

# **Paranormal (Christmas) Dinner Club: Christmas at the Drummond Manor**

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# Editor's Note

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### From Dr. H. F. Cutter

I do not care for Christmas. That's not why I'm publishing this story in December.

This is not a "Christmas Story."

That the action of this story takes place at Christmas is beside the point, as is the fact that I'm publishing this near Christmas. No jolly holiday spirit compels me, it's simply a strange poetry of circumstance. This adventure does contain traditional holiday story elements such as a small-town Christmas festival, a fancy holiday dinner party, a traditional Christmas ballet, marriage proposals, et cetera, but I beg the reader not to be distracted by them.

This story concerns a peculiar adventure my brother had while in my service during the holiday season. These are the days between his rescue from his boarding school and our later adventures that changed the very face of Europe. For an extended time, he and I lived in my large house-turned-scientific laboratory together. I had made the greatest discovery of the last century (becoming invisible) and was unable to share it (again, invisible). While I sought a cure, my brother went on various errands on my behalf.

Here is what you should note as you read:

First, the character of my brother. While seen as a villain in some quarters I consider him one of the most selfless men I've ever known. This adventure shows you how he developed into such a peculiar person.

Second, you may recognize if you look closely, the origins of another villain who will become important later. (But no, not the one you're thinking of at first.)

Third, the discovery of a particular scientific advancement first glimpsed here also becomes important later. It should be obvious.

Fourth, one of my inventions was a journal with near instantaneous communication with me from anywhere. That's how it's possible that he could write to me from a distance. No, I will not explain the science behind that.

Fifth, my brother, despite his incredible memory, often couldn't be bothered to look at the clock during errands. The timestamps and chapter headings here are from me and are approximate.

Last then: Here is where an editor such as I should be expected to wish readers a Merry

Christmas and Happy New Year. But being uncomfortable with such open displays of affection and emotion to strangers let me say only:

It is Christmastime. Whether it is merry for you is beyond my control.

It is also nearly the New Year. Whether it is happy or sad is up to you.

Sincerely,

Dr. H.F. Cutter

Better known in the papers as

“THE INVISIBLE MAN”

2pm

2pm

## **In Which Cutter Arrives at a Christmas Festival and Attempts to Not Succumb to its Charms**

Brother,

I am here sending you an account of what transpired on my visit to Drummond Manor and a *full* account because I daresay you won't like it. But in the end, I think you'll agree that things turned out nearly as well as they could under the circumstances. I am at least returning with something — even if it's not what you expected. And something extra! Which I know you will hate.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

As you have long emphasized, I will give you an orderly account of what happened on this latest “errand” (as you insist on calling these missions of spycraft).

On the train to the village of St. Joseph's, I read, then re-read, and then re-read your instructions, per your instructions. That you continue to insist on writing me formal letters like this would be humorous if it were not so cold. Here were your instructions (see? I memorized them):

*To my younger brother, Ethan Cutter,*

*Your errand is obtaining a rare and valuable item near the village of St. Joseph's. You may have heard in passing of the village given its Christmas season festival, and its famous Christmas Pond, around which the village is situated. It's merely a regional attraction but has proved to be a favorite of less well-to-do families.*

*Your objective is beyond the village in the hills surrounding it — Drummond Manor. The object you're after is a power source of extraordinary strength relative to its size. All gentlemen must find hobbies to take up their idle hours and Aiden Drummond, the current master of the household, has fancied himself a man of science. He especially has a fascination for the mineral world and the mechanical world. Either discipline may have been the source of this discovery.*

*Yet, your errand will not be without difficulties. The small size of the rumored object means it could be concealed nearly anywhere. I'd check the usual places — secret library doors, hidden compartments in desks, and safes. Failing that, look for anything that seems to be powered*

yet contains no obvious power source. If at all possible, Drummond must not know the item has been taken. But if not possible, take the item anyway and make your escape.

I need not remind you of the purpose of these errands. I continue to search for a cure for my condition — my invisibility is simultaneously the greatest scientific discovery of our age and one that I'm unable to share until it can be reversed. According to my latest research, it's possible the invisibility field around me might be able to be disrupted by a strong electrical charge or electrical field. The tragedy, of course, is that all future versions of the serum have been made without this defect, so they continue to be perfectly safe for you.

Be wary while exploring. James the household manager is a large man, built like a boxer, and has a temper from what I gather. But perhaps even more dangerous may be old man Drummond Senior. When I tried to pry into his past history and dealings I came up completely empty — usually a sign that someone has gone to great lengths to erase their past. He watches carefully and pulls the affairs of that household with invisible strings.

When infiltrating the household you'll enter as a seasonal worker, a cousin of a worker who has taken ill. The concoction I gave you to slip him should keep him ill for at least 24hrs. I've forged several false letters of recommendation from households close enough to be known but far enough to be unverifiable. You'll have three steps inside:

- ✘. Get past the guards outside the estate
- ✘. Interview with James the household manager
- ✘. Present references if necessary to Drummond himself

Do your best to mask your American accent, otherwise you'll be notable and memorable. Be friendly, unremarkable, and forgettable. As always, trust no one.

Cordially,

Dr. H. F. Cutter, your older brother

P.S. For heaven's sake don't let the Christmas decorations and cheer affect your reason. I know how susceptible you are to such things. Do not indulge in Christmas frivolity. In fact, I wouldn't risk sending you now if I hadn't heard that this object may not stay in the Drummond household for long. Stay focused.

On the train, I ran through the information repeatedly until I could recite it word for word, then tore up the note and threw it away between compartments.

Yet, you didn't make the journey easy, buying me the cheapest train ticket possible. I was sandwiched in between an old man snoring away and a young family with a

rambunctious child. His mother held an infant but over the long hours his father never seemed to tire of playing with the young lad. They appeared to be on their way to the village on a rare day off. Their clothes were presentable but frayed at the edges and they likely purposed to spend what little spending money they had on Christmas cheer. As I watched the boy and his father, I got the distinct impression that this joy was a normal occurrence, not a rare thing. Eventually, the young boy fell asleep on his dad's shoulder. But as your words echoed around in my head, I wondered how many years it would be until this young boy's father disappointed him. Because it was in the Christmas season I learned the truth about our own father.

*Trust no one*, you said. And I knew that you were right. Our own father proved that long ago.

## 3pm

### 3pm

#### **In Which Cutter is, Indeed, Distracted by Christmas Frivolity**

The train station at the village of St. Joseph's pulled into the station and we disembarked onto a beautiful town green. By happy chance, the village center had three striking landmarks:

The first landmark was the church of St. Joseph from which the village took its name. It was right next to the train station. Years ago, a bishop determined to build a church in the village where he'd been raised and the project resulted in something grand for so small an English village. The church boasted one enormously tall steeple with a cross on its highest point and large wooden doors thrown open toward the village green.

The second landmark was the pond at the center of the town green. It had been called Christmas Pond because, for many years as was tradition, a light was floated across the pond by the resident there, representing the star of Bethlehem. It was probably 30-40 feet of water across and just enticing and deep enough that young mothers shooed their children away from pushing one another in.

The third landmark was a hill leading away from the village up to a manor in the distance. That must be the Drummond Manor, my destination.

The town center was ringed with happy little shops with various Christmas sweets and gifts in the windows. There was a bakery with cookies and treats in the shape of stars whose open door smelled of warm cinnamon. A carpenter's shop advertised wooden toy horses that were pulled on a string and would roll along behind children. A butcher's shop had large Christmas hams hanging in the window but also sold picnic lunches or dinners that could be taken and eaten around the pond. A metalworker's shop had turned to selling trinkets for the season — small bells for girls, little wooden and metal shields for boys, and a large suit of armor in the window to draw in the tourists. The days of heroic knights, fair ladies, and happy endings were long gone from the world, but this shop evidently still made quite a bit of coin from those who still believed in them.

Every shop had a wreath tied with cheerful red and gold ribbon. Those on the streets were all smiling and wishing one another a merry Christmas.

I so wished we'd had this village to visit growing up brother. While the Christmas

amusements of London and the big cities are too expensive for a tradesman or soldier this village is where people go at Christmas if they have a bit of extra money, and want to spend a pleasant afternoon of unstuffy and unpretentious holiday amusement. While most of the village center was given over to a day of Christmas cheer for the working man and woman, there were also some signs of more well-to-do gentry around. I could glimpse servants bustling last-minute dresses from tailors back to their country estates. Through shop windows, I could see a sharp and wealthy-looking man in the hatmaker chair fussing over a cap to hide his growing bald spot. In the shop next door an older but distinguished woman was getting her dress adjusted at another tailor as it seemed to have miraculously shrunk since the previous year.

I knew I was running late, but I couldn't help but risk one walk through the town center. Nearby three singers were cheerfully singing Christmas carols and passersby threw a coin or two into an open hat.

Being here, in a small village of smiling faces, reminded me that one of the few times our unhappy family acted like a happy family was at Christmas. Father would stop drinking (at least temporarily). Mother would stop berating him and us and threatening to leave. Your perpetual frown would turn to a half-hidden smile as you tried not to be impressed with the Christmas decorations in the street.

I walked past a group of villagers getting a raft ready on the pond. It was a small ship painted in dark color with a large torch affixed to the top. The idea was that just after sunset it would be pulled along by rope from one end of the pond to the other as a symbol of the star of Bethlehem so long ago. This was apparently how Christmas Pond came to find its name. The village would gather and sing Christmas carols as the "star" floated by, and then the crowd would either begin to take trains back home or find their way into one of the nearby pubs for a warm cider and another round of Christmas songs until the last train left at midnight.

I was drawn toward the church — a grand old thing built at least a century ago. Its stained glass was marked with a hammer and a saw representing St. Joseph and his humble trade. Then I noticed that directly across from the doors of the church, is a nativity scene. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, carved from large blocks of wood and lovingly painted, looked down at the child in the manger. Off to their side was a group of wise men, one holding a chest open in offering. I couldn't resist, peeked in, and saw there was coin in it. Real coin.



Someone in the town square caught me staring and, smiling, came up to me saying, “Lovely, isn’t it?”

“If that’s real coin,” I asked, “How can it be that no one steals it? It’s right out in the open.”

The villager, a portly and round-faced man with bright red cheeks, laughed. “Steal it from the Christ child himself? Under the shadow of the church? We’re God-fearing men here, young man. ‘Sides everyone knows what it’s for. On Christmas Eve the alms offered is taken up by the priest and distributed to the poor. The spirit of the season and all.”

I nodded and smiled. But I didn’t understand. There was enough there for a poor man to live for months already. And as he walked away whistling, it brought up an unhappy memory from the back recesses of my mind. (The curse of having a perfect memory once again.) I pushed it aside and tried to get on with my task.

## 3:30pm

### 3:30pm

#### **In Which Cutter Hears a Ghost Story That Will Prove Important Later**

I know, I know, I'd wasted too much time already.

I quickly popped into a shop about to close and bought a hat and gloves and overcoat in the local style. After changing my outfit to blend in I followed a group of seasonal workers on their way up to the estate. Along the way, I fell into easy conversation with a haggard-looking woman on her way up to the old mansion.

"First time here to the grounds?" she asked in a kindly but raspy voice. "They truly are magnificent. Wait until you see them in the moonlight."

She was one of those faces that was once strikingly beautiful — sharp cheekbones and a strong chin. But the smooth and blank canvas of youth had been filled in by age and hardship. Her clothes were once fine but were now torn and re sewn many times over the years. She cheerfully wore bright and cheap jewelry, with large hoop earrings. She looked either like an unruly Englishwoman who ran away to join the gypsies or an unruly gypsy raised reluctantly in an English household.

"What brings you here my young sir?" she asked.

"Oh, you know," I tried to say casually. "I hear the estate offers work to those who might need it this time of year. And I could use the extra coin."

"Oh, whereabouts are you from then?" she asked.

"I'm from...not far."

"I see. You have family here?"

"No no, it's just me...and my brother...there isn't anyone else..."

But I know there was something she caught as my voice trailed off. She seemed to smile for having seen it. I was more sure by now that she'd once been a great beauty but that this was hidden underneath many hardships and years.

"No one else is there?" she said kindly, but with a hoarseness to her voice. "None at all? Lost them all?"

"Well..." I admitted and squirmed under her unblinking bright eyes. "We have family. Had. Not anymore. Not really."

And at that, she stopped walking and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Say no more," she said kindly. "Family can be lost not only in illness and death but in..."

other ways as well. And better, I think sometimes, to lose them to death than them being dead to you but still living. Like ghosts that haunt you.”

“I, uh, thank you?” was all I could think to say. “My name is Cutter.”

“And you can call me Miss Vergeten,” she said.

So seldom have I felt affection or kind words that it was unexpected and not disagreeable.

She patted my shoulder and said, “Listen to me now. The ramblings of a lost woman. Telling ghost stories. Of course, there are few things better for a warm night by the fire than a cold story.”

The weather had been unseasonably warm during the day but as we walked the cold air began to come in from the east. I buttoned my coat as we walked.

“And you? You must know the estate well, then,” I said. “Do you work there? Or just come seasonally for things like this?”

“Oh well, there’s that,” she said wrapping her scarf around her now. “This place and I go back many years. Many secrets there. I’ve been a seasonal worker there as often as I can find the work — which is often enough with the parties they throw.”

Now, I was intrigued.

“Any good stories then? About the house I mean?” I asked.

“Oh. Hmm. Good ones.” And the haggard woman smiled but as she did her warm smile turned cold and her eyes seemed to glint. It may have just been the cold air blowing in.

“It is said,” she began, “That the family moved here nearly 15 years ago. It wasn’t the historic home of the family, no, no. They came here under, let us say, inauspicious circumstances.”

“Inauspicious?”

“Odd. Strange. The estate had been without an heir — only distant relations. They sold it to the Drummonds then. Mr. Aiden Drummond and a young girl. Very young. Only a year at most from what I’ve heard tell. And his father. But what brought them here? The Drummonds, well, they wanted no questions asked about them in town. Answered none either. Kept to themselves. They had money to be sure and plenty of it. But no one could quite discern what branch of distant English nobility they were. But slowly, ever slowly, they bought goodwill in the town. Their parties in the surrounding area gathered quite a few friends. They were known to give a quiet loan or two for a favor. And slowly they became over the years the center of social life in this part of England — such as it is this

far out.”

“How very odd,” I remarked as we walked the wide and winding path up the hill. The outer gates of the estate were now visible. Large and ornate with a man guarding them in uniform. Seeing us he waved us further down the side of the estate, to the edge of a forest which hid a smaller gate. All the extra help was being moved along there.

“I finally found this place a few years ago,” she continued. “Like you, my boy, I lost what family I had and bounced from town to town. I’m no servant. I show cards. I foretell the future. I sense things. Feel things. And something drew me to this place. So odd to find such a place of darkness and light. This is both.”

You’ve told me to keep my ears open when I’m on jobs like this. And I realized I had hit upon a wizened woman who could be more than useful. Of course, yes, I knew you’d frown on me throwing in my lot with a fortune teller. But what *you* dabble in can be just as paranormal and on the edges of science, can’t it brother?

“What do you mean about light and dark?” I asked, “Anything I should be concerned about?”

“Oh, look at me!” she laughed in a raspy voice. “Scaring the boy his first year! No, nothing to concern yourself with. But the father there, Aiden Drummond, is still alive as his father Drummond Senior. And I think there is darkness in this house to be sure. I’ve drawn the cards many a time.”

“And what do the cards say?”

She paused as if wondering whether to share it with me, but looked up at the large building and said quietly, “I always draw the rat king.”

The wind blew in bitterly for a moment and our pace quickened.

“Heard rumors,” she half whispered and half yelled in my ear, “That Aiden Drummond had married but his wife died. She died when their estate burned to the ground. Fire was said to be an accident but it was suspicious. More than one servant died in that fire.

Those who were left were dismissed without help. The family sold all their previous land. Said it was grief. Said they needed a new start. But I wonder.”

I could see the estate now. The grounds were immaculate but everywhere workers were preparing decorations and torches and wreaths. The gardens were lovely. Each window was brightly lit with lights in them, perfectly placed in the center of each pane of glass. The effect was striking.

But as I glanced toward the front of the mansion, there was something unusual — a

large tarp thrown over what appeared to be a statue. But around it were boxes and large gears and a young man scurrying around as servants brought other boxes out. It seemed a mismatch to find a grand old house in the old style and its impression ruined by a construction site.

We finally arrived at a guard who gave each person entering the grounds a hard look.

Here was my first test.

“What’s your purpose here?” he asked.

“Er, coming to work the holiday party. I was...recommended for the work. By my cousin.”

