



A DREW
FARTHERING
MYSTERY

Rules
- of -

MURDER

**JULIANNA
DEERING**



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Julianna Deering, Rules of Murder
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*To the One who makes
all things new*

— One —

Farthering Place stood, as it always had, deep in the grove of oaks at the end of a long curving drive, half hidden from the main road and prying eyes. Nestled in the Hampshire countryside, the old manor house exuded respectability and permanence rather than great beauty, but it had a certain pleasing symmetry that saved it from outright stodginess. Even now, when it was little more than a looming shadow in the darkness, it had a dignified grace of line. Perhaps more so now. Now the lights that would have illuminated any ill-considered behavior had been extinguished and even the heartiest of the revelers had stumbled into a bed of some description.

A midnight-blue 1932 Rolls Royce slowed to a stop as it turned into the drive. Behind the wheel, Drew Farthering took a moment to look over the grounds, bracing himself before going down to the house. Before going home. Judging by the number of cars in the drive, his absence hadn't prevented Constance from throwing one of her weekend bashes. He hadn't told anyone to expect him.

Motionless, he surveyed the scene awhile longer. Then he nudged the figure sprawled, sleeping, in the seat next to him.

“We’re here.” He didn’t know why he whispered.

His companion struggled into a more dignified posture and raked one hand through his sandy hair, making it stick up more than it already did.

“Still there, is she, Drew?” he asked through a yawn, and Drew nodded gravely.

“Farthering’s still there, Nick. Always there.”

In another moment they were at the front door and then inside the dimly lit entry hall. Dennison was prompt to answer the bell. As always, he was perfectly groomed and suitably grave, his only concession to the lateness of the hour being the robe and slippers that had supplanted his usual formal attire. Somehow he made even those look dignified and utterly appropriate.

“We weren’t told to expect you, sir. Do come out of the damp.”

He took Drew’s hat, and Drew seized his hand. “How are you, Denny? You’re looking grand.”

“Very well, sir, thank you. I trust Nicholas has remembered his place with you.”

Nick grinned.

“In the middle of whatever mischief I’ve made is his usual place,” Drew said. “He never forgets that.”

Nick threw his arm around the butler’s shoulders and gave them a strong squeeze.

“Propriety,” Dennison reproved.

“Great to see you, Dad,” Nick said, his spirits undampened. “How is the old place?”

“Much less secure since you’ve arrived, I can assure you.”

The two young men laughed.

“Good old Denny,” Drew said. “Farthering wouldn’t be home without you.”

Nick picked up the bags they had brought in from the car. “I’ll haul these up to our rooms, shall I, Dad? You go back to bed.”

Dennison turned to Drew, displaying a rare expression of discomfort as he cleared his throat. “As I said, sir, we weren’t told to expect you. Madam has her guests in for the weekend and—”

“And you’ve had to put someone in Nick’s room. Never mind. He can kip on the divan in my study, can’t you, Nick?”

Nick grinned. “It’s not just my room, is it, Dad?”

“I regret to say, sir, but Madam—”

“She’s put someone in my room.” Drew’s expression grew cool. “And may I ask—”

“Dennison? What’s that noise down there?”

Drew looked up to the top of the gracefully curved stairway. Constance Farthing Parker squinted down at him, straining to see without the glasses she was too vain to wear.

“The master’s come home, madam,” Dennison informed her.

She clutched her pink satin wrapper more closely around her tall frame and, with majestic hauteur, swept down to the entryway. In her middle fifties she still managed to look young and rather pretty in the right light.

“We weren’t expecting you, pet.”

“So I hear,” Drew replied, touching his lips to the rouged cheek she offered. “I hadn’t realized reservations were required.”

“Of course not. It’s just we’ve nowhere to put you and—” she peered at Nick, who beamed at her over Drew’s shoulder—
“and young Dennison.”

“I thought we’d agreed my room was off-limits, Mother. Especially after the last time.”

“Now, pet, Honoria couldn’t help it if she was ill.”

“Perhaps she wouldn’t have been ill if she’d stopped at something less than a quart of gin that night.”

Nick snickered and then, under Constance’s glare, coughed decorously.

“And just who have you put in my room this time?” Drew pressed.

“A friend of Mason’s.” Constance looked down and then up at him again, her eyes wide with innocence. “Really, Ellison, we didn’t know you were coming this weekend, and we’ll be full up with guests after tomorrow.”

Drew scowled. His mother was the only one who called him Ellison. No one else dared.

“I suppose, as usual, my wishes weren’t to be considered.”

“Now, pet, really. Couldn’t you—?”

“You’d think, with all the rooms in this house, you might have put him somewhere other than my room. That’s not asking too much, is it, in view of—”

“In view of the fact that you are lord of the manor and I’m only living here on your charity?”

Her voice cracked with sudden anger, and Drew resisted the urge to snap back at her.

“In view of the fact that it *is* my room, I was going to say, Mother. Who is it anyway?”

“I told you, a friend of Mason’s.” Again she looked away.

“Who?”

