



Beastly

House

A CUPID/ARCHER MYSTERY

JONI GREEN

Beastly House
By Joni Green



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To Jay.
All my love.

Note from the Author

The best thing about creating new stories is sharing them with you. I want to build a relationship with my readers.

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If You Liked This Book

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Chapter 1

The stench of Death was unbearable. Rotting corpses turned to soup under a merciless sun. Flies fattened with abandon on a feast of filth, swarming in a frenzy of activity like peasants at the king's banquet table. The smell of excrement from the dying, purging themselves of their last meal, should have scorched his nostrils, but he did not have time to notice.

The constant barrage of shells from the enemy made it impossible to hear what the soldier beside him was saying, if the soldier beside him roused himself to say anything at all.

Grim hopelessness lived in the trenches with the war-weary soldiers. In the No Man's Land between the Germans and the Allies, there lay an impossible tangle of barbed wire and pitted earth. He was doomed inside this inner ring of hell.

A corpse arose from the muck, his shallow, metal helmet cocked sideways on his head. Both eyeballs lay on withered cheeks, dangling and sightless, swinging from black-veined ropes like two dripping baubles with cloudy lenses in the corrupt air. Ribbons of flesh fell from the blackened palms that lifted to a godless sky. An evil grin spread across the ghastly, blue face, and then, the soldier heard the screeching voice from the jaws of Gehenna gleefully screech, "Gas! Gas! Gas!"

He awoke screaming, drenched in sweat.

* * * * *

The B.S.T. Leigh House sat on the edge of a large lake, dour and grand, and planted on its foundation as firmly as if it had existed there for a thousand years. The one hundred and sixty room, three-story mansion, cottages, and outbuildings were constructed in the Mediterranean style, and they would have looked more at home in Florida where new oceanfront estates were being erected faster than bacon fat pops in a hot skillet. But still, the massive house looked impressive, and smugly superior, as it sat beside the dark, azure waters of Lake Winston.

The apricot stucco façade, topped with brown terracotta roof tiles, needed only a few palm trees to complete the vision, but no well-bred palms would ever deign to survive the colder climates of New England. So, the architect artfully utilized what he had at his disposal to lend an exotic ambiance—arched windows, curved balconies, and imported fountains. All of it substituted for the absence of a tropical locale.

Somehow, he had been successful, for there was something mystical and foreign about the estate, an oddity that the original owner had found enchanting.

B.S.T. Leigh House took its name from the family who first inhabited it: Bernard, Syble, and Therese, Bernard's step-daughter. Therese was dead and so was Bernard. The widow Syble found no happiness in the place. It was filled with too many ghosts.

Syble sold the estate to a group of buyers, who immediately opened an exclusive sanitarium for wealthy socialites looking for a place to hideout, dry out, or ride out some storm in their lives. Mrs. Leigh boarded her private Pullman car and rode the rails south to another mansion, somewhat smaller and easier to maintain.

The sanitarium had been operating for five years. The exclusive jitter joint was jokingly referred to as 'Beastly House' by both staff and patients and that was the name that stuck to it like gum to the bottom of a shoe.

Across the vast, shimmering midnight-blue waters of Lake Winston stood several newly-built mansions, evidence of the nouveau riche flaunting their recently acquired wealth. The newcomers were trying mightily to rise to the status long enjoyed by the old-money families of the area. Those who had lived there for several generations scoffed at such audacious displays suddenly cropping up along *their* waterfront and looked down their noses at their second-class cousins, so conspicuously trying to claw their way to the top rung.

It was one thing for old money to fly in the face of the common man, but when coarse upstarts did it, the whole drama took on the look of a New Orleans madam dressed in minks, diamonds, and pearls sitting in a box seat at the opera, reeking of cheap toilet water and hurling obscenities at the mezzo-soprano.

The year was 1920. The war was over, and it was time to enjoy life.

Dolls and dames were throwing away their corsets and finally living. Religious fanatics were proclaiming the country was going to ruin. Political fanatics were mailing bombs to the rich and powerful. Anarchists and communists were terrorizing America.

It was the Jazz Age, the post-war period, the era when women were chafing at the bit and testing their wings. Hemlines were rising. Everyone was smoking cigarettes, reefers, and opium and nothing seemed too far out of reach.

A sleek Duesenberg breezer was parked in a clearing, near one of the paths carved out of the woods by the wagon wheels of generations past. Avery Brighton stumbled upon the convertible as she walked aimlessly through the woods.

The cloth top was down.

A young couple was necking.

The pale, blonde wisp was dressed in Voile, ribbons, and lace. She looked deceptively innocent, save for the fact she was biting the earlobe of the young man in the car.

The young man had a movie star's profile. His skin was unblemished, except for the smear of red lipstick across his cheek. His hair was a thick mop, disheveled and sparkling, and glints of sunlight filtered through the leaves and lit the scene.

His scarlet tie was haphazardly tossed over his shoulder, collar skewed and wrinkled. His jacket was ruffled. Blue Serge smiled, whispering into the washed-out blonde's ear.

Suddenly, the blonde slapped his face with the heated violence of a woman scorned. She got out of the small roadster and stomped down the dirt path, as indignant as a prim granny warming a proud pew on a sunny morning who has just been notified she must relinquish her seat for the town drunk.

Blue Serge sat in the car, his brown eyes sparkling. He threw his head back in laughter, revealing a perfect set of gleaming, white teeth.

"I say," Avery said, walking up to the sleek chariot, "that was a nice move. She packs a wallop to be so scrawny. Did you really mean what you said? What on earth did you say to her, anyway? She was madder than an old wet hen!"

You suggested a little barneymugging, didn't you? Come on. Be honest."

The blonde, still within hearing distance, stopped in her tracks. She turned to look at Avery, standing beside the automobile.

“Crazy lunatic! How dare you speak of us like that! Easton! Do something! I will not stand by and be so crudely insulted!”

Blondie screamed her indignation at Avery, who thought the whole scene deliciously wicked. Easton, who had exited his roadster, stood by the car smiling.

Blonde Voile looked as if she wanted to spit on both of them, her eyes flaming with rage. She grunted her disapproval, resuming her stiff, marching stride, and headed down the dirt path in the opposite direction.

The young man’s eyes held Avery’s. He looked her over, head to toe.

“You really are one of the crazies from that asylum, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Avery said. “*Nervous invalids*. That’s the phrase they like to use to describe us. At least in our presence. But to be honest, most of us are merely high strung hypochondriacs whose families have closeted us away here for what they say is ‘a little rest.’ A *little rest* that will probably last us the rest of our natural lives.”

“I see,” Blue Serge said.

“You see what?” Avery asked.

“Bit of a pain. Certainly an inconvenience. Embarrassment, maybe. If your family has the dough, then out the door you go. Something like that, though, I’m just guessing.”

Avery smiled.

“But I bet I’m not far off,” Easton said. “You know, an unpleasantness that somebody else can handle.”

“Yes. I think that about sums it up,” Avery said, after some reflection.

“What’d you do? Commit murder or something?”

“No. Nothing that wild or insanely horrendous,” Avery said. “Just have sticky fingers. I’m a booster. A klepto. My family’s faux pas.”

“Fascinating.”

“You think so? I really don’t know why I do it, but at times, I’m overwhelmed by the compulsion. Do you really find this fascinating?”

“No. I was just making conversation.”

“You’re not shocked?”

“Why should I be? So, you’re a thief. A shoplifter. So what! Probably steal just for the thrill. I dunno. Me? I like to drive fast. Father says my speeding will give him a stroke. But I like the way it makes me feel. Alive, you know. So, I’ll keep doing it until I wrap my pretty little automobile around a tree.

Nobody’s perfect.

You’re here at this place. You dress nice. Look like the cat’s meow. So, my guess is, you don’t steal to eat or anything like that.”

“You’re right. I could get my father to give me anything I want. All I have to do is ask.”

“I’ll bet that’s true. But you don’t ask. Why? Who knows? Probably just more fun to see if you can pocket a little bauble and get away with it.”

“You should be my doctor!”

“Nah. That job’s already taken, I’m sure. Besides, I got other plans for my life.”

“Don’t blame you one bit,” Avery said, laughing. “I wouldn’t want to be stuck here nursemaiding the bunch I am currently stuck with! Besides, as soon as Daddy cools

off, I plan to plead with him to let me come back home. I'll promise him I'll be good. And I will be. If only for a little while."

"Wanna butt?" Easton asked, offering her a cigarette from his solid gold cigarette case.

Avery thought he had the most gorgeous eyes.

"What," he said, a wicked grin on his face, "don't they let you crazies smoke?"

"Oh, they let us crazies do most anything we want," she said.

She took the cigarette.

"Thank you," she said, accepting a light from his already lit cigarette.

"Gaspers are bad for you," he said, his eyes crinkled in a cheerful way.

"Isn't just about everything," she said.

They smoked in silence.

"I mean," she said, "isn't just about anything that's really any good *terribly* bad for you?"

"Yes," he said, letting the smoke burn deeply into his lungs. "I guess so. Say, aren't you a little far from . . . home?"

"Yes, but don't worry. There isn't anywhere to escape *to*," Avery said. "You'd need supplies to survive a trek off this estate. It's fantastically large. As you can see, I've only the clothes on my back. No water. No food. I'm not planning to break out and go on a rampage."

She smiled at her little joke.

"Mmmm," he said. "My family hates the fact that this place is here. I'm forever reminding them that *we're* the tourists. The locals were here ages before we came along.

They don't buy it, though. My argument, I mean."

"Oh, there's really nothing to worry about," Avery said. "Truly. Not from this loony bin, I mean. The lake is quite large and deep and very cold. Even in the summer. There are hundreds of acres on this estate. That's why they let us roam the woods. We can walk for hours and never leave the property."

"But what if you become lost in all this forest? I mean . . ."

"Oh, never fear," she said. "There's a bloodhound that will lead them right to the little lost lamb. I would be promptly escorted back *home* in no time."

"Bloodhound. Really?"

"Yes. Really. One of the amenities that sold my folks on this place. Tracking dogs, just like in the old days of slavery."

"Still use them for the chain gangs, I think," he said.

"Good comparison," Avery said. "Chain gangs and loony-bin crazies."

"Are you really serious?"

"No. I am fibbing. There are no dogs. Another bad habit of mine. Anyway, I was truthful about one thing. There is nowhere to run. This place is too damn big," Avery said.

"You want a lift back?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather walk. I treasure my time outside. It's supposed to be therapeutic. Or so they say. Me? I just enjoy exploring. Besides, you never know what you'll see. Or who you will run into! Ha! Ha!"

“Suit yourself. Are you sure? Alright, but don’t say that I didn’t offer,” he said, cranking the car. “By the way, thanks to Shelly, you know my name’s Easton. What’s yours?”

“Avery.”

“Well, Avery, perhaps, if I am lucky, I’ll run into you again, soon.”

“Perhaps,” Avery said, giving Easton one of her most bewitching smiles.

He put the car into gear and sped off down the dirt path. Avery watched him, a smile still lingering on her lips.

“Easton,” she said, “perhaps, we *will* meet again soon.”

Chapter 2

“Flix, you say?” asked the well-dressed lady. “What a positively outlandish name. I mean no offense, Mr. Flix, but really, isn’t that the kind of moniker that should be headlining a comic strip or a vaudeville act?”

“No offense taken, madam. I could not agree with you more. But it is my real name, and I must carry it with me, like an albatross about my neck, until I meet my Maker. And beyond, I suppose. I am one of those poor souls whose name brings, if not a belly laugh, then a discreet smile, when it is proclaimed loudly across a crowded room.

You may simply call me Flix if you wish.”

The man was small, slight of build, but with an enormously rich head of salt-and-pepper hair, cropped and neatly trimmed, and a mustache that lent its wearer a look of worldly sophistication. He had piercing, dark eyes that were quick and intelligent.

He was wearing a linen suit, ivory in color, and a maroon silk bow tie. His shoes were black and charcoal wingtips. His crisp white shirt showed no sign of a wrinkle. The crease in his pants was so defined that it looked as if it would slice your finger. An aura of obsessive neatness surrounded him. He was a walking advertisement for the modern male.

“Well, if I may be so forward as to ask, what is your full name, Mister Flix? Excuse me. I mean Flix.”

“Florian Valentine, madam. But my mother called me, Golden.”

With that, the poor woman lost all control. She laughed heartily, in spite of herself.

“Oh, Flix. Please forgive me. I am sorry. I really do not know what came over me. It must be my nerves.”

“Oh. Think nothing of it, madam. I often get such a response whenever I reveal my given name. I am quite used to it. But I am sorry to hear you have a nervous condition.”

“Oh, yes, Flix. That is why I am here. To rest them, you know. My nerves.

At home, it seemed as if any little thing just set me off. I am so edgy. So . . . I don’t know how to describe how I feel. *Jumpy*. Perhaps that is the word that describes me, nowadays.

My husband recently passed.”

“Oh, I am so sorry.”

“No need to be. Just a fact of life. But I felt that a vacation would help. My lawyer suggested a stay here. Why in the world he recommended this place, instead of the South of France, is a mystery to me. But he handles my affairs, and I trust him implicitly. So, I agreed to come.”

“Well, Mrs. Hood, the scenery is very beautiful, wouldn’t you agree? The accommodations are first-rate.”

“Yes, I quite agree. The views are spectacular, if you like that sort of thing.”

“And the air is so unlike the city. Fresh and clean. It is why I have come here, for a respite.”

“Oh, good heavens! You are not one of those lungers, are you? I mean, when I signed myself into this place, I did it because I didn’t think they allowed hackers here!”

“Oh no. No, dear lady. Do not trouble yourself over such matters. I do not have tuberculosis. Nothing like that, I assure you.

I don't know what you would call what I have. Malaise? I am just not quite myself. Perhaps, it is nothing more than an acute case of laziness. I am joking, of course, Mrs. Hood.

I am here to rest. To recharge. To breathe the fresh air and to allow the sunshine and Mother Nature's beauty to heal my weary body.”

“Bad nerves, too, Flix?”

“That is as good an explanation as any, I suppose, Mrs. Hood.

I do not have those illustrious M.D. letters following my name. My doctor said this place would be beneficial for me. So, I believe it is in my best interest to take the physician's advice. Don't you?”

“If I could find a doctor who is worth his fee, I most certainly would.”

“Besides, the greenhouses on this property are most excellent. I will be able to lose myself in them, I am happy to say. And a commune with Nature may possess the healing qualities that medicine does not, don't you agree?” Flix asked.

“I suppose so.”

“I feel recharged, already, Mrs. Hood. And that is good.”

“How grand!” Mrs. Hood exclaimed. “Well, then, we shall *recharge* together. I am so glad that I have met you, Flix. One feels such a stranger in a new place, you know.”

“Quite so, Mrs. Hood. But now, I must excuse myself. I was promised a tour of the East Greenhouse by the head gardener here, a Mr. Emil Jannins, I believe, and I must not keep him waiting.”

“Oh, of course. Of course. Perhaps, we shall meet later up top!”

“Up top?”

“Why, yes, Flix. I hear they have the most marvelous sun patio on the roof. We can bake and broil and cook our pale skin to our heart's content.”

Flix had no intention of broiling himself like a lobster, but he did not want to hurt Mrs. Hood's feelings.

“Perhaps, madam. Perhaps. One never knows just what will evolve as the day unfolds.”

“Yes. That's so true, sir. Good day, then.”

“And to you, Mrs. Hood.”

Chapter 3

"I don't see why we *all* have to eat here in the dining room together at the same table!" Avery complained. "It is so horrible. I feel just like a pig who is led to the trough to slop with the whole drove! The outer house is never here! Why do I have to be here? Dr. Quintland says that it is fine if I dine alone."

"Oh, you little liar. He says no such thing," Abercrombie Wolcott said.

"Why, of course, he does. I am one of his favorites. It's my reward for being good."

"Good, my Aunt Betsy's bottom."

"Oh, applesauce! Mr. Know-It-All," Avery said, placing a cigarette in her holder. "This place bores me to tears. I don't think I can stand it much longer! Abercrombie, you bindlestiff! You bore me, too! Hop a train and hobo to another room! Mind-numbing boob!"

Avery was sitting on a low bench beside the dining room fireplace. Her legs were crossed, one hand on her hip, wrist slightly curved, her elegant fingers emphasizing the tiny waist beneath them; her other hand lovingly fondled an extremely long cigarette holder crafted from an exotic, highly decorative material. Her shining, ruby lips puckered in an exaggerated pout, drawing the holder further into her mouth. Her dark, short hair exaggerated her pale, flawless skin.

She hiked a shin over one knee, throwing the hemline of her above-the-knee dress dangerously high and showing quite a bit of thigh and silk black stocking. Her eyes, darkly lined with makeup, stared brazenly out at all in the room, daring anyone to say anything to her.

"Oh, goodness! Avery! Please behave, dear. I want to enjoy my meal," someone said.

