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Friday 2nd June 1905

Park Lane, London



Mrs King laid out all the knives on the kitchen table. She didn't do it to frighten Mr Shepherd, although she knew he would be frightened, but just to make the point. She kept good knives. She took excellent care of them. This was her kitchen.

They had scrubbed the room to within an inch of its life, as if to prevent contamination. The tabletop was still damp. She could feel the house straining, a mountain of marble and iron and glass, pipes shuddering overhead.

She reckoned she had twenty minutes until they threw her out. Madam was awake and on the prowl, up in the vast ivory stillness of the bedroom floor, and they were already late with breakfast. It was important that Mrs King didn't waste time. Or endanger anyone else. She didn't care what they did to her – she was past caring about that – but troubles had a way of multiplying, sending out tendrils, catching other people. She moved fast, going from drawer to drawer, checking, rummaging. She was looking for a wrinkle in things, a missing piece, something out of place. But everything was in perfect order.

Too perfect, she thought, skin prickling.

A shadow fell across the wall.

'I'll need your keys please, Mrs King.'

She could smell Mr Shepherd standing behind her. It was the odour that came off his skin, the fried-up scent of grease and gentleman's musk.

Breathe, she told herself. She turned to face him.

He made an excellent butler. But he'd have done even better as a priest. He had that air about him, so tremendously pious. He stared at her, feasting his eyes on her, loving every minute of this.

'Good morning, Mr Shepherd,' she said, voice smooth, same as every morning.

Mrs King's rule was: choose your first move wisely, and you could steer things any way you liked. Choose it badly, and you'd get boxed into a corner, pummelled to pulp. Mr Shepherd pursed his lips. He had a strange mouth, a nasty little rosebud.

'Keys,' he said, holding out his hand.

Straight to business, then. She circled him, making her approach. She wanted to capture a picture of his face in her mind. It would be very helpful later, once things were properly underway. It would give her all the encouragement she needed.

'I'm still doing my rounds, Mr Shepherd,' she said.

He took a tiny step back, to preserve the distance between them. 'No need for that now, Mrs King,' he said, eyeing the door.

The other servants were eavesdropping in the kitchen passage. She could feel them, folded just out of sight, contained in the shadows. She placed them like chess pieces in her mind. The chauffeur and the groomsman in the yard, the housemaids on the back stairs. Cook in the pantry, entirely agitated, twisting her handkerchief into indignant knots. William, sequestered in Mr Shepherd's office, under close guard. Alice Parker upstairs,

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keeping well out of trouble. Each of them watching the clock. The entire house was waiting, motion suspended.

‘I never leave my work half finished, Mr Shepherd,’ she said as she slid round him. ‘You know that.’

And she made for the door.

She saw figures scattering, ducking into pantries and offices. Her boots echoed hard on the flagstones. She felt the cold, damp breeze coming down from the back stairs and wondered: will I miss it? The chill. The unforgiving scent of carbolic on the air. It wasn’t nice, not at all, but it was familiar. It was funny how you got used to things after so much time. Frightening, even.

Mr Shepherd followed her. He was like an eel, heavy and vicious, and he moved fast when he wanted to.

‘Mrs King,’ he called, ‘we saw you in the gentlemen’s quarters last night.’

‘I know,’ said Mrs King over her shoulder.

A steep staircase ran from the kitchen passage up to the front hall. She kept her eyes fixed on the green baize door at the top. It was a partition between worlds. On the other side the air thinned and the light became frosted around the edges. ‘*Don’t* go up there,’ called Shepherd.

Mrs King didn’t care for this. Being ordered about by Shepherd made the inside of her nose itch. ‘I’ve things to check,’ she said.

He continued to follow, sending a tremor through the staircase. Come on, thought Mrs King, chase me.

‘You stay right here,’ he said, reaching to pull her back.

She stopped on the staircase. She wouldn’t run from Shepherd.

He got her by the wrist, his stubby fingers pressing into her veins. His breath smelled stale, but she didn’t recoil. She did the thing he hated most. Looked him straight in the eye.

He said, ‘What were you *doing* last night, Mrs King?’

Shepherd had begun balding over the years, and all he had left were scrubby little hairs dotted right across his brow. Yet still he slicked them with oil. No doubt he waxed them every morning, one by one.

‘Perhaps I was sleepwalking.’

‘Perhaps?’

‘Yes, perhaps.’

Mr Shepherd loosened his grip slightly. She saw him calculating. ‘Well. That might change things. I could explain that to Madam.’

‘But, then again,’ she said, ‘perhaps I was wide awake.’

Mr Shepherd pressed her wrist to the banister. ‘*Keys*, Mrs King.’

She peered up at the green baize door. The house loomed over her, vast and unreachable. The answer she needed was up there. She knew it. Hidden, or sliced into bits, but *there*. Somewhere. Waiting to be found.

