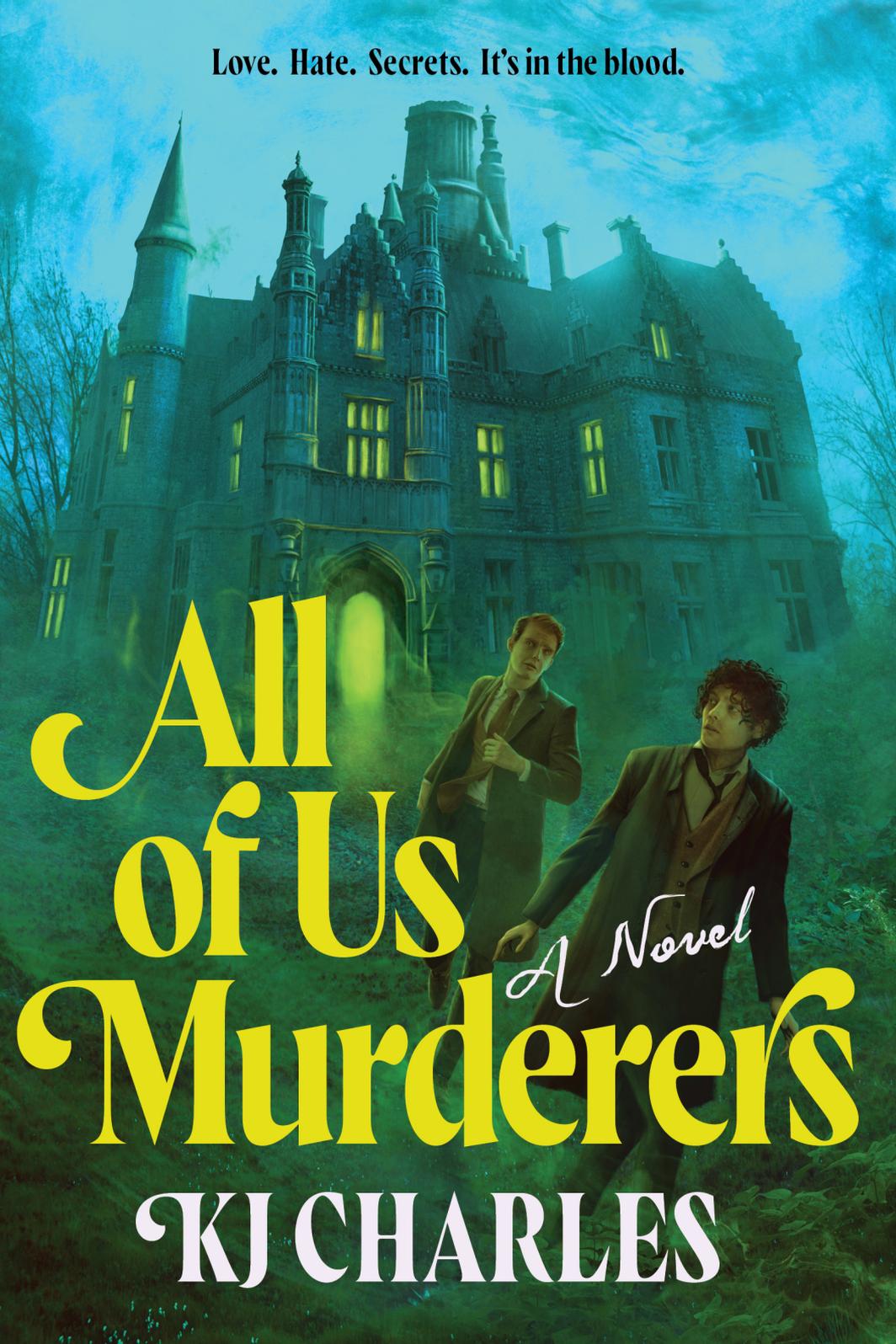


Love. Hate. Secrets. It's in the blood.



All
of US
Murderers

A Novel

KJ CHARLES

one

THE GATES WERE BEAUTIFULLY wrought iron, elegantly monogrammed with interlocking Ws. The motor-car's headlights illuminated the black paint, the curlicues and details gleaming gold. It was an elegant, sophisticated gate. It was also twelve feet high if you counted the spikes, and it stood in a very solid brick wall that matched its height.

Zebedee Wyckham contemplated the gate and the towering wall, its top dimly picked out by the waning moon. He considered the bleak moorland through which they had been driving on the roughest possible track for hours without seeing evidence of human life. Then he asked the chauffeur, "Lackaday House, yes? Not Dartmoor Prison?"

"Lackaday House," the man said, unsmiling.

"Right."