“He’s only staying the weekend.”

“Who is it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said with a defiant lift of her chin, and Drew turned to the butler.

“Who is it, Denny?”

“A certain Mr. Lincoln, sir,” Dennison said in his most impersonal tone.

“Lincoln!” Drew stared at his mother in disbelief. “By Harry, I’ll not have him in my house, let alone my own room.”

He took the steps two at a time, deaf to his mother’s demands that he come back and collect himself. He’d heard what was said

about his mother and Lincoln two years ago in Monte Carlo. He wasn't about to let that sort of thing go on in his own home, right under his stepfather's nose.

He pushed open the door to his room, and a shaft of light from the hall fell across the heavy four-poster bed. He could see Lincoln clearly as he slept—tall, powerfully built, his blond hair slicked back to show his broad aristocratic forehead. An ostentatious ruby ring gleamed on his right hand. Drew hated him cordially and regretted ever having been introduced to him.

He strode to the bedside, took hold of the muscular arm that lay over the sheet, and dragged Lincoln out onto the Persian rug. Sputtering and cursing, Lincoln sprang to his feet, but Drew didn't give him a chance to protest.

“Collect your things,” Drew said, his voice tight and low. “I want you out in five minutes.”

“Look here, Farthering—”

“Five minutes and not an instant longer.”

Lincoln took a step toward Drew, who only eyed him with cool disdain.

“Drew, please.” Mason Parker came into the room, bringing with him his usual air of calm sensibility. “I'm sure Mr. Lincoln meant nothing of the kind.”

Seeing Mason, Lincoln's expression abruptly turned from anger to good-natured bewilderment. “I think we've had rather a misunderstanding—”

“Hardly!” Drew spat.

“He is our houseguest after all, Drew,” Mason said. “I trust you will treat him as such.”

“But, sir,” Drew protested, his consideration for his stepfather wrestling with his anger. “This man—”

“Drew.” Mason put his arm around his stepson's shoulders and took him aside. “Your mother told me what you've heard

about Monte Carlo, and I can assure you none of it is true. Mr. Lincoln and I have some business dealings to attend to, and I asked him to stay the weekend with the others. I hope that doesn't inconvenience you too much."

Drew pressed his lips together and quickly counted ten. "Sir, listen to me." He lowered his voice, seeing Nick and Dennison and Constance were clustered in the doorway looking on. "I don't like to see you deceived, especially in your own—"

"Drew!" His stepfather was as close to being angry as Drew had ever seen him, though he too kept his voice low. "Don't let's quarrel now. I refuse to listen to idle gossip and trust you will do the same. You of course have the right to eject from your home anyone you do not wish to entertain. But I hope, for your mother's sake and mine, that you will remember yourself and manage a little hospitality while Mr. Lincoln is our guest. Please."

Drew counted ten once more, this time letting each number squirm and simmer before passing on to the next.

"I want my room back," he said at last. "And Nick's."

Mason smiled and turned to Lincoln. "Sorry about the misunderstanding."

"Not at all. Not at all. I'd no idea I was putting anyone out," Lincoln said, his smile sheepish. "Bit embarrassing and all that."

"I hope you'll let bygones be bygones and stay with us for the party. Dennison will see you have another room."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker." Lincoln put a robe over his silk pajamas. "No harm done."

Mason patted Constance's hand. "There, my dear. No harm done."

"I'm so glad, darling," she said, her expression meek and worshipful as she clung to his arm. "Good night, Mr. Lincoln."

"Mrs. Parker," Lincoln said with a formal bow.

Mason led Constance away, and Dennison came into the room to gather Lincoln's things.

"This way, sir," he said after a moment. "It's just through those doors and up the stairs."

Drew was standing near the door, his arms folded across his chest, begrudging every minute the other man spent in his room.

"Good night, Farthering," Lincoln said as he followed Dennison out into the hallway, the knowing nastiness in his expression belying his mild words. "Should be a charming weekend, eh?"

"Charming," Drew replied, managing a cool, brittle smile of his own. "So good to have you. You must come again sometime."

Lincoln walked away, chuckling to himself, and Drew slammed the door behind him, making the old leaded windows rattle in their frames.

"Steady on, old man," Nick said, and then he grinned. "No place like home, eh?"

Drew could only laugh.



Drew had breakfast out on the terrace with his stepfather the next morning. It was sweetly June, balmy and green, but the mist still clung to the ground in wisps. It hadn't yet burned off the rolling meadow behind the house, and last night's revelers hadn't yet left their beds.

He smiled over at Mason. The old boy looked the perfect picture of comfortable middle age—thinning on top, thickening in the middle, kindly laugh lines at the corners of his uncritical eyes—a middle age that asked nothing but tranquility and graciousness.

"I apologize for last night, sir," Drew said, spooning honey into his tea. "But I hadn't expected of all people—"

“Don’t let’s go into that again,” Mason said briskly. “Tell me, how was the seaside? You and young Nick look in top form.”

