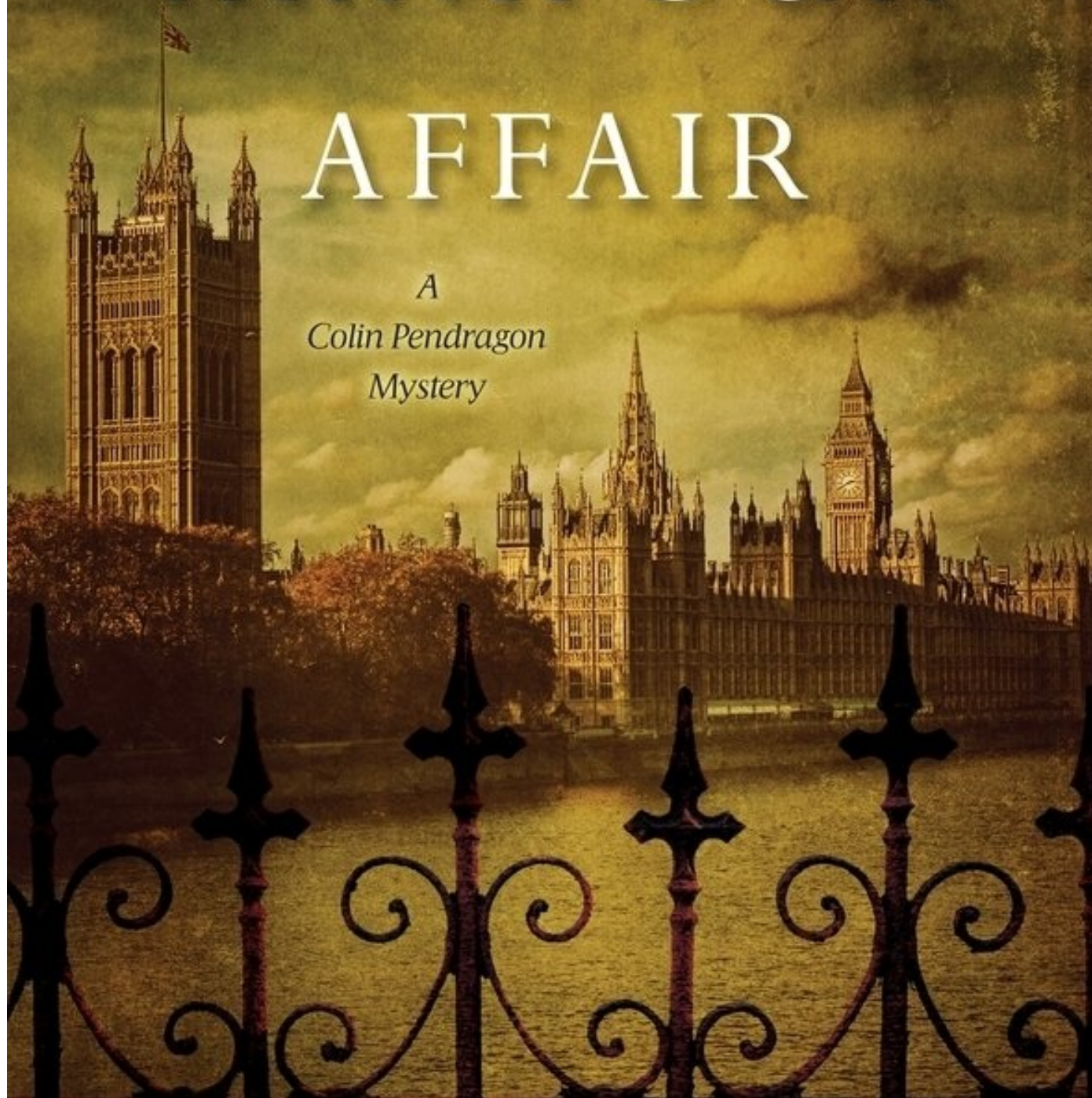


GREGORY HARRIS
THE
ARNIFOUR
AFFAIR

A
Colin Pendragon
Mystery



THE ARNIFOUR AFFAIR

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GREGORY HARRIS



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For Russ, who changed everything forever

CHAPTER 1

The subject, as it so often is, was murder.

It was late in the afternoon, between the time when the sun has dropped sufficiently to be blocked from the city's streets, yet before it has gone low enough for the shadows cast by the buildings to have grown into one continuous black void. Colin and I were sitting by the fireplace in our study, me in the thrall of the American writer Stephen Crane's latest bit of fiction, while he was working up a sweat curling his dumbbells, when a great clattering of horses' hooves arose from the street below.

I laid my book down and went to the window, where I spied an elegant black carriage next to the curb pulled by two fine blue-black steeds. The carriage looked capable of seating a dozen people, yet revealed only a single family crest on its door: a vulture devouring a slain lamb under a thistle bush. It seemed its owner had either a fine sense of humor or extraordinary self-awareness.

"It appears we have company," I announced.

"Do we?" Colin muttered, still hoisting the weights back and forth.

"A coach has just pulled up. There's a crest on its door, but I don't recognize it."

"Oh?" He came over and took a brief glance out the window, dumbbells in tow, before bounding back to the fireplace. "That would be the crest of the once formidable Arnifour family."

"Arnifour?" A distant clanging was set off in my head. "Now why does that name sound familiar?"

"Because they've been a part of the gentry for generations," he said as he shoved the dumbbells onto an upper shelf in a nearby bookcase, "although their fortunes have contracted in diametric opposition to our good Queen's waistline. Yet while Victoria remains the Queen, the Arnifours have become quite toothless and impotent in their waning years. Never a good combination." He snickered.

I chuckled as I watched a dainty ankle covered in swirls of burgundy fabric present itself from within the carriage, followed by a delicate hand held out to the driver. "It's a lady," I said.

"Mrs. Behmoth," Colin hollered down the stairs, "we've got company!"

"I 'eard. I ain't deaf," she called back. "Who the 'ell comes out at this 'our anyway? I ain't putting me shoes back on, I'll tell ya that. Me dogs are already snarlin' like beasts."

"Always so dainty." He chuckled, hastily mopping his face with a handkerchief.

The sound of Mrs. Behmoth thudding her way from the kitchen to the small foyer drifted up, and I was relieved to hear the clack of shoes back on her feet in spite of her protestations. The door creaked on its hinges before the muffled hum of sibilant voices too far away to decipher could be heard.

I went back to my chair as Colin picked up a small penknife and scrap of fine steel wool from the mantel, and started working at coaxing the antique blade back to its former luster. "Must you always be playing with weapons when someone comes to call?"

"I'm not playing." He frowned. "I'm preserving history."

"Still," I said as I heard the stairs begin to groan under the weight of Mrs. Behmoth and our guests, "it could be misconstrued as intimidating to our fairer clientele."

He waved me off. "You're worried about intimidating someone who has a slaughtered lamb being eaten by a vulture for a family crest?"