Zeb had not been to Lackaday House before. Its owner was

his cousin Wynn Wyckham, but Wynn was over two decades his senior, and the Wyckhams were not a close or a loving family. Zeb had met him exactly twice, both times as a child under orders to keep his mouth shut; he'd barely thought of the fellow since.

Then, six months ago, he'd had a letter, quite out of the blue, asking him to come for a visit. Since Zeb wouldn't cross the street to see any of the relatives he knew, he had snorted at the idea of crossing the country for one he didn't. Nevertheless, it had been a kindly gesture, so he'd replied, and Wynn had kept pressing. He'd been friendly and pleasant, which made a nice change, and various circumstances had arisen that made it appealing for Zeb to be somewhere else, and long story short, here he was. In cold, dark Dartmoor at the arse end of November, staring at a firmly closed gate.

He couldn't help feeling he'd misjudged this.

"It's extremely secure," he remarked. "Is there much danger of burglars here?"

The chauffeur looked round at him with an expression of utter contempt. He was a heavy-set man, in his fifties but obviously powerful, with a rat-trap mouth, so the expression was very effective. "No."

Zeb had spent the last two hours in silence, since the noise of the motor and the wind and the road surface had made conversation impossible. He'd also been sitting as close to still as he could, which was to say fidgeting relentlessly and hoping it wasn't annoying his driver too much, and the combination of

enforced immobility and enforced taciturnity was building up under his skin. He really wanted to talk.

He'd been told often enough he should realise when people didn't want to listen. He locked his jaw, concentrating on the feel of the rosary in his pocket, sliding the string of smooth beads round and round between finger and thumb while his foot tapped compulsively. He needed to be out of this blasted car. Maybe he could get out and walk the rest of the way down the drive, once they opened the gates. If they ever opened the gates.

"Gosh, this is taking a while," he said. "It is rather cold to sit here, isn't it? And it must be trying for you to wait like this every time. Unless it's not every time?"

The chauffeur didn't even answer. Zeb's toes twitched violently in his shoes.

A man finally turned up to unlock the gates and haul them open. The procedure took several minutes and was accompanied by a deeply unpleasant screeching of metal on stone. The sound would drive Zeb mad if he were the gatekeeper.

Maybe they didn't open the gates often. Maybe the gatekeeper was already mad and didn't mind. Maybe they wanted it to be noisy so that nobody could escape the grounds in secret.

Zeb grinned to himself, recognising his imaginings as the sort that Gothic heroines frequently thought and dismissed at the start of a book. Specifically, it was very much what Clara thought and dismissed at the beginning of Walter Wyckham's Gothic classic *Clara Lackaday*, which was why she entered the

brooding walls that would become her prison instead of legging it for the horizon in chapter one. The more fool Clara.

The gates were finally pulled wide. The chauffeur got the motor going again, its bangs and growls an unwelcome intrusion into Dartmoor's clean, quiet air, and they chugged along. Behind them, the gate screamed protest once more before shutting with a resoundingly final clang.

They drove on up the drive. After a few moments, Zeb said, "Where's the house?"

"Not there yet, are we?" the chauffeur said contemptuously.

"Well, that's why I asked. It seems an awfully long way. Are the grounds very extensive?"

The chauffeur ignored that as well. Zeb suspected they were unlikely to become friends.

Along with the motor's headlamps, the sliver of moon gave just enough light to indicate that the grounds were as bleak as the moors outside. Zeb saw a few shapes which might be out-buildings, but oddly shaped ones if so. Eventually there were trees, and then Zeb saw Lackaday House at last.

It was huge, dark, towering against the night sky, a great octagonal tower topped by a cupola dominating its centre. Zeb thought he could make out crenellations and flying buttresses, perhaps because he knew they were there from photographs. He would have placed it in the year 1500 or so as a glowering relic of medieval religion and aristocratic pride, if he hadn't known his entirely common grandfather had built the thing a mere century ago.

“That’s very Gothic,” he said, and was ignored once more.

The motor pulled up in front of the house. The chauffeur sat unmoving and unspeaking, so Zeb said, “Well, thank you” and got out.

The relief was overwhelming. He shook his arms out, rolled his shoulder, jiggled his ankles to kick out the infuriating accumulation of fidgets, and then realised the chauffeur was still sitting there, very possibly watching him in the wing mirror, and clearly had no intention of getting his luggage out.

Zeb considered that, then went to retrieve his suitcases from the back himself. He was starting to feel rather unsettled. It was a matter of course in big houses like this that the staff did things like taking bags or opening doors for guests, but the chauffeur didn’t seem to feel that was his responsibility, and there was no indication that anyone had even noticed their arrival.

He turned to the chauffeur, who took that opportunity to drive off without a word, leaving him in a cloud of stinking smoke.

“Bye, then,” Zeb said after him, and hoisted his suitcases towards the stairs and the front door.

