



DAY ONE

I forget everything between footsteps.

“Anna!” I finish shouting, snapping my mouth shut in surprise.

My mind has gone blank. I don’t know who Anna is or why I’m calling her name. I don’t even know how I got here. I’m stood in a forest, shielding my eyes from the spitting rain. My heart’s thumping, I reek of sweat and my legs are shaking. I must have been running but I can’t remember why.

“How did—” I’m cut short by the sight of my own hands. They’re bony, ugly. A stranger’s hands. I don’t recognize them at all.

Feeling the first touch of panic, I try to recall something else about myself: a family member, my address, age...anything, but nothing’s coming. I don’t even have a name. Every memory I had a few seconds ago is gone.

My throat tightens, breaths coming loud and fast. The forest is spinning, black spots inking my sight.

Be calm.

“I can’t breathe,” I gasp, blood roaring in my ears as I sink to the ground, my fingers digging into the dirt.

You can breathe; you just need to calm down.

There’s comfort in this inner voice, cold authority.

Close your eyes. Listen to the forest. Collect yourself.

Obedying the voice, I squeeze my eyes shut, but all I can hear is my own panicked wheezing. For the longest time it crushes every other sound, but slowly, ever so slowly, I work a hole in my fear, allowing other noises to break through. Raindrops are tapping the leaves, branches rustling overhead.

There's a stream away to my right and crows in the trees, their wings crackling the air as they take flight. Something's scurrying in the undergrowth, the thump of rabbit feet passing near enough to touch. One by one, I knit these new memories together until I've got five minutes of past to wrap myself in. It's enough to stanch the panic, at least for now.

I get to my feet clumsily, surprised by how tall I am, how far from the ground I seem to be. Swaying a little, I wipe the wet leaves from my trousers, noticing for the first time that I'm wearing a dinner jacket, the shirt splattered with mud and red wine. I must have been at a party. My pockets are empty and I don't have a coat, so I can't have strayed too far. That's reassuring.

Judging by the light, it's morning, so I've probably been out here all night. No one gets dressed up to spend an evening alone, which means somebody must know I'm missing by now. Surely, beyond these trees, a house is coming awake in alarm, search parties striking out to find me? My eyes roam the trees, half-expecting to see my friends emerging through the foliage, pats on the back and gentle jokes escorting me back home, but daydreams won't deliver me from this forest, and I can't linger here hoping for rescue. My body's shaking, my teeth chattering. I need to start walking, if only to keep warm, but I can't see anything except trees. There's no way to know whether I'm moving toward help or blundering away from it.

At a loss, I return to the last concern of the man I was.

"Anna!"

Whoever this woman is, she's clearly the reason I'm out here, but I can't picture her. Perhaps she's my wife, or my daughter? Neither feels right, and yet there's a pull in the name. I can feel it trying to lead my mind somewhere.

"Anna!" I shout, more out of desperation than hope.

"Help me!" a woman screams back.

I spin, seeking the voice, dizzying myself, glimpsing her between distant trees, a woman in a black dress running for her life. Seconds later, I spot her pursuer crashing through the foliage after her.

"You there, stop!" I yell, but my voice is weak and weary; they trample it underfoot.

Shock pins me in place, and the two of them are almost out of sight by the time I give chase, flying after them with a haste I'd never have thought possible from my aching body. Even so, no matter how hard I run, they're always a little ahead.

Sweat pours off my brow, my already weak legs shaking until they give out, sending me sprawling into the dirt. Scrambling through the leaves, I heave myself up in time to meet her scream. It floods the forest, sharp with fear, and is cut silent by a gunshot.

"Anna!" I call out desperately. "Anna!"

There's no response, just the fading echo of the pistol's report.

"Thirty seconds," I mutter. That's how long I hesitated when I first spotted her, and that's how far away I was when she was murdered. Thirty seconds of indecision...thirty seconds to abandon somebody completely.

There's a thick branch by my feet, and picking it up, I swing it experimentally, comforted by the weight and rough texture of the bark. It won't do me very much good against a pistol, but it's better than investigating these woods with my hands in the air. I'm still panting, still trembling after the run, but guilt nudges me in the direction of Anna's scream. Wary of making too much noise, I brush aside the low-hanging branches, searching for something I don't really want to see.

Twigs crack to my left.

I stop breathing, listening fiercely.

The sound comes again, footsteps crunching over leaves and branches, circling around behind me.

My blood runs cold, freezing me in place. I don't dare look over my shoulder.

The cracking of twigs moves closer, shallow breaths only a little behind me. My legs falter, the branch dropping from my hands.

I would pray, but I don't remember the words.

Warm breath touches my neck. I smell alcohol and cigarettes, the odor of an unwashed body.

"East," a man rasps, dropping something heavy into my pocket.

The presence recedes, his steps retreating into the woods as I sag,

pressing my forehead to the dirt, inhaling the smell of wet leaves and rot, tears running down my cheeks.

My relief is pitiable, my cowardice lamentable. I couldn't even look my tormentor in the eye. What kind of man *am I*?

It's some minutes before my fear thaws sufficiently for me to move, and even then, I'm forced to lean against a nearby tree to rest. The murderer's gift jiggles in my pocket, and dreading what I might find, I plunge my hand inside, withdrawing a silver compass.

"Oh!" I say, surprised.

The glass is cracked and the metal scuffed, the initials *SB* engraved on the underside. I don't understand what they mean, but the killer's instructions were clear. I'm to use the compass to head east.

I glance at the forest guiltily. Anna's body must be near, but I'm terrified of the killer's reaction should I arrive upon it. Perhaps that's why I'm alive, because I didn't come any closer. Do I really want to test the limits of his mercy?

Assuming that's what this is.

For the longest time, I stare at the compass's quivering needle. There's not much I'm certain of anymore, but I know murderers don't show mercy. Whatever game he's playing, I can't trust his advice and I shouldn't follow it, but if I don't... I search the forest again. Every direction looks the same: trees without end beneath a sky filled with spite.

How lost do you have to be to let the devil lead you home?

This lost, I decide. Precisely this lost.

Easing myself off the tree, I lay the compass flat in my palm. It yearns for north, so I point myself east, against the wind and cold, against the world itself.

Hope has deserted me.

I'm a man in purgatory, blind to the sins that chased me here.

The wind howls, the rain has picked up and is hammering through the trees to bounce ankle high off the ground as I follow the compass.