"Oh, Avery! You know the *real* lunatics live in the outer cottage. That crowd would never be permitted to eat with us. I hear them screaming, sometimes. At least, I think I do. You know, when the wind is right. Heh. Heh.

But, what was I talking about? Oh! I know," Abercrombie Wolcott said with a flourish of his hand, "you are constantly unhappy. It is always something with you. Finish your cigarette. And be a good sport. If I can be a good boy, you can be a good girl. I wish to eat, but that won't happen until we are all present and accounted for at the table."

Wolcott unfurled his napkin with a wave of his wrist and floated it neatly to his lap.

"Why can't you just sit down and enjoy your meal like the rest of us?" said another.

"Because," Avery said testily, "I want to eat out in the tennis pavilion."

"Tennis pavilion? Got a little match play this evening, eh, Avery?" George asked.

"Oh, close your head, Crupple Man. I simply enjoy the view," Avery said.

"My dear girl, the only view you enjoy is populated with males beating their chests, scraping at the earth with their hooves, and parading their masculinity before you like willing sacrifices before your altar! Be a chum! Spill your guts! Tell us who you are meeting at the pavilion, won't you?"

Wolcott slammed down his fork, thought better of this action, cleared his throat, and exclaimed, "Let us talk of other things. What? What shall we talk about? Oh, I know. The headlines! There was a bombing on Wall Street, today. Nasty thing! Most horrible! Anarchist, most likely."

"What is this world coming to?" someone near the end of the table interjected.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Abercrombie! Do you really think that is an appropriate subject to discuss while eating?" Avery screamed. "I told you to stuff a sock in it before I give you the bum's rush!"

"Please, children! Let's play nice. We're all under the same roof."

There was an audible rustle as the door of the dining room swung open.

"Well," said Mrs. Hood, entering late as usual, "I see that we are all here."

"Yes, we're here on time, Mrs. Hood. You know it's the doctor's rule that no meal is served until everyone is seated," Avery said testily. "I made it back from my walk on time."

"Excuse me, Avery," Mrs. Hood said airily.

"A pox on the doctor's rules," George muttered under his breath. "Trouble in the lady's room again, Mrs. Hood?"

Mr. Clive Birmingham-Hill looked angrily at everyone at the table, refusing to speak a word. He was a round man, with spectacles that he kept propped on the end of his nose for the sole purpose of looking down at anyone who crossed his field of vision.

"Let me introduce you all to our latest arrival," Mrs. Hood said, breezily, ignoring the ill crew about her. "This is Mr. F. V. Flix.

He is here for a little respite, like most of us, and I am sure that you will all make him feel very welcome," she said with gusty enthusiasm, entirely too exaggerated for the situation.

"Lunch is served," a servant announced.

"Oh good!" said Mrs. Hood. "I'm sure we're all starved!"

"I'll just bet you are! The notoriety of your peculiar appetites precedes you, madam," muttered George.

"George!" echoed a voice across the table.

Mr. Birmingham-Hill looked like he was going to faint.

George could not help but grin maliciously.

Chapter 4

“Hello, Mrs. Hood,” Flix said.

There was a lull in the afternoon. No activities had been scheduled. Flix was sitting in the shade of a very large tree, taking advantage of any hint of breeze that might waft across the lawn.

“There you are! I am trying to get a game of bridge together. Flix, are you in?”

“Bridge? Oh, madam, I am afraid I do not know how to play. Thank you, but I must decline. My interest has always been in other things. My work, I am afraid. It is all consuming. No time for games.”

“There is always time for games! What kind of work do you do? It must be very backbreaking, common labor, or you must be employed by a very hard taskmaster. Do tell me what interests you so that you have no time for cards.”

“Lepidoptery.”

“Oh, Flix, that sounds positively evil. Perhaps, I should try it.”

“I assure you, there is nothing evil involved.

My life’s work is studying butterflies and moths. In particular, I am studying the white-lined sphinx moth. It is a fascinating creature, able to hover over the blossoms of delicate flowers. It sips nectar with a long curled tube at its mouth called a proboscis. Because of its ability to hover above the blossoms, it is often mistaken for a hummingbird. Thus, it is known as the hummingbird moth.

Its wingspan is quite large. And its body is thick. I can see how it could easily be mistaken for a hummingbird.”

“Totally underwhelming. Lepi. . . .”

Mrs. Hood’s tongue simply refused to wrap itself around so many syllables. Why, to her, the very word seemed uncivilized.

“Oh, but it is not, Mrs. Hood. Those creatures are as varied and as interesting as humans. I assure you. We can learn so much from Nature, if we will but open our eyes and observe.

And I am also enthralled by the plants of this world. So many. So varied.”

“How on earth could such boring subjects take up all your time? You’ll never get a floozy to love you troozy with such tedious hobbies! A chippy wants to hear sweet nothings whispered in her ear. Not a lecture on bed bugs and stink weeds!”

This last remark came from George, who was being pushed passed the two in a wheelchair by a sparkling, white-clad orderly.

“George!” Mrs. Hood pleaded. “Please. You can be so appalling!”

George was laughing gleefully. He loved nothing better than to stir Mrs. Hood’s dander.

“Oh, Little Red Riding Hood-Hoodle-Whoo! Don’t let the needle whet your wheedle. Doodle-doo! Ha! Ha!”

“Sorry, sir. Excuse us, madam,” mumbled the orderly.

“Your friend has quite a unique way with phrases, Mrs. Hood,” Flix said.

“Oh, George is no friend of mine, I can assure you. I mean, they say he is a war hero, but there’s hardly anything heroic about him!

Look at him! Poor creature. Stuck in that chair.

We try to make exceptions because of his condition, but sometimes, he goes out of his way to be unpleasant. Depending on his mood, his barbs can seem especially wicked and cruel.

I think the poor man despises women!

If you think what he just said is particularly base, you should hear the vicious things he says to Avery!

I do not care for the girl either, but the things he says to her are especially nasty. I am no saint, Flix, and I enjoy throwing out a cutting barb as much as the next, for the shock value, you know, but even I am stunned, at times, by what comes out of George's mouth.

I will have to give Avery her due, though. She gives as good as she gets.

I sometimes think those two despise each other.

Avery comes from very good stock, you know. I wonder if George is smitten with her, but being a cripple, he couldn't possibly hope to win her."

"He has much to be embittered about," said Flix.

"And Avery!" Mrs. Hood said. "That girl can be just as bad as George!

She can be beastly towards us!

And the stories that girl contrives!

Told me some rubbish about being related to the Queen. She's no more related to royalty than I am the Virgin Mary!

Nevertheless, she taunts George without mercy.

Dr. Quintland says George is a hero. Fighting the Huns. Coming home an invalid. She should try, once in a while, to cut him a bit of slack. But she never does. Always baiting him with those names she calls him. Crimple, Crupple, Cromple Man. It is awful!

She despises him. I believe she really does.

There are times when I feel it would be better for everyone if she would make an effort to ignore the man.

But, perhaps, it is impossible. The way Avery talks to George, you'd think she was as damaged as he.

Oh, I don't mean physically, of course.

But listen to me!

You will think me a perfectly dreadful busybody!"

"Oh, you? No, Mrs. Hood, I think you are delightful," said Flix, watching the orderly and his charge disappear around a meticulously groomed garden pathway.

"Well, finally! A gentlemen among this horde of infidels! How nice of you to notice! It is refreshing to think that at least one inmate in this place recognizes quality!

Now, what were we talking about?

I have the attention span of a grain of sand, you know. Oh, yes. Flutter-by-beasties and poison ivy. Ha. Ha.

Personally, I think I'd rather spend an evening at a fabulous party, drinking myself unconscious, than grubbing about in some godforsaken woodland or that monstrosity they call a greenhouse.

Can you see *me* crawling about on my hands and knees in search of a fluttering varmint? Perish the thought!"

"Winged insects that are as graceful as angels, Mrs. Hood," Flix said. "And much more colorful, I might add."

“If you say, Flix. But whatever is so fascinating about bugs that you could work yourself down to a frazzle? Of course, you know, I mean no harm, but wouldn’t it be better to waste yourself on something wicked and sinful? Or at least, enjoyable?”

Oh, I don’t know!

An orgy or absinthe!

Even opium!

Ha! Ha!

But somehow, you don’t seem to be the type to revel in a drunken orgy. Too timid, I fear.

Life is short, and why not experiment on the wild side!

I shock you, I see. And that gives me great pleasure.

You know, Flix,” here Mrs. Hood’s voice dropped to barely a whisper, “there are really no words to describe your first experience with something *taboo*. It’s like ice skating at blinding speed right over the rim of the moon!

Thrilling.

Titillating.

You really need to experience life on the edge. But, I believe, you will never be a convert to the hedonistic lifestyle!

I am wasting my breath!

But do not despair.

Life’s a fête!

There may be hope for you, yet! Though I fear, Flix, you, my dear man, are destined to be one of its wall flowers! Ha! Ha!

Perhaps, I am too blunt?”

“No. I enjoy honesty in any conversation, Mrs. Hood.”

“Honesty is a bitter pill, at times, isn’t it? Oh! Oh! Dabney! Dabney! Dabney, darling! Wait up!

Excuse me, Flix. I simply must find out where she gets those adorable little handbags she carries. Dabney Glendinney is smack-dab in the middle of a vicious divorce. Tried to commit suicide because of it! That’s why she’s here!

So, you see, there’s no time to waste! I really must find out where she gets them!

Who knows?

She might be successful next time!

Ha! Ha!

Dabney, dear! Wait up!”

“A most amazingly, peculiar woman,” Flix muttered to no one in particular.

“That she is, old boy. That she is! Park me here, Aimes,” George said. “Then, leave me to my vices!”

The orderly did as he was told, positioning the wheelchair near Flix.

“Now, Wolly, scoot your boots to another side of the playground! This fellow, Flix, and I have a lot of important matters to discuss. Top secret! Ha! Ha! And you are not welcome to hear what I have to reveal,” George said, as Wolcott approached.

Abercrombie Wolcott looked perturbed, but he held his tongue.

“Take your gossip rag, or whatever you call that drivel of a newspaper you insist on reading daily, and run along,” said George. “I wish to visit with our newest member of the asylum! Now, go. Go away. Scat! Scat! Before I get really nasty and tell you off!”

Wolcott's face was purple with rage, but he did as he was told, walking to a bench in a far corner of the park.

"And so," George said, "the black widow scampers away, withdrawing her venomous fangs from another would-be victim."

"I am sure I do not know what you are talking about, sir," Flix said.

"Oh, surely man, you know exactly what I am talking about. I mean unless you've had your head in a hole."

"Well," Flix said, "my head has not been too long out of a trench. And to answer you honestly, no, I do not know what you are talking about."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No. I am not."

"She's Inez Hood. *THE* Inez Hood. Her father invented Reddy-Rite. Made a stinking fortune! Loaded! That stuff's in nearly every home in America. Housewives can't get enough. Filthy rich. Filthy! And our little Inez is the sole heir to it all!

Had four husbands. Four! Although with all that money, why bother marrying when you can buy whatever you're in the market for? I mean, why bother chaining yourself to a husband, when you can buy a paramour?

But our little Inez is special! A barracuda when it comes to men. A real man-eater. Other women's men, exclusively!

I hear she's the reason Dabney and her husband split, you know. Though why Dabney gives a flying flip what her husband does is beyond me. Anything that smart looking has to have left a thousand broken hearts in her wake. Don't you agree? Dabney's definitely the bee's knees in my book! In spite of those clumsy bandages that she has on her arms.

But, back to Inez!

Four hubbies and all dead!

They say she's gotten away with murder, our little Inez! Multiple times! But jeez, with all that money, I guess you can grease enough palms to slip your neck out of any noose!

Her last one, Frederick, drowned in a sailing accident in the Caribbean. Only our friend, Inez, and a hired South America crew member will ever know what really happened.

Latin lover? Most likely. Especially if the crewman was married. But who can say?

The other three?

Well, let us say, a cloud of suspicion hangs over her wherever she goes. Those other three left this earth under fishy circumstances, too. So now, I suppose, she is on the prowl for husband number five."

"Interesting."

"I'll say. She's got to be pushing fifty, but she's preserved herself amazingly well. Had some facial enhancements, I'd dare to wager. Looks a bit stretched around the eyes, but perhaps, that's a familial thing. You know, high cheek bones, widely set eyes. Can't say.

Doesn't drink. At least, not very much, from what I've observed.

Nerts! I'd give my eye teeth for a good, stiff brandy this second, but Aimes is a goody-two-shoes and stubbornly refuses to let me have any booze while I'm his charge. Doesn't matter! The wait makes it all the more rewarding.

I'll down a few later when I'm out of Aimes' reach.

And no, if you're about to ask, Quintland doesn't mind. In fact, the good doctor encourages a little snoot. Relaxing. Therapeutic. All that rot.

He's got a cellar stocked with the good stuff!

Got friends in high places, no doubt.

Must have cost him a fortune to buy off the local lawmen. But that doc's got a good head of his shoulders. Knows what's good for business, that one!

Quintland wouldn't think of cutting off the hooch. Half this place would disappear before nightfall if the bootleg stopped flowing.

Therapy schmairapy.

I say, it's just damn good.

But I digress.

What were we discussing?

Oh, yes.

Stiff drinking.

Not our friend, Inez.

Not that she's a teetotaler by any stretch of the imagination. Our Inez does like her poison, only not from a glass. She prefers hers at the end of a needle. That's why she's forever hold up in the john!"

Flix paled.

"Aughhhhhhh!"

A high, piercing scream broke George's reverie.

Flix jumped up from his seat and ran toward it.

"Wait! You! Take me with you!" George ordered. "Aimes! Aimes! Where in the hell is that man when I need him?"

Flix yelled an apology to George, who was struggling with his wheelchair, and ran in the direction where the scream had originated.

Chapter 5

"It has to be one of us!" Avery said, excitedly.

Strange, Flix thought, the eagerness in her voice betrayed enthusiasm, not unlike an owner's excitement when his prize horse wins a race. He would have expected horror or anger.

"Don't you see," Avery went on, breathlessly, "we are all locked up in this prison! I mean, we sign ourselves in, but still, it's like a prison. We're all here, trapped in a golden cage of our own making!"

"Speak for yourself, Miss Hypochondriac," George muttered. "I am an unwilling inmate."

"Oh, jeez Louise! Don't be such a martyr, Crumpled Man!" Avery said, staring down at George in his wheelchair.

"You're so smart, Avery," George said. "And so utterly spoiled! You know it all, don't you? Well, Miss Smarty Pants, what about the legions of visitors who tromp in and out of this place all the time?"

There must be scores!

Unobserved by you, you little self-centered, dumb Dora," George said. "Pray tell me, little Avery-know-it-all, what does that do to your little theory that it has to be one of us?"

The group had gathered in the main dining room at the request of the local authorities.

George, who now had their undivided attention, continued, "Friends. Members of Loony Binville, let me strike a match to the wicks of your dimly lit brains. There are any number of people who come and go from this posh establishment.

Why, you, Madam Hood, I dare say you have a whole squadron of illustrious and infamous acquaintances who have graced these immaculate grounds. Casamir comes weekly, does he not, Mrs. Hood? And what lovely, exotic potions does he bring you?

And you, grumpy Gusblus." George said to Mr. Birmingham-Hill, "that chauffeur of yours drop you off at any tea pads, this week?"

Mr. Birmingham-Hill, obviously insulted, rose to leave.

"Say that again, you insolent, little cretin, and I will sue you for slander. Filthy lies. I will not stand for such from you, even if you are a pathetic, vulgar cripple."

"Oh, boo yah!" cried George. "Touched a nerve, I do believe. Think you're too good to breathe the same air as the rest of us mortals, Hilly!

And no, I do not entertain that our Mr. Birmingham-Hill haunts the tea pads in the city. He's too tightly strung and too hoity-toity to smoke reefer. Might find he likes it if he would ever try it! Ha! Ha! Loosen up his cummerbund."

George focused on Avery, who sat demurely across the room, exuding sex appeal like a Vermont maple, just tapped.

"And you, my little Sheba," George began.

"Oh, dry up, Crimble Man. Nosy, old busybody! You always stick your schnoz into everyone's beeswax! Nothing better to do.

Who do you think you are?

What about that friend of yours, George, who comes round like clockwork! Every Wednesday. Nasty little bohunk and the perpendicular paraplegic,” Avery muttered.

“Tell us all about your new beau, my little Sheba,” George said. “He’s a WASP if I ever saw one, in that sporty little roadster of his! I watched him mooning outside your window, last night. It was way past midnight. Any sensible fellow would have been at home snoring loudly enough to wake the dead!”

“Easton? Easton was here last night?” Avery said. “But, I didn’t know. I was sound asleep.”

“Well,” George said, triumphantly, “I was not, being the incurable insomniac that I am.”

“Well, I see you all have gathered as ordered,” said Dr. Quintland, the director of Beastly House. “The police shall be here, presently. I think they wish to question each one of us.”

“You, too?” Dabney asked.

“Yes, Dabney. I am a suspect, as well,” said the doctor.