As he did so, the door opened, spilling light down the stone steps. Zeb looked up, hoping for Cousin Wynn, or at least a butler, and saw a woman.

She was young, and very lovely, with dark hair spilling in loose curls over her shoulders. She wore a simple long white shift, possibly a nightgown, and appeared to be barefoot. He’d never seen a woman in such deshabelle outside a painting. As he

gaped, she clasped both hands to her generously exposed bosom and ran down the steps, fleeing past him into the dark gardens with a sob.

“Uh, hello?” Zeb said after her, too late. “Excuse me?”

She disappeared into the darkness, a dim white wraith fading to nothing. Zeb gazed at her retreat, bathed in the light from the house. That darkened with dramatic suddenness, and he turned to see that a tall man was silhouetted in the doorway.

“Oh,” Zeb said, blinking at the light. “Good evening. Do you know that a woman just ran into the gardens crying?”

The man didn’t reply. He stepped back and gestured towards the inside of the house, indicating that Zeb should come in.

Zeb looked at him, and back into the gardens. “No, but a young lady has legged it into the darkness, very much not dressed for the weather, and she seemed quite upset. I think someone should go after her.”

“Please enter the house. The cold is getting in.”

Zeb opened his mouth to ask if his interlocutor had somehow not heard him. The words never made it out because they were swamped by an impossible, overwhelming recognition that sent a shudder all along his spine. The tall silhouette. The deep, cool baritone voice.

He dropped his bags, ran four steps up the stairs, and saw a familiar face emerge from the darkness. Patrician nose, light hazel eyes, straw-coloured hair, its reddish tint made flame by the gaslight.

Gideon. It was actually, impossibly, Gideon. Zeb’s heart

lurched joyously in the fraction of a second before his brain caught up and his stomach plunged. The combined experience was unpleasant.

“What the—?”

“Ah, Mr. Zebedee,” Gideon said over him. “You may remember me: Gideon Grey. I’m Mr. Wynn Wyckham’s confidential secretary. I trust you had a pleasant journey.”

Gideon didn’t sound like he trusted it in the least. He sounded like he wished Zeb had driven into a ditch.

Zeb bit back *What the bloody hell are you doing here?* Mixing in his circles, one learned to take people’s cues on one’s previous acquaintance. “Good evening. How nice to meet you again,” he managed, though his mind was scrambling. *Gideon. Here.*

Gideon gave it about two seconds. “Are you going to come in? Or just stand there?”

Right, yes, coming in was the thing to do. Zeb moved forward, realised he needed his bags, went back down again, and remembered. “No, but there was a woman. The young lady—”

“Miss Wyckham will come to no harm. Leave the bags. I’ll have them taken up.”

“Miss who?”

“Miss Jessamine Wyckham,” Gideon said, with some exasperation. “That was your cousin Jessamine.”

“My *what?*”

“Cousin!” Gideon snapped. “Just come into the house, will you? Sir,” he added, more secretarially. “I would like to shut the door.”

“But—”

“It is cold,” Gideon said through his teeth. “If you come in, you can go up. You are the last to arrive, and dinner will be served in half an hour.”

This was a bad dream. In fact, yes, of course it was a dream. Zeb didn’t have a cousin Jessamine, and Gideon could not possibly be here calling him *sir*, therefore he was dozing in the motor-car and would wake up at any minute. Zeb prodded at that thought for a second in a hopeful sort of way. No waking occurred.

“Thank you,” he said, because some sort of reply was needed. “When you say ‘last’...”

“Get in.”

Zeb grabbed his bags and got in, finding himself in a huge hall. Gideon shut the door with the kind of deliberate care that was more pointed than a slam. “Alfred will show you to your room. Take the luggage, please, Alfred.”

A footman approached, with a truculent look reminiscent of the chauffeur. He hoisted the suitcases. Gideon added, “The rest of your family will be gathered in the drawing room, which is there, down the—”

“My family?” Zeb said. “You mean Wynn, yes?”

“And Mr. Bram Wyckham—”

“Bram?” Zeb yelped. “Bram is in this house? Right now? At the same time as me?”

“Mr. Bram Wyckham, Mrs. Wyckham, and Mr. Hawley Wyckham.”

“Sweet baby Jesus!”

Gideon inclined his head. The gaslight was by no means excessively bright, and the positioning of the lamps cast dramatic shadows. His eyes and cheeks were hollower than they used to be, Zeb thought. He looked drawn, older, almost cadaverous.

And he'd said Bram was here, so this wasn't a dream. It was quite clearly a nightmare. “Tell me you're not serious,” Zeb said.

Gideon gave him an expressionless look. Zeb wished he could detect sympathy in it. “Please follow Alfred, Mr. Zebedee. Mr. Wynn prefers punctuality at meals.”



