More Bright Than Unswept Stone

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

Originally written for a Hallowe'en challenge (the topic was "Noir"), in this story Sam Brandon, hard-boiled detective and playball of the gods, is haunted by his past when a client asks him to find a previous lover.

Notes

Shrewsbury College, Miss Hillyard and the lecture on constitutional history are shamelessly borrowed from the inimitable Gaudy Night by Dorothy L. Sayers.

She had the figure of a goddess, and I consider myself something of an expert on that matter. Men would flock to her like sheep and she knew it well. Her black trench-coat clung to her body in all the right places and she had flung a silken scarf around her hair that had obviously been expensive. Sheer nylons clung to her well-shaped calves. I could only guess at the curve the seams would make at the back of her long legs. The dark glass of her spectacles further accentuated the deep red of her lips. Her hands were expertly manicured, or so I guessed, because like any woman who consults a private detective, she wore gloves. In this case, she was not just consulting any private detective, she was consulting the best. Me.

‘You are Sam Brandon?’ she said.
I was, at least for the moment. As someone else once put it, that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell just as sweet.

‘Please, sit down,’ I said.

She took the seat with a non-chalance that surprised me. Women of her quality usually did not consult men in my position every day. She opened the belt of her trench-coat just enough to allow her to sit comfortably, revealing that the frock below was as black as her coat. Her skirt had ridden up slightly, showing more of her shapely legs. It did not seem to bother her in the least that I was looking at them. She tilted her head as if she dared me to make a comment. Maybe she was waiting for one.

‘Let me guess,’ I said. ‘You are here because of your husband.’

‘I am not married,’ she said with more steel in the voice than I had expected.

‘Your fiancé then?’ I asked. ‘Or a lady friend?’

She gave a little gasp, which told me she was not as worldly as she would have me believe.

‘Trust me, there is little I have not yet seen,’ I said. ‘And I seldom judge people.’

‘It – it is nothing like that,’ she said. ‘Mr Brandon, I need your help.’

Of course she did. They all did.

‘I have received a letter,’ she said.

So she was being blackmailed for some indiscretion or other, and thought the world would end. It would not; it never did. But she was far too young to understand that.

‘A letter?’ I said, trying to sound genial.

‘A letter,’ she sighed. ‘From beyond the grave.’

She finally took off the sunglasses and now it was my turn to gasp. She was not Julia’s exact image, but she came pretty close. The slant of her eyes was the same, as was their rich brown colour. She had the long eyelashes alright, and the aquiline nose. Her eyebrows were perhaps not quite as perfect as Julia’s, but then Julia had had the advantage of the best beauticians of her time. The high forehead was definitely Julia’s, though, and so, now that I looked properly, was the wide mouth, which Julia had always hated. She pushed back the scarf and I could see that the hair was even the same colour, that dark auburn I had always admired. This was definitely a nice touch, I had to admit.

Geoffrey of Monmouth claimed that in the churchyard of St Paul’s Cathedral, there once stood a temple for the goddess Diana. Most historians tend to disagree with him. They were right. It had been a temple for Venus and it had stood pretty much exactly where there now were cast-iron benches and a scrap of green in the shadow of the great cathedral. It was there that I had gone after my meeting with my new client. I was now sitting on the bench that marked the place where almost two millenia ago, the altar had stood.

‘You never cared about the hair before,’ I said.

They had all looked like Julia, some more, some less, but always discernibly Julia. Their hair, however, had always been wrong. Fridwulfa had been ash-blonde. Marguerite’s hair had been
almost black. Henrietta had had amber hair. Lady Horatia had been a redhead, for all that she had tried to deny it. Alienor’s hair had not only been red, but flaming.

‘Are you going soft in your old age?’ I asked.

There was no answer, of course. I assumed she was still pouting. Some women do not react well to being neglected, and she had not had as much attention as she thought she deserved in a very long time.

‘I will help her, of course,’ I sighed.

I always did. I could not count the number of duels I had fought. I had solved murders, disputed wills, bribed guards and on one memorable occasion even abducted the bride of a royal wedding. It had all been for naught. The women had been witty; they had been elegant, passionate and intelligent. None of them had been Julia. It had not been their fault. I was predisposed to find their shortcomings, and in those cases where I could not find any, they would certainly find some with me. I was wondering what it would be with Marianne Dashwood.

Her case was still an enigma to me. Most of her story seemed pretty straightforward. When the war had broken out, she had been little more than a girl, seventeen, she said, though I would wager that it was even less. She, her sisters and her mother had been living near an airforce base where her elder sister had worked in a secretarial position. Through the sister, Miss Dashwood had met and fallen in love with a young pilot. Their romance had been epic, or so Miss Dashwood had said, and they had been on the brink of becoming engaged, when he had not returned one day. The secretarial sister finally found out that he was reported missing, presumed dead, and Miss Dashwood had not taken it well. She had fallen ill, had contracted a pneumonia that had turned bad and in the end, had spent most of the war in a sanatorium, trying to recover. A couple of months ago, just as the war had ended, she had finally been able to leave the sanatorium. She had moved in with the sister, who in the meantime had married an Army chaplain. And now that Miss Dashwood finally felt that she was well again, she had received a letter, claiming to be from the dead pilot. It was not dated, there was no return address and the stamp was smudged. There was no way of telling where it had come from or who had sent it, and it was this that Miss Dashwood wanted me to find out.

There were several points of her tale that I did not believe. For one, I had seen pneumonia often and could not believe that it would take her almost five years to recover. She did not have the looks of one who had been ill for a long time. Then, she claimed to be living with a sister and a brother who lived off a chaplain’s wages, but her clothes were, if not brand-new, then certainly expensive. The nylons alone must have cost her a fair sum, more than I supposed a chaplain’s wife was willing to spend on a recovering sister. Lastly, I could see that she desperately wanted to appear more experienced than she was, although this clashed somewhat with her tale that she had spent the last five years recovering from pneumonia.

Julia would never have appeared desperate for anything. She always had given the impression that everything came to her with ease. She had never tried to please anyone; quite the contrary. They had always tried to please her. She had shrugged at their attentions and laughed and never understood that a single movement of hers could attract the gaze of everyone on the forum.

Marianne Dashwood knew very well about the effect she had on men. I understood that however much she looked like Julia, she would never be like her. The realisation was as painful as always. I had hoped the pain would lessen as the time passed, but it never did.

The goddess did not deign to make an appearance in the churchyard that afternoon, not that I had supposed she would. I made my way back to my office, pondering the letter I was going to
examine in detail once I was back. I could not yet discern whether the letter was a fake or not. Miss Dashwood was certain that it was her former lover’s hand-writing, but she had not been able to locate anything else he had written for comparison.

‘We saw each other daily,’ she had said. ‘There was no need to write notes.’

The only mementoes she had of Willoughby were a few photographs that showed the two of them. She had reluctantly left them with me after I had promised to return them as soon as I had had copies made.

The writer of the letter had mentioned his regrets at having to leave Miss Dashwood without further notice, for the sake of a dangerous mission and which prevented him from contacting her again. I would have to find out more about this mission and whether it actually existed.

I had seen enough of wars to know that too many men had told too many women of the dangerous and secret missions on which they had to leave for me to believe this story without further proof of it.

At the moment I could see several possibilities. It all hinged on when the letter had been written and whether Lt Willoughby had indeed died in 1940. If he had, the most plausible explanation was that the letter was a fake, recently written in order to scare Miss Dashwood. In this case, I had to find out who had written it and what motivation they had. Another explanation was that the letter had been written by Lt Willoughby shortly before his death, but never sent until recently. In this case, I would have to find out where it had been for the last five years and why Miss Dashwood had received it now. Given his mysterious disappearance, it was also possible that Lt Willoughby had survived. The question whether the letter was genuine remained. Had he felt remorse and sent the letter to Miss Dashwood to apologise for his disappearance, or had someone else written it to alert Miss Dashwood about his survival?

Back at my office, I found nothing in the letter to date it. The mission was barely mentioned, not enough to say what it might have been. There was no mention of a place or a time when it had been written. The remorse it expressed sounded genuine to me, but that meant nothing. Long experience had taught me that my instincts always wanted to believe that there was truth in love, which was why I rarely relied on them. I tried to, at least.

As I had no material with which to compare the letter, I decided to make the mysterious mission my first priority.

Miss Dashwood had not remembered the name of Lt. Willoughby’s commanding officer, but I did not need to rely on her for that. From my most recent stint in the British Army, I had enough contacts to phone and ask. By the end of the day, I knew that his name was Cmdr John Middleton, that he was considered a jovial, helpful sort of man, that he was currently stationed behind a desk in Whitehall and best of all, that he would see me the next day.

The office, in spite of being in Whitehall, was nothing spectacular. It was furnished with the same depressing items which had become only too familiar for me during the last six years, but Cmdr Middleton did not seem deterred by that. He greeted me cheerfully from behind his regulation desk and offered me coffee immediately. Knowing the quality of Army coffee only too well, I declined. I sat down in the regulation visitor’s chair, and observed the Commander pour himself a large cup of the foul beverage. His face was vaguely familiar. I remembered that I had briefly served under his father in France. Middleton did not know that, but he remembered Lt Willoughby.

‘Of course I do,’ he said. ‘Nasty incident, that was, eh.’
I leaned forward.

‘What was?’ I asked.

‘Well, it sounds all pretty ridiculous now,’ Middleton said, ‘but you know how it was back in the
year ‘40.’

I nodded noncommittally.

‘Saw German spies everywhere, didn’t we?’ Middleton continued. ‘Nuns with hairy arms and all
that, hah, eh?’

He chuckled.

‘So of course when Willoughby disappeared just before a very important mission, that’s what we
all suspected, eh.’

‘So there was a mission?’ I asked.

‘Sure, sure, best flier in my squadron, Willoughby was, of course he was sent on the mission,’
Middleton said. ‘All very hush-hush, of course, top-notch security measures of course, can’t tell
you a thing about that, eh.’

‘I’m not interested in the mission,’ I said.

If the mission turned out to be important for this case, there were always other people I could ask
about it.

‘I am concerned about Willoughby’s disappearance,’ I said. ‘There’s a young lady -’

‘Isn’t there always, hah, eh?’ Middleton said and chuckled again. ‘Hang on, I think I know who
you’re speaking of. Red-haired, eh, awfully young, with eyes like a deer caught in the headlights,
eh?’

‘That’s about her,’ I said. ‘She’s recently received a letter from Willoughby. Some sort of a dear
John letter, in fact -’

‘About five years too late for that, eh,’ Middleton said. ‘Poor filly. So young. Always felt sorry for
her afterwards, and then one day she was gone too. She – Willoughby didn’t get her in trouble,
eh, did he?’

I had not thought about that, but now that he mentioned it, I realised I should have. It would
certainly explain a couple of things.

‘Not that I know,’ I said. ‘She caught pneumonia, from what I was told, and was sent somewhere
to recover.’

‘Ah, small mercy at least,’ Middleton said. ‘Wouldn’t have put it past that boy though, the way he
was all over her all the time, and then one day he’s just gone, I’ve seen that sort of thing before,
eh.’

‘So you believe he disappeared out of his own volition?’ I asked.

‘Must have, eh,’ Middleton said. ‘Now that we know there were no hairy nuns around, hah. Mind
you, from what we know, Jerry never got wind of that mission either, so we’re pretty sure he
didn’t run to them either, eh.’
It took me a second to realise he meant the Germans. I had heard the term fairly often in the last six years, but, then, just thirty years ago we had called them boches. Sometimes it felt like things changed too fast for me to keep up with everything.

‘Can you tell me anything more about his disappearance?’ I asked. ‘Miss Dashwood only knew that he was gone one day and reported missing presumed dead some time afterwards.’

