing the girl to lean forward with a retort on her tongue before Clarke hushed her.

“Oh please don’t start that again,” she implored them, “we’re getting nowhere.”

“I must say he’s certainly not acting like a man with anything to hide,” Raven pointed out, coming in to back up the other two girls, and Doctor Jackson nodded his agreement. “He’s been very practical so far. Bringing in the police, keeping everyone together in groups, preserving the crime scene evidence. Very level-headed. I’d not met him before tonight, but you should have heard him, Mr. Blake. Very sensible, the things he was saying. About the different kinds of murderers, I mean.”

“Considering I’m having,” sighed Jackson, leaning his head against the frayed damask back of his stiff armchair and rubbing his temples, “is that one doesn’t go murdering people merely because they’re unpleasant. I had no more love for the reverend than anyone else, yet I simply cannot imagine a motive for killing the man.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Raven carelessly. “Clergymen hear things, you know. People confess their secrets to them, things they’d never dream of telling another living soul. And sooner or later, everyone in the village interacts with them. Weddings, christenings, funerals . . . He certainly had a wider acquaintance in town than any of the rest of us did.”

“That’s a very good point,” agreed Clarke.

“Not to be vulgar,” said the doctor, “but we are all in agreement, I assume, that our hostess’ theory about a burglary gone wrong is . . .” He paused, trying to think of a polite response.

“Bollocks,” Miss Blake finished for him helpfully, causing the young man to blush a bit. “It’s all right, Doctor, you can say it.”

“Nothing was stolen, as far as it seems,” agreed Raven. “I can see why she’d rather believe it was a simpler and less sinister sort of crime, but I’m of Major Kane’s mind in this. It’s damned fishy that the reverend was in the library at all. Creeping down the back stairs like some sort of criminal himself. He was mixed up in something, and it got him killed. By someone who knew this house well enough to comprehend all its exits and entrances, even the ones we don’t know about.”

Bellamy Blake’s head whipped around sharply, staring at her, as though an idea had just appeared in his mind. “What?” the girl demanded. But he shook his head, reluctant to speak.

“It’s nothing,” he muttered. “I mean . . . it can’t be.”

He never elaborated any further, though, no matter how much they pressed him, so finally they all
decided to leave the thing alone. But Clarke Griffin watched him curiously the rest of the night, as they went round and round, retelling the same scant facts, getting nowhere, and every once in awhile she observed him drifting out of the conversation, his mind wandering, brow furrowed in thought, an uneasy expression on her face. It was not lost on her that the young man was avoiding her gaze, and he did not bring up Lady Abigail’s name again, but Clarke Griffin was not fooled.

They’d stopped him saying it, but not thinking it.

_Well, let him suspect her, then_, she thought. _Who cared what he thought? He’d have plenty of his own explaining to do to the police, crashing his car here in the middle of the night, the only two guests not invited to the party. If she hadn’t been watching him with her own eyes, she’d have put him at the top of her list, and she was far from dismissing charges against the sister, either. Besides, it could be damned useful, knowing in advance before the police arrived where the trouble spots were, so Mother could navigate them._

No, there was nothing here to worry about, she told herself decisively, over and over in the fervent hopes she could make herself believe it. Bellamy Blake could not possibly endanger Mother, who could not possibly have killed anyone, which Constable Miller would surely see, and besides, none of it could have anything to do with . . . the other matter. So there was nothing here to fear. Clarke’s secrets were safe. No police investigators would come snooping through their lives.

This would all be over soon.

The party tromping through the snow down to the village was far less convivial, though young Miller had had the foresight to pack a large flask of brandy, which they passed back and forth in silence most of the way. They were all blunt, straightforward men of few words, who’d exchanged their own recollections of the night in the plainest terms, and had forborne to engage in any of the breathless speculation and theorizing that had overtaken the young people then arguing in the servants’ parlor. Miller and Lincoln had been together, playing at cards. The three young women had gone in to their rooms and not emerged. Both men could testify that no one had unbolted the door between upstairs and downstairs. Mr. Pike, for his turn, repeated again the movements of each party during the game, and while he was a fellow of good manners, he was also one of good sense, and he made no attempt at prevarication when speaking of either Lady Abigail or Mrs. Kane. It was not for him, Mr. Pike, to determine upon guilt or innocence. It was merely for him to fetch the police, and permit the forces of law and order to go about their work. Mr. Pike was a man with great faith in the workings of systems, and right now all he wanted was to hand this burden off from the anxious party at Miss Sydney’s house onto the calm, steady shoulders of Constable Miller, and let the constabulary do its job.

But when they finally cleared the woods and made their way down the hill to the village proper, the constabulary already had its hands full.

“What on earth can be going on at the post office at this time of night?” Pike muttered in confusion, as they arrived at the far end of the high street, which was unexpectedly full of noise and bustle, lights blazing in every window of the little cottage. “Is Nygel on a bender again?”

But Nygel, they learned shortly, would never go on a bender again.

She was lying facedown on the floor of the post-room, a dusky purple-black bruise wrapped around her throat. From afar, you’d think it was a necklace. Constable Miller nearly had, in fact, when he’d passed the cottage on his nightly rounds and spotted the door wide open. Suspecting one of the village youths of jimmying the bolt to break in and steal sweets again, he’d made his way inside to have another word with the postmistress about getting her locks changed, only to find her sprawled
out in a heap. He’d thought the same as Mr. Pike – "that damned nuisance of a woman, on a bender again" – but his sharp policeman's eye had immediately registered the absence of her accustomed bottle anywhere near the heap of her fallen body. This was unusual enough to give him pause, calling her name several times before finally forcing his way in to take a closer look.

Once inside, however, it would not have taken a policeman to note the odd, disjointed angle of her limbs and neck, or the roll of twine she used for tying up post-bundles lying haphazardly on the floor.

“What the devil is going on?” Mr. Pike demanded of young Maya Vie, who’d been tasked with guarding the door as her father helped the constable rope off the room where the dead woman's body still lay. The girl looked dazed, and scarcely seemed to register the entirely unexpected presence of the three men standing before her, nor the fact that they had clearly been walking through snow for hours. At another time she would have bubbled over with eager questions about Miss Sydney's dinner party; but now she sat heavily on a kitchen chair dragged haphazardly into the doorway, a wool afghan wrapped about her against the chill, her eyes a hundred miles away.

“There’s been a murder,” said the girl, a little numbly. “We’re all in a bit of a shock.”

The three men looked at each other, unease causing their blood to grow chill in their veins.

“I’m very sorry, my girl,” said Mr. Pike, and meant it, “but the shock isn’t over yet. Constable Miller!” he called into the back room. "I've another tragedy to add to your case load, I'm afraid. It's rather an emergency.”

“Nathan?” exclaimed the constable, emerging from the back room. “Mr. Pike, Mr. Lincoln, what on earth are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry to say we’re here to add to your troubles,” said Mr. Pike grimly. “We’ve had a murder, too.”

“What?”

“Reverend Jaha is dead,” Pike told his friend, as the constable's professional demeanor crumbled into an expression of open, unconcealed shock. "Stabbed in the chest. Jackson’s done as much of an examination as he could manage without any tools, but it seems straightforward enough. Whacking great gilt letter opener thing, the kind of stupid ornate trinket Miss Sydney would have lying about. Like a blasted theatrical prop. The whole thing is surreal, I don’t mind telling you. Major Kane’s got them all prepared to give statements, and is keeping the household more or less in hand, so we came down to fetch you.”

“Why the devil does it look like you’ve walked all this way?”

“Because we have,” young Miller said to his father. “The bridge is washed out on one side, and a tree’s fallen down on the other. It will take at least a dozen men to move it and clear the way for an automobile to come through.”

“And we’ve got Doctor Jackson, who you’ll need now, of course,” said Mr. Pike. “I’d have brought him with us, had I known.”

“How could you?” asked the constable helplessly. “Two murders in one night, in a town like this?” He turned to Lincoln, suddenly, noticing the man had been silent. “Mr. Lincoln, if I may ask,” he said, “why have you come along as well? Two walking through the forest together makes very good sense, for safety’s sake, with animals about and such, but it’s quite a long walk through the snow to
“Major Kane has asked us all to keep in groups of no fewer than three, for safety,” the man said evenly, and to the constable’s credit, he immediately understood.

“I see,” he murmured. “I take it the major’s of the belief that . . . Well, we’ll face that when we come to it.”

“But then it must be,” said his son, “that the two murders aren’t connected. It’s impossible that anyone could have gotten up and back in time to have done both.”

“Two murderers walking about the village?” Mr. Pike shuddered at the thought.

“Now, that’s for Doctor Jackson to determine,” said Constable Miller. “I should say Nygel has been dead no more than a few hours, but he will be able to put it much more accurately than I can, once he’s examined the body. And I’ll need to get a look at the scene of the crime up at Arcadia. Major Kane’s a man of good sense, I’m hoping he’s locked up the room?”