I conceded the point.

Mrs. Behmoth filled our doorway as she ushered in an elderly woman wearing a tightly curled brown wig intended for someone half her age atop of which sat a small curved bonnet cocked to one side and heavily laden with frilly lace. Her dress was as coquettish as a debutante's, with a flurry of

bows and adornments across the bosom. There was heavy makeup smeared across the deep crevices of her face and a silver dollar-sized bit of cardinal rouge on each cheek. “The Lady Arnifour,” Mrs. Behmoth announced, accepting the Lady’s cloak and unceremoniously tossing it on the coatrack.

“Do come in,” Colin said with the flash of a smile. “I only hope this inopportune hour does not portend too distressing a matter at hand.”

“Oh, Mr. Pendragon,” she said as she collapsed onto the settee. “It is a most dreadful situation that brings me to your door this night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He cast a glance at Mrs. Behmoth still hovering in the doorway. “The sooner we’ll need some tea, please.”

“Yer supper’s almost ready.” She scowled.

“I don’t mean to be a bother—”

“It ain’t no bother, Yer Ladyship, but that roast is sure as Hades gonna turn ta leather if it ain’t served on time.”

“Nevertheless,” Colin’s voice tightened, “tea. Thank you.”

“I really don’t require anything more than a few minutes of your time, Mr. Pendragon.” She turned toward Mrs. Behmoth. “Please don’t trouble yourself.”

Mrs. Behmoth shrugged agreeably before heading back downstairs.

Colin exhaled brusquely. “She basically raised me.”

“She’s refreshingly disarming.” Lady Arnifour gave a brief smile as her eyes flicked over to Mrs. Behmoth before darting back to Colin. “Mr. Pendragon?” She leaned toward him slightly, her voice as thin as a whisper. “Might it be possible for us to speak in private? The matter upon which I seek your assistance contains a degree of . . . delicacy—”

“You have nothing to worry about then. Mr. Pruitt is my most trusted companion and should be considered an extension of myself. Your confidence will be well kept by us both. Now do tell us what’s brought you here.”

Our guest stiffened as she continued to stare at him. It was clear she was not used to being countermanded. “Well . . .” Her eyes flew back and forth a moment. “It’s my husband. . . .” She hesitated. “He was murdered nearly a fortnight ago and my young niece, who was with him at the time, was savagely attacked and remains in a coma even now.”

“How dreadful.” Colin arched an eyebrow at me as I suddenly recalled why her name had sounded so familiar.

“Surely you read of his death in the papers?” she said.

“Newspapers are a dreary business,” he scoffed. “And have you ever read an accurate accounting of anything? No, I leave the perusal of those to Mr. Pruitt,” his eyes slid to me, “who usually keeps me informed of such goings-on.” I could only shrug. “But it’s always better if you tell me of it yourself anyway. From the beginning, if you please.”

“Oh my.” She sagged back onto the settee, looking increasingly fragile. “It’s such a nasty business.”

“Murder tends to be.”

Her brow furrowed and I took that moment to speak up lest she think he was trifling with her. “Hearing the event in your own words is far more likely to allow us to gain insight into the crime than reading some sensationalized account in the paper.”

To my relief, Lady Arnifour’s face softened as she heaved a heavy sigh. “I suppose you’re right. As it is, Scotland Yard has withheld several details from the papers; they claim it’s for the sake of the investigation, but they’ve seemed so muddled by it all,” she groused before drawing in a deep breath and appearing to gird herself to begin. “Ten nights ago my husband took his customary walk after supper. Unless he was ill, he never missed his excursions.

“On this particular night he somehow managed to make it all the way down to the northwest corner

of our property. We have a barn there in which we store hay and other feed for our horses and cattle. It's a considerable distance, Mr. Pendragon, and I am not exaggerating. And while I freely admit that my husband was several years younger than I, neither was he a young man." Her eyelids ticked slightly as though she had just confided something we would not otherwise have presumed. "How he got as far as he did, and why he would choose to do so, I cannot say."

"How far are we talking?" Colin snatched up his penknife and absently started buffing it again.

"Half a dozen kilometers at the least."

"And you don't believe him to have been in the habit of going such a distance?"

"It would've been impossible. He was seldom gone more than an hour and I can assure you, Samuel couldn't have walked a fourth of that distance in that amount of time."

"I see," Colin muttered. "Do go on."

Lady Arnifour watched his hands flutter assiduously over the blade for a minute before she finally resolved to continue. "That night, for whatever reason, Samuel got himself all the way down to the barn, and when he did, he apparently came upon our niece, Elsbeth. Elsbeth is my late sister's only child. Samuel and I have raised her from infancy. My sister did not survive the birth and there was no one else," she said deliberately. When she dropped her eyes I knew better than to inquire about the father. "It was not uncommon for Elsbeth and our daughter, Kaylin, to go riding together." She stopped and clutched at her throat. "Thank heavens Kaylin stayed in that night."

"Indeed," Colin said. "And your niece remains in a coma?"

Lady Arnifour's hand continued to hover at her throat in evident distress. "Yes, Mr. Pendragon. My niece received a horrible blow to her face during the attack. She was found near my husband's boot and has yet to regain consciousness. The doctor . . ." She shook her head as she yanked a handkerchief from her sleeve. "I'm afraid he's been unable to offer much in the way of comfort regarding her recovery."

Colin laid the penknife down and peered at Lady Arnifour. "This is indeed a double tragedy then."

She dabbed the handkerchief to her nose in an oddly self-conscious manner and it suddenly made me wonder if perhaps she'd done it more for our benefit than hers. "Yes," was all she said.

"You must forgive me," Colin pressed on with uncharacteristic restraint, "but I must ask you precisely how your husband was killed?"

"A terrible blow to the back of his head," she fairly whispered.

"*Supper's almost ready!*" Mrs. Behmoth took that moment to holler up from downstairs.

I bolted from my seat and rushed across the room to the landing. "We'll be down as soon as we've finished with our guest," I hissed. "You will kindly refrain from shrieking up the stairs again." She scowled at me before huffing back to her kitchen. "I'm so sorry," I said as I came back to the study, not at all surprised to find that Colin had not even moved.

"She has a good heart." Colin flashed a quick grin as I sat down again. "Please go on, Lady Arnifour. Tell me what our esteemed Scotland Yard has made of all this. Have they formed any theories yet? Or are they still trying to decide who should ask the questions and who should write them down?"

I shot a hasty glance at Lady Arnifour and found her seemingly oblivious to his contempt of the Yarders.

"The inspector assigned to my husband's murder informed me this afternoon that my groundskeeper, Victor Heffernan, and his son, Nathaniel, have become his primary suspects." Her voice had become quite overwrought. I watched as her gaze slid about the room as though she was unable to comfortably settle it anywhere, and thought it yet another curious gesture on her part. Colin leaned forward in a way that suggested he had caught it as well.