‘Damn curious, that’s what it was, eh,’ Middleton said. ‘One morning, he didn’t report for duty, and when we searched his room – he was billeted in the village, eh – it was all in a mess. We thought there’d been a struggle, of course, and he’d been dragged off, by the Huns, but I suppose he did that himself, eh.’

‘Was there any blood, any signs of injury?’ I asked.

‘Well, some blood, eh, on the floor,’ Middleton said. ‘Not much, mind you, could have been a nosebleed or the like.’

‘And I suppose nobody heard anything during the night?’ I asked.

‘Nothing at all, eh,’ Middleton asked. ‘Mind you, his landlady was over eighty and deaf as anything, so Jerry could’ve driven a tank through her house and not wake her up.’

‘Was he in any sort of quarrel with a comrade?’ I asked.

‘You mean one of them fought with him there, eh?’ Middleton said. ‘Not that I know, but I certainly don’t know everything my men do, eh. You’d have to ask them.’

‘Any idea where I can find them now?’

‘Men from his squadron, hah,’ Middleton said. ‘That won’t be easy, eh. Let’s see, who was there – quite a few of them got shot down, of course - Wentworth’s stationed somewhere in Indochina now, eh, you won’t be able to get hold of him. Crawford, no, he got shot down as well. Wickham was killed in a brawl in Lueneburg just last month, eh, heard about it only the other day. Then Bertram, eh, he went mad after D-Day - who else was there? - right, Bingley, last I heard, he was somewhere off in the States. Oh, of course, Fitzwilliam, I’m told that whatever he does is all hush-hush, no luck finding him. Oh, and Darcy, that was a pity, eh, drowned in his own pond, hah, just after he survived being shot down.’

The emotionless way of talking about his men’s deaths was par for the course. I had been in his situation more often that I liked to remember, and supposed it was his way of coping with the fact that he had had to see far too many men die.

There was not much more Cmdr Middleton could tell me. I showed him the letter, but he had no recollection of Willoughby’s writing and no idea if it sounded genuine or not. He did remember that Willoughby had listed a great aunt as next of kin, because they had tried to contact her to find out where he was, but she had been in some sort of hospital and unable to help them. He could not remember what hospital, but he tried to remember her name.

‘Something with an A, eh,’ he said. ‘Mrs Andrews, was it? No, no, wait, she was the widow of a knight, I remember Willoughby once told us he’d been knighted after the Transvaal War, eh. Now what was her name, Lady Ashley, something like that.’

I would have to find the knight’s widow, eventually, but before I tried to do that, I wanted to talk to Miss Dashwood again, and if at all possible, also to her sister. I needed to find out whether Willoughby had indeed got Miss Dashwood in trouble, as Middleton put it. The photographs of
Willoughby that I had promised to return to Miss Dashwood as soon as I had had copies made gave me the perfect excuse to visit her at her sister’s home the next day. Back in the office, I telephoned and reached Mrs Ferrars, who reluctantly allowed me to call on them the next day.

I could not say why the idea that Miss Dashwood might have had a child troubled me so much. It was perhaps because none of the many women who had looked like Julia had had children. Julia herself only had become a mother after I had gone, or at least I had heard that she had had a family. I had never fathered children; that torture at least I had been spared.

Personal feelings aside, however, I needed to find out more.

The Ferrars’ lived not far from London in the Home Counties. A short walk from the station took me to a snug little cottage with roses growing in front of it. It looked as if it had come straight out of a Hollywood movie about merry old England.

Chaplain Ferrars was not at home, but his wife greeted me at the door. I supposed she had been expecting me. Like her sister, she was a beautiful woman, but where Marianne Dashwood’s almost ethereal beauty immediately struck anyone, her sister’s charms were far more earthly, making her the personified English Rose. The impartial observer would likely take the symmetry of her features for granted before realising how pleasant she was on the eye. She was not as tall as Miss Dashwood, and her figure was fuller. Her face was rounder, too, with pale skin. She looked more tired than Miss Dashwood and her clothes were worn and mended, unlike her sister’s pristine toilette. The hair, however, was the same. Julia’s hair. She pushed a stray lock behind her ears and sighed.

‘Marianne has gone out to take a walk,’ she said. ‘But please, come in.’

‘I am sorry. I did tell her you would be here soon, but she could not be dissuaded,’ she said. ‘Can I offer you some tea – we only have biscuits at the moment, I am afraid, but at least the tea is hot -’

‘Tea would be splendid,’ I said.

We sat down in her drawing room. Despite its nearly claustrophobic smallness, the fire in the chimney was not big enough to warm it. She offered me what was probably the best seat from the collection of mismatched old chairs; it was the one closest to the pitiful fire. For herself she chose one that was covered with a thin, often-mended rug. In spite of those obvious signs of poverty, the room was meticulously tidy. A loving hand had tried to make as much of it as possible. Framed photographs stood on the mantelpiece and drawings were hung on the walls. On a sideboard, bright autumn flowers in a chipped vase tried their best to make the room look more cheerful.

Mrs Ferrars offered me biscuits from a tin and took one for herself. From the way she nibbled at it while keeping her eyes fixed on me, I guessed that she was not entirely at ease with my presence. Underneath her calm exterior, she was alert and wary.

‘I have brought these back,’ I said and pulled the envelope of pictures out of my pocket. ‘I have had copies made. Miss Dashwood was rather anxious to have them back.’

Mrs Ferrars took the envelope and placed it on a small table at her side.

‘You are very friendly,’ she said. ‘Marianne told me you are not even charging her.’

She looked at me intently.

‘I have no dishonourable intentions towards your sister,’ I assured her. ‘It is an old debt I have to settle.’
‘With Marianne?’ Mrs Ferrars asked.

‘Oh no,’ I said and forced a wry smile onto my face. ‘That is a story that goes a long way back.’

She still looked at me inquisitively but then seemed to have decided to believe me for the moment.

‘Have you made any progress yet with Marianne’s case?’ she asked.

‘Not really, no,’ I admitted. ‘I’ve talked to Commander Middleton, but he has not been able to tell me very much, apart from what he thought had happened.’

‘Parachuting hairy nuns, wasn’t it?’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘He loves that one.’

‘In one.’

‘I still believe though that’s the most likely answer,’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘Not the nuns, obviously, but that the Germans got him. Or rather, that he got to them.’

I was surprised, to say the least.

‘You didn’t like him, then?’ I asked.

‘I did, at first,’ Mrs Ferrars said, ‘but he was too – too smooth for my liking. The way he kept stringing Marianne along, always hinting about his intentions but never committing himself to anything – he did a lot of damage there.’

She sat her teacup down rather fiercely.

‘I don’t mean to sound bitter,’ she said, ‘but if he’s still alive, he has a lot to answer for.’

She sighed.

‘I might just as well tell you,’ she added, ‘I don’t think any good will come out of your looking for him. I don’t think you’ll be able to find him, and Marianne will just cling onto the belief that one day he will return – and if you do find him, he’s probably long found someone else. Even if he did want to marry Marianne at one time, he obviously doesn’t want to do so now, otherwise he’d never have sent that wretched letter.’

‘You think it’s genuine then?’ I interjected.

‘I have no idea,’ she said. ‘It might be. It sure looks like his handwriting as far as I know. Even if it is genuine, though, who knows if it hasn’t been lost in the mail for the last five years?’

She shot a glance at the window.

‘I don’t know what’s keeping Marianne,’ she said. ‘But then, she always stays out longer than she says she will. Says she loses track of time.’

I then asked the question I had been meaning to ask, one of the reasons why I had made the trip to the Ferrars’ in the first place.

‘Did Willoughby get Marianne in trouble? Commander Middleton hinted that he might have.’

Mrs Ferrars gave a bitter laugh.

‘Oh, yes, he got her in all sorts of trouble alright,’ she said. ‘But the sort of trouble you mean – no,
she was lucky in that.’

She leaned forward and looked me straight in the eyes.

‘Marianne has had a lot of bad things happen to her,’ she said, ‘through no fault of her own. When that letter arrived, it brought everything back. She just can’t forget that man, you see.’

I merely nodded.

‘When she told me she’d gone to see a detective,’ Mrs Ferrars continued, ‘I was skeptical, to say the least. I don’t think any good can come of your trying to find him. I know she’d do anything to see him again, but don’t you dare take advantage of that.’

‘I won’t,’ I said quickly. ‘You have my word on that.’

She shot me a look that very clearly said that she wondered just exactly how much that was worth. She did not voice these thoughts, however.

‘Believe me,’ she said instead. ‘If he’s still alive, I want to see that swine hunted down very much, and made accountable for all that he’s made her suffer, but I believe it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie, in this case. Marianne needs to forget about him and move on, and the sooner that happens, the better.’

‘I suppose I can say whatever I like, and you won’t trust me one jot,’ I said, ‘but I do promise I will try my best not to let her come to any more harm.’

There were a couple of other things I wanted to know, and I decided I could just as well ask Mrs Ferrars if Miss Dashwood was not available.

‘Commander Middleton said that Willoughby’s next of kin was a great-aunt in a nursing home somewhere,’ I said. ‘Would you know any details about that?’

Mrs Ferrars thought about it for a moment.

‘He did mention her, yes,’ she said. ‘Talked about how he wanted to take Marianne to meet her, but he never did. It was Lady something – Allingham? Allerdyce?’

She screwed up her face in concentration, but the name still eluded her.

I left Mrs Ferrars knowing not much more than I had before. I had not actually seen her sister, who was still out walking by the time I left again. As she was obviously still pining for Willoughby, it probably was for the best that I did not talk the matter through with her again. Mrs Ferrars seemed to be pretty certain about Willoughby’s espionage for the Germans and subsequent death, but I was not yet convinced. It did not all add up, although the suggestion was not without merit. I wondered what it was that I needed to do for Miss Dashwood. Alienor, whose hair had been a flaming red, had been in a similar situation; her, I had successfully reunited with her former lover. If you asked me, Miss Dashwood needed closure rather than to meet her lover once more, but as usual, nobody had asked me. Most of the time, I preferred it that way, but I wondered if this time, I should not go against my habits. I had not wanted to press Mrs Ferrars for details, but it was obvious from what she had told me that Marianne Dashwood had taken the break-up with Willoughby badly and was still suffering from her broken heart. It might very well be that Mrs Ferrars had the right of it and what her sister needed most was to forget about him and move on with her life. In that case, it would not matter what I did, because all my meddling in the affair would be counter-productive. Before I made a decision, however, I wanted to find out more and I suspected that the key lay with Willoughby’s great-aunt, whatever her name was.
Back in my office, I mentally went through a list of old contacts, wondering if there was anybody who would know about knighthoods that had been bestowed after the Transvaal War. A couple of hours on the phone later and I was in possession of a name and an address.

Lady Allenham lived in a nursing-home not very far from London. The nurse on Lady Allenham’s ward was waiting for me in an office that could only be called frilly. I admired the dedication that went into producing the many pink and lacy doilies that covered every free surface. The standard-issue blackout curtains clashed rather ferociously with everything else in the room, including the short blonde woman sitting in an over-stuffed armchair. She was dolled up maybe just a hint too much for one who was supposed to work in a hospital, but the starched, pristine uniform with the gleaming watch on her chest clearly marked the professional. Her cap sat on hair that was intricately curled in a way that always made me wonder how it held up. She would have been prettier with a little less make-up, but at least, the paint was expertly applied and did indeed highlight her large blue eyes. I briefly wondered whether her long, red fingernails were in any way practical for her work before my gaze fell on her slender, very obviously naked legs. She apparently did not have the money for nylons.

She had been leafing through a penny dreadful with a disdainful face when I entered, but tossed it away as soon as she saw me.

‘Mr Brandon, is it?’ she said and held out a hand. ‘I’m Sister Steele. We spoke on the phone.’