“I hope I won’t sound too spoilt and all, but I’m beginning to find it rather a bore. All they do is sit and drink and gossip about the latest scandal. That is when they’re not stirring one up.”

“And, it goes without saying, you young chaps never get into any devilry yourselves.”

Drew answered his stepfather’s indulgent grin with a shrug and a mischievous smile of his own.

“Can’t say Nick and I haven’t got up to a prank or two, sir. Just now and again.”

Mason laughed. “And no young lady you’ve wanted to bring home?”

“What, out of that lot?” Drew made a face.

“What about Colonel Saxonby’s daughter?” Mason offered. “Or that Pomphrey-Hughes girl? She seems to like you. Surely there must be some decent girls in society.”

Drew stirred more honey into his tea. “Of course there are. I just haven’t been introduced to them yet. Still, for a dance or a drink or a day on the beach, there’s nobody can touch them. But when I get serious about a girl, I’d rather it was one who hadn’t already strolled round the corner with all of my friends.”

Mason looked away, and Drew cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry, sir.” He rattled his teacup back into the saucer. “I do tend to ramble on when I get talking. Truly, the coast was very nice. Beautiful weather. The sea was lovely, and Bunny, you remember Bunny, sir—”

“Please don’t.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t talk airy pleasantries to me. Heaven knows I’ve enough of that as it is. People talk to me for hours and say absolutely nothing.”

“Sir—”

“And must it always be ‘sir,’ Drew? I’ve been married to your mother for more than ten years now. Must it always be ‘sir’?”

Drew shifted in his chair.

“I suppose I never knew what else I should call you,” he said, making his tone light. “I always thought ‘Mr. Parker’ a bit Victorian and ‘Mason’ rather cheeky. What do you suggest?”

“I wouldn’t presume to ask you to call me Father, knowing how you feel about your own. And I know I’ve not been much of a father to you as it is. Dennison’s seen to you all this while. I don’t know, my boy. I suppose it’s just that ‘sir’ seems so distant.”

Drew gave him a small, warm smile.

“If it is, I don’t mean it to be. You’re one of the finest men I know, and I’ve more respect for you than just about anyone else in the world.”

He knew as he said it that he’d lied, but it was a lie of kindness. He couldn’t really respect anyone who let Constance walk over him as Mason did, but Drew did have a tremendous liking for him all the same.

“I expect you are the closest thing to a son I’ll ever have,” Mason said, “and I’ve a great deal of affection for you. I realize we’ve never been all that close, but I should like us to be friends if that suits you.”

Drew knew only too well how living with Constance could be. He remembered when Mason had courted his mother. He’d been recently widowed and there had been no children, no family save a young niece living somewhere in America—no one to fill the empty space in his life.

“I’d be more than honored, sir,” Drew said finally, and Mason gave his shoulder a squeeze.

“It’s good to have you home again, my boy. The old place just isn’t the same without you.”

“I daresay I’ve livened things up a bit. I *am* sorry.”

“Well, never mind. It doesn’t matter now. But I wish you wouldn’t have such wrong ideas about your mother. You know how people love to gossip, especially those with little else to occupy them.”

“One of the hazards of being in society,” Drew agreed, but this time his smile had a touch of bitterness in it. “I just can’t bear to see her hurt you, sir.”

“I trust her.”

Silent for a moment, Drew watched a pair of robins hopping in and out of a flowering rhododendron.

“Well, I shan’t make any more scenes with your guests,” he said at last. “If you’re certain they’re *your* guests.”

“That’s good of you. Rushford will be in later today, and you can see for yourself.”

“Very well then. I’ll just have a pleasant time and play guest in my own home. It might be fun.” Drew waved away the plate of eggs his stepfather offered him and took another piece of toast instead. “Yes, it will be a change from drinking and dancing and strolling on the beach. Here, we can drink and dance and stroll in the garden.” He sighed in exaggerated contentment. “Ah, variety *is* the spice of life.”

“Perhaps you should come into business with me,” Mason suggested. “Farlinford is doing some excellent things with refining that might interest you. Could revolutionize the industry. And we’ve redone the directors’ offices. You should come have a look.”

Drew laughed. “I’ll do that, certainly, but I think I’m far too young yet to work for sport and not nearly that desperate. Oh, I say,” he added, sobering, “I read about McCutcheon in the news last week. He was in research, wasn’t he?”

Mason nodded. “Bad business, that. Such a young man, as well. He knew his way round a laboratory, though, and I can’t

imagine him making that sort of mistake. Not a man of his experience. It wasn't a pretty way to go."

"Did he have family?"

Mason shook his head. "No one in the world, it seems. Very sad."

"I expect he was part of the new developments you were telling me about," Drew said. "Anything especially good?"

"I don't know," Mason admitted. "He said he was on the verge of something big. Then again, he always said that. I never really saw anything come of it. Shame, really. He showed such promise."

"Well, I remember precious little of my chemistry classes, but I'd not mind seeing what you do out at Farlinford. Perhaps I could help your little revolution. Still, not this weekend. I think I'd like to mingle with some new people for a bit. Maybe I'll find that girl you were asking after."