“I say Flix. What are you looking for? You’ve searched your pocket so many times, I should think you would have worn a hole in it by now,” Wolcott said.

“My pipe. I am sure I had it with me, but I just cannot seem to find it.”

“Here’s your grubby old pipe,” Avery said, handing it to him.

“Where on earth did you find it?” Flix asked.

“Oh, I dunno. You must have put it down. Absent minded of you.”

“I suppose,” Flix said, warily eyeing the young girl.

How had she slipped it from his pocket without his knowledge? He did not know. She’s good, he thought. Damned good.

He’d have to keep his eye on her, he decided.

Chapter 6

The detective entered the room, along with a subordinate officer who held a pencil and a notepad.

“Common,” muttered Mrs. Hood, who sat beside Flix. “Hasn’t even bothered to take it off. Probably wears it to bed.”

Flix knew that Mrs. Hood was referring to the fact that the officer-in-charge had not removed his fedora, but he said nothing. He was too shocked to see that the investigator was an old war buddy from the trenches.

How small the world is, Flix mused. I knew this man, half-a-world away and a lifetime ago, yet, here he stands in front of me. It is unbelievable.

As if on cue, the policeman, taking a mental inventory of the collection of people in front of him, looked squarely at Flix. No sign of recognition washed over the detective’s face.

He does not recognize me, Flix thought. The war has changed us both. Life has left its mark on us, as it has on everyone else in this room.

“My name is Detective Phalen Archer. I will be conducting this investigation. I want to thank you all for gathering here so promptly.”

“As if we had a choice,” Avery muttered.

“I will be questioning each of you, separately and privately, in this room to our left.

You first, Dr. Quintland, if you don’t mind.

Again, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time. I realize this is an inconvenience, and I assure you all that I will conduct my interviews as quickly as possible.”

The detective and the doctor left the room.

“Inconvenience, my Aunt Betsy’s bottom! He doesn’t know the meaning of the word! This is going to make me late for my massage. Dang it all!” Avery said, moodily.

She glanced over at George who had opened his mouth to speak.

“Shut your trap, Cromble Man. I’m in no mood to spar with you, today.”

For once, George obeyed, rolling himself over to the table. He poured himself a glass of water.

“Oh, god! Flix!” Mrs. Hood said. “The third degree! I hope our little detective is a bumbling country bumpkin. But, I don’t think so. His eyes are too keen.”

“Secrets to hide, Mrs. Hood?”

“Absolutely. And do not assume that I am so naive that I do not know what they say behind my back. Flix, really! Take a good look at me. Do I look like someone who would stoop to murder? I mean, with my money, why would I have to?”

Flix said nothing, but Mrs. Hood’s attention had moved elsewhere.

“Look at them. Staring back at the police with their most innocent doe eyes! What a charade! So smug. I daresay everyone in this room has secrets to hide. Not murderous ones, perhaps. But, all the same.”

“I know what you mean,” Flix said. “If you live long enough, the dirt you gather on your soles is better off left on the rug. We all have things we wouldn’t want our mothers knowing, much less a total stranger.”

“A man of secrets!” Mrs. Hood said. “You? Quite absurd!”

Mrs. Hood squirmed in her seat. She rose to leave the room. The officer that had accompanied Archer blocked the doorway.

“Oh, please. I simply have to use the lady’s room.”

“Very well, but come straight back. Munsford,” the officer called out.

Another uniformed man appeared.

“Please escort this lady to the restroom.”

“I have never,” Mrs. Hood said, indignantly.

“That’s the most deceptive understatement I have ever heard in my life,” George said, devilishly.

Avery could not help but smile.

Chapter 7

"I cannot believe that dear Alzada is gone!" said the maid. "She's been poorly, practically since the day she came, but she always managed to get her work done."

"And with no whining complaints, neither! Not that one," said another maid.

"Yes, I know. I could tell she was not well. But she kept up her work like a real trooper. I tried to help her all I could, you know. She tried so hard to act like nothing was wrong."

"I feel so sorry for her. But them others, they seem unfazed by it all. I mean have you heard the things some of them are saying?"

"I know exactly what you mean. No pity for the dead. The way the inmates are acting, you'd think it was a Fourth of July picnic," said the cook.

"I know. I think it's disgraceful! Alzada killed! You'd think it was a holiday to see them all. They are as excited as if Bill Blyndon's band was playing."

"And just as tedious as ever! That snooty, old bat in 407 reminded me to keep his tea hot. Who knows how long the police will keep them locked up for questioning?"

"Oh, stop your fooling! That *kind* is never kept waitin' long. The cops wouldn't dare! But if they were questioning one of us, huh! You can bet your best bloomers, we'd be given the third degree until the cows came home!"

The staff members laughed heartily.

"Ain't you speakin' the gospel truth! You know, I've always said the inmates are *the haves*, and we are *the lowly have-nots*."

"I know. But why should we be treated like something you scrape off your shoe simply because we don't have a boatload of money?"

"It's the way of the world. Always has been. Always will be."

"Well, if you ask me, I think we got us a prize bunch of hoity-toits, this last go round."

"The silent sultan. The saucy hot pepper. The grouch from hell. The crude cripple. The list goes on and on."

"Quite a haughty lot, you're right. You know, around here, I am very used to that sort of thing.

But that old grizzly that is too good to speak, why, he really is over the moon.

Sent me back to the kitchen three times.

Coffee was too weak. Too cold. Too sweet.

I felt like Goldilocks in 'The Three Bears.' I thought my legs would drop off before he was satisfied. Finally, told me to forget it. Wasn't in the mood for coffee. Sent me back with the last cup untouched."

"Usually, the men are more tolerant, you know what I mean. If I'm tied up with someone else, and I just can't get to their request, Johnny-on-the-spot, the men usually cut me a little slack line. But not this lot!

That Mister George is the worst. I think he's the Devil's spawn!"

"I know what you're saying. He has the wickedest tongue. I know he's a war hero and all that, but really! Just because he's a cripple, he thinks he can treat us like dung!"

“That flamin’ Mister Wolcott ain’t no better. An ogre, that one is. A real ogre. Got what I call a *hairy* trigger temper. I ain’t fooling. Tickle his temper, and he throws a tantrum!

I dropped his tie on the floor. He exploded. Scared me outta my wits. Come within a gnat’s breath ‘a wettin’ my knickers.

Wouldn’t have put it past him to have pushed me out the window, he was so mad. Saw it in his eyes. Frightening. Truly frightening. I wouldn’t give ya two cents for neither the men nor the women in this bunch. Love to buy ‘em all for what they’re worth and sell ‘em for what *they think* they’re worth!”

“That’s the gospel. Oh, look sharp, here’s the doctor.”

“Hello, ladies.”

“Doctor Quintland, is it true what they say? Was Alzada murdered? We’re white with fright! I just want to pack up my belongings and go somewhere safe. I am truly scared to death. Who will be next, Doctor!”

“Now, ladies. We will leave the investigation to the police. You all have jobs to do. The detective is questioning each of our guests. There are quite a few currently with us, so it will take the authorities some time to finish.

Please, be your quickest to assist our guests. They have all had a very trying day. They may be a bit testier than usual but remember the terrible shock they have just suffered.”

“Yes, sir,” said the cook.

“What about Alzada? Isn’t she the one who has suffered the most? I mean, she’s the one who was bumped off,” said the maid, after the doctor was beyond earshot. “He didn’t seem to have the least bit of sympathy for her? Or us, neither.”

“He’s just worried about the inmates.”

“The haves and the have-nots. Remember? Besides, it’s the inmates who sign his paychecks, not our kind.”

“Yeah. But it sure ain’t no fun bein’ a notter. It sure ain’t. I gotta get back to work.”

“We all do. Or else, we’ll be notters with no job and nothing at all!”

“Let me know if you hear anything else.”

“Oh, I will. I may be a notter, but I ain’t *not* gonna keep my eyes ‘n ears opened. You can count on me.”

“Be careful.”

“You, too.”

Chapter 8

Phalen searched the boathouse. He found nothing that would indicate who might have killed the maid. He decided to move to the victim's room. He would have to hurry. The storm clouds were gathering, and the skies were darkening.

He raced across the lawn to the main house. He was directed to the third floor. Down a dark, narrow hall, he found the correct door. Little tin numbers were nailed to the top of each door frame. The victim's room was 27. It was a cramped space squeezed in at the end of the hallway near the large bathroom that all of the women servants used.

The room had a musty, closed scent. There was one small window on the far wall. The furniture was sparse: a bed, a chair, and a small table with a book on it. Everything about the room looked tired. The furniture did not match. The whole room looked like it had been furnished with odds and ends no longer used in the main house – an old straight-back chair from the kitchen, thin curtains that did not block the light, a small, plain, scarred wooden table from a work shed.

The wallpaper was peeling, and the whole room looked dreary. It was neat, but the neatness lent no cheeriness.

Spartan, Phalen would have called it.

He picked up the book on the table. It was an old Bible, tattered and falling apart. He peered inside. The pages allotted for family lineage were blank. Written in pencil, barely legible, was one line: Property of South End Orphanage, 1898.

A parting gift is given when an orphan leaves the only home she's known, Phalen guessed.

Just as he was about to decide there was nothing of importance in the room, he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

He jumped.

A mouse skittered across the floor and disappeared under the bed.

He laughed, shook his head, and closed the door. He would order this bedroom and the boathouse off limits until further notice. He would insist that both places be left untouched until his investigation was completed.

As he walked down the dark hallway, his footsteps echoed hollow and lonely.

A clap of thunder sounded in the distance.

This was going to be quite a storm.

Chapter 9

The room was ornate, heavily draped, and spacious. Everything in it screamed money. The two were sitting in soft leather easy chairs in the library just off Flix's bedroom.

A magnificent chandelier hung from the high ceiling, but it was of no use, at the moment. The power lines had been knocked down by fierce winds. The roaring fire threw orange specters that danced merrily about the walls.

Richly-bound volumes lined the shelves that ran from floor to ceiling. The storm outside howled. Lightning flashed, and thunder rocked the foundations of the great mansion.

"It is a real monster of a storm, Cupid."

"That is an understatement, Phalen. I am glad you accepted my invitation to dine with me, tonight."

"I was surprised that the doctor permitted it, quite frankly. I had been told by the others that he is a stickler that you all attend meals together."

"Well, this situation affords a little bending of those rules. Don't you think?" said Flix.

"Definitely! Besides," said Phalen, "I think Dr. Quintland felt sorry for me, what, with my car breaking down right outside his front door and having to be towed. That was a sorry sight!

And then, I told him that you and I were old war buddies.

I wanted to speak with you alone.

I think Dr. Quintland assumed I wished to rehash old times with you. Whatever, it doesn't matter. The doctor readily agreed to allow us to visit privately."

"Well," said Flix, "the fact that you are staying over puts his mind at rest a little, I think. I believe he sees you as a sort of security blanket, Phalen. The possibility of having a murderer on the premises bids well for having a police detective nearby."

"I'm just glad for the dry roof," said Phalen. "The food's not bad either. But I have to ask, Cupid, why are you here?"

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw you.

Have you had a breakdown?

You didn't return to Pinkerton's after the war, did you, Cupid?"

"I can't help but smile when you call me that," Flix said. "Nobody but my brothers-in-arms ever called me *Cupid*."

And to answer your question, no, I didn't have to return to Pinkerton's to pay the bills when I came home from the war. My uncle left me a legacy that allows me to spend my time as I wish."

"Lucky sot!"

"My uncle would beg to disagree," Flix said. "I survived the war, but he did not, so to speak. Too old to fight, but not too old to die, I suppose."

"Of course, I am sorry for your loss, I just meant . . ."

"I know what you mean, Phalen. And don't be sorry. My uncle lived a good long life. I was just having a little fun with you."

"Of course," Phalen said. "You know, after our unit found out about your Christian name, what else could we have called you?"

Valentine?

I don't think so.

Not raunchy enough or funny enough.

Cupid seemed a most appropriate nickname back there in those godforsaken trenches."

"My name is forever the butt of jokes."

"Well, you must admit, *Cupid*, there was so little to take lightly over there."

"I could not agree with you more," Flix said. "They did not call them F-holes, for nothing. Too much death. Too much horror. Too much of everything *bad*."

A little levity, even at my expense, was a good thing. And I didn't mind being the butt of your jokes. The place made everyone too serious. Fifteen minutes in the trench turned even the most optimistic boy into the worst sullen human on the planet.

But how could it have been any other way?

Asleep on the farm one minute, only to awaken in hell the next. It was a most grievous shock to your psyche."

"That was our lot, *Cupid*," said Phalen. "The world had gone mad, and we were the boys called up to make it sane, again."

"Quite so. Quite so. And as to why I am here, well, honestly, Phalen, it's the greenhouses."

"The what?"

"Let this remain between us, but I simply had to get a look at them for myself."

"Greenhouses? But, isn't the country filled with them?"

"Not like these," said Flix. "There is nothing on earth to compare with the collection of plants that thrive here. I have always heard Leigh's greenhouses were the grandest ever constructed, that they rivaled the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and that Bernard Leigh spared no expense in their construction, or in amassing a collection of some of the world's most exotic specimens."

And the rumors have proven true!

Leigh's greenhouses exceeded my wildest expectations! I could spend a lifetime roaming over every nook and cranny of those fantastic buildings.

There are plants here that you will never see, except in books! Believe me, this collection is phenomenal!

I have found several specimens that haven't been cataloged.

Leigh was renowned for collecting only the finest samples from around the world, but he also was fanatical about keeping his treasures only for his own enjoyment.

After his death, a codicil to his will insured the only way a person could visit the greenhouses was as a 'guest' of the estate. When his wife sold the place, she insisted that only guests be allowed inside them. The new owners bowed to her wishes.

Now, you can only gain admittance into the greenhouses by becoming a patient at the sanitarium.

I thought about it long and hard, but in the end, I had to see them.

And if Mohammed would not come to the mountain, as they say, well, I had to come here. As a patient!

It was all fairly easy to arrange. I handed over the requested monies, signed a few papers, and was ushered right into bedlam!"

Phalen looked skeptical.

"I have to admit, I was apprehensive that I would be, you know, strapped to a bed and fed gruel, but the place is more like a fancy spa. I figured I had to come as quickly as possible."

Phalen burst out laughing.

"I hardly think that chains and whips would be used at this palace by the lake, but aren't these types of jitter joints losing popularity?"

"Yes." Flix said, "Many are closing. With the changing attitudes of modern times, what with Prohibition and all, these places are closing faster than a deb gets tanked at a whoopee parlor.

Even the ones whose clientele are from the richest families!

Why spend all that money on treatment when you can make the source of the problem illegal! Take away the booze, and the alcoholic is healed! That seems to be a growing sentiment. So, yes, places like this are disappearing.

And that is why I simply had to come here as quickly as possible. It was now or never. Who knows when they will bar the doors and close down this dip shop!"

"So, you pretended to be a lunatic, just to see the flowers? Cupid, you are insane!"

"Not insane," Flix said. "But, not entirely truthful. I had to feign some sort of problem just to get in the door.

Alcohol, opium, bad nerves. Take your pick. Some sort of mental or physical malady that needed lots of fresh air, scenery, and a period of time for drying out. It was easy enough to persuade my doctor that I needed a place just like this to recover my good health. Coming back from the war, you know, it was easy enough to pretend something was wrong."

"Oh, the war!" said Phalen.

"Some days," Flix said, "it seems like it was a lifetime ago. Some days, it feels like yesterday.

I lied to get into this place, I'll admit that, but it was worth it.

The specimens in the old man's greenhouses are the finest on earth! And such variety!

You cannot imagine!

I only came here to study and see this great collection first-hand. I never thought I'd find murder among such a man-made utopia as Leigh created here."

"Emphasis on *Man*, Cupid. Corrupt and hideous creatures, we are. I see it every day."

"You will, I hope, Phalen, let me see the body."

"Of course," Phalen said. "You have obviously heard the rumors of how she looked. And that she was always rather sickly. Cupid, my friend, I cannot help but believe she was being poisoned. But that is not how she died. She was strangled!"

"Strangled! My goodness!" said Flix.

"We will know more tomorrow after we've examined the body. You know," Phalen continued, "even though it is the site where the body was found, the boathouse was surprisingly undisturbed. Spacious, as you'd expect on a place of this size. Ropes. Oars. Couple of small boats being worked on. Tools lying about, but nothing amiss.

And the victim's room is the typical servant's quarters – at the end of a long hallway, next door to the communal bathroom. Cheap furnishing, and few pieces, at that.

But, just what you'd expect. That whole end of the mansion needs work, but it is the servants' section.

Her room is so sparsely decorated that it has a cloistered atmosphere about it. Almost like a convent. And to top it off, a mouse scampered across the room, and I guess I was so focused on my investigation, I missed it! I almost stepped on the darn thing! Couldn't believe how far off the floor I jumped! Looked utterly ridiculous!

Ha! Ha! Ha!