I could faintly hear the traces of a Bristol accent she’d probably got rid of when she began working in an upscale nursing home.

‘Sit down, please,’ she said.

I gingerly sat down on an over-stuffed armchair, trying carefully not to disrupt the fat cushions that were arranged on it.

‘You’re a private detective, aren’t you?’ Sister Steele asked and mustered me with her large baby-blues.

‘Sure I am, babydoll,’ I said in a theatrical growl, remembering the book she had read with disgust.

Sister Steele giggled.

‘I think that sort of thing only works when you come in a trench-coat and a fedora,’ she said.

‘My apologies,’ I said. ‘I did not know I would meet a connoisseur of the art, otherwise I would have decked myself out in the full kit.’

‘And you think that would have worked?’ she said and raised her carefully plucked eyebrow.

‘Well, can you claim to be unaffected by the fact that I’m a private investigator?’

‘Gee, that must be such a tough job,’ she said and opened her eyes even wider. ‘And so dangerous!’

She frantically tried to flutter her eyelashes at me.

‘It’s a man’s life out on those streets,’ I said in as hoarse a voice as I could muster.
She held my gaze with a serious expression for some very long seconds before she finally looked away and laughed.

‘Gee, thanks,’ she said, ‘Lord knows I needed a laugh today.’

Now that I looked closer, I could see that what the make-up tried to hide was probably a very tired face.

‘Tough day?’ I asked.

She sighed.

‘Three nurses ill on my ward alone, and we have at least one resident who probably won’t live through the night,’ she said.

‘Would you prefer me to come again some other time?’ I asked.

‘No, it’s fine,’ she said. ‘I need a break anyway – do you mind if I smoke?’

I shook my head and she opened a flat cigarette case that had been lying on the desk and placed a thin roll-up between her bright red lips. I had got out my lighter and leaned over to give her fire.

‘You’re here about Lady Allenham, right?’ she said and reached for a gilded ash-tray.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Can you tell me anything about her?’

‘She’s a poor old girl,’ Sister Steel said. ‘Never has any visitors that I’ve met. I’ve been here for four years, and you’re the first one that’s come to see her. Mind you, she does get letters.’

‘Who writes to her?’ I asked, my interest perking up.

‘Well, I wouldn’t know!’ she said with mock indignation. ‘I don’t read the mail, do I?’

I held up my hands apologetically.

‘I guess it’s mostly business stuff,’ she added. ‘From her lawyer. You sure you don’t want to smoke?’

‘Never got in the habit,’ I said as I watched her inhale the smoke with a look of complete concentration.

‘You don’t mind though?’ she said after she had exhaled.

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘I had a friend at Oxford who smoked all the time.’

‘Lady friend?’ she asked and raised her eyebrow again.

‘What can I say, I’m an attractive man,’ I sighed.

She giggled again.

‘Mind you, I have no idea why her lawyer keeps sending those letters,’ she said. ‘It’s not as if she understands them, is it?’

‘Is it?’ I repeated.

‘Completely gaga, the poor dear,’ said Sister Steele. ‘Most of these days, she doesn’t even
remember her name.’

Her wording was blunt, but I was quite certain that there was compassion underneath the manner of routine that came with seeing decline and death every day. The make-up, after all, could not fully hide the lines of care and worry around her eyes. She took a deep breath once more, then blew out the smoke.

‘Probably all the better for her, but it does remind you, does it not, how short life is,’ she said.

‘I’ve never found it that,’ I said truthfully.

I reached into my pocket for the photograph of Willoughby and Marianne Dashwood.

‘Have you ever seen this man?’ I said.

‘Lady Allenham’s nephew, yes,’ she said. ‘Lady Allenham has a photograph of him on her mantelpiece. I’ve never seen that woman, though.’

‘But the man has been here?’ I asked, unable to hide my excitement.

She shook her head.

‘I only ever saw his photo,’ she said. ‘I’m sure I would have remembered him. He’s very good looking, if I may say that in your presence.’

‘Are you certain?’ I asked. ‘He’s never been here?’

‘Never seen him in person in my life,’ she said. ‘Though I sure wouldn’t mind to. What’s he at these days?’

‘I’m sorry to say that he’s probably dead,’ I said.

For a second, she looked disappointed. Then, she resolutely stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

‘I’m sorry, but I’ll have to get back to work,’ she said. ‘Anything else I can do for you?’

‘The lawyer,’ I said. ‘Can you find out his name and address while I’m talking to Lady Allenham?’

As she got up and lead me out of the room, I noticed that she had carefully painted brown seams onto the backs of her calves. She surely was a woman with dedication.

Lady Allenham was a sweet old lady, thin and frail. One of the nurses – I wondered if Sister Steele had taken the time – had taken care to brush and braid her hair and dress her in an old, but pretty frock. The little room was full with what I assumed had once been her antique drawing-room furniture. I carefully navigated my way around two Louis quinze chairs and a Chippendale desk so that I could shake Lady Allenham’s hand. It took three turns for her to understand that I was neither her doctor, nor her hair-dresser. Sister Steele might have been cruel in calling her ‘completely gaga,’ but she was in essentials correct.

In addition to that, the old lady was also blind as a bat. When she slowly turned her head in my general direction, I realised quickly that she could see little more than lights and outlines. There would be no point in showing her the letter.
‘I am here about your nephew, Lady Allenham,’ I said loudly after I had sat down in a Queen Anne-chair opposite Lady Allenham.

‘John is not here,’ she said. ‘He’s at Oxford, you know.’

I wondered if she was going to have a lucid moment.

‘He’s so bright,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘He got a scholarship, you know.’

‘A scholarship?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘We’re all very proud of him.’

I asked myself if there was a tactful way to ask her if she was in full possession of her mental capacities.

‘You should come again next week,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘He’s going to visit for Easter.’

That seemed to answer my question. I was fairly certain it was the end of October.

‘Such a good boy,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘He’s going to be very successful.’

She reached out a hand, searching for mine, and I took it.

‘You really should come for Easter dinner, Mr Williams,’ she said. ‘John would be delighted, I’m sure, you’re such a good friend of his.’

I did not bother to correct her. While she went on telling me how very well Willoughby was doing at Oxford, I looked around in the room if there was any clue that Willoughby might have been in contact recently.

‘Sophia will be coming too,’ Lady Allenham said.

‘Sophia?’ I asked.

‘You will know her, of course,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘I know it’s not official yet, but I feel free to think of her as his fiancée, you know.’

My eyes fell on a photograph sitting on a sideboard next to her armchair. It showed Willoughby sitting on the bonnet of a car with a young woman.

‘Is that Sophia on that photograph with the car?’ I asked.

Lady Allenham turned her unseeing eyes toward the sideboard.

‘That’s Sophia’s car,’ she said proudly. ‘She bought it when she first went to Oxford, you know.’

‘Sophia’s at Oxford, too?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ Lady Allenham said. ‘She’s just as clever as John.’

‘May I take a closer look?’ I said.

She nodded and I took the photograph. Willoughby and the woman called Sophia were sitting on the bonnet of a small car, their arms around each other, their hair blown about by the wind. Sophia appeared to be as tall as Willoughby, a thin, fair-haired woman with a daring look in her eyes and an amused smile around her lips. Willoughby looked much younger than in Miss Dashwood’s
photographs, a boyish, almost goofy, grin on his face. It looked to me as if he had been besotted
and Sophia had known it. The car’s number plate was not visible.

‘They’re such a happy couple, aren’t they?’ Lady Allenham said. ‘She’s the love of his life, he
says.’

‘What did you say, when was this picture taken?’ I asked.

‘Shortly after Sophia bought the car,’ Lady Allenham said, ‘you know, when she first went to
Oxford.’

‘What year was that?’ I insisted.

‘1935,’ she said, ‘the same year as John, didn’t you know?’

‘I sure never did,’ I said. ‘What did you say Sophia’s last name was?’

But Lady Allenham pressed her lips together, shook her head and did not want to say anything
else.

Harry Dashwood, Esq. was no relation to Miss Dashwood or her sister. I had asked. He was
simply a good-natured man who would have been very content as a simple country lawyer, but
whose wife had pressured him to take up practice in London, so that in time he might become a
K.C., or whatever else her fancy dictated. All this he told me, in perhaps not quite as many words,
in the first five minutes or so of our meeting. The thing that really astonished me was that he did
not even seem upset by the constant conjugal nagging – as a matter of fact, he presented it as
something he was thoroughly grateful for. I looked at him as he sat there, jovial, quite rotund,
balding, in a bespoke pre-war suit probably ordered by his wife, in a large leather armchair behind
an oaken desk, all arranged by the wife so they would show him off to his best advantage, and
realised that, all evidence to the contrary, he was thoroughly content with his life.

‘So, the Allenhams, hm,’ he said when I had explained why I had come. ‘Very old clients, very
old. My grandfather worked for her husband, back when the families both still lived in Devon.’

He patted the thick file sitting on his desk.

‘Have you heard anything from the nephew, John Willoughby, since 1940?’

Dashwood scratched his head.

‘Tell you what,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I ever even saw that nephew. It was the old lady I did
business with, Sir Roderick already having died when I took over from my father -’

‘So he never contacted you after he disappeared in 1940?’ I asked again.

‘Can’t say that he did,’ Dashwood said. ‘Hang on, did you say he disappeared?’

‘Afraid so,’ I said. ‘There was a terrible hullabaloo on the base, I think. They didn’t contact you
then?’

‘No, not at all,’ Dashwood said. ‘He’s back now, though, isn’t he?’

I stared at him in disbelief. I was pretty sure I had explained just that not five minutes ago. He did
not notice my irritated glance, however; he was just helping himself to some chunks of toffee. He
had hid the box in an opened drawer of his desk and obviously thought I would not notice. I
suspected he had been perfecting the art of inconspicuous munching for quite some time now.

‘Afraid not,’ I said. ‘He’s been missing since then. I’m not sure if he was ever officially declared dead, but as far as I know, nobody’s been in contact with him since.’

‘Oh, dashit,’ he mumbled through a mouthful of toffee.

He quickly swallowed and brushed invisible crumbs of his tight waistcoat.

‘That’s going to cause a lot of bother eventually,’ he said. ‘You’re quite certain, old man?’

I did not know whether to be offended. I was considerably older than him, but he did not know that. I certainly did not look much older than thirty and he was closer to fifty. I did not let my consternation show, however, and just confirmed, once more, that Willoughby was quite certainly very much missing.

‘Oh, bugger,’ he said. ‘Well, better to be prepared, I guess.’

He helped himself to another toffee under the pretense of blowing his nose, and hastily chewed it.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘the old lady named him as her sole heir in her will and if he isn’t back by the time she – you know – well, there’ll be lots of letters to write, my boy.’

It had been a very long time since anyone had called me a boy; in fact, they had usually called me puer. I let it slide anyway.

Harry Dashwood mopped his large forehead.

‘There's no way the old lady will change her will again,’ he muttered. ‘Even if she wanted to, there’s no way she could – you’ve seen her, I suppose?’

I nodded.

He helped himself to another toffee, without any pretence this time.

‘Do let me know if you find him,’ he said thickly. ‘Would make things so much easier.’

I promised I would do just that.

‘Did you ever hear mention of a young woman called Sophia?’ I asked.

‘Who'sh she?’

‘According to Lady Allenham, Willoughby's fiancée,’ I said, ‘but as you said yourself, the old lady is – well, you know -’

‘Can't say I ever heard of her,’ Dashwood said. ‘But I know who might.’

He reached for a sheet of paper and scribbled an address onto it.

‘That's the old lady's former housekeeper,’ he said. ‘Tough old bird, mind you, and can get horribly cross, but back when she was still at Allenham Court, she knew everything that went on there.’

