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The Wellington Affair: A Detective Story

Abstract

The week the heiress to the Wellington Family fortune returns to England, a series of strange events sweeps through the streets. The Wellington Diamond, unsurpassed by all of its kind, becomes the envy of more criminally-minded eyes and a plan is put into motion to steal it. Caught in the cross-fire, prospective writer Mark Verner is framed for the theft of the diamond but is saved from arrest by none other than the heiress herself. When the conspiracy to steal the jewel turns murderous, the only hope of the duo lies in the hands of the reluctant yet limitless detective mind of one Miss Elizabeth Tanner, and in her careful hands, what was an impossible chance becomes a fighting case.

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The Wellington Affair:
A Detective Story

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Master of Arts

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Critical Forward

The popularity of the mystery genre cannot go understated. Classic detectives like Sherlock Holmes are embedded into literary canon, where stories of murder on trains, planes, boats, automobiles, and private mansions prove that every setting imaginable is a viable place for criminals to ply their craft. The mystery genre is storied, where the writers of the past build upon the themes of one another in service of their own time, their own beliefs, and their own period's crimes. To write in the mystery genre, then, is an exercise in history and modernity. A prospective writer must evaluate what tropes and trends in the literature to elevate to the modern day while understanding the context that they stem from. In addition to the historical perspective, though, are the issues of gender and class that pervade any narrative. The fictional female detective actually predates the historical one in more official capacities, so navigating the interesting history of these figures can provide an interesting background for the modern story. Any mystery novel, though, must also contend with the literary canon that precedes it. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple move to detectives like Shawn Spencer, Nancy Drew, and Columbo. The combination of all three factors has shaped the way I approached my project.

Writing *The Wellington Affair* has involved looking at the mechanics of the mystery novel and determining where and how to present them within a modern text. Three central figures shape the course of the story. The protagonist, Mark Verner, is a working-class man of some intelligence, working in a world that never thinks the best of him. His narration provides the majority of the context and the background to the mystery, but it is also integral to the story that his voice is censored halfway through the narrative. Mark Verner is a victim of circumstance and prejudice, of being an easy target to blame, and so much of the narrative is shaped by his stakes in a story that moves from intellectual curiosity to dangerously personal. The second protagonist,

then, is the opposite. The heiress Maribelle is young, rich, flighty, spacey, and privileged. Her perspective is a biased one, but her character is also looked down upon by her surrounding peers. She is given a freedom of movement far greater than Mark by nature of class, but her voice and actions are constrained in different ways than his. It's her relationships with her peers, though, that provides a lens to direct the detective of the story. Elizabeth Tanner is prone to pessimism and selfishness, traits that don't tend to fit the role of classic detective, though arguably do fit the Noir. Elizabeth, however, is elegant and clever, and it is her work that unveils the mystery at the heart of the affair. All three characters work within an imaginative depiction of their setting, a fact that is perhaps even more important than their historical context.

When writing in a historical setting, any writer has to consider historical accuracy as compared to the much more important quality of their writing, the verisimilitude of their narrative. In *The Art of History*, Christopher Bram writes that "There is pleasure in recovering old things from the junk shop of history, but an overload of period details can clog a narrative" (Bram 39). This is an important reading to consider when approaching a fictional story. *The Wellington Affair* draws upon its historical context, but specificity can actually harm the narrative that it is trying to tell. The date the story is set in is summer, but there is no accurate year to fact-check, nor should the reader be encouraged to. For all intents and purposes, *The Wellington Affair* is set in a fictional setting that just happens to share the name with London. For a more period accurate novel, this would prove a detriment to the narrative. For a story more concerned with the style of detective stories, though, this allows the setting more room to breathe. When writing fiction, Bram writes that "The big bogeyman in fiction is anachronism, the wrong detail that can break down the dream and throw us out of the narrative, but this is more subjective than it might seem" (Bram 55). This line of thought might explain why a traditional name like Tiffany

or Zack might feel inaccurate to historical fiction despite those names having older roots. Stories are driven by accuracy, but factors of tone and the feeling of these narratives arguably matter even more.

As an example of how I use this technique, the makeup of a Victorian household provides important context to this novel, but I've made the active choice to keep some of those details on the lighter side. A detail like washing clothes with lye overnight adds context to the scene, but I don't make the space to painstakingly describe the whole clothes-washing process, an endeavor that could take all day during the period. I poke fun at the foyer of the house, but I don't allow the accuracy of the floorplan to overwhelm other parts of the story. Christopher Bram writes that "The best details in a work of history, fiction or nonfiction, are like double knots of character and time: they tie us to both the people and age they live in" (Bram 49). To emulate this idea, what is seen in the novel is of vital importance to the narrative without being overwhelming. The position of footman or butler has a precise definition in the household, which makes the fact that Mark is unceremoniously promoted to one of narrative interest. I do not spend a lot of time breaking down each role within the Victorian house, but I allow that knowledge to impact the narrative in a way the audience can attach to the characters involved. Impressions are everything to *The Wellington Affair*, and those impressions can be double-sided. Mr. Wellington appears charming to Mr. Verner, but somewhat addled in Maribelle's perspective. Jacob codeswitches between his peers, his employers, and those under his command, and these are elements that draw insight from the social roles being used within the story.

Social roles are just one of the many components to consider when looking at the setting of the story, and it is in the importance of setting where the historical and fictional literature research coincides. The essay, "Places for Mysteries" by Douglass McManis emphasizes how the

social and geographic layout of a mystery story will shape its text. The protagonists exist in the setting of the world and allow their experiences in it to shape their methods. Agatha Christie's mysteries are often set in the charming English countryside, a place where crime seemed a distant occurrence and where privacy was valued. As explored in the essay "Spinster, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll," one of Miss Marple's strengths as a detective comes from the fact that she is a nosy spinster, likening the invisible social class to that of a narrator working behind the scenes (Mezei 104). In a world where crime happens in the sanctity of the household, it is the nosy spinster, that underwhelming figure in every town, that holds an unexpected eye for human nature. The sanctity of the household, in fact, is a rather interesting obstacle in the detective story. One of the texts that I read for this project, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" draws tension from the fact that the crime is occurring in a private household. The infamous Sherlock Holmes is approached by Helen Stoner, who is fearful that her Stepfather is threatening her life. This is a crime that the police cannot address, and in fact, may even side with the Stepfather. It is Sherlock's willingness to help the young woman, though, that prevents her untimely murder via serpent.

A takeaway from these examples is that in the household, there is a level of respect and propriety granted to the private life that ends up allowing all sorts of abusive and criminal acts to go on behind the scenes. This is a particularly interesting concern because it has to do with the temperament of the period. The household, idealistically a place of solace, becomes just as temperamentally wicked as the rest of the world. There is also an interesting conversation to be had, though, about the way police are treated in the period in relation to mystery stories nowadays. As an institution, police were often considered to be corrupt and incompetent. As discussed in the novel, *The Pinks: The First Women Detectives, Operatives, and Spies With The*

Pinkerton National Detective Agency, by Chriss Enss, the narrative states that “Detectives, particularly in the Chicago area, were seen as abusive police officers who looked for evidence to solve a crime. Corrupt law enforcement officers weren’t opposed to bending the rules to get their man” (Enss 7). This is a sentiment that did not just apply to the Americas. Police could be considered braggarts and bullies that infringed on that important privacy in the household, and this is where the narrative of the classic private detective takes on prominence. Sherlock Holmes assisted Scotland Yard at various points, but there are mysteries where he works as a private consultant with the hand of the state behind him. In the famous ending of *Murder on The Orient Express*, Hercule Poirot offers a solution that allows the culprits to go on with their lives out of respect for the tragedy they endured. Classic detectives could straddle the lines between justice and the state, and there are stories where those two institutions do not align.

It is the combination of social roles in the Victorian Estate that I use to create tension in *The Wellington Affair*. The household estate or Victorian manor is a staple in detective literature. The events of *Clue* concern a murder on a rainy day, and the first *Knives Out* movie stars a family estate deliberately drawing upon the imagery and style of Agatha Christie and other classic detective stories. The countryside estate is isolated from most means of law enforcement and holds its own culture within its walls. An estate is no mere building but a web of relationships to navigate within. A web of murders holds only so many culprits, and a rash of thieves in the countryside may have trouble getting away with their stolen loot. In *The Wellington Affair*, the differing social roles of the protagonists shape their investigation of the narrative within this household. Mark Verner is hired on as a servant, and a temporary one at that, so he finds himself on a lower social playing field than the guests that arrive at the party. This invisibility irks him, but he does have a closer connection to servants like Harriete and

Jacob, characters with who he can feel free to question and gossip on an even playing field. Maribelle, on the other hand, is the heiress and is shown throughout the narrative to barely remember poor Mr. Verner's name. She, however, is able to connect to Christopher Smithson, the blond-haired guest that barely spares Mark the time of day. These separate social playing fields place emphasis on propriety, and perhaps more importantly, place emphasis on the privacy of the household. It is a deliberate choice on my part, then, that Elizabeth Tanner, someone who can blend in with both sides of the social equation, is the one able to navigate the web of lies at the heart of the narrative, but she does so at a deficit. All three protagonists are working in a setting arranged against them and where the police are more likely to be harmful than anything else.

Near the end of the story, Maribelle pushes Elizabeth to the center of the crowd in the ballroom and calls her a detective. She talks about her work and family history with the American Pinketons, and that backstory provides a lens through which Elizabeth is given the means to finish her investigation of the true culprit. Now, the American Pinkertons are an interesting organization to examine within the context of the period. Many of the criticisms laid at the feet of the police can arguably and justifiably be applied to the private company. A common but unspoken trend in Chris Enss' *The Pinks*, is the way the organization breaches the privacy of the suspected criminal. More than one story in the collection ends with the victim committing suicide after the Pinkertons used methods of stalking and harassment to get their confessions. Later, the Pinkertons were even used to break up unions and strikers that threatened companies. At the same time, however, there was an effort to distance the competent Pinkertons from the reputation of the police. Enss writes that the director, "Allan[,] expected his operatives to be well-groomed and polite. He maintained detailed records of the subject or situation his staff was charged with investigating and the clients who hired them, and he expected the same

meticulous note-taking from those working for the Pinkerton Detective Agency " (Enss 7). The organization worked as a counter-spying organization in the American Civil War and worked to prevent President Lincoln's assassination during his inauguration, which provides a rich history for Elizabeth Tanner to have grown up hearing stories about.

Elizabeth Tanner's backstory of growing up in a family history of Pinkertons, however, stems from a much more interesting historical background. Unlike police organizations in America or Europe during the Victorian period, the American Pinkertons actually employed women operatives. Enss writes in the prologue to *The Pinks* that "Although women were not admitted to any police force until 1891, or widely accepted as detectives until 1903, Kate Warner and the women she trained paved the way for future female officers and investigators, and are regarded as trailblazers in the private eye industry" (Enss XIII). Years before the first official female detectives would begin official work, Kate Warner played a key role in Pinkerton's bodyguarding of President Lincoln. Kate Warner was not the only female operative in Pinkerton's employ, either, and the organization made use of them as informants, confidants, and spies. Kate Warner, as the most famous of these operatives, explained that "Women could be most useful in working out secrets in many places which could be impossible for a male detective," Allan remembered her saying. 'A woman would be able to befriend the wives and girlfriends of suspected criminals and gain their confidence. Men become braggarts when they are around women who encourage them to boast. Women have an eye for detail and are excellent observers'" (Enss 6). These are useful traits for the spy and for the classic detective to rely upon, and the American Pinkertons were also experienced with disguises, forgeries, and other useful skills for the prospective detective.

The character of Elizabeth Tanner, then, exists in a sort of gray area. She is neither rich nor poor, and she cannot claim to be a detective on paper. It takes an excited endorsement from the heiress Maribelle to give her the credibility needed to confront the culprits of the story. This is a decision I made to bridge the gap between the period and the fiction of the story. Enss writes, after all, that “The press approached stories about police matrons and other women trying to force their way into the trade as ‘confused or cute,’ rather than a useful addition to the law enforcement community” (Enss 38). Elizabeth Tanner, then, is a character that works behind the scenes. She approaches Mark to get his insight into the household, and she doesn’t establish her credibility in the way a gentleman like Poirot might. Her tell-all at the end of the story, a staple of the detective genre, occurs reluctantly. This is a trait borrowed from characters like Miss Marple, who eschew the limelight and fame of the role. Elizabeth’s fame is something unwelcome. What makes her stand out as a protagonist, however, is her relationship to the main narrator Mark. Both characters almost act as rivals in that Mr. Verner is just as interested in unveiling the mysteries of the house and willing to consider the possibility of Elizabeth’s guilt in this affair.

One of the primary influences of this text comes from an early mystery text that codified many tropes of the genre, namely Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, and some of the creative choices that I’ve made in this text have been done to replicate this material. In *The Moonstone*, multiple narrators describe the theft of the titular gemstone and their efforts to uncover the truth, and the detective of the story plays a lesser role to the suspects involved with the affair. In this same way, I allow Mark Verner to serve as a narrator to play around with another trope of the genre, the perspective of the detective. Many mystery stories tend to obscure the perspective of the detective through the use of a point of view character they follow instead. In some ways, this

is done to maintain the tension of the mystery and the legend of the detective. Much of Sherlock Holmes' reputation as a crime solver stems from his relationship to Watson. Mark Verner, in my story, does so in the same way, but he also works from a more antagonistic angle. In the original *Moonstone*, the detective initially says that the culprits are actually the victims of the theft, which serves as a reference to the real true-crime story that Collins' narrative was based around. In *The Wellington Affair*, Mark Verner considers the possibility that it was Elizabeth that stole her companion's diamond, which makes it more ironic when he is framed for the crime.

At that point in the story, I make the decision to shift perspectives to the day before which serves to pause the tension right at one of the tensest moments. Maribelle's perspective, though, allows the reader a little time to catch up to the narrative. Maribelle is more concerned with love and her relationship with Elizabeth than any threat of danger, but unlike Mark who is an observant narrator, Maribelle's perspective is more socially oriented. She makes no observation of clues like Mr. Wellington's oiled clothes, but she does manage to catch a more complete glimpse of his character than Mark does. Two of the driving themes of *The Wellington Affair* are the idea of being two-faced and the risk of someone jumping to conclusions. Maribelle has limited interactions with Mark and is barely able to identify Richard Brent out of a line-up, but Mark Verner mischaracterizes Christopher Smithson and misreads his relationships with the rest of the staff at the manor. Mark even accuses Elizabeth Tanner of stealing the diamond, jumping to a conclusion that fits his perspective. This flaw is best emphasized in Jacob, one of the main antagonists of the piece despite him having nothing to do with the actual crime. Jacob reads the same clues that Mark does and even jumps to the same conclusion, but he importantly misreads Mark's interest in the situation as guilt. Both Mark, Maribelle, and even Jacob are observant in

different ways, but they don't have the information to put together the full picture in the way that Elizabeth does.

Elizabeth's character, in this story, takes heavy inspiration from two detective figures. Her more classical inspiration stems from Miss Marple, whose stories emphasize the idea of observation and human nature. Elizabeth isn't invisible in the same way as a spinster, though. She instead relies on the classic Pinkerton technique of disguise and acting. Elizabeth acts vulnerable, weak, silly, and determined through different contexts of the narrative with different characters in the same two-faced way that characters like Jacob are read. Another huge inspiration for Elizabeth's tactics, though, stems from the unlikely source of *Arsene Lupin: Gentleman Burglar* by Maurice Leblanc. Lupin is a thief who makes ample use of disguise, attitude, and confidence to succeed as a thief, and as the original Sherlock Holmes and historical Pinkertons proved, those are tools that can just as well suit the detective. Elizabeth's competence as a detective, though, takes on inspiration from the more modern Lieutenant Columbo. In *Columbo*, the titular detective may not appear until halfway through the narrative. Instead, the viewer gets to see the crime committed by the culprit first and gets to watch Columbo dismantle the lies that obscure the truth. The reader doesn't get to see the culprit of *The Wellington Affair*, but they do get a pretty clear reading of the strange circumstances surrounding the Wellington manor, and by doing so, are operating with knowledge beyond that given by the multiple perspectives of the narration.

In the end, Elizabeth and Mark Verner are intertwined as protagonists. It's Mark's keen observations that allow Elizabeth to close the case, but more importantly, she offers Mark the opportunity to come to his own closure. The detective, here, serves an arguably supporting role to Mark in a way that lets him serve as more than a victim of the story. This twist on the typical

mystery structure takes inspiration from Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* movies, which turns the genre on its head by switching the typical relationship between the detective and the protagonist of the film. Elizabeth Tanner, someone who finds difficulty in fitting in within her social group, nonetheless is the one to bridge the gap and work with Mark Verner to see that justice is done, and it is that kind of narrative that redefines these classic mystery tropes in the modern world.

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1. "It began with a newspaper carrying a photograph that its writers should not have been able to take."

On the covers of the morning paper was a diamond of some incredible polish. Gem cutting was far from his field of interest, but even Mark Verner, removed as he was from an expert, could make reasonable assumptions about its worth from the image. The diamond depicted in the picture easily eclipsed the width of a fist if the scaling was to be believed. Far more useful to any collector, however, would be the quality of the cut, but then again, the newspaper pointed out that such a quality would have to be observed in person.

"Do you really read this stuff?"

Mark thumbed through the newspaper in his hands, which prominently featured a picture of the crest of the family that owned the diamond. Some old-tosser kind of family that was nevertheless still important enough to announce the fact that the heiress to the family was returning from study abroad.

The gemstone was an odd choice to be depicted in the paper, all things considered. Even offhand, Mark could think of interesting rumors about smuggling on the docks or the possible theft of a precious painting that would be far more interesting for readers. Mark set the paper down, but the movement was too distracting for the other person in the room to let slide.

"What are you doing? Give me that!"

Maria, who was sitting on the countertop of the shop and fiddling with an iron filing tool of some sort, was quick to crack it against Mark's shoulder with a strength that far eclipsed her size. Mark let go of the paper, letting his sister grab it and hold it close to her chest. Maria, her black skin covered in sweat, soot, and the oil from the metal she was sitting by, was quick to bring it close to her chest.

"I need it for research."

"It's the morning paper. What does that have to do with the study of mechanics?"

Maria shook her head, her curly hair exaggerating the motion. "It's about my latest client. It's best to be well informed."

Mark raised an eyebrow. "It's a nice diamond, which is precisely why its owner will never set foot within this shop."

Maria stuck her tongue out at him with the decorum of someone half her age. It would be difficult to tell that she was the older of the two. Chastised, though, she loosened her grip on the paper. "It might be of interest. The article said that the diamond could possibly be used in a lens in a refractory sense."

"Given that the article started talking about its importance in the family's inheritance, I doubt it will be used in that fashion."

"So you did read it!" Maria crowed, perhaps tickled pink by Mark's hypocrisy. Mark did his best to ignore her, as oft he was to do.

"Just give me that paper, there's an advert for a typist that's not too far from the shop."

Maria acquiesced, even if it was only because there was a ringing of the bell at the store-front door. One of the boys that she paid to run scrap by the shop for half-pennies had moved in with an entire wagon full, and Mark lost his sister to a rush of mumbling over the suitability of the metal. Snagging the paper from the counter-top, he paid one last glance to the diamond on the cover. An Indian diamond, apparently, though why it was coming home to Britain instead of India was anyone's guess.

Mark paid it no more heed, but as events would turn out, he was one of the few that did.

A little ways up in Center London, Mr. Morgan held the paper up to his eyes, close enough that his spectacles were nearly touching the pages. These days, it was getting a little harder to see text close up even with his glasses, and while that no doubt signaled that a visit to the optometrist was in order, it made it hard to tell exactly where his coworkers had gone utterly stark-raving mad.

"So is the board in agreement?" An older man brushing his white beard said.

Another older man, to his left, simply nodded. "It's from a reputable source."

"And exactly what source is that?" Mr. Morgan tutted, turning the yellowed pages around as if he could ask the paper that question. "It doesn't exactly say in the *Times*."

The board merely hemmed and hawed, not conceding to his point. On the left again, came a voice. “An interesting diamond. From Afghanistan, was it?”

“India, but then again, there is the argument that it could have moved around before falling into the hands of that family.” This time from the only woman on the board, though Mr. Morgan was loath to admit that she was no help here. Her eyes were gleaming with anticipation.

“It’s a historical artifact” crowed one of the other board members, and they all muttered their agreements.

“I really must caution against this course of action.” Morgan placed the paper down on the table, desperate to just put the folly of it all behind.

“Mr. Morgan, we on the board have deliberated this. You’ve been approved to take a 2000-pound offer to the owner of the diamond.”

Hence, the madness. “Do we have the money to spend so frivolously?”

“For a diamond like this? It’s worth more than that, even on lesser markets.”

“The Wellingtons will never sell.”

“Old Wellington will never sell. Do you understand what I’m saying?” said the head of the board, and Mr. Morgan couldn’t help but skirt back from the intensity of his fervor. Deep in his gut, Mr. Morgan knew that the diamond would cause them no end of trouble. His stomach was aching, and he suspected it would for quite some while yet.

A few hours later, Mr. Mark Verner was both out of work and out of mind. All the pity to him because as a young man of some twenty-two years of age and in the prime of his youth, he should have been the first in line to a job, perhaps writing about the fashion trends within the busy streets of London or shilling out for interviews for the Edwards Museum, which was purportedly going through a bit of financial trouble for the moment, and as such, always game for some publicity.

Those problems, of course, were perhaps the reason why Mark couldn’t find work. He was too smart for his own good, or at least, the kind of mind that couldn’t be kept busy with any simple kind of job unloading crates from passing ships. Mark was a people-person in that he’d prefer

finding someone with a story to write down, if possible, in favor of the manual labor he seemed cursed with.

For now, he worked at his sister's shop, which worked out well because for all legal purposes, he was the technical owner. Maria, though, was lord and master of the steel and bits of iron she collected throughout the city, and her customers were always those interested enough in the mechanics of engineering to care about her breaching their inflated sense of propriety.

Mark still had the newspaper from the morning clutched in his hands, which was perhaps the only thing distracting him from saying something he would regret to his latest potential employer. But perhaps it was best to eliminate the word potential, because no sooner had he entered the office of the company building had he been shoved out the door. The advert in the paper had been for typists, which was a particular skill of Mark's, but apparently his gender and unwillingness to take a pay cut was wrong for the job.

The streets of the city were in that evening fervor you'd sometimes find during the height of travel season. It was a brilliant start to the summer, right before the weather moved from mostly mediocre to truly terrible, and that was something to celebrate. Mark passed by a constable swearing at one of the news sellers in the street, both out of good sense for avoiding the police and the fact that the paper had rejected his application for work a few weeks past.

With his route blocked off by common sense and a tad hint of trouble, Mark found himself standing at a street corner. A well-dressed man in a tailored suit roamed around the street stands with a bit of an air of wonder, like a schoolboy on a trip. Comparatively, there was a young group of boys playing hooky in the streets, but given the weather, Mark was prone to forgive them. A man with a tightly trimmed beard tried pushing through the commotion in the road on the other side of the blockade, but quickly, he found himself pushed back.

The wind was blowing slightly, but there was no hint of rain. If anything, that should have been what was newsworthy. The schoolboys had turned to playing with a long skipping rope, which made Mark feel the slightest tinge of envy.

The well-dressed man reached the end of the stands, but rather than brave the blockade, he started turning his head around for alternate routes. He had a head of hair of a rather dignified black graying color, or that was to say that he was at that age where the detour might be a bit more of a problem. Perhaps Mark had been staring at him for too long, though, because the man gamely approached him.