“He has.”

“Good.”

“There’s something else, too,” said his son uneasily. “And it might be related to Nygel’s death, or the reverend’s death, or both, or neither, but Major Kane said it was something you ought to know. Miss Sydney got a blue envelope in the post, and whatever was in it rattled her so badly that she asked me to call her friend at Scotland Yard. If the snow hasn’t stopped the trains he’ll be in on the ten a.m. from London.”

“A blue envelope?” his father repeated, eyes narrowed, then disappeared back into the post room for a moment before returning. “You mean, one like this?”

“That’s it exactly,” exclaimed the young man, regarding the innocent-looking square of bright blue that his father held between his gloved fingers. “Wherever did you find it?”

“On the floor, beside the woman’s body. I rather suspect it dropped out of her hands when the bastard wound the packing twine around her throat. It hasn’t been opened, but I fancy she was looking at it and didn’t hear the fellow come in.”

“I thought it was only the usual hysterics,” said Mr. Lincoln in his mild-mannered voice, “but if there was one in this morning’s post and another in the evening’s, then perhaps she was right to call in her friend from Scotland Yard after all.”

“This one was not destined for Miss Sydney,” said the constable, in a curious voice, and dropped the envelope into a brown folder marked “EVIDENCE” without saying anything further. The two servants felt nothing but relief at the thought that this trouble, at least, seemed unlikely to land at their doorstep, and neither of them gave the letter another thought as the constable locked the cottage door behind him and led the men down the lane to the station, to call in a second constable from the neighboring town.

Only Charles Pike, with his keen schoolmaster’s eyes which could easily read upside-down, had caught a glimpse of the bold black lettering on the front of the envelope as the constable filed it away.

He told no one what he saw. It was not his business. Constable Miller was a solid, level-headed man, and the investigation would unfold in a careful and methodical way, Pike was sure of it.
But as he watched the sun rise through the police station windows, a hot mug of tea in his chilled hands, he thought about the sense of foreboding he’d felt earlier that night, and he thought about footprints and alibis, and whose suggestion the game of Hide-and-Seek had been, and it seemed to him that nothing good in the world could come of the body of a dead postmistress, strangled with a letter for Abigail Griffin in her hand.
"The Lady Doth Protest Too Much, Methinks"

As Mr. Pike, Mr. Lincoln and young Miller warmed themselves in the police station, Vincent and Maya Vie went door to door throughout the village, rallying everyone they could wake to motor back up to Miss Sydney's property line to break down the massive tree trunk and clear a path through for the constable, so he could collect the reverend's body and begin taking statements. If any of the village men swinging their wood-axes happened to notice what Major Kane had seen when he himself first observed the tree trunk, however, no one remarked upon it; but that was to be expected. By now, the party still gathered inside Diana Sydney's house were the only people in the village who had not heard the news about the second murder; word of both deaths had spread like wildfire, and there was little room in anyone's minds for anything apart from breathless speculation about the culprits and endlessly repeating incorrect facts over and over again. By the time the last of the massive, gnarled roots were carted away, the story had solidified into a tale of sordid murder involving either American whiskey smugglers, or the Italian Mafia, depending upon whom you asked.

Constable Miller rang down to the train station to inquire into the whereabouts of the mysterious Scotland Yard visitor, only to learn that the morning trains had all been canceled, the snow on the tracks being too deep for anything to get through.

"What do we do about Miss Sydney's friend?" his son asked him, but the constable shrugged.

"I don't mind saying I'd be glad of the help with this case," he said, "but I haven't the time to worry about the inspector right now. If he's wise, he'll hire a car. The roads are clearer now than the train tracks are. In the meantime, Miss Sydney will have to make her statement about those blue envelopes to me instead."

"I can't think she'll like that very much," said Nathan a bit wryly. "She hates the locals knowing her business."

"Oh, she'll be mad as the devil," his father agreed, "but there's no help for it. At the moment, I'm the policeman she has, and after two murders in one night I'm not of a mind to indulge her desire for privacy."

Mr. Pike and Mr. Lincoln accompanied both the Millers in the police-car as they made their way back up the snow-blanketed road to where the massive tree had finally been carted away. The Blakes' automobile remained in the drive where they'd left it, nose smashed up against the low stone wall. Constable Miller did not appear in any kind of a hurry to get inside the house, and lingered for several long minutes examining the automobile in detail, even opening the unlocked door to examine its interior before finally climbing into the driver's seat, fiddling with the vehicle's controls for reasons the other men could not immediately determine. When he finally emerged, he pulled out the notebook he carried always in his jacket pocket and wrote for several minutes in silence before putting it away and making his way up the long drive toward the house.

Neither his son nor the other two men asked him any questions. All three of them had realized, rather uncomfortably, that down in the village they had been the constable's guests, drinking his tea and warming themselves at his fire to recover from their long, chilly sojourn; but now they had returned with him to the scene of a crime in which he was the investigator and they were all suspects. A line had been crossed, and none of them quite knew how to behave, so all three opted for silence.

When they entered the house, they found the entire party gathered in the breakfast-room, though it
did not appear that much breakfast had been consumed by anyone. "Constable Miller," exclaimed Major Kane, rising to greet him, "thank God you've come. The road is cleared, then?"

"Indeed it is," the constable said. "The work of many hands and a long night. The hearse will be up later today, to take the body down to the county morgue."

"Oh good," said Miss Sydney, sipping at her coffee. "So this whole unpleasant business will all be over soon. It will be a relief to have the beastly thing out of my house. And then of course I'm sure you'll all be looking forward to returning to your own houses."

The silence that followed this remark bespoke the group's inability to decide, as a whole, whether the remark's rudeness exceeded its stupidity, or the other way round. No one quite knew how to respond to it. Fortunately, the constable was not intimidated by actresses.

"Er, not just yet, Miss Sydney," he cautioned. "I'll be trespassing on your good hospitality a few hours longer, unfortunately, as I'll need to look round a bit, and take everyone's statements."

"Surely that can all happen at the police station?"

"Much better to get it over with as quickly as possible, Diana," said Lady Abigail reassuringly. "We'll be out of your way in no time, I'm sure. Let the constable do his job."

"Thank you, Lady Abigail. Doctor Jackson, if you wouldn't mind, I should like to examine the reverend's body. Have you the key to the parlor?"

"I have," said Major Kane, retrieving it from his pocket and handing it over.

"And it has been in your possession all night?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep?"

"Not a bit. I suspect none of us did."

"I'm sorry to hear it, though hardly surprised," said the constable sympathetically. "You've all had the devil of a night. I'll be as efficient as I can, in the hopes of releasing you all home to your beds as soon as can be." Then he took the key from the major's hand, and the young doctor rose to follow him out of the room. Major Kane did not accompany them, a fact which several members of the group noted with a whisper of unease; suddenly the tragic events of the previous night had departed the realm of nightmarish unreality, and hardened with the cold light of day into a formal criminal investigation. In handing over the key, it seemed to those gathered as though the major had ceded his temporary authority into official hands, which made everything suddenly and terrifyingly real.

They had not dreamt it. A man they knew had died, and now the police were here, and every one of them was a suspect.

In the sinister darkness of the night before, they had all yearned desperately for morning to come, for fresh air and sunshine and coffee and ordinary conversation to dispel the horror of sudden death which had descended so unexpectedly into their midst. But daylight had brought no relief, and they each began to realize that the worst was far from over.

By now, social hierarchy had largely been dispensed with, so young Miller, Lincoln and Mr. Pike found themselves in the midst of a decidedly mixed gathering, servants and guests alike seated around the table with steaming cups of coffee, absently nibbling at toast or pushing bits of egg
around their plate with their fork, silent and distracted. Even Diana appeared unusually subdued. She had spent an entirely sleepless night, the two bleary-eyed servants informed their colleagues when they finally descended from her chambers, ill-tempered and exhausted and ready to hand in their notice altogether; it had been the Blake siblings, therefore, who took on the task of preparing breakfast for the house to permit Monroe and Harper to lie down in their beds for a few hours until the constable arrived. Bellamy and Octavia had been cooking for themselves since they were tall enough to reach the stove, and were perfectly competent to navigate their way around even such a grandiose kitchen as Arcadia’s; eggs, bacon, toast and porridge were hardly alien to them, and if their handiwork fell beneath Diana’s exacting culinary standards, she did not notice, having hardly any more appetite than anyone else in the house.

The constable and the doctor were gone for a little more than half an hour, during which time the room remained largely silent save for the clinking of flatware and coffee cups. There seemed an unspoken agreement, now the formal investigation had begun, to begin behaving a bit more cautiously with one another; they were, after all, murder suspects, a fact with which everyone save the mistress of the house was beginning to come to terms. When the constable returned, Doctor Jackson resuming his seat at the breakfast-table, both men looked sober and serious, and it did not escape the notice of Major Kane, as well as several of the others, that the young doctor looked far more worried now than he had before he left the room.