When I left, he invited me to take dinner with him and his wife soon, claiming she would be happy to see me, which I doubted. He asked me once again to let him know if I heard anything about Willoughby, then shook my hand firmly, leaving me to wipe toffee off it as soon as I had
Mrs Reynolds was indeed a woman not to be crossed, that much became obvious even on our very short acquaintance. She had once lorded over a large Edwardian household and commandeered countless frightened maids and footmen. These days, although she was in her eighties, she helped out a grand-niece who was running a tea-room in Margate, because, as she said, she could just not stand being lazy.

‘So, young Master Willoughby has got himself into trouble again?’ she said sternly.

She mustered me with a stern glance over the top of her gold-rimmed spectacles before she resumed cleaning the empty tables. I noticed that she was still wearing her housekeeper's uniform of a severely cut black dress. She even had a key-ring still fixed to her belt.

‘He's been missing since 1940, ma'am,’ I said. ‘Didn't you know?’

‘Nobody tells me anything,’ she huffed.

She finished wiping the last laminated table. She took the bucket and sponge she had been using to a little sink where she wrung out the sponge and emptied the bucket. Like a school-boy, I followed her.

‘I take a break of half an hour now and have tea,’ she announced. ‘You may join me. You can have tea as well and apple pie if you have coupons.’

Luckily I could spare some. The pie was worth every single one of them and I told Mrs Reynolds so. This seemed to soften her a little.

‘He was a good little boy, Master John was,’ she said. ‘But I fear that in his later years, he got rather wild. It was all that loitering at Oxford that did it if you ask me, but her ladyship was so proud of her clever little boy, she wouldn't hear a thing of it.’

She sipped her tea.

‘Yes, all that loitering at Oxford,’ she repeated, ‘and that woman of course.’

‘That would have been Sophia?’ I asked, trying to sound disinterested.’

‘Tch, her,’ snorted Mrs Reynolds, confirming my suspicions. ‘She was very pretty, I grant you that, and young John fell for her head over heels. He just didn't realise that she wasn't good news.’

‘Lady Allenham mentioned that they were as good as engaged?’ I said.

‘Her ladyship liked to think so,’ Mrs Reynolds said, ‘but the little miss quite obviously thought marriage was beneath her. She was no better than some who walk the London streets, if you get my meaning.’

She huffed again.

‘No wonder that she didn't go to church with us on Sundays,’ she said primly. ‘Probably realised that we wouldn't want any of her loose morals there.’

‘Would you happen to know her last name, ma'am?’ I said. ‘I believe it's possible that Lieutenant Willoughby, if he's still alive, has been in contact with her.’
‘Aye, that he would,’ she said and betrayed for the first time her Scottish roots. I had suspected them beforehand, from the very slight accent she had, but not been sure.

‘Miss Sophia Grey, that was her name,’ Mrs Reynolds said.

‘I believe her to have been at Oxford at the same time as Lieutenant Willoughby was,’ I said. ‘Would you know if that was correct, ma'am?’

‘Oxford, indeed,’ Mrs Reynolds snorted. ‘At least, that's what she told us. Her ladyship was so impressed, but if you ask me, all those tales of her glorious Shrewsbury college probably were little more than humbug. Mind you, I wouldn't put it past her to be one of those Oxford women – the things one hears about the goings-on at the colleges. Well, it wasn't done in my time, I can tell you that.’

She seemed to be warming to me.

‘Gave herself airs, she did,’ Mrs Reynolds continued. ‘Thought she was better than everyone else just because she kept driving that infernal car.’

She took another sip of tea. I thought it would probably be best to let her ramble on, and see what questions she might answer without being asked.

‘I know the Princess Elizabeth drives ambulances and all that,’ she said, ‘and it's one thing if it's for the war effort, but you cannot tell me that the Princess drives a car around just because she can, behaving no better than a common coachman.’

She huffed.

‘She even had the audacity to ask me if I wanted to ride with her, if you will believe it,’ she said. ‘No, thank you, I said, and then took the bus, just as I always did. I certainly didn't take any favours from her. And all those books she kept toting around -’

She sipped at her tea again. I wondered if she had any left in her cup or if this was merely some sort of habit with her.

‘Not that there's anything wrong with reading,’ she added after a thoughtful pause.

‘Quite so, ma'am,’ I said.

‘I like a good book, myself,’ she said. ‘There's nothing like a nice hot cup of Bovril and a bit of Barbara Cartland or Georgette Heyer after a long day on your legs. But with little Miss Sophia, you wouldn't believe it – kept books everywhere in her room just to impress people, and all in queer languages that no normal person can read.’

I was fairly convinced that by now, her cup was empty, but she kept pretending to be sipping tea.

‘I ask you, did that girl ever do a spot of honest work in her life?’ she asked without waiting for an answer. ‘Of course she didn't. And with no one around to teach her any manners, well, it's no surprise she turned out the way she did.’

‘Her parents were dead, then?’ I asked.

‘Why, I believe they must have been,’ Mrs Reynolds said. ‘Not that I would know for certain, of course, but the way she kept talking about how she had that apartment in London all to herself – and I ask of you, for what purpose but the obvious does a girl of her age need an apartment all of her own in London?’
She took another imaginary sip of tea.

‘Not that young John ever saw her for what she was, mind you,’ she said. ‘He was completely besotted with her, like a young fool. Would've done anything, I suppose, if she just asked him for it, and didn't she know it. Well, until the big quarrel anyway.’

My ears perked up.

‘They quarrelled?’ I asked.

‘He probably found out what she really was,’ Mrs Reynolds said, ‘sent her packing that same night, and we never saw her again – no better than she deserved, mind you.’

‘You wouldn't know when that was, would you, ma'am?’ I asked.

‘Why, of course I do,’ she said instantly. ‘It was just after the war broke out, for Master John joined up not three days later.’

She paused for a pregnant moment.

‘So I suppose if what you say is true and he did get himself killed, it's all her fault,’ she said. ‘Well, good thing her ladyship doesn't understand these things anymore, bless her, or it would break her heart.’

There was little else left for me to do. I showed her a copy of the letter. She admitted that her eyesight was not what it had once been, but after much peering at it and adjusting her spectacles, she showed herself fairly certain that it had been written by John Willoughby. She was quite adamant, however, about the fact that she would not want to testify to that in court and I assured her it would probably not come to that.

At least now I had a name and a college. Even better, as fortune would have it, I knew a woman who would be able to find out more.

I had not seen Hilda Jennings in almost twenty years. I had been saving money for Oxford since the turn of the century, having been there in the 1820s and wishing to repeat the experience. I had the money ready in 1914, but the Great War came in between and as foolish as many men much younger than me, I had rushed overseas to defend English virtues in a muddy French trench. War treats nobody very kindly, not even when you have seen an awful lot of them. When I met Hilda in Miss Hillyard’s lecture on constitutional history, I had been drawn first to the fact that she did not look like Julia at all.

Hilda had been just what I needed after the horrors of the trenches. She had not needed my help for anything more difficult than to quiz her Latin vocabulary; she had always been independent and full of an inner strength that Julia just never had possessed, if I was honest to myself. It had allowed her to help me, which made for a nice change. I would have loved to continue to see her after I left Oxford and Hilda stayed to make her way in the academic world, but I knew that Hilda would notice eventually that I was not ageing. Instead, we kept in contact via the telephone, although we had not spoken much during the war. Nevertheless, I knew that Hilda now was a don at Shrewsbury college, the very college Sophia Grey had in all probability been to between 1935 and 1939. I decided to phone Hilda and ask her for yet another favour.

I had made many friends in my life, more than I can possibly remember, I am sorry to say. My problem was keeping up those friendships, because after ten or fifteen years, people would notice that something was wrong. In the old days, I had to rely on letters, at least in those cases where my
correspondents could write and postal services were to be had. It was always good while it lasted, but sooner or later, I would inevitably get a letter from a well-meaning relative who was sorry to tell me the sad news. Worse yet were those times when the letters simply stopped one day and I never found out what happened. The telephone improved my life. It meant closer contact to the people with whom I wanted to keep in touch without giving too much away, and it gave me the illusion that I was an actual part of my friends’ lives.

I did not know the secretary who answered the phone but she promised to fetch Doctor Jennings while I waited. My mind went back to long Sunday afternoons spent on the Isis, to evenings spent in an obliging friend’s empty apartment, to cheap red wine and dusty sunshine and Hilda’s old gramophone. Hilda had been unlike so many other girls I had known. In that, she was much more like Julia than anyone else, because she hardly cared about what anyone else thought of her. We had begun our acquaintance with strong coffee and talking about books, but soon we had moved on to almost undrinkable wine and philosophy, and then to hot chocolate laced liberally with rum, consumed on a rug in front of a fire while we whispered all sorts of nonsense. The gramophone always played in the background while the afternoon sunlight moved across the dusty carpet.

‘Walter Crawley, is that you?’ a hoarse voice said on the other end of the line.

It was, at least to her. It had been a good name and I had been sorry to let it go when I enlisted in ‘39. Walter had been a successful lawyer, thanks to his Oxford degree. Novelists seem to think that eternal creatures have access to unlimited resources, but they tend to forget that we have to live and eat and dress ourselves just like everyone else, and are subject to financial crises just like the rest of the world. I could not count how often I had made a fortune and lost it again.

‘It has been too long, Hilda,’ I said.

‘Damn right,’ she muttered and I knew she was lighting a cigarette just then. ‘You still not married?’

‘Never met anyone like you,’ I said and it was true. Hilda was one of a kind.

‘What about you?’ I asked.

‘You know me, Walter,’ Hilda said. ‘After you left, the Venerable Bede always held more interest for me than any real man.’

She coughed furiously.

‘It’s good to hear your voice again,’ she said. ‘I had been wondering what you were doing – I suppose you were too old for the trenches this time around?’

I had been too old for the trenches for quite some time, but I never learnt it.

‘They stuck me behind a desk,’ I said evasively. It was the truth, more or less. ‘But I got demobbed in June.’

‘Lucky you,’ Hilda said. ‘So you’re back to the lawyering now?’

‘More or less,’ I said. I hated lying to Hilda. ‘What interesting things are happening in your life?’

Hilda gave a throaty laugh.

‘I’m that close to finishing the fundamental work on the historians of Anglo-Saxon England,’ she said. ‘I suppose it will be less than fifty years now until I finish it.’
‘And how is Oxford these days?’ I asked. I missed the city of the dreaming spires like few other places where I had lived. Rome, of course, was the exception, but it had been such a long time ago that the pain was duller these days, although not yet dull enough to allow me to think about returning.

‘The usual,’ Hilda said. ‘Ill-behaved undergrads are crowding everything, Doctor Bunting got lost in the Merton library, and the city dump stinks to the heavens. You should come and visit.’

‘I might, one of these days,’ I said. Maybe I would. ‘Listen, Hilda, I hate to bring it up, but -’

Hilda laughed again.

‘I knew you had a reason for calling,’ she said. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Have you ever heard of a Shrewsbury undergrad called Sophia Grey?’ I asked. ‘She would have been at Oxford between 1935 and 1939.’

There was silence for a moment.

‘Oh, of course,’ Hilda said then. ‘The Dauntless Miss Grey, we called her. Famous for ignoring all Oxford customs about bicycles and driving everywhere in that rusty American car. She was a student one does not easily forget.’

‘What else can you tell me about her?’ I asked. ‘What did you think about her?’

‘She was awfully bright, that is for sure,’ Hilda said. ‘Read Greats and gained a First almost effortlessly.’

There was a brief pause and I heard the lighter click.

‘She had a certain French existentialist chic, if you know what I mean,’ she said. ‘Black jumpers and berets, that kind of thing. Took everything very serious. We feared she would develop a bit of a radical streak, but nothing ever came of it; at least nothing ever reached our ears.’