“Never seen you here before.”

“I haven’t been before. But my cousin fell ill, so he sent me in his place.”

I gave him the name of my “cousin” and explained that he’d eaten a bad stew. I didn’t tell him that I’d given the “cousin” a mild poison in that free bowl of stew. He’d have a bad 24hrs but recover in time for Christmas. No real harm done.

“I liked your cousin,” the guard said. “Had a good laugh or two last year.”

Uh oh. I hadn’t planned on the guard knowing this cousin.

“Let you in on one condition,” he said with a friendly smile. “Tell me what your cousin won’t shut up talking about. At least he didn’t last year.”

With my perfect memory, I went back through my brief interaction with the cousin. I’d been at a small tavern and he’d just walked in. I knew he frequented it. I got up and told him I had just been called away. I asked if he’d wanted my stew since I hadn’t touched it. The man’s eyes lit up and I could nearly see his substantial stomach growl. Then I left. Not much to work with from that memory.

The guard looked at me expectantly, then started to turn suspicious. I was taking too long to answer.

Think. Think.

I went back over the man’s clothes, his demeanor, his face. Then I saw it in my mind’s eye. Cookie crumbs on his collar. A bit of chocolate left in his beard. Hadn’t noticed it at first glance but...

Think. Think.

“Sweets,” I said. “My cousin won’t shut up about them. Loves sweets. When has he never not had a bit of cookie in his beard left over for later!”

At that the guard broke into a wide grin. “Caught him last year pocketing a scone! Told

him he had enough in his beard already!” And he slapped me on the back.  
Then he waved me through.  
One step down, two to go.

# 4pm

## 4pm

### **In Which Cutter Is Subjected to An Uncomfortable Interview**

We were welcomed into a large room down below. It had none of the finery and ornate detail of the mansion above it but it was snug and warm and comfortable. I imagine it was normally where the house staff would take their meals but it had become a staging area for the seasonal workers. Uniforms were being handed out — servers, extra footmen, extra guards, and all the rest. We stood in the line.

“Well,” I said to the woman. “It doesn’t seem quite as bad as you described here.”

“Oh no,” she said, “That’s because of the light I spoke about. And what a light. The young girl who arrived here as an infant grew up to be a beloved young woman. A striking beauty and one who will be courted by every man from here to London at one point or another. This Christmas she turns 16.”

“And what of her father?”

“Ah, I can’t say I care for him. But he could be worse. Her father—Aiden Drummond is his name— did remarry. Not for love, though, I think. The new wife is not a bad sort but boring and bland as an unfinished wooden block. Every year the estate throws a magnificent holiday party and I do think the new wife is behind it all — she loves the pageantry and fancy gowns. That’s one reason to be grateful to her at least.”

A large man made his way down the stairs with heavy footfalls. He was built like an ox with a severe mustache and his thinning hair severely parted straight down the middle. He could easily have been a boxer and rather than the soft-bodied men you find in these English estates he was broad-shouldered and at least six feet tall. This must be James, the household manager.

He quickly walked up and down the aisle with a discerning eye. He greeted one or two of the returning workers by name.

But coming down the line to me he stopped and pointed.

“You there,” he said. At first, I nearly panicked thinking he was pointing to me. Had I been discovered already? But instead, it was the man in front of me he pulled from the line.

Holding the man’s collar James nearly shouted, “Last time you were here silverware was missing after the party. I know it was you. And I have a good mind to have you

handed over to the local police — but I'm far too busy. Leave now before I change my mind. And never dare to show your face here again!"

And James picked up the young man with both hands by the collar and marched him straight out into the cold, tossing him onto the ground.

The large man marched back in and dusted himself off. Seeing he had the attention of the room he said loudly, "As you know my name is Reginald James. If you are new, I represent this great household and it has been my pleasure to serve them for a full decade. It is an honor to be part of this occasion and I expect you to treat it as such. All first-timer workers will line up at my office and come in one at a time for brief interviews. Working here is a *privilege* and not all may be accepted." And he scowled down at us.

He led the way and two others left the line with me and followed him to a small cramped office around the corner. I wondered if I should have sought to disguise myself as the worker I poisoned instead of going with the cousin story? No no, I've tried that too many times before. Requires too much knowledge. Better to take my chances with being a new face there.

James called me into the tight office most of which was taken up by his desk, and there was just enough room to sit on a chair opposite him. He scowled and didn't appear to much like what he saw. He saw a gangly, shy, not particularly well dressed, and not particularly confident child of 15. I wouldn't appraise myself very highly either. You'd no doubt agree, brother.

"Well then, your references please," he said holding out his hand impatiently.

He quickly reviewed the papers I presented, pausing briefly over the names and mumbling to himself.

"Well, I see the last name here — you're replacing your cousin I gather? I can't say I see the resemblance at all."

"Yes, sir. People often say we look nothing alike. Families and all that. He came down ill today and he didn't want to leave the estate shorthanded or fail in his commitment so he sent me in his place. I'd be glad of the extra coin if I'm honest sir. I'm between jobs at the moment."

James large eyebrows pushed together and he looked at me closely. I had a sense he was used to ferreting the truth out of unreliable staff.

"Well, your references are in order. I'm hesitant because I don't know anyone *directly*



you've been employed by. What are your skills?"

"I've been a footman on occasion. I can serve food meals well enough. I can make small repairs." Seeing his eyebrows hadn't lifted yet I pressed on. I listed anything else I could think of. "I've done a bit of sailing and apprenticed to a shipwright. I assisted a scientist with his lab. I have gone on small expeditions. I can be very resourceful."

He held up his hand. "Stop," he said heavily. "As I feared..."

This didn't sound good.

"You're one of those young men who can't be bothered to learn a position or a trade can you?" he said with gravity. "Always flitting about, aren't you? You're what's wrong with England. Whatever happened to sticking with being a footman, learning it, knowing it inside and out? There's no loyalty these days. NONE. And you my young man are such a person."

I swallowed hard.

This might have been the end of it but the gypsy woman Vergeten stopped in the doorway of the small office. She'd just returned from putting on her uniform and looked trim and proper but her hair was still a bit wild, her large earrings jangled, and she'd kept a large bangle on each wrist.

"Well, there Mr. James," she said leaning in. "Putting the fear of God into this young man and no mistake. Better at it every year I think sir."

He permitted a half smile to creep into the very edge of his mustache. "Well, it's a big night. Annabelle is only 16 once after all. It must all be perfect for her."

"Quite right," she said. "And have you lost a bit of weight this year as well? Looking trimmer."

The man was as solidly built as an ox so I doubted this was true.

Then I realized she might be, if it's possible, *flirting* with the man?

My suspicions were confirmed when James blushed slightly.

"It's a marvel you've not been snapped up by a young maid by now," she said with a wink. "But married to the manor as it were, am I right? You can't bear a glance at anyone else. Yet, don't worry Mr. James, I know the night will go off without a hitch. How is this young man looking then, eh?"

"Well, to be honest, I have my reservations," he said squinting at me.

"Ah, you're probably quite right. I found him a little suspicious myself," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“And yet...” she continued. “When I drew the cards this morning I was surprised to find him there. Might be a bit of good luck for the evening. Might be a sign. Can’t be sure though, who knows?”

“A sign? This young man?” That certainly made him pause. “Perhaps I’d better see it myself.”

So with one fluid motion the gypsy woman produced a set of unique cards out of her pocket. I’d seen gypsy cards before but these were unlike I’d ever seen. On one side there were all kinds of interesting pictures — nutcrackers, a sleeping beauty, a ring, a sugar plum — hand drawn in ornate and detailed fine lines style. On the other side were black and red patterns of intricate detail. She shuffled and dealt and re-shuffled the cards so quickly it was mesmerizing.

James stared at the cards, caught in their trance. I found myself drawn to them as well — they felt almost hypnotic as they swirled back and forth.

Not almost.

They were.

I shut my eyes and turned away. I’d seen hypnosis before. The rhythmic alternating patterns of a watch face at a night market, the alternating colors of a con man, all of them had this same feel, this same pattern.

Unless I was greatly mistaken, she was hypnotizing with her cards.

When I blinked my eyes open again I found the gypsy woman looking directly at me with a half smile on her lips.

“Very good, young man,” she said. “I think you may nearly be as smart as I guessed.” With another fluid motion she laid out a series of cards. James was still staring, unblinking, at them.

“Now here, you see? The nutcracker?” she said flipping a card out in front of James. “A hidden help that comes to life and saves the young girl? And here is its match — the young servant. It seems that this young man might be a hidden help tonight.”

James nodded slowly.

And then with another swirl of colors and cards, the deck was back in her pocket. James blinked slowly. “Hmm...well...yes. I do wonder...He might be useful...can’t be too sure...” He had returned to himself and looked at me, scowling once more. “Well then, it’s obvious you’re not averse to hard work. This occasion will be even larger than normal so we’ll be grateful for the extra help. Your meal is served only after guests have gone in

the late hours of the night. It'll be a long night and you will be in the cold much of it. Complaint or failure means dismissal without payment. Do I make myself quite clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Give your cousin my regards. Tell him to lay off the sweets. And you, my young man, try to stick with something for a bit eh? I've been here 15 years. One family. One position. And while not as exciting there are joys — unique joys — seeing a household grow and flourish. Tonight, for example, with the young lady of the house turning 16. It's quite, you know..."

And he sighed heavily and blinked away the obvious emotion he felt.

"It's gratifying is all," he said. "A fine young woman. You'd miss all that flitting about."

"Yes, sir, I appreciate the advice."

"Good, then off with you."

The gypsy woman swept out of the small room with me, "Good to see you as always James. Handsome as ever. Happy to read the cards for you yourself later if you get a moment."

He tried not to smile, but it crept into the corner of his mouth.

"Good to see you again as well, Vergeten. Perhaps later, a glass of port once things are quite finished?"

"I never miss it," she called over her shoulder.

So the gypsy and I walked together toward the household uniforms and she pointed to a pile. I looked through them for my size but must have glanced back at Vergeten without thinking.

"Do you have a question for me?" she said, smiling.

"Er, yes, I do."

"Your first question is what was that? The second question is why I helped. Do I have it in hand?"

"Yes, on both points."

She leaned casually on a wall and said, "The first answer is easy. That was hypnosis. An old gypsy trick. You've seen it before I gather."

"Yes, but never like that"

"It takes years of practice but often proves more than useful."

"So why use it to help me?"

"Well, young man, two reasons. You'd be about my child's age if I had one. I have a soft

spot perhaps. But more importantly, I both love this family and loathe the grandfather here. He's a prickly and sour shell of a man. If you'll promise to pocket something valuable from his collection of old world artifacts I'd be delighted. Just so that when I come back to clean up tomorrow I can hear him rage and complain. It would be a delight."

This was rather unexpected. But I was determined not to turn away a gift. She had, after all, gotten me into the house. I simply nodded.

"Excellent, pleasure making a trade with you," and she went away singing softly.

I popped into a small bathroom and changed into the uniform. I looked all of my 15 years and not a day more. But I looked suitably servant-like.

As I emerged from changing, James was there.

"One moment, young man. Now that you're presentable you have one more step. Mr. Drummond Senior wants to meet any new hires for the evening we've not seen before. He's decided to take an active hand in the vetting process, given the importance of the evening."

"Mr. Drummond Senior wants to interview...me...personally?" I tried to sound casual but didn't succeed.

"Yes, immediately. Up the stairs to the right. Look for the large library. He'll be there. Keep your answers short and to the point."

And with that he was gone, calling after a footman.

I tapped the vials of invisibility potion in my pocket and wondered if I should use one and simply disappear. But I didn't know quite enough about this power source yet, or where to find it. I had no choice but to go on.

## 4:15pm

### 4:15pm

#### **In Which Cutter Is Subjected to An Even More Uncomfortable Interview**

The first-level library felt more like a museum than a library. There were large windows looking out at the grounds with thick curtains drawn back elegantly. I'm sure in the morning sun or dying afternoon light it was quite lovely. But the room was only half books and the rest of it was filled half art pieces, stone busts of figures, and other objects housed in glass cases.

Glancing around at the small metal placards around each object gave me the theme: Drummond. Each object was tied back to this family. The Drummond family crest from 200 years ago was emblazoned on a wall. A rough oil painting of Edwin Drummond, III (1721-1755) was on the opposite wall. A collection of sailing ship models the collection of Walter Drummond (1808-1865) sat under glass cases. A globe of the world once the possession of Emilia Drummond (1818-1862) stood in the corner. And on it went.

I made my way through stacks and objects, trying to remember as much as I could of the placards I glanced at. Then at the very center of the library, I arrived at a large half-circle desk. In the middle of the desk, was an older man there scribbling something. Without looking up he said, "Come in. You'll see there's no chair to sit on. This won't take long. You'll be working or dismissed in less than half a minute."

Based on his gray hair and face it was clear this was not Aiden Drummond, Jr., but rather this father — Drummond Senior.

"Do you see the objects around you?" he asked with his head still hunched over the desk, scribbling.

"Yes," I said. "They are quite a testament to the Drummond estate and its legacy."

At this, he looked up at me with small, bright, and not especially kind eyes. "Yes, and have you *heard* of the Drummond family and our legacy?"

I wasn't sure how he wanted me to respond, so I decided on the truth.

"To be honest sir, I've not heard much. It's obvious that there is a family legacy here going back at least two centuries but...I've honestly not heard the Drummond family mentioned much among the noble families of England."

At this, he smiled. But it was unkind, cruel, sort of smile. "Of course. Of course. Our history erased. Three generations ago, we crossed the wrong Duke, and he saw fit to do

something worse than cast us out of England — he ignored us. Soon others cut us out as well. Our substantial fortunes slipped into a slow decline both in reputation and finance. It's understandable that you've not heard much of us. But you will. After tonight."

And he stood up to his full height. It's been my observation that as people age they either grow rounder and softer or sharper and more angular. This man had taken on a severe look, all elbows and sharp chin.

"I have just one question for you, young man and your employment here depends upon it. Usually, I don't take such an active hand in matters like this. But tonight must be perfect. Utterly perfect. Because with one stroke we will reverse our fortunes. I have just one question."

He walked around the semi-circle desk slowly until he was face to face with me. Even hunched with age he was taller than me and looking down on me. He was probably once a powerfully built man.

"Do you know what's like to bear a curse?" he asked quietly, his eyes squinting down at me.

I was prepared for any number of questions. But this one I wasn't. Again, I risked the truth.

"Yes. I sometimes think my family is cursed. My father moved us to England from America to chase wealth," I said sighing. "He only succeeded in sinking us lower. Or perhaps he tried his best and this country swallowed our family whole, without mercy. Or maybe it was the industrial age and it wouldn't matter where we'd been. It doesn't really matter. But we've been trying to pull ourselves out ever since—at least my brother and I have."

His eyes rested on me for a long moment.

I felt my heart beating loudly in my chest.

Finally, he clicked his tongue and turned to walk back around to the desk chair and sat again.

"Very well," he said. "Welcome to the Drummond household, at least temporarily. Do well tonight and you'll have a seasonal job as often as you need it. You're being employed because I trust that you understand what it's like to crawl out of a hole your family has sunk into. That is what we're doing tonight. Let me emphasize again how important this night is and how unforgiving I'll be if you don't treat it as such."

I stood there awkwardly for a moment until without looking up he waved his hand and

muttered, "To work then."

I began walking out when he called out after me. "Oh, and one final thing. I'll be keeping an eye on you, especially tonight. You have a friendly enough face but I can see something in your eyes. There's desperation there. Don't get any funny ideas about walking away with a treasure or trinket. I'm not as understanding as James on those matters. You'll be taken straight to jail and spend all your short and unhappy years there. Am I quite clear?"

"Yes, sir."

I made it outside the library and sighed deeply.

The good news was that I had access to the household and was authorized as a worker, just like we'd planned.

The bad news was that I feared I was memorable now and that the old man's sharp and unkind eyes would be on me all night. In those eyes I had seen something as he was examining me:

That old man was desperate, too.

# 5pm

## 5pm

### **In Which Cutter Is Required to Help With Something He Doesn't Understand**

I had changed and was setting out place settings in the large central room when James found me and interrupted me.

“You there! The new young man! I don't remember your name and don't care to. You'll be in the front garden helping set up something special. Any skill with gears or clockwork?”

“Er, perhaps some. I did help my father sell —” I began.

“Good good,” he said not bothering to letting me finish, “You'll do fine then. Out front, you'll find Viktor who is preparing a special surprise tonight. Help him with whatever he needs.”