Major Kane was well aware that he had broken his own rule about keeping to groups of three in sitting up all last night alone with Lady Abigail, a fact it would hardly be possible to keep secret for long; but for propriety's sake, he had elected to sit down to breakfast as far away from her as he could. He regretted this decision immediately, however, as soon as the constable began speaking, and delivered the terrible news which so far only the doctor and the three men who had accompanied him up from the village had so far been told. Major Kane did not know if his presence at her side would have afforded Abby anything like comfort – if comfort could be had at such a time – and he was aware of the selfishness inherent in his own motives (didn’t he, if he were really honest with himself, simply want to be near her, whether it did the lady any good or not?); but still, his seat at the far end of the table between his mother and Mr. Blake suddenly felt an ocean away from her, instead of merely a few feet of polished mahogany scattered with the remnants of breakfast on Diana’s second-best plates.

“Look here,” said the constable, in his sober, steady voice. “It’s no good beating about the bush in a matter like this, so I’m going to be very frank with you all. We are at present investigating not one crime, but three. As it stands now, they may be connected. They may not. There is insufficient evidence, at this time, to come to any kind of determination. But if you find that I am obligated to put to each of you a great many questions which strike you as unrelated to the events of last night, I implore each and every one of you to be fully honest and forthcoming. Things which you believe have no bearing on the death of the reverend may in fact be of vital importance if we learn these matters are linked. You each may have seen things, or heard things, that struck you as meaningless at the time; but which, when laid side-by-side with an irrelevant observation on a different matter from a different person, form themselves into a definitive clue. I also wish to remind you all, as both a precaution and a kindness, that there is no such thing in a murder investigation as privacy. It will go a good deal better for everyone if you come clean immediately, about anything which might be relevant, rather than leaving me to discover it for myself and find I was lied to. You all know me, and you know that I am not a man who goes in for rumor-mongering or gossip. Your confidences will be safe with me, if I determine them to have no bearing on the case. You need have no fear of speaking openly with me. Have I made my meaning clear?”

“I say, you’re doing rather well,” Diana Sydney remarked from her seat at the head of the table, gesturing at the constable with a graceful arm sleeved in a voluminous emerald-green morning gown. “I’d never have thought a small-town constable would have such a gift for commanding a
room. Have you ever thought of going on the stage?"

“For God’s sake, Diana,” said Lady Abigail sharply. “Now is hardly the time to be running auditions.”

“It was a compliment, darling, don’t be such a stick in the mud.”

“Miss Sydney,” said the constable, turning his attention to her with a commanding and weighty seriousness that silenced her immediately, and struck the others in the group rather satisfyingly as something like a punishment. “Am I correct in understanding from my son that you are even now expecting a Scotland Yard detective upon your personal request to address a criminal matter?”

All heads in the room swiveled her direction, as the rest of the party waited with more than a little satisfaction to see how their irritating hostess would navigate herself out of the direct question she’d been hoping to avoid. Diana was visibly discomfited. She plainly did not want to say anything more on the matter than she already had, which was virtually nothing; yet even she understood that inquiries from a police officer held a very different tenor than those from Major Kane. She weighed her response carefully before she spoke, but her tone was at least more steady and less theatrical than her prior remark. “I did not think it worth mentioning,” she finally responded, rather vaguely, "as it can have nothing to do with the reverend’s death."

“As I have informed you,” the constable repeated rather curtly, "the reverend’s death is not the only matter under investigation. Nygel the postmistress was also murdered last night.”

Mr. Pike was one of the few in the room to whom this announcement was not news, and thus took the opportunity to cast his eyes around the room, curious to assess the assembled party's reactions to the constable's words. Doctor Jackson's reaction was slight, confirming the schoolteacher's suspicions that the constable had enlightened the young doctor while they examined the body together. Lincoln and young Miller shared the same grim, unsurprised expression he knew was mirrored on his own face. Major Kane and Lady Abigail looked utterly horrified, with exactly the expression of fear and shock one would expect under the circumstances. The female servants, to whom this was all new information, looked very much the same, while their mistress appeared mildly confused, as though unable to quite recall who the postmistress was and how upset she ought to be. The Blakes were the most visibly affected, very carefully refusing to look at each other and staring resolutely down at their plates as their whole bodies stiffened with something like alarm that Mr. Pike could not help but note with some suspicion.

It was the two others – Clarke Griffin, and Vera Kane – whose expressions puzzled him most exceedingly and struck his heart with a pang of apprehension. In both their faces, he saw something which very plainly bespoke an entirely natural shock and horror masking something far more interesting to him . . . something that might have been relief.

And he was not the only one struck by it, he realized shortly, as he watched Major Kane's eyes drift to his mother, reading the same expression on her face that had so struck Mr. Pike, and the schoolteacher watched as the other man's look of bafflement gave way very swiftly to apprehension, and even fear.

What possible reason could his mother have for wishing the postmistress dead? Or, if not wishing the death itself, precisely, at least knowing some burden had been removed by the occurrence of it. Major Kane had no leisure to think on it further, as the constable went on, but the fear lodged itself deep into his breast and nothing could remove it.

“Nygel is dead?” Bellamy Blake finally broke the silence, his words carefully neutral, revealing nothing. “When did this happen?”
“Sometime last night,” said the constable evasively. “I shall await Doctor Jackson’s professional opinion before committing myself with more specificity, but I should say between eleven p.m. and three a.m. It was close to four when I spotted her door open and found the body, and she had been dead for some little time before then; though, with the door open and freezing air sweeping in, it is difficult to determine whether rigor mortis was hastened along or not. We shall know more shortly.”

“What is the third matter?” Major Kane asked him, and the constable’s head swiveled to make eye contact with the other man.

“Yes,” he said slowly, pulling an evidence file from the leather satchel he had brought with him. “The third matter is not, as far as I have been able to determine, a murder. Yet there is a definite connection to one of the deaths, and I should like very much to know if a connection exists to the second. Lady Abigail,” he said, reaching out across the table to hand her the file, “can you tell me if this means anything to you?”

She opened the file and examined its contents, though the rest of the room could not immediately see them. Major Kane watched her face with enormous interest, but whatever was inside, it was plainly unfamiliar to the woman. He watched her examine it closely, brow furrowed, before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, no,” she told him apologetically. “I see that it has my name on it, of course, but neither the envelope nor the writing are familiar to me. I’m sorry I can’t be more help.”

Perhaps someone else in the room will recognize it,” said the constable in a noncommittal voice, “would you do me the favor of holding it up, please?”

“Certainly,” she said, and removed the bright blue envelope from the file.

The effect was electric.

The room appeared evenly divided amongst those to whom the blue envelope was of very little interest, and those upon whom it landed with an explosive blow. Miss Sydney rose halfway out of her seat before collecting herself and sitting back down again, Mrs. Kane’s face fell in an expression of utter distress, the Blakes clutched at each other’s hands under the table, and Clarke Griffin reached across the table to snatch the envelope out of the constable’s evidence file. The constable, however, was quicker, and plucked it deftly from Lady Abigail’s grasp before any other fingers could touch it, leaving the young girl glowering at him with a deep flush of anger and embarrassment sweeping over her cheeks.

“I believe I am right in assuming, then,” said the constable in a perfectly calm voice, “that this blue envelope is not unfamiliar to many of the people in this room.”

The silence that followed was terrible. Not a single person in the room was anything less than miserably uncomfortable, mired in either baffled confusion, or their own private fears.

It was Vera Kane, finally, who gave a deep sigh and broke the silence first. “You’re a very clever man,” she said to the constable, “I’ve always thought so. So I don’t suppose there’s any merit in pretending this isn’t exactly what you think it is. If the envelope for Lady Abigail is anything like the ones I’ve received, then it’s a very wicked thing indeed, and I’m a great deal less surprised now than I was a few minutes ago that the second murder should have been the postmistress. Or perhaps the first murder; Doctor Jackson will tell us.”

“Mother, what on earth are you talking about?” the Major exclaimed. She patted his hand reassuringly.

“Blackmail, darling,” she said very calmly, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. “I
thought I was the only one, I imagine one always thinks that. But Lady Abigail makes two, and if this is the private matter Miss Sydney summoned her pet policeman for, then that’s three.”

“Four,” said Clarke Griffin, reluctantly, as though the words were being dragged out of her, causing her mother to turn and stare at her with wide, stunned eyes.

“Five,” said Octavia Blake, to her brother’s great dismay.

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“Five,” said Octavia Blake, to her brother’s great dismay.