‘Did you ever see her in the company of John Willoughby?’ I asked. ‘Not sure what college he was.’

‘Corpus Christi,’ Hilda said. ‘Yes, of course I recall him. It’s difficult to imagine Sophia Grey without him. What happened to the two of them? Did Miss Grey give in and marry him?’

‘They had a terrible quarrel in ’39, from what I know,’ I said. ‘Afterwards, Willoughby joined the R.A.F. and didn’t contact her again. He disappeared the following year, no idea where, but he’s probably dead now.’

‘Gee, Walter, you know how to cheer a girl up,’ Hilda said. ‘Mind you, half the girls at Shrewsbury can tell a similar story these days.’

‘So Sophia and Willoughby were close when you knew them?’ I asked.

‘Inseparable is more like it,’ Hilda said. ‘Miss Grey led and Mr Willoughby followed, worshipping the ground underneath her feet. I think though she genuinely liked him, in spite of all his tendencies to look like a lovestruck puppy whenever she was near.’

‘Do you know anything about where Miss Grey was from? Or where she might be now?’

‘Her parents were both dead by the time she came here,’ Hilda said. ‘She was under the
guardianship of some relative, I believe, but he died soon afterwards and she was more or less independent. She had inherited enough money from her parents to live comfortably and buy the car that made her notorious, and I believe they also left her a house somewhere up North – I can ask around if anyone remembers, if you’d like me to?’

‘You’re a dear,’ I said.

Hilda coughed again.

‘Will you let me know what you need all this for?’ she asked.

‘I might, once the case is over,’ I said.

‘Come to Oxford and I’l treat you to dinner at the Mitre,’ Hilda said.

It was a terribly tempting offer.

There was not much I could do until Hilda got back to me about Sophia Grey’s address. I was more and more convinced that Sophia held the key to Willoughby’s disappearance. If she had become as radical as Hilda had hinted, she might very well have decided to persuade Willoughby to do something drastic, whatever that might have been.

I decided to visit Miss Dashwood and her sister once more. I felt a little bad that I had not even stayed to talk to Miss Dashwood the last time I was there, and I wanted to know if Willoughby had ever mentioned Sophia to her.

When I rang Mrs Ferrars, she immediately asked if there were any new developments. I told her that I had not yet been able to locate any viable trace of Willoughby, but that I was still waiting for a call that might tell me more. I then told her about my intention to see her and her sister again. I had expected her to be very reluctant or even to refuse to see me, but she said that she was glad about my call. Her sister, she said, had been very restless the last few days and constantly enquiring about news from me. If I told her in person that Willoughby remained untraceable, and that the most likely explanation was his death, Mrs Ferrars said, it might help her realise that her hopes were probably unfounded. We arranged for me to visit them on the next day and I hung up, still unsure whether it was the right thing to do. If Willoughby was still alive, he was in all probability reunited with the love of his life, and the chances that he would return to Miss Dashwood were slim indeed. Would it not, I mused, perhaps be kinder to tell Miss Dashwood that Willoughby could not be found, and let the matter rest at that? I had, however, promised her that I would do all I could to locate Willoughby and I considered myself bound to that promise, come what may.

When I got to the Ferrars’, Mrs Ferrars was once more waiting for me at the door. It might have been just my imagination, but I thought that she looked even more tired than she had the previous time I had visited her. She told me that this time, she had been able to persuade her sister to stay, and that her husband was home as well.

‘I’m really glad you could come,’ she said in an under-tone as she took my coat and hat. ‘Maybe seeing you will help Marianne – she’s really not been well lately.’

Before I could ask more, she had already opened the door to her drawing-room and asked me to step inside.

My eyes first fell on Miss Dashwood. She was seated in her sister’s best armchair and once more displayed the poise I had previously noticed in her. Her clothing stood out in a stark contrast to the
old, shabby furniture. This time, she was wearing a sleek silk cocktail dress in a brilliant shade of red that was, in fact, the same shade as her lips. Once more, her long legs were sheathed in spotless nylons. To keep herself warm in the cold room, she had wrapped herself in a large fur stole. Next to her, Mrs Ferrars, the simple elegance of whose home-made dress I had previously admired, looked dowdy and much older than she actually was.

It was then that I realised that I had not even noticed the other person in the room, a young man with an open, winning face. His chaplain’s uniform was carefully ironed, the work of a loving wife, I presumed. Mrs Ferrars introduced her husband to me and we sat down.

‘Have you found Willoughby?’ Miss Dashwood asked without further ado.

‘Not yet,’ I said. ‘There are some hints I have been following, but I am not sure if anything will come of them.’

I shot a brief glance at Mrs Ferrars, who gave me an almost imperceptible nod.

‘You should prepare for the worst, Miss Dashwood,’ I said.

‘By which you mean –‘ she said.

It was disconcerting the way her face looked just like Julia’s. Julia too had had the same air about her when she was thinking herself more sophisticated and more important than the company around her. I shook myself from these thoughts; I had been telling myself too often that I should not always infer that a similarity in looks led to a similarity in outlooks, but it was always in vain.

‘I mean, that it is very likely that Willoughby is dead,’ I said. ‘I have not been able to find a trace of him since his disappearance in 1940.’

‘Then you must not have looked hard enough,’ Miss Dashwood said, keeping her voice very modulated. ‘He must have been somewhere.’

‘There is only one other explanation that I can see at the moment,’ I said, ‘and you are not going to like it.’

‘What would that be?’ Miss Dashwood said, pronouncing every word very precisely.

I could see Mrs Ferrars reaching for her husband’s hand and pressing it tightly.

‘There are some witnesses who have been telling me that before he met you, Willoughby was very much in love with a young woman named Sophia Grey – have you ever heard that name?’

Before Miss Dashwood could answer, Mrs Ferrars quickly said, ‘He never mentioned her to us.’

‘It seems that they were very devoted to each other at one time,’ I said. ‘It might be that she helped Willoughby disappear, and that wherever he is now, he is with her.’

‘You are forgetting the letter,’ Miss Dashwood said, enunciating every word in the manner of a 19th century stage actress. ‘Willoughby sent me the letter. He loves me. There was no mention of any other woman.’

‘The letter could have been a mistake,’ I said. ‘Or a hoax. I do not want you to get your hopes up.’

I could see her upper lip tremble, but I could not say from which emotion. She stood up.

‘You clearly have no idea at all about my hopes,’ she said calmly.
Then, she marched out of the room and before we had quite realized what had happened, we heard the front door slam behind her.

‘I was afraid that would happen,’ Mrs Ferrars finally said.

‘Maybe I should not have come,’ I said.

‘It’s not your fault, Mr Brandon,’ Chaplain Ferrars said. ‘You explained it very well to her, I thought.’

‘Is she – will she do anything dangerous?’ I asked. ‘Should we have gone after her?’

‘She wants to be alone when she is like that,’ the Chaplain said.

‘Normally, she just walks down the road until she is tired, then takes the bus back,’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘The bus driver knows we will pay him at the next day.’

She sighed.

‘I hope that’s what she’s doing now.’

‘She will not get very far in these shoes,’ the Chaplain said. ‘You’ll see, she’ll be back in no time.’

Mrs Ferrars took a deep breath. I saw her tremble as she exhaled. I noticed now that not only was she looking more weary than she had before, but that it seemed as if her clothes were hanging a little loose about her, as if she had lost weight recently. The Chaplain put an arm around his wife’s shoulder.

‘You’ll see, it’ll be fine, Elinor,’ he said. ‘The fresh air will do her good.’

‘Maybe we just should not have brought her here,’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘Maybe it was too early – maybe she should have stayed in the clinic –‘

‘The pneumonia?’ I asked, sensing a chance to get one of my questions about Miss Dashwood answered. ‘Miss Dashwood did mention that she was in a sanatorium for most of the war –‘

The Chaplain looked faintly embarrassed.

‘Marianne was in a mental health clinic,’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘After Willoughby – she took it very bad, you know.’

‘Yes, you mentioned that,’ I said. ‘I just had no idea how bad.’

‘She was very with-drawn, at first,’ Mrs Ferrars said. ‘Wouldn’t eat or talk or anything, the only thing she did was take long walks, which helped a little, or so it seemed. She did catch pneumonia then, but it was mild and she soon got better. But when she got released from the hospital –‘

She blushed.

‘Her behaviour became a little – aberrant,’ the Chaplain said. ‘She – she went to London, lived there with a family friend – we thought the change of climate might help –‘

‘She made friends,’ Mrs Ferrars continued. ‘The wrong sort of friends. Male friends. They gave her all those clothes, no idea where they had them from – she went out all night, nobody knew where she went –‘

She looked at her husband, who pressed her shoulders.
‘I hoped it would be just a phase, but it wouldn’t get better – it got worse in fact. When our friend tried to speak to her, she got very aggressive, said that Jenny was only jealous, that nobody understood her,’ she said.

She swallowed hard.

‘Edward and I just happened to be there that day,’ she said. ‘After that out-burst, she ran out into the rain and we couldn’t find her for hours. When we did, she was still raving and Edward convinced me that it was for her own good if we had her brought to a clinic.’

‘She did get better in the clinic, at first,’ Chaplain Ferrars said. ‘But as soon as she was released, everything began anew, and things got even worse. I had been posted here by then and we thought we would get her to live with us, but she as soon as she was here, she tried to seduce my superior officer when he came to visit. The poor man was completely taken aback; quite a thing, in fact, the way she – anyway, we tried to talk to her, but all that brought about was a new fit and we had to bring her back to the clinic. She was released only this May.’

‘She – she didn’t try anything with you, did she?’ Mrs Ferrars said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I don’t think she did.’

‘You would have noticed,’ the Chaplain said.

I left them soon afterwards, feeling at unease about everything and myself. My admiration for the Ferrars’ had grown even more.

My thoughts were still in turmoil by the time I boarded the train that would bring me back to London. I hardly noticed who else was sitting in my compartment until my gaze fell on a pair of well shaped, nylon-clad woman’s legs opposite me. My first thought was that I had accidentally met Miss Dashwood again, but a further look told me that I was mistaken. This woman was another category altogether. Her well-cut suit was made of deceptively plain, dark material, but it accentuated every curve and plain of her body so well it might just as well have been nothing more than a silken sheeth. A spectacularly large, wide-rimmed hat cast her face and head into shadow, but my eyes locked onto her hands, the nails filed to perfection and painted an understated pink, and onto the signet ring on her third finger. I gasped in surprise. She lifted her head and I looked into large, violet eyes and a delicate, elfin face.

‘Salve, Quinte,’ she said in a low, melodious voice. ‘You were looking at my legs as if they were exhibits on a fishmongers’ stall – kindly refrain from doing so in the future.’

The other passengers in the compartment showed no surprise or even interest in the fact that the elegant woman in their midst was speaking what they either recognised as fluent classical Latin or complete gibberish. The goddess noted my question.

‘They cannot hear us and they feel no interest in the fact that we are speaking,’ she said.

She looked me up and down.

‘It has been too long,’ she said. ‘You look absolutely rotten. No need to ask how life has been treating you.’

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked tersely.

‘The quintessential cavalier, aren’t you?’ she said with a faint smile. ‘The epitome of chivalry for
thousands of years. Why don’t you ask what I can do for you, for a change?’

‘Because you never do what you’re asked to do anyway,’ I said. ‘Have you been enjoying
yourself lately?’

‘No need to sound so sullen,’ she said. ‘Don’t you like her?’

‘The hair was a nice touch, I’ve said that before,’ I said, ‘but you’re tormenting the poor girl, can’t
you see that?’

‘Me?’ she said. ‘I’m not doing anything. She brought all of that onto herself.’

I did not answer that and chose to merely look out of the window.