But seriously, hers is the typical austere living arrangements for the hired help. The only book I found was a worn Bible, probably a gift from the orphanage when she left.

Blast! It all happened so late in the afternoon!

Darkness fell so quickly with those thunderheads! The sky turned black in moments, and there was hardly time to inspect the outside areas. With this storm, any evidence that may have remained on the grounds will, in all probability, be washed away."

"Umm," Flix muttered in agreement. "The storm is rotten luck."

A particularly close bolt of lightning struck nearby. Both men flinched in their seats.

"Reminds me of over there," Phalen said.

"Yes," Flix said. "It is all I can do to keep from jumping out of my skin when the thunder booms. Sounds just like big guns, all over again."

"I know what you mean. I don't know about you, but one of the hardest things I had to get used to back over here was the silence."

"Fritz loved his constant shelling, didn't he?"

"I'll say. It's a wonder we aren't stone deaf."

"I know."

Both men sank deeper into the rich leather of the soft chairs they occupied.

"Here's to the boys who never made it back."

"Here. Here," said Phalen, draining his coffee cup.

"When I think of the mud and the gore, I wonder how we managed! Those trenches were truly hell on earth. How did we survive, Phalen? Why are we still among the living, when so many of the others that we called 'brothers' are not?"

"I know. I lie awake nights, wondering. Was it luck? Fate? Chance?"

"Remember Eddie?" Flix asked.

"I'll never forget him," Phalen said. "He hadn't been on the line two days. Fresh out of the hay fields, that Eddie.

Somebody should have told him he wasn't faster than a bullet."

"I know," Phalen said. "Sticking your head up just to have a peek at the enemy. It was suicide!"

"And what was there to see?"

"Nothing. Nothing but wire and tortured earth. Not one jot of green left. Not a leafy tree. Not one blade of grass. Nothing but a bloody field of madness and destruction.

But, it wouldn't have made one ounce of difference.

With Eddie, I mean.

You couldn't tell him anything.

That boy thought he knew it all.

Was going to stick it to the Huns and win the war single-handedly.”

“Well, they showed Eddie, didn’t they?” Flix asked. “But enough about the past, tell me what else you have discovered about this case.”

“Ahh. The old Pinkerton juices still flow. I am glad to see that. Well, I’ll be honest, Cupid, there isn’t much to tell. The bruise on her neck tells me she was strangled. And as I said, the storm is sure to wash away any evidence that may have been outside.”

“I agree.”

“If I get the chance,” Phalen said, “I’ll go back and search more thoroughly tomorrow, when the light is better. Her body was taken off the estate, much to my dismay, but the doctor who runs this place thought it would be disturbing to his patients. I suggested taking her into the city, but he insisted upon removing her to some place a few miles from here.

Assured me that this fellow was a bonafide medical man. Could do the autopsy for me. Why the devil he didn’t let me do as I wish is beyond me, but the blasted regulations of this place are beyond me, too.

They run this whole county like a fiefdom. Off in their own world. Above the rest of us. Do as they damn well please, and my superiors have given strict orders that I must do as Dr. Quintland wishes. It’s almost as if he is a puppeteer pulling their strings!”

“Do not trouble yourself much about the politics,” Flix said. “Politics is the prerogative of the very rich, my friend. They inhabit another sphere above the rest of us mere mortals.”

Chapter 10

The slime was knee deep. Literally. It was a soupy muck, not just of mud, but of things unimaginable – rotting human bodies lay beneath your feet, a bridge to stand upon – if the gods smiled on you, and you were lucky. They kept your feet above the gore in the narrow ditch that led straight to hell. And the good Lord only knew, trench foot was just one more misery that the soldier had to contend with. If a corpse kept a soldier's boots above the water, then good for the warrior.

The soldier had spent more than one night digging comrades out of this festering goop, and it became like quicksand if you stood or sat still in it long enough.

The soldier beside him shook uncontrollably. Once in awhile, he yelped, as if in pain, but that man had no physical injury.

"There is no sleep in hell," he muttered to himself.

It was night. As he looked up into the dark infinity above his head, he wondered if the gods were partying, too busy to intervene in this madhouse of death and destruction.

He looked around. It really was a madhouse – tight, cramped, with walls of eroding dirt.

When would the next attack come?

He felt his stomach jitterbug inside him.

That was the scary part. The waiting. Once the fighting started, everyone and everything sort of acted without thought. There was no time to plan strategic tactics when the next artillery barrage began raining down. There was only time for action.

When the action stopped, the waiting game began again.

And then, boredom, mind-killing boredom during those down times. Boredom that threatened to push you over the brink of sanity. And while you wait, Fear gnaws your insides like acid.

He looked up once again into the blackness above.

The searing whistle of a shell blew past him, exploding nearby. The trench became a chaotic crater of mud and blood.

Someone was screaming.

Someone was pulling at his jacket.

He had to get away!

He had to get away!

Suddenly, a skeletal hand reached from out of the mud from the side of the trench where it had been buried and grabbed his jacket collar.

He woke up, clutching his pillow and screaming.

Chapter 11

The next morning dawned gray and dreary. The sky looked like a solid sheet of slate that bore down heavily upon the earth's inhabitants. Phalen and Flix decided to skip breakfast and get an early start.

"Dr. Quintland has been most generous, lending me his personal automobile, Cupid."

"I really think he wants this thing put to rest as quickly as possible," Flix said.

"You're probably right. His guests will scatter like quail after a cannon blast if it is not," Phalen said. "At least, the doctor has a good alibi. He was holding the hand of a client who is trying to get a monkey off his back."

"That is good to know, but what about me? You have not asked me where I was or if I have an alibi. As Miss Avery said so bluntly, Phalen, we are all suspects."

"All! I dare say not," Phalen said. "There is one of you that I trust."

"But how do you know I am not responsible for the death of this young woman?"

"Because," Phalen said. "I have gone through hell and back with you. I trusted you with my life in the trenches, and on more than one occasion, I might add, you were there for me. I have you to thank for still having a life!"

"I suppose you are right. You and I, at least, have had the metal of our characters purified in that blast furnace called war."

"Exactly," Phalen said. "But, you realize, this does not mean that I will not have to be as harsh on you as I am the others. They must not suspect that we are friends or war buddies. Dr. Quintland has given me his word that he will keep our secret."

I want you there for me as my eyes and ears, but no one must suspect that you are my assistant in this investigation. I have come up with a cover to explain your absence, Cupid.

You have been sent to the infirmary, suffering a nervous collapse, as it were, from the shock of what has just happened. I hope you don't mind, but it was the only story I could think of to justify your absence on such short notice."

"I am willingly your spy," Flix said. "If the murderer is there at the sanitarium, as one of the guests, staff, or frequent visitors, then it is better if they think I am a wilting violet. I can remain in the background, unnoticed, as the others go about their routines. That little lie you have planted will work to my advantage, I think."

"Good. I was hoping you'd see it like that."

"Now where are we going?" Flix asked.

"We're headed across the county. That's where the victim's body was taken. As I told you before, Quintland insisted the corpse be removed from the property and taken there as quickly as possible."

Phalen lit a cigarette.

"And thanks for coming along," Phalen continued, drawing deeply on the end of the cigarette and filling the car with a hazy cloud of smoke, "I like the company. Riding with my sergeant is a bit like riding with a sweating cow. Wields is six foot four and is always hot, even in a snow storm. A good man, though, if you don't mind riding around with the windows down in December. Heh! I swear one of these days I'm gonna get frostbite!"

But seriously, Wiels sent word to me this morning. My automobile is officially dead. I'll have to get another, but right at the moment, buying another car is at the bottom of my list."

"Yes. I agree. This doctor, I assume, will allow us to examine the body?"

"Yes.

It's about twenty miles away according to Quintland. The place is stuck way out on the other side of a little town right on the edge of nowhere."

"Part of that may be because the Leigh estate is just so large, Phalen. And then, of course, there's that lake. It is enormous, too,"

"Yes, that's part of it, I'm sure," Phalen said." Even Quintland remarked that it will be a bit like climbing Mount Everest to get there. I mean with the storm and all. He said the roads weren't that great in dry weather. Now, we're axle deep in mud."

Phalen swerved to miss a large rock sticking up in the middle of the road.

"I've given strict orders not to touch her until I have had the chance to thoroughly comb the body for clues. I just hope these hillbillies will not get antsy and have her buried before we get there."

"I agree. Too many times, valuable evidence can be lost in haste. What more do you know about this girl, Phalen?"

"Not much. She's been working in her present position at the estate for some time. Quiet. No family. Dr. Quintland says she was highly recommended as a sweet, hardworking girl. Hired to do general housework. A maid. No complaints from anyone, according to the doctor."

"A mouse, like the one that scampered across her room, giving you such a fright. A little mouse who goes about her work unnoticed. And she gives her killer such a fright that he feels compelled to take her life. Interesting."

"Why so, Cupid?"

"Well, think about it," Flix said. "Here, we have a 'nobody.'

I do not say that to be cruel. It is simply a fact.

A working girl. No one rich. No one famous. Nothing to indicate a troubled background. Good references.

Why was she a victim?

No friends. No enemies.

Why kill someone who is no one?

Was she more than we think?

Evil?

Or was she simply someone unfortunate enough to be at the wrong place at the wrong time?

Think about it, my friend.

We have a victim who has been strangled.

Strangulation is a man's preferred method of murder. And it is a method of killing that requires the murderer to be close to his victim.

But, you suspect that she was being poisoned, too.

Well, then why go to all the trouble of strangling someone if you are already poisoning them?

Poison.

That is usually a woman's preferred method of knocking someone off."

“Yes,” Phalen said. “You’re right on all counts. I quickly assessed the body on the boathouse floor. Our victim shows all the signs of being poisoned. Her eyes were puffy. She had white horizontal lines on her fingernails. Thinning hair. Coworkers told me she was often very ill.”

“So,” said Cupid, “are we dealing with a man and a woman operating as a team to destroy this young girl?”

Or, do we have a man who employs both methods, first poison, and then, when that does not do away with her quickly enough, strangulation?

He quickly chokes the life out of her.

Or, do we have a man and a woman whose intent is to kill the maid, but who are operating on their own, unaware of what the other is doing?

Unless, of course, the maid was strangled by mistake!”

“Which makes the whole case about as clear as mud!” Phalen said.

“Exactly.

And while we ruminate, let us consider this: what are the reasons that compel murderers to act?

Greed, revenge, pride.

To protect.

To keep a secret.

A fit of insanity, although, Phalen, I believe that losing one’s mind does not happen so much, unless one was, say, in those abominable trenches.”

“I agree. In war, you must lose yourself and simply operate like a machine.”

“Kill or be killed.”

“Oh, here we are at last,” Phalen said.

The car pulled up to a small, white clapboard building. Nothing would alert the passing traveler that this was not a family-owned general store, were it not the hand-painted sign advertising ‘Doc Brinally: Doctor’s Office, General Medicine, Merchandise, & Hand-made Coffins at Dirt Cheap Prices.’

“Unusual, but effective, I suppose,” Flix murmured.

“I warned you. Quintland said this place was a rustic backwater. He wasn’t fooling.”

The detective and his friend were greeted by the owner.

“Call me, Doc,” said the old man.

They were led through a storefront where a few canned goods lined the shelves. In the back of the store was a selection of wooden coffins painted or stained a myriad of colors. Off to one side, a small room held baby coffins, all painted white. Flix noticed that these were lined with squares of brightly colored material. A tiny handmade pillow rested at the head of each.

Fringed lamp shades with small electric bulbs lent a somber atmosphere to the back of the store. Doc seemed very proud of his establishment. He had yet to mention the body downstairs, preferring instead to chat about the latest competition that threatened his enterprise.

“I got my son-in-law, Clemis, to make these beauties for me. He’s real handy with a hammer. You know anybody in need of a good carpenter, send him to Clemis. I guarantee Clemis will satisfy the fussiest hard ass this side ‘a the Mississippi.

Dang, if it don’t seem like good hard work don’t mean a hoot, nowadays.

All these upstarts 'round here want is machine-made goods. Darned metal coffins is the rage. All of a sudden, good ole woodies ain't good enough no more. Burns my cigarette butts, but times are changing. And not for the better, if you ask me."

"Sir, could you kindly lead us to the body?"

"Oh, yeah. That. Well, don't worry none, Cap'n. I did like you said. I ain't touched her. They brought her to me, 'n they told me to leaf her be. That's just what I did.

Not that the rich 'uns ever get carted out here.

No, sir.

Just the poor folks, like me. Figure she's headed for the paupers' cemetery. Maid, from what they said. But those high-brows out at the lake, even the new folks comin' in droves I hear, new money 'n all, why, they wouldn't be caught dead near a place like this. Heh, heh.

Oh, watch your head. The beam's kinda low. Or the steps are kinda high. Ain't never figured out which.

Light switch is by the door. I've gotta run down the road and see about Lefty's calf. I won't be long.

Do double duty as the vet 'round here.

Lefty's awful worried 'bout that dang calf.

But the girl, she's resting on the table to your right. Got me two tables down there, you know. Wanted to expand, but hell, with these tin-can coffin makers selling 'em so cheap, I don't even know if I'll be here next year. Everybody wants a confounded metal box. Wood just ain't good 'nuff, no more.

Thinking about opening up a practice in West Virginia. Mebbe Arkansas. The Ozarks, you know. Some place like that.

Heard they need docs out that way. Not too keen on modernization, I hear. Wood coffins 'er still good enough for them. Clemis says he's willin' to make the move with my daughter. We'll see.

You gentlemen turn the lights off after you're done. Let me know when I can have her. Damn shame she ain't got no fam'ly. I'll be dousing her good with turpentine and wrapping her in a white sheet and taking her by wagon to the potter's field, as quick as you say it is okay. Shame Death took her so young, a beauty like that."

"Thanks, Doc. We will let you know when we're through."

"Take your time. Ain't like I got 'em stacked up to the ceiling. Only her and Guff Starkweather. Guff shorely don't mind the company. Do ya, Guff?" Doc yelled down into the basement from the top of the stairway.

Both Phalen and Flix looked at Doc like he'd lost his mind. Doc didn't seem to notice.

"I'll get to ya as soon as these two leaf me to get back to work. Enjoy the view, Guff. Heh. Heh."

The old man shuffled off.

"Quite a character."

"I agree. Seems to me, his bedside manner is doing more harm to his practice than the tin-can coffin makers," Flix commented.

"Come on. Let's get downstairs and get busy. If the evidence warrants an autopsy, I want to be here while Doc works. I want to be sure he does this right."

“Afraid ole’ Doc might take short cuts, Phalen?”

“Ole’ Doc is just itchin’ to douse her with turp and plant her in the ground, so he can collect his five dollar burial fee. With five dollars staring him in the face, an autopsy is the last thing on his mind.”

The two made their way carefully down the basement stairs. It was cold and dark and smelled of turpentine. Phalen fumbled for the light switch.

The room became lit with dingy, yellow light.

It was as the old man had said, occupied by two bodies lying on metal tables, one to the right and one table on the left. A white slop jar stood empty beneath each table. The bodies were covered with white sheets. It would have been impossible to know which was which had they not been told, for Guff Starkweather was a small man.

Phalen and Flix had very serious looks on their faces. They moved to the body resting on the table to their right and removed the sheet covering.

“Must mean his other right,” Phalen said softly, replacing the sheet on the male corpse whose dull eyes stared up at the two men.

“Rough looking character,” stated Flix.

“I agree. Looks like he just came right off the mountains after about a twenty-year hike.”

“Smells like it, too. Doesn’t seem like whatever smashed his face in had much mercy.”

“Amen,” Phalen said, turning to the body on his left.

“Well, let’s see if she hides any clues,” Flix said.

Even though the two men came from different areas of the country, both had experience in big city police methods. Phalen was surprised at how easily they worked together.

Flix let Phalen take the lead, waiting for a point of the finger or a look from the detective before giving his assistance. They searched the body for anything that might tell them who the killer was.

“The old man was right about one thing, Cupid. She must have been beautiful.”

“Yes. Such a waste.”

“Hold your light closer while I examine her face,” Phalen said. “The chief has really tied my hands on this one. If only I could get her body back to the city coroner. I can’t help but believe we are going to miss crucial clues.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Phalen, but if these are the circumstances we have to work with, then we can only make the best of them.

“How’s the lighting?”

“Not so good,” Flix said, adjusting his camera a little more to the right.

“It’s nice your uncle’s fortune allows you to collect so many toys, Cupid. You’re way ahead of us at the department with your gadgets. Budgets and all that. I never was good at brown-nosing. My department hobbles along on brains and ingenuity. Little else, I’m afraid.

“I’m only too glad to help,” said Flix. “But, you’re the expert, here. I was only a private investigator, remember?”

Flix was a renaissance man. Phalen had seen the evidence of his friend’s abilities many times during the war. It seemed to Phalen, Flix was a magician, coming up with practical solutions to problems in the trench and whipping up answers out of thin air. Flix

loved science and plants and butterflies and moths. The fact that he had also been a Pinkerton agent in his younger days didn't hurt, one bit.