“Shut up, Octavia,” he hissed. “We agreed not to talk about it.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” she snapped back. “It wasn’t only us, you idiot, it was half the village by the looks of it, and now the only person who knew the blackmailer’s identity is dead. And we were probably the last to see her alive. Don’t be stupid, Bellamy, you heard what he said. Lying about it will just make this worse.”

“Last to see her alive?” the constable repeated, making a few scribbles in his notebook. “Well, Miss Blake, if you wouldn’t mind accompanying me into the library, I believe I’ll give you the courtesy of letting you get the burden of questioning over with first.” It sounded courteous, but it was very plain that it was not a request. Sullenly, she rose to follow him, her brother leaping to his feet to join them, but the constable shook his head. “No, Mr. Blake,” he said politely, “I will not be requiring your services just yet. I’ll send for you when I need you.”

“But – “

“Sit down and stop making it worse,” Clarke Griffin hissed at him, tugging his sleeve, and reluctantly, he finally obeyed, watching his sister and the constable disappear into the other room.
As Miss Blake was first to be summoned for questioning, the rest of the party could not help but feel grave unease as the length of her absence dragged on and on. There was no clock in the breakfast-room, and of the gentlemen, only her restless, anxious brother was wearing a wristwatch, which he checked so often it began to drive everyone in the room slightly mad. Still, no one could fault him, really, as it did begin to seem that the girl had been sequestered in the library for an unsettling long time.

When she returned, she was silent, and did not meet her brother's urgent, questioning eyes. Bellamy Blake had a face as expressive as it was handsome, in its stubborn, square-jawed way, and had been born with the fortune - or, perhaps, in this moment, misfortune - of being one of those people whose every thought and sensation are instantly legible to any observer. His wordless question to his sister was plain as day to everyone in the room:

!*How much did you tell him?*

But Octavia's eyes did not answer his. They remained downcast in her tightly-drawn face as she resumed her seat in silence, hands fidgeting with her napkin. She spoke nothing and looked at no one, and did not even lift her gaze to Bellamy as the constable politely requested that young man's presence in the library next.

This did not, the party silently reflected as one, bode well for anyone.

Of the more observant among them, several noticed a subtle but deliberate pattern in the constable's behavior: namely, his polite insistence on escorting each of them back to the breakfast-room himself before calling for the next to be questioned, rather than ringing for a servant. It did not escape Major Kane or Lady Abigail that the Blakes had been entirely prevented from obtaining a moment alone with each other, even so little as passing to and fro in the hallway. Whatever their hostess might think of her local bobby's lack of urban panache, even she could not dispute that he was taking his position seriously.

Bellamy Blake was succeeded by Vera Kane, and then by Miss Sydney. Mr. Pike followed. The Griffins went next, and the major noted that Lady Abigail's restlessness, as she awaited Clarke's return, was quite a match for young Mr. Blake's, lacking only the wristwatch. Time felt endless to them all, and it was impossible to determine the relative length of each absence compared to the others; still, it seemed that the daughter was gone quite a bit longer than her mother was, a fact which made him wonder.

As the constable brought Abby back into the breakfast-room and exchanged her for the young doctor, Kane saw that her lovely face was etched with worry. He was weighing to himself whether he felt brave enough to throw caution to the wind, rise from his chair and sweep her into his arms, right there in front of God and the servants and his mother, when she did something he found astonishing.

"Miss Blake, Miss Sydney, Mrs. Kane," she said, nodding in their direction, then looking down at her daughter and taking her hand. "I wonder if I might request that you join me in the morning-room for a moment. I believe it may be prudent, at this juncture, to undertake a private conference among the ladies."

Constable Miller turned back, on his way out the door with Doctor Jackson, and gave her a curious, searching look, leading Kane to wonder if he were about to contest this, and prohibit anyone from
leaving the room. But after a long, silent moment, his expression changed, and the major was astonished to see that he looked, perhaps, impressed. At any rate, he did not stop her, and one by one, the women - wearing varying expressions of confusion and surprise - rose obediently from their seats to follow Lady Abigail, as she closed the door behind her.

* * * * *

“What is this about, Mother?” asked Clarke Griffin, once they had seated themselves, coffee cups in hand, on the room’s delicate cream-colored settees, and Diana had closed the door, leaving them out of earshot from the gentlemen and servants still waiting in the breakfast-room.

Lady Abigail had seated herself in an armchair by the window, rather at the head of the room, the others circled around her, and it was evident to all of them that she had something very definite to say. She wasted no time with idle pleasantries, therefore, and got to the point immediately, her voice clear and honest and straightforward.

"I believe it is fair to assume," she began, "that each of us faced more or less the same questions from Constable Miller, and that each of us are intelligent enough not to bother lying to the police about things which are easily checked. That is to say, I have now seen the contents of that blue envelope with my name on it, and I daresay all the rest of you revealed to him the contents of yours."

The others shifted in their seats uncomfortably, and no one could quite look at each other, but their tense faces confirmed her hypothesis.

"Then I think we'd better have it out," she declared grimly. "We can agree, if we like, that none of it need leave this room without unanimous consent. But it does seem just possible that, if only we were to put all our stories together, we might discover something - some thread of connection, however fragile - which may point us in the direction of the blackmailer . . . and from him, therefore, the murderer. I am under no illusions that this will be a comfortable chat for any of us, and I know I am asking you to reveal things which may be very painful, things which you may never have spoken aloud. And not all of you know me well enough," she said, eyes fixed on Miss Blake, "to trust whether I am a safe receptacle for such secrets. I understand that. But I truly think there is no help for it. I think we had better tell each other what was in those letters."

Vera Kane alone looked serenely unsurprised at this; it was plain she had expected something of the kind from the moment Lady Abigail summoned them. Clarke bit her lip nervously, brow furrowed as she watched her mother, but she did not protest. Even Miss Blake, though stubborn to the last, appeared, if not pleased, at least resigned.

Diana Sydney alone seemed prepared to refuse.

“I’m sure you mean well, Abigail,” she said loftily, with an airy, dismissive gesture toward the lady seated across the room. "But with the greatest affection in the world, my dears, the situations can hardly be compared. The four of you are permanent residents of this quaint, sleepy little town, while I am a highly-visible public figure. Really, the damage a few silly little rumors might do to your reputations is unlikely to compare with the possible risk of –"

“Oh, stuff it, Diana,” said Vera Kane unexpectedly, causing everyone in the room to sit bolt upright in their seats and stare at the woman with wide, astonished eyes. Lady Abigail was forced to cough into her handkerchief to disguise a laugh, Clarke was gazing at the older woman with an awe bordering on the religious, and Octavia Blake looked closer to delighted than anyone had seen her in her life.

Miss Sydney, for her part, was so startled, and the remark itself so wildly out of character, that - at
"Whoever this blackmailer is," Vera went on, "he or she is quite remarkably clever, and has obtained access to our deepest, most closely-held secrets. Secrets which many of us, perhaps, have never spoken aloud to another soul - even to our dearest loved ones. We are not speaking here of mere gossip, Diana. This is not a game. This fiend does not traffic in such. These are grave matters, which in the wrong hands could destroy lives. Your sins may be more glamorous than mine, but the public revelation of them is no more dangerous."

To her credit, Diana seemed chastened by this, and did not interrupt again.

Vera turned to Lady Abigail. "I trust you," she said simply. "You are a wise and kind woman, with a great sense of justice, and I put myself in your hands. If we all agree to follow your lead, preserving one another's confidences, in the hopes that it may bring the nightmare in which we are trapped to a swifter end, than I find myself entirely of your mind in this matter. And, if you like, I will go first."

“Thank you, Vera,” said Abby warmly, reaching out to take the woman’s hand in her own. “I give you all my word of honor never to reveal to another soul - without the unanimous permission of all five of us - any of what we discuss here today in this room. Do we have an agreement?”

“I agree,” said Clarke, and “I agree,” said Octavia, and “oh, very well, if the rest of you insist,” sighed Diana, and with that the pact was sealed.

"Before we come to the contents of the letters," said Lady Abigail, settling back into her chair, "I should like first to ascertain how many each of us has received, and when. The letter which was found in Nygel's hand was the first addressed to me. Or, at any rate, the first I have seen." She turned to her daughter, who shook her head definitively.

“No, Mama. I never saw any for you.”

“How many for you, darling?” her mother asked gently.

Clarke swallowed hard. “Just the one,” she said, “I promise. It arrived two days ago. Yours would have arrived this morning, if we’d been home to receive it and if it wasn’t police evidence now. So they weren’t mailed together. I don’t know if that matters or not.”

Lady Abigail nodded, and turned to Miss Blake, who answered without being asked. “My first was nearly two months ago. I burnt it, without telling Bellamy. I suppose I hoped it would all go away on its own, though I do realize now that was foolish. The second arrived perhaps three weeks ago, I’ve forgotten the date. And then I did something I oughtn’t, you'll think me very stupid for it, I know Bellamy does, but I . . .” She trailed off, cheeks flushing hot red with shame, and stared down at the carpet.

