

Flakes of large, wet snow splat against the window. A crisp wind rattled the shutters. William shuffled closer to the fire, his nose buried inside a book. Ella's footsteps pattered from the kitchen. She sounded to be in quite a huff—all the more reason he kept himself hidden in the library.

Their servant, Mary, entered with a tray in her hands. The smell of peppermint swallowed the room as she presented a porcelain teapot. William gave an absentminded nod as thanks. His mind strayed from the contents of his book while Mary left in the direction of the kitchen.

"Is there anything else you wish for me to prepare, madam?" he heard her ask.

"Have the divans all been straightened?" inquired Ella.

"Precisely to your liking," answered the servant.

"And the entrance mat?"

"It's been cleaned."

"You've removed our own coats from the rack?"

"I have."

Ella murmured. "Well, find something that needs attention, and if you wouldn't mind, send word to the lazy scoundrel that his wife demands his presence."

William snorted. He held his book even closer to his face, as if the pages could protect him from the summoning.

Mary's shadow draped the library entrance a moment later. "Mrs. Thompson wishes to speak with you in the kitchen."

William gave a low grumble, but Mary continued to speak before he could complain further. "I have no right to say so, sir, but I believe it would be in your best interest to see her."

William spun about. A smirk had creased his lips. "Is that so? Pray tell, what makes you say such a thing?"

Mary gave a stiff bow of the head. "Merely an observation, sir."

"Perceptive now, aren't we?" chuckled William.

Mary's gaze fell to the floor. "Forgive me for speaking so recklessly, sir. It was only out of concern for you."

Her words wiped the grin from William's face. *Concern for me? Would that also be why you, Mary, have been obstinately tight-lipped about the nature of my wife's 'errands'?*

The servant's soft eyes shimmered as if she had read his thoughts. "I have overstepped myself, sir. I apologize."

She scurried away. William set his book beside the platter of tea, and with a grunt, rose to his feet. He crossed into the kitchen, where a sugary aroma wafted alongside the sprightly flames billowing from the oven's hearth.

Ella dashed from one end of the room to the other, the base of her neck dabbed with a light sweat. As William ambled into view, she looked up with a scowl. "I hope I haven't interrupted anything too important," she said with obvious sarcasm.

William stopped at the fire, arms outstretched, watching his wife from the corner of his eye. "My dear, you must've felled a whole forest to get such a blaze going."

"With no help from you," she grouched. "Mary and I have been making preparations since morning, and you, meanwhile, have been lounging in the library all day. This little party was your idea, wasn't it?"

"It was merely to please you," said William. He narrowed his eyes. "You *are* awfully fond of company, aren't you?"

Ella wrinkled her nose. “What do you mean by that? Of course I love company. Though I expected you to contribute, considering this cookie exchange was your own invention.”

“My work begins once the guests arrive,” said William with a sigh. “Speaking with Englishmen these days has become such a chore. The bourgeoisie are weaned on little more than the theatre and whatever fashions those Americans bring back with them.” He winced. “To think they’d leave only to return with such depraved views on aestheticism.”

Ella scoffed. “What nonsense! You know nothing of the Americans. And if you ever went to the theatre, you might develop some tastes of your own.”

William’s back stiffened. It took due restraint to quell the venom in his next words. “If you ever wanted me at the theatre, then perhaps I would come. But it seems I’m a horrible burden you like to keep from your...associates.”

Ella froze with a tray of cookies in her hands. “You have an erratic imagination. I go most often with Lady Chamberlain and her other friends. They know too well of your existence.”

William ran a finger through the thick of his moustache. “I don’t like a single one of those ladies. They’re always talking about France. Everyone wants a cottage in the French countryside these days.”

Ella’s brow drew together. “For heaven’s sake! Enough drabble! Will you help me before the guests arrive?”

William eased himself away from the fire, every movement languid and begrudging. “Very well. What services may I offer?”

Ella jabbed a finger towards the doorway. “Mary has prepared some baskets. Take them to the drawing room, and lay them on the table I’ve arranged.”

William departed, relieved to separate himself from his wife and the short temper she’d adopted in recent months. He entered the dining room, lit only by a single oil lamp, where Mary pulled ornamental cloths from a lower cupboard. He eyed her warily as he approached the centre table adorned with small wicker baskets. He lifted one and examined the blue and silver paper tucked inside.

“Mary, has Ella given you orders to label each basket with the name of the guests?”

The servant turned from the cabinet. “She never asked for such a thing, sir.”

“I’d like to do that. You have the guest list, do you not? Dictate, and I’ll write the names myself.”

He fetched a quill and inkwell from the library. Mary had the list ready upon his return. “The party consists of Mr. and Mrs. Price, Lady Anabeth, Mr. and Mrs. Wright...”

“Slower, my dear,” William grumbled. “I can’t write that fast.”

Mary resumed in a drawling voice. “Lord and Lady Moore, Sir Walker, Mr. and Mrs. Shaw, Sir Charles Clarke—”

William’s hand froze. A drop of ink fell from the quill. It bled across the sheet, spoiling the most recent name. Even with the final letters smudged, the words Charles Clarke seemed to glare at him with mockery. His hands began to tremble.