"What are you looking for, Cupid?" Phalen asked, as his friend searched the room.

"A cabinet, a shelf. I am wondering where our wizard of industry keeps his extra sheets."

"Probably has no extras is my guess. Two tables for two bodies. My guess is there are only two sheets."

"You're probably right. Well, Gruff Guff won't mind, will you, fellow?" Flix said, pulling the sheet from the dead man's body.

"Flix!"

"Don't worry, Phalen. We'll put it back when we're done. See," Flix said, smiling at his friend, "not a peep of discontentment from our old friend, Guff. Take this end. Drape it there and secure it, just as I have done on my side."

"I say, you amaze me. The room is brighter with the light bouncing off the wall of white you've made."

"I knew it would be. Shall we continue, Phalen?"

"Her right hand is clenched in a fist. There's no way I can pry her fingers open. We'll leave that to Doc."

When the two had completed their examination, they took down the sheet and replaced it over the male corpse.

"I'll go and tell Doc, if he's back, that he can start the autopsy."

"Phalen, what kind of place has a doctor who's the funeral director?"

"I don't know. But, I sure as shootin' know I wouldn't want to be one of his patients."

"My thoughts, exactly."

Chapter 12

“What the devil!” Phalen exclaimed.

“This is much worse than I anticipated,” said Flix.

“I’ll say. A double homicide!”

“How far along do you think she is, Doc?” Flix asked.

“I’d say about 16 weeks.”

“So, now we have an added motive,” Flix mused on the ride home.

“Poor girl. No family, and when she finds herself in a family way, who could she turn to?”

“Our own Dr. Quintland, perhaps,” Flix answered.

“Perhaps, but I don’t think so. More likely, she’d turn to a friendly co-worker. Someone she saw as a mother figure, perhaps.”

“Or another girl her own age.”

“Yes. Blast it, Cupid. I surely did not see this coming.”

“Nor I. When we saw the body on the table, exposed and naked, I did not dream she was with child.”

“No,” Phalen said. “But it would be hard to tell, I mean with a big-boned girl like that.”

“Yes,” Flix said. “She could hide her pregnancy for awhile, yet. But, inevitably?”

“I know. And the evidence we’ve collected so far points to poison. But is not wanting a child reason enough to kill?”

“Men have killed for less,” Flix said.

“So, they have. So, they have.”

“But why strangle her?” Flix said. “That’s what I don’t get. She has all the signs of arsenic poisoning – horizontal lines on her fingernails, puffiness of the eyes, dusky patterns of discoloration on her skin. This whole case just doesn’t make any sense.

You and I are both veterans,” Flix said.

“Yes. The memories are atrocious. I rarely talk of my time in service.”

“I know what you mean,” Flix said, “I feel exactly the same way. But here is a thought, Phalen, as military men, we were trained to kill, were we not?

What if, and please bear with me, I am only speculating, dear friend, what if appetites were aroused during those unbearable days that must be fed during peace time?”

“I do not follow you, Cupid.”

“I am simply saying, what if an appetite for killing was turned on during the war, and now, during peace time, it has never been turned off?”

“A hunger for murder?” Phalen mused. “My god! I suppose it’s quite possible and horrifying to contemplate, but, if that is the case, then why isn’t the world littered with corpses during these few short years since the armistice was signed?”

“I do not know,” Flix said. “I may be totally wrong. I sincerely hope that I am.

What if a monster is roaming about who likes to destroy human life for the simple pleasure it gives him?”

“If you’re right,” Phalen said, “then *monster* is the correct term that would describe such an evil devil. But nobody in this high-priced hotel appears to be a raving, frothing-at-the-mouth lunatic.”

“I know,” said Flix. “This place houses the elite hypochondriacs who wish to escape from the real world, from the reality of the chaotic storm called Life, over which there is very little control. Here, with the aid of beautiful surroundings, one can forget the dirt, the grime, and the unpleasantness that is on every hand.

The estate is an escape. A place to hide. And I am as guilty as all the rest of the ‘*guests*’ here. My uncle’s money has afforded me the opportunity to retire in style and to concentrate and focus my energies on finishing my book on the White-lined Sphinx. But, I find I cannot escape my memories. Not even in these most beautiful surroundings.”

Phalen looked pained.

“My friend, you look as if you have just swallowed one of my beloved moths.”

“There’s something we are missing. Some piece of the puzzle that I can’t quite figure out. It’s floating around in my brain, like a word I am searching for that seems to be on the very tip of my tongue.

This case is most perplexing, Cupid,” Phalen went on. “We have evidence of an obvious murder, as proven by the bruising to her neck. But why? She was merely a maid. And, as far as I can deduce, a young woman with no enemies.”

“Since no obvious pattern was left on her neck, such as hand prints or rope marks, I’d make an educated guess that murderer strangled her with something cloth, silken perhaps, like a scarf or a necktie,” said Flix.

“I agree. But, she also appears to have poisoned, too.”

“But, Phalen, why go to all the trouble of poisoning someone, only to quickly end her life in the boathouse?

I go back to the same old questions.

Was the poison not working quickly enough to suit our murderer?

Do we have two killers, one who had yet to be successful and one who was?

“I believe that scrap of paper Doc found in her fist sealed her fate.”

“Umm. Blackmail? Perhaps.

I must say, Doc’s methods of breaking her fingers to retrieve that clue were shocking,” Flix said, shaking his head in disbelief.”

“Shocking, but necessary,” Phalen said. “Behind that crude façade of a country bumpkin is a very intelligent medical practitioner. I will admit, I was fooled into thinking that Quintland had sent our victim to a yokel and a quack, but when he noted that her fingers would never loosen, he was correct.

I’ve been told by city coroners that the grip loosens only upon the final stages of purification when decay allows the fingers to relax.”

“Death grip.”

“Precisely. Happens with traumatic death. And we are lucky it did, Cupid. The killer could not have pried that scrap of paper from her fingers, even if he had wished.”

Flix looked at the crumpled piece of paper in his hands.

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“And there were no other signs of a struggle,” Flix said. “No torn clothing. No scratches or other bruising. She didn’t fight her attacker off. That suggests that she knew her killer, or I imagine, that the murderer caught her unaware.”

“And although she was young, her corpse suggests she was not well.”

“Again,” Flix said, “I keep coming back to why kill her, if she already has two feet in the grave?”

She is being poisoned. She is pregnant.

Did the killer know she was with child?

Is the killer the father of the child?

She is a maid. Even if the killer is one of the guests, there are ways to rid women of unwanted babies. Back alley abortions are performed all the time.

And why poison?”

“This scrap of paper has to be the motive,” Phalen said. “It is a cipher of some kind, but what does it mean?”

“We will both make copies and try to solve this riddle.”

“Yes. I think that is wise.”

They were silent for a bit.

“I wish it was easier to spot murderers, Phalen.”

“As do I. People would be astounded, and frightened, to learn how many murderers get off scot free.

First off, they don’t wear signs saying, ‘I am a cold-blooded killer.’

They blend in with the rest of us.

We’d never guess in a million years that average-looking Joe has just knocked off somebody. With some people, killing seems to be as easy as eating pie. They move amongst us like other ‘normal’ people, and we rub shoulders with them, never guessing their horrible secrets.

Then, there’s the problem of witnesses.

Nobody saw or will come out and say they saw Average Joe stick the knife into the victim or shoot him or whatever. People do not want to get involved.

And fear is often stronger than a steel bear trap.

And lastly, there’s the evidence.

A lot of times, it just isn’t there. Or it’s there and is destroyed or overlooked. Without the evidence, I may know in my gut Average Joe is the killer, but knowing something, and proving it are entirely two different things.”

“What you say is true, Phalen. So many homicides are not deep mysteries. But proving who did it can be impossible. Happened to me many times as a Pinkerton.”

“And Cupid, thanks again for all your help. You will never know how glad I was to see your face that day in that room at Beastly House.”

“That’s such an odd name,” Flix said. “*Beastly House*.”

The mansion is strange and exotic, but, I wouldn’t say there is anything beastly about it. In fact, I like it. I find it enchanting. While not your ordinary run-of-the-mill mansion, it grows on you, you know.”

“Yeah. I do understand,” Phalen said. “I remember driving up that first morning and feeling like I’d stepped into another world.”

“It is another world. Or at least, Leigh’s vision of it. But, so much has changed since his passing,” Flix said.

He sat quietly brooding for a time.

"I wonder what will happen to the place," Flix murmured.

"Probably, what happens to most white elephants when their time has passed," said Phalen.

"It is sad to speculate. This house has had quite a history. Two very wealthy people, falling madly in love in their twilight years, both embracing their dreams to create a magical island of serenity in a sea of confusion, only to see their dreams end as quickly as they were conceived."

"I've heard stories," Phalen said. "Leigh and his wife were famous for throwing extravagant parties, the likes of which will never be seen again.

Can you imagine just what kind of shenanigans went on inside those magnificent walls?" Flix asked.

"No. And I don't think I wish to. A manor house left to drunken socialites. It is absurd."

"It's a shame," Flix said. "The party only lasted a decade. The old man dying off like that quickly put an end to the fun. Dignitaries, heads of states, even presidents were guests of the Leighs.

Beastly House is a magnificent showpiece, Phalen.

But, like everything else, after you see your dream fulfilled, you must keep paying and paying to keep it alive. A dream on the scale of Beastly House would easily empty the coffers of Croesus faster than a candle dies when it burns at both ends."

"Yes," Phalen said. "You're right. The upkeep for that house is unimaginable! The expense of the staff. The guests. Those gardens and greenhouses alone must have taken a bushel of cabbage to keep them in top shape."

"The expense would eat up any fortune like cancer," Flix said. "I have heard rumors of over a million dollars a year just to keep the cobwebs at bay and the grounds beautiful."

"My word! I would never have dreamed it was that much."

"Yes," Flix said. "When you build such extravagance on a monumental scale, it takes a mountain of money to keep it polished and shiny."

"No wonder his widow had to put the property up for sale."

"Yes," Flix said. "It is a pity. Leigh was brilliant with money. He came from nothing and, over time, worked his way up to partner at one to the premier financial houses on Wall Street."

"Making money with money. That is the American way!"

"But I hear that Leigh left his widow with barely enough to take up residence in their estate in Georgia," Flix said. "No one can figure out just how a man worth so much could have depleted his resources so quickly. Gone in a little over a decade."

"Well, it was his money to spend as he wished, I guess."

"What about their daughter?" Flix asked.

"Oh, that was his wife's child by her first marriage. Mr. Leigh had no children."

"I see. Pity," Flix said. "A son might have taken the reins of the estate and kept it in the family."

"I doubt it. Well, perhaps if he were some kind of magician. You have to have oats in the bin if the horse is going to thrive through winter."

"You're right," Flix said.

“But, how on earth can Quintland keep such a gargantuan estate running as a sanitarium for the wealthy? I mean, from the short time I’ve been here, this place must be running at only a tenth of capacity.”

“He can’t,” Flix said. “Not the way the tides are shifting. Think about it, the eighteenth amendment makes alcoholic beverage consumption illegal. The country is weary of war. Although we were not in the conflict as long as our European neighbors, we suffered greatly.

Americans are ready to remove the temptation from the sinner, and without the sin, the sinner becomes the saint. Well, something along that line. The logic escapes me, but Americans are ready to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Places like this are not going to be allowed to operate for long. Mark my words. The opinions of the general public are shifting. Why throw good money down the drain for such treatments as are given here to rich neurotics, when so many of our young war heroes are suffering?

That is why it was imperative for me to gain access to the greenhouses. Even if I gained access to them by presenting myself in a less than honest light.

I feigned a malady to get the chance to see the wonders in Leigh’s greenhouses. And, it’s been worth the small measure of guilt I suffer about lying to get into the sanitarium. That one little lie gained me entrance into a lost Eden.”

“Well,” Phalen said, “I for one cannot get excited about exotic vegetation. That’s your waltz, not mine. But I do think you’re right, Cupid, about the feasibility of operating a place like this. I think these grand estates are doomed to extinction, eventually.

“Beastly House will be no exception, I fear,” Flix said. “And now, especially, with the scandal of murder at his doorstep, Quintland may be forced to close this place down much sooner than expected.”

“Who would buy it?” Phalen asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps, some other titan of industry, but I think not. This was their dream, Leigh’s and his wife. They built this place for parties and for show. If someone else comes along with a bank account that fat, I am sure he will build his own monument to himself rather than buy someone else’s hand-me-downs.”

“You’re probably right,” Phalen said. “Nothing says ‘big me, little you’ like a brand new palace plunked down on hundreds of acres of land.”

“Ah, yes. Nothing at all. Though you and I will never have such an experience.”

“You, perhaps. But me, never. Not on my salary!” Phalen said.

“I suppose this will all crumble and go back to nature if Quintland is forced to close.”

“It is the way of the world, Cupid. The way of the world.”

Chapter 13

“You did what! Sergeant!” Phalen said. “You idiot! I cannot believe what my ears just thought they heard! Have you lost your mind!”

“No, sir, I most certainly have not. Talk to the Chief, sir. Quintland got a call from the doctor who did the autopsy. Quintland called the Chief, who ordered the arrest of Hadrian Jannins. He works with his father, the head gardener on the estate. It was Quintland who went over your head, not me.”

“I apologize, Sergeant.”

“No problem. I knew your stogie would be burnt. I’m here delivering your automobile, sir. Rex said he thought for sure she was dead, but he got her running, somehow. He told me he’d settle with you later, but that it took him all night to fix her and that you owed him two arms and a leg.”

“Tell Rex, I appreciate his hard work. I’ll see him back at the garage and settle up.”

“Are we heading back, now?” Wields asked.

“No. I’ve got to talk to Quintland. Since when does having a medical degree qualify Quintland to run a murder investigation?”

* * * * *

“Well, Detective Archer, I can’t tell you how pleased I am to have this matter wrapped up.”

“Dr. Quintland, what evidence do you have that Mr. Hadrian Jannins committed the murder? Did he confess?”

“He most certainly did not, but in my dealings with the staff, I hear rumors. It came to my attention that the unfortunate maid, Alzada, I believe they call her, and young Jannins had been, how shall I say this, on more than friendly terms. It seems that a breakup between the two occurred a short time before the murder.

So, you see, the instant Doc told me that the unfortunate girl was with child, I had only to put two and two together to make four.

Two and two are four, Detective.

Quite simple logic, really.”

“I see,” Phalen said. “So, you have no witness that can place this young man at the boathouse the day of the murder?”

“Well, no.”

“You have no one who can place him within the vicinity of that area, if not directly *in* the boathouse,” Phalen said.

“No.”

“No one saw the two arguing during the time leading up to the murder,” Phalen said.

“No,” said Dr. Quintland, “but Chief Amesby agrees with me that Jannins is the most likely suspect. I was so happy to see the Chief act quickly. He ordered your officers to arrest the man, removing him from the property.”

Phalen was so furious. He did not trust his mind to keep his mouth quiet.

“I’ll be getting back with you, Dr. Quintland. Good day,” Phalen said evenly and quickly turned to leave the room.

“That’s all? No thanks? Nothing to show your appreciation for all I have done for you?” Quintland said.

“Good day, Dr. Quintland,” Phalen said, leaving the doctor standing behind his desk with a look of confusion on his bland face.

Chapter 14

“Hurry, Dr. Quintland! Wolcott is out of control again!”

Dr. Quintland rushed out of the room. Flix followed at a discreet distance. From the doorway, he observed Abercrombie Wolcott in a frenzied rage. The man was throwing things, hitting the staff, and acting with such energy that he was like a dynamo fueled by the sun.

A beefy orderly grabbed at Wolcott, who spun away with the grace of a gazelle, and ran toward the door. Flix was in his way. Wolcott punched him squarely in the gut and pushed him, throwing Flix to the floor with a thud.

“Are you alright?” the orderly asked.

“Yes. I’m fine. Only my pride is injured, I assure you.”

The staff scrambled after Wolcott. It was an unruly scene of limbs akimbo and curses and shouts, but Wolcott was finally overpowered and thrown to the ground.

“Hurry, Lindstrom, Aimes! Hurry! Hold him! Hold him!” Dr. Quintland ordered.

Wolcott was given a shot. Flix had no idea what was in the syringe, but he was glad the ordeal had ended quickly.

“The poor man doesn’t know what he is doing when he’s like that.”

It was Dr. Quintland.

“But don’t worry. Everything’s under control. He’ll be fine once he sleeps it off. Now, may I turn my attention to you? Are you quite sure that you are uninjured?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Please, don’t say anything about this episode to the others.”

“Oh no. I won’t. You have my word, Doctor.”

“Very well. Please, excuse me. I must attend to the poor man.”

“Of course.”

* * * * *

“Where were you when all this happened, Hadrian?” Phalen asked.

The young man was distraught. He was sitting on a wooden bench in a jail cell, handcuffed to a large metal ring that had been cemented into the floor of the dingy room.