Mason stood up and tucked the morning paper under his arm. "That reminds me. My niece, Madeline, and some friends of hers from America will be driving down from London for a few days. Perhaps one of them will suit. It would be a great favor to me if you'd show them about the place a bit."

Drew raised his teacup in a toast. "We aim to please."

Once Mason had gone, Drew sat alone at the table until, seeing sturdy Mrs. Devon hovering at the terrace door, he stood up.

"Morning, Mrs. D. You haven't come for the breakfast things, have you?"

"If you've done, Mr. Drew," she said, scurrying out with a tray.

"What's happened to Ivy?"

"Nothing at all, love," Mrs. Devon said as she began stacking dirty plates. "I told her I'd clear away this morning. I wanted to make sure you had everything you wanted, your first morning back and all."

“Yes, lovely, Mrs. D. You’re a wonder with the eggs as always. Nick’ll be sorry he slept in.”

“Oh no, sir. The scamp was in the kitchen before dawn, snatching bangers right from the skillet barely cooked through, if you please, and then out the door for the Lord knows what mischief.”

“Yes, the Lord and the Lord only,” Drew said with a laugh, and then a sudden clatter from the front of the house made them both jump. “That was never Nick.”

Drew hurried to the terrace railing and looked down over the front lawn. Coming up the drive with three girls crammed inside was a little roadster meant at best to seat two. The car lurched, making the girls giggle and shriek almost loud enough to cover the sound of the sputtering motor. About fifty feet further, the engine died and then kicked back into life amidst the jeers of the passengers and the driver’s half-growled cursing. Why a woman could never be trusted behind the wheel of an automobile, Drew didn’t know, but he was certain it was true nonetheless. When the car slowed to a stop, he went round to the front of the house and down the steps.

The driver waved, smiling up at him with wide blue eyes and a coquettish tilt to her bobbed blond head. “We’re here,” she called in a high, babyish voice that was a world away from the one she used for cursing.

“Welcome to Farthing Place, Miss Parker,” he said with polite reserve as he opened the car door for her.

All three of the girls giggled, but the dark-haired one in the middle looked swiftly away, pretending to look for something in her handbag. Realizing his error, Drew walked around the car and opened the passenger door.

“Miss Parker,” he repeated, reaching over to take the brunette’s hand.

She surprised him with an impish grin, a firm grip, and an intelligent pair of eyes that just happened to be the color of periwinkles. “You’ve found me out at last.”

“Hey, you found me out, too!” protested the girl to her left, the one Drew had unthinkingly crowded even further into the corner of the seat when he had reached over to Madeline.

“A thousand pardons,” he said, smiling at the diminutive redhead and bringing her to her feet with flourishing gallantry. He helped Madeline out next. The blonde at the wheel merely sat smiling at Drew, thrusting out her hand once he had released Madeline’s.

“Don’t forget baby,” she cooed.

“Have they named baby yet?” he asked, putting his hands contemplatively behind his back. “Or shall we simply put ‘Baby Girl Horwitz’ on your place card at dinner tonight?”

The other girls giggled again. With a knowing grin on her red lips, the blonde slid over to his side of the car and got to her feet, putting her arm through his.

“It’s Brower. Muriel. But *you* can call me Baby Girl. How ever do you drive these cars on the wrong side and everything? And, yes, I’d love you to show me the grounds.”

The little redhead rolled her eyes. “Oh, brother.”

“Charmed, Miss Brower, I’m sure,” Drew said, smoothly disengaging her arm as he turned to the other girls. “And your other friend, Miss Parker?”

“Carrie Holland is the one you nearly crushed.”

“Think nothing of it,” the redhead said with a grin.

He found the grin infectious and gave her one of his own. “Miss Holland, a pleasure.”

Muriel sidled up next to him and took his arm once more. “Now you can show me your castle, sweetie, and we can go from there.”

“Perhaps we can arrange for the three of you to see the place after you’ve got settled in,” Drew said as he again disengaged himself. “For now, I’d best fetch someone to take up your luggage and—”

“Uncle Mason!”

Madeline hurried up the stone steps to give her uncle a warm hug.

“Madeline, dear, how lovely to see you again.” Mason drew her close to give her a fond kiss on the cheek. “And how nice to have your friends.”

After another swift round of introductions, they all went into the house. Following behind everyone else, Drew couldn’t help stealing another glance at Madeline Parker. She was tall, only three or four inches below his own six feet, gracefully slender and delightfully feminine. He’d seen the photograph on Mason’s desk—a gawky beanpole of a girl, pirouetting on the beach in Atlantic City and smiling hugely. There was a world of difference between twelve and twenty-two, no denying that.

Perhaps there was hope for the weekend after all.

— Two —

Uncle Mason immediately entrusted Madeline and her friends to the capable Mrs. Devon, and soon the girls found themselves settled into a trio of rooms at the sunny south wing of the house. Madeline thought hers was particularly lovely with its wide bay window and huge four-poster bed draped in pale blue damask. It managed to be opulent and rich and yet light and airy all at once. She could hardly wait until it came time to nestle under the heavy coverlet and fine linen sheets like a princess in a fairy tale.