"I'm sorry, sir, do you mind if I look at that newspaper?"

Without any particular reason not to, Mark handed over the paper. With a nod of his head, the man scanned through the pages, only to tighten his vice-like grip when he saw the headlines.

“Is everything all right?”

The well-dressed man simply blinked, before loosening his grip. “It’s just a surprise, that’s all. I wasn’t expecting the story it was showing. It shouldn’t be there.”

“On the paper?”

The well-dressed man shook his head. “It’s nothing. It’s nothing.”

“What business brings you this side of the city, sirrah?” Mark asked, and the man smiled at the obvious change of subject.

“A business trip. Am I that obvious?” Mark wisely chose not to comment, which was perhaps the best because of what the man said next.

“Do you happen to know where I could find a nearby tinker’s shop? I have an appointment to meet soon.”

And with a sudden burst of realization, Mark answered the man with a grin.

The *Times* was the kind of paper willing to run any number of stories, Lady Smithson knew. Was it reliable? Perhaps, but there were rumors that certain stories could be pushed if the wheels were greased.

“Doesn’t that seem familiar?” she muttered, rolling a glass of wine in her hands. “Very interesting.”

There was a diamond on the front page, and cogs were beginning to turn in her head.

“And you say that you’re currently not working? I would have thought you would do some work at the shop.” The well-dressed man said, as the pair cut through the streets.

“Well, I’m the renter in name only,” Mark said, with the barest hint of where this conversation was going. Still, it was a lovely day, and the man was not the worst company. Perhaps Mark could consider himself somewhat of a detective, considering his suspicions on whom this was based on nothing but a throwaway comment.

“Would I be wrong to say that you would be the famous Mr... Wellington?” The pause was necessary since Mark needed to take a quick glance again at the paper, but his instinct was right. The well-dressed man sheepishly grinned.

“In the flesh! I suppose you deduced it from seeing the client list at the shop?”

Mark shook his head. “My sister takes care of that. No, it was the paper.”

Mr. Wellington shook his head at that, smiling wryly. It was then that Mark found himself quite liking the company of the man, or at the very least, recognizing he was the most interesting thing to happen that day. Their walk across the city streets had been full of meandering, easy conversation at least.

“I do appreciate you taking the time out of your day to help me here.” Mr. Wellington was a little slow to move around a boy rushing past in the streets, dragging an empty wagon behind him.

“Reliable chap, aren’t you?”

“I get things done.”

Before they could fall into an easy silence, Mark couldn’t help but consider the diamond on the cover page and the strange comments.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why shouldn’t the story be there?”

Mr. Wellington didn’t stop moving, but his pace noticeably slowed. Mark made his move to match him. It was relatively quiet by this side of the alleyway, so when Mr. Wellington lowered his voice, Mark didn’t have to do much to hear him.

“It’s the oddest thing. It was only a few days ago when I received word that my niece was willing to come visit for the start of the summer. In the letter she sent... there wasn’t a photograph of the diamond at all.”

Mark leaned in a little closer. “Are you telling me that the photograph in the news is fake?”

Mr. Wellington sighed, but he started moving again. Mark strove to match him. “Far from fake, it has to be a picture of the real thing. I remember that much of my time with the diamond, but there’s no way they could have gotten that photo.”

And indeed, that was a mystery to consider. Mark pondered it as the two neared the site of the mechanic’s shop. Once there, Mr. Wellington held out his hand, and Mark shook it. His grip was firm, and there was a sort of solidarity to it.

“Tell me Mr. Verner. Seeing as you are currently unemployed, would you be interested in a bit of work? I’ll pay you well, and I could use a reliable hand or two.”

And caught a little blindsided by the generosity, the only thing Mark could do was give his answer.

There was no newspaper to be found on the deck of the *Gallant*, where Maribelle stood staring into the water. Foam was churning as the ship chugged towards its destination, and there was a heavy scent of fish in the air. It was not the most pleasant of scents, but it was blindingly new, and that counted for quite a bit.

It felt like the start of an adventure.

“Eliza dearest, you’re going to miss the view!”

And with that, Miss Elizabeth Tanner, underneath an umbrella for the sun, came reluctantly onto the deck. Maribelle practically had to drag her to the side of the ship, past one of the other passengers who turned their nose up at the sight.

“Come on, both of us have never been to London proper. Let’s make it a memory worth keeping.”

Elizabeth was less than pleased, and soon made it clear that the fussing was unnecessary, but she’d been so grim of late, the chance to see something a little brighter than the endless case manuals that her friend forced herself to read was more than welcome. This was a brand new start, for the both of them. It was going to be perfect.

“Maribelle, I have a bad feeling about this trip.”

But Maribelle only laughed because Elizabeth had not drawn away, and the two watched the streets of London come into focus. Hidden inside a package at her side shone a brilliant diamond, one that seemed to twinkle like one of the night stars. It was strange to think about the troubles, the lies, the murders that such a pretty little thing would cause.

There was a chime on the clocktower, and its echo signaled a new start, but one as bloody as the dawn that would spring forth soon. The bright sun was fading to mist and the bustling wind of a greater storm loomed as the great detective finally made her way to London.

The romanticism of the Wellington Affair, what with the fervor of inheritance and beautiful, foreign detectives swooping in at the last moment, has made it particularly difficult to distance the event from its actual counterpart. An unbiased account has yet to exist, and frankly with the publishing of this briefing, will continue to elude the public.

As the primary suspect in these affairs, though, I write to assure you that there is a grain of truth to the stories, even if the figures of the case have been demonized and back. And while the mechanics of the case merely seem improbable now, in truth, the mystery began long before the dinner party that drove this case to such modest fame.

For all the notoriety of the Wellington Affair has made it a legendary affair and her detective a popular figure, I endeavor to show that such tragedies begin with the smallest of questions, questions that would bubble up into a murderous affair that would shake the core of London for weeks on end.

It began with a newspaper carrying a photograph that it should not have been able to take.

No, not even that. It began, I think, with a lady detective and someone she loved.

-M Verner.

2. "A terrible storm, the kind that rumbled in the distance followed Mark out to London. Perhaps the day of sun was a toll too costly for the country to bear, because for the first few days of his newest position, there was hardly a moment not soothed by the pattering of rain and distant clap of thunder-- M Verner."

Mrs. Wellington was a firm-looking woman with a steely glint to her eye. A little younger than Mr. Wellington had been, but not excessively so. She walked with a prominent stride, nothing like the meandering one that her husband had taken with him to London, and when she spoke, there was an edge to her cadence.

Mark brushed a hand against his new uniform and found her sharp glance aimed his way.

"Button the second, leave the first untouched." Mrs. Wellington snapped. Sharp, but not overly so. Mark fixed it without complaint and caught the slightest hint of a nod of approval.

"You'll be the last addition to the staff, but I'm sure my husband has already worked out your contract. He thinks himself a clever man, when the mood strikes him."

Mark knew the business well, or at least, well enough to keep quiet as Mrs. Wellington turned him around. Once, twice, then sent to walk up and down the hallway without breaking anything too important. Seeing that she had settled for silence, Mark tried for a tempered, professional smile.

"Mr. Wellington has signed me on for at least two weeks, ma'am."

If Mrs. Wellington pursed her lips, then he could only hope it was aimed at some unknown problem. "Indeed. Well, go on then. Jacob will see to your instruction, boy."

Mark kept his expression clear, though he let his muscles relax when Mrs. Wellington deemed him well enough and left the room. There was a clip to her steps that echoed across the halls for a fair distance before fading into the background. He'd have to keep an eye on her for professionalism's sake, but so far, it was a manageable kind of concern. Mrs. Wellington seemed busy.

Busy, after all, was a perfect term to describe the affairs of Wellington manor. The estate was far grander than any Mark was used to, and it was hard enough to pick his way through the myriad of corners of the polished hardwood floors without being turned around. But Mark had been raised on the far wilder streets of London, so it wasn't too hard to make his way from one of the

attaching drawing rooms around the main throughway where a maid was handwringing over a vase of flowers, and out to the front doors to look onto the well-maintained lawn outside.

A day to put affairs in order, then another to arrange transportation into the country. That was all it took for Mark to rearrange his life. Maria was thrilled, of course. To gain the attention of a client like Mr. Wellington in the first place must have been quite the coup for her, so to hear that Mark would be making a respectable salary for the work of a few weeks was more than welcome.

She'd more or less packed his bags herself with the promise to have him have first pick through any of the latest yellowbacks when he got back. It was just the right touch of sentimentalism that led Mark to taking it to heart, even if her half-penny papers were of clearly no interest to him. It was good to know that affairs at home would be manageable.

Arranging the carriage was slightly trickier. There weren't that many going to the countryside at a rate he could justify, but the proffered salary was enough that Mark would very well walk if he had to. Luckily enough, there was an alternative. Mr. Wellington was hardly one to walk to the city himself, and after raising the issue to the man on his way out of his meeting with Maria, Mr. Wellington was quick to direct him to a blond-haired footman, Richard Bent who offered to pick him up the following day after some business in the city.

For better or worse, Mark thought to himself-- this would be his life for the next few weeks. The soft patter of rain dissuaded Mark from venturing out from the safety of the rooftop, but since he'd seen the head butler discussing something with a gardener outside, he'd have to dare the rain to make it. Just as Mark was about to step out onto the turf, though, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"If you don't want to spend the next few hours drying out your new uniform, you will at least take an umbrella."

"Sorry, sir."

Jacob wore glasses, thick-rimmed and attached to his nose by golden-chain. It was the first thing you would notice about the pale-skinned man, though his age and posture was equally distinctive. Mark wasn't a short man by any means, but Jacob held a good few inches over him, and with his perfect posture and graying hair, he cut quite the authoritative figure.

"Never mind that now. Has Harriete seen fit to deal with your uniform?"

"Mrs. Wellington saw fit to get me ready sir."

At that, Jacob blinked. It was a quick moment, but Mark saw he looked somewhat taken aback. Mark felt comfortable enough, then, to push. “Was there something odd about that? Now that I think about it, that seems rather involved for a woman of her stature.”

“No, it was nothing of worth. Right now, you had best be focused on what you will be accomplishing here!” And perhaps it was his posture and crisp uniform speaking, but that ended the conversation solidly.

Somewhat chastised, Mark nodded his head. “Right sir.”

Jacob took him through the front door-

“The foyer, Mr. Verner. Please try and keep up.”

Jacob took him through the foyer, where the maid from before was now desperately trying to reach for a light that had gone out, only to find that her stature made it just out of reach. Jacob didn’t break his stride when he plucked the bulb out. “Use a ladder next time, Harriette”

“Pardon me, but it’s being used in the East Wing. I might as well just use a chair instead”

At that, Jacob rolled his eyes, which was a break in his otherwise capable stature. He turned to Mark, “The East Wing is currently going through construction. We’ll be closing it off for the weekend with the hopes of shying any of our guests away. It is, however, not too far away to justify destroying the antique furniture.”

Harriette didn’t respond, but then again, she wouldn’t have the chance. Jacob was already moving forward, and perhaps it was a somewhat sympathetic glance towards Mark that told him what kind of job he was being pressed into.

To the west was the kitchen and dining room, parts of the house that Jacob pushed through like they were everyday sights and not impressive rooms in their own right. Maria’s entire shop could fit within just the two rooms, though Mark couldn’t imagine being the only cook in rooms like this, the man was bustling about almost as quickly as Jacob was and couldn’t spare them more than a raised nod.

A bit further North was the servant quarters, which Mark would have expected to have been seen outside the manor itself, though he wouldn’t complain about his lodgings, which were of a decent size. Nothing spectacular, but Mark would be well-kept during his time here.

The ballroom, then the study. These were rooms that seemed to take up much of the house, but for all their supposed splendor, Mark couldn't help but feel like they were hollowed on the inside. A long stretch of floor is nothing special to look at, and the study was a sparse, albeit comfortable nook of the house.

For all the world, it was like Mark was breaking into a hollow shell of a house, where the facade was more important than the interior. It was honestly overwhelming in a different sense of the word, and though he was no particular expert in the world of arts, he found himself grinning with excitement to see the gallery at the center of the building.

Yet when Mark tried to catch more than a glimpse inside the room with its barely visible portraits worth the sum of his home, he found another hand on his shoulder.

“I wouldn't if I were you. You're new enough that if anything were to go... er wrong, it would be on your head more than anyone else's.” Jacob looked a little sorry to be saying it, but it was fairly good advice, all things considered. Nonetheless, Mark made a promise to himself to go and visit during his off-hours, or at least, sometime when it would be difficult to trace his specific person to the room.

The tour proceeded then, though much of the enthusiasm that Mark had reluctantly held close to his chest was now tinged with the feeling of the reality of his new position. His work would have to be careful and quiet, two qualities that Mark knew how to express but perhaps not to a degree and diction that he would be expected to follow while here.

Jacob, at the very least, was not too harsh a task-master if you could discount his rapid pace. The tour of the upper level of the house went fast: a drawing room for more important guests, a more private library that Mark would love to get his hands on when he had the chance, and a few private bedrooms that a more experienced and perhaps even trusted worker would be allowed to work in. Mark's work would likely be saved more for the ground level-floors.

It was up there that Mark had his second encounter with Mrs. Wellington. She stood with her back to him and Jacob involved in close conversation with Mr. Brent, the footman that had brought him to the manor. The two were standing close, but Mrs. Wellington's voice carried just enough to show what must have been exhaustion. That would explain the tenseness in her posture.

“--And my husband will be gone for another trip soon? We need his hands here to get things sorted out.”

“All day. His attention is sorely needed with the investors.”

Anything else was cut off when Jacob approached the two boldly, and Mark would have gone with if he hadn't waved him off on the incline. "Madam, the gardener wishes to inform you that he will no longer be working on the day of the party.

"I know. It is his day off. We've discussed this Mr. Jacob. It shouldn't be a problem. I've taken care to arrange his schedule so that most of the work will be done beforehand, and the Footman here will be willing to do the extra duties that we've discussed." She waved off the man in question, who respectfully cut his way past the pair. Mark spared him a nod on the way down, but remained in the corridor.

"He'll have to turn in his keys of course. The gardening house runs on a separate electricity and phone line, so we'll have to ensure the appropriate steps are taken to-

"Mr. Jacob, if that is the only affair you have to bother me with, it could come at another time. I'm in the midst of finishing up the guest list for our little event, and don't you have someone to show around?"

That led to a glare at Mark, or at the very least, a glare meant for Jacob. Whatever the case, Jacob seemed to have lost some of the authoritative posture that he'd taken on for much of the tour. Next to the mistress of the house, it was all the man could do to keep his posture up. Quite the change of pace from the man from earlier.

"I wouldn't bother you with something so trivial ma'am. It's more a matter... Your husband has arrived with Lady Smithson."

At that, Mrs. Wellington seemed to well up, as if she had much to say and no diction to put the words to it. Jacob seemed to shrink in himself even further as she thrust a finger against his chest. "You will find that I can put that together, what with the Footman having already found me with the report. Go see to the preparations." Then in a much softer, if not equally commanding tone. "Mr. Verner, go see to the lady's luggage."

It was a step up from boy at the very least, though Mark made no more pretension of staying on the incline of the stairs. It seemed his tour of the household was done, and indeed, Jacob seemed so much less a blustering presence with Mrs. Wellington, mind you a few feet shorter than the man, going through the extensive list of tasks that he could be doing instead of wasting her time.

Whatever the case, Mark took the stairs two at a time and found himself following Richard out to the ~~door~~ foyer. The man's coat was neatly buttoned and its coattails were neatly arranged, which seemed all the more impressive considering the wind that had started to pick up in the outside

rain. Richard took an umbrella from a stand that Mark hadn't noticed at the entrance, and Mark found himself following.

The rain was still pouring down, but it didn't diminish the beauty of the path that spread before them. The gardeners must do great work if they could take the swell of hedges and form them into something that fit the aesthetics of one of the more impressive French estates that Mark sometimes read about. He'd need to take a glimpse from the upper levels, but it had the look of a hedge maze, or at the very least, something so confused by the concept of aesthetics that it would be impossible for someone like Mark to navigate without a compass.

Richard, who hadn't even turned around to face Mark, nonetheless kept to a pace that allowed Mark to keep up. The stables were a bit further from the front entrance than Mark would have expected, but then again, space was something that the estate was far from lacking. When the building and carriage came into sight, Mark tried pressing ahead and at that, Richard broke the silence that had come between the two.

"Hold on for a moment, we'll swing around to the other side of the carriage. Out of sight and mind."

Quiet and competent might have been a better way to describe the man. Mark found himself following his senior around to the other side of the carriage, which lay empty in a little alcove shielded from the rain. The bags were already neatly stacked up in piles, though there was a surprising amount of them. A set of purple cases that seemed more than what a man would carry to a simple visit to the city. Then again, Mark hadn't been sent to carry Mr. Wellington's gear in, now had he?

There was a surprising amount of luggage for someone to just be visiting from the city.

"Will Lady Smithson be staying in one of the guest rooms? Jacob didn't show me where those would be."

"The east wing is damaged. We'll be taking them to one of the upper guest-rooms."

Between the two of them, they were able to carry about half of what had been unloaded from the carriage, though if it hadn't been raining, perhaps they wouldn't have to bother with avoiding the dangers of getting their precious cargo soaked. It was a trek and a half for the pair of them, exactly the kind of work that Mark had been hoping to avoid down at the docks, but for the salary he would be getting paid, Mark could deal with work like this. A wonder what a few pounds did to the employment equation, but he might as well string out a little bit of discussion.

“Who is this Lady Smithson?”

“Jacob is one more for gossip.”

“Jacob, really? He didn’t seem the type” Mark tried to get his peer talking, but Richard didn’t respond. It wasn’t a big loss, but Mark might have almost wanted for the quick pace of Jacob or even the sheer subtext of Mrs. Wellington’s discussions. Something odd was going on at Wellington estate, but Mark couldn’t put his finger on what at the moment.

Up into the front door, no, the foyer, then towards the staircase. There was muffled laughter coming from the gallery and Mark could peer inside the room, but if he wanted to keep up with Richard, he couldn’t linger. Down the stairs and do the process all over again. The hedge maze really did seem like a maze, as far as he could tell, though the function of it seemed somewhat unclear to him at the moment. As did many of the other events and conversations he’d been lucky enough to catch snippets of.

Certainly it would be a strange course of affairs at the Wellington Estate, but then again, Mark had been looking for something more interesting than simple manual labor. Say what you would about the work environment, but Mark was far from bored, and sometimes, that was all that mattered.

It struck Mark during dinner. Not in the main dining hall, oh no. There was a separate room for the workers to eat in, which might have rankled Mark if he hadn’t been tired enough that trying to keep his manners might have cost him his job. From package-carrying to cleaning, to the arrangement of decoration in the already lavish house, there wasn’t a rhyme or consistency to Mark’s work as much as it gave a constant push and pull across every corner. Mrs. Wellington had popped in and out of their work with new directives to give, but there was so much to do that it hardly seemed to matter. It was enough to sit with a slice of bread and a drink and take a look at his new surroundings.

There was Harriete fidgeting in her chair while Richard picked away at his plate. A man who must have been the gardener, there was a speck of dirt on his face that he must have missed, stood in conversation with the cook who didn’t bother to sit down with the rest of them. His apron was still on, and he seemed jittery.

At the very least, Jacob seemed to have regained his posture of authority given by how he was waving his fork around like a maestro, but it was by now a lost cause. Mrs. Wellington had popped in and out of their work with new directives to give, and every time, Jacob had found himself a little too slow to answer. But there was so much to do that it hardly seemed to matter that the work could only be done so fast with the workers that were there, and that was the crux of the little problem that Mark had been toying with all day.

No, what struck Mark was the realization there were a total of five servants in the household, an incongruity with an estate as big as this one so vast that he couldn't help but mention it to his newfound company.

The ensuing silence was a little expected, to be honest.

Jacob lowered his voice, his tone dropping to something with a little more color behind it. "You seem to have joined us at an interesting time, Mr. Verner. There are a few other workers that you haven't met yet--"

"They quit!" Harriete said, perhaps a little too giggly because it meant that Jacob was left glaring at the smiling maid.

"They chose not to renew their contracts, a choice that we all had the opportunity to make. Mark, pay no attention to this fiend."

"Fiend, that's an interesting one."

"At least I know how to use a ladder."

But perhaps Richard the Footman had the right of it: both in his assessment of Jacob, the grinning gossip a little too happy to be indulging in childish taunts, and now in his move to clear his plate. "I will see you tomorrow."

Richard's departure was quick, but at the very least, it was enough to cool the temperament of the room. Jacob adjusted his spectacles, turning his attention back to Mark's question.

"We're all a bit stressed here Mr. Verner. Right down to even Mrs. Wellington. She's been overworking herself. This upcoming affair has been placed mostly on her shoulders, and she doesn't need any unnecessary work that comes with negotiating contracts."

A rational answer, and perhaps peace might have been restored to the moment if Harriete didn't choose to interrupt. "It's all the diamond's fault!"

And at that the room erupted into bickering. A noise that was beginning to tear at Mark's headache, one that had been building all day. Perhaps he would have to clear his plate like Richard, though he'd have to cut past the rest at the table and perhaps draw their attention back to him. All of the noise was on the household, the tension of the upcoming party, the return of the heiress like it was the time of kings and royal family's. Finally, he had enough.

"What's so special about this diamond anyway?"

The question, hardly an innocent one in the first place, still made the room go dead silent. Harriete shook her head, but made no move to answer, and the others were hardly any better. Perhaps, Mark couldn't help but think, she had no answer for them. The gardener and cook, whose names Mark had yet to catch, were no better. After a moment's more of silence, the eyes in the room turned to the oldest of their peers.

Jacob, the pale and elderly head of the household, lowered his spectacles and raised his voice just loud enough to draw the attention of the rest of the room. This time they didn't interrupt.

"This would be before any of your times, but Lord Wellington and his sister have never had the best of relationships. Before she ran off with that damn frog, she pilfered several jewels from the storerooms. Cambodian rubies. Emeralds. His Indian diamond."

And Mark couldn't help but bite his lip at that, if not for the revelation that the good Mr. Wellington had a sister, then the idea of a theft of that level occurring in a noble house such as this. A single gemstone was the sort of thing that would set up any of the servants for years, assuming they could get away with the job. A theft of that scale would no doubt lead to bad blood between the family.

Jacob wasn't done with his story. He held up a finger and waited as the rest of the room leaned in to listen. "All that is between Lord Wellington and his sister, but his niece is a different story. She's exchanged letters with the household for years, and now, she's bringing back one of the most important gemstones. The Indian diamond that the late Lord Wellington won in the war."

"Is it a peace offering?" Mark asked. The old footman, someone who Mark would bet was at the heart of half the estate's gossip wheels, just smiled. Perhaps Jacob thought himself enigmatic, but Mark could tell he didn't know what the truth of the matter was, and that was that for the night.

A certain kind of fervor, though, seemed to have taken a hold of all those involved with preparing for the dinner party. For the next few days, it was hard to keep an eye on the work being done when there was room for speculation. With each telling, the mystery of the diamond grew larger. It was a perfect, uncut stone. It was a polished diamond that Lord Wellington had won during the fierce conflict. It was a shining blue stone like the ones from the stories. No one

person had a clear view on the identity of the stone, and the only one who would know the truth of the matter, Lord Wellington, had been called away for matters of state.