Spotting a flash of color among the gloom, I wade toward it, coming upon a red handkerchief hammered to a tree—the relic of some long-forgotten child’s game, I’d guess. I search for another, finding it a few feet away, then another and another. Stumbling between them, I make my way through the murk until I reach the edge of the forest, the trees giving way to the grounds of a sprawling Georgian manor house, its redbrick facade entombed in ivy. As far as I can tell, it’s abandoned. The long gravel driveway leading to the front door is covered in weeds, and the rectangular lawns either side of it are marshland, their flowers left to wither in the verge.

I look for some sign of life, my gaze roaming the dark windows until I spot a faint light on the second floor. It should be a relief, yet still I hesitate. I have the sense of having stumbled upon something sleeping, that uncertain light the heartbeat of a creature vast and dangerous and still. Why else would a murderer gift me this compass, if not to lead me into the jaws of some greater evil?

It’s the thought of Anna that drives me to take the first step. She lost her life because of those thirty seconds of indecision, and now I’m faltering again. Swallowing my nerves, I wipe the rain from my eyes and cross the lawn, climbing the crumbling steps to the front door. I hammer it with a child’s fury, dashing the last of my strength on the wood. Something terrible happened in that forest, something that can still be punished if I can only rouse the occupants of the house.

Unfortunately, I cannot.

Despite beating myself limp against the door, nobody comes to answer it.

Cupping my hands, I press my nose to the tall windows either side, but the stained glass is thick with dirt, reducing everything inside to a yellowy smudge. I bang on them with my palm, stepping back to search the front of the house for another way in. That's when I notice the bellpull, the rusty chain tangled in ivy. Wrenching it free, I give it a good yank and keep going until something shifts behind the windows.

The door is opened by a sleepy-looking fellow so extraordinary in his appearance that for a moment we simply stand there, gaping at each other. He's short and crooked, shriveled by the fire that's scarred half his face. Overlarge pajamas hang off a coat-hanger frame, a ratty brown dressing gown clinging to his lopsided shoulders. He looks barely human, a remnant of some prior species lost in the folds of our evolution.

"Oh, thank heavens. I need your help," I say, recovering myself.

He looks at me, mouth agape.

"Do you have a telephone?" I try again. "We need to send for the authorities."

Nothing.

"Don't just stand there, you devil!" I cry, shaking him by the shoulders, before pushing past him into the entrance hall, my jaw dropping as my gaze sweeps the room. Every surface is glittering, the checked marble floor reflecting a crystal chandelier adorned with dozens of candles. Framed mirrors line the walls, a wide staircase with an ornate railing sweeping up toward a gallery, a narrow red carpet flowing down the steps like the blood of some slaughtered animal.

A door bangs at the rear of the room, half a dozen servants appearing from deeper in the house, their arms laden with pink and purple flowers, the scent just about covering the smell of hot wax. All conversation stops when they notice the nightmare panting by the door. One by one, they turn toward me, the hall holding its breath. Before long, the only sound is the dripping of my clothes on their nice clean floor.

Plink.

Plink.

Plink.

“Sebastian?”

A handsome blond fellow in a cricket sweater and linen trousers is trotting down the staircase two steps at a time. He looks to be in his early fifties, though age has left him decadently rumpled rather than weary and worn. Keeping his hands in his pockets, he crosses the floor toward me, cutting a straight line through the silent servants who part before him. I doubt he even notices them, so intent are his eyes upon me.

“My dear man, what on earth happened to you?” he asks, concern crumpling his brow. “Last I saw—”

“We must fetch the police,” I say, clutching his forearm. “Anna’s been murdered.”

Shocked whispers spring up around us.

He frowns at me, casting a quick glance at the servants, who’ve all taken a step closer.

“Anna?” he asks in a hushed voice.

“Yes. Anna. She was being chased.”

“By whom?”

“Some figure in black. We must involve the police!”

“Shortly, shortly, let’s go up to your room first,” he soothes, ushering me toward the staircase.

I don’t know if it’s the heat of the house, or the relief of finding a friendly face, but I’m beginning to feel faint, and I have to use the banister to keep from stumbling as we climb the steps.

A grandfather clock greets us at the top, its mechanism rusting, seconds turned to dust on its pendulum. It’s later than I thought, almost 10:30 a.m.

Passages either side of us lead off into opposite wings of the house, although the one into the east wing is blocked by a velvet curtain that’s been hastily nailed to the ceiling, a small sign pinned to the material proclaiming the area under decoration.

Impatient to unburden myself of the morning’s trauma, I try again to raise the issue of Anna, but my Samaritan silences me with a conspiratorial shake of the head.

“These damnable servants will smear your words up and down the house in half a minute,” he says, his voice low enough to scoop off the floor. “Best we talk in private.”

He’s away from me in two strides, but I can barely walk in a straight line, let alone keep pace.

“My dear man, you look dreadful,” he says, noticing that I’ve fallen behind.

Supporting my arm, he guides me along the passage, his hand at my back, fingers pressed against my spine. Though a simple gesture, I can feel his urgency as he leads me along a gloomy corridor with bedrooms either side, maids dusting inside. The walls must have been recently repainted for the fumes are making my eyes water, further evidence of a hurried restoration gathering as we progress along the passage. Mismatched stain is splashed across the floorboards, rugs laid down to try and muffle creaking joints. Wingback chairs have been arranged to hide the cracks in the walls, while paintings and porcelain vases attempt to lure the eye from crumbling cornices. Given the extent of the decay, such concealment seems a futile gesture. They’ve carpeted a ruin.

“Ah, this is your bedroom, isn’t it?” says my companion, opening a door near the end of the corridor.

Cold air slaps me in the face, reviving me a little, but he walks ahead to close the raised window it’s pouring through. Following behind, I enter a pleasant room with a four-poster bed set in the middle of the floor, its regal bearing only slightly let down by the sagging canopy and threadbare curtains, their embroidered birds flying apart at the seams. A folding screen has been pulled across the left side of the room, an iron bathtub visible through the gaps between the panels. Other than that, the furniture’s sparse—just a nightstand and a large wardrobe near the window, both of them splintered and faded. About the only personal item I can see is a King James Bible on the nightstand, its cover worn through and pages dog-eared.

As my Samaritan wrestles with the stiff window, I come to stand beside him, the view momentarily driving all else from my mind. Dense forest surrounds us, its green canopy unbroken by either a village or road. Without that compass, without a murderer’s kindness, I’d never have found this place,

and yet I cannot shake the feeling that I've been lured into a trap. After all, why kill Anna and spare me, if there wasn't some grander plan behind it? What does this devil want from me that he couldn't take in the forest?