Mary looked up from the list. “Is there a problem, sir?”

William set down the quill and spread his fingers. “No...it’s nothing of concern. You see, though I selected the guests myself, I can’t seem to remember this Clarke fellow.”

“He’s the son of a Lord Cecil, sir. From the north end. A well-to-do fellow—quite an eligible bachelor, they say. He’s become known as a necessity for any respectable party.”

“Which would mean he’s a menace away from them.” William took a long breath to calm himself. “Remember that, Mary. Men will only ever show their vices in front of an audience, in the absence of one, or become an activist if nobody cares either way.”

Mary gave a terse nod. William crumpled the paper he had ruined and started anew, his mind now a fog. The name Charles Clarke rang in his ears. Only the tangible shrill of Ella’s voice managed to distract him from thoughts of the ‘eligible bachelor’.

“Mary!” she cried. “I hear some guests at the door!”

The servant dropped the guest list and raced for the entrance hall. Ella appeared in the dining room a moment later, her skin pale and her expression flustered. “Guests already! William, we should have written the invitations for eight rather than six.”

She approached him and examined his work. An indignant groan escaped her lips.

“Good heavens, William! We only have twelve baskets! You could’ve done something more useful than scribble silly little nametags.”

William threw the quill against the table. His composure suddenly eroded. “I can’t seem to do anything without you disapproving, can I?”

Ella reeled backwards. “My word! You are incorrigible! Must you foul every gathering we host?”

“Is it I who’s fouled things?” snapped William. “What about—”

“Enough!” cried Ella. “We can’t bicker in front of guests. Will you please keep them entertained while I prepare myself?”

She stormed off without waiting for his consent. Muttering under his breath, William sulked towards the entrance hall to find Mary in company of the first guests, Lord and Lady Moore.

A beaming smile creased Lord Moore’s pale lips as he shook William’s hand. “Mr. Thompson, a pleasure! I heard rumours you’d fallen down a hole and disappeared. I’m glad to see they were nothing more than lies.”

“If Englishmen preferred the truth,” grumbled William, “they would’ve run out of conversation decades ago.”

Lord Moore laughed in spite of William’s acrid tone. “What a cynic you’ve become! And all the while, you conjure up this—what do you call it—ah yes, a cookie exchange.”

Lady Moore produced a fanciful tin adorned with painted cherubs. “I forgot how long it had been since I last baked. I must say, it’s a pleasant hobby, but I would never dismiss my cooks.”

William offered a crooked smile. “If the cookies are well-received, perhaps you will reconsider.”

Lady Moore waved a hand. “Unlikely! I don’t care much for meaningless praise. But come! Show us in. Ella is here, I hope?”

“She’ll join us momentarily.” William escorted his guests upstairs to the drawing room as Lord Moore began a story that immediately lost William’s attention. His mind had already drifted to more important thoughts as Mr. and Mrs. Price arrived shortly after, and became the sole target for Lord Moore’s dreary tales.

An hour or so passed with the arrival of several more guests. Ella had come down from the boudoir, though she kept her distance from William, who had slunk to the corner of the room. She seemed to be in the brightest spirits as he watched her chat with Lady Anabeth.

Later on in the night, a figure appeared at the top of the stairs. Ella glanced over. An expression somewhere between terror and thrill lit her eyes. William followed her gaze. His

blood cooled. A vehement hatred sprung up at the arrival of the eligible bachelor himself, Charles Clarke.

The man sauntered into the room with a lazy smile. He passed the crowd and steered straight for Ella and Lady Anabeth. Though William could tell she was trying to stay composed, Ella's behaviour transformed to that of a young woman who hadn't yet discovered the cruel realities of marriage.

Seeing the delight in her eyes filled William with reproach. He marched towards her, stomach churning as he forced calm, collected breaths through his nose. It wasn't until he stood directly in Charles's shadow that Ella took notice of him.

She moved a step away from the bachelor. "There you are," she said to William. "I thought you'd be with Mr. White. It's been so long since you've seen him last."

She spoke as if they'd never had a conflict before. Irrked by the façade, William mumbled an unsavoury remark in a constrained tone.

Ella's face twisted. She gestured to Charles while taking another step away from him. "I was surprised to see Sir Clarke here. I didn't know you knew him."

"Everyone knows each other in this town," answered William. "If there were any anonymity, we'd be forced to evolve as a society. That would be very unlike us Englishmen."

Charles let out a laugh, one that annoyed William to no end. "A wonderful observation, Mr. Thompson! Allow me to formally greet you."

He held out his hand in offering. William accepted the pleasantries with a pungent reluctance. He detested the texture of the man's skin. His long, bony fingers irritated him, almost as much as the shrewd face, which he couldn't find the strength to look at. Eyes fixed on his feet, he shook with an iron grip, fighting the urge to crack every bone in the man's hand.