"But the inspector is wrong?" he asked.

“I would stake my very reputation on it.”

“And would you be referring to Inspector Emmett Varcoe?”

Lady Arnifour started. “How could you know that?”

“Your estate is under his jurisdiction.”

I could see she was impressed, though in truth that was exactly the sort of thing he should be expected to know.

“It’s hardly a surprise you believe him wrong.” Colin sat down and leaned back in his chair. “The man’s ineptitude is matched only by his ignorance of his own shortcomings— proving that failing upward is neither an art nor a science. But we needn’t concern ourselves with him just yet. Why don’t you tell me how it is you’re so certain he’s mistaken?”

Lady Arnifour fixed her eyes on Colin before sliding delicately forward on the settee and throwing a discreet glance backwards, as though Mrs. Behmoth might actually have roused herself to creep up the stairs and eavesdrop. “This is difficult . . . ,” she mumbled.

“It usually is.” He flashed a mischievous grin. “So tell me, were you having it off with your groundskeeper?”

“*Mr. Pendragon!*” She bolted to her feet with remarkable speed, both hands streaking to her décolletage as though to physically shield her honor.

“You misunderstand . . . ,” I blurted out as I too hopped up. He’d fooled me, as I hadn’t seen the coming. “Let me get us all a brandy,” I barreled on. “A touch of brandy will settle everyone’s nerves. God knew it would mine. I hurried to the liquor cabinet and flipped over three snifters, pouring little more than a finger into two of the glasses, but adding a healthy shot more to the third. I noticed that Mrs. Behmoth had been into the sherry again, for cooking purposes she would insist, and then steel myself as I turned back to our guest.

Lady Arnifour had moved to the fireplace and stood staring into the flames as though her dignity might be regained somewhere in among them. I scowled at Colin, but he seemed wholly unconcerned as he fished out a silver crown and began absently spinning it around between the fingers of his right hand. Only then did it occur to me that as Lady Arnifour had failed to storm out of the room with righteous indignation, there was likely some kernel of truth to his question.

“Lady Arnifour . . .” I handed her a snifter, taking care to avert my gaze so as not to discomfort her further.

“You’re very kind,” she muttered, and I caught a bit of a flush beneath her heavily powdered cheeks.

“You mentioned . . . ,” I chose my words carefully, “. . . that you disagree with Inspector Varcoe’s assessment. Might you tell us why?” I shot Colin another warning glance as I pressed a snifter into his free hand, his other continuing to swirl the coin effortlessly, and was rewarded with a comparable rolling of his eyes.

“Victor Heffernan is a good man,” she began slowly, keeping her gaze on the fire. “His family has worked for my family for three generations and that doesn’t even include his son Nathaniel. I’ve known Victor since we were children. I was present at Nathaniel’s birth. My husband and I have always been fond of the Heffernans. There’s simply no reason why Victor or Nathaniel would want to hurt Samuel or Elsbeth. It’s inconceivable. As I told you before, I would stake my reputation on it. She turned and glared at us as though daring us to disagree. “I can see that you’ve earned every fact of your reputation, Mr. Pendragon, but I would still like you to take this case. So will you prove that Mr. Heffernan and his son are innocent of this terrible crime?”

“And if the perpetrator *does* turn out to be your Mr. Heffernan or his son?”

She blanched slightly, her face drawing rigid as though she’d been struck. “I do not fear the truth,” she said, but there was little conviction in her words.

“Then I am your man.” He gave her a quick tilt of his head as he snatched the coin into the palm of his hand. ~~“But you do understand, Lady Arnifour, that the truth is seldom what we want it to be.”~~

“I only ask that you live up to the *best* of your reputation.”

He smirked, but gave no other quarter to her having chastised him. “I think I’ve already proven that I shall not disappoint you.” He flashed her a rakish smile that showed off his dimples. “We will be on our way tomorrow to have a look around.”

Lady Arnifour nodded earnestly before downing her brandy in a single ferocious gulp. “I shall look forward to it,” she said as she set her glass on the mantel and glided past us.

“There are two things you must do, however.” Colin spoke up before she reached the landing. “If you’ve not already done so, you must hire a guard to sit with your niece twenty-four hours a day. We cannot risk the chance that whoever committed this crime might wish to correct their unfinished business. Your niece could solve this case quite handily.”

“A guard has been in place from the first night.”

“Then there is only the matter of my fee,” he gestured toward me, “and I shall leave that to the two of you.”

I escorted our new client to the front door as we discussed an agreement, quickly coming to terms on a figure she had not hesitated to accept. Colin’s repute does preclude most clients from balking at his fee.

“What did you make of that?” Colin asked, carefully pouring the contents of his untouched snifter back into the decanter, as I reentered the room.

“It’s a horrible crime. The poor niece.”

“Indeed.” He finished with his glass and did the same with mine. “Yet Her Ladyship hardly seemed the grieving widow.”

“I’m sure their marriage was arranged and you know those things just never seem to turn out well.”

“Tell that to dear Victoria. She seems unwilling to ever let off mourning Albert. If it weren’t for my father and his scheming with her stable man, John Brown—”

“That’s nothing but rumor.”

“Ah, Ethan, ever naïve.” He chuckled. “As to Lady Arnifour . . .” He moved to the fireplace. “She not only lies to herself every time she looks in a mirror, but she was most certainly lying to us tonight. There is much more to this crime than she’s letting on. It’s preposterous to think that she would place her reputation on the line for a groundskeeper.”

“I thought I could hear her forefathers spinning when she said that.” I laughed.

“It will be most interesting to meet this Victor Heffernan. And we shall see if I am not right about him and the Lady.”

I chuckled. “And what if you are right about the two of them?”

He looked at me with a mischievous grin. “Then we shall have our first motive.”

CHAPTER 2

We set off for the Arnifour estate on the outskirts of London only after the new day had eased past one o'clock, jouncing along the cobbled roadways in the cab Colin had procured. We had chosen this specific time of day as there are few things as indulgent as teatime in the finer homes. Finger-sized sandwiches of cucumber and butter, petit crown-shaped biscuits, thinly sliced hard-cooked egg with cream cheese with minced olives atop water wafers: all the delicacies Mrs. Behmoth has had no patience for. We came through the massive stone archway that marked the edge of the Arnifour property, catching our first glimpse of the family home: a rambling Greco-Roman structure in the shape of an elongated U rising from the green hillsides around it like a white monolith. A double row of Ionic columns adorned its façade and there were well over a dozen chimneys crowning its rooftop. As our carriage rose and dipped over the uneven hills, the house was never lost completely from view but rather stretched out like an imposing anomaly, reminding all that it did not dwell *within* its surroundings, it *ruled* them.