Slamming the window shut, my companion gestures to an armchair next to a subdued fire, and passing me a crisp white towel from the cupboard, he sits down on the edge of the bed, tossing one leg across the other.

"Start at the beginning, old love," he says.

"There isn't time," I say, gripping the arm of the chair. "I'll answer all your questions in due course, but we must first call for the police and search those woods! There's a madman loose."

His eyes flicker across me, as though the truth of the matter is to be found within the folds of my soiled clothing.

"I'm afraid we can't call anybody. There's no line up here," he says, rubbing his neck. "But we can search the woods and send a servant to the village, should we find anything. How long will it take you to change? You'll need to show us where it happened."

"Well." I'm wringing the towel in my hands. "It's difficult. I was disoriented."

"Descriptions, then," he says, hitching up a trouser leg, exposing the gray sock at his ankle. "What did the murderer look like?"

"I never saw his face. He was wearing a heavy black coat."

"And this Anna?"

"She was also wearing black," I say, heat rising into my cheeks as I realize this is the extent of my information. "I... Well, I only know her name."

"Forgive me, Sebastian. I assumed she was a friend of yours."

"No..." I stammer. "I mean, perhaps. I can't be certain."

Hands dangling between his knees, my Samaritan leans forward with a confused smile. "I'm missing something, I think. How can you know her name, but not be certain—"

"My memory is lost, damn it," I interrupt, the confession thudding on the floor between us. "I can't remember my own name, let alone those of my friends."

Skepticism billows up behind his eyes. I can't blame him; even to my ears, this all sounds absurd.

"My memory has no bearing on what I witnessed," I insist, clutching at

the tatters of my credibility. "I saw a woman being chased. She screamed and was silenced by a gunshot. We have to search those woods!"

"I see." He pauses, brushing some lint from a trouser leg. His next words are offerings, carefully chosen and even more carefully placed before me.

"Is there a chance the two people you saw were lovers? Playing a game in the woods, perhaps? The sound might have been a branch cracking, even a starting pistol."

"No, no. She called for help; she was afraid," I say, my agitation sending me leaping from the chair, the dirty towel thrown on the floor.

"Of course, of course," he says reassuringly, watching me pace. "I do believe you, my dear fellow, but the police are so precise about these things and they do delight in making their betters look foolish."

I stare at him helplessly, drowning in a sea of platitudes.

"Her killer gave me this," I say, suddenly remembering the compass, which I tug from my pocket. It's smeared with mud, forcing me to wipe it clean with my sleeve. "There are letters on the back," I say, pointing a trembling finger toward them.

He views the compass through narrowed eyes, turning it over in a methodical fashion.

"SB," he says slowly, looking up at me.

"Yes!"

"Sebastian Bell." He pauses, weighing my confusion. "That's your name, Sebastian. These are your initials. This is *your* compass."

My mouth opens and closes, no sound coming out.

"I must have lost it," I say eventually. "Perhaps the killer picked it up."

"Perhaps." He nods.

It's his kindness that knocks the wind out of me. He thinks I'm half mad, a drunken fool who spent the night in the forest and came back raving. Yet instead of being angry, he pities me. That's the worst part. Anger's solid; it has weight. You can beat your fists against it. Pity's a fog to become lost within.

I drop into the chair, my head cradled in my hands. There's a killer on the loose, and I have no way of convincing him of the danger.

A killer who showed you the way home?

“I know what I saw,” I say.

You don't even know who you are.

“I'm sure you do,” says my companion, mistaking the nature of my protest.

I stare at nothing, thinking only of a woman called Anna lying dead in the forest.

“Look, you rest here,” he says, standing up. “I'll ask around the house, see if anybody's missing. Maybe that will turn something up.”

His tone is conciliatory but matter of fact. Kind as he's been to me, I cannot trust his doubt will get anything done. Once that door closes behind him, he'll scatter a few halfhearted questions among the staff, while Anna lays abandoned.

“I saw a woman murdered,” I say, getting to my feet wearily. “A woman I should have helped, and if I have to search every inch of those woods to prove it, I'll do so.”

He holds my gaze a second, his skepticism faltering in the face of my certainty.

“Where will you start?” he asks. “There are thousands of acres of forest out there, and for all your good intentions, you could barely make it up the stairs. Whoever this Anna is, she's already dead and her murderer's fled. Give me an hour to gather a search party and ask my questions. Somebody in this house must know who she is and where she went. We'll find her, I promise, but we have to do it the right way.”

He squeezes my shoulder.

“Can you do as I ask? One hour, please.”

Objections choke me, but he's right. I need to rest, to recover my strength, and as guilty as I feel about Anna's death, I do not want to stalk into that forest alone. I barely made it out of there the first time.

I submit with a meek nod of the head.

“Thank you, Sebastian,” he says. “A bath's been run. Why don't you clean yourself up? I'll send for the doctor and ask my valet to lay out some clothes for you. Rest a little. We'll meet in the drawing room at lunchtime.”

I should ask after this place before he leaves, my purpose here, but I'm impatient for him to start asking his questions so we can get on with our

search. Only one question seems important now, and he's already opened the door by the time I find the words to ask it.

"Do I have any family in the house?" I ask. "Anybody who might be worried about me?"

He glances at me over his shoulder, wary with sympathy.

"You're a bachelor, old man. No family to speak of beyond a dotty aunt somewhere with a hand on your purse strings. You have friends, of course, myself among them, but whoever this Anna is, you've never mentioned her to me. Truth be told, until today, I've never even heard you say the name."

Embarrassed, he turns his back on my disappointment and disappears into the cold corridor, the fire flickering uncertainly as the door closes behind him.

I'm out of my chair before the draft fades, pulling open the drawers in my nightstand, searching for some mention of Anna among my possessions, anything to prove that she isn't the product of a lurching mind. Unfortunately, the bedroom is proving remarkably tight-lipped. Aside from a pocketbook containing a few pounds, the only other personal item I come across is a gold-embossed invitation, a guest list on the front and a message on the back, written in an elegant hand.

Lord and Lady Hardcastle request the pleasure of your company at a masquerade ball celebrating the return of their daughter, Evelyn, from Paris. Celebrations will take place at Blackheath House over the second weekend of September. Owing to Blackheath's isolation, transport to the house will be arranged for all of our guests from the nearby village of Abberly.

The invitation is addressed to Doctor Sebastian Bell, a name it takes me a few moments to recognize as my own. My Samaritan mentioned it earlier, but seeing it written down, along with my profession, is an altogether more unsettling affair. I don't feel like a Sebastian, let alone a doctor.