Zeb's allotted room was on the first floor of the west wing, towards the back of the house. It was reasonably sized, with a canopied bed, leaded windows, a heavily-framed oil painting of a man that Zeb didn't want to look at, and a Tudorish sort of air it was three centuries away from deserving.

Zeb didn't care about historical accuracy at this moment. He was more concerned with getting dressed, and also whether he could fashion a makeshift rope from bedsheets and escape.

Bram was bad enough. Elise made everything worse. Bram, Elise, *and Hawley*...well, if Cousin Wynn had planned this as a delightful family reunion, he had a shock coming.

And, worse than all that put together, Gideon. How could Gideon be here, working as Wynn's secretary? How was Zeb

supposed to spend a fortnight with Gideon calling him *Mr. Zebedee* and looking at him with such cold dislike?

Obviously Gideon still hated him. That was more of a blow than Zeb might have expected. He had woken up for a year knowing that Gideon hated him, of course, that he'd ruined the best thing in his life out of his own damn fool stupidity, but he'd known it from a distance: their paths hadn't crossed since they'd parted. Now he was faced with Gideon hating him in person, and it hurt as much as it ever had.

Gideon ought not hate him. It was quite reasonable he did, in the circumstances, but he ought not. In a better-ordered world, his light eyes would have warmed as they used to, and his lips would have twitched in the little smile that utterly changed his serious face, and the stiffness of his shoulders would have relaxed, and Zeb would have run up the stairs and caught his hands...

That should have happened. And he shouldn't have that drawn, unhappy look, as though he hadn't laughed in a year; as though all the old stiff reserve had come back and calcified him. As though Zeb had ruined, not just what they'd had, but Gideon himself.

He sat on the bed, head in hands. He didn't want to have hurt Gideon; he also very much didn't want to spend a fortnight having the fact he had done so rubbed into his own face. Perhaps that was cowardly and he deserved the punishment, except he couldn't imagine Gideon enjoying the next fortnight either. Why the devil was he here? *How* was he here?

Distantly, Zeb heard a gong. It didn't register for a moment, then he realised with a jolt he was supposed to be downstairs.

At least he'd got everything done but his tie. He went to do that, and winced at what the mirror showed him.

He'd meant to get his dinner things cleaned and pressed for this visit, but there had been all the kerfuffle with work, and various tasks had come up that he couldn't even remember now but which had seemed more urgent at the time, and the fact was, he hadn't got round to it. The neglect showed. His dinner jacket was decidedly grubby and creased after a few excessive nights a couple of years ago, followed by an unspecified period stuffed into the bottom of his wardrobe; the disgraceful state of his black trousers suggested very accurately that he'd spent some time kneeling in them; and his white waistcoat lacked snowy spotlessness in the same way that London's streets lacked a patina of gold.

In fact, he looked an utter scruff. He usually did, in part because of his shambolic inability to get things cleaned and pressed, rather more because he simply didn't care. His father had frequently expressed that cleanliness was next to godliness, and, as with many things, Zeb wasn't inclined to follow in his footsteps. Left to himself, he would live in old tweed, older shoes, and a general state of baggy comfort. If only people would leave him to himself.

But he *had* wanted to sort out his dinner things for this visit, and at this moment, the failure felt crushing.

He batted ineffectually at the unruly curls he might have

smoothed with pomade if he'd had any. He'd intended to buy some when he got his hair cut, which he also hadn't got round to. Bram was going to love this.

Zeb got the tie dealt with in the speckled mirror while, to one side, the portrait contemplated him with a sneer. "You can sod off," Zeb told it, and wondered whether it would be rude to take it down and turn its face to the wall.

Stop dallying. Get on.

Zeb took a deep breath, and headed out of the room to find himself in a long, empty corridor. The dim gaslight revealed it was papered in dark red with an aggressively repetitive decoration of swerving, bloated lines, and hung with dark paintings of grim old men and empty moors. At least they distracted the eye from the wallpaper. Doors stretched off in both directions.

It would be very easy to have no idea where to go at this point, and end up helplessly baffled and miserably late for dinner. It was what he'd usually do, in fact, which was why Zeb had made himself consciously note the way to his room. Now, if he could just remember what that was.

He checked his bedroom door to be sure he could identify it on his return (three from the end, and opposite a painting of a man in a Georgian wig who looked like his father but with syphilis), and headed off with reasonable confidence that he had to take the first right turn and then a left. He did so, but decided after about ten feet he'd been wrong: he didn't recognise this corridor at all. Hell's bells. He doubled back, took the next right in an exploratory way, and decided that was wrong too. He

turned back to retrace his steps, trying to quash the rising fear that he'd got turned around somehow, came round a corner, and almost walked into Gideon.

"Oh," Zeb said.