“Fifty pounds?” suggested Vera Kane her voice full of sympathy and free of judgment, startling the girl into looking up at her, eyes bright with tears. She nodded, lip quivering. “That’s all right, dear heart,” said the older lady kindly. "I paid too. And, well, maybe your Bellamy and my Marcus would think us silly for believing it would end the matter, and would reproach us for not coming to them for counsel straight away; but when you are protecting someone you love, money always seems such a trifling thing."

“That's it," said Octavia gratefully, "that's it exactly."

“I didn’t pay, yet, but I was planning to,” Clarke confessed to the other girl, to her mother's chagrin.
“If that's any consolation. You aren’t a fool, Octavia, you’re a very practical girl, and this person has done something very wicked to all of us. You mustn’t blame yourself for protecting your brother.”

“I thought it would make it all go away,” Octavia muttered. “Stupid of me, I know. So stupid. Bell was right. He’d gone round the bank for grocery money and learned what I’d done. So he came straight back and stormed into my room to demand an explanation, and found me burning the second letter in my bedroom grate, just as I’d burned the first. And then, well, we had a frightful row, and the whole nasty business came out. Fifty pounds is quite a lot for us, and with that money gone, we couldn’t wait for the morning delivery; we needed mother’s pension cheque to pay the rent right away. So we went to Nygel to collect the post ourselves, so we could get the cheque straight to the bank. But when we arrived, there was . . . there was a third letter . . .”

Her voice cracked abruptly, as Vera Kane patted her back in a comforting fashion. “I thought I’d fixed it,” she said plaintively, “I thought it would all go away, I told Bell I’d handled it, but I was wrong, I’d only made everything worse. I haven’t read the third letter, it’s still in the back seat of the car, but I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore. I can fetch it, if you like.”

“Later, perhaps,” said Lady Abigail. “It might be helpful for Constable Miller to be able to compare it to the others. But other than, perhaps, escalating their financial demands, I’m certain you don’t need to see it again to guess what it says.”

“If it’s like mine, it will be a hundred pounds now,” said Mrs. Kane. “I’ve only had two. I paid the first, as I said, and then the second came yesterday afternoon. I found it just as we were leaving for the dinner, as a matter of fact. Marcus saw me reading it, though of course I lied to the dear boy and didn’t tell him what it was. But the contents were quite the same. Just more money, now.”

“So that’s one for me, one for Clarke, three for Miss Blake, and two for Mrs. Kane,” said Lady Abigail, looking pointedly at her hostess, who sighed in resignation.

“Four,” Diana finally said. “The last arrived yesterday morning, as Constable Miller already knows, precipitating my phone call to my friend at the Yard. The first arrived perhaps a month and a half ago? So, beginning after Miss Blake, it seems. And the others followed, oh, every two weeks or so. I’ve kept them all, and I’ll provide them to the police. And no, before you ask, I didn’t pay. The greedy beast appears to have scaled his demands according to our respective means, so it was - well, quite a bit more than fifty pounds. As I suspect it was for the Griffins,” she added pointedly, "though they are both too polite to say so, as we all know the gentry loathes talking about money.”

“It’s true,” said Clarke heavily. “It was three hundred for me. A great deal more than I could get at without telling Mother, unless I went into town to the bank.”

Lady Abigail looked at her, compassion and sadness in her eyes. "So it wasn't a shopping trip, was it?" she murmured. "Your plan to drive to London tomorrow.”

"I'm so sorry,” Clarke whispered, eyes bright with tears of shame, which spilled over as her mother reached out to take her hand.

“Well, on the bright side,” said Diana, adroitly changing the subject - though whether to allow the Griffins a moment to compose themselves, or simply for the opportunity to take the spotlight back, it remained unclear - "though I’m very sorry for both Mrs. Kane and Miss Blake that you should both find yourselves out a bit of money –”

“More than a bit,” Octavia muttered.

“Well, regardless, it does occur to me that this could end up being rather useful to the investigation. I
mean to say, if you remember more or less when you gave the man his money, couldn’t the police merely pop round the bank and ask if anyone has made any suspicious deposits following those dates?”

“It’s not quite that simple, Diana,” said Lady Abigail. “For one thing, no intelligent criminal, in a place as small as this, is going to pay a visit to Mount Weather’s only bank to deposit a hulking great sack of blackmail money. He’d know how damned suspicious it would look. The clerk would go down the pub for a pint after work, and tell one person, who would tell another person, who would tell another person, and by breakfast the whole village would know.”

“I notice we keep referring to this criminal as a man,” Vera observed. “I have been doing it myself. But it occurs to me - given that the letters were not slipped under our doors, but actually sent through the post - that perhaps there is a far more likely suspect right in front of us. Namely, Nygel herself.”

Everyone, Lady Abigail included, turned to stare at her. This had plainly never occurred to any of them.

“But the letter was sent from London,” Clarke argued. “Stamped from a post office and everything.”

“Was it?” said Vera. “Or did a very clever woman carefully remove the paper stamp from one of the hundreds of pieces of mail that pass through her hands, and place it onto a letter she’d written herself?”

“That would certainly explain why she was found with one in her hand,” said Octavia. “We’ve no notion how many other people she’s been blackmailing. Someone could have walked in, seen her with a letter in her hand, put the pieces together, and simply lost their head in a rage.” She turned sharply to Lady Abigail, a thought abruptly occurring to her. “Good God,” she exclaimed, eyes wide with horror. “What luck that you were trapped up here when the body was found. Otherwise –” She halted mid-sentence, cheeks reddening as Clarke shot her a repressive glare.

“Yes,” said Lady Abigail slowly. “I’d thought of that. Especially given that no one in the village knew, yet, that the tree was down, and no one had expected the snow. On an ordinary night - no matter how generous the hospitality of our hostess,” she added politely, in Diana’s direction, “it would have been entirely reasonable to expect that I would be home in my bed by then.”

“Mother is neither a murderer nor a blackmailer, Miss Blake,” said Clarke stiffly, deeply affronted.

“She knows that, darling,” said Lady Abigail. “She merely observed – and was correct to do so – how easy it would be for someone to make it appear that I was.”

“So then I was right,” Diana pronounced triumphantly. “I told that bore of a constable the two matters could not possibly be connected.”

“That’s a bit of a reach, still,” said Lady Abigail. “We still don’t know what was in each letter, so I’m not willing yet to discount that there might be some link between them. At any rate, I believe that the power of blackmail lies in secrecy, and perhaps if we bring our secrets into the light, we may diffuse the hold they have over us. Especially if we are wrong, if the blackmailer is yet living, and plans to make another attempt on any of us. Should that occur, I suggest we notify one another - and the constable of course - straightaway, preserving the evidence in as pristine a state as possible, and that no one pay another cent. Agreed?” They all nodded. “Well, then, Mrs. Kane,” said the lady soberly, “I’m afraid there’s no more stalling to be had. You very kindly offered to take the first bullet for us, and I am sorry to say I am cowardly enough to let you. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, my dear girl,” said Vera, her warm, motherly voice bringing an odd sense of comfort to
Lady Abigail—who, now in her forties, had not been anyone’s “dear girl” in a matter of decades. “I confess I am at a loss as to how Nygel, if Nygel indeed it was, might have come by this knowledge, but here is the truth. I shall tell you everything—not all of this, of course, was mentioned in the letter, but enough to lead me to believe the entire story is known to whomever wrote it. I shall lay it all out for you, and leave it to you all what to make of it.”

The curiosity pounding in the hearts of all four women was equally great, as they watched the older lady settle back into her seat and set forth her tale.

"My husband was an unkind man," Vera began, surprising them all with her frankness. "Miss Sydney is too new to the village, and you ladies too young, to have made his acquaintance, but Lady Abigail knows of which I speak, though she herself was only a girl when he died. George had a great many debts—which he could never pay, because he drank away so much of our income. And he had a terrible temper, besides, which made steady employment difficult and our home a very unhappy place. It pained me very much to part with Marcus, but sending him away to school was the only way to protect him, as his father’s temper grew steadily worse.

“The day George died,” she went on, “he stumbled home from work, drunk already in the middle of the day, and announced he had been dismissed for threatening another fellow with a broken glass bottle. No one was seriously hurt, thank the Lord, but the very notion gave me a wretched fright. He shouted and stomped and swore, and insisted that since we had no more money, I must send for Marcus immediately, in order that he might give up his education and return to Mount Weather to find employment to support his father. I refused. I had made my own choices, and I did not wish to shame my son by asking for a divorce. I knew George was my husband until one or both of us left this earth. But I would not let Marcus suffer on his father’s behalf. George grew . . . rough with me," Vera went on tactfully, eliding past details she clearly had no wish to discuss, and even inveterate busybody Diana Sydney was too humane to press for more, “and then slammed the door and stormed off to the Swords.