“Imagine,” Muriel grouched as she barged through the connecting door from the room she had been given, a copy of *Silver Screen* under her arm. “The three of us and only one bathroom. Is your room any better than mine?”

Madeline had been kneeling on the window seat, looking through the mullioned windows and admiring the lush rose gardens, but now she unfolded her long legs and swung around to sit on the edge of the seat and scowled at her friend.

The maid, a girl called Anna, looked up from her task of transferring Madeline’s delicate lingerie from a suitcase to a bureau. “Is there a problem, miss?”

“Don’t you mind her, honey,” Carrie told her, a hint of South Carolina drawl showing through. “Some people wouldn’t be happy in the governor’s mansion.”

“Yes, miss,” Anna said, and she stood up. “I’ll see your things are unpacked after luncheon has been served.”

“We’re lucky there isn’t just one bathroom for the whole floor,” Madeline observed once the girl was gone. “It’s not like these old places were originally built with them, you know.”

“And what’s wrong with these rooms?” Carrie demanded. “They look just like rooms in an old manor house should. Velvet drapes and fussy old wallpaper and carved furniture that’s been here just hundreds of years. I love my room. And did you see the view down toward the woods over there? It’s just dreamy.”

“I’ll tell you what’s dreamy,” Muriel confided to Madeline. “That cousin of yours. Mr. Farthering.”

Carrie breathed a little “ooh” of agreement.

Madeline laughed. Muriel always latched on to the best-looking man at hand. This time, though, Madeline didn’t feel like letting her have everything her own way. Besides the thick dark hair and arresting gray eyes, besides the undeniably handsome face, there was something about Drew Farthering that was worth more than a second look.

“Oh, is he attractive? I didn’t notice.”

“You didn’t notice,” Muriel muttered, smirking.

“Besides,” Madeline said, “he’s not actually my cousin, you know. Uncle Mason’s only his stepfather.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell us about him before?” Carrie asked.

“I never met him till now.”

Muriel arched one finely penciled brow and lit a cigarette. “I’d say if there was any man I was glad was *not* my cousin, it would be that one. He’s adorable. What’s it they call him? Drew?”

Madeline nodded. “Short for Andrew, I think. But his first

name is something else, some stodgy family name he doesn't like."

"Drew's fine by me," Muriel said. "Adorable Drew. A real English gentleman and all that."

"He's probably like all the men, here and at home," Madeline said with an airy wave of one hand. "Full of hot air and applesauce."

"Who's on the cover this time?" Carrie asked, snatching Muriel's magazine. "Oh, Lucy Lucette. They'll put anybody on there."

"Ain't that the truth," Muriel said. "I hear dear Lucy will do anything to get her name in the paper."

"She's got a new picture coming out, doesn't she? *The Soiled Dove*?"

"No, they shelved that one 'cause they couldn't get a backer. This is something about a cage." Muriel reclaimed the magazine and flipped through the pages until she found what she wanted. "*Anabella's Gilded Cage*. Sounds decadent."

Shaking her head, Madeline went to the wardrobe, took out one of the evening gowns hanging there, and draped it over the bed.

Carrie "oohed" again and ran her hand over the pale green satin. "That's not the one from Giselle's, is it? Oh, you didn't!"

"I did."

"I thought you said it was too—"

"I changed my mind."

Muriel came over to inspect the garment in question. "Pretty sporty, if you ask me. A little out of your league, isn't it, doll?" She held it up against herself, dousing it in cigarette smoke as she did. "Now, on me it would be *trez chick*. And would the boys come running."

"*Tres chic*," Madeline corrected, taking the shimmering creation from her. "And why not on me? Uncle Mason had Madame Giselle create it especially for me, after all."

“Don’t get me wrong, Madeline, honey,” Muriel said. “You’ve got the stuff all right. But you’re more the organdy type.” She clasped her hands in front of herself and somehow managed to look demure. “White organdy with little puffed sleeves and a bunch of violets at the waist.”

“Maybe forty years ago,” Madeline protested with a laugh, and she held the daring gown up before her reflected image, wondering what Aunt Ruth would think to see her in it. “It is pretty, isn’t it?”

“Pretty enough to make our Adorable Drew forget his stuffy English manners and sweep you off your feet.” Muriel grinned. “Unless I get to him first.”

“The poor kid,” Carrie said.



Lunch was served, buffet style, on the terrace. Madeline had hoped she and her friends would meet more of her uncle’s guests, but besides the three girls, only a few others had come to the table. The rest, having breakfasted late, had evidently decided to forgo the noon repast in favor of a hearty meal at teatime.

“Your uncle is meeting with his business partners for the afternoon,” Drew told her, “and my mother has gone out driving and to the shops in Winchester with Mrs. Chesterton and Mrs. Laney.”

“Oh, I had hoped to meet her right away.”