Whatever the case, the work and the rumors made the days slip by, so quickly that before Mark realized it, it was the morning before the dinner party, and as such, the arrival date of the heiress that seemed to have thrown all of London into such a tizzy.

Or perhaps Mark should have said the expected arrival date because as the day slipped into the evening, no heiress ever came.

3. *"She was clothed in an American-styled dress, one that had fallen out of fashion here in London for some time. Her skin was pale enough on its own, but she brought a sun umbrella for even the scant London sun. If Mark didn't know any better, he would say that she was the heiress. It put together the picture of some pampered lady if not for the fact that her eyes were piercing and her pace steady. Then, she spoke and any illusions of her character were dispelled" --M Verner*

The day of the heiress' supposed arrival started with only a drizzle of rain, and that was as good of a sign as any. Mark was called to an early morning start, as with a mere five servants at a household meant for maybe a dozen more, there was always another thing for Mark to do, whether it be to assist Harriete with the cleaning, arrange for foodstuff for the cook, or just keeping up with Jacob's walking pace.

With Lord Wellington away to London once again, the household fell to the expert management of Mrs. Wellington. Strict and focused, she was quick to point out any lagging cleaning efforts, and even with the East Wing closed, that still meant that the rest of the household needed to be prettied up for the coming guests. Cleaning and furniture arranging, table-setting, silver polishing, and drying the rainwater from all the laundry left out overnight. It was enough work to make Mark glad that he'd been pulled to the side by Jacob to watch the road for the heiress.

Mark had accepted the job with the knowledge that he would be avoiding the manual labor of a docks or factory worker, but all the easy-going conversation that he'd imagined when he took the job from Lord Wellington had fallen to the wayside. The man was barely in his own home at the best of times, and all that charm grew stale with absence. It was only the paycheck that kept Mark's mind on the road.

No, Mark was content with the excuse to watch the rain fall from outside the window, and perhaps that was all his day would have been like if he hadn't been approached by his employer on the Foyer-door.

"Mr. Verner, I have a task for you to accomplish. And mind your collar."

Mrs. Wellington, short and thin as always, was wearing makeup that contrasted well with her pale skin. It was any wonder that Mark hadn't been able to catch Mrs. Wellington's approach, but the patter of rain outside the mansion muffled her footsteps, and his attention had been turned away.

A hand flew to the top button of his uniform, and with a sheepish look, he let Mrs Wellington loosen the first button. He half-expected a scolding comment, but the mistress of the house was surprisingly reticent, waiting for Mark to dare make a remark. Mark chose instead to answer her first request.

“Jacob has me watching for your niece.” Then, when Mark realized that sounded a touch too informal, quickly added, “I can still do whatever you ask me to.”

Mrs. Wellington was wearing a long dress that rustled every time she moved, and Mark caught it rustling as she drew a little closer outside, just enough so that she could touch the rain if she so wished.

“Late, is it? That would be the French part of her.”

Mark wisely chose not to comment on that, being on the back foot as he was. Mrs. Wellington carried on regardless.

“Isn’t Jacob supposed to be here too?”

Mark shook his head. “There was a problem in the parlor that he needed to take a look at.”

What actually happened was a mishap of the highest order. Harriete had been fetching a ladder, but since she had forgotten about how the Eastern Wing had been closed off, she wasn’t looking when she walked in. She’d stepped in paint and tracked it throughout half the house before Jacob had caught wind. Mark said none of this though and let Lady Wellington assume what she liked-

“Then Jacob should finish and get here quickly.” Lady Wellington glared like him, as if he was the one in charge of Jacob’s movements, “The girl should arrive any time now. She’s late as it is.”

“I can quickly fetch him,” Mark offered, but she shook her head--

She shook her head, looking weary all of a sudden, like all the wear and tear of the household was reflecting back on her soul. Perhaps in a way, the burden that had fallen onto her was. Mark had been working hard, yes, but he’d only been working for less than a week. Lady Wellington seemed to have much more on the table.

“I’ll wait until the footman returns tomorrow for my business.” Lady Wellington whispered, staring off into the window. A statement a bit odd, honestly.

“Isn’t he arriving with the heiress today? Lord Wellington went to fetch his niece.”

“My husband has critical meetings in London to attend to. He won’t be near the manor until right before tomorrow’s dinner party. I’ll send the footman back to him after he drops off Maribelle.”

Mark filed that information away into a little crevice of his mind, partly because he could hear footsteps behind them. The soft patter of rain couldn’t hide the clinking of heels on the hardwood and marbled floors, and the woman wearing them was so much... louder than his employer.

“Now darling, isn’t that a bit cruel to do to the boy? When I lent you Richard to help with the manor, I didn’t expect you to work him like a draft horse!”

This was a new voice, as Mark hadn’t seen much of her given that he’d been kept busy elsewhere, but here she was on the arms of one Mr. Jacob no less, who looked to be a little flustered. Who here could it have been that drove Lady Wellington to squirm in place than the other guest of the household--

The approaching lady wore more jewelry around her neck than Mark would ever own in his lifetime. She was tall. Taller than even he was, and certainly taller than Lady Wellington. Her white face was covered in delicate make-up that would have been ruined in the storm outside and around Smithson’s neck was a set of jewels that sparkled, even in the grey and stormy undertones of the countryside.

A quick glance towards Lady Wellington proved his hypothesis true. Her smile was fixed like a bayonet as she muttered, “Miss Smithson. A little late is no worse than days early. There are few things ruder than playing on the hospitality of a guest.”

Lady Wellington’s words were something like the sound of a kettle when the water inside reached a boiling point. Miss Smithson towered over even Mark, and as she approached, Mark gave way to give her the room to spread her wings, so to speak.

“Oh darling. I’m so glad that Reginald invited me to stay early. My evening with the fine ladies society was canceled last week, and I would have been left bored. Better to just skip my way to the next event on my calendar.”

Lady Smithson passed the bag in her hands to Jacob as she went to kiss Lady Wellington’s cheeks. Personally, Mark thought that it would be safer to kiss an adder given the gossip that Jacob had been circling around the house. Lady Smithson was pushy, she dressed out of her station, and worse of all, she was French.

On second thought, Mark was beginning to like her. Not everyone could make Lady Wellington squirm in place from faux politeness. It was a line of politics that didn’t necessarily go over Mark’s head, but it was far beyond his experience to begin to untangle whatever thorny relationship of status and familiarity the two shared.

“Footman.” It took Mark a few moments to realize that Lady Wellington was addressing him. “Take care of things on this end. I suppose I must do my job as hostess and escort my *guest* to the parlor to be entertained.”

“Oh Charlotte. You never seem to change. Don’t worry, I know the way. I grew up in this house after all.”

Lady Wellington's glass smile began to crack as Smithson audaciously strolled back into the household with Lady Wellington's arm in hand. It was a complete breach of etiquette that led the two ladies marching into the household like it was a battlefield.

Before he scurried after them, Jacob waved Mark over. His clothes were a bit disheveled and there were lines of red paint that were clearly visible on his coat. If Lady Wellington had been in half her mind, she would have snapped him in half, but Jacob didn't look as nearly put out as he usually did: "Those two won't be coming back. Their rivalry is something fierce."

Mark bit his lip. "Miss Smithson mentioned something about knowing the household. Was the estate hers?"

Ever the gossip, Jacob leaned forward. "Years ago. I used to be in her employ too, but when the estate was sold, I stayed with it."

Mark couldn't keep the chuckle from breaking out of his chest. Mysterious staffings and odd arguments of class: It was like one of those yellowbacks that Maria insisted on reading. His heart a little lightened by the intrigue, Mark waved off Jacob, who scurried back into the house leaving Mark alone with nothing but the empty road and his own thoughts.

Tomorrow would be the dinner party between the Wellingtons and a few members of high society, followed by a respectable ballroom dance if the work in the household was any insight. Soon, he'd be done with the political intrigue and back-breaking pace of the work and back home in time to steal Maria's paper. All in all, a respectable week of work. Mark settled in for the rest of the night and kept his eyes on the road.

An hour passed, and the falling rain made no sign of stopping, and the heiress never showed.

Jacob came by for a bit to lean on one of the supporting pillars on the awning of the estate. Mark chose not to tell him that he was getting paint all over it-- After a while though, he was sent careening back into the household to solve a problem in the gallery, a room Mark still hadn't gotten the chance to explore yet.

Another hour passed by, and the wind seemed to pick up. Mark loosened the button on his collar so that he could breath a little better. By now, the lights leading up to the driveway had been turned on, so Mark amused himself by watching the wind sweep through the grass. There was a crow in the hedge maze moving around, sweeping up and down past his sightline every now and then.

"Caw!" said the crow, but silence had fallen onto the estate in a tangible way. A bit more time passed, and the lights in the household began to go out.

Another hour passed. Mark was off his shift by now, but it seemed he'd been forgotten.

Mark was about to step inside to avoid the rain, but just as he was about to make his excuse, a black carriage pulled by only a single horse came clippity-clopping into the driveway.

It certainly was not Wellington's niece. The carriage on the path wasn't the Wellington's at any rate, and the carriage driver looked like he'd been plucked right out of the London underbelly, which made for a stark difference from the reliable face of Richard the footman. Even from a distance, Mark could see holes in this driver's outfit that only grew bigger as the rickety carriage pulled up to the front.

Unlike the shabby appearance of the carriage, the lady that stepped outside was cut of a finer cloth. Her dress was bell-shaped and purple, and she wore a long, white shawl wrapped around her. Mark would have moved to help her if he had the slightest idea of who she was, but by the time he reached his bearings, she had already grabbed a single purse and waved the carriage driver forward.

She was clothed in an American-styled dress of very fine quality. Her skin was pale enough on its own, and if Mark didn't know any better, he would say that she was the heiress. It put together the picture of some pampered lady if not for the fact that her eyes were piercing and her pace steady. Then, she spoke and any illusions of her character were dispelled.

"Excuse me, good sir. Do you know if Maribelle has arrived yet? We separated in London, but she was supposed to meet up with me on the road. Though if you don't know, could you perhaps fetch the first footman for me?"

The name Maribelle rang... well a bell, but it took a moment to put a face to the name. It took a moment longer to realize he didn't know the face at all, but the name was familiar enough from the papers. "I'm sorry to say that the Wellington heiress has yet to arrive."

"A pity then. Oh, now I am starting to truly worry. We should have crossed paths miles ago."

Mark bit his lip. There was no guest list for tonight, after all, and though her clothes marked her as a lady of some status, they weren't in style for the area. Couple that fact with her accent. Though it was subdued, the cadence reminded him of an American his father got along with. What an odd character. What was this American doing near the estate? Her words implied that she knew Maribelle, but where could the former be?

Mark froze when his mind seized on something else the lady had said.

"How did you know I wasn't the first footman?"

The lady smiled, nodding her head slightly. “Your collar is just a little loose and you’ve undone the button. You don’t seem accustomed to the style yet. I would presume that you are new to this employment?”

She wasn't wrong, but Mark couldn't think of how she knew that from a single glance. “Perhaps I was busy polishing the silver or attending to tasks in the household and haven't had the time to fix my coat. The household is in a bit of a rush.”

“In that case, you would have left paint behind like the other man. Look, the door is smeared from where the wet paint off his coat brushed against the wood.”

Mark turned to the door. Indeed, it was true. His quick eyes spotted the smear of paint where Jacob's coat had brushed against the door. In his rush to fulfill his duty, Jacob must have brushed against the door. Mark had even made note of it early.

Mark turned back to the lady, “And perhaps I traded formality for comfort in this busy season. What evidence you presented could have been caused by anything. Was the bit about the first-footman just a guess?”

Now it was the lady who was watching him with a somewhat approving look. “One you confirmed. Your accent gave it away, though your posture did some of that work too. Nothing certain, for sure, but enough to lay a foundation. You told the rest to me yourself.”

And Mark had to give her that. She'd taken the point in this verbal spar, and though the hour was late, he couldn't feel more awake. Mark returned to the first of the lady's questions with his own response. “I would fetch the first footman, but I fear that he wouldn't be able to help you either. No one has seen the lady in question.”

It was the strangers' turn to look puzzled. Her stature was short, and her blond hair swung in the wind, done up in pig-tails that made her look young, but her eyes were old and weary when they scanned along the house with just the slightest edge of desperate if Mark was willing to hedge a bet.

“She should have arrived by now. Never mind the fact that she promised to meet me on the way.”

By this point, Mark made his decision. Even if she was an unexpected guest, the rain was pouring down. He might not have been as rich as a Wellington, but Mark Verner was certainly a gentleman.

“Please step inside, miss...”

The lady put a hand to her mouth, “My apologies. My name is Elizabeth Tanner. At your service.”

And like that, Mark Verner let the lady inside the estate.

4. *"And Like that, Mark Verner let the fox into the chicken coop, and all the rest would follow" -- M Verner.*

Mark, with a look of askance at the unexpected guest, grabbed the suitcase that she had been holding. Elizabeth let him and followed closely behind, stopping only to close her umbrella under the shelter of the roof. When Mark moved to take the umbrella, however, she held it to her side, so Mark let it be.

"Here, let's get you into the hallway."

"It's called the foyer." Elizabeth whispered back, tightening the strap of her umbrella so that it was closed tightly shut.

A bit chastised, Mark propped the door open and Elizabeth followed him close behind without any more fuss. It was all rather sedentary if not for the fact that her eyes were darting about the room, almost as if to catalog each and every turn of the corner. When Mark gestured to the rack where she could leave her umbrella, she did so, albeit after only a moment's hesitation. Mark laid her case neatly by the doorway and gestured across the hall.

"I'll let Mrs. Wellington know that you've arrived. Did you telegram ahead to tell her that you would be arriving?" Mark asked, despite betting that the opposite was true. He would have been told to watch out for her if so. Elizabeth's answer, though, was surprisingly assured.

"I was to arrive with Maribelle. My arrangements should be taken care of."

An interesting assumption on her part, then, but Mark let it lie for then and now. Instead he found himself re-adjusting the button on his collar, giving his attaché the time to settle in the hallway. But when he moved to go alert the lady in the house of the unexpected guest, Elizabeth moved to follow him.

Mark decided to let it slide for the time and moved out of the front door-

--Moved out of the foyer and into the hall. Even at this hour, the lights were still on, but even after being changed, the color of the bulbs was still a bit spotty. The house was simply too big to deal with a household this small.

Mark crossed by what must have been Harriete's ladder, at the very least, and tried to step over the tarp that had been laid across the floor. Small splotches of pain were strewn about underneath, but Mark and his guest made no comment on it or the fact that the tarp itself was a countermeasure at best, there was what must have been a perfect sized footprint near the ladder that hadn't been covered.

For a moment, there was only the sound of rain falling outside to accompany the clicking of heels and leather shoes, but that was interrupted, seemingly out of nowhere, by a question.

“What are the Wellingtons like?”

There was no judgment in Elizabeth’s tone, but it was an odd question to ask right off the bat and to a stranger at that. Mark took a moment to think of an answer.

“Busy.”

A moment of silence, then, on Elizabeth’s part. They were nearing the study where Mark could leave her, but if he slowed down to give her a little more time to dry off, that was no one’s business but his.

“There is an interesting amount of work going on within the household.”

Perhaps a little pridefully, Mark answered “We can take care of things.”

“It must be a late hour, then, for you to be working while the rest of the staff get to retire.”

And it was a fair point, on her end, to call out, but Mark was beginning to suspect that conversing like her was like picking his way through a dark hallway next to a cat. It was hard to tell where you were going, and the cat knew perfectly well where everything should have been.

All hallways must end eventually, however, and Mark found himself hesitating at the locked door, a door where he could hear muffled voices inside. Given the lack of suspects, he could only wager that he had an awkward conversation on his hands, but Elizabeth showed no signs of hurrying him along.

He was a few years older than she was, he bet. She couldn’t be anything less than twenty, and to be a foreigner at that! Mark could understand her hesitancy.

Mark opened the door to a room with an expensive looking sofa and chair set, pattern matched to the drapings over the window. There was a fireplace that was smoldering in the center of the room, but there wasn’t that much heat to it. Lady Wellington sat in the cushioned chair, and at the sound of the door opening, she whipped her head to meet Mark’s eyes.

On the coach, Lady Smithson was laying down, taking up a little more room than was strictly polite. “Oh, how lovely! And this is your niece? Your dress looks lovely darling, but you must be soaked.”

“Thank you Madame.” Said Elizabeth, but that was a quiet comment, overshadowed by the sudden tenseness that came over Lady Wellington.

“And who is this, Mr. Verner?”

Lady Smithson sat up at that. “Oh, do you mean to tell me that this isn’t our prodigal heiress?”

Mark would have answered, but he was beaten to the punch. Or perhaps to put it more accurately, he took perhaps a moment too long to gather his thoughts. Next to him, Elizabeth shuffled her way forward.

“My name is Miss Elizabeth Tanner, madam. Maribelle should have written ahead.”

“I received no such letter.” The only Wellington in the room said, rising to her full height, as scant as it was, and Mark was the proud recipient of a scolding look, perhaps for bringing the unverified guest inside.

Miss Elizabeth was quiet in her response, but she was prompt. “The telegram would have been sent yesterday. Any sooner would not have been possible thanks to our travel.”

“It’s rude for an uninvited guest to let herself into the household!”

“Mr. Wellington assured us it was fine. He called ahead.”

That was the wrong thing to say, and Mark could not hide his wince at that. Lady Wellington began to puff herself up, though at least the vitriol in her tone was directed more at herself. “That husband of mine has evidently forgotten.”

“Oh, Charlotte, quit with the suspicion. The young dear looks frozen. Come now, sit. Jacob, would you be a dear and fetch us another cup of tea.”

For not the first time that day, Mark was thankful for the presence of Lady’s Wellington’s mortal enemy. Lady Smithson looked, for all the world, giddy at the drama, but she was more than willing to make a seat for Elizabeth and herd the girl over to a place by the fire. With a leisurely snap of her fingers, the dear old butler was quick to come into the room and professional enough not to gawk at the scene. With a quick glance towards Mark that promised questions for later, he fell into the tried routine of the effective servant he was.

For Mark though, he had greater concerns on his mind. Wellington was quick to close the gap between her and Mark and pull him aside. Once within the safety of the hallway, she pounced.

“When did she arrive?”

“Not a moment ago. She was dropped off on a carriage, one of the ones you can hire in London.” Expensive carriages at that. Even a shabby cabby like that one would have cost a fair bit for a trip to the countryside. Another point for Elizabeth being someone of wealth.

Irreverent of Mark’s thoughts, Wellington pushed forward with a scathing “Why did you let her in?”

And at that, Mark drew on something in himself. “I wouldn’t be a gentleman to let her drown out there.”

“We are- not prepared for an extra guest.” Lady Wellington snapped, but it was thankfully half hearted at best. She peered back into the room, and Mark could see her source of hesitation. Removed from the rain, it was clear that Elizabeth was a young, debatably pretty thing, enough so that it wasn’t unreasonable to let her inside. The girl in question barely looked twenty, certainly no older than that, and Wellington wasn’t unnecessarily cruel.

There was a part of Mark that drew some relief from that, but a bigger part of himself was drawn inside the room, where the two ladies of some status had started talking, albeit in a mismatch of the boisterous Smithson and the more demure Elizabeth.

“Darling, I love that dress of yours. Particularly daring, isn’t it for this time of year?”

“It was one of my mother’s.”

Smithson, at least, seemed taken in by her, but then again, she was one to cast a sly look at Wellington in the process. Lady Wellington drew away from the doorway at that, but Mark stayed. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light or a matter of scale, she was taller than the rest of them put together after all, but the fact that Jacob had come to call when she asked made it almost seem like Smithson was the master of the house, not Wellington.

Interesting, wasn’t it, what a change of perspective brought to the table.

“That’s a creative use of water color. Who is it by?” asked Elizabeth. Her question wasn’t pointed at anyone in particular, but by this point, Wellington was back in the room. Propriety would demand nothing less than she responded, with Smithson so clearly taking charge elsewhere.

“A French artist who traded it for a closer look at one of my husband’s inventions.” A strange hint of what must have been pride was filling Wellington’s tone, one that welcomed questions like-

“I wasn’t aware that your husband was an inventor.”

“Oh, dear Reginald was always interested in playing with metals.” And there was Lady Smithson, right there to steal the thunder. Their dynamic was beginning to fill in like clockwork, Mark couldn’t help but note. Every line said by Wellington had to be undercut by one of Smithson’s. There was some history here, some kind of relationship that he wasn’t quite privy too, but it was deeply interesting all the same.

A writer had to pride himself on being an observant one, and Mark would like to think he was one of the best. He could speculate on the stories behind the names all day, though, because something was more pressing on his mind. That sense of anticipation that had been building, albeit to a bored watch over the courtyard, was reaching a breaking point, and he was more surprised that no one else thought to bring up-

“Where is Maribelle?”

Being in the light of the fire must have done wonders for her constitution because that edge of desperate tenseness was back in Elizabeth. Her hands were curled together around one another, but her question brought an effective end to the cold war between the women in the room.

“Was she not to arrive with you?” Smithson asked, but that received a shake of the head from Elizabeth. And perhaps the situation was starting to dawn on her because she fell silent, no the better word was poised. Coiled for wherever the action might take her, or so Mark would artistically attribute.

“It is undeniable now. She is late. Far from the point of propriety now.”

“Perhaps dangerously so.” Wellington had the floor, but it was the old gossip in the room that stole the show. Jacob finished pouring a cup of tea for Smithson and stood back to his full height, taking the center of the room in a few strides. “Would I be wrong in asserting the fact that only recently, a rather popular newsprint put out news of her arrival?”

It took a moment or two to ponder the subtext in that comment, but there was a more visible reaction to seize upon from Elizabeth, who cried out-

“What do you mean, newsprint? What did it say?”

“Why, the fact that she was returning to London with the family diamond of course!” With a tone that, if Mark didn’t know any better, seemed a tinge too jovial to be the center of attention, Jacob certainly commanded everyone’s attention in the room now. His voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. “A newsprint, mind you, that stressed how valuable a diamond she was carrying with her.”

Jacob knew what he was doing, though it was a bit cruel to carry through. Elizabeth looked like she wanted to strangle the teacup in her hands, and Lady Wellington looked like she was winding up for a lecture. Lady Smithson just had a thoughtful, thoughtful look on her, and perhaps that was the most terrifying of them all.

“I could go out looking for her.”

Even Mark was surprised to find that the comment was coming from him, but after he said it, he found himself resolved to follow through. Perhaps the stories of the Wellington Diamond had filled his mind too, because his mind was rife with possibilities for what had befallen the missing heiress. With the idea out in the open, Jacob was quick to follow with his own assertions of action, promising to wake Harriete and the rest for the search. Little Elizabeth Tanner looked ready to follow, and perhaps if Smithson had been less willing to draw her attention away with questions of her own, she would have. It was enough for the rest of the room to slip away. Jacob went out to the servant quarters to rally the troops, which left Mark on his way to grab his coat next to the door--

Throughout this, Lady Wellington seemed content to follow in silence, but her eyes met with Mark's in the foyer. She didn't say anything, and her lips were terse, looking for all the world deep in thought. After a moment, she nodded to Mark, who took it as good a time as any. He opened the door and cut his way into the storm.

He wasn't gone for five minutes before there came a clapping of a horse's hooves against the muddy walkway, and out of the darkness and storm, a bright white horse bearing a woman on her back came into sight.

“Oh, hello there! Do you mind telling my Auntie that I've safely arrived?”