Gideon's jaw was set. "May I show you the way downstairs?"

"Gideon—"

"Mr. Grey," Gideon said, low and savage. "Remember that. You're not losing me another job."

Zeb's stomach tensed so hard it hurt. "What are you doing here?"

"I assumed you'd get lost. Clearly, I was right."

He stalked off on that. Zeb hurried to catch up. Gideon had longer legs and a fast pace; Zeb was one of nature's amblers.

"I meant, why are you *here*?" he demanded as they stormed along the dark corridor. "Here with my cousin? How did you get this job?"

"Not off my references from Cubitt's; I can assure you of that."

He sped up, leaving Zeb entirely behind, and led the way to a door that opened on to the landing at the top of the main hall.

Zeb had been too distracted to pay attention when he had entered the house. He now saw it was impressively sized, with a very high ceiling, a couple of huge windows, and a neck-breaker of a stone staircase leading down to the flagstoned floor. It was distinctly cold. He hurried after Gideon, but couldn't quite catch him before they reached the drawing room, and his assembled family.

Everyone turned to look at him as he tumbled in at Gideon's

heels. There was a silence. Finally Bram said, through tight lips, “Zebedee. You’re late.”

“Charmed to see you too,” Zeb retorted.

He regretted it as soon as the words were out. He always did, but his determination to be the bigger man and rise above his brother’s sneers never survived contact with the blighter. He swung away before it got worse, giving his sister-in-law the obligatory bow. “Good evening, Elise. Ah—” He glanced between the two men he didn’t know.

The shorter of them stepped forward, smiling, and shook Zeb’s hand warmly. “Zebedee. How delightful to meet you after so long. I am your Cousin Wynn.”

Wynn was cheerful, plump, and entirely bald but for a fringe of grey hair. He blinked in a friendly way through owlish spectacles. Zeb knew him to be in the region of fifty; he looked older.

“It’s lovely to be here,” he lied. “Very good to meet you, Wynn. Well, to meet you again, I suppose, since we have met, but I was rather young then—”

Bram muttered something not quite under his breath, in which Zeb made out the word ‘withering’. He stopped talking.

Wynn was smiling, though. “Yes, it has been twenty years or more, hasn’t it? We must not let so long go by again. Thank you for coming, Zebedee.”

“Zeb, please. I go by Zeb.”

“Really? What an ungainly shortening of an elegant name. Still, that’s young men for you, eh, Dash? Do you know Colonel Dash?”

He indicated the other unknown man, who looked to be in

his mid-forties, with a ramrod-straight back and a heavy moustache. He and Zeb shook hands as Wynn said, "Wyckham Dash, our second cousin. Dash, this is Zebedee. Zeb."

Dash gave a confident smile. "Pleased to meet you. Call me Dash. Too many Wyckhams in here."

That was inarguable. Zeb crossed his fingers as unobtrusively as possible, turned to the final member of the company, and said, "Good evening, Hawley."

"Zeb, dear boy," Hawley drawled. He was much the best-looking of the younger generation, with dramatically swept back dark blond hair and striking green eyes, and sported a goatee that suited him tiresomely well. He wore an emerald velvet jacket in lieu of the conventional black (or, in Zeb's case, blackish) evening dress the other men sported; it made him look like the artist he was. He held a glass of sherry, presumably because Cousin Wynn didn't stock absinthe.

Hawley was assessing Zeb in his turn. "It's been a while, hasn't it? Now, when was it I last saw you?"

He knew very well where: a very specific sort of gentleman's club. Hawley had been there because he liked to be acquainted with London's scenes of vice; Zeb had been there because he was a member. It was a little tease, a little taunt, a little flick of the cat's claw.

"The Café Royal, I think. You were with a party," Zeb said. That was actually the last time but one he'd seen the fellow, and it had been brief, what with Hawley's party getting themselves thrown out for drunken and disorderly behaviour.

“The Café Royal?” Elise repeated in her clear, bell-like voice. “Goodness, Hawley. How strangely predictable of you. So very bourgeois.”

“It can hardly be strangely predictable, dear Elise,” Hawley returned, with a wolfish smile. “You muddle your metaphors.”

“That wasn’t a metaphor,” Zeb said, and got glares from everyone involved: Hawley for the correction, Bram for inserting himself in a conversation with his wife, Elise for existing, probably. She’d never been pleased about that.

Wynn beamed around them. “How marvellous it is to have the whole family together like this. I don’t know if it has happened before.”

Zeb was fairly sure it had not, since the spectrum of Wyckham family relationships ran from indifference to loathing. He said, “It’s very kind of you to host us all.”

“Be so good as to speak on your own behalf,” Bram said. “I don’t require you to offer gratitude for me. Wynn is, as always, a most thoughtful host.”