A wry smile touches my lips.

I wonder how many of my patients will stay loyal when I approach them with my stethoscope on upside down.

Tossing the invitation back into the drawer, I turn my attention to

the Bible on the nightstand, flipping through its well-thumbed pages. Paragraphs are underlined, random words circled in red ink, though for the life of me I can't make sense of their significance. I'd been hoping to find an inscription or a letter concealed inside, but the Bible's empty of wisdom. Clutching it in both hands, I make a clumsy attempt at prayer, hoping to rekindle whatever faith I once possessed, but the entire endeavor feels like foolishness. My religion has abandoned me along with everything else.

The cupboard is next, and though the pockets of my clothes turn up nothing, I discover a steamer trunk buried beneath a pile of blankets. It's a beautiful old thing, the battered leather wrapped in tarnished iron bands, a heavy clasp protecting the contents from prying eyes. A London address—my address presumably—is written in the slip, though it stirs no recollection.

Taking off my jacket, I heave the trunk onto the bare floorboards, the contents clinking with every jolt. A murmur of excitement escapes me as I press the button on the clasp, transforming into a groan when I discover the damned thing is locked. I tug at the lid, once, twice, but it's unyielding. I search the open drawers and sideboard again, even dropping to my stomach to look under the bed, but there's nothing under there but rat poison pellets and dust.

The key isn't anywhere to be found.

The only place I haven't searched is the area around the bathtub, and I round the folding screen like a man possessed, nearly leaping out of my skin when I discover a wild-eyed creature lurking on the other side.

It's a mirror.

The wild-eyed creature looks as abashed as I at this revelation.

Taking a tentative step forward, I examine myself for the first time, disappointment swelling within me. Only now, staring at this shivering, frightened fellow, do I realize that I had expectations of myself. Taller, shorter, thinner, fatter, I don't know, but not this bland figure in the glass. Brown hair, brown eyes, and no chin to speak of. I'm any face in a crowd; just the Lord's way of filling in the gaps.

Quickly tiring of my reflection, I continue searching for the key to my trunk, but aside from some toiletries and a jug of water, there's nothing back

here. Whoever I used to be, it appears I tidied myself away before disappearing. I'm on the verge of howling in frustration when I'm interrupted by a knock on the door, an entire personality conveying itself in five hearty raps.

"Sebastian, are you there?" says a gruff voice. "My name's Richard Acker, I'm a doctor. I was asked to look in on you."

I open the door to find a huge gray mustache on the other side. It's a remarkable sight, the tips curling off the edge of the face they're theoretically attached to. The man behind it is in his sixties, perfectly bald, with a bulbous nose and bloodshot eyes. He smells of brandy, but cheerfully so, as though every drop went down smiling.

"Lord, you look dreadful," he says. "And that's my professional opinion."

Taking advantage of my confusion, he strolls past me, tossing his black medical case onto the bed and having a good look around the room, paying particular attention to my trunk.

"Used to have one of these myself," he says, running an affectionate hand across the lid. "Lavalaille, isn't it? Took me to the Orient and back when I was in the army. They say you shouldn't trust a Frenchman, but I couldn't do without their luggage."

He gives it an experimental kick, wincing as his foot bounces off the obstinate leather.

"You must have bricks in there," he says, cocking his head at me expectantly, as though there's some sensible response to such a statement.

"It's locked," I stammer.

"Can't find the key, hmmm?"

"I...no. Doctor Acker, I—"

"Call me Dickie, everybody else does," he says briskly, going to the window to peer outside. "I've never enjoyed the name truth be told, but I can't seem to shake it. Daniel says you've suffered a misfortune."

"Daniel?" I ask, just about holding onto the back of the conversation as it streaks away from me.

"Coleridge. Chap who found you this morning."

"Right, yes."

Doctor Dickie beams at my bafflement.

“Memory loss, is it? Well, not to worry, I saw a few of these cases in the war and everything came back after a day or so, whether the patient wanted it to or not.”

He shoos me toward the trunk, making me sit down on top of it. Tilting my head forward, he examines my skull with a butcher’s tenderness, chuckling as I wince.

“Oh, yes, you’ve a nice bump back here.” He pauses, considering it. “Probably banged your head at some point last night. I’d imagine that’s when it all spilled out, so to speak. Any other symptoms? Headaches, nausea, that sort of thing?”

“There’s a voice,” I say, a little embarrassed by the admission.

“A voice?”

“In my head. I think it’s my voice, only, well, it’s very certain about things.”

“I see,” he says thoughtfully. “And this...voice. What does it say?”

“It gives me advice. Sometimes it comments on what I’m doing.”

Dickie’s pacing behind me, tugging his mustache.

“This advice, is it... How should I say? All aboveboard? Nothing violent, nothing perverse?”

“Absolutely not,” I say, riled by the inference.

“And are you hearing it now?”

“No.”

“Trauma,” he says abruptly, raising a finger in the air. “That’s what it’ll be. Very common, in fact. Somebody bangs their head and all manner of strange things start going on. They see smells, taste sounds, hear voices. Always passes in a day or two, month at the outside.”

“A month!” I say, spinning on the trunk to look at him. “How am I going to manage like this for a month? Perhaps I should visit a hospital?”

“God no, terrible things, hospitals,” he says, aghast. “Sickness and death swept into corners, diseases curled up in the beds with the patients. Take my advice and go for a stroll, root through your belongings, talk to some friends. I saw you and Michael Hardcastle sharing a bottle at dinner last night, several bottles actually. Quite an evening by all accounts. He should be able to help, and mark my words, once your memories return, that voice will be no more.”

He pauses, tutting. "I'm more concerned by that arm."

We're interrupted by a knock on the door, Dickie opening it before I can protest. It's Daniel's valet, delivering the pressed clothes he promised. Sensing my indecision, Dickie takes the clothes, dismisses the valet, and lays them out on the bed for me.

"Now, where were we?" he says. "Ah, yes, that arm."

I follow his gaze to find blood drawing patterns on my shirtsleeve. Without preamble, he tugs it up to reveal ugly slashes and tattered flesh beneath. They look to have scabbed over, but my recent exertions must have reopened the wounds.

Bending my stiff fingers one by one, he then fishes a small brown bottle and some bandages from his bag, cleaning my injuries before dabbing them with iodine.

"These are knife wounds, Sebastian," he says in a concerned voice, all his good cheer turned to ash. "Recent ones, too. It looks like you held your arm up to protect yourself, like so."