“She should be in well before the party tonight.” He picked up a plate for her at the serving table, and she couldn’t help noticing how nice his hands were, perfectly groomed but not overly fussy—like his clothes, stylish but unselfconsciously masculine.

“Would you care for kidneys?” he asked. “Veal? Hashed meat?”

She hesitated for a moment, uncertain what sort of meat

would be in the hash and revolted by the thought of eating kidneys. “The veal, please,” she said finally. “And some of that delicious-looking bread and cheese.”

“Excellent choice,” he said as he put some meat on her plate. “Now, which of the cheeses would you prefer? Red Leicester? Wensleydale? Cheddar?”

“The Lancashire.” A pleasant-looking young man with sandy hair came up beside them, and after tucking his paperbacked novel under his arm, helped himself to a large serving of a pale yellow cheese. “If I were three years marooned on a desert island, Miss Parker, this would be what I craved the most.”

She stared at him for a moment, wondering if he had lost his mind, and then she laughed. “*Treasure Island!* Oh, then I must have some of that.”

Drew shook his head and served her a portion of the cheese in question, along with a slice of hearty brown bread. “I regret, Miss Parker, that I cannot present to you Mr. Stevenson’s illustrious Ben Gunn. At the moment, all we have available is the equally unbalanced Nick Dennison. Mr. Dennison, Miss Madeline Parker.”

Nick took Madeline’s outstretched hand and made a flourishing bow over it. “Delighted, Miss Parker. And, before you ask, yes, the indomitable Dennison who serves as butler to Farthering Place has the honor of being my father.”

He smiled as he said it, but there was a hint of a challenge in his hazel eyes. He was waiting for her reaction. So, evidently, was Drew Farthering.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet a literary man,” she said, squeezing his hand, and his smile warmed in return.

“Is that Stevenson you’re reading now?” she asked.

“This? Oh no.” Nick began helping himself to a variety of the hot dishes. “Do you like mysteries, Miss Parker?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” she said, lowering her voice, “but I love them.”

“Capital!” Nick showed her the book he carried: *The Footsteps at the Lock*. “Have you read any Ronald Knox? I’ve only just started this one.”

“I haven’t heard of him,” Madeline admitted.

“Some priest chappie turned mystery writer. I just got through *The Three Taps*. He tells a ripping tale, Father Knox. He’s even got a list he calls his ‘Ten Commandments’ about what one should and shouldn’t put into a proper detective story. I think he’s jolly right, too.”

Madeline took the book from him, examining it. “Do you read, Mr. Farthering?”

“I manage to make out most of the words,” Drew said as he handed the plate to her and began filling his own.

Madeline pursed her lips, fighting a smile. “I mean, do you read mysteries? Have you read anything by Knox?”

He considered for a moment as he cut a slice of bread. “*The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women?*”

She tried to look severe but managed only to laugh. “Not John Knox. Ronald Knox. Do you never say anything meant to be taken seriously?”

“On the contrary,” he said, “I’m quite a serious person.”

“Monumentally solemn,” Nick put in, reclaiming his book and tucking it into his coat pocket.

“Dare I say grim?” Drew asked, his expression thoughtful.

“I think you may go so far as grim,” Nick said, “provided you do not venture past that and on to moribund.”

“There,” Drew told Madeline in triumph. “What would such a dour fellow be doing reading so frivolous a thing as a mystery novel?”

Nick looked at Madeline and tapped the side of his nose knowingly, saying in a loud stage whisper, “I have it on the best of authorities that Mr. Farthering has a complete set of Doyle in his study, several of Mrs. Christie’s novels in his golf bag, and a stack of books by that Sayers woman in the boot of his car.”

“I won’t hear such outright falsehood!” Drew protested. “I’ve only got *Murder on the Links* in my golf bag. The rest of the Christies and all of the Sayerses are up in my study now, too.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Madeline exclaimed. “I love Lord Peter. I was just sure Harriet would break down and marry him at the end of *Strong Poison*.”

“Well, don’t despair,” Drew said. “I’ve heard Miss Vane is to return in Lord Peter’s new adventure, so all matrimonial hope is not lost.”

“Shall we sit down?” Nick asked. “I believe Miss Parker’s friends are missing her.”

“Let me introduce you to them, Mr. Dennison,” Madeline said.

“Yes, do that,” Drew told her, a hint of distraction in his voice. The butler was standing portentously at the terrace door, obviously waiting to speak to him. “If you’ll both excuse me, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Madeline watched him as he went to confer with Dennison.

“You and Mr. Farthering have known each other for a long time, haven’t you?” she asked Nick.

“All our lives. My mother was parlormaid here when I was born. When she died, Drew’s father was good enough to put me in the nursery with Drew and provide for me to be sent on to school with him up through Oxford. I can never repay either of them. I know my father will never leave here, and I suppose I’ll be around, as well.”

“Oh, really?”

Nick nodded. “Mr. Padgett, the estate manager, is letting me apprentice with him as it were. Totting up the bills, collecting rents, that sort of thing. Once he decides to chuck it all in, I’ll be next in line. It’s the least I can do for the old place, and fine use for my business studies, eh?”