It was only after we gained the final hill that we could see how this seemingly regal building showed its age every bit as much as its overly lacquered mistress. Its wooden columns were chipped and flaking while the stone block façade covering its lower half was in need of both cleaning and repair. Both wings of the house had boards fastened across their windows, leaving only the long central section showing signs of habitation. And even there the large French doors fronting the portico revealed that many of those outlying rooms were devoid of furniture.

"It would seem . . .," Colin mused as our cab rounded the driveway at the main entrance, ". . . this tea will likely be less than we were hoping for."

"Now don't start," I scolded. "These people are dealing with a terrible tragedy."

"This entire estate is something of a tragedy."

"It is a wonder she didn't blink at your fee."

"She'd have been stuck with the inspector if she had," he said as he climbed out of the cab.

While I made quick arrangements for the driver to wait for us by paying only half his fee, Colin availed himself of one of the door's large, scripted-A iron knockers. As I joined him on the porch, I noticed that the massive doors were warped and weather-beaten as they abruptly yawned open to reveal a thin, pinch-faced woman dressed entirely in black. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled tight into a bun. She offered nary a smile nor a nod of welcome.

"Mr. Pendragon and Mr. Pruitt?" she asked with obvious disdain.

"Well done," Colin answered. "You've saved me a card."

Her brow furrowed as she glared at him. "I will remind you this is a house in mourning."

"Indeed. . . ." He arched an eyebrow.

Whether she understood his inference or not I cannot say, but she did finally feint to the side and allow us entry. Colin gave a tight smile and passed so close to her that she was forced to take an awkward step back while I, on the other hand, gave her as much room as I could.

We were ushered into the study and directed to a pair of brocade armchairs. Dutifully obeying the housekeeper's silent bidding, we settled into the chairs and watched as she turned with the rigidity of a Queen's guard and left through a rear door.

"That woman has disapproval refined to an art."

"Whatever could she be so sour at us for?"

“An excellent question.” Colin stood up and began to inspect an oil painting of a grim family hanging above the mantel. “This must be the Arnifour family in happier times.” The portrait showed a stilted, balding man with a sour face seated next to a woman obviously older than him, with three stooped children shy of their teens—one boy and two girls—standing behind them. The woman at the portrait’s center was clearly a twenty-some-years-younger version of our client. “It is extraordinary how unhappy some people look when being immortalized.”

“I don’t remember you looking much better in that portrait your father had done when you were living in Bombay,” I needled, recalling the equally stuffy rendition of Colin and his father.

He scowled at me a moment, but his expression quickly slid into a warm, generous smile, his dimples flashing and his eyes sparkling like sapphires as he said, “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

I turned as Lady Arnifour ambled into the room, appearing even more haggard in the harsh daylight. “I regret I cannot say the same. How I wish this were a social call.” She sat on the edge of a sofa across from me.

“I appreciate how difficult this is for you,” he said as he came and sat down next to her.

“Do you, Mr. Pendragon? Have *you* suffered the loss of a loved one to murder?”

Colin flicked his eyes at me and I knew what he was asking. I returned a slight nod and he said, “Mr. Pruitt has, but I have not. Yet I would suspect there are few who do not understand what it means to lose someone they love.”

“How perfectly maudlin.” A disheveled, rail-thin man in his early thirties stood in the doorway the housekeeper had exited through, clenching the doorjamb so tightly that I wondered if he had an infirmity that left him unsteady on his feet. “Comparing war wounds, are we?”

Lady Arnifour glowered at her son, yet he seemed either unaware or unconcerned as he stalked into the room with a gait that was at once as unstable as it was cocksure. I guessed his infirmity to be intoxication.

“Mr. Pendragon.” He stuck out a hand and gave a protracted bow that seemed more mocking than deferential.

“*Eldon!*” Lady Arnifour snapped.

Colin stood up and pumped the younger man’s hand, flashing him a rogue’s grin. “Such a formal greeting. I assume you are doing your best to adapt to your new role as lord of the manor?”

Eldon’s eyebrows shot up as he pulled himself to his full height, several inches taller than Colin, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Yes.” He smirked at his mother. “That would be me. Lord of the manor.”

“You will excuse my son’s insolence,” Lady Arnifour scoffed as she snatched up a small bell from the table beside her. “His manners tend to wither with the advancing day.”

“Now, Mother . . .” Eldon dropped into a chair near me. “Let’s not be priggish. I’d much prefer to hear what Mr. Pendragon has to say about Father’s murder.” He settled his gaze on Colin, in whose furrowed brow I noticed the seeds of distaste. There was clearly no love lost between this son and his father. “Tell me, do you agree with Mother’s contention regarding the innocence of the sainted Mr. Heffernan?”

“Do you disagree?” Colin shot back.

“I would sooner stake my bits to a fence post, Mr. Pendragon. It’s not prudent to disagree with Mother.” He forced a laugh that did not cover the unsettling rage that momentarily shifted behind his eyes.

Before either Colin or Lady Arnifour could respond, however, the mirthless housekeeper returned with a silver tray piled high with sandwiches and a tea set.

“Perfect timing, Mrs. O’Keefe,” Lady Arnifour said as she began fussing over the tray, slowly regaining her composure.

“Yes, ma’am.” Mrs. O’Keefe exited as hastily as she had come. The only warmth she’d shown, and that only rudimentary, was when she’d addressed her mistress. She’d not even given Eldon the slightest look. He seemed ever the misfit, or perhaps something more.

“Mr. Pendragon . . .” Lady Arnifour held out a cup of tea. She was about to do the same for me when Eldon popped out of his chair.

“Perhaps our guests would like something to invigorate their tea?”

“Really, Eldon,” Lady Arnifour rebuked. “It’s not even a proper hour.”

“That’s never stopped the Arnifours,” he sneered.

“Tell me . . . ,” I interrupted to keep things from denigrating further, “do you still cultivate your land?”

“Not anymore. Mrs. O’Keefe tends a small garden out back, but it’s been generations since these lands were properly worked. It’s too much, I suppose . . . the staff, the upkeep, the toil—”

“The expense . . .” Eldon chuckled. “That’s why this old pile looks as tired as it does. The family gentry forgot how to earn its keep a long time ago.”

“*That’s enough!*” Lady Arnifour banged her cup back onto its saucer. “I will *not* have you talk about your heritage that way.”

He waved her off. “We can hardly sully the Arnifours or your Langhems any more than they’ve already done to themselves.”

“I’ve had all I’m going to tolerate!” she snapped. “You may take your leave.”

Eldon shrugged and stood up. “And there you have it, gentlemen. The lord of the manor can still be dismissed by his doting mother.” A smile thick with resentment spread across his face. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“I should very much like to speak with you later,” Colin called to him.

“You’ll have to get dispensation from the dowager empress!” he growled as he stalked out.

“You must forgive my son. My husband and I married later in life and my children were born to me at a time when most women are finished with such duties. I remember thinking them little miracles when she grimaced, “but Eldon’s never been well and I cannot help but wonder if my choice to bear him at such an age had an impact.”