He demonstrates with a glass dropper from his medical bag, slashing violently at his forearm, which he's raised in front of his face. His reenactment is enough to bring me out in goose bumps.

"Do you recall anything of the evening?" he says, binding my arm so tightly that I hiss in pain. "Anything at all?"

I push my thoughts toward my missing hours. Upon waking, I'd assumed everything was lost, but now I perceive this isn't the case. I can sense my memories just out of reach. They have weight and shape, like shrouded furniture in a darkened room. I've simply misplaced the light to see them by.

With a sigh, I shake my head.

"Nothing's forthcoming," I say. "But this morning I saw a—"

"Woman murdered," interrupts the doctor. "Yes, Daniel told me."

Doubt stains every word, but he knots my bandage without voicing any objection.

"Either way, you need to inform the police immediately," he says. "Whoever did this was trying to cause you significant harm."

Lifting his case from the bed, he clumsily shakes my hand.

“Strategic retreat, my boy. That’s what’s required here,” he says. “Talk to the stable master. He should be able to arrange transport back to the village, and from there, you can rouse the constabulary. In the meantime, it’s probably best you keep a weather eye out. There are twenty people staying in Blackheath this weekend, and thirty more arriving for the ball tonight. Most of them aren’t above this sort of thing, and if you’ve offended them... well...” He shakes his head. “Be careful. That’s my advice.”

He lets himself out and I hurriedly take the key from the sideboard to lock the door after him, my shaking hands causing me to miss the hole more than once.

An hour ago, I’d thought myself a murderer’s plaything, tormented, but beyond any physical threat. Surrounded by people, I felt safe enough to insist we try recovering Anna’s body from the forest, thereby spurring the search for her killer. That’s no longer the case. Somebody’s already tried to take my life, and I have no intention of staying long enough for them to try again. The dead cannot expect a debt from the living, and whatever I owe Anna will have to be paid at a distance. Once I’ve met with my Samaritan in the drawing room, I’m going to follow Dickie’s advice and arrange transport back to the village.

It’s time I went home.

4

Water slops over the edges of the bathtub as I quickly slough off the second skin of mud and leaves coating me. I'm inspecting my scrubbed pink body for birthmarks or scars, anything that might trigger a memory. I'm due downstairs in twenty minutes, and I know nothing more of Anna than when I first stumbled up Blackheath's steps. Banging into the brick wall of my mind was frustrating enough when I thought I'd be helping with the search, but now my ignorance could scupper the entire endeavor.

By the time I'm finished washing, the bathwater is as black as my mood. Feeling despondent, I towel myself dry and inspect the pressed clothes the valet dropped off earlier. His selection of attire strikes me as rather prim, but peering at the alternatives in the wardrobe, I immediately understand his dilemma. Bell's clothing—for truly, I can't yet reconcile us—consists of several identical suits, two dinner jackets, hunting wear, a dozen shirts, and a few waistcoats. They come in shades of gray and black, the bland uniform of what appears thus far to be an extraordinarily anonymous life. The idea that this man could have inspired anybody to violence is quickly becoming the most outlandish part of this morning's events.

I dress quickly, but my nerves are so ragged, it takes a deep breath and a stern word to coax my body toward the door. Instinct prompts me to fill my pockets before I leave, my hand leaping toward the sideboard only to hover there uselessly.

I'm trying to collect possessions that aren't there and I can no longer remember. This must be Bell's old routine, a shadow of my former life haunting

me still. The pull is so strong, I feel damn queer coming away empty-handed. Unfortunately, the only thing I managed to carry back from the forest was that damnable compass, but I can't see it anywhere. My Samaritan—the man Doctor Dickie called Daniel Coleridge—must have taken it.

Agitation pricks me as I step into the corridor.

I only have a morning's worth of memories and I can't even keep hold of those.

A passing servant directs me to the drawing room, which turns out to be on the far side of the dining hall, a few doors down from the marble entrance hall I entered this morning. It's an unpleasant place, the dark wood and scarlet drapes bringing to mind an overlarge coffin, the coal fire breathing oily smoke into the air. A dozen people are gathered within, and though a table's been laid with cold cuts, most of the guests are flopped in leather armchairs or standing at the leaded windows, staring mournfully at the frightful weather, while a maid, with jam stains on her apron, slips unobtrusively among them, gathering dirty plates and empty glasses onto a huge silver tray she can barely hold. A rotund fellow in green hunting tweeds has set himself up on the pianoforte in the corner and is playing a bawdy tune that causes offense only for the ineptness of its delivery. Nobody is paying much attention to him, though he's doing his best to rectify that.

It's almost midday, but Daniel is nowhere to be seen, and so I busy myself inspecting the various decanters in the drinks cabinet without any clue as to what they are, or what I enjoy. In the end, I pour myself something brown and turn to stare at my fellow guests, hoping for a flash of recognition. If one of these people is responsible for the wounds on my arm, their irritation at seeing me hale and healthy should be obvious. And surely my mind wouldn't conspire to keep their identity secret should they reveal themselves? Assuming, of course, my mind can find some way of telling them apart. Nearly every man is a braying, beef-faced bully in hunting tweeds, while the women are dressed soberly in skirts, linen shirts, and cardigans. Unlike their boisterous husbands, they move in hushed tones, finding me from the corner of their eyes. I have the impression of being surreptitiously observed, like a rare bird. It's terribly unsettling, though understandable I suppose. Daniel

couldn't have asked his questions without revealing my condition in the process. I'm now part of the entertainment, whether I like it or not.

Nursing my drink, I attempt to distract myself by eavesdropping on the surrounding conversations, a sensation akin to sticking my head into a rosebush. Half of them are complaining, the other half are being complained at. They don't like the accommodation, the food, the indolence of the help, the isolation, or the fact they couldn't drive up themselves (though heaven knows how they would have found the place). Mostly, though, their ire is reserved for the lack of a welcome from Lady Hardcastle, who has yet to surface, despite many of them having arrived in Blackheath last night—a fact they appear to have taken as a personal insult.

"Scuse me, Ted," says the maid, trying to squeeze past a man in his fifties. He's broad chested and sunburned beneath a thinning crop of red hair. Hunting tweeds stretch around a thick body that's slipping toward fat, his face lit by bright-blue eyes.

"Ted?" he says angrily, grabbing her wrist and squeezing hard enough to make her wince. "Who the hell do you think you're talking to, Lucy? It's Mr. Stanwin to you. I'm not downstairs with the rats anymore."