Out front there was a large semicircular driveway for carriages and in the center was a large green. It was there that I found my task—the large pile of boxes and the large thing under the tarp I'd seen earlier. I was gruffly deposited by James next to a young teenage boy. Wooden crates were strewn about, half open, and something half-constructed was standing on a platform covered in a large tarp.

“Er, hello?” I said, announcing myself.

“Ah yes, put it over there,” he said without looking up. He moved from box to box like a ferret searching for scraps, muttering to himself.

“Er, I'm here to help?” I said.

“Oh!” and his head popped up out of the box it was in. He had a long face with large round spectacles and a messy mop of black hair. It had the effect of making him look like an intelligent mouse and it only grew as he looked me up and down making a “tsk tsk” sound.

“Any experience with gears or mechanical items?” he asked in a slight German accent.

“Well, I did help my father with —”

“Splendid!” he said, not letting me finish. “I've been asking for help for hours and that oaf of manager James hasn't found anyone close to suitable. If we hurry we can just finish this in time.”

So we began. The machinery was the most complicated I'd ever seen. Imagine the inside of a clock tower with its mass and mess of twisting and turning gears. Then imagine



that shrunken down to even tinier gears and clicks. Then imagine two dozen components of that kind that must interlock and work together. Then off of those components were larger and longer gears and pistons of various kinds that seemed to move with a series of clacks.

Fortunately, Viktor did most of the really difficult mechanical work and my part was to carefully remove each component, extract any straw or packing materials, and have it ready for insertion into the mechanical apparatus. My one helpful idea was to get white tablecloths and lay the pieces out on the tables so they could be more easily seen in the fading light.

“Brilliant!” was what Viktor said, and I have to say it was nice to receive even the barest encouragement. (You should try giving an encouragement or two sometime, brother.) We soon had it roughly assembled. It was humanoid in shape but enormous. It was a mass of gears and screws and metal plates. Its face was strange and ghastly — nearly like a skull but made of metal, though without a mouth. Against the holiday lights and bright decorations, it looked downright ominous. More than one servant muttered to themselves that it was unnatural.

“The core components are done!” Viktor said triumphantly. “Only two things remain: First, make it beautiful. And then second, bring it to life. Isn’t it marvelous?” Viktor asked, looking at me expectantly.

“Well,” I said diplomatically, “It’s certainly...impressive and...imposing...whatever it is...”

“I don’t have the facade on yet...you know...but it has enough for me to show you at least..” And he clicked something in the back of the figure. It raised its head, its eye sockets glowed with golden light, and it raised a metal hand in greeting and waved with jittering movements like a skeleton slowly freezing to death. It was at once fascinating and terrifying. And for the life of me, I couldn’t imagine what it was doing at a Christmas party.

I was trying to think of some kind of positive comment I could make about it when we were interrupted by a sound behind us.

I turned and there was a girl behind me whose fancy dress was rustling in the evening breeze. It was a beautiful girl, in fact. She had the youthful beauty of a teenager and wore a fine maroon-colored coat over her dress in deep holiday green with a hood that framed her face. I must confess, she looked like something out of a fairy tale and her

heart-shaped face seemed to sparkle in the evening lights.

“Annabelle!” Viktor said with mock surprise. “What are you doing out here? You know your father would simply die if he saw you here. This is all meant to be a surprise, you know.”

“It looks like you’ve gotten that central gear spinning correctly at least,” she said peering at the thing. “Though I still have to say I’m concerned about the neck rotation not engaging correctly.”

“I think I’ve finally gotten it down,” Viktor said.

She squinted and strained, then said, “Oh I can’t see a blessed thing, hang on.”

She threw her hood back and it was obvious her hair had not been styled yet for the dinner. It hung in a bun behind her but there were wisps of loose hair flying everywhere. She fished inside her coat and pulled out a pair of large, thick spectacles. She put them on and peered in closely. She and Viktor now looked like a pair of blind mice chattering back and forth about gears and mechanical components.

The girl backed up, put her hands on her hips, and said, “Well, I do think you’ve done it. And I do think it’s absolutely wonderful. You’re simply a marvel Viktor.”

At that, Viktor blushed a bit. I sensed something between them, perhaps some unspoken affection. But while I’m unused to matters of the heart even I know that a tinkerer and a nobleman’s daughter have no future. This was harmless flirtation, most likely.

“Listen Annabelle, I can’t have you down here spoiling the surprise and getting me into trouble. You’ve simply got to go back into your room. This is my new friend — er,” and he looked at me embarrassed.

“Cutter,” I said. I used my real name but I could stop myself. He seemed so genuine and friendly, it felt wrong to use a fake name.

“Of course,” he said. “Cutter here has been an enormous help and he would happily take you back upstairs and *ensure* that you remain there. Won’t you my good man?”

“Of course,” I said. And then I gave a little bow. I guessed it was what a servant here did? I had no idea.

At that Annabelle laughed, “Next you’ll march me upstairs with one of your mechanical soldiers Viktor. I’m going. I’m going. And I promise I’ll act so surprised.”

She pulled off her glasses, pulled her winter cloak hood back on, and seemed to transform quickly back into a serene princess. Yet, I sensed that, perhaps, the real girl was the one with wild hair and glasses and her nose stuck in gears.

She led the way into the house and seemed to move without her feet touching the ground. The billowing dark green cape only added to the effect since I couldn't see her feet. She moved with the grace of a dancer. But when we arrived at the central staircase she passed it.

"Um, miss, I assume your room is upstairs?" I stammered.

"This is *my* house after all," she said. "I'll be locked into makeup and styling soon enough. I just need to make a quick stop."

She arrived downstairs and the room of servants lit up with smiles. She seemed to have that effect on people.

She dodged servants racing back and forth over to the kitchen downstairs and made her way to a large table piled with baked goods. There were puffy buns brushed with gleaming butter, delicate French pastries with flaky layers of buttered delicacy, dark red velvet cupcakes with creamy white frosting, and cinnamon sugar cookies in the shape of snowflakes.

"I suspected we might be inspected," the baker said with a smile to Annabelle. "So I've taken the liberty of having some reserved for you ma'am."

"Ah," she said. "Very good. Inspection. Of course."

And taking a bite she frowned. "I'm not sure— I require a second opinion." And then she handed me a small tart and nodded. I tried it. And brother, it was as if all Christmas itself were rolled up, frosted, baked to a golden crisp, and then made into a tart. I couldn't stop myself from a loud groan of joy.

"Well," she said with a mock frown still in place. "Opinion?"

"Satisfactory," I said.

Then her frown broke into a smile, and we all laughed.

"You've all simply outdone yourselves this year," she said to the servants who had gathered in a rough circle. "Truly. I could not be more grateful to you all. I know what it means to ask you to give up a night at the Christmas festival in town. To be honest, I'd be there myself if I could. But what the Christmas festival is to the average person, this family Christmas dinner is to so many of the well-to-do in the countryside here. Let them have their fun and then I'll see you afterward for our staff feast. It's better every year."

I got the sense she was down here regularly and the household staff were used to her because there was none of the stiffness and formality that normally follows a

noblewoman into a servant's area.

“Well,” she said turning to me pulling a handful of baked goods into her cloak, “Lead on my jailer. Back to the prison cell of my room. I need to practice my mock surprise.”

When arrived back in the main room, at the top of the staircase a worried-looking servant appeared, “Miss Annabelle! There you are! We've been looking all over for you. We've barely enough time to do your hair and makeup if we hurry!”

Annabelle looked at me, pulled another scone out of her coat pocket, and said, “Well, duty calls.” And she made her way up the staircase, scrunching on the scone, as the servant chided her for being late.

I tried to form a plan for what to do next and where your power source might be. It would seem a natural fit for the mechanical contraption but I'd seen nothing like while there. I didn't think the grandfather had it in that museum of his. I didn't think Annabelle did either.

That left only Aiden Drummond, the master of the house. He must have it.

# 6pm

## 6pm

### **In Which Cutter Is Haunted by a Ghost of Christmas Past**

I was not a very good servant, I'm afraid.

While I was assigned to serve guests and ferry food back and forth, everyone was eventually pressed into service to get the last of the decorations up. The front garden was bare except for the mechanical thing, though the rough tarp was changed for an elegant golden sheet, artfully staked around it, and a large bow fixed to the top of it. It suggested the shape of a Christmas tree and large "ornament" decorations in gold and silver were brought out, as was a star. Soon it seemed only a large welcome decoration. In the back of the house was a series of lovely gardens where candles in delicate vases were strung in the air. The wind had faded into a cool but not unpleasant breeze. There were small high tables usable for placing drinks. And a group of carolers was warming up in the corner, trying to get their voices used to the cold.

Meanwhile, inside the gold and dark green theme was artfully executed. Bannisters had dark greenery on them with golden balls adding touches of elegance. Table settings were in gold with fresh pine bough centerpieces. A roaring fire was crackling in the main central room where all the dinner tables were set up. While the main room could be used for dancing, this Christmas party was more suited to a fancy dinner, elegant music, and town gossip.

But as I said I didn't make for a very good servant that night. For the past two years with you, Christmas has been a muted affair celebrated with nothing more than a rare dessert delivered from town. And before that, at my boarding school, only the barest of decorations greeted students left over the Christmas holiday. This household party was the first time I'd really *really* been around a full Christmas dinner. And I confess it left me staring at decorations or into the fire too long.

I'd awake to James snapping fingers in my face: "Get at it me boy! Back at it!"

I learned that James was a task master of the first order and short of his brief look at the gypsy woman's cards, seemed to be everywhere at once. His voice was a constant presence in the background everywhere on the grounds.

"Absolutely slovenly appearance Mrs. Davies," he said to a seasonal worker in a wrinkled uniform. "You're relieved. Leave your uniform downstairs. No payment for

services rendered.”

“Crisp linens me boys!” he shouted to a few teenagers laying out tablecloths. “CRISP linens. Iron that one again. CRISP.”

“Short-handed in the parlor room are we?” he said glancing around. Seeing the wrinkled form of Mrs. Davies headed downcast downstairs he called after her:

“Mrs. Davies — you’re re-hired! Get that uniform ironed out and get over to the parlor room!”

The regular staff were trim, precise, professional, and said little. I tried to cozy up to a few of them to get more information but they seemed used to inquisitive people from town and are tight-lipped. They weren’t unkind just responding with brief, one-word answers. I needed another source of information then.

Yet, while I tried to keep my mind on the task you assigned me brother, I found myself distracted and running through memories of our past.

While our parents seemed to be in a constant state of conflict, Christmas seemed to be the exception. It was the one time a year our father enjoyed a measure of financial success. Each holiday it seemed he had a new item to sell (“unique!” “amazing!” “astonishing!”) and while often his schemes fell on deaf ears something about the holidays made wallets open. I remember the year of the windup mice that scurried about and the year of the army Christmas caps for young boys sold with wind-up wooden toy soldiers. You were home from whatever school and there were long days of exploring town, playing games, and playing in the snow. Sometimes we went along helping father demonstrate his toys or gifts from door to door.

Our house really was rather pleasant for once, wasn’t it? But it wasn’t long before I learned that beneath the warm and cheery exterior of the day, there was a lingering coldness, waiting.

I can still see the coldness wrapped its fingers around me: We were walking with our father down to buy some sweets to eat on Christmas. It was Christmas Eve and the bell of the chapel in town was ringing out, calling people in to visit the Christ child. The shopkeepers beamed and welcomed patrons in and for once gave a little more than they should for the price, rather than a little less. Holly and Ivy were hung on the doors. A group of carolers sang outside a well-to-do home. I breathed in deeply and the streets smelled of warm bread and cinnamon and pine.

Then, as we walked, we were interrupted. An old man stumbled out of a side alley

toward us. He reeked of alcohol and his face was unkempt, his beard patchy and slovenly. "Merry Christmas!" he said with a smile highlighting more than a few missing teeth.

"Merry Christmas!" I said back, only to see our father shoot me a sharp look.

Encouraged by my greeting the old man stumbled forward and clasped at our father's hand.

"Sir," he said. "Can you spare anything for an old man? Being Christmas and all?"

But our father looked cold and impassive. "Away with you drunkard! You reek of cheap liquor," he said.

"But sir," the old man continued, "It's so very cold out and the booze is all what keeps me a bit warmer. My family you see sir —"

But my father cut him off: "I don't care." The old man tried to tell his story again, but our father only said more forcefully: "I. Don't. Care."

As a child, my tender heart went out to this man. I fished into my pocket for the few farthings I had saved. I'd intended to buy a small sweet. But instead, I held the coins out and offered them to the old man.

Before he could speak our father slapped my hand and said, "Back in your pocket, son." The old man shook his head and said slowly, "I can'a do that to 'ye son." And then stumbled off. I watched him limp and sway back down into the alley. I suspected he wouldn't survive the winter.

My father scowled and bent down to me, looking me in the eye.

"Look here son, I'll give you a lesson. And remember it well: keep to your own business. The troubles of others are not yours. We all have enough trouble of our own. That old man saw a small boy and dad in Christmas spirit and saw easy prey. He'll drink the farthings you'd give him before we get home."

"But can't we help, sometimes, at least?" I asked.

"Helping just makes you poorer, son. And we're already poor enough."

I looked over at you, brother, and you were pointedly ignoring the whole interaction, pretending to examine a shop window.

With that, our father tried to smile again and sing a bit as he led us through the streets decorated for Christmas.

But by Christmas, our father was drunk again.

Speaking of drink, during preparations Drummond Senior occasionally emerged from

the library to refill his glass of wine and scowl at the servants. More than once I saw him looking suspiciously at Miss Vergeten — the gypsy woman from earlier. He would make a sharp comment about whatever she was doing and she'd reply with a pretend sweet smile. Then when he'd walk away, she'd roll her eyes and return to what she was doing the way she was doing it before. I sensed there was more than a few years of tension between those two. Likely waging a cold war from Christmases past. How did it start, I wonder?

My suspicions were confirmed when later I caught the grandfather, Drummond Senior, whispering to another servant. I moved in subtly and got just close enough to hear. He was offering the servant a bonus if they could catch Vergeten doing anything wrong or breaking house rules. She was a young maid from a neighboring city and nervously nodded.

So when I passed Vergeten in the hallway I decided to repay the favor she had done me in securing my job.

“Miss Vergeten, thank you for your help earlier. Perhaps I can pay you back for it in a small way.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You see I overheard Mr. Drummond Senior offering that young maid with all the freckles from East Farthing a little extra coin if she caught you doing something you shouldn't. If I didn't know better I'd wager he's looking for some grounds to dismiss you.”

Vergeten smiled and said, “Well I thank you, young man. And don't worry, it's easily dealt with. All I need to do is...make friends with that young girl.” And she winked at me, but not unkindly.

Later I passed Vergeten in a corner of the downstairs lodge. Evidently she was on a break and had her cards out and the young freckle-faced maid in front of her. The young maid was looking intently and cheerfully, eager to have her fate read for free. But I could tell with the hypnotic motions and alternating patterns of red and black Vergeten was doing more than reading this young maid's fate. She was hypnotizing her. I grew concerned and more than a bit uncomfortable. How often did Vergeten use this power? And on who? Had I made a mistake in telling her about the threat?

I approached the two of them and Vergeten said, “Ah, Mr. Cutter, just in time. I was just having a chat with our friend here and explaining that Mr. Drummond Senior often



can't quite be trusted. What do you think?"

The young maid's eyes drifted toward me as if in a dream. "Hmm...?" she said, "I can't?"

"Well..." I replied. "To be quite honest, I think he cares more about the relics in that museum of his than the flesh and blood people walking through it. If you know what I mean."

"You see?" Vergeten said. And with a flourish, she picked up the cards. The maid blinked slowly.

"Oh, and the cards had one more thing for you. They say not to worry, dear. I think that young boy back home you're sweet on returns your affections."

"Oh really?" the maid said happily. "Why thank you so much!" And with a spring in her step, she returned to her duties.

Once the young maid was out of earshot I asked: "How did you know there was a young man back home?"

"There always is at that age," she said, sighing. "I remember."

And I concluded that despite Vergeten's powers of suggestion, she wasn't a bad sort of woman. She just gave things a bit of a push when needed. Rather like you or I do when necessary, right brother?

I returned to work. The house was bright and cheerful in decor, but I felt I kept catching sight of dark shadows in the corners.

What was hidden in those shadows, I wondered?

# 7pm

## 7pm

### **In Which Cutter Finally Discovers the Object of His Errand**

After over an hour of looking for the right opportunity, between armfuls of decorations and delivering trays, I managed to slip away. James was fully distracted, criticizing someone who had spilled a large bottle of champagne on a fine rug. Seeing him occupied I carried a bundle of linens upstairs and out of his view.