“I’m sure you did everything you could,” I said.

Colin smirked. “I’d say it has more to do with your son’s passion for drink than your age and conception. Either way, it serves no purpose to blame yourself.”

“That’s . . . ,” Lady Arnifour paused before giving an awkward grin, “. . . very kind of you, Mr. Pendragon,” she finally said. “Now tell me,” she shifted in her seat, “how can I assist your investigation?”

“I should like to ask a few questions, after which we shall need to go out and see where the attack occurred,” he said.

“Of course.” She nodded, a hand nervously fluttering up to her face. “I’ll have someone take you.”

“Excellent. Now you mentioned that your husband and niece met at the barn that night. What makes you think they didn’t meet along the way? That perhaps she gave him a ride? Wouldn’t that explain his covering such a distance in so short a time?”

“I think not, Mr. Pendragon. My husband was not a small man. There’d never have been room for him to get onto her horse. Samuel was of average height, but he was quite stout.”

“I see. And has Inspector Varcoe shared with you his theory on how your husband covered the distance?”

“He brought up precisely what you’ve suggested. An inauspicious beginning to your investigation it would seem.” She gave a flinty smile.

Colin arched an eyebrow but held his tongue as he sipped his tea and snatched up a petit four. “Ar-

what alerted the household that something was wrong that night?"

"Nathaniel saw smoke on the horizon. The barn where my husband and niece were found had been set on fire."

"On fire?" Colin leaned forward. "You didn't mention that yesterday."

"It hardly seems relevant."

"How a thing seems is seldom how it is."

"Of course," she said, but there was little resolve in her words.

"And what of Mr. Heffernan and his son, Nathaniel? Has the inspector rounded them up yet?"

"He's allowing them to stay here at my behest. But I fear he's only biding his time. It would be a tragedy if they were arrested, Mr. Pendragon, and this family has suffered enough already."

Colin offered a quick smile, one that left me wondering what notions were racing about in his mind.

"Permit me one last question. Has the inspector found the weapon used in the attack?"

"No."

"I didn't suppose he would." He drained his tea and stood up. "That would require actual detection. May I trouble you to have someone escort us down to what's left of the barn then?"

"I shall have Mr. Heffernan take you. It will give you an opportunity to speak with him."

"Outstanding." Colin leaned forward and grabbed two more petit fours, palming them into a napkin and sliding them into his pocket. "I should also like to speak with your daughter—Kaylin, isn't it?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid she's not here just now. All of this business has put her quite on edge, so I've sent her to stay with a friend in town. If you'd like, I'll arrange to have her meet you at your flat on Wednesday afternoon?"

"That would be ideal. The sooner the better."

We followed Lady Arnifour through the rear door Mrs. O'-Keefe had used and found ourselves in a sparse hallway that opened onto a large, immaculate kitchen. It was the most pristine space I had ever seen. Not a speck, not a smudge anywhere save for the harsh, black-clad personage of Mrs. O'Keefe peeling carrots into a rubbish can at a well-worn table.

"Have you seen Mr. Heffernan?" Lady Arnifour asked.

"Out back, ma'am. Trimming roses last I saw."

"Very well."

We filed through the kitchen and out back, and I was aware of being under the watchful gaze of Mrs. O'Keefe the entire time.

A compact vegetable garden ran along the back of the house just off the kitchen, displaying a assortment of lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, broccoli, cucumber, spinach, and a few other bits of greenery I did not recognize. Just beyond was a hedge of boxwoods clipped to precision, but it wasn't until I looked out among the array of rosebushes beyond that I noticed the thick man attending them. He had a plaid cap slipped down on one side of his head and the plain gray-green jumper of a groundsman. I knew at once it had to be Victor Heffernan.

"Here you are," Lady Arnifour fairly purred.

"Ma'am." He stood up and I saw that he was barely taller than our hostess.

"You must be Mr. Heffernan." Colin stuck out his hand.

"If you aren't here to arrest me, you can call me Victor. Everyone does."

"I assure you, Victor," Colin smiled amiably, "I have no interest in arresting anyone."

Victor Heffernan stared at Colin, a dark curling mustache an accent mark above his lips, and appeared to be trying to determine whether we meant trouble. Colin kept smiling, revealing nothing of his dimpled grin as natural as the rose petals Victor had been fussing among. He appeared to be about twice as old as Colin's thirty-eight years, but even so, I could tell he had no idea what to make of us.

"This is Colin Pendragon." Lady Arnifour came forward in a peculiarly maternal way. "I've hired

him to prove you and Nathaniel innocent of this tragedy.” She let her voice drift off as though she was overcome by the very thought.

“Now, now . . .” Victor reached out and patted his mistress’s hand with marked intimacy. “Don’t get yourself worked up again.”

Lady Arnifour gave a tight smile and took a slight step back, effectively moving out of his reach. Victor seemed to realize his indiscretion and suddenly stumbled backwards, carelessly slicing off the top of an errant rose. I was beginning to believe that Colin’s initial assessment of the alibi Lady Arnifour could provide this man might be true.

“Would you take them down to see what’s left of the barn?” she said. “I simply cannot bear to go.”

“Of course. I’ll go hitch up the buckboard.”

“Thank you.” Lady Arnifour gave him a gentle nod as he headed off. “I’ll wait for you in the study.”

“When we come back I’d like to check on your niece.” Colin tipped his chin toward me. “Mr. Pruiett knows something of wounds and healing and such.”

“But I’m not a doctor,” I pointed out.

He clapped my shoulder. “That he’s not, but he can be a fount of medical bric-a-brac just the same.”

I fought to keep from scowling at him as I caught Lady Arnifour glancing my way. What little knowledge I possess was learned by necessity during a regrettable tenure spent in the coarser areas of the city during my youth. It is not something I prefer to advertise, so I was relieved when Victor and his buckboard came rounding the corner of the house. Two minutes later the three of us were trundling onto the open seat of the wagon heading for the farthest reaches of the Arnifour estate.

CHAPTER 3

Our journey began in relative silence with only the occasional snort of the horse to interrupt the steady drone of our wheels as we rocked along the dirt ruts of the driveway, me watching the bread of their property unfold while Colin appeared to be studying nothing in particular as he smoothly coaxed another crown between the fingers of his hand. The moment we turned off the path and started out across an open field, however, Colin turned to Victor and began peppering him with questions about the family history.

“Barnaby Langhem was given this property and the title of Baron by King George the Third himself,” he said with evident pride. “Lord Langhem was Lady Arnifour’s great-grandfather and was one of the men responsible for keepin’ that poor man on the throne until long after he shoulda been removed.” He snickered. “Not six months later the King had a violent fit and accidentally throttled Lord Langhem, which meant that the land, but not the title, was passed on to his eldest son, Jacob. That’s when the great house was built—paid for by a royal decree under the circumstances. That was when the whole Langhem family moved in and my family first began workin’ for them.