The handshake went on long enough to make Charles, Ella, and Lady Anabeth all uncomfortable. Once William had finally let go, Charles gave a nervous chuckle then hid his hands behind his back.

"You must explain that theory sometime, Mr. Thompson—how we keep ourselves from evolving. I have a box at the Gossendow Theatre. Merely send me a letter, and I'll make sure there's a seat open for you. We'll philosophize between acts."

William answered with a stiff jaw. "I'd be humbled to attend." He turned to his wife. "Shall we begin with the cookie exchange soon? It's getting rather late. We mustn't keep our guests too long."

Ella nodded. "Wonderful idea, my dear. You brought the baskets up like I asked, correct?"

William paused. He bowed his head in a repentant manner. "I seem to have forgotten them in the dining room. Allow me to fetch them quick, then we can start."

He hurried down the stairs. His heart pounded against his chest, and it felt as if thorns prodded his stomach. He kept glancing over his shoulder, afraid someone might be following him. "Mary!" he cried. "Come quick!"

The servant came huffing to his side. William scooped half the baskets off the table and placed them in her arms. "Will you please bring these to the drawing room? And act subtle. They were supposed to be there before the guests arrived."

Mary obeyed without a word. Once she had left, William shut himself in the dining room. He took the oil lamp to a far cupboard, one used so seldom, a layer of dust had gathered atop the surface. He waited a moment, listening with tensed nerves for any footsteps. When it appeared certain nobody would interrupt, he pulled open a tiny drawer and unfolded a collection of

napkins. Wrapped inside were a half-dozen cookies, identical to the ones Ella had baked this afternoon.

A chill ran down his spine. With unsteady fingers, he took the cookies and placed them in the basket reserved for Charles Clarke, all while a sharp guilt bombarded his conscience. It almost convinced him to crush the cookies and throw them away, but he thought of the recent nights spent alone at home while Ella continued to attend the theatre without him.

*A box at the Gossendow Theatre...*

His cheeks burned. He nearly pounded the table with his fist, but caught himself in time. *Don't idle. You'll raise suspicion.*

He threw the rest of the baskets together, making sure to keep Charles's hidden at the bottom. Rushing upstairs, he found Mary alone at the table, arranging the baskets and filling them with cookies. He whisked her away with a flick of the wrist. "No need to bother yourself, my dear. Allow me to finish."

His voice quivered with each word, but Mary didn't seem to notice. As she departed, he scrambled to fill the rest of the baskets. Nausea plagued him. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead. He distributed Ella's cookies first, mixing them in Charles's basket with the identical batch he had baked himself.

Next, he divided the cookies Lord and Lady Moore had brought. He moved on to Lady Anabeth's, then Mr. and Mrs. Price's, when a voice startled him from behind. "What are you doing?"

William whirled about. He met the curious, azure eyes of Timothy White. "Is something the matter?" his friend asked. "You look dreadful. Are you running a fever?"

William rested his hands on the edge of the table to keep them from shaking. "No, I'm quite all right. I'm only flustered. I forgot to arrange the baskets after promising Ella I would do so."

Timothy waved a hand. "Let your servant girl finish. Come join a few of us in the smoking room instead. Sir Walker has been dying to speak to you all night."

William scanned the table. Though he was only half-finished, his cookies were indiscernible among the mound he'd stuffed into Charles's basket. Nobody would touch them tonight.

"Very well," he said, somewhat remorsefully. "I wouldn't mind a cigarette."

He made an awkward show of himself in the smoking room. Conversation seemed a foreign concept as the other men discussed politics, science, and literature. His troubled mind yearned so desperately for the party to end, by the time people began shuffling for the exit, his temples were throbbing. He felt weak, exhausted, and ravaged with anxiety. Guilt plagued him.

Once the final visitor had bid farewell, he bolted the front door and let out a long sigh. "Thank heavens this night is over with!"

Ella, who had escorted the guests with him, crossed her arms. Her lips formed a grimace. "I quite agree. I think this will be the last time I allow you to devise a party like this."

William was too tired to argue. He brushed past his wife without a word.

"Just a moment," she demanded. "Where are you going?"

William didn't answer. He turned to the library and shut himself in. Taking a book from the nearest shelf, he flung himself onto a sofa and submerged himself in a story with the hope of staying distracted.

Sleep didn't come much that night. Troubles kept him awake, and Ella had locked the bedroom door behind her, forcing him to remain in the library. The next three days passed in a similar pattern of drowning himself in novels and avoiding his wife at all costs.

On the fourth day, as he read by the fire, a shout rang from upstairs. He nearly dropped his book, and would've leapt to his feet had Ella not barged into the library first.

Her cheeks were pale as snow. "William!" she wailed, her voice cracked and frenzied. "I just received a note." She waved a letter that looked to have been torn open in a panic. "Charles Clarke has died!"

William stared at his wife. His soul began to grovel, yet it burst with laughter at the same time. His insides roared with delight. He buried his face behind the book in an attempt to hide a wicked grin that had forced itself upon his lips.