She nods, shocked, searching our faces for help. Nobody moves, even the piano bites its tongue. They're all terrified of this man, I realize. To my shame, I'm little better. I'm frozen in place, watching this exchange from the corner of my lowered eyes, desperately hoping his vulgarity doesn't turn in my direction.

"Let her go, Ted," says Daniel Coleridge from the doorway.

His voice is firm, cold. It clatters with repercussions.

Stanwin breathes through his nose, staring at Daniel out of narrowed eyes. It shouldn't be a contest. Stanwin is squat and solid and spitting venom. Yet there's something in the way Daniel stands there, hands in his pockets, head tilted, that gives Stanwin pause. Perhaps he's wary of being hit by the train Daniel appears to be waiting for.

A clock drums up its courage and ticks.

With a grunt, Stanwin releases the maid, brushing past Daniel on his way out, muttering something I can't quite hear.

The room breathes, the piano resumes, the heroic clock carrying on as though nothing happened.

Daniel's eyes weigh us one by one.

Unable to face his scrutiny, I stare at my reflection in the window. There's disgust on my face, revulsion at the endless shortcomings of my character. First the murder in the woods, and now this. How many injustices will I allow to walk by before I pluck up the courage to intervene?

Daniel approaches, a ghost in the glass.

"Bell," he says softly, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Do you have a minute?"

Hunched beneath my shame, I follow him into the study next door, every pair of eyes at my back. It's even gloomier in here, untrimmed ivy shrouding the leaded windows, paintings in dark oils soaking up what little light manages to squirm through the glass. A writing desk has been arranged with a view onto the lawn, and looks recently vacated, a fountain pen leaking ink onto a torn piece of blotting paper, a letter opener beside it. One can only imagine the missives written in such an oppressive atmosphere.

In the opposite corner, near a second door out of the room, a puzzled young man in hunting tweeds is peering down the speaker of a phonograph, clearly wondering why the spinning record isn't flinging sound into the room.

"A single term at Cambridge and he thinks he's Isambard Kingdom Brunel," says Daniel, causing the young man to look up from his puzzle. He's no more than twenty-four, with dark hair and wide, flattened features that give the impression of his face being pressed up against a pane of glass. Seeing me, he grins broadly, the boy in the man appearing as if through a window.

"Belly, you bloody idiot, there you are," he says, squeezing my hand and clapping me on the back at the same time. It's like being caught in an affectionate vice.

He searches my face expectantly, his green eyes narrowing at my lack of recognition.

"It's true then, you can't remember a thing," he says, tossing a quick glance at Daniel. "You lucky devil! Let's get to the bar so I can introduce you to a hangover."

“News travels fast in Blackheath,” I say.

“Boredom’s very flat ground,” he says. “Name’s Michael Hardcastle. We’re old friends, though I suppose we’re better described as recent acquaintances now.”

There’s no hint of disappointment in the statement. In fact, he seems amused by it. Even at first meeting, it’s evident Michael Hardcastle will be amused by most things.

“Michael was sat next to you at dinner last night,” says Daniel, who’s taken up Michael’s inspection of the gramophone. “Come to think of it, that’s probably why you went out and coshed yourself on the head.”

“Play along, Belly. We’re hoping one day he’ll accidentally say something funny,” says Michael.

There’s an instinctive pause for my rejoinder, the rhythm of the moment collapsing under the weight of its absence. For the first time since I woke up this morning, I feel a yearning for my old life. I miss knowing these men. I miss the intimacy of this friendship. My sorrow is mirrored on the faces of my companions, an awkward silence digging a trench between us. Hoping to recover at least some of the trust we must once have shared, I roll up my sleeve to show them the bandages covering my arm, blood already beginning to seep through.

“I wish I had coshed myself on the head,” I say. “Doctor Dickie believes somebody attacked me last night.”

“My dear fellow,” gasps Daniel.

“This is because of that damn note, isn’t it?” says Michael, his eyes tracing my injuries.

“What note?” asks Daniel. “Are you saying you know something about this, Hardcastle? Why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

“Because the way you described it, all of Belly’s misfortunes came about this morning,” he says. “The note came last night. I didn’t put the two things together until now.”

“I think an explanation is in order,” says Daniel.

“There’s not much more to it,” says Michael sheepishly, digging at the thick carpet with the toe of his shoe. “A maid brought a note to the table

during our fifth bottle of wine. Next thing I know Belly's making his excuses and trying to remember how doors work." He looks at me shamefaced. "I wanted to go with you, but you were adamant you had to go alone. I assumed you were meeting some woman or other so I didn't press the issue, and that was the last I saw of you until now."

"What did the message say?" I ask.

"Haven't the foggiest, old bean. I didn't see it."

"Do you remember the maid who brought it, or if Bell mentioned anybody called Anna?" asks Daniel.

Michael shrugs, wrapping his entire face around the memory. "Anna? Doesn't ring any bells, I'm afraid. As for the maid, well..." He puffs up his cheeks, blowing out a long breath. "Black dress, white apron. Oh, dash it all, Coleridge. Be reasonable. There's dozens of them, how's a man meant to keep track of their faces."

He hands each of us a helpless look, Daniel meeting it with a disgusted shake of the head.

"Don't worry, old boy; we'll get to the bottom of all this," he says to me, squeezing my shoulder. "And I've an idea how."

He motions toward a framed map of the estate hanging on the wall. It's an architectural drawing, rain spotted and yellowing at the edges, but quite beautiful in its depiction of the house and grounds. As it turns out, Blackheath is a huge estate with a family graveyard to the west and a stable to the east, a trail winding down to a lake with a boathouse clinging to the bank. Aside from the driveway, which is actually a stubborn road cutting straight toward the village, everything else is forest. As the view from the upper windows suggests, we're quite alone among the trees.

A cold sweat prickles my skin.

I was meant to disappear in that expanse, as Anna did this morning. I'm searching for my own grave.

Sensing my disquiet, Daniel glances at me.

"Lonely sort of place, isn't it?" he murmurs, tapping a cigarette loose from a silver case. It dangles from his lower lip as he searches his pockets for a lighter.

“My father brought us out here when his political career keeled over,” says Michael, lighting Daniel’s cigarette and taking one for himself. “The old man fancied himself a country squire. Didn’t work out quite the way he’d hoped, of course.”

I raise a questioning eyebrow.

“My brother was murdered by a chap called Charlie Carver, one of our groundskeepers,” says Michael calmly, as though he were declaring the racing results.

Aghast that I could forget something so horrific, I stammer out an apology.