5. *"She was like a wild thing--In the time it took to settle Maribelle in, Mark needed to redirect her attention no less than three times to the shelter of the estate and there was simply no pointing out that she was in deathly danger of a chill in those water-soaked clothes. If there was any miracle that could be attributed to Elizabeth, it was that she took only a single moment to do what Mark couldn't in ten."*
-- M Verner.

The heiress of the Wellington Family Fortune, a lady who had been so recently the center of all the major newsprints in London as the renowned and elegant heiress of the family, insisted on unsaddling her horse in the stables-

"Because she did a remarkable job in ferrying me home. It's cold and wet, I won't have her waiting."

Mark thought it best not to get in her way when she put it like that. Not because of any particular merit on the horse's part but because it was late enough in the night for Maribelle's cheer to burn.

Maribelle had brown hair, cropped to around the length of her neck, and her skin had a reasonable tan like she'd been spending most of her time outside the household. She was wearing a lot more athletic clothes than Mark would have expected, riding clothes if he had to wager a guess which was perhaps the reason why she had been able to ride her horse bareback across the countryside. Of course, that didn't explain anything about her situation.

"Come on, let's get you an umbrella at least. You are going to freeze to death."

But she wouldn't have it, or rather, by the time that Mark waved Jacob and the half-woken Harriette over from the scant distance they'd managed to cover in the rain, she had ventured outside of the stables to gawk at the line of hedges that ringed around the estate.

"Oh, look at that! It's all fancy-like. I rather like the hedge-maze. I wonder what it would be like to give it the run-around?"

"My lady, please get yourself inside!" Said Jacob, who at least had the worthwhile to have grabbed an umbrella before he ventured out into the storm. It was a bit of a lost cause with the missing heiress though. She was much too enthralled by the albeit impressive looking hedge-maze to budge from her curiosity.

Meanwhile, Mark was staving off a look from Harriete, who for all the world looked like she was blaming him for this mess. Of course, it wasn't his fault! It was hard to say who was at fault here except that of the storm, but even now, it was settling into something akin to a drizzle.

It wouldn't do, however, to have recovered the missing heiress only to have her bedridden with the cold, and Mark was nothing if not clever. On one of Maribelle's passes back and forth across the walkway next to the hedges, he gently interposed himself next to the girl and revealed his secret weapon:

"Miss Maribelle? I do believe that one Miss Tanner is inside waiting for you."

Maribelle's eyes widened at that information, and it was like a switch had been turned on in her. She took a look at herself, her state of dress, and the general storm around them and it was like a sudden rush of understanding filled her. Her pacing fell to a stop.

Mark lowered his voice, more out of the sense of keeping her embarrassment to a minimum than anything else. "I can get you something to dry off and get you inside."

"Of course, Mr. Verner. Of course. We'll get the young lady next to the fire, don't you worry," Jacob then broke that pretension of privacy, the nosy gossip that he was, and perhaps that attributed to Maribelle distinctly ignoring the older servant to instead turn her attention to Mark.

"Right, I suppose I should go introduce myself to my Auntie, correct? Good sir, would you see me through, *s'il vous plait*?"

She held out her hand expectantly to Mark, who just stared at it for a moment before realizing that she might have wanted him to grab something. But she had no luggage in sight, which he mentioned as such-

"Oh, I lost it a few miles ago, now come on! Why don't the rest of you check on my horse?"

And without a moment's hesitation, grabbed Mark's hand and started dragging him forward, if any. Perhaps Harriete's look of confusion was spreading to him because he had time to exchange only a look of confusion with Jacob before he was pulled forward, leaving the others in something crossing between confusion, indignation, and sheer dumbstruck awe.

Mark didn't seem to need to be the one directing Maribelle, as she found her way through the door without much trouble. Once they were on the other side and out of the rain, however, she let the hand that she had grabbed dropped.

“Sorry about that. That butler was getting rather picky, oh, I like the look of this front-room!”

And perhaps the rush of the evening was leaving him a bit light-headed because Mark responded to the only thing that was on his mind. “I believe it’s called a foyer.”

An odd situation. It was an odd situation and Mark knew as much. Maribelle had nearly taken off to explore the rest of the estate before Mark had mentioned the fire in the study and her companion. At the mention of that second part, he found himself directing the girl through the dark hallway at a faster pace than he felt was strictly comfortable. The hour was late enough for the lights to have been turned off, but that didn’t stop Maribelle from seeming to be the one leading him on.

Herding the girl, in many ways, was much like catching a cat, and there was a familiarity to that statement that gave Mark enough room for pause.

Girl was the right word for Maribelle. She, like Elizabeth before her, was a few years younger than he would have expected, but where Elizabeth cloaked that youthfulness through several layers of level-headed maturity, the same could not be said of Maribelle. It was baffling, really, the extent to which she was swinging through the house with that cheerful and brimming confidence when so much of her situation wasn’t all that clear to Mark.

Just why had she been delayed when her arrival had been scheduled for hours ago? There had been a carriage, too, that she had been supposed to have arrived on, but instead she came in on horseback in the dark of the night. There were good odds, though, that such a measure would have ended with Maribelle breaking her neck on one of the backroads of the countryside.

And Maribelle should have known that too. She was energetic and whirling in place through the hallways. Not typical behavior of someone unused to riding, much less riding bareback. Then there was Maribelle’s outfit. It was a sturdy, professionally made thing, and while it was no expertise of Mark’s, he really stood by his earlier observation of it being a set of riding clothes.

So Maribelle was someone who was willing to stable her horse before anything else on arrival to her family’s estate and owned a fine set of riding clothes to take along for a trip to a foreign country. Was Mark expected to believe, then, that she was one to risk the dangers of riding in the dark where she could so easily be thrown off?

There was one bit of information, too, that Mark could think back on. This was apparently Maribelle's first time in England, much less at her Uncle's estate. Perhaps she knew the way, but was it risky enough to ride all the way to the estate in the dark?

"What happened out there?" Mark asked, but Maribelle didn't slow. Instead, she turned around to face him while still walking backwards across the hall.

"The carriage broke down." She shrugged, before nearly stumbling in place. Harriete's ladder from before was still in the middle hall, and for a moment, she almost fell if she hadn't caught herself on the ladder at the last moment.

At the very least, the paint from earlier had dried entirely, not that it would have mattered to the soaked heiress. Their forward progress, however, was halted when she caught sight of the footprint, perfectly encased on the hardwood floor.

"Would you look at this! Perhaps some dashing thief wasn't looking where he was going! What do you say Mr. Verner?"

"I would say that even if it was a dashing thief, the weather outside is bad enough that we might as well offer him a room. What would he steal in this weather?"

"*Au contraire*, I'd expect this would be the perfect weather for a heist! Imagine it, you could get a fair bit of distance away, and all your tracks would be covered in the rain." It was a teasing kind of comment, but one that clearly got away from her. The second half dwindled into something a little more thoughtful, a moment of hesitation in an otherwise energetic girl.

Mark decided to throw her another hook for this image-play of theirs. "I would expect that any thief would be more attracted to the gallery. I haven't been allowed to see it yet."

"Oh, is that the room that you're leading me to then? It would be a nice excuse for you, and I love looking at art." She then took on a mock accent, and Mark felt a twinge of embarrassment when he realized it must have been styled after him. "You'd say, 'Oh, Mrs. Wellington, I thought that we'd find you in the gallery. Terribly sorry to be here, tally-ho!' That's a word you use here, right?"

There were a few things that Mark wanted to say to that bit of cheekiness, and the least of those was to actually follow through on her suggestion to see that gallery he'd been wanting to take a look at, but one look at Maribelle took care of that. She was fidgeting in place like she had energy to burn, but there was something about the way she was acting that struck Mark as... perhaps exaggerated was not the right word.

Elizabeth had been nervous when she came through here, and Maribelle might not be showing it, but they were a similar age. It was a late hour, and she was cold and alone in a foreign country. If that tidbit from Jacob was true, this would be the first time in her life that she'd be meeting her aunt.

Mark liked to think of himself as a bit of a romantic at heart, but you didn't have to be a writer like he was to make something out of that observation.

Without a response from Mark aside from a smile and a shrug, the two fell into a more comfortable silence with that little tidbit kicking around in the back of his mind. Mark must have lost track of time, because the rest of the hallway had moved in much more of a comfortable silence after that. They'd arrived at the study, but without an answer to the questions that started to wriggle into Maribelle's story. Just what brought the heiress to be here, really? What caused her to run so late to her schedule, and did it have to do with the diamond that had taken the estate to the height of such hysterics?

There wasn't any time to answer those questions at the moment, because Maribelle threw open the doors of the study without a second thought. Behind her, Mark took in the sight of Lady Wellington nursing a cup of tea, but that was much overshadowed by the sudden burst of action that came from the girl sitting in one of the armchairs around the fire.

"Maribelle!"

Because no sooner had the heiress stepped into the room had Elizabeth sprang off her seat. In a disarray of limbs, it was less elegant than she seemed to have intended, but Maribelle made up the difference by rushing forward. They met in the middle of the study in an embrace.

"Oh Eliza, you look soaked." winked the utter hypocrite, but that was soon overshadowed by the smaller of the two, who took both of Maribelle's hands in her own.

"You are utterly ridiculous! What are you doing, looking like that! You were due here hours ago! You're soaking, and the papers were all talking about your arrival like it-"

"Oh, I'm in the papers?"

"-I told you this was a bad idea for a trio. I was worried sick and-"

The two, stumbling, slipped into a quiet whisper that Mark couldn't quite hear at first, but that was with good reason. They were in French now, and fluent in the language of romance, he was

not. Perhaps it was better that way since he could give them a little privacy. He could turn his attention to the other woman in the room.

Mrs. Wellington looked tense, like a statue almost, as she took a look at the sight in front of them. It was one more moment of... smallness from the strict taskmaster that Mark wasn't expecting. He would have thought that she would have pounced on Maribelle's disheveled appearance immediately, just as much the strict governess as she was master of the house.

Mrs. Wellington looked small. Looked small next to her niece, and small slumped in her chair. Perhaps many of the questions that were plaguing Mark were dancing around in her mind, but it was hard to tell what she was really thinking. Mark let himself stand in the corner, so he could observe, as oft he was to do.

When the rush of French and English from the pair drew to a close, Mrs. Wellington took a deep breath as if to steady herself. She stood up from her sight, and perhaps a little bit too formally for the circumstances, said-

"You must be my niece. We've never met, but I hope you understand that-

"Oh, 'ello Auntie! That's how you say it in English right?" Perhaps it could be expected that Mrs. Wellington fell silent, because the taciturn woman was thrown into an embrace that clearly caught her off guard. Maribelle seemed to swivel on the balls of her feet as she held her aunt.

Mrs. Wellington held Maribelle in her arms for a moment, before murmuring, "I do not believe that's how it's pronounced... It's nice to meet you, Maribelle."

And perhaps it was that moment of vulnerability that made Mark feel out of place here. A trespasser on a moment he rightly should not have been witnessing. He was a gentleman who loved the intricacies of conversation with interesting characters, of moments of verbal sparring and the stories that came with. Some things, though, were a lot more personal. He was only a visitor to the house, after all. Soon he would be gone and all he would have left would be its stories.

Mark caught Elizabeth's eye in the middle of this, and her expression spoke clearly to the feeling of the pair being a little out of place in the moment between family. Mark said nothing, but when he left the room, he was not surprised to find Elizabeth behind him, closing the doors to the study shut.

"I could show you to one of the guest rooms." Mark offered, though all the stress of the night was beginning to get to him."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I would rather stay here. You seem tired, Mr. Verner. Perhaps it's best that you get some rest."

Mark considered her words for a moment, before nodding. No matter how enticing, no matter what kind of story they would tell, Mark was just passing through the household. The Wellingtons did not need a stranger and a busybody prying at them with no respect for the order of the household. In that regard, Mark was no different than the gossiping Jacob or any of the prying, newspaper columnists that had no say in the lives of the people living here.

The secrets of the Wellington house could wait one more night--

Mark went to bed, a stalwart gentleman.

6. *"The thing about chess as a metaphor is that it is a binary competition. Two sides held apart by equal playing fields, equal sets of information of how the game is played and equal moves available to each player. The only difference stems from whether or not you were the player with the starting move. The limits of chess, of course, is that it does nothing for those third parties caught in the crossfire"* -- A note, from the famous Elizabeth Tanner.

The morning came quickly, and with it, Jacob's prediction from their first encounter came true. When Mark had collapsed in his bed last night, he had only the mind to set his work clothes to the side of his temporary bed, half-cognizant of the state of his dress. By dawn, however, the truth was clear enough. His clothes were soaked through.

"You'll have to take them to the laundry room, I'm afraid. I'll let Jacob know you'll be busy," said Harriete when Mark asked her what to do in the hallway. The maid had black eyebags that Mark felt partially responsible for after dragging her out of bed last night, but the truth was, his appearance was likely no better. "The laundry is in the East Wing, so you'll have to kip over the barricade."

"Is there a key?"

"The room should be unlocked, but I would watch out for the paint! Jacob has me practically scrubbing the place after yesterday morning!" She was, after all, awake relatively early and already in uniform. There was no time to do anything else.

Tonight, after all, was the night of the party that would be thrown for Maribelle's arrival, and soon the Estate would be filled with members of high society crammed into every nook and corner of the house. Mark didn't know how many guests were due to arrive for the party, but he knew it would be enough to overwhelm the staff.

So despite every bone in Mark's body aching for him to return to bed, he instead found himself tiptoeing past the line of furniture being used as a pseudo-barrier for the East Wing, propped in front of the hall to discourage guests from visiting the rougher side of the house.

In the grand scheme of things, it was no less magnificent than any other section of the Estate save for evidence of the construction. There were cans of paint strewn along the faded walls, and tools for the construction left in the wayside, as if their wielders were only one break away from returning to the work. It would have made for a busy picture if the hallways hadn't been emptier than sin, and it all painted a picture of...

It painted some kind of picture. By now, Mark knew every servant in the estate by face, and that total was low enough to count by hand. The Eastern Wing, however, showed full signs of construction of a much larger crew. Mark would have bought the excuse that they had left construction in preparation for the party celebrating Maribelle's return to London, but he would have expected for them to have at least tidied the workplace up.

And it was an odd thing, wasn't it, to label the party as the Heiress' return to a place that she had never before visited. The papers must have been wrong, but then again, there were strange occurrences everywhere Mark cared to look. Mark's mind was idly whirling with possibilities when he made his way into the laundry room-

The laundry room, which had a single occupant kneeling by a dolly.

It took a moment for Mark to recognize her, but Elizabeth Tanner had changed out of her soaked-dress, which she held in her hands. Instead, she was clad in a little more sensible clothes, the kind you'd see for a day out in the town. In her hands, her dress almost drowned her in fabric, but at Mark's approach, she laid it carefully down.

"My apologies, Mr. Verner. I didn't see you approaching."

"You seem to be up rather early, Mis Tanner." But that wasn't the real question Mark wanted to ask. The real one was more along the lines of what some noble lady was doing, kneeling by a puddle of water in the early parts of the morning. Her hands, Mark couldn't help but note, were scrubbed raw, which explained the fact that the room was in a water-logged state. He had to step over a pool of water, a fact that seemed to steal the energy and fire out of Miss Tanner's eyes.

"Do you require a hand?" Mark offered, and it was like he had offered to push the moon aside for her viewing pleasure. Miss Tanner picked herself off the ground, and if there was a little bit of redness in her eyes, well, that could be attributed to how soaked she was the night before.

"I needed to wash and dry my dress out for tonight, but I seem to have had a bit of a mishap." she admitted, and soon Mark found himself holding out a hand to help pull her off her feet, leaving the clothes behind on the dolly. She found herself wringing out her pants at one of the chairs, while Mark politely looked away and pretended that the tears that had been speckling her cheeks were accidental.

Soon, Mark found himself with his hands full with the washing, the least of those problems being that washing wasn't a task he was typically accustomed to performing, but evidence of Tanner's work was well established by the puddles that were strewn about the room, so perhaps he was in good company.

“It might have been easier, I think, to have someone like Harriette wash the clothes out. She’s already awake.” Mark observed, but Elizabeth shook her head. At least the levity was undercutting the bizarreness of the situation that was just starting to hit Mark about this encounter.

“The butler would have been the better bet, I think. He’s the one to ordinarily take care of the laundry.”

“Now why would you say that?” Mark asked. “He’s the head butler. Surely he has better things to do.”

“Well, the maid was the one to track paint all over the house, right? She must not have been back here often enough to get used to the construction or she would have avoided it.” Elizabeth confidently said, as if there were no other alternatives, a fact that Mark couldn’t help but comment on-

“Anyone else in the house could have been tasked with this.”

“Do you mean to say the Chef or Gardner?” Elizabeth had a kerchief in her hands now and was dabbing it at her eyes. “If they were in charge of the washing, their clothes wouldn’t show it. But then again, I have another source of information to draw upon.”

“And what would that be?”

“I asked the butler for the key to the room and he brought it up.”

And it was a remarkably succinct point, that. Mark once again conceded the point to her in the little game of wit that they seemed to have once again slipped into. The next few moments fell silent after that. Miss Elizabeth leaned back in the chair, her eyes following Mark’s movements as he tried to wrangle the clothes, a fight which he was clearly losing.

“You know, there was another piece of evidence that told me it was the butler in charge of this task.”

“And that was?” Mark asked, though most of his attention was on the fact that Jacob was liable to kill him for what he was doing to his uniform, and he supposed that it was for the best that he hadn’t touched Elizabeth’s dress yet.

“There are not that many servants here, for a household of this size.”

Mark had no idea what he was doing with the laundry, but it was a question that caused him to scrub his uniform all the harder. Something in Elizabeth's tone, here, had shifted. If he hadn't been paying attention, he might have missed it. But that exhaustion, that deep-seated tenseness that followed her every move before now, was gone out of her voice.

"I haven't been here long enough to comment on that."

But Mark had to wince at that, because it was a telling statement in and of itself. It really was an odd situation, the pair in that laundry room, and between just the two of them, it was clear that the real focus wasn't on the clothes.

"Mr. Verner, I must ask another favor of you."

Scrub, scrub. Mr. Verner was solely regretting his offer to help with the clothes, but he'd rather be helpful than out of the job, and he was a gentleman to be sure. Despite his best interests, Mark answered "I should be more than capable of lending a hand."

Elizabeth lowered her voice, all friendly-like, but with a noticeable tilt of her head. "When you are asked to look into Maribelle's carriage later today, would you mind telling me what you see?"

"I'm sorry?"

"My dear Maribelle seems to have misplaced one of her purses, and I would like to see it recovered."

And perhaps that was what made the strangeness of their situation crash down on Mark. Here he was, scrubbing a uniform well outside of his pay-range in what should technically be his off-hours. Here was Mark, being asked questions about a workplace that seemed to pile secret after secret onto the pile, and there was nothing in the room illuminating them. Here was the uninvited Miss Tanner, sitting in the room watching him. Mark's uniform was completely soaked through at this point, and while he probably shouldn't have submerged it in water to dry it off, he felt like it could be excused.

Mark had lost track of the role that he'd been playing here. Perhaps he had been too caught up in the guise of a reliable servant, but he hadn't been drawn to the job because of the work. He'd been drawn in by Mr. Wellington and the story he'd taken him in with. This whole affair at the Wellington Estate, the diamond, the missing servants. There was a secret at the heart of these proceedings, and perhaps it was time for Mark to get to the bottom of it.

Before Mark could ask Elizabeth what she'd been thinking, though, there were the sound of footsteps coming across the halls, and it left just enough time for Mark to stand up, for Elizabeth to straighten her posture like they were school children whose governess had just returned to the room, as the footsteps reached the open door.

“Good heavens! What happened here!” There at the door was Jacob, looking rather flummoxed, and it was easy to see why. The laundry room was soaked from top to bottom. Mark was no longer kneeling next to the doily, but his uniform was still submerged. Miss Elizabeth, who had been curled up in a ball just a moment before, was now sitting ramrod straight like she was meeting the queen. It certainly made a sight for the poor old butler.

“I should have taken your advice on the laundry” Mark admitted, but the humor seemed lost on Jacob who was blinking at the pair, at the walls, with all the strength and muster of someone about to faint.

After a moment where the old man was perhaps processing his grief, he gave what might not have been truthful, but at the very least, was a heartfelt smile.

“When you soak the clothes in lye overnight, you’re not supposed to douse the whole room Mr. Verner!”

“Overnight?”

At the same time that Elizabeth asked- “What do you mean with lye?”

And it was the timing of their comments that did it. Mark started laughing, and Elizabeth joined in too. One a lower chuckle, but the latter with something much brighter. It was a stark contrast to the more somber scene that Mark had stumbled into only a little while before, and the mirth was well worth the scolding that Jacob gave to the two of them afterwards.

“Mr. Verner, my good man! How are you faring here?” Mr. Wellington, was surprisingly for once, present within his own household. A few hours after his misadventures in the laundry room, and Mark had been called to the front to help Mr. Wellington with his bags into the house.

“Smarting, sir. Mishap in the laundry room.” Mark admitted, but Mr. Wellington simply clapped him on the back.

“Don’t let my wife’s tongue get to you. She’s under a bit of stress.” Mr. Wellington winked, which made Mark feel all the more awkward when he pointed out-

“It was Jacob this time.”

“Oh, old Jacob is all bark and no bite. Now, I would love to stay and chat, but I hear that there was a spot of trouble with my darling Niece?”

Mark would have explained the mishap, but he hadn’t any need to. Mr. Wellington was already pushing him into the house, and there a much more interesting scene was waiting for him. Arranged in the foyer was Lady Wellington with a hand on her niece’s shoulder. At the sound of the bell, the two turned from what looked to be a game of chess, one they must have started a little while ago because the board was half-empty. Two cups of tea were arranged on the table, half-drained.

“It’s good to see you, Uncle. I do hope your travels kept you well.” Maribelle’s voice was a little softer than the night before, but perhaps it was because she didn’t bother turning her head away from the board.

“Oh, it was all well enough, well enough! So how are you faring, Maribelle? Jacob was telling me something exciting happened with your arrival,” Mr. Wellington said, boldly approaching the table. Without looking too deeply, he made a move for Lady Wellington’s side, a fact that made the woman in question frown because it was followed by a quick capitalization on Maribelle’s part.

“Oh, it was a simple mishap, nothing too out of the ordinary. I ended up riding-”

“Oh, then it all turned out fine. Mr. Verner, just leave my bags here. And you look rather somber, Charlotte! Try smiling, our work here is almost done!” Mr. Wellington said, and without a moment’s more, started heading towards the hallway without a second glance.

And something curious happened here, because Maribelle seemed to seize upon one of the chess pieces that she had been holding, and it slipped from her fingers. A fact that would have been more noticeable if Lady Wellington hadn’t stood up to follow her husband.

“Reginald, do send the Footman to my quarters when you’re finished unpacking. We’re just about finished here.” Lady Wellington said somewhat frostily, but Mr. Wellington was already on his way to the stairs, and the pair’s conversation faded into the distance, leaving Mark in the room with the still-sitting Maribelle.

She had changed out of the riding clothes that she had been in earlier, and was now clad in a much more formal dress, this one a pasty-white that seemed to swallow her in its fabric. It looked off-sized on her, and she was adjusting the collar while she sat there. It was like she and Elizabeth had swapped dresses, all things considered. She had forgone her practical clothes for the overtly formal, and Elizabeth had donned something that wouldn't be out of place for a trip through the forest.