“Everybody prospered under Jacob, but his life also came to a sudden end not more than ten years later. He either slipped in the mud stirred up by a downpour and was run over by a funeral carriage making haste to a plot before it was turned into a quagmire, or the carriage cut a corner too close and ran him down. Whichever the case, the outcome was the same.

“That left the estate and all its lands to Jacob’s eldest son, Alanon.” He heaved a weary sigh and knew the story was becoming personal. “Alanon liked women and drink, and spent more time going through the Langhem fortune than addin’ to it. He and his wife only had one child—a daughter, the future Lady Arnifour herself.”

“What about bastards?” Colin muttered.

Victor shrugged. “None that I ever heard about.”

“And what happened to him?” I asked before Colin could toss out another indelicacy.

“Unfortunately, he lived into his eightieth year before he finally took a tumble out an upper-story window into the garden below. Destroyed the family’s prize roses, not to mention the damage he’d done to the Langhem name and fortune. A real pity.”

“And as his only surviving heir,” Colin interrupted, “Lady Arnifour inherited the estate, such as it is.”

“That’s right.”

“Must have been a shock to the Earl to discover he’d married into a family almost as penniless as his own.”

Victor glanced at Colin and shrugged self-consciously. “I wouldn’t know about that,” he said, but his manner suggested otherwise.

A moment later we skirted around a stand of trees and caught our first glimpse of the charred remains of a small building a short distance off. “The barn . . .,” Colin muttered as he flipped the coin into his vest pocket and stared at the approaching destruction. It was impossible to notice anything else beyond the hulking blackened wreck, its remains baking in the sun like some great sea creature carcass that had managed to wash up on this waterless terrain. Only the stinging residue of charred wood lingered to assault the nostrils.

Victor pulled the horse up short and Colin hopped out, walking in a sideways arc around the ruins.

barn. "Did the Earl and Lady Arnifour raise their family here then?"

"They did. Lady Arnifour has spent her whole life here. Born and reared in that very house."

"And the niece too?" he asked as he continued to take slow, careful steps toward the wreckage, studying the ground meticulously as he drew nearer as though the earth itself might reveal some clue.

"Yes," Victor muttered as he stared out at the horizon, an odd look of discomfort clouding his gaze.

We both watched Colin kick at something with the toe of his boot and then crouch down to inspect it. Only after he stood up and brushed his hands against his slacks, having lost interest in whatever he'd been pawing at, did I turn back to Victor and ask, "How long ago did Alanon Langhem die?"

"Eldon was just a tot. Must be almost thirty years ago."

"He must've been pretty angry when he learned she'd married a title without the means to pluck him out of debt." Colin chuckled. "That's so often the way: antiquated titles without a farthing for a piss pot."

Victor shrugged.

"Tell me something," Colin called out from within the remains of the barn. "Who came out here that night of the attack?"

"Lord Eldon, Nathaniel, and me."

"Did you take any notice as to how the blaze was started?"

I watched as Victor's face registered an obvious level of confused disbelief. "Kerosene," he said. "The whole place smelled of kerosene just like it does now."

Colin smiled without even bothering to throw a glance at us. "Quite so." He wandered around a minute, glancing at what was left, toeing a few fallen timbers and running his fingers down the black framework. All the while his eyes flicked from place to place and I knew he was trying to take everything in, to remember it. "Why don't you tell me about that night," he said as he sauntered over to the far side.

"There's not much to tell," Victor said, his gaze still locked on the horizon. "It was after supper. Nathaniel and I eat in the kitchen with Mrs. O'Keefe. I was done first, same as always, and had gone out to the stable by the house to check on the horses, and that's when I noticed Miss Elsbeth's horse was gone. Don't get me wrong; there's nothing unusual in that. She and Lady Kaylin often go out for a ride in the evening."

"But was it unusual for Elsbeth to go alone?"

"Not really." Victor lifted his cap and scratched his scalp, glancing down at his feet. "She goes out by herself as often as not. She's an independent sort." He smiled, and for a moment I thought I detected a note of pride. "She always takes care of herself . . .," he started to say, and then winced. "I registered the irony of his words. "'Til that night."

"Of course," Colin replied absently, drawn more to the scorched earth than anything Victor was saying. "Go on."

"I was putting the tack up and tending a mare when Nathaniel came running in shouting about seein' smoke on the horizon. We didn't know it was the barn. From the house it looked like part of the woods was on fire."

"How long had you been in the stable before Nathaniel came in?"

"About an hour, maybe less."

More than enough time for Nathaniel to have come down here, perpetrated the attack, and returned to the stable to report the smoke, I realized. His father certainly wasn't providing much of an alibi.

"And what happened then?" Colin prodded.

"I grabbed two horses straightaway. Didn't even bother with saddles. But before we could get the bridles in place Lord Eldon came out hollering about the smoke and insisting on goin' with us. Mind you, he can't ride bareback, so I had to take the time to get a third mount ready before we could g

under way. As soon as his horse was sorted Lord Eldon took off. Didn't wait for us."

I could tell he was still aggrieved by Eldon's behavior; the extra time he had cost them, and his determination to get under way first, but he did not dare utter the words.

"Do continue," Colin said without seeming to have taken note.

"Nathaniel and I followed Lord Eldon and we all ended up here."

I thought his story came to a decidedly abrupt conclusion.

"So . . ." Colin put his hands on his hips and turned toward us, having apparently finished investigating the ground. "Eldon got here first—"

"By a deer's breath. It was past supper, Mr. Pendragon, and you can be sure Lord Eldon had consumed his share of drink by then. Nathaniel and I were able to catch up to him by the time we got here."

"But you didn't overtake him."

"Lord Eldon was riding like Death himself was chasing him. I'd say his condition kept him from realizing just how reckless he was being."

"Of course. And what did you find when you got here?"

"The barn was in flames. Most of it had already collapsed." He gestured with his chin. "Just like you see now. Nathaniel spotted the Earl. He was laid out just about where you're standing," he said, his brow slowly furrowing.

Colin gave a quick smile and I knew he'd already figured that out. "And Elsbeth?" he asked. "Where was she found?"

"On the other side. Closer to the woods. We never would've even looked for her if I hadn't seen her horse stamping at the tree line." He gestured to the woods just beyond.

"The horse hadn't run off?"

"No, sir," Victor said proudly. "The Arnifours have fine animals. Trained never to abandon their riders. Nathaniel and I seen to that."

"Impressive."

"It was Nathaniel who found Miss Elsbeth too." He dropped his gaze again. "It was terrible."

"Was she unconscious when you found her?" Colin asked as he headed off in the direction Victor had gestured.

"Yes, sir. It was her face. . . ." He sucked in a deep breath and shook his head again. "I didn't think she was alive."

"And the Earl? Had he been beaten the same way?"