“And Mr. Farthering—?”

“Joyous tidings,” Drew said, hurrying back up to them. “Denny informs me that Minerva is now a happy mother made.”

“Huzzah!” Nick cried. “Sound the trumpets and let the welkin ring! I had some sausages for her this morning and was wondering where she had got to.”

“Minerva?” Madeline looked from one to the other of them, wondering who this Minerva might be and why Dennison had brought this news particularly to Drew.

“Minerva,” Drew informed her, “is Farthering Place’s resident feline.”

“A cat?” Madeline laughed. “Dennison seemed awfully serious when he brought you the news.”

“He was. Most grave.”

“She’s all right, isn’t she?”

“Oh yes,” Drew said, adding one last spoonful of green peas to his plate. “She’s thriving, as are her five little ones.”

“Then what was he so concerned about?”

“It seems she gave birth in the cupboard in my dressing room.”

“Oh dear,” said Nick.

Madeline looked at him and then at Drew. “Is that so awful?”

“I’m afraid, to Denny, it’s no less than a tragedy,” Drew said. “It seems Minerva decided there was nothing more suitable in which to swaddle her newborns than my new cheviot trousers.”

“Shame,” Nick murmured, popping a bit of cheese into his mouth.

“Yes, it seems so,” Drew agreed, “especially since I told him

he's not to move her off them for now. You'd think I'd suggested something reprehensible—murder or treason of some variety.”

Nick nodded solemnly. “Or serving the Rothschild with the fish course.”

“Well, come on then.” Drew took Madeline’s arm and turned her toward the table. “Lunch is getting cold, and your friends have too long been spared the pleasure of meeting young Mr. Dennison.”

“Jolly nice to have some new girls about for the festivities and all.” Nick shifted his plate to his left hand and used his right to smooth back his hair. “Oh, I say, Miss Parker, do either of your friends read mysteries?”

Madeline laughed. “Only *Silver Screen*.”



The party that evening was lavish and suitably chic. Suave gentlemen in dinner jackets and black ties went to dinner in the company of elegant ladies dressed in diaphanous gowns cut to show off daring backs and bold décolletage. After the sumptuous meal came an offering of drinks and dancing in the ballroom, which evidently had once been a medieval great hall. This was to be followed by an extravagant display of fireworks on the front lawn. Although Madeline had attended a great many society functions since her debut four years before, some of them staggeringly gaudy in their ostentatiousness, none of them had been as opulent and grand as this. It would be the perfect evening if Drew weren’t so busy with all the other guests and if she could escape the attentions of that odious David Lincoln.

He had introduced himself to her, bold, almost smug, and now, for the second time this evening, he held her crushed against him. She would be glad when this dance came at last to an end. He reeked of liquor and stale cigarette smoke, and

his way of holding her too close and sliding his hand with just a shade too much familiarity down her bare back made her wish she had been more modest in her choice of evening gowns. Maybe Muriel was right and she was more of an organdy girl after all.

She glanced around for a means of escape and saw Drew in the middle of the room with none other than Muriel herself clinging to his arm, looking up into his face with guileless blue eyes, no doubt cooing over what a big, strong man he was. He was looking uncomfortable, obviously planning his own escape, and Madeline couldn't help a silent giggle.

"What is it, Miss Parker?" Lincoln asked, holding her even closer.

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. Really, it's nothing. Just, um—" She glanced up at him and then away. "I'm getting a little warm with everyone packed in like this. Do you think you could get me something to drink?"

"Of course," he said, his smile suave and insinuating. "If I'm going to leave a lady breathless, I'd rather it be when we're alone."

He left her with a bow at the far end of the room. Once his back was to her, she slipped into the hallway.

"As if I'd ever be alone with you."

She looked around, trying to gain her bearings. This wasn't one of the grand hallways leading to the other wings of the house. It was just a small one, still paneled in rich mahogany and floored with plush carpet, still grand in everything but scale. Surely there was some little out-of-the-way place she could find here, a library or a sitting room maybe, until Lincoln was otherwise occupied.

She tried the first door she came to and found it locked. Probably a broom closet or storage room of some sort. The next led

to an austere passageway that looked as if it might end up in the kitchens. She might have to come back to that one if she didn't find anything more promising farther on. Finally she pushed open the door at the very end.

“Madeline, dear, do come in.”

“Uncle Mason!”

Madeline found herself in a small study with a lovely vaulted ceiling and arched windows. Her uncle sat behind an untidy old desk ornamented with intricate carvings and stacked with ledger books and a jumble of papers weighted with an ivory-handled letter opener with a gleaming blade. In the overstuffed chair across from him sat a grandfatherly looking man in expensive but rumpled eveningwear. Both men stood to greet her.

“Come in, come in,” Mason repeated, smiling. “Shut the door or we shall never be able to hear ourselves over the music.”

