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THE RETIRED ASSASSIN'S GUIDE To AMATEUR THEATRICS



NAOMI KUTTNER

THE RETIRED ASSASSIN'S GUIDE TO AMATEUR THEATRICS

RETIRED ASSASSIN'S GUIDE
BOOK 3

NAOMI KUTTNER

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To my mum, the bestest mother in the world.

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QUOTE

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When the hurly-burly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

Where the place? Upon the heath.

There to meet with Macbeth.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

— William Shakespeare, opening lines of *Macbeth*

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PROLOGUE

IT WAS A THEATRE.

Said like that, you might miss the echoes of past drama and untamed enthusiasm that had seeped into its velvet curtains and polished hardwood floors over the last century. You might miss the laughter and the tears, the grandiose and the ridiculous, the many dreams that had lived and died within its walls.

It crouched on the corner of Queen Street and Station Road, in what had once been the centre of Te Kohe. Over the decades, the town had moved closer to the harbour and left the theatre behind, surrounded by tarmac car parks and the backs of shops.

Every season, a play would be performed. Cast members would drag reluctant relatives to see it, and thus Culture was achieved for the year.

But the memory of all that had taken place in the theatre lingered like the faded gilt that clung to its façade.

And within the theatre, in the darkness under the stage, in the dusty corners where even the caretaker never trespassed, something watched… and waited.

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1

In which Dante and Andrea discuss workplace health and safety

DANTE GRIPPED THE HANDLE ABOVE THE PICKUP TRUCK DOOR AS THE vehicle bounced along the rocky road. Next to him in the driver's seat, Andrea hung onto the wheel, occasionally checking the GPS as they bounced their way over steep hills terraced with cattle tracks and dotted with flowering gorse and the occasional limestone boulder.

"We're going to see Boris," she shouted over the engine noise. "Jerry's worried he might have footrot."

At this point, Dante wasn't sure what Boris was. He was probably a farm animal of some sort, but by the way Andrea talked about him, he could have been a mutual friend of hers and the aforementioned Jerry.

"Jerry can't meet us there," she yelled. "He's out fixing a broken fence, but he's left us the portable crush in the paddock. I'll need your help to get Boris into it so I can check his hooves."

At the mention of hooves, Dante crossed a number of large animals off his mental list. It had been an outside chance, but he was still glad Boris wasn't a bear, lion, or rhinoceros.

He braced against the door as the vehicle tilted sideways, then righted itself as they rode over a small hillock. Andrea had said the road was 'a bit on the

rough side.’ It wasn’t as bad as some of the routes he’d traversed in the Caucasus Mountains, but it was close. Also, Andrea drove as if she were in a demolition derby, or possibly trying out for the Paris to Dakar Rally.

“We’re nearly there.” Andrea swung the wheel, and they careened off the main road and down into a paddock. The pickup bounced across the field and ground to a halt in front of a wide metal farm gate.

On the other side, an enormous bull with a rust-red coat and cream underbelly studied them. The bull had muscles on his muscles and two short but wickedly sharp horns, curving up at the perfect angle to gore an unlucky visitor in the neck.

Andrea made a ‘tch’ noise. “Boris needs some TLC, that’s for sure.”

“TLC.” Dante studied the bull. Boris had the fixed glare he’d seen on brawlers about to kick off a bar fight with a ‘what’re yer lookin’ at?’ opener.

Andrea slid out of the driver’s side and tramped around to the back to fetch her vet’s bag. Dante followed.

“Do you want me to take that?” he asked.

Andrea looked surprised, then nodded. “Thanks! I keep meaning to get an assistant but…” Her voice trailed off as she took in the rolling meadows, the distant Tūwhenua foothills, and the wide blue sky above. “I quite like going solo.”

Dante understood this preference perfectly, though probably for different reasons. He hefted the vet bag out of the truck bed and followed Andrea across the paddock towards the gate and the waiting bull. Andrea wore gumboots that reached just below her knees. On her, they looked remarkably good. Her black, curly hair was tied in a ponytail that fell down her back.

As they neared the gate, Boris lowered his head and snorted. One hoof stamped the ground.

“Are you going to tranquillise him?” asked Dante.

Andrea laughed and shook her head. “Boris and I are on good terms. Also, I’d never get any work done if I had to wait for tranquillisers to kick in. I just need to get him into that.” She pointed to a steel contraption in the far corner of the paddock. “And then I can give him a proper going over. Although,” she ran a practised eye over the bull, “he seems tetchier than usual.”

As if to illustrate her point, Boris blew twin puffs of steamy breath from his nostrils and shifted restlessly.

Dante found his free hand drifting towards his Glock, nestled securely in his underarm holster. A firearm worked well to intimidate humans, but the threat was unlikely to work on Boris.

“Hey there,” Andrea crooned, her hands drifting out of her jacket pockets to make the universal ‘I come in peace’ gesture. “How’re you doing, Boris, you gorgeous specimen?”

Boris’s wide-set brown eyes flicked between Dante and Andrea. They were fringed with surprisingly long lashes, and Dante wondered if cows found that attractive in a bull.

Perhaps identifying which of them was an apex predator, Boris fixated on Dante. Dante glared back. Boris rolled his eyes and snorted.

“Easy,” said Andrea, her voice low and lilting. “Easy, Boris.”

It happened so quickly that Dante was almost caught by surprise. Boris lurched forward and the gate crashed against the gateposts. Andrea jumped back and Dante had his Glock in his hand.

Dante swiftly holstered his gun as Boris backed away, gaze baleful. Andrea had her attention fixed on Boris and hadn’t seen Dante draw.

Boris tossed his head, his horns tracing a deadly arc. Dante imagined the point of a horn colliding with Andrea’s face. His hand crept back inside his jacket.

“I think you’re making him nervous,” said Andrea.

Of all the words Dante could use to describe the bull, ‘nervous’ wasn’t even in the top ten. He locked gazes with Boris, daring him to try anything — anything at all — with Andrea in range.

“Dante,” said Andrea in a low voice, “could you go back and sit in the ute? I can handle Boris, but you two having a standoff is not what I need right now.”

Dante broke off his staring contest to make sure he’d understood Andrea. “You want to go into the paddock alone?”

“I won’t be alone,” said Andrea calmly. “I’ll be with Boris.”

“That's the issue.”

“I’ll be fine.” Andrea tugged her vet bag to get it out of Dante’s hand. It didn’t budge.

Dante studied Andrea’s face. Dark eyes, thick brows drawn together in a frown. Not a hint of fear. Swiftly, he formulated a new plan. He could cover Andrea from the truck and move into a forward offensive position if she blocked his line of fire.

“Okay.” He released the bag, and she staggered slightly under the sudden weight.

He didn’t say that if Boris made a wrong move, he would be dead. In Dante’s experience, no one took these kinds of threats seriously. And if he had to make good on the threat, it didn’t help to remind upset people that he had, in fact, told them so.

“Thanks.” Andrea looked puzzled by his sudden change of mind. She swung the bag into a two-handed grip and trudged towards the gate.

Dante retreated to the ute. He opened the passenger door and swung himself in. He wished he’d taken his Remington 700 rifle along. With that, he could safely cover Andrea from a distance of 1,200 metres and be far more accurate than the Glock.

Andrea set her bag down to open the latch that held the gate closed. Boris turned his attention to the gate. Puffs of hot breath steamed in the crisp, cold

air as Boris readied himself.

Dante carefully wound down the window. A handgun shot from this distance was less than ideal, but it might distract Boris long enough for Dante to close the distance to Andrea.

“Hey there, Boris.” Andrea’s voice was low and calm.

She swung the gate open — just enough for her to slip through, carrying her bag.

Boris backed up a few feet, head swinging one direction, then the other. His breath rose in a cloud around him, indecision made visible. His great shoulders tensed, the muscles jumping into stark relief. Dante rested his forearms on the open car window and sighted down the barrel of his Glock.

Dante’s attention focused on one thing — the patch of thick fur between Boris’s eyes. All the other extraneous details — the bright sun, the cloudless sky, the distant hum of bees and the scent of crushed pennyroyal — faded away.

There was a moment of perfect balance as Andrea reached out a hand towards Boris.

Then Boris charged.

Andrea gave a yelp and dived out of the way as the bull rushed her.

Dante didn’t take the shot — Boris had missed Andrea and was backing up, no doubt getting distance for another charge. Shooting a bull the size of Boris anywhere but between the eyes would just make him madder.

Instead, Dante sprang from behind the truck door, holstering his gun as he sprinted towards Andrea. She lay in a heap beside the gate, her bag flung aside by Boris’s mad hooves.

Dante hadn’t even drawn a breath before he slammed against the gate, reaching over to catch Andrea under the arms. He swung her up and over the gate an instant before Boris rammed into it. Dante staggered backwards, Andrea in his arms.

Dante set her down next to him and drew the Glock. Boris had backed off, his horns describing wide arcs as he rolled mad eyes at them.

Dante lined the shot up, cradling his right hand in his left as he aimed for the spot exactly between Boris's long-lashed eyes.

"Stop!" shrieked Andrea. She shoved his arms up just as Dante squeezed the trigger.

The sound of the shot ricocheted off the hills.

"What are you doing?" panted Andrea, eyes wide.

Dante thought that was obvious. "I'm going to shoot Boris."

"Why?"

"He nearly killed you."

"You can't…" Andrea stared at him, her face pale. She backed a few steps away from him. "You were going to shoot…" her voice trailed off, and she darted a glance at Boris, who seemed content to stand there, watching the drama play out. "Dante, Boris is a prize bull worth fifty thousand dollars. I'm meant to look after him, not kill him. And now that I'm safe — thank you for that — there's no reason to kill him." She brushed mud off her denim jacket. "Boris is a bull. They don't attack for no reason."

"I don't care if he had a reason or not." Dante had the gun pointed at the ground, but the next round was ready to go. He wasn't impressed by Boris's dollar value. The price on his own head in some countries was ten times that.

Andrea stared at him for several seconds. Dante didn't like the look on her face — as if she'd never seen him before.

"You can't shoot Boris." She spoke slowly and clearly, as if getting the point across to someone either drunk or slightly crazy.

"I will if you go in that paddock again."

Andrea let out a deep sigh. "Fine. I'll phone Jerry. It's clear Boris is in more pain than I'd thought. We'll come back with tranquilliser and a bucket of

his favourite mash. And Jerry will be here to keep Boris calm."

Dante thought coming back was a good idea. It would give him time to collect the Remington.

Andrea seemed to have sensed his plan. "And you can't come. I'm sorry, but I think you rub Boris up the wrong way."

Dante spared Boris a glance. Now, the bull had his head down, chomping placidly on a patch of dandelions.

"He tried to trample you."

"He's a *bull*, Dante. They do things like that when they're upset. It's not malice. They just lash out. He'll be fine once I get some local anaesthetic into him and treat his footrot."

Dante had heard similar excuses from people defending homicidal lunatics and psychopathic killers. He didn't mind the excuses. As long as these same people recognised it was in his nature to eliminate anything that threatened his friends.

"Let's go." Andrea sounded tired, and something else Dante couldn't identify.

Dante stepped towards the gate, calculating whether he could retrieve Andrea's vet bag faster than Boris could try to trample him.

"I'll get it." Andrea kept her eyes on Boris as she hauled her bag over the gate, ready to drop it and back away if he showed any sign of aggression.

She watched Dante in a similar way as he climbed back into the ute.

Dante gripped the handle above his door as the pickup truck roared to life and began its journey back over the rutted road.

This trip had been meant for him and Andrea to get to know each other better. Dante supposed it had served its purpose.

“I’M NOT TRYING to be high maintenance or anything.” Andrea’s shoulders tensed, but that could have been because she was approaching a bend in the road marked ‘55 km’ at a speed of one hundred and five kilometres per hour. “But…” her shoulders rose in a shrug, “I want you to know that shooting Boris was totally not okay. Vet work is sometimes dangerous, and you just have to accept it. And chill.”

Dante examined this statement from every angle he could think of. “You don’t want me to try to protect you when you’re working?”

“Well, yes!” Andrea gripped the wheel as the pickup truck lurched through a large pothole. “I mean, I get that it was a tense situation, but…” she swung around another bend at double the recommended speed. “Oh, I don’t know. It’s fine.”

Dante relaxed. Andrea had said it was fine. Which was good.

Although Dante was still struggling with the concept that Andrea didn’t want him protecting her at work. It was the opposite of what every other person he’d worked with demanded. It went against every instinct that he’d honed over the last two decades.

They pulled into the small car park behind Andrea’s vet clinic where Dante had left his Buick. Dante got out and went around the back of the ute. He retrieved Andrea’s vet bag and carried it up the steps to the back door of the clinic.

“Thank you for taking me to see the farm,” said Dante.

“You’re welcome.”

“Would you like to have dinner this Friday?”

Andrea hesitated, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, that’s… it’s not such a good time for me.”

“Saturday, then?” Dante had read that regular dates were important if you wanted to build a relationship.

This time, the hesitation was even longer. Andrea looked up at him, then away. She sorted through her key ring for the keys to the clinic door. “Can

we take a rain check on that? I… I just need to think things through, okay?"

"Okay." Dante wasn't sure what exactly had complicated Andrea's schedule, but he was willing to wait until she found a time that would suit.

Andrea darted another look at him. Her brows were drawn together, lips slightly parted, as if she wanted to say something. Then she looked down again. She'd found the correct key and used it to open the door.

"Bye, Dante," she said, and lugged her vet bag down the corridor.

She didn't look back as Dante closed the door and made sure the lock clicked.

It was only after he'd backed the Buick out of the car park that Dante began to think something wasn't quite right.

Should he have told Andrea about the Glock before they met Boris? He didn't think so. Gun laws worked differently here in New Zealand than in America and everywhere else he'd operated. You couldn't simply carry them around, even if you had all the correct licences.

It seemed unfair to burden Andrea with knowledge of his illegal weapon carrying, especially as she was, as far as he knew, a law-abiding person.

He decided this was a technical matter, and therefore the best person to talk it over with was Eleanor. As luck would have it, he and Charlie were going to have afternoon tea at Eleanor's place later today.

Dante would spend the time until then making sure his Remington 700 was in perfect working order. Then he would check that his re-homed kittens were also in perfect working order.

All was well in Dante's world as he headed for home.

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2

In which Dante considers a new hobby

AFTER A SATISFYING FEW HOURS CLEANING WEAPONRY AND SURVEILLING kittens, Dante went to have tea with Eleanor and Charlie. Eleanor justified this standing arrangement by saying that Friday afternoon was a time when trouble gathered unless you had something scheduled.

Dante wasn't sure he agreed with this — many troublesome things in his life had happened right on schedule, possibly because he'd started them — but he did like the Assam tea Eleanor served. And, to his surprise, he'd come to not exactly dislike talking with Charlie and Eleanor.

The crisp air of this morning had warmed into a perfect autumn day — clear skies with enough heat in the sun that Dante didn't need his black leather jacket. He wore it anyway, as there were many useful things concealed in its inner pockets.

"Dante." Eleanor smiled in greeting as he opened her backyard gate. An elegant lady in her late fifties (or possibly early sixties), she sat beside Charlie at a small, round, cast-iron table inside the gazebo that was the focal point of the garden.

The purple wisteria flowers of spring were long gone, but the air was rich with the buzzing of bees gathering nectar from the late blooming plants.

“Tea?” asked Eleanor.

“Thanks.” Dante selected a chair and sat.

“Hi, Dante.” Charlie’s hazel eyes crinkled as the young man gave him a warm smile. “What’s up?”

“How did your farm trip with Andrea go?” Eleanor passed him a plate filled with golden brown biscuits.

“I thought it went fine, but then…”

Eleanor sat forward. “Please, tell me everything that happened.”

A few minutes later, Eleanor leaned back in her chair, her face thoughtful.

Dante reviewed his debriefing. All the salient points were there, including an estimate of Boris the bull’s muscle mass, his acceleration from standstill, horn-gouging range, and a summation of the Glock’s accuracy over twenty metres.

“She blew off your next date and said she needed to think about things?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” Eleanor took a sip of tea. “Why do you think she might have done that?”

Dante looked from Eleanor, whose face showed only what she wanted it to, to Charlie, whose face showed everything. Right now, Charlie looked like someone had died.

“Because she has a busy schedule?”

Eleanor shook her head. “Any other guesses?”

“She doesn’t want to see me again?”

Charlie winced.

“That’s the reason?” asked Dante.

“Well, I think it’s more complicated than that.” Eleanor offered Dante the biscuit plate again, as if to fortify him for bad news.

“Complicated how?” Dante didn’t like complicated. Complicated usually meant a higher risk of collateral damage, and that was never good.

“Well…” Eleanor tapped the side of her teacup. “Where to begin? How much do you know about the female psyche? Actually, don’t answer that. Here’s a question to ponder: how do you show someone you care about them?”

This was an easy question. Nevertheless, Dante thought for a few seconds to make sure he’d covered all the angles.

“You take all the necessary steps to ensure their safety. You cover their six. You never blow their cover or compromise their network. If they ask you for a favour, you say yes before you find out what the favour is. If they’re in danger, you shoot first. No questions asked.”

“The problem with all the things you’ve mentioned, admirable as they are, is that they’re all things you do.”

“Yes.”

“Whereas I asked how you show you care. Show being the important word.”

“She said she didn’t want me to protect her while she was working.” Dante was still getting his head around that one.

“Hmmm,” said Eleanor, which didn’t help Dante at all. “Here’s another question — how do you show you’re upset?”

Dante thought about this. Nothing came to mind. “I don’t think I get upset. What does that have to do with Andrea?”

“I think that for Andrea to believe you care, she wants to know you’re feeling emotions.”

“I… see.” To Dante, Eleanor may as well have said: ‘Andrea wants to see you walk through walls.’ Maybe it was time to join that private protection unit a fellow retired agent had told him about. You did the job, you got paid, and nobody talked about feelings. Ever.

“When people think they know how you’re feeling, it puts them at ease,” said Eleanor. “It’s a remarkably useful skill to learn.”

Dante was sure he and Eleanor were imagining very different scenarios. He took a biscuit from its place on his saucer and dipped it in his tea. The half-soaked biscuit was delicious — golden syrup and rolled oats bound together with an ambitious amount of butter.

Charlie’s phone buzzed, and he looked at the number in surprise. “It’s Andrea.” He stood and walked down onto Eleanor’s small lawn to take the call.

Eleanor raised her eyebrows at Dante, who refused to own a phone. “Ten to one it’s for you.”

A moment later, Charlie climbed the steps back into the gazebo. “It’s for you.” He handed the phone to Dante, who took it like it was an unexploded IED.

“Hi.”

“Dante.” Andrea sounded hesitant. “I’ve had an idea.”

“Yes?”

“Firstly, thank you for saving me from Boris.”

“Okay.”

“I really do appreciate it. You were amazing.”

“Okay.”

On the other end of the line, Andrea blew out a pent-up breath. “And… I think maybe we had a misunderstanding because we were in a high-stakes environment. Maybe we could get to know each other somewhere different. Not work.”

“Okay.” Dante wondered where this was going.

“This may sound crazy,” Andrea gave a shaky laugh, “but my friend Deirdre had this idea, and I thought I’d run it by you.”

“Okay.”

“So… I was wondering if you’d like to be in a play with me.” The words came out in a rush, followed by a tense silence.

Dante waited for clarification. There were several things Andrea could mean by ‘a play.’ The one he knew best was ‘back my play,’ and that one usually led to a high stakes confrontation.

“What do you think?”

“A play…” Dante looked at Eleanor and Charlie for inspiration. Charlie looked puzzled, but Eleanor was nodding. “A play.” He tried to sound as if he knew what was being proposed.

“The Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society is doing a play this autumn. It’s right here, and we could try out for it, and then we’d get lots of time to get to know each other in a more relaxed way.” Andrea sounded as if she were trying to convince herself as well. “I was talking with Deirdre about this book I read that said modern dating sets unreasonable expectations, and we’ve lost touch with the community and the village’s role in bringing two people together, and the traditions of matchmaking have disappeared, and so maybe if we did this instead you and I could connect as people first without the pressure of dating.” She ended in a breathless pause.

Dante tried to parse all this. It wasn’t easy. “You’re saying… you want me to be in a play. In a theatre. With you.”

Now Charlie was nodding enthusiastically, bouncing slightly on the spot like he was bursting to say something.

“Because… because it would be a good way to…” Dante replayed Andrea’s monologue in his mind, “to connect.” It was like speaking a foreign language. Dante was well aware that he was in a foreign country, but it had never been so disorienting as now.

“That’s right.” Andrea sounded relieved. “I’m so glad you’re on board with this. The way Deirdre described it, it’ll be a great bonding experience.”

“It will?” Dante hoped that if Andrea kept talking, it would finally make sense.

“Well,” Andrea half laughed. “She actually said: ‘Either you’ll end up closer than ever, or you’ll end up killing each other.’”

“Oh.” Dante did not think this sounded like a good idea after all.

“So I’ll see you at the audition tomorrow afternoon! Charlie knows where it is.” She hung up before Dante had a chance to tell her that he wanted to rethink this.

When Dante passed the phone back, Charlie was trying to suppress a grin and failing utterly to do so.

“Yes?” Dante asked, mainly to prevent his friend from straining something.

“I’m going to audition too! I’ve been part of Te Kohe Am Dram for ages — sorry, that’s Amateur Dramatics Society. It’s fun. I usually get a non-speaking part. I’ve done trees before. I’m good at trees.”

“Oh.” Dante had never been to a play before. Actually, he’d been to half a play. The other half had been cut short when his target had taken the lead actress hostage. Dante had ended up centre stage, neutralising the target with extreme prejudice. No one in the audience applauded.

It struck him as an ominous theatrical debut.

“So Andrea thinks you can get to know each other by being in the play.” Eleanor gave an enigmatic smile. “She could be right.”

“Have you been in a play before?” Dante mentally prodded the idea like a man exploring a sore tooth.

“These days, I stay strictly in the audience.” Eleanor took a languid sip of tea. “I did some acting back in the day. It was on Broadway — part of a larger job we were doing — and it went off with a bang. Literally. I shall watch the developments at the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society with interest.”

Dante noted the lack of detail on the ‘larger job’ Eleanor had been working on.

“I think you’ll be great.” Charlie’s face glowed with enthusiasm, and something Dante had come to think of as Charlie-ness. Dante had yet to see

him express disinterest or boredom. “There’s this new director come over from New York! Yves Bouchard.”

“Yves Bouchard.” Eleanor’s eyes took on a distant look. “I know that name from somewhere.”

“He’s meant to be famous,” said Charlie, “and really good.”

“Okay,” said Dante. “Tomorrow. What time?”

“Three. At the theatre. I’ll come around to yours at quarter to. We can go together.” Charlie swallowed a mouthful of biscuit and grinned. “You’ll love it. It’s a gorgeous old building.”

“Okay.” Dante wondered whether being in a play would change his life in a significant way. Thus far in Te Kohe, he’d learned about gardening, orchids, various types of baked goods, and cats.

The gardening and the cats he liked; the orchids were pretty, but had come bundled with an unexpected level of intrigue. The baked goods, so far, had been blameless. He suspected that being in a play would land somewhere between the baked goods and the orchids.

“To amateur dramatics.” Eleanor raised her teacup in a toast. “This is going to be fun.”

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3

In which Dante finds the role he was born to play

THE TE KOHE THEATRE WAS, AS CHARLIE HAD PROMISED, AN OLD BUILDING. Dante wasn't on board with the 'gorgeous' part, though. There were far too many dark corners and hidden vantage points from which an assassin could take a clear shot and get clean away.

He and Charlie pushed through the double doors at the main entrance to arrive in a carpeted lobby filled with the hubbub of a talkative crowd.

"I don't know exactly where they'll be holding the auditions." Charlie looked around at the mob of people Dante supposed were auditioning actors. "But I'm sure they'll let us know."

"They like to keep you guessing," cut in a female voice.

Dante shifted slightly as a middle-aged woman with a square jaw and glowering eyes inserted herself between him and Charlie.

"They want you nervous. That way you'll blame yourself when you don't get the part you want." The woman shook her head in distaste. "Directors and their little games."

"Hi, Marge," said Charlie cautiously. "This is my friend, Dante."

Marge looked up at Dante sharply. "Another hopeful, are you?"

“No,” said Dante.

“Just as well,” said Marge. “Deano’s sniffing around, hoping for the lead part. Didn’t you hear? First, he refused the casting call, straight up turned it down. Then, a month ago, he changed his mind. He’s come over from Auckland. And of course Stanley and Benedict are keen. Very experienced actors, those two. Many times treading the boards.”

Dante had met people like Marge before. In his old line of work, they’d tell you how many agents had disappeared into gulags, or been found floating face down in the Danube. The best policy was to ignore them.

“I just want to be a spear carrier.” Charlie sounded daunted. “Dante’s new to this, so I guess we’ll just see.”

Marge sniffed. “I’m sure our new director will make sure everyone gets the part they deserve.” She managed to convey extreme scepticism in this outcome.

“Do you know what play we’re doing?”

If this was Charlie's attempt to smooth things over, it did not work. Marge’s jaw set.

“No one’s said. I think it’s inconsiderate. Some of us have real jobs, you know. We might want to know what we’re in for before we commit to an afternoon of auditions.”

“Don’t mind Marge,” broke in a cheerful male voice. “She’s just salty because she’s out of the loop.” A wiry man with a ginger goatee, heavily tattooed arms, and a friendly smile stepped into their little circle.

“Hi, Steve,” said Charlie.

“Hey, Charlie. And your friend is?” Steve turned to Dante.

“Dante,” said Dante.

“I just like knowing beforehand,” said Marge. “It’s never happened like this before.”

A shrill whistle cut the air, and the talk died down.

“Here we go,” muttered Marge.

“Greetings Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society,” called a voice. Dante recognised the spry elderly lady with her steel-grey hair in a neat bun as Mrs Haddock, his neighbour. “Welcome, all.” A muffled cheer arose from the crowd. “Auditions will commence shortly. Everyone who wants to try out, put your name and the part you’re after on the sheet by the main theatre door. When your name is called, please proceed inside. If you’re not sure what part you want, just leave it blank. You’ll be given lines to read — no need to bring anything prepared.”

There was a brief silence, then a buzz of conversation.

A few voices rang out above the hubbub. “What’s the play?”

“We need to know the play to say what part we want.” Marge’s strident voice cut across the chatter.

Mrs Haddock slipped on a small pair of glasses and looked down at the sheet in her hands. “Quite right. This year we’re putting on a production of *Macbeth*.”

There was a stunned silence, then the crowd erupted at three times the volume of before. Several people were shouting at Mrs Haddock, who had retreated several steps, the sheet of paper raised protectively.

“I can’t believe she just said that!” said Steve.

“That’s why she’s props, not cast,” said Marge.

“What’s the matter?” asked Charlie.

“You’re not supposed to say that name in a theatre.” Steve shook his head in disapproval.

“What, Macb—” Charlie cut off as Marge shushed him.

“It’s bad luck,” she hissed. “You call it ‘The Scottish Play.’”

“Technically, that rule only applies if you’re not putting on a production of said Scottish Play,” said Steve.

Marge shook her head. “You can only say the word if you’re actually rehearsing the lines.” She looked as if she wanted to say more, but Mrs Haddock’s voice rang out over the crowd.

“Very well, very well. I see I’ve committed a major faux pas, and I do apologise. I will throw salt over my shoulder, turn my jacket inside out, or whatever else is required to appease this…” she paused, a little red in the face, “venerable tradition. But in the meantime, please fill in your names on the form. Director Yves is waiting in the main theatre, and I will call you in, one by one, starting in five minutes.”

The crowd volume rose again as she stalked back through the theatre doors.

“Not off to a good start,” said Steve.

“I can’t believe they’re putting that play on.” Marge’s mouth pursed in consternation. “I mean, after what happened last time…” She broke off, staring towards the theatre doors.

“Maybe they hope the notoriety will attract a crowd,” said Steve.

“It’ll end in disaster.” Marge sounded pleased. “My tarot cards already warned me.”

“You said they were warning you about your nephew’s laryngitis.”

“That was just one interpretation.”

“Let’s go sign up,” said Charlie quietly.

Dante followed him to the crowd gathered around a plinth by the theatre door. He scanned the room, but couldn’t see Andrea. Perhaps she was late.

They waited a good five minutes before the press of people thinned enough for Dante to see a white notepad lying on the plinth, its first page already covered in names.

“Bad form, letting everyone see what part you wanted,” muttered Steve behind them. “Doesn’t leave much room to go forward with good grace once you lose out on your dream part.”

“We already know who’ll get what.” Marge sounded tart.

Charlie stepped up to the notepad and picked up the battered blue ballpoint pen in his left hand. “I’m going to put ‘non-speaking’ by my name. What do you want, Dante? I can look up the parts on my phone.”

“Just leave it blank,” said Dante.

“Done.” Charlie handed the ballpoint to Steve and stepped away. “Now we wait.”

“Okay.” Dante’s gaze took in the foyer, its ornate wall sconces, mirrors, and friezes creating a style that could best be described as 1920s picture palace.

The theatre was grand, but it had seen better days. He wondered whether a performance of Macbeth by a famous director would be enough to bring in a crowd.

Dante and Charlie had just retreated to the other side of the lobby when Mrs Haddock reappeared and whisked the list of hopefuls away. A few minutes later, she pushed through the doors once more.

“We’ll start calling people now,” she announced. “Once everyone’s finished, our new director will come out and let you know his casting decisions. And I will remind you all,” she said, lowering her glasses to give the assembled throng a penetrating stare, “that all decisions are final. Remonstrations, threats, arguments, and bribes will not be looked upon with favour. Do I make myself clear?”

There was a resentful murmur.

Dante wondered what the audition would entail. The last audition he’d done had involved a litre of vodka and an arm wrestle with Vilov ‘Wild Moose’ Vorkovsky. He doubted there was any crossover between the skills he’d employed then and the ones he might need now.

“Feeling spooked out by the Scottish Play? I’m not surprised.” A burly man with a wavy brown mullet and grease-stained blue overalls sidled up to Dante. “It’s a mad idea to put it on, especially here.”

“Why’s that?” asked Charlie. “This is Trevor, by the way. Trevor, this is Dante.”

Dante gave the new arrival a quick once over, and categorised him as ‘probably harmless.’

“Because the play’s unlucky,” said Trevor. “Always has been, always will be. Fire, disaster, even death has followed it from the Globe Theatre in London all the way to Te Kohe.”

“Death?” asked Dante.

Trevor looked surprised. “You didn’t know? The last time they performed the Scottish Play here was twenty years ago. And someone died. On stage. During the performance.” His face fell into a macabre grimace.

“Are you going to sit this one out then?” asked Charlie.

“Wouldn’t dream of it! It’s one of the great plays,” said Trevor. “It’s got everything — ambition, murder, prophecy, witchcraft, bangin’ sword fights. What’s not to like?”

Mrs Haddock’s voice sounded across the room. “Charlie Wilson, are you here?”

“I’d better go.” Charlie looked pale.

“Break a leg.” Trevor gave Charlie a hearty slap on the back as he took off in the direction of the main theatre. “Nice to see fresh faces.” He winked conspiratorially at Dante. “Are you new to the theatre?”

“Yes.” Behind Trevor, Dante finally spotted Andrea. She was deep in conversation with two ladies, their heads bent close together as they talked.

“Looking forward to a spot of murder?”

“No.”

“Er, well… I’d better be off. Got to clear the old windpipes before my name’s called.” Trevor gave a hasty wave and retreated into the crowd.

Dante folded his arms across his chest and stared across the room at Andrea. Should he go over? She looked busy.

A minute later, Andrea looked up and saw him. Her lips parted slightly in an expression that he found hard to parse. Anticipation maybe? Nervousness?

She said something to her friends, and then threaded her way through the crowd towards him. When she arrived, she slipped her arm through his and smiled up at him.

“Dante! You made it! Isn’t this exciting?”

Dante wouldn’t exactly describe the foyer as exciting. For him, that word summoned up visions of large scale explosives, and possibly a doomsday device.

“Yes,” he said, provisionally.

“I’d love you to come and meet my friends.” Andrea tugged at his arm, and reluctantly, Dante accompanied her back through the crowd.

They arrived just as the brunette lady was saying to the blonde lady: “— and it’s unheard of to not announce the play beforehand, though I can see why. The Scottish Play! Quite unfortunate.”

“Hi.” Dante loomed over the brunette. She looked up, eyes widening as she took him in.

“Hey everyone, this is Dante.” Andrea smiled brightly. “Dante, these are my friends, Deirdre,” she said, indicating the blonde lady, “and Jennifer.”

Jennifer had straight brown hair and thick, straight brows. These brows dipped as she studied Dante. “You’re Dante Reid.” It sounded like an accusation.

“Yes.” Dante caught Andrea’s slight wince as his one-word sentence fell flat in the conversation. This was probably where he should summon the natural smile his therapist kept telling him about. Right now, though, he was busy assessing Deirdre and Jennifer for combat capability and hidden weaponry. They both registered as a low threat level.

“It’s brave of you to come along.” Deirdre had a poise about her that reminded Dante of royalty — always gracious, always on show. “We’ll do our best to ease you into acting.” Her smile was warm, and Andrea relaxed slightly.

“Thank you.” Dante wondered why being in a play required bravery. Perhaps they did the combat scenes with real, sharp weapons.

Jennifer, meanwhile, had not lost her frown. “Andrea’s a good friend of mine. A very close friend.”

“Okay.” Dante wondered why she wanted him to know this.

“She deserves the best.” Jennifer didn’t break eye contact with him.

“Yes.” Dante was puzzled. Jennifer’s words did not match her body language, which was that of someone who wanted to fight.

“And she doesn’t need another gaslighting prat.” Jennifer folded her arms, still glaring, while the colour rose in Andrea’s cheeks. “She needs someone who’ll be straight with her.”

Dante thought he’d figured out what Jennifer was on about. “If anyone in this town bothers Andrea, I will see to it that—”

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” interrupted Andrea. “Thanks, Jennifer. Dante’s been great. Very supportive. And he has good taste in cats.” She kept her arm linked through Dante’s.

Jennifer pursed her lips, still looking Dante up and down. “I just want to make sure that he knows who he’s dealing with.”

“I always want to know that,” said Dante.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jennifer’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m sure we’ll all learn a lot about one another,” said Deirdre, placing a soothing hand on Jennifer’s forearm. “Being in a play is a great way to get to know people.”

“My thoughts exactly.” The voice was smooth, well-trained, and its owner stepped in beside Deirdre with self-assurance and a suave smile. He was about Dante’s age, near forty, with curling dark hair cut long, and a dazzling white smile.

“Dean.” Deirdre’s smile slipped. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Indeed.” Jennifer’s voice could have cut ice.

“Hi, Dean.” Dante felt Andrea’s arm slip out of his as she faced this new arrival.

“Ladies. Gentleman.” Dean looked abashed. “I’m sorry, was this a private conversation? Discussing audition tactics, perhaps?”

“Not at all,” said Deirdre. “Everyone’s excited to have you back.”

Dean gave a shrug and a self-deprecating smile. “I rather doubt that.”

“Why are you back, then?” Jennifer reminded Dante more and more of a mastiff itching for a fight.

“How could I miss a chance to be in an Yves Bouchard play?” said Dean. “He’s a Broadway legend.”

“Well, I think we ladies had better discuss audition tactics.” Jennifer shared her glare between Dante and Dean in equal measure. “Dante, Dean, see you around.” She linked arms with Deirdre and Andrea and shepherded them away.

Andrea gave him a brief wave over her shoulder, with a helpless shrug that Dante wasn’t sure how to interpret.

Dante found Dean regarding him curiously. “I’m Dean Myers,” he said, extending a hand.

“Dante Reid.” The man’s hand wasn’t calloused in any way that suggested proficiency with weapons, but Dante studied him with interest. He clearly had history here. Dante wondered if Andrea knew him well.

“It’s strange being back in the old home town.” Dean’s gaze strayed around the room. “Same people, same contretemps, same old, same old. Do you ever come home to find you’ve changed, and it hasn’t?”

“No.” Dante hadn’t had a place to call home until now, and he made a point of never returning to the scene of a crime. It avoided a lot of problems.

“Well, all the best with the auditions.” Dean gave him a wry smile. “See you on the flip side.”

A moment after Dean disappeared into the crowd, Charlie pushed through the doors, his face pink. Mrs Haddock followed, a small smile on her lips.

The next half hour passed in fits and starts. Dante and Charlie retired to sit on a couple of chairs by the ticket booth. Every so often, Mrs Haddock would appear and call another name. Some people were gone for just a couple of minutes, while others took far longer to return from the depths of the theatre.

Charlie fidgeted, then got up to pace in front of the booth.

“Are you nervous?” asked Dante.

“I don’t think so,” said Charlie. “It’s more… there’s something up with this theatre.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been in here loads of times, and it’s never been like this.” Charlie spread his hands, like someone feeling an unseen wind. “There’s a… presence, I think. Energy gathering. Can’t you feel it?”

Dante stilled his mind and let his senses spread out, taking in the movement around him. There were about fifty people gathered. His gaze travelled over the crowd, noting stances, clothes, and mannerisms. No one was armed, and no one exhibited the jumpy behaviour that could lead to a sudden outbreak of violence. Several people were nervous, but trying to hide their nerves in bright, overly cheerful conversation. Nothing suggested an elevated threat level.

“Is it ghosts?” asked Dante.

“Probably.” Charlie waved his arms again. “The air feels heavier somehow.”

“Dante Reid, can you come over here?” Mrs Haddock’s mention of his name filtered through the crowd noise.

“This way.” Mrs Haddock pushed back through the double doors, and Dante followed.

As the dark closed in around him, he felt unaccountably tense. The air was crowded, like the build-up of static before a thunderstorm.

Mrs Haddock strode down a short corridor and pushed through a single door. Dante stepped through and found himself at the back of a rectangular theatre. They were in the stalls, with the dress circle cantilevered above them. Nearer the stage, the theatre opened into a four-storey space.

There was a night sky painted on the ceiling, with the southern constellations formed by hundreds of tiny points of light. Rich red velvet curtains fell in soft folds from an arch framing the stage to the wooden floor, where a single spotlight cast a golden circle of light centre-stage.

“Just follow the aisle down,” whispered Mrs Haddock, “then climb the stairs onto the stage. Our director Yves will take it from there.”

Dante descended the shallow steps, his footfalls silent on the thinning carpet. There was a man seated in the third row from the front, but all Dante could see of him was a halo of silver hair.

At the bottom of the theatre aisle, the floor dropped into a pit about two metres deep. It looked like a trap to Dante, and he wondered what it was for.

On the far left-hand side of the space, stairs painted black led up onto the stage. Dante took them one at a time, his movements deliberate.

There was, as far as Dante could tell, nothing remarkable about the worn wooden boards that made up the stage. Yet stepping onto them marked an entry to a different space.

“Take centre stage, please.” The voice was commanding, a New York accent overlaid with a BBC radio tone that probably came from years in the theatre.

Stepping into a circle of light while being overlooked by a darkened space went against every fibre of Dante’s well-trained survival instinct. He took a slow, deliberate breath. Try new things, he told himself. Living a new life requires you to try new things.

He walked into the circle of light.

“Dante… Reid, is that correct?” Yves sounded interested.

“Yes,” said Dante.

“Extraordinary…” Yves murmured. “Face to the left, please?” Dante did so. “And now to the right?” Dante faced right. “Extraordinary.”

It was hard to see in the dimly lit space, but to Dante’s adjusting vision, Yves’s face may have broken into a delighted smile. “You, my friend, are a murderer.”

Dante stilled. He wondered how Yves knew.

“I’m not,” said Dante. Sometimes the best defence was a flat denial.

“You are.” Yves’s voice rose in conviction. “Better yet, you are my murderer.”

“No, I’m not.” Dante wondered what Yves might have done to attract the attention of somebody like him.

Yves jumped out of his chair and climbed nimbly over the two rows of seats to stand just on the edge of the pit. Here, Dante could make out his features better. He was tanned, with a thin, craggy face and a shock of silver hair that swept back from his forehead in a wave.

He wore a dark, tailored shirt with a white silk scarf flung artfully over one shoulder. It fluttered as he raised his hands in a broad gesture that encompassed all of Dante.

“You,” said Yves, “are perfect. A remorseless murderer. One who would kill without compunction. One who can smile, and murder while he smiles.”

“I don’t…” Dante stopped, thinking over his next rebuttal. He had never once smiled while conducting an assassination. It was a job he took seriously and executed with efficiency. Also, Yves’s silk scarf was a custom-made murder weapon, but he didn’t think telling him this would help his case.

“You shall play the part of Murderer One,” pronounced Yves. “The desperate knave who waylays Banquo and his young son on the road. The tragic man who does Macbeth’s bloody bidding and slays his oldest friend.”

“I… see,” said Dante. Apparently, there was a person in this play called ‘Murderer One.’ He didn’t know Shakespeare numbered his murderers. “You want me to play a murderer.”

“Better than that.” Yves raised both hands in a theatrical wave. “By the time I’m finished, you’ll *be* a murderer. You will have transformed into a dark and dangerous felon of the night.”

Dante’s brows drew together. “I don’t transform.”

“It’s a process.” Yves tucked a hand into his pocket with studied nonchalance. “Trust the process.”

“YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE,” came the voice of Mrs Haddock. “May we have silence? The parts are about to be announced.”

Within seconds, the foyer was as silent as a graveyard. A tense, expectant graveyard. With dramatic timing, the theatre doors swung open, and Yves swept in.

He didn’t look as striking in the well-lit foyer, but Dante thought the director must practise standing a lot. He stood as if he were about to take a salute from a full battalion.

“Greetings all,” said Yves. “And thank you for coming. After great deliberation, I have made my selections for the Scottish Play. My assistant director will now read them out.”

“Ahem.” Mrs Haddock cleared her throat and set her glasses firmly on her nose. “For the titular character, we have Dean Myers.” A buzz of voices greeted the announcement. Half the people in the crowd looked disgusted, while the other half looked intrigued.

“Aucklanders,” muttered someone close by. “Stealing all the best parts.”

“For his wife, we have Deirdre Rathburn.”

There wasn’t the same buzz here. Dante guessed everyone had expected this choice.

“Banquo: Charlie Wilson.” There was a huge buzz from the audience at this, and Charlie went red. Dante caught whispers of ‘but he’s never had a speaking part before,’ and ‘he’s not even a real actor.’

Mrs Haddock glared around the room and cleared her throat again. “Lady Macduff: Jennifer Wilcox. The Lady’s Maid: Andrea Kingi.”

Dante’s gaze found Andrea. She looked pleased as first Jennifer and then Deirdre gave her congratulatory hugs.

Dante tuned out as Mrs Haddock ran down the list. There were a lot of characters to get through, and most of them sounded Scottish. He’d never had to fake a Scottish accent before, but, given a few days to study, he was sure he could do it.

“Murderer One: Dante Reid.” The announcement caused several necks to crane in his direction.

“Shouldn’t Trevor be Murderer One?” Marge’s voice cut across the whispers of conversation. “He’s far more experienced.”

“He can be murderers one, two, and three if he wants to,” said Trevor, taking in Dante’s broad shoulders, muscled torso, and impressive biceps. “I won’t argue.”

Mrs Haddock ran through the last names and lowered her clipboard. “That’s all. If you haven’t been selected, we always need people in the props and wardrobe departments. If you’re willing to help out there, please see me.”

Yves stepped forward and raised his hands. The low murmur of voices died away. “I know some of you will be disappointed — that’s an inevitable part of auditioning for a play. Remember, the good parts next time will go to those who did the best with the parts they were given.” There was general eye-rolling and muttering at this. “I look forward to seeing you all here on Thursday for our first rehearsal. Good afternoon.” With that, Yves strode through the crowd and out of the double doors at the front of the theatre.

The doors thunked closed, and the crowd noise level rose again.

“Herr Direktor knows how to make an exit,” said Steve admiringly. “Let’s go to the pub, eh? Audition post-mortems always go better over a pint or two, am I right?”

“Well done, Dante!” Andrea appeared at his side, her face glowing. “We both got parts, and Deirdre said yours is quite a big one. Bigger than mine, anyway.”

“Yes.” Dante was not so enthusiastic about being Murderer One. The promise of transformation did not appeal, either.

“Everyone’s going to the RSA to celebrate,” Andrea continued. “Would you like to come too?”

“No, thank you.” Dante wanted to get away from people, and spend a quiet afternoon cleaning weaponry.

“Alright.” Andrea’s smile faded slightly. “Well, congratulations anyway, and I’ll see you at the rehearsal.” Her smile brightened again. “Say hello to the Cat for me.”

“Yes.” Dante watched her walk away, her curls bouncing slightly as she moved.

Deirdre and Jennifer waited for Andrea on the other side of the foyer, their smiles welcoming. Steve and Trevor gave the trio a theatrical ‘huzzah’ as they headed towards the doors.

Outside in the car park, Charlie’s mud-spattered Honda Civic waited. Charlie paused as he neared his car door.

“Huh. Someone’s slashed the tyres.”

Dante frowned. “Your tyres?”

“No, the car next to us.” Charlie nodded at a red Toyota Camry parked alongside.

Dante walked around to survey the damage. Sure enough, the two tyres he could see had punctures. Someone had stuck a knife into the side of them — most likely a four-inch fixed blade. It was a neat enough job, and from

the lean of the car, he could tell the tyres on the other side were also slashed.

“Everything alright here?” Dean walked towards them, keys in hand.

“Erm…” Charlie’s ears went red. “Someone’s slashed this car’s tyres.”

“My car.” Dean stepped over to survey the damage. He scratched his chin, and a look flashed across his face so quickly that Dante only caught it because he was on alert.

Dean didn’t look angry or shocked, both normal reactions to the situation. He looked calculating, as if he were assessing a new possibility.

“Welcome back,” Dean murmured. “Always nice to find the home fires burning.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Charlie.

“Why? You didn’t do it.” Dean flashed a boyish grin.

“Do you need a lift anywhere?” asked Charlie. “Or… I could call the mechanic for you.”

“Merv? That’s okay, I still have his number.” Dean fished his phone out of his pocket. “Don’t worry, Charlie. I’m sure it was just a random delinquent with an unhappy childhood.”

Back in Charlie’s car, Dante eased into his seat. “That wasn’t random.”

“Why do you think that?” Charlie looked over his shoulder to back out of the car park.

“Someone passing by would have targeted a car just off the road. Dean’s car was in the middle of the car park, and close to the theatre. Slashing his tyres risked being caught on a security camera or seen from the overlooking windows. Whoever did it knew which car they wanted to vandalise. And…” Dante glanced back at Dean, who had turned away from them as he made a phone call, “I think Dean has a good idea about who did it.”

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4

In which Dante discusses the lethal potential of the thespian arts

"I'M IN A STAGE PLAY," SAID DANTE.

His Assassins Anonymous group looked back at him from his computer screen. Each person sat in an anonymous room with an unremarkable background and wore, (except for Jasmine) extremely plain clothes.

There were six members of this chapter of the Assassins Anonymous Society: their leader John, Frankie, Caleb, Aubrey, Jasmine, and Dante.

They'd mostly been successful since Dante had joined, with one exception. Caleb had recently fallen off the wagon and terminated the vengeance-bent people who'd tried to terminate him.

Dante wasn't sure where he stood on this. On the one hand, Caleb had killed people. On the other hand, said people were trying to kill him. There had to be a mathematical equation here — like two negatives making a positive.

However, the Assassins Anonymous Creed didn't allow for such ethical calculations. Killing people was wrong, and the aim of joining the group was to stop doing it.

AA operated on a ‘three strikes and you're out’ rule, although it wasn’t exactly clear what happened next. Whenever he met John’s dark eyes, Dante was sure he’d rather not find out.

Thus far, Dante had completed two hundred and forty-one days homicide-free. It hadn’t been easy, but as John reminded the group every week, the aim was to take one day at a time.

“What kind of play?” asked Aubrey.

“Macbeth,” said Dante.

Frankie and Jasmine looked blank, Aubrey nodded appreciatively, and Caleb looked concerned. John, as always, looked calm.

“That’s quite a play to be in,” said Aubrey. “What’s your part?”

“Murderer One,” said Dante, and Frankie snorted a laugh.

“That’s real subtle, man,” he said. “How many people you gonna whack on stage?”

“Just one. And one miss.” Dante didn’t feel like explaining that in the play the miss was Banquo’s child, Fleance.

In his former career, he had never agreed to terminate anyone who wasn’t an adult, in full possession of their senses, and guilty as hell. Although some of his targets had arguably been criminally insane.

“Abe Lincoln was murdered in a theatre,” said Caleb. “Booth did a good enough job with the shooting, but totally botched the escape. Broke his leg on the exit.”

“Brandon Lee,” sighed Jasmine. “Shot on set with a prop gun that was supposed to be loaded with blanks. I’m sure there was a conspiracy there.”

“There’ve been a few actors who died when their props were switched,” said Aubrey. “Real knives instead of fake ones, real nooses instead of rigged ones.”

“It’s a pretty convenient way to kill someone,” said Caleb.

All the ex-assassins looked thoughtful, then tried to look as if they hadn't been considering the possibilities for on-stage murder.

"How do you feel about this role, Dante?" asked John. "I don't want to dissuade you from a new interest, but playing the part of Murderer One could rake up memories for you."

Frankie's tanned face split into a grin. "Guess you were a shoo-in for the role. Or did you have to whack someone in the audition?"

"Frankie," said John. "This is not the time for jokes."

"Sure, man. No big deal." Frankie subsided, his pecs straining against his tight white muscle shirt as he crossed his arms.

"Dante?" prompted John.

"I don't know." To Dante's left, a fly buzzed against the window. He would open the window when he'd finished the call and let it out. For now, though, it fought to fly through, continually hitting the glass, unaware that its efforts would never amount to anything.

"Dante?"

Dante looked back at the screen to see the five other members of his AA group watching him. "I guess… it's fine. It'll be fine."

John regarded him for a long time, his dark eyes clear and perceptive. "If it's not fine, what will you do?"

"I'll call," said Dante.

"Good," said John. "Now, on to other matters. Jasmine, it's been four months since you joined us. Please share with the group any challenges that have come up…"

FORTY MINUTES LATER, Dante stood up from his desk. Behind him in a patch of sun, the cat lay belly up, a contented grin on her face that showed her sharp teeth to good effect.

He crossed the room and slid the bottom pane of the wooden sash window upwards and sent the fly outside with one scoop of his hand. It buzzed off into the cool air, where a world of flowers, trees, and spiderwebs waited to test its newfound freedom.

Could a leopard change its spots? Should leopards change their spots? What did the saying even mean? Presumably, leopards evolved to have spots for a good reason. The only way a leopard wouldn't need spots is if it lived in a zoo, which was a sad fate for any large predator.

Dante frowned. These thoughts were not welcome. Usually, his mind dwelt on simple, practical matters, like 'what's for breakfast?' or 'is that person armed, and if so, do I neutralise him?'

Something was throwing his controlled existence out of kilter, and he wasn't sure what.

Dante checked his watch. He had a rehearsal at five-thirty that evening. Until then, he would spend his time doing maintenance on his tools — both the garden ones and the more lethal ones — and then he would weed underneath the kōwhai tree.

Was it normal for an ex-assassin to take up gardening? How would he know? All the assassins he'd crossed paths with were dead or anonymous.

Dante shut the window and left the room. Outside the window, a praying mantis swayed on a leaf. It flexed its front claws, its green-eyed gaze following the path of the buzzing fly with perfect, ferocious intent.

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5

In which the ghosts of the past make an entrance

"We'll start from the scene where King Duncan arrives at Castle Inverness," said Yves.

The actors were gathered in the Low Bar — a large, oddly shaped space that opened off the theatre foyer. It had been renovated in the eighties, leading to an unfortunate loud-patterned carpet and a fake chandelier in the middle of the ceiling. A bar stood under the lowest point of the sloping ceiling, the bottles of spirits locked away to protect them from the predations of roving actors.

At the front of the room, Mrs Haddock had set out a few chairs to mark the extent of the imaginary stage. Yves stood in the centre, with the cast in a loose crowd around him.

The sound of distant vaudeville music percolated through the walls — the Te Kohe Under-18 Tap and Jazz Group were practising their dance routine in the main theatre.

"Okay, everyone. Check the script to see if you're in this scene." With a few gestures, Yves outlined where he wanted the various cast members to stand. The actors not in the scene went to sit in the chairs arranged in loose rows facing the stage.

Charlie’s heart raced as he joined the other actors on the imaginary stage. He gripped the pages of his script with sweaty fingers. Why had he ever thought this was a good idea? He wished he was back in his favourite patch of bromeliads, clad in his comfortable old gardening pants, shovel in hand.

“It’s just nerves,” said a cheery voice in his ear, and Charlie jumped. “Don’t worry, young man. All the best actors get them.”

Just behind Charlie stood Stanley, looking stolid and serious as King Duncan. But between Stanley and Charlie stood a ghost Charlie hadn't seen before. She was perhaps mid-thirties, with a dark bob and a heart-shaped face.

“Thanks,” whispered Charlie. “I hope I’ll be alright.”

“‘Course you will!” Her heart-shaped face lit up with an impish smile. “And call me Allie. That’s what all my friends did when I acted here.”

“Okay,” whispered Charlie.

Stanley shot him a puzzled glance, and Charlie tried to look as if he were practising lines quietly to himself.

Yves strode across the stage, shirt tails fluttering as he whirled around to face the cast.

“Let me set the scene. Our tragic hero has heard the prophecy of the three witches: he will be king of Scotland. He has told his wife, and she is determined that he will claim the crown. Now his cousin, King Duncan, has arrived to stay the night. King Duncan is Macbeth’s guest, his kinsman, and his oath-sworn lord. Macbeth and his wife plan to murder Duncan in cold blood and frame his loyal servants for the crime.” Yves clenched his fist. “Imagine the tension. The treachery. Macbeth plans to break every rule of loyalty and hospitality. He will sacrifice all his virtue and honour on the altar of ambition.”

Charlie’s mouth went dry. How on earth could anyone convey all that with just acting? It seemed an impossible task.

“This director’s rather good,” said Allie approvingly. “All directors have to be actors too.”

As Yves continued speaking, Charlie realised his nerves weren't just from the fear of acting in front of a crowd of actors, most of whom wanted his part. There was something else going on.

The air thickened. The distant tap-dance music disappeared as other sounds took over — sounds that Charlie was sure no one else could hear. There were footfalls on wooden floorboards, the crash of falling scenery, and a woman's scream.

He blinked, coming back to the present. Allie had disappeared, and Yves sat in the front row, legs crossed, chin in hand as he leant forward in anticipation.

With a start, Charlie realised the scene was about to begin. He'd blanked out for a few precious seconds. What was going on? Had he missed his cue?

"Banquo?"

Frantically, Charlie scanned the text.

"Er… 'This guest of summer,'" began Charlie. Marge smirked as he stammered through the rest of his lines.

Charlie finished and stepped back, trying to regain his composure. Deirdre, playing Lady Macbeth, welcomed King Duncan with false smiles and falser promises.

There was still a wrongness in the air. Charlie loosened the collar of his shirt and wondered if Allie had fled from whatever was causing the air to feel as close as a hothouse.

The last scene wound up, and now Charlie and the boy Oliver had a scene together.

"Banquo!" This time, Yves sounded annoyed.

Charlie cleared his throat. "'How goes the night, boy?'"

His eyes caught on Deirdre, who had returned to the audience to sit in a chair next to her husband Raymond, and Andrea. They were smiling and chatting, and Charlie wished he was also in the audience.

“‘The moon is down; I have not heard the clock,’” read Oliver. He was just ten years old, but seemed to be doing a better job than Charlie.

“‘And she goes down at twelve.’” Charlie’s eyes travelled upwards, then his breath caught. The ugly eighties chandelier was jerking around as if in a high wind.

With a crack, the chandelier sheared off from all but one of its fastenings and swung down, heading straight towards Raymond, Andrea, and Deirdre.

“Look out!” Charlie yelled, but he knew it was already too late.

With a tearing sound, the last fastening ripped out of the ceiling, and the chandelier scythed towards the seated actors.

Charlie blinked. Somehow, Dante was in the air, leaping up like a goalkeeper to slam the chandelier out of the way. Bits of fake glass scattered as the chandelier exploded a metre from the two ladies, the wreckage spraying over the tacky eighties carpet.

The actors leapt to their feet, squawking like a flock of startled chickens. Andrea, Raymond, and Deirdre gaped at the fallen chandelier.

Dante, who had landed with lethal grace on a nearby chair, was glowering up at the hole where the chandelier had been. With the chandelier swinging from behind the seated trio, and everyone else looking at the stage, Charlie bet no one had even seen Dante’s save.

“My, my,” came Allie’s reedy voice in his ear. “What a turn-up for the books.”

The pressure in the air had cleared, and the ghost’s outlines were crisp and clean. “What’s going on?” mouthed Charlie.

“By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes,” said Allie.

The hairs rose on the back of Charlie's neck. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, Charlie, that you have a revenant to deal with.”

“A revenant? What’s that?”

Allie sighed, and the chill wind that blew past Charlie’s ear made him shiver. “It means you have an especially powerful, angry ghost trapped in this theatre. It can’t leave until someone makes it go away. And it looks like it has a grudge against one of those three people.”

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6

Which contains whispers and riddles

AFTER THE REHEARSAL ENDED IN CONFUSION, CHARLIE RETREATED TO ONE of the small changing rooms to collect his thoughts.

In these rooms, the caretaker waged a constant war against the accumulated junk left by the various groups that used the theatre. He appeared to be losing the battle.

The changing room Charlie stepped into had a shelf stuffed with feather boas, and another one overflowing with pink tartan mini-skirts.

Someone had left a fake 1950s radio next to a small TV monitor that currently showed the darkened stage with the ghost light illuminating a pale circle in the centre of it. Charlie felt a moment of kinship with the long ago actors who'd decided that, even when the theatre was empty, a light had to be left on to keep the ghosts happy.

"Hey." The voice was a whisper, and Charlie spun around, thinking that either a ghost or an actor had come into the changing room.

There was no one behind him.

"What do you want?" A second whisperer spoke, and Charlie looked wildly around the room before he worked out what was going on.

A camera view of the stage was useful during a live show. That way, actors didn't have to sneak up into the wings to know whether they had time for a quick nap, beer, or game of poker before they were next needed on stage.

No one hovering in the wings also meant fewer opportunities for bored actors to make faces at the people on stage and try to put them off their lines.

But with plays like 'Waiting for Godot', seeing the stage wasn't much help. So the AV guy, Raymond, had hung a microphone over the stage so people in the green rooms could hear the lines.

The voices Charlie had just heard were coming from the speaker on the TV monitor. He peered at the stage. He couldn't see anyone, so whoever was talking must be hidden in the wings, but close enough to the suspended mic for Charlie to hear them.

He wondered if he should go away. He hated eavesdropping and didn't want anyone to think he was spying on them. On the other hand, why were two people whispering on stage? Could it have something to do with the revenant and the falling chandelier?

"You should quit the play," came the first voice.

It was hard for Charlie to work out much about the speakers. The whispering obscured their natural voices. But he thought maybe one of them was female.

"Really? Why?"

"You know why."

"What happened just now was an accident," scoffed the second voice. "Don't tell me you believe all that nonsense about the Scottish Play."

"That's not why. Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" The whisper was harsh as a startled crow.

"You know what I mean," said the first whisperer.

“I’m sure I don’t.”

“She passed it on to me. I have proof of what you did.”

There was a silence so long that Charlie wondered whether the people had left. His skin crawled at the thought they were coming down here. They might see the screen and know he’d heard them.

At last, the first voice continued.

“If you want to carry on as you are, then leave.”

“Is that a threat?” The second whisperer sounded tense.

There was another long silence.

Then the second voice spoke again.

“It didn’t happen like that at all. If you want to know the truth, I can show you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Do you know why she did nothing? Because she wasn’t sure. But I know what really happened, and I can prove it.”

“Now?”

“No. I need a day or two to get the proof.”

Silence. Then the first whisperer said: “Fine. Two days. Then I go to the police.”

“Two days. And you’ll know the truth. I promise.”

Footsteps sounded through the speakers. Charlie stared at the screen, but the unseen speakers must have left the stage.

He waited, heart pounding, hand poised to switch off the TV screen if someone came into the changing room. The silence stretched, and nothing happened.

Eventually, Charlie opened the door a fraction and peeked out. The corridor was dark and empty.

Charlie crept up the stairs to the backstage exit. Every time he turned to look behind him, there was no one there.

He sighed with relief as he eased the exit door closed behind him. What was the proof the first whisperer had talked about? Why would they go to the police? And what did the second whisperer mean about what really happened?

He wondered if he should take the unknown first whisperer's advice and quit the show. Maybe Dante could be persuaded to do the same.

The problem with that plan was the trapped revenant. Charlie was the only one who could do anything about that. Which meant that if the angry ghost hurt people, it would be his fault.

Charlie's mouth turned down in an unhappy grimace. Sometimes, being the only person who could see ghosts was a lonely duty.

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7

In which Dante considers the virtues of leaving a job unfinished

"So how is the play going?" asked Eleanor. "Any problems getting into character?"

It was the next morning, and Eleanor, Dante, and Charlie sat in the Frog and Gumboot cafe, caffeinating and debriefing.

"There's an angry ghost in the theatre," said Charlie. "It tried to throw a chandelier at… well, we don't know who yet."

"Andrea," growled Dante.

"It could have been Andrea or Deirdre," said Charlie. "Or maybe Raymond. And just afterwards, I overheard two people having a strange conversation."

"About what?" asked Eleanor.

"One was trying to get the other to quit the show," said Charlie. "Saying she — I think it was a she — had proof. And would go to the police. She said: 'Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him,' or something like that. And the other person said that wasn't what happened, and they could prove it."

Eleanor stirred in her seat. "What they said about the old man — that's a quote from Macbeth. It's said by Lady Macbeth, when she's overcome with

guilt over the murder of King Duncan.” She gazed across the crowded cafe, her eyebrows lowered. “I think we need to find out who died last time the play was performed.”

“I think so, too.” Charlie eyed Dante, who was dissecting his cheese scone. “I was thinking maybe we should quit the play. Everyone else would love to have a crack at the part of Banquo. When they tell me ‘break a leg,’ I think they mean it literally.”

“Andrea’s in the play,” said Dante.

“Perhaps you two could do something else together?” suggested Eleanor. “Lawn bowls, perhaps? Flower arranging?”

“Flower arranging would be good,” said Dante. “Although the club secateurs are probably not sharp enough. I could sharpen them.”

“No doubt.”

“Also, I don’t think I want to be Murderer One,” said Dante. “It’s not acting when you’re just playing yourself.”

“What’s the matter, Charlie?” asked Eleanor.

Charlie was staring dolefully at his coffee. He hadn’t even scooped the chocolate-sprinkled foam off the top, like he usually did.

“Something dangerous is waking up at the theatre. Allie — she’s a ghost who used to be an actress there — called it a revenant. I’m worried that if I don’t do something about the revenant, it’ll hurt someone. Maybe even kill them.”

Eleanor sipped her tea, her face thoughtful. “I once spent a summer down in Haiti and met a houngan who seemed genuine. He said banishing ghosts was a risky business.”

“I’ve never done a banishment. I just help ghosts with their unfinished business, and they’re happy to go.”

“Would you know how to do a banishment if you had to?”

Charlie shook his head. “All I know is what I’ve learned from movies and reading books on the occult in the library. Basically, I’d be making it up.”

“So, do you want to quit?” asked Eleanor.

“I… I don’t know.” Charlie took a teaspoonful of foam off the top of his coffee, but didn’t eat it. “Would you quit too, Dante?”

“Only if Andrea does.” Dante drank the last of his coffee and rose. “Does anyone want another coffee or tea?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” said Eleanor.

“An almond croissant, please?” Charlie looked hopeful.

Dante collected his empty coffee cup and headed to the counter.

Laine popped up from behind the drinks fridge and flashed him a friendly smile. “The usual again?”

“Yes please. And an almond croissant.”

Dante retreated to the other end of the counter to wait while Laine steamed milk and ground coffee.

A group of tradesmen pushed through the cafe door, and behind them came Andrea. She saw Dante at the same time as he saw her. She gave him a half-smile that looked a little worried and headed over.

“Hi, Andrea. How are you?” Dante thought about the difference between caring and showing someone that you cared. He doubted his acting experience thus far as Murderer One would be any help.

“Hi.” Andrea stuffed her hands in her jeans pockets. She looked up at him, a stray curl winding down the side of her cheek.

There was a pause, punctuated by Laine banging the old coffee grounds out of the portafilter.

“I was thinking of quitting the play,” said Dante, at the same time as Andrea said: “I’m sure that’s the only accident we’ll have—”

She broke off, biting her lip. “You want to quit?”

“Charlie thinks it’s dangerous,” said Dante.

“Charlie?” Andrea shot a glance over to where Eleanor and Charlie sat at the corner table. “Why would he — oh. Is this about the whole unlucky play thing? I suppose Charlie would know if…” She hesitated, frowning. “How well do you know Charlie?”

Dante wondered what she meant. “He’s my friend.”

“I know. And Charlie’s also a good friend of my grandmother, Mrs Kingi.” Andrea studied his face, and Dante felt like this was a secret message he’d somehow failed to intercept. “I was going to say, I’m sure the chandelier falling was a freak accident. Deirdre said nothing like that’s ever happened before.” Her smile reappeared, dimpling her cheeks. “And I’m looking forward to being in the play. With you.”

Dante stared down at her. Managing two people with different ideas on how to proceed was going to be difficult. He should have thought of this before he acquired more than one friend.

“I’m not sure I want to be Murderer One.”

“Is it because you’re worried about the acting? Deirdre said getting into character can be challenging, especially if it’s a darker role.” Andrea bit her lip. “I suppose you shouldn’t take a part if it’s making you too uncomfortable.”

“Yes.” Maybe this would be a way to get Andrea out of the play. “It does.”

She sighed. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but I do understand.”

“What about you? Being Lady Macbeth’s maid?”

“Oh, I think it’ll be fun! I’m looking forward to being on stage. I’ve never done that before.”

“Fun.” Dante had never been sold on fun. He was even less convinced a haunted theatre was going to be fun.

Laine appeared from behind the coffee machine, cup in hand. “Your flat white.” She handed the cup and saucer to Dante. “And your croissant’s over

there.” She nodded to the end of the counter, where a golden-brown croissant sat on a plate. “Yours is up next,” she told Andrea. “To go?”

“Yes, please,” said Andrea. “I have a pregnant mare to look after.”

Dante accepted the coffee and moved over to pick up the croissant.

“Well, let me know what you decide.” Andrea’s smile was hopeful. “I don’t want to pressure you, but I do think you could do an excellent Murderer One. But only if you’re okay with it.”

Luckily, the noise of the coffee grinder made it impossible for Dante to explain the real issue with his murderous role.

With a cheery wave, Andrea took her coffee and whirled out the door, leaving Dante with his coffee, Charlie’s croissant, and a feeling that things were not heading in the right direction.

On his return, Eleanor turned bright green eyes on Dante. “Did you convince Andrea to quit the play?”

“No,” said Dante. “She thinks it’ll be fun. Though she’s worried that playing Murderer One might be difficult. For me.”

“I see.” Eleanor’s eyes danced. “I don’t think I can help you with that one. You might need some… what would you call it? Sensitivity training, perhaps? Social mores? The intricate dance of courtship? But I can’t help you at the moment.”

“Why not?” Dante’s mind was still fixed on sensitivity training. He wondered if it was similar to the hostage negotiation training he’d received before entering the Urabá region.

Eleanor smiled briskly. “I wanted to tell you both — I have to go away for a time. There’s a thing I need to clear up stateside. Old friends, old troubles…” She made a dismissive gesture with her left hand. “Nothing to be concerned about, except that the timing isn’t great.”

“Old troubles?” Dante wondered if Eleanor needed someone in New York removed. He had a USA passport, driver’s licence, and gun licence he could lay his hands on at a moment’s notice. Not to mention the ease of obtaining

an impressive range of weaponry once he'd landed at LaGuardia. Then he remembered this was no longer something he did. "Do you need help?"

"Oh, no." Eleanor smiled easily. "Just a few minor details. Nothing really."

Charlie frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Are you leaving soon?" Charlie's frown deepened.

"Yes," said Eleanor.

"And you're sure you'll be alright?" Charlie chewed the inside of his cheek.

"Honey, it's not me I'm worried about. You two are in a play so unlucky you're not even supposed to say its name. And you're performing in a haunted theatre where the last time the play was staged, someone died. That sounds like trouble to me."

"When you put it like that…" Charlie gave a worried grin.

"If you need help in New York," said Dante, "I can be there in eighteen hours."

"That's very kind of you," said Eleanor. "And please call me if anything else comes up."

"Okay."

"Good luck," said Eleanor. "And don't break any legs."

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8

In which the plot doth thicken

"BUT YOU MUST COME," SAID DEIRDRE. "RAYMOND AND I ARE SO PROUD of how well you're doing in the play."

"That's so kind of you." Charlie flushed.

He and Deirdre were standing in the foyer of the Te Kohe Theatre after Friday evening's rehearsal. This time, the session had gone smoothly. The only jarring note was the jagged hole in the ceiling of the Low Bar where the chandelier was still missing.