"No, sir. He was the opposite of Miss Elsbeth. He was facedown with the back of his head stove in. Whoever hit him meant to kill him. An awful sight." He kept his gaze lowered and I couldn't tell if he was swamped by the memory or if it was something else.

"Did you find any sort of weapon nearby?"

"No, sir."

"Elsbeth was about here then?" Colin called as he reached a position a dozen or so yards beyond the ruined barn.

Victor barely glanced up. "About that."

Colin knelt to the ground and fingered several spots before standing up and finally coming back around to where Victor and I were. "It was clearly a most unfortunate scene," he said as he reached up.

"Yes, it was."

"I only need trouble you with two more questions."

Victor nodded.

"Did you notice if the Earl had been robbed?"

"No, sir. But the inspector found a roll of bills in his pocket and said he still had his gold watch on."

him.”

~~“It’s always important to rule out the obvious,” Colin murmured. “Which brings me to my last question. Did it appear that Elsbeth had been violated in any way?”~~

~~“No . . . no . . .” He shook his head rapidly and looked almost ready to swoon.~~

~~“She was fully clothed?”~~

~~“Yes, sir.”~~

~~“Her dress was not torn or mussed about in any way?”~~

~~“No, sir. There was nothing of the kind like that. Nothing at all.”~~

~~“Thank you. I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable, but I trust you understand the need for such questions.”~~

Victor Heffernan nodded but did not reply. It made me wonder if he thought he’d said too much, too little, or simply feared that he sounded guilty in spite of himself.

CHAPTER 4

“There’s definitely a familial resemblance,” Colin said as he gazed down at Elsbeth. “I’d say the Langhems have the dominant gene pool.”

“I don’t know how you can see any such thing with all the damage that’s been done to her,” answered. Her face was a rainbow of mottled blues, yellows, greens, and purples, and it was obvious that she had suffered multiple fractures to her nose and cheeks given the distortion of the bone beneath. However she had once looked, she would never be the same again, assuming she survived all.

“Well . . .,” he allowed. “Try using a bit of imagination.”

“Imagination, is it?” I said, glad we were alone with her.

“I’d say she was attractive—before the attack.”

“Does that matter?”

His gaze shot over to me. “Everything matters. And that includes both the way a person looks and how they are perceived. Physical beauty can be a motivator, a crutch, a distraction, or a curse. And the lack of it every bit the same.”

“I suppose you have a point.”

“Other than her injuries,” he pressed, “what are the first things you notice about her?”

I looked down at her battered face and knew that these were indeed the only things I had made note of thus far. “Well . . .” I cleared my throat as I studied her and tried to decipher what he meant for me to see. “I’d say she’s about twenty and has long brown hair. She’s very slight, really just a slip of a thing, and she’s breathing so shallowly that I can hardly see her moving at all.”

“There . . .,” he said with finality. “All things physical.”

“Well, I can’t very well say she’s a compelling conversationalist.”

“No, but you could have pointed out the meticulousness of her room, or the color of her bedding, even the high-necked and positively unremarkable dressing gown she’s wearing, all of which speak volumes about who she is.”

“I don’t think I like this game.”

“Just keeping you honest.”

“What have you learned so far?”

“Several things. I know that the Earl was knocked to the ground by a blow that most certainly came from someone atop a horse. I know that he was running when he was struck down, and that he persisted in pulling himself along the ground by his elbows for another fifteen feet before the killer finally dismounted and came right up beside him, and then beat him with the absolute intent to kill.

“As for this poor girl . . .,” he turned his gaze back to Elsbeth, “. . . she was running for the woods when she was struck, the assailant having once again mounted his horse. She collapsed on the spot and was left in the condition we find her now, though I would presume her attacker thought her to be dead.”

“You figured all that out by pawing at the ground around that barn?!”

“It was very telling, especially since much of the grass had been burned away. If we’d been able to get a look at it before the whole of Inspector Varcoe’s buffoons descended upon it, I’m sure I’d be a damn sight closer to telling just who did this.” He shook his head and let out a sigh. “But the one thing I can’t profess to have the slightest notion about yet is *why*.”

“Well, we know it wasn’t robbery.”

~~“That’s true. Yet even so, can we be sure there wasn’t something in that barn worth stealing? The~~
perhaps all of this is about covering the theft of something from there?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Doubtful, though.” He shrugged.

“Come now, we are only collecting information,” I teased.

“Always a quick learner.”

“I’d hardly call twelve years quick.”

“Well, you’re doing better than the inspector and he’s been at it the whole of our lifetimes and the
some. Did you recognize the man he has posted outside the door?”

“Yes, I remember him from the Rathburn case. Seems agreeable enough.”

“Perhaps, but he *is* a Yarder.”

“You can’t blame them all for the inspector’s ineptitude.”

“They’ve accomplished nothing in a fortnight,” his eyes were alight with fire, “and I’m already
certain that Victor Heffernan is innocent.”

CHAPTER 5

Victor's son, Nathaniel, was a lanky, painfully thin boy of twenty-one whose pasty complexion belie the work he did outside. While he shared his father's hawkish nose he did not so much as bear a whisper of the older man's compact frame. His mother had died before Nathaniel learned to walk, the victim of a frail constitution, Lady Arnifour had informed us, right before she instructed us to go east on the boy, as she termed him delicate in both mind and constitution like his mother.

Lady Arnifour had relayed the story of the late Mrs. Heffernan in a voice both wistful and content. It was clear she was moved at the loss suffered by the two Heffernan men, yet losing his wife had left Victor available for the attentions of the Lady herself. I was reminded again about Colin's initial suspicion of the nature of Lady Arnifour's relationship with her groundskeeper and was all but convinced that he was correct. I was beginning to believe that the only person who actually harbored any real emotion for the late Earl was the dour housekeeper, Mrs. O'Keefe. Other than her, I didn't see anyone who was truly lamenting his death.

We were seated in the kitchen with Nathaniel, Victor having already disappeared out back after making the introductions. Nathaniel was still standing by the back door, all gangly limbs and awkwardness, as he self-consciously dragged the cap from his head.

"Please . . .," Colin pointed to a chair across from us, "sit down. Make yourself comfortable. We are not the enemy."

Nathaniel did not embrace Colin's gesture of camaraderie, as he remained standing a good minute longer before finally making the decision to stay, skulking over to the table, and slipping into one of the chairs without even having to pull it out.

"I shall only trouble you with a few questions," Colin said in a voice I knew he meant to sound placating. "I'm sure you'll have discussed it all with the Yarders anyway."

Nathaniel gave a slight nod even as he kept his gaze riveted on the table. I was thinking he looked guilty and would be likely to grunt his answers when he suddenly blurted out, "I didn't kill that rotten bastard. It wasn't me and it sure as bloody hell wasn't my father. And if you think it was you can go straight ta hell with that old piss pot inspector!"