“I told you, sir, I was running an errand for my father. He is the head gardener. I help him inside the greenhouses, as well as work outside on the grounds.”

“Then, we shall have a witness who is able to testify that you came to him on this errand.”

“No, sir,” said the young man.

“No? Why not?”

“Because, I didn’t run the errand.”

“You didn’t run the errand.”

“No, sir. I wanted to talk to Zada, um, Alzada.

You see, sir, my pop keeps a pretty tight rein on me. It was my chance, this errand, to get out of his sight. Bertie, the man I work with, agreed to run the errand for me.

I sent word by another mate to tell Zada to meet me back of the barn. We had a special place, you know. We'd meet there, sometimes.

She's been actin' cool, lately. I wanted to know for myself if her feelin' for me had changed. If, you know . . . if there was somebody else her heart had struck upon."

"So, you didn't hear the commotion in the boathouse?"

"Boathouse. Why, no sir. Oh, gosh! Oh! Oh! That was where they found her. Johnny told me. The barn's a good three-quarters of a mile from the boathouse, sir."

"Did you talk to anyone? See anyone?"

"No, sir. I wasn't supposed to be there, you see.

I hid in the woods near the barn. It was a special place. Out of sight. Zada knew where to find me. I waited and waited. But, she never came, sir."

"Did you know your friend was with child?"

"What!" young Jannins said, breaking down in tears.

"She had not told you?"

"No. No, sir. Oh, Zada. She must 've thought I'd shun her, sure. But, I love her, sir. I wudda done right by her. I wudda, I swear! Oh, God! This is terrible. I've lost my Zada and a baby!"

"Officer!" Phalen said, "I'm ready."

The officer unlocked the door.

"You haf'ta believe me, sir. I didn't kill Zada! I swear to God! I loved her. Oh, Zada! I . . . loved her!"

Phalen left the young man, head in his hands, and the echo of muffled sobs blended with the hollow sounds of his own footsteps.

Chapter 15

The rain was beating on the window pane. It slowly lulled him to sleep.

Up to his ankles in mud. The crotch of his pants was wet, biting his skin from dried blood and earth. All around him, the trunks of the few remaining trees stood like bent skeletons or dead sentinels, witnessing silently the madness of humanity.

They had been ordered to move the line back. Reinforcements were taking their place. They traced gingerly across a plank bridge, muck and brown filling every pocket and hollow where shells had exploded, hitting or missing their targets with abandon. No one spoke. No one smiled. There was nothing to be happy about, save the fact that maybe, just maybe, they could grab a moment's rest, sleep the sleep of the dead for just a little while, away from the front line. If they were lucky. Leave the fighting to the other poor saps for a bit. For a tiny bit.

And then, it would be their turn again. Back to the front.

'Over the top,' the orders would come.

And he would watch, too scared to sweat, too afraid to scream. Masking the insanity that bounced about his brain like a ball, he grimly looked ahead, looking calm and unaffected to all who stood about him.

Like fleas they appeared, over the ridge, picked off one by one, in twos or threes. Falling, dropping to the merciless ground, breathing a few agonizing moments more, or mercifully dead before the dirt met their faces. Smoke and the incessant patter of gunfire would surround them like a funeral cloth. Huge plumes of dislodged earth and the deafening boom of the blast.

Retreat!

The fleas scamper back to their tunnels of hell and misery, the scene replaying over and over again in what felt like an infinite loop.

Back home, the smoke stacks belch out their billowing plumes, sparks fly, women work with tireless energy, stoking the furnace of the Great War Machine.

And still, the men come, the fleas back and forth over the pitted earth.

And still, the blood flows.

A soldier hangs over a fence post, caught in the wire, his head drooping down as if to kiss Mother Earth. His helmet lies on the ground beside him. It will not help him now.

It does not matter which side a soldier is on. The soldier is a sacrifice to War, to the fruitless loss of human life. No one gives him a second glance if he falls in the fray. As night comes, the cold winds blow over him, howling, crying.

But the living soldiers do not cry for him. No, the living soldiers breathe a sigh of relief that they are not him.

They have been spared. At least, for now.

Fat generals, proud and tall, still give the orders to hold the lines, to move them forward, to pour the blood of their men upon this unhallowed ground, to obey at all costs.

'Over the top!'

The orders come. They always come.

And once again, the fleas scamper across the ridge of the trench, bayonets in hand, to face the enemy who is zeroing in on them with machine guns.

*The fat generals smile among themselves, smug, heavily-coated warriors.
A few hundred yards were gained, today!
Several thousand men lost, but those precious few hundred yards were gained!
Only to be lost, tomorrow.
The fat generals smoke their cigars, sip their wine, wax their mustaches, and
make sure the orderlies shining their boots are doing a good job.
Over the top!
His bayonet slices through the chest of the warrior.
To his left, a man is shot.
'One of ours', his brain registers, and he watches as the hole in the other man's
uniform puffs a wisp of gray smoke.
The man screams in agony, dropping to the ground.
The soldier looks up at him, the mouth still open, and the dull eyes glazed with the
jellied look of a blind man staring back.
PLOP!
The sound was unmistakable.
Mortar fire!
He scrambles for cover.
Was it ours?
Was it theirs?
It does not matter.
Beside him, a man is blown from his boots, scattering the remains in pieces that
rain down upon him in blistering remnants of flesh and bone.
He awoke, screaming at no one, in his dark room.*

Chapter 16

"I'm telling you, Phalen, the man was completely out of his mind," Flix said into the telephone receiver.

"Well, then that puts Abercrombie Wolcott at the top of my list. What have you been able to find out about him, Cupid?"

"Not much. Not married. Money to the gills."

"I'll see what I can dig up. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open. Something else may turn up."

"I will."

"I have to get back and question Jannins some more. I am sure this case is being railroaded to a speedy conclusion so the good doctor won't lose income from patients fleeing the facility because they fear a murderer is on the prowl."

"Yes. I fear that justice is not at the top of Quintland's list of priorities when it comes to keeping his clients happy."

"I will have to rely on you, Cupid, to snoop about. I'm being pressured to wrap this case up as fast as possible. I fear everyone just wants to forget about it. She was just a maid and all."

"Umm. You're right, you know. Well, Phalen, I will do my best."

"Here is the number where you can reach me: Valmont 8358. I will tell the desk sergeant to be sure to pass any messages you leave for me to my desk only."

"Very good."

"Are you getting drenched out there? We surely are in the city. I fear we are in for another wet one. This rainy season shows no signs of letting up. I wish to god it would, though. I'm as soggy as a London paperboy."

"Phalen, you have sparked an idea. I must check it out. I will get back to you, but for now, I am ringing off."

And with that, Flix hung up the phone and exited the small booth as if his underwear was on fire.

* * * * *

"It is just as I suspected, Phalen," Flix blared out excitedly over the phone. "You must come back to Beastly House at once! At once!"

"Alright, Cupid. I'm on my way."

"Oh! There you are, Flix," Mrs. Hood said, bumping into the man as he exited the phone booth. "I was beginning to think you were avoiding me."

"You, no madam, I assure you that is not the case."

"Remember tonight. You promised to sit with me at the costume party."

"Costume party. But Mrs. Hood, please allow me to excuse myself from such things. Parties, dancing, festivities. I am afraid that I would be poor company."

"Nonsense! It is high time you lived a little. I won't take no for an answer! Look around you! Who would I partner with? Wolcott is still locked away in the outer houses. And George! Hrumph! Certainly not. I would rather crawl on my hands and knees across broken glass!"

“And I would rather accompany you across that broken glass than humiliate myself on the dance floor. Please, Mrs. Hood, may I suggest Dr. Quintland as a partner at tonight’s festivities. He is tall, handsome, and I am sure, he is agile on his feet.”

“Dr. Quintland. Flix! Don’t be absurd. Why he’s at least fifteen years younger than I am.”

“Oh, no. I do not believe that,” Flix said. “A fine looking woman like you must be celebrating a very young birthday! And if I am not mistaken, the good doctor’s wife is out West. Chicago, perhaps, I don’t remember, but I think she may be visiting a sick relative. I am sure the doctor is lonely, madam. Lonely for the company that only an understanding, beautiful, vibrant female, as yourself, can give.”

“He’s married, you say,” Mrs. Hood said. “Well, I guess I could suffer to spend an evening with him.”

“Oh, by all means,” Flix said. “Your charity in this instance will be rewarded many times over, fair lady. I am sure.”

* * * * *

“I say, Cupid, this place is as mad as a clip joint two minutes before midnight on New Year’s Eve!” Phalen said loudly, hoping his voice carried over the din.

“It is some kind of costume party. I suppose they do this sort of thing all the time to entertain the patients! They’ll be nursing hangovers tomorrow, but at least, it will keep everyone busy, tonight.

Come with me. Hurry! You must see what I have uncovered. Hurry. Hurry! I don’t think we’ll have to worry, but you never know.”

Flix opened the door.

“Hurumph!”

“Sorry, sir,” Flix muttered. “Partygoer,” he muttered to Phalen, who was following closely on his heels.

“I say,” Phalen said, “the music is extraordinarily loud. And who was he supposed to be? A hobo mingling with the aristocracy?”

“It is the one night the staff is allowed to dress up and mingle with the patients. The younger crowd eats this kind of thing up. But I would imagine, the older ones are appalled. The good doctor believes the classes should mix!”

“Well, that one could use a good scrubbing, staff or not. I mean his costume is perfect, but he smells.”

“Hard worker. Probably, one of the yard men. Anyway, a hobo does not get the chance to bathe often. I just hope the staff enjoys their night off.”

“Me, too.”

“But, come, Phalen. We must not delay! That was a close call. Hopefully, the rest of the staff have gone to the party. Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the victim’s room.”

“You’ve decoded the message she held in her fist!”

“No. But it is something almost as important.”

The two crept stealthily up the stairs to the maid’s room.

“Do not worry, my friend,” Flix said, “it is as you ordered. Undisturbed since that day. And here we are,” he continued, opening the door and stepping inside.

Phalen followed closely at his heels.

“Don’t turn on the light,” Flix said. “We will use my flashlight. The curtains are drawn, and the staff and guests are occupied, so perhaps we will go unnoticed.”

“It’s so, I don’t know, musty or something in here.”

“The odor of rodents,” Flix said. “But, the house is not infested, even though you saw one mouse. No, that is not the reason this room smells. And this odor only confirmed my suspicions.”

“What suspicions, Cupid?”

“I must say,” Flix said, “I am embarrassed at my mental lapse. I will say it happened because of the thunder of the storm, the imaginary bombs from the enemy going off, but really, there is no one to blame but myself.

When you described this room, remember, you said it was at the end of the hall next to the latrine. You said it needed work. That statement should have caused bells to go off in my head, but alas, it did not.

I must presume I was preoccupied with other matters. But, this is the point – this end of the mansion has a leaky roof!

I checked it myself. Several places are in need of repair. On top of that, it is located near the communal bathroom. This is the servant’s quarters, and as you remarked, that end does not get the attention that the main house does. Their needs, I am sorry to say, are placed at the bottom of the priority list, as so often is the case.

But I digress.

The servants’ side of the mansion is falling apart. I daresay the plumbing is in as much of a state of disrepair as the roof. Leaky roof combined with leaky pipes equals a very damp living environment.”

“I agree,” Phalen said. “But, what does poor maintenance have to do with this case?”

“Everything, my friend. Look. Look here.”

“Peeling wallpaper,” Phalen said. “What’s so special about that? You’ve already said this end of the place is a soggy bog.”

“Pay close attention to the design.”

“It’s not something I’d have in my house. The floral pattern is too effeminate. Too much pink. I prefer something more masculine.”

“No. No,” Flix said. “Not the outer layer. Look at the layer of wallpaper underneath this one.”

“It’s very green, Cupid. Old fashioned in design, I’d say. But why are we wasting time examining her wallpaper, for goodness sakes?”

“You are correct,” Flix said. “The paper underneath is old. And it is the color which is important.

This wallpaper uses a particular green dye that was very popular just before the turn of the century. It was dirt cheap to manufacture. Companies sold it by the ton. Fortunes were made on this stuff, Phalen. And the public ate it up like candy. This green was all the rage, for a while.

Multitudes of homes had this color of green in the wallpapers, the carpets, why, it was so popular, women's ball gowns were dyed this shade of green. I am telling you, it was everywhere!

Even their stockings and the paper flowers that decorated women's gowns. And the recipe for this striking hue contained poison! Arsenic, to be exact!

This particular bright green is called Sheele's green.

And that is the reason we are wasting so much time with our noses stuck near a damp, peeling specimen of wallpaper!

I had a case with Pinkerton's years ago. It concerned a man who thought his wife was poisoning him. He was desperately in love with his wife but fearful of what she might be doing to him.

So, he hired me to watch her, discreetly of course.

It was a very interesting case, and I must admit, at first, I was completely baffled. You know how easy it is to obtain arsenic. Just visit your local pharmacy, tell the pharmacist you need something to kill rats. He'll be more than happy to sell you the stuff.

Arsenic is as easy to buy from your local drugstore as food from your grocer.

And, as you know, arsenic is the king of poisons!

So many murderers have used it to dispose of unwanted victims.

Why, I've even heard of fly paper being placed in water to dissolve the arsenic contained in it. Then, the poison is used as a murder weapon!

The wife was a saint, by the way. A good woman. I could see why my client loved her so much. But as I say, the case was extremely perplexing.

The husband complained that each evening he would retire to his study with a cup of tea and toast, only to become sick.

For many nights, he would enter this room, and after a time, become very ill. He thought the poison was in the food given to him by his wife. She was innocent. The food was harmless. He told me that after a good night's sleep in another room at the opposite end of the house, he would awaken feeling quite well.

I must admit, for a time, the case had me stumped!

The culprit was the wallpaper!

The wallpaper!

The room was damp. I can't help but believe that the dampness and the arsenic react in some way. The mold, perhaps. Nevertheless, there was a distinct smell, very like rodent urine in that room, as well.

Sheele's green is made with copper arsenite. As I said, the color was wildly popular. The dye was even used to color sweets that reportedly killed little children!

But back to the topic of peeling wallpaper.

When the paper starts to flake, you end up with arsenic dust. Those tiny particles detach, floating about the room like dust chimeras. I have also observed a distinct garlic odor, just like the one present in this room.

I had read reports that speculated the arsenic compounds in the wallpaper were making people sick. I advised him to remove the paper, and I am happy to say that his symptoms of illness disappeared.

And that is why I must confess embarrassment at not picking up on the fact that the wallpaper might have been poisoning this maid."

"But," Phalen said, "this place wasn't built that long ago."

“Doesn’t matter,” Flix said. “When the architects were constructing this part of the house, I am sure that keeping costs down was a priority. The builders probably knew someone with a warehouse full of these rolls. Who cared what was put on the walls of the servants quarters. They were only servants, after all.

It would not be the first time that tragedy has occurred because corners were cut.”

“So,” Phalen said, “I was right. She was being poisoned.”

“Yes,” said Flix, “but not by a person’s conscious actions. By the wallpaper!”

“So, she wasn’t poisoned by our killer, but she was still strangled.”

“Yes. She and her unborn child.”

“But why?” Phalen said. “I would bet the farm that the Jannins boy is innocent.”

“I do not know. If we find the answer to the *why*, we are sure to know the killer’s identity.”

Chapter 17

“Flix! You are a genius,” said Mrs. Hood. “An absolute genius! How clever of you to suggest I ask Dr. Quintland to be my dance partner! The man is brilliant. And can he dance like a dream. His moves are as smooth as silk!”

Flix was trying to make his way discreetly to the table. On hearing Mrs. Hood’s voice, his neck seemed to shrink down into his heavily starched collar.

“Bravo, old man!” said George. “You successfully removed the heinous claws from your own back and firmly planted them into the good doctor!”

“What are you jabbering about, you disgusting imbecile?” Avery spat at George.

“Zip it, moron. Can’t you see the intellectuals at the table are trying to conduct an intelligent conversation?”

“Mrs. Hood,” Flix said, ignoring the darts and arrows that George and Avery were passing across the table, “I am so glad you enjoyed yourself last evening!”

“Enjoyed! I haven’t had this much fun since I spiked the cocktails with amphetamines two years ago! I danced all night.”

“I am happy for you,” said Flix.

“Good dope puts the zing in your swing, eh, Inez,” muttered George.

“Crapple Man, do us all a favor and drop dead, you little diddly-squat!” said Avery.

George ignored Avery. There was an audible bump as someone stumbled into the room. It was Wolcott. He looked very pale.

“Wolly wolly oxen free,” George exclaimed, “you look like the butt end of a cheap cigar that’s been left out in the rain for weeks! Was it tie-downs and gruel? Screaming and banging your head against the wall night and day and day and night? Or did they have you so doped up, you dribbled down your straight-jacket like Niagara Falls?”

“Please, George, we’re trying to eat.”

“Hope you are feeling more like old self, Wolcott,” someone commented.

“Yes. I am feeling much better. Thank you,” Wolcott mumbled.