“Do pour yourself a sherry, Zebedee,” Wynn said. “If you care to smoke after dinner, there are cigarettes in the boxes around the house: please do help yourself, but I ask that my guests do not smoke in here or the dining room. I have a quite irrational aversion to the smell. I will just send to see if Jessamine will join us. Do please enjoy catching up with each other.”

Zeb was fairly sure they’d already managed all the courteous interaction of which a group of Wyckhams was likely to be capable. He went to look at the paintings on the walls as a pretext for

not talking to anyone, slipping his hand into his pocket as he did so, and realised he'd forgotten to transfer the rosary from his other jacket. Blast.

There were several rather good pictures, including a Turner seascape and two portraits of a woman in her thirties, one of which had the sensuality of John Singer Sargent's best work. In fact, Zeb realised as he examined them, it *was* a Sargent, and the other one was John Everett Millais. That must have cost a few bob to commission, and he wondered who the woman was. Wynn had never married, so far as he knew, but Lackaday House's previous owner, his father, had died around 1880—

"For goodness' sake, must you?" Bram snapped in his ear.

Zeb jumped, startled. "What?"

"Fiddling and fidgeting. It is intolerable."

Zeb had no idea what he was talking about for a second, and then realised he'd picked up a box of matches from the table in front of him and had been playing with it, pushing the drawer in and out. He hadn't noticed himself doing it; he never did. "Sorry," he said automatically, and then could have kicked himself. He had no need to apologise to Bram, for anything, ever.

At the door, Wynn clapped his hands. "Well! We are all here except Jessamine, and we will not wait for her. Let us go through."

two

THEY FILED THROUGH TO a grand dining hall with a table that would seat thirty. Their party of seven looked decidedly meagre clustered at one end, particularly since there was an eighth place set. Wynn nodded at the dour footman. “Miss Jessamine may not be joining us tonight. Leave the setting in case she changes her mind, but we will begin.”

“Is that the young lady I saw as I arrived?” Zeb asked.

“That’s right. Your cousin, or first cousin once removed, though we need not split hairs. As it were.” He chuckled.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.” Zeb could feel several people looking daggers at him, but he didn’t trust anyone here to explain matters discreetly at a convenient juncture. “I wasn’t aware I had a young lady cousin. Is she your daughter, Hawley?”

Bram made an explosive noise which Zeb connected too late

to the footman who was serving out soup, as if the staff wouldn't know exactly what was going on.

Hawley had no interest in manners or discretion, but his lip curled anyway. "Of course she is not my daughter. The girl is barely ten years my junior."

"She's eighteen, and you're thirty-five if you're a day," Elise pointed out. "I know you like to consider yourself an enfant terrible, but you're really getting a *little* past that, don't you think?"

"Thirty-four. And I'm quite sure a woman's thirtieth birthday comes before a man's fortieth." Hawley delivered that with a smirk.

"That makes no mathematical sense at all," Bram said.

Hawley clearly felt his aphorism should have received more applause. "How you can presume to comment on Art with your cloddish literality—"

Zeb felt a pang of sympathy for Wynn, unwittingly inviting this mess to his dining table, and for Gideon, not even a Wyckham but stuck here listening to them. "I still don't understand," he said, hoping to pull the conversation back on track. "Who is she?"

"It's a sad story," Wynn said. "You know I had a sister, Laura. Well, not quite a sister. She was our grandfather's daughter by his fifth wife, born after his death."

Zeb worked that out. "So, she was your aunt? My aunt too, I suppose."

"Indeed, but she and I were born in the same year. My father took full charge of her, and Laura and I were brought up as siblings."

“Why did your father take charge of her?” Zeb asked. “What happened to her mother? Oh, was that the housemaid?”

Bram harrumphed with annoyance. “Kindly don’t dredge up family history.”

“We’re talking about family history. And I’m sure Walter Wyckham’s last wife was his housemaid: I remember Father complaining about it.”

“Yes, he was nearly eighty when love’s young dream struck him in the servants’ quarters. Senility is a marvellous thing,” Hawley remarked.

“So why did—”

“There is no need to pry,” Bram said over him. “For heaven’s sake, hold your tongue.”

“Not at all,” Wynn said. “There is no mystery about it: simply, Laura’s mother was of low birth and weak mind, not fit to live independently. Laura and I were inseparable growing up, but at sixteen she had a love affair. The passion of youth. My father had her removed from the house when the consequences of her error became visible. He took her away, and he told me she was dead.”

Wynn stopped there. Zeb could see his throat working for a moment before he went on. “He told me that cruel lie, and he gave her a small allowance to live on with her daughter so long as she did not contact me. Thus he kept us apart, until just a few weeks before his death. He said she had brought shame to the family, that she and her mother were a stain on our name. Well, let him think that. He died at last, I became master here, and my Laura returned to her home. She is there, look.”