There were two main wings to the manor. One was a guest wing, but it was strangely dark and full of dusty and neglected furniture. I got the sense that few, if any, guests ever came to stay at Drummond Manor. The other wing was the family wing. There was an upstairs sitting room and office and three large well-appointed bedrooms.

The first bedroom I peeked into when a tray of coffee was being delivered. Inside it there were no warm adornments or sentimental keepsakes. Instead, there were weapons of all kinds — knives, pistols, medieval shields. There were also cold and sharp ornaments of his time in the military with a full collection of medals and commendations. There were no drawings or pictures of family, no woman's touch in paintings or mementos. It was a severe and decidedly unfriendly room. And it gave the impression that while this was clearly the grandfather's room, he was not the kind of grandfather whose lap you would leap into when you came to visit.

The grandfather was there at the desk, tapping his hand sharply as he read a letter. He seemed nervous but as he read he relaxed and looked pleased. He said something along the lines of "Very well, that's sorted" and rose to finish dressing. I quietly shut the door. The second bedroom I could clearly see into when a servant left the door ajar upon leaving. It was Annabelle's room. Her unruly and messy bun was being reshaped into an elaborate hairstyle. She looked none too pleased as the servant pushed and pulled her hair while apologizing repeatedly and explaining that Annabelle's hair was thick and had a mind of its own. A second servant was applying makeup with quiet strokes to her face as Annabelle complained. To distract herself Annabelle was tinkering with a mechanical soldier in her lap.

I also saw a couple of other mechanical toys on her bureau — one a mouse and another a nutcracker. They looked like Viktor's handiwork. I knew then that there *was* something between those two. But I also knew I'd not find your power source in there. These were

toys, not serious instruments.

The third door was firmly closed, and I couldn't see any way in but a direct approach. I grabbed an armful of linens, cleared my throat, and knocked on the third door. Aiden Drummond answered. "Oh," he said seeing the pile of sheets and towels in my arms, said, "Come in."

Drummond Jr. definitely looked like his daughter. He had a handsome face and a thin mustache as well as thick, sharply molded hair that was just starting to show flecks of gray on the sides of his temples. His younger years were firmly behind him but he still looked youthful and slight but not particularly assertive. Having seen the long line of scowling distinguished Drummonds in the library, Aiden Drummond, Junior did not seem to be one of the more refined or powerful members of the family tree. Rather than commanding the house, he seemed swallowed by it. Perhaps the best thing that could be said for him was that he seemed friendly enough.

The woman in the room was talking rapidly to her husband about preparations and explaining she had ordered these decorations put back and that they just wouldn't do with this year's theme. "Green *and gold*," she said, "The silver simply ruins the effect." She looked quite a bit younger than her husband if my eyes didn't deceive me. In fact, too young to be a 16-year-old girl's mother, I thought. She was one of those flighty women who speak a constant stream of words in a high voice with such speed that sentences never seem to begin, or end, but simply go on forever.

I delivered the linens into a bureau made my apologies for interrupting and turned to leave. But when I glanced to Mr. and Mrs. Drummon it was clear neither of their eyes were on me.

This was the moment.

I stepped out of the room, took your invisibility serum, and waited a moment for it to take effect. Then I called out a goodbye to the Drummonds. But instead of leaving I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. Then I held my breath.

Their conversation continued as normal. They didn't suspect or see a thing.

Mrs. Drummond was apparently fussing over a seating chart, saying, "And I simply don't think it'll do to have the Harpers seated next to the Smiths. They haven't spoken since the incident last Spring. You remember the incident don't you darling?"

"Yes, of course," he said without looking up.

"Because with *their* daughter returning and their son's failed courtship of *the Harper's*

cousin things took a turn. I can't say I blame the son though the Harper's cousin isn't exactly the prettiest in the family, is she? Well, the two families simply haven't been seen together in at least a fortnight if not longer. But with Christmas and the season and all things will either thaw or freeze, don't you agree darling?"

"Yes, quite right," he said halfheartedly.

And so it continued.

Eventually, the wife grew concerned about a particular set of glasses being put in the right place and made her way downstairs calling to her husband that she'd be right back.

I assumed he'd follow her and I would be in the clear but he didn't. He simply sat there for a moment, tapping his hand (a habit from his father I think).

And what he did next was profoundly odd. He was fully dressed for the evening's festivities in a sharp and jet-black suit, but he crouched down feeling below his bed for something. He cursed and strained and then finally retrieved it.

I moved up closer to look over his shoulder. I controlled my breathing, taking deep shallow breaths as I'd learned the hard way over the last year.

I could see that Drummond was pulling up a wooden box he then placed on a table. From inside his pocket he took a key unlocked the box. I thought, no I hoped, that this is what I came to find. Yet nothing glowed or clanked in the box. Instead, it was just ... letters. He removed each letter carefully, about five in all. He flipped through them, sighing.

I got the gist quickly: They were love letters.

But why would he be hiding them from his wife? Wouldn't she have written them?

And then, yes, it hit me. They were letters not from his *current* wife.

The last two letters were in different handwriting. Masculine and sharp. It must be Aiden's. I read the first:

*My dear bride,*

*I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly — but you see my money has finally run out. I could only take so much with me when we fled and got married. I need to finally return and convince my father to see reason and allow me my rightful share of the estate. He will accept you. He must. I think once he sees our dear Annabelle, sees his own granddaughter, he'll reconcile and accept what has happened.*

*I needn't remind you that because your own family has disowned you this is our only real option.*

*Give me one week.*

*Your forever love,*

*-Aiden*

This must have been written to Drummond Junior's first wife. Apparently he'd fallen in love, fled, married, and then been forced to return home when his funds ran out. Having met the grandfather I can't imagine he found a warm reception upon returning.

Then I read the last letter over his shoulder. He lingered over it, allowing me to read the whole thing clearly.

*My dear,*

*I know you are anxious. I told you to wait a few weeks more as I smoothed things over, but now you insist on coming? Very well. But I must warn you that father's mood has not lightened.*

*If I am honest, my father has also begun to put some doubts in my mind about our union. Did we move too quickly? Did we act too rashly? Perhaps. Do I regret our dear child? Never.*

*Yes, I think in the end that it's best that you come here. You'll need to hear from my father and the three of us must work this out.*

*Please don't fear being thrown into the street or some sinister action like that. I know that with the force and speed with which your family disowned you, you cannot return there. I know that our union scandalized your own friends. And I know, as you've told me, that I'm all you have in the world now. I will ensure that you and Annabelle are taken care of and provided for.*

*We may need to think differently about all this — that is all I'm saying —*

*Sincerely,*

*-Aiden Drummond*

*P.S. Be sure to dress Annabelle warmly, the carriage ride over was frigid.*

Evidently, after a few weeks at home, the son's mood had changed. Either Aiden had seen the situation more clearly outside the emotion of it all, he'd gotten cold feet, or his father had exerted a fair amount of pressure on him. Perhaps all three.

I was so distracted trying to read what I could from the notes I was surprised by a sudden loud sound. Drummond Junior had balled his hand into a fist and struck his bed.

He was muttering something and I risked leaning in to hear it:

"What could I have done? My father had cut me off. No future there for a child. What life would she have had? I'd been impulsive. I was too young. But now, at 16, a girl needs her

mother. A real mother. And she has none. Because of me. We should never have gone back to that old mansion.” At least that was what I could make out.

I remembered the fire that Vergeten spoke of. It must have occurred after the former Mrs. Drummond arrived at the estate. What happened there? Was it just an ill-timed tragedy? Did he regret, after thinking he might be better separated from his new wife, that she actually perished? Did he blame himself for wishing this out into the universe? Could it be even darker? Could he have had his wife killed?

“Son? Aiden! Are you in there?” a voice called from outside the door.

Despite being a full-grown man, Aiden Drummond panicked and quickly hid the box behind his back.

“Yes,” he replied. “What is it? I’m busy!”

“Come out here to the upstairs sitting room. We need to speak to Viktor!” the grandfather called.

Aiden looked at the box and shoved it halfheartedly under the bed. Then he looked at himself in the mirror, took a deep breath, and shook off the emotion of the previous moments. As he walked he plastered a smile on his face, but his eyes still seemed sad. That was all interesting but where in the world was our power source?

I knew I had only moments left with the invisibility serum dose I’d taken but I risked following Viktor into the upstairs office. The grandfather and young Viktor were sitting opposite one another on large well-appointed leather couches. Viktor was looking excited but nervous, the grandfather was smiling, but in the way a shark smiles before striking.

“If you don’t mind, son,” the grandfather said, “Viktor needs access to the item.”

“Yes,” Viktor said, “It all appears to be working correctly, though with my limited power sources only for a minute or so at a time. When I tested it previously with *your* source, it appeared to work perfectly and for far longer.”

“Very well, I guess it’s time,” Drummond Junior said, “I can’t wait to see what happens when we combine the two – your mechanical wonder and this power source.”

Aiden rummaged through the side compartment of large writing desk nearby. “Now that it’s complete I’ll finally answer some of your questions I’ve been avoiding up until now.” He said it with a good-natured laugh. Drummond Junior reached into a desk drawer and clicked something, causing a secret compartment to pop out of the side of

the desk.

“You’ve asked where I obtained such a strange item. As you know in addition to being a lover of all things mechanical, I’m also a geology enthusiast. All gentlemen must have hobbies after all. I’ve a standing agreement with a trader in North Africa to send me anything interesting he finds. Well, one week he sent this. Only a piece of it was exposed and he couldn’t figure out how to free it from the volcanic rock it was inside. Said it came from an extinct volcano in North Africa. Yet, the sliver of it sticking out was an extraordinary yellow color.”

Viktor was interested. I could tell he wanted to ask a hundred questions but he stayed silent.

Drummond Junior was fishing inside a secret compartment and clicked something inside it. Now, a small piece of the top of the desk, just above the wooden leg of it, popped up. This Drummond Junior unscrewed as he talked.

“I tried everything to separate the gem from its volcanic case—hammers, chemical compounds, nothing worked. That’s when I showed it to you. You, my young Viktor, actually gave me the solution more than six months ago.”

Viktor’s eyes brightened.

“I’d hired you to create some mechanical presents for Annabelle. She has her father’s scientific streak, much to the distaste of her grandfather. I asked about various methods of manipulating properties of rock — you said that after physical and chemical some were experimenting with electrical.”

He’d unscrewed the top of the desk’s secret compartment and pulled a cylinder out of it. Inside was something glowing. No, glowing is the wrong word. Flashing? Hissing? Crackling? Something like that. As soon as your eyes rested on it, it seemed to flash and change.

“You often asked what gives this extraordinary gem its power. Well, I stumbled into it. It’s likely the only scientific discovery I’ll ever make—I love science but I know I’m nothing more than an amateur. I’d taken the gem out to the garden shed to use some of the more acidic chemicals on it. But I was called away and had left it there. When I tried to go back a terrible storm had started. Well, during the night the shed was struck, and when I went the next morning I was amazed. It had all burned, except for the rock. All the volcanic casing had burned off leaving this glowing softly.”

And he handed Viktor the gem inside its case. It was only about the size of a small palm

sized ball.

“You gave it to me in that state...” Viktor said, “And I saw quickly that I could connect mechanical components to it... But those were small charges at first. Then the gem seemed to grow stronger in power. I couldn’t figure out why or how it was growing in strength and power. How did you manage that?”

“Oh quite simple,” Drummond Junior said, “It’s caught an electrical bolt from every storm in the last year at least. I had the lightning rod lengthened if you haven’t noticed and have been placing the gem on it. The small rock has the power of over a dozen lightning storms flowing through it now.”

Viktor held the cylinder in his hands and murmured, “A dozen storms in there. Amazing. It really is beautiful. I only hope what I created for Annabelle will do it justice.”

At this Drummond Senior handed Viktor a check, payment for services rendered, and shook his hand. “When my son said we should hire a tinkerer, and a mere teenager at that, I thought he was mad. But I’ve been proved quite wrong. You’ll notice the amount is larger — much larger — than what we agreed. We’ve had to change a few small details of the agreement but it’s all there in the note.”

Seeing the amount written on the check Viktor sputtered, “Oh my, thank you, sir. I must be going now sirs, it’ll be ready, all ready, soon. I must run now.”

And he made his way downstairs with obvious excitement.

But when I happened to glance at my hand now, I could see it shimmering in the air. The serum was fading. I needed to get out of this library quickly.

“What was that?” I heard Drummond Junior ask, “About changing the agreement?”

“It’s all for the best,” the old man said, “I realized we couldn’t allow Viktor to have the gem after all but I’ve compensated him for it. And besides, we’ve better things to worry about tonight. I’ve received wonderful news. I won’t take but a moment to announce it later during the party.”

“But I promised Viktor that gem,” Drummond Junior said.

“Don’t worry about it, son. You’ve always left the business dealings to me, and have I ever steered you wrong?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes, if you’ll remember the matter of my first wife.”

But the grandfather waved the comment away.

“Try to enjoy yourself tonight, son, for Annabelle’s sake. She only turns 16 once after



all.”

That was all I got before I quietly opened the door and left.

The good news was that I'd very clearly found your power source, brother.

The bad news was that I had no way to get it.

# 8pm

8pm

## **In Which Cutter Finds His Task Even More Difficult Than Expected**

“You there! On the landing! Where have you been!”

James caught me on my way downstairs.

“Get down here immediately, dinner is being served. Drinks are to be served promptly afterward. Get a tray in the kitchen and get out there *now*.”

I mumbled an apology and raced to the kitchens. Servants were now coming out of the kitchen with carefully balanced trays I grabbed one and I followed them doing my best to throw my shoulders back and raise my chin. But I found that I could barely see my feet in front of me, much less balance a large tray.

I found myself at the largest table where the Drummond family was sitting at one end with a collection of best dressed and most well-to-do men and women in the room. The men wore sharply tailored suits with perhaps a pocket square or vest of holiday adornment. Meanwhile, the ladies were dressed in elegant gowns of gold or shawls and hats of deep green. (A few ladies at the lower tables hadn't gotten wind of the colors and were dressed in red gowns that stood out and clashed and they looked embarrassed.) After a brief prayer from the local parish priest, the servants pulled off the covers of the trays and placed them on the table in one elegant move. The trays contained oysters and other shellfish. Soon after, a hearty soup was brought out as the first trays were cleared. Annabelle caught my eye (she must have recognized me from earlier). She waved me over conspiratorially and said, “Oh dear these oysters simply don't look fresh enough, I'll have to send them back.”

I glanced down. They looked cold and clammy sitting there in their shells. I started to say something in protest because they looked nearly alive to me, but she raised her eyebrows at me. Ah. I understood. She hated oysters and I couldn't blame her — I wouldn't want to eat a slimy snail-looking thing either.

“Of course, miss,” I said nodding with my chin raised as high as I could in imitation of James, “I'm so sorry. I'll tell the kitchen. Can I get you something else?”

“Oh, how about a large fresh loaf of bread if you don't mind?” she said, and she gave me a small smile.

The rest of the meal proceeded in this fashion. After the soup course a fish course was

brought in — a large river caught local fish with unappetizing yellow eyes. Again, Annabelle criticized the food and had me substitute it. Finally, the main course was a large turkey with liberal amounts of fresh herbs and baked to a golden crust with a crunchy skin. Annabelle finally devoured that and asked for another portion. There followed a salad course with fresh vegetables and a light French dressing. By the end I was finally getting used to the art of walking, carrying trays, and looking expressionless.

But just as I got the hang of things I was reassigned to bring drinks out to the front courtyard. The dessert course would evidently be served out there. The air was quite cold but thankfully there was little wind. Lamps were lit. In the center was Viktor's machine. There was now a simple black tarp thrown over it. Guests were soon beginning to make their way out now, grabbing glasses of champagne from trays. The guests walked down the large front steps murmuring excitedly.

After each guest had a glass of champagne in hand, Mr. Drummond cleared his throat and stepped forward in front of the tarp and machine.

"Thank you," he said loudly into the chilly air, "For joining us. As you know this is a special time of year for many reasons. The first of which is the wondrous Christmas season which is of great religious significance...and so forth..."

Apparently, Mr. Drummond Junior was not a very religious man. The parish priest, I noticed, gave a longsuffering sigh.

"But, secondly, this season is special because it was in this season our family came to this village so many years ago. And you have welcomed us with open arms after a great tragedy. The bright lights and warm fires lit our hearts and lives after a cold time." Nods and smiles rippled through the crowd.

"And lastly, this season is special because it is the birthday of my dear daughter! A better gift I could never receive. Annabelle, you are my light and I daresay the light of this dear village. To have lost your mother so young and to yet grow into a person of light and life is an extraordinary thing. So today on your sixteenth birthday we wanted to give you a special gift."