Wolcott stared down at his plate, trying to remember which fork to pick up first.

“Too many roadster smash-ups jumble the brain,” muttered Mr. Birmingham-Hill.

“What’s that, B. Hill?” George asked.

“Nothing. I was just thinking aloud. And kindly remember, it is Birmingham-Hill, not some abbreviated, adulterated mockery of my family’s good name.”

“Mockery? Mock anyone! Me?” George said, devilishly.

“That’s all you do, Capple Man,” spat Avery.

“Avery,” one of the nurses said, “kindly finish your meal. It is getting cold.”

“Not hungry. I’m going outside for a smoke.”

“Just remember to be back in time for tea. They have crafts scheduled today.”

“Damn your crummy, old crafts,” Avery grumbled on her way out.

“I wonder, what’s knotted her petticoats?”

“Mooning over her latest lover, I’d imagine. She wasn’t sleeping last night when he showed up under her window. He wasn’t at the dance, I noticed,” George smirked. “Eastwyk, or some ridiculous name, such as that.”

Anyway, I noticed her at the party.

A wilting wallflower.

I don't recall her dancing once the whole night. And that get-up she was wearing. Glad rags? What was she supposed to be?"

"A gypsy, I think," someone from the other end of the table offered.

"Gypsy!" George said. "Huh! I thought she was the local rag picker!"

"That seemed to be the theme, I think," someone added.

George took an enormous bite of Danish. He continued his conversation as pieces of the sweet tried gallantly to escape mastication.

"Anyway, I noticed a couple of strangers crashing the party," George said. "They were young. Probably thought it a wild prank to look in on the loonies.

Bet you a donut, they were some of the riffraff from across the lake. You'd be surprised how many motor boats are out in the middle of the night.

But Avery didn't go for any of them. The young men, I mean. Not like her at all. She's usually the life of the party. She just sat around like a knot on a log. Wore such a grimace all night, even I didn't dare speak to her."

"Poor dear," said Mrs. Hood. "I wish I'd known. I'd have jazzed up her drink with a little dope."

Flix choked on his coffee.

"Oh, my dear man. I did not mean to startle you. But, it is true. It really does put the pep into the party!"

Chapter 18

“Avery has been murdered!”

Flix sank down in his chair, pale as a sheet.

“I’m sorry to spring the news on you this early in the morning, Cupid,” Phalen said.

“I was sleeping in,” Flix said. “They always have a midweek hike scheduled. To be honest, I am the only one who attends. My guide and I are the only two who seem to think the benefits of strenuous exercise are worth the stiff muscles.

Up early, back early. Fresh air. Beauty of the morning. That sort of thing. Then, the rest of the afternoon off. I thoroughly enjoy it, but I’m sore the next day. So, that’s why you caught me in my pajamas.

But, who cares about my pajamas or my aches and pains?” Flix said. “I knew when I saw you, it was bad news. You wouldn’t have shown up again for a Sunday picnic.

My heavens!

We have another murder, once again on Leigh House grounds!

It is unbelievable!

There is truly a mad man on the premises of this estate! But who?

What are we missing? What? I do not know. I am driving myself mad trying to discover what it could possibly be that we have overlooked!”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Phalen said. “I didn’t see it coming, either.”

“Please, tell me what happened,” said Flix.

“I was called out early this morning,” Phalen said. “It was still dark. A groundsman found her body in the woods. She’d been strangled, just like the maid. This time, it looks like the killer used a wire garrote.”

“Oh, my word!” Flix said. “How horrible! She was so fond of those woods. I think she felt truly free in them. There was no one to criticize her. No prying eyes. Nothing shiny that caught her eye. Nothing of value to try and steal.

That was one of her problems, you know.

I realized it the instant my pipe went missing. It had been in my jacket pocket only minutes before. She casually gave it back to me with some flippant excuse that I must have mislaid it, and she had picked it up off some table top or other. But why would a young girl pick up a pipe off a table?

It didn’t make sense.

I think she knew I knew she was lying, but I was too much of a gentleman to embarrass her in front of anyone.”

“A thief,” Phalen said. “Interesting. But I can’t imagine what would be so valuable that, if stolen, would necessitate killing her to get it back?”

“Nor can I. Besides, she was just a young woman. Of means, I assume.

But why her?

There is a reason she was murdered. It may not seem logical or even sane to us, but you can be sure, the killer has his reasons.”

“Yes,” Phalen said. “Well, let’s go with what we have. It isn’t much, I’m afraid.

Avery's family is very well-off. Her father is a titan of industry. He would be the one with enemies, I would think, if this was a normal situation."

"Yes." Flix said. "You're right. I remember, now. Her father made headlines. He received one of those mail bombs the anarchists are forever mailing out. It didn't go off, as I recall."

"No, it did not. You're right. One of his employees opened the wrong end of the box."

"Lucky guy."

"Very lucky," Phalen said.

"Understandable," Flix said, "why she was upset when Abercrombie Wolcott attempted to strike up a conversation at mealtime about the latest headline and the bombings on Wall Street. I should have suspected something, but I admit, I was distracted."

"O.K." Phalen said. "So, her father has been a target in the past, but I am sure his daughter has no knowledge of her father's business dealings.

Why target her?

And the maid?"

"Umm," Flix said. "I am positive the maid has no connections with big business and the barons of industry. Why was either one of them killed?"

"I don't know," Phalen said. "There's no connection between the first victim and the second, either, as far as I have been able to ascertain. The maid worked in the eastern wing of the facility."

"My section. The male wards. At least, that's what I've heard some of the guests here refer to it as."

"Yes. Quintland said that he strictly segregates the male and female population to prevent, ah . . ."

"Fraternizing?" Flix said.

"Well, that's blunt, Cupid, but I suppose that's as good a word as any, and it makes sense. Quintland would not want any hint of scandal. It is to be expected that the wards are segregated according to sex."

"So, the maid would not normally have contact with Miss Avery. Of course, one might bump into any of the staff, from time to time, but it isn't likely."

"So, we're looking at a male killer, probably," Cupid said.

"Well, it does look that way. Not to say a woman cannot strangle a victim, but I have found that women murderers tend to use less messy means of attack. Women are like vipers. They prefer a more silent approach."

"Like poison."

"Generally speaking, yes. So where does that leave us? We have a pool of suspects that include the male population of this facility, staff and guests, and any number of male visitors who come and go at will.

Oh, let's not forget the gardener's son, Mr. Jannins. But we've pretty much ruled him out. Are you still holding him in jail?"

"Yes. We can definitely rule him out as a suspect in this last homicide. He's still in jail. I have told my superiors that I believe young Jannins is innocent, but it seems, they have turned a deaf ear to me.

They wanted the first murder solved quickly and neatly. I was convinced from the start that young Jannins had nothing to do with her death. My superiors tied my hands. Refused to allow me to continue to investigate. Now, look.”

“Yes,” Flix said. “It is a very sad affair. Especially, if the first murder and the second were committed by the same person.

But, your bosses must have felt the pressure to solve the first murder. They needed a scapegoat, and Jannins was as good a one as any, I suppose.

I am sure that Dr. Quintland is connected with some very influential movers and shakers in the community. And now, a second murder! The doctor must be fit to be tied.”

“Yes,” Phalen said. “You hit the nail on the head. He’s not the least bit happy. Wants this one wrapped up, and somebody, he doesn’t care who, arrested.”

“I can imagine the natives are getting restless,” Flix said.

“You can say that again. I bumped into one of the women staying here. She was practically rabid to get catch the next train home.”

“I’ll bet. If this keeps up,” Flix said, “Quintland will be wandering about this estate alone.”

“He’s scared,” Phalen said. “There’s no telling what strings he’ll try to pull to get this case resolved. He doesn’t care about catching the killer, only about putting somebody behind bars. Anybody will do. That way, our good doctor can forget this whole nightmare ever happened.”

“Then, we have to work quickly.”

Chapter 19

“I still don’t know who the murderer could be,” Phalen said, “but we must proceed with caution. There is a monster that is stalking these grounds, and he has to be stopped! But, I confess, I am stumped.

I have questioned the staff. They have alibis, and their backgrounds do not suggest anything other than ordinary people who are working here at Leigh House.

The patients are your run-of-the-mill hypochondriacs. Wolcott is interesting. Not much the doctor will tell me, of course, about his illness, but I have been able to surmise he suffers from uncontrollable fits of anger.”

“Yes. That much I have witnessed,” Flix added.

“From what little he will divulge, the doctor seems to think Wolcott is more of a danger to himself, than to anyone else. I must say, I do not have the doctor’s training, but despite what the doctor says, I think Wolcott deserves a second look. I’ve got my men checking into him.”

“What do you know about Miss Avery, Phalen? Have you discovered anything more?”

“No. I am afraid I have not. This whole case is proving very puzzling. Very puzzling, indeed. I feel our answer is in that coded message picked from the maid’s death grasp.”

“I still haven’t figured that blasted thing out,” Flix said, “It is driving me crazy, but I will work on it some more, tonight.”

Chapter 20

No one had said a word as they entered the dining room. Each guest sat at his place at the table, glumly staring a hole into his empty plate. As each dish was offered, hand after hand waved off the server.

“Well,” Flix observed, “no one has much of an appetite. That is understandable,” he continued, his eyes wandering towards Avery’s empty chair.

“I’m taking the first train out in the morning,” someone at the far end of the table said.

“As am I,” said Mrs. Hood. “My nerves are shot. If I thought they were bad before I entered this place, well, harrumph. Just look” she said, sticking her heavily bejeweled porcelain hand out for all to see. “Shakes like a drunk in a monastery!”

Multiple diamonds on her fingers and wrists sparkled in the light from the chandelier above the dining room table like a mini-fireworks display of dazzling glitter and glitz.

“I’ve called my attorney,” she continued. “He has made arrangements for me to transfer to another, more suitable location. This house of horrors is too much! Too much!”

“But what about the police? Aren’t we bound to stay here until the murderer is caught?” Flix asked.

“I am bound by nothing,” said Mrs. Hood, and rose from the table, promptly leaving the room.

“She’s right,” Wolcott said, softly. “If we stay here, they are liable to carry us all out in pine boxes.”

“Pine, my withered legs! Make mine the finest . . . I say, old man,” George said, turning to Flix, “what materials are used to make the finest caskets, nowadays?”

“I am sure I do not know,” Flix said.

“It’s a cinch this party’s nothing but a flat tire,” George said. “I could use a little hair of the dog. Yes. Perhaps, more than a little.”

“Dr. Quintland has cleaned out the liquor cabinets in all of the public meeting rooms, George. He said he was afraid the stress of the situation will provoke too much imbibing by strained and weakened wills,” someone at the end of the table noted.

“Quintland’s a quack. What about it, sport” George asked Flix, “care to roll down to my room for a snort? If they refuse to allow me my libation downstairs, well, how ‘bout a little bust head in our own dorm room? Are you up for a snort?”

“I think you’ve hit on all sixes, my friend,” Flix said. “After everything that’s gone on, I could use a drink.”

“Great. Let’s go. We can toast Avery.”

“A splendid idea,” Flix said.

“Oh, why not strip naked, howl at the moon, and pour a bottle of brandy in the woods on a charred red oak stump to toast her, George?” said Mr. Birmingham-Hill.

“Ahh, the Sphinx, he speaks,” said George. “Not a bad idea, Hilly, but too many spooks out there. And it’s too damn dark to find the perfectly charred stump, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely repulsive! All of you!” screamed Wolcott.

Dabney was pale with fear.

“Sorry. Sorry,” Wolcott said, clutching a wad of tablecloth like an anchor in a storm.

“Perhaps, it would be better if we left now, George,” Flix said.

“Right-oh. Let’s get rollin’. You push. I’ll steer! I shall be the captain of my ship! O, Captain! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Flix and George left the others looking painfully uncomfortable.

Chapter 21

“You could have knocked me over with a feather, accepting my invitation for some giggle water, Flix! I only asked because I thought it would stir them up a little. I never dreamed you’d accept! Anyway, I was only fooling around. I certainly meant no harm.

Now that Avery’s gone, I guess my focus will be on getting a rise from Birmingham-Hill. That bastard thinks he is so much better than the rest of us.”

The two had entered the elevator that allowed George’s wheelchair access to the upper stories of the mansion’s male section.

“He is a bit of a stuffed shirt,” Flix said.

“I’ll say. And the sad part is his family’s fortune isn’t what it used to be, if you catch my drift.”

“Financial difficulties?”

“That’s an understatement. Hilly walks around like he has a gold scepter up his keister, but his daddy pretty much gambled the family’s fortune away. Hilly’s grandfather, Hilly the First, struck the mother lode, mining in South America, as well as owning several sugar plantations, which he ran with slave labor.

He was a ruthless old cad to those who worked for him. He returned to North America, just in time to cash in on the enormous rail boom of the 1840s. Hilly’s father inherited the cash, but not the work ethic or the gift for making money that his daddy always had.

Yep. Hilly the Second, loved the ladies, the liquor, and the dice. And we’re not talking penny ante stakes, my friend. I’ve heard stories of how Hilly the Second would spend days gambling hard, drinking harder, and losing his shirt in the bargain!

And now, all our own Hilly the Third is left with is a legacy of what once was and what was squandered!

Oh, to give the Devil his due, there is some money left. But nothing like what the family once had! Compared to what once was and what jingles in Hilly’s pocket, the man is a pauper.

And to sit beside him at a dinner table, you’d think he owned the world! Pompous ass, if you ask me. But, of course, no one ever does! Ha! Ha!”

“You seem to know a lot about what goes on around here, George.”

“I make it my business,” George said, opening a closet and pulling out a bottle.

“Keeps me from going crazy!”

“I see. No. That’s plenty,” Flix said, as George offered to fill his glass to the rim. “I think toasting Miss Avery is a splendid idea, George. I really do. And rumor has it that you keep quite a stash of good booze. I think a stiff one would do wonders for my nerves, about now.”

“Antsy, huh? Well, I can’t say that I blame you. Not one bit. With all that has happened, I’m not ashamed to admit I have the jitters, too.”

“Here’s to Miss Avery. May her beautiful soul find eternal peace.”

George clinked his glass to Flix’s, adding nothing further to the toast.

They sipped their drinks.

“Do you mind?” Flix asked.

“Be my guest,” George said.

Flix took the only seat available in the room. It was at a desk. The chair was leather and quite comfortable. The desk was massive and ornate. It took up half the room.

The top of the desk was very ordered. Nothing was out of place. Telephone, pens and paper were neatly aligned and in reach. There was an old framed photograph of young George with a man who was his spitting image, his father, Flix surmised, a very expensive set of pens, a spent rifle shell engraved with the letters AAM, and a large calendar that served as an ink blotter in the center of the desk. The calendar was heavily decorated, a one-of-a-kind creation.

“I say, is this shell a souvenir?”

“Yes. Indeed, it is. Arnold Aaron Matthiason. Name of the man who saved my life, on more than one occasion, over there.”

“Great keepsake, I’d say. I am extremely jealous of you, George. Green with envy. And this calendar is fantastic. It is quite a nice work of art,” Flix remarked. “You realize that it is two months behind.”

“Of course. I keep it like that to drive the maids crazy! Works like a charm, too.”

Both men laughed.

“I can see where it would. And that is a nice collection of medals you have hanging on the wall. Yours?”

“Did you serve?” George asked Flix.

“No. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t have me. Bad ticker,” Flix lied.

“Oh. Rotten luck. Yes, they are all mine. I volunteered.”

“Quite commendable. I envy you,” Flix said. “They are all so pretty! What’s this one?”

“Oh, that’s the 1914 star. Drove ambulances, for awhile. Got into combat soon enough.”

“And another from 1914-15. Amazing! There are so many! I am impressed,” Flix said. “I am always looked upon as a shirker whenever anyone finds out I didn’t ship overseas. But my health!”

“Oh, it is understandable,” George said.

“Such a long, distinguished career! Your bravery during the war is exemplary! I cannot tell you how honored I am to be in your company,” Flix gushed.

“Thank you. Thank you. Well, let me tell you, it was hell over there. No one was prepared for a war fought in inches! And I was as naïve as the rest, I suppose. Thought the whole row would be over in a few months! Couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Where did you serve, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Oh, I really don’t like to talk about it. Too many horrendous memories!”

“I understand,” Flix said. “A toast to the war hero!”

“Oh, please.”

But George raised his glass once again, blushing slightly.

There was a telescope in the far corner of the room, its stand extended and the lens pointed downward.

“You’ve decorated your quarters nicely. I must commend you on this room’s homey atmosphere.”

“Oh, I just had them rearrange the stuff in here. Made more room for the wheels, you see.”

“Yes.”

It was the first time Flix had entered George’s room. His suite was spacious, and Flix took a quick mental inventory of its furnishings as he sipped his drink.

“Mind if I have a look?” Flix asked, moving to the telescope.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do. I had that telescope imported from England. It’s top rate.”