It, however, was not in the style of Elizabeth's dress and the two were not the same size anyways. It took a moment for Mark to place the dress, and to his surprise, he actually could. This was one of Lady Wellington's dresses, though why Maribelle was wearing it could fall under a number of explanations.

"Checkmate in six." Maribelle groaned, which was impromptu enough to shock Mark out of his thoughts.

"Excuse me?"

"The board."

Her comment made a little more sense once Mark got a better look at the game left behind, but Maribelle wasn't the one on the losing side. Her black pieces didn't outnumber the white pieces on the opposing side, but they didn't need to. Her husband's move seemed to have set Lady Wellington's work steps back. He was no expert, but he was pretty sure that the Lord's thoughtless move would have cost both Wellington's the entire game.

"Well done." Mark meekly offered, but that was met with a huff from Maribelle, who seemed to have some of the color restored to her tone.

"I was losing."

"Ah."

Given the moment alone, it struck Mark that this was the perfect opportunity to ask Maribelle a few questions about the night before. The foyer was empty, the older Wellingtons were upstairs, and he'd just been given a good opening. So he might as well take advantage of it.

"Do you mind if you cut in then? I promise that I'm nowhere near as good as Wellington at this game, but I can try to make up the difference."

For a moment, Mark thought that perhaps his boldness had given the game away, but Maribelle held up a hand to hide a giggle, a move clearly more playful than anything else. “Well, good sir. Let’s even those odds. Start from scratch. I doubt Auntie will be finishing her game.”

The two started assembling their pieces on either side of the board, and Maribelle, at least, seemed a little less tense than before. Mark felt comfortable enough, then, to start probing for questions.

“Have you been able to peek at that gallery yet? I’ll admit, I was a little too tired last night to pop in.”

Maribelle sighed as she righted one of her knights. “I hardly have any time. I wanted to go looking through the hedge maze too, but the entire schedule has been thrown off, Auntie says.”

“Was it a long trip to England, then?” Mark said, just a little bit pleased that Maribelle was bringing up the subject herself.

“Long enough. Eliza does horribly on ships, so it was a bit of a hassle to coax her out of the cabin.”

“Where is Miss Tanner, but the way?”

“In her room. She takes to colds easily, and after last night, I expect her not to budge until tonight.”

And Mark would not have thought twice on that bit of casual talk if not for the fact that his encounter this morning proved otherwise. Elizabeth had been perfectly up and about just that morning, and Mark would have brought up as much to Maribelle if not for the fact that the girl had gone back to rolling the Queen piece in her fingers. The piece that she had dropped earlier. It was a small movement, nothing of really note, but the action was repetitive.

Maribelle had seemed far much less energetic when faced with Mr. Wellington than her Auntie, and when he spoke, she had rolled that piece too. And Maribelle’s eyes even now were focused on their game, a game which Mark had yet to even make the first move on.

Mark was no expert, but there were Maria’s yellowbacks that talked all about tells and little clues that a smart fellow could use to tell if someone was lying or uncomfortable, and he knew this for sure. He had met with Elizabeth that morning. Which meant that Maribelle, as strange as it sounded, was not being entirely truthful. Or perhaps she didn’t know Elizabeth’s whereabouts,

but that prompted questions of its own, and it struck Mark that the household really had no idea of the character of either of the girls they held host too. Not really.

Just about the only thing that Mark knew about her was that she owned that damn diamond, the one in all the papers. Anything else was out of his knowledge, and he had met Elizabeth a little while before, and just now, Maribelle said that she was confined to her room.

“Are you going to make your move, good sir?” Maribelle asked, batting her eyelashes at him. Was he attributing intrigue to her question, or was she getting at something else entirely? Perhaps Mark should have pressed his advantage more though, since soon out of the hallway came Mr. Wellington, and Maribelle seemed to shrink in front of Mark’s eyes like a wildflower.

“Oh, hello again Uncle. Did you forget anything?”

“Oh, nothing much. Nothing much.” Mr. Wellington curtly nodded his head towards his niece, but his attention was elsewhere. He put a hand on Mark’s shoulder. “Mr. Verner, though, can I have a word with you?”

Maribelle seemed a perfectly nice girl, but Mark couldn’t help but notice that her eye widened at that question. She didn’t break her gaze on them as Mr. Wellington drew Mark aside and out of sight.

Mark turned his attention to his employer, who had a handkerchief in his hands that he was dabbing at his eyes. Mark let him finish, and Mr. Wellington patted his shoulder once again.

“Now that there’s a bit of daylight to light our way, let’s have you and old Jacobs go search the carriage out for anything Maribelle left behind.”

“The carriage?”

“Exactly! You’ll gather up her things, and we can get them all organized when you get back before tonight’s party.”

And with one more clap on his shoulder, Mr. Wellington gave him the directions and sent him off. Jacob met him halfway to the stables, looking a little tired but no worse for wear after the morning’s mishap, but there were now too many questions floating around Mark’s mind for him to make right of it. Maribelle, The Wellingtons, the workers, that diamond, and as they left for the countryside and the abandoned carriage, Mark was just left to think too, about how Elizabeth had known this would have happened.

7. "On any other night, the evidence would not have been spoiled. Perhaps in another life, the life of a good-hearted man would have been spared and an innocent man left to go free. But the storm that had hit the English countryside did more than plague its travelers with a bout of the cold, it set into motion the perfect circumstances for a tragedy.

What Mark Verner did not know, here, was that his part in this story would soon be coming to an end." -- M Verner.

It said something about the Wellington wealth that, in order to recover a damaged carriage, Mark and Jacob ended up taking their own carriage into the countryside. It was somewhere near midday at this point, but Mark was at least able to sit on the inside. He was no expert in horsemanship, which meant it was up to Jacob to lead the way and corral the horses, which included the bright white horse from the night before, which looked somewhat chuffed to be hooked up to a carriage.

An hour and a half of travel, roughly, opened up a lot of room for questions, and Mark was more than willing to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Why are we searching for the carriage?" Mark would ask.

"Because Mr. Wellington asked us too." Jacob would call back leading to a-

"No, I mean. What happened in the first place? You probably know more than I. Did Maribelle explain things?"

"Lady Maribelle," stressed Jacob, "And she explained little. All she said was that the carriage was damaged."

Trot, trot, trot. There was something rhythmic to the movement of the carriage over the dirt roads of the countryside, and though it was a somber kind of afternoon, the kind where it would have been best to stay inside with a cup of tea, the carriage had a soothing enough movement that Mark was tempted to lay down his head and rest.

Tonight was the night of the party, and soon after, the termination of Mark's limited contract. This meant that if he wanted to figure out the secrets of the Wellington Estate, he was running out of time to do so. At the same time, the question emerged whether or not he even wanted to solve the mystery. The household was a private one, and any story he'd come away with would run the risk of damaging his status with the Wellington's.

It all came down, really, to the night of this party. Mark would figure out his next move after the night was done, but that was a mountain to overcome in and of itself. Jacob would likely push the household to the limit when they returned-

Which opened up questions of what they were doing here.

“Aren’t you busy with the household Jacob? You’re the head butler, surely you don’t have time for an afternoon trip to pick up some suitcases.”

“Evidently so, but I expect Lady Wellington to have things well managed in my place.” Jacob muttered from the carriage head, but it was a slightly bitter thing, that. The carriage lifted as they crossed over a stone bridge, and Mark let the movement subside before pressing on.

“Still, why didn’t Wellington send Richard with to check this out? You’re the head butler and hardly needed here.”

Mr. Jacob took a moment to respond to this, and he did so with a fair bit of incredulity. “As you’ll recall, the footman has absconded.”

“Pardon?”

“Richard never returned to work. He never made it back home.”

The lethargy of the moment suddenly snapped, but it was the matter-of-fact tone that made Mark wince. Jacob was making no sense though because, “How would have Mr. Wellington made his way back home then?”

“By himself. Didn’t you notice that you were taking on most of Richard’s duties?”

And indeed, Mark had been taking on tasks he would have previously assisted Richard with. He helped Mr. Wellington with the bags and was on call for the rest of the household, and he hadn’t noticed. He hadn’t noticed that Richard had never returned, hadn’t put together the pieces that if Maribelle had arrived on horseback, then the natural question of what happened to the driver emerged. Richard had slipped away in the midst of the much more exciting mystery of the heiress.

Mark hadn’t noticed.

“What happened?”

Jacob was staring off into the distance. “Miss Maribelle mentioned, off-hand, that he had gone to get help. She didn’t care to mention how long that took or what happened next.”

“That’s... odd.” Mark trailed off, but it was Jacob who muttered the real truth of the situation.

“No, that is suspicious.”

It was not too long afterwards when the strangest thing greeted the pair as they hit round the bend of the road. They’d been following a stream that curled around the path for some time now, and Mark had been content to stare into its waters when he felt the horses come to a stop. In front of him, Mark heard Jacob gasp, and that caused Mark to stick his head out of the door.

There was the carriage.

But it wasn’t sitting in the middle of the road. The carriage looked like it had been sent flying in some terrible accident, and the contents of the carriage well illustrated this. Packages were strewn about the road, with suitcases and purses emptied of their contents. Bright dresses were dragged through the sludge of the steam-side road and left to the winds, and it was like the start of some grand battle had occurred.

“Mr. Jacob, what do you think?”

The butler did not respond in the time it took to close the gap. Mark approached one case of clothes and nudged it with his foot. The dress was speckled with mud like it had been dragged through the dirt, yet it had been shoved back inside the case. It was a statement evidently not true for every case on the carriage, which made it interesting that there were a few that had been saved.

“This would be worth half the salary I would make in a year.” Mark mentioned, but still no response from Jacob. The mess had seemingly struck him mute, so Mark left him to his own business.

There were, in fact, a few thoughts turning around in Mark’s mind regarding the scene in front of him. With the stream on one side and a patch of woods on the hilly overside on the other side of the path, there wasn’t much room to maneuver. The terrain was muddy, which his boots could clearly attest to, and it had been raining the night before. It was conceivable, then, that the

carriage could have gotten stuck, but that would never explain the mess of affairs here or the cause of Maribelle's departure via horseback.

There was an idea! Maribelle had arrived at the estate on the back of one horse, the white one that was currently saddled to their own carriage, but there were two horses to the carriages here. Where was the second horse?

Maribelle had arrived on a horse she was willing to stable and care for before her own needs were met, which meant that it was unlikely that she would abandon a horse in the rain, so what ever could have happened to the missing horse? Where was the missing footman for that matter?

"Jacob, I'm going to see what I can look for."

Because there was one piece of information that Mark could work from, one piece of the story that he'd manage to drag out from those in the know about this situation-

Elizabeth Tanner had asked him to look for a purse. There were bags tossed into the stream and suitcases with their locks broken, presumably by the force of the fall, but there was no purse in the area. Mark even walked through the scene two times, careful to keep track of where he was stepping so that he wouldn't disturb the scene or the footprints embedded within.

There were tracks of course. The terrain was muddy, but that caused a problem in and of itself. The rain had washed away the edges, and the prints that remained lost some of their edge. Looking closer, however, Mark's nimble eyes could at least distinguish between some of the tracks. There was a smaller set of footprints, and one that came from someone much bigger.

Nothing outside the ordinary, except there were a third set of prints from someone in-between the size of the smaller and larger set of prints. What was curious, here, were that they were from a flat-footed pair of shoes, of the kind that Mark would be wearing in his uniform.

Exactly like what Mark would be wearing in his uniform, in fact. He even had an example. The paint scattered from the day before had left a print like this one, posthumously preserved on the tarp for their viewing pleasure.

"Where did you go, Richard," Mark muttered to himself, crouching next to one of the best-preserved prints.

"You were the one who worked with him the most, in these last couple days," came a voice from behind. Jacob must have taken his second wind because he was standing over Mark, who felt just a little embarrassed to be caught on the ground. He rose back to the feet and pointed at the print.

“That’s from the uniform, I would bet. Something like what I was wearing yesterday.”

“Indeed, like something you were wearing.” Jacob muttered, drawing close to the print to view for himself. “You cleaned off your uniform this morning, didn’t you?”

“It’s my only one, so I’ll need it back for tonight,” Mark answered, but in a half-hearted way as something much more interesting had caught his view with the carriage. There was no breakage of the wheels, and it wasn’t like they were stuck in the mud in a way that two horses couldn’t solve. If enough force were applied, he would bet the carriage would move.

So why did it seem to have broken down here?

“Who had access to the carriages?” Mark asked, but Jacob shook his head. The kneeling and standing up too quickly was starting to get to the older man.

“Anyone in the household, I would suppose, but the only people who actually worked on the carriage were Richard and you.” Jacob’s eyes were narrowed, but he made no move to examine the carriage closer. The terrain was muddy enough to make it a failed effort.

Mark was somewhat thankful that he wasn’t wearing his nicer clothes for what he was about to do next. Without a moment of hesitation longer, he slid underneath the carriage. Ignoring the groan from Jacob, he did his best to look at the construction underneath, and would you know what he found?

There was no problem with the axle. There was no strain on the wheels, and there was hardly a scratch on any of the wood of the carriage above. The carriage itself was in remarkably good shape for being broken.

Mark let himself crawl out from back underneath the carriage, holding out a hand for Jacob to help pull him up. The butler, though, was lost in his own world, staring at the scene with scrunched eyes, so Mark had to stand by himself.

He couldn’t blame Jacob. The scene in front of them implied something a lot more thought-provoking. The suitcases had their locks broken, presumably when they fell from the carriage, but what if they never fell at all? How did every single suitcase have their locks broken, in fact?

Mark took a step backwards to view the scene in its entirety, and really looked at the spread. There was a bit of wind, yes, last night, but it didn't look like the suitcases had fallen. It looked like they had been searching for something.

"Someone else was here." Jacob said, kneeling next to one of the tracks, the one from the larger set of prints.

"Yesterday, you mentioned that everyone in the country knew Maribelle was coming here with the diamond."

"Lady Maribelle," Jacob frowned, but Mark pushed forward.

"Who would have known that the carriage was coming this way? Just the people in the household, right?"

"I've worked with the people in the household for years." -- but that wasn't a denial. Mark pursed his lips together as he took one more look at the scene.

"So, it's just us, then, that knew where she would be."

And that was the end of that conversation, at least for Mark, but Jacob whispered something so slight that Mark barely caught it--

"So, it's just you."

Jacob said, but he was halfway too quiet for Mark to really catch his meaning. No, Mark was caught up in visions of intrigue, of mystery, of hysteria, and perhaps just a twinge of excitement.

Elizabeth had asked Mark to look for a purse, and Maribelle had arrived with no bags. An interesting series of events if not for one very interesting factor, something Jacob had said the previous night.

Everyone in the country knew that she would be arriving with the Wellington diamond, a gemstone the size of a fist. A famous, legendary diamond that even Mark's sister was able to identify on sight. But Mark had seen Maribelle when she arrived, gotten a good look at her, her clothes, and there was no place for that diamond in her pockets.

It was hard to hide a diamond the size of a fist on you, but perhaps it was not so hard when you didn't have the diamond in the first place.

By the time that Mark and Jacob returned to the manor, things were coming to a head for the party. It had taken maybe half an hour to salvage whatever case or rogue set of clothes that the pair could recover, rough work that left them sweating and covered in mud. Couple that with the time it took to trek back, and Mark would barely enough time to get clean before he was expected to take up his post for the night.

There was a bath in the East Wing of the Estate, and though it would be cutting it close, Mark asked for the keys from Jacob, whose age meant that he hadn't trekked through as much of the mud as he had. Jacob had taken one look at Mark, who was probably breaking a cardinal rule of etiquette by even approaching the estate in his mode of dress and relented.

Only with the keys though, did Mark draw close to Jacob, hidden by the stables by which they had parked the carriage. The pair were alone, but this would likely be their last opportunity to discuss things in solitude and secrecy, which was something Mark was in desperate need for.

"Listen, what we saw at the carriage. Between you and me, I think it's best if we keep that information to ourselves."

"And why, Mr. Verner, should we do that?"

"I think there is something odd going on about all of these affairs. If word of this gets out, I would wager that the Wellington's wouldn't end up looking good."

Jacob was quiet for a moment, a long and drawn out moment. It was hard to tell what the man was thinking, but Mark's logic was sound. There was a thin veneer of normalcy which was being applied to the Wellington Estate that they were desperate to avoid peeling back. There were too many mysteries, now, to keep working in good faith.

Jacob finally shook his head. "It would be disastrous if word got out. I will- remain quiet for now." He didn't sound happy about it, the old gossip, but Mark would wager that he understood the situation at hand.

There were a few more concerns Mark could also mention, but he didn't. The most selfish of which was the fact that Mark was invested in, well, whatever secret or conspiracy that was occurring here. The story was his now. He had been hired, by chance, to the center of perhaps the most interesting series of events going on in London's high society. This was Mark's mystery to solve.

“Were you able to clean my uniform for the night?” Mark asked, changing the subject, but Mark’s appeal for silence had triggered some change in Jacob’s demeanor. He stood with full height and confidence, like any doubt had been removed and the seriousness of the situation falling upon him.

“Mr. Verner,” There was an edge to Jacob’s tone, here, that rankled at the word. “It would be more convenient, no, for you to borrow another uniform. No?”

“I haven’t been fitted for anything else. I need that uniform.”

“Then you should have thought of that before you dirtied yours. Go fetch one of Richard’s from his room. I’ll take care of what you left for me.”

And that ended the matter. Jacob left the Stables, no doubt intent on returning to his duties while there was still time remaining. Mark had too much to do to clarify anything else. His time was up. The party would begin soon, and with it, Mark suspected, would come out the revelation that he had only just begun to suspect was true. The Wellington diamond was gone.

The first guest to arrive was an elderly man, wearing a pair of spectacles that seemed too small to fit on the bridge of his nose and a brow that hung over his head a bit higher than usual. He arrived via carriage first, but when Mark moved to help him out, the man refused his hand.

He seemed oddly familiar, actually, to Mark, but he couldn’t place his image. It wasn’t until Lady Smithson approached, wearing a set of fine pearls that eclipsed Mark’s salary by half and a dress that seemed cut rather risqué, that he received a clue.

“Mr. Morgan, I wasn’t expecting you to be invited as well. I suppose the board sent you to tonight’s affair?”

“Oh, Smithson! You’re Smithson aren’t you? I mean. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It should be. I am one of the leading donors for the Edwards.” There was a grim satisfaction to that fact in her voice, but Mark perked up at the mention of the museum.

“Edwards? You did seem familiar.” Mark said, and the man blinked at him, almost shocked to have heard Mark speak up, a fact that made heat flush over his cheeks.

“Do I know you?”

“Oh, you allowed me to interview your staff a fortnight ago.”

“Oh, yes. You would be, Mr...” but Mr. Morgan trailed off, and Mark let him. It was an embarrassing conversation anyway, and it did smart, knowing that one of his best sources of interviews barely knew him by face.

“Ummm Smithson!” Mr. Morgan asked, adjusting the pair of spectacles on his head. “I don’t suppose that you happen to know where the lady of the hour is? We were having a conversation the previous afternoon that I would love to finish.”

“My niece.” came a voice from behind that was colder than the drizzle that had started outside, “Is inside, waiting for her debut. I’m afraid you will have to wait.”

Lady Wellington was in top form today, posture all tense and her stride unbroken. She was clothed in a nice white dress that didn’t do much to draw the eye. Indeed, that was half the cause of confusion. It was a small party that waited to greet the guests. There was Mark in his borrowed uniform, which made it all the more awkward since Richard was just a little stockier than he was, and Harriete was there to keep up the slack, but any guests that arrived were subject to the cold war between their *two* hosts, a fact that no doubt rankled.

Mark wasn’t the sort to judge things by any standard, but Smithson was taller, more... aesthetically beautiful, and seemingly much kinder than Lady Wellington. Was it any surprise, then, as more and more guests started to show that they sought her approval first?

More guests began to trickle and, and to Mark’s surprise he heard a steady rumble that seemed to shake the pavements of the walk. It was an automobile, an actual automobile! The kind of machine that he would love to get his hands on and his sister would literally kill to look inside. Indeed, now it was more akin to a lineup of fame and fortune unlike anything Mark had ever seen.

A shame then, when Lady Wellington pulled him aside.

“Footman, the time has come to fetch my niece. And is the other one feeling well enough to attend, I suppose?”

“I’ll let them know.” Mark promised and headed off. There would be, after all, later opportunities to mingle with the famous of London. No, here he had a much more interesting opportunity: to present to Elizabeth Tanner and Lady Maribelle his hypothesis.

Mark had gotten used to the solitude of the Wellington Estate, so it made for a strange affair, picking his way past the guests that stood along the narrow hallways, with glasses of wine in their hands and all the gossip of London on their tongues. The ballroom may have been their final destination, but for now, they were content to meander in the hallways.

Mark received three requests for drinks before he was able to slip onto the stairways and retreat to the second floor of the estate, where he stopped to catch his breath. So far, the work of the week was showing off rather nicely. The estate did look polished and pristine to an extent that Mark was surely not used to, but it didn’t hide the fact that the servants who were present were severely overworked.

Their facade of a household, though, had been painted on with the sweat and effort of the past week. The guests didn’t seem to think anything was wrong, so Mark supposed that Lady Wellington’s worries had been unfounded. The party was going well, and it was as good of a time as ever for the debut of the heiress.

Maribelle’s room was on the top floor in a suite typically reserved for guests, and as Mark approached, he raised his knuckles to knock and disturb the guests. He stopped, though, when he recognized the voice on the other side of the door. Or to be more accurate, he recognized the pair of voices.

“Eliza, I know you’re worried, but I can’t stay in this room forever.” Came the first, spoken with a kind of soft fondness that made up for any of the edge present in the second.

“Maribelle, they never mentioned that tonight would be a party. They promised a few guests, but there are dozens of people downstairs!”

“You love parties. You love them more than me even. I should be the one worried about debuting today!”

“You should be worried. You know as well as I that someone here is lying, and I refuse to sit here and wait for the other shoe to drop!” Her declaration, firm as all the water in the sea, softened to a whisper so quiet that Mark had to press his ear to the door to hear it.

For a moment, the gentleman in him balked at the breach of privacy, but now, with the evidence of the abandoned carriage and the suspected missing diamond, he was willing to break it.

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me whether you are simply hiding the diamond.”

“Nope!”

And there was as good a confirmation as any. Or perhaps not. Maribelle was supposed to have the diamond, though, and it would be odd if she hid it from her traveling companion, but then again, perhaps there was something to that. Would she hide the diamond from Elizabeth. Did she or did she not have the diamond at all?

“You still won’t tell me what happened with the carriage, but the whole household has been gossiping about it. And have you noticed that your movements about the estate have been limited?” said Miss Elizabeth Tanner, and really? Mark had missed that little tidbit, but then again, he had been gone for most of the day. It cast an interesting light, though on the way that she had clung to Lady Wellington’s side that morning.

“Well, last night was pretty exciting,” joked Maribelle, and if Mark didn’t know any better, that was the sound of a pillow hitting the other. Perfectly carefree, and all that, except it didn’t answer his burning question. None of this did.

There was a crack in the door that, if he squinted, he could probably see through. Mark crouched to get a view of the room, and there was the “famous” heiress and her “sickly” companion, looking all the well for wear. They were lying on the bed together, arms pressed close to one another, and the pair were practically intertwined with one another with Maribelle’s head on Elizabeth’s lap-

Mark may have made a mistake.