"And your friend Dante," said Deirdre. "Please bring him along. He's new in town, and he seems shy."

"I'm not sure he—"

"We want to make him feel welcome," said Deirdre. "It'll be such a fun night. Say you'll both come."

"See you laters," called Trevor as he headed out the doors, his mullet blowing in the breeze.

"Who left their red jumper in the Low Bar?" growled Callum, the stage manager.

“Oops!” Jennifer hurried back into the rehearsal room. “Sorry!”

“I’m trying to close up here,” grumbled Callum. “Actors. Four-year-olds are tidier.”

“Well, okay.” Charlie found it hard to say no to Deirdre, who looked as lovely as ever. The strong sun had hardly touched her smooth features, her rosy cheeks contrasting with her milk-white skin. “I’ll ask Dante to come along too.”

“Wonderful.” Deirdre smiled warmly at him. “Make sure you get there before seven o’clock — that’s when we’ll start the movie.”

Deirdre waved goodbye and pushed through the theatre’s double doors. Her husband, Raymond, drove up in their BMW just as she exited the building, and she waved to him, her face lighting up.

Charlie sighed as Deirdre’s car pulled away from the kerb. Perhaps one day he’d meet someone who’d be that happy to see him, even after twenty years of marriage. Preferably someone who was okay with the fact that he talked to ghosts. It seemed a tall order.

Dante emerged from the theatre, unreadable as ever.

“Hey, um, there’s a thing tonight,” said Charlie. “Would you like to come?”

“What kind of thing?” Dante’s face was expressionless.

“A, um, party. For all the crew. Deirdre invited us. She said she’d love you to come. Andrea should be there, too.”

“Okay.”

“Really?” Charlie couldn’t hide the surprise in his voice.

“Yes. I am trying new things.” Dante didn’t sound enthused. “When do we go?”

“Er, in about an hour. Enough time to put on nicer clothes, I guess.” Charlie wasn’t sure of the dress code, except that Raymond and Deirdre’s place was posh.

“Do I bring something?” Dante sounded equally uncertain. “To drink. Or eat.”

“Oh, no. It’s the manor. Their parties are always fully catered. So, ah, I’ll come round to yours in an hour.” Charlie wished Eleanor were here. She thrived at this kind of event. Whereas he suspected that he and Dante would be equally awkward at this party, but for very different reasons.

“See you.” Dante’s broad shoulders were briefly silhouetted against the dying sun as he shouldered through the doors, and then he was gone.

Charlie hefted his bag. He wasn’t a natural partygoer, but perhaps tonight would be a chance to kick back and relax.

RATHBURN MANOR WAS a gorgeous clifftop property three kilometres out of town. As the sun sank over the Pacific Ocean, Dante and Charlie drove around the coast, onto the clifftop road, and past Land’s End Creamery.

“It’s tradition,” said Charlie. “Once the cast is chosen and rehearsals start, Raymond and Deirdre always host a party. It’s a ‘get to know you’ party, although everyone pretty much already knows everyone else. There’s a party at the end as well, but it usually takes place at the theatre. The caretaker keeps trying to ban it.”

Dante took another hairpin bend, driving well within the speed limit. The cliffs fell a sheer 100 feet into the sea here, and while he could have drifted every corner, the Buick wasn’t the car he’d choose to push the limits of speed and safety. Also, Charlie got carsick easily.

He took the last curve. On the other side of the road, a narrow paddock ended abruptly at the cliff edge. A fence clung to the edge of the field, half the fence posts already hanging over the abyss.

“Erosion’s a real problem here,” said Charlie. “The bedrock is sandstone, which gets worn away fast. That fence used to be ten feet back from the cliff edge. Raymond hasn’t had a new fence put in yet — that’s why there’re no sheep grazing that side of the road.”

Up ahead, a pair of wrought-iron gates stood open at the entrance to Rathburn Manor. The Buick juddered across a cattle grid, and now they were winding up a broad sweep of driveway lined with oak trees.

“This is one of the original homesteads,” said Charlie. “It dates back to the 1880s, when the Rathburns settled here. They’ve extended the house over the years, but always in keeping with the original Victorian style. The garden is lovely,” he said with feeling. “Some fine old trees. The oaks are all a century old, and there’s Ribston Pippin apple trees they brought over from Yorkshire by ship. That must have been quite a journey.”

Charlie sounded more interested in the fruit trees than the English family who brought them. They crossed another cattle grid, and now the sense of visiting a stately home was undeniable.

The garden surrounding the two-storey building was pure English country — anemones, dahlias, and lavender edging.

“Jamie Monroe does this garden.” Charlie sounded wistful. “It takes a lot of upkeep, but it’s worth it. Just look at those viburnums.”

Dante duly looked and noted that the viburnums were bushy and would give adequate cover for surveillance or a sniper.

The large gravel parking lot to the side of the manor was already half full with cars. Dante picked a spot next to a battered red Toyota Corolla and eased the Buick into it.

They climbed the front steps to find the heavy wooden front door propped open by an oriental vase. Music and laughter from the party floated down the hallway.

Charlie tugged nervously at the cuffs of his button-down shirt. “Te Kohe Theatre do’s are always posh. The local acting crowd’s alright, but a bunch of Deirdre and Raymond’s Auckland friends always show up. I never know what to say. They always want to talk about theatre and literature, and I only know about gardening.”

Dante doubted whether they’d be into talking about covert ops and wet work either. Even if they were, he never discussed such things outside AA.

Charlie paused just inside the hallway. “Do we really want to go in there?”

Deirdre appeared, talking back over her shoulder. She saw them and beamed.

“Charlie! And Dante! Come on in, we’re going to start the show soon.”

And just like that, it was too late to back out.

Dante followed Charlie into a large parlour filled with smartly dressed people. They were all talking loudly, drinks in hand, while discreet black-clad servers walked around with trays of drinks and canapés.

The room itself was in the best tradition of an English country manor. Panelled timber covered the walls to elbow height, then gave way to patterned wallpaper, and then finally to a white ceiling with elaborate plaster friezes and ornamentation around the chandeliers.

“Just like home, eh?” A slim, dark-haired man stood beside Dante. He had an amiable face with soulful dark eyes behind his glasses.

“Yes.”

“I’m Raymond,” said the man, sticking out his hand.

“The owner?”

“Yes, for my sins,” said the man with an easy laugh. “Of course, this place has been in the family for generations — I more or less grew up here.”

“It’s nice.”

“Isn’t it just?” Raymond took in the scene with satisfaction.

Dante also surveyed the crowd, looking for Andrea. In one corner, dark-haired Dean and a younger blond man were acting out a fight scene, both brandishing dessert spoons while a group of ladies looked on, laughing and cooing. In another, Steve, Trevor, and a short, round-faced man talked animatedly. But Andrea was nowhere to be seen.

“Thank you for inviting me. And Charlie.” Dante’s store of small talk was exceedingly small, and nearly used up.

“It’s a pleasure.” Raymond beamed. “Always good to see new people getting involved in the arts. I see Deirdre’s taking charge — we’re all going to watch a short movie soon. It’s become a tradition. Part of the venerable customs of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society.”

As far as Dante could tell, under all Raymond’s polish, their host was genuinely enthused. It made Dante wonder if acting had the potential to become a lasting interest.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dante, and I’d love to talk more, but I’m afraid duty calls. Excuse me for one moment.” Raymond advanced into the circle of chatting people, clinking a teaspoon on his wineglass for effect. “It’s that time again!” he called.

Good-natured cheers and boos greeted this announcement.

“Could you all please follow my lovely wife to the media room?” said Raymond. “Bring your drinks. Chop-chop, people. Time to face the music.”

With that, Raymond began herding the party-goers down the corridor.

“There you are!” Andrea appeared at his side, dark eyes smiling up at him.

She’d done something sparkly around her eyes in deep shades of brown and gold that looked very nice. Dante was about to say so when something else caught his attention.

At the end of the passageway, Jennifer stood, scanning the incoming people. Her thick eyebrows were drawn down in a tense frown, and she was just about the only partygoer without a drink in hand. There was something in her stance that was familiar to Dante. He came on alert, senses wired for danger.

“Dante? It’s nice to see you.” Andrea’s brows drew together slightly.

“Hi,” said Dante. “What’s going on?” He wanted information on why Jennifer was looking so tense.

“I think it’s some sort of film.” Andrea looked around the room, trying to see what had caught Dante’s attention.

“It’s the blooper reel from last year’s production. Tradition.” Steve inserted himself into their conversation. “We have to wait an entire year for the privilege of being embarrassed on film. Most everyone is here from last year, though, so we can all suffer together.”

This information, while clear enough, did nothing to answer Dante’s question.

“The suffering will not be evenly distributed.” Steve affected a radio announcer’s stentorian tones. “Not after Trevor managed to lose his secret script in a flurry of paper over the orchestra pit.”

Trevor stepped up beside Steve, his mullet for once neatly combed. He grinned. “I’d forgotten about that. After tonight it’ll be another couple of months before I live that one down again.”

“Let’s go get good seats,” said Andrea. “This is going to be fun.”

She and Dante joined the flow of people into the media room.

As a rule, Dante didn’t like darkened rooms with only one exit. As the room filled with people, he liked it less and less. It was what he and his colleagues would call a ‘target-rich environment.’

But the same could be said of a theatre, and he’d signed up for this. ‘Try new things,’ the voice of his therapist repeated in his memory. ‘That’s how you make a new life.’

He allowed Andrea to guide him to the middle of the third row of seating — very much not his preference for a quick exit and a commanding view of the room.

The media room was modern, painted a charcoal grey, and crowded with chairs, sofas, and large cushions to sit on. There was a proper projection booth in the back, where Raymond disappeared to get the film ready. It had a large tinted-glass window, which turned transparent as Raymond dimmed the lights.

“Raymond’s a proper film buff,” said Steve, who’d plumped down in a chair next to Dante. “He uses Super 8 film. That’s why it takes him so long to edit it all together.”

It appeared Dante was going to get a running commentary, whether he wanted it or not. He glanced around. Charlie had ended up on the other side of Andrea, with Trevor on the next seat along. There were a few latecomers standing against the back wall. Dante thought he recognised Dean, the star of the show, and the props guy, Alex, whose main job seemed to be running around giving scripts to people.

He tried to locate Jennifer, then saw her seated in the back row. Dante liked this even less. Why was Jennifer acting as if there was a hidden threat? And why was she sitting near the back? Were the two things related?

Dante was about to stand and take a position near the door when the room lights switched off, and a hush spread through the audience. A bright rectangle of light appeared on the wall. It wavered, then jumped into sharp focus.

Raymond opened the booth door and strode to the front of the room. He stood in the glare of the projection light and bowed, an impresario about to give a performance.

“Ladies and gentlemen, dames and lads, welcome to the nineteenth pre-show party for the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society. In the film we are about to see, you will all find yourselves depicted in varying degrees of foolhardiness and misfortune.” A few scattered groans greeted this statement. “But take heart! The actor who lives to act another day can always redeem themself. It’s never too late to vanquish past ignominies.”

“Unless you’re Baxter in The Crucible,” growled Callum. A few laughs broke out among the audience.

“Nevertheless,” said Raymond, “it is my great pleasure to give you: ‘My Fair Lady. The Blooper Reel!’”

Applause erupted. Raymond re-entered the booth. A moment later, a flickering countdown appeared on the projection screen.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The film started with a sped-up sequence of the set being constructed to the Benny Hill theme tune. Then the bloopers began.

As far as Dante could tell, in between glancing around the room for danger, My Fair Lady had been a string of constant mishaps.

There were wardrobe malfunctions (most noticeably, Eliza Doolittle's dress got caught on a lampshade, and said lampshade sent a domino cascade of other objects tumbling off the table as she tried to free herself), props failures (umbrellas didn't go up when needed, and then spontaneously unfolded in the middle of songs), and set problems (Steve got stuck in a cupboard, and the professor tried to make a sweeping exit, only to have the door handle come off in his hand).

This series of disasters was in addition to the many actor-induced problems. Dante was treated to close-ups of actors looking desperately off stage, hoping for a prompt, coming in at the wrong times, leaving at the wrong times, or, in the case of Eliza's father, not arriving at all.

Each clip was greeted with laughter, good-natured teasing, and jokes from the audience.

Dante frowned. His last job had come with its fair share of disasters, but people only laughed about them if they lived to tell the tale. More proof that he'd entered a very different world.

He looked at Andrea, seated next to him. Her face was lit by the reflected square of light on the wall, and her eyes crinkled up as she smiled and laughed at the unfolding play. Dante wondered what it would be like to move through life without worrying about hidden dangers and monsters who looked like normal people.

On screen, Deirdre as Eliza ascended an orange crate to sing 'Wouldn't it be Loverly,' and nearly tumbled off before being saved by Trevor dressed as a fishmonger, his mullet for once looking appropriate.

The audience broke into gales of laughter, which almost masked the soft opening of the media room door. Dante glanced behind him.

Jennifer, her face lit by the corridor light outside, held the door half open. She glanced back into the room, her face twisted with worry. The people closest to the door grumbled, and Jennifer disappeared into the corridor. Darkness returned as the door swung quietly shut.

Dante's gaze fell on the projection booth window. The bright light of the projector made the booth interior indistinct, but he could just make out the

shape of a man inside.

He looked back at the screen, where a harassed stagehand hurried onto the stage to give Deirdre the professor's slippers so she could throw them at the professor.

"Oh, dear," said Deirdre, sitting near the front. "I remember that!"

"It's amazing they keep asking us back." Trevor sounded unabashed.

Marge sniffed. "I don't think it's fair setting us up like this. Not good for the psychic aura, and not all that entertaining."

"Oh, but it is." Steve folded his tattooed arms with a grin, "and you're coming up soon, m'dear."

The procession of disasters wound to a close. Happy cast members filled the last few minutes of the blooper reel, taking down the set and packing it all away. The last sequence was silent. A stagehand came onto the stage, raised his hand, and switched off the ghost light. The screen went dark. The whirr of the projector cut out.

A sigh spread through the audience. Dante studied the faces around him as the room lights came on. The laughter had fled, and now they looked wistful, a curious yearning on their faces.

Then a scattering of applause broke out. It grew in volume, filling the room, and the audience's mood turned jovial again.

People were still teasing each other as they returned to the party, intent on more drinks and possibly more food.

Andrea excused herself and headed for the kitchen bar, and Charlie sidled up to Dante. "I vote we leave soon. I'm not a police officer or anything, but there's a lot of drunk people here, and I bet most of them are planning to drive home. Probably best if we get out ahead of the crowd."

"What about Andrea?"

"She said she's staying the night."

Dante glanced around the room. Andrea was by the drinks table, deep in conversation with Deirdre and Raymond. Dante wondered what they could talk about if he went over there.

The main thing he wanted to discuss was quitting the play, and he had the feeling this would not go down well.

“Okay,” said Dante.

“And I think we should skip the goodbyes,” said Charlie. “That can take a good half hour.”

Night had fallen as they left the brightly lit house, with cheerful voices raised and music starting up.

Dante’s car was nearly blocked in by late arrivals, but he could edge his way out past a Land Rover because the red Toyota Corolla he’d parked next to was now gone.

Charlie was quiet as they coasted out through the garden and down the oak tree-lined driveway.

“I was doing props for the ‘My Fair Lady’ production,” he said at last. “I remember Raymond filming everything with his Super 8 camera. But I don’t remember all those bloopers, except for the one where Benedict couldn’t get off set. Mostly, I remember the magic on opening night when it all came together. That was special.”

Dante couldn’t think of anything to say to this, so he kept quiet.

“I wish we were doing something like that this time,” said Charlie. “A musical with lots of song and dance numbers. Or a comedy.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like how the theatre’s feeling. The ghost that’s come awake is stronger than anything I’ve come across before. I think everyone believing Macbeth is a cursed play is helping it grow in power.”

Dante rounded the first curve of the road that hugged the cliffs. The headlights of his car lit the neighbouring paddock as he took the corner. He slowed the car, then stopped.

“What’s up?” Charlie asked as Dante backed up, turning the car so the headlights illuminated the narrow paddock between the road and the cliff edge.

“The fence,” said Dante. “And the tyre tracks.”

“Oh!” Charlie leapt out of the car and hurried over to the open gate. The Buick’s lights lit a broad swathe of paddock, showing crushed grass where a vehicle had recently driven. “Oh, no.”

Dante’s eyes followed the tracks, which led straight off the edge of the cliff. The fence that clung to the cliff edge now had a gap four metres wide.

“Don’t go near the edge. It may be unstable.” Dante army-crawled to the missing fence section and lay full-length to peer over the cliff edge.

A faint glow to the west lent just enough light to make out the white wash of waves breaking on the rocks far below. The foam traced an oblong shape at the base of the cliff. The light was too dim to make out a colour, but if Dante were to guess, he would have put money on it being a red Toyota Corolla.

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9

In which Dante puts his sensitivity training to good use

CHARLIE RAN HIS HANDS THROUGH HIS HAIR AND BLINKED TIRED EYES AS HE waited for his coffee at the bar table of the Frog and Gumboot.

The events of last night played through his mind in blurred detail: his call to emergency services, Dante's slight shake of the head when the efficient woman on the phone had asked whether there was anyone alive in the car, Deirdre's surprise when they'd reappeared at the party and she'd confirmed that yes, Jennifer wasn't here, and yes, she drove a red Corolla. And how that surprise had turned to grief when Charlie had explained why he'd wanted to know.

Then there was the tired policeman waving them through the roadblock as Dante drove past the crash scene for the second time that night, and the bright searchlights of the rescue helicopter hovering above. There was the tingle down the back of Charlie's neck as a crowd of ghosts gathered at the edge of the cliff and, one by one, stepped off it to float down to the wreckage.

"Charlie? Charlie Wilson?" Mel called out from behind the counter and thrust a steaming mug of coffee into his hands. "We heard about last night," she said in a voice just audible above the cafe noise. "Sorry, mate."

“Yeah.” Charlie took a cautious sip of coffee, the steam warming his face as the precious liquid flowed down his throat. “It was pretty rough.”

Mel gave him a sympathetic look, but the entrance of half a dozen new customers quashed further conversation. Charlie perched himself on a high stool at the bar table.

He was halfway through his coffee when Dante entered. His friend didn’t scan the room to find Charlie — he simply headed in his direction, moving in that uncanny way that seemed slow, but covered ground quickly.

“I want to have another look at the crash site,” said Dante.

“Why?” It was the last thing Charlie wanted to do.

“Because it’s not right.”

“Not right?”

“Not right.” Dante folded his arms.

“Driving over a cliff is not right,” said Charlie slowly, “but do you mean… that it wasn’t an accident?”

Dante considered. “I don’t think Jennifer meant to drive over the cliff.”

“So it wasn’t an accident?” Charlie felt like he was being slow, or missing a giant hidden part of the conversation. He thought about Dante’s life prior to arriving in Te Kohe. “You mean someone made her drive off?”

Dante’s face looked more closed than usual. “It wasn’t me.”

“Of course not,” said Charlie. “You were with me at the party the whole time.” As he said the words, he heard them as if he were outside himself, listening to them. “You think… someone at the party could have…” he wasn’t sure how to end the sentence, so he didn’t.

“I want to have another look at the crash site to reassess the threat level to you. And Andrea. And me.” Dante nodded out the window towards the parked Buick.

“Oh.” Charlie’s stomach tightened. “Really?”

“Yes. When you’ve finished your coffee.” Dante’s gaze fixed on Charlie’s coffee mug.

“Ah, okay.”

The second half of Charlie’s cup of coffee was drunk under the closest scrutiny he’d ever experienced.

DANTE STOOD on the side of the road, appreciating the wide vista spread out before him.

On one side, the foothills of the Tūwhenua Ranges piled up, higher and higher, still brown from the summer heat. To his left, the cliff edge gave way to the blue Pacific Ocean, and it in turn ended in a clean line where blue sky reached up to form a dome of light.

It was beautiful, as such things are reckoned, and it held a peace that Dante imagined he could sink into, given sufficient time.

Maybe that was what he needed — to go to sea or to live up a mountain for a year. He was sure nobody would bother him if he lived in a remote hut several thousand feet above sea level.

“What do you think?” Charlie was looking around with the vague expression Dante thought of as his ‘looking for ghosts’ face.

“I want to see the wrecked car,” said Dante.

“They’re hauling it up later today. It’ll probably end up at Merv’s after the police have checked it over.”

They walked down towards the farm gate where Jennifer’s car had gone off the road, and then off the cliff.

“What do you think happened?” asked Charlie.

Dante gazed at the point where the paddock ended abruptly and the far off view of the sea began. “Jennifer’s car went off the road. She drove across

the field, and then over the edge. It looks like she drove through the fence when she went off the cliff."

"Looks like?" Sometime over the last few months, Charlie had become attuned to Dante's scepticism.

"A section of the wire fence is missing, possibly so Jennifer wouldn't see the wires as she drove towards the cliff. But it's too clean. All the wires are cut at the same point." Dante frowned in disapproval. "Sloppy work."

Charlie's lips parted in consternation. "That's not good." He followed Dante's gaze to the cliff edge. "What time is it in New York right now?"

"Early afternoon." Dante stared at the road, thinking.

Charlie fished his phone out of his pocket and keyed in a number. "Hi, Eleanor? I've put you on speakerphone."

"This is Claude Duval," came a male voice with an American accent. "Not my real name."

"Ah, hi," said Charlie. "Is Eleanor there? It's Charlie Wilson. Her, ah, gardener."

"Really." The voice sounded amused. "Crabgrass playing up?"

"I don't think she has any," said Charlie. "Er, is this not a good time?"

"She's busy breaking into a safe right now. It looks like it'll take another couple of minutes," said the voice. "She'll be free to talk to you after that."

"Ah, okay." Charlie eyed Dante in confusion.

Dante shrugged. What people chose to do when they visited their former home was their business.

"So you're Charlie Wilson," said Claude. "She's mentioned you."

"Oh," said Charlie. "Right."

"And is Dante Reid there?"

"How do you know Eleanor?" asked Dante.

“I’m an old friend and associate,” said Claude. “We’re just resolving a rather delicate situation. Debts must be paid, and so on. And they’re always called in at the most inconvenient times.”

Dante nodded. He knew exactly what Claude (not his real name) was talking about.

A siren whoop issued from the phone, followed by the long wail of an alarm.

“That’s our cue,” said Claude. “Eleanor, darling,” he called, “time to blow this joint. Literally. By the way, your gardener’s on the line.”

The next thirty seconds contained a small detonation, footsteps running along a corridor, clattering down stairs, and then a long, quiet stretch when Charlie guessed Claude and perhaps Eleanor were in a lift. At last there was the solid ‘chunk’ of a door closing, and traffic noise.

“Charlie! How you doing?” Eleanor’s New York accent was noticeably stronger than the last time they’d talked.

“Are you alright?” asked Charlie.

“Oh, yes. Fantastic, actually.” Eleanor did sound happy. “Refreshing to give the old skills an airing.”

Claude’s voice sounded close at hand, as if he’d leaned over to speak in Eleanor’s ear. “Two squad cars at ten o’clock, my dear. And some plainclothes about twenty feet back.”

“Hmmm,” said Eleanor. “Best make it quick, Charlie, or I might have to call you back.”

“We’re at the last bend in the road before Rathburn Manor,” said Charlie. “An actress in our play died last night. The police think it’s an accident.”

“I don’t,” said Dante.

“Well, that is interesting. One moment.” There was a whoosh of air, and the traffic noise vanished. “We’re just taking a shortcut through Macy’s to lose our tail. What exactly happened to this poor person?”

“She drove off a cliff.”

“I thought nothing ever happened in small towns.” Claude’s urbane voice sounded amused. Light jazz came through the phone, presumably supplied by Macy’s.

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” said Eleanor. “Why not an accident?”

“A number of things,” said Dante, “that aren’t quite right.”

“I can see I left just as things were getting interesting,” said Eleanor. “Now, as lovely as it is to hear from you both, Claude and I need to take a detour up a fire escape. I will call you back, but it might be tomorrow.”

The line cut off, and Charlie slowly returned the phone to his pocket.

“She seems to be enjoying her trip,” said Dante.

“Yeah.” Charlie sounded nonplussed. “Dante, did you have holidays? Before you retired here?”

Dante considered. “I went to the Faroe Islands once.” It hadn’t been a holiday, but Dante’s target had died of a heart attack the day before he got there, and Dante’s bosses hadn’t found out for a week. Partly because Dante had decided not to tell them.

“That’s where they shot a Bond film!” Charlie perked up. “What was it like?”

“It was winter, so there were gale-force winds, sleet, snow, and four hours of light a day.”

“Oh. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes,” said Dante. “I liked having no one around.”

“O-kay.” Charlie took in the view of the road, winding along the clifftops. “What else doesn’t look right?”

Dante loped onto the road. There was a line of reflective markers running down the centre of it, and he crouched down to examine them.

“Did you see Jennifer leave the party?” asked Charlie.

“Yes,” said Dante. “She didn’t look drunk. Just on edge, like she was being threatened.” He replayed the view of Jennifer’s face as she left the media room. Who else was in the room? Was anyone missing when the film ended?

The problem with witnessing the events before a murder is that, unless you were the assassin, you usually didn’t know a murder was going to happen. It was another disadvantage of being the sleuth rather than the killer, and Dante mentally added it to what promised to be a long list.

He studied the nearest reflective road marker. “There’s residue of a black substance on these markers.”

“We call them cats’ eyes.” Charlie crouched next to him and examined the nearest marker. “I see what you mean.” He rubbed at the reinforced plastic face of the marker, and his fingers came away streaked with black. He sniffed at them. “You know, I’ve smelt this before. I’m just not sure where.”

Dante paced up the road, examining the other cats’ eyes. “The black residue is on six markers. From there to there.” He pointed at the start of the first curve, to the beginning of the second one.

“Maybe…” Charlie started to get excited. “Maybe someone covered over the markers to make Jennifer go off the road.”

“That’s the most likely explanation.” Dante returned to the open gate to survey the paddock.

“Anything unusual here?” asked Charlie.

“It’s been driven on and trampled by five cars and about a dozen people last night,” said Dante. “All the emergency services were here.”

“A friend who’s in the ambulance service told me a guy rappelled down the cliff,” said Charlie. “Then they airlifted poor Jennifer’s body out of there and flew back to Auckland in the rescue helicopter.”

Dante strode into the field, following the trail of Jennifer’s car. The grass was still cropped short from summer, and not yet greening from the autumn rains. A detail caught his eye. “There’s a hole right next to the path

Jennifer’s car took to go over the cliff edge.” He bent down to study it. “It’s round, half an inch wide.”

Charlie followed Dante to peer down at the hole, visible through the trampled grass. Then he walked closer to the cliff’s edge. “There’s another one! It looks just the same. Any ideas on what it’s for?”

Dante shrugged. “A few.”

“So you think it’s definitely not an accident?”

“Hard to say.”

“If you had to put money on it?”

“If I had to put money on it,” said Dante slowly, “then I’d say it wasn’t a usual kind of accident.”

“Jennifer’s ghost isn’t around, but…” Charlie’s face changed. “Someone’s coming.”

A figure in a white dress was making its way down through the fields towards them. The scene looked gothic to Dante — the grey trunks of the oaks behind her, the hills, and the figure in white, the edges of her gown fluttering as she walked, arms wrapped tight around her midriff.

It was Andrea, and the gothic ambiance faltered as she trod carefully across the cattle grid.

As she drew near, it was clear from her red-rimmed eyes and the dark shadows under them that she’d hardly slept. Her curly hair hung in untidy loops and spirals, escaping the loose plait that hung down her back.

“I’m so sorry.” Charlie walked back over the paddock to meet Andrea on the road. “How are you holding up?”

Andrea shrugged. “Well enough, I suppose. I’ve been up half the night looking after Deirdre. She’s really cut up.” She gave a sad laugh. “I wish I still smoked. I used to, back in the day. And right now, I could do with a packet of Winfields.”

“I reckon go for it.” Charlie gave her a sympathetic smile.

“What are you doing here?” Andrea’s gaze travelled from Charlie to Dante.

“Finding Jennifer’s car last night still doesn’t seem real.” Charlie shrugged uncomfortably. “We just wanted to…” He trailed off, as if not sure how to finish that sentence.

“I don’t believe it,” said Andrea abruptly. “I was talking to Jen just five minutes before we started the movie. Ten minutes before she left. She’s a responsible person. She was planning to drive home, and she wasn’t the slightest bit drunk.”

“Do you know why she left early?” asked Dante.

“No…” Andrea’s gaze seemed magnetically drawn to the gap in the fence at the cliff edge. She shivered and looked away. “She didn’t say. Maybe she got a text message? I thought she was staying till the end.”

“They will have recovered her phone,” said Dante. “They can check her messages.”

“Last night, Jen was telling me about her plans for this winter. She was taking her nieces down to Ruapehu to go skiing for the first time.” Andrea put a hand across her eyes. “I’ll never see her again. Yesterday, she was so full of life, and now… she’s gone.”

Dante stepped forward and placed a hand on Andrea’s shoulder. His usual promise when a comrade had lost a friend was that he would find the killer and dispatch them with extreme prejudice. Right now, though, this might not be the best way forward.

“I’m sure she’s in a better place.” Dante had once heard this at a funeral, and it seemed appropriate.

Andrea looked up at him, blinking rapidly, her face screwed up as if to stop the tears.

“You think so?”

“No.” Truthfulness was important in a relationship, wasn’t it?

Andrea’s eyes widened. “What?”

“But…” Dante tried to rescue the situation, “...she will be. As soon as…” He looked over Andrea’s shoulder to see Charlie frantically mouthing something to him, “as soon as we find out what happened. And…” he stopped short of saying ‘avenge her,’ “figure it out.”

Andrea did not look relieved. “What happened? Figure it out?”

“Well,” Dante thought fast. Would telling Andrea his suspicions get her to quit the play? He wasn’t sure. “We don’t know why Jennifer went off the cliff.”

Andrea sniffled. “Deirdre thinks she was tired. She should have stayed the night. She’s been so stressed lately.”

Dante finally worked out what Charlie was trying to say. ‘Hug her!’

He took his hand off Andrea’s shoulder and carefully slipped his arm around her shoulders, followed by his other arm.

“I’m sorry.” Andrea sniffled. “It’s just so awful.”

“I wish… I wish there was something we could do,” said Charlie.

Andrea gave an awkward half laugh. “I know what you mean. I’m still in shock. It doesn’t feel real.”

“I was wondering if you could answer a few questions.” Dante tried to sound tactful. His sensitivity training had not included talking to the recently bereaved.

Circled in his arms, Andrea turned tear-filled eyes up to him. “What?”

“Did anyone else leave the party at the same time as Jennifer?” asked Dante. Behind Andrea, Charlie was shaking his head again.

“I don’t know. I was watching the movie with you. I think Jen left about halfway through. The catering staff said she asked one of them to walk her to her car.” Andrea sniffed. “We’ve been friends for nearly ten years. I’ve looked after both her dogs. I comforted her when Trixie died. She’s always been there for me.” Andrea swallowed a sob on that last word and buried her face in Dante’s chest.

Andrea’s shoulders shook as she cried. Dante held her close and wondered why Jennifer had asked a staff member to walk her to her car. It was an odd thing to do. Rathburn Manor had outdoor lighting that made it easy to navigate the car park at night.

At last, Andrea gave a deep sigh and lifted her head from Dante’s chest. “I’d better get back to Deirdre. She’s even worse than me. I had to hold it together for her. Thank you.” She smoothed his black jumper where her tear-stained face had rumpled it, then looked up at him intently, as if trying to decode a hidden message. “Thank you for being here.”

With that, Andrea walked quickly away, heading up the road towards Rathburn Manor.

Dante watched her go. He’d wanted to tell her that now was a good time to quit the play, but maybe Charlie was right. A hug was better. He could always tell her that later.

Charlie cast a look around the deserted paddock. “So, what do you think happened here?”

Dante surveyed the scene, measuring angles and creating various scenarios in his mind. “I think this was a trap. It was designed to make Jennifer’s death look like an accident. And in that case, it would require careful timing. Which means it’s far more likely to have been engineered by someone at the party. Or someone with an accomplice at the party.”

Charlie grimaced. “It’s an awful thought, but… who else was watching the movie?”

“All the theatre people,” said Dante. “Steve, Marge, Trevor, Callum, Dean, Stanley, Liam… the whole crew.”

“That’s a lot of suspects,” said Charlie.

“It could also have been someone who wasn’t at the party,” said Dante.

“That’s really a lot of people.”

“It was rather well done,” Dante conceded. If he had been in charge, the probability of discovery would drop to a vanishingly small 3%. But he

judged this scenario an 80% chance of passing unnoticed. “The police will probably think it was an accident.”

“That’s not good.” Charlie chewed on his lip.

Dante wondered how many small towns had undiscovered murders lurking in their history. Probably a lot.

“If I tell Andrea she needs to quit the play because Jennifer was murdered, do you think she would? Because then we could just let it go.”

“I don’t know.” Charlie’s brow furrowed in thought. “You’d probably have to get Deirdre to quit too, because Andrea might stay to protect her.”

“Deirdre’s a suspect,” said Dante. “Near the top of the list. This happened right by her house.”

Charlie shivered. “I don’t think just letting it go is a good idea. Because it might happen again. And then it would be our fault.”

“It would be the fault of whoever did the murder.” Dante did not subscribe to the guilt by omission argument. If that were true, then the police forces of several foreign countries bore responsibility for the government work he’d completed over the years.

“Yes, but if we know a crime’s been committed, and we do nothing, it sort of is our fault.” Charlie’s auburn eyebrows drew together.

Dante sighed. It was this kind of thinking that led to civilian casualties. “How about we go to the police?”

“Oh.” Charlie’s brows lifted in surprise. “Good idea. Do you think we could go now?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t Dante’s normal mode, but since he was trying to be a civilian, why not do what a good citizen would, and contact the appropriate authorities? As plans went, it at least had novelty on its side.

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10

In which Dante learns about provincial rugby

THE TE KOHE POLICE STATION WAS A SMALL BUILDING THAT HAD originally been constructed in the forties. It had then been extended in a ramshackle way in the seventies, eighties, and nineties.

Its current incarnation had a smart double-height entry foyer, which rapidly became a warren of low-ceilinged spaces and beige corridors.

On his last visit, Dante had assessed the building for entry and escape routes, surveillance points, and general defensibility. He'd given it an 'F.'

Standing next to him, Charlie contemplated the revolving entry door. "I don't like being here. It reminds me of that time I got arrested and Eleanor had to bail me out. I got good-cop / bad-copped by Inspector Avery and Sergeant Hemi."

"They tried that on me too," said Dante. New Zealand police were far too law abiding to do a credible bad cop act. They needed someone like Dante to remedy this shortcoming.

"Well, I guess we better go and tell them." Charlie drew a breath. "I wish Eleanor were here."

Dante and Charlie navigated the revolving door and approached the reception desk.

“Hey, Cynthia,” said Charlie. “We want to make a police report?” He made it sound like a question.

Dante frowned. As far as he could tell, the reception desk was empty.

Charlie listened for a moment, then spoke to Dante. “Cynthia says a new policeman from the Serious Crash Unit has been visiting.” He listened again. “A guy called Seth Burns. She said he’s trodden all over Hemi’s toes and he’s not in a good mood.”

“Who was that?” asked Dante as they headed down the corridor.

“Cynthia Davies,” said Charlie. “She haunts all the quiet reception desks around town. She says it's a peaceful way to spend the afterlife, and she’s not ready to move on yet. She’s worried the next world will be a giant waiting room with nineties magazines and no wifi.”

It was a fair enough concern. If Dante thought about it at all (which he usually didn’t), his hope was that after death came oblivion. It seemed the tidiest way to finish things.

Voices came from an open door halfway down the corridor.

Dante paused. “I think it’d be better if you do the talking.”

“Why’s that?”

Dante thought of Boris the Bull. “I sometimes rub people the wrong way. Especially police.”

“Er, I’ll give it a go, but…” Charlie glanced at the open door. “I’m not that great with the police either.”

Dante doubted Charlie could do worse than he could at convincing the police to believe him.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Right…” Charlie rubbed his palms on his trousers and walked the final length of corridor. As he got to the door, he called a polite “Hello?”

This was a mistake in Dante's view. Gathering intel before engaging was always best practice.

"Yep?" came a deep voice, unmistakably Hemi's.

"Hi, Hemi, it's me," said Charlie, poking his head around the door. "And Dante."

Dante had never been in this room before. It was the tea room / briefing room / sports room. The whiteboard had a series of action items written neatly on it, and the TV in the corner currently showed a provincial rugby game.

Sergeant Hemi Henare sat at the table, glaring at the TV.

"Er, hi," said Charlie.

"Hmph." Hemi looked across at them, then back at the screen. "My nephew Jay's in the starting fifteen, and what do they do? Bench him. Idiots."

"Er, yes," said Charlie. "We were just wondering… well, we had a couple of thoughts about the crash that happened last night."

"Oh yeah?" Hemi flicked his eyebrows up at them.

"Yes, erm, you see, we, ah…" Charlie cleared his throat.

"Spit it out, Charlie." Hemi folded his arms. "Haven't got all day."

"We're pretty sure it wasn't an accident," Charlie blurted, then looked like he wished he could take the words back.

"Oh yeah?" Hemi's eyebrows rose higher.

Charlie rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at Dante. 'Help me out,' he mouthed.

Dante folded his arms to match Hemi. Eleanor called this 'mirroring' and it was meant to build rapport. "It wasn't an accident."

"Really." Hemi pursed his lips. "Enlighten me."

“Well, ah, you see,” said Charlie, “the fence line by the cliff was cut, not driven through.”

“That’s your professional opinion?” asked Hemi.

“A professional would have made sure the fence was cut in an uneven way,” said Dante.

“Is that so,” drawled Hemi. “And?”

“Er, there were traces of black on the road reflectors,” said Charlie.

“I think they call that road tar,” said Hemi. “Common enough substance, found in roads.”

“It wasn’t road tar,” said Dante.

“I see.” Hemi rocked slightly in his wheeled office chair, causing an ominous squeaking sound.

“And there were these holes,” said Charlie. “Two of them, running alongside the tyre tracks as they led off the cliff.”

“Holes. In the paddock.” Hemi’s eyebrows had gone from raised to lowered. “With observations like that, it’s a wonder Scotland Yard hasn’t already called you in.”

Charlie’s face flushed beetroot red. “Look, Hemi, I’m not saying—”

“I don’t think you know what you’re saying.” The words were punctuated by angry squeaks from the chair. “Dammit!”

Charlie jumped, but Hemi’s ire was directed at the TV screen, where a youth on the opposite side from Hemi’s nephew was about to score a breakaway try.

“Bunch of useless amateurs!” barked Hemi, and Dante wasn’t sure whether he was addressing the rugby players, or himself and Charlie. Possibly both.

“Have you finished examining the car yet?” asked Dante.

“What?” Hemi glared up at Dante.

“The brake line will likely be perforated.” Dante stopped short of saying, ‘It’s what I would do.’ “The autopsy report will reveal if Jennifer was drugged. Nothing major, just a subtle sedative to slow her reactions.”

“Do you think you’re the first people to come in here today to tell me how to do my job?” Now Hemi sounded beleaguered. “I’ve had an earful the last twelve hours, and we’re just getting started!”

“I’m sorry,” said Charlie, contrite. “Seth Burns was probably just—”

“How do you know who’s involved?” Hemi rose from his office chair in one heave, sending it rocketing back on squeaky wheels to careen off the wall. “The SCU guy just got here.” He advanced a step, his heavy boot going ‘thump’ on the floor.

“Erm…” Charlie went from flushed to pale in under three seconds.

“Let me tell you two what to do.” Hemi’s voice went low and dangerous, and he raised one accusatory finger as he glared at them. “You stay the hell away from my crime scene. I do not need civilians wandering around, bugging me and stuffing up police procedure. Do you hear?”

Dante wanted to tell him that adopting an aggressive stance while holding up one finger was a good way to get that finger broken, but Charlie was already backing towards the door.

The door slammed as they retreated into the corridor, blocking out the sounds of rugby and Hemi’s disgruntled mutterings.

Charlie stared at the door. “I’ve never seen Hemi like that before,” he said in an awed whisper. “I’ve heard he gets super grumpy on no sleep, but I thought Cynthia was exaggerating.”

Dante re-ran their conversation in his mind as they retraced their steps back to the reception area. “I don’t think that went well.”

“You reckon?” Charlie shook out his hands, as if trying to lose some lingering tension. “I thought he was going to throw a haymaker.”

“That would have been a bad idea.” Dante would have done his best to make sure Hemi didn’t get hurt, but police brutality might have been

unavoidable.

“I guess we can’t hand this off to the police then.”

“No.” Dante didn’t favour the idea of further police consultation.

Charlie waved at the empty reception desk. “Hey, Cynthia.”

Dante wondered, as he had several times before, how complicated it would be to see things no one else did.

“Can you do me a favour?” Charlie paused, listening to a silent conversation. “Sure, I’d be happy to do that. Mills & Boon? Yeah, sure. I was wondering if you could do a bit of snooping for me. We just want to know if Hemi and the SCU guy find out anything about the crash. Hey, thanks. I appreciate it.”

Dante pushed through the revolving door and out into the bright autumn day. “What are you doing with Mills & Boon?”

“Cynthia wants me to make her an 80s Mills & Boon ghost book.”

“How do you do that?”

“You burn it. I feel awful doing it, but it’s the only way to make Cynthia a book she can actually read.” Charlie sighed. “I can’t help thinking that Eleanor would have made Hemi believe us.”

“Maybe.” Dante had seen Eleanor at work before, and it was impressive.

“So, what do we do now?”

“Breakfast,” said Dante.

Charlie nodded. “Good call.”

As he drove back into the town centre, Dante considered his next move. Being a responsible citizen had not borne fruit. But if he could get Andrea and Charlie to quit the play, then the problem of Jennifer’s death and a murderer at large would become someone else’s problem. It seemed a reasonable outcome to aim for.

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11

In which Dante receives relationship advice

"IT IS WITH GREAT SADNESS THAT WE BEGIN THIS REHEARSAL," SAID YVES. "I understand if anyone wishes to bow out now. It's a difficult time, and Jennifer will be sorely missed. The funeral will be this Sunday, and you are all welcome to come and pay your respects. We will now have a minute of silence."

The Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society stood with bowed heads in the Low Bar, as the second hand of the clock ticked slowly around to twelve.

Dante studied the floor and wondered why people thought sixty seconds the appropriate time to remember a person who was gone. It didn't seem very long.

The clock completed its circuit, and people raised their heads and looked around.

"Very well." Yves's voice was soft in the quiet. "If anyone has concerns, please see myself or Mrs Haddock. I'd like all the actors to gather here in five. Backstage staff, please see Callum down in the Crypt."

The gathering broke up, voices hushed as people prepared to get to work. Deirdre, pale and puffy-faced, stood in one corner of the room talking with Raymond, her husband.

Their conversation appeared tense. Raymond's shoulders were hunched, and his hands made sharp motions as they talked. At last, Deirdre threw up her hands in a gesture that could have been agreement, or the opposite.

Five minutes later, Yves stood with the cast gathered around him. "It has been brought to my attention by several of you," one eyebrow lifted in an ironic tilt, "that the part of Lady Macduff is now vacant."

The actors murmured in a low buzz. Dante caught a few whispers of 'seems in poor taste,' 'but I thought that' and 'the show must go on…'

"I'm pleased to announce that Andrea Kingi has been given the part of Lady Macduff," said Yves.

An offended murmur ran through the acting crowd. Phrases like 'no acting experience,' 'why weren't we offered,' reached Dante's ears, but they barely registered over the mounting warning signals in his brain.

The plan was to get him and everyone else out of the production, not more embedded. Did Andrea even know how to defend herself? He needed to talk to her now. Right now.

Andrea looked around the circle of actors, a defiant tilt to her head despite the dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes.

"Now that's sorted," said Yves, "let's get to work."

The rest of the rehearsal passed in a parade of ponderously pronounced lines, literal hand-wringing (by Marge, sullenly standing in as Lady Macbeth's maid), and Steve needing to be prompted three times to step forward and deliver the line: 'The Queen, my lord, is dead.'

Eventually, Yves called a break, and the actors dispersed to have a snack and complain about the production in general and one another in detail.

Dante zeroed in on where Andrea stood, having what looked like a serious talk with Steve.

"Do you think I'll get killed on stage, or offstage?" Andrea was saying as Dante approached.

Steve scratched his ginger goatee. “Depends on what the high command says. But it’s generally done offstage.”

As he walked over, a distant part of Dante noted that his pulse was elevated and his cortisol levels were higher than usual.

He loomed behind Steve, who looked up, saw Dante, and shrank back.

“Er, hi, Dante. Nice to see you?” His words curled up into a question as he took in Dante’s stony face.

“Andrea,” said Dante. “We need to talk.”

“Right, er, see you!” Steve flapped his hand in a hasty wave and beetled off towards the bar.

Andrea gave Dante a smile that lacked her usual spark. “Hi, Dante. What’s up?”

Dante drew in a slow, even breath and let it out equally slowly. He monitored his heart rate as it returned to normal, though his cortisol levels remained elevated. “I don’t think you should be in the play.”

Andrea frowned. “And why is that?”

“Because…” Dante considered. He didn’t have Eleanor’s flair for deception, or Charlie’s ability to be truthful and get people on his side. Also, there was Andrea’s injunction that she didn’t want him to protect her at work. Was this work? He wasn’t sure. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Andrea’s frown deepened, shading into another emotion Dante wasn’t sure he could accurately name.

“I want to do this for Jennifer,” she said quietly. “She was always a ‘show must go on’ kind of person.” Andrea blinked as tears threatened to overflow her eyes. “Jen was the best friend you could ever ask for. I know she sometimes came across as a bit… rough-edged, but she had a heart of gold. I wish you could have gotten to know her.”

“If you stay, it might be dangerous.” Was warning the same as protecting? Again, this seemed to be a grey area. Dante didn’t like grey areas.

“Dangerous how?”

“I don’t know yet.” Dante was still working on the angles of attack. “But I don’t think Jennifer’s death was an accident.”

Andrea’s eyes widened and her hands flew to her mouth. “Why? How? Have you told Hemi?”

“Yes, and…” Dante didn’t want to go over that conversation again. “That’s why I don’t want you to be in the play anymore. I’ll quit too,” he offered.

“But… does that mean other people in the show might be in danger too? What about Deirdre? And Raymond?”

Dante shrugged. He hadn’t factored them into his calculations. There was, however, a strong possibility that Deirdre or Raymond had set the trap for Jennifer. They were ideally placed to do so.

“Surely the police are going to look into this more closely?” Andrea’s brow wrinkled in worry.

“I don’t think so,” said Dante.

“Because…?”

“They’re sure it’s an accident. And they’re not open to feedback.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Did you threaten to shoot someone again? Like with Boris?”

“No.”

Andrea folded her arms. “I don’t think you’re being one hundred percent straight with me.”

Dante considered. “No?”

“What about Charlie? Are you going to get him to quit too?”

“Yes.”

“And if he doesn’t want to? He’s got a major part.”

“So do I. I’m Murderer One.”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed further. “Why are you so sure Jennifer’s death wasn’t an accident?”

This conversation was not going according to Dante’s plan. “I’m sure we can find another activity to get to know each other. Glass blowing?” On second thought, 1000-degree molten glass might not be the best idea.

Andrea shoved a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. “Would you have told me about Jennifer if I wasn’t in the play?”

“No.” Again, this might not have been the best thing to say. Andrea stepped away, levelling a glare to rival Boris the Bull’s straight at Dante.

“Well, I have news for you. I’m staying. There’s no way I’m going to lose another friend to… to whatever or whoever caused Jennifer’s death. And I want the full story of what you think happened.”

“I don’t want to do that.” Dante thought telling Andrea that her close friend was a murder suspect would not go down well.

Andrea’s eyes widened. Her mouth opened to say something, then she shut it, spun on her heel, and stalked away.

Dante watched her go. He had the sense that he could have handled things better, but he wasn’t exactly sure how.

Andrea rejoined Steve, and they both talked quietly with Trevor at the bar. Across the room, Marge, Hilda, and Sylvie glared at her and whispered.

Dante remembered the conversation with Hemi. Would actors murder to get the part they wanted? Perhaps he should tell Marge and her cadre that this was a bad idea.

Maybe, a voice at the back of his head advised, you should run that by Eleanor first. Dante nodded to himself. He would do that.

Everything about the theatre world had proved more complicated than he’d expected. Who would’ve thought a place where people pretended to be other people would have so many opportunities for misunderstandings?

The last time Dante had dealt with this much intrigue had been during the Munich Security Conference. It was traditionally a place for double agents

from rival nations to gather and try their hand at becoming triple agents.

Fortunately for Dante, his instructions had been simple: eliminate anyone who tries to recruit you. Since he was the only single agent there, everyone assumed he was already a triple agent and left him alone. He'd spent a lot of time sipping mocktails at the pool bar.

He went over to where Charlie had left his backpack and took his friend's phone out. He keyed in the six-digit entry code he'd seen Charlie use and called Eleanor.

"Hi, Charlie," said Eleanor. "Or is it Dante?"

"It's me," said Dante. "I want Andrea to quit the play because it's dangerous, but she won't."

"Have you told her what's going on?" asked Eleanor.

"I did, but I think that made her want to stay," said Dante.

"Ah," said Eleanor. "Is she trying to protect someone?"

"Yes. Her friend. Who is a suspect."

"I see…" There was a long pause. "And you don't want her getting further involved in finding the murderer, because that might make her a target."

"I don't want anyone involved." Maybe Dante could kidnap Yves. That would stop the play, wouldn't it?

"Don't do anything hasty," said Eleanor. "This would be the time to proceed with caution."

"What do you do in a relationship," said Dante slowly, "when you disagree about something?"

"I'm probably not the right person to ask," said Eleanor. "My fallback position is to do exactly what I want, and keep it a secret. Alternatively, I get the other party to think it was their idea in the first place."

"That could work. Although… it doesn't sound ideal." Dante admitted this reluctantly. He could summon strong arguments for following exactly this course of action.

Eleanor’s voice became pensive. “Lady Macbeth and her husband had a good relationship. He was honest with her, and she supported him fully in all his endeavours.”

Dante paired this up with the plot of the play. “He ended up getting his head chopped off, and she killed herself.”

“Perhaps not the best role models then. The problem is that on the occasions when I’ve broken with my usual way of doing things, the results have been…” Eleanor paused. “Not good.”

“Did anyone die?”

Another pause. “You have to remember, most people don’t spend their time around real danger. The stakes are generally lower.”

“They weren’t for Jennifer.”

“True. If you’re right, then somewhere in all the sound and fury of your play is a murderer. I think, perhaps, that the best way to keep Andrea safe is to find out who it is.”

Dante frowned. This was not the advice he’d been hoping for.

“You know, it could be an opportunity disguised as a challenge.”

Dante didn’t think he wanted an opportunity right now. He’d always been sceptical of them and saw no reason to change his stance.

“Dante?”

“Goodbye, Eleanor. I’ll let you know if anything else comes up.”

Dante cut the call. He scanned the room and found Andrea by the bar. She raised her hands in a futile plea as Steve mimed stabbing her with an imaginary dagger. Andrea clutched at her side, a grimace of pain twisting her face. Dante unclenched his jaw. Opportunity was not the word he would have chosen.

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12

Which contains tea, coffee, and many murder methods

CHARLIE SCANNED THE *TE KOHE BUGLE* WHILE HE WAITED AT THE BAR table of the Frog and Gumboot for their coffee order to be called.

The local newspaper proclaimed ‘Locals demand improved road safety after fatal crash at Te Urupari cliffs.’ He turned to the horoscopes page. The forecast for Pisces read:

With the moon in Capricorn, you will find your hobbies bring fresh challenges. Be prepared to throw out assumptions if you want success. Lucky colour: red. Lucky numbers: 3, 11, 56.

“I thought you’d be sceptical about that sort of thing,” said a voice behind him, and Charlie jumped.

“Eleanor!”

He spun around to see Eleanor giving him her usual ironic half-smile. Her eyes, however, were warm and sympathetic.

“Good to see you. How are you holding up?”

Charlie shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“You haven’t seen Jennifer’s ghost?”

“Not yet. I’ll ask around the local crowd again, but I think she’s moved on. Most people do. I thought you weren’t coming back for another week or so?” Charlie eyed Eleanor with concern.

“I was missing all the fun.” Eleanor’s smile turned impish.

“It’s not fun when someone drives off a cliff,” said Charlie reproachfully.

“Of course not.” Eleanor scanned the article on Jennifer’s crash. “But it is intriguing when Dante says it’s not an accident, and you’ve got a mansion full of actors who are also suspects. How is the production going by the way?”

“We’re in a bit of a bind,” said Charlie. “Dante wants to quit, but Andrea won’t. I’m not sure I want to either. I need to sort out this angry ghost, and being in the play gives me the best chance at doing that.” He briefly outlined the events of the last few days.

Eleanor listened attentively, her finely pencilled eyebrows drawing together as Charlie spoke. “I’m sure we’ll work out what to do when the time comes.”

“We?” Charlie felt both relieved and concerned about this development. “What about the New York things you were sorting out?”

“Oh, they're fine.” She waved a hand in dismissal. “Nothing to worry about.”

Charlie had the feeling that Eleanor’s ‘fine’ might be similar to Dante’s ‘fine.’ It seemed to encompass anything from ‘totally normal’ to ‘catastrophic chaos.’

“If we’re going to investigate,” said Eleanor, taking a sip of her Assam tea, “I might call for reinforcements.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was thinking of getting Marcus Avery involved.”

“Oh.” Charlie wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

He could admit that the last time they'd been detecting, Inspector Marcus Avery had been helpful. But the first time they'd met, he'd arrested Charlie. And then, of course, there was the matter of the ghosts.

Charlie had had enough people sneer, accuse him of being a fake, or — worse — want him to contact dead relatives, for him to be wary of bringing up ghosts with new people.

Eleanor gave a quick smile. "There are two reasons why Avery might be helpful. One, he has access we don't. For instance, I'd like to know if Jennifer was drunk, or drugged, when she crashed. The coroner's report won't be made public, but Avery could probably get his hands on a copy."

"And the second reason?"

"I seem to like having him around."

"But you two don't seem to get along. You bicker constantly."

Eleanor shrugged. "It's part of the charm."

The cafe door swung back as Dante entered. He saw Charlie and Eleanor, looked completely unsurprised, and made his way over.

"Do you want to look into the car crash too?" he said by way of greeting.

"I do indeed," said Eleanor. "What's interesting about this situation is that we have a reverse locked room mystery."

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie.

"Normally, if a victim is found dead inside a locked room, the mystery is how did they die. There are several established ways the killer can accomplish this and leave the door still locked behind them."

Dante's brows drew together. "I can think of eight ways to do that. Ten, if you include metamaterial cloaks and nano drones."

"Quite." Eleanor took a sip of tea. "However, this is a reverse locked room. The victim, Jennifer, leaves and, according to you, all of our suspects stayed in the room, watching a film. The movie ends, and all the suspects are still there. So, who did it?"

“Someone could have arrived early, and lain in wait to arrange the trap that sent Jennifer off the road,” said Dante.

“Yes, a hidden accomplice is possible,” said Eleanor. “But not likely. How often do people bring in a stranger to help them with a murder? Dante, please don’t answer that one.”

“Someone could have driven in after us,” said Dante.

“They didn’t,” said Charlie.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow at him.

“Cynthia told me,” said Charlie. “She’s a ghost receptionist who’s been hanging out at the police station. There’s a traffic counting tube a kilometre down from the crash site on the only road going to Rathburn Manor. Cynthia heard Hemi talking about it. After seven, no cars came up the road until the emergency vehicles arrived.”

“Good sleuthing, Charlie,” said Eleanor. “If it was someone at the party, how did they leave the room ahead of Jennifer without being noticed? They would need to set the trap to misdirect Jennifer off the cliff after the last car drove up the road to the party. Then, they must have removed the evidence of the trap before you and Dante reached the crash site. Lastly, they had to have hurried back to Rathburn Manor before the film ended so no one would notice their absence. That’s a tight time window.”

“Could there be identical twins?” Charlie had always wished he had a twin. Though not for the purposes of committing murder, obviously.

“Maybe, but it seems far-fetched,” said Eleanor. “You’re sure no one else left before the end of the film?”

“No…” Charlie’s voice trailed off as he thought. “Raymond was doing the projection in that booth, Deirdre was sitting in the front, I’m pretty sure she was there the whole time. Dean was standing at the back, next to Alex. Everyone else was sitting down. Opening the media room door let the light in, so it was easy to see when Jennifer left.”

“How long after the film ended did you leave?”

“Five and a half minutes,” said Dante.

“We could discount everyone in the media room from our suspect list,” said Eleanor. “But I feel that would be a mistake. Also, it would leave us with no suspects, which is a terrible way to start an investigation. Rather, I think we focus on how someone could have left the media room at the start of the movie, and returned before the end, without anyone seeing them.”

“We’ll need to re-examine the media room,” said Dante.

“Most definitely,” said Eleanor. “And since everyone up at Rathburn Manor that night is involved in Macbeth, I think I will need to attach myself to the play somehow.”

“Everyone’s been cast already,” said Charlie. “Except… well, there’s no Lady Macbeth’s maid. I suppose they’ll need to recast her, now that Andrea’s been promoted.”

“I think you two have the stage covered,” said Eleanor. “It’d be more useful to have someone working backstage. I will see what I can do.”

Charlie was sure Eleanor would sort something in record time — she was that kind of person.

He couldn’t help wondering if the hostile theatre ghost and Jennifer’s death were somehow connected. What was it Macbeth had said? ‘Blood will have blood.’

Charlie’s neck prickled, and he bit into his almond croissant to take his mind off murder.

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13

In which Dante has a new experience

A SMALL, BEARDED MAN WITH A POTBELLY AND ROUND GLASSES SIDLED UP to Dante.

“Hi.” The man stuck out a hand, and Dante shook it. “I hear you’re Murderer One.”

“Yes?” Dante was still not happy with this moniker. It telegraphed the wrong message about his new life.

“I’m Benedict Bede, at your service.” The tubby man sketched a bow. “And I’m in charge of fight choreography.”

“I see,” said Dante, who didn’t, really.

“We’re going to get you started on stage fighting.” Benedict beamed. “Me, Trevor, Steve, and Liam, when he’s free. He tends to get excited though, so we only want him in at the end, once we’ve sorted out the tricky parts.”

“Okay.”

Benedict tucked his thumbs into the loops of his jeans and looked Dante up and down. “I reckon you’ll make a first-class stage fighter.”

Dante wasn’t sure this was a good thing.

“Let’s get started.”

Five minutes later, Dante was being introduced to the secret art of pretending to fight without hurting anyone. It did not come naturally.

“Strike me. Go on. Just try it.” Benedict Bede bounced on the balls of his feet, ducking and weaving while he held his cardboard shield up.

Dante angled his sword. It was timber painted to look like steel. He supposed that, applied with enough force and to the correct spot, it could be lethal. But this particular weapon did not inspire confidence.

“Go on.” Benedict sounded breathless. The industrious ducking and weaving was taking its toll. “Don’t be scared. I’ll block.”

Dante experimentally tapped Benedict’s shield with his sword.

“Excellent!” Benedict peered out from behind his shield, grinning broadly. “See, nothing to worry about. Now, let’s take Dante through a few of the old favourite manoeuvres, alright lads?”

Steve grinned and stuck out his ginger goatee in a gesture of agreement, tattooed hands wrapped around a painted wooden sword.

Trevor pushed his mullet back behind his ears and nodded, looking serious. “Right on.”

They were practising the Noble Art of Stage Fighting down in the Forgotten Green Room, a gloomy room just off the Crypt crowded with cleaning materials and fake weapons in equal numbers.

Dante watched in bemusement as Benedict, fight master of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society, matched up Steve and Trevor, and then paired himself with Dante. The two pairs of combatants faced each other two metres apart, with, in Steve and Trevor’s case, expressions of ferocity.

“First up: Clashing Swords. Just follow along, Dante, no need to worry.” Benedict readied himself for the attack.

Steve gave a ‘huzzah’ and swung his sword at Trevor’s sword. Dante wondered why anyone would ever aim at the other person’s weapon. The point of combat was to take out the person holding the weapon.

Still, he mimicked Steve's sword swing, timing it to thwack neatly against Benedict's wavering blade.

"A hit!" cried Benedict. "A palpable hit!"

Over the next ten minutes, Dante worked his way through a full montage of fighting moves, including 'Help! I've lost my eyes,' 'The Sausage of Death' (don't ask), 'The Side Waggler,' and 'Oh dear, my sword just got stuck in your shield and won't come out.'

That last one, Benedict explained, was a close cousin to 'my sword is now bent at right angles' and 'my sword just flew out of my hands and hit the reviewer from the *NZ Herald* between the eyes.'

"Dying is often the best way out of a difficult situation," said Benedict. "Like a get out of jail card. Just don't collapse anywhere the lead actor or actress has to do their thing. A random example: don't die on the couch where the romantic leads are supposed to confess their love. Dying offstage's the best. That way you can get some downtime before your next appearance."

Strategic dying had never been part of Dante's skill set, but he could see the benefit. "I will die offstage."

Yves strode into the room. "Got your fight scene ready? Good." He studied the four actors. "Do you know what acting is all about?"

Benedict, Steve, and Trevor exchanged glances.

"It's about putting on a show?" volunteered Trevor, when it was clear no one else was about to speak.

"That is the end result," said Yves. "But really, acting is all about trust. You trust everyone will play their part, so you can do yours. And nowhere is that more evident than in fight choreography."

"Erm, about that," said Trevor, ignoring Benedict's frown.

"Yes?" Yves took in Trevor's mullet, stained jeans, and air of general scruffiness.

“We put our heads together the other day, and we all thought…” Trevor ignored Benedict’s rapid head shake.

“Yes?” Yves raised one eyebrow.

Trevor drew himself up. “We’d like to work in a gag where someone swings across the stage.” Behind him, Benedict covered his eyes with his hand.

“Swings across the stage,” repeated Yves, as if he’d just heard words spoken in a foreign language.

“Yeah.” Trevor looked defiant. “Like Robin Hood.”

“There is no swinging in Shakespeare. Ever.” Yves’s foot beat a rapid tattoo on the floor. “No swinging.”

“I was just asking,” said Trevor, reddening slightly.

“And now you have your answer.” Yves cast his eyes heavenward as if to check for hidden rope swings. “Back to trusting your fellow actors. We are going to do a trust exercise.”

Beside Dante, Steve gave a muffled groan.

“Sounds great.” Benedict shot Steve a look.

Yves cupped his chin and gave the gathered actors a considering look. “I think we’ll do… ‘Willow in the wind.’”

Steve vented a deeper sigh.

“You all know this one,” said Benedict with forced cheer. “Except Dante, I expect.”

“Three of you stand in a circle,” said Yves.

“A triangle,” put in Trevor.

“And the fourth person stands in the centre,” said Yves, ignoring the interruption. “That fourth person is the willow in the wind. They close their eyes, and gently fall in any direction. It’s the people on the outside’s job to catch the person and then pass them on to the next person.”

Dante pictured this scenario in his mind. It was probably time to quit Te Kohe and join the French Foreign Legion.

“Dante, you’re new to this,” said Benedict. “Maybe you should go first.”

“Good idea,” said Yves warmly. “Dante, stand in the centre of the circle.”

“Triangle,” muttered Trevor.

The three actors gathered around Dante, crowding into his personal space. Dante eased into a fighting stance, ready to attack at the slightest hint of danger.

“Dante.” Yves sounded reproving. “You need to stand up straight. Make your body like a tree. And close your eyes.”

“We got you, mate.” Benedict barely reached Dante’s shoulder, and one punch would surely flatten the man.

“Yep,” said Trevor. “We’re all in this together, mate. You’ll be alright.”

“You got this,” said Steve.

“Eyes closed, Dante,” said Yves. “This exercise only works if you go with it.”

Dante closed his eyes. He could sense the men around him as three masses of varying size disturbing the air currents as they moved. He could hear Yves breathing three metres away, and the distant hum of an aircon unit.

“Now you hold yourself rigid and fall to one side,” said Yves.

Dante didn’t move. It was physically impossible. He couldn’t abandon his centre of balance and entrust it to someone he barely knew. Or even to someone he knew well. It was simply not possible.

He sensed Benedict to his left, shifting from one foot to another. Then Trevor, reaching out a hand to Dante’s shoulder.

“Ow!” said Trevor. “Hey! Let go!”

“Sorry.” Dante released the wrist lock and opened his eyes.

Trevor shook out his hand, eyes squeezed shut in pain. Steve stifled a snort of laughter, and behind the twin circles of his glasses, Benedict looked taken aback.

“That’s one way of doing ‘Willow in the Wind.’” Yves pinched the bridge of his nose. “Maybe we circle back to do a trust exercise later.”

“Good plan,” muttered Trevor, still massaging his wrist.

“Let’s see your fight choreography.” Yves leaned against the wall with an air of studied nonchalance.

“Right!” barked Benedict. “Positions!”

The three of them squared off against Trevor, who crouched, grimacing horribly over his fake sword.

“And…” Benedict’s eyes darted from Trevor to Dante. “Go!”

Steve gave a blood curdling shriek and swung his sword at Trevor, who blocked it with a loud ‘huzzah!’

Unfortunately, the point of Steve’s sword snapped on impact, and the sharpened wood flew straight at Benedict’s face.

Time slowed for Dante. He had a metre of ground to cover and a metre-long sword to wield. He slid between Steve and Benedict as his blade rose to parry the shard of sword.

With a solid ‘thwack’ he batted it away. The piece of sword buried itself in a tin of paint.

There was a stunned silence.

Benedict’s eyes widened in shock. Trevor’s mouth fell open.

“Wow,” mouthed Steve.

Paint glugged slowly out of the ruptured tin and soaked into a pile of old cleaning cloths.

“A good opener, but it fell apart after that. Get another sword, Steve, and I’ll be back shortly to see it all again.” Scarf fluttering, Yves swept away.

“Dante, do you play cricket?” asked Benedict. “Or tennis?”

“Yes?” said Dante.

“That was great!” enthused Trevor. “You moved so fast I hardly saw it.”

“You know what I reckon?” said Steve.

“Yeah,” said Trevor. “I reckon too.”

Dante looked between the two men, wondering what was going on.

Benedict nodded. “We don’t usually do this after one practice. But I reckon we’ve struck gold this time.”

“Okay.” Dante hoped this would all make sense soon.

“Dante, I’d like you to join the Fighting Actors Guild.” Benedict thrust out his chest and pulled himself up to his full five foot three.

“It’s a select group,” said Steve.

“A group within a group,” said Trevor.

“We’re the actors in Te Kohe Am Dram (that’s Amateur Dramatic Society) who put the action back in acting.” Benedict looked pleased with that last sentence.

“How many Fighting Actors are there?” Dante wondered if he’d have to fight them all at the same time to join.

“Erm… at the moment it’s just us,” said Benedict. “But if you joined…” There was a significant pause.

Dante looked from actor to actor. There didn’t seem to be a downside to agreeing. Just the vague notion that joining things was not his usual mode, and it might lead to trouble further down the track. He thought of trying new things.

“Okay.”

“Excellent!” Benedict beamed. “We’ll go to the RSA to celebrate our latest member.”

“It’s traditional that the first round’s on you,” said Trevor.

“And the second,” said Steve.

“Possibly the third, too,” said Trevor.

“Okay.” One thing Dante was sure of — news of this had better never get back to his AA group. If it did, he’d have to kill Frankie, just to stop the terrible jokes.

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14

In which we delve into the dark history of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society

"IT WAS SCARY," SAID CHARLIE. "ANDREA, DEIRDRE, OR RAYMOND COULD have been badly hurt if Dante hadn't shunted the chandelier out of the way. I'm still not sure how he did it."

Eleanor and Charlie stood in the Low Bar after the rehearsal had ended and the actors dispersed. There was a jagged hole in the ceiling plaster where the chandelier had been. A trio of capped electrical cords hung down like the building's innards leaking out.

"Were those three the only people seated below the chandelier?" asked Eleanor.

"Yes — it kind of swung at them." Charlie remembered the pressure, like being underwater, and the nightmare feeling of knowing something bad was about to happen, but being unable to stop it.

"Seems a clumsy way to try to kill someone," said Eleanor. "I mean, how on earth would they know who was going to sit there? I wonder which of those three was the real target."

"I don't think any person made the chandelier drop," said Charlie.

“That’s nice,” said Allie. “You’re saying ghosts aren’t people?” The theatre’s chattiest ghost stood next to Charlie, mirroring his pose as she stared up at the missing chandelier.

“Sorry,” said Charlie. “I mean, I don’t think it was anyone alive.”

“Theatres are often said to be haunted,” said Eleanor. “For good reason. Most of the old ones had at least one serious fire in their lifetime.”

“There’s a spirit here who is…” Charlie’s voice trailed away as he reached out towards the corners of his senses. There was something black and angry inhabiting the forgotten spaces of the theatre. “Vengeful.” Charlie's shoulders tightened. “Not a happy ghost.”