Zeb turned to follow his gesture, and was relieved to see he meant a painting. It showed the same woman as in the other paintings. She was elegantly dressed and wore a distinctly smug smile.

Wynn gazed at the portrait for a moment, eyes focused on the past, then sighed. "Our reunion was too short. All Walter's children were to die before fifty, and Laura was no exception to that. She died only a handful of years after her return."

"What a shame," Elise said, with glacial insincerity.

"It's a very sad story," Zeb added, because he felt rather bad for Wynn, his voice throbbing with feeling while nobody around the table cared. "I'm still not sure about the young lady?"

Wynn nodded. "Laura's daughter, your cousin Georgina, had come with her, of course, and we put her into what I believed to be an excellent school. But it proved sadly lax. The girls were allowed a great deal too much freedom, and as a consequence, a plausible rogue was able to insinuate himself into her trust." He glanced at Elise. "I wouldn't wish to insult a lady by speaking of matters that would defile unsullied ears."

Someone in the room inhaled, a tiny indrawn breath that was all too audible. Elise wore a smile as bright and sparkling as her diamonds but without their authenticity. "How very kind, dear Wynn," she said, her voice a musical chime.

"Very kind indeed," Hawley added. "But you need not mind Elise. I dare say she'll survive a touch of impropriety."

Bram's nostrils flared. Elise's expression didn't falter. Wynn said, "Then I shall not scruple. This villain, whose identity I was never able to discover, took ruthless advantage of Georgina, and

she bore a child, though she was just a girl herself still. She was... troubled, afterwards, and took her own life. The child she bore is Jessamine.”

“That’s terrible,” Zeb said. “I am most awfully sorry. I had no idea about this.”

“None of us did,” Hawley said. “It seems Wynn kept this offshoot of the family tree entirely secret, even from Bram. That must have come as a shock.”

“To you all, I dare say,” Elise said. “Naturally you would all be distressed at the spawning of illegitimate children.”

Bram’s jaw twitched. Hawley’s mouth hardened to a sneer. Zeb couldn’t help glancing down at Gideon. He was eating his soup with the expression of someone who wasn’t listening and might not have been there at all.

“I kept her secret, yes,” Wynn said, ignoring the byplay. “I kept her safe. My Laura’s daughter had her innocence abused in my care, and I determined that I would not fail Jessamine as I had Georgina. I have had her brought up in the most careful circumstances, protected both from predators and from those who would scorn her birth.”

“You are generous, sir,” Bram said. “It is inevitable that the stain of her origins will attach to her, but I hope all of us will treat her with the pity her unfortunate situation must demand.”

“I am glad you are so thoughtful,” Wynn said. “But I want more for her than pity. Yes, her birth is stained. I intend to remedy that.”

“How?” Zeb asked.

“By marriage, of course. Finding her a husband.”

That gave the table pause. Zeb realised he'd forgotten all about his soup, and it must be getting cold. He sipped it. It was probably mulligatawny, but regrettably underseasoned.

"Well, that is very thoughtful," Bram said. "Some decent young fellow who will overlook her origins: an artisan or clerk, perhaps. You intend to give her a sum to marry on, I suppose? Of course, we have discussed the needs of the house—"

"Indeed we have, very often," Wynn said composedly. "And this brings me to the reason for this gathering. I summoned you all together with the intention of discussing the disposition of my fortune."

"Indeed," Bram said. "Yes, indeed."

"I am unmarried, childless, and Walter Wyckham's legacy rests heavy on my shoulders. He, of course, was generous to his younger sons in his will." He glanced between Zeb, whose father had received a tidy sum and stewarded it well, and Hawley, whose father had blown the lot on the horses. "I do not intend to divide my fortune. Lackaday House is not cheap to maintain, and with the world going downhill as it is, its inheritor will need every penny. Bram has persuaded me that I should keep the estate—house and money—intact."

"I'm quite sure he has," Hawley said viciously.

"The necessity is clear to any man of moderate acumen," Bram said. "With the rising cost of living, it is imperative the property should not be fragmented."

"And that's up to you, is it? Up to you, and going to you?"

"It is Wynn's decision. But I am the next of Walter's

grandchildren,” Bram said. “Naturally, I follow Wynn in the line of succession.”

“We’re not monarchs,” Hawley retorted. “And *you* may believe that inheritance goes by ‘winner takes all’—”

“The winner will take all,” Wynn said. “The estate will be kept in one piece, no matter to whom I bequeath it.”

“Of course,” Elise said. “And you have named Bram as your heir. That has been understood for years.”

“But I never made a formal arrangement,” Wynn returned. “And I have recently concluded that I should reconsider.”

Bram was going a rather unhealthy shade of red. “What is this? We have discussed this, Wynn, often. You told me I was to inherit. I am the *eldest*.”