Then Elizabeth said something in French, “*Quelqu’un écoute.*”

Maribelle stood up suddenly, and without a moment’s hesitation, pounced towards the door. It was a quick movement, one that he wasn’t expecting, so there was barely enough time for Mark to stand up from the keyhole before she opened it and-

“I’m here to fetch you for the party.” Mark tried not to look directly at Elizabeth’s eyes, even if it was Maribelle standing in front of him. Maribelle was all cheery in posture, but it was that piercing look that her companion gave him that brought a sense of shame deep in his gut.

“Oh, is it that time already! Go ahead and let Auntie know that I’m coming down, once Elizabeth is ready.” Maribelle looked back into her room, Elizabeth was standing up, perhaps flushed by the interruption, and Mark was hardly any better.

“Is that Mr. Verner? Go on without me Maribelle. I have a few questions that I would like to ask him.

Maribelle’s eyes narrowed, and only now did it seem like she was becoming as serious as the situation called. “You will come downstairs, correct? Promise me that you will at least try to dance.”

“I promise to save a dance with you.” Elizabeth whispered, and it was sincere enough for Maribelle. The girl spared one last look then scampered down the hallway, taking the stairs two at a time, leaving Mark alone with Elizabeth Tanner.

Elizabeth was wearing that dress again, the one that she had been washing that morning, and she started fixing the crease as she stood up from her place. The awkwardness of their meeting loomed over the pair, but Elizabeth, in a somewhat unusual no-nonsense tone of hers, went straight to business.

“Mr. Verner. Let’s cut to the chase. Were you able to find Maribelle’s purse?”

“You look rather well, for someone who was so sick the night before and this morning.”

And there were these strange things, bubbling around in Mark’s head, here, that made him hesitate. It began with their conversation that morning, where Elizabeth had asked him about Maribelle’s purse, something the heiress herself didn’t seem all that concerned about. A strange quality, to their conversations and the way her attitude changed behind closed doors.

Just look at Jacob. A firm, authoritative man except when placed in a room with either Wellington or Smithson. People could wear a lot of masks, living day to day.

Elizabeth, however, blew a strand of her hair out of her eyes and answered his initial question. “Mr. Verner, I think you will find that I am going to sleep through the entirety of tomorrow, once I am finally able to lay down and rest.”

“Your dress was wet. You were soaked last night.”

“Yes, I was.”

“You were in a carriage. Maribelle rode to the estate on a horse, but you were the one who looked more like a water-soaked cat. Care to tell me why?”

And there was a firmness to Mark's tone that surprised him, but he had been toying with that revelation on the trip back to the estate. There was no reason, after all, for Elizabeth to have been water-logged on arrival, but the household had been too distracted by the young girl arriving on their doorstep to question her state.

"Perhaps I was waiting in the rain, at the meeting point that Maribelle and I had agreed upon when we were separated in London. Your Mr. Wellington took care of that." There was no overt change in Elizabeth's posture or words, but Mark could read a man or woman from a hundred paces down.

"Or, you were somewhere where you shouldn't have been." Mark said. "You mentioned that the dress was your mothers, and you arrived with only one suitcase, but what sort of lady takes a trip to the country with only one bag?"

"Perhaps Maribelle had most of our luggage kept together. We travel close to one another, after all."

"But not close enough for her to tell you where she's keeping that diamond. Doesn't trust you with that, does she?"

"She trusts me-, she trusts me enough." but there was that brief second of hesitation in her voice. That moment of doubt, doubt that she might not have even considered if Mark hadn't brought it up.

Now did Mark think that what he was saying was true? Of course not. But it said something, didn't it, that Elizabeth did. That she could consider it for a moment, that Maribelle was keeping something from her. That maybe, just maybe, one more person might have known where Maribelle's carriage had been going and arranged an accident for her. A betrayal she would never see coming.

It was an inversion of their early verbal spars, but here, Mark finally felt like he had taken the point. It was enough for him to press forward with one last push, one last revelation-

"The diamond. She doesn't have it anymore, does she?"

And Elizabeth didn't say anything to that, but she straightened her posture. "I would be careful about any assumptions, Mr. Verner. There are forces at work here that I doubt are friendly to you and I."

Mark shook his head. "I will ask you one thing, and you can respond however you want. Do you know where it is now?"

“I expect, Mr. Verner, that it is somewhere in this house. Now Mr. Verner, do me one last behavior before we part ways. What did you see when you looked at Maribelle’s carriage?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary” Mark lied, and the two regarded one another in silence, before Mark found the resolve to part ways, leaving a teary-eyed Elizabeth in the room behind him.

It was a cruel, cruel thing for Mark to do, but Jacob had been right. Everyone at the household had served there for years and they all trusted the Wellingtons, well Lady Wellington, enough to stay past the date of their contracts expiring. The leak could not have come from them.

But the diamond was missing, and one person’s whereabouts could not be ascertained. Mark would swear it. His fellow peers were innocent, and he went away to the rest of his duties for the night, not knowing where the fallout of this would lie.

He did know this. He was closer to the story than ever, but it was a bittersweet kind of feeling. Mark did not feel all that much like a gentleman.

“I hope you know, Mr. Verner, that you paint yourself in a terrible light here. Your questions were not unfounded, and your sense of honor was commendable. That makes what happens next all the worse, really.” -- Elizabeth Tanner.

8. *"I hate to admit the truth to him here, but I didn't actually think much of Mr. Mark. He was funny and easy enough to talk to, but I didn't pay him all that much attention. I only knew his name because it was mentioned a few times by the much more nagging servants.*

I think that makes it worse, somehow, because that meant that he had been set up as a fallman. I knew enough about him on sight to recognize him, but I wasn't supposed to care enough after.

Perhaps my dearest Eliza was right. We should have stayed in France."
--A quote from Miss Maribelle, in the aftermath"

"Fetch me a drink."

Mark had gotten used to the address of Mr. Verner, he supposed. It was something that implied respect when it was used, even if the labor he was called to was nothing special. Mr. Verner meant that he worked well enough to be called by name, Mr. Verner was a figure of respect.

"Do I need to say it again?" said a young, blond man who was looking impatiently at Mark to jump to his will. So Mark made his excuse and parted away from the party guest, but he wasn't the only one to find a few snappish words for the crowd. Here, Mark would love to have a conversation or two with a few of the figures, but the truth was, he wouldn't dare. Clad in uniform, he may as well have been a signpost with the amount of respect he was getting.

Mr. Verner, it seemed, didn't matter as much as anyone else here. Well, he should have expected it with the work, but the tone of the party stung. He'd gotten used to having a say. Even the harsh "Footman!" from Lady Wellington was understood with the knowledge that she was snapping "butler" and "husband" just as much. But now, he wasn't receiving even that respect.

Mark would just have to get through the evening, that was all. Besides, there was a revelation he was waiting on from the guest of honor, though she was nowhere in sight quite yet. He simply had to wait a bit longer.

The party itself, luckily, was nowhere near as busy as he might have initially expected. Sure, Mark expected crowds of England's finest, and there were a few standout people present, but for the most part, two real factions seemed to have emerged in the guest list.

There were older figures like Mr. Morgan, pocketbooks no doubt as flush as their cheeks as they sampled the wine, but what was perhaps more interesting was the second demographic. If he didn't know any better, Mark would call this an esteemed college party given the gaggles of young men carousing in packs. Men his age with twice his fortune, but it did make for an interesting sight.

Esteemed men and women of fortune were placed right next to their sons of lesser names. It was an interesting composition, but there was something about it that bothered Mark for a moment. Bothered him for a moment before he got it-

Compared to the number of young gentlemen, there weren't all that many young ladies at the party.

Oh sure, Mark passed by a few clusters of girls clad in expensive dresses, winking at the men around them, but they were in the minority. There were few peers for the debutante to mingle with. Just the older generation with their valeted cars and wealth and the younger stock of the generation. Carefree young men, who Mark would bet, would just happen to be eligible bachelors.

From the center of the ballroom, Mr. Wellington was standing with a glass of champagne in hand. Through the bustle, Mark saw Harriete nimbly make her way through the crowd, whisper something into Mr. Wellington's ear, and back away. Mr. Wellington struck the glass in his hands, making a pinging noise that echoed in the ballroom, and through the cluster of the crowd

"Hello there! Friends and investors alike, it's my pleasure to welcome you to our little affair here!" said Mr. Wellington, casually drawing the attention of the crowd. Mark found himself being pushed by the crowd, and instead of fighting against them, Mark found himself a corner to stand at.

Mr. Wellington's speech, Mark supposed, was nothing special. Welcome to the party, here's a charming little anecdote about a mishap he'd had while traveling abroad. He was a charismatic speaker, though, so even if the words themselves were nothing original, Mark could see that the others in the room were nodding all.

"And remember, the gallery will be opening, so feel free to break way at any time! And now, it is my pleasure to introduce you to my niece!" Mr. Wellington finished his speech with aplomb, and attention turned to the front of the ballroom.

The Maribelle that walked through the door was a far cry from the woman who had burst onto the estate on horseback in the middle of a rainstorm. By most standards, she was no doubt reasonably pretty, and he could hear whispers from the young men in the crowd. She was wearing that dress from Lady Wellington, but the fashion was cutting edge. Now clad in make-up, she wasn't quite the national beauty that the papers had started to describe as, but no one could deny that she made a good showing of it. Mark was impressed, but he couldn't help but think of another thing.

She looked miserable.

Oh, not publicly. But as the party went on, and the suitors began to press in, Mark could see that Maribelle was acting very- reserved was the word. Almost mechanically. Greeting each young politely and staying near the edges of the party. But she was the center of the room whether she liked it or not, and so the press of the room moved towards her orbit.

Mark stayed well enough way, by this point, and so, he amused himself by walking through the rest of the room. As much as it chipped at his soul, there was a benefit to being invisible. Mr. Morgan was doing his best to press through the crowd of young man to talk to the heiress but was getting nowhere, Mr. Wellington was in deep talks with an Indian man wearing a fine suit, and there was a pianist in the room that was adding a very soothing choir to the room.

That slower song betrayed the passing of the clocks when it was replaced by another one. Mark stayed out of the way, occasionally being sought out by guests looking for drinks, the bathroom, or even in once case, the gallery. Given that Mark had hardly gotten the chance to see them for himself, he was almost tempted to hop, skip, and away towards them himself, but every moment Mark was alone, he'd be called down by another guest. Smithson, this time, who at least nodded her head in thanks with a "Mr. Verner," when he gave her a drink. She was deep in talks with a cluster of formal women who were hanging on to her every word, looking for all the word the queen of the party.

Mark let her be.

"How are you holding up there Mark?" whispered Harriete , who had been making her way across the room with drinks in hand. "It's early hours yet."

"Fine enough, though I'm waiting for the night to end." Mark frowned though. "Where is Jacob?"

Harriete widened her eyes at that and looked around the room. It was true, the head butler was gone, and given that they were understaffed as they were-

"Bloody hell, what is that man thinking? Oh, watch your back there Mark."

A more formal dance had started in the room, and now, couples were forming as the pianist began a much more energetic tune. Mark let Harriete pull on his arm to get him out of the way, and they found themselves near a corner of the room.

"Is that a waltz?" Mark whispered, somewhat amused by the fact that the gender imbalance in the room had struck. There were quite a few young men stuck without partners, so they were

hanging along the edges of the room. Much of the older crowd was no longer even in the room, perhaps they had skipped over to the gardens which had been opened at this time.

“It’s a gallop. It’s French, I think.” Harriete shook her head. “Take a gander at that, poor girl. She’s been on her feet all night.”

The girl in question was Maribelle, who seemed to finally be able to stave off her band of followers. As the next round of dancing started, Harriete looked at Mark for a moment before passing him the serving dish in her hands. “Can you kip over there? She might appreciate a drink or too.”

“I wouldn’t mind doing it.” It wasn’t the biggest deal, even if Mark had stayed his fair share distance away after that embarrassing encounter earlier in the day. Harriete, though, treated this act like he’d volunteered for some great Sisyphean task, sighing in relief. When Mark raised an eyebrow, she blushed and muttered-

“I’d rather not embarrass myself by hedging over there when that lot of young men are so obviously focused on hounding that girl and any other they see.”

Ah, now Mark felt a little color flood to his cheeks too, but he nodded his head. “Why don’t you take a moment to rest. See if you can spot Jacob.”

Harriete was more than willing to follow through, which left Mark on a direct path to the other side of the room, where Maribelle was currently engaged in a conversation with that Mr. Morgan, one that evidently had been going on for some time because the man barely paused to breathe-

“That’s a very lovely dress you are wearing, Miss Maribelle. Now, I believe we were discussing some of the museums you’ve seen in France, right? Well, there are certainly some things to be said about our own Edwards...”

“Pardon me, but I just happen to have a flute of champagne for the lady” Mark interrupted, and it was like he’d thrown out a lifeline to someone in the middle of an ocean. Maribelle made her excuses to the stammering Mr. Morgan and closed the distance between herself and Mark, leaving the man by himself.

Mark too that as revenge, petty as it was, for Mr. Morgan snubbing him earlier.

“Watcher, Mr. Verner” Maribelle smiled, putting a little too much emphasis on the first part of the sentence. She took the drink from her hands. “It’s good to see you. That Mr. Morgan has been bothering me these past two days.”

“You’ve met before?”

“There was a little party the other day that Uncle dragged me to. Didn’t let me take Elizabeth with to break up the crowd, so I ended up having to stave off a lot of wealthy investors.

“I thought today was your debut?”

Maribelle shook her head, her brown hair swaying back and forth. “This is a social requirement. That was a fiscal one. Uncle wanted to show off, I suppose.”

“He did call attention to investors in his speech.” Mark wondered aloud. He was no expert in high class social affairs, but was that a bit crass of the man? It was hard to tell, since Wellington usually had the charm to pull it off.

“Anyways, have you seen Elizabeth? She isn’t disguising herself as any of the help again, is she?”

“Pardon?”

“Trust me. You wouldn’t notice. She’s a dab hand at that. Figured she might be a little worried about what happened- I mean, nothing happened that would be worth getting worked up about, but what can you do?”

Maribelle was having a separate conversation than Mark, that was for sure, but he didn’t get the chance to inquire more. The pianist started a new piece, and one of the young men in the crowd took Maribelle by hand, rather audaciously at that.

“I don’t suppose you’d let me continue our dance from the night before?”

It was the blond man that had bothered Mark for drinks. It was a bit rude of him to push his way between the pair, but Maribelle let him take her to the center of the room, though not before looking back to Mark and rolling her eyes. It was a small cry of defiance before Maribelle swung back into the motions.

Mark made himself relax, even if he’d been expecting something more of their little meeting. Perhaps an admittance that something strange had been occurring behind the scene here at the household, though he supposed that Maribelle had no cause to bring things up with him.

There was a bit of commotion at the front of the hallway, but Mark only paid it a little bit of mind as his thoughts whirled. Jacob was still nowhere in sight, but even with only Mark and Harriete holding up the fort, the party was progressing rather nicely. When a young man jostled Mark's shoulder, however Mark found his eyes wandering to what had drawn the attention of the room.

Perhaps it was only because the number of eligible ladies were in short supply of the evening or the fact that the party was in full-swing, but many of the young men at the party were surprised by the appearance of one more girl, gracefully entering the room and making her way through the crowd.

She was wearing a purple dress, one that Mark happened to know was in an outdated American style, but it didn't matter. Elizabeth Tanner drew the eyes of those in the room with her every step. Her hair was done up in a simple braid, and she walked with an easy-going confidence like she'd been there the whole time.

As the song ended, and the pairs in the center of the room broke up their close dances, Elizabeth seemed to scan the room, stepping past the men that approached her until she came right up to a pair that were still locked in step. Maribelle was dancing with her partner from before as the next song started, but the young man pulled away when Elizabeth approached and called out-

"Excuse me, may I have a moment with your partner?"

But she needn't have asked him, because the moment she spoke, Maribelle whirled around and threw her arms around her companion. "Eliza! I was beginning to think you would never show up!"

Mark was close enough to hear some of the men and women around him begin to whisper at the scene, but his attention was wholeheartedly on Elizabeth, whose words were muffled, but Mark could read her lips-

"We need to leave!"

Maribelle's response, though, was so much more casual. "Oh, Eliza. I was waiting for you! Come on, let's take this next dance."

"Maribelle, I think I've figured it out. I've been talking with the Cook, and-"

"Oh, but they're starting a waltz! That's your favorite! Come on, let's spin around for a round!"

Maribelle took Elizabeth in hand, unintentionally snubbing the blond partner she'd been dancing with, but even Elizabeth was powerless in the face of Maribelle's infectious cheer, a far departure from the resigned attitude she'd been displaying before.

The pair started to dance, with Maribelle leading and Elizabeth going through the motions for a quick second before relenting and naturally falling in step, hesitantly raising a hand to hold Maribelle by the side.

Mark's eyes weren't the only one on the dancing pair, but not before his attention was drawn away by a Harriette tugging at his loose uniform sleeve and whispering-

"Hey Mark, look who finally decided to show up."

Indeed, it was Jacob, but he was not alone. There was another commotion at the front of the ballroom, though it took Mark a moment to realize what kind. The others in the party, though, made their views on it pretty clear, pulling away enough from the center so that Mark could see the recognizable black hats and uniforms of the Police.

Like the red sea, the crowd parted around Jacob and was growing to an uneasy hum, but there was one man who did approach. It was Mr. Wellington with a glass of champagne in his hand that did nothing to hide the red that was swelling to his cheeks.

"Mr. Jacob, whatever are you doing?" called out Mr. Wellington, though that easygoing cheer had the slightest bit of an edge to it. The pianist was still going through the motion of the waltz, and a few partners were still going at it, but now, more of the room was pulling away to view the scene in full.

"I've had enough! I won't have this injustice slide!" shouted Jacob, drawing to his full height that eclipsed much of the room.

"Mr. Jacob, this is entirely unreasonable! What business do you have calling the police here?" called out Mr. Wellington.

"I am preventing a horrendous crime!" Jacob seemed to fluff himself up at that, perhaps basking in the fact that the entire room was staring at him now. Their attention seemed to feed the gossip, imbuing him with a strength of character and stature that was almost biblical in proportion: "The culprit may have thought themselves as clever, but I've seen through his lies!"

Jacob motioned to the police behind him, letting them fall forward. Jacob raised his hand pointed-

“This is the man that I’ve spoken to you about! Now, arrest him!”

And pointed straight at Mark.

“Excuse me?”

Mark said, recoiling, but the police nodded their heads and approached, billy sticks in hand. “I’m going to have to ask you to come to the station.”

“Why?” Mark asked but the whole of the room was turned on him now, even if it made no sense. It made no sense. Why were the police here, and what business did they have approaching him? Mark drew back, but the police stayed in step. Mark looked to Mr. Wellington for help, but the man was standing aside, only confused at the proceedings.

But it was Jacob, eyes shining in determined justice, that sealed his fate.

“For the theft of the Wellington diamond, of course, and the murder of one Richard Brent.”

And the crowd was starting to whisper louder and louder, but it made no sense, and Mark saw Harriete pull away from him as one of the cops approached, and when he shrunk back, Jacob called out-

“He’s getting away!”

And Mark was greeted with a room full of stars as he took a blow to the head, and this is where his part in the narrative ends.

9. "It's no easy thing, to switch narrators so close to the end of a story, but poor Mr. Verner had received a blow to the head that makes his account of what came next somewhat fuzzy. Together, we've decided to cut the story here. I will do my best to finish what the good Mr. Verner cannot. I cannot promise the same kind of detail that Mark has, he's clever in the way I've never been able to live up to in my life.

How exciting is that! To be surrounded by intrigue on all sides! If not for what happened to Mark, it would have been a wonderful mystery to unravel, but I will admit to stoking the drama a little by putting off poor Mr. Mark's accident. Let's start our story a little earlier. Let's start, let's say, with a carriage ride." -- Miss Maribelle.

Maribelle supposed the problems began when they reached London.

London was a beautiful city, no doubt about it. She would love to see the clocktower at the heart of it, Big Ben was the name? There were any number of museums that she would love to pull Elizabeth through. They've traveled up and down the Louvre enough times to know it by heart, and while there really was no other place in the world like it, Maribelle was more than excited to see the sights of their sister country.

Her country of origin even. Her mother had been born here, but she refused to go back, and that meant Maribelle would have to simply make it a trip worth remembering with Elizabeth, who had reluctantly agreed to accompany her after weeks of begging.

(It was only days-- Eliza Tanner.)

The moment they stepped off *The Gallant*, though, the troubles started. Elizabeth had grabbed her arm and they were forced to sit down and wait for the poor girl's stomach to settle. Eliza had the tendency to fall ill. Ever since she had come to France for college, Maribelle had been fetching her notes from her classes and making sure that she saw at least a bit of sun, but it could be troubling to see how easily she could become sick.

No, the chance to get some good English air would do her good, even if said air smelled... well of fish and smog and Maribelle was reasonably confident that she was the one getting sick, much less her friend, but hey! This was her chance to reunite with family! Family that her mother refused to speak to and warned Maribelle to not let her hopes up all that much.

So it was a somewhat nervous Maribelle, soothingly rubbing circles into her best friend's back, that made her first encounter with her Uncle Wellington.

At first, Maribelle didn't recognize the man. There were plenty of older gentlemen awaiting the crew of the *Gallant*, tearfully uniting with their families or welcoming their sons and daughters back to their homelands. To pick out one man, a man she'd only seen in pictures, was a spot of trouble, so Maribelle kept her attention on poor Elizabeth, who kept insisting that she was fine! Really!

Nonsense of course.

Maribelle was a bit preoccupied, though, when an older gentleman in a very fine suit approached the pair. He almost walked right past, but his eyes caught along Maribelle's neckline and the diamond that was prominently displayed on it. Not THE diamond, per say, but one nonetheless. Bothersome, really, the thing was heavy, but it did its job and drew her Uncle's attention to her.

"Is that you Maribelle?" Was that relief? Had he been searching long, or had he just arrived? It was hard to tell, but Maribelle would have leapt to his side if she hadn't been worried about leaving poor Eliza alone.

"Oh, Uncle! It's a pleasure to meet you!"

But the triumphant meeting that she'd been hoping for was yet to arrive. A stern kind of expression crossed over Wellington's features, and he asked, not cruelly, but somewhat firm, "And who is this, Maribelle?"

"Miss Elizabeth Tanner, sir-" Eliza said, but it was a shame that her ordinarily composed companion had to make her first impression like this. Maribelle rubbed circles onto her back, and turned her head to the side, so she could keep both her Uncle and Eliza in sight.

"My travel companion. We attend the same college."

"I was not informed you'd be traveling with guests," Her Uncle muttered before tilting his head. "Footman, take my niece's bags to the carriage."

Maribelle crossed her arms at that. "I thought it would be a given that I would not travel abroad, alone."

Indeed, this wasn't the most unreasonable thing for her to do. Maribelle may have even written a letter on the topic on their return back, so it was odd that her Uncle called such attention to it here. But her Uncle laughed out loud, letting any of that sternness fall into what seemed to be good cheer.

“Well, no problem! No problem at all!” His eyes darted to the Footman, who was now grabbing both hers and Elizabeth’s back without being prompted. “It’s just a problem of the evening’s affair.”

“Pardon?”

“Well I had arranged invitations to a party for us to attend in London before we returned home. Your companion won’t be able to come with.”

“This wasn’t on the itinerary,” Elizabeth muttered, but her voice was muffled. She was trying to stand up now, but Maribelle could tell she was still shaky. She sat her back down and put a hand on her back to still her.