“Revenants seldom are.” In contrast, Allie looked cheerful. “I’ve been haunting this theatre for thirty years and it’s never been like this before.” With an airy wave, she disappeared into a wall.

“We need to look into the history of the theatre,” said Eleanor. “Starting with the last time they put on your play.”

“Great.” Charlie relaxed. It was good to have Eleanor back. She always seemed to know what to do next. “Who do we talk to?”

“I think Mrs Haddock will be able to tell us everything we want to know,” said Eleanor. “Let’s see if she’s still in her office.”

Mrs Haddock opened the door in response to Eleanor’s knock and raised her eyebrows to see the two of them standing outside.

The theatre office was a small and crowded room, with one other door. A desk took up one wall, and bookcases and filing cabinets covered all other available wall space.

“And what can I do for you?” Mrs Haddock’s grey hair was, as ever, neatly wound into a tight bun, and her tweed jacket and skirt ensemble was immaculate.

“We want to satisfy our curiosity,” said Eleanor.

“Ah…” Mrs Haddock’s eyes twinkled. “You want to delve into the theatre’s dark history?”

“Absolutely,” said Eleanor. “Is now a good time?”

“I’m due for a break, so yes,” said Mrs Haddock. “I must say, the accounts have been left in a shocking state. The last financial manager employed the ‘receipts in a shoebox’ method of record keeping. Half the receipts are for the RSA bar.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised,” said Eleanor.

“I imagine you want to know about the last time we put on the Scottish Play? Yves has a reputation, so no one’s complained to him directly, but there are murmurs aplenty.”

“I’m curious — how did Yves end up in Te Kohe?” asked Eleanor. “I have the feeling we’ve crossed paths before.”

“I’ve heard all sorts of ridiculous theories, but really, I think he just fancied the quiet life.”

“That can happen,” said Eleanor. “Although he seems very… energetic.”

“I suspect he’s found the change of pace a bit much.” Mrs Haddock took a circle of keys from a desk drawer and unlocked the other door. “I doubt Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics will measure up to New York in terms of excitement.”

“You never know,” murmured Eleanor.

The door revealed a space that was either a tiny room or a large cupboard. Steel shelving lined the walls, overstuffed with ring binders and albums.

“I think you want that one.” Mrs Haddock pointed to a thick folio on a top shelf at the back. “And that one. Charlie, would you be a dear and fetch them down for me?”

Charlie reached past her and tugged the two folios out of a stack of albums.

“Thank you,” said Mrs Haddock. “On my desk, please?”

Charlie retreated to the office and dumped them on the desk. A small cloud of dust arose as the pages thumped together.

“They used to keep lovely photo albums back in the day. These days it’s all digital — not half as nice.” Mrs Haddock checked her watch. “I’ve got to run a few errands. Have fun delving into the past. I’ll be back in about half an hour.”

With that, she was gone, the office door clicking closed behind her.

“Interesting that she knew exactly where to find the folios we want.” Eleanor stepped up to the desk and examined the books. They were both albums with photos stuck to thick card pages alternating with translucent vellum to protect them.

A note had been fixed to the first album, in a careful, rounded handwriting. It said: ‘Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society. Production: Macbeth.’

“Very helpful,” Eleanor murmured. “The second album is a full history of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society. I think we’ll start with the first.” She set the other album aside, and centred the first one on the desk.

As the first page turned over, Charlie felt the air shift. It was as if someone had turned an invisible screw, tightening the pressure. At the edges of his perception, an angry hum began, like a beehive that sensed intruders.

Eleanor, oblivious, leaned over to study the photo.

There was the entire cast, assembled as if for a school photo: the front row seated, the second row standing. They were gathered on the stage of the Te Kohe Theatre, with the curtains framing the photo, and a painting of a grey stone wall as the backdrop.

Below the photo, the same person had written all the names of the people, with their part in the play in brackets next to them.

“Director front and centre, I see,” said Eleanor. “Flanked by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.”

“That’s Maddie Brown. She’s an old family friend.” Charlie fidgeted, wondering how to soothe the growing tension in the air. “Maddie’s getting on, and I need to catch up and see how she’s doing.”

“That might be a good way to get an inside line on what happened. I see Dean played Macduff.” Eleanor pointed at a much younger Dean Myers, grinning at the camera, dark features enhanced by a faint five o’clock shadow. “Interesting. And there’s Jennifer. And Callum.” She took a photo of the page with her phone. “With this, it’ll be simple to make a list of who was in both plays — past and present. That might help narrow down our list of murderers.”

“Do you think the guy who died in the play twenty years ago was murdered?” Charlie regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. Something crashed onto the ground down in the depths of the theatre, and the humming grew more distinct. Now, it sounded like angry murmuring, low and waspish.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie bit his lip. “This angry ghost waking up now makes it seem likely. Even if it wasn’t murder, what matters is whether the ghost thinks it was murdered.”

“Surely the ghost would know?”

Charlie tried to block out the otherworldly sounds and focus on the idea that had been turning over in his mind. “I think with the theatre and the play, it could get confused. There’s something about all these people pretending that muddies the waters. Ghosts are more or less a bundle of thoughts, feelings, and ideas that have decided to stick around. I mean, they’re spirits too, but they manifest as their old personalities. They can get caught up in stories. For an actor who died during a play, it could be even more extreme.”

“I suppose it takes method acting to a whole new level.” Eleanor turned the page.

This photo was an informal one — smiling people at a garden party, with a gracious mansion in the background.

“That’s Rathburn Manor,” said Charlie. “Mrs Rathburn — that’s Deirdre, who’s playing Lady Macbeth — lives there now with her husband,

Raymond. They're big supporters of the theatre, though she's the one who acts, not him."

"Nice crib," said Eleanor. "That's where you had the party and Jennifer died?"

"Yes."

The next page showed a selection of actors on stage, in costume, striking dramatic poses.

"King Duncan arrives at Castle Inverness," said Eleanor. "Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Lennox, King Duncan — all the major players are there."

"That's the scene we were about to do when the chandelier nearly landed on Andrea and her friends." The murmuring had died away now, but it didn't ease Charlie's anxiety. Now it felt like a stalking silence, the stealthy approach of something that didn't like them being here.

Eleanor glanced at him, then her eyebrows rose. "Something the matter?"

"We're really stirring things up right now." Charlie felt like a deer grazing close to a lion's den. The problem was knowing the lion was around somewhere, but not knowing exactly where. "Something in this theatre is not happy with us."

"I shall take that under advisement." Eleanor turned another page. "Now, this is interesting."

This photo was of the stage, but there were no actors present this time. Instead, a ghostly figure walked across the boards, the scenery clearly visible through his bloody clothes.

"I didn't know that was possible." Charlie stared.

"You've never tried to photograph a ghost?"

"Loads of times when I was younger, but it never works. You have no idea how many photos are full of ghosts, but they never come through in the picture."

Eleanor unstuck the photo from its backing and turned it over. The caption read: ‘Danny demonstrates ‘Pepper’s Ghost’ for Banquo at the Feast.’

“Of course. That stage trick’s been around since the 1860s. Hannah and I thought about using it for our seance schtick back in the day, but we decided against it. Never rely on technology to pull off an illusion when the human psyche is so much more powerful.”

“So it’s not a ghost?” Charlie felt obscurely relieved.

“It’s a trick using reflected light. I believe Disneyland still uses it for its Haunted Mansion.”

“And they used it in the last production?”

“Probably for the most famous ghost scene in history: Banquo at the Feast. Which will be played this time by you.” Eleanor continued to page through the album, stopping every so often to photograph the pictures.

The last page contained three pictures. One was of the theatre exterior, with the black-and-white letters proclaiming ‘Macbeth: Opening Night, 7pm.’ The second was a photo of the cast in full makeup and costume, looking nervous and excited.

“That was probably taken just before the show began.” Eleanor snapped a photo of the page.

The final photo was of a tall man, broad-shouldered, about sixty. He smiled at the camera, strong-jawed and vivacious, with a close-cut beard and a direct gaze.

“He’s dead,” said Charlie, and the hairs on the back of his hands rose. The ghost is very near, he thought. It’s listening to this conversation.

“How do you know?” asked Eleanor.

“I can tell from the picture when I look at it in a certain way.”

“This certain way being how you look at ghosts?”

“Yes.”

“And you can do that for any photograph?”

Charlie nodded. It had been heartbreaking, the first time he'd seen a missing person's advertisement, to know that the person in the picture was already dead. Even more so, to know that telling the grieving relatives wouldn't help at all.

"I think we should go." Charlie glanced around the room, looking for signs of a ghostly form. Nothing, but the feeling of being watched grew stronger.

"Nearly done." Eleanor photographed the picture, then carefully removed it from the album to see the back.

It read: 'In memory of Frank Rathburn. Pictured here as King Duncan. Much beloved uncle, treasured cast member, and pillar of the community. 'A good name is better than fine perfume.' — Ecclesiastes 7:1'

"That's our ghost," said Eleanor. "And his nephew inherited a gracious manor, and presumably the fortune that goes with it. Interesting."

Charlie grimaced. This was the other part he didn't like about investigations — suspecting people he'd known for years.

Eleanor closed the album. "Mrs Haddock should be back soon. Keep watch at the door, will you? I want to have a quick snoop."

The door rattled, and Charlie jumped.

"She's back earlier than I thought," said Eleanor.

"I don't think that's Mrs Haddock." Charlie stepped towards the door, ready to jump back in a heartbeat if it burst open. He tried the handle. It didn't budge. "I think we're trapped—"

The metal filing cabinet burst open, showering papers into the air. Eleanor stumbled back, her hands raised to protect her face as the next drawer burst open, and then the next.

The ancient computer screen sparked, then burst into flame, the toxic blue and yellow flames quickly turning to billowing black smoke.

"Stop it!" yelled Charlie. The pressure pushed down on him like a vice, and he pushed back. It felt like trying to lift a two-hundred-kilo weight. "Stop! It!" he yelled again, as the papers from the filing cabinet drifted down,

landed on the computer and burst into flame. “Do you have a death wish? If this place goes up in flames, you do too!”

The pressure abruptly vanished.

“Grab the fire extinguisher,” commanded Eleanor. “Outside, turn right, ten paces down the corridor.” She was under the desk, yanking out the computer power plug.

Charlie charged out the door, which now opened easily. He yanked the red extinguisher out of its mount and sprinted back, trying to read the instructions as he ran.

He burst through the door to see Eleanor stamping burning pages out on the carpet. She seized the extinguisher out of his hands, pulled the pin, and aimed the nozzle at the burning computer. She hesitated.

“Anything you want to ask the ghost? We’re in an excellent bargaining position.”

Charlie stared at her. “We can’t let the building burn down just to strong-arm the ghost! Also, it’s gone now.”

Eleanor shrugged. “Very well.” She aimed the nozzle, squeezed the trigger, and a thick jet of white gas blasted the computer with a roar. The burning plastic smelt horrendous. “Could you be a dear and open that window, Charlie?”

Charlie climbed onto the desk and opened the casement window. Acrid black smoke already hid the ceiling, and he knew from experience that someone would need to wash it with sugar soap to get the soot off. He could already guess who that someone would be.

They were stamping out the last burning pages when Charlie heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Charlie gave Eleanor a frantic look. “What are we going to tell Mrs Haddock?”

“The truth, I suppose. It’s certainly too late to hide it.”

The door opened. Mrs Haddock stood framed in the doorway. She took in the scene in a single glance. Her hands went to her hips.

“I’m sorry,” said Charlie. “It was… well, the computer caught fire, and…”

“I can see that, Charlie,” said Mrs Haddock. “There seems to have been a bit of a disturbance.”

“There certainly has,” agreed Eleanor. She placed the extinguisher on the desk. “I hope you have the computer files backed up.”

Mrs Haddock slowly shook her head. “It was on the to-do list.”

“Perhaps a sign from the universe that it’s time to make a fresh start?” suggested Eleanor.

“I see you’ve already begun on the filing,” said Mrs Haddock drily.

“Sorry,” said Charlie again. “It was… well… spontaneous combustion. I’ll help clean up.”

“You’d better,” said Mrs Haddock. “I really don’t need more items on my list.”

“I’m happy to donate a state-of-the-art computer with new accounting software,” said Eleanor. “A definite upgrade.”

They all turned to regard the melted glob of khaki plastic that had been the office computer. With a sound very like a burp, a final gout of black smoke belched into the air.

Charlie winced. “I’ll go get the cleaning equipment.”

“I’ll go get your new computer,” said Eleanor brightly.

Mrs Haddock gave them a look over the top of her thick spectacles. “Whatever really happened here, I would appreciate it not becoming a wild rumour. We have enough of those circulating.”

“We will reassure anyone concerned that the theatre is not haunted, and the play isn’t cursed.” Eleanor sounded perfectly sincere.

Out of Mrs Haddock’s field of view, Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t think he could do that with any conviction.

“Good.” Mrs Haddock’s mouth curved in a wintry smile. “And thank you for the hardware upgrade.”

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15

In which Eleanor recruits

ELEANOR SAT AT HER DINING ROOM TABLE AND CONTEMPLATED HER NEXT move. Managing Inspector Marcus Avery would require tactical planning. Perhaps it was even worth a trip to Auckland — it would be easy enough to track down his address and ambush the police inspector at home.

On the other hand, it wouldn't do to appear too keen. Getting Avery on board would require a delicate balance of piquing his interest and playing hard to get.

While part of Eleanor thought she might get the best results by playing it straight and laying her cards on the table, where was the fun in that?

With a smile that was a curious mixture of wry amusement and self-mockery, Eleanor brought up Avery's personal number on her phone.

Instead of calling, she texted the message: Eleanor - will call in five.

She could already picture Avery's look of wary interest. It changed her smile into the more genuine article.

Eleanor spent the next five minutes studying the prints she'd made of the Macbeth production photos from twenty years ago. She couldn't shake the notion that Frank's and Jennifer's deaths were related.

They were twenty years apart, but the parallels seemed more than coincidence. Frank Rathburn and Jennifer Wilcox. Both theatre people, both acting in Macbeth. And Jennifer had been in the original production, playing the part of Lady Macbeth's maid.

Charlie had said the angry ghost hadn't been there for the other theatrical productions he'd been part of. Surely that was significant.

It might take work to find the links between the two deaths, but Eleanor had plenty of time.

Exactly five minutes after her text, Eleanor's phone rang. She picked it up and pressed the button to receive the call.

"Is this a bowling invitation, or something more sinister?" Avery's voice sounded formal, and there was background noise coming through on his end.

"Are you on a construction site, or in the middle of a motorway?" asked Eleanor.

"I'll ask the questions," said Avery, but she could hear the smile in his voice.

"Yes, bowling is an option, and yes, something sinister is afoot. The two are not mutually exclusive."

"The case of the sinister bowler. It has a ring to it."

"My spare room is available if you'd like to stay on Saturday, or shall I book you into the Pepper Tree Hotel?" asked Eleanor.

There was a long pause.

"I'll see you Saturday, but don't book me in anywhere." Avery sounded carefully polite. "It might be just a day trip."

"My place, one p.m. sharp," said Eleanor. "Bring your deerstalker hat." She ended the phone call, then frowned at the phone, wondering why she felt she'd both won and lost the exchange.

‘It’s because you can’t handle simplicity.’ It was a fond and chiding voice from long ago, in the back of her mind where she kept her past lives. ‘You complicate things just for the fun of finding your way out of trouble.’

Eleanor sighed, a shadow falling over her thoughts. Giving herself a mental shake, she brought out a notepad and began making a list of the members of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society, past and present. It was something to do, and it kept the ghosts of the past at bay.

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16

In which the sleuths discuss the merits of mac and cheese paired with arson

"So, would you like to become a part-time detective?" asked Eleanor.

"I already have a day job." Avery looked relaxed, pleasantly full of wine and excellent cheese. He looked so at home in her living room, it gave Eleanor an odd feeling of not-déjà vu. A memory of something that might never happen. "It involves detective work, and—"

"But it's way more boring," put in Eleanor. "With so much more paperwork."

"And far less wine and cheese," agreed Avery. "You had me at Harlan Estate cab sav and Rogue River blue cheese."

Eleanor laughed. "I should have known the way to convince you was via the catering."

"In vino veritas," said Avery. "You know my usual exclusions apply?"

"No entrapment, no breaking and entering." Eleanor counted off on her fingers. "No tampering with evidence, and we call in the police — that's you — if things look dangerous."

“You’ve been paying attention. Well done, you. Although with your friend Dante involved, things already look dangerous.”

“I don’t think there’s much danger,” said Eleanor. “This case is twenty years old, after all. It’s more an academic exercise than anything.”

“Do you have a bridge to sell me as well?” asked Avery.

“The Brooklyn Bridge can be had for a good price these days,” said Eleanor. “Just a small, non-refundable deposit of five million dollars.”

“Be serious, Eleanor,” said Avery. “People who’ve lived for years believing they’ve got away with murder react to discovery in two ways.”

“Which are?”

“They’re secretly relieved to be caught because their conscience has been troubling them all that time. They come quietly.”

“Or?”

“They react with extreme violence, cunning, and a passion born of wounded innocence. Over the years, they’ve convinced themselves that their actions were fully justified. They’re as dangerous as a cornered wild animal.”

“Hmm.” Eleanor took a sip of her wine. It was excellent. “I’m sure any murderer we uncover will come quietly.”

“I’m sure they will.” Avery’s smile was wry. “So?”

“So what?”

“Brief me. What have you got so far?”

“Well, the rest of the gang is due here soon…”

“I should have known this was a coordinated ambush.”

A knock sounded at the door. “Ah, right on time.”

Eleanor went to answer the door and returned with Charlie and Dante in tow. Charlie waved a brief ‘hello’ to the inspector and sat on the sofa

adjacent. Dante moved into the room in absolute silence, gave Avery a considering look, then sat next to Charlie.

Eleanor wheeled a whiteboard to stand in front of the coffee table.

The briefing went smoothly until the chandelier incident.

“So you think the chandelier was rigged to fall on someone?” asked Avery.

Eleanor decided they might as well tackle the ghost thing head-on.

“We have it on good authority that the theatre is haunted. A revenant, if you will.”

“I see.” Avery leaned back on the sofa, face expressionless.

But to Eleanor, whose stock in trade was reading faces and body language, he’d just told her everything she needed to know about his opinion of the paranormal. A slight tightening around the eyes, the curl of his fingers, the distancing himself from the scene.

“You don’t have to believe any of this,” said Eleanor. “In fact, I’d prefer you take the sceptic’s role.”

“Who’s your ‘good authority’ on ghosts?” Avery’s mouth set in a firm line.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” said Eleanor smoothly. “They’d like to remain anonymous. However, they’re not getting any money from this, if that’s your concern.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Who’d have thought that you, of all people…” Avery trailed off, studying Eleanor as if he’d forgotten there was anyone else in the room.

“That I, of all people, would be hoodwinked by a charlatan? I assure you, I know all the tricks of the trade,” said Eleanor. “This isn’t that. But we’re not asking you to take anything on faith.”

“Just as well, because I’m not going to.” Avery folded his arms. “In my years as a police officer, I’ve come across a dozen of these so-called ‘sensitives’ or ‘psychics.’ At best, they were well-intentioned people who believed their own baloney, and at worst, they were ambulance-chasing

frauds who got in the way of our investigation and helped botch one murder case beyond recall."

"Duly noted." Eleanor wrote 'Avery: anti-paranormal' on the board, below the 'falling chandelier' note. "To get back on topic, we don't yet have any further indications that Frank's death was murder, except that he was a wealthy man with only one heir. We will, of course, be interviewing people to find out more about the events surrounding his death."

Avery gave a deep sigh. "If word ever gets out I'm involved with you lot, the hassling from my colleagues will never stop. If nothing else, this caper might push me into early retirement."

"Silver linings everywhere," said Eleanor.

"We're assuming one murderer," said Dante. "But it could be two murderers, acting independently or together."

"It's an interesting premise — perhaps Frank was killed by a treacherous husband and wife team, scheming to get their hands on their older relative's fortune." Eleanor tapped her lips, looking thoughtful. "Where have I heard that before?"

Avery scowled. "Don't tell me this case is going to follow the plot of a certain Shakespearean tragedy. Anyway, all the evidence linking Frank's and Jennifer's deaths is circumstantial."

"There's a fair bit of it, though," said Eleanor. "Can it all be weighed together?"

"When I was a rookie," said Avery, "we arrested a guy caught fleeing the site of a deserted industrial building on fire. He said that when he walked past the building, he hadn't noticed any flames. But he suddenly remembered that he'd left the stove on at home. He was cooking mac and cheese."

"I like mac and cheese," said Dante.

"He said he was running home to turn off his stove. We said, pull the other one, mate, it's got bells on. And we arrested him. Half an hour later, when

he was in the holding cell, his neighbour rang, saying there were clouds of smoke pouring out of his kitchen window."

"Yikes. Did his house burn down?" asked Charlie.

"The fire service got there in time. It made an awful stink, though."

"Mac and cheese would." Dante stared into space, perhaps contemplating the ruin of a good mac and cheese dinner.

"My point is that you can't rely on circumstantial evidence alone. You need definitive proof."

Eleanor wrote 'beware circumstantial evidence - mac cheese' at the bottom of the whiteboard.

"Thank you," said Avery. "It's nice to feel seen."

"The mac and cheese guy may still have been the arsonist," said Dante.

"True," said Avery. "We never did catch the firestarter."

"And we return once more to our six suspects. Callum, Deirdre, Raymond, Dean, Mrs Haddock, and Jennifer. Who happens to be dead," said Eleanor. "And the mysterious conversation overheard by Charlie just after the chandelier fell."

Avery sat forward in his chair. "Oh, yes?" He listened as Charlie related what he'd heard. "Sounds like blackmail, just ahead of an unexpected death. That is interesting."

"Isn't it just?" Eleanor wrote a summary of the overheard conversation on the whiteboard. "Mysteries abound."

"How are you going to join the play?" asked Charlie.

Eleanor cleared her throat. "I talked to Mrs Haddock this morning. She said they'd love assistance in the makeup department."

"I didn't know we had a makeup department," said Charlie.

"Exactly," said Eleanor. "Being a makeup artist is like being a hairdresser. People feel the need to make conversation, and they say all sorts of things."

Charlie’s eyes widened. “The black stuff on the road reflectors was greasepaint. That’s why I’d smelt it before.”

“Interesting.” Eleanor noted this on Jennifer’s side of the board. “Very interesting.”

“Have you ever done stage makeup?” asked Avery. “Silly question. Of course you have.”

“It’s an honour to join the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society,” said Eleanor primly. “Also, I’m good at making people look the part.”

“Of course you are,” sighed Avery. “And I’m… what? The weekend backup team? Research assistant?”

“Both, please,” said Eleanor. “I hope you don’t have any plans this month.”

“I’ll cancel them immediately,” deadpanned Avery.

“Good. Now, as far as we know, neither Dean nor Callum benefitted from Frank’s death. And we know of no strong link between them and Jennifer, apart from the obvious one.” Eleanor drew a line between Frank’s and Jennifer’s names.

“What’s that?” Charlie’s brow wrinkled.

“Jennifer may have realised who killed Frank,” said Eleanor, “and threatened to reveal them. That’s a powerful motive for murder. Any thoughts on our next actions?”

“Autopsy reports,” said Dante. “For Frank and Jennifer.”

Everyone looked at Avery.

“It might be possible,” said Avery.

‘Autopsies: Avery will see what he can do,’ wrote Eleanor. “Now, on to the first rule of witness interviews.”

“What’s that?” asked Charlie.

“People’s memories are unreliable,” said Eleanor. “And they lie.”

“That’s two rules, not one,” said Avery.

“There you have it.”

“The murderer would lie,” said Dante.

“So who’s doing who?” asked Eleanor.

“Whom,” said Avery, and Eleanor shook her head.

“I can talk to Mrs Haddock.” Charlie didn’t look enthusiastic. Eleanor guessed he still felt bad about the fire in her office.

Dante said nothing.

“I’ll see about cornering the others. Except for Jennifer, of course.” Eleanor deliberately didn’t look at Charlie, and hoped his face wasn’t currently turning red. Her friend and gardener would be the worst poker player ever.

“So, to sum up,” said Avery, “you have two deaths, twenty years apart, thinly related due to the performance of a Shakespeare play.”

“A famously unlucky Shakespeare play,” said Eleanor.

Avery gave her a look. “For Frank’s death, Raymond, the principal beneficiary of the death, was cleared by the police. For Jennifer’s death, there appears to be no motive.”

Eleanor tsked. “It’s early days. If you’re going to be a negative Nelly, we may have to scale down your involvement.”

“Huh.” Avery summoned up an officer-grade glower.

There came a ‘ding’ from the kitchen.

Eleanor put down her whiteboard marker. “Now for the real reason for this gathering: my patent-pending upside-down feijoa cake. Only those who have made a positive contribution will get a slice.”

“I’ll look into the coroner’s reports this coming week,” said Avery.

“Good decision, Inspector,” said Eleanor. “You’re back in the running for cake.”

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17

Which contains Louise slice and memories of Macbeths past

Mrs Haddock leaned over the table towards Charlie. “Tea and biscuits?”

“Yes please.” Charlie felt drained after an hour discussing murder, and biscuits were a welcome boost.

Mrs Haddock poured tea and stirred in milk and sugar exactly how Charlie liked it. Then, she twitched aside an elaborate embroidered doily to reveal a tray of Louise slice, the coconut meringue on top baked a perfect golden-brown.

Charlie was suddenly glad he’d come, despite the difficult topic he was about to broach. But no broaching was necessary.

“I suppose you’ve come to ask me about the production of Macbeth twenty years ago.” Mrs Haddock took a dainty bite of her Louise slice and laid it back on her saucer, her brown eyes canny.

“Erm, yes. Thanks.” Charlie took a bite of his slice to fortify himself. It was as perfect as it looked, creamy meringue, a sweet jam layer, and beneath that, crumbly coconut shortbread laden with butter. “I was wondering if you could tell me about the Rathburns, and Dean and Callum.”

“Sometimes it’s best to leave things in the past. But I take your point. We’ve had one death already — not in the theatre, but certainly related to it. Poor Jennifer. It’s not a big leap to believe the past isn’t as dead and buried as it should be.”

“The theatre has an angry resident ghost,” said Charlie. “I think it’s Frank Rathburn, stirred up by us doing the play again. So I thought if I knew more about him then maybe I could lay him to rest before…”

“Before another chandelier falls or the whole place burns down?”

“Yes.”

In the quiet sitting room, sunlight shone through the heavy lace curtains in a dappled patchwork. Charlie’s brain took that moment to prod him with Eleanor’s first rule of witness interviews: memories are unreliable, and people lie. It undercut the peaceful ambience, and Charlie wished he were here for another reason.

Mrs Haddock took a meditative sip of tea and stared into space for a few moments before speaking. “Twenty years ago, I had just started doing props for the theatre. Frank was a great patron of the arts in this county, but for the theatre, it was something different. He loved the limelight. With everything he donated, he was guaranteed a major part in everything the theatre put on.

“People muttered about that, but the truth was, Frank was a fine amateur actor. His nephew Raymond liked the theatre too, and he was close with Maddie, the director. Raymond could act, but his real love was special effects. He could make extraordinary illusions with nothing more than clever light placement and screens. He and Maddie would spend hours messing around with lighting, and they both loved old Super 8 film cameras.

“That year, autumn came late, and it was still blazing hot when they had the casting call for Macbeth. The tar was melting on the roads, the fields were brown, and the dairy farmers were worried.

“The cast buzzed like a kicked hive when the two major parts went to young Raymond and Deirdre, who was even younger, and a complete

unknown.”

“Were Raymond and Deirdre already… you know, dating?” asked Charlie.

“They called it ‘going out’ back then,” said Mrs Haddock with a twinkle. “Looking back, I think they were, but they kept it quiet. Frank was a patriarch of the old school. I got the feeling Raymond was expected to marry someone of a similar social standing.”

“Did everyone know Raymond was Frank’s heir?”

“Oh, yes. Frank showed no interest in remarrying after his wife died of cancer, so Raymond was next in line. It’s possible Raymond was afraid he’d lose his inheritance if he married without Frank’s blessing. But I suppose we’ll never know.”

“Did they all know each other?” asked Charlie. “Raymond, Callum, Deirdre and Dean?”

Mrs Haddock pursed her lips. “I’d say Callum was more Deirdre’s friend. Raymond and Dean included him for her sake. That year, she was the sun around which they all orbited. I think they were all a little in love with her.

“It was hard for Callum to fit in, because Dean and Raymond were more like brothers. Raymond was an orphan, you see. He went to boarding school, but every holiday, he’d come home to Rathburn Manor, and then Dean would be there, all day, every day.”

“Did Frank…” Charlie paused, considering the relationship dynamics. “Did Frank like Dean?”

Mrs Haddock’s mouth lifted in an odd smile, half amusement, half regret. “How would I put this? Frank was an outdoors, larger-than-life man. Raymond was quiet, bookish, and shy. Dean was far more like Frank than Raymond ever was. I think if Frank could have chosen an heir, without any considerations of birth, or blood, or family ties, he would have chosen Dean.”

“Did Raymond resent it?”

Mrs Haddock paused, as if reviewing an internal film. “I don’t think so, but Raymond was, and still is, a self-contained person. It’s hard to know exactly what he’s thinking. I do know that they had an enormous argument, just after rehearsals began.”

“Who did?”

“Frank and Raymond.”

“How did you know about it?”

“It was in the theatre,” said Mrs Haddock simply. “It’s a terrible place to do or say anything private — there are so many odd angles, crossing corridors, and places to accidentally overhear conversations. Everyone else had gone home, and I suppose they thought they were alone.”

“Do you know what they were arguing about?”

“Not exactly. They were in a dressing room but the door wasn’t closed. And no, I wasn’t eavesdropping. I was putting props away, so I heard bits as I went up and down the Crypt stairs.”

“Oh.” Charlie’s ears went red. “I didn’t think you were.”

“I bet you wish I had, though.” Mrs Haddock’s eyes crinkled. “Let’s see… It was a long time ago and I would have normally forgotten about it, but Frank’s death made me re-examine the memory in the weeks after he passed.

“I heard: ‘If you’d really cared more about your standing, this wouldn’t be an issue.’ That was Raymond. I’d never heard him raise his voice before. And ‘I’ll acknowledge what I damn well please. It’s mine to dispose of as I wish.’ That was Frank. Usually in an argument, he bellowed, but now he was icy calm, a sure sign he was in a rage. And then ‘Well, you’d be sunk without me anyway.’ That was Raymond.”

“What did you think they were arguing about?”

Mrs Haddock blew out her cheeks. “At the time, I thought it was the play. Everyone thought Frank was going to be Macbeth, and it was a slap in the face to choose Raymond. But now, I think it was about Deirdre. It’s

possible Frank found out about her, and forbade Raymond to continue the relationship. But here's the thing…" Mrs Haddock looked sidelong at Charlie.

"Raymond's parents had died in a motor accident when he was just a boy. Raymond's dad was the second son, so he got nothing of the Rathburn Manor. He went off to seek his fortune, and by all accounts, he was good at it. Raymond was due to come into a lot of wealth when he turned twenty-one. And while Frank splashed his largesse around as befits old money, there were signs — subtle ones, mind — that perhaps Rathburn Manor wasn't as solvent as Frank would like everyone to think."

"So…" Charlie thought about this, "it might not have mattered so much if Frank cut Raymond out of the will?"

"I imagine it would have stung. You've seen the estate — it's gorgeous. And it's where Raymond's father grew up. It was his by right."

"Do you think…" Charlie edged his way to the question like someone walking out over a rotten pier. "It would be enough to kill for?"

"The thought did cross my mind in the months after Frank passed," said Mrs Haddock. "And unless you can talk to his ghost, it's possible we'll never know. I wouldn't have thought Raymond was the murdering type, but again, you never can tell. People do strange things when love and money are involved."

"What happened the night Frank died?" said Charlie, "What was it like on set?"

Mrs Haddock's eyes glinted. "I missed it. I had a migraine and stayed home."

"Oh." His conscience prodded him. "Do you have anyone who could confirm that?" Charlie took a bite of Louise slice to hide his discomfort.

"Ha!" All Mrs Haddock's wrinkles turned upwards when she laughed. "A fair question, young sleuth. Let's see… Atticus the caretaker was the usher that night. He could confirm I never entered via the front of house. And…" Her smile became pensive. "Mrs Davison. She dropped off some ginger tea.

And Mrs Kingi, of course. She checked in on me several times that evening."

"I see." Charlie swallowed down another bite of Louise slice. Two of those people were dead, and their ghosts were regular residents of Te Kohe. Mrs Davison would tell him exactly what had happened, but he thought, somehow, that if Mrs Haddock had been involved in a murder, Mrs Kingi would stay silent as the grave.

"You can check those sources," said Mrs Haddock pleasantly. "But in the meantime, I can tell you the bare bones of what happened — I certainly heard enough versions of it in the weeks that followed.

"Frank was playing King Duncan. He died during his own murder scene. He was pretending to be asleep on a bed, next to a large hearth with a weapons display on the wall above it. The hearth toppled over just before his nephew — who played Macbeth — was about to stab him with a fake knife. The set was all fake, of course, but I suppose the painted wood was heavy enough. The hearth or the weapons must have hit poor Frank in just the wrong spot. The ambulance arrived five minutes later, but he was already dead."

"What did the police do?" asked Charlie.

"They went over everything thoroughly. Pete was the police officer in charge back then. A group of forensic specialists were called in. But in the end, they ruled it a freak accident. Of course everyone was devastated. Frank was such a pillar of the community."

Charlie tried to decide if Mrs Haddock was telling the truth, but really, he didn't have a clue. He tried to think of other questions that might reveal motive.

"What were Callum, Dean, Deirdre, and Raymond like back then?"

Mrs Haddock leaned back in her chair, gazing into the past. "Callum was in props with me. He was a typical surly young man, but under it all, he was keen to learn.

"And Dean? Dean was like he is now, but younger and even more handsome. Brimful with confidence, Dean succeeded at everything he put

his hand to. And he had something to prove. His mother had had him out of wedlock — some sailor who'd knocked her up and disappeared. Nowadays, it doesn't seem a big deal, but things were different back then. She'd died when Dean was just a boy — a car crash, I think it was. Frank had paid Dean's school fees — he helped a lot of local kids — and Dean was out to make something of himself.

"Dean was playing Macduff, and did his best to outshine Raymond in every scene they shared. Actually, he upstaged everyone, but I think he put special effort into making Raymond pale by comparison."

"I thought they were friends?" asked Charlie.

"They were at the age when everything is a competition. You know — when you're taking your first steps into a wider world, and testing your strength." Mrs Haddock's gaze was focused on the past, perhaps twenty years ago, perhaps back to her own youth. "Almost twenty is such a strange age. You have all the power of adulthood, all the foolishness of youth, and you're in such a hurry to *become*. It's as if every success promises a whole new world, and every failure could last forever."

Charlie, who'd just turned twenty, wondered if he should feel this way, and the thought made him sad. In many ways, he felt like he'd never had the chance to be young. "I haven't seen Dean in any of the other Te Kohe plays."

"He hasn't been back to Te Kohe until now. Busy with his acting career, he claims. Dean's staying at Rathburn Manor, so I guess there's no hard feelings between him and Raymond now. But he wasn't supportive during the inquest into Frank's death. Raymond was the prime suspect, as he stood to inherit everything.

"Maddie ended up stepping in as a character witness for Raymond, as Dean didn't. Or wouldn't. I think Dean was upset at Frank's death — he'd been a father figure to him growing up, and he needed someone to blame."

Charlie tried to think of what Eleanor would ask if she were here. "Did anyone else benefit from Frank's death?"

Mrs Haddock shook her head. “I don’t think so. There were several charities that relied on his largesse, but they didn’t benefit from his death.

“Raymond was cleared of suspicion and inherited everything. He waited six months, then he and Deirdre were married in a small ceremony in the church here in Te Kohe. Raymond took up where his uncle left off as patron of the arts, and no one has complained since.”

Charlie sorted through his head for anything else he could ask. “Can you think of any reason someone would kill Jennifer?”

Mrs Haddock tapped her teacup as she thought. “Not really. Jennifer was there the night Frank died — she was one of the maids to Lady Macbeth. But if she knew something, why kill her twenty years after the fact? I can see how Macbeth could stir up Frank’s angry ghost. But for Jennifer? I can’t see the connection.”

“Me neither.” Charlie wished he was one of those pipe-smoking genius detectives who could lie back in a comfortable armchair and work it all out in his head. Instead, he seemed fated to run around asking awkward questions and poking around spooky theatres.

“Well, I’m sure you will.” Mrs Haddock pushed the tray of Louise slice towards Charlie. “Have another one, dear. Solving crimes takes a lot of energy.”

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18

In which Eleanor applies makeup and flattery in equal measures

ELEANOR STUDIED THE DARK HEAD OF THE MAN SITTING WITH HIS BACK TO her. From her vantage point, she could see both the back of his head and his reflection in the mirror.

Dean's hair was thick, curling, luxurious, but thinning slightly on top. This was artfully disguised by the styling of his haircut. The row of lightbulbs arrayed around the makeup mirror lit the reflection of his face from all sides. It was a handsome face, softening slightly at the edges as its owner entered his forties.

Eleanor's eyes traced the thick arched brows, faint crow's feet forming at the corners of blue eyes, a thin, straight nose, and lips that were a little fuller than could be considered manly. It was an actor's face, a perfect canvas that could become a king, a vagabond, a hero, or a villain.

"Do you think you can get the effect I'm after?" Dean Myers raised one shapely brow.

Eleanor chose a soft dark makeup pencil and examined the point. "Let's find out."

Dean sighed and relaxed into the chair, tilting his head back ever so slightly in the manner of one accustomed to being fussed over by makeup artists.

Eleanor smiled to herself and began to work. A makeup artist had a certain hypnotic power. There was something intimate about the work of applying pigment to the face that gave the artist permission to ask all sorts of questions, and often receive unguarded answers.

She decided to play the part of the slightly starstruck older lady, who'd heard all sorts of rumours about this particular play, and had decided Dean was the only one to set her mind at rest.

"It's wonderful to work on such an attractive canvas," she said, eyes widening slightly. "A modern-day Cary Grant."

"Why, thank you." Dean fingered his chin and set his expression to bashful.

"How has the theatre season in Auckland been this year?" Eleanor started contouring Dean's well-manicured eyebrows.

This was a good opener, and Dean was all too happy to share how well his acting career was doing.

Which raised the question, why leave it all to play in his tiny amateur hometown production? Was Yves that big of a draw? Or was there another factor at play?

"This isn't your first time acting in the Scottish Play, is it?" asked Eleanor.

"You mean that affair twenty years ago?" Dean had a well-trained voice, with a melodious lilt and a rich timbre.

Here's a man who could lie, and sound beautiful doing it, thought Eleanor.

Eleanor's hands fluttered as she combed Dean's fringe in a wave over his forehead. "It sounded so dreadful," she cooed. "What a thing to happen! It must have been terrifying at the time."

"Tragic, more like." Dean's gaze met hers, assessing, then he appeared to dismiss her. Just another elderly theatre bunny, trying to coax a touch of glamour back into her life. "Poor old Frank. Terrifying would be the time the Sydney Opera House curtain nearly landed on my head during Les Mis. Nearly a ton of fabric in that thing."

Eleanor made appropriately impressed noises as she combed his hair in a different style, brushing the thick locks back over that betraying, shiny spot of scalp.

“Does it worry you, coming back here?” she asked innocently. “A few of the other actors seem worried.”

Dean snorted. “Amateurs are all like that. They’re more superstitious than the real—than the professionals. Secretly, they all love the fact that someone died on stage here. Gives the show that extra dramatic flair.”

“Professional actors aren’t superstitious?”

“Some of them are,” admitted Dean. “I’ve had salty stage managers, practical as can be, tell me they’d seen a ghost. No joke, just ‘this is what I saw.’ Every theatre older than a century has at least one ghost story attached to it. The old ones, like you get in England or Europe, have dozens.”

“It must be amazing, touring the world.”

“Yes, well, you have to leap on those opportunities when they come up.” Dean gazed into the mirror, his blue eyes roving over his face.

Eleanor wondered what he saw. A successful actor in the prime of his career? A frustrated actor still hoping to make it big? A has-been actor clinging to past glories to mask the downward trajectory of his career? Or simply a man, getting his makeup done.

“Let me try something here.” Eleanor expertly powdered under his cheekbones, giving them an aristocratic cast.

“That does do the trick,” said Dean. “You’re a marvel.”

Eleanor recognised the expert flattery of a man used to working with underpaid grad students. This wasn’t her best work, but she was planning to get there over the course of her interview.

“Thank you,” she simpered. “How about a little sculpting makeup? I Googled Laurence Olivier’s look last night, and I’m sure we could do something similar, if you’re interested.”

“You have done your homework.” Dean’s voice deepened to a smoky rumble.

“I like to be prepared. Especially with such an important job.” Eleanor smiled to herself as she reached for a new palette of powders, and reflected on who was buttering up whom. “So you don’t think there’s any curse?”

“With the Scottish play? In this theatre?” Superstitious or not, Dean had yet to say the play’s name. “No. That’s not to say there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oh?” Eleanor chose a soft brush to feather the shadow above Dean’s eyes.

“I played Macduff the last time they performed this play here.” Dean closed his eyes as Eleanor brushed across his eyelids. “The actor who died — Frank Rathburn — had a piece of scenery dropped on him during his murder scene.” The corners of Dean’s mouth turned down. “The police ruled it an accident.”

“You think they were wrong?”

“I know they were wrong.”

The shadows in the corners of the dressing room flickered. Eleanor tapped her brush to knock off the excess powder. “Really? Did you tell them at the time?”

“Of course I did.” The words came out quick, and bitter. “But I had no proof. Nothing concrete to go on. Just…”

“A feeling? Intuition?”

“Something I saw.”

“Something you saw?” Eleanor ran a soft brush lightly across Dean’s eyelids to keep his eyes closed. Memories were easier when your eyes were shut.

“It was a certain person’s face. I was in the wings when they pronounced Frank dead. Everyone else was in shock. We just couldn’t believe it. But… just for an instant, this person looked satisfied. It was only there for a moment, but it was unmistakable. They looked like someone who’d done

what they set out to do.” Dean shifted restlessly in his chair. “I know what you’re thinking. It was a long time ago, how could I be sure? But I know what I saw.”

“Well.” Eleanor didn’t disguise the interest in her voice. “I imagine you’ve thought on it a great deal since then. Did this person have a motive?”

“Maybe…” Dean’s eyes were open now, and he gazed at his reflection. “Frank was a good fellow — one of the old school gentry, you know the type. Sponsoring local kids and sports teams, always giving at charity galas and the like. This person relied on Frank, and… well. They were running with a bad crowd. If Frank found out, their support would be cut off.”

“Seems extreme though, resorting to murder.”

“People do strange things to get what they think is theirs.” Dean’s voice was distant, as if he were talking to himself.

“And…” Eleanor hesitated, as if steeling herself to ask something that frightened her. “This person is here? In the production right now?”

Dean paused, as if suddenly aware that this conversation could spawn a rumour, and a whole family of other rumours after that. “It was a long time ago,” he said at last. “And, you know, I think I was mistaken. Like you said, it is extreme. The police did look into it all, and pronounced it an accident.” He gave a heartfelt sigh. “I think it’s just being back here after so long. I don’t think I’d have come if I’d known we were doing this play.”

“It must be difficult dealing with all those memories.” Eleanor laid on the sympathy. “I think everyone would be happier with one of Shakespeare’s comedies.”

“Well, you know directors.” Dean’s voice took on a conspiratorial tone. “They always like to make a splash. Even when they’ve supposedly retired to the quiet life.”

“So true,” agreed Eleanor. “I’m curious though — why come back? Everyone’s thrilled to have you, of course.”

“They are?” Dean’s rich tones were tipped with irony.

Eleanor applied a touch of eyeliner to the base of Dean's long, thick eyelashes. Unfair, lashes like that on a man, she thought. She blocked his view of the mirror as she finished her work, rapidly making the changes she'd envisioned.

"I expect some of the actors feel threatened, but the rest of the crew are so happy to have a true professional." Eleanor wondered if she was applying the butter a little thick. In her experience, though, actors were amongst the most paranoid performers around, and thus the most in need of reassurance. The butter could never be too buttery.

"I figured it was time to give back to the community." Even Dean seemed aware of how unconvincing this sounded. "And of course, it's exciting to work with Yves. He's a Broadway legend."

"All done." Eleanor stepped out of the way, and Dean saw his reflection.

His quick intake of breath told her all she needed to know. She had to admit, she had done an excellent job.

Dean's handsome face was subtly altered. There, in the bright light of the dressing room mirror, sat a man ripe for hubris and then tragedy. With 'wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.' Shelley's poem floated into her mind.

He now looked like a man who would grasp what he desired, no matter what the cost. His eyes were deep in shadow, the cheekbones sharpened, the jaw strong. The full lips were accentuated, an indecent curl to them that spoke of wanting, and then wanting more.

Dean cleared his throat. "That's… really, I had no idea. It's perfect. Do you think you could do that every night of the show?"

Eleanor gave her best doting elderly lady smile. "I'm so glad you like it. And it'd be a pleasure. Now, if it's alright, I'll take a photo, make some notes, and we'll wash it all off."

"The show must go on," declared Dean, and Eleanor found herself thinking how that statement could justify a multitude of sins.

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19

In which Dante reflects on the nature of conflict

DANTE GLOWERED AS STEVE MURDERED ANDREA ON THE IMAGINARY STAGE in the Low Bar. Steve looked up from his final stab, caught Dante's eye, and hurriedly backed away from Andrea's prostrate form.

"Very good." Yves leaned back in his chair and flicked the end of his white scarf over one shoulder. "Steve, I'd like to see a bit more ferocity. Really sell the awfulness of what you're doing. Andrea, excellent. Good plea for mercy, followed by your tragic death."

Dante shifted on his feet and tried to channel his battle readiness into something less lethal. He knew Andrea was just pretending to be Lady Macduff. He knew Steve was just pretending to murder her.

But seeing them enact it on stage still triggered his fight or strike instinct.

After Yves called time on the rehearsal, Dante drifted over to shadow Andrea. She listened politely while Steve gave her enthusiastic advice on how to do a convincing death rattle.

"Would you like a ride back to town?" asked Steve.

Dante thought briefly of giving Steve personal experience with a death rattle, then remembered this wasn't an option.

“Thanks, that’d be great. I have a mare that’s due to give birth soon, and...” Andrea glanced up and saw Dante. “Hi, Dante.” A tentative smile curved her lips.

“Hi.” Dante didn’t have his car here. He considered the best way to help Andrea back to her clinic. “I can walk you back to your clinic.”

“I can take you both,” said Steve, then shut his mouth when Dante fixed him with a look.

“That’d be lovely,” said Andrea. “Thanks, Dante.”

“Okay.”

“So,” said Andrea, as they pushed through the theatre doors to the street outside. “Do you still think Jennifer’s death wasn’t an accident?”

“I’m not a hundred percent certain.” Certainty would require the vehicle analysis and Jennifer’s post-mortem results. Dante matched his stride to Andrea’s as they walked down the sidewalk, heading towards the centre of town.

Andrea gripped her handbag strap with both hands. “I’ve been asking around, and keeping a careful eye on things, and I haven’t come across anything dodgy. Have you?”

“No.”

“So, maybe it’s alright,” said Andrea. “I’ve talked with Hemi, and he said the police aren’t treating the car crash as suspicious. I’m sure he’d tell me if they were.”

Dante wasn’t sure of that, but maybe Andrea was better at talking to Hemi than he and Charlie had been.

“I get why you’d want me to quit the play,” said Andrea. “Most people don’t like conflict, and that’s one way to avoid it.”

“I don’t mind conflict.” Dante especially didn’t mind it when he’d secured the high ground.

“Well,” Andrea had a half smile on her face. “That would make you unusual in Kiwiland. We’re notoriously conflict averse. But sometimes the best way to face things is head on.”

Dante had not found that to be true. Flanking manoeuvres and ambushes had a far better success rate.

“Sometimes conflict is unavoidable,” he said provisionally. That was why it was important to choose your ground.

“When I was a kid,” said Andrea, “we used to play out on the farm all the time. My parents had Herefords, and we were always in and out of the paddocks. One day, when I was about four, my older brothers had their cousins to visit.”

Dante pictured a bunch of kids running around bulls like Boris. It was not a vision to inspire confidence.

“My cousins and brothers were aged six to eight, and they used to tease me a lot. I was a bit chubby, back then.” Andrea glanced sidelong at Dante as she said this. “This time, they teased me until I lost my temper, then they ran across an empty paddock to climb a tree that was too tall for me to get up into.”

“I see.” Dante wondered where these brothers and cousins were now, and added them to a list of people he might need to have a quiet talk to.

“I was halfway to the tree when I realised that the paddock wasn’t empty. All the two-year-old bulls were just over the brow of the hill, grazing. They heard my brothers, and came charging over to see what was happening. They weren’t really aggressive, just curious. But when you’re four, and facing down a herd of charging bulls, you don’t realise that.”

Dante pictured a herd of Borises charging a four-year-old Andrea, and carefully relaxed his trigger finger.

“What happened?”

Andrea gave a husky laugh. “I would never have reached the tree in time. And I’m not sure my brothers would have been brave enough to jump down and help me climb it. I was on my own. So… I turned and faced the bulls.”

“And?”

“The herd rumbled towards me. Did I mention they each weighed about forty times as much as me?”

“No.”

“I was petrified. And then, they slowed to a trot, then a walk. I ended up surrounded by a herd of curious young bulls, all snorting, eyes rolling, wanting to get closer, but suddenly shy.” Andrea sighed. “It was kind of magical. Just them, and me.”

“That was brave of you.”

“I was lucky. Running away would have just made things worse.” Her dark eyes met his, full of earnest concern.

Dante thought of Charlie’s angry theatre ghost, and its possible connection with Frank’s death. He pushed it to the back of his mind. The last thing he wanted was Andrea getting involved in more murder investigations.

“Did your brothers and cousins get in trouble?”

Andrea huffed a laugh. “We would never have told the adults. But I think they were all a bit ashamed.”

Dante wondered if this story had anything to do with the current situation. Probably not. Still, he liked the image of Andrea as a little girl, communing with a herd of young Borises.

“I had glasses, back then,” said Andrea. “And buck teeth.”

Dante revised his mental image. He still liked it.

The vet clinic came into view, and a ‘bing’ issued from Andrea’s handbag. She drew her phone out and frowned.

“I think the mare I’ve been looking after might be ready to foal. I’d better go.” She reached out and touched Dante’s upper arm. His biceps muscle gave an involuntary flex, and her mouth turned upwards. “I’ll see you round, hey? Take care.”

“Okay.” Dante watched her enter the vet clinic, then turned for home.

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20

In which the scene is set for Scottish murder

RAYMOND SMILED CHEERFULLY AT CHARLIE AND ELEANOR. "YOU'D LIKE TO know about the history of the theatre?"

"I'd love to," said Eleanor. "I confess I've never been a part of a real theatre group before. One of the crew was saying there are gorgeous old props hidden below the stage, and you're the man who knows where all the treasures are hidden."

"In that case, you'll need to come down to the Crypt," said Raymond with a faint smile. His dark hair was neatly combed in a side parting, and his eloquent eyes were warm behind his glasses. Eleanor could see how he had succeeded in winning Deirdre's heart twenty years ago, despite the competition of the classically handsome Dean.

"The Crypt?" Eleanor raised an eyebrow.

"It's what we call the under-stage space," said Raymond. "I'm not sure how it got its name, except that it is spooky. In most theatres, this space is called the Trap Room, but it's sometimes called the Underworld, or Hell."

"Because?"

Raymond gave a self-deprecating shrug. “I suppose it was where demons would pop out from, or they’d drag Doctor Faustus down there through a trapdoor at the end of the play.”

They were walking down a narrow corridor which ended in a flight of black stairs leading down into darkness. To Eleanor’s mind, it looked suitably ominous.

Behind her, Raymond flicked a light switch, then sighed.

“The fuses around here are unreliable. I’ve been told this part of the theatre was rewired in the nineties, but I have reason to believe that’s a load of nonsense.”

“Cellphone lights?” asked Charlie.

“Oh, no,” said Raymond. “I’ll get Big Bertha.”

Eleanor and Charlie exchanged a puzzled glance as his footsteps disappeared around the corner.

There was a rattle and a thump, and the corridor was illuminated with a warm yellow glow. Raymond appeared again, holding an ancient red lantern. It was electric, but looked like it may once have housed an oil or even tallow light. One shutter stood open, allowing a beam of light to shine out.

“Big Bertha’s been with this theatre since the beginning,” said Raymond. “Always a saviour when the power cuts out.”

“Have you been getting more power cuts than usual?” asked Eleanor.

“Funny you should say that, but yes,” said Raymond. “It’s high time the whole theatre got rewired. It’s a mess of work done over the last half century. Getting that expense past the board will be a chore, though.”

“Let’s hope the sprinkler system works, then.” Eleanor decided not to mention that the board probably hoped Raymond would cough up the necessary funds.

“Sprinklers? You’d be lucky.” Raymond started down the steps. “We have fire exit lights, smoke doors, and hopefully the blessing of Thespis.”

The temperature fell as they made their way downwards. The stairs ended in a cold concrete slab, scarred by years of use and marked by paint hastily applied to long-ago props.

Raymond shone the light around the space. It was long and low, and packed with the remnants of old stage sets.

“That’s the stage above us.” Raymond directed the beam upwards. “You can see the trapdoor for actors to disappear below stage in shows like *Don Giovanni*.”

“When the demons haul him down to hell,” supplied Eleanor helpfully.

“Of course, the stairs aren’t set up now,” said Raymond. “Anyone trying to use the trapdoor would fall four metres onto bare concrete.”

“Not ideal.” Eleanor’s eyes travelled down from the trapdoor to the concrete wall opposite. There, in copper gone green with age, was a plaque. “What’s that?” She pointed.

“Oh, just our resident ghost,” said Raymond, unaware of Charlie’s start of surprise. “Josiah Bent, a humble bricklayer who perished in an accident while they were laying the foundations for the theatre. I’m not sure where he’s buried.”

“Surely not in the foundations like a heathen offering?” asked Eleanor.

“Good gracious no,” laughed Raymond. “Here’s what I wanted to show you.” He made his way through piles of props, boxes of costumes, and assorted gear to the far wall, where rolls of scenery backdrops were folded and stacked on each other. “The nineties was a great period for the Te Kohe theatre. A talented crew got together, and there was this energy. Magic happened. August Carroll had just started as our scene painter, and he spent hours on set, making true works of art.”

Raymond hauled a dirty cream canvas out from the pile. It thumped to the ground, and Charlie jumped, looking around as if something had spooked him. Raymond, bending over to unroll the top of the canvas, didn’t notice as Charlie mouthed ‘getting bad ghost vibes’ to Eleanor.

“Look at this.” Raymond flipped the canvas open to reveal a night sky and the outline of a castle. The brushwork was beautifully detailed, the colours still bright. “Lovely stuff. We still have all the old drops. Mrs Haddock couldn’t bear to throw them away, and we’ve reused them over the years.”

“Was this the one used in the Scottish Play twenty years ago?” asked Eleanor. Was it her imagination, or did Big Bertha’s light flicker? The cold was biting now — a damp chill that got into your bones, like a New York winter.

“You know, I think it was.” There was a heavy pause, then Raymond flipped the canvas closed.

“Can I put it away now?” Charlie sounded tense.

“Sure.” Raymond looked puzzled.

“I’ve been doing research into the last performance of the Scottish Play,” said Eleanor. “And please do tell me if you’d rather not go into it. I realise it’s a sensitive topic.” Eleanor’s breath frosted in the air as she spoke.

“When Uncle Frank died?” Raymond took his glasses off and polished them on his shirt. Without them, his face looked oddly naked, and younger. “It does bring it all back, seeing the play acted out again on this same stage…” His gaze strayed back to the folded canvas backdrops. “But it’s alright. I imagine a lot of people are curious about it now. An echo of the past.” His voice had dropped and his tone was introspective. Then he slipped the glasses back on, and his focus returned. “What would you like to know?”

“Well, since we were looking at that lovely backdrop, I was wondering if any other props remain from that time,” said Eleanor. “The bed, perhaps? Or the hearth that fell on it.”

“I don’t think—” began Charlie, but Raymond didn’t appear to hear him.

“A bit ghoulish,” he said with a brief smile, “but yes, there probably are parts of the set still around. The hearth was a lovely piece — made by our stage manager, Brian. We used it in most of the interior scenes. It was made up to look like mahogany, but of course it was just light timber. Let me see… after Uncle Frank passed, the police took it away as evidence.”

“They didn’t bring it back?” asked Eleanor.

“I’m not sure what became of it. Such a shame.” Raymond shook his head. “The years leading up to that play were such a special time for theatre in Te Kohe. Everything fell apart after that, and the theatrical society has never recovered. Maddie stopped directing, too, which was a big loss.” He looked genuinely sad now.

A loud crash from above their heads drowned out the rest of what he’d been about to say.

They all jumped, and Charlie glanced around uneasily. “I can go check.”

“We’ll all go,” said Eleanor. “This cold is getting into my bones.”

Raymond shone Big Bertha around the Crypt, making the shadows leap and stretch. “It is rather cold down here.”

“Do you believe the superstitions around the Scottish Play?” asked Eleanor as they climbed the stairs.

“I don’t,” said Raymond, “and yet…”

“Yes?” prompted Eleanor.

“The theatre has an atmosphere, don’t you think? I don’t like being here by myself after hours.”

“Me neither.” Charlie sounded heartfelt.

They climbed the stairs and headed towards where Raymond seemed to think the crash had come from — the wings on the right of the stage.

“What was Frank like?” asked Eleanor.

Charlie mouthed ‘can’t we talk about that outside?’

Raymond paused. He had unusual self-possession, Eleanor thought. He didn’t rush to fill the silence with words, like most people. It could come across as cold and detached, but she had the feeling that wasn’t the case with Raymond. She had the sense that he conducted an intense interior life, but was careful not to reveal it to the public eye. The result of an unhappy childhood, perhaps? Or something else…

“My uncle became my guardian when I was eleven,” said Raymond. “After my parents died. He was… well, if you’ve asked around, you know how people thought of him.”

“Larger than life, generous, straightforward?” suggested Eleanor.

“Yes.” The word contained an ironic huff of almost laughter. “In private he was a more complex individual.”

“Most people are.”

“He wasn’t always easy to get along with. I suppose I wasn’t either. A grieving eleven-year-old isn’t the easiest guest for a widower in his fifties to take in.”

Eleanor noted Raymond’s use of the word ‘guest.’ Like he had been hosted at Rathburn Manor, rather than welcomed into a close relative’s home.

“It must have been nice to have Dean visit so much. Otherwise I imagine it would have been lonely.” Eleanor was watching Raymond’s face closely, and caught the tiny grimace as she said Dean’s name. Remembered pain. Perhaps Dean hadn’t been the companion Raymond needed during a difficult period in his young life.

“Dean was a great distraction,” said Raymond. “Always up to something. He attracted a fair bit of Uncle Frank’s attention, which was a welcome relief.”

“Your uncle was a disciplinarian?” Eleanor guessed.

“Not in the old school ‘spare the rod’ kind,” said Raymond. “It was more… everything you did was measured against an impossible standard. One by which I always came up short. Even though,” and now his tone slid into true bitterness, “he didn’t always abide by his own rules.”

“That is hard.” Eleanor decided not to ask how Frank had failed his own standards. She had the feeling Raymond would evade the question. “Did your uncle have any enemies?”

“I don’t think so.” Raymond seemed unfazed by this line of questioning. “He didn’t hold back out of delicacy for other people’s feelings. But he was

well liked in Te Kohe.”

Eleanor thought that anyone who had a piece of scenery land on them in the exact place to cause instant death must have had enemies.

“Now, what fell over?” Raymond shone the light around the stage wings. Eleanor followed the lantern beam up to see ropes, counterweights, and complicated gantries high above them.

So many possibilities for accidental injury or death, she thought. It’s a wonder more people don’t get murdered during stage productions.

“There it is.” Charlie pointed, and Raymond aimed the lantern beam into a corner where a lead counterweight had fallen off a small wagon loaded with similar counterweights.

“That’s odd,” said Raymond. “I thought those were stacked neatly.”

“Could be the timber shifting,” said Eleanor. “Change of season.”

Charlie walked over and crouched to lift the counterweight and set it back in place. It looked heavy.

“Well, it’s been a nice trip down memory lane,” said Raymond, glancing at his watch, “but I must be getting on.”

“Thank you so much,” said Eleanor. “We’ll find our way out.”

“My pleasure.” Raymond’s voice was polite, but his eyes were observant. “I’ll be up in the AV Room if you need anything.”

Charlie waited until Raymond disappeared through the doors at the back of the theatre, then blew out a long breath.

“That was intense.”

“Ghosty?” In her mind’s eye, Eleanor measured the wagon, and how far a counterweight would have to shift to fall on the floor. Of course, it might have been stacked carelessly, and fallen due to natural causes.

“Extremely.” Charlie glanced at the ghost light in the centre of the stage. It was a single pale yellow bulb on a stand that set it at head height, and did nothing to alleviate the spooky air of the empty theatre. “We need to tread

carefully. Names have power, and there's something about this theatre that lends strength to the revenant."

"All those years of audiences suspending their disbelief to make the illusions real. It would give a place a certain aura." Eleanor smiled to herself. After her time as a fake medium, she was surprised to find herself talking about auras without a trace of sarcasm. Which said something about the true irony of life. "What's our next step?"

Charlie gave a helpless shrug. "I could try talking to the revenant. Knowing his name helps, though I'll need to look up Frank's middle names."

"Could it be dangerous?"

"Maybe…" Charlie shifted uncomfortably. "I, er, also checked about Mrs Haddock and the production twenty years ago. Mrs Davison confirmed she definitely wasn't there on opening night."

"Good to know." Eleanor glanced up into the shadows, and was reminded suddenly of the microphone suspended above the stage, and the possibility of Raymond listening in the AV Room. "Here's what we're going to do." She tried to ignore the sense that an invisible theatre audience was also listening. "Nothing."

"Nothing? But what about the chandelier?"

She raised her eyes up to the hidden microphone, and Charlie's eyes widened. "Nothing until we know more," she reiterated. "Carry on with the play and I'm sure the next step will become apparent."

Charlie nodded, still looking worried. "I guess it will."

The shadowy theatre swallowed his words in thick velvet. Eleanor tried to convince herself that the next step would, in fact, be clear and simple. In this, she failed.

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21

Which contains Shakespearean debate and ominous portents

CHARLIE STOOD IN THE SMALL CROWD OF ACTORS AWAITING THE ARRIVAL OF Yves. They were about to begin their first on-stage rehearsal.

Te Kohe's under-18's tap group had reached the county division, but alas, fell short of the national title. The young hopefuls thus abandoned the stage until the winter term, allowing Te Kohe Am Dram to move in and enact their tragedy.

The doors at the far end of the theatre swung open, admitting a golden shaft of late afternoon sun. Yves's hair glowed briefly in the sunlight as he strode down the aisle, silk scarf flapping in his wake.

"Knows how to make an entrance," murmured Steve.

"Afternoon all." Yves flared out his coat tails as he lowered himself into a chair in the third row of seating. "I hope you're all feeling inspired today. I certainly am. I can already feel the muse entering this sacred space."

"Uh oh," muttered Allie into Charlie's ear. "You're all in for it this time."

"We're going to start with the murder scene," said Yves.

"Which one?" asked Dean, and Allie smiled.

“The one that sets all the others in motion,” said Yves. “The murder of King Duncan. He is Macbeth’s guest, his kinsman, and his king. So Macbeth commits a triple betrayal, spurred on by ambition, prophecy, and his wife.”

Charlie glanced apprehensively around him. At the mention of King Duncan’s death, there had been a definite change in the air. Allie had faded, and Charlie wondered whether the revenant’s presence chased away normal, un-vengeful ghosts.

“Stanley, I want you lying over there.” Yves pointed to a spot on the edge of the stage, near the wings.

“Right on.” Stanley was a blocky, practical-minded man. In real life, he was a plumber, and Charlie wondered whether his mind drifted to Shakespearean tragedy while he fixed pipes.

“Dean and Deirdre, I want you here.” Yves pointed at a patch under the spotlight. “Macbeth is having second thoughts, and wants to call the murder off, but Lady Macbeth is having none of it. Everyone else, stage right please.”

Dean and Deirdre stood together in the circle of light, facing each other.

“Take it from: ‘We will proceed no further in this business,’” said Yves.

Charlie had to admit, Dean was a good actor. When he put on the role of Macbeth, his whole demeanour changed. Deirdre, on the other hand, looked pale and tense, her hands clasped together in front of her.

As Macbeth and Lady Macbeth debated the merits of regicide, Charlie became aware of two things.

There was a growing thickness in the air, a tension that pressed down on him, making it hard to stand upright and breathe. And the actors behind him were having a discussion.

“What I don’t get,” Trevor said, combing his fingers through his mullet, “is why Macbeth got so worked up about Banquo’s kids being kings hereafter. I mean, he didn’t think it through, did he?”

“How’s that?” asked Steve.

“Well, if Macbeth had a daughter, then she could marry Banquo’s boy, and boom! Prophecy fulfilled, and no one has to die,” said Trevor.

“Shhh,” cautioned Steve. “You’ll get the glare of disfavour.”

Yves hadn’t appeared to notice the debate — yet. He’d taken up his ‘listening hard to actors’ pose, legs crossed, chin cupped in his hand.

“‘I dare do all that may become a man.’” Dean glowered at his on-stage wife as Deirdre drew herself up, bristling at his words.

On the other side of the stage, Stanley gave an artistic snore, and Trevor stifled a laugh.

Charlie blinked. The shadows of the side masking curtains were growing darker, almost solid in their blackness.

“‘If we should fail—’” said Dean.

“‘We fail.’” Deirdre’s eyes flashed. “‘But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we’ll not fail.’”

There was a muffled gasp to Charlie’s left. Steve stared up into the dark space over their heads.

The next moment, there was a rattle and a whoosh from high above the stage. Someone screamed.

Deirdre looked up, then threw herself to one side, crashing into Dean, so they both fell heavily on the floor. An instant later, a black shape flew past where they’d been standing and smashed into the back wall.

“Bloody—!” swore Trevor. “What the hell was that?”

“And cut.” With admirable composure, Yves hadn’t moved from his pose. But Charlie saw the subtle signs of anger — clenched jaw, clipped speech. “Somebody get me Callum right now. This place is a death trap waiting to happen. Well?” He glared at the assembled actors. “Go and get him!”

“Right, right.” Steve hurried backstage, heading for the Crypt.

Dean untangled himself, then chivalrously helped Deirdre to her feet. She looked up into the blackness above, her face tense with fear.

“That was a close one,” muttered Trevor. He caught the lead weight as it swung slowly back onto the stage. Its momentum gone, it spun in erratic circles, like a drunken fish.

“The stay must have broken,” he said. “It’s one of the scenery counterweights.”

Yves pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t care what it is, we cannot rehearse with heavy objects whizzing across the stage at lethal velocity. Callum’s the stage manager. His job is to run a safe set. Alright, everyone take five. I’ll see what’s going on.” He strode up the stairs and vanished backstage, scarf rippling.

Trevor gave a low whistle. “Glad I’m not Callum.”

An hour later, Yves ended the rehearsal and swept out of the theatre, Charlie looked around, but couldn’t find Dante. His friend had been seated in the audience with Andrea, and had probably left with her.

Charlie blew out a breath. There was something he had to do, and he was not looking forward to it.

One by one, the actors packed up and left. Charlie waited, each slam of the theatre doors making him feel lonelier and more exposed.

Mrs Haddock appeared, a large ring of keys jangling in her hand.

“Er, do you mind if I stay behind?” asked Charlie. “I want to… check out a few things.”

Mrs Haddock looked around the silent theatre. The highest rows of seating — the Gods — had a window at the back of them. The light from this window was dying, and the space seemed both loftier, and oppressive, as if it contained an oncoming storm.

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

Charlie shook his head.

“Well, if you’re sure. The backstage door will lock automatically when you leave the building, and please turn the lights off when you go. The ghost light stays on, of course.” With that, Mrs Haddock disappeared into the

wings, and returned to place the ghost light on its stand in centre stage. It was already switched on, looking pale and inadequate in the darkening theatre.

“Thank you.” Charlie wished Dante had a phone. He toyed with the idea of calling Eleanor, but it would be ungentlemanly to ask her to join him for an event that might be uncomfortable, if not dangerous.

With a nod, Mrs Haddock departed. There was a slam as the heavy doors at the far end of the theatre closed, and Charlie was alone.

Or, perhaps not. Darkness was falling fast, a thick, reddish black that played with Charlie’s sense of distance. The ghost light grew stronger as the day faded, though even its yellow glow failed to feel warm and friendly.

“Hello?” called Charlie. “Anybody here?”

There was a change in the air, a heaviness to the space that had nothing to do with the weather. It was psychic tension, and now that the noise of actors and drama had departed, its weight was palpable.

Ordinarily, Charlie was never spooked by dark and silent buildings. Ghosts were a normal part of his life, and they were usually pleased to talk to someone living who could actually hear them.