Madeline did as he asked and then drew a startled breath to realize a third man was standing with his back to her, searching through a book that lay open on a side table.

“Mr. Lincoln, I—”

The man turned to face her. He wasn't Lincoln after all.

“I beg your pardon,” Madeline stammered, one hand over her heart, “but I thought—”

The two older men laughed between themselves.

“Come here, my dear, and let me introduce you,” Mason said, and then he nodded toward the older man across the desk from him. “This is Mr. Rushford, one of my business partners. Mr. Rushford, my niece, Madeline.”

Mr. Rushford squinted as if his glasses were not strong enough to give him a very clear look at her, but his expression was kind.

“How do you do, Miss Parker?”

“Very well, thank you, Mr. Rushford. I *am* sorry to have interrupted your business meeting.”

“Not at all. Not at all. Such a lovely interruption is more than welcome.”

“And,” Mason continued, “this is my new secretary, Merton Clarke.”

The secretary, the man she had mistaken for Lincoln, closed the book he was looking through and made a slight bow. “Good evening, miss.”

She managed a smile. “Forgive me for staring, Mr. Clarke, but from the back you looked so much like—”

Her uncle nudged his partner. “I told you as much.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Rushford squinted at the secretary. “I suppose there’s a bit of a resemblance. What’s it matter anyway? The man’s competent, isn’t he? So long as Lincoln didn’t recommend him just for one of his pranks, what’s it matter?”

“Having a good time tonight, my dear?” Mason asked. “You seemed quite popular with the young gentlemen on the dance floor.”

“Maybe a little too popular,” Madeline said with a rueful laugh.

“Ah, so that’s why you ducked in here. And who is it you’re running from? Anyone I know? I’ll have a word with him, of course.”

Madeline squeezed his arm, grateful for his kindness. “Now, nothing so serious as that. I just thought I’d take a minute and see some of the rest of the house.” A green marble clock, French by its look, ticked on the carved stone mantel. She couldn’t help touching one finger to the figure that ornamented it: a lounging bronze lute player in the dress of an Elizabethan Romeo. “Everything is so beautiful.”

“You stay with us as long as you like, Miss Parker,” Rushford told her. “So long as you don’t mind the company of a couple of crusty old badgers and one industrious little mole.”

The others laughed, but Clarke merely blinked his pale eyes and did not protest the description. In evening dress and with his blond hair oiled and slicked back as it was, it was easy to see why, from behind, she had thought he was Lincoln. But his pasty complexion and almost nonexistent chin, oddly dimpled on one side, immediately put an end to the likeness. His stylishly thin mustache did little to improve things and only somewhat concealed the scar over his upper lip.

Madeline gave him her prettiest smile. “I understand you’re leaving for Canada. Won’t you tell me what you’re working on, Mr. Clarke?”

His pale face turned pink, and he stammered something about pumping stations and pressure gauges until his commentary was interrupted by a knock on the door. Before anyone could respond, the door opened and Drew Farthering popped his head into the room.

“Ah, there you are, Miss Parker. We’ve been wondering where you’d gone off to.”

Seeing him, Madeline felt her own face flush with pleasure. “Uncle Mason and his friends have been telling me about Farlinford Processing and the new system they’re working on.”

Drew put one gloved hand dramatically over his heart. “Good thing I’ve come to rescue you just in time.” He nodded to the gentlemen in the room. “Good evening, sir. And to you, Mr. Rushford. And I don’t believe we’ve met.”

He offered his hand to the third man, who shook it briefly.

“Mr. Clarke is my new secretary,” Mason explained. “Clarke, this is my stepson, Mr. Farthering.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise,” Drew said, and then he turned to Mason once more. “But what happened to old Vickers? He’s been with you just ages.”

“Vickers suddenly decided to retire, so I’ve taken on Clarke. He’s off to Edmonton, by the way, to see to some things there for me. I haven’t told them he’s coming.” Mason winked. “See you manage a bit of work now and again, Clarke, when you’re not fly-fishing.”

“Only on the weekends, to be sure,” Clarke told him, turning a bit pink.

“Ah. Well, best of luck to you, Clarke,” Drew said. “Mind you keep your hand out of the till.”

The other men chuckled, and the secretary’s face went from pink to scarlet. “See here, Mr. Farthering, I would never—”

“Now, now, hold steady there, Clarke,” Drew soothed. “Don’t you mind me. Miss Parker will tell you I never say anything meant to be taken seriously.” He gave Madeline a sly grin. “And she doubtless keeps a catalog of my faults close at hand lest any of them be forgotten.”

“Oh, no,” Madeline replied, all wide-eyed innocence. “I don’t see any reason to keep a personal record of anything so well-documented and widely known.”

“And that, Miss Parker, is why you’re so desperately needed at the party.” Drew tucked her arm under his. “Do you know, some of our guests, most notably your Miss Brower, are actually starting to believe I’m a charming fellow.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Drew assured her, his face all earnest concern. “It’s an absolute scandal, and there’s no one but you to disabuse them of the notion. Now come along. There’s someone I want you to meet.”