‘Now, Quintus Julius Gallienus, where are your manners all of a sudden?’ she said. ‘Won’t you at
least talk to me anymore?’

‘You know what I want you to do,’ I said, still looking out of the window, ‘and seeing as nothing
I can say will persuade you, I might just as well be silent.’

‘Now you’re being unfair,’ she said. ‘You know very well that you can have all you want – and
more, and I know you’re interested, I’ve seen your looks – but just like everything else, it comes at
a price.’

‘Why,’ I said and tried to keep my voice level, ‘why, after all these years, do you still believe I
would suddenly change my mind? I did not betray Julia when they threatened to execute me –
why should I betray any of those poor girls you’re bewitching to look like her now?’

She cocked her head to one side.

‘Because I’m threatening to let you live,’ she said softly, ‘and you want nothing more than just to
lie down forever. Think of it – just a few words from you, and you can fall asleep in my arms and
wake in Letus’.’

‘You’re not getting it,’ I said, ‘Hundreds, thousands of years and you’re still not getting it – I
wouldn’t betray her if my life depended on it.’

‘But it does, Quintus Julius,’ she said. ‘It does.’

I felt helpless anger rising in me.

‘I loved her,’ I cried. ‘Aren’t you supposed to understand that one human emotion?’

She looked at me with an expression that in a human being might have been sadness.

‘My poor boy,’ she said and tried to reach for one of my hands. ‘Don’t you understand, after all
these years, that what you loved was merely an illusion, a figment of your mind? Julia hardly ever
thought twice of you until she needed your help, and even then, you were nothing to her but her
father’s client, who was honour-bound to hide her and claim ownership over the documents she
carried.’

I hardly heard her words as rage, directed at all and everyone, washed over me.

‘Think about it,’ she said. ‘Think about the life you could have led.’

Unbidden images rose in my mind. I saw my wife, of whom I had not thought for years. I had met
her shortly after I had arrived in Britannia, married her not long afterwards and buried her after a
decade or two. In the vision in my mind, we raised the children we never had and grew old together. I saw myself strolling through the woods with Fridwulfa’s cousin, laughing happily, saw myself getting married to Alienor’s maid, saw myself setting sail for the New World with Henrietta’s daughter, saw Lady Horatia’s governess reading to me in our own little home. Finally, I saw myself and Hilda, sitting opposite each other at a large desk, hammering away at identical type-writers, occasionally sharing a remark or a joke. The vividness of this last image, the possibilities it evoked, almost tore me apart.

‘Don’t you see it, Quintus?’ the goddess said. ‘You’re still following the wrong girl – you’re leading the wrong life. Give up Marianne – you cannot help her anyway. Go back to Oxford, find Hilda – deep down, you know that what you are doing now is utterly futile.’

I could only look at her, still unable to form or express any coherent thought.

‘Quintus,’ she whispered softly and reached for my hand again. ‘I only have your best interests at heart, don’t you see that?’

‘Then just let me die!’ I cried. ‘Can you not give me that at least?’

She shook her head.

‘You gave your life to me, don’t you remember?’ she said. ‘It was a fair deal, was it not? I offered your life to you, didn’t I?’

‘In exchange for Julia’s,’ I muttered bitterly. ‘You said all I had to do was betray her and I could live the kind of life a man like me could only dream of, could bed the most beautiful women –‘

‘Myself included, don’t forget that,’ she said.

Very slowly, she folded her left leg over her right.

‘And what did you do?’ she said. ‘You flung my words right back at me, you said –‘

‘Take my life then, do with it as you want, I don’t care one jot for it,’ I said, repeating the words that had been burnt into my memory.

‘So there,’ she said with a puckish smile. ‘You see, I don’t owe you anything. You know what to do.’

The train came to a screeching halt and the goddess got up.

‘Think about it,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you again soon.’

She blew me a kiss and was gone from the compartment with no one but me even seeing the door open.

When I reached my office again I was still full of emotions I would rather not examine to closely. I was glad to hear the telephone ring almost as soon as I had closed the door behind me; anything that distracted me from my thoughts was welcome right now.

‘Ask me if I have news for you,’ said a hoarse voice at the other end when I answered the phone.

‘Hilda,’ I said. ‘You cannot believe how happy I am to hear your voice.’

She chuckled and I let myself collapse into my chair as the sounds of her laughter washed over
‘Had a nasty day?’ she said. ‘You sound all of a thousand years old, at least.’

‘You have no idea, my dear,’ I muttered. ‘You have not the faintest idea.’

‘No need to sound all world-weary,’ she said. ‘You’re not the only one who’s had it rough. We’ve had undergrads trying to start a bonfire out of old bicycles – I ask of you, what sort of school does one need to have visited to believe that a bicycle is the most inflammable material around?’

I could hear her lighter click again.

‘You know, at this stage, the stupidity angers me so much more than the intended crime,’ she said. ‘I feel injured on behalf of all the scientists around, I can tell you.’

I realised that in spite of everything, Hilda had still the ability to make me smile.

‘Why didn’t you persuade me to stay at Oxford?’ I asked her. ‘Why did you ever let me leave?’

‘I don’t know if you recall,’ Hilda said, ‘but I tried my utmost. I distinctly remember female lures being employed at one time and also myself pointing out the financial benefits that would have come with the two of us being able to split the costs of all dictionaries we’d buy in the future.’

‘I should have listened to you,’ I said.

‘It’s not too late,’ Hilda said. ‘Come down here tonight and I promise I’ll take you to Blackwell’s and buy a Du Cange first thing in the morning – we’ll have to find something else to while away the night.’

‘Don’t tempt me.’

‘Darling, I’m trying my utmost to do just that,’ Hilda laughed.

‘You were saying about having found something out?’

‘Don’t think I didn’t notice you changed the topic, Walter Crawley,’ Hilda said. ‘But yes, I have found something out.’

I heard some papers rustle on her end of the line.

‘Your Miss Grey was from Yorkshire originally,’ she said. ‘Her parents owned the manor house in a tiny little village called Bishop’s Bolton. It seems that it was still in Miss Grey’s possession when she was at Oxford, because she gave it as her contact several times. I heard she also had a flat in London at one time, but I couldn’t find out anything about that.’

‘Never mind that now,’ I said. ‘If she is connected to my case, I believe it’s much more likely she’s hiding in that manor house than in London. What did you say the address was?’

‘The Manor House, Bishop’s Bolton, near Thirsk,’ Hilda read out. ‘I suppose it’ll be the only one around.’

‘You’re a treasure,’ I said.

‘You keep forgetting that.’

Before I hung up, Hilda once more invited me to Oxford and for a fleeting second, I wondered
what the goddess would do if I did take her up on that offer, forgot about Marianne Dashwood and tried to see if the intimacy of twenty years ago could be restored.

Then, however, I saw once more the image of Julia’s eyes in Marianne’s face and knew that I could not, would not, go through with that, tempting as it might be. I had something to finish first. Whatever came next, would only come once I’d found out what had happened to Willoughby.

I first thought about asking the telephone exchange if she had any entry for the Manor House in Bishop’s Bolton, but figured that whoever answered would only be alarmed to my existence and probably be gone long before I reached Yorkshire. Instead, I asked to be put through to the Ferrars’ house once more. I was glad to hear that Miss Dashwood had come home unharmed after her outburst. Mrs Ferrars told me that she had had a hot bath and tea and seemed to be better now. She agreed to let me speak with her.

‘I do not want you to get excited,’ I told Miss Dashwood when she answered the phone, ‘all this might lead to nothing, but I have found a hint as to where Willoughby might be now.’

‘Can I see him?’ she asked immediately.

‘I need to find out more first,’ I said. ‘I will let you know what I find out as soon as possible.’

‘I need to see him,’ Miss Dashwood said. ‘Where is he?’

‘The trail is leading to Yorkshire,’ I said. ‘But it might be that it continues from there.’

‘Tell him I want to see him,’ she said. ‘Tell him I got the letter and I forgive him.’

‘You do understand, don’t you,’ I said, ‘that he might be living with Sophia Grey – the woman I told you about?’

‘That does not matter,’ she said at once. ‘He will see that when he sees me again.’

‘She was his fiancée at one point,’ I reminded her.

‘I don’t believe she will be in the picture for much longer,’ Miss Dashwood said confidently. ‘He loves me, I know that.’

I felt somehow uneasy as I hung up, but I thought that maybe the shock of learning that Willoughby did not love her anymore might be just the thing Miss Dashwood needed to be woken from her delusions.

The next day, I took the first train to Yorkshire. I changed trains in York. In Thirsk, I boarded a bus that deposited me in Bishop’s Bolton around noon. The conductor on the bus freely told me that the Manor House was a little outside Bishop’s Bolton, but on the main road, and that I just could not miss it. He also recommended I try lunch in the local King’s Head, which, as he confided in me, was run by his own brother-in-law.

He had neglected to mention that the King’s Head also was the only public house in the village. It had a certain quaint, old-fashioned charm and the lunch I ordered was fairly decent. Afterwards, I decided to have a beer at the bar and catch what local gossip I could before I headed to the Manor House.

It occurred to me then that it might have been cleverer to look up Miss Grey at Somerset House before setting out to Yorkshire, but in my eagerness to conclude the case, the thought had never
even come to me.

The beer was surprisingly good. The company at the bar consisted mostly of elderly men who were all silently nursing their pints of ale.

‘All the way from London, are you?’ one of them said after having mustered my suit.

‘On business,’ I answered. ‘Nice to have a day in the country.’

‘Aye,’ one of the other men said.

‘You could have picked better weather,’ the first man said.

Several ‘aye’s signalled the agreement of the rest of the company.

‘Supposed to be foggy tonight,’ the first man offered.

‘I’ll hopefully be on the train back to London by then,’ I said.

‘Must be quick business,’ my new friend said.

‘So I hope,’ I said. ‘Mind you, I’m only doing the leg-work here. The boss couldn’t be bothered to do it himself, so I’ve been up and down the country this past fortnight.’

‘Odd line of business, that,’ my new friend said.

Several of the other patrons offered another ‘aye.’

I shrugged.

‘He’s a lawyer,’ I said, ‘specialises in finding lost heirs.’

‘Oh, that sort of thing,’ my friend said. ‘S’pose you feel like Philip Marlowe himself some of the time then.’

I snorted. The barmaid came up from the cellars then and I ordered a round before turning back to my friend.

‘I wish,’ I said. ‘All I’ve been doing these past two weeks is asking people if they’re related to a Sir Roderick Grey, who left for Madeira in the 1890s and would like to leave a fortune to his next of kin.’

‘Oh, so it’s our Miss Grey you’re after,’ the barmaid said in between drawing two pints. ‘Well, I won’t begrudge her the fortune if it comes her way.’

‘You see a lot of her then, here?’ I asked.

‘Not much,’ the barmaid conceded.

‘I’m not saying she ain’t a good lass,’ my friend said, ‘but she don’t like to mingle with village folk much.’

‘Aye,’ another man said. ‘These days at least, she don’t. I remember before the war, when she rode out with the hunt, she always had a friendly word for people.’

‘She’s always friendly-spoken,’ the barmaid said. ‘Only she doesn’t speak much, does she?’
She handed me my pint.

‘Likes to keep to herself, she does,’ she said to me. ‘Doesn’t even have a girl from the village to do some of the cleaning or laundry for her.’

She paused in thought.

‘Might be of course that she just doesn’t have the money for it,’ she said. ‘That would change of course once she gets that inheritance.’

‘I have to find out if she is the right one first, though,’ I said. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know if she has a brother?’

‘No, she always was an only child,’ the barmaid said. ‘Old Mr Grey died when she was quite young, see.’

‘She has a cousin though, hasn’t she?’ my friend said. ‘Or what she calls a cousin, at least.’