But this brooding presence sent a shiver running down his spine.

“Hello?” This time, Charlie was hoping for some of the theatre ghosts. But none appeared.

Charlie set his shoulders and walked out of the wings and onto the stage.

At first, nothing happened. Charlie let out a sigh of relief, and then the noises started. The tap, tap, tap of footsteps. A tuneless whistling, eerie and discordant, floated up from beneath the stage.

Charlie closed his eyes. Of course the ghost would be lurking down in the Crypt. Of course it would.

He crossed the stage to the stairs and began his descent into darkness. Halfway down, he thumbed on his cellphone light to augment the dim ceiling bulb.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, the whistling and the footsteps stopped. The only noise now was a slow drip, drip, drip at the far end of the Crypt. Charlie swallowed. He did not like being here. Keeping his eyes fixed on the darkness ahead, he reached out and switched on the Crypt lights.

The space sprang into vision, crowded with old furniture, racks of costumes, cupboards, spare theatre seating, and the detritus of many shows.

But the fluorescent lights did not illuminate the space as much as they should have. They stuttered and flickered, and the darkness pressed close around them so that the edges of the Crypt blossomed with shadow.

You're going to have to go over there and see what's dripping, thought Charlie. It's probably just a ghost noise, but maybe it's a pipe that's sprung a leak.

Wishing more and more that he was back in his comfortable living room, Charlie crossed the space, phone light held high. The darkness closed in behind him like a living thing.

It's now behind you, his brain supplied. Whatever it is that's giving all the bad vibes is right behind you. Shut up, Charlie thought back. Shut up shut up shut up!

The drip, drip, drip was in front of him at the far wall. Maybe it was a leaking pipe. There might be pipes running between the rafters of the stage, and if one was leaking, it could ruin all the props. He'd better work out where it was coming from and tell the caretaker.

Charlie shone his phone light onto the black painted plywood ceiling. Nothing. He traced the light along the plywood joint, following it to the point where it met the wall.

There was a dark stain, right where the ceiling met the wall. It oozed out of the crack, the liquid running down the wall and dripping from the ceiling.

As if in a dream, Charlie reached out his hand. The droplet splashed onto his fingers, cold and wet. He shone his cell light onto his hand. The tips of his fingers were splashed crimson, and for one frozen moment, he couldn't think why.

Then he leapt back with a cry, heart pounding, the cellphone flying out of his other hand.

The Crypt lights flickered, and then went out.

Charlie dropped to hands and knees, feeling around desperately for his cellphone. A faint glow off to his right showed where it had fallen, light down, and he scrabbled towards it.

Now the whistling was back, and the footsteps came towards him in a rush, louder and faster, louder, faster. Charlie threw himself towards his cellphone. Something hard smacked into the side of his head but he reached out and grasped the phone with fingers numb with fright.

He rolled onto his back and shone it behind him, thinking to illuminate a terrifying spectre, but there was nothing. With a buzz, the fluorescent lights came on again.

Charlie let out a shaky breath. He shoved the chair he'd hit his head on to one side as he got to his feet. The wall where the bloodstain had been now looked completely normal, except for one thing. Charlie swallowed.

An arrow was now there, drawn in chalk, stark white on the grey wall. It pointed upwards to where the spectral blood had dripped down. And below the arrow were the words: 'help me.'

Charlie rubbed his bruised temple. Helping such a terrifying ghost was the last thing he wanted to do. But that was, more or less, his calling.

He examined the point where the wall and ceiling met. He climbed onto a box and rapped on the ceiling, hearing a hollow 'thunk.' An idea formed in his head. What was particularly attractive about this idea was that it involved getting out of the Crypt.

Back on stage, he retraced his steps to the point directly above where he'd been in the Crypt. Here, the stage wall met the floor, and there was a gap. It was just big enough for Charlie to get his fingers under the floorboard.

He pulled, and the floorboard levered up with a dry sound, revealing a cavity a foot deep.

Charlie played the light over the dusty timber, wondering what he was looking for. Something metallic flickered back at him. Charlie lifted the thing out and held it up to examine it.

The object was two crescents of steel, welded at the outside curving edge, as if they were meant to fit over something. There were two round holes in each crescent, perhaps for two pins to run between them. The edge was dull with age, but he imagined it had once been sharp. Charlie stared. He had no idea what the object was for.

As the burnished steel caught the light, a whisper ran through the theatre. Charlie was sure it was a ghostly whisper, audible only to him, but then the curtains moved, blown by an immense, invisible breath.

“Right. Time to go. Bye!” Charlie gripped the metal object, sprang to his feet, and pushed his way through the backstage door.

The feeling of pressure shut off like a tap as soon as the outside door shut. Gasping for breath, Charlie leaned against the balustrade overlooking the car park.

Night had fallen, and the half moon cast a calm light down on his face. Charlie sucked in the cool air and rubbed his face with one hand. His heart pounded and his head throbbed where he’d hit it.

“That was…” he tried to think of the right words. Extremely unsettling? Rather unpleasant? Something he wished someone else could deal with?

Charlie sighed. As always when it came to ghosts, he was on his own.

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22

In which Eleanor encounters the literary world

"THAT'S AN INTRIGUING FIND." ELEANOR PICKED UP THE PIECE OF METAL Charlie had taken from the theatre last night and turned it over in her hands. "Dante? Thoughts?"

"It could cut someone badly if it was attached to something. I think that's what the holes are for. Though it needs sharpening." Dante said this as if an unsharpened weapon was a travesty that needed remedying as soon as possible.

"Frank Rathburn wanted me to find it," said Charlie. "It looked like it'd been hidden in a hurry, maybe by someone who'd been on stage when he died."

"We need to figure out who had the opportunity," mused Eleanor.

"Did the ghost cause that counterweight to swing across the stage during rehearsal?" asked Dante.

"I'm not sure," said Charlie. "All of us were too scared to ask Callum what exactly went wrong."

"Deirdre's life was in danger," said Dante. "The counterweight could have hit her with lethal force."

“That’s where it was aimed?” asked Eleanor.

“Yes. Unless the ghost had a bad aim. In which case, the target was Dean,” said Dante.

“Interesting. I’ll try to get the details out of Callum tomorrow. In the meantime…” Eleanor’s voice trailed off, and she looked thoughtful. “I want to talk to Deirdre. She’s looked tense ever since this play began. I’d like to find out why.”

“Her best friend died,” said Charlie.

“She’s showing tension as well as grief. I’d say she has something to hide. Now… the approach…” Eleanor tapped her fingers on her coffee table. “I know. I’ve decided to write a book on local history — something to put in the library. And both Deirdre and I are part of the Te Kohe Literary Book Club. We’re discussing *The Aurelians* today.”

“I don’t think I can join you for that.” Charlie looked apologetic.

“I’m not joining any more clubs.” Dante folded his arms.

“That’s alright,” said Eleanor. “As luck would have it, I’m bringing along a guest.”

“Avery,” guessed Charlie.

“My gentleman caller.” Eleanor lowered her eyelashes. “Don’t blush, Charlie. We’re on a case together, that’s all.”

“I’m going to visit Maddie. She was the director of the play when Frank died,” said Charlie. “I think she’ll have insights about what happened that night.”

“Excellent,” said Eleanor. “And we’ll figure out what your mysterious find is. Good sleuth work.”

THE TE KOHE LITERARY BOOK CLUB didn’t meet in the library, or even in the local book shop. This was a *literary* book club, and they had standards.

They met, Eleanor explained as she drove Avery down the main street, at Nocturne, the fanciest (and only) wine bar in Te Kohe.

“I’m amazed Te Kohe can support a wine bar,” said Avery.

“It probably can’t. It’s the retirement baby of Germaine Fontaine,” said Eleanor. “One of the richest divorcees in New Zealand. She has excellent taste in wines, and is the last word when it comes to women’s fiction. At least, that’s what she says.”

“On that point, how many men are going to be at this Literary Book Club?”

“My dear, you are going to be a cause célèbre. The odds are favourable should you wish to romance a lady of a certain age with bookish pretensions.”

“I’m not sure I’ll survive the encounter,” muttered Avery.

“Just say you’re a Jack Reacher fan and they’ll leave you alone.”

They pulled up in front of a small, dark shopfront. The designer had clearly gone for muted style over any desire to advertise the wine bar’s existence.

The interior was also dark — timber stained to look like mahogany, black leather seats, and a rich red ceiling with post-modern dark glass chandeliers.

The literary society members were already staking their claims around a long table at the back of the room. Perhaps with an eye to an unobtrusive exit, Avery shepherded Eleanor towards two chairs at the corner of the table.

With some satisfaction, Eleanor noted that Deirdre had yet to arrive. With any luck, she would end up seated next to Eleanor or Avery. If that didn’t work out, Eleanor was confident she’d be able to corner their quarry after the formal discussion.

At the spiritual head of the table sat Germaine. Her curling black hair was smoothed back into an elegant bun. A copy of the club’s current read — *The Aurelians* — sat on the table in front of her, and Eleanor would bet money it was a signed edition.

“Have you actually read the book?” asked Avery in an undertone.

“Heavens, no. I trawled the net for the CliffsNotes, like everybody else. Except Germaine, of course.”

Eleanor watched as the seats along the table filled up. At last, when there were just two empty seats left, Deirdre hurried in.

Her thick blonde hair blew around her face, as if the sou’wester that whistled down the street had followed her inside. She took in the seating arrangements with a quick glance, and sank into a chair next to Avery.

Eleanor suppressed a spark of frustration. It had been a fifty-fifty chance, and Avery had the novelty value of being one hundred percent of the male attendees.

Germaine coughed politely. “Perhaps we could start by going around the table to give our initial thoughts on this masterpiece?”

Eleanor recalled the internet summary she’d read. Really, she could have done a cold read based on the responses of the seven women who went before her, and produced a credible reaction to the Booker Prize winning novel.

“I found it profoundly moving. And, of course, the themes.” Eleanor laid one hand expressively across her heart. “I’ve always believed in the forces that guide our destiny, and this book brought it all together.”

Next to her, Avery stirred. He was either suppressing laughter at her faux review, or realising he was up next.

“I agree,” sighed Germaine. “It is a significant work. And now, our guest.” She gave Avery a bright smile. “Welcome! I take it you are a literary aficionado?”

“Not as such.” Avery’s Kiwi accent had grown noticeably stronger. “I like a good Louis L’Amour novel as much as the next man. And Jack Reacher, of course. They even did a pretty good TV series, has anyone seen it?” There was a flare of agreement in the circle, quickly suppressed. “But this Aurelia book sounds a bit highbrow for me. Still, it’s nice to have a drop of vino with you ladies.”

“Thank you for sharing.” Germaine sounded a tad frosty. “Perhaps this meeting will inspire you to give it a try.”

“No doubt,” said Avery solemnly.

Eleanor caught a small smile on Deirdre’s face and nodded to herself. Perhaps Avery could run point on the upcoming interview.

As the discussion wound down, Deirdre drifted over to the wine bar to place an order. With a glance at Avery, Eleanor rose and followed her.

Deirdre appeared lost in thought when Eleanor stood next to her. Then she saw Eleanor and Avery, and a warm smile transformed her face.

“Another literary masterpiece done and dusted,” said Deirdre.

“I have to confess I haven’t read it. I looked the summary up on LitCharts,” said Eleanor.

Deirdre’s cheeks dimpled. “I wish I’d done that. Instead, I battled through the first four chapters, then gave up. It’s been so busy lately, and then Jennifer…” Her face tensed, and Eleanor felt a pang of sympathy. She knew that expression. It was the face of someone struggling to push down tears so they could be cried later.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. Jennifer will be missed.” Eleanor heard the sincerity in her voice. Inconvenient, that. It didn’t help to feel empathy for someone you planned to interrogate as a possible murder suspect. “Perhaps…” She paused as if searching for a change of topic. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Detective Marcus Avery. You might remember him from earlier this year. He was the police detective in charge of Ted Andrews’ case.”

“I’m Deirdre.” Deirdre offered her hand. “A pleasure.”

“Likewise,” said Avery. “Are all the book club meetings this literary?”

“No, you picked a good one.” Deirdre gave a shaky laugh.

“You know, this might not be the right time to broach the subject,” said Eleanor, “and please tell me if that’s the case, but I’ve started working on my own small book project.”

“Oh, really?” Deirdre’s face brightened with interest. “You’re writing something?”

“Just a modest project. I’m doing a history of the Te Kohe theatre. Well, it’ll be a history of the region told through the lens of the theatre. I know the building’s been around for a hundred years, and there’ve been dramatic events over that time.”

“I suppose yes.” Deirdre looked thoughtful. “There was that accident during the construction.”

“And the death of Frank Rathburn twenty years ago,” said Eleanor.

Deirdre was lifting her wineglass to her lips at that moment, and Eleanor did not miss the tiny hitch of arrested movement. Flight, fight, or freeze, she thought.

“It’s been a while.” Deirdre regained her composure. “And while I was there at the time, it’s a blur.”

“Might you be willing to revisit it?”

Deirdre spun the stem of her wine glass and looked away. “Surely there were news articles?”

“Nothing beats a first-hand account,” said Eleanor.

“Perhaps now isn’t the time,” said Avery. “It’s an upsetting topic, and you’ve just sprung it on Deirdre.”

Eleanor knew what he was doing, but it was a risky play. She looked apologetic. “That’s true. Look, you don’t have to—”

“It’s alright.” Deirdre’s well-trained manners, or perhaps noblesse oblige, came to the fore. “It was a long time ago, and we’re always keen to help out local artists and authors.”

Eleanor noted the ‘we.’ Clearly, Deirdre had taken on her husband’s mantle as supporter of the arts. “It would be such a help.”

Deirdre took another sip of her wine, and Eleanor wished she’d ordered fortified wine. In vino veritas, she thought, but in a pinch, 11% prosecco

would have to do.

“What would you like to know?” asked Deirdre.

“Can you give me an account of what happened? Don’t worry about being objective. Your impressions, thoughts, and feelings are what bring the past to life.”

Deirdre’s long, pale fingers encircled the stem of her wineglass. “Let’s see… twenty years ago, I was just nineteen.”

“How time flies,” said Avery with a charming smile.

Deirdre looked pensive. “It’s strange, you know. Doing the play now, it all feels real again. What you said about bringing the past to life… it does feel like that’s what’s happening.”

“It must have been a surprise when Yves announced his choice,” said Eleanor.

“It felt inevitable. Like in a dream, when you know something’s going to happen, and then it does, whether you want it to or not.”

“Life can be like that sometimes.” Avery looked sad for a moment, then brushed it off to return to his usual urbanity.

“You were Lady Macbeth in the last production too, weren’t you?”

“The self-styled leading lady of Te Kohe was not happy when I got the part.” Deirdre had a glint of humour in her eyes. “But Maddie knew what she wanted, and she was the director. I think she wanted a fresh take on a dark tale. Raymond was Macbeth, and Frank, Ray’s uncle, was King Duncan. Dean was in it too, playing Macduff.”

“You’re getting the band back together then,” said Eleanor. “Maybe that’s why it feels like the past has come knocking.”

Deirdre gave a shake of her head, but made no comment. She toyed with her wineglass for a few more moments, then continued. “We were so young, back then. It’s hard to even know how we felt. I know Raymond was nervous as anything about being the lead. Everyone thought Frank would be Macbeth, and Raymond was always diffident around his uncle.”

“Did they get along?” asked Eleanor.

“Oh yes.” Deirdre’s words came out a little quickly.

Denial, or covering up the truth, wondered Eleanor. “So, opening night,” she prompted. “Who else was there?”

“The usual. Actors’ families, mainly. Aiden Wright from the *Bugle*.” Deirdre’s lips curved in a tiny smile. “He slept through the first act. I don’t think he expected the scoop he got. Maddie was there too, of course. She hated opening nights, and spent this one hovering around the Gods and the AV Room.”

“Who was in charge of the set?” asked Eleanor.

“Who was to blame for what happened, you mean?” Deirdre sighed. “That was Brian. He passed away five years ago. He was a sweet man. I don’t think he ever got over it. He blamed himself but…”

“But what?” asked Avery, after the silence dragged.

“I don’t think he was at fault,” said Deirdre. “It was the most unfortunate, tragic accident. A freak occurrence, the police said. They went over everything carefully. I don’t think they would have made a mistake.”

“What do you remember?” asked Eleanor.

“Well, you know the play,” said Deirdre. “The first murder happens at the start of Act 2. Macbeth stabs King Duncan while he’s asleep. That usually happens offstage, but we had this clever revolving set with a fabulous backdrop of the inside of Castle Inverness. Brian had made this beautiful hearth to go behind the king’s bed. Above the mantelpiece was a display of mounted weaponry, all painted to look like it was real. One of the weapons caught Frank just right as it fell.”

“What happened just before the hearth fell?” she asked.

Deirdre studied her wineglass again. “Ray snuck in like he was meant to. Frank was lying in bed, just as he had in every rehearsal. Raymond stabbed him with a fake blade — you know, one of those retractable ones, where the blade telescopes up and disappears into the handle?”

“They can be convincing,” said Avery.

“How did you manage to see it all?” asked Eleanor.

“I was waiting in the wings — I had the next scene with Ray. You know, the one where he’s starting to regret everything, and she’s all business. It’s a classic: ‘Macbeth hath murdered sleep.’” Deirdre’s voice became dreamy as she sank into the memory. “I had an excellent view of what happened. The audience couldn’t — Raymond had his back to them as he leaned over Frank, blocking their view. But I saw.”

Avery and Eleanor exchanged a glance.

“And?” asked Eleanor.

Deirdre gave a husky laugh. “It sounds mad, I know it does. But when Raymond leaned over, Frank started up, as if he’d got a fright. Maybe he’d dozed off for a few seconds, and woken up with a shock. That’s the only explanation I came up with, because it made no sense. Frank clutched at Ray, as if he was trying to grab him, and Raymond stumbled back, because he’d startled too. And then the hearth came down on Frank with an almighty crash. I saw it fall. I might have screamed. It didn’t feel real. I saw it starting to fall, and then it fell. Like a dream.”

“And then what?”

“Well, I was the closest, so I rushed in to try and lift the hearth off Frank. Raymond had stumbled back and fallen. He’s often clumsy like that. I was pushing at the hearth when I… when I…” Deirdre swallowed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t expect it to take me this way.” She took a gulp of wine. “I looked down, and noticed that my hands were covered in blood. I froze. I wasn’t thinking. I mean, it took me so long to put two and two together — there was sticky stuff on my hands, and it looked like blood. I thought it was fake, but Frank wasn’t moving. I just kept staring at my hands, and then Frank’s body. Someone else was there, trying to help me with the hearth — Callum, I think. He was one of the props guys back then. And when they lifted the hearth up, Maddie was on stage, calling for a doctor.” Deirdre sniffed, then wiped her eyes, a sudden, violent gesture. “Poor Frank was dead the moment that hearth fell. Raymond was so upset. And of course the police were all over him, as he stood to inherit the manor. But everyone saw

it. I mean, there were about two hundred witnesses." She gave a shaky laugh. "Ray only had that fake knife on him. And he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Brian didn't get a manslaughter or negligence charge?" asked Avery.

"It was a close thing." Deirdre sounded abruptly tired. "But the police couldn't work out how or why the hearth tipped over. It was well designed, with a broad base. Honestly, half the cast were convinced it was the work of a poltergeist or the bad luck of the play."

Eleanor raised her eyebrows. "There are similar rumours going around now."

"Oh, yes. It happens most years. Actors." Deirdre gave a rueful smile. "As if our parts aren't dramatic enough, we have to go on and invent more drama."

Avery went on to offer an anecdote about psychics in policework, and the conversation moved on to lighter topics.

Deirdre left to circulate with the other book club members, and Eleanor decided it was time to move on from prosecco. She ordered an espresso martini.

"An interesting eyewitness account," said Avery. "It'll be instructive to compare it with the others as we go."

"Do you know what the name Deirdre means?" Eleanor asked.

"I do not."

"It means 'sorrowful' or 'broken-hearted.' It's an old Irish name. Deirdre of the Sorrows was the focal point of a love triangle in the Ulster Cycle legends — a love triangle that led to the death of her lover."

"It's a wonder people ever name their child Deirdre. Do they not look up the meaning?"

"It's a nice sounding name," Eleanor conceded. "But not my first choice."

"Do you have children?" Avery's voice was carefully neutral.

Eleanor gave him a bright smile. “I’ll take the Fifth Amendment on that one.”

“So you do.”

Eleanor took a sip of her espresso martini. “Any ideas on what happened?”

“Accidental death,” said Avery. “Despite what you amateur detectives like to think, the police are reasonably competent at recognising murder when it occurs.”

“Sticking to your first impressions. Fine.”

“Paint me an alternative scenario then.” Avery rested his arm on the back of her chair.

“In the confusion after the hearth fell, there were two people who had a chance to kill Frank: Deirdre, and Callum. Of the two, Deirdre had a compelling motive.”

“She did if she knew she was going to marry Raymond.”

“Quite. Callum might have a motive we don’t know about.” Behind Eleanor, the members of the Te Kohe Literary Book Club began to disperse. “Did you catch her Freudian slip?”

“The falling weapon caught Frank ‘just right?’ Maybe Deirdre didn’t like him much. You’d have to stretch that a long way to get to murder.”

“It’s a start.” Eleanor gave Germaine a breezy wave as the literary critic stalked out of the wine bar. “How are you going with the autopsy report?”

“Frank’s case is fairly easy to access,” said Avery. “I’ll let you know if I see anything unusual.”

“You can’t take copies?”

Avery shook his head. “That’s a line I’m not willing to cross.”

“And Jennifer’s case?”

“A few well-placed phone calls will let me know if there’s anything amiss there. I have an interest in Te Kohe now, having recently had two cases

here. They may even call me."

"Our local law and order expert. There's a thought."

"I live to serve." Avery gave her a salute that was less ironic than it should have been, and Eleanor reflected that trouble came in many shapes and sizes.

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23

In which Charlie visits an old friend

"CHARLIE." GRACE LOOKED UP, EYEBROWS RAISED IN SURPRISE. THE HEAD nurse of St Margaret's Memorial Hospital stood behind the main reception desk, a sheaf of files in her hands.

"Hi Grace," said Charlie.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"I was just about to call you." Grace came out from behind the desk, tucking the folders under one arm. She looked quickly down the corridor, but the nurses and patients were all out of earshot. Still, she lowered her voice. "I think we might need your services."

"I see." Charlie's face heated slightly. "I, er, actually came for another reason but we can do a clearing first, if you like."

"Thanks." Grace studied him. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if I could talk to Maddie Brown? Mum said she's here." It wasn't only for the investigation — Charlie wanted to see her. Maddie was an old family friend, and they'd lost touch.

Grace sighed. “You could try, dear, but I don’t know if you’ll get anywhere. She’s slipping away, poor thing. She had a massive stroke. Spends most of her time asleep, and isn’t sure of where she is when she’s awake.”

“Ah.” Charlie felt horribly guilty for not visiting sooner.

Grace checked the watch attached to her front pocket. “I’m going to check her vitals and turn her in about twenty minutes. You could try to talk to her then. Meanwhile, can I show you the room…?”

Grace’s voice trailed off, and Charlie nodded. He was on firmer ground helping the few people who trusted his special expertise. No matter how often he told himself that solving murders was also helpful, a part of him was uneasy about the necessary secrecy.

He followed Grace down polished vinyl corridors redolent of disinfectant and boiled vegetables.

“Old Mr Green passed last week,” said Grace, turning into one of the wards. “And since then, the cats haven’t been into this room. I’ve kept it empty, as I was planning to give you a call today, but we’re going to need to put people in it soon.”

Flopsy and Mittens were the two resident hospital cats. Three years ago, someone had left a cardboard box on the doorstep of the hospital. Inside were two bedraggled blue-eyed kittens, mewing with hunger.

They had grown into two large, sleek, tortoiseshell cats and were doted on by the hospital patients. The secret among the staff, though, was that Flopsy and Mittens had a particular talent.

A few days before a resident departed forever, the two cats would start sleeping on that person’s bed exclusively. Hospital staff would exchange glances and make discreet arrangements for when that bed would become free.

But only Grace knew what to do when the cats refused to go into a room. Other staff might complain that the room was chilly, but Grace knew the truth: a resident hadn’t passed on properly, and it was time to call Charlie.

“Here.” Grace indicated the room with a wave of her arm, and Charlie entered, his ghost sense rising in expectation.

The room contained two beds, and as no one was currently in them, the curtains were all open. Pale sunlight, rendered insipid by the cloudy autumn sky, shone through the window.

The hairs rose on the back of Charlie’s neck. With a ‘squeak, squeak, squeak,’ a nurse strode past in the corridor, the wheels of her trolley making a spirited attempt to escape their bearings. Her Crocs also squeaked, adding to the general spooky ambience.

“Do you think you could give me five minutes alone?” asked Charlie. “Maybe with the door shut.”

Grace patted him on the shoulder. “You’re a keeper, Charlie.” She left, closing the heavy fireproof door behind her.

Charlie walked over to the last bed on the left, nearest to the window. He lowered himself into the reclining chair, its leather worn and cracked with years of use and morning sun.

“Hi, Mr Green,” he said. “What’s keeping you here?”

FIVE MINUTES LATER, Grace poked her head through the door.

“How’s it going?” she called softly.

“All done.” Charlie finished writing in a small notebook and shoved it into his back jeans pocket. “Thanks.” He smiled wanly at Grace. “Should be all good now.”

“I’ll take you to see Maddie.” Grace indicated the trolley behind her. “She’s getting fluids, but…” She sighed. “Her living will was clear. We’re giving her palliative care and keeping her comfortable. You might not get any conversation out of her. She’s had a few visitors — I think Jennifer came to see her before her crash.” A deeper sigh. “Her family’s been by a lot as

well.” They reached the last door on the left at the end of the corridor and Grace pushed her trolley inside.

Maddie lay in a small single room at the far end of the hospital. Outside her window lay the Te Kohe golf course, the fairways dotted with greens, bunkers, and the occasional sheep.

“Hi Maddie.” Grace locked the brakes on her trolley. “Charlie’s here to see you.”

“Hey.” Charlie sat on the chair next to Maddie’s bed while Grace checked her blood pressure and oxygen levels. “It’s me, Charlie.”

The woman lying on the bed would have been tall when she stood up, and her face, even sunken with age and illness, had the bone structure of a classical beauty. Her eyes were closed, and the hands lying on the coverlet were worn thin and pale, like driftwood after years of being washed in the ocean.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” said Grace.

Charlie took Maddie’s hand gently. “It’s good to see you, Maddie. Mum sends her love.”

Maddie didn’t stir. Her eyes were sunken in her face, the skin around them so thin it was almost translucent.

With a lithe movement, Flopsy landed on the bed just by Maddie’s knees. Charlie startled, then quickly relaxed his grip on Maddie’s hand, conscious of how easily she might bruise.

“Hey,” he said softly. “How’s things?”

Neither Maddie nor Flopsy replied. The cat curled in a comfortable circle by Maddie’s legs as Charlie sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the clouds drift by above the fairways. Time seemed on another track in this little room, an eddy where nothing much changed except the slow turn towards the inevitable.

At last, Charlie let go of Maddie’s hand, and stood. “I’ll see you round, Maddie.”

He gave Flopsy a scratch behind the ears, and the cat arched her elegant neck, purring deep in her chest.

The cat watched in silence as Charlie left, closing the door quietly behind him.

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24

Which contains interrogation, evasion, and halberds

ELEANOR APPROACHED CALLUM WITH THREE BOTTLES OF FAKE BLOOD. Ostensibly, she was here to help Callum inventory props and costumes for the coming show. Really, she was here to see if she could get Callum's account of Frank's death, and his version of the party after which Jennifer had died.

Dante had insisted on coming too, on the grounds that if Callum was a murderer, she shouldn't be questioning him alone in the aptly named Crypt. Eleanor appreciated this, though she was sure she knew how to conduct the interview without Callum becoming suspicious.

"I found a couple of bottles of fake blood," she said. "One opened, two unopened. The opened one looks alright, but it's hard to know how old the other two bottles are."

Callum spared her a brief glance. "Oh, those are from when we did Sweeney Todd. They'll be fine."

"So many productions over the years," murmured Eleanor. "Dean was telling me about the things he's been involved in."

"Oh yeah?"

To Eleanor’s ear, that ‘oh yeah,’ had the curl of an unfinished argument. Good, she thought, I can work with that.

“He’s had quite the career,” she said. “And so have you, I believe. Managing shows all over the country.”

“We all have to eat somehow,” grumbled Callum.

“Indeed. And it’s so good of you to come back every year to do this amateur production.”

Callum grumbled something about checking in on the hometown.

“Because there’s a fair bit that went on here over the years,” said Eleanor serenely. “Dean was telling me about the show twenty years ago, when someone died.”

Callum’s posture shifted, his shoulders unconsciously hunching, as if bearing a burden. Or hiding something.

“Oh, yeah? And what did God’s gift to the stage have to say about it?”

This time, the ‘oh yeah,’ had more of a warning edge to it. Eleanor was suddenly glad Dante had insisted on coming along.

“Well,” she said, shifting into a conspiratorial tone, “you know how everyone’s worried about this production being unlucky.”

Callum snorted. “You’ll hear the same nonsense the world over. Actors. Bunch of superstitious old ladies. No offence.”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows. “None taken. Well, Dean had a theory.” She paused to ratchet up the tension. Callum’s posture was purposefully nonchalant, as if he didn’t care if she carried on or not. But the stiff set of his neck said otherwise. “Dean thought Frank was murdered.” Bingo. Callum’s hands clenched involuntarily around his tablet. “That’s why things are so fraught this time.” She kept her manner light and chatty, like an oblivious old lady. No offence. “Doing the same play in the theatre where someone was killed? That’s bound to stir things up.”

“Thank you for your analysis.” Callum’s voice was heavy with sarcasm. “Did our stage superstar present any theories as to who the murderer was?

Or, perhaps, how they managed to get away with it?”

Eleanor shook her head. “He didn’t want to. But I think it’s because…” She lowered her voice. “They must still be here. Working on this production.”

“There’s a few people in that camp.”

“Are there?” Eleanor gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. “I suppose you would know.” She frowned. “What happened that night? Dean said Deirdre was the first on the scene.” It was a fishing question, and it found its target. At the mention of Deirdre, Callum’s hands tightened again.

“She had nothing to do with it,” he said gruffly. “There were ugly rumours, but it was all jealousy and spite — people with nothing better to do with their time.” His look said plainly he put Eleanor in that group.

“Hmmm,” said Eleanor. “But what do you think? Was Frank murdered?”

“How should I know?” Callum turned back to his tablet. “I am but a simple stage manager, with a lot to do, and not a lot of time.”

“Well, it does have a bearing on this production,” said Eleanor. “You may make fun of superstitious actors, but some of them are talking about dropping out.”

Callum shrugged. “Casting is the director’s job, and good luck to him.”

Eleanor decided to change tack. “Some of them are even saying Jennifer’s death is part of the play’s curse.” She adopted a worried look. “Is anyone safe here?”

Dante was abruptly there, in that way he had of moving quickly in total silence. “The counterweight that swung across the stage and nearly hit Deirdre.”

“Yes?” Callum eyed him with apprehension.

“What happened?”

Callum scowled. “The rope frayed through. I took possession of this theatre less than a week ago, and Herr Direktor hauls me over the coals for something that had been slowly unravelling for the last year! This place is a

death trap. The electricity's dodgy. The lights are archaic. The fly tower's a spaghetti monster. It's amazing no one else has died." He stopped, aware that he'd said too much. "Can you find me some halberds please? They should be out back." He waved a hand towards a storage room at the back of the Crypt.

"Okay," said Dante. "And the chandelier that nearly hit Andrea?"

"About that I have no idea, man." Callum scratched his close-cut beard. "Freak accident. That one almost made me a believer in the whole cursed play thing."

"You see?" said Eleanor. "There is something going on."

"No," said Callum, "there isn't. It's just an old theatre, with its own history. All old theatres have had people die in them."

"But you were there on the night Frank died," said Eleanor. "It must have been a shock."

"Yeah, but…" Callum trailed off, looking into space. "Screw it. You may as well know."

"Know what?"

"Not to speak ill of the dead, etc. etc, but the old man had it coming."

"He did?" Eleanor raised her eyebrows.

"You'll have no doubt heard he was the pillar of the community, patron of the arts, defender of the weak and all that, but really, Frank Rathburn was a phoney."

"In what way?"

"He was more like the Godfather than anything. Everyone owed him in one way or another. Even his own nephew didn't want to owe him any more than he could help, and Frank was the only family he had."

"That's… pretty damning," said Eleanor. "But murder?"

"That's the thing, isn't it? Everyone thought Frank was so great, but they didn't see the people he trod on to stay on top."

“Were you one of those people?” asked Eleanor.

“Me?” Callum scowled. “Old Frank was putting me through drama school, so I was on his books. He hadn’t come to collect, yet. I knew other people who’d already been leaned on, and they certainly had an axe to grind.”

“But the only people on stage that night were Frank and his nephew.”

Callum opened his mouth, then shut it with a snap. “The police ruled it an accident, and I reckon they did everyone a favour.”

“I suppose. The police must have gone over everything with a fine-tooth comb.” Eleanor’s eyes widened. “We’re going over all the props now. Is the hearth that fell on Frank still here?”

Callum shifted his feet. “That was years ago. I’m pretty sure it would have been trashed by now.”

Eleanor was watching carefully, and saw his eyes flick over to where a trapdoor lay, flush with the concrete Crypt floor. Interesting. She marked that down as the first place to search when she and Dante had the place to themselves.

“Well, thanks for sharing,” she said brightly. “I’ll just inventory the rest of the special effects cupboard. We need something gory for Banquo’s ghost.”

Callum grunted, and returned his attention to his tablet.

“Yes?” he said a minute later, and Eleanor turned, thinking he was talking to her.

Instead, Dante had glided up to Callum, and was looming over his shoulder.

“How many heavy things are suspended up in the ceiling?” asked Dante.

“I dunno, man.” Callum stepped back to glare at Dante from a better vantage point. “Lots, probably. There’s a whole metal truss up there hung with heavy stuff, and loads of pulleys.”

“How do you know if someone’s up there?”

Callum gave Dante a stare that hovered between perplexed and annoyed. “You can’t. If they’re up above the lights, the glare stops you being able to

see. But no one should be up there without proper fall protection and the stage below cleared. In fact, the only person allowed up there would be me. What's this about?"

"Safety," said Dante.

"Safety…" repeated Callum, nodding slowly. "Well, despite what Herr Direktor seems to think, I do know how to run a safe production. Have you found those halberds yet?"

"Yes." Dante didn't move.

"And?"

"They are not effective."

"What?"

"The halberds."

"Right…" Callum studied Dante, as if trying to decide how to proceed. Eleanor decided this was an opportune moment to continue her cross-examination.

"There's plenty of prosthetics to make the murders of King Duncan and Banquo rather grisly. Do you know if Lady Macduff's death is on stage, or off?"

Callum pulled his gaze away from Dante. "His nibs the director has not graced me with that information yet."

"Would you like me to call him?"

"You have his number?"

"I'm sure I can get it." Eleanor had already begun digging into Yves's history. There was something about the name and the man himself that was eerily familiar, and she needed to know what.

"You are just full of surprises." Callum looked at her properly for the first time. "Don't worry about Lady Macduff. We can always whip up more fake blood if we need it."

“Andrea is playing Lady Macduff,” said Dante.

“I know.” Callum had adopted that slightly glazed expression that people dealing with Dante sometimes got.

“It will be an offstage death,” said Dante. “No knives, swords, or halberds.”

“Right. Well. I’ll just let His Directorship know, shall I?”

Dante nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s awful, having to recast Lady Macduff like this,” said Eleanor. “Did you know Jennifer well?”

“We crossed paths.” Callum watched Dante’s retreating form, brows furrowed. “Why?”

Eleanor shook her head. “I just keep thinking it seems strange — suspicious, even. Do you know why she left the party early?”

“I dunno. Probably had to be somewhere else.”

“You didn’t see anything strange at the party?”

“It was a house full of actors, all trying to outdo each other. There was a lot going on. Although…” Callum trailed off, eyes narrowing. “She was rather curious about Frank’s death too. Asked about it the other day, after rehearsal.”

“She did?” Eleanor managed to sound shocked and intrigued at the same time. “But I thought she was there.”

“She wanted my thoughts on it. Rather like you, in fact. Do you want my take?”

“Very much so.”

“We leave the past in the past where it belongs. That way we’ll all get through this blasted play with no further casualties.”

It wasn’t exactly a warning, but it wasn’t benign, either.

Eleanor watched narrowly as Callum stomped off to check something else in the theatre.

“The hearth,” said Dante. “And the bed.”

Eleanor smiled. “Probably hidden under that trapdoor in the floor over there. I’ll give Charlie a call. As soon as Callum leaves for lunch we can all have a look.”

“I’m going up into the ceiling,” said Dante. “I don’t like things hanging over my head.”

“I’ll sort through my fake blood and special effects materials until you’re satisfied, then,” said Eleanor. “Please don’t fall off anything.”

Dante gave her a look, and disappeared up the stairs.

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25

In which the first few puzzle pieces fit together

CHARLIE FOLLOWED DANTE DOWN THE STAIRS TO THE CRYPT. AS BEFORE, the air was colder than it had a right to be. The room had an oppressive feeling, reinforced by the low beams and the black-painted ceiling that hid the stage above. Outside was a crisp and gorgeous autumn day, but Charlie had no sense of that here.

“Charlie.” Eleanor’s smile did little to warm the space. “Thank you for coming. Callum’s gone out to lunch, so let’s do a snoop while he’s gone. We think the hearth and bed Frank died in might be under there.” She pointed to a trapdoor in the floor.

“Oh.” A jolt of unease shot through Charlie. He didn’t watch horror movies, preferring Country Calendar and gardening shows, but he was pretty sure a trapdoor leading even deeper into darkness under a place called the Crypt was not a good sign.

“Oh, that.” Allie floated into view. “We ghosts prefer not to go down there.” She waggled ghostly fingers and stage-whispered, “It’s spooky.”

Dante crouched down and flipped the heavy timber trapdoor open like it weighed nothing. The hinges creaked as it settled onto the cold concrete floor.

Dante took a slim head torch from a pocket somewhere on his belt and secured it via a headband. He shone the light down into the darkness.

The hole went down three metres to a larger space hidden in shadow. Ladder rungs were bolted into the dusty concrete wall to give access.

The words ‘I’m not going down there,’ arrived in Charlie’s head, and stuck.

“What do you think?” asked Eleanor.

“I wouldn’t go down there by myself,” said Allie. “Brrrr.”

“You two stay up here.” Dante matched words to action by swinging himself into the shaft and climbing swiftly down.

“Okay.” Relief flooded Charlie.

It wasn’t just that the trapdoor looked like the entrance to the underworld. Actually, it looked exactly like that, if the underworld could be entered via a theatre basement. It was also that the further Charlie moved from the bright sunlit world outside, the closer he came to the brooding presence of the revenant. For all he knew, this deepest, darkest underground room was its daytime resting place.

Then shouldn’t you go down there to help your friend? Charlie’s conscience prodded him, but Dante had already gone out of view, the beam of his head torch flashing every so often as he moved around the space.

There was a low grating noise, like rocks being scraped together. Charlie shivered.

“How’s it going down there?” he called, feeling like the worst friend ever.

“I’ve found it.”

Like a bizarre apparition, the top of a fake rock wall came into view.

“Well done,” said Eleanor approvingly. “That’s our murder weapon.”

A display of weaponry — axes, swords, and a mace — glinted as they caught the light, and Charlie swallowed.

“Do you want me to come down and help lift it?” he called down.

“When it’s clear of the trapdoor.” Dante circled the hearth, then in one fluid movement, lifted the whole piece. The fake rock made him look more superhuman than ever. He disappeared underneath the set piece, and it began ascending in jerks as Dante climbed the ladder.

Charlie seized the hearth as the bottom of it came level with the Crypt floor. It wasn’t rock, but it was still heavy as he wrestled it away from the trapdoor shaft.

They all stood back and surveyed the set piece.

“There’s a bed down there too,” said Dante. “In pieces.”

Eleanor looked delighted. “The same one as in the photos from the last production?”

“Yes. I'll pass it up.”

A minute later, Charlie held the bed pieces while Dante fitted them together.

The headboard slid into place with a satisfying click, and the entire frame firmed up.

“Someone had those moved down here after the play where Frank died,” said Allie helpfully. “You should have told me you were looking for them.”

“Who moved them?” asked Charlie, getting a glance from Dante and Eleanor.

“Someone who didn’t want them found, I suspect,” said Allie. “I’d already been dead for ten years at the time, and I may have been hibernating.”

Charlie relayed this information to his friends.

“Callum knew they were there,” said Eleanor. “We need to listen out for his return.”

“Where can we hide these before he comes back?” asked Charlie.

“Do we want to… I suppose we do,” said Eleanor. “They may prove useful later.”

“There’s a room back there where hardly anyone goes.” Allie pointed into the far corner. “It’s full of rats.” She made a face. “But you could put everything there.”

Dante, meanwhile, was studying the bed and hearth. “If it was a planned murder, the hearth had to fall at the exact moment Raymond approached the bed.”

Eleanor nodded. “Can you see how that might have been arranged?”

Dante began searching the bed frame minutely, running his hands along it, looking for something Charlie couldn’t imagine.

Then, he did the same with the hearth. Finally, he stopped at a small hole in the base of the fireplace. He tapped it.

“What is it?” Charlie peered at the hole, trying to imagine what significance it could hold.

“I’ll show you.” Dante positioned the hearth with its spiky display of swords and daggers next to the bed. “This is how it was the night Frank died.”

Next, Dante took a small roll of black twine from his bag. He tied one end of the string high, to the frame of the weapons display. Then he fed the loose end down the front face of the hearth and out through the hole at its base.

"Take this." Dante handed the end to Charlie and walked him back to the bed. "Keep it low."

Charlie crouched while Dante guided the twine under the headboard, through the gap where the board met the frame, and laid the last of it along the bed slats.

"Now pull," said Dante. "Gently."

Charlie pulled. The twine came taut, and the hearth shuddered, and began to lean towards him. Quickly, he let go, and the hearth fell back into place.

“It’s a clever design,” said Dante. “The weight of the weapons display makes the hearth top-heavy and easy to pull over. My guess is the murderer

put some extra weights up there after the set designer had finished. One good pull, the hearth falls across the bed, and the axe comes down on the victim."

Charlie wiped his hands on his jumper. They felt cold, and clammy.

"The audience is there." Dante pointed to the wall opposite the hearth. "Frank lay there." He pointed at the side of the bed closest to the imaginary audience. "Raymond, pretending to be his killer, had his back to the audience when he stabbed Frank with a fake dagger."

"Everyone said Raymond was still holding his dagger after the accident," said Charlie. "And it was a fake one, with no blood on it."

"There was another dagger." Slowly, Dante drew a knife from his belt, and Charlie winced as the air closed in tight around him.

"Where did that come from?" asked Eleanor.

Charlie peered at the blade through the pounding in his head. It looked similar to the other ones he'd seen in the prop weapons cupboard.

"It was down in the cellar, shoved into a gap in the concrete wall. It looks like the other fake blades, but it's real steel, good quality. Sharp."

"It doesn't look like real steel," said Eleanor.

Dante handed her the blade.

"It's painted to look like it's blunt, cheap steel. Clever." She held it up to the light, and the sharp edge didn't glint, hidden as it was under a thin dark grey stripe that made it look like the edge was rounded.

"That piece of metal you found," said Dante.

"The one the revenant showed to me."

"Look at the weapons display above the hearth."

"Oh!" Charlie's eyes widened. "It might fit onto that axe blade!" He pictured the wooden axe head, its edge encased in sharpened steel. He shivered. It would be a lethal thing to fall on an unsuspecting victim.

Eleanor tapped her lips, her eyes shining. “In the confusion just after Frank’s death, someone removed the sharpened axe blade and hid it under the floorboards.”

“Then what was the knife for?” asked Charlie.

“In case the blow from the axe wasn’t fatal.” Dante said this as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“But… who could it have been?”

“If the string went to the bed as Dante’s described,” said Eleanor, “it could have been pulled by either Frank or Raymond.”

“And the intended victim could have been either Frank or Raymond,” said Dante.

Charlie winced, his mind painting a vivid scene of murder.

“After the hearth fell, there were two people who could have removed the sharpened axe blade and the string,” said Dante. “Deirdre or Callum.”

As if to punctuate his sentence, a door slammed above.

“One of whom has just re-entered the theatre,” said Eleanor.

“Oh, dear,” said Charlie.

“Better get a wriggle on.” Allie grinned and faded out.

The next minute was a flurry of movement as Dante and Charlie hauled the hearth and bed frame quietly into the room Allie had told him about.

Callum arrived as Dante and Charlie lowered the bed into place.

They waited in darkness as Eleanor chatted to Callum and steered the two of them into another room so Dante and Charlie could make their exit.

“I don’t want it to be Deirdre,” whispered Charlie. “She’s nice.”

“It could be Raymond and Deirdre working together.” Dante sounded thoughtful. “Like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.”

“Please don’t say that name here.”

Outside, Eleanor suggested she and Callum check out the tartan costumes in the Forgotten Green Room.

“I’ve known a lot of people who believed in good and bad luck,” said Dante.

“You don’t?” asked Charlie.

Dante shrugged. “It’s good to be lucky. But it’s even better to have superior firepower and a solid contingency plan. Then you don’t have to be lucky.”

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26

In which a trap is set and Dante explores honesty as a policy

REHEARSAL ENDED WITH DANTE STANDING OVER THE FALLEN BODY OF Charlie, a fake knife in his hand and the taste of murder in his mouth.

“Good work, everyone.” Yves checked the large Swiss watch on his wrist. “That’s it for tonight. See you all tomorrow!”

With his exit, a wave of relaxation spread through the cast.

“That was intense,” said Charlie from the floor. Dante reached down and a moment later, Charlie was standing next to him. “You’re even scarier when you’re acting.”

“Dante is a total boss man.” Trevor clapped him on the back. “I wouldn’t like to meet him in a dark alley.”

Benedict stifled a yawn. “I reckon we should pack it in. Big day tomorrow…” he trailed off, as if waiting for confirmation.

Steve grinned. “Or…”

“We have a midweek crew bash!” chorused Benedict, Steve, Trevor, and everyone else in earshot except for Charlie and Dante.

“I’m going to find Eleanor,” said Charlie in an undertone. “She said she has a plan for the bed and hearth we found.”

“Okay.” Dante didn’t feel the need for a crew party. On the other hand, he didn’t have anywhere else to be. And Andrea looked like she was staying too. Maybe he could talk to her again.

“Are you joining us?” asked Benedict.

“Sure,” said Dante.

“Then let’s get set up.” Benedict tried to sling an arm over Dante’s shoulders, then gave up and clapped him on the back instead.

“Hey Dante,” called Charlie as Dante was led away. “Just look out for the—”

Charlie’s last words were drowned out in a shout of laughter as Trevor tried the complicated sword manoeuvre Dante had shown him, and accidentally stabbed himself in the knee.

Dante didn’t know whether an impromptu party would contain food, though he imagined it would have drink. That was alright. He never drank, even at wakes. The only time he had drunk a mind-altering substance was when he’d met a tribe of headhunters deep in the Peruvian jungle. Since the consequence of not drinking had been decapitation, he’d figured downing the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus brew was the safer option.

“Party in the Low Bar,” called Alex. He was one of several spotty props youths whom Mrs Haddock ruled with a rod of iron.

Dante thought they might be her grandsons, or grand-nephews. Alex and his two companions certainly looked related, with the same pointy chin and shock of spiky black hair.

Over the next ten minutes, everyone congregated in the Low Bar. There was a slow breaking down of barriers as backstage and front of house crew mingled. As if by magic, bottles of spirits, crates of beer, bowls of chips, and creamy onion dip appeared.

Benedict brought in a tray of chocolate brownies, and everybody cheered.

“Have a brownie, Dante!” Steve handed him the plate.

“Wait a moment. Do you have any allergies?” asked Benedict.

“No,” said Dante.

“Do you like to party?” Benedict waved an arm to attract the crowd’s attention.

“No.”

“Do you want to be part of the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society?”

“Yes.”

“Then have a brownie!” shouted everyone.

Dante looked at the plate of brownies. Most of them were cut into quarters, but there was one whole brownie there. He picked it up and sniffed it. It smelt strongly of cocoa, with an undercurrent of something else. He was trying to identify it when Andrea passed by, her arm linked in Dean’s. They appeared to be deep in conversation.

“Go on, Dante,” cried Steve. “Down the hatch.”

Dante ate the brownie in one bite, and everybody cheered.

Half an hour later, the Low Bar went hazy. Noises seemed either too loud, or hardly there at all.

Time lengthened and then compressed. Minutes flew by, and then walking from one part of the room to another would take an age of empires.

The part of his mind that was ever alert and watchful passed a memo up to his conscious brain. ‘There was something in the brownie. You are high.’

Dante stood stock still while his brain furiously calculated the probable duration, risks, and mitigation steps he could take until he was no longer high.

He retreated to a corner to assess the situation. The middle of the floor was taken up with actors playing a theatre-themed version of ‘spin-the-bottle’ with lots of shouting, laughter, and dramatics.

The opposite corner was taken over by skinny youths who probably wore black even when they weren't being stagehands, and were currently arguing over what music to play on their boombox.

Trevor had taken up residence behind the bar, his mullet flapping as he bopped to music only he could hear, and poured drinks for already buzzing actors.

And Andrea… Andrea and Dean were still deep in consultation. He leaned close, his dark head next to hers as they talked.

Dante zeroed in, watching for any signs that Dean might become a threat. But right now, there was so much noise, so much movement, so much input. It flooded his senses, making it hard to think in a straight line.

"Hey man, you peaking? You look like you're peaking." Steve loomed in his view without Dante even being aware he'd approached.

Dante stared down at him. "Not peaking," he mumbled. "Also, fighting actors can't fight."

"Whazzat?" Steve leaned into Dante's space. Dante would have stepped back, but the wall was right there.

"Not real fighting. Not like… like in real life. Too…" he waved a hand, looking for the right words, "polite. No blood or broken bones. Everyone still alive."

"Should hope so." Steve grinned through his ginger goatee. "Take it easy, man. Just breathe, y'know. It'll all make sense in the end."

This seemed such a profound insight that Dante spent the next interminable length of time contemplating it.

He emerged from thinking deep thoughts to find he'd slid down the wall and was sitting on the ground, gaze drifting as he studied the crashingly bright checked carpet.

Someone's shoes were walking towards him, stepping over the pattern with a careful tread.

Dante peered upwards. A head was silhouetted against the temporary fluoro tube the caretaker had hung in place of the chandelier. The person's hair stood out in a dark halo, limned with light.

Then they crouched down to stare into his eyes.

"Dante? Are you alright?"

Andrea. Dante realised he hadn't actually said her name when she gently shook him on the shoulder and asked again.

"Dante? Are you okay? Steve said you ate an entire brownie! You're only meant to take a quarter, or less. God only knows what Benedict puts in them."

"Andrea." Dante studied her lips as she said more words. He hoped it would all make sense in the end.

"Just… maybe I need to get you out of here," said Andrea, tugging ineffectually on his arm. "Somewhere quiet, till you come down a bit."

"...too dangerous," said Dante.

"I know, you said, but this is a party." She frowned at him. "No one's going to drive off a cliff here."

"There's a murderer. Maybe more than one. In the crew."

Andrea sat back on her heels, her frown deepening. "Dante, I've known these people for years. They're good people. Well, I haven't seen Dean for a long time, but he's a local boy. And Ray's a sweetheart. And Deirdre is the gentlest person I've ever known. She literally won't harm a fly. You're safe here."

Dante thought about dangerous people he'd met who'd had soft spots for animals, birds, and insects. The worst offender was a man who'd taken out an entire gang of Russian mobsters because they'd killed his dog. At the time, Dante hadn't understood it, but now that he had a cat, he did.

"She's a suspect." The words were out of his mouth before he'd even thought of saying them.

“Who?” Andrea’s eyes widened. “Deirdre? She can’t be.”

“Top of the list.” Dante wondered why he was saying all this. Not saying things had worked perfectly well for him in the past, but it seemed his mouth had stopped paying attention to his brain.

“But… that’s impossible! She was Jennifer’s closest friend! She’s heartbroken that she’s gone.”

“Good actress.”

Andrea shook her head in disbelief. “Who else is on your list?”

“Raymond.” Dante counted them off. “Jennifer, Callum, and Dean.”

Her eyes narrowed. “How could Jennifer be a suspect? She’s dead.”

“Two murders,” mumbled Dante.

“I could see Callum doing something he regrets later but…” Andrea stared at him. “How do you know so much about murders anyway? What did you do before you came here?”

Dante’s brain tried frantically to block off what he was going to say before he opened his mouth, but it seemed he’d lost all his filters.

Well, shrugged the small part of him at the back of his mind who observed everything, I guess Andrea’s about to find out about me.

OUTSIDE THE THEATRE, Eleanor passed Charlie a large bundle of linen. The familiar rush of setting up a con lent an extra aliveness to the air.

“You want all this down in the Crypt?” asked Charlie.

“Here’s what I want you to do.” Eleanor explained her plan as they passed through the backstage door of the theatre and proceeded down the corridor.

The dull thud of bass echoed through the space, accompanied by raised voices and laughter.

“Seems like quite a party,” said Eleanor. “Any questions on the setup?”

“Good to go.” Charlie hesitated at the top of the stairs. “You do think this’ll work, right? Because, I’d hate for…”

He trailed off, as if uncertain of his main concern.

“If we play this right,” said Eleanor, “we’ll have the murderer’s confession by the end of the night. I’ll be back in ten minutes, give or take. And once you’re set up, find Dante, and ask him to lurk down here and watch, will you? Just in case.”

“Alright.” Charlie disappeared down the stairs to the Crypt, and Eleanor went towards the sound of partying.

The Low Bar was transformed from earlier in the day. Bottles of alcohol and bowls of snacks were everywhere, alongside crew in various stages of inebriation. It brought to mind Eleanor’s mother, who had been reluctant for teenage Eleanor to be involved in any acting. Perhaps she’d known.

Eleanor spotted Deirdre in the far corner of the room. She was sipping from an elegant champagne flute, and listening to whatever Steve was telling her with a calm demeanour.

“Showtime.” Eleanor smiled to herself. If there was one impossible task, it was to get actors to stop acting when more than one of them gathered in a space.

She made her way over to Deirdre, stopping to pour herself a glass of wine from a random bottle.

Steve was in the middle of a tale about being on tour with a theatre company back in the eighties.

“And they made us take the whole thing down!” he exclaimed, clearly coming to the punchline of the story.

Deirdre laughed appreciatively. Her cheeks were rosier than usual, and her thick blonde hair less coiffed. “It must have been a scene.”

Steve looked pleased. There was something about Deirdre, thought Eleanor, that made people want to make a good impression. She was so poised, so

self-contained. Winning her favour felt like a worthwhile prize. Well, it was time to test that composure.

“I’m sorry I missed that yarn.” Eleanor slid into the conversation. “Steve has a colourful history.”

“Bit of this and that. Chequered past.” Steve winked at Deirdre.

“I wonder,” drawled Eleanor. “I imagine Deirdre could one-up you on wild stories, only she’s far too well behaved.”

Deirdre’s smile had a spark of mischief in it. “I imagine Eleanor could trump us both.”

Always remember, thought Eleanor, that when you’re observing someone, they could well be studying you.

“There’s not much to tell,” she sighed theatrically. “Although I do know one thing.”

“What’s that?” asked Steve.

“Absinthe,” she said succinctly.

Steve swung to face her fully. “The milk and honey of an actor’s world. Take me to it.”

“I’m not sure if I can do that,” said Eleanor.

“Whyever not?”

“It’s…” she paused as if searching for the right words. “I think it might be the secret stash of our illustrious caretaker.”

“Even better.” Steve’s eyes gleamed. “And where would this secret stash of green gold be lurking?”

“I saw suspicious signs down in the Crypt,” said Eleanor. “Behind the weapons cupboard.”

“Ooo.” Steve swayed in place, the room clearly circling him as his brain absorbed the alcohol he’d imbibed on an empty stomach. “Lead me to it.”

“You know,” said Deirdre, “perhaps it would be better if we didn’t add absinthe to the mix right now.”

“I agree,” said Eleanor. “Forget I mentioned it.”

“Oh, no you don’t. I clearly heard you say the hallowed name,” said Steve. “Also, the caretaker’s stash! That sly old codger. I bet it was the bottle he confiscated last season. It’ll taste even sweeter, knowing it’s nicked. Do you know what he said about Trevor last rehearsal?”

“I think,” said Deirdre, “that you’d better not brave the stairs down to the Crypt.”

“What’re you implying?” said Steve. “I’m sone cold stober.”

“In the interests of safety, I’ll go get it,” said Eleanor. “Not a problem. I’ll be just a minute.”

“And let a lady venture down into the darkest abyss by herself?” cried Steve. “Never!”

“I’ll come with you.” Deirdre laid a hand on Steve’s forearm. “You stay here.”

“As milady wishes.” Steve gave a lopsided salute.

“Are cast parties usually like this?” asked Eleanor, as she and Deirdre walked down the corridor.

“Not always. Just usually,” admitted Deirdre. “Especially the impromptu ones.”

The stairs down to the Crypt were dimly lit and wound away from them like a dark promise. Eleanor hoped Charlie had finished setting up down here.

It grew colder as they descended, and Eleanor wondered if the angry ghost lurked here. In which case, she was probably about to throw a large lump of fuel on its fire.

“I’m just glad that Raymond left early,” said Deirdre as she stepped carefully down the stairs. “He’s still getting over his torn rotator cuff

operation, and they do insist on him doing shots from a brew that's equal to absinthe in toxicity."

"Te Kohe is lucky to have you both." Eleanor drifted further behind Deirdre as they rounded the final corner. She wanted her suspect to take in the view uninterrupted.

The Crypt was dark, the only light seeping down through the trapdoor from the stage above.

"Just a moment," said Eleanor. "I'll find the light."

She flicked the switch Charlie had shown her earlier, and Deirdre gasped.

"What… what is *that*?"

Eleanor admired the scene. Charlie had set it up perfectly.

A single spotlight hung from a beam in the centre of the Crypt, creating a circle of light. In the centre of it was staged the bed from the first Macbeth play. The fatal hearth stood beside it, half in light, half in shadow.

Charlie had made the bed with a mattress and linen as close as possible to the original. The sheets glowed with an unearthly whiteness.

"What—?" Deirdre turned wide eyes to Eleanor. She cleared her throat. "What is the meaning of this?" Her voice was husky, as if her mouth had gone dry.

"Oh, we found this in a forgotten corner of the Crypt," said Eleanor airily. "Takes you back, doesn't it?" She wondered where in the shadows Dante was hiding.

"I…" Deirdre shot a nervous glance at the bed, and then swayed back as if she wanted to bolt down the corridor. "I think I'll go now, thank you."

"I think not," said Eleanor pleasantly. "You see, my friends and I had a little idea that the deaths of Frank and Jennifer might be related. It all seemed so… coincidental. What were the chances? Two productions of Macbeth, two deaths that appeared to be accidental."

“I’m going to call the police.” Deirdre pulled her phone from her pocket with a shaking hand.

“It might save time,” said Eleanor. “When they arrive, perhaps you could explain to them what we found when we conducted a thorough search of these props.” She waved a hand at the bed and hearth.

Deirdre followed her gesture, and her phone slipped from nerveless fingers.

There, gleaming darkly on the pristine white bed, was the dagger Dante had found in the cellar under the Crypt.

“Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” Eleanor’s voice echoed off the concrete walls of the Crypt, and Deirdre flinched. “Come, let me clutch thee. Art thou but a dagger of the mind—”

“Stop!” Deirdre’s hands flew up to press against her face. “Stop it now! I… I refuse to listen to this!”

“Perhaps you’d like to lie on the bed, then,” suggested Eleanor. “And see what happens when someone pulls the string that connects to the hearth, and brings the whole thing crashing down onto you?”

Deirdre let out a groan like a person in physical pain. She stumbled forward to lean, gasping, against the carved wooden foot of the bed.

“It’s strange how the past comes back to haunt us.” Eleanor kept her tone conversational. “I would have thought twenty years long enough to lay anything to rest, but then again, perhaps not. There was no way Raymond could have removed the hearth string and hidden the dagger after Frank died. He didn’t have the opportunity. Tell me, did the hearth kill Frank immediately when it fell on him, or did you have to stab him when you first rushed over, pretending to see if he was alright?”

Deirdre sat on the bed, as if her knees had given way beneath her.

“Guilt is a heavy burden,” said Eleanor. “You’ve had twenty years of it. Perhaps it’s time to lay your ghosts to rest.”

“It wasn’t like that at all.” Deirdre’s harsh whisper raised the hairs on the back of Eleanor’s neck. “Everyone thought Frank was a hearty, good-

natured saint. He wasn't. He made Ray's life a living hell."

"That may be so, but unpleasant people don't deserve to be murdered."

Deirdre made a weird, huffing sound, and it was a few seconds before Eleanor realised what it was. She was laughing.

DANTE FOCUSED ON ANDREA. "What did I do before coming here? I was at home gardening, and then I went to the rehearsal here."

"That's not what I mean." Andrea leaned closer, blocking out the bright light and the noisome chequered carpet. "What did you do before coming to Te Kohe?"

"I was a… cleaner," said Dante.

"A cleaner?" Andrea's brows went up. "Like, cleaning office buildings?"

"Office buildings, apartments, malls, motorcades, casinos, palaces, ghettos, a submarine and a castle in Transylvania. And a circus," he added as an afterthought. After that job, Dante could see why a lot of people didn't like clowns.

"Wow. That's a lot of… cleaning." Andrea appeared to be thinking. "If that's so, why do you carry a gun? And why do you have all those extra locks on your door? And—"

Charlie's flushed face appeared in Dante's vision. "Dante! Where have you been? I've been looking for you." He paused, his lips parting in concern. "Dante? Are you okay? What happened?"

"I think he ate a whole brownie." Andrea glanced across at Charlie. "One of Benedict's. I want to get him someplace calm and quiet."

Charlie winced. "I thought I told you! That's not good. Dante, you're supposed to be down in the Crypt right now, to make sure…" He trailed off, looking sideways at Andrea.

Andrea flicked Charlie a glance, then fixed her gaze back on Dante. “Dante, what exactly are you up to in the Crypt?”

“Er, well, you see…” said Charlie. At the same time, Dante spoke.

“We set a trap for Deirdre,” Dante informed Andrea. “To see whether she’s the murderer. I need to go down there and make sure Eleanor’s safe.”

“I see.” Andrea’s voice was just audible above the crowd noise and hip-hop beats.

To Dante, it sounded dangerous.

“Erm…” Charlie’s face became, impossibly, pinker.

“Deirdre had motive, means, and opportunity in Frank’s murder. We haven’t worked out the opportunity for Jennifer’s death yet, but there is motive.” Dante wondered why his mouth was so far away from the rest of him. Currently, it seemed to be off on its own side mission.

“I think you should stop talking, Dante.” Charlie darted an anxious glance at Andrea. “We’re just trying to prevent anyone else from being murdered.”

“I see.” Andrea stood up briskly. “Well, I think it’s my duty to go down there and see what you people are putting my friend through.”

“I will come too.” Dante looked at his legs, commanding them to move. They didn’t. “In just a moment.”

A shout of laughter came from the bottle-spinning circle as Trevor did something particularly outrageous.

“I think you’ve done enough.” Andrea looked down at him through shuttered eyes. “And in your current state, I don’t think you can protect anyone from anything.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?” said Charlie.

“Two,” said Dante. “And you have three held up on the hand behind your back.”

“How did you know that?”

Dante couldn't explain how he could tell from the way Charlie's muscles had shifted in his left arm. It was as far beyond him as the moon, right now. He made an attempt to stand, but his leg muscles refused to activate.

Charlie knelt next to him and slipped an arm around his back. "Hup!" Charlie strained against Dante's weight, and slipped back, gasping.

Dante reviewed the situation. Andrea was looking down at him, hands on hips. His feet seemed to be a distant subcontinent. But… someone needed to make sure that Deirdre, potential murderess, was not inspired to murder anyone else to cover up her possible crimes.

That thought got him moving. Charlie was yanked up as Dante got to his feet in one unexpected movement. Andrea stepped back as Dante swayed, then locked onto the exit door as his next target.

Andrea and Charlie followed as Dante marched straight through the bottle-spinning circle and out of the Low Bar. If murder was going to be committed, it was best to leave it to the professionals. Which right now, unfortunately, meant Dante.

"THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK? I murdered Frank to stop him terrorising Ray?" Deirdre straightened as if steel was entering her spine again. "You couldn't be more wrong if you tried. I wasn't the murderer. Frank was."

Eleanor schooled her face to blandness. "Frank needed Raymond's money to prop up his crumbling estate? That was always a possibility. It seems a complicated way to get it though."

"Oh, it wasn't Frank's first attempt at murder." Deirdre smoothed her dress, regaining composure. But her eyes kept sliding back to the dagger, lying on the clean white bedsheet. "I'd spent a lot of time with Raymond that summer. We were getting closer, I suppose. He was — still is — the sweetest man.

"There was a near miss one evening with a car while we were walking home. It was a rental car, and I pulled Raymond out of the way just in time.

It just so happened Frank was out that evening. And then there was the lookout above the cliffs. It was where Raymond went to get away when Frank was in one of his moods. Raymond would always lean against the wooden railing and gaze out to sea. But this time, it was sawn almost through, in a hidden, cunning way. Raymond would have fallen off the cliff if I hadn't been there."

"How did you know what Frank planned to do at the theatre?" Various thoughts were clamouring for attention in Eleanor's mind, but she ignored them. Keep her talking, she thought. Keep the information flowing. You can decide what's true and what's false later.

"I found the evidence," said Deirdre simply. "The atmosphere had been awful between Frank and Raymond the whole production. Everyone thought Frank was sore that Raymond got the main part. But that wasn't it. I'd see him shoot these looks at Raymond. They chilled my blood. So I started snooping. The evening after the last dress rehearsal, I stayed behind. I was scared, but I knew it was my last chance to work out what he was planning."

Deirdre's left hand gripped the bed post and her gaze strayed towards the dagger again.

"I don't know how long I waited to be sure everyone had gone. They were the longest minutes of my life. Finally I went onto the stage, my heart pounding so hard I could hardly think. I was convinced Frank knew what I was up to and was just waiting for me to come out of hiding so he could murder me.

"But everyone really had left for the night. The scene for King Duncan's murder was all set up, with the ghost light shining on it. I looked under the mattress and saw the dagger. It was that one." She nodded towards the bed. "Painted to look like a fake. And I found the string. It was threaded through the bed up to the top of the hearth, and then down in a neat coil at the bottom of the fireplace.

"That was when I knew what Frank was planning. He was going to stab Raymond during King Duncan's murder scene. Frank would be on the bed, and when Raymond leaned over to stab him with a fake dagger, Frank

would stab Raymond for real. Then he'd pull the hearth down over both of them. Frank would hide the dagger before the police arrived, and it'd all look like a tragic accident."

"What did you do?" Eleanor kept her voice as passionless as a judge.

Deirdre gave a half shrug. "I went and hid Frank's blade in the depths of the Crypt."

"Interesting," said Eleanor. "Do you have anything that could prove you're telling the truth?"

"If I had proof back then, don't you think I would have done something? I was just a nineteen-year-old kid. If I'd accused Frank, it'd be his word against mine."

"Hopeless," said Eleanor.

"Hopeless," agreed Deirdre.

"I'd like to believe you." Eleanor decided to leave out the axe head Charlie had found — for now. Either Deirdre was telling the truth, and didn't know about it. Or she did know about it, and she'd been the one to hide it in the floor twenty years ago. Either way, it could be useful to spring that information later. "The mechanism for bringing the hearth down on the bed could have been operated by either Frank or Raymond. And Frank could have been stabbed before, during, or after the hearth fell on him."

"Proof is hard to find twenty years later," said Deirdre softly. In the pale light of the Crypt, she looked half a ghost herself. "I should have guessed what you were fishing for with that story about writing a book." Her gaze measured Eleanor. "Slippery."

It was a one-word accusation that Eleanor couldn't deny. Instead, she changed tack. "And, of course, there's Jennifer's murder to account for."

"Jennifer's murder?" Deirdre's mouth dropped open in a reaction that seemed genuine. "Why? *How?*"

Eleanor was about to answer when the party noises grew abruptly louder. Someone had opened the door at the top of the stairs and now it sounded

like several people were stampeding downwards.

The first person down was Dante. He blinked in the spotlight, his eyes lacking their usual focus.

Next was Charlie, who skidded to a halt next to Dante. “Hi, Eleanor. Hi Deirdre.”

“You’re still alive,” said Dante.

Andrea pushed her way past them, scowling. She stalked over to Deirdre and linked arms with her. “I don’t know what you all think you’re playing at. But this is way out of line.”

Deirdre’s mouth compressed in a thin line. “I couldn’t agree more. Let’s go.” She crossed the floor to the stairs with dignity. But just before she left, she looked back at the bed, the linens lit ghostly white under the single light.