“You care greatly about that,” Wynn said. “But why should I exclude Zebedee simply because he is younger?”

Elise gave a cold smile. “Perhaps because Bram has shown his dedication to Lackaday House for years, whereas Zebedee is quite useless.”

“Marital support, Elise?” Hawley drawled. “You must be worried. Wynn, do I take it from my presence here that I am in this newly opened field?”

Wynn gave him a look that was hard to read. “I was not fond of your father. He was a nasty, spiteful boy who became a vicious man. But I must ask myself, is it fair to judge you on that basis?”

Bram was looking rather red around the neck. “Of course it is. This is absurd. You chose me as your inheritor years ago, with the well-being of the house and its future in mind—”

“Did I, though?” Wynn asked. “Did I really consider each of you on your merits, or was I swayed by your father’s arguments in your favour, and my dislike of Hawley’s father? Can that be right?”

“Of course it was right. Hawley is as debauched as his father, and Zebedee an idle wastrel. The circumstances demand frankness,” Bram added over both men’s strong protests. “We are talking of Lackaday House’s future. Hawley’s appalling career speaks for itself, and I regret to say that Zebedee has recently been dismissed from yet another post in disgrace. He is incapable of holding a position of trust.”

The fraternal treachery was jaw-dropping, even from Bram. “That is utterly unfair. I was not dismissed for any wrongdoing,” Zeb protested.

“I had the news from Purefoy. Do you claim he lied?”

“If he said it was for wrongdoing, yes!”

“What were you sacked for, then?” Bram demanded.

“Well, gross incompetence,” Zeb had to admit. He didn’t want to look at Gideon, to see his face at the news of yet another dismissal, another failure. “But—”

“Quite,” Bram said heavily. “Quite. Look at the state of you. You are a scarecrow. You cannot hold a position, even as a mere clerk with no prospect of advancement—”

“Can we just recall why I have old clothes and no prospects?” Zeb said furiously. “Why I’m a mere clerk?”

“Oh, not this again,” Elise said, light and deadly. “Do stop complaining.”

“You had every chance to make something of yourself, and you have failed. Whereas what Hawley has made of himself is...” Bram raised a scornful brow.

“I am an Artist,” Hawley said. “I have made my name—the family name—as a creator, not a pettifogging, spiteful critic who sneers at other men’s work because he has no talent of his own.”

“You are a dauber of paint, at best. Your latest exhibition—”

“*You* killed that!” Hawley shouted. “You and your damned patronising review and your clique of damned patronising friends with their hidebound, tedious, classical views. You will not keep your stranglehold on Art forever.”

“Art, art, art,” Elise said with disdain. “Goodness, you do go on about it.”

“Your artistic judgement extends to deciding whether a painting matches your dress,” Hawley snarled. “And whence this sudden loyalty to your husband? I don’t recall you demonstrating much of that before!”

Zeb had no fondness for his family, but this display was intolerable. He looked away from Bram’s red face and Hawley’s glittering eyes and Elise’s anger, to the other end of the party.

Colonel Dash seemed, if anything, amused, mouth curved under his heavy moustache. Gideon’s mouth was twisted in a sneer, and his eyes snapped to Zeb’s as though he felt him watching, with a look of such contemptuous disdain it struck him like a physical shock.

He recoiled just as Wynn put an end to the accelerating family row by slamming his hand on the table.

“That is enough! Stop it at once. At once, all of you! Dear me.” He mopped his brow. “I understand feelings run high, and I must forgive it, in the circumstances. I dare say I carry much of the blame for leaving matters undecided so long.”

“They *are* decided!” Bram shouted. “I am your heir!”

Wynn carried on as if he hadn’t heard. “But I have Lackaday House to consider, and my unfortunate Jessamine in need of safe harbour. I have thought long and hard about how to proceed. This visit from you all will resolve the matter.”

“Resolve it how?” Elise demanded.

Wynn looked around the table. “It is very simple. One of you shall marry Jessamine, and have my fortune with her.”

“What?” Colonel Dash barked. Bram gaped. Hawley gave a wolfish smile. Elise said, “But you promised it to Bram!”

“What if she doesn’t want to marry any of us?” Zeb asked.

“You have all been invited to stay so you can get to know her and she you. If she does not wish to marry any of you after that, I shall not force her, but I am determined the estate will remain in the family. Jessamine will choose one of you, or she may decline, in which case I shall make my choice among you all. Whichever it is, that man will have every penny.”

“But—!” Bram, Elise, Hawley, and Zeb all said, at different but urgent pitches.

Wynn lifted a hand commandingly for silence. From the door, the burly footman marched forward. The master of Lackaday House looked around at the table and said, “Has everyone had enough soup?”