“From there, I debated with myself what I ought to do. By acting with violence toward me, for the first time in our married life, I felt a line had been crossed which marked a dangerous alteration in our home, and I no longer trusted that Marcus was safe at his hands. But he would be home in only a few weeks for his next holiday; I could not keep him away forever. I debated whether to write him, and reveal the truth, and implore him to remain at school; but he was a boy of fourteen, and no child should be forced to make such a decision. No. My son, my responsibility.

"Finally, after an interval of some consideration—I know not how long, though it was quite dark by then—I made my way down to the high street, and seated myself on a bench near the bridge over the pond, from which I could see the pub. George was still inside, drinking heavily; I could see him through the window. Some hour or two later, he finally stumbled out, scarcely able to walk. He was halfway over the bridge when I approached him. I will not repeat in polite company the insults he hurled at me, or the ugly things he said about our son. It has been the work of half a lifetime to try and forget them. I bore it, then, as stoically as I could, and informed him that he was no longer welcome in our home, and henceforth ought to consider himself as a man with no family. I would not divorce him, and I would support him as well as I was able—Reverend Jaha's predecessor had offered more than once to find me employment at the church. But, as I said to him quite clearly, I was no longer his wife, I owed him no duties, and Marcus was no longer his son. ‘Then I have nothing,’ he hissed at me, in a cruel, bitter kind of voice I had never heard before. ‘No money, no job, no family, no name. Nothing to live for.’ ‘That is not true,’ I said. ‘Forgiveness is something to live for. Hope is something to live for.’ ‘You have taken all of that from me,’ he said. ‘You have done this to me. Know this, for the rest of your life. This is your fault and yours alone.’ Then he stepped over the bridge-rail, and jumped.”
She said the words in a very even tone, but every woman in the room started violently, eyes wide with horror. Clarke Griffin’s hand flew to her mouth, and Octavia Blake went quite pale. Even Diana looked horrified. Lady Abigail alone wore a different expression - not surprise, but grief.

How badly she had wanted to be wrong about this.

How desperately her heart ached . . . and not only for the woman sitting across from her.

Oh, Marcus.

“No one suspected anything amiss when his body was found the next day,” Vera continued, “as no one in the pub had seen me from the bench across the street; the light, of course, being all on their side, while the park was pitch black. And I had waited long enough to be quite certain I was alone, not wanting witnesses for what I expected to be a frightful row. And George’s unpleasant habits were known through the village, the testimony of his employer as to his state of mind that day quite damning, and in saying he had departed the Swords barely able to walk upright, the publican was speaking no more than truth. That he drank himself to oblivion, left the pub alone, stumbled over a bridge whose rails came only up to his knees, and drowned by accident seemed quite plain to everyone who heard the tale. Including my son. For my own sake, I cared little whether George were buried in the churchyard or the potter’s field, but the true story seemed too heavy a burden to put on Marcus. I suppose I feel differently now; if I had told him the truth at fourteen, if I had had more faith in his natural fortitude and resilience - if I had been willing to protect him a bit less and trust him a bit more - perhaps I should not be sitting here now. But I lied. I watched George Kane’s body sink to the bottom of the pond, weighed down by his wool overcoat and all his sodden clothes, and then I returned home and went to bed. In the morning, exactly as I had anticipated, I was awoken in the morning by the constable’s knock. David Miller’s father, it was then. I told him the full and complete truth, holding nothing back, right up until the moment George left for the pub. Then, I said to the constable, I had taken to my bed in distress and had not emerged again until he knocked on my door. The constable believed me, the judge at the inquest believed me, and Marcus believed me. Until I received that blue envelope, not a single human being had ever asked the one question which truly sounded the depths of the wickedness of my deed. The question I lived each day in fear of being asked.”

“What question was that?” asked Octavia, unable to help herself. Vera turned to her with a sad, resigned expression.

"The question of why a wife who, in her youth, was Mount Weather's girls' championship swimmer for ten years running,” said Vera, "did not jump into the water to save her husband."

Octavia swallowed hard. "Oh," was all she said.

“I did consider it,” she admitted, “as I watched his body sink to the depths of the pond. I think I could have saved his life, if I had wanted to. But I realized then that I did not want to. That is the sin which the blackmailer found out. Not that I told a well-meaning lie to protect my son and ensure a wicked man a Christian burial, which after all is not so very shameful . . . but that I suppose, in an indirect way, I am something of a murderess myself. A fact which my very proper son, who takes justice quite seriously, would not understand.”

Her tale complete, she looked over at Lady Abigail. “I am more than willing to offer you the letter itself, at any time you might care to look it over,” she said, “but now you know where my position stands. It appears that I was wrong, that some witness was present that night - perhaps concealed in the trees near the bridge, perhaps watching from a darkened window along the high street. I have gone over it and over it in my mind, and I cannot think of who it might be, or how they would know. But someone must have seen George step off the bridge, seen me stand there and watch him
drown before turning my back and walking away. Why such a person would wait nearly three decades to use this information against me, I cannot know, but there you have it. Now you can understand why fifty pounds seemed such a small price to pay, to keep such a letter from being sent to my son.”

Clarke Griffin, seated beside her on the settee, turned to the older woman and embraced her with fierce affection. “You are not a wicked woman, Mrs. Kane,” she said, voice muffled by the gray silk of Vera Kane’s borrowed morning-gown. “You are the best and kindest person I know. If you had jumped in and saved him, if your husband had lived, there is no telling what he might have done next. A young boy would not have been safe near a father prone to threatening people with broken glass.”

“And you raised a good son, which means you did right,” said Lady Abigail. “Mother to mother. You gave him a home in which the parent he took after the most was you. I do not know that I would like a Major Kane who grew to manhood under the influence of such a wicked man as that.”

“But you like this one, I take it,” said Vera irrepressibly, even the grim nature of the moment unable to suppress her inherent good nature, and Clarke was amused to see her mother blush and look away.

“Well, I’ll go next,” declared Octavia, “since Mrs. Kane was so very much braver than I was prepared to be. I suppose I’ll just tell you the whole truth as well, since she has. The fact of the matter is that Bellamy and I – well, he’s not really my brother.”

“What?” exclaimed Clarke, in shock, interrupting the girl in the middle of her next sentence.

“He’s my half-brother, I was going to say,” said Octavia, impatient and a trifle amused, “I mean we haven’t been pretending to be related or anything. And we were raised as proper siblings. But we have different fathers, though we never met them. Mother forged a marriage certificate, claiming some third fellow, a soldier – entirely made up, as far as we know – as her deceased husband, in order to obtain a military widow’s pension to help support us. After she died, the cheques kept coming, and, well, we needed the money, so we couldn’t quite bring ourselves to be too scrupulous about it. When we moved here from the city, we simply provided them a new forwarding address, and no one ever asked any questions. We thought we might be a great deal safer in Mount Weather than we were in London, since Mother had . . . a wide acquaintance,” she finished rather tactfully. “Many of them unsavory. And we rather suspected that if either of our fathers had been able to locate us, they’d think nothing of attempting to get a piece of Mother’s money for themselves. So we disappeared. We tried, first, to split up; Bellamy got his teaching degree in Manchester, while I went to Germany for mine. Having a foreign language in your pocket helps, you know, when trying for a job at a school. But when Bellamy came to Mount Weather to apply for the job here, he learned they were also looking for a girls’ athletics instructor, and I’d more than enough experience for Mr. Pike to hire me sight unseen on Bell’s recommendation. All my German lessons for naught, more’s the pity. It’s quite a challenging language.

“Anyway, we thought we’d managed to put the past quite behind us, so it was a shock to realize – as I’d thought, at first – that someone from our old life had found us here. I didn’t know about the other letters then, of course. I thought it was someone who knew us, or knew Mother, from London. One of our fathers, most likely, they were always hard up for money and it seemed the kind of underhanded thing such men would do. Now that I know about the other letters, though, I confess I’m even more at a loss than I was when I got my first one. Because for the life of me I can’t imagine who in this town could possibly have known about Mother. We hid our tracks with such care, to keep anyone finding it out.”

“There isn’t any shame in it,” said Diana Sydney unexpectedly, and everyone in the room turned to
her, astonished to hear that her voice - for the very first time - was perfectly and entirely sincere. “Not on your mother for doing it, and not to you and Bellamy, for being born from it. Trust a woman who knows more than the rest of you what it’s like to try and make your way in London.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Clarke, baffled.

“That their mother was a prostitute, darling,” said Diana easily, as though they were talking about the weather. “That’s what Miss Blake was trying to say. That’s what was in the letter. The blackmailer doesn’t give a fig about a misappropriated military pension. He’s shaming you by calling your mother a whore. Am I right?”