It was a many-layered look. Eleanor saw regret, worry, determination, and something else, so fleeting she would have missed it if she hadn’t been paying close attention. Guilt.

“What happened?” asked Charlie as the two ladies’ footsteps disappeared up the stairs.

“It’ll take some explaining. It sounds like you two have a story too.”

“We’d better pack up,” said Charlie. “And it’s probably best if we all leave soon.” He cast a doubtful glance up at Dante, who had extracted a small black knife from somewhere, and was tossing it up in a flash of spinning metal, and catching it by the hilt, perfectly every time.

“I agree. Let’s stow the gear and split.” Eleanor sighed. Deirdre claimed she had taken the dagger before the fateful opening night, but Frank had died, and Raymond had lived. While the bed could be said to have done its job, their case was far from complete.

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27

In which Dante weighs the pros and cons of transparency in relationships

"IF A WOMAN IS ALL UP IN YOUR BUSINESS, WANTING TO KNOW WHERE you've been, where you're going next… " Frankie scowled into his laptop camera. "Then she's gotta go, y'know? You can't put up with that kind of scrutiny. It's bad for business."

Dante sat at his desk at home and wished he'd never tabled the subject with his AA group. Under the desk, the cat attacked his shoe laces with enthusiasm, her front paws wrapped around his ankle. Every so often, she forgot to sheath her claws, and they sank into his skin. It was a welcome distraction from his brain fog, a reminder of last night's party.

"But what if she cares for you?" Jasmine's eyes widened. The effect, when framed by enormous false lashes, was startling.

Frankie folded his arms, bulging biceps on display. "If she really cares for you, she'll know when to shut up and leave you alone, is what I'm sayin'."

"Thank you for sharing your views, Frankie." John's voice cut through whatever rejoinder Jasmine was about to make. "We're keeping this session focused on Dante, and his questions about relationships. Dante, could you clarify what it is you're hoping to achieve?"

Dante brought his mind back to the present. “My…” he paused, not sure what to call Andrea. Girlfriend sounded too formal, and he had the feeling Andrea was supposed to confirm this was, in fact, the case. “My date is upset because I’m trying to protect her from a dangerous situation. Her friend’s involved too.”

Frankie snorted. “That’s women for ya. If you whack someone for disrespecting them, they think you’re crazy. If you rid the neighbourhood of undesirables selling crack, they never notice. But say the wrong thing in front of her people, and you’ll never hear the end of it.”

Aubrey nodded. “Never offer to get rid of an ex by dangling them off a ten-storey building. Girlfriends want you to listen to their problems, not solve them.”

“Men can be unreasonable too.” Jasmine’s eyes narrowed, her lashes forming a dark thicket around her bright blue eyes.

“Like how?” said Frankie.

“If they ever ask how many exes you’ve had, don’t say.”

Caleb frowned. “The question’s not in the best taste, but I don’t see why a guy would get upset if he was the one who asked it.”

Jasmine batted her eyelashes. “I guess I forgot to mention that all my exes are dead.”

A silent ‘ah’ of understanding passed around the on-screen group.

“To get back to the main point,” said John, “Dante, is it alright if I clarify your goal? You can always correct me if you want to.”

“Okay,” said Dante.

“Your relationship goal,” said John, “is that you want a shared understanding with your date. The difficulty is there’s a lot you can’t tell her, and it’s bringing you into conflict with her friends.”

“That’s about right.” Dante didn’t want to complicate matters with ‘how do you get your possible girlfriend to quit acting in a play that’s set in a haunted theatre with an angry revenant and a murder investigation?’

“Understanding is overrated,” said Aubrey. “Most people are happier not knowing the truth. They won’t thank you for complicating their lives.”

“The only time I’ve told my ex-boyfriends the truth,” said Jasmine, lowering her eyes, “was just before I dispatched them. It was sad, but sometimes in relationships you have to sacrifice.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows. “Reading between the lines a little, but… were you monologuing when you offed your exes?”

“Absolutely not.” Jasmine’s cheeks coloured a delicate pink.

“Sounds like ya were to me.” Frankie’s grin was wolfish. “Bad habit, that. Will get ya killed one day.”

“Thank you all for weighing in on the issue at hand,” cut in John. “Dante, I want you to think about this question. How can you become the best version of yourself?”

Dante frowned. “What about my date?”

“In the end,” said John, “people will do what they do, and trust who they decide to trust. All you can do is be the best you can, every day.”

“Okay.” It was not the actionable advice Dante was hoping for.

“That’s one thing The Godfather movie got right,” said Frankie. “You don’t tell wifey the truth unless they’ve grown up in the family. Of course then they’d know not to ask.”

“Thank you, Frankie.” John’s voice contained just a hint of patience wearing thin. “Does anyone else have a question they’d like to discuss?”

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28

Which contains surveillance and counter-surveillance

CHARLIE WATCHED AS DANTE FED A ROPE THROUGH THE PIN RAIL, AND Callum adjusted the counterweights, sliding a heavy iron brick onto the arbor with a clink. The heavy object on the other end of the rope drifted gently down as if it were as light as paper.

“A bit lower,” said Callum. “There.”

Dante tied off the rope to the pin rail and stepped away. A large pane of glass on a wooden stand with a big ‘X’ of tape in the centre of it rested lightly on the stage, one end brushing against the wing curtains.

“Why’s it at that angle?” asked Charlie.

Callum called up to the AV Room in the far back of the theatre. “Oy! Ray! Turn the Pepper light on, will ya? Stand over there, Dante.”

Dante took two steps to stand where Callum was pointing, and a stage light switched on, lighting him up.

“Wow!” gasped Charlie.

Next to him was what looked like a hologram of Dante. Dante experimentally raised his hands, and the apparition mirrored him. Charlie’s grin faded. It looked like a ghost of Dante, and he didn’t like that idea at all.

“Nice effect,” drawled a voice in his ear. “Though I can’t say it’s in the best taste. Like blackface for ghosts.”

Allie stood at his shoulder, ghostly hands on hips as she eyed the phantom of Dante.

“It’s not like real ghosts could play the part,” murmured Charlie. “No one would be able to see them.”

“‘Spose.” She patted her bobbed hair. “Though I reckon I could do a bangin’ Banquo at the feast. Shaking my gory locks at whomever I pleased.”

Callum gave a grunt that could have signified anything from approval to derision. “Looks alright, Ray. You can turn it off.”

“That looked great!” said Charlie. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Oh, really?” Allie rolled her eyes.

“Are you going to take that ‘X’ off?” Dante pointed to the tape on the glass as the spotlight flicked off.

“And have some numpty walk into it and damage themselves or worse, crack the glass? We’ll take it off on opening night, not before.” Callum tapped things into his tablet, face set in his usual scowl.

“I didn’t know you could do real life special effects on stage,” Charlie enthused.

Callum harrumphed. “Pepper’s Ghost. It was how Maddie planned to do the Banquo ghost scene twenty years ago. Same piece of glass and everything. Gotta love the classics.”

“This same piece of glass was set up on the night Frank died?” asked Charlie.

Callum shot him a sharp look. “Visit any hospital or rest home, you’ll find the same thing: people have died there. As far as I know, hospital staff don’t make a big deal of it. Just actors.” He made a final note on his tablet and slid it into the messenger bag that seemed permanently attached to his hip.

“Okay, haul it up, Dante. And thanks for staying behind to help,” he added grudgingly.

The glass ascended into darkness, swinging gently as Dante hauled on the rope.

That’s one way to kill someone, Charlie thought. They’d never see it coming. And that glass is heavy. He eyed the ropes. They were strong, synthetic ones, the same as arborists used. Easy enough to saw through with a sharp knife, though.

“Are we all done for the night, Callum?” Raymond appeared in the wings, looking mild and rumpled.

Callum gave one of his grunts.

Raymond looked apologetic. “I’m sorry I can’t help with setting up, it’s just that my rotator cuff tear—”

“Yeah, fine,” said Callum. “If you’re in such a hurry, fine.”

“No, I can help, it’s not—”

But Callum had whirled away to stamp off stage. He strode straight through Allie, who sneezed.

Raymond watched him go, his expression a curious mixture of regret and exasperation.

“Don’t worry,” said Charlie in a low voice. “I’m sure it’s just stress as opening night gets near. Nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, but I know it is.” Raymond massaged his right shoulder and grimaced. “We go back a long way, you see, and…” His voice trailed off, as if he’d decided not to say what he’d been going to say.

“I liked the Pepper’s Ghost effect,” said Charlie, mainly to fill the uncomfortable pause in the conversation.

“Isn’t it great?” Raymond looked pleased. “It was notorious in the late 1800s Spiritualist Movement, when fake mediums used it to pretend they were summoning ghosts.”

“Bet you’d like to be a fake medium,” said Allie. “Wooo…” She did spirit fingers while Charlie tried to recapture his train of thought.

“Are there any other effects you’re planning?”

“I’m going to go up and test a few now,” said Raymond. “Would you like to join me?”

“Yes please!” Charlie decided Deirdre hadn’t told Raymond about their investigation. He seemed relaxed and unaware that there was anything sinister at work in the theatre.

“Me, too.” Raymond started slightly to see Dante standing next to him.

Charlie blinked. Somehow, Dante became more… Dante when he was in the theatre. The veneer of gardener and sleuth that Charlie had become used to vanished when Dante played ‘Murderer One.’ Charlie was concerned that something about the heavily haunted theatre and its vengeful occupant was affecting Dante’s psyche.

One more thing to worry about, he thought, as they followed Raymond past the rows of seating and through the theatre doors to climb the stairs up to the Gods.

From the back of the Gods the stage was a distant place, framed by curtains, the false perspective of the backdrop murky in the dim ghost light. The shadows lent the stage depth so that it seemed another world, floating in darkness, reachable only through the mythical fourth wall.

Someone had drawn the blind down over the small window that gave the theatre its only view of the outside. Charlie wanted to pull the blind up and bring reality back to the illusory landscape of the theatre.

Raymond opened the AV Room door and entered, dropping into the well-worn seat. A dim red light glowed above the controls dashboard, just enough to illuminate the knobs, dials and switches. There were stickers above the switches with helpful names like ‘Front Wash’, ‘House Lights’, and ‘Don't touch this! No really, don't.’ Charlie was sure these were for the benefit of visiting AV techs, and Raymond knew the entire setup by heart.

Raymond flicked the ‘House Lights’ switch and the stage jumped into bright relief, the floorboards shining golden and the curtains a rich red.

“We should have LED lights,” said Raymond. “The halogen ones get so hot that matinee performances turn the roof space into a sauna. But the budget doesn’t allow for it, yet. There’s so much else to do to get this place up to scratch.”

“What does that do?” Dante pointed at a blinking red light.

“It’s… ah… that shouldn’t be on.” Raymond adjusted his spectacles and peered at it. “It’s a motion sensor up in the roof space.”

“Do you want us to have a look at it?” Charlie had loved being up high ever since he was a kid. He was sure the Te Kohe roof space would not disappoint.

“Ah, sure.” Raymond tapped the light. It continued to blink. “It’s on the left hand side if you go to the last walkway. It shouldn’t be going off, as there shouldn’t be anyone up there…” he trailed off, looking concerned.

“We will go have a look.” Dante reached up and pulled down a section of ceiling. As he did so, a ladder extended down to the floor.

Raymond stared. “How did you know…? Never mind. Let me know what it is, okay?”

Charlie climbed behind Dante into the roof space of the theatre and grinned with delight at what he saw.

There were great trusses running between the roof and the dropped ceiling of the theatre. A catwalk ran down the length of the theatre, ending above the stage, with perpendicular walkways coming off it at intervals. Charlie followed Dante along the narrow gangway.

He ran his fingers along the railing as they went. It was cold steel, but a vibration ran through it. With a sinking feeling, Charlie wondered if this was something only he could sense.

The gangways that ran off at intervals meant you could walk out the width of the theatre. And along each walkway was an angled gap in the ceiling.

From here, large black halogen lights were mounted on a steel track. They were placed so that the audience many metres below wouldn't be able to look up and see the lights, but someone up in the ceiling could look down and aim them at the stage.

Dante pointed at the last gangway, and walked along it. He looked back at Charlie and put a finger to his lips.

Charlie wondered why, but he followed as quietly as he could. He crouched beside Dante at the end of the gangway and peered through the gap that gave a view of the stage.

The stage looked far away, and Charlie felt the open air between him and the seating below in the pit of his stomach. It would be a long way to fall.

There was someone in the wings, hidden behind the curtains. It looked like they were doing something by the pin rail, where all the ropes and their counterweights were fastened.

“Is it Callum?” whispered Charlie.

“Not sure,” said Dante.

“What do you think they’re doing?”

“We’ll go have a look. After.”

They sat in silence for the next few minutes, while the curtains that shielded the wings from view twitched and occasionally billowed out as the unknown person did unknown things offstage.

Eventually, the activity ceased, and Charlie let out a long breath. “What about the sensor?”

Dante reached out and removed a small motion sensor attached to the same railing as the lights. “Something set it off.” He looked back down at the stage. “I wonder…”

They retreated to the AV Room. When Charlie descended the ladder, he found Raymond deep in conversation with Eleanor.

Both were talking and smiling like old friends.

“Charlie. And Dante.” Eleanor bestowed a warm smile on them both. “Ray’s been telling me all about Rathburn Manor. I have a special interest in historic houses, and this one’s particularly fascinating.”

This was news to Charlie, but he tried to look like he’d always known it.

“He’s invited us all for tea there this Sunday afternoon. Are you free?”

Charlie quickly reshuffled gardening appointments in his head. “That sounds great. I’d love to come.”

“Yes,” said Dante.

Ray looked up at them with absent-minded friendliness. “Deirdre’s out that afternoon, I’m afraid, but I’d love to show you around. Oh, and Dean might be there. He’s staying with us, just like back in the day.”

“Wonderful,” said Eleanor. “It'll be like a mini theatre reunion.”

“Here is your sensor.” Dante handed Raymond the motion sensor. “It may be faulty.”

“Thanks.” Raymond pushed his glasses up on his nose. “I’ll test it out.” He still looked slightly nonplussed, and Charlie guessed he hadn’t planned to invite Eleanor over, and was wondering how it happened.

“I, ah, just need to have a look backstage,” said Charlie. “I think I forgot something back there. See you soon!”

Raymond waved as the three of them disappeared through the AV Room door. Once they were on the stairs, Charlie filled Eleanor in on what they’d seen.

“Interesting,” said Eleanor. “Though a shame you couldn't identify the person. Of course, it might be nothing.”

“There are heavy things hanging off those ropes. And at least one person will be suspended from them later this week,” said Dante.

They entered the theatre and walked down the aisle towards the stage. Eleanor was ahead of Charlie as they climbed the stairs to the stage. She strode to the wings, then stopped.

“What is it?” asked Charlie.

Eleanor turned to face them. Her lips curved in a smile as she waved a small piece of white paper.

Dante slipped past Charlie, his gaze scanning both the theatre, and the darkness above the stage. Something in the way he moved reminded Charlie of a panther.

“It’s a note,” said Eleanor quietly. She held it up.

The words, ‘Stop Or Else,’ were glued onto the paper.

“Gotta love the classics,” said Eleanor. “Distinct lack of punctuation, though.”

Charlie blew out a breath. “Is that meant for us?”

Eleanor glanced up at the microphone, barely visible in the shadows above the stage. She lowered her voice. “I would say so. Is it possible to set off the motion sensor you found from down here?”

Dante nodded. “It’s an old model. You could do it with a laser pointer.”

“Right…” Eleanor tapped her lips. “Dante, would you mind checking the changing rooms? Charlie and I will check the green room.”

Dante vanished through the backstage door, and Eleanor and Charlie followed. Charlie’s heart raced as they crept to the green room behind the stage.

“I don’t think we’ll find anyone,” said Eleanor quietly. “They probably left as soon as they’d planted the note. But it always pays to check.”

As she’d predicted, the green room was empty. They retraced their steps to the door that led onto the stage, where Dante joined them.

“All empty,” said Dante.

“Thought so,” Eleanor said approvingly. “First rule of surveillance — assume that you are also being watched.”

Dante’s eyes hooded. “The first rule is to ensure no one knows you’re there. By any means necessary.”

Charlie’s skin prickled. “So, how would the murderer know if we’ve stopped investigating, or not?”

“We should assume they won’t take that chance,” said Eleanor.

“They will likely go on the offensive.” Dante’s voice was flat.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. “Please remember we’re just gathering evidence, Dante. Once we have enough, the police can take over.”

“Okay.” Dante sounded entirely unconvinced.

“Could it have been Raymond?” asked Charlie.

Dante considered. “It depends at what time Eleanor came up to talk with him. It would be a risk on his part, though.”

“I’d only been talking with Raymond for about a minute or two when you two appeared,” said Eleanor.

“The timeline is tight, but he’s not completely ruled out,” said Dante.

“I’ll ask Allie next time she appears. She’s a ghost, and might have seen something. But…” Charlie swallowed, his stomach churning with nerves. “What do we do now?”

“Be very careful.” Eleanor looked far too pleased at the recent turn of events. “And there may be an opportunity to force our target to show their hand.”

“I will check all your cars before you go,” said Dante. “And review your home security.”

“Thank you,” said Eleanor. “And remember — Rathburn Manor on Sunday. I want to have a good snoop.”

“Alright.” Charlie tried to ignore the notion that he was still being watched by unfriendly eyes. He remembered the old joke: ‘It’s not paranoia if they’re out to get you.’ It had never been particularly funny. It was even less so now.

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In which more puzzling pieces arrive

"To what do I owe the honour?" Avery sounded relaxed, and Eleanor pictured him at ease in his kitchen, somewhere in the centre of Auckland.

"I have an invitation to Rathburn Manor this weekend." It was an afternoon rehearsal, and Eleanor sat in a chair in the theatre foyer, taking a break from helping Mrs Haddock with the many costume repairs the show required.

"And I'm invited? Wonderful," said Avery. "I'm surprised you won Deirdre over after your accusation of murder."

"I chose an easier target." The silence on the other side of the phone had a particular quality. Eleanor decided to hazard a guess. "You have fresh information too."

Avery sighed. "It's aggravating to think you may have been right all along."

"I thought you'd be used to it by now. Did the Serious Crash Unit find something? Or the coroner?"

"Both. There was a low dose of benzodiazepine in Jennifer's system. A search of her house showed no sign she took benzodiazepine, and she didn't have a prescription for it. It would be enough to cause the lapse of

judgement that sent her off the road, when taking into account your theory of shifted reflectors. And there's the brake fluid. It was low, nearly empty."

Eleanor pictured the days leading up to the Rathburn party. "Jennifer's car would have been parked outside the theatre most afternoons and evenings. Someone could have made a tiny hole in the brake line the day before the party. By the time she drove down from Rathburn Manor, her brakes would have been slow to respond."

"It's possible."

"Are you on the case yet?"

"I think it's only a matter of time."

"At which point you'll want us to hand over all the evidence gathered?"

"With signed witness statements and any objects bagged and photographed in situ before removal."

Eleanor ran over everything they'd gathered so far. "I think that's doable. You'll be over this weekend?"

"For this manor visit? Of course. And then I'll likely be at the station with Hemi, working on the case."

"Hemi's not too happy with my fellow sleuths." Eleanor wished she'd been there when Dante and Charlie had gone to talk with him.

"Hemi's a sensitive human being who contains multitudes, just like the rest of us. So, when is this snooping mission?"

Eleanor smiled. "Sunday afternoon."

"Not Saturday?"

"I will be hard at work all Saturday in the theatre. Some of us work weekends too, you know," she said primly.

"It's high time you formed an amateur sleuths' union then." Avery sounded amused. "À plus tard."

“Les absents ont toujours tort.” Eleanor was pleased to hear Avery’s laugh of understanding.

She had rung off and was about to slip her phone back into her handbag when she felt someone’s eyes on her. She looked up to find Deirdre watching her from across the foyer.

Eleanor watched curiously as Deirdre looked away, then back, then crossed the room quickly, before she could change her mind again.

“Hi Deirdre.” Eleanor’s feelings were similarly undecided, but she knew better than to let them show on her face. “How goes the show?”

“Did you mean that, about Jennifer being murdered?” asked Deirdre.

“I wouldn’t lie about a thing like that.”

“But…why?”

“Possibly to cover up the truth of Frank’s death. Perhaps for another reason.”

“I… see.” Deirdre’s delicate brows drew together. “A murder to cover up a murder.”

“I apologise for the dramatic scene the other night, but you were the most likely candidate.” And still are, Eleanor thought.

“That’s alright.” Deirdre brushed this away with one hand, as if it were a cobweb. “I was upset, but now… now I understand. And I can see why you did it.”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows. “That’s nice.”

“I have something that might help.” Deirdre held out a white envelope. “It’s a note I found in Jennifer’s cardigan pocket. She’d left it on a chair at the party. She was always leaving things behind — it was a standing joke between us.” She blinked rapidly. “I’ve also included my account of everything I remember from the party.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor took the envelope, her eyes never leaving Deirdre’s. “Why doesn’t Raymond know about our investigation?”

Deirdre smiled fretfully. “I try not to worry him. He’d probably insist on helping, and Ray’s always been hopeless at that sort of thing.”

Eleanor revised her opinion of who held the reins in their relationship. “You think he wouldn’t cope?”

“He’s just not that kind of person. He’s far too trusting.” Deirdre glanced at the clock above the ticket booth. “I’d better go. I’m due to do a high fall in fifteen minutes.”

“Break a leg,” murmured Eleanor, as Deirdre hurried away. She slid a small piece of paper out from the envelope and scanned it, then turned it over. Her eyebrows rose. “Well, isn’t that interesting.”

Then, remembering Avery’s request for bagged and labelled evidence, she slipped the note back in the envelope, and slid it back into her handbag. Securing it in her safe at home would have to wait until the late afternoon, when she’d finished helping Mrs Haddock.

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In which Dante experiences the folly of gags

"OKAY, LISTEN UP." CALLUM STRODE ON STAGE. "I WANT NO ONE ON STAGE who doesn't need to be here. Which means, everyone out, except for Deirdre, myself, and Alex."

Yves cleared his throat in a meaningful way.

"I suppose you can watch from the wings," said Callum.

Dante hesitated while the actors began moving offstage, then he drifted over to the stairs that led down into the Crypt.

The air cooled as he noiselessly descended the stairs. It reminded him of various morgues he'd visited over the years. Dante didn't favour either a morgue or the Crypt as a place to visit.

Right now, though, he had more on his mind. Deirdre was going to practise the 'falling to her death' scene.

Callum was taking every opportunity to ensure that nothing went wrong, but Dante had an uneasy feeling about the fall, which Callum insisted on calling a gag.

In this staging, Lady Macbeth, overcome with guilt, throws herself off a cliff. To Dante's mind, it had echoes of Jennifer's recent death.

The stage trapdoor had been latched open and a square of light shone down onto the Crypt floor. Beneath the opening, a thick crash mat gave an extra layer of safety.

Something moved in the back of the Crypt, and Dante came on alert.

“Hey,” whispered the shape, and as it moved out of the shadows, Dante recognised Charlie’s silhouette.

He scanned the rest of the space till he was sure he and Charlie were alone in the Crypt.

“I’m worried something might go wrong.” Charlie crossed the floor to stand next to Dante.

“Yes.” Dante was still trying to fit the events from the other night into his brain. Had he really told Andrea he was a cleaner? It was as if the party had happened to somebody else. Andrea seemed clear on where she stood, though — as far away from him as possible.

“I think the ghost has it in for Deirdre, and this is a perfect opportunity for it to strike,” said Charlie.

Perhaps this was the solution. Let the ghost eliminate Deirdre, and that was one suspect out of the picture. Dante wasn’t sold on Deirdre’s claim that Frank had been the murderer. Even if it were true, Deirdre and Raymond were still the prime suspects in Jennifer’s death.

“The murderer could sabotage the rig too,” said Charlie. “That wouldn’t be good.”

“I’ve checked up in the grid,” said Dante. “The wire line looks okay.”

“Yves said he wants Deirdre to plunge headfirst.” Charlie sounded doubtful.

“Hmph.” Dante reflected on all the specifics that could go wrong here. And the foolishness of stage directors in general.

“The descender’s meant to slow her down as she goes through the trapdoor. And stop before she actually lands on the crash mat. Callum seems tetchy about it though.”

Dante understood that. Callum was the man on the spot. If anything went wrong, it would be his fault.

Dante peered up through the trapdoor. Deirdre stood on a platform raised four metres above the stage by a scaffold. Callum was with her, testing her harness and making minor adjustments. The suspension lines attached to the harness ran up into the ceiling and disappeared into the darkness.

“Ghosts can’t snap steel rope, can they?” asked Dante.

“I don’t think so.” Charlie gave a convulsive shrug. “Atmosphere’s getting pretty tense. In a ghostly sense.”

“Do you think the ghost could survive if the theatre weren’t here any more?” Dante hated the idea of an enemy he couldn’t see, hear, or feel. Perhaps this could all be solved by a can of petrol and a lit match.

Charlie gave him a puzzled look, then his eyes widened. “Oh no! This is a historic theatre!”

Dante peered up through the trapdoor again. “It would solve the ghost problem, then we can focus on the murderer problem.”

“You can’t…” Charlie shook his head. “Just… no.”

Dante mentally shuffled this strategy into the ‘break glass in case of emergency’ category.

“Good to go,” called Callum. “Alex?”

“Ready when you are, boss.” Alex’s voice came from up in the ceiling space.

“Deirdre, are you ready?” Callum sounded uncharacteristically concerned.

She responded with an easy smile. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Alright.” Callum stepped away from Deirdre. “Set!”

“Set!” yelled back Alex.

Deirdre drew in a deep breath, and stepped to the edge of the platform.

In the shadows below, Dante waited, poised, not sure what he was readying himself for.

Deirdre leant forward, then fell out into space, her form graceful and composed.

There were gasps from the actors seated in the theatre as she plummeted downwards.

And then the crash mat moved. It shoved sideways, as if a giant invisible hand had pushed it. Dante sprang forward and ripped it back into position. Then, he had just an instant to flip Deirdre onto her back before she slammed into the mat.

There was a muffled oath from up on the platform and Callum's face appeared.

"Are you alright?"

Dante faded away into the darkness of the Crypt as Deirdre sat up, her expression rueful. "I'm okay. Neck's a bit sore. I thought I was meant to slow before I got to the mat?"

"You were!" Callum's voice was choked with raw emotion. "Alex! What happened to the descender?"

"Uh… it didn't do the slowing down thing." Alex sounded like he wanted to run away. "Like it did when we tested it out just before."

Deirdre got to her feet, looking shaky. She waved up at Callum and gave him a thumbs up. "It's alright. Really. We can go again."

"No way. I need to take this descender apart and test it a dozen times before you go anywhere near it. Useless gear hire companies…" Callum's diatribe faded into grumbled threats as he began pulling rope hand-over-hand through the descender.

Dante slipped up the darkened Crypt stairs, followed by Charlie. His fingers ached where he'd gripped the heavy crash mat. Pulling it back into position had felt like tugging it out of an unseen person's grip.

“That was nearly a disaster.” Charlie blew out a breath. “If you hadn’t pulled the crash mat back into place…”

“It looks like the ghost wants to kill Deirdre.” Dante marked that as a definite point in favour of the ‘Deirdre killed Frank’ theory.

Charlie nodded, his face unhappy. “That would mean that Deirdre lied about Frank’s death.”

They stood in the wings, looking at the black rectangle of the trapdoor.

“People lie,” said Dante. “Especially when they’ve murdered someone.”

Charlie vented an unhappy sigh.

“Okay, people.” Yves’s voice rang across the stage. “We’re going to take a break and start again in five. We’ll be doing the ghost scene, then the second prophecy scene. Lots of witchcraft, lies and misdirection. Hilda, I want to see your movements looser in this scene. Don’t pay too much attention to my stage directions this time around.”

“That’s alright, I never do.” Hilda’s response was followed by a snort of laughter from Alex.

Dean sauntered onto the stage. He shaded his eyes to look up at the platform, then strolled to the edge of the open trapdoor. He leaned over to look at Deirdre down in the Crypt.

“Nice fall.” A small smile played on the edge of Dean’s mouth. “Do you need a hand with the harness?”

“I think I’m alright,” came Deirdre’s voice.

“Hey, stand back from there, you idiot!” Callum’s voice blared out from high above the stage.

“Got it.” Dean gave a languid wave and stepped back.

“I said no one on stage till we’ve finished.” Callum’s voice was accompanied by the stomping of him climbing down the steel scaffold ladder. “Do you know how much paperwork I’d have to do if the lead actor

fell on top of the lead actress? Perhaps you'd like to do me a favour and fill it out yourself before you do something that brain-dead again."

"So sorry." Dean's rich voice didn't sound particularly sorry. "I was just checking up on my co-star. Seeing if she needed a hand."

Callum skipped the last rung of the ladder to jump onto the stage. "Get off the set before I book you."

"We're not in a movie, chum." Now Dean sounded less bored, more annoyed.

"Believe me, I know." Callum's steel-capped boots thumped on the floor as he strode across to Dean. "For a start, I'm not getting paid enough to put up with this level of idiocy."

Callum and Dean glared at each other, faces just inches apart. Callum was slightly taller than Dean, but lankier. Dante gave it even odds if they came to blows.

"Is that so," drawled Dean. "Tell me, how many on-stage disasters have we had so far?"

Dante glanced to where Yves was watching the standoff with his head tilted to one side, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Callum's neck reddened. "I wouldn't mind having one more if it got rid of you."

"I can believe it," said Dean softly. "This seems pretty similar to another production twenty years ago. Wasn't such great safety then either."

Callum's hand bunched into a fist, and the argument might have escalated to a brawl, but suddenly, Dante was there.

He laid one hand on Callum's shoulder, and the other on Dean's. The two men moved away from each other as if on casters, though Callum's neck muscles bulged with the tension of trying to resist.

"Thank you, Dante," said Yves quietly.

Both Callum and Dean looked over to the director, as if they'd forgotten they had an audience.

"I could do with a little help down here." Deirdre's voice floated up from the Crypt. "Sorry! This carabiner's hard to reach."

Dante removed his hands from each man and stepped back. They both backed away, muttering.

Dante wondered whether the two men would arrange a time and place to hold their fight later. That's what he'd do. Except he'd probably arrange an ambush to end the fight before it began. There was no point in having a fair fight if you wanted to win. And there was no point in fighting unless you were going to win.

He saw Andrea watching him from the theatre seats. She was still keeping her distance and hadn't said a word to him since the party.

Dante considered his relationship with Andrea, such as it was. It seemed relationships were one arena where you couldn't win by superior tactics or firepower. It was an entirely new way of looking at things, and Dante wasn't sure where to begin.

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31

Which contains drama, subterfuge, and disappointment

CHARLIE STOOD IN THE WINGS, NOT SURE IF YVES'S THREAT TO 'DO THE ghost scene' was happening now, or not. There were three witches on stage, so perhaps not.

"We seem to have misplaced the witches' pot." Callum's face was absolutely deadpan. No one watching the exchange would have guessed he'd had an epic rant about the horribly heavy iron cauldron an hour before it mysteriously disappeared. "But I found this papier-mâché one in the Crypt. It's from the kids' pantomime last year. Let's use it until we find the iron one."

Yves pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. We'll make do." He gave Callum a look under one bushy eyebrow that said he knew exactly what the stage manager was up to.

The three witches gathered around the cauldron. They were three ladies Charlie had known for years: Marge, Hilda, and Sylvie.

Marge was muttering to herself and shooting angry glances at Callum. For his part, the stage manager folded his arms and gave the dirty looks back in spades.

Charlie strained his ears to catch the ghostly muttering on the edge of his awareness, but it had faded away. Instead, a muffled argument came from the vicinity of the cauldron.

"'Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble—'"

"No, Marge, it's 'Double, double, toil and trouble.'" Hilda sounded like this argument had happened before.

"That makes no sense! It's got to be 'Bubble bubble, toil and trouble' otherwise how do you know it's a magic stew?"

"Because you can see the cauldron. Great big black thing, and Sylvie's got a giant stirring spoon and everything."

"Then what's doubled?"

"The trouble, obviously. And the toil."

Marge drew herself up. "I'm hardly going to take advice from a non-Wiccan like you. Your occult sensitivity is zero."

"Why don't you just concentrate on learning your lines?" huffed Hilda. "You totally missed your cue in the last scene."

"That's because Trevor nabbed my script."

Across the stage, Eleanor appeared. She gave Charlie a wave, and then a 'come over here' beckoning gesture. Charlie took a step towards her.

"You there! Banquo!"

Charlie jumped. Yves bore down on him with a sheaf of papers clutched in one hand.

"We'll run through the witch scene, then carry on to 'Banquo at the feast.' You've read it?"

"Er, yes," said Charlie. "I just, ah, walk around, right?"

"No!" Yves pushed back his silver mane of hair with an irritated swipe. "No actor ever just 'walks around.'"

“Okay…” Charlie wished he’d stuck to his guns and got a part as one of Birnam Wood’s mobile trees.

“You are a ghost.” Yves’s voice dropped to an intense growl. “Do you know what ghosts do?”

“Er, hang around and gossip?”

Yves looked momentarily nonplussed, then employed his director’s talent for ignoring anything that didn’t fit with his vision. “A ghost is the spectre of a haunted conscience. A pure embodiment of guilt. You,” he said, waving towards Charlie’s uncertain frame, “are a dreadful warning.”

“Ah, okay. So…” Charlie hesitated over his next question: how does a dreadful warning walk around?

“Just imagine you have a sense for the supernatural.” Yves patted Charlie on the shoulder once more. “And channel that.” He whirled away with a flourish.

“Well. He certainly gets your hidden talents.” The voice was wry, female, and ghostly.

Allie stepped through the curtains that shielded the wings, a twinkle in her eyes and a ghostly smile on her lips.

“I’m not sure I belong here,” he said in an undertone.

“Oh, boo hoo,” said Allie. “The only actors who don’t think that are raving narcissists. Actually, that explains a lot of what goes on in theatres.”

Charlie blew out a breath. “Like I said, I’m way out of my depth.”

Allie’s response was overridden as Eleanor appeared beside him.

“Charlie, I’ve just been given a rather large puzzle piece. When are you next free?”

“Er, after this, I think.”

“Great. Get Dante and come and find me in the large green room.”

Yves strode onstage and clapped his hands. “Alex, are you ready on the curtain pull?”

“Yessir.” Alex stood in the wings, poised like a sprinter at the start of a race.

“Now.” Yves raised his hands. “What we need here—”

Alex gave a convulsive jump and the curtains twitched apart, revealing the theatre seating beyond.

Yves sighed. “Alex, while it is important to be ready on the draw, no one is a fan of premature de-drapification.”

Callum turned his snort of laughter into a cough. Alex, cheeks burning, hauled the curtains closed again.

“As I was saying, I want this scene to be bewitching. Ominous. Alive with tension.” Yves shot Alex a look. “And… go.”

The curtains rippled as they parted. The three witches circled the pot, chanting Shakespeare’s witchiest words.

“Double, double, toil and trouble;

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.”

Marge kept catching her elbow on the papier-mâché cauldron handle. She glared at Callum every time this happened. Sylvie briefly got the giggles which became hiccups, ruining her delivery of the next lines.

“Eye of newt and toe of frog,

Wool of bat and tongue of dog…”

Hilda accidentally trod on the back of Marge’s shoe, so that with the next step forward, her foot came right out of the shoe.

Callum stifled a snort, and Marge snapped.

“That’s it! If you make one more remark…”

“You’ll what? Curse me?” Callum leaned against the wall and smirked.

“I could, but I don’t need to. This play is already cursed!” shrilled Marge.

There was a tense silence. The crew who'd been dozing or eating lunch in the theatre seating were now engrossed in the drama unfolding on stage.

"That's your excuse? Nice try," said Callum in measured tones. "A little professionalism would go a long way to—"

"You see what I have to put up with?" Marge turned an outraged face to Yves. "This is… this is—"

"A ridiculous waste of time," snapped Yves. "Callum, go find something productive to do. Marge—"

But his next instruction was lost in Marge's howl of rage. "That's it! I've had enough! I quit!"

She snatched up her shoe and stormed offstage, dress flapping.

The stunned silence was broken by Callum's slow clap.

Yves pinched the bridge of his nose again. "Callum? Please go away before I say or do something regrettable."

"Right you are." Callum did a tactical withdrawal backstage.

"Someone always chucks their toys around now," Allie said with a judicial air. "It's a bad sign if they don't — means no one's feeling the pressure."

Charlie was feeling pressure from all directions. The threatening note. The angry ghost. Dante's preference that they all quit the play was looking increasingly attractive.

"Take five, everyone. And now, I need a temporary witch until Marge can be coaxed back." Yves stalked into the wings, his next comment audible only to Charlie. "Unless we're lucky and she has quit. Bubble, bubble, indeed."

"All that's left is the inevitable blowup between director and stage manager, and we'll have a full bingo card." Allie studied her ghostly fingernails with a smug smile.

"We've had one of those already," said Charlie.

“But not the full fireworks. A proper dustup requires a bottle of wine and maybe a written apology to coax whichever party is more affronted back.”

“I think Callum’s more of a whiskey man,” said Charlie doubtfully.

“And I think Yves is more of a rosé man,” said Allie. “That would also be traditional.”

“I’m still not sure how I’m supposed to be a ghost.”

“You’re asking me?” Allie put a hand on her chest in mock modesty. “I’m a method actor when it comes to being a ghost.”

Charlie sighed. Opening night was next week, and he still had two murders to solve, a murderous ghost to banish, and the part of Banquo to play. If Yves didn’t like his performance, well, Charlie would take a leaf out of Callum’s book, and tell the director that it’d just have to do until he learned how to act.

“I have to go find Eleanor,” he murmured. “See you around.”

Charlie found Dante first. His friend was standing in the largest green room, watching Eleanor sort through her handbag.

“It was here!” She slammed the bag down on the bench.

“How long was your bag left unattended?” asked Dante.

Eleanor frowned. “I had it on me all afternoon. But there were two minutes when... When Callum asked me to hide that iron cauldron. I left it at the top of the stairs while I helped Steve and Trevor wrangle it down into the Crypt. There was no room to manoeuvre, and that thing weighs a ton.” Eleanor looked up and saw Charlie in the mirror. “We have an unfortunate development. Earlier today, Deirdre gave me an envelope containing the note Jennifer left in her cardigan pocket at the party before she drove off a cliff. And now it’s gone.”

“Oh.” Charlie slumped against the green room door. “That’s not good.”

“Indeed.” Eleanor raised one eyebrow in irony. “It’s hardly a mark in our favour as competent sleuths. Although it does point to an active and daring agent within these walls.”

“Callum,” said Dante.

Eleanor made a face. “If someone knew I had the note, they could have just followed me through the theatre.”

“Did you read the note before it disappeared?” asked Charlie.

“Luckily, yes. So there’s that. But I do feel it’s a key piece of evidence that’s now probably gone forever.”

“I would burn it if I were the murderer,” said Dante.

“What did the note say?”

Eleanor closed her eyes. “‘It is a knell, that summons thee to heaven or to hell.’”

“That’s what Macbeth says just before he enters King Duncan’s chamber to murder him,” said Charlie.

“A bit on the nose, that. On the other side of the paper was written: ‘Pepper Tree Restaurant, 7:30pm tonight. Come alone if you want the guilty parties to survive.’ The person chose a meeting place that’s public, so Jennifer might feel it was safe.” Eleanor folded her arms. “I knew we were being observed, but that was slick work.”

“Who saw Deirdre give you the paper?” asked Dante.

“I was in the foyer, facing the ticket booth. I’m afraid we were both clearly visible through the glass front of the foyer, and there were plenty of people arriving in the car park.” Eleanor pursed her lips. “Most of the cast was offstage for this last scene. Lots of people could have stolen the envelope out of my bag.”

“Do you think Jennifer meant to leave the message behind?” Charlie tried to stay positive against the sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Maybe? The note looked like blackmail,” said Eleanor. “I thought Jennifer was the one doing the blackmailing, but this suggests she was being threatened. If we assume Jennifer’s car went off the cliff on the way to that meeting, then the note was the first step in arranging her death.”

“If only we’d known when we were at the party.” Charlie sucked in an unhappy breath.

“Everyone in Raymond’s media room has an alibi. Which means we must be missing something.” Eleanor stared down at her handbag.

“You think the person suggesting the meeting was threatening to reveal how Frank died?” asked Charlie.

“It’s an easy leap to make,” said Eleanor. “Jennifer was in the play, acting as a maid. She might have had something to do with the ‘accident’ that killed Frank. But why bring it up twenty years later?”

“Because they’re doing the play again?” asked Charlie.

“That doesn’t make sense…” Eleanor stared into space, her gaze unfocused. “Unless… unless it has something to do with the ghost.”

“Frank’s ghost.” The near miss with the crash mat floated back into Charlie’s mind.

“The ghost showed you the murder weapon,” said Eleanor. “Do you think someone else could see that kind of visitation?”

“Maybe… it was super strong.”

“So maybe Frank’s ghost was able to reveal the truth about his murder to someone else.”

“A ghost who incites people to murder.” Charlie shook his head.

“It’s a new wrinkle.” Eleanor gave Charlie a reassuring smile. “I’d love to see an arrest warrant for ‘Frank Rathburn’s departed spirit.’”

“I want to know how someone left the media room in time to erase the evidence of their trap on the road,” said Dante.

“Yes, on that topic,” said Eleanor. “I have Raymond’s account of the party. He said Jennifer seemed tense, and didn’t drink any alcohol, which was unlike her — just a cup of coffee. She didn’t check her phone either, which was also unusual. I’ve drawn a plan of where everyone was seated based on what Dante remembers.” Eleanor passed Charlie a piece of paper.

“That’s the same as I remember,” he said slowly. “Dean standing at the back with Alex, Jennifer in the last row of seating, myself, Dante and Andrea around the middle along with Marge, Trevor, Steve and Benedict. Deirdre near the front with Callum and Mrs Haddock, Raymond in the booth.”

“Raymond in the booth is the strongest candidate right now. Sorry Charlie.” Eleanor’s gaze fell on her open handbag with its missing envelope. “That’s top of our list to check when we go to Rathburn Manor. It’s just one week until opening night, and someone knows a lot more about what’s going on than we do.”

“I think Frank’s ghost will try to kill again,” said Charlie. “On opening night, when Deirdre does her high fall.”

“Well, we’ll just deal with him before that happens.” Eleanor’s light tone rang false as she snapped her recently invaded handbag closed.

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32

In which Charlie learns of the villainy of tights

"HAVE YOU SEEN THE ARTICLE?" STEVE GREETED CHARLIE'S ARRIVAL AT the theatre with a meaningful wave of the folded newspaper in his hand. "No one's dared to show it to Herr Direktor yet."

"Er, I haven't." Charlie looked around for Dante. He was keeping close tabs on his friend, worried that the theatre might be getting to him.

"Have a gander." Steve thrust the newspaper into Charlie's hands. "It's a doozie."

Charlie retreated to sit on one of the chairs in the Low Bar and unfolded the *Bugle*.

The headline jumped out at him.

'Haunted Theatre Threatens Cast!'

"Yeesh." Allie stood half in the wall, half out of it in order to read over his shoulder. "I can see why no one's shown this to Yves yet."

Charlie's heart sped up as he read the opening paragraph.

'An anonymous source in the production of *Macbeth* at the Te Kohe Theatre has emerged to blow the whistle on what they have called the

‘rampant exploitation’ of the Te Kohe Theatre Amateur Dramatics crew.’

‘We’re all terrified of what’s going to happen next,’ says the source. ‘But no one’s allowed to question the director, or they’re fired. It’s a toxic working environment, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a casualty before the season’s over.’

Allie snorted. “‘An anonymous source.’ Pull the other one.”

“Do you know who it is?” asked Charlie.

“Rhymes with ‘barge,’ starts with ‘m.’ It’s tradition for disgruntled actors to go to the press.”

“I suppose so…” Charlie could picture it clearly. “Do you think it’ll make a difference?”

“‘Course not,” said Allie. “If anything, it’s great publicity. People are even more likely to come if they think someone might die for real on stage.”

Charlie was shocked. “Do you think so?”

“Go ask your treasurer,” said Allie. “By the end of the day, ticket sales will have doubled.”

“Have you heard about the costumes?” Dante’s voice was right by Charlie’s ear.

“Dante! You startled me.”

“The costumes.” Dante’s face was more set than usual.

“Er, no. I guess they’re going to be medieval-ish. They generally recycle the clothes from anything close to that era. We used the same basic outfits for ‘Camelot’, ‘Becket’, and ‘The Lion in Winter’. I reckon they’ll just chuck tartan on it to make it look Scottish.”

“They want me to wear tights.” Dante had the same tone as someone saying ‘they want to shoot me out of a cannon over Niagara Falls,’ or ‘they want me to skydive without a parachute.’

“Er, there might be tights involved. Along with the tartan kilts. Under the tartan kilts, that is. Which is not historically accurate, from what I’ve heard.

But when we did ‘Brigadoon’, no one was up for being historically accurate. Except for Stan. But everyone stopped him.”

“I. Do. Not. Wear. Tights.” The words were perfectly enunciated, and final as a funeral.

“Erm. What were you planning to wear?”

Dante shrugged. “Combat gear.”

“Medieval combat gear?”

Dante considered. “Yes. Probably.”

“Look.” Charlie wondered how to negotiate this one. He didn’t feel up for any more dramas just at present. “Maybe just try the tights? I mean, what do you have against tights?”

Dante looked at him from under lowered brows. “Somebody once tried to kill me with a pair of tights.”

“Really? I mean, how?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ah, okay… But that’s not likely to happen again. Is it?” Charlie wasn’t sure. Not in this theatre.

“No tights.” The words were a growl, and Charlie gave up.

“Go talk it over with Mrs Haddock. She’s in charge of the wardrobe department.”

“I will talk to Mrs Haddock.”

“Okay,” Charlie sighed.

“It’s always like this, heading up to opening night,” said Allie. “Don’t let it get to you.”

“But the revenant… I need to figure out how to talk to Frank. Somehow. Calm him down, then figure out how to get him to move on.”

“Summoning ghosts is simple,” said Allie. “You draw yourself a protective circle, light three candles, and call their name. Their full name, mind you — middle names and all. Then you wait.”

“It’s really that easy?” asked Charlie.

Allie shrugged. “Pretty much. And then, if you want to bind the ghost, you draw another circle, and use their name to trap them in it.”

“And then what?”

“You…” Allie waved her hand in a vague gesture. “You send them on to wherever they’re meant to go. Having never done that journey myself, I’m not too sure. But you’ve seen plenty of ghosts pass on, right?”

“I guess…”

“You’ll figure it out.” Allie patted his shoulder with one ethereal hand. “I have total faith in you.”

“That makes one of us.” Charlie tried to push off the gloom that threatened to settle on him. He was the only one who could sort out the vengeful ghost before it killed someone. Something had to be *done*.

He turned Allie’s advice over in his mind. It was a dangerous idea, with a lot of unknowns. But it might just work.

“Five minutes till we begin,” called Steve. “Put your game faces on, you ‘orrible lot.”

A chorus of cheers and boos greeted this statement, and Charlie stood, folding the newspaper and tucking it under his arm.

The new plan unfurling in his mind could wait. But sometime soon, he might have to do it. He just really, really, hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“‘OUT, DAMNED SPOT, OUT, I SAY!’” Deirdre, acting as Lady Macbeth, knelt over an imaginary basin and washed invisible blood from her hands.

On the far corner of the stage, the doctor and maid kept a running commentary.

“‘Foul whisp’rings are abroad,’” quoth Steve. He was dressed in dark doctorly robes, and had somehow augmented his ginger eyebrows so they stood out in great tufts from his face, endangering Sylvie as he leaned close to deliver his next line. “‘Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles.’”

The revenant’s anger broke over Charlie like a wave, shocking in its strength. It buffeted at him as he sat in the middle row of the theatre seats, and he put both hands over his ears to block out an angry roar like the ocean smashing against a cliff.

On stage, Deirdre buckled, falling onto her hands and knees.

“‘What, will these hands ne’er be clean?’” she cried. “‘All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.’” Shaking, she pulled herself up. “‘What’s done cannot be undone.’” Her voice was a harsh whisper, and tears ran down her cheeks. “‘Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?’”

She collapsed to the floor, sobbing, while all around Charlie a spectral keening grew into a tempest of sound.

“And… cut.” Yves didn’t stride onto the stage as he usually did. He hung back in the wings, studying Deirdre’s form with an expression that was difficult to read. Appreciation, perhaps? Calculation? Concern?

Slowly, the sound and fury of the revenant died away. Charlie blew out a breath of relief. He was surprised when the actors around him reacted similarly.

“That was the goods,” said Steve.

“Bit of a worry, giving your all like that in a rehearsal,” said Trevor. “She’ll peak too early and have nothing left for opening night.”

“Just like the All Blacks,” said Steve gloomily. “Herr Direktor looks chuffed, though.”

“Excellent commitment.” Yves cautiously approached Deirdre and crouched beside her. “Let’s reset, shall we?”

Deirdre raised a tearstained face. “Oh.” She looked around, bewildered. “Oh, yes.” She got unsteadily to her feet, and Yves took her arm to draw her out of the centre stage lights.

Charlie caught bits of their muffled conversation. Phrases like ‘method acting,’ ‘scaling back’ and ‘control over intensity’ drifted across the stage.

Deirdre’s not coping, he thought. But is that the revenant affecting her or… is she overcome with guilt? Because if she did kill Frank on stage twenty years ago, or engineer his death, or whatever, this would bring it all back.

Something made him turn to look back over his shoulder. Three rows behind him, Dean sat, fingers steepled in front of his face. His dark eyes caught the glow of the stage lights, and something in them gave Charlie an all-body shiver.

Could the revenant be strong enough to affect other actors besides Deirdre? And if so, could a vengeful revenant influence someone else to do its bidding? Every rehearsal, Dean was getting into character as a cold-blooded killer. Could that make him more susceptible to the ghost?

It was an awful thought. How could you guard against the threat that hid behind a man's eyes?

Charlie realised Dante had dealt with this all his working career. In which case, it was amazing how well his friend had adjusted to civilian life. As long as there were no tights.

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33

In which gravity takes over

ELEANOR SAT IN THE FRONT SEAT OF THE BUICK AS DANTE NAVIGATED THE twists and turns of the road up to Rathburn Manor. The promised rain had finally arrived, and it swept in great sheets across the bay, hurling itself against the cliffs and green hills of Te Kohe. In the back of the Buick, Avery sat calmly, and Charlie stared out of the window and fidgeted.

“So we’re going to Rathburn Manor to have afternoon tea with Raymond, and look for clues?” Charlie sounded uncomfortable.

“That’s the plan.” Eleanor weighed up various distraction techniques, alibis, and misdirections in her head. Anything was possible, given the right opportunity.

“That’s where Jennifer went off the cliff.” Dante inclined his head to one side as they rounded a steep curve in the road.

It looked just like any other rain-soaked paddock they’d passed on the clifftop drive. The only difference was that this one had a gap in the fence which was now patched with orange hazard tape. Through the gap, the stormy Pacific Ocean was briefly lit by a shaft of golden sunlight, before the rain swept in again.

Eleanor measured the distance from here up to the far-off outline of the manor. It would be difficult to get down here and back in time on foot. But you could do it in a car. Or on a bicycle.

“This is a very English manor,” she said as they entered the oak tree lined drive. “Will there be a white gloved butler to greet us at the front door?”

Charlie snorted. “I don’t think there are any white gloved butlers in the whole of New Zealand. It’s just not a thing.”

“All hail the colonies,” murmured Avery.

Raymond himself opened the door to Dante’s knock. He was dressed casually in jeans and a dark wool sweater that Eleanor valued at a low four figures. She felt a momentary pang that regrettably, she was not here to relieve the wealthy of some of their riches in an elegant and non-violent way.

“Wonderful to see you all.” Raymond’s voice had a lovely timbre — deep and melodious.

While Dean’s was a well-trained voice, Raymond seemed to have come by his naturally, and Eleanor wondered what kind of actor he’d been. Good enough to lead an amateur production of Macbeth. With a real murder.

“Thank you so much for having us,” she said. “This is my friend, Marcus Avery. He’s a heritage homes enthusiast, so I hope you don’t mind me inviting him along.”

“Not at all,” said Raymond. “Come on in. The weather outside is frightful.”

“Just like the song,” said Eleanor.

Raymond hesitated for a moment, then laughed. “Exactly. This way. Jeeves is out, so I’m going to have to do the honours.”

Eleanor eyed Charlie, who mouthed, “I think he’s joking.”

“You did say you wanted a tour?” said Raymond from the corridor.

“Oh, yes please. It’s such a fabulous place.” Eleanor found herself falling into a familiar role — that of slightly flustered foreigner, who is *so* charmed

by local customs, but a bit clueless. It was a good role to get people to underestimate her.

“Deirdre’s better at doing the honours,” said Raymond, heading for the kitchen. “But she’s out for the afternoon. Tea first, though.”

The kitchen was spacious, with a large marble counter facing an open plan dining room.

“What a lovely space,” trilled Eleanor. “Do you and Deirdre enjoy cooking?”

Raymond looked faintly embarrassed. “We mostly do toast and coffee, to be honest. There’s a kitchen that’s a lot more industrial in the South Wing by the garage. It’s much closer to unpack deliveries, and all that. But Sal whipped us up macarons before she left for the weekend.” He held up a tray of delicate biscuits, with a ‘here’s something I prepared earlier’ flourish.

While Raymond bustled around making tea, Eleanor, Charlie, Avery, and Dante arranged themselves around the table. Charlie was already looking embarrassed, Dante impassive, and Avery alert. The familiar thrill at the start of a heist hummed through Eleanor.

Except this time, you’re going to be on the side of truth, justice, and the Kiwi way, she thought. How times have changed.

Raymond deposited a tray onto the middle of the table. It contained a kettle, tea cups, sugar cubes, and cream jug, all in gorgeous Aynsley bone china.

“This is beautiful,” said Eleanor, admiring her cup and saucer.

“It came with my great-great-great-grandfather,” said Raymond. “They brought it over from Kent in the 1850s. It was quite the journey.”

“It’s a wonderful thing to know your family history,” said Eleanor. “Alas, my ancestors came on the boat from goodness knows where, changed their names when they got to Ellis Island, and never looked back.”

The door opened, and a slightly rumpled Dean Myers walked in.

“Oh, hi.” He peered at them, and rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “Sorry. Didn’t know you had company.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to disturb you earlier to let you know,” said Raymond. “Would you like to join us for macarons?”

To Eleanor, Raymond seemed painfully polite, as if he were papering over a recent argument.

“Thank you, but no.” Dean displayed his sparkling leading man smile. “I have a lot of email and so on to catch up on. Casting agents, directors, and journalists all want a piece of me. The work never seems to stop, even when I hide out here.”

He disappeared, leaving behind the scent of expensive shampoo.

Eleanor sipped tea and listened to the clink of cups and saucers. Across from her, Raymond described the improvements he wanted to do to the manor.

“Does Dean often stay here?” she interjected into a pause in the conversation. She was curious as to how Raymond would explain his sudden return.

“This is the first time in many years,” said Raymond. “You saw how it is for him — work runs his life, even when he’s meant to be taking a break.”

Again, Eleanor got the sense he was talking around other, more painful subjects.

Dante took a green macaron from the china plate and munched it meditatively. He finished the biscuit, washed it down with a swig of tea, and sat back with the air of someone about to get down to business.

“Do you own a bicycle?” he asked.

“Er, I think so,” said Raymond. “Several. Deirdre likes to go around the harbour. She has a group of ladies who ride.”

“Can I see them?” asked Dante.

Eleanor hid a smile that was half amusement, half exasperation. She had no doubt Dante could be subtlety itself when it came to the mechanics of a physical stakeout. When it came to the finesse of a suspect interview, not so much.

“Perhaps we could start with the house first?” she said. “I’m fascinated by the history of Te Kohe. In fact, I’m writing a book on the theatre.”

“I did hear that from someone,” said Raymond. “Not sure who, but I think it’s a great project. Such a lot has happened there, over the years.”

Charlie flushed pink, and Eleanor thought for a moment he was going to broach the subject of Frank Rathburn’s demise. Instead, he reached for another macaron and bit into it, holding it in front of him like a shield.

“How’s your acting debut going, Charlie?” asked Raymond. This time his smile seemed genuine. “I know you’ve been on stage before, but this is something of a breakout role for you, yes?”

Charlie hastily swallowed his macaron. “It’s a big learning curve. But I’ve been getting lots of advice.”

“I’m sure you have.” Raymond’s expressive voice shaded into irony, and Eleanor was reminded how much someone perched up in the AV box of the theatre would see, provided they were patient and paid attention.

“It seems tense on set at times,” said Eleanor. “Is that normal?”

“Yes and no,” said Raymond. “All actors believe they deserve the leading parts, so there’s that friction. Directors and stage managers butting heads is also par for the course. But…” He gazed off into the distance for a moment. “It does seem more fraught than usual. For a variety of reasons. But I’m sure it’ll come right by opening night. It always does.” He gave Eleanor a bright smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Let’s start our tour.”

“Wonderful.” Eleanor and Avery stood up, and Charlie followed, giving the plate of macarons a longing look. Dante reached out and carefully selected two macarons, then stood.

The tour of Rathburn Manor didn’t yield any surprises. Eleanor had expected this from a guided tour — it limited opportunities for snooping.

However, it gave her an internal map of the place. The building was symmetrical in the way of most large buildings of that time. Two wings stretched out from the central house, one to the south, and one to the north.

The building was two storeys high, with elaborate wooden scrolling around all the windows, balconies, and timber pillars.

As they walked from room to room, rain lashed against the windows. Eleanor stopped to take in the view from a long sash window that overlooked a box hedge garden and pétanque lawn.

“It must have been amazing to become the owner of this place,” said Eleanor, contriving to sound both innocent and admiring.

“Er, I suppose so,” said Raymond. “I mean, it’s a responsibility, the upkeep and so on. But it’s important to the community and Heritage New Zealand. We’re such a young country, compared to Europe, or even America.”

“Do you spend all your time here?” asked Avery. “Or do you get away to the Big Smoke sometimes?”

“Well, we do have a *pied-à-terre* in Ponsonby. It’s just a villa, but it’s so convenient to have a bolthole in the city. Ideal for when we want to see a show or similar.”

Eleanor did a quick calculation of how much ‘just a villa’ in Ponsonby would cost, and revised the Rathburns’ net worth upwards.

They trooped downstairs to what Raymond called ‘the new addition.’

The fabled media room, thought Eleanor. At last.

“This is where we watched that blooper reel,” said Charlie helpfully, as Raymond swung open the large door to the media room.

“Each year, I tell myself I’m going to film on a digital camera,” said Raymond. “But I just can’t bring myself to do it. There’s something special about a Super 8. Even though it adds days to the editing process.”

“I think it’s lovely to keep things classic.” Eleanor took an inventory of the room.

It was the only obviously modern room in the house. Smooth plastered walls, painted a matte charcoal to complement the brightness of the white projector wall. There was no obvious way for anyone to leave it, other than

the doorway in which Dante currently stood, his broad shoulders nearly filling the space.

No secret panels, sliding bookshelves, or rotating chimneys, she thought. Such a shame. How else could one disappear for twenty minutes to commit a murder?

“Can we have a look in the projection booth?” she asked. “I’m something of an old film enthusiast myself.”

This was true, if you counted watching ‘The Italian Job’ about a hundred times as a kid. Eleanor didn’t think her parents realised how formative the film would be for her young and impressionable mind.

“Sure.” Raymond swung open the door to the booth and Eleanor slipped inside.

It, too, was disappointingly free from secret panels. While Raymond bent over the projector and showed them how it all worked, Eleanor ran her fingers surreptitiously over the back wall, the one the booth shared with the corridor outside.

Dante caught her eye and tilted his head upwards. Eleanor followed his gaze. There was a panel in the ceiling, the kind an electrician might use to gain access to the roof space.

Eleanor’s eyes widened. The ceiling in this new section of the house was just over two metres high. A reasonably athletic adult could stand on a chair and haul themselves up into the ceiling space.

She reviewed her mental map of the house. The media room was close to the garage. Who knew — it might even be possible to crawl from here to the garage, drop down into that space, jump on a bike, and pedal down the drive to the road…

Eleanor brought her mind back to the present as Raymond flicked off the projector and straightened up.

“It’s a labour of love every year,” he said. “But I think everyone enjoys it. And the ones who don’t, well, they probably take it too seriously anyway.” His eyes twinkled at Eleanor, and she blinked.

Anyone can be a cold-blooded killer in the right circumstances, she told herself. Well, almost anyone. She had difficulty putting Charlie in that category. But, unfortunately, experience had taught her that people could justify the most extraordinary actions, if life squeezed them enough.

And as the projectionist, Raymond had just jumped to the top of the suspect list for Jennifer's murder. Which made a husband-wife team even more likely when it came to Frank's murder.

She sighed as she followed their small group out of the media room.

"You said you wanted to see the bicycles?" asked Raymond, ever the polished host.

"Yes, please," said Dante.

The garage was large, and carpeted. Eleanor loved her Jag, but even she couldn't justify its tyres resting on carpet when it came home to roost.

And there, in the top of the wall, where the garage roof joined the house, was a small service hatch.

Bingo, thought Eleanor. Means and opportunity, check. Motive comes neatly bundled in, assuming Jennifer somehow figured out how Frank was killed all those years ago, and decided either to blackmail her friends, or go public. The only thing that doesn't fit is that note. It supposes the existence of another interested party. But as it was supplied by Deirdre, it could easily be a misdirection.

"Nice bikes," commented Dante. On a bike-stand against the near wall, four e-bikes stood, black and glossy.

There was no trace of splattered mud on any of them, but that didn't mean much. There had been ample time for a white-gloved butler to polish them back to their current gleaming state.

Still, Eleanor had said there would be snooping, and she was going to be thorough about it. Even if the case looked resolved in her mind, there was nothing there to make a jury trial a sure bet. Hard evidence was distinctly lacking. So…

“Would you mind if I used the facilities?” she asked with a flustered smile. “I just…” She flapped a hand to indicate an embarrassing problem that she’d rather not describe in detail.

Raymond took the hint. He led the way out of the garage. “Go down that corridor, turn left, and you’ll find everything you need on the third door to the right.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor bobbed an almost curtsey. “I won’t be long.”

Behind Raymond, Avery gave her a sceptical look, and Charlie fidgeted.

Five minutes later, Eleanor was upstairs, with a ‘thoroughly lost’ story ready if she saw anyone. There were rooms, and more rooms. She wondered where Dean was staying, and where the master bedroom was. It might be too much to hope for to find a pair of mud-stained trousers and a set of fake road reflectors, but if they were going to catch a lucky break in this case, now was as good a time as any.

She made her way back to the central part of the house, with an idea that the master bedroom might be here.

Instead, she found a picture gallery, a museum of photos of the Rathburn family through the last century.

If she had indeed been writing a history book, this would have been ideal, so it was interesting that Raymond hadn’t brought them here. That thought was enough to get her pacing slowly along the rows of black and white photos, looking for something she didn’t know the shape of.

She passed quickly over the sepia-toned early settler photos. Everything was laid out in chronological order, and this made it easy to find the seventies (Frank as a bearded young man, looking handsome and patriarchal), the eighties (Frank and his wife, no children, but a German longhaired pointer, also looking patriarchal), and finally the nineties, where the wife disappeared, and Frank was joined by a small, serious, dark-haired boy who had to be Raymond. The features were the same, but softened by youth.

The boy stared into the camera with an expression Eleanor found difficult to read. The best word for it, she supposed, was guarded. Next to this formal

family photo was a leatherbound album on a small table.

Eleanor leafed through it, fascinated. Raymond was there, still grave and unsmiling. But he was often joined by a taller boy, also dark-haired, handsome and broad-shouldered. This boy gazed at the camera like he was sharing a secret with the unseen cameraman. There was a confidence in his stance that Raymond lacked, a boldness and assurance that said that this boy was ready to take on the world.

“Dean,” murmured Eleanor, pausing on the page.

A floorboard creaked outside the room and she froze, a shiver running down her spine. Quietly, she shut the book and turned.

There was no one behind her. She tiptoed across the room to peek through the doorway into the corridor. It was empty.

Get a grip, she told herself. Also, it’s time to go. Raymond will be looking for you by now.

With a confident stride, she crossed the corridor to the staircase that wound down into the foyer.

Too late, she heard the rush of muffled footfalls on the carpet. The shove hit her between the shoulder blades, sending her reeling down the stairs. She lost all balance halfway down the first flight, and fell headfirst.

The edge of the stair rushed up to meet her. There was an impact she heard rather than felt. And then pain as she tumbled over and something in her leg went ‘crunch.’

Her last thought as she hit the landing was that she should have told Avery her true feelings towards him. After all, it seemed a shame to waste time when no one was guaranteed to see tomorrow.

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In which Eleanor receives threatening well-wishers

FLASHES OF COLOUR, SNATCHES OF SOUND. A CEILING WITH RECTANGULAR tiles and a fluorescent light.

You're in a hospital, supplied Eleanor's conscious mind. Her limbs were far away, unresponsive. She rode in her body like a passenger, unable to steer.

Someone was in the room with her. A whiff of cologne, freshly pressed cotton shirts.

Avery. I'm with Avery. Eleanor wanted to ask what was going on, but the distance between her mind and her body was too far.

She drifted for an indistinct stretch of time until her attention came back to the present. Had a minute passed? An hour?

"You're awake." Avery's voice was quiet.

"I…am." Eleanor managed to force the words past lips that belonged to someone else. She turned her head.

Avery sat on a chair next to her bed. Behind him, a green golf course dotted with white sheep.

I’m in St Margaret’s Memorial Hospital. Eleanor had a sudden awful thought that she’d been unconscious for a dozen years or more, and she’d joined the ranks of those who needed aged care. It was something she’d been carefully not thinking about, a looming threat she planned to deal with, somehow, if and when the time came.

Avery leaned forward. “You had a fall, Eleanor, and they’ve dosed you up with painkillers because you’ve broken your ankle. And a hefty dose of midazolam, I believe. You’re probably feeling strange. But if you relax and wait, you’ll feel much better soon.”

He sounded calm, patient, like he was explaining this to a five-year-old. Had they had this conversation several times before?

“I can’t…” Eleanor struggled to think of the thing. The important thing. “I can’t remember.”

Avery took her hand in his. “I want you to relax. Don’t worry about anything right now. We’ll deal with all of that later. Please.”

Eleanor watched the ceiling spinning, but somehow not spinning, at the same time. Her mind drifted like a boat unmoored on the restless sea, and time passed, flowing beneath her like the ocean swell.

“HEY.” The voice was quiet, and it took Eleanor a few disorientating seconds to place it.

She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she was wrong about the voice’s owner. The last thing she needed was for Marcus Avery to be here, witnessing her in this state.

“I’m a little indisposed right now,” she murmured.

Jagged memories jangled in her mind. An oriental vase, quick footsteps, a voice. Charlie’s worried face. Tree branches flashing overhead, stark against the cold, white sky. Carpeted stairs, rushing up to meet her. Fear.

“Are you thirsty?”

“No.” Eleanor’s head gave a vicious pound. “Yes.”

Glass clinked, liquid poured.

She drank it down in small sips, then sank back on the soft pillows and did a quick mental survey. She was bruised down one side, her ankle was encased in something solid.

“What time is it?” Her voice sounded husky.

“It’s nearly midnight. The doctors said it was a nice, clean break, and you’ll get out of the cast in about six weeks. You came around from the anaesthetic, and then slept for about eight hours.”

“Eight hours.” Eleanor cast her eyes around the room. She was lying in a hospital bed, the white sheet pulled up to her chest.

“We were at Rathburn Manor,” she said slowly. “And I wandered off to have a snoop. What happened?”

The bed dipped as Avery sat on the edge of it. He had dark rings under his eyes and a faint shadow of stubble on his jaw.

“It looks like you fell down the stairs.”

Eleanor let her eyes wander up to study the ceiling again. Thoughts fluttered around her like moths. “I was there with you and Charlie and Dante. Did anyone see me fall?”

Avery shook his head. “We heard it.”

“I think…” She searched for inspiration in the faded white ceiling tiles. A memory swam closer, like a fish in murky waters. “I was pushed.”

“Dante seemed to think so.” Avery appeared to change his mind about what he’d been planning to say, and left the words hanging.

Eleanor kicked her brain into action. Avery was still watching her, his face patient.

“You look tired.”

“I feel tired.” Avery stifled a yawn. “You’re not asking the obvious questions.”

“I didn’t see who pushed me either.”

Avery gave a wry smile. “I thought you were going to ask about your injuries.”

“Oh. Yes. What’s the damage?”

Avery rubbed his stubbled chin. “You’re worse than a cop when it comes to personal care. So. You have bruises. Lots of them. You’ll feel them once the pain meds wear off. And you have a broken ankle. But you were lucky — there was no head trauma.”

“I don’t have time for this!” protested Eleanor.

“You’ll have to make time.”