He gulped down some of his ale.

‘We had other words for that in my day,’ he said.

‘She says he’s sick,’ the barmaid said.

‘Don’t look sick to me,’ my friend said.

‘Might be he’s just completely loony,’ another man said. ‘I saw him once walking out in the park and he just kept petting them dogs and muttering to himself.’

‘He has beautiful dogs,’ the barmaid added. ‘His pointer bitch could easily go to dog shows –’

‘Yes, and do you know who likes dogs?’ my friend said. ‘Germans do.’

‘Don’t be silly, Alan,’ the barmaid said.

She turned to me again.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ she said. ‘He’s been telling us that that cousin of Miss Grey is a German ever since he first arrived here, but I can tell you he’s just as English as you or me.’

‘Might be the cousin is the one I’m looking for,’ I said.

‘Nah, he won’t be,’ she said. ‘He’s not from the Grey side of the family, I don’t think so.’

‘Calls himself Smith, he does,’ my friend said. ‘Do you know who also calls themselves Smith?’

I decided I had learnt enough in the pub, and after exchanging a few more words with the patrons and leaving the barmaid a generous tip, I left. The mysterious cousin of Miss Grey certainly did sound promising.

There was no hint yet of the fog I had been promised, and the walk up the road to the Manor House was rather pleasant. The autumn sun shone on my back and behind me in the village, the church bells were ringing. To my left and right, behind the dry-stone walls, sheep were grazing until the meadows gave way to the shrubs and trees of a park.

I recognised Willoughby the moment I saw him. He was walking towards me, the famous pointer
bitch in tow. Upon his coming nearer, I discerned that he was not armed. He was wearing old
tweed trousers and jacket, a collarless shirt and a fair isle jumper. When we were within speaking
distance, he nodded and murmured a greeting, then made to pass me by. I decided there and then
that he posed no danger to me and I accosted him.

‘John Willoughby, is it not?’ I said.

He came to a halt immediately.

‘Who’re you?’ he said.

This, I thought, was not the behaviour of a man who is hiding on purpose.

‘Sam Brandon,’ I said. ‘I come from Marianne Dashwood.’

Suddenly, all colour left his handsome face.

‘Sweet Jesus,’ he muttered.

For a moment, we contemplated each other in silence.

‘Well, I suppose there’s no good denying anything,’ he said then. ‘You’d better come up to the
house with me, I’d rather not discuss things right here.

He whistled to the pointer bitch, who’d gone up the road and in silence, we marched to the Manor
House.

We entered the house through a dirt-room at the back. Willoughby changed out of his wellington
boots, then made his way through the large, empty kitchen and the equally empty servants’ rooms.
The dog and I followed him.

We found Miss Grey in what I supposed had once been the laundry room, where she was trying
to press linen sheets with a large, old-fashioned iron. She, too, was instantly recognisable from the
photograph I had seen, but the amount of time that had elapsed between then and now was more
obvious with her. I could see some streaks of white in her flaxen, braided hair and the lines in her
still pretty face hinted at the fact that the last years had not been easy. Her dress was similar to that
of Mrs Ferrars and countless other women: of pre-war origins, worn much and mended even more
often. Her dark eyes widened in confusion as she saw me behind Willoughby.

‘You’d better come upstairs with us,’ Willoughby said. ‘This is Mr Brandon. He comes from
Marianne.’

Miss Grey almost dropped the heavy iron, but managed to keep her grip on it just barely.

Willoughby led the way up the stairs to the main parts of the house, and into the library, where he
stoked the dying fire in the chimney whilst Miss Grey and I sat down on opposite armchairs.
Willoughby hung the poker pack on its hook and turned towards us.

‘Why is Marianne looking for me now?’ he asked me.

‘She got a letter claiming to be from you,’ I said. ‘In it, you apologised for leaving her and
expressed your regrets at being unable to return.’

Willoughby balled his hand into a fist.
‘That wretched letter,’ he said. ‘I should never have written it.’

‘I should never have posted it,’ Miss Grey said. ‘I am sorry, I just did not realise –’

‘It was not your fault,’ Willoughby said decisively.

He turned towards me.

‘I wrote the letter years ago,’ he said, ‘just after I had disappeared. It weighed heavy on my conscience that I had left Marianne as I did, and I thought that I would feel better if only I could write her a letter, so I did. Of course I didn’t dare post it, but I kept carrying it around with me. Stupid, I know.’

‘I found the letter one day when I was doing laundry,’ Miss Grey said. ‘I didn’t pay attention to what it was, just put it on a stack of other letters and brought it to the post office later that day. When John realised that it was missing and we had concluded where it must be, it was too late.’

She buried her face in her hands.

‘We hoped that maybe it wouldn’t reach her, that she’d moved, or married –’

‘She did move,’ I said, ‘but they had her forwarding address.’

‘How is Marianne?’ Willoughby asked.

I thought for a moment, wondering what to tell him.

‘Not too good,’ I finally said. ‘She took your disappearance very hard, caught pneumonia soon afterwards. She was in hospital for most of the war; she only got released this spring.’

Willoughby paled again.

‘I never meant to hurt her, you must believe that,’ he said. ‘I am truly sorry about everything, but I simply had no other choice.’

‘What happened in 1940?’ I asked. ‘Commander Middleton believes that you were abducted by Germans –’

Willoughby grimaced.

‘They tried to, at least,’ he said.

‘The Germans abducted you?’ I repeated.

‘I can’t say for certain that they were Germans,’ Willoughby said. ‘They didn’t say much, but I got the distinct impression they were. Of course, my memory is a bit hazy, so I might be mistaken.’

‘What happened?’ I asked again.

Willoughby swallowed and shot a quick look at Miss Grey, who sat huddled on her arm-chair and looked thoroughly miserable.

‘I was in my room that evening,’ Willoughby said, ‘preparing for bed, when suddenly, three or four men burst into it. They tried to overpower me, we fought, then I must have got a blow to the head or something, because the next thing I remember is that I woke up in the trunk of a car – not that I knew what it was at the time. They’d tied me up, my head hurt terribly, I couldn’t see nor
breathe properly and I later found out that I’d cracked several ribs and broken my hand.’

He frowned.

‘I’m not sure about what happened next,’ he said. ‘I suppose that they hadn’t closed the trunk properly. Or maybe they had halted somewhere when I was still unconscious and someone had opened it. What happened was that just as I was realising the fact that I was in a car, it took a sharp turn and the trunk sprang open. I seized my chance and rolled out of it and landed in some ditch.’

He rubbed his scarred hand.

‘I must have lost consciousness again there,’ he said, ‘because it had been dawning when I rolled out of the car, and when I came to again, it was bright day. It took me a while to get rid of the ropes they’d tied me up with. I drifted in and out of consciousness for most of the time and by the time I felt ready to walk anywhere, the sun was setting again. I have no recollection of where I walked, or crawled, or anything else. Finally, I found myself in a small lane with a public phone by one end. I was by that time so incapable of thinking clearly, it did not even occur to me to call the police, I just dialled the only number I could remember, which was Sophia’s.’

‘He was lucky I was in London for the night,’ Sophia said, ‘otherwise he’d never have reached me. When I answered the phone, I didn’t even realise it was him at first because his speech was horribly mangled. The only thing he kept saying was that they were after him, and the address of the phone-box, which he was reading off its wall. It turned out to be not very far from London, actually, but by the time I got there, he was barely even conscious and couldn’t tell me a thing about what had happened.’

She sighed.

‘I should have called the police, or at least an ambulance,’ she said, ‘but he kept muttering that they were after him, and I had no idea what he meant, or if there was a serious threat to him.’

She mustered her hands in her lap.

‘I panicked, it’s as simple as that,’ she said. ‘I bundled him up in my car and drove through the night, all the way up here.’

‘I don’t remember a thing about that drive,’ Willoughby said. ‘The next thing I remember is waking up in our bedroom here, with Sophia by my side, trying to make me eat some soup.’

‘That was over a week later,’ Miss Grey said.

‘When I realised where I was and how much time had elapsed,’ Willoughby said, ‘I was afraid that on the base, everybody would think I had deserted.’

He rubbed his scarred hand again.

‘Foolish of me, of course,’ he said. ‘Not to mention cowardly, but I just didn’t dare to go back. The threat of being seen as a deserter was there, but I also didn’t know if I’d been set up, or what they thought had happened to me –’

‘When he was better, I went down south to see if I could find out if they were looking for him,’ Miss Grey said.

‘They were,’ I said. ‘Commander Middleton thought that something had happened to him.’
Miss Grey sighed.

‘I realise that now,’ she said. ‘But back then, when I saw those soldiers showing his picture around, I thought they were looking for him so they could arrest him, so I returned home and told John it was too dangerous to go back.’

‘The more time passed, the more cowardly I felt, holed up here in Yorkshire,’ Willoughby said. ‘I believe I’ve been half-hoping someone would recognise me, just to put an end to that whole farce. I would have reported myself, but I didn’t want to dare risk that they’d see Sophia as an accomplice.’

‘Are you going to report him?’ Miss Grey asked in a hollow voice.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But I’ll have to tell Miss Dashwood that I found him.’

‘Fair enough,’ Willoughby said. ‘Will you tell her how sorry I am about how everything turned out, and that I never meant to lead her on?’

‘I will,’ I promised.

‘You should know,’ Willoughby said, ‘if you or Marianne decide to report me after all, I won’t run. I’ll face whatever is coming my way.’

In the end, I spent the night in Yorkshire. By the time Willoughby and Miss Grey had finished their story, the train had already left. Both were most eager to answer all my questions about details and even tried to give me what proof they had for everything they said. I had no reason to doubt anything they told me.

I rang Mrs Ferrars from the train station in York the next morning and asked if I could call on them after I had got back. I wanted to tell Miss Dashwood in person that I had found Willoughby; I did not think she should learn what I had found out over the phone. Mrs Ferrars was agreeable to my suggestion.

On the ride back, I pondered how Miss Dashwood would take the news. I hoped that she would be relieved that Willoughby was still alive, and not a spy, but there was no telling what she would say about his having lived with Miss Grey for the past five years.

Once more, Miss Dashwood was decidedly over-dressed. She awaited me at her sister’s door, with an eager expression in her face.

‘Elinor says you found him,’ she said, ‘and that he’s still alive.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Will you let me come in?’

She stepped aside and let me enter. When I shrugged off my coat, she practically ripped it from my hands.

‘Come into the drawing-room,’ she said. ‘You must tell us everything. How is Willoughby? Did he mention me?’

‘Willoughby is very sorry about everything,’ I said, once we had joined Chaplain and Mrs Ferrars in the drawing-room. ‘He did not mean to hurt you.’

‘Why did he leave?’ Mrs Ferrars asked. ‘Did he have any explanation for that?’
I told her what Willoughby and Miss Grey had told me and added that I had found them both utterly sincere and believable.

‘He never meant for that letter to be sent and cause you fresh pain, Miss Dashwood,’ I said. ‘He was most sorry about that.’

I had been expecting an outburst from Miss Dashwood since my arrival, but she had taken the news very calmly. Even now, she was only nodding to what I said.

‘But he did mean what he said in the letter?’ she asked now.

‘He did,’ I confirmed. ‘He only did not want to send it because he did not want to alert anybody to the fact that he was still alive.’

She nodded again.

‘I should tell you too,’ I said, ‘that it appears that he and Miss Grey have come to a new understanding. I do not think he will leave her.’

Miss Dashwood did not lose her composure, but a single tear slid down her cheek. Mrs Ferrars moved over to her sister and placed an arm around her shoulders.

‘At least you know for certain now, Marianne,’ she said. ‘And you know that he was not as bad as we all thought him.’

Another tear slid down Miss Dashwood’s face.

‘I really thought he wanted to come back to me,’ she said softly.