“I’m...I’m sorry, that must have been—”

“A terribly long time ago,” interrupts Michael, a hint of impatience in his voice. “Nineteen years, in fact. I was only five when it happened, and truthfully, I can barely recall it.”

“Unlike most of the gutter press,” adds Daniel. “Carver and another fellow drank themselves into a mania and grabbed Thomas near the lake. They half drowned him, then finished the job with a knife. He was seven or so. Ted Stanwin came running and drove them off with a shotgun, but Thomas was already dead.”

“Stanwin?” I ask, struggling to keep the shock from my voice. “The lout from lunch?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go saying that too loudly,” says Daniel.

“He’s very well thought of by my parents, is old Stanwin,” says Michael. “He was a lowly gamekeeper when he tried to save Thomas, but Father gave him one of our African plantations in thanks and the blighter made his pile.”

“What happened to the murderers?” I ask.

“Carver swung,” says Daniel, tapping ash onto the carpet. “The police found the knife he used under the floorboards in his cottage, along with a dozen pilfered bottles of brandy. His accomplice was never caught. Stanwin says he clipped him with the shotgun, but no one turned up at the local hospital with an injury and Carver refused to give him up. Lord and Lady Hardcastle were hosting a party that weekend, so it could have been one of the guests, but the family were adamant that none of them knew Carver.”

“Rum business all round,” says Michael tonelessly, his expression black as the clouds crowding the windows.

“So the accomplice is still out there?” I say, dread creeping up my spine. A murder nineteen years ago and a murder this morning. Surely that can’t be a coincidence.

“Does make you wonder what the police are for, doesn’t it?” says Daniel, falling silent.

My eyes find Michael, who’s staring into the drawing room. It’s emptying out as the guests drift toward the entrance hall, carrying their conversations with them. Even from here, I can hear the stinging, swirling swarm of insults touching on everything from the rundown state of the house to Lord Hardcastle’s drunkenness and Evelyn Hardcastle’s icy demeanor. Poor Michael, I can’t imagine how it must feel to have one’s family so openly ridiculed, in their own home no less.

“Look, we didn’t come here to bore you with ancient history,” says Daniel, fracturing the quiet. “I’ve been asking around after Anna. It’s not good news, I’m afraid.”

“Nobody knows her?”

“There isn’t anybody by that name among the guests or the staff,” says Michael. “More to the point, nobody’s missing from Blackheath.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Michael holds his hand up, silencing me. “You never let me finish, Belly. I can’t gather a search party, but the chaps are going hunting in about ten minutes. If you give me a vague idea where you woke up this morning, I’ll make sure we head in that direction and keep our eyes open. Fifteen of us are going out, so there’s a good chance we’ll spot something.”

Gratitude swells in my chest.

“Thank you, Michael.”

He smiles at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke. “I’ve never known you to over-egg the pudding, Belly, so I can’t imagine you’re doing it now.”

I stare at the map, eager to do my part, but I have no clue where I spotted Anna. The murderer pointed me east and the forest disgorged me toward the front of Blackheath, but I can only guess for how long I walked or where

I may have started from. Taking a breath and trusting to providence, I prod the glass with my fingertip as Daniel and Michael hover over my shoulder.

Michael nods, rubbing his chin.

“I’ll tell the chaps.” He looks me up and down. “You’d better get changed. We’ll be leaving soon.”

“I’m not coming,” I say, my voice strangled by shame. “I have to... I just can’t...”

The young man shifts awkwardly. “Come now—”

“Use your head, Michael,” interrupts Daniel, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Look what was done to him. Poor Bell barely got out of that forest, why would he want to go back?”

His tone softens.

“Don’t you worry, Bell, we’ll find your missing girl, and the man who murdered her. It’s in our hands now. Get yourself as far away from this mess as you can.”

I stand at the leaded window, half concealed by the velvet drapes.

Out on the driveway, Michael is mingling with the other men. They're heaving beneath their thick coats, shotguns crooked over their elbows, laughing and chatting, cold breath escaping their lips. Freed from the house with a slaughter to enjoy, they seem almost human.

Daniel's words were comforting, but they can't absolve me. I should be out there with them, searching for the body of the woman I failed. Instead, I'm running away. The very least I can do is endure the shame of watching them set off without me.

Dogs pass by the window, straining at leads their masters are struggling to hold. The two commotions merge, striking off across the lawn toward the forest, in precisely the direction I indicated to Daniel, although I can't see my friend among them. He must be joining the group later.

I wait for the last of them to disappear among the trees before returning to the map on the wall. If it's correct, the stables aren't too far from the house. Surely that's where I'll find the stable master. He can arrange a carriage to the village, and from there, I'll catch a train home.

I turn for the drawing room, only to find the doorway blocked by a huge black crow.

My heart leaps, and so do I, straight into the sideboard, sending family photographs and trinkets clattering to the floor.

"You don't need to be afraid," says the creature, taking a half step out of the gloom.

It's not a bird at all. It's a man dressed as a medieval plague doctor, his feathers a black greatcoat, the beak belonging to a porcelain mask, glinting in the light of a nearby lamp. Presumably this is his costume for the ball tonight, though that doesn't explain why he's wearing such sinister garb in the middle of the day.

"You startled me," I say, clutching my chest and laughing in embarrassment as I try to shake off my fright. He cocks his head, examining me like I'm a stray animal he's found sitting on the carpet.

"What did you bring with you?" he asks.

"I'm sorry?"

"You woke up with a word on your lips, what was it?"

"Do we know each other?" I ask, glancing through the door into the drawing room, hoping to see another guest. Unfortunately, we're alone, which was almost certainly his intention, I realize with growing alarm.

"I know you," he says. "That's enough for now. What was the word, please?"

"Why not take off the mask so we might speak face-to-face," I say.

"My mask is the least of your concerns, Doctor Bell," he says. "Answer the question."

Though he's said nothing threatening, the porcelain muffles his voice, adding a low animal rumble to every sentence.

"Anna," I say, clamping my hand on my thigh to stop my leg from jogging. He sighs. "That's a pity."

"Do you know who she is?" I say, hope flickering within me. "Nobody else in the house has ever heard of her."

"I'd be surprised if they had," he says, waving away my question with a gloved hand. Reaching into his coat, he pulls out a golden pocket watch, tutting at the time. "We'll have work to do before long, but not today and not while you're in this state. We'll speak again soon, when everything's a little clearer. In the meantime, I'd advise you to acquaint yourself with Blackheath and your fellow guests. Enjoy yourself while you can Doctor, the footman will find you soon."