“There were two other people in Rathburn Manor,” said Eleanor slowly, ignoring Avery’s gaze as memory drew closer. “Raymond… and Dean. Two people that we know of. Was Raymond with you when I fell?”

Avery looked both relieved, and troubled. How can those two emotions exist on a person’s face at once? Eleanor felt a sudden urge to embrace him. To her acute embarrassment, her eyes welled up and she blinked rapidly to dispel the unshed tears.

“Raymond wasn’t with us when we heard you fall.” Avery’s face returned to its usual calm competence. “He’d gone to get a book for Charlie — something about gardening. He appeared in the hallway just after we found you. Dean came out of a downstairs room.”

“Downstairs,” said Eleanor. “Maybe I did fall. But… I remember being pushed.”

“There are two staircases in the manor,” said Avery. “The central entry flight you fell down, and the service stairs.”

“So Dean or Raymond could have pushed me, then raced downstairs to ‘discover’ me on the landing.”

Avery took her hand and squeezed it. “Please don’t worry about that now.”

She was worried, though not for the reason he thought. “Where’s Dante?”

“Dante?” Avery frowned. “He was with Charlie. I expect he’s asleep now.”

“Oh.” Eleanor knew what Dante had done when someone threatened his cat. She’d like to think she ranked ahead of the cat in terms of retribution, but she wouldn’t bank on it. Either way, Dante in vengeful mode was a terrifying prospect.

It was just as well both Dean and Raymond were equal opportunity suspects.

“What’s the time again?”

Avery glanced at his wristwatch. “Definitely past my bedtime. Yours too. I had to pull rank to make the staff let me stay.”

“Really?”

Avery coughed. “Actually, Charlie pulled rank on my behalf.”

“Did I…?” Eleanor studied his face, looking for traces of…what? Wariness? Distrust? “You’ve been here all this time — thank you, by the way. I do appreciate it.”

“And?” he prompted.

“Did I admit to anything while under the influence of whatever it is I’m on?”

“Of course not. It would have been ungentlemanly of me to ask you anything revealing. And I treasure my plausible deniability.” Avery gave her a lopsided grin that was as charming as it was worrying.

“So you gave me the third degree.”

“Of course not. Anyway, I’ve got the goods on your last heist — enough to put you away for a few years.”

“I thought you gave those back.”

Avery’s smile deepened, revealing a dimple on the left side of his face. “Over the hours of ten till midnight, I found out all your favourite musicals. You have a lovely singing voice, by the way.”

Eleanor winced. “That’s almost worse.”

“Worse than what?”

Eleanor shook her head, then regretted it.

“Most people under the influence of midazolam aren’t nearly as entertaining. They just stare into space, then go to sleep. They gave it to you, by the way, because you kept insisting you had to go back to Rathburn Manor to find something. Loudly. I had to make up a story about a missing necklace to satisfy the staff’s curiosity.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.”

“Avery.” She gave him an exasperated stare.

Avery’s smile slowly faded. “I was worried. Very worried.” He stroked a thumb across the back of her hand, a slow, achingly tender movement. “This investigation of yours is keeping me up nights.”

“Macbeth hath murdered sleep,” she murmured.

“What?”

“I wonder if I was about to find something out, or my attacker simply saw an opportunity and took it.”

Avery’s shirtsleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms. He looked like he needed a good twelve hours’ sleep. “That’s not a concern right at this moment.”

Eleanor ruminated on this, then decided he was right. It could wait until tomorrow. “Here’s what I want you to do.”

“Hmmm?” Avery was looking at her with an expression she couldn’t interpret. He hadn’t let go of her hand.

“I want you to go back to the hotel. Or my place. The key is in my handbag. Which should be around here somewhere.”

“It’s in the drawer over there.” He indicated a small freestanding cupboard on wheels next to the bed.

“Fine. And I want you to go to sleep for a full eight, ten, or however many hours you need.”

“I can’t—”

“You absolutely can,” she said firmly. “And I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“You say that like it’s something I can turn on and off like a light switch.”

“And then tomorrow, when I discharge myself from hospital—”

“No way are you—”

“It’s a hospital, not a maximum security prison.”

“That can be arranged.” Avery’s expression turned mulish.

“After I discharge myself, having taken all steps necessary to speed my recovery—”

“Like leaving this case to the police, God help them—”

“Then you and I will go over the evidence, and work this thing out once and for all. And I want you to stay at my place,” she finished firmly.

“For protection?” His expression had gone sympathetic again, only a slight improvement on mulish.

“Because I want you to.”

Avery gave a deep sigh, let go of her hand and fished the keys out of her bag. He pushed himself to his feet, the lines on his face deeper as he looked down at her.

“I’m only agreeing to this because I think you need more sleep.” He crossed to the doorway, and his finger hovered over the light switch. “And for the

record, you are *not* charging back into danger again. With your ankle busted, you're a sitting duck."

He was gone before Eleanor had time to frame a suitable rebuttal. She heard footfalls getting softer as Avery headed for the exit at the far end of the hospital.

She was about to close her eyes and drift back to sleep when there was a tap at the window.

Eleanor was immediately wide awake, adrenaline racing through her system. She reached for the drawer with her handbag before remembering that her small sidearm was forever lost to police custody after the summer's orchid hunt.

A light flicked on outside the window, revealing Dante's face, uplit by a tiny flashlight. It was not even a slightly reassuring sight.

Eleanor raised a hand in a weak wave, and a moment later, the window latch clicked open as Dante somehow manipulated it from outside the building.

A second after that, he had swung open the window and climbed inside with a swiftness and silence that was terrifying.

"Hi Dante," said Eleanor, a little shakily. She did not say, 'I hope you're not here to kill me.' After all, it was Dante. If he wanted her dead, she'd simply never wake up in the morning.

Dante stood over her. With the flashlight pointed at the floor, his face was a darker shadow in the unlit room.

"Do you know if you were pushed, and who did it?"

Eleanor reminded herself that this was Dante's version of being a caring friend.

"I was pushed." The memory of quick footsteps and a strong shove between her shoulder blades was clearer, like fog rolling away to reveal a landscape. "But I don't know who did it." And I certainly wouldn't tell you if I did, she

thought. Not until I was up and about, and ready to talk you down from something irrevocable.

“Alright.” Dante’s voice was a low growl. “Charlie is waiting for me in the Buick.” He moved to exit via the window again.

“Wait,” said Eleanor. “It could have been either of them, right? Dean, or Raymond.”

“Yes.”

Eleanor sank back into the bed. Her head had started spinning again. “Just… don’t do anything yet. Please?”

Dante stopped by the window. “It wasn’t me who was going to do something.”

“Charlie?” Eleanor didn’t bother hiding her disbelief.

“Your inspector. I had to talk him down.”

“Really,” murmured Eleanor.

Dante’s outline shifted as he turned to look back at her. “Get well soon.”

It sounded like the most threatening Hallmark card ever, but Eleanor smiled.

“Thank you. Will do.”

Dante’s shadow dipped, and a second later, he had vanished into the deeper black of the night.

Eleanor sighed. With friends like Dante, pretty soon you would have no enemies at all.

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In which Dante explores cosmic consequences

"SOMEONE JUST TRIED TO KILL ONE OF MY FRIENDS," SAID DANTE.

There was a tense silence on screen, as the other AA members exchanged glances, wondering who was going to speak first.

"So… this person's still breathing?" asked Frankie.

"I haven't identified the guilty parties," said Dante. "Yet."

The tension did not dissipate.

"Times like these test our resolve, but ultimately, killing is never the answer," said John. "Keep to the code."

"You'd think that but…" Aubrey gazed into the distance. "Sometimes if you let things like that stand, you end up with more violence further down the track."

"That's right," said Frankie. "If people think you're weak, they muscle in and then you've got a turf war on your hands."

"It's about boundaries. I read a book about that." Jasmine lowered her prodigious fake lashes. "Establishing healthy boundaries means that people

will think twice about messing with you. And then you have fewer bodies to bury."

"I'm not sure what I'll do when I find out who it was." Dante met John's gaze. "There may be repercussions."

Frankie snorted. "Repercussions. That's a nice way of sayin' somebody's gonna end up dead."

John sent a calm look around the assembled AA members. "There are other ways to right the scales of justice than murder."

"What, like, half murder them?" asked Caleb. "I know some guys who do that. It's not pretty."

"That's not what I mean." John paused for a long moment, as if deciding on his next words. "This is a non-denominational AA group. I myself am agnostic."

"Is that, like, a star sign?" said Jasmine.

"In the end," John continued, "you need to decide what you believe. If you think the only agency in the world is your own, then of course, it is up to you to ensure that evildoers are punished. But if you are open to the idea that there are other powers in the world, some for evil, some for good, then the notion that you are the only one who can bring about justice becomes an unnecessary burden."

"You mean, like, karma?" asked Jasmine. "As in, karma's a bitch? Because I'm down with that."

"That's one way to put it," said John.

Dante thought about Macbeth. His story hadn't ended well, but maybe that was a natural consequence of killing all those people. He wondered what this said about his own life.

"You're saying we should trust in karma to serve up people's comeuppance?" asked Aubrey. "Seems a bit passive."

John shook his head. "The point is neither revenge, nor justice. The point is that we are finite beings. In the end, despite all that we do, things will

happen as they happen. To be at peace with the world means you understand where the range of your power ends."

Dante thought this over. A Barrett M82 rifle had a range of around 1.8km. The length of the Te Kohe Theatre would fit into that measurement many times over. He had the feeling that wasn't what John was talking about.

Frankie gave a gusty sigh. "I dunno about you, but the only guy I know who seemed at peace with the world was my uncle Nate. He smoked four doobies a day and had a pet iguana. Never lost his temper, always had time to help. Nice guy. Just a shame he ended up dead at forty."

"Health problems?" Aubrey looked sympathetic.

"Nah. Caught on the wrong side of a new Don taking over," said Frankie. "I still feel bad about it."

The other assassins nodded understanding.

"It happens," said Caleb.

"That's why you gotta be proactive, y'know? There's that saying." Frankie snapped his fingers. "A stitch in time saves nine. Someone's getting out of line, you deal with them. Then everyone can see it's a bad idea. That's how you get peace on earth."

"Peace for our time," murmured Aubrey.

"Dante," said John, "when you find out who was responsible for injuring your friend, you will be faced with a choice. What you do next will determine the course of your life going forward."

"So no pressure." Frankie grinned.

"Good luck, old chap," said Aubrey.

"It's not how you kill, it's how you feel about it," said Jasmine. "I'm sure I read that in an astrology magazine somewhere. It's about the dawn of a new age."

"Thank you all for coming," said John. "And Dante?"

"Yes?"

One eyebrow rose in an ironic tilt. “Break a leg.”

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In which Charlie makes a choice

"We're down to four suspects for the murders," said Eleanor. "Charlie has confirmed that Deirdre was in town the whole afternoon, so only Dean or Raymond could have pushed me. However, the most likely suspects for both Frank and Jennifer's deaths are Raymond and Deirdre working together. They had two obvious motivations — money and marriage. But so far, we have no definitive proof."

Eleanor, Avery, Charlie, and Dante were sitting in Eleanor's small hospital room. The tray table was piled high with baked goods from the Frog and Gumboot and several vases of flowers.

Despite the excellent coffee Charlie had brought, Eleanor felt tired. Thick-headed. Old. She did not succumb to such feelings often, but this was proving hard to shake. She told herself it was just the after-effects of the anaesthetic and focused on Avery's next question.

"Motivations for Callum and Dean?" asked Avery.

"Callum clearly didn't like Frank. Frank was putting him through a performing arts degree, and he obviously resented being indebted. I'm not sure what Frank was demanding in return, but Callum was not happy about it. Also, he was in love with Deirdre at the time. Actually, he's still carrying a torch." Eleanor remembered Callum's face when Deirdre fell too fast

through the trapdoor. “If Frank found out about Deirdre and Raymond, and threatened her, it’s possible Callum acted to protect her.”

“Thus leaving Raymond free to marry Deirdre. Hardly a desirable conclusion.”

“People aren’t rational when they’re in love.”

“True.”

“Also, Callum may have been aiming for Raymond,” said Eleanor. “The hearth could just as easily have landed on him, and if Raymond had stuck to the script, it would have.”

“Poor execution,” said Dante.

Avery raised his eyebrows. “Indeed. And our final candidate? What makes Dean a suspect?”

“He and Raymond grew up together,” said Eleanor. “There’s no hint now that he has feelings for Deirdre, but Mrs Haddock said that back then, all three young men were infatuated with her to some degree. In that case, the trap could have been meant for Raymond. Or perhaps it was jealousy of Raymond’s standing with Frank. By all accounts, he spent a lot of time in the Rathburn household, and Frank favoured him over Raymond. Perhaps he figured with Raymond out of the way as Frank’s heir, he could step into his place, even though he wasn’t a blood relation. Jealousy is a powerful motivator.”

“You have a lot of ifs and maybes, but that’s normal for this stage of an investigation.” Avery scratched his stubbled jaw. “What’s your plan?”

The silence that followed this question was heavy.

“I prefer offence to defence,” said Dante.

“Unless you narrow your suspects down, you may end up playing defence,” said Avery.

“I think…” Charlie opened his mouth, then shut it.

Avery eyed him. “Anything you’d like to share with the group?”

“Erm… no. I thought of something, then I realised it wasn’t a good idea.” Charlie was the worst liar ever, but Eleanor let it slide.

“I’m sure we’ll come up with something.” Opening night was just a day away and Eleanor knew she needed to get up to speed. She just couldn’t summon the energy.

There was another, even worse silence. Charlie studied the linoleum floor, ears burning, Avery gave a grimace that looked remarkably like pity, and Dante was as motionless as a statue.

“Okay, well, I should get going,” said Avery. “I’m behind on work, so I’d better…” he trailed off, looking across at Eleanor.

She smiled brightly. “Don’t let me keep you. I plan to be out of here today, and I’ll see you all tomorrow before the show begins.”

The door closed on their departure like the end of the line. Eleanor lay back in her starched white sheets, stared at the ceiling, and tried to think.

DANTE UNLOCKED the Buick and started the engine. Next to him in the passenger seat, Charlie folded his arms. There was a curious redness creeping up the back of his friend’s neck.

“What’s going on?” asked Dante, spinning the wheel to back out of the parking place.

Charlie started. “I think I’m… angry.” He sounded surprised. “I don’t think I’ve been this angry since… since we were after my dad’s killer.”

Dante nodded. He wasn’t angry, but that didn’t rule out vengeance as soon as he knew who the target was.

“What’s our plan?”

“I’m going to do a summoning,” Charlie said.

“Okay,” said Dante.

Charlie looked at him like he'd expected something more.

"In the theatre," said Charlie. "I'm going to summon the angry revenant ghost to find out who killed him."

"That makes sense," said Dante. "And you didn't want to tell Eleanor, because she'd want to come, or Avery, because he doesn't believe in ghosts."

"Ah, yeah," said Charlie. "So, er, are you in?"

"Yes." Dante coasted out of the hospital parking lot, and turned towards town. "Where to now?"

Ten minutes later, they were buying supplies in 'Cosmic Vibrations.' The narrow shop was sandwiched between a dairy and the dollar store, and sold crystals, tie-dyed everything, vaping pipes, bongs, and other paraphernalia associated with the occult. Dante had never been in a shop like this before, but there was a first time for everything.

"Do sage candles do anything?" Dante picked out a few likely ones from the display.

Charlie shrugged. "Lots of mediums use them. Ghosts don't seem to mind them."

"What about angry revenants?"

"I've never met an angry revenant before now. So… maybe?" Charlie hunched his shoulders. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Dante never had a bad feeling about a mission he'd planned to do. Either that, or he'd always had a bad feeling about them. It was hard to tell. Either way, he never factored feelings into the equation. They were too difficult to quantify, and therefore unreliable.

"Do you want to pull out?"

"No!" Charlie looked shocked. "I'm just worried that it might be dangerous. But I can't risk any more… risks. Eleanor could have died on those stairs."

Dante wondered whether he could extract Charlie from the theatre if things went wrong. He wondered what ‘things going wrong’ would look like.

“Summoning the revenant might be like kicking a stone into a hornet’s nest. Unless it’s not, and this works.” Charlie stuck his hands in his pockets, then pulled them out again and folded his arms across his chest. “I wish… I wish I knew what I was doing.”

In Dante’s experience, everyone from pizza delivery guys to reigning presidents wished that. Only presidents weren’t allowed to admit it.

“So we’ll do it.”

Charlie blew out a long breath. “Yeah. But maybe you shouldn’t come into the theatre with me. Just wait outside or something.”

“No.” There was no force, short of death — maybe — that would keep Dante out of the theatre while Charlie did the summoning.

Charlie shot him a quick look, then nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Dante. Really, thanks.”

Dante headed to the counter to purchase their supplies.

They were just exiting the shop when Charlie’s phone rang. He looked at the number.

“It’s Andrea. So it’s probably for you.” Charlie passed Dante the phone, and he accepted the call.

“Hi, Andrea.” Dante slid into the driver’s side of the Buick and fastened his seat belt.

“Dante.” Andrea let out a long sigh. “I heard about Eleanor. I’m so sorry. Is she alright?”

“She broke her ankle.”

“That’s not good. Especially at her age.”

Dante didn’t think a broken ankle was good at any age. “I will help with rehab,” he promised.

“Look, is now an alright time to talk?”

Dante glanced at Charlie, who was studiously gazing out the car window. “Yes.”

“I was thinking… about the other night.”

“Yes?”

Andrea let out another deep sigh. “This isn’t easy. Look, I’ve had relationships in the past, well, one in particular, when I always had to choose between this guy and my friends. It wasn’t nice. Whichever choice I made, I felt bad.”

Dante thought this over. “Was the guy doing an unofficial murder investigation?” Maybe this sort of situation was more common than he’d thought.

“What? No!” Andrea gave a surprised laugh. “Looking back, I think he was just a bit of a control freak.” She paused. “Do you really think Jennifer was murdered?”

“Yes.” If someone like Dante had arranged the car crash, he doubted he would have been this certain. But an amateur could rarely match up to a true professional.

“But the police wouldn’t believe you?”

“No.” Perhaps Hemi would come around. Dante supposed Eleanor could talk to him once she felt better. Things were moving quickly, however, and Dante didn’t feel like waiting for official backup.

“Right. Well. Can I see you later today?”

“No.” Dante glanced at Charlie. “Because… I have to do a thing. With Charlie.”

“Oh.”

It was a short syllable, but Andrea didn’t sound happy. Dante considered what he could tell her that might lead to a shared understanding.

“But I’ll see you tomorrow. At the theatre. And we can… talk. About relationships.”

“And murder?”

“Yes.” Hopefully by then, Charlie would have the name of Frank’s killer, and the investigation could be resolved in a way that wouldn’t put his friends at risk.

“Okay.” There was another long silence. “Well, you and Charlie take care, and all the best with the thing you’re going to do.”

“Thank you.”

The call went dead, and Dante handed the phone back to Charlie.

“I always thought seeing ghosts would make a relationship difficult,” said Charlie. “But I guess there’s a lot of things that can complicate relationships.”

“All I can do is be the best version of myself.”

“That sounds wise.”

Dante wasn’t so sure. After all, the best version of himself would be just as dead as the worst version if he made a mistake during this investigation. In fact, the worst version of himself was far more likely to survive.

He started the car and put it into first gear. Once you’d made a plan, future outcomes were rarely improved by thinking about them. Action was what counted.

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Which contains many consequences

CHARLIE STOOD IN THE HALLWAY JUST INSIDE THE THEATRE STAGE DOOR AND wished that he, Charlie Wilson, was not planning to beard the lion in its den.

“Where does the saying ‘beard the lion in its den’ come from anyway?” he asked out loud.

Allie shrugged. “No idea. Sometime long ago.” The ghost leaned against the window that looked out over the car park. She tried to breathe on the glass and write on it. “I saw this on ‘The Others’ back when it first came out. Seems a shame I can’t do it.”

“I bet the revenant could,” said Charlie gloomily.

“For sure,” said Allie with relish. “It could probably grab a pen and write whatever it wanted.”

“It already has.” Charlie remembered his first encounter, which had led to discovering the murder weapon. “Why won’t it talk to me?”

“It’s a revenant,” said Allie, as if that explained everything.

Charlie gave her a look.

“Well,” she relented, “it’s super angry, right? Like a wounded animal. It won’t let you get near, even if you’re trying to help it. It’s probably lost its sense of self and got confused. I reckon it’s taken the theatre on like one of them crabs, you know? That grow into bigger and bigger shells.”

“Hermit crabs?”

“Yeah. So it, like, thinks the cursed play is about it. It thinks it’s King Duncan being murdered, or whatever.”

“So even if I call Frank by his full, real name, he might not listen?”

“Oh, I’m sure he will.” Allie’s eyes went luminous black, and genuinely creepy. “If you set foot inside that theatre and do a proper summoning rite, you will have our boy’s full attention.”

“That’s great.” Charlie tried to ignore the lump of dread that settled in the pit of his stomach. “Well, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Your funeral, mate,” said Allie, and faded away.

Charlie gazed out over the grey car park, and hoped it wasn’t. But opening night was tomorrow, and either the revenant or the murderer could claim another victim.

So he had to speak with and then banish Frank’s ghost tonight. And hope that might solve their murder mystery.

After a few more minutes of brooding, Charlie saw Dante’s car ghost into the car lot and park next to his battered Honda Civic. His friend exited the Buick, and immediately looked up at the window behind which Charlie stood. Charlie shivered. He was invisible behind the one-way window, yet some sixth sense of Dante’s meant that didn’t matter.

Charlie tried not to fidget while Dante unlocked the stage door. He did so with keys he’d lifted from Mrs Haddock’s office a week ago, when the suspicious events began, and then had copies made. Sometimes, Dante’s efficiency was worrying.

Dusk was fast approaching, and the theatre had that special even emptier feeling of a building that had bustled with life not long ago.

“I think everyone’s left,” Charlie whispered, as if that would prevent the revenant from knowing they were there.

Dante opened the door to the stage and paused for a full minute, listening. Then he nodded. “Where do you want to do the summoning?”

Charlie bit his lip. This was rapidly becoming more real than he was ready for.

“The best place would be where Frank actually died.” His mouth formed the words as if from a long way away.

“Stage right, mid-stage.” Dante stepped onto the stage and paced to the approximate point where King Duncan’s bed had been situated, twenty years ago. A few feet away, the ghost light shone.

Charlie’s throat felt tight, and his hands cold. He wondered if this was nerves, or the revenant’s presence flowing into the space.

“Do you want more lights on?” asked Dante.

“Yes, please.”

Dante disappeared backstage, and a couple of lights flicked on. Now the ghost light was all but invisible in the bright glow of two large work lights. They gave the space a more prosaic feeling, and Charlie relaxed.

“What now?”

Dante sounded totally unhurried, and that calmed Charlie further.

“I think… I think we set up a protective circle.” Charlie put his backpack down and took out a stick of chalk, three candles, and a lighter. He crouched on the floor and tried to measure out a circle.

It was harder than it looked. The resultant circle was more of an amoeba. Charlie stared at it in dismay. He wasn’t sure why a circle was important, but he’d never heard of a protective amoeba before, and there was probably a reason for that.

“Here.” Dante put his hand out, and Charlie passed him the chalk.

Dante wiped away Charlie's wavering line with his foot, stood back and eyed the wide floorboards. Then he knelt and swiftly sketched a perfect circle, his arm flowing in a smooth arc.

Charlie sighed. It looked like Dante was already better at spirit summoning than Charlie. "We need a smaller circle there." He pointed a few feet away. "That's to contain the ghost when I bind it."

The two circles complete, Dante set the three candles equidistant from each other inside the larger circle. "Now what?"

"Can you turn the work lights off, please?" Charlie didn't want to do this, but the ghost had been elusive so far. It might be more willing to show itself in dim surroundings.

A flick of a switch, and they were once more in gloom and the anaemic glow of the ghost light. Night was falling outside, and Charlie heard the rush of an autumn wind rising.

He tried to imagine that this wind wasn't also blowing through the theatre, but he could hear the whoosh of respiration, as if a vast creature now inhabited the darkened space beyond the pale globe of light.

Charlie stepped quickly inside the circle. Dante flicked his lighter, and a yellow flame flared. He lit the candles, and three answering flames of light cast a soft, warm glow.

"What now?" Dante stepped into the circle and sat with his back to Charlie.

Somewhere up in the roof space, a shutter rattled. At least that was what Charlie thought it was. He didn't ask if Dante had heard it too.

Charlie blew out a breath. "Now, we wait."

DANTE SAT and listened to the night. This silent vigil was well known to him. He'd made friends with the dark long ago.

He could feel Charlie behind him, vibrating with nerves. Dante didn't want to tell him to calm down. In the first place, he'd found that instruction rarely worked. And in the second place, it was possible that Charlie was experiencing a very different night than Dante.

He had had several ghost experiences so far with Charlie, but two stood out — the time Charlie had nearly been swamped by Dante's ghosts while drinking gin in the RSA, and the time Charlie had helped Dante rid himself of said ghosts.

Dante had a healthy respect for Charlie's ghostly senses. The question was: would this ghost have the same respect for their protective circle?

Around them, the three flames flickered. They seemed small in the cavernous darkness of the theatre.

Dante's favourite sidearm — a Browning Hi-Power — sat snugly against his side in its underarm holster. He wished someone would invent a ghost gun. That was what he wanted now.

Behind him, Charlie drew in a sharp breath.

"It's here."

The three flames lowered, as if something pressed down on them. Dante didn't feel any other sign of the ghost's arrival, but Charlie tensed.

"Hello," said Charlie. "I'm Charlie Wilson. Er… how are you?"

There followed a tense silence, then Charlie shifted position, his back still pressed against Dante's.

"It's not happy." Charlie's voice was husky. "It doesn't like us being here."

"Keep talking to it," said Dante. "See if it tells you anything useful."

"Ok." Charlie raised his voice. "Hi Frank. I was wondering—"

He cut off as a wind blew across the theatre, moving the heavy velvet curtains. The three candles guttered, their flames blowing horizontal for a moment before they straightened and reached upwards again, desperately bright against the night.

Dante was impressed. The protective circle worked. In normal circumstances, a wind like that would have blown the candles out.

“It’s angry.” Dante felt Charlie straighten his shoulders. “Frank, we want to help.”

“Tell him that we’re looking for his killer.”

“Frank.” Charlie cleared his throat. “We want the same thing — justice for you.”

The candles swayed, then steadied.

There was another ‘bang’ high in the ceiling, followed by a drawn out scraping of steel on timber.

“I think it wants justice too.” Charlie’s voice sounded husky.

“Good.” Dante had never been a fan of protracted negotiations. The sooner you got to the point, the sooner you found out whether you had to shoot someone, or not.

“Hey, Frank,” Charlie called up into the darkness. “We want to help you. Can you tell us how you died? What happened? Did someone kill you?”

There was a hush, as if the whole theatre was holding its breath.

Then Charlie’s shoulders slumped. “It’s not answering.”

“Make it answer,” said Dante. “Do the binding.”

“There’s a lot of power pushing in on us.” Charlie sounded strained. “And I’ve never done this before.”

“What’s the alternative?” Dante would never set up an ambush without at least two escape routes.

“Ah…”

Dante glared into the gloom. “The binding will neutralise the ghost, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then do it,” said Dante.

“Okay,” Sweat ran down Charlie’s face, and he huffed like he was holding something heavy.

Charlie’s voice was loud in the silence, but all around were signs that the theatre outside the circle was not the same as the one inside. The curtains swayed and the ghost light shuddered as if in high wind. The candle flames held rigidly upright, the same way Charlie sat, his face drawn and tense, shoulders trembling with strain.

“Here goes.” Charlie raised his voice. “Franklin Desmond Rathburn. I summon you and bind you to the circle. Franklin Desmond Rathburn, you will stay within the circle until I release you. Franklin Desmond Rathburn, I command you with your name.”

There was a moment of stillness, then the curtains snapped away from them in a silent gale. Charlie went ashen.

“It’s not working!” he choked. “It’s going to break through. It’s not—”

Charlie’s last words were broken off as he shuddered, his body convulsing like he was having a seizure. Dante grabbed hold of him by the waist and tried to stop him going outside the circle.

Then, Dante heard something that snapped his focus outside the circle. It was the ‘tap, tap, tap’ of footsteps, coming closer. Worse, he recognised the gait.

It was Andrea.

“Charlie!” he yelled. “Charlie! Wake up!”

His friend was rigid, eyes rolled back in his head. The world outside the circle looked like a hurricane was blasting through it, and any moment, Andrea would come up the backstage stairs and into the main theatre.

Dante faced the backstage door and called: “Andrea! Please stay where you are.”

“Dante?” Andrea’s voice came from behind the black painted stage door. “Is that you?”

“Yes, and I want you to stay where you are.”

In Dante’s line of work, an instruction to stay where you were by someone you trusted was always obeyed. You didn’t need to know why. It could be anything from a sniper, to a tripwire, to a pit trap full of piranhas. The point was, you stayed where you were until you knew what was going on.

Unfortunately, Andrea did not live in the same world as Dante, because the handle of the door began to turn.

“Andrea,” shouted Dante. “Get ready to run.” He gripped Charlie tighter as his friend spasmed back into a rigid arch.

“What?” The door swung open, revealing Andrea, her hair whipping around her face in the ghost-driven gale. “Dante! What’s going on?”

Charlie went limp. At the exact same instant, the candles blew out.

Dante scooped Charlie up and tossed him over one shoulder. He focused on the stage door. Sometimes in life, there was no easy answer. You just had to take the hits.

He plunged out of the circle, and a blast of air nearly knocked him down. He recovered by flinging himself towards the door, which swung shut with a bang that hurt his ears.

Behind it, he heard Andrea shriek. His fingers closed around the handle, but there was no way he’d get the door open with the uncanny wind howling around him.

So he went through the door instead, shoving his shoulder through the timber and smashing the broken halves of the door aside. He reached Andrea and wrapped his free arm around her, spinning to shield her as his momentum rammed him into the opposite wall.

“Dante! What’s going on?”

People usually said inane things in times of crisis. Dante didn’t waste time in answering. He simply picked Andrea up too and careened down the ramp.

The green exit sign flickered like a strobe light as Dante sprinted towards it. He spun again to barge back-first through the door, and then they were

outside.

“What,” gasped Andrea, “was that?” She smoothed her dress as Dante lowered her to the ground. Her eyes were wide and her curls stood out from her head in a wild tangle.

“An angry ghost,” said Dante. “It attacked Charlie.”

He lowered Charlie to the ground, then knelt and felt his neck for a pulse. To his great relief, it was there, faint, but steady.

“Look after him,” Dante told Andrea. Then he pushed back inside the theatre, and paused to listen.

The backstage stairs were curiously quiet. Ominously so. Dante crept up the stairs, his Browning in hand, thinking again on the wished-for ghost gun.

He peered through the ragged hole of the shattered stage door. The ghost light shone on a scene as still as the ocean after a storm had passed.

The chalked circles were still there, the larger one with the three dead candles.

Dante stepped cautiously onto the stage, expecting an ambush.

Nothing happened.

The theatre’s silence was the hush of a building that is truly deserted. Dante scrubbed out the chalk circle with his shoe and returned the candles to his bag.

Back outside, Charlie lay still on the concrete landing, his face lit orange by the parking lot street light. Andrea had taken off her coat to use as a cushion under Charlie’s head.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “What happened to Charlie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he hit his head?” Andrea’s face was tight with concern.

“No.”

Andrea knelt by Charlie’s side and shook him gently. “Charlie? Charlie!”

“I don’t think he’ll wake up.”

“Why’s that?”

“The theatre ghost attacked him.” There was something ominous about the stillness in Charlie’s collapsed form. It went beyond mere sleep, or even unconsciousness. It looked like his friend’s essential Charlie-ness had been removed.

“We need to call 111.” Andrea pulled her phone out of her pocket.

While Andrea rapidly relayed directions to the person on the other end of her emergency services call, Dante paced, an idea forming in his mind.

It might work, but…

“They’ll take Charlie to a hospital in Auckland?”

“I think so.” Andrea slid her phone back into her pocket, face tense with worry. “What really happened, Dante?”

“I told you. He got attacked by an angry ghost.”

Andrea’s eyebrows drew together, then her face cleared. “Oh! Do you think all those accidents…” She shook her head as if casting off what she’d been about to say. “Whose ghost was it?”

“We think it’s the ghost of murdered Frank Rathburn. Charlie reckoned doing the same play again made him angry.”

“Oh.” Andrea blew out a quick breath. “I see.”

“That’s why Charlie isn’t waking up,” added Dante, just in case she hadn’t put it all together.

In the distance, a siren sounded as the ambulance approached.

“I don’t think Charlie should go to a hospital.” Dante was still thinking through his idea, but this part at least was clear.

“You think he needs a… supernatural intervention?”

“Yes.” What Dante had in mind to wake Charlie up would not mesh well with a crowded hospital ward.

“I don’t think we can stop them taking him there now.”

“No.” Dante gently put Charlie into the recovery position. Charlie’s skin was white as ash, and his breathing shallow. “Why are you here at the theatre?”

“I…” She looked away quickly. “I was thinking about what you said about Jennifer. And then I thought of Frank. I guess… I guess I just wanted to have a look around myself. See what I could find.” She looked up at him, eyebrows drawing together. “Why didn’t you tell me what you were up to? Then I’d know.”

“I thought it would keep you safe.”

“Well, it hasn’t. And I’m going to help with whatever you’re planning to do next. Because we need to get Charlie back.”

“Okay.” Dante couldn’t argue with this logic.

“What do you mean: okay?”

“I mean okay.”

“Really? Because when people say ‘okay,’ it can mean almost anything.”

“When I say okay, it means okay.”

She blew out a breath, half sigh, half laugh. “I guess so.”

The sirens came closer and an ambulance pulled into view at the far end of the street, lights flashing.

In his mind, Dante prepared a reasonable explanation of events to give the ambulance team.

“I think I’d better call Delia — Charlie’s mum — and let her know what’s happened.” Andrea dialled a number, then turned away to speak softly to the person who answered.

“Hello?” A lady poked her head out of the driver side of the ambulance. “Do you have a medical emergency?”

Dante delivered his fabricated explanation to the ambulance officers while they checked Charlie for obvious wounds and strapped him to a stretcher.

Then they departed, leaving Dante to climb back up the theatre stairs with a bag of spent candles in his hand and the taste of failure in his mouth.

There could be no glossing over the facts — the summoning had been an unmitigated disaster. While Dante was not entirely to blame, he assigned himself a generous 85% of the responsibility for everything going pear-shaped.

Andrea closed the distance between them. He looked down in surprise as she put her arms around him.

“It’s going to be alright,” she said.

“Okay.”

“You know, you can stop being staunch and strong for once. It’s alright to feel worried for your friend.”

“I know.”

She studied him. “This is your worried face?”

“Yes.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “I think I’ll need a degree in Dante before I can tell it apart from your happy face.”

Slowly and carefully, Dante returned her embrace. “I was worried about Charlie. But I have a plan to get him back. So I don’t feel worried any more. Unless the plan doesn’t work. Then I’ll make another plan.”

“Is that how it is for you? You only feel worried if you don’t have a plan?”

Dante frowned. “Isn’t that how everyone works?”

“No, Dante. That isn’t how other people work at all.”

She was warm against him, and her head was the perfect height for him to kiss the top of it. So he did.

“That seems inefficient.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret, Dante. Something you may not have figured out yet.”

“What’s that?”

“Not everyone is as efficient as you.”

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38

In which Dante seeks help from an unlikely quarter

DANTE PARKED ON A STEEP STREET IN THE AUCKLAND CENTRAL BUSINESS district. Here, modern skyscrapers jostled uncomfortably with the few heritage buildings left over from when Auckland was a Victorian port.

He checked the address an associate had sent him, then faced Andrea, sitting in the passenger seat.

“Are you sure you want to come up? This guy is not a friend.”

“How do you know him?”

“He helped kidnap my cat. But then he kept her safe while I—” beat up everyone in sight would probably not inspire confidence, so Dante changed it to, “got my cat back. So we’re square.”

“I’m coming.”

Dante removed his Browning and its underarm holster and stowed it under the car seat. As much as he wanted to go to this meeting armed to the teeth, it might send the wrong message.

The apartment building was a white and grey modern construction with the odd outbreak of louvres to show architecture had been accomplished. The entry was a large automatic glass door controlled by a keypad.

Dante waited until a trio of slightly drunk ladies stumbled up to the security pad, giggling and swaying in their stilettos.

The doors slid open, and the three women, Dante, and Andrea entered the building. Dante followed them into the lift, where the two drunker ones made faces at each other in the mirrored lift wall.

“Can you swipe us up to level four please?” Dante asked the non-face making lady. He put an arm around Andrea to create a non-threatening vibe.

She did so, and a few seconds later the doors dinged and slid open.

“Good luck with your date night!” one of the ladies shouted as the doors closed. “Hope you get lucky!”

The corridor was low and drab with a grey carpet that smelt of cigarette smoke with a light dusting of mould.

Dante checked the apartment numbers, and strode to his left. Soon, they stood in front of apartment number 408. In keeping with the colour scheme, it was gulag grey, with a small spyhole in the door.

Dante checked for additional surveillance and found none. Either there was none, or Viktor was enough of a professional that it was invisible to the naked eye.

“Can you please stand over there?” Dante indicated a spot down the corridor, out of the firing line of the door.

Andrea raised her eyebrows, but did as he’d asked.

Dante reached out and knocked three times on the door. Then he stepped back and waited.

Silence.

Dante knocked again.

Nothing.

He was preparing for a longer wait when the door swung open and Dante found himself looking down the barrel of a sawn-off shotgun.

“Ah,” said Viktor. “Is you.” His gaze took in Dante’s unarmed state, then shifted to Andrea. He lowered the shotgun. “What is this?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Hmmm.” Viktor scratched his stubbled chin. “Fine. You can come in. I make tea, you tell me everything. Da?”

“Okay.”

Inside, the flat smelled of dill, fried potatoes, and an indefinable scent that Dante guessed was Viktor’s incense. The small living room was dimly lit by several crystal lamps that cast an orange glow. Two sofas lined the wall, and a third sat with its back to the kitchen. A small coffee table sat low between them. It was crowded with stuff — books in Cyrillic, candles, coasters, and a half-finished game of solitaire.

“You like those?” Viktor pointed at a particularly large lamp. “Is salt lamp. Meant to give good vibes.” He gave a sardonic grin. “Sit there.” He pointed at the longest sofa. It was covered with a wooden beaded throw, and brightly coloured cushions.

Dante sat down, Andrea next to him. Her eyes darted around the apartment, as if trying to make sense of what they were doing here. Dante didn’t blame her. Coming here was a long shot, and it may have been a mistake.

What he wanted to do right now, he realised, was have a fight with Viktor. The Belarusian had probably thirty kilos on Dante, and an extra three inches of reach. It would be a good fight, and since they were four storeys up, the possibilities were extensive.

He looked up to find Viktor watching him, face impassive. The double-barrelled shotgun had disappeared, but Dante had no doubt Viktor could locate it quickly if need be.

“Tea,” said his host.

Dante waited while Viktor pottered around the kitchen fixing the tea — a curiously domestic operation for such a large, battle-scarred man.

The apartment kitchen was small for someone of Viktor's size. His head brushed the lowered ceiling, and when he leaned over the bench, he had to be careful not to bang his forehead on the wall cupboards.

In one corner of the kitchen was an ornate copper urn on four little legs. A small tap came out of the bottom of it.

"My mother send me," said Viktor, nodding towards the vessel. "Is samovar. For tea."

Soon, the aroma of mint filled the air. Viktor came out from behind the kitchen bench bearing three glass mugs with ornamental metal bases.

Viktor passed Dante and Andrea each a cup of tea. It was a warm golden colour, and steam coiled gently from it.

"Thank you," murmured Andrea, and took a sip before Dante could stop her.

"So," said Viktor, lowering himself into the armchair, which groaned under his weight. His dark eyes glinted with amusement. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Charlie Wilson is in a coma and he isn't waking up."

"And why," Viktor took a deep draught of tea, "do you think I can help?"

"Because it's something to do with ghosts. And you know about ghosts."

Dante wanted to set his tea down untasted, but he knew this would not be polite. After all, he was the guest here, and he was seeking Viktor's help. That presupposed a level of trust he was feeling less and less comfortable with. Watching Viktor carefully, he took a sip of tea.

It was minty, with an astringent tang he couldn't identify. Also, it was delicious.

Viktor raised his cup in salute. "We make progress, my friend. How do you know it was ghosts?"

"There is a theatre." Once again, Dante was reluctant to mention he was involved in a play — even as Murderer One. "Charlie thought it was

haunted by a dangerous ghost. He summoned the ghost earlier this evening. It broke through the chalk circle when he tried to bind it, and he passed out."

"Did something break the circle to let the ghost in?" Viktor sounded improbably like a doctor trying to diagnose a rare ailment.

"No. The ghost attacked, Charlie had a fit, then he passed out at the same time as the candles went out. Then I got him out."

Viktor scratched his chin. "Ghost boy is powerful viadzmar — wizard. That should not have happened. You did something wrong in the binding."

Dante was sure this was the case, but right now, he didn't care. He had more pressing things to sort out. "The doctors in the hospital can't find anything wrong with him, but they say his vital signs are steadily declining."

"In hospital?" Viktor's eyebrows rose. "If we help him with a ceremony, hospital is not a good place for it."

"I will get him out of the hospital."

Viktor took a sip of tea. "So you have the hospital discharge forms?"

"No."

Viktor grinned. "It will probably be on morning news — man abducted from hospital."

Dante thought about hospitals and security cameras. He knew how to deal with those.

"I want him to wake up."

Viktor grew serious. "If it happened in this ghost theatre, then we will need to take him back there. That is where he will be. His…" Viktor clicked his huge fingers, looking for the word. "His spiritus. His soul — that is it."

There was a long silence. In the background, a clock chimed a musical note. It was nearly midnight.

"Suppose I can help him," said Viktor. "What would you give me in return?"

“Money.”

Viktor shrugged. “Money I have.”

Dante sighed internally. “I don’t kill people.”

Viktor’s scarred face broke into a smile. “He doesn’t kill people! Such an angel, this one. You mean: you don’t kill people any more.”

Dante didn’t bother replying.

“I want something specific.”

“What?”

Viktor tapped his fingers on his metal cup holder. “A little favour.”

“That doesn’t involve killing anyone,” said Andrea.

Dante glanced at her in surprise.

“Yes, yes.” Viktor waved a hand in dismissal. “Just a small matter of a package delivery.”

Dante was immediately suspicious. Doing favours for someone like Viktor was the worst possible idea. But then his memory shifted to Charlie, lying motionless on the ambulance stretcher.

“Done. If you can help him.”

Viktor grinned. “Is good for a man to have friends he will — what do they say — ‘go to the mattresses’ for.”

Dante sipped his tea. It was still good.

“Can you help Charlie tonight?” asked Andrea.

“How far is this theatre?”

“About two hours’ drive,” said Andrea.

“If you can get him there before dawn, I can help him.” Viktor looked at the clock. “Just before dawn is good time for this thing.” He fixed one bright

eye on Dante. “You can get your friend there? Is getting late. Perhaps it is too difficult for you.”

“He will be there.” Dante drained his teacup and set it down on the low table. Beside him, Andrea did the same.

“So confident.” Viktor grinned. “Here. For later.” He slid a white business card with a phone number and nothing else on it across the coffee table. “Nice to meet you, friend of Dante.” He lifted his teacup to salute Andrea.

Dante stood, and gave Andrea a hand up off the sofa to prevent himself from punching Viktor.

“Later.”

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On the virtues of honesty in extractions

ANDREA FINALLY BROKE THE SILENCE AS THEY APPROACHED THE HOSPITAL, driving an anonymous grey rental car Dante had hired with a fake ID from a place which specialised in such transactions.

“You’re not a cleaner.”

“What?” Dante stopped going through the various plans running parallel in his head to glance at Andrea.

“You said you were a cleaner at the party. After you’d eaten a whole one of Benedict’s brownies.”

“I am. It’s a term for what I used to do.”

“Which was?”

Dante hesitated. He’d never had this conversation with a civilian before. Well, the only other times were Eleanor, who’d already worked it out, and Charlie, who’d already seen his ghosts. The other people who knew his profession were either dead, or in the trade themselves.

“A cleaner gets rid of bad people,” he said at last. “For the government.”

Andrea bit her lip. “Like an assassin.”

“Yes.”

“And now?”

“I’m retired.”

Andrea stared out the window at the passing street lights. At this time of night, the roads were deserted, even around the city’s biggest hospital.

“The people you killed… Were they all bad?”

“The worst.”

Andrea paused. “How many— actually, I’m not going to ask that.”

“I haven’t killed anyone in two hundred and eighty-four days,” Dante offered.

That might have been the wrong thing to say, because Andrea winced.

“I’m retired,” said Dante. “And I plan to stay that way. Killing ghosts doesn’t count, because they’re already dead.”

“I can’t believe I’m having this conversation,” muttered Andrea. “There is no dating advice book I’ve read that covers this.” She drew in a breath. “Fine. You want to kill the ghost that took Charlie?”

“Yes.”

“Won’t that be hard to do?”

“I plan to find out.”

“And then what?”

Dante ran through his list of action items, and decided to relay just the headlines. “Get Charlie back, kill the ghost that took him, then find out who killed Frank and Jennifer.”

Andrea’s eyes widened. “And kill that person?”

“It could be more than one person.”

Her gaze intensified. “And then kill them?”

It was Dante’s turn to frown. Hadn’t he already said he was retired? “Then have the police arrest them. And complete my role in the play.”

She shook her head again, but this time a tiny smile curved the corners of her mouth. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Complications that arise will be dealt with.”

He could feel Andrea’s eyes on him as he drove the two blocks to the hospital.

“Doing the play has meant I’ve gotten to know you better,” she said at last. “I think your role as Murderer One should have clued me in.”

“I think I would have preferred a comedy.”

“I’m trying to imagine you in a comedy…” Andrea’s smile deepened, then faded. “Will you promise me one thing?”

“It depends.”

“If you find out it’s Deirdre who’s the murderer, can you make sure it is her? Because I’ve known her for years, and she seems like such a good person.”

“I will make sure.”

She blew out a breath. “This is so weird. Okay. What now?”

“Now I get Charlie out of hospital and we take him back to the theatre. It’s called an extraction.”

“I’ve never done an extraction before.” Andrea’s brows crimped down as she said the word ‘extraction.’

“I have.”

Dante navigated the hospital car park in the rental car. He located a vacant space close to the service exit where delivery trucks came and went.

“What’s the extraction plan?” Andrea fished dark glasses out of her handbag and slipped them on.

“The dark glasses just make you look suspicious,” said Dante.

“I might be visually impaired,” said Andrea. “Or have a light sensitivity.”

“You can wait in the car.”

She shook her head.

“Okay. I need to scout a few things first.” Dante checked his watch. “I’ll be back in ten minutes. Don’t do anything.”

“Anything what?”

“Anything anything.”

Dante strolled across the car park, enjoying the chill night air. Parts of his brain that had lain dormant for months were coming online.

The service entry was like most industrial-scale buildings. There was a raised platform for trucks to back up to the loading bay, and various trolleys and shifting equipment.

Dante strolled through the double height truck entry, his nondescript black clothing identical to that of any late night delivery driver. He paused before the first security door. A small device from his pocket turned the door lock light green, and he slipped through.

The next step was to find their disguises.

Here, Dante’s talent for quickly understanding building layouts took over. After wandering in a purposeful manner for less than a minute, he followed a tired-looking nurse into a locker room. The man lifted a neat pile of civilian clothes out of his locker and disappeared into the changing room.

From here, it was just a short walk to the scrub room, where neatly folded hospital uniforms sat in rows, the size label conveniently facing upwards. It took Dante less than a minute to find a set of clothes his size, and ten seconds to get Andrea a pair that would fit.

Andrea jumped when he opened the driver’s car door.

“Oh! I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

Dante checked his watch. It had been nine minutes and twenty-five seconds.

“I’ve got you a change of clothes.” He handed over the neatly folded green scrubs.

“Do you mind going outside while I change…” she trailed off, then shrugged. “Actually, whatever. I’m about to kidnap someone out of a hospital. This is truly the least of my worries.”

Dante pushed the rental car seat back as far as it would go to strip off his trousers and shirt. When his shirt came off, he felt Andrea’s eyes on him. He caught her eye and she looked away quickly, blushing.

“I guess you work out a lot?” she asked.

“Every day.”

Once Dante’s scrubs were on, he leaned back and closed his eyes while Andrea got changed. She swore softly as she struggled out of her jeans.

When she went silent, Dante found her watching him again.

“You don’t have to be such a gentleman,” she said.

Dante didn’t know what to say in response, so he checked his slim tech belt was in place beneath his scrubs, and slipped the rental car key into it. Finally he put on a pair of reading glasses with clear lenses. He’d found they softened his appearance considerably, and meant that people he interacted with weren’t as likely to call security.

Andrea took in his new look. “I like them. They make you look almost nerdy.”

Dante didn't have a reply for this either, so he opened the door and checked the car park for signs the hospital security had been alerted. There were none. “Let’s go.”

A few minutes later, they walked along the brightly lit hospital corridors, passing nurses, doctors and cleaning staff. Dante looked for a likely desk to steal paperwork from.

“Don’t we need security passes?” hissed Andrea. “Someone will notice we’re not wearing them.”

“Soon.”

Dante waited for a gurney pushed by three staff to go past, then swung Andrea around and followed them. At the end of the corridor, they all crowded into a lift and went up three floors.

The lift dinged, and the staff pushed the gurney out. Dante held the lift doors for them, and then he and Andrea stepped out into the new corridor.

He checked for security cameras and observers, then handed Andrea an ID tag. Her eyes widened, but she slipped the lanyard over her head without comment.

Dante had learned the art of lifting things from several tutors. Two teachers had been in MI6, but the third (and best) was a nine-year-old urchin in the slums of Bogota. The fact that Dante was helping the street thief escape the reprisals of a well organised paramilitary gang had provided all the motivation he needed to share his secrets.

A vacant desk yielded an official looking manilla folder, which Dante scooped up. He rounded two corners and approached the reception desk.

“Hi,” he said.

A lady with thick-framed glasses similar to his looked up from her computer.

“I’m looking for Charlie Wilson.” He held up the paperwork. “Some results have come through.”

She glanced down at her computer, then clicked a few buttons. “Charlie… Wilson. You’re a bit lost, aren’t you? You want Block E, Ward 14.”

“Thanks.” Dante gave her a friendly nod and left, Andrea trailing after.

He checked the map on the next signage board.

“There.” Andrea pointed at an oblong building next to their current location.

It was labelled ‘head trauma and rehab.’

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait in the car?”

Andrea grinned. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“You could get arrested, maybe even shot at, go to jail, and lose your vet’s licence.”

She swallowed. “Is that likely to happen?”

Dante pushed through a set of double smoke doors. “About a twenty-two percent probability.”

“That’s not bad odds.”

“It’d be a three percent probability if you wait in the car.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

Dante pushed through another set of doors. He wondered why Andrea was so set on coming with him. It must be that she cared for Charlie. But he didn’t think he needed help right now. It wasn’t exactly an easy job, but Dante had done far more difficult extractions.

They reached Ward 14 after a brief detour to pick up a large, wheeled laundry trolley. Dante paced down the doors until he found one where the piece of paper in the holder outside said ‘Charlie Wilson.’

He parked the laundry trolley just outside the ward, and stepped within.

There were two beds in the ward, and they both had curtains drawn around them. Dante peered through the first curtained space. An elderly lady lay in her bed and snored, head tipped back and mouth open wide.

In the second alcove, Charlie Wilson lay, sheets drawn up to his chest, auburn curls pressed against the starched white pillow.

A machine sat next to him on a wheeled stand. It beeped every so often, displaying red numbers, and a cord led to a white plastic clamp around Charlie’s index finger. An IV line ran into his arm, and an oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth.

Dante stepped into the curtained space, followed by Andrea, who drew the curtains shut behind her.

“Poor Charlie,” murmured Andrea, and brushed her fingers across his cheek.

Charlie didn’t stir.

“I assume you’re going to put him in the laundry bin?” said Andrea in a low voice. “What about that?” She pointed at the clamp around Charlie’s finger.

In response, Dante wheeled the machine to the far side of the bed. He opened the curtains, and peered through at the sleeping lady in the next door bed.

Then, with a swift movement, he released the clamp from Charlie’s finger, brought it over to the lady’s hand, and slowly eased it onto her index finger.

The machine gave a loud ‘beep’ of protest, then settled into its previous pattern. Dante checked the red numbers.

“The oxygen mask and IV line are trickier,” he whispered. “When we take it off, the saturation will drop and an alarm will sound. Probably several. We’ll leave it on him until we’re ready to go.”

Dante retrieved the laundry bin from the corridor and pushed it through the curtains to butt up against Charlie’s bed. He was about to lift Charlie into it when the curtains parted and Delia, Charlie’s mother, stepped through.

Her face was pale and her eyes red-rimmed. They widened to see two hospital orderlies, then narrowed as she recognised them.

“Hello, Delia,” said Dante cautiously. His mind ran through a series of cover stories and escalations. He didn’t think Charlie would appreciate him tranquilising his mother in order to achieve a clean getaway, so he put that down as a last resort.

“Dante. And Andrea.” Delia blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“We wanted to visit Charlie,” said Dante, at the same moment as Andrea said:

“We’re here to take Charlie away.”

There was a silence, punctuated by the beep of the machine.

“We think we have a way to get him to wake up,” said Andrea.

Delia took a step inside the alcove, then collapsed into the chair by Charlie’s head. Dante watched her carefully. She didn’t look like she was about to call security, but maybe she was waiting for an unguarded moment.

“Dante thinks it’s something to do with…” Andrea hesitated.

Dante ran over his conversations with Charlie. His friend had never mentioned ghosts in relation to his mother. It was as if their relationship ran completely apart from his strange world of spirits and the dead.

Delia looked up. Bright tears ran down her cheeks. “It’s to do with ghosts, isn’t it.” Her voice was husky, as if her throat had tightened around the words.

“Yes,” said Andrea.

Delia shook her head, and teardrops sprinkled the white bedsheet. “I always thought I could just persuade him out of it. Like if I pretended everything was normal, then maybe it would be.”

“I’m sorry,” said Andrea.

Dante wondered why Andrea was sorry. She hadn’t done anything wrong. Apart from showing up at exactly the wrong time during the summoning. Maybe that was why she was apologising.

“Do you think you can help my son?” Delia turned tear filled eyes to Dante.

“Yes.” Dante had prepared several contingencies in case Viktor turned out to be a fraud. The third one involved threatening to burn down the theatre unless its resident revenant released Charlie’s spirit. The fourth one involved burning down the theatre for real. He rather liked that one, but because it might endanger Charlie, it was near the bottom of the list.

“They say he’s getting worse,” said Delia. “His vital signs… They keep talking about oxygenation and core temperature. But they don’t know how to help him. They say—” Her voice went all choked. “At this rate he might not last much longer.”

“We’ll do everything in our power to get Charlie back,” said Andrea. “But we need to take him away — right now.”

“Will… will anything happen if you take him out of the hospital? They couldn’t find anything wrong with him, but…” Delia shrugged helplessly, her hands tightening in her lap.

“We might get arrested,” said Dante. “If we’re not careful.”

Andrea shot him a look. “Like you said, they can’t find anything wrong with Charlie. He’s not on life support, so he doesn’t need to be in hospital. If we don’t succeed, we’ll get him back here by morning. Before lunch. I promise.”

Dante wanted to say that insertions were ten times harder than extractions. For one thing, you didn’t have the element of surprise.

But when he opened his mouth to say so, Andrea was already speaking.

“Can we take him now? Please?” she asked.

Delia nodded, her throat working as if she was trying to say something, but couldn’t.

Andrea walked around the bed to squeeze her hand. “It’ll be alright.”

Dante flipped the sheets back off Charlie and lifted him into his arms. He was used to unconscious (or dead) bodies feeling heavier than their weight would suggest. It was, after all, where the term ‘a dead weight’ came from. So he was disconcerted to find Charlie was lighter than he should have been.

“I’m going to take him out in that.” Dante nodded towards the laundry trolley.

Delia nodded again, eyes shining with unshed tears. Then she stood. “I want to come with you.”

Dante opened his mouth to say there was no way he was letting another civilian get involved, but Andrea trod on his foot.

“I know you want to come with us. And that this is probably the worst night of your life,” said Andrea softly. “But we need you to stay here and cover for us.”

“How?” Delia’s hands clenched.

“In a moment, we’re going to take the monitoring equipment off Charlie. A bunch of alarms will go off. When the hospital orderlies rush in…” Andrea hesitated, shooting a glance at Dante. “Tell them that you came in to find the bed empty. And when you looked out the window, you think you saw Charlie wandering off into the Domain.”

It was a workable cover story. With the added advantage that it sent everyone in the opposite direction from where Dante’s car was parked.

Delia paused for a long moment.

“Please,” said Andrea.

“Okay,” whispered Delia. “I’ll do that.”

“Andrea, can you remove the IV and oxygen mask?” asked Dante with the sense that time was growing short.

She did so, with the practised ease of someone who injected animals daily.

Alarms began to beep as Dante fitted Charlie into the bin, his body folded into a loose crouch. He packed the blankets and sheets from Charlie’s bed around him, and finished the ensemble with a pillow to hide the top of Charlie’s head.

“We’ll call you as soon as he wakes up,” Andrea told Delia, as Dante pushed the wheeled laundry bin out through the curtains and into the corridor. “I promise.”

In the corridor Dante sped up. A hospital orderly appeared in front of them, walking towards Charlie's room with a worried expression. Dante pushed through double doors, the wheels of the laundry bin skidding and squeaking under the load of the unconscious Charlie.

Dante retraced their steps through the warren of corridors and lifts. Part of his mind was on potential pursuit, while another part turned over the fact of

Charlie’s strange lightness. He remembered a long and tedious rainy season he’d spent camped out in the jungle with another operative, waiting for the rain to stop so they could find their target.

For some reason, his fellow operative had wanted to pass the time by talking. And his favourite topic was death, followed closely by various theories about the afterlife.

None of this had interested Dante. He planned to find out about what happened after death the traditional way — by dying — and was not interested in second-hand theories.

But one thing had stuck in his memory. According to his companion, people lost 21 grams in weight when they died. So this, the story went, was the weight of the departing soul.

Dante had never had the desire to verify this weight loss for himself. But it seemed to him that Charlie had lost something, if not physically, then spiritually.

As they pulled out of the car park, a police siren wailed a few blocks away. Andrea stiffened. “Is that because of us?”

“Could be.” Dante planned to dump this rental car as soon as possible. He wasn’t sure of the legalities of removing someone from hospital, and he really didn’t want to find out.

It was only as they got onto the Northwestern Motorway, Charlie seatbelted firmly in the back seat, that Dante revisited the fact that Viktor was not the most trustworthy person.

For all he knew, Viktor might have another scheme in mind, and planned to set up Dante to fail. If that was the case, vowed Dante, Viktor would not leave the theatre alive.

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In which Dante prepares for a journey

IT WAS JUST COMING UP TO HALF PAST FOUR IN THE MORNING WHEN DANTE drove the Buick into the Te Kohe Theatre car park. Andrea was asleep in the passenger seat, and despite the seat belt, Charlie had slumped over in the back.

There was one other car in the car park — a sleek black Tesla. Dante parked the Buick and stalked over to the unknown car. The window wound down soundlessly, and a gravelly voice said: “You are late. But not too late.”

Dante didn’t bother answering. He went back to his car and opened the back door. Andrea woke with a half snort. She peered back at Dante.

“We’re here?” she said blearily.

“Yes.” Dante lifted Charlie out of the car, still disconcerted by the way he weighed less than he should. He looked up at the dark silhouette of the theatre. It seemed to brood, and he wondered whether the revenant looked down at them from the attic windows. Probably yes.

“How are we going to get in?” Andrea pulled on her duffle coat as she got out of the car.

“Not to worry. This man has answer for everything.” Viktor waved cheerfully at Dante.

Dante strode up to the main entrance and extracted his theatre key. He’d found out the four-digit code to the alarm days ago. Those four digits being one, one, one, and, in a fit of security consciousness, two.

Inside, the theatre had reverted back to its waiting silence.

They pushed through the double doors into the main theatre. The blackness was thick enough to cut with a knife, and Dante wondered again about supernatural weaponry.

Viktor sniffed the air. “Smells like spooks.” He had a small satchel slung across his chest, a curiously elegant accessory that didn’t match his towering form.

They walked in procession down the stepped aisle towards the stage. Dante tried not to think of it as a funeral march.

“Where exactly did the ghost take him?” asked Viktor.

“On the stage,” said Dante. “Left hand side.”

“I can still see the traces of the chalk circles,” said Andrea.

Dante was surprised how she’d come on board for their mission, supernatural elements and all. It seemed kidnapping someone from a hospital was a better way to build trust in a relationship than going out to dinner.

“We go there.” Viktor climbed the stairs to the stage.

Dante waited for something to happen when he stepped onto the stage, but the only sign of ghostly occupancy was a tiny flicker in the ghost light that could have been him blinking. Almost.

He laid Charlie down in the spot where he’d collapsed just six hours ago.

Dante tensed as Viktor leaned over Charlie’s form. The Belarusian felt the pulse on his neck, and gently opened first one eyelid, then the other.

Charlie’s eyes were rolled back in his head, and he didn’t react in any way Dante could see.

Viktor frowned and scratched his ruffian beard. Then he dug in his satchel, and brought out a wooden box, just the size of his hand, ornately carved with flowers and birds. He opened it, and the scent of birch bark filled the air.

Out came a small copper candle holder. It held a stub of candle made from coiled honeycomb.

“Is old trick my grandmother teach me.” Viktor’s English seemed to become more basic whenever he thought of home.

He fished in his pocket for a cigarette lighter. With a flick of his thumb, he lit the candle. It sputtered for a moment, then the flame burned clean.

Kneeling down, Viktor held the candle flame close to Charlie’s face. As Charlie breathed out, the candle burned blue-green.

“Ah…” The candle flickered on his pitted face, and for a moment Viktor looked older, a craggy shaman of the underworld. “He is beyond.”

“Beyond what?” Dante didn’t like enigmatic statements.

“You know — Beyond.” Viktor swirled a finger in illustration. “Beyond all this… this... world of things.”

“But he’s here.”

“His spirit is not.”

“Right. So how do we bring it back?”

“So practical.” Viktor snuffed out the candle between thumb and forefinger. “That is the question.”

“Does your grandmother know?”

“Undoubtedly she would, but she is dead these past thirty years.”

Dante ran his fingers over his knuckles. He wished there was someone he could hit until a solution presented itself.

“So what now?”

“Someone is going to go and get him.” Viktor’s tooth glinted gold. “They must go just before dawn. That is when the world changes from one thing into another.” He held up two hands as if weighing unseen quantities. “Day world, night world.”

“How does it work?”

“Is not easy.” Viktor’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “You will need a guide, and a way back.” His humour vanished, and Dante caught a hint of unease in the man’s dark eyes.

This relaxed him slightly. If what he was about to try was dangerous, then maybe it was real, and would work.

“I will go.”

“Of course,” said Viktor. “Now is time to make ready the things, so that we can send you on your way.”

“Is there a risk?” Andrea stood next to Dante, arms folded on her chest. Dante was pleased to see she didn’t trust Viktor either.

“You ever did a…” Viktor flicked his fingers as if to summon the missing word from the wings of his memory, “a seance before?”

“No. He did a summoning.” Dante pointed at Charlie’s sleeping form.

“I am not magician like your friend here.” Viktor put his bag down and began to search it for something. “But I learned from my grandmother. She was a viadzmarka — a witch. She knew many things.”

“Like how to get people back from the Beyond?”

As he’d told Andrea earlier, Dante was good at extractions. He’d done them in warzones, from islands owned by crimelords, and, on one memorable occasion, from a submarine. But he had no idea how to break into — or was it cross over to? — the Beyond.

“It is simple,” said Viktor. “But not easy.”

Dante had expected this.

“In the old country, outside the cities, many people know how these things are done. They have the right things at hand.”

Dante got the feeling Viktor was avoiding something.

“How does it work?”

“Like I said, is simple. You need,” Viktor held up one thick finger, “a guide. You need,” he held up a second finger, “someone to cross over, and you need,” he held up a final finger, “an anchor to draw you home once you find the lost soul. As long as you have these three things, you can succeed.”

Dante took note of ‘can succeed.’ It meant you could fail.

“What happens if you lose the anchor?” asked Andrea.

Viktor shrugged. “Then you get lost too. And unless someone goes in to fetch you, there you stay.”

Dante wondered whether he needed to put a contingency in place. He knew people who owed him favours. At the very least, he could put out a hit on Viktor if he never woke up.

“Relax.” Viktor’s smile was far from reassuring. “I will not betray you. Otherwise how will I get paid?”

“Okay,” said Dante. Life was simple when you made simple choices. “Where is the guide?”

“Well…” Viktor scratched his chin. “Traditionally, it is an animal or bird. A crow or raven, a cat or black dog.”

“I have a cat,” said Dante.

“I know.”

“Will it hurt the cat?”

“Of course not.” Viktor looked indignant. “Cats are good at going Beyond.”

Dante relaxed a fraction.

“I can go get your cat,” said Andrea.

“Thank you.” Dante handed her his keys.

“What about your alarm?” asked Andrea.

“Just put your index finger to the keypad. My front door will unlock.”

Andrea’s mouth made a silent ‘o’ as she absorbed this information. “Alright then.” She headed for the exit.

Viktor took the beeswax candle in its holder and set it on the floor next to Charlie. Then he took a small copper gong hung from a tiny stand, and placed it next to the candle, along with a small hammer. Lastly, he took a tin box covered in elaborate scrollwork and put it beside the gong.

“A candle to focus the mind,” said Viktor. “A bell to send you off, and call you back. And this,” one thick finger tapped the box. “My grandmother’s herbs, to open the door to Beyond. These are precious. Do you know how hard it is to bring plants into this country? Easier to smuggle cocaine.”

“What do I do?”

“You sit here.” Viktor pointed at the floor next to Charlie. “You look at candle. When your girlfriend comes back, you hold cat.”

Dante was going to say that Andrea wasn’t his girlfriend, then he hesitated. Maybe she was? Did helping him kidnap Charlie cross an invisible relationship line? If he came back from the Beyond, he would ask her.

“One other thing,” said Viktor. “Is important. What took your friend is an upyr ghost — an evil spirit. It is sucking out his life force, and it will try to take yours too. There was something wrong with your binding, and now it is drawing on your friend’s power. Defeating it will not be easy.”

Dante waited to see if there was more, but it appeared that was all Viktor had to say.

They waited in silence as the minutes ticked by. At last, Andrea returned, Dante’s cat cradled in her arms. The cat was alert, its tail lashing as it glared around the silent theatre.

Wordlessly, Andrea passed the cat to Dante, and it nestled in his arms, its tail curving around its haunches.

“Sit.” Viktor indicated a spot next to Charlie and two feet from the candle. With a flick of his cigarette lighter, he lit the candle. “Look.”

Dante sat. The cat’s eyes were already focused on the candle flame, its pupils dilated into black circles that swallowed its green irises.

The flame hung luminous in the air. Around the wick was an area devoid of light, and then it changed from bright yellow to burnt orange in a smooth gradient. It flickered as Viktor moved to sit cross-legged opposite Dante.

“Look only at the flame,” the big man rumbled. “Let it take hold of your mind. Let it fill your thoughts. There is only the flame.”

Dante’s focus sharpened in an instant. It was the focus of a sniper, a knife fighter, a man who could wait for hours in the darkness.

The flame grew huge in his mind. The distances in the theatre became unreliable, both too close to be real, and miles away.

A ringing tone sounded, and a small part of Dante’s mind noted that Viktor had struck the gong. The sound reverberated in his mind and the flame grew brighter. Dante focused in on the core of darkness around the wick, and waited.

The air filled with the sharp scent of burnt herbs — tarragon and thyme, and a sweet scent Dante didn’t recognise. The cat’s fur bristled up and down its spine.

“Listen to the gong,” whispered a voice Dante only dimly recognised as Viktor’s. “Catch the sound and let it take you into the Beyond. When you hear it again, ride it back. It will ring but once to bring you home.”

“Wait,” said Andrea. “What happens if—”

The next tone struck, and it tugged inside Dante’s chest, then his forehead, and then he was falling inside himself, turning faster and faster, over and over, down through the darkness.

The bell tone of the gong cut out as Dante opened his eyes.

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In which Dante goes Beyond

DANTE WAS SITTING IN THE THEATRE. HE WAS ABOUT TO TELL VIKTOR THAT it hadn't worked, when his brain caught up with his senses.

Viktor was sitting in front of him, yes, but the big man was insubstantial as mist. So was Andrea. She stood, a few feet to Dante's right, arms crossed and a sceptical scowl on her face. For a moment, Dante thought she was frozen in time. Then he saw that she was, in fact, moving very, very slowly. Her frown deepened in a glacial change, and her lips parted a fraction, as if she was about to speak.