Octavia stared down at her scuffed black shoes against the gay yellow carpet, eyes bright with tears, unable to meet anyone’s gaze, and gave only the faintest nod.

“I mean it,” said Diana firmly. “You’ve none of you anything to be ashamed of. The world will tell you differently, of course, especially in a provincial town like this, but that’s because they don’t understand London. They don’t understand what it’s like when you can’t find respectable work because you’re a woman – or when you do, it doesn’t pay – or it doesn’t pay enough – or men expect that you’ll give it to them anyway. What did your mother do for a living? I mean properly.”

“She was a seamstress,” said Octavia, in a dull voice so low they could scarcely hear her. Diana nodded, as though this answer was what she’d expected.

“Seamstress, translator, landlady,” she said, “those are the most common in my experience. Work you do alone, in your own rooms, with men coming in and out all the time. Better for camouflage. Easier to preserve as much respectability as you can. And a seamstress of limited means, struggling to make her way in the city – even without any children, yet – would find herself very regularly at the mercy of predatory men expecting her to offer additional services when they came to pick up their mended suits. If she said yes from time to time, and got a bit of coin for an act he might well have forced on her anyway, I think the only people in the equation with anything to be ashamed of are the ones turning up their noses to judge her. Men are always quite ready to condemn women for providing services that men themselves take advantage of with great and hypocritical regularity.”

She finished this rather extraordinary speech by reclining back against the armchair and taking an elegant sip of her coffee, as the other women stared at her in blank, undisguised astonishment.

“I think this is the most I’ve ever liked you since the day we met,” said Lady Abigail. “No offense intended.”

“None taken, darling,” said Diana breezily. “Women tend not to like me.”

“Miss Sydney is very right,” said Vera Kane, reaching out to pat the girl’s hand. “Men cast all manner of judgments on women who make choices they disapprove of, because they’ve never really understood what it’s like from the other side.”

“That’s true,” said Octavia, considering it. “I can see why a man might be very shocked at you for not jumping into the lake to save your husband, but I watched too many wretched men treat my mother unkindly to feel much sorrow that there is one less angry drunk in the world. Perhaps we are both very wicked.”

“Or perhaps none of us are,” said Clarke.

“Well, I am,” said Diana brightly, “but I don’t apologize for it quite as much as I ought, and men don’t like that either.”
“All right, give it to us then,” said Octavia, who was feeling more warmly disposed toward their hostess than she could have imagined, last night, was even possible. “You have the rather unpleasant distinction of being the one who received the most letters, though I believe I win the prize for being first. So tell me what Nygel – or whomever – has on you that you felt you couldn’t trust Constable Miller to handle himself.”

Diana hesitated for a moment, then gave a long sigh, and the last of her theatrical artifice dropped away. “I must confess,” she said with an unusual new frankness in her voice, “that I now feel I may have . . . overreacted, a bit.”

“Really,” said Lady Abigail, her voice impressively neutral. Diana raised her eyebrow.

“Yes, all right, Miss High and Mighty,” she retorted, “blame the actress for being too dramatic. You may all have your bit of fun. But this is the first I’d ever interacted with the man since I moved here, and this is a village where the worst crime to date – as far as I was ever informed – was when Vincent Vie from the pub thought someone had stolen his new bicycle, and it turned out he’d merely forgotten what color it was. You may have grown up with David Miller, but I didn’t. How on earth was I supposed to know he’d turn out to be actually quite good at his job?”

“You could have trusted everyone in the village who told you he was quite good at his job,” said Vera, a flicker of amusement in her voice.

“I know, I know,” Diana sighed. “And now we’ve got two of them, and we shall probably have to be questioned all over again when the other one arrives, which is all my fault, and they shall have many tedious disputes about jurisdiction, and it will be a horrible bore, and now that I know the blackmailer is someone in the village, I feel rather silly for having called in Lieutenant Shumway to drag himself all the way out here, in a blasted snowstorm, on a case where he may well prove himself less than useless. If it makes you all feel better to know that I find the whole thing rather embarrassing now –”

“It does, rather,” said Lady Abigail wryly.

“Well, anyway,” Diana sighed, “I’ll tell you the story, and hopefully once you’ve heard it you’ll understand why it did seem at the time to be a case for a London detective, who might have more experience with the thing. It was to do with . . . well. A man.”

“Married?” asked Vera Kane.

“Good Lord, how damnably clever you are. Yes, he was married. I’d rather not give out his name, if it’s all the same to you, and anyway I can’t see how it matters. He’s a theatrical director, and a very well-known one, with a sweet wife in the country who wouldn’t hurt a fly. I fancied we were in love, I believed all the things he said about career opportunities I could never have dreamed of, and I thought secrecy a kindness to his wife, so I agreed readily. We were exceptionally discreet – false names, separate taxis, all of it. He never came to my home and I never went to his, to prevent our servants from being privy to anything. No letters. No public telephone boxes. Nothing that could be traced. I mean you’d have to be a private detective to have found us. We were the very soul of caution. But somehow, well, I suppose along the way we must have missed something – or perhaps there was a private detective involved, who knows – because the blackmailer knew quite a frightening amount. The letter he – or she, if really was Nygel – proposed to send to the gentleman’s wife if I didn’t pay up would have been quite lurid in its details. Not the kind of thing one wants in the papers. Nor did I fancy being named in a divorce suit, if it came to that. I’d never be hired again. Every theatrical director in London is a man, you realize. And most of them are married. And most of their wives hate actresses on principle – even the ones that were actresses. So a woman attempting to build a respectable career can’t afford to let it get about that she’s gone to bed with a
married man on the promise of a job. I mean, that wasn’t why I did it, of course. Like I said, I did really think we were in love. But it wouldn’t look like that when the papers got hold of it. I thought about paying, actually. I very nearly did, after the third letter, when I realized they were just going to keep coming. At the end, what stopped me was the realization that payment of blackmail money was firmer proof of my guilt than anything else he might have on me. I could deny a rumor, and make it sound quite plausible – I am an actress, after all – but I could not deny a cheque drawn from my own bank account. And if you aren’t guilty, what reason have you to pay for a blackmailer’s silence? No, I changed my mind at the last, and determined that if a fourth letter arrived, I would put it in the hands of someone I trusted to handle it discreetly. And Lieutenant Shumway – well, he’s known in artistic circles as a detective one can trust when a matter is to be handled sensitively. He was a darling when my friend Lorelei had some diamonds stolen while she was on holiday – got them back without Lorelei’s husband ever learning who she was on holiday with, or where she’d gotten the diamonds from, if you understand me.”

“Well, I must admit,” said Abby, “in that light, it does all make a great deal more sense. And perhaps it’s lucky for you that you have a personal relationship with the London detective, given the circumstances.”

“Lucky?” Diana snorted. “Hardly. Knowing what we now know about the rest of the letters, I can’t think that his London connections will be of use there anymore.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Abby cautiously. “I mean because you’ve been framed for murder.”

Diana’s jaw dropped. “I’ve been what?”

“I don’t know, and I’m not saying you did. I am saying that the rest of us benefit from being known to Constable Miller, and perhaps it may be of benefit to you that you also will have an advocate in this investigation who knows you personally.”

Diana shuddered, and Clarke took pity on her, redirecting the subject. “Mother, what was in your letter?” she asked. “You are the least likely in the entire world to have anything at all resembling such a secret, and it has been making me rather sick with worry, for surely whatever such a monster wrote to you must be lies.”

Lady Abigail looked at her child with great compassion. “I’m so sorry, my love,” she said gently, “but I’m afraid I must ask that you go next. I will tell you what was in the letter Constable Miller showed me, but I need to hear about yours first.”

Clarke looked rather astonished at this, as did all the rest of them, but she nodded hesitantly, fingers fidgeting in her lap, before she began.

“It isn’t a very long story,” she admitted, staring down at the floor, cheeks flushed pink, unable to meet her mother’s eyes. “And I’m very ashamed of myself for not simply telling you all about it, though you’ll understand why at the end. But when you first sent me to Paris, and found me those very nice rooms with those very nice, respectable maiden aunts . . . well, I didn’t stay there. I mean, I did, for the first year. But by the time I’d turned seventeen, I’d begun to make friends, and they were artists, and I liked the way they lived, they were colorful and wild and they stayed out late drinking coffee and arguing about politics, and they didn’t live in the proper part of town where the
good English girls and the nice spinsters lived. They were in Montmartre, where there were fights in
the streets at night sometimes, and real American jazz musicians in the nightclubs, and that was the
Paris I wanted. I began selling my drawings in one of the street markets, where some of my other
friends did, and soon I was making a rather decent amount of money. Enough to pay off the nice old
spinsters to keep collecting my post for me and pretending I still lived there, so that you wouldn’t
suspect. I lived on my own for awhile, and I fell in with a rather wild circle of artists and models,
and I learned that while one could make a few coins selling drawings of flowers or portraits done on
commission, there was a great deal more money to be made in drawing . . . well . . . things
respectable English girls ought not to be drawing.”