"The footman?" I say, the name ringing an alarm bell somewhere deep within me. "Is he responsible for Anna's murder, or the wounds on my arm?"

“I very much doubt it,” says the Plague Doctor. “The footman isn’t going to stop with your arm.”

There’s a tremendous thump behind me, and I spin toward the noise. A small splash of blood smears the window, a dying bird thrashing the last of its life away among the weeds and withered flowers below. The poor thing must have flown into the glass. I’m startled by the pity I feel, a tear creeping into my eye at this wasted life. Resolving to bury the bird before I do anything else, I turn around, intending to make my excuses to my enigmatic companion, but he’s already left.

I look at my hands. They’re clutched so tightly my fingernails are digging into my palms.

“The footman,” I repeat to myself.

The name means nothing, but the feeling it evokes is unmistakable. For some reason, I’m terrified of this person.

Fear carries me over to the writing desk and the letter opener I saw earlier. It’s small, but sharp enough to draw blood from the tip of my thumb. Sucking the wound, I pocket the weapon. It’s not much, but it’s enough to stop me barricading myself in this room.

Feeling a touch more confident, I head for my bedroom. Without the guests to distract from the décor, Blackheath is a melancholy pile indeed. Aside from the magnificent entrance hall, the other rooms I pass through are musty, thick with mildew and decay. Pellets of rat poison have been piled up in the corners, dust covering any surface too high for a maid’s short arm to reach. The rugs are threadbare, the furniture scratched, the smeared silver crockery arranged behind the dirty glass of display cabinets. As unpleasant as my fellow guests seem, I miss the thrum of their conversations. They’re the lifeblood of this place, filling up the spaces where otherwise this grim silence would fall. Blackheath’s only alive so long as people are in it. Without them, it’s a depressing ruin waiting on the mercy of a wrecking ball.

I collect my coat and umbrella from my bedroom and make my way outside where rain is bouncing off the ground, the air smothered by the stink of rotten leaves. Uncertain of which window the bird crashed against, I follow

the verge until I locate its body, and using the letter opener as a makeshift shovel, I bury it in a shallow grave, soaking my gloves in the process.

Already shivering, I consider my route. The cobbled road to the stables skirts the bottom edge of the lawn. I could cut across the grass, but my shoes seem ill suited to the venture. Instead, I take the safer option, following the gravel driveway until the road appears on my left. Unsurprisingly, it's in a terrible state of disrepair. Tree roots have overturned the stones; untrimmed branches hang low like pilfering fingers. Still unsettled by my meeting with the strange man in the plague doctor costume, I clutch the letter opener and move slowly, wary of losing my footing, afraid of what might spring out at me from the woods if I do. I'm not sure what his game is, dressing up like that, but I can't seem to shrug off his warnings.

Somebody murdered Anna, and gave me a compass. It's doubtful that same person attacked me last night only to save me this morning, and now I must contend with this footman. Who must I have been to assemble so many enemies?

At the end of the road is a tall, redbrick arch with a shattered glass clock at the center, and beyond that a courtyard, stables and outbuildings arranged around its edge. Troughs overflow with oats, and carriages stand wheel to wheel, draped in green canvas covers to keep the weather off.

The only things missing are the horses.

Every stable is empty.

"Hello?" I call out tentatively, my voice echoing around the yard but meeting no response.

A plume of black smoke is escaping the chimney of a little cottage, and finding the door unlocked, I chase my hollered greetings inside. No one's home, which is curious as a fire's burning in the hearth, porridge and toast laid out on the table. Removing my soggy gloves, I hang them on the kettle pole above the fire, hoping to spare myself a little discomfort on the walk back.

Touching the food with a fingertip, I discover it's lukewarm, so not long abandoned. A saddle lies discarded beside a leather patch, suggesting an interrupted repair. I can only assume whoever lives here has rushed out to

deal with some emergency and I consider waiting for them to return. It's not an unpleasant refuge, though the air's thick with burning coal and smells rather strongly of polish and horsehair. Of greater concern is the cottage's isolation. Until I know who attacked me last night, everybody in Blackheath must be treated with caution, including the stable master. I will not meet him alone, if it can be helped.

A work roster hangs on a nail by the door, a pencil dangling from a piece of string beside it. Taking it down, I turn the sheet over intending to leave a message requesting a ride to the village, but there's a note already written there.

Don't leave Blackheath, more lives than your own are depending on you. Meet me by the mausoleum in the family graveyard at 10:20 p.m. and I'll explain everything. Oh, and don't forget your gloves. They're burning.
Love, Anna

Smoke fills my nostrils and I swing around to see my gloves smoldering above the fire. Snatching them down, I stamp the ashes out, eyes wide and heart pounding, as I search the cottage for some indication as to how the trick might have come to pass.

Why don't you ask Anna when you meet her tonight?

"Because I saw her die," I snarl at the empty room, embarrassing myself.

Recovering my composure, I read the note once more, the truth of it no nearer at hand. If Anna's survived, she'd have to be a cruel creature to play such games with me. More likely after word of this morning's misadventure spread around the house, somebody has decided to play a trick on me. Why else would they choose such a sinister location and hour for the meeting?

Is this somebody a fortune-teller?

"It's a foul day, anybody could have predicted I'd dry my gloves once I arrived."

The cottage listens politely, but even to my ears that reasoning's desperate. Almost as desperate as my urge to discredit the message. So defective is

my character, I'd happily abandon any hope of Anna being alive in order to flee this place with a clean conscience.

Feeling miserable, I pull on my singed gloves. I need to think and walking seems to help.

Heading around the stables, I come upon an overgrown paddock, the grass grown waist high and the fences so badly rotted they've all but collapsed. On the far side, two figures huddle beneath an umbrella. They must be following a hidden path as they're moving easily, arm-in-arm. Heaven knows how they spot me, but one of them raises a hand in greeting. I return the gesture, sparking a brief moment of distant kinship, before they disappear into the gloom of the trees.

Lowering my hand, I make my decision.

I told myself that a dead woman could lay no claim to me, and that's why I was free to leave Blackheath. It was a coward's reason, but at least it had a ring of truth to it.

If Anna's alive, that's no longer the case.

I failed her this morning, and it's all I've thought about since. Now that I have a second chance, I cannot turn my back. She's in danger and I can help, so I must. If that's not enough to keep me at Blackheath, I don't deserve the life I'm so fearful of losing. Come what may, I must be in the graveyard at 10:20 p.m.