The theatre was grey monochrome, as if Dante had night vision goggles on, and the ghost light a white sphere. The only patches of colour in the scene came from the candle flame, which burned blue, and two golden glows, like tiny stars, lodged in Viktor and Andrea's chests. Dante looked down at his own chest, and saw the same glow there.

At his feet, the waves of sound from the gong expanded out like ripples on a pond. Dante studied Charlie. His friend's insubstantial form was there. But there was no glow in his chest.

With a lithe hop, the cat leapt out of Dante's lap. It was neither misty nor transparent. It looked just as it did when it was lying in a patch of sun in Dante's living room, or stalking through his garden.

It gave a ‘prrr’ and turned lamplike green eyes on him. It seemed to say, as clearly as if it had spoken: ‘We don’t have all day. Let’s get on with this.’

Dante stood up and stepped away from his body. He looked down at himself. His smoky form looked just like Charlie's now — absent its golden glow.

The cat wandered to the edge of the stage and sniffed the air.

Dante studied the shifting grey planes of the theatre. Something was moving in it. A shadow, sliding over the ceiling baffles like a scudding cloud. It travelled down the wall, quick and subtle, to vanish into the darker grey of the balcony box.

The cat’s green eyes stared at the balcony box and its ears swivelled back. Dante knew what this meant. Whatever it was, the cat did not like it.

Dante’s right hand went automatically inside his jacket for his Browning. To his relief, the hard grip met his fingers. He drew it out, and it was the same grey as everything around him. He wondered what type of bullets an insubstantial gun would fire, then shrugged. He’d find out soon enough.

The cat finished its perusal of the theatre air and walked delicately over to the corridor that led down into the Crypt.

Of course, thought Dante. Monsters always hid in basements and cellars. Keeping a careful watch around him, the ghostly Browning in one hand, Dante followed the cat down the stairs.

As Dante descended, the blank walls changed from light grey, to dark grey, to charcoal. The sounds of something, or several somethings shifting and scratching grew louder. As he got to the last turn of the stairs, the sounds stopped, and he stepped into a Crypt as silent as the grave.

The cat trotted a few paces into the Crypt, and sat, curling its tail around its haunches. Dante scanned the space, every sense on high alert. Shadows hung from the ceiling like cloths, draping down towards the floor.

They seemed alive. Was it a trick of the light, or did a shadow just twitch? Dante thumbed the Browning hammer back into full cock and stepped into the Crypt, moving as cautiously as a cat.

Still no sign of Charlie, and time was ticking down every second.

A shape moved in the darkest corner of the Crypt, and Dante crept towards it, pistol lowered in case it was Charlie.

The shadows blew aside, to reveal a woman, standing with one foot pointed out like a ballet dancer.

“Dante.” Her smile was wide, her eyes dark. “I’m Allie, a friend of Charlie’s. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Okay.” Dante studied her carefully. It was too early to tell if she was an ally or an enemy. Charlie might have mentioned her, but it was hard to keep track of an invisible host Dante would never see.

“Charlie’s here,” she said, her eyes widening. “But there’s an evil ghost keeping him prisoner. A man who died years ago and wants revenge.”

“Where is Charlie?” asked Dante.

“He’s that way.” She pointed to a door in the darkest corner of the Crypt. “But we have to be quick. Frank Rathburn will know we’re here any minute.” She shivered. “We don’t want him to find you here.”

“Lead on.”

Dante followed her to the door, the cat brushing against his calf. Allie bent to unlock the door with a small, silver key. Dante wondered how keys worked Beyond, and how she had one. The door creaked open, a dark grey rectangle that opened on more darkness.

Allie held the door open. “Go on, Charlie’s in there. But you have to hurry! The ghost is feeding on his life force, and he doesn’t have much time.”

Dante tilted his head to look at her. In his world, people hurried you for two reasons: they were afraid, or they wanted you to be afraid.

“You go first,” he said.

“I can’t!” Allie wrung her hands. “It’s too dangerous. I’m afraid.”

Dante looked closer. Allie’s hands looked totally normal, but her shadow sprang up behind her on the wall. That shadow was growing, and its hands

had become clawlike.

The cat lowered its ears, flicking them back. Its hackles stood on end as it hissed.

“You need to go inside.” Allie’s eyes were wide with sincerity and fear, but when she blinked, they went pitch black, with no white in them.

Dante loosened his shoulders, set his stance, and fired two bullets into her heart with the Browning. The bullets shot out silver, hitting her in the chest, causing a shockwave to ripple through her.

Her obsidian eyes went as large as teacups and her whole face distorted as she howled, and sank like a melted candle into the floor.

Dante booted the door open, but instinct made him reach a careful foot over the threshold before he stepped inside. His reaching foot found only air.

“Over here!” It was a man’s voice, coming from the middle of the Crypt where Dante had just been.

He spun, Browning trained on this new threat. The man was broad-shouldered and square-jawed. Dante knew him from the Te Kohe Am Dram photos.

“You’re Frank Rathburn.” Dante did not lower his pistol.

Frank raised his hands in surrender. “Your friend is down there.” He pointed to the floor, where a trapdoor lay.

The trapdoor looked like it had been drawn by a child — a simple square, inked on the grey floor. As Dante watched, the line shimmered and reformed, as if the building was remembering itself, second by second.

Dante prowled forwards, gun still trained on Frank’s chest. In his experience, questions like ‘how do I know I can trust you’ were just an invitation to be betrayed.

Instead, he looked down at the cat. It was gazing up at Frank, but its hackles had subsided, and it appeared merely curious.

“She won’t be gone long,” said Frank. “Now’s your chance.”

His eyes still on Frank, Dante heaved the trapdoor open. Just like the last time he'd seen it, ladder rungs led down into darkness.

"Charlie?" called Dante. "Are you down there?"

There was a rustle of movement below, and a faint voice.

Dante couldn't be sure of the words, but they might have been 'help.' It did sound like Charlie, though.

Frank pointed towards the door Dante had just abandoned. Around it, a shadow was growing, creeping towards them.

"We don't have much time."

Dante studied the ghost. Threats like 'if you betray me, I'll kill you' didn't pull much weight with a ghost. Frank seemed to know what he was thinking.

"That young man's my only hope of getting free and moving on. I need you to get him out of here."

The cat whined, a low curling mewl of warning. The shadow was solid now, hooked claws starting to dig into the floor as it gathered strength.

Dante made his choice. He swung his feet down onto the rungs and descended in a rush.

"Charlie," he called again as his feet hit the floor.

"Dante!" The voice came from a few feet away, and Dante stepped forward, hands held out against the solid darkness.

His foot bumped against something solid, and Dante bent to find Charlie's curly head of hair. He grabbed his friend by the shoulders and hoisted him up in a fireman's lift.

It was awkward climbing a ladder with one hand, but Dante managed it in a flurry of movement. He always knew when a mission was about to go south, and right now, things were headed that way — fast.

As he reached the final rung, the trapdoor lifted and began to swing down towards him.

Dante leapt, boosting himself and Charlie onto the Crypt floor just as the trapdoor slammed shut and locked.

He pushed to his feet to see Frank, fighting off a clawed shadow. The cat spat and hissed as Allie walked towards them, her palms out in a welcoming gesture, a smile on her face that was all teeth.

Dante drew the Browning and sighted down the barrel.

And then the third and final gong rang out, reverberating from on stage.

Allie looked up to where the sound was coming from and smiled.

“You’ll never make it. Or rather, you’ll never make it if you take him with you.” She nodded towards Charlie, slung over Dante’s shoulder. “I’ll stop you. But if you leave him here, I'll let you escape. Otherwise, you’ll both become prey, and I’ll drain you both dry, and grow in power until I can escape this cursed place.” She stretched her arms wide, and the shadows behind her leapt and writhed.

Dante fired a shot but Allie dodged with unreal speed, laughing as the bullet sped by.

“You can’t take him,” she sang. “He’s mine!”

On Dante’s shoulder, Charlie groaned. “Just leave me. She’s right, you have to get out.”

The gong sound waxed to a peak, and now it was already starting to fade away.

Dante fired again, and Allie slipped aside, smirking. “Better make the smart choice now. Or you’ll have no choice at all.”

There was a rattle and a bang behind Dante. He risked a quick look. Frank had climbed up on a scaffold and unfastened the trapdoor that led from the Crypt up to the stage.

“Go!” Frank gestured at the trapdoor. “It’s your way out.”

Dante looked at it. He would have to jump four metres to get through that. It was impossible.

“You’re only standing on the ground through habit,” shouted Frank. “You’re in the Beyond now! You weigh nothing!”

Allie tilted her head and smiled. “Flying here is only possible for those who are pure of heart. Look at your soul. It’s dark. Tarnished. Earthbound.”

Dante looked down, and it was true. Charlie, weak as he was, glowed a bright, pure silver, while his own form was more of a muddied, silver-ish colour, dim and darkened.

“You have to try!” bellowed Frank. “Listen! It’s fading.”

He was right. The gong echoes were dying away, and Dante knew this was his only chance.

“Leave me,” mumbled Charlie, and glowed even brighter than before. Dante swung him down to hold him in both arms.

“Up,” he told the cat, and it leapt up to crouch on Charlie’s stomach, tail lashing.

“He’s pure-hearted enough for both of us,” Dante told Allie, and leapt.

The ceiling trapdoor flashed by as Dante soared towards it. Allie let out a howl of anger and malice and endless hunger. Her shadow stretched towards them, all long claws and razor-sharp edges.

But now they were out of the Crypt, and Dante was stumbling across the stage towards his and Charlie’s physical forms.

With the hands of his spirit, he seized hold of the bell chime, and rode it back to reality.

“—YOU don’t wake up when Viktor hits the third chime?” said Andrea.

Dante opened his eyes. With a groan, so did Charlie. His friend rubbed his eyes and blinked up at him.

“Good job.” Viktor had an especially annoying grin. “You wake up.”

The curtains stirred as a chill wind blew through the theatre.

“I think we’ve really ticked off the ghost. We should leave.” Charlie tried to sit up, then slumped back, looking spent.

“No,” said Viktor. “Look.”

Dante followed his pointing finger. Up at the back of the Gods, the tiny window to the outside shone a pale china blue.

“Is dawn,” said Viktor. “Ghostie goes bye-byes.”

Brightness shimmered through the window, and with it came a release of tension like an outbreath. The shadows seemed shallower and the air lighter.

“Charlie!” Andrea knelt down to give him a hug. “I’m so glad you’re back. You must call your mum immediately — she’s so worried. Also, she needs to call off the police hunt for you. Ask her to tell the police you woke up all confused and wandered off by yourself until Dante found you. Here.” She pressed her phone into Charlie’s hands.

The cat stirred in Dante’s lap and he ran a hand over its head and down its back. “Thanks,” he murmured.

“Is not easy to go Beyond. Maybe you and Ghost Boy can make crimefighting team. Like Batman and Robin, but spooky.” Viktor’s eyes glinted.

“I have a big can of petrol in my garage,” said Dante. “If Charlie can’t banish the revenant, I will burn this theatre down, ghost and all.”

Viktor laughed, whether in agreement or disbelief, it was impossible to tell. He didn’t mention that Dante owed him, but Dante was certain Viktor would come to collect soon enough.

Dante looked at Charlie, now on the phone to his mother. “The binding didn’t work because we had the wrong ghost. The revenant isn’t Frank Rathburn.”

“Then who is it?” asked Andrea.

Dante thought through what he'd learned of the theatre, and ghosts in general. Like most mysteries, the answer was obvious in hindsight. "She said her name was Allie. She claimed to be a friend of Charlie's."

Charlie rang off the call and met Dante's gaze. His face was pale and drawn, and Dante's mind turned back to petrol and a lighted match. Although a remote-controlled incendiary device would be better. That way, he could create a rock-solid alibi for when the theatre burned to the ground.

"Let's get out of here," said Dante. "We need a new plan."

"You've seen the ghost, right?" said Andrea. "So once you work out who it is, Charlie can banish her for real?"

Charlie swallowed. "We have to. But it won't be easy."

"First breakfast," said Viktor, with surprising tact. "Then ghosts."

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In which Charlie reflects on the importance of names

THE FROG AND GUMBOOT CAFE EARLY ON A SATURDAY MORNING LOOKED surreal to Charlie. He'd spent the last five minutes reassuring a tearful mother that he was alright, and then left her to relay the news of his recovery to the relevant authorities.

Now he, Viktor, and Andrea were seated at a corner table at the Frog and Gumboot, while Dante appeared to be ordering the entire menu.

"How much do you think he's ordering?" Andrea eyed Dante at the counter with a bemused expression.

"He said I need to get my energy up." Charlie was what his dad would have called 'a bit crook.' It was how he felt after a bad flu — weak, wobbly, and dazed.

Dante returned. "Your breakfast is coming." He gave Charlie an ominous look, then sat next to Andrea.

"And me?" Viktor's lip curled in a villainous smile. "Am I part of the catering?"

"You'll get what's coming to you." Dante's biceps flexed as he folded his arms.

Laine arrived with four plates piled high with the famous Frog and Gumboot ‘Big Breakfast.’

“More coming soon.” She sashayed off with a smile.

“How are you feeling, Charlie?” Andrea stretched out a hand. “Do you mind if I check your pulse?”

“Er, sure.” Charlie tried to feel fit and strong while Andrea checked his pulse.

“It seems okay. Of course, you should be doing a whole battery of tests — blood pressure, ECG, and more?” Her voice ended in a question.

“I feel weak,” admitted Charlie, “but that’s because of the ghost.” He looked at Viktor. “I’ve never had things go wrong like this before. Do you know what happened?”

Viktor leaned back, his vast bulk dwarfing the chair he sat on. “You do binding, yes? And then you find you have the wrong ghost.”

Charlie sighed. “We were so sure it was Frank. But then when I tried to bind him with his name, the ghost broke through the circle and I ended up trapped outside my body, locked in that dark cellar. It was awful.” He shuddered. “I could feel my energy draining away, but I couldn’t get out.”

“When you do a binding, you open yourself.” Viktor mimed opening a door with his hands. “Is not safe if you have the wrong ghost. And this ghost…” He shook his head. “A mean and hungry ghost, trying to return to the world. Very bad idea.”

“Do you know who it was?” asked Andrea.

“Yes,” said Dante. “Unless she lied about that too.”

“I thought Allie was helping me.” Charlie felt wretched. “She disappeared every time the revenant struck. I thought it was because she was scared, and hiding.” His mind flashed back to Allie waiting with him in the car park before the summoning. In this new light, every meeting with her seemed sinister. “I should have known. How did I not know?”

Both Dante and Viktor were looking at him with weirdly identical expressions. Not exactly sympathetic — he couldn't imagine Dante looking sympathetic — but understanding. As if they'd both gone through a betrayal like this before.

Andrea squeezed his arm. "It's not your fault, Charlie. There's no way you could have known, right?"

"So now you can do the binding properly?" asked Dante. Andrea mouthed 'too soon' at him.

"If she is your ghost, it will work," said Viktor. "Just make sure you have her birth name."

Charlie felt an emptiness even the Big Breakfast couldn't fill. "She was draining my life force." He looked at Viktor. "What was she hoping to get?"

Viktor made a seesaw motion with his hand. "Sometimes a ghost takes a life, and then it becomes more solid, almost real. But it is not alive — it is cursed. It becomes an Upyr. Vampire zombie ghost."

"A vampire zombie ghost." Andrea looked suitably impressed.

"And you kill it how?" asked Dante.

"Always with the killing." Viktor's gold tooth glinted. "Can you not give peace a chance?"

Dante gave him a withering stare.

"If I bind her," said Charlie slowly, "then I can banish her?"

"Yes, I think so. But first you must take control of the source of the ghost's power." Viktor pushed his emptied plate towards the centre of the table. "Thank you for delicious breakfast. And remember." He winked at Dante. "You owe a favour."

Dante growled something deep in his throat as Viktor's chair scraped back and the big man wove his way jauntily out of the cafe.

As if by magic, Laine appeared with three lattes and one long black. "Coffee?"

“I’ll have Viktor’s too,” said Charlie. “Thanks.”

“I took this from the theatre archives before we left.” Dante placed a photo album on the table in front of him. Charlie recognised it as the album he and Eleanor had been about to look at before Mrs Haddock’s office had caught on fire. “We will find this Allie.”

“Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society Through the Years,” Andrea read. “Good thinking, Batman. Charlie, less talking, more eating.”

“Yes ma’am.” Charlie’s energy returned as he gulped down mouthfuls of crunchy fried goodness.

Dante leafed through the album, studying each cast photo with steely focus before turning to the next page.

Charlie was just mopping up his egg yolk with the last of the sourdough toast when Dante stopped.

“This one.” He pointed at a face in a formally posed group photograph.

Charlie leaned over to look, and a chill washed over him. The photo was labelled ‘Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Soc., *Arsenic and Old Lace*.’ The cast were arrayed in the theatre foyer, dressed in vintage suits and dresses. One face gazed out with an expression of friendly mischief, her mouth curved in a secret smile.

“It’s her.” He pointed at the lady. “She’s the revenant.”

“Rosalie Myers.” Dante read from the list of names below the photograph. “Myers. Like Dean Myers.”

“Allie.” Charlie shivered and took a sip of coffee.

“How did Dean’s mother die?” asked Dante.

“Mrs Haddock said it was a car accident,” said Charlie slowly, and it might have been the coffee, but his brain finally kicked into action. “When Dean was a kid. Allie did say she’d been haunting the theatre for thirty years. The two match up.”

“You think she got awakened by Dean being back in town?”

Charlie shrugged. “It seems a bit coincidental otherwise. And now…” He thought it through. “Now, Allie wants to somehow regain her life. By taking mine. At least, I think that’s what she wants.”

“You’re not going to ask her anything.” Dante made that into a statement of fact. “I don’t care what she wants, as long as she stays dead.”

“Allie was pretending to be Frank,” said Charlie. “She showed me the axe head, and told me how to do a binding. She wanted me to summon Frank so she could trap me. Not a nice ghost.”

“So we get rid of her,” said Dante. “Opening night is tonight, and we need to simplify operations.”

Charlie gave a smile that wobbled around the edges. “Yessir. Did I say thanks? For saving me? Because I really, really, appreciate it.”

“It’s okay,” said Dante around a mouthful of poached egg. “You needed it.”

Against all odds, a wave of warmth engulfed Charlie. It wasn’t just the coffee, or the sun shining through the clouds onto his shoulders, or the Big Breakfast. It was his friends, who got together to kidnap him and save him from a threat beyond the grave.

He looked up to see Andrea, her lips curved in a curious smile as she watched Dante eat.

“Dante’s a good guy,” said Charlie. “One of the best.”

Dante’s eyebrows lowered, but he kept his gaze on his food.

“You know,” said Andrea, “I think you’re right.”

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In which Eleanor leads Avery astray

"So…" Eleanor said into her phone, "last night, you summoned the revenant, Charlie got abducted into the spirit world, then you kidnapped him from the hospital, joined forces with the guy who used to work for Ted, and got him back. And now you have the true identity of the revenant. And you didn't tell me any of this until now because?"

On the other end of the line, Charlie began to apologise, but Eleanor cut him off.

"It's okay, Charlie. I get it." She eyed her ankle cast, currently propped up on an ottoman, with chagrin. "You think I'm hors de combat."

She smiled as Charlie protested he'd never thought of her as a horse. "That means out of action due to injury. I'm not going to lecture you about charging into dangerous situations for two reasons. One, I'm hardly the poster child for low-risk ventures, and two, I'm just so glad you're okay. But please, don't do it again."

"Erm…" said Charlie. "I have to. But we've got the right name now, so it should work."

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "Wonderful. So when do you plan to do this dangerous rite?"

“It has to be tonight,” said Charlie. “Because Allie — the revenant — will try to cause another death on set. I’m sure of it. She’s desperate to gain power, and that’s how she’ll get it.”

“The fact that she’s a murderous ghost doesn’t automatically make her son Dean our murderer,” said Eleanor. “Though Allie did seem quite keen on offing Deirdre. I wonder why? Did Deirdre jilt Dean, perhaps? Wrong him somehow? Is she a vengeful mother taking action from beyond the grave? Also, can we do your ghost banishing now?”

“The theatre’s already full of people getting ready for opening,” said Charlie. “And Allie is in hiding during the day. So we’ll have to do it…”

“Sometime during the play.” Eleanor vented a sigh. “The sooner the better, but definitely before Deirdre plunges from a high platform. Wonderful. One more thing, though.”

“Yes?” Charlie sounded wary.

“This evil ghost called Allie — not a very evil name, that — couldn’t have killed Jennifer. Or attacked me, for that matter. Those were human crimes. So we still have a murderer to catch.”

This time, Charlie was the one huffing out a breath. “It’s all getting super tight timewise.”

Eleanor heard the front door open and then close. “I believe I have an idea or two in that direction. I’ll keep you posted.”

There was a long silence, then Charlie said, “You’re not going to tell me. Okay, fair enough. But please don’t do anything without backup.”

“I won’t. Rest up, Charlie, and I’ll see you after lunch at the theatre.”

Avery walked in, carrying a cardboard holder with two takeaway coffees in it and a brown paper bag that smelled promising.

“Plotting your next move?” he asked, setting the bag down on the coffee table.

“Only if you’re up for driving me somewhere,” said Eleanor.

“Where?” Avery passed her a coffee.

“I want to go back to Rathburn Manor.”

Avery tore open the paper bag to reveal an almond croissant, a cinnamon roll, and two quiches. “What, today?”

“Definitely. Before the play kicks off this evening.”

“Why?” He sounded curious, rather than obstructive.

“I have a theory,” said Eleanor. “About why someone pushed me down the stairs.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

“I’m certain that the reason I was pushed down the stairs was because I was about to discover a key piece of evidence.”

Avery regarded her with a measured look. “And so you want to walk straight back into the lion’s den.”

“With police cover.” Eleanor lowered her eyelashes at him. “Also, I reckon I could thwack someone quite hard with my crutches if I had to.”

“And what’s our cover story?”

“Hmmm.” Eleanor sipped her coffee while she considered. “I’ve been advised by my psychologist to return to where I fell in order to heal my trauma.” At Avery’s sceptical look, she added, “I’m from Manhattan, honey. Everyone north of 14th Street has a shrink.”

“Fine,” said Avery. “Keys please?”

“I believe you already have them.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, gravel crunched as Avery parked Eleanor’s Mark II Jag in front of Rathburn Manor. The house was grey under the sullen sky, and more gothic than ever.

“It doesn’t look lively,” observed Avery as he helped Eleanor out of the car and handed over her crutches.

“They’re probably having a late breakfast in the parlour.” Eleanor gritted her teeth as she swung into motion and her ankle throbbed.

Avery helped her up the entry stairs, and put a steadying hand around her waist as he rang the doorbell.

There was no answer.

“Maybe it’s broken.” Avery didn’t sound convinced. Everything in this house was beautifully maintained. It was unlikely guests would be left to deal with a broken doorbell.

“Try the knocker.”

Avery duly pounded on the brass knocker, the sound sharp in the misty quiet of the morning.

Eleanor strained her ears for approaching footsteps from inside. Nothing.

“You know,” she said lightly, “I think they must all be out. How unfortunate.” Most likely, Deirdre, Raymond, and Dean had gone in early to the theatre. There were always a million things to do the day of the first performance, and the Rathburns were committed society members.

Eleanor calculated rapidly. If she could get Avery busy somewhere else, it would be simple to return with Dante and break in. It was the perfect time to finish her interrupted snoop. As long as none of the domestic staff were here. But she’d seen no cars in the staff parking area.

She was drawn out of this speculation by Avery taking a small leather bundle from his pocket.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said shortly. “Now, put up your parasol, because there’s a camera aimed right at us, and I want plausible deniability if this all goes pear-shaped.”

“Honey,” said Eleanor, deploying the small umbrella in her handbag and shielding them both from the camera’s watchful eye, “you’re speaking my love language.”

“And to think I was worried about a conflict of interest in this case.” Avery chose a tension wrench and a hook pick from the lockpick set and inserted them into the front door lock.

“You’re rather out of practice,” said Eleanor, a minute later. “Which raises the question: when did you get into practice?”

“Quiet, and let a man work.” Avery applied more torque to the tension wrench and raked the pick back through the lock.

“I think you’re nearly there,” said Eleanor helpfully. “Were you a junior housebreaker who had a road to Damascus moment?”

“More of a ‘lucky to be alive’ moment,” grumbled Avery. “It’s just this last pin…there.” With a satisfying ‘click’ the wrench turned and the lock opened.

“You have hidden depths,” said Eleanor. “Now, what was your plan for the alarm system?”

Just inside the door, a small lit up panel started flashing red.

Avery swore softly, and Eleanor smiled. With a flourish, she pulled her best safe-cracking gloves from her handbag and donned them. “Allow me.”

“You have the luck of the unholy,” said Avery, as the alarm light flicked from red to green.

“Nonsense,” said Eleanor. “Most alarm systems give you thirty seconds before they go off. It was easy to see the four-number combination from the wear on the number pad. After guessing the year Deirdre and Raymond were born, the number order was simple.”

“Elementary.” Avery looked up at the grand curving staircase, his expression bemused. “I’m being led astray, and I don’t even seem to mind.”

“And why would that be?”

“Simple. I want vengeance.”

“You mean justice.”

“Nope, definitely vengeance.” And with that, Avery lifted Eleanor in his arms. It was more of a heave than a sweep, but her heart leapt anyway.

Their progress up the staircase was slow, and Avery paused to rest on the landing. When they reached the top, he set her down with a huff.

Eleanor smoothed his shirt front. “My knight in slightly tarnished armour. Which is infinitely to my preference, I might add.”

Avery just shook his head. “Let’s find this evidence you’re so sure is here.”

Eleanor entered the room she’d been in just a few days before. Jokes about Manhattan shrinks aside, a frisson of unease raced through her. The fall had been bad, but it could have been so much worse. She sent a silent prayer of thanks to whichever deity protected foolhardy amateur detectives and retired conwomen.

“It was this album.” She pointed at a large book of photos set on a side table.

Avery began slowly paging through the book. Eleanor studied each page, wondering what she was looking for. Avery came to where she’d reached last time, and continued on. Old photos of Frank at various social occasions passed without comment. Until—

“Stop!” Eleanor stared at the picture.

It was taken in the formal garden at the back of the manor. Frank and Dean stood, the one with a patriarchal hand laid on the boy’s shoulder. Both of them looked to one side at something off camera.

For once, Frank was clean-shaven, and without the covering of his beard, the resemblance was unmistakable. It was there in the set of both their shoulders, in the tilt of the head, the wave of their dark hair, the strong jaw, the cleft chin.

“Damn,” whispered Eleanor, and half a dozen assumptions reset themselves in her mind. “How did I not see this before?”

“Father and son?” Avery’s eyes narrowed as he took in the picture.

“Definitely. Which means…” Eleanor ran over the facts they’d uncovered these last few weeks. “If Dean had succeeded in offing Raymond twenty years ago, he would have been Frank’s closest living relative. Frank must have known about his son. I wonder if Dean knew about his father? Similarly, if Frank acknowledged Dean as his son, it would disinherit Raymond.”

“I propose a search of our prime suspects’ rooms,” said Avery.

“Agreed.”

Dean’s room was a short walk down the corridor. Eleanor knocked, then pushed the door open. For some reason, her heart was thudding like a jackhammer. “Hello?”

The room was silent, but she still checked behind the door, and in the cupboard. Once bitten, twice shy, she thought, and didn’t meet Avery’s gaze.

The room was small compared to the grandeur of the manor’s other bedrooms, and Eleanor guessed it was the room Dean had stayed in as a child. An illegitimate child, invited to the estate for reasons of guilt, or duty, but never recognised as family.

There was a narrow bed, a large cupboard made of dark wood and a dresser with a mirror. Dean’s suitcase sat empty in one corner.

“Can you search the cupboard and dresser for… pants with chain grease on them, reflectors that can be spiked into a paddock, or black greasepaint?” she asked, knowing that was a long shot. “Or any drugs that could have been used on Jennifer.”

“Yes ma’am.” Avery donned disposable gloves and began his search. Eleanor sat on the bed with a sigh of relief and hauled the suitcase up to rest beside her.

It had been thoroughly unpacked, but she wasn’t looking for anything that someone like Dean would display openly. It wasn’t practical, but she had

the strong feeling that if Dean had evidence of his father's identity, he'd want to keep it close, like a child clutching a precious treasure.

It was a pathetic thought, and she had a pang of sympathy until she remembered the push that had sent her down the stairs, and Jennifer's car crash. And, perhaps, Frank's death, two long decades ago.

"There's a bottle of Xanax here," said Avery. "It would be the ideal thing to drug Jennifer with. Though of course, Dean could have had it prescribed for anxiety."

"He doesn't seem the anxious type, but maybe it's the effect of the Xanax." Eleanor's fingers detected a tiny seam in the satin inner layer of the suitcase. It came apart with a snap — a clever hidden pocket, probably designed for hiding cash or passports from petty thieves. She fished out an envelope, unsealed and unstamped, and held it up. "Bingo."

Avery came and sat beside her, putting Eleanor in mind of a couple of truant kids. Which, having broken into a house and rifled through a man's suitcase, wasn't far off the mark.

The envelope was crisp and white, but the paper inside was soft with age. It was written in a flowing copperplate — a letter from Franklin D Rathburn, addressed to Miss Rosalie Myers.

Eleanor scanned it, taut with the thrill of finally figuring things out.

'My dearest Rosalie,' the letter began, and carried on to offer the lady flowery compliments.

Eleanor snorted. "Landed gentry messes around, and then tries to cover it up. An old story."

Frank went on to promise the expectant mother that her child would be given every opportunity.

'But you see, don't you, that I can't acknowledge him as my son. There are standards that must be obeyed.'

Eleanor's mouth turned down. "Hypocrite."

"I sense a bitterness born of personal experience?" murmured Avery.

‘But I promise to give your child the hospitality of Rathburn whenever he needs it, and will be a most active force in his upbringing and career. In return, I ask that you keep all knowledge of our connection private, even from your son, if you want my patronage to continue.’

“The carrot and the stick.” Eleanor remembered Callum’s assessment of Frank. Had Callum known the truth about Dean? Had Raymond?

“Well,” said Avery, “there’s your motivation for Frank’s murder.”

“Or Raymond’s attempted murder. There’s a photograph in here too.” Eleanor fished it out and stared. It was a young lady with a dark bobbed haircut and a heart-shaped face. She sat on the beach, in a pale blue bikini, her eyes staring boldly at the camera, bow-shaped lips curved in a smile.

“Rosalie Myers, I presume,” said Avery.

“Also known as Allie.” Eleanor snapped a photo of it with her phone. She turned the photo over to find ‘the best summer ever - from your Allie,’ scrawled on the back. “Motivation, cause, and consequence all wrapped up into one murderous bundle. How tidy.”

“What do you think?” said Avery. “Confiscate these or return them?”

“I think return them,” said Eleanor. “I believe that whatever our murderer plans will be done tonight, at the theatre. Once we have them in custody, we can always regain this via a search warrant.”

“I like how you’ve drafted the entire New Zealand police force into your plans.”

“Next, Raymond’s room.”

The next few minutes revealed nothing to them except that Raymond (or rather his housekeeper) kept his and Deirdre’s room meticulously neat. Nothing was out of place, and nothing suggested hidden agendas. Eleanor reflected that Raymond could have hidden evidence in any number of concealed places known only to him. There wasn’t time to search the whole house, but there was time to do one more thing.

“There’s just one more room I want to check,” said Eleanor. “Because I’m beginning to think Dean was the one who left via the ceiling hatch in the media room the night Jennifer died.”

“Lay on, Macduff. Let’s get us more evidence.”

They entered the media room, Avery carrying a small stepladder he’d borrowed from the garage.

Eleanor waved towards the projection booth. “The ceiling hatch is in there. And while Raymond could have left any time during the film, there was one time that Dean could have left, and it’s likely no one would have seen him.”

Avery climbed the stepladder and pushed at the ceiling hatch, which swung up easily on springs. He ascended the final steps and shone his cellphone light into the space.

“Do you want the good news?”

“Is there bad news?” asked Eleanor.

“Actually, no.” Avery’s voice had a triumphant note. Light flashed as he took several pictures. “There is a beautiful, clear handprint in the dust on the melamine panel next to the hatch. The kind of evidence forensic teams dream of. As long as it doesn’t belong to a local electrician, we have a winner in our suspect race.”

“Well.” Eleanor sagged against the wall. “I think we beat a hasty retreat and prepare for the big event, yes? And hope you’ll be able to re-obtain all this evidence lawfully next week.”

“Indeed.” Avery climbed down, eyes shining. “You know—” He broke off at the sound of Eleanor’s telephone.

“Yes?” Eleanor listened for a moment, then rang off. “It’s Dante — he’s over at the theatre. He says Deirdre, Raymond and Dean are headed back here for lunch.”

“You drafted backup without telling me?” Avery did mock outrage well. “And here I thought we were lone wolfing it.”

“There are two of us,” pointed out Eleanor. “Lone wolves come in packs of one, and I’m pretty sure that lone wolfing is not even a term.”

“It is where I come from.” Avery leaned in.

The kiss was brief, a press of lips on her cheek, but it came with a definiteness that took Eleanor’s breath away.

“Well,” she said on autopilot. “I guess that’s our exit cue.”

Avery doffed an imaginary hat and gestured towards the door. “Shall we?”

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44

Which contains a goodbye

CHARLIE'S PHONE DINGED AS HE FINISHED PAINTING A PAPIER-MÂCHÉ TREE branch brown for Birnam Wood. It was Grace. Her message was typically brief: Maddie is dying. Come soon as.

He slid the phone back into his pocket and examined his hands. Despite his efforts to remain paint-free, they were speckled with brown and green and in need of a wash.

Charlie decided this was acceptable. The hospital had plenty of places to wash hands — they were rather keen on it, after all. And this visit was urgent.

He slipped out the front door of the theatre and drove to St Margaret's. It was another beautiful autumn day, crisp and clear.

A good day to die.

Charlie smiled to himself. It was a joke Maddie would appreciate, given that her humour had always tended to the darker side.

Inside, the hospital was quiet. The morning tea service had subsided, and Charlie walked down an empty corridor.

He knocked on Maddie's door. No one answered. Charlie was about to knock again when he heard Grace's distinctive tread behind him. Grace walked with a stomp, as if she wanted the floor to know precisely who was in charge.

"Hey," said Charlie. "Maddie's still in here?"

"Go right in," said Grace. "All the family were around this morning, and they'll be back in an hour. We all got emotional, to tell the truth. Still, Maddie had a good life. You figure that when the whole family is there, laughing and joking and blubbing." She sniffed. "Well, go on." She waved one imperious hand. "You said it was important. Scoot!"

"Yes ma'am." Charlie pushed through the door to Maddie's small hospital room.

The thing that immediately caught his attention was the stillness. Yes, there was the smell of disinfectant, and flowers, and cigarettes (it appeared that, despite hospital regulations, someone had surreptitiously smoked by the open window), but there was an added layer only Charlie was aware of.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs. This stillness had its own particular smell. It smelt of all things good, like lavender, and sunlight, and the first morning of the holidays.

Charlie thought he'd missed Maddie then, that she'd gone, as so many people do, once the family had stepped out for a short interval.

But then a voice spoke from near the bed.

"Charlie! I'm so glad you made it. I've been meaning to speak to you all this time, but, well, you know. It's been hard."

Maddie was sitting on the chair next to the bed, watching her unconscious body. Her spirit looked a decade younger than her physical form. Many ghosts did. Charlie wasn't sure why — perhaps they simply felt younger once they'd shed their physical bodies.

"Hi, Maddie." Charlie took a seat next to her.

“I look so much older than I thought I’d ever be.” Maddie reached out a transparent hand and gently stroked her sleeping face. “It’s not all it's cracked up to be, getting old. Except the grandchildren. I’ll miss seeing them grow up.”

“They’ll miss you.” Charlie was getting choked up. No matter how many times he saw death, it touched him. It was both the sadness of saying goodbye, and the beauty of seeing a soul set free. Light and dark, sunshine and rain, opposites coming together to form a truth.

“Oh, Charlie.” Maddie’s face broke into a fond smile. “You’re such a sweet boy. I’m not sorry to go. The last few months I’ve been thinking of not much else.” She rolled her shoulders. “You won’t believe how nice it feels, ditching all those aches and pains. I feel like a new woman.”

Charlie nodded, swallowing back the emotion. “You look great.”

“Why thank you. Not a day over seventy, I’m sure.” Maddie patted her ghostly silver hair. “But this isn’t why I wanted to talk to you, Charlie. There’s something I’ve kept secret all these years.”

Charlie’s heartbeat quickened. “About the first Macbeth play? And Frank’s death?”

Maddie nodded soberly. “I would have given it to you when you first came to talk to me, only my mind was a dead loss.” She grinned, looking even younger. “Terrible pun, I know. But now it’s all clear. Charlie, I want you to go to my house, right after this. My key is under the front pot plant. You know, the gardenia your mother gave to me. And I want you to go to my study. It’s hidden in the album marked ‘Te Kohe Am Dram - Macbeth.’”

“Hidden how?”

“The album isn’t a book — just a housing for what you’ll find there.” Maddie’s smile glowed like moonlight through high clouds. “I used what you’ll find there to keep a murderer at bay for twenty years. Perhaps I should have used it to nail them, but I wasn’t sure I’d succeed. Keeping them from killing again seemed the best option at the time. But now you’re in the thick of it, I think you’d better have it.” She looked sad. “Jennifer

knew something of what you're about to find out, but I never told her everything. I thought it would help keep her safe. I was wrong."

"What is it?" Hope bloomed in Charlie's stomach. Maybe this would solve everything, and keep his friends safe.

"It's a roll of Super 8 film."

"What's on it?"

Maddie tsked. "If I tell you, it'd spoil the surprise. Allow an old woman not long for this world the pleasure of a little suspense."

Maddie was looking even younger now — more his mother's age. And the sweet scent was growing stronger. It was a smell Charlie had come to think of as holy. It was the scent of things so good, they contained within them all the wishes and dreams you could ever imagine, only even better than that.

"My family's on their way over," said Maddie. "I'm sorry, but I will be gone by the time they get here." Her smile lit the room. "You don't have to tell them anything from me, Charlie. We've already said everything we need to. They know I love them so, so much. And now…" The glow was all around Maddie now, bright gold, like the dawn of a new day. "It's time to go."

The joy in Maddie's voice pierced Charlie like an arrow. For an instant, it was like the sun had come down into the small hospital room. It flared, and Charlie squeezed his eyes shut even though he knew he wasn't seeing this with his physical eyes.

And then the light was gone. The room looked as it had before — slightly dingy walls painted hospital white. The smell of disinfectant and boiled potatoes.

Charlie rubbed his chest where his heart ached. Then he wiped his eyes on his sleeve and stood up. He didn't want to be here when Maddie's family returned.

He pushed open the door, and Grace popped out from a side room.

"All good?" she asked.

Charlie gave her a smile that was more of a grimace. “Yes. Though Maddie’s gone. I guess… I guess I’d better go, too. Thanks for getting me here in time.”

Grace gave him a hug, pressing him close, then letting him go just as quickly. “You’ll be alright.” It was more instruction than reassurance.

“Thanks,” Charlie told her. “See you round.”

He stepped out into the bright day. While he’d been in the hospital, a light breeze had sprung up from the ocean. It tossed the tops of the pōhutukawa trees and brought scents of salt, and sand, and cut grass from the nearby golf course.

Charlie jumped into his car and drove off, trying to remember where Maddie’s house was, and what excuse he could give the inevitable snooping neighbours. It was time to find out what Maddie had kept hidden for twenty years. He hoped it would help them solve the murder in time.

The problem was, he knew of only one person who had the means to play Super 8 film in the short time they had available before the show started.

And for all Charlie knew, Raymond Rathburn might be the murderer that Maddie had kept at bay.

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45

In which the stage is set

"YOU'RE SURE YOU WANT TO DO THIS?" AVERY PARKED OUTSIDE THE entrance to the theatre. It was late afternoon, and the parking spaces were already half full with cast and crew vehicles.

"Absolutely," said Eleanor. "For starters, I need to update Dante and Charlie on our latest discovery."

"You do know that the police are investigating?" Avery studied her from under lowered eyebrows. "I'm probably going to be brought on board, although Hemi will run point."

"Oh, good." Eleanor's voice shaded into irony. "Hemi's already talked the case over with Dante and Charlie. As I understand it, the meeting did not go well."

"He's a solid copper," said Avery. "I'm sure he'll get past that." Avery walked around to help her out of the car.

Eleanor took a moment to get her balance, keeping her face smooth as her ankle throbbed in fierce protest. "I wonder if the show preparations are under control in there."

They both glanced towards the theatre doors.

“I’m sure they are,” said Avery neutrally.

Eleanor snorted. “Of course they’re not. Well, time to make my presence known and join the delightful chaos.”

Avery’s phone rang. “It’s Hemi.” He answered the phone, his face transitioning to ‘serious work mode,’ a look Eleanor found far less interesting than the ‘breaking into houses’ look he’d worn an hour ago.

Eleanor blew him a kiss, which he returned with a businesslike wave. She had nearly reached the doors when they burst open on what appeared to be a travelling argument.

The usually composed Mrs Haddock’s hair was flying out of her bun as she remonstrated with an irate Stanley. Trailing behind her was Callum, looking sardonic, and Hilda, wearing a combination of her three costumes as lady’s maid, English soldier, and witch.

“If he says one more word about amateurs,” Stanley was saying, “I’ll deck him.”

“Good idea,” said Callum.

Mrs Haddock spared a glare for Callum before turning back to Stanley. “I know he’s being a pain, but wouldn’t that just be proving his point?”

“It’d also prove my point,” said Stanley, but he appeared to cool down a trifle.

“Personally, I’m all for it,” said Callum.

“He got Alex to fetch him Diet Coke from the store,” said Hilda. “Like who died and made him king?”

“Dean’s been throwing his weight around?” asked Eleanor.

“Goes on like he’s Hugh Jackman or something,” muttered Stanley. “He’s never been in anything I’ve heard of.”

Callum snorted. “That’s ’cos he’s a two-bit, D-list, wannabe—”

“Anyway,” broke in Mrs Haddock, “the main point is that we all have things to do. Things that don’t involve decking our lead actor right before

the show.”

“He fully deserves it,” said Stanley.

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Eleanor, earning a hard stare from Mrs Haddock. “But perhaps revenge could wait until we finish the show?”

“It’s not a crime to be a pompous ass,” said Hilda, “but it should be.”

“If you’re all quite finished,” said Mrs Haddock, “Callum, I believe you have a runsheet to confirm. Stanley, you need to get your blood pouch fitted. And Hilda — don’t let Dean get under your skin. I’m sure we’ll get your costumes straight.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Eleanor, I’m so glad you’re on your feet. We have someone doing makeup, but I think they’re another disaster in the making. Could you…”

“Tactfully fix their awful work?” asked Eleanor.

“Yes.” Mrs Haddock heaved a grateful sigh. “Thanks.” She held open the entry door and Eleanor entered the foyer, flanked by Callum.

“Where is Yves in all this?” asked Eleanor.

“Communing with the muse. Lucky he has a good assistant is all I can say.” Callum peeled off to the AV Room, while Eleanor began her slow progress down a side corridor to the changing rooms.

She caught up with Charlie and Dante backstage, amid the chaos of actors dressing, undressing, tripping over props and arguing over who owned which wig.

They retreated to the top of the Crypt stairs, a spot Dante chose for the clear sightlines and diminished foot traffic.

“I think I know who killed Jennifer,” said Eleanor.

“Was it the same person who pushed you down the stairs?” asked Dante.

“Yes,” said Eleanor, “but I’d prefer they remain alive to face the New Zealand court of law.”

“Hmmm,” said Dante.

“Alive, and uninjured, preferably,” said Eleanor.

Dante made no reply to that, just looked down at her, his grey eyes as opaque as a winter sky, as she told him and Charlie her recent discoveries at Rathburn Manor.

“I may have the proof of who killed Frank too,” said Charlie. “Maddie gave it to me. It’s a roll of Super 8 film. Maddie said she used it to blackmail the murderer into staying dormant for twenty years.” He swallowed. “But there’s only one person who can play it for us.”

“And that person may have caused Frank’s death,” said Eleanor. “Oh, dear. What’s your ghost up to?”

“She’s laying low — for now.” Charlie’s jaw jutted and he looked uncharacteristically fierce. “I’m going to deal with her.” Though his muttered, “When I work out how,” did undercut the statement somewhat.

“What’s the plan?” asked Dante.

Eleanor leaned on her crutches. “Can we do a drawing room scene? I’ve always wanted to do one of those.”

“The theatre doesn’t have a drawing room,” said Dante.

Eleanor hmmm’d, a small smile playing around the corners of her mouth. “The drawing room is more a symbolic home for the reveal than a real place. Most houses these days don’t have them either. But we do have an AV Room. And Raymond has a Super 8 projector up there, all ready for the midwinter retro film festival.”

“Are you sure you want to do it there? I don’t know what’s on the film,” said Charlie.

“We don’t have much time,” said Eleanor. “The play’s due to start in two hours, and once it’s going, our murderer will set their plans in motion.”

“But…” Charlie scrubbed his hand over his face. “We don’t have enough evidence to force a confession. Do we?”

“We’ll see,” said Eleanor.

Dante looked down at her, arms folded. “I don’t intend to let anyone else get hurt. If I see the murderer make an attempt, I will take steps.”

Eleanor nodded slowly. “Understood. Now, I have a plan. And it will involve gathering Raymond, Callum and Deirdre in the AV Room an hour before we’re due to start. Mrs Haddock would be useful too.”

“I can do that,” said Dante.

“Good. And don’t let anyone else know what’s going on.” Eleanor tapped her crutch on the ground. “Oh, and Avery’s going to be poking around the theatre with Hemi. Please keep them out of it too.”

“Okay.” Dante vanished into the gloom.

Eleanor looked at the long corridor and sighed. This was a terrible time to be incapacitated, but she supposed it could have been a lot worse. She checked her phone. Two hours to go till the play, and one hour before her plan kicked off.

“Charlie, do you know where Yves is?”

“He’s in the foyer, pacing around and glaring a lot.”

“Oh, good. I just need to convince him to let us completely ruin the opening night of his play.”

“Ah, okay.” Charlie held a door open for her. “Do you think you can?”

“I believe I have the leverage.”

“Alright.” Charlie pushed through the foyer doors and set Eleanor’s makeup bag on the ticket booth counter.

As promised, Yves was on the other side of the room, pacing up and down and scowling.

“I’d better go get ready.” Charlie gave her a quick thumbs up and disappeared back into the theatre.

Eleanor watched the doors swing closed, her mind fitting pieces into place like a puzzle where you’ve finally found all the corners and have most of the edges filled in.

“Here goes.” She smiled, and made her way over to the director.

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In which Eleanor wishes the theatre contained a drawing room

GRIPPING THE HANDLES OF HER CRUTCHES, ELEANOR BEGAN HER UNEVEN progress up to the Gods.

Lights flashing on and off on stage told her that someone was in the AV Room, testing the lights for the coming show.

She cracked the door, and sighed in relief to see Raymond, alone, staring out through the long window at the stage. Eleanor shuffled inside and shut the door behind her.

The little room was warm and dark, a cosy eyrie from which someone who preferred technology to limelight could orchestrate their magic.

“Hi Raymond,” said Eleanor.

“Oh, hi.” Raymond looked surprised, then concerned. “Are you alright? Deirdre and I felt awful about your fall.”

“Well, so did I. But that’s where ibuprofen can work wonders. I’ve come to ask a small favour.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“A friend recently gave me this roll of Super 8 film.” Eleanor put on her best casual voice, though her nerves were strung tighter than a high wire. “I was wondering if you’d be able to give it a quick play. Just to check it is what I think it is.”

“Ah… yes.” Raymond went into nerdy AV mode. “I actually have a small projector here that would do the trick.” His gaze flicked to the clock. “We’d better get onto it now, though. The half hour call’s coming up in twenty-five minutes.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor didn’t have to feign gratitude.

There came a quiet knock at the door, and Eleanor’s tension ratcheted up. It was the eleventh hour, and her ducks were still far from lining up.

A small bevy of people entered the room. Each face reflected the person’s primary mode of dealing with the world. Callum looked prickly, Deirdre serene, Mrs Haddock assessing. Yves strode in with a flourish, and Charlie looked hopeful. Dante came in last, silent and impassive. He shut the door behind him and stood in front of it.

“Thank you all for coming at such a busy time,” said Eleanor. “But what I have to discuss with you is — and I promise I’m not being dramatic — a matter of life and death.”

Callum scowled. “This isn’t that twenty-year-old nonsense again, is it?”

“It started there,” Eleanor conceded, “but what we’re dealing with now is a modern-day murder. With another one planned tonight.”

There was a ripple of surprise among her listeners, except for Deirdre, whose mask slipped for a moment to reveal true emotion: fear.

“I’d like to see proof.” Mrs Haddock glanced to where the clock above the window ticked down to the half hour call.

Eleanor organised her thoughts. The summary she gave would need to be clear, compelling, and concise. She had to convince five sceptical people, all with different reasons for not wanting to come clean, all within the space of around five minutes.

She smiled and mentally cracked her knuckles. Just as well I'm rather good at this sort of thing.

"Twenty years ago, Frank Rathburn was murdered on stage. Hear me out." She raised one hand against Callum's angry rumble. "We have two versions of this event. In one, he was the target of cold-blooded murder by his nephew and his nephew's fiancée, intent on taking control of his fortune."

The upheaval was immediate, but Eleanor's slight smile remained unchanged.

"I'm not sure this is at all legal," said Yves.

"Probably not," said Eleanor cheerfully, "but seeing as someone is in danger of being murdered this very night, I'm prepared to bend the law."

A Mona Lisa smile strayed onto Mrs Haddock's lips. "I'd quite like to hear what Eleanor has to say."

"To continue," said Eleanor, "the other version of Frank's death is that rather than being a wealthy estate owner, Frank was in desperate need of cash to bail out his destitute estate. A lot of money was due to come to his nephew in a matter of months, so Frank made a plan to kill him, on stage, in a way that would look like an accident. Due to unforeseen circumstances, that murder plan backfired." Her eyes found Deirdre's, who flushed and looked away. "Frank was caught in his own trap, and died on stage."

"That's a pretty story," said Callum. "I want to see your proof."

"But there's a third version," said Eleanor. "One which none of you knew about, yet you all conspired to make it happen. This version is the correct one, and it concerns most closely the true murderer."

There was a tense silence, as each person looked around the room, wondering if the murderer was here with them. The noise of the arriving theatregoers filtered up the stairs.

"Twenty years ago, on the night Frank died, two people were first to rush on stage to help him," said Eleanor. "Each had a different reason to do so, and each took something from the scene in an attempt to obscure the truth of the murder." The silence grew thicker. "Though she told us otherwise, Deirdre

believed Raymond intended to kill Frank. So when she rushed to the scene, she removed the sharpened axe head she knew was attached to the weaponry display. She feared it would be used to convict her lover."

Deirdre made a distressed noise in the back of her throat.

"She managed to coat the wooden weapon with blood, making it look like it had dealt the fatal blow. Callum remembers her sticking her blood-covered hands in her pockets. He said he thought she was in shock. She had almost no time to dispose of the metal axe head before she and all the cast were detained by the police. So she hid it under a loose floorboard at the far side of the stage."

Raymond stared at Deirdre, then at Eleanor. "You think I tried to kill Uncle Frank?" His eyes became noticeably less dreamy. "It's a lie."

"You will all listen to the end," growled Dante.

"To continue," said Eleanor. "The second person to rush to Frank's side was Callum. He was a props guy at that time, and he'd seen Deirdre loitering around the hearth before the curtains opened. And Callum had a secret of his own." Eleanor looked up to see Callum's glare searing through the air towards her. If looks could kill, she thought, and was glad Dante was in the room. "Callum harboured a deep, unrequited love for Deirdre."

"That's enough," growled Callum, but Eleanor ignored him.

"In his mind, she was acting to pursue a marriage to which Raymond's uncle would never agree. I don't know what masochistic tendency prompted him to help her, but as they say, love is blind. So when he rushed to the scene of the crime, he removed from the hearth the string that had been used to pull the hearth down onto Frank." Callum made an involuntary noise, and Eleanor exulted. Her guess had been correct. "It was a risk, and an extraordinarily altruistic act — a man rescues the object of his affections in order to lose her to another."

Deirdre's hand covered her mouth. "I never knew," she whispered. "Oh, Callum, I'm so sorry."

Not, Eleanor reflected, the words a man wanted to hear on revealing a long-ago heartbreak. "And so, by removing both the means of murder, and the

true murder weapon, you both conspired to let the real murderer get away." All eyes in the AV Room turned to Raymond, and Eleanor smiled to herself. Let them have their moment of doubt. It had certainly taken her, Dante and Charlie long enough to get to this point.

"Am I to take it," said Yves, "that we have the real murderer here, right now, in this room?"

"This," said Eleanor, "is the point where we play the movie. Raymond, would you mind?"

Raymond hesitated, looking around the room.

"Play it," said Dante.

Raymond reached out his elegant fingers and took the film, inserting it into the projector with movements made clumsy by suppressed emotion. Fear? Anger? Guilt? Then he pressed a button on the control panel in front of him and blinds came down, blocking the window to the theatre.

With a grunt, Callum pushed off the back wall and joined Yves and Mrs Haddock by the window.

"Let's get this travesty over with." He shot a poisonous glance at Eleanor.

With a clatter the projector started up. The past lays traps for us all, she thought.

Figures jumped into motion on the wall, first blurred, then coming into focus as Raymond adjusted the projection.

It was Te Kohe Am Dram in the nineties. Big hair, puffy jackets, high-waisted jeans. In the Low Bar, a much younger Dean grinned at the unseen camera holder and struck a theatrical pose.

Deirdre smiled shyly, her classic beauty Pre-Raphaelite, a still point in the bustle and noise of the cast.

"Tell us what's going to happen," came Maddie's voice.

"We're going to nail it like it's never been nailed before," said a strongly accented Scottish voice. Callum popped up from behind a half-finished

prop, hammer in hand. He was fresh-faced, none of the lines of bitterness yet in evidence.

The present-day Callum gave a snort. “What fools we were.”

Deirdre gave him a look that was half fondness, half pity. Perhaps she’d always known he was in love with her. But what can you do when you don’t feel the same?

Now the camera caught the cast relaxing. Dean and Raymond sat side by side, legs dangling off the edge of the stage, while Mrs Haddock pinned long trains of cloth around Deirdre’s shoulders.

Deirdre held her arms out, smiling, and Raymond gazed up at her, a look of adoration on his face.

Then, abruptly, it was opening night. A dimly lit stage, seen from above. The person filming was up in the ceiling, looking down through one of the spotlight shafts. Eleanor wondered what on earth had prompted Maddie to go up there. Had she already suspected something was about to go wrong?

“Is this a dagger I see before me…” the words floated up to the hidden viewer as Raymond paced slowly across the stage to the bed where Frank lay, awaiting a death he thought was only for show.

Eleanor glanced around the room. Yves stared, rapt, as the scene unfolded. Mrs Haddock’s only sign of interest was her eyes narrowing slightly. Callum’s frown was so deep the lines in his face looked like rocky crags. Deirdre stood like marble. And Raymond stared, his fingers tightening around the projector handle as if he could steer the past.

In the past, Raymond advanced towards the bed.

Deirdre made a move as if to turn off the projector, and Dante was suddenly a lot closer, a warning growl in his throat.

On screen, Frank stirred slightly as Raymond leaned over the bed. There was a movement off in the wings, where the shadows were thickest. Raymond bent closer, a dagger in his hand. Frank’s eyes flickered open.

The hearth began to fall towards the two men, a slow movement that grew faster, but still silent. With a cry, Frank shoved Raymond backwards with all his might.

His nephew stumbled back in surprise, arms flailing. He fell to the floor just as the hearth collapsed on Frank. The camera jerked as the unseen watcher flinched.

There was a moment of quiet, then Deirdre ran on stage, dress trailing, followed by Callum. Raymond got to his feet and then fell to one knee, disorientated.

The camera shifted to the side. There, a dark shape slunk out of the wings. Hidden from view by the fallen scenery, it slipped through the shadows to the foot of the hearth, where it tugged at something, pale hands lit by the spotlight.

The intruder turned to go. And then looked up suddenly, its face a pale orb, unholy white against the blackness.

Deirdre gasped and Callum swore.

Even at a distance of thirty feet, those features were unmistakable.

It was Dean.

They watched in silence as the figure dropped its gaze and vanished into the dark.

“That sorry son of a…” Callum’s voice faded into a growl. “What was he doing?”

“Removing the last piece of string that pulled the hearth down on Frank,” said Eleanor. “The timing had to be perfect, you see. So it could only be controlled by either someone on stage, or waiting in the wings. It couldn’t have been Raymond, and it wasn’t Frank, who pushed his nephew out of the way.”

“But I took the string out of the mess of the hearth,” said Callum.

“You took some of it,” said Eleanor. “No doubt if the hearth had fallen on Raymond, as Dean intended, he would have rushed on to do what you did,

Callum. But it fell on Frank."

"Sloppy execution," said Dante.

"Imagine the turmoil in Dean's head right then," said Eleanor, whose brain was running on overdrive to make it seem like she already knew all this. "He had hoped to kill Raymond, but his plan had backfired, killing a man he admired. But now, maybe, he could still frame Raymond as a murderer. His aim could still be accomplished. But he had to remove all evidence that someone in the wings had made the hearth fall. He cut the long end of the string that led back to him, hoping the rest of it, hidden in the ruins of the hearth, would suggest murder to the police, rather than a tragic accident."

"Uncle Frank saved my life," said Raymond in a small voice. "I always thought he hated me."

"Why has this footage only come to light now?" asked Mrs Haddock. "Who took it?"

"It was Maddie's," said Charlie.

"But why not give it to the police?" asked Callum. "Nail the bastard."

"I believe," said Eleanor drily, "that with all the missing evidence, Maddie didn't think she had a case. It was possible that one of you three could have been convicted in Dean's place. So she decided on a different course of action." She nodded at Charlie to continue.

"Maddie blackmailed Dean to stay away from Te Kohe," said Charlie. "If she'd died in a sudden accident — that is, if Dean killed her — this footage would have been revealed in her will. She bought Deirdre and Raymond twenty years of safety. But she hadn't planned for the stroke that killed her."

"But what did Dean even want?" asked Callum. "What did he think he'd gain by offing Raymond?"

"He was Frank's illegitimate son," said Eleanor simply. She noted with satisfaction that Raymond showed no surprise, though Deirdre, Callum and Mrs Haddock did. "If Raymond had died that night, Dean planned to come forward with his claim, and inherit Rathburn Manor. He believed Frank would finally acknowledge him as his heir. Frank certainly favoured the

young man, though he was reluctant to admit their true relationship due, most likely, to an old-fashioned shame of having a son out of wedlock."

"So…if Raymond and I die, Dean thinks he can step in to take Rathburn?" said Deirdre.

"And he'll have revenge," said Eleanor.

"Revenge for what?" asked Callum.

"For what he probably thinks of as twenty years of being cheated out of his rightful inheritance," said Eleanor. "Who knows, maybe he's even convinced himself that Frank's death was your fault. By the way, Raymond, you wanted Frank to acknowledge Dean. So why didn't you do anything for him once you inherited?"

Raymond frowned. "How did you know—" He scrubbed a hand across his face. "Never mind. What I inherited was a small mountain of debt and a money pit of an estate. The money I used to shore it up was all I had left of my parents. I wasn't sharing that with anyone." His jaw set, making him look for a moment quite like Frank Rathburn. "Besides, Dean and I were no longer friends."

"Back to the present issue," said Mrs Haddock, "I doubt Dean could murder Deirdre and Raymond tonight and get away with it. Seems ambitious."

"I think he's a desperate and dangerous man," said Eleanor. "I wouldn't put anything past him."

Deirdre went pale. "Perhaps we should stop the show?"

They had come to the crux of the matter, and Eleanor hoped she could persuade them. "I would advise against it. Right now, we know where Dean is, and what he is planning. In a few months, who knows? What surprise attacks might he launch — and succeed with?"

"Can we take this tape to the police and get him arrested?" asked Raymond.

"Do you want Callum and Deirdre to explain why there was no murder weapon found at the scene of the crime twenty years ago?" asked Eleanor. "I agree with Maddie — it's hard enough to prove one person was a

murderer twenty years ago. In this case, we have three other suspects muddying the water. I wouldn't bank on it."

"Jennifer," said Deirdre suddenly. "Dean killed Jen."

"I'm afraid so," said Eleanor. "Jennifer knew what had happened all those years ago. Maddie told her, but kept the whereabouts of the film secret, thinking it would protect Jennifer. Charlie heard Jennifer trying to blackmail Dean into quitting the play. Jennifer visited Maddie before she died, but Maddie wasn't conscious and couldn't tell her where to find the film.

"That note you found in Jennifer's pocket was from Dean. He'd convinced her he had the proof to accuse Deirdre of murder. Jennifer planned to go from that fateful party to a dangerous meeting. Normally, a person would constantly check their cellphone in case of further news from the murderer. But Jennifer didn't do that.

"Why? Because the person she planned to meet was there, at the party. She had only to turn her head and see Dean. It was only during the movie that she lost sight of him. She had one of the staff walk her to her car because she was afraid Dean would try and attack her then. But he had something else in store."

"But… how did he leave the media room?" asked Raymond.

"Via the ceiling hatch in the projection booth," said Eleanor.

"But… he couldn't have. I was there," said Raymond.

"Which made you a lead suspect for a while," said Eleanor. "However, with your injured shoulder, you couldn't have climbed up through the hatch. But there was one time everyone's attention was diverted, and you weren't in the booth. At the start of the film, you stood at the front of the media room with the projector beam effectively blinding you. Everyone else was looking at you, their night vision gone.

"That's when Dean slipped through the open door of the booth, and up into the ceiling space. From there, it was easy to exit into the garage. Then, he could cycle down the road and wait for Jennifer's car to go off the cliff due to the misdirection he arranged. Then, Dean could remove the evidence of

his trap, return, and wait in the corridor for the crowd to exit the media room. He could slip in with them unnoticed, and create his perfect alibi."

"Dean suggested I do the speech in the projector beam." Raymond's voice was just above a whisper. "He said it would be a dramatic start to the show."

"Can you prove Dean killed Jennifer?" asked Callum.

Eleanor see-sawed her hand. "The theory is sound, but again, it's all circumstantial evidence. It may or may not hold up in court."

"I hate to hurry such a fascinating conversation," said Yves, "but the half hour call is coming up. One of you needs to be on stage in forty-five minutes." He raised an eyebrow at Charlie.

"As I was saying," said Eleanor, "our best chance to reveal the murderer is to catch him red-handed."

"I'd rather not be murdered on stage if it's all the same to you." Deirdre tried for irony, but she sounded shaken.

Eleanor nodded as if this were a small consideration. "I believe if we work together, we can pull this off. That's why I wanted Mrs Haddock and Yves here."

"Good to hear we're considered useful," muttered Yves. "And Callum needs to give the half-hour call in ten minutes. Believe me, this cast needs all the reminders they can get."

"Let's hear this plan then," said Callum. "And it'd better be good."

"Wonderful," said Eleanor. "Here's what each of you has to do…"

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In praise of relative values

TEN MINUTES LATER, ELEANOR WAS KNEE-DEEP IN A PROCESS SHE COULD only describe as ‘fixing dreadful makeup while making it look like she wasn’t.’ Her stand-in — Dominique — was an assistant at the local hairdressing salon, and applied her art with an assurance born of total incompetence.

“Thanks,” murmured Trevor, as she smoothed out the most egregious errors. “I looked like something out of ‘Night of the Living Dead.’”

She’d just put the finishing touches on Trevor when the tension in the crowded makeup room rose. Eleanor glanced behind her to see Dean lounging against the door frame.

Funny how people’s true colours come out when it’s showtime, she thought. Dean had started off all nice and hometown-boy-makes-good. By the looks of things, he’d managed to alienate the entire cast in the few days she’d been away.

“Eleanor,” purred Dean, sauntering over to stand behind her. “Just the person I was hoping to see.”

“What can I do for you?” The hairs rose on the back of Eleanor’s neck. There’s no way he’d do anything here, she thought. Not with people

everywhere.

“Thanks again.” Trevor rose, pointedly ignoring Dean.

“I was wondering if you could do that amazing makeup job you did before.” Dean’s voice was mellifluous.

“Of course.” Eleanor gave her brightest smile. “Take a seat.”

“In my private room if you please,” said Dean. “I need to be all alone to get into character.”

“I thought professionals could focus in any situation.” Stanley obviously still harboured feelings.

“For the Scottish Play, I want to make a special effort.” Dean invested the last two words with a sinister innuendo.

It’s not any different from being surrounded by people, Eleanor told herself. If you and Dean go into a room, and he exits, leaving your corpse behind, he’ll get nailed for sure. Avery will arrest whatever Dante leaves behind, which won’t be much. Also, if you do this, you might learn something of his plans.

It was not the most comforting thought, but it was sufficient for her to say: “Certainly. I’ll be there as soon as I’ve packed up my gear.”

“You shouldn’t have to move rooms.” Stanley’s jaw jutted. “Especially with your leg in a cast.”

“I’ll carry your makeup bag,” said Dean gallantly. “I’m so glad to see you on your feet again. It looked like a nasty fall.”

“It was.” Eleanor used all her conwoman’s skills to keep her voice light and natural.

“After you.” Dean lifted Eleanor’s overstuffed makeup bag and opened the changing room door with a flourish.

Eleanor limped out into the corridor, wishing she’d taken Dante up on his offer to attach a scythe blade to each crutch, and fit a spring-loaded projectile in the base.

Dean’s private changing room was small, with just a simple railing for hanging clothes, a high stool, a chair, and a desk with a large makeup mirror above it.

The door closed with a click that sounded loud in Eleanor’s ears. The voices, bumps, bangs, and snatches of music from the prop guy’s boombox faded.

Dean sat in the makeup chair and smoothed his hair back. “Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor,” he crooned. “Can you make me a murderer?”

Eleanor’s ankle throbbed in a pain that was partly psychosomatic. “I think you’ve been doing an excellent job so far.”

“Why, thank you.” Dean mirrored Eleanor’s New York accent with a smirk. “The role of chief murderer seems to agree with me.”

Eleanor came to stand behind Dean’s chair, seeing them both in the golden glow of the mirror. Dean’s darkly handsome looks contrasted with her own, paler than usual. The words ‘old’ and ‘tired’ floated into her mind, and Eleanor dismissed them.

Listening to the chorus of doubt never got you anywhere. She wouldn’t have had a successful career as a conwoman, art thief, and connoisseur of crime if she’d listened to the voice of reason.

Instead, she propped her crutches against the side bench and rummaged in her makeup bag for a sponge to blend on the base layer.

“What do you plan to do once you’re finished here?” she asked.

Dean leaned back in his seat, the portrait of a man at ease. “Oh, you know, there’s half a dozen projects waiting for me back in the city. I haven’t been without work in a long time.”

“I thought it a perennial threat, even when you’re established.” Eleanor pulled over the high stool to sit on, selected a skin-toned powder and began setting it with firm, practised presses of the puff.

“That may be so,” said Dean, “but I think things may be about to change. Perhaps it’s time to get back to my roots, and settle into the old hometown

again. Re-acquaint myself with Rathburn Manor."

A chill crept up Eleanor's spine. She could imagine Dean taking possession of the manor house, once its current owners were dead.

"Your portrayal of a murderer is something to behold." Eleanor began to shade the hollows of Dean's cheeks. "Tell me, where do you draw your inspiration? How do you get into character?"

Dean's eyes drifted shut as she applied a lighter colour to bring out his cheekbones, and his voice became dreamy. "I always knew I was different, even as a boy. The usual rules didn't apply to me."

"Like you were special," murmured Eleanor. This time, the chill didn't leave her. It reminded her powerfully of a young Eleanor, landing in New York for the first time. The city that never slept. The place where you could be anyone you wanted to be.

"Special, yes. It's funny, you know. My mother was a good, working-class lady. She used to tell me 'the world doesn't owe you a living.' But when you're special, that isn't true. There are things that are there, just for you. Things you have a right to. Things you deserve, just because of who you are." Dean's voice was a deep purr, hypnotic.

Eleanor struggled to focus on her job, and not be sucked in by the magnetic pull of Dean's eyes in the mirror. Perhaps this had not been a good idea after all. She wondered where Dante and Avery had gotten to. Her ankle throbbed, a heavy, hot pain that reached up her leg to her knee.

"When you're special, you don't need to wait your turn. You don't need permission, or approval." Dean's eyes met hers with a flicker. "You see something you want, and you take it."

"You haven't always gotten what you've wanted." Eleanor tried to keep her voice neutral, but it was an effort.

There was a heartbeat of silence, then Dean smiled, a curling shimmer of teeth that stuttered Eleanor's heart and stilled her hands. "All the people who kept me from what I wanted are gone." His smile widened, snake-slow and satisfied.

Eleanor wanted to leave, but she knew it was a mistake. You never, ever, turned your back on a predator.

Instead, she carefully blended between the lighter contours and the dark. “That may be so, but everyone’s luck runs out eventually. Especially if they get too ambitious. Surely the Scottish Play has taught you that.”