‘I know, dear,’ Mrs Ferrars muttered. ‘I know.’

She hugged Miss Dashwood to herself and rocked her.

‘You will forget about him,’ she said. ‘Now that you know everything.’

‘I want to see him,’ Miss Dashwood said and began to cry.

‘Dearest, I’m not sure that is a good idea -’

‘Just one last time,’ Miss Dashwood said between two sobs. ‘Just to say goodbye properly.’

Mrs Ferrars looked at her husband, who shrugged and looked at me.

‘I could call Willoughby and Miss Grey and ask them if they would see you,’ I said.

‘Please do,’ Miss Dashwood sobbed.

‘The phone is in the study,’ Chaplain Ferrars said. ‘Wait, I will show you -’

Miss Grey was willing to see Miss Dashwood and Mrs Ferrars on the next day and we arranged everything to everybody’s satisfaction.

‘You will come with us, won’t you?’ Mrs Ferrars said when I hung up the phone.

‘I had not intended to,’ I said.
‘I would feel so much better if someone came with me and Marianne,’ Mrs Ferrars said, ‘and you know the way, and you know Miss Grey.’

‘Yes, please come with us,’ Miss Dashwood said, wiping her face.

‘If you insist –’ I said.

It was settled then, of course. If Miss Dashwood insisted I come with them, could I refuse her?

I was less than thrilled at the idea of accompanying her to the meeting with her former lover, but I sincerely hoped that it would give her the closure she needed to move on. If it achieved that, then my going with her would not be in vain and I could take comfort in the knowledge that I had done everything I could for her.

After some more deliberation, we agreed that Miss Dashwood and Mrs Ferrars would travel back to London with me, stay the night in a hotel and continue on to Yorkshire from there.

I invited the two ladies to dinner in the evening. For once, Miss Dashwood’s dress was not out of place. She looked completely at ease in the elegant restaurant, and moved herself with a poise few other women in the room possessed, but she talked little during dinner and was obviously thinking about something completely different. We finished the pudding in silence and Mrs Ferrars said that they had best retire for the night.

‘Anything else I can bring you?’

I had not even noticed the waitress approach our table, and she was most certainly not the one who had served us earlier. She was taller, with golden hair and an elfin face – I groaned.

‘Nothing for us, thank you,’ Mrs Ferrars said.

I paid the goddess, noticing that she had added a hefty provision for herself. She took the money with an air of professionalism, then winked at me.

‘Later,’ she mouthed. ‘In your office.’

Like a schoolboy bidden into the headmaster’s office, I sat in my office and waited for the woman at whose mercy I had been for ages, wondering why I still obeyed her after everything she’d done to me. I wished I could just board the next train out of London and never return. I did not want to travel to Yorkshire the next day, I did not want to witness Miss Dashwood dissolve upon having to part from the man she described as the love of her life, and I most certainly did not want to be the victim of yet another attempt at seduction by the goddess.

The door to my office opened and in came a completely different goddess.

‘Hello, my lovely,’ Miss Dashwood purred. ‘Have you missed me, big boy?’

She shrugged off her fur coat and dropped it onto the floor. Underneath, she was wearing little more than black silken lingerie and the long gloves she had already been wearing earlier in the evening. She sat down on my desk and leaned over to me, an artistic feat that demanded she bend completely in her hips. With one gloved hand, she reached for my tie. It was then that I noticed that her gaze was a little unfocused. She was completely blotto.

‘Why don’t you and I get a little more comfortable?’ she muttered. ‘The things I could do for you, Sammy –’
I tried to push her hand away put she placed it quite firmly on my shoulder.

‘How did you manage to get so completely drunk in such a short time?’ I asked.

‘Questions, questions,’ she said. ‘Everybody’s always talking and asking questions and searching for answers. Wouldn’t you rather do something?’

She slowly licked her lips.

I was tempted. Of course I was. I am only a man, after all. Luckily reason got the better of me.

‘You’re completely drunk,’ I said. ‘You’d regret this tomorrow as much as I would.’

Before my resolution could wane again, I stood up. I retrieved her fur coat and placed it around her shoulders.

‘I’ll call you a taxi,’ I said. ‘You should go to sleep.’

It was a damp and foggy evening. The cold night air seemed to sober Miss Dashwood a little.

‘Please don’t tell Elinor what happened,’ she said when we had climbed into the taxi.

I looked at her. She had cried as we had waited; her make-up had run, leaving black streaks across her face. I observed her face as it was thrown into sharp relief when we passed under a street lamp, then cast into shadow again. She was so very much Julia’s image, but it was hard to imagine Julia look so helpless. Even when Julia had asked for my help, it had been a demand more than anything else.

‘Elinor would never let me go to Yorkshire,’ she said. ‘She would send me back to the hospital if she knew.’

She reached for my hand.

‘Please, Sam,’ she said. ‘I need to go to Yorkshire, I need to see Willoughby again.’

‘Come here, kid,’ I muttered and put my arm around her, allowing her to cry into my shoulder. ‘Shh, don’t cry.’

She cried, of course.

‘I won’t tell your sister, I promise,’ I said. ‘Now, now.’

I left Miss Dashwood in the hands of a capable porter at her hotel and asked the driver of the taxi to take me back to my office. I still had an appointment to keep.

The driver made a highly illegal u-turn and sped away into the dark. Suddenly, the divider was lowered and I was looking into a perfect face.

‘Hello, my lovely,’ the goddess said, imitating Marianne’s pitch perfectly. ‘Do you think that was wise?’

I was in no mood for games.

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked.
‘Well, I for one wouldn’t have pushed her away,’ she said. ‘You had something going there, you know.’

I did not say anything to that.

‘But you should have told her sister,’ she said. ‘All your problems would have dissolved just like that.’

She snapped her fingers.

‘You wouldn’t have to go to Yorkshire in that case,’ she said, ‘and that would only be the beginning.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you’d consider it a betrayal of her trust if you told the dowdy one, wouldn’t you?’

I saw where she was going.

‘Think about it,’ she said. ‘There would not have to be a tomorrow – and tonight –’

She licked her lips in a bizarre echo of Marianne’s earlier action.

‘Forget it,’ I said.

‘As you wish,’ she said. ‘But just ask yourself if it wouldn’t be in our girl’s best interest if you chose to betray her.’

With that, she was gone and my taxi driver was back, completely oblivious to what had happened.

Miss Grey had done her utmost to make us feel welcome at the Manor House. The feast she had laid was marvellous, especially considering she had to feed two with her ration cards. The tea table could not have been set prettier at the Savoy. Both Miss Grey and Willoughby seemed very nervous to see us. The conversation was stilted at best. Mrs Ferrars complimented Miss Grey on her china and the cucumber sandwiches. Willoughby said little, but kept his eyes on Marianne, expecting her to say something. She, however, had been silent ever since we had exchanged greetings.

‘You must have cake,’ Miss Grey said and began cutting slices off a large marble cake. ‘Please, do have some cake -’

She looked at me with such an intent begging in her eyes that I took the slice she offered me.

‘Things cannot have been easy for you,’ Mrs Ferrars said to Miss Grey.

‘I am so sorry about all that happened,’ Miss Grey said. ‘You must believe that.’

She cut more cake, even though nobody was eating.

‘You heard, probably, that John and I broke up just before the war began,’ she said. ‘I honestly thought I would never see him again.’

She placed another slice of cake on my still full plate.

‘But when he called me that night, I had to go and see him, didn’t I?’ Miss Grey continued. ‘I only wanted to help him, I had no intentions beyond that.’
‘Of course,’ Mrs Ferrars said.

‘It was only when he was here again,’ Miss Grey continued, ‘when he was on the mend again, and we realised he would be here for the foreseeable future – and suddenly I noticed that things were as they had always been, and I could not even remember why we had quarrelled before –’

She swallowed hard.

‘Everything just got out of control,’ she said, ‘with all these crazy things happening, and suddenly I was in for it, completely lost – you must believe me, Miss Dashwood, I never meant to take him from you, and if there had been any way he could have gone to see you again, I would have sent him on his way the minute he could walk again.’

Marianne only nodded. She was as composed as she had been when she had first heard the news.

‘What are your future plans?’ Mrs Ferrars asked.

‘John will turn himself in,’ Miss Grey said with a look at Willoughby. ‘I know you said you would not tell anyone, but we cannot stand this secrecy anymore. The worst thing they can do will be to send him to prison, and we’re willing to face that.’

She bestowed a fond smile on Willoughby, who returned it.

‘And when he has come clear, and sorted everything out,’ Miss Grey said, ‘we’re going to get married. We should have done that ages ago, really, then this whole mess would never have happened.’

I noticed then that tears were running down Marianne’s face.

‘You’re going to get married?’ she said with trembling lips.

‘Yes,’ Miss Grey said, ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have blurted that out just like that – but we agreed on that only yesterday and it’s just so new to me –’

‘You cannot marry him,’ Marianne said and got up.

‘Well, we will have to wait for his trial, probably –’ Miss Grey began.

I did not think Marianne was hearing a word she was saying.

‘Marianne, dear, calm yourself –’ Mrs Ferrars said, but her words were equally unheard.

‘You cannot marry him,’ Marianne said again.

Before any of us noticed what was going on, she had reached for the large knife on the cake platter and buried it in Miss Grey’s stomach.

‘He was mine,’ Marianne sobbed, ‘mine, and you took him, you took everything, you had no right too –’

Unable to pull the knife back out, she began pounding Miss Grey’s chest with her fists. Miss Grey’s face showed no pain, only her complete surprise as she watched her pink shirt suddenly be drenched with blood. Almost instantly, the colour vanished from her face and she slumped in her chair.

Then, several things happened at once. Suddenly roused from our trance, Mrs Ferrars and I were
wrestling a sobbing Marianne off Miss Grey. Mrs Ferrars dragged Marianne into a corner of the room, away from any of the cutlery, and forced several pills down her throat. Willoughby was kneeling by his fiancée’s side, frantically trying to press a napkin to the wound in her stomach while I was helping him lift her out of her chair.

I could tell that whatever we did was of no use at all. The only relief we could bring was the knowledge, for Miss Grey, that she was not alone.

‘John,’ she whispered and Willoughby bent over her to catch her words.

‘Don’t blame yourself,’ she rasped. ‘I love -’

Her head dropped to her side, her face at peace. Willoughby collapsed on top of her chest.

Marianne and her sister were still huddled in a corner of the room, Marianne hysterically sobbing as Mrs Ferrars tried in vain to calm her.

I left the room in search for a telephone.

Marianne was found not guilty on grounds of insanity. She was sent back to the clinic where she had spent most of the war. Her sister faithfully went to visit her every weekend. The military administration was not interested in taking any action against Willoughby and cleared his name. Sophia had named him her heir in her will. He sold the Manor House and set up a fund for Marianne with the money, taking a great burden off Mrs Ferrars’ shoulders. As soon as he was free to go, he left England, stating his intent never to return.

Three days after the horrible incident in Yorkshire, I found myself walking once more towards the churchyard of St Paul’s cathedral. The goddess was already waiting for me. There was a certain sadness in her face that I had not noticed before.

‘I told you it would have been for her best,’ she said to me.

I did not answer her. I knew that now, and had been telling myself the same thing over and over again.

‘It’s not too late,’ she said. ‘It’s not yet too late. Hilda is just a phone call away.’

I shook my head.

‘It’s two thousand years too late,’ I said. ‘I’m just too old for this world. I cannot take it anymore. I am weary, I want to sleep.’

‘Are you begging me?’ she asked and tilted her head to a side.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Would you beg me for death?’ she said.

‘I only ask for mercy,’ I said.

She reached out a hand and placed it on my face.

‘Quintus Julius,’ she said softly. ‘Whatever shall I do with you?’
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!