“Oh, of course. I understand. You wouldn’t want my bumbling fingers toppling it over. It’s a Broadhurst scope, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, as a matter of fact. Finest they make. You are familiar with telescopes?”

“No. Not really. I just happen to have cataloged a lot of superficial information about many topics,” Flix said. “I am a voracious reader. It comes from not being a very social animal, I am afraid.”

“Umm. Well, I am afraid I don’t sleep much. So, like you, I have time on my hands. I enjoy looking at the stars. The night skies are really quite beautiful.”

“Yes. I imagine they are, but I am afraid that I only see them in my dreams.”

“Lucky you.”

There was a knock on the door, and the maid entered, using her key.

“What do you think you are doing,” George said harshly.

“Oh, sorry, sir. I thought everyone was still dining. It is the dinner hour. And your shoes were ready,” the poor maid said, shoving a pair of newly shined shoes in Flix’s direction.

“Not him, you imbecile! They belong to me!”

The poor maid was so flustered, she dropped a shoe in front of Flix.

“Dear lady,” Flix said, calmly. “It is perfectly alright. We decided to forego dinner for some liquid nourishment. After everything that has happened lately, there was a black pall over the dinner guests. It was all too depressing. So, we ran like rabbits to this lair to relax.

But you must forgive us for not following protocol. I am afraid we have disrupted the staff’s schedule. You must forgive us,” he said, bending over to pick up the dropped shoe.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, backing out the door.

“Well, you certainly showed her who’s boss!” George said. “That’s what’s wrong with this country, in my opinion. Nobody knows their place.”

“You prefer to keep them in their place,” Flix observed.

“Darn well right! Too much like my old man, I am in that respect.”

“Is that your father and you in the photo?”

“Yes. Our days of youth. Spent in innocence and ignorance of what lay ahead.”

“What did he do?”

“My father was a businessman. He had his hands in many ventures: rails, steel, arms, and manufacturing.”

“Must have made a killing in the war,” Flix said.

“I like to think our family did its part in the patriotic push to rid the world of evil.”

“Would you like me to put these away for you, George? I do not mind in the least.”

“No. I’ll do it,” he said, taking the shoe from Flix and rolling toward the closet. Flix followed, looking over his shoulder.

George opened the door, placing the shoe back in the rack. When George wheeled around, he looked at Flix curiously.

“I have enjoyed our chat, George, but I must be getting back to my paper on the White-lined Sphinx Moth,” Flix said, finishing his drink. “I feel that the only way to calm my frayed nerves is to drown myself in work. I am ashamed to admit it, but with everything that has conspired in these past few days, I have neglected my work terribly. My little moths will think I have abandoned them! Thanks so much for your hospitality and for the drink. My nerves are settled enough that I feel I can get off ten pages, tonight.”

“Quite welcome. Er, and good luck with the bugs.”

“Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

As soon as he exited George’s room, Flix made his way downstairs to the small call room, a tiny phone booth with a telephone, that Dr. Quintland had made available for personal telephone calling to the guests at the sanitarium.

Chapter 22

“Phalen! Come at once!” Flix whispered. “I know who the mastermind is!”

When Phalen arrived, it was well past midnight.

“Phalen! I thought you would never get here,” Flix cried.

“I got here as quickly as possible, Cupid, but the roads are terrible. Who is it! Who!”

“I must talk with Quintland!”

“Dr. Quintland is our killer?”

“No. Of course not. But, we have to talk to him, at once!”

“He’ll be asleep at this hour.”

“And we will use that to our advantage. A drowsy mind is more apt to tell us what we want to know than one that is alert and on guard.”

“On guard?” I don’t understand. Oh, my friend, but you will.”

The two immediately hurried toward Dr. Quintland’s suite.

“He’s gone!”

“We are too late!” Flix exclaimed.

“But, I thought you said Quintland was not the murderer,” Phalen said, standing inside the empty suite of rooms.

“And that is true. Hurry! We must go to George’s room!”

“The cripple!”

“Come! Come! If what I fear has happened, the joke is on us!”

The two men ran swiftly to George’s room.

“Dear God!” Phalen exclaimed.

“He is a ghost, my friend. Along with our good doctor. Both have slipped away from us as unseen as the wind.”

Chapter 23

“George!” Phalen said. “I never suspected him.”

The group was seated in the large library that overlooked the lake. The setting was beautiful, marred only by the knowledge that two murders had been committed on the property, and two evil men had escaped.

Destinations unknown.

“How did you know?” one of the patients asked Flix.

Flix was standing in the center of the room. His suit was as crisp as the new morning.

“I didn’t, until last night. I will be as brief as possible, for I understand many of you have trains to catch or private cars awaiting your arrival.

Several things set the hairs on the back of my neck on end.

I kept wondering why Quintland was so quick to finger young Jannins. I was convinced that the railroading of that young man was due to the doctor’s financial predicament. If his patients flew the coop, out of fear, the institution would have to lock its doors. That theory proved only partially true.”

“How could someone in Quintland’s position have access to so much hooch?” another asked.

“Connections,” answered Wolcott Abercrombie.

“Yes. And many that had to be unsavory,” said Phalen.

“But didn’t you say George was our man?” asked Mrs. Hood.

“I did. I believe that George was the mastermind. The others, George used, like a puppet master, to his own ends. Many of you have experienced George’s crass behavior. It was designed to throw you off balance, to make you pity the poor man trapped inside a wasted body, to make you seethe with anger at the impossibly cruel words he said to you. All of his actions were his way of keeping your mind spinning while he wove his evil web.

Doctor Quintland provided George a plausible screen to hide behind as he continued his operations. I think George paid the doctor handsomely for harboring him. And the doctor played along with George.”

“But how are we to believe that George is capable of such horrible deeds. George is a cripple,” said Mrs. Hood.

“A poor invalid, a decorated war hero, and a man above reproach. That is the mask George wore in front of us all,” Flix said. “But it was all lies. Those things were only what he wished us to believe, Mrs. Hood. It was a clever ruse. I must admit, I fell for it, like everyone else.

I think Avery saw through his subterfuge, perhaps while on one of her woodland excursions. I believe she saw George standing and talking to the stranger. I remembered the insult she hurled at George about being perpendicular. Remember her comment, ‘*Nasty little bohunk. Perpendicular paraplegic.*’

It made no sense to me, at the time, but they were very dangerous comments to make to George. I believe that it was at that moment, Avery sealed her fate. George had to eliminate her. If Avery talked, his ruse was up.

I was fumbling about like a blind man in the dark until I spent time in George's room. You see, when I had the chance to visit with George, on the offhand invitation of joining him for a drink in his room, there were several alarms that immediately went off in my head. After only a few moments in his room, I was sure George was an imposter."

"What on earth are you jabbering about, Flix?" Mrs. Hood asked.

"George is not a war hero?"

"What!"

"Who told you those stories, Mrs. Hood? Dr. Quintland?"

"Yes. He did mention it, offhandedly."

"The medals in George's room are a sham," Flix said. "Oh, the medals themselves are quite real, and from a variety of countries. But, they were purchased or stolen. Not won.

I pretended that a heart defect prevented me from fighting overseas. I praised George on his many medals, all the while, inspecting each one.

George's story about them did not wash.

Of particular interest to me was the British 1914 and 1914-15 Star. I commented on the amazing accomplishments it must have taken to receive both. George blushed like a school girl.

I knew he was lying.

You see, it is impossible to be awarded both medals."

"But George is a cripple, injured during the war!" cried Mrs. Hood.

"Nothing could be further from the truth. When I was sharing a drink with George, the maid assumed he was out of his room having dinner. She entered with a pair of his shoes. The poor woman was so flustered when she saw us that she dropped one of them at my feet. I picked it up. The sole was scuffed and worn. I looked inside his closet as George put the pair of shoes away. I noticed another pair was muddy.

Someone who cannot walk does not own scuffed or muddy shoes, Mrs. Hood.

George can walk as well as you or I.

And then, there was the large desk positioned in the center of the room.

George remarked that he had ordered the room rearranged to accommodate his wheelchair. But, why, I wondered, was such a large piece of furniture not in some far dark corner, out of the way. The desk is huge. It took up most of the room. It would prove hard to manipulate a wheelchair around it. Yet, there it sat, like a four hundred pound gorilla, right in the center of the room.

And there was a telescope he had near a window.

George told me some story about being an insomniac who stared at the stars to while away the night hours. The lens was not pointed up the sky. It pointed downward across the lake. The telescope's stand was positioned too high for a man to comfortably look out of it from his wheelchair. George is a tall man. I am not. At the level of the scope, I would have had to tiptoe to see out of the lens.

Standing.

The telescope was fixed on its stand for a tall man who was standing."

"Bravo, Cupid," Phalen said.

"But George was with you, Cupid, when the maid that discovered the first body screamed, so he had an alibi," said Abercrombie Wolcott.

“He was sitting next to me when the first body was discovered. That is correct. Now, whether or not George strangled the first victim, and exactly what time she was killed, I cannot say.

Both victims were strangled, but with two very different weapons. I am sorry to say science has not advanced sufficiently in 1920 to allow me to give you the exact time of death for the first victim.

We can only say, with certainty, the exact hour the first body was discovered in the boathouse. And, as I said before, our first victim was strangled with something which left no impressions, a silken scarf or necktie perhaps, whereas our second victim was strangled with a wire.

I do not know whether or not George killed both women with his own hand, but I am sure that the murders were committed by his order.”

“How do you figure that?” Phalen asked.

“I thought Avery’s comment about a weekly Wednesday meeting with a ‘bohunk,’ as she described him, rather odd. The term is extremely reproachful, suggesting a shady fellow or a common laborer from Europe.

And remember the night of the costume party, Phalen?

You and I bumped into a rather aromatic reveler in the hallway outside of my room. In the men’s section of this facility. Hardly a stone’s throw away from George’s suite.”

“You’re right,” said Phalen. “We thought he was masquerading as a hobo or something. But he really did smell like he had not bathed in ages.”

“Bohemian. Swarthy, Dirty. Uneducated, no doubt. But how could such a man get here on this estate?”

“George made a point of telling Avery that people come and go here all the time, remember Flix,” Mrs. Hood pointed out.

“Yes, but there was another method of transportation that George also talked about. I think if I was embarking on some clandestine operation the mode George mentioned would be the one I would choose.

Let me refresh your memory.

Remember George was talking about how Miss Avery did not dance the night of the party. According to George, the behavior was very unusual for the girl. But then, I remembered something else he said.

I knew that I had fallen for one of George’s little mind traps. George was wonderful at laying his cards on the table, then distracting his audience, and pulling a slight of hand.

Because of the way he worded it, I was focused on Avery’s apparent bad temper. But that was not where my attention should have been. Remember George’s words . . .

“Anyway, I noticed a couple of strangers crashing the party. They were young. Probably thought it a wild prank to look in on the loonies.

Bet you a donut, they were some of the riffraff from across the lake. You’d be surprised how many motor boats are out in the middle of the night.

But Avery didn’t go for any of them. The young men, I mean. Not like her at all. She’s usually the life of the festivities. She just sat around like a knot on a log. Wore such a grimace all night, even I didn’t dare speak to her.”

It wasn't the fact that Miss Avery was a wall flower that was remarkable. George was practically telling me how unsavory visitors came onto the estate."

"By boat!" Phalen interjected.

"Exactly. It is the most feasible way that both George and Dr. Quintland escaped, as well.

Our smelly stranger arrived and departed by boat!" Phalen said.

Then, there was the telephone."

"A telephone!" Mrs. Hood exclaimed.

"Yes, Mrs. Hood. A telephone."

"Blasted rule. I hated going down to that grim water closet whenever I needed to talk on the telephone."

"Yes. It was inconvenient. The absence of telephones in the residents' rooms was just one more of Dr. Quintland's unbreakable rules. Think about it. Having one line available to the patients made it very easy to eavesdrop on their conversations to the outside world."

"Cupid! Quintland and George were always a step ahead. They knew we were on to them by listening in on your calls to me!" Phalen said. "No wonder they escaped this estate like bats out of hell."

"Yes. But George had his own telephone, and I would bet money, his telephone has a private line."

"So, George could telephone anyone he wished, at any time."

"Yes. With no one, the wiser."

"Unbelievable," someone added.

"Then, there was the ornate calendar on George's desk. It was two months behind."

"How odd," Abercrombie Wolcott commented.

"I know. I commented on this fact, but George made a joke about driving the staff crazy by leaving it like that.

But a busy cleaning staff would hardly take the time to notice.

I am sure they have seen many strange things in patients' rooms. The staff would not have cared one way or the other.

So, I paid no attention to George's remarks.

It was the intricate designs I noted inside each numerical box on this page that caught my eye. And even more valuable, the scrawl that was written in the lower margin of the page. At the bottom of the calendar, George had scribbled the answer to the coded message that was found in the maid's hand."

Here, Flix produced a copy of the coded message, along with its meaning.

"This piece of paper cost the maid her life.

I believe she planned to use this to blackmail George. She was a desperate woman. She was sick. She was unmarried. She was with child. Perhaps, she overheard George make some incriminating remark. I don't know. But I believe she knew this piece of paper was worth money.

There is no limit to what a mother will do to guarantee a future for her child. A mother's love knows no boundaries. And you do not stay at this estate unless you are a person of some means."

“But George was talking to you,” Phalen said.

“While his henchman was murdering the maid?” Flix said. “Perhaps. There are so many scenarios. It is hard to say exactly who the murderer of the maid was. We can never know.

Maybe George murdered her, left her body in the boathouse, and hurriedly positioned himself back in his wheelchair to reappear among the rest of us as if nothing had happened.”

Here, Flix stopped for a moment and collected his thoughts.

“Detective Archer and I noticed that the maid’s body showed signs of poisoning. I will admit, I was so focused on uncovering the poison that I put off trying to decipher this coded message. I doubt that I could have solved it, but I will never know.

Here, Flix showed Phalen the decoded piece of paper.

0+Δ□X 30Fπ++□▷↘34Δ↑+□

READY PROCEED AS PLANNED

“If everything was ready, as this message suggests, why not simply telephone his accomplice?”

“Good question. My guess is,” Flix said, “the man did not have a telephone. Remember, he is poor. Probably an immigrant. And, I believe, an anarchist!”

“My word!” blared Mr. Birmingham-Hill.

“Yes,” Flix said.

“But I thought the war was over,” Dabney said.

“But remember the headlines in the newspaper. Wall Street has just been bombed! America is under attack!” said Abercrombie Wollcott.

“Correct on both points,” Flix said. “Armistice has been signed. The war is over, and with it, the immense profits of supplying a war machine. My theory is this: George is collaborating with anarchists to incite instability and procure immense gains financially. He told me his father had been in arms and manufacturing.”

“Murder and mayhem for money?” Phalen asked.

“Mammon. Filthy lucre. Money. It is one of the oldest motives for a crime, is it not?” Flix said. “The war has ended. The river of wealth that flowed into George’s family’s coffers has dried up.

There is no reason for nations to stockpile munitions during peace time. What better way to restart the war machine up again, and reap fantastic profits by supplying the hardware necessary to outfit the combatants, than to foment instability in America?”

“Germany is defeated. In ruins. Europe has war debts. America is the logical choice to stir up insurrection. America is where the money is,” added Clive Birmingham-Hill.

“Another interesting clue on George’s desk was the rifle shell, engraved with the initials AAM. George had some line about those initials belonging to some soldier who had saved his life. But those initials also stand for something else.”

“American Anarchy Movement!” said Phalen.

“Exactly.”

Chapter 24

“Do you think we will ever catch them, Cupid?”

“I don’t know. George has connections, wealth, and the cunning to elude us. But Dr. Quintland? The doctor is not as wily as George. He may show up, somewhere, when we least expect him.”

“This house is spectacular. It’s a shame the place is will be locked up and abandoned.”

“So, you see, my friend, old Cupid’s method of gaining access to the greenhouses was suspect, but I was right about the urgency of seeing the gardens before they became inaccessible to me.”

“Do you really think the whole place will go to seed?” Phalen asked.

“That is a good possibility. The world is changing. Tastes are changing. There are tides in this country, and around the world, that frown upon such ostentatious displays. The little men are restless. Look at Russia.”

“You are right, but, at least, tonight, you can sleep like the richest man on earth beneath the decorated ceilings of a titan’s palace. I’ve got to get back to the city. Evil never sleeps.”

“Be careful. And let me hear from you, Phalen.”

“I’ll keep in touch. I promise,” Phalen said, getting in his car.

He waved good-bye to Flix.

“Sweet dreams, Cupid,” Phalen yelled, as he drove away.

“Easy for you to say, my friend. Easy for you to say,” Flix muttered, watching the car exit through the elaborate gate and disappear over the rim of the gently rolling crest of the far hill.

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About the Author

Joni Green writes mysteries, historical fiction, and suspense novels. She also writes and illustrates children's books. All her works are designed to entertain and to transport you to other places. She lives online at www.jonigreen.com. Connect with Joni [on Facebook](#) and also [on Twitter](#).



jonigreen.com

THE END