Mr. Drummond Senior coughed loudly and the younger Mr. Drummond caught himself. "Well, really it is from your grandfather *and* me. It was my connection with Viktor that led to the idea and your grandfather helped fund it, of course, generous man that he is." At that comment, a few snickers were audible behind me among the servants.

“But now without further ado, I want to present you, Annabelle with this gift. When we recently traveled to Moscow I know how very enraptured you my dear daughter were with the recent ballet from that master composer Tchaikovsky. You danced through the halls for weeks! While I couldn’t bring the entire ballet with me from Moscow, thanks to Viktor, I managed to bring this. Viktor?”

And Viktor emerged, sweating a little, but smiling shyly. Annabelle smiled back at him with barely hidden affection.

“Well, it has been...” Viktor said aloud in a small voice that seemed to fade in the cold air “...a privilege to create something for you. For your birthday. And...” he seemed to fumble his words looking at her. “And for the whole house and town...of course. Anyway, I hope you enjoy it and so forth.”

And with a flourish, he pulled the large heavy curtain covering down.

The crowd gasped.

Standing there with arms overhead and toe pointed was a seven-foot-tall ballerina. The ballerina’s skin was painted the brightest shade of white, with shining pink circles on her cheeks, the face frozen into an elegant smile. Her costume was a soft pink and of the most delicate fabric. The crowd drew closer, a hushed awe settling over them at the sight of this extraordinary statue.

Then the ballerina began to move.

Viktor adjusted something at the base and soft buzzing and whirring began to be heard from the ballerina. The head, with its unmoving smile, moved toward Annabelle and the ballerina nodded elegantly. Small motors and gears turning were visible then, in the neck. The ballerina then began to spin — first with arms out and then with arms in a circle again above her head. The ballerina’s toe pointed out toward the crowd and then back in.

The crowd applauded.

“But that’s not all, is it Viktor?” Mr. Drummond asked with good nature.

“No sir,” he said with a smile. Viktor nodded and then a phonograph was brought out. It began to play the loveliest ballet music I’d ever heard.

“Ah, the *Nutcracker*,” a woman’s voice near me said. It was Vergeten, the fortune teller now at my side. She’d cleaned up somewhat into a staff uniform but maintained somewhat wild hair and some jangling bracelets on her wrists. “He has outdone himself this time, Mr. Tchaikovsky.”

Then Viktor removed from his pocket a slim metal case. And as he opened it, it glowed. It seemed to crackle and hum. That sphere about the size of a man's palm was inside flashing. Viktor removed it, stepped up toward the ballerina, and opened a panel in the ballerina's back. Before he placed it inside he held it in both hands and murmured something softly, then placed the sphere in. A ripple of electrical energy moved through the statue once, then twice.

And then as the music played, the ballerina stepped off the platform.

The crowd gasped again and this time, pushed itself out. For around the circle platform the ballerina now leapt and danced and pirouetted with elegance. Motors and whirs could be heard faintly over the music of the phonograph. It was obvious this was some mechanical automaton but like none any of us had ever seen. It moved on its own, its movements elegant and soft with only occasional jitters or stutters and it quickly recovered. And the size of the ballerina — at seven feet tall — made its effect even more striking.

As the movement of music finished Viktor clapped twice and the ballerina took the steps up the platform again. It looked to Annabelle and despite not being able to move its face, the ballerina mimed blowing a kiss to Annabelle. Then the automaton returned to first position — arms rounded forward, both feet pointed in a straight line.

The crowd which had been in hushed silence, now exploded into applause. Even the servants forgot their tasks and positions and cheered.

Viktor beamed shyly and made a small bow. Then he removed the crackling ball of electricity and placed it back in its case. And then handed the case to Mr. Drummond Junior and shook his hand.

But he was quickly intercepted by Mr. Drummond Senior, who took the case himself. I could overhear him saying something like, "I'll take that — Paid a pretty penny for it after all."

Then Mr. Drummond Senior raised his hand to quiet the applause of the crowd. His angular chin raised in a forced smile. "If you will allow me..." he began and waited for the crowd to stop murmuring.

"It is a special occasion. My granddaughter's birthday. Sixteen. Having only one child all the hopes and dreams of this family rest on her — as if she were not special enough."

Annabelle smiled at her grandfather, but I think I detected it was just slightly forced. The man continued and stood up on the platform to continue.

“As you know, I am not quite as young as I once was. But it is and has ever been my hope to see my family settled for the future long after I am gone. That is why I am proud and relieved tonight to announce an engagement. The engagement of my daughter Annabelle to Steven Hastings — who will after his father entire the title of Duke and the large Silverbrook estate. With the union of our two families, our legacy will live on as surely as it has. Perhaps greater. Congratulate my granddaughter. Though she will leave next year, I know her light will remain here forever.”

I looked to Mr. Drummond Junior and he looked as if he'd been struck by a bullet. His mouth was agape. Annabelle tried to smile but it was little use — she was shocked and saddened.

“Oh but isn't that lovely! A wedding to plan!” Mrs. Drummond said, oblivious to the distress of Annabelle and her husband. She clapped and then the rest of the guests clapped politely with her.

“Now, I wanted you our dear friends to be the first to enjoy this,” the grandfather continued. “For soon enough this will travel with Annabelle to a future home. As you can imagine this is quite an early engagement for a young girl, but the Duke's family would like to see the matter settled, even if the engagement is lengthy. In the meantime, and for the foreseeable future the Duke's family has invited us to live nearer them in a large estate that the family has available. All the better to get to know and be integrated into our future family and their social circles.”

“And this,” he said gesturing to the ballerina, “In the future, it will only be accessible at the Duke's large and formidable estate. Few in England will see what you have seen! And while this news will be attended with joy tonight, there is I am sure some sadness on the part of my granddaughter as well. You understand of course. Because in some ways this holiday party will be goodbye for us.”

At this, the crowd murmured. They realized, I think, that the grandfather and Drummond family were moving up in the world and leaving them all behind.

James, who had been a constant presence of barking orders had fallen silent and looked like he had taken ill. His hands were clenched and he stared straight ahead.

The crowd dispersed as I saw Viktor, standing alone, his hand on the ballerina. And for the first time, I realized the mechanical wonder had been painted to look something like Annabelle. And with his hand on it, Viktor was crying softly. Then he balled his hand into a fist and hit the mechanical leg with force. It clanged.

This house is crackling with more than electricity. I suspect that I must obtain the item immediately, and make my escape quickly. In the drama of the moment I'd lost track of where it was and who had it. Bbut I needed to work fast.

This place, I realized, was liable to explode.

## 8:30pm

8:30pm

### **In Which Cutter Tries to Ignore Mounting Household Problems**

As I walked back inside the fortune teller woman grabbed me and pulled me into a side room and whispered, “Come on— This way—This will not do for the young lady—Not at all.”

“But Vergeten, I simply can’t,” I tried to protest. “I have my own...tasks tonight.”

And she looked at me, and it seemed, through me.

“Oh I know,” she said. “But I think we may be able to help each other. And don’t you want to help that dear girl?”

I squirmed.

“I don’t know what it is you think you know about me but...” I said.

“Oh, I know you came here tonight to steal something. Over the years, I’ve discovered I don’t really need the cards to read people. In fact, most good card readers do the reading before they ever take out the cards. They just present it all with a flourish. So yes, you’re here to steal something.”

I swallowed hard and tried to look innocent. I can’t say I think I succeeded.

But she just continued: “Every year there are fresh-faced kids trying to take a piece of the Drummond future. That’s why I told you to at least take something from the old man. But most who come here as thieves are disappointed. The fortune has been fading. Mr. Drummond Senior’s holdings while extensive haven’t been as successful as they once were. And Mr. Drummond Junior ... well it seems his heart isn’t in the management of the estate. Hasn’t been for years.”

I blinked at the revelation. How then had the Drummonds commissioned such an extraordinary gift for Annabelle? “But that thing downstairs...the ballerina...the party...”

“Oh,” the woman laughed with a raspy voice, “It’s important to them to maintain their outward appearance. The annual Christmas party is an annual announcement that they’ve still got money. But the cupboards are bare, as it were, my dear. Many of the valuables have been sold off bit by bit. Rare silver. Gold jewelry. Artwork of incalculable value traded for lesser. The whole guest wing has been cleaned of valuables. So you see —”

And she took my hands in hers. They were calloused but kind.



“The cards have brought you to me, my dear. Brought us. Because this poor girl must be rescued. While you are here, why not help?”

And, dear brother, I must admit I was tempted. But I thought of Christmas and the lessons I learned that year from my father. And I said simply:

“Helping just makes you poorer. I’m sorry.”

Then I walked away.

The guests were returning to the party and mingling and buzzing about the ballerina in the courtyard. So I slipped into a side closet to change and calibrate the serum for another half hour.

Time was of the essence. I suspected that the mechanical figure and electrical ball were the hinge of the Drummonds future, the last investment that can and must pay off to reverse their futures. They’d do everything they can to guard it.

“That poor girl, poor poor girl...” I heard James muttering as he walked toward us.

I thought I nearly glimpsed a tear roll down his cheek, but it may have been a trick of the light. Evidently, the announcement had caught him off guard, despite being the head of household there. What did he care? Wasn’t he simply a servant?

I remembered what Vergeten had told me, that he’d been with the family for years. I imagined that he’d watched Annabelle grow up. And with a disengaged mother and a distracted father and an uncaring grandfather I imagine he’d spent a fair bit of time with that young woman. He had no children of his own, it seemed, the household was his family. I remembered Annabelle popping into the servant’s floor and imagined that was a regular occurrence.

Vergeten came up and put her hand on his cheek, her bracelets jangling as she did.

“You poor dear,” she said. “You really do care for that girl don’t you?”

“Of course, I care,” he said bitterly, “it is my duty, I —”

“This is more than duty,” she said softly. “I see it. You scruffy grumpy ill-tempered man, you really do care, don’t you? Is that why you stay?”

James’ expression softened and a single tear rolled down his cheek. So Vergeten embraced him in a hug saying softly, “Come here then.”

And with their embrace, I could see a familiarity between the two. I couldn’t sense if they had a regular relationship, or if this was simply a Christmas flirtation every year, but this embrace was warm. The smaller woman with wild hair embraced this large man who looked like a boxer, though he seemed nearly twice her size.

“What’s done is done,” James said with resignation.

“Perhaps, not. You shouldn’t give up.”

He paused a moment and finally said, “I’ve half a mind to just turn in my resignation. I’ve been thinking about it quite a while. I thought I could outlast that old man but he seems to run on spit and vinegar. He’ll probably live to a hundred.”

“No, no, don’t resign,” she said. “You can’t. Especially not tonight. In fact, the cards counsel against it.” She pulled out her cards and began laying them out in front of him. Reluctantly he looked at them. And soon the hypnotic patterns of black and red drew him in.

“Don’t resign,” Vergeten said softly. “The girl still needs you.”

Satisfied that Vergeten wasn’t using her powers for evil, I slipped past them up going back outside. As I went the pull to help this family was great but the words kept echoing in my mind:

*Their problems aren’t mine, I have enough of my own.*

Guests were filtering back into the manor now complaining that the outside air had begun to turn more bitterly cold. The wind had picked up and it was blowing decorations and drink glasses down. Servants frantically grabbed what they could to take inside. Viktor was standing alone, unmoving, framed against the large and now silent ballerina. The mechanical arms were arced upward delicately overhead, the painted face serene. Snow began to fall, biting my face and sticking to the mechanical automaton.

“Viktor where is the gem?” I asked.

But if Viktor had heard me, he didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he turned to me and said: “In one night, it’s all gone. The promised payment for this was minimal but Drummond Junior promised me that I could take the gem largely as payment. Of course, I didn’t insist on a contract. I’d worked for them before. It was a handshake. And now it’s gone. I just read the letter from the old man. He’s changed the agreement. He’s not going to give me the gem now. I don’t want money. I wanted that gem. I can’t help but think about what I could create. And that’s not even the worst part of the day.”

“The girl,” I said.

“Yes. The girl. I know it was too much to hope for but I hoped that...perhaps...My workshop is successful, you know. Getting more orders here and some orders even from France and my old homeland in Germany. I thought with time I could make an attempt to...or at least try to...perhaps in a year or two...”

“But now she’s engaged.”

“Now, she’s engaged to a future Duke no less. Whatever hope I had is lost.”

He was unmoving and simply continued to stare at the automaton.

“Viktor couldn’t you just, you know, take it? The gem?”

His eyebrow rose slightly. But then fell.

“I couldn’t do that to Annabelle. If this is what she wants... And anyway, the old man will never let it out of his grasp now.”

So, that’s where the gem was now. The old man still had what I needed.

I wanted with all my heart to promise to steal the gem and give it Viktor. He could flee — back to Germany perhaps. He could leave tonight not fully empty-handed. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t help this young man at the expense of my own brother.

It seemed tonight everyone had their share of problems and I had more than enough of my own.

# 9pm

## 9pm

### **In Which Cutter Gets Close, But Not Close Enough**

I ducked into a cupboard and took another dose of the invisibility serum. I needed to be careful now. I didn't have many more.

Some guests were already calling for their coats and carriages. I knew the Drummond family couldn't be far — and I discovered the three of them in the downstairs library. The cold busts and figures of departed Drummonds looked onward to the conversation with coldness. The family was arguing and not quietly. I crept past the busts of past Drummonds, a globe, and other artifacts and got closer.

"Listen Annabelle," Drummond Senior said in a patronizing tone as if she were a little girl rather than a sharp girl of 16, "LISTEN my dear. As you know the fire years ago greatly diminished our holdings and finances. Yet I've done all I can to manage it safely to this moment. I could sense, immediately, that you were special. And how special? Special enough to take your place among the nobility of this country. We've been outcasts too long."

"But we are not outcasts Grandpapa," Annabelle said. I noticed that she'd put her large glasses back on — a beautiful young woman in a fine gown with the largest and thickest spectacles I'd ever seen. She chewed her lip and tried to argue: "This town loves us, our friends love us..."

The grandfather laughed unkindly and said, "Some backwater townies? Some local gentry? Come now Annabelle, I see now your education has been too limited. Too small. This marriage will secure — no *expand* our name. The Duke's son is a great prospect, a fine man. You'll learn to care for him in time."

"But," Annabelle said softly, "What if I don't want to care for that man? What if I'm fine right here?"

"Because you already care for someone else you mean?" the old man asked.

"Yes," was all she said.

At this the grandfather's face had a spasm of anger ripple across it, but he controlled himself and returned to his grandfatherly tone.

"My dear sweet girl," he said softly with an arm on her shoulder, "I know. Oh, I know. That tinkerer has been hanging around this house for far too long. It's my fault, you

know. Your father hired him but I kept giving him money to do it. But now you must see it's nothing more than a childish flirtation. You have been a girl. Now you must become a woman."

"But I —" Annabelle tried to speak but was choked up by tears.

"You know I am not well," the old man said softly and he added a small cough to make his point. "You know this. I have not much time. And my dying wish, as it were, is to see this family restored. Our legacy secured. Our future bright. You wouldn't deprive an old man of his dying wish would you my dear?"

"But you've said that mother left me some amount of money? I thought that once I turned 18...I can start helping with our expenses. Father said it would be enough to live a comfortable life."

The grandfather shook his head, "Yes, your mother left you some funds, of course. Or rather, her family. A sizeable amount was left in trust for you when you turn 18. Her parents insisted holding it until then." (And I detected there a hint of resentment in his tone.) "But it's an amount sufficient for a *small* estate, not what we have now, of course, it will not last you forever. And if you, dear girl, are determined to help support your father and I, it will dwindle much faster than you think. And you *do* want to help, don't you?"

Annabelle struggled with his words. She looked torn between doing her duty as a Drummond and a desire to give her grandfather a good piece of her mind.

Sensing this, the grandfather pressed in further: "And one more thing... I'm afraid that if our fortunes continue as they are we simply won't be able to retain most of the household staff. This would likely be the last Christmas in our household for most. So unfortunate. I know some of them have become quite dear to you over the years."

At this, Annabelle did flinch.

"Whereas... if you accepted the proposal from the Duke's son, I'm sure many of them could be brought with us across the country. And think of the privilege and security of being part of the household of a future Duke. It would lead to a far brighter future for them all."

Annabelle sighed, exasperated. She was trapped.

Then she nodded.

The old man took a bottle of dark liquor out of a nearby cabinet and began to pour three glasses. Backlit by the moon behind him he appeared ghostly and unnatural. He

hummed the tune of the ballet slightly as he did so.