I’ll just have to come back and get it, she thought.



She took him to the housekeeper’s room, her room, and he stood guard in the doorway, blocking the light. Already it seemed to belong to her past. It wasn’t cosy, just cramped. On the table was the master’s present to her. Four weeks before, she’d marked her birthday, her neat and tidy thirty-fifth. The master had given her a prayer book. He gave them all prayer books, with gilt edging, satin ribbons.

She held her head up as she handed Mr Shepherd the keys.

‘Any others?’

She shook her head.

‘We’ll see to your personal effects. You can come and collect them in . . .’ He considered this. ‘In due course.’

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Mrs King shrugged. They could inspect her bedroom and sniff the sheets and lick the washbasin all they liked. Even give away her uniforms, if it pleased them. Serge dresses, plain ribbons, tight collars. You could construct any sort of person with those. *Best to choose a new name*, they'd told her, when she'd first arrived, and she chose King. They frowned, not liking it – but she held firm: she chose it because it made her feel strong, unassailable. The *Mrs* came later, when she made housekeeper. There was no Mr King, of course.

She kept her navy coat and her hat pins, and everything else she folded away into her black leather Gladstone. There was only one more thing she needed to remove. Pulling open a drawer in the bureau, she rummaged for a pack of papers.

She threw them on the fire. One neat move.

Mr Shepherd took a step. 'What are those?'

'The menus,' said Mrs King, all the muscles in her chest tight.

The packet was held together with a ribbon, and she watched it darken on the fire. Red turning brown, then black.

'The what?'

She turned, fixed him with a stare. His eyes were hurrying around the room, disturbed, as if he were looking for things he'd missed, secrets stuffed and hidden in the walls.

'For Miss de Vries's ball,' she said.

Mr Shepherd stared at her. 'Madam won't like it that you did that.'

'I've settled all the arrangements,' Mrs King said with a cool smile. 'She can take it from here.'

She studied the ribbon on the grate. It was satin no longer, simply earth and ash. How quickly it changed, dematerialised. How completely it transformed.

Shepherd marched her through the servants' hall to the mews

yard, but he didn't touch her again. They passed the portrait of the master hanging above the long table. The frame had been draped with black cloth. She wondered when Shepherd would replace the portrait, now that the funeral had passed, now he'd been buried. Would he put up one of Madam instead, something in soft oils and lavender? It would give everyone the willies if he did. That girl's eyes were like pincers. She guessed Shepherd would delay as long as he could. He'd be mourning his master longer than anyone.

I hope you're watching from heaven, she thought, looking at the portrait. Or wherever you've landed. I hope you see it all play out. I hope they pin your eyes open so you have to watch what I do to this house.

The *house*. She'd admired it, once. It was bigger than any other on Park Lane. A sprawling mass of pillars and bays, seven floors high from cellars to attics. New-built, all diamond money, glinting white. It obliterated the light, shrivelled everything around it. The neighbours hated it.

Had any house in London ever been decorated in such sumptuous and stupendous style? Miles of ice-cold marble and gleaming parquet. Walls trimmed with French silks and rococo panelling and columns. Electricity everywhere, voltage throbbing through the walls, electroliers as big as windmills. Enormous gas fires. Acres of glass, all smelling wildly of vinegar.

And everywhere, in every room, from floor to ceiling, such *treasures*: stupendous Van Dycks, giant crystal bowls stuffed with carnations. *Objets d'art* in gold and silver and jade, cherubs with rubies for eyes and emeralds for toenails. The zebra-hide sofas in the saloon, and the baccarat tables made of ivory and walnut, and the pink-and-onyx flamingos outside the bathrooms. That library, with the most expensive private collection in Mayfair.

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The Boiserie, the Red Parlour, the Oval Drawing Room, the ballroom: all dressed with peacock feathers and lapis lazuli and an endless supply of lilies.

They didn't impress Mrs King at all any more.



She didn't shake hands with Mr Shepherd. 'I shall keep you in my prayers, Mrs King,' he said.

'Do.'

She supposed the upstairs servants were already clearing out her room. The girls would be scrubbing the floorboards with boiling water and soda crystals and taking the bedsheets to be laundered, eliminating any trace of her.

It was important that she didn't look over her shoulder on the way out. The wrong look at the wrong person could betray her, spoil things when they were only just underway. A pigeon landed on the portico of the gigantic marbled mausoleum as she crossed the yard. She didn't give it a second glance, didn't dip her head in respect to the old master. She marched straight past instead.

She stepped into the mews lane, alone. Heard the distant rumble of motors, saw a clutch of wild poppies growing out of a crack in the paving stones. They were being neglected, trampled, yearning upwards to the sky. She plucked one, pressed a fragile crimson petal in her palm, held it warm. She took it with her.

Her first theft.

Or, rather: the first correction. It wasn't simply *stealing*, not at all.