“That’s true.” Dean became momentarily solemn, like a choirboy caught with his hand in the holy biscuit jar. “But I’ve also learned that you don’t need to take care of every detail. With the law on your side, you’ll always come out on top.”

Dean slid a dagger from the sheath at his belt. The metal gleamed silver in the mirror lights as he held it up. With a smirk, he pressed his palm to the point, and the blade collapsed back into its handle.

He’s toying with you, thought Eleanor. At the risk of sounding British, what a cad.

A knock came at the door.

“Come in.” Eleanor spoke without turning.

The door opened to reveal Charlie, looking tense.

“Erm, it’s Charlie.”

“Our up-and-coming star,” said Dean. “Looking forward to being murdered tonight?”

“Not really.” Charlie advanced into the room. He took Eleanor by the upper arm as if he wanted to pull her out of there right then.

“I’m almost done,” said Eleanor. “Care to wait a minute?”

“Alright.” Charlie hovered by her shoulder while she defined Dean’s eyebrows with a soft pencil and put the final touches on his eyeliner.

Dean raised enquiring eyebrows. “Is there an emergency that needs Eleanor’s attention? A mystery to solve? The case of the missing dagger?”

“I think we’d better go.” Charlie handed Eleanor her crutches and picked up her makeup bag.

“See you on stage.” Dean waved his fingers in dismissal. His eyes met Eleanor’s in the mirror one final time. “Good luck.”

Outside, Charlie shut the door just short of slamming, and rounded on Eleanor. “What were you thinking? I couldn’t believe it when Stanley told me where you went!”

“Charlie,” said Eleanor. “Charlie!”

He drew breath to carry on his tirade, and stopped.

“Thank you for coming to rescue me. I appreciate it.”

“It’s okay.” For once, Charlie’s face was flushed with anger, rather than embarrassment. “Please don’t do it again.”

“I won’t. How are your preparations going?” Eleanor followed Charlie down the corridor away from the changing rooms.

“Probably fine?” Charlie sounded far from certain.

“Works for me.” Eleanor rolled her shoulders, trying to alleviate their ache. “It’ll be a night to remember.”

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In which the curtain opens

DANTE STUDIED THE EXPANSE OF THE VELVET CURTAINS DRAWN ACROSS THE stage. A sliver of light shafted through the gap where they met, leaving the rest of the space behind the curtain dark.

From beyond the curtains came the rustling and chatter as the audience filled the theatre. The *Bugle* article on cursed plays had its predicted effect on the theatregoers of Te Kohe, and they had a full house.

Dante needed to go down into the Crypt and check the crash mat Deirdre would land on for her suicide fall. He needed to go up into the ceiling and check Deirdre's fly wire for sabotage. He needed to go into the green room and face the reviled tights.

But he was held in this moment, standing in the wings of the stage, the full two-storey height of the crimson curtains forming the thinnest barrier between the events that were about to unfold, and the waiting audience.

It was a feeling unlike any Dante had encountered before, and he turned it over in his mind, trying to fit it into the 'threat anticipation' or 'pre-mission adrenaline' compartments. It didn't fit.

Perhaps it was because, as his therapist had recommended, this was a new experience.

“It’s something else, isn’t it?” Andrea stepped out from behind the wing curtain and crossed the space to stand next to him.

Dante looked up to where a microphone hung suspended in the dark. Andrea followed his gaze, then took his hand and drew him out of range towards the back of the stage.

Here, the mythical fourth wall was outlined in gold where the house lights leaked through.

“Dante,” said Andrea. “I want you to know that it’s alright.”

Andrea’s face was turned up to his, and her hand was warm in his grip. In the dim light, her wavy black hair floated around her shoulders, merging with the dark as if she swam in a pool of night.

“What is?” Dante took her other hand in his, so they faced each other like two actors about to have a moment, hopefully without bursting into song.

“I get why you think keeping the truth from me would keep me safe.”

“You do?” Dante hadn’t thought through all the implications of sharing his profession.

“At first, I thought all the secrecy was because you were… a player.” Andrea looked away, then back to him. “Then I realised that was ridiculous.”

Dante wondered what kind of player she meant. The kind he was familiar with sold state secrets to both sides, and usually ended up dead in a ditch in Kandahar or Luxembourg. He didn’t think this was what Andrea meant.

“Then when you told me what you used to do and… well… I thought maybe it’s too big a red flag to get past.”

“I wouldn’t be dangerous to you on purpose.” Dante shifted into sniper’s focus as he gazed into her eyes. “But things around me might be.”

She held his hand tighter. “I know. But I want you to know that it’s okay.”

Dante didn’t think it was. After all, there was a murderer at large, heavy counterweights up in the ceiling, trapdoors, angry ghosts, and other hazards

he was still assessing.

“I still want to get to know you.”

“Oh.” Dante realised he could give Andrea a full briefing on himself. In the darkness behind the curtain, it suddenly seemed so simple. “What would you like to know?”

“Dante.” Andrea reached up and put a hand on each side of his face. “I don’t think you’re ready for a relationship. Not a conventional one, anyway. And I want you to know that I’m okay with that. I’m willing to wait.”

“Oh.” Dante felt something relax inside himself. He’d always preferred missions with time and space to do the proper preparation. Perhaps there was time to get this right, after all.

“Although…” Andrea pulled downwards, and he leaned towards her. He thought she was going to kiss him, but instead, she brought her mouth right by his ear. “There is one thing I’d like right now. I want you to kiss me like the deadly assassin you are. And then you can go do whatever hare-brained scheme your friends have cooked up and hopefully all of us will make it through the show alive. And never, ever let me find you’ve gone behind my back to try and ‘keep me safe.’ It won’t fly, and I’ll be extremely annoyed. Deal?”

Dante met her eyes. “Deal.” Then he swept her off her feet and kissed her in the light of the rapidly opening curtain.

It took a moment for him to register the fact of the growing light.

The curtains were, in fact, being hauled open. Andrea made a startled noise as Dante whirled her away into the wings.

“Alex,” hissed Mrs Haddock’s voice from the backstage door. “What on earth are you doing? We're not starting for ten minutes!”

“Ahhhh... sorry!” came Alex's frantic stage whisper. “Just closing them again. Nothing to see here, folks.”

Dante lowered Andrea to the floor. She was shaking. For a moment he thought she’d had a fright, then he realised she was laughing.

She looked up at him, eyes dancing.

“Your timing is perfection. And — oh! I need to get my costume on!”

Dante scowled. “Me too. Then I will find you and tell you about our plan.”

She gave his hand a final squeeze, then dashed away to don Lady Macduff’s many lengths of muslin.

Dante made his way down into the Crypt, where the crash mat and possible murder trap awaited.

ELEANOR’S PHONE BEEPED, distracting her from the task of stealing fake blood from the supplies cupboard.

She turned on the phone. “Yes?”

“Dante here. I’m in the Crypt with Callum. The crash mat has sharp steel rods hidden in the stuffing. Fatality likelihood for someone landing on them is around 90%.” Dante sounded approving.

“And, er, you’re going to take them out?”

“I’m not comfortable with that,” said Callum. “There’s no time, and I can’t be sure we’ll get them all. Just one would be enough to kill Deirdre.”

“So you’ll come up with an alternative,” said Eleanor.

Callum’s grunt crackled over the phone speakers. “Working on it.”

Eleanor unlatched the supply closet and was about to liberate a squeeze bottle of fake blood when a hand fell on her shoulder.

She bit down on an undignified squeak and resisted the urge to wing the person behind with the bottle. Even mixed with the smells of spirit gum and greasepaint, she recognised that scent.

“And what are you up to?” She turned to face Avery.

“Sorry for sneaking up on you,” said Avery, not sounding sorry at all.

“You’re lucky I didn’t coat you in fake blood. What’s your plan? Are you here to maintain law and order in the building? You should know that’s a tall order in this place.”

“I’m here semi-unofficially. Sergeant Hemi is here as a civilian with a ticket, but I’m going to convince him to snoop around.” Avery gave her a sidelong look. “You have a plan, which I hope does not involve too much mayhem. I’ll support you, with the caveat that you better pull this off, or I’ll be taking an early retirement in a cloud of disaster.”

“In that case, you’d better go down and see Dante in the Crypt. He has an interesting murder weapon for you to look at.” Eleanor remembered doing Dean’s makeup, and his comment about having the law on his side. “After that, you’ll want to go up to the AV Room to see how Raymond is being framed to take the fall for his wife’s murder.”

“Alright. Don’t mess it up.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor’s words caught Avery just as he turned to leave.

He paused, face in profile. “For what?”

“Trusting me. And all the rest.”

CHARLIE PLUMPED down onto a seat in the changing room to pull on his baggy tights. He’d had pre-show jitters before, but nothing like this.

It was not helped by the fact that he not only had dozens of lines to potentially forget, there was also a murderer to unmask and a powerful revenant to lay to rest.

The revenant, dormant throughout the day, was pushing against the edge of his perception. As the sun set and curtain time drew closer, her power grew.

“How are you going, love?” Sylvie stuck a few strategic warts to her face as she looked into the brightly lit makeup mirror.

Behind her, Hilda searched with increasing desperation for the witches' giant stirring spoon.

“I’m okay,” said Charlie. “Hilda — I think I saw the spoon over there behind Steve’s halberd.”

“Thanks!” Hilda swooped on an untidy stack of weapons and retrieved a giant soup ladle with a flourish.

Charlie glanced at the small screen mounted in one corner of the changing room. It showed the stage, black except for a thin slit of light in the centre where the curtains met.

“We’ve got a full house tonight,” said Sylvie. “All the family’s here to see it. Is your nephew here, Hilda?”

“Oh yes,” said Hilda. “Some cousins from Auckland too. They all want to see the haunted play.”

“We better give them a show, then.” Sylvie cheerfully adjusted her ragged grey wig. “Do you think I should black out one of my teeth?”

“The witchier the better,” said Hilda. “Can I borrow a few warts?”

“Over there next to the fake eyebrows,” said Sylvie. “Help yourself.”

Charlie wondered how Dante was doing with his tights. And then he paused as a memory surfaced. Viktor had said: ‘you must take the source of the revenant’s power.’

The PA system crackled into life, relaying Mrs Haddock’s precise tones:

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your beginners call. Beginners to the stage, please.”

The play was about to begin.

Charlie blew out a calming breath. This time, his binding of the revenant would work. With a theatre full of people, there was no room for error.

ELEANOR'S PHONE buzzed as she waited in the green room with Benedict, Trevor, and Steve. Avery's number came up on her phone screen, and she accepted the call.

"Dante showed us the crash mat," said Avery. "Ingenious, and potentially gruesome."

"Dante also checked the steel wire Deirdre is meant to descend on," said Eleanor. "It's sawn almost through, right up by the pulley."

"That would be nasty," said Avery. "And would explain the hacksaw we found in the AV Room, along with another iron rod, the same as the ones embedded in the crash mat."

"Apart from all this evidence being wonderfully convenient, is there anything that points away from Raymond?" asked Eleanor.

"No." Avery's voice was flat. "The show can proceed, with the understanding that no one is going to dive off the platform onto the mat."

Eleanor ran her mind over the hasty plan they'd come up with. "Yes, no one will dive off the platform onto the mat." That was technically true.

"Someone will be arrested for attempted murder after the show." He vented a sigh. "I just need to make sure it's the right someone. That's the only reason we're going ahead and not shutting the whole thing down right now."

"What's your next move?"

"Hemi wants to go under the stage to see if we can find further evidence of tampering. I'll join him."

Eleanor thought about the revenant. "Maybe the Crypt isn't such a good idea?"

"Is this more haunted theatre stuff?"

"Of course not."

"Well, try to stay out of trouble. See you later." The call cut, leaving Eleanor to do her least favourite thing: wait.

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In which Charlie embraces his inner bard

DANTE HOVERED IN THE WINGS NEXT TO MRS HADDOCK. THE DIMINUTIVE lady stood at a podium with a tiny red light shining on her copy of the script.

So far, four actors had needed prompting. Mrs Haddock had already marked the script where three of the actors had repeatedly fudged their lines during rehearsal. The fourth fudgee was Deirdre, who'd unexpectedly dropped a line during her 'screw your courage to the sticking place' scene.

Dante was not surprised. As the play progressed, unusual things were happening. The stage lights flickered, and actors who brushed up against the velvet curtains got electric shocks.

It was as if a storm were brewing on stage. Dante wondered if Charlie had come up with a plan to banish the revenant of Rosalie Myers. A plan that would work, that is.

Here and now, it was time for Dante to go on stage and pretend to murder Charlie on Dean's instructions, while the boy acting as Charlie's son ran away.

It was strange, thought Dante. Dean was a real murderer, as was Dante. And yet, something about these stage murders grated against him in a way that

his real murders had not.

Perhaps it was the tights. He loathed the way they bagged out at the knees, wrinkling like an elephant's legs.

No self-respecting murderer would do his deadly deeds in tights.

On stage, Dean complained of the witches' prophecy that Banquo's sons would be kings, and plotted his murder.

All Dante's killings had been to right the scales of justice in the most permanent way possible. Standing in the shadow of the wings, Dante was less certain than ever that it had all been worth it.

"Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill."

Killing people was a hard habit to break. Dante wondered whether his life would ever come out from under that shadow.

He tested the fake dagger in his hand, checking once more that the blade was blunt, and telescoped easily back into its sheath. No one was going to make a murderer of him tonight.

BACK IN THE GREEN ROOM, Charlie blew out a breath, still shaky from being killed on stage. He had not, as Yves suggested, become comfortable in his part.

The coiled strength of Rosalie 'Allie' Myers built like a weight in the back of his mind. Charlie thought he knew when she planned to strike — when Deirdre did her suicide dive from the platform on stage, down into the Crypt.

What power would another death on stage give the revenant? Charlie didn't know, but it couldn't be good.

He needed to deal with Allie now, ready or not.

"Hi, Hilda? Sylvie?" Charlie tried for a 'calm but serious' tone of voice.

“Yes, dear?” Sylvie looked up, one eyebrow perilously close to falling off.

“Do you know where Mrs Haddock is?”

“She’s on her way,” said Hilda. “She was just helping Steve find his physician’s hat.”

“I was wondering…” Charlie considered waiting for Mrs Haddock, who was standing in for Marge as the third witch. She’d be on his side, he was certain. But both witches were regarding him curiously through a hedge of bushy eyebrows, broad hat brims, and warts. “I was wondering if you could both help me with an exorcism.”

“A what?” asked Sylvie.

“An exorcism,” said Charlie.

“I use a facial scrub to take off stage makeup,” said Hilda. “I have it here if you’d like to try.”

“I mean a ghost banishment,” said Charlie. “Where you do a thing to get rid of a ghost.”

Despite the drooping eyebrows, the two witches managed to send him deeply sceptical looks.

“The play’s been more hectic than usual,” said Sylvie, “but there’s no need to go summoning ghosts.”

“We’re not summoning a ghost. We’re banishing it,” said Charlie. “Look, this is important, and we don’t have much time.”

The green room TV showed Steve in baggy tights, listening while Macbeth ordered him to attack the rebel Macduff’s castle. Soon, Deirdre would do her fall.

“I’m not sure if I hold with occult practices.” Hilda adjusted her pointy witch hat to sit more fetchingly on her wild hair.

Charlie racked his brains for how to convince them. “It’d be like… being ghostbusters for real.”

Hilda sighed. “We all have aspirations, dearie. I just don’t think we’re cut out for an exorcism. You need a priest for that.”

Charlie thought furiously. With the right lever, you can move anything. What would Eleanor say?

“If we succeed, it would annoy Marge no end,” he said.

Hilda perked up. “You think so?”

“It gets on my nerves sometimes, the way she keeps saying Hilda and I are muggles,” said Sylvie. “I reckon she makes up half the mystic stuff she goes on about.”

“If we do this, we could get a piece written up in the *Te Kohe Bugle*.” Charlie hoped this was true.

“You mean with our names redacted, but everyone knows it’s us?” Hilda’s lips curved in appreciation.

“Sure.” The smallest edge of excitement pushed up against dread churning in Charlie’s stomach. Maybe this was how Eleanor felt when she convinced people to do things they wouldn’t normally do.

“Where do you want to do it?” Sylvie surveyed the changing room. “This isn’t very… occult, is it?”

“We’ll do it in the Crypt.” Charlie thought: right by Allie’s centre of power.

Sylvie set one hand on her hip, considering. “Won’t the audience hear?”

Charlie thought about the Forgotten Green Room. That was next to the Crypt, and close enough. “It’ll be fine. Are you in?”

Sylvie and Hilda exchanged a loaded glance. Then, as one witch, they nodded firmly.

“We’ll do it,” said Hilda.

“And we’ll never let Marge hear the end of how she missed out on the occult event of the year.” Sylvie’s smile was spiky.

Charlie drew in a deep breath. “Great. Okay. Right.”

The door opened to admit Mrs Haddock with her wig off, pointy hat in hand. “Hi, Charlie. What’s going on?”

Sylvie and Hilda exchanged a conspiratorial look. “We’re going to do an exorcism with this nice young man.”

“Can you help?” asked Charlie.

Mrs Haddock jammed her hat back on her head. “We have eight minutes until we need to go backstage and wail over Lady Macbeth's death. Let’s get exorcising.”

“We need to cover you in fake blood to make your death convincing,” said Eleanor.

Deirdre nodded. “I hope I’m up to pulling this off.”

“You’re a fine actress,” said Eleanor. “I’m sure you’ll rise to the challenge.”

“This is real, though, and I need to…” Deirdre trailed off, her hands clenching into fists.

Eleanor remembered Deirdre’s anger in the AV Room when she discovered the reason for her friend’s death. Here was another thing that could go wrong with their hastily arranged plan.

“We have this one chance to trap our murderer. Don’t blow it.”

“I won’t,” retorted Deirdre, stung. She wrapped another muslin cloth around her shoulders, her movements restive. “I just need to get into character.”

“Try pretending you’ve been murdered,” said Eleanor drily. “And are out for blood.”

Deirdre gave an involuntary start and Eleanor berated herself. Actors were like racehorses — prone to spooking if not handled with care.

A few minutes later, Deirdre's robes were splashed liberally with fake blood.

Eleanor stood back to admire her handiwork. "You look the part."

"Thank you." Deirdre's colour was high, but her lips looked pale, bluish. Her shoulders rose and fell with rapid breaths.

She's freaking out, thought Eleanor. Hyperventilating.

Out loud, she said: "Which part are you more nervous about? The dive from the platform, or what comes after?"

"The dive." Deirdre swallowed convulsively. "I keep picturing poor Jen. I… I don't know if I can do this."

The worst thing, thought Eleanor, would be to have her freeze up on the platform. That would ruin everything.

"Here's what I want you to do for the next few minutes." Eleanor pointed to a chair in the corner of the changing room. "Sit on that chair, put your head between your knees, and do long, slow breaths."

Deirdre stared at her, eyes wide.

Eleanor took her gently by the shoulder and pushed her into the chair.

"Deep breaths," she said, lowering Deirdre's head until her forehead touched her knees. "Slow, deep breaths."

Eleanor closed the changing room door behind her and rested against it for a second. She had five minutes to find a suitable suicide dive replacement. What fun it was to stage a trap for murderers.

"DANTE? ARE YOU THERE?" The voice came from just outside the changing room.

Dante paused. He'd been about to tear his tights off and get back into his jeans, but Eleanor sounded worried.

“Come in,” he said, and the door burst open.

Eleanor stood in the doorway. Next to her was Andrea, still in her Lady Macduff dress.

“We have a problem,” said Eleanor. “Deirdre’s panicking. I don’t think she can do the high fall.”

Dante eyed the screen that tracked the progress of the Scottish Play. On stage, Trevor reported the return of the Scottish rebels.

Dean sat on his throne, eyes shadowed, and caressed the pommel of his stage dagger as he listened. Dante’s eyes zeroed in on the weapon. Was it one of the fakes he’d carefully checked this afternoon? Or perhaps not?

Dante added this to his risk calculations. “The dive is happening in four minutes. We’ve set up a rope belay and a stack of empty cardboard boxes as a substitute crash mat. If Deirdre freezes, I’ll push her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Eleanor. “I could do it instead.”

“You have a broken ankle.” Andrea folded her arms. “I’ll do it. I’m Deirdre’s height, I’m dressed for the part, and I’ll be in silhouette. No one will see the difference.”

The muscles in the back of Dante’s neck tensed. The words ‘under no circumstances’ blazed across his mind in neon lights.

He parted his lips to say them, then hesitated. Hadn’t he and Andrea just had a conversation about this? He tried to remember the details over the accelerated beat of his heart.

“You know the risks?” he said carefully, hardly believing the words coming out of his mouth.

Andrea nodded firmly. “Angry ghosts. Trapdoors. No proper crash mat. Improvised fall rig.”

Dante’s tension ratcheted tighter with every word. “Could we use a dummy?”

Eleanor shook her head. “I don’t think we can make a dummy look convincing.”

“So…” Andrea set her hands on her hips. “I’m your only hope.”

Dante set his jaw against the words of agreement that were trying to escape.

“Dante,” said Andrea. “I trust you.”

Her dark eyes met his, and Dante found himself momentarily paralysed. It was suddenly agonisingly clear to him what a terrible risk it was to let people in. For a start, they might trust you with their lives.

A horn sounding on stage told him the rebel soldiers were gathering with their camouflage tree branches.

Great Birnam Wood had arrived at Castle Dunsinane. It was time for Lady Macbeth to fall.

“Okay,” he said.

Andrea swallowed and gave a brief jerk of a nod.

Eleanor’s eyes flicked between them. “I’m not allowed to wish you good luck, and don’t want to mention broken legs so… see you all soon.”

Andrea gave a decisive nod. “Let’s do this.” She stepped out into the corridor, beyond which lay the stage and the waiting platform.

A minute later, Dante was in the stage wings with Andrea. He knelt to tighten the straps around Andrea’s waist and check the harness was properly fitted.

Andrea looked up at the ladder, then down at her trailing skirts with misgiving.

“I will carry you up,” said Dante.

“How?” she asked.

He glanced briefly at the ladder. “Piggyback?”

Andrea’s face crooked into a smile. “Alright. Turn around.”

He dutifully did, and she leapt and flung her arms around his neck, bringing a flurry of memories — all of people trying to choke him.

Dante set Andrea down on top of the platform. She leaned forward to look over the edge, and her hand curled tighter around the railing.

Dante peered down to see the black square of the trapdoor lined up with where Andrea would fall. The large scrim that would display her silhouette hung the full height of the stage, shielding them from view. The lights that would create the effect weren't on yet, and he and Andrea moved in a world of grey shadow.

On the other side of the veil, Macbeth declared his lack of interest in the coming battle, because no man of woman born could defeat him.

Dante reached out and unhooked the carabiner he'd clipped onto the platform railing fifteen minutes ago. The rope attached to it vanished into the gloom above where the grid and pulleys hung.

There was no time for Dean to have tampered with the line. But that didn't rule out the revenant.

Dante hoped Charlie's plan was working. Rosalie's ghost needed to be fully occupied when Andrea did her fall.

"Are you ready?" he whispered.

Andrea grimaced. "Not really."

"Are you going to be ready in one minute?"

"No." Andrea sighed. "But I'll do it anyway."

Dante clipped the carabiner onto the back of her harness and wound the safety screw tight.

"I'm going to go down to the fly rail and hoist you up," he said. "Just enough to test the rig."

"Dante?"

He paused.

“Just…” Andrea caught his hand. “Make sure it works, okay?”

Dante took her hand and pressed it against his chest, just over his heart, making sure his heartbeat was slow and steady.

“You will fall safely.”

Andrea’s shoulders relaxed and she sighed out a breath. “Okay.”

Dante climbed down the ladder, letting his heart speed up again. He had one job to do, and he hated the fact that its success depended on other people doing theirs.

There might be no ‘i’ in team. But there were thirteen 9mm rounds in his Browning.

If anything happened to Andrea, he would take the law into his own hands. Permanently.

ELEANOR STUMPED DOWN to the Crypt for the fifth time that evening. The ache in her ankle had graduated to stabbing pain. She gritted her teeth as she reached the final step.

The doctor’s instruction to ‘not overdo things’ hadn’t taken into account her pressing need to prevent a murder during a live performance of Shakespeare’s most notorious play.

The Crypt was dark and empty of life. The stage trapdoor hung open like a gateway from the underworld, a neat square of boxes stacked beneath it.

Avery came down here with Hemi, she thought. And I haven’t seen him since, and he’s not answering his phone. Charlie said this is the revenant’s epicentre, and she needs another death to cross back to this world.

Above her, voices and footsteps sounded on stage as the action rose towards the fifth act denouement. Muffled sounds came from the Forgotten Green Room, where Charlie and his witchy companions prepared to banish the ghost of Rosalie Myers.

Which could go well, or very badly, judging by the last time Charlie had gone up against the ghost.

Her attention turned to the cold Crypt floor, a suspicion growing in her mind. If you were a ravening ghost, and two police officers showed up and started poking around your lair, what would you do?

Cautiously, she limped towards the second trapdoor in the Crypt floor. Police inspectors did tend to poke their noses into trouble. Rather like retired conwomen.

With a wince, she knelt on the cold floor and brought her ear close to the trapdoor, trying to hear. Behind her, something rattled.

If Eleanor strained her ears, she thought she could hear voices coming from the other side of the heavy trapdoor, and a curious rushing noise.

The rattle came again, louder this time. She risked a glance over her shoulder. The heavy weapons cupboard shook and then inched towards her, moved by an invisible force.

There was a bolt holding the trapdoor shut. Eleanor tried to draw it open, but it was like struggling against an unseen but determined person.

The bumping rattle came again. The cupboard was halfway across the floor, wobbling towards her with a menace she'd have never thought possible in a piece of furniture.

"Dammit!" Eleanor struggled futilely with the bolt.

The cupboard was just six feet away now. At any moment, it could tip and fall on her, along with goodness knows how many pounds of heavy timber and fake weaponry.

The cupboard shuddered as it tilted towards Eleanor. Ankle stabbing in protest, she rose to a crouch, ready to dive out of the way. And then Charlie's voice came from the Forgotten Green Room, raised in command.

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Which contains curses and courage

CHARLIE REVIEWED HIS GATHERED TROOPS UNDER THE DIM GLOW OF THE basement room's single naked lightbulb.

The mystic atmosphere was not helped by Hilda trying to re-stick a wart on her nose, or Sylvie propping her phone on a stack of buckets to film the event.

But this was more than made up for by the mounting pressure in the back of Charlie's skull.

"I will not be afraid of death and bane, Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane." Dean's voice rang through from the stage above.

"We'd better get moving." Mrs Haddock pushed her pointed hat back. "Just a few minutes to go until Lady Macbeth's death scene."

The light flickered, and Charlie cast it a wary look. "Get your cellphone lights ready to go if that blows."

"This will do," said Mrs Haddock, and pulled 'Big Bertha' out of a cupboard.

Charlie gave her a grateful smile. "You're all clear on the plan?"

“More or less,” said Sylvie.

“More less than more,” said Hilda.

“We’ll be fine, dear.” Mrs Haddock grasped the cauldron ladle.

“Right.” Charlie forced himself to relax. He fetched the scrap of paper from his pocket and read the words he’d scrawled on it again. Despite Viktor’s advice, it seemed precious little to hold up against the hungry ghost of Rosalie Myers. “Let’s go.”

The three witches chanted as they began to circle the cauldron:

“Round about the cauldron go;

In the poisoned entrails throw,”

Sylvie circled the cauldron with a rolling lurch, like she was part of the Addams family, while Hilda limped like a pirate with two peg-legs. Only Mrs Haddock paced with dignity, her face serene.

“Eye of newt and toe of frog,

Wool of bat and tongue of dog.”

The hairs on the back of Charlie’s neck stood up. The light above him flickered again, and a chill wind swept Hilda’s wig across her face.

“For a charm of powerful trouble,

Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.”

The words of the play took effect, hooking Allie like a fish. The pressure intensified as the revenant’s energy gathered.

Charlie clenched his fists into tight balls. His skin prickled, and out of the corner of his eye, a form began to take shape. A woman with a sleek bob of dark hair and a heart-shaped face hovered in the shadows at the back of the room.

He took a deep breath, and joined in the last verse.

“By the pricking of my thumbs,

Something wicked this way comes.

Open, locks,

Whoever knocks.”

Charlie reached out and knocked three times on the wall. Then he said, in a clear voice:

“Enter, Rosalie Jane Myers.”

The shadowy figure stepped forward to the edge of the pool of light.

“Oooh.” Hilda’s eyes widened. “I think I can see something. Like a shadow that shouldn’t be there.” She peered up at the light above her. “Is it some sort of special effect?”

To Charlie’s eyes, the revenant wavered between human form and a crouching shadow with claws instead of fingers.

Sylvie shivered, and rubbed her arms. “Seems chilly down here, all of a sudden.”

Mrs Haddock fixed Charlie with an enquiring eye. “Your ghostie turned up?”

Charlie swallowed. “Yes. Now we say the next lines.”

Frost crystals spread along the rafters as the ghost’s power strengthened. Charlie drew in a rasping breath of frozen air to recite the words he’d written. Words designed to seize the play’s power and turn it back on the revenant.

“Now stand before we judges four,

Spirit who still wants for more,

Hear the sounding of your doom,

Fear the binding of your tomb.”

The shadowy figure of Allie lurched, and Charlie’s heart gave a mirroring jump. He stepped forward, and, feeling like a fool, struck a pose:

“O, thou ill-starred evil fae,

Who trespass’d on our peaceful way

I shall name and bind thee now.”

Charlie glanced over his shoulder, hoping the three witches were with him. Instead, they stared, open-mouthed, as dust scudded across the floor, sucked towards the ghost in an icy wind.

The revenant raised its arms in a monstrous embrace. There was very little human about it now. Its head grew, mouth opening obscenely wide, revealing black teeth and a red glow down its throat. It swung its head towards the stage above, and sniffed the air like a predator sensing its prey.

Charlie stiffened. Deirdre, he thought. She’s about to fall. This is when the ghost will strike.

The ghost began to flow like oil through the wall, towards the other side of the Crypt where the trapdoor lay.

“Rosalie!” called Charlie. “I name you Rosalie Jane Myers, and bind you to this circle.”

Hidden beneath artfully scattered equipment, the meandering chalk circle he’d drawn ten minutes before blazed blue.

The ghost hissed and flinched back, repelled by the protective barrier.

Except now, thought Charlie, I’ve trapped her in here with us.

He faced the revenant, summoning his courage.

A high shriek sounded from the stage above, followed by an awful, crunching thump down in the Crypt. A low moan, then silence.

Dean’s voice rang from the stage above. “Wherefore was that cry?”

Footsteps tapped overhead.

“Ahem.” There was a long silence as Steve sorted through the lines scrawled on his arm. “The Queen, my lord, is dead.”

With a mocking laugh, the ghost of Allie stepped into the light. This time, her misty shape was clear — the same cupid's bow smile, pert bob, and friendly eyes Charlie had grown familiar with over this production.

"You can't keep me here forever, Charlie boy." Allie's eyes glinted with malice. "As soon as you break the circle, I will reap the power from the cursed play, and Deirdre's death will clear the way for my son to gain what's rightfully his. I've won, and you have lost."

"I can see her," stage-whispered Sylvie. "It's like something out of 'The Conjuring.'"

"You're not staying." The circle blazed in Charlie's mind as Allie pushed against it with all her might. The pressure built inside him, like being deep under water. "Rosalie Jane Myers," said Charlie, and his small coven joined in a ragged chorus. "You are but a walking shadow, a poor player that has strutted her last hour upon the stage. And now, you will be heard no more."

With the last line, Charlie reached for the place he'd seen so many ghosts go when they crossed over and left the world behind.

This time, though, he'd been Beyond, and he'd come back. This time, he knew how to open the door himself.

So he did.

DANTE GRIPPED the rope in his gloved hands. It was coarse hemp, definitely not his first choice. It was fastened to the belay at his waist, and right now, it was all the safety he could provide Andrea.

He stood motionless in the wings, watching Dean brood on his throne, while messengers brought him reports of rebel soldiers preparing to storm the castle.

Far from looking concerned, Dean had a small smile playing around his lips. Every so often, he would flick a glance up to the screen behind which the scaffold lay.

He’s waiting for Deirdre to fall to her death, thought Dante. He wanted to assassinate Dean right then. It would tidy things up nicely.

Two hundred and eighty-five days, no fatalities, he told himself. Keep to the code. Take one day at a time. Don’t let Andrea fall to her death in a haunted theatre.

A hushed silence fell, and then up in the AV Room, Raymond switched on the backlighting. The outline of the tower jumped into sharp relief against the screen. At the top of it, Andrea stood in silhouette, her curling hair hidden under a veil, her trailing dresses streaming out behind her as she stepped to the edge.

Dante’s hands spasmed on the rope, then loosened. This was not the recommended way to do the fall. He should have had a wire rope flying rig with a descender. But thanks to Dean’s sabotage, that was no longer an option.

And so Dante was the human friction brake. He had to let Andrea drop fast and clean through the trapdoor. The second she was clear, he would have to arrest her fall with only three metres of height — stopping 65 kilograms of falling woman without breaking her back or snapping the line.

Dante let out a slow, controlled breath, his gaze fixed on Andrea. He wondered if she was going to back out. He wouldn’t blame her. He wanted her to back out.

But Andrea moved as if in a trance, her face impossibly calm. She stepped to the edge of the platform, then tipped forward, her robes streaming out behind her as she fell.

The audience gasped. The rope buzzed through Dante’s hands, paying out at frightening speed.

His vision zeroed in on her falling form. As she vanished into the blackness of the stage, he gripped the rope, hard.

His gloves tore with the friction of the fibre, but he ignored them, gripping tighter. His hands stung as the rope burn bit, but he ignored that too, and gripped with a ferocity he’d never felt before, even when fighting for his

life. His hands jerked upwards as the rope took Andrea's full weight, almost lifting him off his feet.

When Dante judged Andrea was just above the boxes, he released the rope completely. There was a crunch, and a shriek of surprise as Andrea plunged the last half metre to land face first on their improvised crash mat.

There was silence, then a long, drawn-out moan.

Dante's gaze burned across the stage to Dean, who hid a delighted smirk behind one hand. Dante stepped forward, his hand reaching for the knife in his boot.

Two hundred and eighty-five days, no fatalities. And Andrea's alright. She has to be.

Dante unclipped the belay, dropped the rope, and vanished down the stairs to the Crypt in furious silence.

To Charlie, keeping the portal to Beyond open was like holding a door against a summer storm. The spirit wind blew from the Forgotten Green Room into the next world. It pulled at Allie, and she strained against it.

But she was losing. Her outline blurred as she began to stream into the doorway, sucked through like black ink flowing down a plughole.

Allie lost her footing and flew towards the door. She caught the threshold in her hands, ghostly fingers gripping the frame.

Her heart-shaped face twisted and her eyes flickered red as her gaze caught Charlie's.

"This is not justice," she snarled. "I died too soon. My son was denied his birthright by someone I trusted, someone I loved. It isn't fair!"

Charlie thought of a dozen things to say, including the fact that Allie had nearly killed two innocent people in her quest for more life.

But what he really wanted was to never see the ghost of Allie Myers ever again. So he kept his mouth shut and concentrated on keeping the spirit door open.

The ghost wind howled around them. Allie howled louder as her grip on the doorframe tore free. She vanished, sucked into wherever ghosts with unfinished business went. In his mind, Charlie let the door slam shut and vanish.

Panting, he met the three women's gazes. Hilda's mouth was slightly open, the fake wart hanging by a thread from the tip of her nose.

Mrs Haddock sniffed. "Good riddance."

Sylvie gave a convulsive shudder. "Dear lord, deliver us from evil."

"Amen," said Hilda.

Charlie wiped sweat from his forehead with a shaky hand. "I didn't know I could do that." He said it quietly, because he didn't want the witches to hear.

Mrs Haddock cocked her head at him. "You did well, Charlie. Now, I believe we all have more to do before the night's over?"

"Yes," sighed Charlie. "Thank you all."

"Just as well it worked," said Sylvie. "Because we missed our wailing cue, and I need to be a soldier for the grand finale."

She collected her phone and exited, swinging the cauldron ladle jauntily over her shoulder. Hilda gave Charlie a triumphant look, then followed, brushing through the chalk circle as she left.

ELEANOR HEARD CHARLIE call out Rosalie's name. A gust of wind blew through the Crypt and the weapons cupboard settled back onto the floor with a thud.

The force holding the trapdoor bolt vanished, and Eleanor shot the bolt open with a snap.

As soon as the bolt shot open, the trapdoor burst upwards, just missing her face. Avery's head and shoulders appeared. His face and hair were soaking and his eyes were wild.

Below him came a shout of triumph. "Got it! The tap's off!"

Avery's gaze took in Eleanor, the weapons cupboard, and the empty Crypt. He climbed up out of the cellar and called back down into the gloom. "Hemi! The trapdoor's open. Let's get out of here."

The sound of splashing came from below, then feet on ladder rungs. Hemi's head appeared. He was also drenched, and looked even more wild-eyed than Avery.

"Holy smokes." Hemi climbed the last few ladder rungs and hauled himself out, sitting with a squelch on the concrete floor. "That was intense."

Avery reached a hand down to help Eleanor up. "Thank you for the rescue." He handed her the crutches.

Eleanor took in their sopping wet suits. "I didn't know there was a pool down there."

"There shouldn't have been," said Avery grimly. "It was… unexpected."

"It was like something out of 'The Frighteners,'" said Hemi. "I heard some noises coming from under the floor, so we went down to look. Then the trapdoor slammed shut and locked, and this water started gushing out of a service pipe, and we couldn't shut off the tap, and the cellar was filling with water, and…" He ran his fingers through his wet hair and shivered.

"I'm not sure exactly what happened," said Avery slowly, "but I'm glad you found us." His eyes searched Eleanor's. "And I think that we're probably needed elsewhere."

"I recommend the AV Room. A good vantage point to see everything that's going on." The last thing Eleanor wanted was for the police to barge in on Charlie's work.

“I want to get out of this whole building,” muttered Hemi. “I think it’s haunted.”

“There’s no such thing,” said Avery briskly. Out of the cellar, he regained his natural scepticism with speed. “We’ll go up to the AV Room and… supervise.” His look told Eleanor that he knew she was trying to get him out of the way, and he’d allow it… for now.

Eleanor limped up the stairs after the sodden policemen. It was time to set the second part of the trap in motion.

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In which Dante embodies Robin Hood. In tights

"YOU'RE CLEAR ON WHAT TO DO?" ASKED ELEANOR.

Deirdre's shoulders rose with a quick indrawn breath, then she nodded. "Yes."

"It's nearly time." Eleanor eyed the little TV screen in the changing room.

The vengeful rebel army had breached the castle walls. On stage, Dean engaged in a ponderous sword fight with Benedict, cast as a slightly improbable Young Siward.

Deirdre smoothed down her robes, grimacing as her hands ended up smeared in fake blood. "Let's go."

Eleanor followed Deirdre towards the stage door. They slipped into the wings, where Liam stood, swinging his fake sword in a state of high excitement. Yves arrived at more or less the same moment.

The director gave the pair of them an ironic once-over, then stepped forward and laid a hand on Liam's shoulder. The young man jumped in surprise and spun to face Yves, nearly skewering him in the groin.

Eleanor looked up at a faint movement overhead, then glanced sideways. Callum stood by the fly rail, frowning in concentration as he lowered the

final piece of their plan into place.

Yves continued his whispered conversation with Liam, edging him towards the backstage door, as Deirdre stood on the ‘X’ Callum had taped on the floor earlier.

Eleanor could imagine the contents of Yves and Liam’s argument, and was glad that for once, she wasn’t the one trying to persuade a young bravo to give up his big moment on stage.

Instead, she limped into the shadows until she was sure she was out of range. The large sheet of glass came to rest on the stage floor with a barely audible ‘thunk.’ Callum tied the line off, then quietly slid a wing flat into place to hide where Deirdre stood.

On stage, Dean dispatched Benedict with the tried and true ‘impale the air two feet away’ manoeuvre. Benedict staggered off to die noisily off stage — the sign of a seasoned actor.

With a flourish, Dean proclaimed to the audience that even with his army defeated and his castle overrun by enemy troops, he would not fall on his sword like a Roman fool. While he still had breath, he would fight.

Good, thought Eleanor. Let’s see you face the ghost of past misdeeds.

There was a pause, and Dean looked to his right, clearly expecting Macduff to appear for their final battle.

Instead, a bright light beamed out from the AV Room, high in the Gods. Raymond had turned the projector on, aimed at the bright sky backdrop.

Dean stared as the picture jumped into focus. There was the bed and the hearth from twenty years ago. There was Frank, his father, lying in uneasy repose. His cousin Raymond stole across the stage, fake dagger in hand.

And then, it all went wrong. The audience gasped as the hearth fell. There was a low murmur as the people who remembered this event realised what they were watching.

And then the camera caught the Dean from the past as he went to cut the incriminating string.

On stage, Dean staggered forward, hands raised as if he could block the giant moving picture from view.

Then a phantom appeared.

The ghost of Deirdre arose centre stage, facing Dean. Her tattered garments were bloodstained and torn.

Yves's sonorous voice came from offstage. "What phantom is this, and whom doth she accuse?"

Deirdre's arm rose to point unerringly at Dean.

"For what crime is he to blame?"

Deirdre coughed, and blood ran down her chin. "For bloody deeds, for sabotage, for framing the innocent. And for the worst crime of all — the murder of a father."

She stepped towards Dean, her arms outstretched as if to embrace him. He stumbled back, face white.

"I didn't… it wasn't… it wasn't meant to be him…" he stammered. "It was meant to be Raymond, not Frank. This is all Raymond's fault!"

The stage lights flickered, and Dean gasped as Deirdre's ghost reached out to him in a dreadful strobe, her face fixed in a ghastly smile.

"No!" cried Dean. "I didn't mean to kill Frank! It's not my fault!"

Deirdre's ghost lunged towards him. Dean fell onto his backside. The apparition vanished as the light that had reflected her image onto the stage flicked off.

The vengeful ghost returns, and guilt does the rest, thought Eleanor. Gotta love the classics.

Shakily, Dean started to laugh.

"That was quite a joke," he said, into the hush of a shocked auditorium. "Very funny. About what you'd expect from a bunch of amateurs."

Eleanor smiled in satisfaction. Dean's slip had been recorded by Raymond up in the AV Room. It should be sufficient to make a case.

A movement caught her vision, and her heart gave an unsettled lurch. Pale as a phantom, Deirdre drifted into the wings, her gaze fixed on Dean.

Deirdre's hands were clenched at her sides. One more step would take her onto the stage.

Intervene, or let this play out? thought Eleanor. No easy answer presented itself.

Dean climbed to his feet and caught a glimpse of Deirdre's white robes. He put on another fake chuckle, brushing his tunic down as he regained his composure.

"You had me for a moment there. Not in good taste to break the fourth wall though, is it? Hardly fair to the audience."

There was a disturbed murmur from the crowd.

Deirdre stepped on stage, and Raymond flicked a spotlight on to follow her. Her robes glowed whiter than white in its light, the congealed blood trailing down her chest blazing crimson.

"It wasn't your fault?" said Deirdre, with a smile that was all teeth. "Well, then, what about Jennifer? Was that an 'accident' too?"

DANTE LIFTED Andrea off the boxes, doing a quick scan as he set her on her feet. She shut her eyes against the bright beam of his head torch.

"Okay?" he asked.

"I didn't know you were going to drop me the last bit," she hissed. "You should have said!"

"We needed genuine surprise and a convincing crunch at the bottom of the fall."

Andrea stepped away from him and crossed her arms.

Dante thought over what his therapist had told him about other people's feelings. It didn't make sense, because surely actions were more important than words. But apparently, there was a magic phrase that made people feel better. He tried it out silently in his head, then said it.

"I'm sorry."

Andrea slowly unfolded her arms. "Alright. Just... don't do it again. What's next?"

Dante unhooked the carabiner from her rig. "I need to secure the rig, and make sure Dean doesn't stab anyone. Can you close the trapdoor once I haul this rope up?" He fitted his spotlight band around her head.

Andrea eyed the trapdoor above her. "Alright. Fine."

As Dante turned to leave, she caught his arm. "Please be careful, Dante. Remember, Dean's a murderer."

Dante thought this redundant. After all, he was a murderer, and a lot better at it than Dean. But he nodded in agreement. "Okay."

Up on stage, the screen that had put Andrea's fall in silhouette was gone, hauled up by Alex into the space above the stage.

Dante undid the rope from the fly rail and pulled the rope up through the trapdoor. Then he climbed the scaffolding soundlessly, planning to lock the carabiner at the end of the rope safely onto the platform railing. On stage, Dean stumbled back as Frank's death scene took effect and Deirdre's ghost confronted him.

Dante heard Dean's slip of confession. The ghost illusion winked out.

And then, events began to diverge from the plan, as Deirdre stalked on stage to confront her friend's murderer.

"Jennifer?" replied Dean with a sneer. "She was drunk, and drove off a cliff."

“Surely you’re man enough to avenge yourself?” said Deirdre sweetly. “Ray and I knew who your father was, all those years. We just didn’t feel like doing anything about it.”

Dean flinched at the mention of his father, but then he leaned forward, his mouth twisting. “I thought you knew.” The words came out low and poisonous with hatred. His hand strayed to his belt.

Dante’s eye followed the movement. Dean’s dagger was there, hidden in its sheath. Perhaps Dean had planned to ‘discover’ Deirdre’s body in the Crypt right after the play, and finish the job if she were still alive. For that, he would need a real dagger.

“You got what you deserved.” Deirdre’s words were low and fierce. “Your father was never going to choose you. You were an embarrassment, nothing more.” She stepped forward, her hands palm outwards, as if inviting Dean to strike.

Dante needed to get down there now, but there was no time. He slipped his throwing knife out of its boot sheath.

“Too bad you couldn’t even manage to murder the right guy,” said Deirdre. “Your father died and Raymond got everything.”

“It wasn’t meant to be him.” Dean’s voice was a snarl. “It was never meant to be him.”

Dante eased into a knife-throwing stance, hand poised to send his dagger in a tightly spinning arc to bury itself in Dean’s throat.

“Dante!”

Dante’s gaze jerked sideways to fall on Trevor, who had hold of the other end of the high fall rope.

“Swing out and stop him!”

Dante paused, knife ready to throw.

“I’ll belay you!” Trevor’s stage whisper was more of a frantic hiss.

Dante shook his head.

“We’re fighting actors,” said Trevor. “I got your back!”

“You don’t weigh enough,” growled Dante, just as Andrea emerged from the Crypt stairs.

“Your cunning plan to kill Raymond and become Frank’s heir?” Deirdre gave a tinkly laugh. “Didn’t work out so well, did it?”

Andrea rushed over to hold the rope, her hands grasping it just above Trevor’s.

Dean’s hand closed convulsively around the hilt of the dagger, and he drew it in one swift motion.

Dante made his choice. “Hold tight!” he commanded.

Trevor tensed as Dante stepped to the edge of the platform and wound the rope around his forearm.

Dean’s knife glinted in the spotlight as he raised it high.

There was no time for Dante to do anything but jump, and hope he’d put his trust in the right people.

The air rushed past him as he dropped like a stone. For a moment, he thought he’d miscalculated the trajectory, or that Trevor had let go in a panic.

Then with a jerk, the rope took his weight and he swooped out across the stage.

Dean’s knife slashed downwards…

…and Dante smashed into him, catching Dean in a one-armed tackle. They swung out over the auditorium, and the audience gasped.

Struggling wildly, Dean tried to stab Dante, who wondered whether he should simply drop the man. But then Dean might land on an audience member, and that would not be good stagecraft.

With a ‘whoosh,’ they swung back over the stage, and Dante’s boots skidded on the floorboards. He let go of the rope and disarmed Dean in one

swift movement, putting the man in a full nelson that doubled him over, gasping and swearing.

“Are you okay?” Dante asked Deirdre.

Her eyes wide, Deirdre raised a hand to her neck. Her fingers came away clean.

A noise began, swelling in volume. It took Dante a long moment to realise what it was — a massive wave of applause that became a foot-stamping, yelling cheer of approval.

Deirdre’s mouth turned up in a tiny smile. “Best give the audience a bow, Dante.”

“I’m restraining a murderer,” said Dante. “Also, my tights have split down the front.”

Deirdre raised both hands in a graceful wave that took in Dante and the struggling Dean. “Please join me in giving Dante Reid a big round of applause for his stage debut.”

Dante scowled as the audience cheered louder. This was not what he’d had in mind when he joined the Te Kohe Am Dram Society.

Avery and Hemi, who for some reason were both soaking wet, marched on stage. The audience continued to cheer in a good-natured way, with the occasional ‘boo’ thrown in.

“Nice save,” said Avery.

Hemi looked less grumpy than the last time Dante had seen him. “Bring that man out to my car so I can cuff him and take him to the station. Now, please,” he added, as Dante eyed him dubiously, “because I for one would appreciate getting out of here.”

ELEANOR WATCHED in great satisfaction as Dante marched Dean off stage, followed by Hemi. Avery retrieved Dean’s fallen dagger and slipped it into

an evidence bag.

“I can see why you wanted to change the ending.” Liam sounded awed. “I hope you’re not planning to do this every night.”

“With our many health and safety violations, we’ll be lucky if we don’t get closed down tonight,” said Callum. “Though I can’t fault the result.” His mouth curved in a thin smile. “Bastard had it coming.”

“And now?” asked Eleanor, turning towards Yves. “Time to bring it all home?”

Yves gave a derisive snort. “You’re asking me to conclude this debacle?”

“I thought it went rather well.”

“To be fair,” said Yves judiciously, “I’ve had worse disasters on stage. Not many, though. And I did like the rope swing.”

He strode on stage, white hair glowing in the spotlight. He stood silently, and the audience gradually quietened, a magic trick that Eleanor had always admired.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Yves's deep voice carried to the back of the theatre. “What you have witnessed today is a triumph of justice over injustice. The tragedy of Macbeth masked another, real tragedy: the murder of one of our number — Jennifer Wilcox. You have just witnessed her murderer being caught, and no doubt, there will be a reckoning in the court of law.”

There was a tense murmur at this. Eleanor could guess the content: was this real? Did we really just see someone attempt murder?

Yves fell silent, and his stillness once more flowed out into the crowd.

“Why not.” Yves’s voice was just above a murmur. “The Bard does it best after all.”

The director raised his arms to the audience, and his voice filled the auditorium:

“If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended,

That you have but slumbered here

While these visions did appear.

So, good night unto you all.

Give me your hands, if we be friends,

And Robin shall restore amends.”

A long pause greeted these verses. With an actor’s sense of exactly how long it would hold, Yves dropped his arms, bowed, and strode off stage.

An instant later, the audience’s voices rose in a clamour of questions.

Above them all came Marge’s shrill tones. “I said this show was cursed! But did anyone listen? No!”

“Nicely done,” said Eleanor.

“I second that,” said Callum.

Yves put his hands on his hips, his face a mixture of annoyance, relief, and mirth. “Alex, draw the curtain. I need a drink.”

“Yessir.” With a will, Alex started cranking. The curtain swung across the stage, velvet rippling as the audience disappeared from view.

“Low Bar in five minutes,” said Yves. “I want that moonshine you lot have been skulling after every late rehearsal.”

“You know about that?” squeaked Alex.

“Of course I know,” said Yves. “This ain’t my first rodeo. And it had better be eighty percent proof or higher. Five minutes. Spread the word.” And away he strode.

Callum, Alex, and Eleanor exchanged a glance.

Callum shrugged. “Works for me.” His face softened as Deirdre walked hesitantly across the darkened stage. “You alright?”

“For someone who’s nearly been killed twice in the same night?” Deirdre looked pale and tired, but relieved. “Surprisingly good. And in urgent need of some hooch.”

Avery slipped through the stage door to stand next to Eleanor, his arm coming around her waist. “I never did thank you properly for rescuing me.”

“It was a pleasure.”

“There’s going to be a lot of paperwork and so, so, many questions soon,” said Avery. “Both official and unofficial.”

“We better get the party started, then,” said Eleanor.

“Amen to that,” said Avery. His arm curled tighter around her waist, and Eleanor relaxed into it. The best things in life rarely came without complications. However, Eleanor was good at complicated.

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In which several details are made clear

"So, is this another successful arrest on your career list? How do policemen measure these things?" Eleanor took a sip of the excellent kawakawa gin the RSA served.

Across from her sat Avery and Dante, while Charlie occupied a chair next to hers. The RSA was crowded with locals filling up on gossip and hot chips.

"I don't know any policemen who notch their belts, and closing a case is almost always a team effort." Avery nodded at Dante and Charlie. "Still, there are some cases that are more personal than others." His gaze lingered on Eleanor.

"How did you get Yves to go along with it all?" asked Charlie. "I never thought he would, then you talked to him and…"

Eleanor took another delicate sip of her gin. "It all comes down to leverage."

"I thought your pistol got impounded," said Dante. "At the orchid event."

"Not that kind of leverage."

Avery frowned. "What kind?"

“Well, the name Yves Bouchard rang a bell. It just took me a while to figure out which bell.” Eleanor tried to suppress a smile. Well, tried a little. “You know that theatre job I did back in the day?”

“On Broadway? No other details?” said Dante.

“The very same. Well, he was involved. I suppose it was one way for a young up-and-coming director to fund an off-Broadway show. Only back then, he was known as Ivo Burkhardt. From there, it was simple to apply a little leverage.” She caught Avery’s eye. “I may have used your name in vain as a police officer rabidly keen on taking down ex-cons.”

“I should be,” muttered Avery.

“And Dean?” asked Charlie. “Where’s he at now?”

“Mt Eden Prison, awaiting trial,” said Avery. “But that’s really a formality. We have enough evidence to nail him for Jennifer’s murder, and the attempted murders of Deirdre, and possibly you, Eleanor. Frank’s death is a little more difficult, but we might be able to prove it with the Super 8 footage. That’s up to the Crown Solicitor.”

“Glad to be just an attempted murder,” said Eleanor.

Avery raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. From what I’ve heard, Dean has ignored his lawyer’s advice to say nothing. While he shows zero remorse for Jennifer’s death, he’s been quite voluble on how Frank’s death wasn’t his fault.” He took a meditative sip of his hazy ale. “You three might be in line to receive some sort of commendation. I’ve had to extemporise wildly about how some of the evidence was acquired. Fortunately, Dean’s on-stage antics are more than sufficient to close the case successfully. Talk about a cloud of witnesses.”

“A commendation.” Eleanor tried to conceal her glee at the delicious irony. “Have you ever received one of those, Dante?”

“Many,” said Dante. “All to remain sealed until several years after my death.”

“That does put a damper on things,” said Avery. “If you get this certificate, you can hang it in your hallway, or pool room, or wherever you keep such

things.”

“I have a collection,” said Eleanor.

“Under how many aliases?” asked Avery.

She merely smiled and sipped her gin.

“I’m glad Jennifer’s family got justice,” said Charlie. “She didn’t deserve what happened.”

“The victims rarely do,” Avery sighed. “It’s been an interesting case.”

“Especially the part where you and Hemi got locked down in the deepest cellar,” said Eleanor. “How did that happen?”

Avery shot her a look. “That has yet to be ascertained.”

“You haven’t come up with a plausible explanation yet?” Eleanor feigned surprise. “Surely they teach creative writing in police school?”

“Hemi’s theories have grown increasingly… paranormal,” said Avery. “For the sake of his career, I’ve made sure they don’t leave the office.”

“And your theories?” Eleanor deliberately didn’t look in Charlie’s direction.

Avery shrugged. “There’s bound to be a reasonable explanation. I just haven’t tracked it down yet.”

Eleanor raised her glass. “Good luck with that.”

Dante shifted in his seat, eyes locking onto the RSA entrance. Andrea entered, flanked by Deirdre and Raymond.

“The aristocrats have come to mingle with the rank and file,” said Eleanor. “What has become of standards these days?”

Andrea left her companions at the counter and made a beeline for their table.

“Hi, Andrea,” said Charlie. “How’s it going?”

“It’s been an interesting time.” Andrea’s eyes found Dante’s. “I wanted to ask you something, and since you don’t have a phone, I ended up having to

call Charlie, who said you'd be here."

"Yes." Dante's face was hard to read, even for an expert like Eleanor.

"Would you like to go out on a farm visit tomorrow?" asked Andrea. "No 1200-kilo bulls, just a friendly foal who needs a few injections and a physical checkup. We could go get coffee first at the Pepper Tree Hotel."

There was a beat as Dante considered this. "Yes. Half past seven?"

Andrea grinned. "See you there." She waved at the other table occupants and headed back to her companions.

From the counter, Deirdre caught Eleanor's eye and gave a brief nod of acknowledgement that could have been thanks, or perhaps a simple hello. Eleanor reminded herself virtuously that amateurs did their sleuthing not for applause, but for truth and justice.

Who are you kidding? she thought. I do it because it's almost as fun as pulling cons.

"Don't take anything with you," Charlie was saying in a low voice.

"What do you mean?" asked Dante.

"I mean," Charlie shot a look across at Avery, "don't bring along your usual gear. I'm sure Andrea will feel much more relaxed that way. So will the horses."

Dante's brows drew together, as if Charlie had suggested he go naked. "I don't think I can do that."

Charlie sighed. "I suppose not."

"I'd like to propose a toast." Eleanor lifted her glass. "To good friends, fallen enemies, truth, justice, and the Te Kohe way."

"To all of that," murmured Avery. "And new beginnings."

"To new beginnings, and laying the ghosts of the past to rest," Eleanor caught Charlie's eye.

"To laying the ghosts to rest and daring rescues." Charlie elbowed Dante.

Dante frowned and raised his glass. “To not wearing tights.”

“To not wearing tights,” they all chorused, and drank from their various beverages.

Eleanor relaxed, a glow of goodwill sweeping through her. It was good to celebrate with friends.

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In which a new day dawns

ELEANOR SAT IN HER GAZEBO, THE EARLY MORNING SUN SENDING SLANTED rays through the leaves of the wisteria vine.

Across from her, Avery opened the morning papers with a crisp rustle. The sunlight gilded the side of his face, highlighting his salt and pepper stubble.

Eleanor smiled to herself. She could get used to unshaved Avery.

“Have you found the ‘Arts and Entertainment’ section yet?” she asked.

“Getting there.” Avery thumbed through a few more pages. “Ah.” He adjusted his reading glasses, and his eyebrows rose slightly.

“The critics are unanimous — thou shalt not tamper with the classics,” guessed Eleanor. “Or, the critics are divided. Some applaud the breaking of the fourth wall, while others think it was a cheap trick to add drama to an otherwise dull production.”

“Make up your mind,” said Avery. “Predictions are only impressive if you don’t cover all bases.”

“Fine. Here’s my prediction...” Eleanor placed a finger on each temple and closed her eyes. “I predict… that our fearless *Te Kohe Bugle* reporter has fought his natural instincts for ghost hunting, and decided to write a

scathing review of the play, eviscerating everyone concerned. While in contrast, the illustrious writer from *Stagecraft* had an enjoyable night. Especially since I had Alex refilling his wineglass with the good stuff during the interval. He was rather mellow by the time the play crashed in the fifth act, and the melodrama put a cherry on top of a thoroughly enjoyable evening out in the sticks."

"Well done," murmured Avery. He arched an eyebrow at her. "You didn't sneak a peek, did you?"

"If I did, would I admit it?" She relented. "No peeking. I simply know human nature well enough to predict what's likely. Most of the time."

He stretched a hand out and covered her fingers in warmth. "Can I make a prediction?"

"Yes?" She gave him a sidelong look.

"I predict that you and I might just get along for the foreseeable future."

"If you think that, then you are entirely lacking in imagination. I predict a turbulent future with lots of ups and downs." She leaned in to whisper in his ear. "But it'll be much more fun."

DANTE SAT at a table on the Pepper Tree Hotel balcony, and waited. A staff member had already brought him a carafe of hot, black coffee, and he'd read the menu twice.

At last, a battered Toyota Hilux pulled up to the grass verge and Andrea slid out of the driver's seat. She came around the bonnet of the vehicle and paused, her face unreadable behind dark aviator sunglasses.

Dante knew the moment she found him, seated among the other early morning diners. Her lips parted, then curved in a smile. An unfamiliar feeling arose in Dante's chest. Andrea was smiling because she'd seen him.

It was entirely different from how most people looked when they saw him, but Dante decided he could analyse it later. He rose as Andrea ascended the

steps, and pulled out a chair for her to sit next to him.

“Hi,” said Andrea as she settled into the chair and placed her sunglasses on the table.

“Hi,” said Dante.

There followed a pause where neither of them spoke. Andrea’s eyes were a rich warm brown, flecked with a lighter colour that Dante thought might be called amber.

The silence stretched, and Dante felt another strange sensation. The corners of his mouth tugged upwards. Maybe this was what his therapist had meant by a ‘natural smile’. Dante hadn’t realised it would be this simple. It felt good.

CHARLIE WAS BACK amongst his beloved trees. He was the gardener-in-residence for the Te Kohe cemetery, and he’d never been keener to get into his old, comfortable clothes and dig around the oak trees.

Right now, there were oak leaves to rake, and a hundred daffodil bulbs to go in along the eastern wall.

“That was quite a night.”

The voice sounded so similar to Allie’s that he spun around, pruning shears raised in self-defence.

“Steady on, son.” Mrs Davison, who had owned Dante’s house before she passed away, grinned down at him.

“I, er, sorry, Mrs Davison. I thought you were someone else.”

Mrs Davison nodded slowly. “You did well the other night, Charlie. You’re really growing into yourself. Your father would be proud.”

“Thank you.” Charlie swallowed against an unexpected swell of emotion. “That means a lot.”

“And you know something else? I reckon now that she’s gone from the theatre, old Frank can finally move on. Though he may need a bit of help.”

Charlie sighed. “Of course, Mrs Davison.”

“It’s not so bad, Charlie. Back in the day, someone like you would probably have been burned at the stake. Now all you get are funny looks.”

Charlie made a face. “That’s not as comforting as you might think.”

“I know. But it’s something to bear in mind. You’re doing good work, Charlie Wilson. And the ghosts of Te Kohe are grateful. Even if they don’t always let you know.”

With that, she faded from view.

Charlie wiped his forehead on his shirt sleeve. The sun shone down through the oak leaves, dappling the thick moss at his feet. The smell of wet leaves rose around him, joining the scent of freshly turned earth and growing things.

He let out a deep sigh as his shoulders finally relaxed. It was good to be home.

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EPILOGUE

In which Culture completes its season

THE CURTAIN FELL ACROSS THE STAGE ON THE FINAL PERFORMANCE OF Macbeth by the Te Kohe Amateur Dramatics Society. Charlie straightened from his bow and let go of Deirdre and Steve's hands.

It had been an interesting theatre season. They'd extended the run due to popular demand. When you apprehend a murderer on stage on opening night, word gets around.

The audience who came hoping for more derring-do were disappointed, as was Trevor when Yves vetoed making Dante's rope swing a permanent part of the action. Hopefully, seeing Macbeth dispatched by an enthusiastic Liam in the fifth act made up for it.

Yves had stepped in to play Dean's part. To no one's surprise, he'd brought it off in style.

Beyond the curtain, the applause died down.

Yves let out a deep sigh. "That's it, folks. Everyone, we're going to do a short end-of-show ritual. I find it helps release the energy we've been carrying these last couple of weeks." He made a circular motion with his hand. "Everyone form a circle and hold hands. Backstage crew too."

They did, casting puzzled glances around. When their circle was complete, Yves said: "Now close your eyes."

Just before Charlie did, he saw the theatre ghosts drifting in, clad in outlandish costumes, wigs, and stage makeup. They formed their own circle, intersecting with the living circle.

“To the gods and goddesses of the theatre,” said Yves. “To the nine muses and the spirit of Thespis, we offer our humble craft as a gift. Please bear it away, with all the triumph and disaster it contains, and return to us your blessing.” Yves paused for a moment, then clapped three times.

It was as if a spell had broken, or everyone had woken from a dream. Charlie opened his eyes, and around him, the rest of the cast did the same, blinking as if surprised to find themselves still in a theatre.

“Right,” said Yves briskly. “We’re going to strike the set tonight. Everyone report to Callum for their duties. I want to be out of here in two hours.”

Callum gave him a nod that was almost respectful. “Alright, you unruly bunch. It’s time to do some real work.”

Two hours and ten minutes later, Charlie straightened from stowing the last tree branches into the back of the Crypt.

“And that’s a wrap.” Callum’s voice called out from the other end of the space. “Go away now, and I don’t want to see your ugly mugs until next year.”

“Always a pleasure,” said Yves drily. “And good evening to you all.”

Charlie followed the rest of the cast up the stairs from the Crypt. He felt flat, and empty. He remembered this feeling from last season, though he couldn’t work out if it was more this time, or about the same.

Mrs Haddock stood at the backstage door, handing out RSA vouchers to each crew member and thanking them for being part of the production.

Charlie accepted his voucher, then waited at her shoulder until the last of the crew had left.

Mrs Haddock eyed him, a knowing glint in her eye.

“Charlie Wilson, our resident Sherlock Holmes. What are you planning now?”

“I was wondering, could I stay behind? Just five minutes.”

She lowered her head to peer over her glasses at him. “You’ll need to turn off the ghost light when you leave.”

“Oh, I will.”

“Very well.” She patted him on the shoulder. “You did well. An excellent Banquo. And although Dante’s acting did not improve, his flight out over the audience more than made up for it. That will become theatre lore.”

Charlie grinned. “It was quite a show.”

“It was indeed. And now, good night.”

Charlie waited until Mrs Haddock’s footsteps disappeared. The backstage exit door thunked closed, and he was alone in the theatre.

All the lights were off except the ghost light. Charlie stood in its glow, feeling the theatre come alive in a new way.

It was different since Allie had been banished. The usual theatre ghosts had returned, like pigeons after the hawk had passed. Now they gathered on stage, looking out over the empty auditorium.

Charlie sighed. It was a feeling he knew all too well — the ending that had to come once something had begun. It wasn’t that the play had died, because it had never been alive. But, in a way, it had. It was a shared dream they’d all been part of, and now it was over.

The row of ghosts bowed, and one by one, drifted away. Until there was just one solitary ghost left, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a strong jaw and a cleft chin. Frank Rathburn raised a hand in greeting.

“Hi, Frank,” said Charlie. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“I’ve been keeping to myself,” said Frank.

“Why?”

Frank rubbed his jaw, his outline misty in the ghost light. “Shame, mostly. There were so many things I was blind to. Like Macbeth, I suppose. I had

one lapse of judgement, made one mistake, and then I committed further sins to cover it up."

Charlie had never wanted to be a confessor, but it seemed to come with the mixed blessing of talking with the dead.

Frank gazed over the darkened theatre. "The truth is, I wanted Dean to know I was his father. I wanted to raise him as my son. But I was afraid of what other people would think." He laughed softly. "Ridiculous, isn't it? I cared more about what other people might think. I did so much damage, for something so unimportant."

"It was Dean's decision to become a murderer," said Charlie.

"True," said Frank. "But he might have turned out differently, if I'd been honest. Now I'll never know."

"No," said Charlie. "You can't know. But you can let go. And when you do, you can move on."

Frank ran one hand through his translucent hair. "Yes, about that."

"Yes?"

"I saw you do that thing with Allie. You opened a door to elsewhere. Can you do that for me?"

"I can. And I think it'll take you somewhere quite different."

"That's good." Frank regarded him sidelong. "You know, you're wise, for a young fella." Already, his posture had straightened, and his ghostly glow was more silver than grey.

"Well, all the best," said Charlie. "Or rather, break a leg." He opened a door in his mind.

Charlie watched the figure of Frank step through the door, and walk away along a path that curved beneath a wide, bright sky. He let the doorway fade, and at last, he was alone in the theatre.

He reached out and switched off the ghost light. Darkness flooded the space, a warm, comfortable, interior night.

He felt his way outside and let the backstage door thunk closed behind him.

Charlie let out a deep breath. “Well. That’s the theatre done for a year.”

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WHAT'S NEXT?

There's quite a bit going on in the Dante-verse, and you can find it all at:

www.NaomiKuttner.com/assassins-guides/

This is where you can find out about illustrated special editions, free short stories, and be in the running to beta read my next book. 🥳

Happy reading!



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Apologies to Shakespearean scholars — I took a few liberties with the Macbeth quotes.

Because… well… I wanted to. (That's what authors do — mess with things :)

If you want the unsullied original, you can always find the full play online or anywhere good books reside.

As for the ghost light, the cursed Scottish Play, and the many other rituals and superstitions that surround the theatre, these are all true. I didn't make them up (although I wish I had…)

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I created this book with help from some very talented people. They're mentioned here, in no particular order.

My cousin Daniel, who helped me understand the theatre backstage and its many opportunities for murder…

My wonderful writing group, who gave me encouragement, criticism, and excellent advice.

My fabulous beta readers, who thrashed through various versions of misadventure in the world of Macbeth.

Max, my faithful hound, who kept my feet warm while I wrangled with the plot.

The Waiuku & Papakura theatre staff, who let me poke around and go places members of the public aren't really supposed to be.

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