He tried to hand one to Annabelle, saying “Congratulations are in order then.”

But she looked at him coldly and said with as much dignity as she could muster, “If you’ll excuse me, I must see to our guests.”

Mr. Drummond Junior had not moved through the whole interaction. His fists were clenching and unclenching I noticed. He tried to speak more than once but the words couldn’t come.

Finally, softly, I heard him speak: “I won’t let you do this again.”

“What’s that boy?” Drummond Senior asked.

“I won’t —” he said clearing his throat “I won’t let you do this again.”

“It’s already done,” the old man said, putting the stopper of the liquor on firmly.

“It can’t be.”

“I have to admit you enabled all this, my son. That gem. This mechanical wonder of a gift. What a gift. Fit for a King. Fit at least for nobility. You will box up the mechanical wonder and prepare it for transport to the Silverbrook estate. There you will unbox it and demonstrate it with as much flourish and showmanship as you can manage.”

“Whatever for?”

“Because the Duke, your future in-law, has a delight for all things mechanical. Can’t get enough of them. Just like you in that respect. All those clocks and gears. It’s the fashion of the moment. Hastings is a surly and sour chap but becomes a child again in the face of a good grandfather clock. That’s why I funded your little mechanical adventures, son. And you then brought two things together masterfully — though you didn’t realize it.”

“What are you playing at now, father?” Drummond Junior was growing upset.

“You brought it all together,” he said as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “Your acquaintance with Viktor and you obtaining that rare gem. And in bringing them together — magic. Sheer magic. I knew I had what I needed. The last stroke would be a gift to the Duke. I visited and told him of it. He’d not found a suitable match for his son yet — he’s something of a bore — but I assured him that our Annabelle would be such a match. And furthermore, I assured him that the mechanical wonder we’d commissioned would follow Annabelle there and provide a fitting centerpiece for the Silverbrook estate. He responded that his family fortunes would be more than sufficient to return our fortunes.”

“You sold your own granddaughter off?” Drummond Junior’s mouth hung open.

“This isn’t anything as crass as bribery you understand. I could just tell that though he was open to the idea of a union between the two, he needed a push. A sweetener. A glass of port to cap off the evening meal, as it were. And so I found it and now I’m capping off the evening meal. All that needs doing is that you travel with this mechanical wonder, demonstrate it, and return with the engagement letter.”

“Wait a moment,” Mr. Drummond Junior said, “The engagement hasn’t been *proposed?*”

“Details,” Drummond Senior said, “It is as good as done once you show up there with this wonder.”

The entire conversation I’d been slowly circling the library trying to ascertain whether the old man had stowed the object somewhere or if he still had it on his person. But I still couldn’t tell. I needed a distraction. I thought of one. It would be risky. But it might work. And if it helped the family in the process, all the better. Not that, at that point, I was really focused on helping this family. Or perhaps I was more than I wanted to admit at the time. My mind was a jumble at that point, brother. I have none of your cold clarity in these moments. Though I often wish I did.

I reached into my pocket for the antidote to the serum. I needed to be visible. I took it. Waited for it to take effect. Then stepped out into the library.

“Excuse me?” I said.

The three family members looked at me, shocked and more than a little red-faced.

“Get out of here at once!” Drummond Senior said with raised voice. “This is a private family matter.”

But Annabelle must have recognized me and interjected, “Let him speak. He wouldn’t interrupt if it were not important.” She nodded at me.

“I beg your pardon sirs and ma’am. But one of the servants fainted. The gypsy woman. Apparently, she read the family’s fate with her cards after the announcement and what she saw was so terrible and caused her such distress that she simply fainted.”

“Bah!” the old man said, “That gypsy’s been a nuisance for years with her superstitions. Distracting the servants. I’ve caught her at it more than once. Get her out of here.”

“Nevertheless, it has caused some amount of... distress... among the servants,” I said carefully. “You should probably understand it and see the cards for yourself so you can calm the staff. Come up with an alternate explanation perhaps?”

I tried to catch Annabelle's eye here. "I think it would be good — to see it for yourselves —" I said it slowly trying to make her understand.

She squinted at me, then said, "Yes, I want to see it."

"This is ridiculous," the old man said.

"Bring her in," Drummond Junior said. "If she really has been a distraction, we'll see what she told everyone, ask her to leave due to distraction, and then calm the staff."

"Fine," Drummond Senior said.

So I ran to fetch Vergeten and found her tidying the last of dinner.

Breathlessly I tried to relate what had happened: "Listen, you can help this family but do exactly as I say. You'll have to trust me."

She smiled and said, "I knew you'd come around."

"I need you to act distraught. Fainting. Disturbed. I told them you read Annabelle's fate and it was dark and you fainted and disturbed the household. They want to see it for themselves, then fire you, most likely. But you can use your...cards, right? To break the engagement?"

She sighed and said, "It doesn't always work like that. There are clear limits. The first time only small suggestions can get through with the cards. The deeper the relationship, or the longer lasting, the deeper the effect. But the problem is that once they snap out of it they remember what has happened. So you have to make them think whatever they believe now was their idea. It takes practice and art."

I blew out a long breath. "Well, you can try. Meanwhile, I'm going to steal that object. You get a chance to save the girl. I get the object. That's the deal."

"Very well," she said. Then she began breathing slowly and heavily, her lip quivering.

"Oh no!" she said. "Oh no!"

"What is it?" I said shaking her.

"What?" she said blankly. "You said to be distraught."

"Oh. Right. Yes."

And then as we walked she began crying out and her eyes welled with tears. We approached the library.

If this doesn't work, I thought, we'll both be dismissed and I'll lose my chance at that object forever.



## 9:15

9:15pm

### In Which Cutter Attempts to Hypnotize Unwilling Participants

I led the way past the bookshelves and busts and portraits to the sitting area at the far end of the library. Vergeten fully embraced her assigned role and was whimpering and muttering “Oh no... no... no... no.” She’d even managed to conjure a few tears and stain her face appropriately. When she saw Annabelle she let out a howl, “Oh sir, the poor girl, the poor poor girl.”

“Look here,” Drummond Junior said. “Compose yourself. You’re disturbing the staff and guests. I’ve half a mind to dismiss you right now. But you’ll show us the source of all this and be quick about it.”

Vergeten wiped her eyes and tried to straighten her hair. “I’m sorry sir, I truly am...it’s just that I couldn’t help but draw the cards for Annabelle and see her fate. And what I saw was just too terrible.”

“Wait a moment. You’ve been here before, I think,” Drummond Junior said. “You have a familiar look to you. But I’m struggling to place you.”

“Yes sir, last few years seasonal work — I live nearby.”

“Strange I don’t remember speaking to you.”

“I try to keep quiet and out of sight. Usually downstairs or behind the scenes sir.”

Drummond Senior lost patience and snapped, “Get on with it.”

So Vergeten knelt down in front of the coffee table. With a smooth motion, she pulled the cards from somewhere in her dress. And then she began to work her magic. She fanned the cards out, pulled them back, laid them in a line, flipped them, and then flipped them again. They swirled around the table. I knew what she was doing now, and now that I knew what to look for, I found it extraordinary.

You’ve always been obsessed with the fringes of science brother. You would have found this extraordinary. Our minds are such fragile things we often don’t know where ideas come from, how they grow, and when we lose them. The key is getting the mind into a receptive and docile state. Often our minds are whirling at a hundred miles per hour, our scurrying thoughts like armor defending us from suggestion. But get the mind to slow down, to pause, to rest, and it can be gently pushed or pulled.

In addition to the cards, she began to mutter and chant and nearly sing:

*“The cards show paths  
That twist and wind  
The die is cast  
The fates align”*

As the cards swirled, Annabelle and Drummond Junior and Senior leaned in. Annabelle’s face quickly softened. Then after a few more moments, Drummond Junior’s frown turned blank. This might work, I thought.

But I could tell that Vergeten had her work cut out for her with the old man. He remained scowling. “Stop your muttering and show us the cards. We’re not schoolchildren playing games.”

She said softly, “A moment a moment” and then she began to arrange the cards in patterns — a cross, an X, a circle. Then she’d sweep the cards back into her palm and make another. The effect began to pull me in as well and I had to blink and turn away, shaking free of the mesmerizing effect.

Slowly, Drummond Senior’s eyes began to soften. Then his jaw unclenched. But he still said, though softer, “We haven’t all day.”

I was making my way slowly around the room now while the rest were distracted, trying to ascertain where the old man had stowed the object. It could tell it wasn’t on his person. But it must be close by. I rummaged through a nearby cabinet but it was empty. Vergeten continued chanting unrushed:

*“The cards show paths  
That twist and wind  
The die is cast  
The fates align”*

So Vergeten laid out the first card — a girl. Clara. Under a Christmas tree.

“The girl Annabelle is there clearly,” Vergeten said.

Then the second card — a rat king. Holding a scimitar.

“Then there is danger — a rat — someone who seems harmless grown monstrous. You must be careful.”

Then the third card — a heart wrapped in sugar plums and sweets.

“There is tenderness and openness. An open and receptive posture.”

Then the fourth card — a poisoned spindle.

“There it is clearly. The danger. The open heart gives way to poison. The open heart is

struck with poison and killed.”

I had worked my way through the obvious bookshelves and bookcases. No secret compartments or drawers I could see. Wherever this object was now, it was well hidden. Drummond Junior said quietly and still hypnotized, “And what does it mean?”

Vergeten cried out, “It’s too terrible to speak! But I will tell you plainly. The girl is Clara. The second figure is her husband-to-be. The third is vulnerability. The last is betrayal. If she goes into that household of the Duke she will die. She will be betrayed. The Duke’s family appears normal but their designs are nefarious. The day she leaves this house is the day her fate is sealed.”

I knew that Vergeten was using hypnosis and the power of suggestion, but even I found myself compelled. She was using the sense of danger the family felt, deepening it, pulling out their own anxieties. Like blowing softly on a flickering flame to bring it to life.

Annabelle put her hands over her mouth in shock.

Drummond Junior looked stricken.

I examined another writing desk. Then a cabinet. It wasn’t here. Where could it be? But when I turned to the old man I did not see what I expected. His expression had grown cold and hard again. He shook his head as if waking from a dream.

“What is this?” he said.

“What?” Vergeten asked.

“You think I’ll accept the ravings of a gypsy over my own good sense? Never.”

“But aren’t you concerned for your granddaughter? Isn’t it dangerous to throw in her lot with a family you barely know? What if a dark fate awaits her?”

“My granddaughter,” the old man said, standing to his full height, “is a Drummond. We make our own fate. The world might rage against us but we rage back.”

At this Annabelle and Drummond Junior seemed to wake from the hypnotic state, shaken by the callous words of the old man.

“And we have what we need to shape our fate,” the old man said. And he walked to the desk nearby and clicked something inside.

“This night has been far too long in planning for me to let it slip from our grasp because of girlish anxieties or the mutterings of an old woman — you’re dismissed gypsy — grab your things and go.” Then seeing me off to the side he said, “And you too!”

“But sir!” I said.

“I’ve seen you slinking about the house. It wouldn’t surprise me if you and this gypsy are thieving. Be gone both of you.”

“Hold just a moment!” Vergeten said.

But the old man reached deep into the desk into some secret compartment and his hand came out with the sphere. It crackled and hummed in his hand. “This will make our family’s fate. This is all we need. Now, I’m warning you, get out!”

I took a step closer to him, wondering if I could wrestle the object out of his grasp and then make a run for it. It wasn’t a good option, but it might be my only option.

I took a step closer.

“Stop!” Drummond Senior yelled and as he yelled it the sphere seemed to spike in energy..

“Listen Mr. Drummond put the sphere down and we can talk about this,” I said. And I took another tentative step forward.

“I SAID STOP!” Drummond Senior yelled and as he did an arc of electrical energy shot from the sphere out toward me. I felt it race through my body like a searing bolt of lightning. I felt myself held in place as every limb went rigid, and then my vision went white.

I fell.

## 9:30 pm

### 9:30 pm

#### **In Which Cutter Must Make a Costly Choice**

Do you remember the last good Christmas we ever had? After father had told us to turn away from the beggar? We'd walked home so happily carrying the food we needed for a Christmas feast.

I'd only been brought to England as a boy, our father leaving America seeking his fortune in the old world. The first few Christmases had been nice. We'd inherited that cottage from a distant relative of mother's, remember? Father declared we would be farmers and tried his hand at sheep farming. And for a few seasons, we didn't have much in the way of money but we at least had plenty of mutton and vegetables from the garden. The table was full. Those were good days.

Yet, father quickly tired of such a life in the country and had new schemes for making money. "Foolproof," he told mother. I remember the word because it was so strange. "Foolproof," I remember repeating to myself. So we sold the cottage, took the money, and moved into a smaller home on the edge of London.

"Closer to the action," he said.

But of course, as always, his plan was full of foolish hopes that never came to pass. He'd make money, sure, then lose it. He and mother would fight and argue. Then mother would refuse to leave her room. Then she'd leave and go take the train far away to her distant cousins for a while. (We never visited though — they weren't on speaking terms with father if you remember — and mother seemed glad to be rid of us for a few days.) But one thing I never understood was where all the money went. Was it just invested and reinvested in more "foolproof" speculations?

I found out when, on Christmas Eve, our father approached me. He was full of cheer and mother was smiling for once as he pinched her cheek playfully. Father even coaxed a smile from you as you read a book in the corner as you pretended to ignore him.

Then he took me aside and said he needed my help.

"It's something special son," father said with a twinkle in his eye. "I just need a few pence more to make our Christmas celebration the best ever."

I hesitated because he'd charged me so strongly not to give my meager savings away. "Oh it's okay," father said, "I'll take care of it. A last-minute bit of Christmas cheer is

all we need.”

So I handed the few pence over to him. And he winked at me.

Then he told mother he had one more errand to run. He grabbed his coat and was out the door.

I imagined what he'd return with: A baked good with steam still rising off it? A tin soldier for each of our stockings? A wreath to make momma smile?

But he returned with none of those things. Instead, he returned, slurring his words a bit already, with a small bottle of liquor.

“Where did you get that?” mother shouted, “You promised!”

I didn't understand. Had he lost the money? Why did he have that bottle? I thought of every possible explanation except for the most obvious.

I can see it so starkly now: our father had lied to me, taken my few pennies, and bought alcohol so he could be thoroughly drunk on Christmas Eve.

And then I awoke.

The first thing I was aware of was Aiden Drummond nervously tapping his hand against the side of the chair. “Finally,” he said when my eyes blinked open. “He's not dead.”

I looked around to find Drummond Junior, Vergeten, Annabelle, and now James staring at me.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

“Well, you were electrocuted,” Aiden Drummond explained. “My father insists it was an accident. But I think he's begun to be more unstable in his old age. I am terribly sorry about it all. Now if you'll excuse us we've a party to get back to and guests are beginning to depart. Annabelle is out there doing her best without me.”

This wasn't good. The old man had the sphere. I was surely fired now and had no way to get what I needed. My one plan had been foiled.

“Just a moment though,” Vergeten said softly. “Do you really intend your daughter to be married off like this?”

“Well, I'm not sure what place it's yours to ask. But to be frank, I can't say I would be in favor of it,” Drummond Junior said.

He hesitated, but evidently, Aiden Drummond needed to talk this out with someone, even with a couple servants. “The fact that my father maneuvered us into this is maddening. But there's simply no way out of this, I fear. No way out without causing scandal at least. And having endured my share of scandal myself in the past I'd like to

spare my daughter if I can.”

“But if you had a way to stop this, would you?” Vergeten asked. She was standing and staring at an old portrait. It appeared to be a portrait of Aiden as a younger man and it must have been painted nearly 20 years ago. He was fresh-faced and smiling with brighter eyes and no gray hair.

“Don’t you remember what it was like to be young and have a life ahead of you?” the gypsy asked.

She had her back to Aiden and if I didn’t know better it seemed she was intentionally avoiding looking at him. I thought perhaps she was trying to remain calm and not push Aiden too hard.

“I do remember,” Aiden said quietly. “And I do want the best life I can give to my daughter. But it’s done now.”

“Ah, but is it completely done?” Vergeten asked the portrait. “Is the engagement formally done I mean?”

“Well, it’s good as done. As soon as that mechanical wonder and that infernal ball of electricity arrive at Silverbrook estate, the engagement is sealed. And if I don’t take it, he or someone else will.”

“So it’s not...*completely* done?”

At that Drummond Junior caught himself and brightened just a tiny bit. “Well, no, nearly. I suppose if we could keep that crackling sphere from leaving...the engagement *might* quietly be broken off...”

“Yes.”

“But, how could it be managed?”