Colin leaned back in his chair with an easy smile and casually folded his arms across his broad chest. "Piss pot. I rather like that." Nathaniel's eyes raked across Colin's face, searching for some sign of sarcasm, but he found no such thing there. "We're not so unlike, you and me. At least not when Scotland Yard is concerned." The young man blinked repeatedly, his outburst drained with the rapidity of a flash flood. "Now why don't you tell us what you remember about the night of the Earl's murder?"

Nathaniel snapped his eyes back to the tabletop, but not before I spotted something dark and angry trying to hide there. "It was after supper . . .," he began with marked reticence. "The Earl had gone out on his walk and I was watering the garden by the stables when Elsbeth came out and said she wanted ta go riding." He shifted in his chair but did not lift his gaze. "I told her it was too late, but she wouldn't listen. She never listens ta me."

"Was your father in the stable?" Colin asked.

"If that's what he said," he shot back.

"Convincing."

"What difference does it make?" He finally looked up, glaring at Colin again. "You already think we're guilty. I can see it in yer face."

“The only thing you see on my face is that I’m beginning to find you an ungrateful little tosser. I suggest you knock off the ruddy attitude or I’ll return Lady Arnifour’s money and leave you to hang. What do you prefer?”

Nathaniel sagged and dropped his chin to his sternum so that all I could see was the sharp cut of his nose protruding from beneath his brow. This interview seemed to be yielding about as much information as we’d gotten from Elsbeth.

“All I’m asking, Nathaniel, is for you to tell us the truth of what you remember that night. And give you my word that I’ll not come to any conclusions until the solution is irrefutable. Are we agreed?” We watched the boy until he vaguely shrugged his shoulders. It would do. “Good. So Elsbeth wanted to go for a ride and you were warning her off. . . .”

Nathaniel sighed heavily. “That’s right.”

“I presume it was dark and you were worried about her?”

“No . . .”

I figured Nathaniel would explain what he meant, but seconds quickly turned into minutes without so much as a hint of clarification. He sat there, morose and slouching, his gaze tucked in on himself and his arms folded like two crossed swords. He looked like a man with a great deal to hide.

“Then why, Nathaniel?” I could hear the strains of impatience seeping into Colin’s voice.

“Because I knew what she was up to.” He raised his eyes just enough to meet Colin’s, and behind his inky black irises I saw a flash of something unsettling I could not place. “I’m done talking,” he suddenly announced, pushing himself up from the table and stalking back outside before either Colin or I could say a word.

Colin shook his head and stabbed a crown out of his pocket, quickly running it between his fingers. “Curious.”

“Curious?! It’s more than curious. It’s disturbing. No wonder Varcoe’s convinced he’s guilty.”

He glanced at me. “Well, that should tell you something, because Varcoe’s seldom right. Though I will say that I’ve never seen so many angry people in one house hiding so very many secrets. This place was like a tinderbox just waiting to be set off. Even Elsbeth seems to have been up to something.”

“You think that based on the word of that infuriating boy?”

“So quick to judge,” he clucked. “I’m sure that’s precisely why our uninspired inspector is so eager to throw the blame on the Heffernans. Varcoe must have been ecstatic with such easy targets.” He tossed me a tight look. “But I’m not so sure.”

I nodded, mortified to discover myself aligned with the inspector.

“A crime like this is seldom so easy. The blows to the Earl’s head were delivered with malice and forethought. The same is obviously true for Elsbeth. This was not some spontaneous act of vengeance; it was a purposeful and calculated crime. I will be astonished if this level of cleverness was wielded by that agitated boy.”

“But you don’t know that. He could be exactly what he seems. Guilt can be an extraordinary burden to carry, especially for a boy like that.”

“A boy like that? . . .,” Colin echoed, furiously rotating the coin.

Before I could tell him what I’d seen lurking behind the young man’s eyes Victor came scurrying back inside. “Is everything okay?” he asked, a note of dread in his voice. “Nathaniel is a moody lad but you mustn’t hold that against him. It’s my fault. I did the best I could to raise him without a mother.”

“I know he means well,” Colin answered as he slid the crown back into his pocket.

“He does!”

But I couldn’t help thinking Victor was pushing too hard.

“Might you be able to answer a few more questions for me?” Colin said as he rubbed his chin.

“Of course.”

“Do you know where Nathaniel was that night while you were tending to the horses?”

Victor shifted uneasily, wringing his hands without appearing to have any awareness that he was doing so. “He was working in the garden until Miss Elsbeth asked him to saddle a horse for her, which he did. All very proper,” he added, and I wondered why he’d said that.

“And then what did he do?”

“What did he do?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated and I knew his answer before he gave it. “I don’t know.”

“I see. And the first you heard of the smoke at the far end of the property was when Nathaniel ran into the stable to tell you about it, is that right?” Victor nodded. “So if I estimate that it took about thirty minutes for Elsbeth to ride down there and the attack to happen, does that sound conceivable to you? Thirty minutes?”

“Thirty?”

“Yes. You know, the number after twenty-nine.”

Victor took a step back and shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose so.”

“Right. So after you heard Elsbeth ride off, do you have any idea where Nathaniel was for any part of the next thirty minutes?”

“Where?”

“Come now, Victor, these are the easy questions.”

I suddenly found myself feeling oddly defensive of Victor and could not keep from speaking up. “We’re here because Lady Arnifour believes you and Nathaniel to be innocent,” I reminded him. “Just tell us the truth.”

Victor’s body sagged as his chin dipped toward the floor.

“Sit down, Victor.” I gestured to the chair his son had vacated. “You mustn’t stand on formality.”

Victor slumped into it and ran a hand across his brow. His hesitation was palpable. “I don’t know where Nathaniel went after Miss Elsbeth left,” he muttered. “He was upset. I thought he would come back to help me in the stable, but he didn’t.”

“And *why* was he upset?” Colin cut in irritably.

“It’s not what you think,” Victor answered at once. “It was Miss Elsbeth. He was upset about Miss Elsbeth.”

“I’m not thinking anything particular at this moment. So please just tell me what his quarrel with Elsbeth was about?”

“No quarrel.” Again he spoke quickly. “He wasn’t *angry*, he was *upset*. You see?” His eyes sought mine and I gave a confirming nod.

“Just the same,” Colin pressed, “you’ve made it clear that Nathaniel was in a mood and I should very much like to know what it concerned.”

“You have to understand—”

“*Mr. Heffernan!*” Colin slammed a fist on the table. “I cannot understand *anything* unless you start talking to me. I am not your judge. In fact, I am trying to be your ally. But I’ll be quite useless if you insist on continuing to hinder me.” He leaned forward as though doing so might make his point clearer. “Between your son’s contrarian behavior and your dissembling, I’m about ruddy well worn out. I’m thinking the best thing you and your boy can do is throw yourselves on the mercy of the Yarders.”

“Victor,” I spoke up while Colin plastered a brooding gaze out the window, “Mr. Pendragon and I understand how determined you are to protect your son. Any parent would be.” The words caught

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