“What do you mean, Eliza can’t come with?”

“Understand, Maribelle, that I hadn’t word that you were bringing a guest. I’ve arranged a ticket for you to accompany me to a very fine party, very fine, but I neglected to arrange one for your companion.”

Which was just outrageous, and Maribelle didn’t need to have Elizabeth’s hand tightening in her grip to hear it.

Maribelle stamped her foot on the ground. “Then get her one!”

“It’s fine.” Elizabeth then said, which was an odd enough occurrence on its own that it got Maribelle to still. “You should spend some time with your Uncle. I’ll wait here.”

“For hours?” Maribelle had limits though, to what reasonability she was willing to extend to Eliza. There was a look in her eyes that betrayed any semblance of weakness she might have had. A suspicious look, all things considered. Maribelle turned to her Uncle, who was looking at his watch, the stains on his cuffs all ruffled.

“Uncle, let Mr... the Footman take Elizabeth back home in your automobile. By the time we’re done, he should be back!”

“Erm. I’m afraid that can’t happen. That’s quite unreasonable.” her Uncle responded, but it was the Footman who offered the more compelling reason, he shook his head and spoke up for the first time:

“I’m afraid I need to be on call for Mr. Wellington. And our carriage would not be able to make the trip back in time.”

“You don’t own a car?” Maribelle blinked, but that felt beside the point, even if she would expect a man of his fortune to own an automobile, especially if he held a position in London like he said.

“Then I insist you hire a carriage for Eliza!”

“Maribelle!” Now her friend was blushing red, perhaps at the need for charity, but between the two of them, one of them was well enough to hire a carriage out of their pocketbooks.

“Eliza, it’s fine.” Maribelle tried to waive her friend’s stammering off, but Elizabeth was shaking her head.

“Let’s meet halfway then. I would like to look around London a bit before we leave for the country.”

“Now that that’s taken care of” her Uncle interrupted, I’m afraid we have to make our head start to the party. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Aliza!” And before he could be corrected on the name, Wellington was already walking away, perhaps to the carriage he had spoken of before. The Footman waited a moment for Maribelle to catch his gaze, and he tilted his head to the carriage before, almost regretfully, hoisting their bags in his hands and moving out to follow his employer.

So much for their first meeting as a family, but then again, perhaps this would be an opportunity in and of itself! A chance to get to know her Uncle a little better! If she told herself that enough, she might actually start to believe it.

Before they left, though, Elizabeth grabbed Maribelle by the hands, a move that seemed to only dawn on the girl a moment later. Was she... red-cheeked? No, and it hardly mattered. Elizabeth dropped her grip and instead she stared directly into her eyes.

All of the weakness that she had from the boat was gone. Perhaps it had even faded earlier, but Eliza was a good actor when she wanted to be, Maribelle could never tell.

“Did you notice?”

“Eliza, are you sure about this? I mean, I would like to spend some time with my Uncle, but-

“For a man going to a very selective party, it’s quite odd that his clothes were stained with oil, wouldn’t you say?”

And there was nothing that Maribelle could say to that. There was a familiar fire lit in her friends eyes, and Maribelle’s heart began to race in a way that only had somewhat to do with the way Elizabeth’s eyes were focused solely on her.

“Well I’ll admit. That is a little exciting.” Maribelle smiled, and her cheer seemed to spread, because Elizabeth Tanner smiled back.

Mr. Wellington’s special party was everything Maribelle dreamed, in those bleak nightmares that seemed to daunt her steps every now and then. She would have wished her cheer from before would have followed her through, but the moment Maribelle stepped through the threshold, it was clear exactly what kind of party Mr. Wellington was attending.

“Well, let’s see the diamond then.”

Maribelle sighed, and showed it off for what seemed like the twelfth time that night. The diamond in her hands sparkled by the light of the chandelier, and it was an admittedly pretty thing, but her audience reacted the same way as they had when she first showed it off. In reverent awe that hid the calculated look in their eyes.

What her Uncle Wellington had failed to inform Maribelle, was that this was not an affair in the strictly social definition of the world. The ladies of London were not present in the current fashion, so there were few friends for Maribelle to approach at the party. There were dashing young men crouched around a table, but they weren’t in the midst of some game. They were in attendance at the behest of their older relatives, relatives that Uncle Wellington greeted with equal amounts of smarm and charm.

“And who is this, Mr. Wellington? Smithson is usually your plus one!” cried one of the older men at the table, but his calculating eyes were on Maribelle. As she drew to greet the man, her Uncle put an unasked hand on her shoulders.

“Oh, this? This is my niece! Dashing, isn’t she? She’ll be making her proper debut at tomorrow’s ball.”

“What’s this tomorrow?” Maribelle pulled away from his grasp, even if it made her Uncle wince and the table of guests to collectively turn their eyes. “You didn’t tell us that we would be attending a ball.”

“Er, well. I listed it in my last letter of mine! Youngsters, they never think of replying in good time.” Wellington said, more to the table of men than to her, which could perhaps be explained by the fact that no such letter had arrived. “We’ll be hosting a ball to celebrate your return to London!”

“Hosting?” Maribelle had quite a few things to say to that, but Uncle Wellington shot her a look that seemed uncharacteristic for his usually cheerful expression.

“Right, right. It will be a grand affair. No expenses spared, and the gallery will be host to a number of original artists, very famous and properly skilled,” her Uncle went on. By now, it was clear that Uncle Wellington was speaking more to the table of men than her. Maribelle had quite the number of things she wanted to say to that! But she held her tongue, a trait which may surprise those she knew.

This was a chance to reunite with family. It was best to take advantage of it.

Uncle Wellington finished up his speech to the men at the table before clearing a space for himself to sit down. After what felt like an eternity, though, he turned to Maribelle. “Say, why don’t you go ahead and entertain some of these young gentlemen? This is a party after all! The time of your life! Why don’t you go and enjoy yourself. Leave us older men to talk about silly things like finances.”

And before she could make a choice for herself, Maribelle was bullied away to the other side of the room, where she was immediately approached by a man wearing spectacles, probably twice her age and size. He seemed surprised at her appearance at first, but settled into a neutral expression.

“Oh, yes. You would be the Wellington Heiress, correct? I don’t suppose your travels have been good.”

“They’ve been well- enough,” but Maribelle didn’t get another word in before the man in spectacles started talking about his work, the Edwards Museum, and was it so terrible that she never received his name? He didn’t seem to care, and by the time Maribelle tried to pull away from the conversation, she was boxed in by another guest at the party.

Sooner than she would have liked, a crowd began to form around her. Here was one woman, a little older than herself with black hair done up in a braid, but there were a group of young men close enough in looks to be brothers, brown hair and tanned complexions the same who asked her about France, and a girl her age that made a sly comment about the make-up she had been using.

She was boxed in, but the worst thing was, they weren't even doing it properly. In London, it seemed, the attitude was to hold the guest at a reasonable distance and expect their full attention, as unwelcome as it was. Maribelle tried to break away, but she was at the center of the room now, and it was hard enough to keep track of their names. This was why she took Elizabeth with her, that sort of thing fell into her expertise.

"Do you like horse riding? I love reading detective stories, if you've read anything" She asked to a boy with blond hair who had yet to ask her anything, and she was surprised enough when he was willing to give a response.

"I'm afraid I haven't caught up with many, but I have seen that wonderful Sherlock Holmes."

"Oh, which one?" Maribelle asked, at last pleased with the opportunity to gain something out of this meeting.

"That scarlet study, I think. My name is Christopher, Miss Wellington." the blond-haired boy said in proper decorum, and didn't so much as flinch when Maribelle winced at the name.

"Just Maribelle, please. And Wellington isn't even my family name."

"Odd for you to be called the returning Wellington heiress then, isn't it?"

"How could I return to somewhere I've never been before?"

"Touché. And rather interesting at that." Christopher muttered, and this was a breath of fresh air that Maribelle was waiting for. She'd finally managed to gain some kind of control over the situation, but it was not fated to last. Before she could draw Christopher into a conversation, that spectacled man from before approached once again, evidently tired of her attention being drawn elsewhere. Somewhat briskly, he said-

"Well go ahead and show it!"

“Show what?” Maribelle blinked, but there was no room for her to ask questions. The spectacled man whose name she couldn’t remember was waiting in both awe and irritation, two factors that seemed to go hand in hand.

Christopher took a look at her befuddled expression and interjected. “I don’t suppose you mean the diamond? Isn’t that rather rude of you?” The last part was directed at the spectacled man, but before he could well up in anger and ruin the night, Maribelle spoke up.

“Oh, I don’t mind.” Maribelle said, even if she rather did. But the sooner she gave the spectacled man the time of day, the sooner she would be free, right? So Maribelle dug into her purse pockets and unveiled a velvet case. Not strictly unbeknownst to her, most of the room turned their wandering eyes to her. Uncle Wellington looked up from his table even to look at the case.

Her mother’s diamond was, in all fairness, a beautiful thing. It shone in the light in such a pretty way, but what Maribelle particularly liked about it was the color of the jewel. They reminded her of Elizabeth’s eyes in a way, though it didn’t seem to shine nearly as brightly as that pair.

A silence though, seemed to have fallen over the room, and Maribelle tried not to let the hairs on her neck bother her so much as she returned the jewel to its velvet bag. The spectacled man seemed appeased, at least, which left her attention to pull towards the one friend she’d made at the party.

“Tell me, have you read the Sign of Four yet? I particularly liked the idea of an underground society. Seems so thrilling to think about!”

“Perhaps,” Christopher said, not breaking that stiff-upper lip that Londoners were so famous for but still sounding somewhat poised to move. “We will have to continue our conversation later. Save me a dance at tomorrow’s ball, perhaps?”

And somewhat worriedly, Maribelle shook her head. “Perhaps,” before she had to bear the inevitable. It seemed the room’s attention was on her now, and they were closing in. Their eyes, Maribelle could not help but note, were on the purse that she carried. So it was a reluctant Maribelle that let the other side of the shoe drop, and the crowd politically but still as eager as sharks with the scent of blood, close in.

Her Uncle Wellington met her eyes and nodded once, almost in approval. At least one of them was happy with the night’s affairs, as Maribelle settled in for what seemed like a particularly long night.

By the time the party was over, Maribelle was exhausted. There was a certain level of decorum one was expected to indulge in, and any nonsense of the like seemed to be discouraged. No, I did not ride horses. No, I've never read any of those Sherlock Holmes stories. All the topic of their conversations were of a similar quality. Let's talk about that diamond, the financial affairs of her household, and that upcoming ball that no one had the foresight to inform her about!

So it was a somewhat irate Maribelle that approached her Uncle, completely void of expectations of gaining anything else out of the evening, which made his next statement fall like a sword.

“Oh, I'm afraid that I have to stay here in London for a little longer. The footman will take you home.”

And if Maribelle had not been exhausted, perhaps she might have protested, but the hour was late, and Maribelle had a ball to worry about tomorrow! A ball! What did her Uncle expect, for her to magically recover enough to be prepped for such an occasion?

Well, Maribelle didn't object when the Footman showed her to her carriage, and he didn't say so much a word when she spent a minute with that lovely white Mare that was brought up with the carriage, though that beige horse was as equally inquisitive, pulling at her hair like it was something to eat. She needed something to eat, really.

They had an hour to go. Or was it two hours? The rain was somewhat fierce, but that played a soft enough sound to her ears that she couldn't help but let her eyes close shut.

And the rest, Maribelle supposed, was up to history.

10. "Maribelle took Elizabeth in hand, unintentionally snubbing the partner she'd been dancing with, but even Elizabeth was powerless in the face of Maribelle's infectious cheer, a far departure from the resigned attitude she'd been displaying before.

The pair started to dance, with Maribelle leading and Elizabeth going through the motions for a quick second before relenting and naturally falling in step, hesitantly raising a hand to hold Maribelle by the side" -- M Verner.

There was a commotion at the door, Maribelle supposed, but there were more important matters for her to deal with. Matters like being able to take a moment to relax in the midst of a long, long night. Christopher, in this regard, was particularly kind. As they shared that dance she had promised him, it was clear that his focus was elsewhere on the party. He didn't complain about any missteps she may have been making and was more than willing to make up the difference by leading her arms practically for her.

"My mother, did you know, has been bugging me to ask you to dance. I think she's using me to prove a point." Christopher's voice was low.

"Who was your mother again?" Maribelle whispered, and there was a bit of a wry smile he had going on.

"She introduced herself to you as Lady Smithson."

"Ah." And there were a great many things to consider about that. Factors that Maribelle was left curious about. Factors of relationships she only had piecemeal clues about, and she wasn't the most brilliant person in the room, but she didn't mean being the bravest, so Maribelle did the only thing she could think of. She cast off her layers of subtlety and went for a direct question.

"If you don't mind me asking, then. Is she having an affair with my Uncle?"

Christopher Smithson's smile seemed to draw just a little more cat-like. "An odd thing to say" Christopher said, but then he shook his head. "Between you and me, have you seen the gallery?"

"Not yet."

"I think you might find it... enlightening." He said, before they finished their set. Another gentleman was about to approach her, now, and see if he could spend a moment with the famous heiress, and she was almost tempted to ask Christopher for another dance and the chance to

question him further, but he let go of her arms, as the sound of a pair of heels on the polished floor stopped right behind Maribelle, and any thoughts of intrigue disappeared from her mind.

“Excuse me, may I have a moment with your partner?”

It was a perfectly familiar voice, and maybe she forgot herself a little, but she threw her arms around Elizabeth, who stiffened in her grasp before settling. But Maribelle didn't care

“Eliza! I was beginning to think you would never show up!”

Elizabeth Tanner was wearing her mother's dress, and like always, it left her feeling like she was the one playing dress-up. Eliza was the picture of elegance and the smartest person in the room, and it always made her chest wriggle to find those lovely pair of eyes directed straight at her.

A shame, that Elizabeth was clearly not here for the ball.

“We need to leave!”

“Oh, Eliza. I was waiting for you! Come on, let's take this next dance.”

“Maribelle, I think I've figured it out. I've been talking with the Cook, and-”

And if she didn't do anything else, Elizabeth would bring up her concerns, and then she'd be forced to talk about the carriage ride back. She'd be forced to stop pretending that their vacation was going well, and that her best friend had found another mystery to plunge head-first into, and Maribelle loved mysteries! But this was supposed to be their chance to relax!

And so, Maribelle took the plunge and took her companion by the hands.

“Oh, but they're starting a waltz! That's your favorite! Come on, let's spin around for a round!”

Maribelle held Elizabeth close, and as the music began to swell, took on the leading part. Half-expecting a scolding or for Eliza to pull away, it took Maribelle by surprise when her partner raised her hand to her side and followed.

Maribelle's heart was racing, and that pair of brilliant blue eyes were focused on just her, so Maribelle let all her worries fade into the distance. For a moment, that sweet moment, it was just the two of them, letting the sweet sound of the pianist lull them into their own world.

It was a truly happy moment, which makes it a shame about what came next.

“For the theft of the Wellington diamond, of course, and the murder of one Richard Brent.”

“He’s getting away!”

Maribelle wasn’t there to see the blow fall upon the poor Mr. Verner’s head, but she was able to hear the sound of the billy club striking, right as her waltz with Elizabeth came to an end. Suddenly all too aware of the commotion of the rest of the room, their little moment slipped to an end.

“Mr. Verner!” cried Eliza, forcing her way to the crowd to the young man’s side. That cheerful buzz was now replaced with an anxious heartbeat, one that burned in Maribelle’s heart and up her throat.

Ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous! What did Mr. Verner have to do with anything?

But as Maribelle tried to fight her way past the crowd, she was stopped by one of the police who had so grievously attacked Mr. Verner.

“You’re that Wellington right? Well, we’re going to have to take your statement, and then we can get your diamond back.”

And it was unladylike, but Maribelle didn’t regret slamming her heels on the man’s foot, which made him cry out in pain. Taking the opportunity as it was presented to her, she rushed past him to Mr. Verner’s side, where Elizabeth was busy arguing with the other officer and the butler that had brought them in. Maribelle paid them no mind and grabbed Mark by the hand.

“Are you all right Mr. Verner?”

“Absolutely pleasant.” He muttered, trying to stand up when he was clearly in no condition too. “I’m certainly no expert, but I’m pretty sure that checking my heartrate won’t help.”

“You can be quiet, good sir!” Maribelle laughed, but there was an edge to it. There was some shouting in the crowd at the police, some shouting at Mr. Verner for whatever he was being blamed for, and now Eliza was trying to talk

“Officer, look. I work with my brother in America. He’s a Pinkerton and a detective, and I’m telling you that you have the wrong man.”

The butler that had accused Mr. Verner, though, pointed a finger at her and said the most foolish thing that Maribelle had heard all day.

“You’d say that, but Mr. Verner has admitted it himself! You were his accomplice!”

A statement that was so outrageous that Maribelle nearly thought she had fallen ill, but on the ground, Mr. Verner tried to stand up, “I never said that.”

But now the eyes of the room were on the Head butler and Elizabeth now, and it was clear that the temperament of the room was turning against them. Elizabeth said nothing, simply drawing herself into a composed stance, as if she could weather their looks and accusations like a tree amidst a windstorm.

Which was ridiculous, and Maribelle said as much.

“With all due respect, neither Mr. Verner or Elizabeth stole my mother’s diamond!”

Her Uncle Wellington, now, approached her though, and held her hands. “Let’s let Jacob figure things out.”

“But-”

But her uncle grabbed her arms so she couldn’t pull away, and this Jacob had the center of the room now, and he ran a hand through his graying hair. The murmuring in the room didn’t die down, but it was clear all the attention was on him.

He began to speak:

“This morning, I encountered Mr. Verner and this woman in the laundry room, where they were in the middle of cleaning their outfits, outfits that had been dirtied the night before. Well, and Mr. Wellington can attest to this, I was told to investigate the scene of a carriage!

It was clear through my examination that Lady Maribelle’s carriage had been waylaid last night, a fact that can be attested by the fact that the carriage itself was undamaged. Footprints revealed three sets of tracks were present at the scene. Well, by chance, Mr. Verner who had been accompanying me let something slip. He said that only someone at the house would know when the heiress would be passing through, but the servants at the household have been with the Wellingtons for years. None of us would talk, no sir, except for Mr. Verner.

Well, it came to me this morning that it was an odd thing that Mr. Verner had been hired on such late notice. Odder too that he seemed to fall into such close acquaintance with the girl in front of me, the supposed companion of Lady Maribelle. The uninvited companion in fact! And it occurred to me, frankly, that there would be one more party privy to the schedule of the party, who better yet, knew that Lady Maribelle had the diamond on her!

Mr. Verner was unaccounted for several hours the night the heiress was due to arrive, and our unexpected guest had yet to arrive, despite Lord Wellington assuring me that she had left for the estate hours before! You had Mr. Verner ambush the carriage, presumably murdering poor Richard and making off with the diamond! And I can prove it! I found the diamond where it was stashed, and do you know where I found it?"

Jacob thundered through his speech, almost like an ancient saint or crusader, almost seeming to feed on the attention of the room. He was an imposing figure, towering over most, and his finger beckoned a thousand declarations of guilt aimed straight at Mr. Verner and her Eliza.

More than once, Maribelle would have interrupted his speech, but her uncle had his hands on her shoulder, beckoning her to stay still. Poor Mr. Verner was still lying on the ground, and Eliza wouldn't say anything in response. It was only when Jacob paused, that the silence broke. Elizabeth was tapping her fingers on her shoulder.

Elizabeth Tanner then said something curious:

"I suppose that you found the diamond in Mr. Verner's clothes, then?"

The wind seemed to deflate, somewhat, in Jacob's chest, but he took a deep breath of air and settled it.

"So you admit it! Well, I won't have this injustice occur here! You've heard her confess!"

And it was a terrible line of evidence against them. Mr. Verner tried to lift himself up once more, but the attitude of the room was seeming to get to him. The officer that Maribelle had so rashly moved past moved to approach Elizabeth, this time with a pair of cufflinks in his hands, and Maribelle moved to interrupt, but her Uncle pulled.

"I know that she's a friend of yours, but Jacob has been making some very important points--"

"Why would she need to steal a diamond that I've already offered to give her?"

“Excuse me?” Her statement seemed to have shaken her Uncle, like a nervous pall had crossed over his features, but Maribelle had found her voice now, and so she broadcast it to the room.

“If Elizabeth Tanner had asked, I would have given her every diamond in the world. And I did! She turned it down! And if your accusation relies on the fact that Mr. Verner was washing his clothes that night, then I think you’re mad!”

What was that look in Elizabeth’s eye? That look that filled her with the courage to speak out, all without saying a thing? Well, she found her voice and wrenched her arm away from her Uncle.

Jacob the butler seemed to sputter, and now Mark was back on his feet. There was something bitter to his voice now, that had never been there before.

“How could I have snuck away to ambush Maribelle? Ignoring the fact that I’ve never seen her before in my life, you saw me waiting for her! Miss Wellington saw me waiting through the storm for hours. I thought we were friends, Jacob!”

And at that, Jacob drew back. “You threatened me in the stables! You said you’d smear the Wellington reputation if I spoke out!”

But it was Mark that shook his head. “Then what are you doing now?”

Indeed, it wasn’t the biggest party she’d ever attended, but every eye on the room was on her. Perhaps she could understand Elizabeth’s silence now. Her Auntie was watching in the wings with a clenched fist, and Lady Smithson and her son were coiled up in the corner, eyes that were darting up and down like they’d hadn’t decided where they’d land. Even the police were hesitant, her statement evidently enough to cause them room for second doubts.

Maribelle looked at the crowd and she couldn’t say a word. She shared a glance at Mark, but he shook his head, still smarting from his injury.

Elizabeth, though, broke through the stares. “Where is the diamond now?”

Jacob perked up at that. “That’s right! I still found it in Mr. Verner’s original set of clothes! Explain how that got there!”

By now, the police officer that Maribelle may or may not have... rudely brushed past spoke up, his voice tinged with an accent that Maribelle couldn’t place. “Mr. Jacob. You had called us down with irrefutable evidence. But given that you can’t explain things, and the lady whose property was stolen is claiming it wasn’t, you’re making a waste of our very valuable time.”

“The thief who stole the diamond must have stashed it in the laundry room of course.” Mark said, but Elizabeth shook her head.

“The thieves never placed it in the laundry room. I would expect that the diamond would have been planted in your room after your uniform dried.”

“Then that would mean that I was-

“Set up, yes Mr. Verner. You must admit that the timing is perfectly fortuitous.”

The officer blinked at the pair, who seemed to be having a different conversation than the rest of the room. “So the diamond was definitely stolen? That doesn’t help your case sir. And maybe Ma’am, but” and he stole a look at Maribelle, shifting on the foot that she had er, tripped on. “I doubt that.”

“Officer, if you were willing to investigate the household-” Elizabeth asked, but the officer shook his head.

“We already swept through, and we did find the diamond in his quarters. That’s evidence enough on its own. There’s also the disappearance of that footman too.”

“Then you haven’t found the footman yet?” Elizabeth shook her head, with a bitter lull to her voice, and the officer shook his head.

“Until we do, I think we’ll have to rule it as a homicide.” He sounded almost reluctant, but then again, it had been his partner who had been the one to hit Mark, and his partner hadn’t said a word.

“Elizabeth will find the truth! She is, after all, a detective! The greatest detective in the world!” Maribelle called out, and she would have called it out to the whole world. And maybe it was the passion in her voice that led the crowd to whisper, that led the police in charge of speaking to nod his head, once, briskly.