“That’s why I’ve been waiting for our friend here to wake up,” she said as she walked toward me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Because our friend here is no worker from a nearby town, our friend here came here for a very particular reason with a particular set of abilities.”

Drummond Junior took a hard look at my gangly disheveled form in a servant’s uniform and said, “Him? He looks like he could be blown over with a gust of wind!”

I resented that remark.

“No, no,” she said smoothing my hair to make me a little more presentable. “He is a thief. I could tell nearly immediately as I talked to him as he walked up to the estate. His answers vague and evasive, his story full of holes.”

I was slightly disappointed then, because I'd thought I'd done quite well.

"I thought I'd keep an eye on him tonight," she said. "I thought perhaps he might even prove useful. The cards have brought him to us just in time. I knew they would. If I had to guess I'd bet that he's here to steal that very ball of electricity that's the source of all our problems. Isn't that right dear?"

You, dear brother, would likely have simply looked impassive and stared at the wall. Instead, I'm sure I looked like a small child with his hand in the cookie jar in the middle of the night. "Er, no, well, I mean I'm not exactly from town but...of course...this can all be explained..."

"Save your stories for more gullible ears dear," Vergeten said. "We need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes, and you need ours. We're going to help you steal that infernal ball and then you're going to take it far from here."

"You are?"

"Yes, and in the process we're going to free this family from that devilish old man. Especially Annabelle."

Drummond Junior had become more animated, sensing there might be some hope in the situation.

"While supportive of this idea of course," Drummond Junior said to the gypsy woman, "I'm presuming you have some sort of plan?"

"Yes, it was to place ourselves in this young man's hands," she said gesturing to me.

"He is a professional thief after all."

Everyone looked at me, waiting. I said nervously, "Look, if you'll really agree to let me have the sphere, I will help you. As you have said I've procured and gotten hold of a number of objects that are very difficult to obtain."

"You *are* a thief," Drummond Junior said with contempt.

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes. And I've found that most rich and powerful people, most brilliant people, have one weakness — their own arrogance. Their pride. They think they can't be stopped. They can't fathom it. You'd be surprised what you can simply walk out of houses and laboratories with. You simply use their arrogance against them."

Vergeten now turned to James who had been silent up to this point. "Would you be willing to help us James?" Vergeten asked.

"We will do what must be done," James said quietly.



Vergeten patted his shoulder softly and gave it a gentle squeeze.

He cleared his throat and said, “I’m starting to think my time here at the house is at an end. But if I can save our Annabelle before I go, I’ll do it.”

Vergeten looked at him with affection and said, “I knew there was a heart of gold beneath that crusty house manager exterior. You’re only cold and severe because you care so much. For years I’ve thought that if I could just get you in a swim costume, sitting on a blanket by the sea, I’d finally meet the real James—the sun in your face and the cares of the house not on your shoulders.”

“Yes, well, perhaps...” James said, “When this is all over...I’d like that. The seaside I mean.””

Drummond Junior, meanwhile, sighed and ran his hands through his once-perfectly combed hair. “Well then. My daughter imprisoned to my father’s schemes and here is what I have to save her — an old house manager, a gypsy woman, and a thief. What could go wrong?”

# 10pm

## 10pm

### **In Which Cutter Finally Does Some Thieving**

One of the curses of having a complete photographic memory (an *eidetic memory* you called it) is that nothing bad that's ever happened to you, can you forget. And too often, I can't control what triggers the memories and they are often triggered at the least helpful times. It's why I spent the whole evening distracted and replaying past Christmases of our family in our mind.

But there are benefits too. Sometimes small details collect and collect, bit by bit. Then slowly these details form themselves into a picture and the picture suddenly presents itself to me. And it did here. I knew what I needed to do.

First, I needed access to the old man's finances. He had been recalled to greet guests slowly filing out of the party, and so I knew I had a few minutes. It helps that I've become quite adept at finding where people hide things. And I analyzed everything I knew about the old man — he was obsessed with the past, he was untrustworthy, he lied and manipulated, and he trusted no one.

That meant that he'd never leave the finances out where they'd be accessible to others. Sure, there might be house ledgers or ledgers in accountant's offices, but I was sure that James and even Drummond Junior would only have partial access. The real ledgers must be in the old man's room.

It was a severe little place. Everything was perfectly aligned. Everything was perfectly cold and unadorned. Not a shirt or a pen was out of its place. But that, of course, only made it easier to search. As I've observed before when you're a thief, people who are organized in their possessions do half the job for you. The hardest places to rob are those with piles of clothing, stacks of papers, and schemes of organization known only to the occupant.

(So, yet again I tell you: when I leave my things around the estate it's not laziness it's an anti-theft strategy thank you very much.)

I checked all the usual places (secret lockbox in the wardrobe, false books on the bookshelf. Then I wondered...what if sons take after their fathers? I tried the exact spot that Drummond Junior had hidden his letters, under the bed and hidden in an alcove. There it was. In fact, there were several hidden boxes there and I felt around until I

seemed to find several boxes of files.

I pulled them out and saw old documents, ledgers, sketches, and receipts. I started with the oldest I could find. It was a ledger of a large sum given years ago – now worn thin and nearly transparent – and a fragile accompanying letter. Though I was keenly aware I had limited time I couldn't stop myself as page after page told a torrid and shocking story:

Apparently, in the grandfather's relative youth, he'd begun a relationship with a girl his age from town. Their union produced a child and whether they'd fled to be married was unclear. Yet, the girl's father soon discovered it and tried to extort the Drummond family. A sum was then handed over from the Drummonds to this girl's family. The relationship was over before it truly began.

A final letter was there with barely a hint of emotion. Apparently, the spark of affection had burned down to smoldering ashes. The young mother said, matter-of-factly, that being unable to give the child the last name of his real father she'd chosen a new last name for him. Because of his thick black hair (all that he'd ever really receive from his father) she'd decided to give him referring to darkness:

Moreau.

While not directly related to the search these documents did give me an insight into the grandfather, which could become important later. This family carried in its bloodline a tragic pattern. The grandfather's actions toward his son that evening and granddaughter were nothing more than an echo of his own life. This family tree was rotten and what grew on its branches was diseased.

And not for the first time that night I thought about our own father. His cheery smile on Christmas Eve. His glassy drunken eyes by the end of Christmas day. As a result, I'd refused to ever drink. But could it be that I'd simply end up an echo of him?

But the sound of someone walking past the room jolted me back to action. It was a servant who — seeing the door of the grandfather's room ajar poked their head in. Seeing nothing. They closed it behind them.

I had only minutes left.

I tried to remember what you told me. Panic makes you miss important details. So rather than speeding up, I kept going methodically, working my way through hidden boxes under the bed. And then, happily, I did find a locked box inside another.

Jackpot.

Once I picked the lock I found a long record of payments and credits. They must be his main personal account. And my *goodness* did he start with a lot of money. But I saw that slowly at first, then faster, this once account was being drawn down. A couple of years ago his accounts took an enormous blow when a ship he'd commissioned on a speculative scientific expedition was sunk and lost. There was even correspondence from a financial manager back to the old man warning against setting such a great sum into it. "I feel it is owed," was all Drummond Senior said in his letter in response and a signed record that he was proceeding despite risks. And so the money was sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Most recently, the old man's major expenses had to do with trips, new suits, gifts — likely what he was using to impress the Duke's family and give the impression of wealth. Then I saw his patronage of Viktor beginning about a year ago. And my goodness was that a large sum. The old man was taking an enormous risk, but one that appeared to have paid off.

Yet, there was something odd about his accounts. He kept receiving infusions of funds from another account. But that was profoundly odd. The blessing of having a perfect memory is that I knew from snatches of conversation that this family's estate money was not as great as it had once been, that it had dwindled over the generations due to tragedy and poor investment. Where had this money kept coming from?

I went quickly now, barely glancing at records, charts, letters, ledgers. Then I finally found it. The infusions of money were coming from Annabelle's trust. This was Annabelle's money.

Yet, that should have been impossible. I found it all laid out in a severe letter from lawyers at the creation of the trust. The substantial amount for Annabelle was to be held in trust until she turned 18. Yet, it was leaving the account somehow. How?

I finally found the answer near the bottom of the stack and tucked inside an envelope. These were records of correspondence between Drummond Senior and a lawyer. They were exactly what I needed. This plus the ledger of Annabelle's account was enough. Or I hoped it would be.

But there was one more thing in that envelope— there was a simple ring rolling around at the bottom of the envelope as well. I knew where it came from. It was there with a small tag attached to the ring that said "Sadie." It was the ring Annabelle's mother had once worn. Perhaps the only thing of hers that survived the fire.

I looked over at a mirror and saw my hands beginning to reappear in the visible spectrum. I took the letters, the ledger, and the ring — and tried to make my way back into the hallway as quickly as I could before I lost all invisibility. I had only one last dose of the serum from you, but if all went well I wouldn't need it.

I just needed to find Viktor.

## 10:30pm

### 10:30pm

#### **In Which Cutter Meddles in Matters of the Heart**

I weaved my way through the downstairs room, which was rapidly emptying. Guests who had been waiting for the weather to let up were finally deciding to brave the cold. The light snowfall dusting the estate was turning sharper. Cups of tea and hot coffee were being poured for those who still remained.

I found Viktor after a great degree of searching, in the back of the house, hidden in a corner. I could tell he'd been trying not to cry but had been unsuccessful, as streaks of tears were evident on his face. They'd been smudged with oil and gear grease from his hands.

"Ah, my friendly assistant," he said trying to smile when he saw me. "Is there anything wrong? Some issue with the ballerina?"

He was trying to put a brave face on. But he looked as if he'd been struck through the heart.

"No," I said. "Well, yes."

I was fumbling now that it came to it. I sighed and pulled myself together.

No, there is no issue with the ballerina. But yes, there is something wrong. I...ah...gather you're not happy that Annabelle is engaged."

At this, his smile dropped and he exhaled a long breath into the cold air, steam rising from him. "I was a fool," he said quietly. "Thinking I could, somehow, some way, whisk a daughter of nobility away. I thought the biggest issue was simply money. Ha! I've no title. No nobility. No chance."

I was silent for a moment as the wind whipped around us. You seem to always know what to say in scientific explanations, brother, explaining the way a serum works or blood runs in the veins. Explanations come so easy to you. But I think even you would have struggled there with Viktor. Because how can you explain the workings of the human heart? It's much closer to magic than science.

I made an attempt anyway—I had to.

"Viktor," I began, "For all your brilliance you're missing the truth here. Everyone is pushing and pulling Annabelle. Telling her what she should do. Deciding for her. But shouldn't she be allowed to decide for herself? She is no collection of gears. Her heart

beats on its own.”

At this, Viktor said, “You’re right of course.”

“You’ve spent too much time with the mechanical Annabelle, so much that perhaps you’ve begun to treat the real Annabelle the same way. She should decide.”

“Yet, what choice can be afforded to her? She is engaged,” Viktor said.

I shook my head and replied, “I just learned that’s not quite true. She will be, and soon. If that sphere and automaton arrive at the Silverbook estate an engagement will be forthcoming. But what if she had another proposal before her first?”

I gave him a knowing look.

It took him a moment. He muttered, “You can’t mean…”

“Tell her how you feel Viktor. Not with a mechanical wonder, but clear and plain from one beating heart to another.”

“How could I consign her to a life of scandal and humiliation?”

“She would not be consigned. She would choose. And as I see it, scandal and humiliation are usually the kind of thing that only sting if you let them.”

“I’m barely a teenager!” he said.

“You’re a successful inventor. You’re going to open a workshop. You’re going to change Europe. And you’ll happily wait for Annabelle until her parents feel she can be married.”

“Well, I’m not sure about the first but I’m definitely sure about the second. Ideally, I’d wait for a few years…grow closer to her…start my workshop…but obviously I can’t. It would be too late. And even if I said something now, her father would never approve.”

“Leave that to me. You will have his permission. And possibly his blessing.”

Viktor was reeling. But a small smile was creeping at his face.

“I don’t even have a ring!” he said laughing.

“I think I can help with that.” Then from the bottom of the envelope, I pulled out the simple ring that had accompanied the ledger and letter.

When I dropped it into his hand, unexpectedly, he hugged me. The anxiety was still written on his face, but it was a different kind altogether—the giddy butterflies of a young man in love.

“I can’t thank you enough. No matter what happens. It’s far easier to plan and scheme and design in my workshop where everything can be laid out, disassembled, and reassembled. There, everything can be examined and calibrated. But sometimes, in real life, you just have to act or you’ll lose the moment forever.”

He began trudging up the back steps toward the house.

“Er, Viktor,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“Have you an idea of what to say?”

At this, he blinked twice.

“It’s traditional,” I said, “To accompany the presentation of an engagement ring with a brief expression of love.”

“Give me 10 minutes,” he said. “Any less and I’ll fumble. Any more and I’ll lose my nerve.”

The pieces were ready. The flint was set. I needed only strike the match.



# 10:50pm

## 10:50pm

### **In Which Cutter Dons a Dubious Disguise**

The last of the guests were now making their way down the steps. As was traditional, Drummond Senior, Drummond Junior, and Annabelle stood outside on the front steps bidding the guests goodbye. It was obvious the other two stood apart from the grandfather. There was an obvious chill between the three of them. But most guests didn't notice and instead still gawked at the mechanical wonder still positioned in the front courtyard, the thing's arms arced outward in a delicate ballet pose.

While this occurred on the front steps, the staff were bringing up the remaining food for their staff feast. There were smiles and congratulations on a job well done, but there was an unmistakable note of sadness among the crowd. They all knew that this meant she'd be going away soon.

Drummond Senior's attempt at a warm smile had soured and with no guests of importance left, it turned into a wrinkled attempt at neutrality. He looked upstairs toward bed and I knew I needed to move quickly.

But first I needed Drummond Junior. I finally caught up with him in the corner where Mrs. Drummond, flighty thing though she was, seemed to genuinely be beaming. Far from being a sour matron of the house she was encouraging the servants.

"The food! The decor! I don't know how you do it every year!" She had grabbed a young maid and was patting her warmly on the shoulder, "Thank you for those delicious pastries served with the coffee!"

The maid had a pained smile and said, "Madam, thank you but I'm a maid I didn't bake anything I just..."

"Simply delicious! Do it again next year!"

And faced with such an enthusiastic hostess the maid finally gave in and said, "Of course madam."

Mrs. Drummond looked toward her husband now, staring off into space, and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Now dear, I know how sad you must be to lose Annabelle but it's simply the way of things. Girls grow up. They marry. She'll be glad of it one day and you will too. And what a lovely wedding we'll once the time has come."

Drummond Junior looked at his wife, the woman I knew he'd been forced into quickly

marrying to return to society, the woman he'd married only after losing his first wife. She seemed by all accounts flighty and simple. She understood nothing of how the world worked (much less the positions of a house). But she wasn't mean-spirited. And in her own way, she was trying to comfort her husband.

And Drummond Junior was glad of the comfort and said, "Thank you, my dear."

Feeling this was the opportune moment I strode up to Drummond Junior. He looked surprised to see me.

"Mr. Drummond, listen," I began awkwardly. "I have a plan. But I'll need your help."

He looked at me quizzically. "What do you have in mind?"

"I just — there's no time to explain — I need you to trust me," I said.

"Young man, I barely know you. But if you explain it to me then —"

"There's *no time*," I said more forcefully than I intended. "Listen, trust this. I know what it's like to be controlled by others. To have a father whose approval you long for but also hate. To feel as if your life were lived on a leash. To feel trapped. It's no way to live."

The words had tumbled out faster than I had intended. And as you read them, brother, you know what I'm talking about. You know our father. And you know, I think, deep down, that there is perhaps too much of him in you.

Drummond Junior stared at me for a long moment and then said finally:

"Alright then."

"I need you to hold up the dinner for 10 minutes. Keep everyone including your father in the room."

"But how will I —"

"I don't know. Make a speech or something. Toast James' last day. Toast your daughter. Toast the royal family for all I care. I need 10 minutes."

Then I disappeared downstairs quickly. I found the briefcase I'd brought in, then found an empty room. I went to work.

That briefcase had become my constant companion over the last stretch of employment with you, brother. I had your contributions:

- (1) one last emergency dose of the invisibility serum
- (3) three passports from various countries and
- (100) one hundred pounds in case of emergency

But in addition to that I'd added slowly over my trips:

- (2) two different changes of clothes (one formal, one informal),
- (1) one false beard with separate mustache and sideburns,
- (1) one makeup kit to add a false scar to my face,
- (2) two kinds of spectacles,
- (?) various kerchiefs, and other assorted jewelry and clothing items.