“My word,” said Diana, leaning forward in her chair, suddenly extraordinarily interested. “And here
I thought you’d spent your years sitting in museums doing dutiful, tedious copies of Monet.”

“Not quite,” said Clarke, flushing a little, “it was rather more along the lines of Michelangelo’s
David.”

“But in the flesh.”

“Yes.”

“But surely that’s not so very wicked,” protested Octavia. “Your mother does not strike me as so
stuffy and prudish that you would need to pay hundreds of pounds to keep her from finding out
merely that your artist friends in Paris were a bit more racy than she’d thought.” She turned to look
at Lady Abigail, who was watching her daughter with warm, sad eyes, and did not look stuffy or
prudish at all.

“Tell them the rest of it, darling,” she said in a gentle voice. “It’s all right.”

Clarke looked at her mother, blue eyes bright with tears. “Oh no,” she whispered. “Oh no. Our
letters were the same, weren’t they? He thought I would give in, to protect you, and that you would
give in, to protect me, and he could get twice the money from us that way.”

“Your life is your own,” said Lady Abigail, “and you are nineteen now, which makes you an adult
in every sense of the word. I understand why you felt you could not tell me the truth – I understand
the burden of being a part of this family, and the pressures to behave always as a proper lady. The
life you lived in Paris – well, it certainly is not what I expected when I sent you there, but in its own
rather risqué way, I suppose it is very much the kind of adventure I sent you there to have. I wanted
you to know a world that was wider than Walters Hall, and now you do. But the letter you received,
I think, was not only about the drawings, was it?” Clarke shook her head. “What is her name?” her
mother asked, causing the other three women to look sharply from daughter to mother and back
again. “My letter did not say.”

“Niylah,” said Clarke dully. “Her name is Niylah.”

“She owned a bookstore, in Paris.”

“Yes.”

“And you were lovers.”

“Yes,” said Clarke. “I lived with her for two years.”

“And because you paid off the spinster landladies, and told no one,” said Lady Abigail, in a voice of
infinite compassion, “this blackmailer assumed you would rather pay another bribe than risk bringing
shame on your family’s good name. Likewise, he assumed that I would pay an equally substantial
sum to keep the secret under wraps, because as your mother and as a well-bred noblewoman I must therefore be ashamed of you.”

“I’m so sorry, Mother,” Clarke whispered. “It’s all my fault.”

“Did you care for her?” Lady Abigail asked. Clarke nodded. “Did she make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Then never,” said her mother, taking her daughter’s hand and pressing it tightly, something fierce and powerful in her voice, “never, never apologize for it. Not to the village, and not to me. You are the light of my life, my darling. I could never be ashamed of you because of who you love, and your father would not have been either. We cannot prevent the judgments of others, as everyone in this room knows full well; but you are always safe with me.”

Clarke could bear it no longer, and rose from her seat to embrace her mother, tears in her eyes. Lady Abigail stroked the girl’s back as she wept with a combination of misery and relief. “About the drawings, perhaps the less said the better,” her mother said wryly, a hint of amusement in her voice, “though I must admit I am always impressed at your resourcefulness. But if the opportunity should ever present itself, I would like very much to meet your Niylah. A woman who has devoted her life to collecting old books sounds like someone I would like a great deal.”

“And after all,” said Vera Kane, her eyes focused keenly not on the younger Griffin woman, but the elder, “we none of us can help who we fall in love with. Even when it is sometimes surprising, or inconvenient. It is a peculiar force which operates outside our control. Would you not agree, Lady Abigail?”

Abby looked up, over the white-gold halo of her daughter’s fair hair, and met the older woman’s gaze – kind and direct and compassionate and all-knowing – and she felt her heart twist painfully in her chest.

How she longed to curl up on the settee with her head on Vera’s shoulder, to seek the wise older woman’s counsel and comfort, as she was offering her own to Clarke now. How she wished she could say to her, “It took me less than a day to fall in love with your son, and I have no notion of how to proceed from here.”

But she could do nothing of the kind, as she well knew; so she tore her eyes away from the woman’s perceptive gaze, kissed Clarke’s hair, and sent her back to her seat, taking control once more of the matter at hand.

“So now we know where we are,” she said, once her daughter was seated again. “We know each other’s stories. We know the similarities and differences. We know, perhaps, a bit more than we did about the pattern that might connect them. I feel a bit closer now than I did before to a sense of who might have sent these letters.”

“You do?” asked Clarke, shocked. “Who?”

“I think it is noteworthy,” said Lady Abigail slowly, the puzzle pieces drawing together in her mind as she spoke, “that despite the difference in our various cases – location, for one thing; Vera’s is the only incident which took place here in the village, while Diana’s and Octavia’s pertain to London and ours to Paris – and despite the fact that our information must necessarily be incomplete, as we have no idea how many other victims this village may hold – still, there is I think one very striking pattern that we have not yet discussed.”
“And what is that?” asked Diana.

“That so far as we know,” Lady Abigail answered, “the blackmailer only targets women. And targets us specifically for what you might consider to be . . . well, for lack of a better phrasing, women’s crimes. That is, offenses against the particular morality of a particular kind of man. Vera, refusing to put her husband’s life and well-being above her own. Diana and her married lover. Clarke living with a woman, paying her way through Paris with risqué art. Octavia’s mother having children out of wedlock, perhaps with men who paid for her services - a sin, if sin it be, which covers both siblings equally, yet the letter was addressed only to the daughter. That seems noteworthy to me.” She looked around at the room. “I think none of us in this room have heard anything which makes us think any less of one another, have we not?”

“Not at all,” said Octavia Blake frankly. “I find I like you all a great deal better, in fact.”

“As do I, I must say,” Diana agreed with something that was almost a genuine smile.

“Well, then. Hasn’t it occurred to anyone else that we all, in fact, have quite a good idea who – out of everyone in the village – possessed a particularly virulent belief in woman as the vessel of sin, and would consider all of these acts to be evils worth punishing?”

Clarke gasped. Diana stared. Vera Kane looked devastated.

Octavia only looked confused. “I don’t,” she said. “Who on earth do you mean?”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Clarke in surprise. “You weren’t there. You came after. We got an earful about it at dinner last night.”

“Last night?” Octavia repeated.

Abby nodded grimly. “I don’t know that we shall be able to prove it,” she said. “But I would be willing to wager all the money in all my accounts that those letters came from Thelonious Jaha.”

“But why?” asked Clarke. “Why should he be so cruel? What could he want with our money? Lord knows we gave the church enough already.”

“I don’t think it was a matter of mere money, darling,” she said. “I think it was power. And the thrill of causing fear.”

“Well, that’s good then,” said Diana in relief. “That means our troubles are over. If it really was the reverend, and now he’s dead, then the blackmail will stop.”

“Diana,” said Lady Abigail, impatience and irritation edging into her voice, “step out of yourself and look at the big picture for once in your damned life. Are you really incapable of seeing that the reverend being the blackmailer makes our position a thousand times worse?”

“Why on earth should it? The problem has resolved itself quite neatly.”

“Yes, and we’re the ones with the motive,” said Vera. “Someone who would pay to keep a secret quiet very well might also kill for it. The police will immediately point their gaze directly onto the women in this room.”

“Can we search his house before the police do?” suggested Octavia. “See if there’s any evidence it really was him, and then destroy it?”

Lady Abigail shook her head. “Anything other than total and complete honesty will only look worse
in the end,” she said. “Miller has very few opportunities to exercise his skills, that’s true, Diana was not wrong about that; but he is an excellent policeman nonetheless, and I think if there is anything to be found, he will find it. Concealing anything from him will only make us look more guilty. No, I think we must gather up every letter and put them all in his hands, and if you left anything out of your account to him which you have subsequently revealed here, I would urge you to go back to him and be forthright about it. Trust that he is levelheaded and kind enough to preserve your confidence unless it should turn out that it be absolutely vital to the pursuit of a murderer. In the meantime,” she said, looking meaningfully at Vera and Octavia, “I think perhaps there are conversations with our loved ones that, for a few of us, are quite long overdue. We have given the reverend power over us for far too long, by allowing our secrets to cause shame. I think that should end here.”

She rose from her seat and extended her hand to Mrs. Kane. “Do we have a pact?” she asked the older woman.

“We do,” said Vera, shaking her hand, before turning to take Clarke’s as Lady Abigail took Octavia’s. All five of them shook hands with each other, as solemnly as if they were sealing a bond of life and death – which in its own way, they were – before Lady Abigail opened the door, and they all departed.

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