Elizabeth though seemed put out by her encouragement, all the more put out by the eyes that had fallen onto her during these affairs. Her fingers were drumming across her arm.

“I would need half an hour for decisive evidence,” she muttered, “and I’d rather not do it in public like this. Could you let Mr. Verner come with us to the gallery, where I can ask him some questions in privacy?”

“Sure.” The officer said, making Maribelle feel almost bad about things, but they were getting somewhere. “Need anything else, miss detective?”

“Would you send somebody to fetch my umbrella? I’ll be needing it” Elizabeth Tanner said, before turning to Mark, who was biting his lips in concentration, and if

“Mr. Verner, would you need a hand in moving? You took a nasty blow to the head.

“No, let’s see to the truth here.” And that was that, the trio left the ballroom with the gaze of maybe a dozen or two eyes trained on them. Elizabeth had gotten them a half-hour’s reprieve, and perhaps they were doubting that she could make use of it, but Maribelle knew her well.

Elizabeth Tanner would find the truth.

“I do want to clarify to the readers that the ballroom scene did occur, though if liberties were taken with the dialogue, I hope you won’t care that I excluded maybe ten minutes of conversation with the police over jurisdiction, potential abuse, and excessive violence among other things. Interviews with the guest present at the event were conflicting, and Maribelle can be an... excitable source.

I would comment more, but this was not how I remember that scene in the ballroom unfolded. Then again, I was suffering a head injury, so the jury is out on that one”

--Mark Verner

11. "The truth is a terrible thing." -- Elizabeth Tanner.

"Watching Miss Tanner work was like getting to see an artist paint. There was something simplistic about her method, but her talent was inspiring." -- Mark Verner

Those who tended to get to know the both of them made their assumptions, but the truth was, Elizabeth was not her keeper. No, Maribelle prided herself on being hers. And Elizabeth had just been let loose." -- Maribelle

Mr. Verner found himself in the rather ironic position of lending an arm to Elizabeth as soon as the trio were out of sight in the main ballroom. His head was smarting, but he was well enough to walk under his own power. The same, it could be said, was not true for Miss Tanner.

"Maribelle, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but the whole room was staring at us."

"You seemed to have had it under control" Mark whispered, but it was overshadowed by the enthusiastic response from Maribelle that happened at the same time.

"Yeah, and you handled that crowd so well!"

Her cry was so energetic, in fact, that it startled the officer leading them to the gallery. Now, Mark wasn't exactly thrilled that one of the police was sticking so close, but this wasn't the officer that had hit him. This was the Scottish man, who was fair-spoken and seemed reluctant to turn Mark in for murder.

Oh gods above. Mark had almost forgotten the second part of Jacob's accusation. He'd been so overwhelmed by everything, that he hadn't thought to ask what had become of his coworker, someone he had begun to think of as a friend. Mark turned to the detective who was clutching her arms and asked,

"There isn't a chance that Richard simply got lost in the woods, did he?"

"I'm afraid not." Elizabeth sighed, and it was the directness that did it for him. They'd verbally sparred a few times now, and each time, she had been a more than willing partner. But here? With that tone of resigned nature?

Mark narrowed his eyes. "You don't need half an hour to find him at all, do you? You already know where he is."

Elizabeth said nothing, but her eyes said it all. She raised an eyebrow and waited for Mark to elaborate, so he did.

Mark shook his head “Usually, you offer alternative possibilities to your statements. That’s your pattern, right? You offer options and statements that seem knowing, but you’ve already done the groundwork to back them up. And when you went to the ballroom, you didn’t come to dance. You came to get Maribelle and leave.”

He didn’t mean to sound accusatory, but that was the way it ended up working out. There was a bitterness in Mark’s chest, now, and if he didn’t know any better, he would expect it to get worse.

“Would you have just let the mystery be?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I was confident that the police would be able to handle it. I’m not a real detective, you should know. My family were Pinkertons, and my brother is working as a detective in New York. I simply consulted them, so anything I said here would lack credibility.”

“Not to interrupt or anything, but if you do know where this Footman got to, I would like to know,” said the Scottish police officer, right as they reached the gallery. He poked his head inside and shook it to the group. “Empty. They’re probably all in the ballroom now. You have those thirty minutes, but if there is anything you can tell me now...” he trailed off meaningfully.

“Officer-” Elizabeth said, but paused with an uncertainty to her voice.

“Officer Wilson.”

“Officer Wilson, if you direct your search to the eastern wing, I expect you will find the Footman in one of the locked side-rooms. If you would like, you could even wait for the decisive evidence for who put him in there.”

“If the room is locked, how did you get in there?” Officer Wilson asked with a bit of a tilt to his voice.

“I picked the locks, then relocked them when I was done,” Elizabeth admitted, and without looking back, she opened the doors to the gallery like she was the one who knew the home like the back of her hand.

Mark took his first step into the gallery, and was greeted with a wall of paintings and portraits, done up in different styles. There was something in Baroque, one in more watercolor, and half a dozen more still-lives of famous figures that Mark could readily identify. On the edge of each of

the portraits, though, was a sheet of paper with a series of sums listed on the side with initials scrawled in the margins.

Elizabeth Tanner's voice was all business, even if she found the closest chair and sank into it. "We are looking, let's say, for a small list of papers. One that has a list of sums on it with a line of initials from investors. This paper won't be attached to any of the portraits though, because it represents bidding on something a little more valuable."

"Christopher said that the gallery would be illuminating." Maribelle muttered, but Mark had seized on something more important in that little statement of Tanner's.

"The investors. The Wellington's are holding a silent auction." He said, but he wouldn't finish the thought that came to his mind afterwards, but perhaps something showed in his face. Elizabeth seemed tired, just too tired to be there, but she held Mark's attention in full.

"Are you willing, Mr. Verner, to hear information that may cause you harm?"

And the hour was growing late, and something next to a migraine was building in Mark Verner's head, but he shook his head.

"Then, I would like to ask you what you've noticed over the last few days of your employment here. Officer Wilson, if it pleases you, you could take notes on his testimony. Then, I will explain the theft of the diamond."

And so Mark Verner, amidst a gallery of portraits by painters both noble and skilled, talented and talentless, began his testimony. It was, admittedly, somewhat different than what is enclosed above in this very book, but the details were more or less the same. Mark spoke for a fair bit of time, waiting to be interrupted, but no interruption ever came. There was the occasional grunt from Officer Wilson, but he was taking close notes, and Elizabeth sat and sat in the chair in the gallery with her eyes closed in thought.

When Mark finished, he found that his voice was hoarse, but his mind was racing far faster, because when he put the pieces together, there was a picture painted on them that he was being forced to make, and it was made even clearer when Elizabeth turned her attention to Maribelle, asking for her side of the story,

The only thing missing from Maribelle's testimony, he found, was the accident with the carriage ride, but Maribelle seemed reluctant to explain it.

Mark turned to Elizabeth, who simply nodded her head once before grabbing at Maribelle's hands.

"Maribelle, now is the time. Your testimony will be crucial."

Now, Mark wasn't one to attribute meaning to the acts of those around him, but there was a bit of a blush from Maribelle, and maybe there was something about the seriousness of Elizabeth's tone, or the proximity of the two that-

Well, Mark wouldn't make assumptions.

"Alright," Maribelle sighed, perhaps a little too dramatically for the situation called for, but she didn't turn away. "I suppose we won't be getting any further without vacation. Alright then! Let me tell you about the spot of trouble I found myself in last night!"

It was an all-together carefree tone that Maribelle took, one that perhaps betrayed the fact that she perhaps hadn't grasped the truth of what Elizabeth was saying. Mark wasn't sure she had realized what had happened to Richard Brent or what Officer Wilson was liable to find in that locked room, but Mark wouldn't be the one to break her illusion-

"So this was when I realized that the footman was attempting to murder me!"

Or perhaps, Mark should stop making assumptions all together. Instead, he emulated Elizabeth and listened as Maribelle told her story.

Maribelle reluctantly opened her eyes when the carriage stopped, though she made no move to pick herself off the door that she'd been leaning on. Her hair was frankly a mess, and she hoped that she hadn't been snoring in the meantime, but she felt leagues better after having shut her eyes.

"Have we caught up to Elizabeth yet?"

"I'm afraid we have a problem, Lady Welling-"

"Maribelle, please." she groaned, but picked herself into something akin to a sitting position.

"What's the problem?"

"The carriage has broken down."

What was that saying in English? When it rained, it poured? Well, it was raining now, and Maribelle did not like the look of it one bit. Nevermind the fact that she'd certainly be late for her reunion with Elizabeth. She'd be lucky if she made it back home to the estate tonight.

"Can you fix it?"

"I've been working at it for a while, but I don't have the tools." The footman muttered apologetically, like it was his fault that this mishap had occurred, but Maribelle dare not blame him. It was simply the way things worked.

Talk about poor timing though! This was supposed to be her vacation, and it was all going wrong!

"If it pleases you, Miss... Maribelle." The footman began speaking, his form just barely visible past the shadow of the carriage door. "We're not too far away from the estate. I could go ahead and ride for help."

"How far up the road is it?" Maribelle rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn, all decorum thrown to the side and all.

"I'll just follow the road. A half-hour by horseback, even in this weather," he apologized, and Maribelle only needed to think about it for a moment.

"Do it."

And Maribelle was left to the company of the rain and the sounds of the footman unhooking the horses from the carriage, and pretty soon, that too faded into the sound of collapsing hoof-beats. She was alone, and given the wait time, she might as well catch up on that sleep she'd been missing.

Well, however she closed her eyes, oblivion wouldn't come. Without the lull of the horses and the familiar rhythm of the carriage to rock her to sleep, she expected she wouldn't be able to reclaim that state of mind, not when her mind was not racing with too much energy for her body to handle.

Not even ten minutes had passed, and now Maribelle was alone. It was raining, somehow worse than it once had been, and now she would be late for her meeting with Elizabeth! Things had not been going as planned for her trip to London. In fact, she'd go so far to say that things had fallen apart some time ago.

Her heart was racing now. The carriage seemed to be just a little bit cramped. Too cramped, in fact, to hold her, and her legs were asleep, but how could she be expected to stay here any longer?

Maribelle stood up, and she walked out of the carriage.

Almost immediately, her clothes became soaked, but the rain was a kind of rejuvenating thing. It calmed her, somewhat. The place the carriage had stopped would have been picturesque, she supposed, if the storm hadn't been working to ruin that picture. There was a stream below them and a patch of woods on the other side.

The footman had yet to return, though she expected him to take a few more hours at that, but Maribelle was bored, and if that boredom led her to examining her carriage, well it was something to do to pass the time.

Now, Maribelle would never call herself the smartest person in the room. There was a reason she let Elizabeth take care of that sort of thing, but there was something off about the carriage, in the sense that nothing seemed off at all.

It wasn't like there was any visible damage, so Maribelle had a hard time figuring out what exactly was stopping the carriage from moving forward, and from her view, it seemed odd that they had stopped here of all places. There were no sharp inclines or anything of the sort, so why had the carriage broken down?

Then came the sound of hoofbeats against the road, a sound that should have been encouraging except it had hardly been fifteen minutes since the footman left, and it sounded like there was more than one horse, and it was silly. Positively silly, but Maribelle couldn't help but think that this was a pretty interesting place for her carriage to break down at, where the sightlines were hard to make out the surrounding area.

Why just the other night, she'd been reading a story about a gang of bandits that roamed the great American plains! Elizabeth had laughed when she had asked her, but then again, she was city folk through and through.

Maybe it was a little silly, but Maribelle drew into the woods, and if her heart was beating, well, it was an exciting thing to do! Perhaps it was a group of roving land pirates that roamed the... wild English countryside. A place of savagery and daring rebels!

But when the horses came rounding the corner, Maribelle felt her heart slow down. It was just the Footman, only now he was accompanied by another man, presumably one he'd run into on the road.

They were wearing masks.

So Maribelle did the only thing that felt natural to her. She hid in the forest, and she watched as the Footman and their hard-to-make out partner approached the carriage. She watched as they walked up to the door and pulled it open, only to discover that she was not there.

She watched as they searched the area for her, combing through the ground, but she was luckily. The rain was making it hard to tell their footprints apart, and they eventually abandoned the search to tear through the carriage, to go rifling through hers and Elizabeth's suitcases until they found her purse.

And then the pair both mounted their horses and rode off, all without seeing her from her hiding place. So Maribelle did the only thing she could think of. She went to one of her suitcases, grabbed one of her riding outfits that had been spared the massacre, and she mounted the back of the beautiful white mare that had been left behind to graze in the rain.

At the end of Maribelle's story, Mark bit his lips in thought. There was a bit to chew through, but he had a fair idea of the identity of the second attacker.

And it hurt. It hurt Mark in a way that he was surprised by. Hurt enough that it led Mark's nimble eye to look through the room, every corner, until he found a listing for an auction with no piece of art attached, an auction, though that had listings in the thousands of pounds.

It was lying on a newspaper at the side table of one of the chairs in the room. The paper, of course, depicted the Wellington diamond.

"I found it!" Mark cried out, but Elizabeth held a hand out in the air.

"Our trouble, I think we will find, is the court of public opinion. My conclusions are drawn out of a few key interviews that I've done on the subject, but if some of my sources refuse to testify, Officer Wilson here may not be able to do anything of substance to get the charges to stick."

“Then why don’t we present the facts in public?” Maribelle wondered aloud, and to that, Elizabeth sighed very deeply.

“I was afraid you would say that.”

Then there came a nervous knock at the gallery door, and the voice of Harriete the maid came sounding through. “It’s been half an hour, and um, I brought you your umbrella Miss Detective!”

There was just one thing wriggling in the back of Mark’s mind, one thing that he had yet to find answers for. “What do you need the umbrella for?”

Elizabeth smiled cheekily, but it was Maribelle who spoke for her.

“Oh, she needs that to point at people!”

“Oh, do be quiet, you.” her voice softened as she scolded her companion. “You will find that if I don’t have something to lean on, I will faint. That is a promise.”

And it was that promising note that led them back to the ballroom, and the resolution of this terrible affair.

12. "The papers that came out of the affair painted Elizabeth Tanner as the elegant mistress of crime, the detective that effortlessly solved the case. The truth was, she was leaning on her umbrella the whole time, but that didn't diminish her part in the story." -- Mark Verner

It was a somewhat grim ballroom that greeted Elizabeth Tanner as she made her way to the center floor. The sight of it made her sick to her stomach, but Maribelle was at her side the entire time, and it seemed unlikely that any potential fallout would fall onto her or Elizabeth for their part in this story.

No, the only one in danger of fallout was the good Mr. Verner, but that didn't stop the determined stride in his steps. He was a clever one, and Elizabeth didn't doubt that he had figured out what she was about to relay to the audience. It was, frankly, his story to tell. It was such a shame that she had to be the one to tell it.

Lady Wellington stood in the corner of the ballroom with a smile forced onto her lips that was cold as the night sky. Lady Smithson was sitting next to her son and looked for all the world, the queen of the castle. There was a smattering of followers beside her, and she seemed to have no fear of any potential fallout. Her son followed suit. The good Mr. Wellington was swirling that glass of wine in his hands back and forth.

The maid Harriette seemed much more nervous, though, and perhaps it was a given. If it wasn't Mark to blame, then eyes would no doubt turn to her. A petty maid stealing a pretty trinket. That was what all the stories would say.

Jacob the butler seemed to have shrunk in the half-hour, but he still looked determined as ever. It was a shame too, because he was completely innocent of any crime except that of poor detective work, but she expected that the man had burned more than a few bridges with his stunt.

Mr. Morgan was so uninvolved that it was no use pointing him out, but he was adjusting his spectacles and complaining of his stomach ache all the same.

Elizabeth looked out at the crowd of investors, figures that knew perfectly well that they had been bidding on a diamond, and now, that diamond was thought to have been stolen. What they could be thinking was anyone's guess.

There were a few young men with their eyes solidly trained on Elizabeth's legs, and that was embarrassing enough that she almost called it right then and hide behind Maribelle. Still though, this was a matter of justice, and so, Elizabeth Tanner plunged forward.

“The facts, I think, you will find as follows, in no particular order: One, yesterday evening, the occupants of this household were surprised to find that their heiress had yet to arrive at the given time. These occupants included the staff of the household, the Lady Wellington, and the visiting Smithson, and they were left waiting an hour until midnight, when Miss Maribelle arrived on horseback without her carriage, and perhaps more importantly to our timeline, without the diamond that has so famously been displayed in London newspapers.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and continued, keeping her voice steady.

“There are a few points of order to this affair that I will try to keep in order. First, approximately a week ago, one Mr. Verner was hired by Lord Wellington as an additional hand for an upcoming party. A position that he is trained up for with the rest of the staff.

And our second point of order, one that can be confirmed by the testimony of Mr. Verner, the cook, and Harriete the maid if she is willing to testify-”

Elizabeth turned to Harriete, who squeaked, but with eyes on her, it was all she could do to nod.

“Second, is that the Wellington Estate is chronically understaffed for a household of this size. I think the public will count for servants on hand here, not counting the Gardner who is reported to be in Germany at this time for holiday.”

And here was a delicate bit, one that she had only gotten out of the Cook after a bit of conversation, and a fact that would appear out of nowhere to someone like Mark or Maribelle.

“The rest of the staff left over, and I can quote, contracting problems. This is indicative of a fact that many of the crowd should well be aware of. The Wellington family are not in the best financial straits, isn’t that right Lady Smithson?”

Rather than shrinking back when called out, the real lady of the house only nodded. “Oh, I wouldn’t say broke. Just that the household is under new management.” Smithson’s smile was venomous in a way that Elizabeth could only appreciate.

“Now wait just a minute!” Jacob cried out from the crowd, but Elizabeth pressed forward, ignoring his outburst.

“Third point of affairs is the following. Tonight is the night of a debutante ball, except the crowd isn’t the right makeup for it. A single pianist and perhaps a dozens’ crowd is a poor showing for an event of this caliber, but it is more noteworthy for the clientele. The majority of you were invited to an art auction, part of an attempt to provide finances for the household for the

Wellington's to pay off their debts, but something is missing from their selection. There are no great works of art, no Monets to raffle off for the right price. There is, however, one item in the family tree that might fit the bill."

Elizabeth chose her next words very carefully, as they would be the crux of her argument in the court of public opinion.

"Though technically first in our timeline, the following event occurs. Right before our arrival on the *Gallant*, an advertisement is placed out onto a popular newspaper about the return of the Wellington diamond. Included is a photograph of the diamond in question and brings the public conscience towards the Wellington family."

"I never enclosed a photo! And I never said that I was giving them the diamond!" Maribelle cried out in the room, but her confusion was more helpful than anything else. It drew the audience's eyes to the actual owner of the diamond.

"You aren't?" Mark asked, blinking, and the heiress shook her head.

"I was bringing it with me, but it wasn't a gift. I never mentioned such a thing. The only reason I brought it up was because my Uncle was curious if I still had it."

There was a nervous shift from the back of the room, but Elizabeth pushed forward.

"How many of the crowd, speaking honestly, were under the impression that tonight you would be bidding on the purchase of the Wellington diamond?"

For a moment, it seemed like no one would raise their voice, and Elizabeth would be forced to rely on forensic evidence to prove her point beyond a shadow of the doubt, but it was the Mr. Morgan who sheepishly raised his hand, a move that encouraged others in the crowd to raise their own.

And now came the painful part. She lowered her voice. "Mr. Verner, would you like to--"

But he shook his head no, though there was a pen and paper in his hands that was taking down her every word, which scared her in every sense of the word. Still, it was time.

"Lady Wellington, you arranged for the release of the Wellington diamond photograph and arranged for the auction to take place."

But Lady Wellington said nothing. Her hand was clenched, and she looked liable to kill Elizabeth on the spot. Still she pushed forward.

“Still, you had a problem. A problem that Richard Brent was forced to correct. Your husband informed you that he would be returned the diamond by Maribelle, but what you didn’t find out until later was that he was lying and he-

“I stole the diamond. I enlisted Richard to rob my niece’s carriage, and when Maribelle returned safe and sound, schemed to plant it on Mr. Verner to put the blame on him in case she had seen the culprit “ Lady Wellington said out loud, drawing the focus of the room to her. “When the deed was done, I murdered Richard and left the footman in the Eastern wing. That’s what you were going to say, isn’t it? Well you have no evidence to prove otherwise!”

And then Elizabeth said the most heart-breaking thing about this whole affair, the truth she had been hoping to avoid all day. “No, you didn’t. You wouldn’t confide in the Footman because Lady Smithson said so herself. Richard was one of her men. You wouldn’t rely on him.”

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Mark Verner spoke up.

“Mr. Wellington, you hired me on the street to serve as an extra hand for the party, but you made no such measures to fill out the rest of your roster. My sister is a tinkerer, and you had been speaking to her about a diamond. The Wellington diamond in fact. You were appraising its worth when you already knew Maribelle wouldn’t be gifting it to you, because you already knew it would be the only thing to pull yourself out of debt.”

Elizabeth picked up after him, shaking her head and speaking up before the man could interrupt. “You knew when Maribelle would be arriving, and you arranged a place for her accident to occur. You had Richard abandon her in the woods, so you could steal the diamond, but you didn’t realize that she’d be traveling in company. When Maribelle disappeared from the carriage, you assumed that she’d been tipped off, and there was only one man that could have done that.”

Mark picked up. “Richard Brent was a loyal man, but he wouldn’t stay quiet. You murdered him and took the diamond for yourself, and you planned for me to take the blame. You would have planted the diamond on my uniform, and auctioned it off to the highest bidder when the police recovered it and returned it to you, the apparent rightful owner.”

“But you never expected a man to do the right thing. And you tossed his life away like it was nothing.” spoke Elizabeth Tanner, “and it is that careless attitude towards life which led to your downfall.”

And the ending of the Wellington Affair, that terrible night of some renown, ended softly. It ended with a Lord of his house accepting his arrest in good charm, with the promise that his lawyers would clear up this trouble wouldn't they? But it wasn't to be, because Lady Wellington began sobbing in the corner, and the diamond safely recovered from Mark's room with the man's fingerprints all over. It ended with the crowd of investors going home without their art, because with the recovery of the remains of poor Mr. Brent, the household became a crime scene and all the rest of the Wellington servants were released from their contracts at last.

The next day, Mark Verner faced Elizabeth Tanner and Maribelle, who were standing outside a carriage with their arms linked together.

"You'll be staying in London then?" he asked, and Maribelle nodded her head,

"Eliza's been invited to stay with Lady Smithson for a bit, so we'll have a place to stay for our time abroad. You'll be going back home, right?"

Mark held his hand to the back of his head, scratching it. "Yeah, I guess I'll be back where I started. I'm pretty sure I won't be receiving those wages that I was promised."

"Lured in with the promise of a day's wages," Elizabeth Tanner muttered, "What has the world come to?"

"You should write a book," Maribelle said, so earnestly that it made Mark look up to her.

"About what?"

"Well your story of course! I bet it would make your money back," Maribelle said, but the time of their departure was coming, and so, Mark Verner watched Elizabeth Tanner and Maribelle, hand in hand, ride off into the sunset. One more story under their belts, without a thought or care for the world they left behind.

And Mark was left by himself, staring at the household that had been his life for the past two weeks, and he looked at it, and he shook his head.

Mark Verner returned back home to his sister's shop in London, and he started writing a book. The rest, he found, was history.

Fin