It took me a moment to decide my final course of action and what I would use. But once I committed to it, the choices came easily:

A large mustache. An elegant pair of spectacles. A pocket watch and silver chain. A neat vest. Rolled up shirtsleeves. And one last thing... in a pile of misplaced clothing items I found a hat that looked like it could be worn by a constable, a tradesman, or a businessman.

Brother, I knew you would not like this next part. Be silent, you'd told me. Be invisible. No one must remember you or know you're there.

Most of my work depends on me being absolutely invisible, and I like it that way. What I was about to do now would be profoundly uncomfortable. I thought about simply giving up, telling you the item was unobtainable, and moving on. But I knew you needed a cure and this family needed something as well.

I was never one for being in the front of the room, telling jokes, or leading out in song. That was always our father. He was like a fireplace at the center of a house. When things were right, the whole house was filled with a glow. Everything seemed a little brighter, every meal a little better, every story a little more wondrous. But when the fire went out, things went dead cold. A chill swept through the house and there was no getting warm. Or when the fire was raging, out of control, the entire house sweat and grew uncomfortable.

I remember that Christmas, after he'd taken my money, and come back with more booze. There was a catch in my throat as I realized what he'd done. But for a moment on that Christmas Eve, it really was alright. All the alcohol would do at first was make him laugh louder, tell grander stories, and grab our mother and whirl her around the room. For that night, at least, I forgot that he'd swindled money from his son and was just grateful the fire was back in the fireplace.

But Christmas morning he woke up angry. The meager presents he handed out which seemed so wondrous wrapped in bright paper the previous night, were opened quickly and put away just as quickly. Then before the morning was out our parents were arguing

again and our mother was threatening to go stay with a distant relative in another part of England. The rest of Christmas the house was bone-chillingly cold in atmosphere. Then we each retreated. You escaped back into a corner of our room, working on problems and formulas—your perpetual refuge. Father left the house and retreated to walk the town, cold and snowy, alone on Christmas day. Mother simply went to bed and lay there. And I found myself in our family room, alone.

That was what drove father's lesson home: *helping only makes you poorer son and we're already poor enough*. It wasn't even that he'd taken the last of my money. It was that I hoped for a family Christmas, only to find everyone gone and myself alone. I learned that it's best to care only for yourself and preserve what happiness you can. It's what everyone does. And if you don't do it too, you'll be the one alone in an empty room, disappointed.

But this house was different.

There was something different in this house. And it wasn't Annabelle alone. It was James. Vergeten. The household staff. And the way they all cared for each other in differing ways. That was the kind of light we never had in our house. Part of me hated that they had something I did not. And part of me found what they had more unspeakably precious because it was something I never had. It was now a fragile, flickering flame about to be snuffed out.

So, I strode out into the main dining room, determined to save this house if I could. It was one house among thousands in England. But perhaps, if I could save one house, on one Christmas, it would leave the world a little brighter.

## 11 pm

11 pm

### **In Which Cutter Unexpectedly Commands the Room**

The large ballroom was filled with tables along the edges, piled high with trays of foods and Hors d'oeuvres and desserts. The staff were laughing and joking and making the best of the strange moment. After hours of service, everyone had an appetite. And the baker was bringing up piles of sweets they'd kept back in reserve. There were eclairs and croissants, small cakes topped with cinnamon and sugar, and hearty cookies with huge chunks of chocolate. To drink there was hot chocolate with chocolate liqueur, spiced cider, spiced rum, and a bright-looking punch.

The place was nearly spotless again because the staff had been cleaning as the guests dined. With the decorations still up, it looked for all appearances like this late-night feast was thrown just for them.

Earlier a staff member had told me how all this came about originally: it was all Annabelle.

She began it accidentally a few years ago when she realized that the staff who ran the party got to sample few, if any, of the delicious goods they served. The little girl stamped her foot and declared she would not eat dessert until everyone serving also had dessert. Determined not to make a scene her father promised everyone would get a bite — assuming a young girl would forget this quickly. But she didn't. She stayed stubbornly in the corner, her arms folded. When the guests finally left, Drummond Junior said everyone could take a dessert as they left. Annabelle declared that was dreadful and ordered the tables cleaned and reset. "It will be a full party or nothing at all," she'd declared.

So, as I walked in the staff were toasting their patron Annabelle. She was smiling but there was an undercurrent of sadness in her demeanor.

I spotted Drummond Senior sitting sourly in the corner like a vulture — his fake smile had dropped now that everyone of standing had gone. He was anxiously waiting until his obligation was fulfilled and he could leave upstairs. Good.

I strode right up to Drummond Junior. He saw me and looked confused.

That was good, too. My appearance was much changed — I looked 10 years older, with a bushy mustache, a hat, and the coat of a businessman. I walked up to the table. Then

stepping from a chair, stood directly on the table (kicking some eclairs to the side). This got the room's eyes on me.

But I cleared my throat and said, with as much force as I could muster: "Your attention please, ladies and gentlemen. I am about to make a grievous but needed announcement. A criminal is among us! And I mean to expose them."

A nearby member of the household staff, old enough to be balding, said, "Look here, who the devil are you to barge in here like this?" And moved forward to lay hands on me.

"Wait a moment there my good man, I'm a private detective!" I said as forcefully as I could, "I've been hired by our esteemed Mr. Drummond, Junior. Isn't that right sir?" Drummond Junior looked as if he'd had his pants pulled down unexpectedly and was recovering from the shock. It had taken him a moment, but I was sure he recognized me. For a moment I feared he'd lose his nerve and back out of the scheme. Instead, he gathered himself and said:

"Yes! I did! I hired this man! He is a private detective and I have hired him. And he is here now, to detect things I have hired him for. Which he will now explain in detail. And you will see why I have hired him!"

It perhaps wasn't the clearest endorsement I'd ever received, but it was enough to get me a hearing. And, as I've learned, confidence can overcome a great deal. If you act as if you're supposed to be somewhere, or doing something, people will often simply accept it.

"Yes, yes," I said lifting my chin into the air. "It was weeks ago Mr. Drummond Junior contacted me. For I have been among you this whole time. Disguised. Unknown. But with a mission of gravest importance. For you see an evil crime has been committed against our dear Annabelle."

"Oh my goodness!" Mrs. Drummond, Aiden's wife, said aloud. "Crimes are such terrible things."

The room murmured with concern. They'd gone from "Who is this man talking on a table?" to "Who did what to our dear Annabelle?" in a matter of one minute. I glanced toward Drummond Senior who looked annoyed, but largely unfazed so far. I'd fix that. "Yes!" I said quieting the crowd. "And not only a crime but an ongoing one, stretching back years." Then I held the documents aloft.

I glanced at Drummond Senior and he was leaning forward now. That had his attention.

“Annabelle’s mother had been from a wealthy family in the France, but they had objected to her relationship. No, more than that, they disowned her and refused to ever speak to her again. Yet, things changed when the fire happened and Annabelle’s mother apparently died. These mysterious in-laws came forward when they found they had a granddaughter. They refused to acknowledge the granddaughter as part of their family, but they did do something. They gave a sizeable amount of money to this granddaughter before cutting off contact completely.”

I was finding my footing now. Somehow the disguise seemed to deflect the anxious state I often got into in front of crowds. I was gathering confidence as I spoke.

“So, despite tragedy, it would have seemed that Mr. Drummond had been set up for life as a widower with his young daughter and a large sum of money. Yet, it was not so easy. Annabelle’s mysterious grandparents hated the Drummonds and distrusted them. They gave the money in the form of a trust that Annabelle would only gain access to at age 18. She was the sole recipient of the funds. Drummond Senior and Junior had no access to the money.”

Annabelle looked saddened at all this and glanced at her father. He looked embarrassed. Apparently, she’d known bits and pieces of this, but perhaps this was the first time the whole thing had been laid out clearly. And clearly, it would be hard to hear. I couldn’t stay stuck in this family drama, though, I needed to move this along.

“So Mr. Drummond Senior, Mr. Drummond Junior, and Young Annabelle found themselves having undergone a great tragedy and didn’t have as much in the bank as they often pretended to have. Their estate was dwindling. They needed a fresh start. They sold their land for a healthy amount and relocated to the other side of the country.”

Mr. Drummond Senior was scowling darkly and interrupted, “Look here boy you can’t go about revealing people’s private personal matters like this! It’s unseemly. Someone take him away!”

“No.” Drummond Junior interjected. “Give us the rest.” There was a resolve in his eyes then. Good, I thought. He’d need his nerve for the next part.

I continued: “Slowly the Drummond family began eating through their finances. And slowly they dwindled. Then Drummond Junior remarried. And for a while, his new wife’s finances kept them afloat. But recently, they’ve begun to run out...”

Mrs. Drummond appeared animated for the first time here. “What’s he saying Aiden? Is

what this man is saying true? It can't be surely!"

I couldn't let this descend into a family squabble. So I raised my hand and turned the attention back to me.

"Meanwhile," I continued, "the great pile of money for Annabelle sat, unused, in trust waiting for her to turn 18. Mr. Drummond Senior had contacted a lawyer in London and very quietly began making inquiries. He discovered that Annabelle's grandparents, who had set up the trust had died. This lawyer also discovered a loophole with the trust set up for Annabelle: any expenses '*necessary for Annabelle's education, medical expenses, and protection*' could be submitted and money taken out of the account. Upon learning this, I doubt Drummond Senior even told his son about it because his son would never want money taken from that account..."

Drummond Junior looked shocked at the implication now. He whispered, "You don't mean — "

"Yes!" I shouted. I was getting into this. "Yes! Drummond Senior had his lawyer begin submitting expenses on Annabelle's behalf."

I held the record aloft. "Expense submitted — tuition payment to St. Anthony's school for girls in the amount of one thousand pounds. Expense submitted — medical care for long-term care with Dr. Laraby in the amount of two thousand pounds. Expense submitted — lengthy hospital recovery by the seaside for fainting fits. It goes on and —" Drummond Junior interrupted then, sputtering, "You told me that was your money! You said you'd had it in reserve! When you began spending unexpectedly I questioned it and you said it was from your late wife!"

Drummond Senior said nothing. He was as still as a cat, waiting to leap and strike. His eyes were cold and dead. I hoped he'd seem more rattled by now. But I pressed on.

"And now, if you'll see here the estate gift money has dwindled and dwindled. It's less than 10% of what it started with. Perhaps that's why this engagement was pressed forward with such speed. You knew that unless Annabelle and your son never even needed the money, unless they were in a position not even to worry about the account, it would be exposed. And I have to say you nearly succeeded."

At this moment Mrs. Drummond swooned back into her chair in her fancy dress. Those around her began fanning her.

Meanwhile, the room's eyes had shifted from me to Drummond Senior. The staff — who I gathered had never liked him — were pointing and whispering and scowling. This



was, thankfully, a room in which the accusations were received and found believable. Had I made the accusations earlier, of course, with all the well-to-do country noblemen and hangers-on they would remember Drummond Senior's gifts and status. That room of fancy dresses and sharp suits might reject my accusations. But this room had seen the man's true character over the years. It wasn't impossible to believe, then, that he was a man stealing from his own granddaughter.

The time had come to turn things over. I said, "Mr. Drummond Junior — my evidence has been presented — what do you choose to do? Shall the culprit be taken in hand and turned over to the police?"

The eyes of the room turned to rest on Drummond Junior. He appeared to falter for a moment. I expected him to look vengeful and angry but instead, he simply looked at his father and looked... sad.

It was the same look I gave our own father on that fateful Christmas when, the next day, I awoke to find him passed out on the floor near the fire, clothes and all. An empty bottle of hard liquor lay near him. I wanted to feel angry. I wanted to feel vengeful. But instead, I simply felt sad. Sad because my father was not the kind of father a young boy wishes to have. Sad because despite it all I knew that when he slept this off and returned to himself, I'd still try to please him, I'd still want him to love me.

Because he was, after all, my father. Not the father I wanted, but the father I had.

And Drummond Junior was caught in the same moment. His father's cruelty had been exposed. His own father, he knew now, had embezzled and stolen. His father, he knew now, had played this game before and would play it until he died.

But Drummond Junior hesitated. He tried to speak, tried to pronounce a judgment, but he couldn't. Instead, he simply whispered, barely audible across the room:

"How could you?"

Drummond Senior, though, simply raised his eyebrow and stared back with expressionless eyes. And sensing his son's hesitation, seized the moment. With the eyes of the whole room on him did something most unexpected: he began clapping. And he kept clapping, louder and louder.

"Bravo," he said. "It's all quite dramatic, isn't it?"

Slowly, using his cane, the old man began moving through the crowd toward his son and I. He moved slowly, unhurried, with decades of dignity. I felt suddenly very self-conscious standing on a table like a fool.

“Well done,” he said. “Well done, young man. I have to say it took me more than a few moments to recognize you from our little interview earlier. But to be quite frank with you: this changes nothing.”

Drummond Junior looked uncertain. He’d expected his father to rage, or weep, upon being exposed. Instead, his father looked as in control as ever. This wasn’t good.

“Look here,” I said, “We’ve got the evidence in hand!”

I held the documents aloft. Some of the servants nodded. But not as many as I’d hoped.

“Ah yes,” he said. “The documents. What will happen I wonder if you were to run down to the police station with them? Our family would be scandalized and our reputation ruined. And we’d be exposed as having far less money than people think. What would happen then I wonder?”

He walked calmly and coldly until he spoke only a foot from the face of his son, who was now trembling.

“I’ll tell you what will happen, my son. Our creditors will come calling, debts called in. What will you do then? Sell our family heirlooms bit by bit? Start with the artwork perhaps? Your daughter and wife living in a drafty and empty home with no suitors to speak of?”

And then he slowly moved toward Annabelle, putting his hand on her shoulder. She flinched at it.

“My dear Annabelle, this is all much bigger than you. You’re selfless and that is both your best and worst quality. You have nothing of the killer instinct necessary to make it in this cold and cruel world. So, I have made your way for you.”

“What if I don’t want your way,” Annabelle said.

In a small act of defiance, Annabelle had taken her large glasses out of her pocket. And it seemed that when she put them on she grew a little braver, a little more herself, in the face of her intimidating grandfather.

“What if I simply don’t care about my standing and our old family legacy and your dusty heirlooms? You’ve always cared about that all more than your own family in front of you, more than your son, more than even me, I think. I think you’re a sad, bitter old man. I still care about you as my grandpapa. I do. But I’ll not force myself to care about any of the things you care about.”

The old man quickly withdrew his hand from her shoulder. But he said coldly, “Then what of the things you care about? What about your precious household staff? How

many of them will have jobs once this breaks? How many will be thrown out into the cold as this news spreads? And it's so very cold in the winter isn't it?"

At this Annabelle flinched, looking around at the household. They were trying to put on a brave face but they all knew what the old man said was true. Once exposed, once debts were called in, this large staff would be fired.

Annabelle was faltering too, now.

Drummond Junior was cowed again by the force of his father's personality.

There was only one person who could save them now:

Viktor.

## 11:10pm

### 11:10pm

#### In Which Cutter's Last Card Is Played

From the corner a voice called out, starting small but growing in volume:

"Excuse me," Viktor said, "Excuse me I'm sorry. So sorry. Coming through. This is urgent. Quite urgent. Quite!"

And the young tinkerer pushed his way through the crowd of servants until he'd reached the very center of the room.

Viktor looked up at me with a sheepish grin. He'd gone somewhere and combed his hair back, found his best jacket, straightened his tie, cleaned off any oil or grease stains, and looked really rather presentable. The only sign of his old form as a tinkerer were the enormously thick glasses he still wore on the edge of his nose. He was perhaps not quite ready to attend a fancy Christmas ball, but certainly, he would be the most sharply dressed man walking the town square at the town's Christmas festival.

"If I may," he said to me, "Might I borrow that table for a moment?"

What a relief. I gladly traded places with him. Drummond Senior looked none too pleased to have lost the moment and tried to interrupt. But Annabelle and Drummond Junior shushed him.

"I stand here before you all, Annabelle's household," he said motioning to the staff and servants assembled, "Because as I've gotten to know this household with various visits I know that you are not merely the staff here, you are her family."

"Hear, hear!" a servant said from the back.

"Many of you have watched this young girl grow up. She did not ever have a mother, but she had you all."

"That she did!" said the old cook, beaming in the back, "Sneaking her treats after bedtime like a good mother should!"

And the crowd laughed.

"So, what I have to say," Viktor continued, "I saw in front of all of you — her family. Annabelle, you are the light of this house. You are beautiful — the most beautiful girl I've ever seen or has ever been created in this wide world." And he blushed very deeply here.

"But even were I blind I'd see your beauty. I have for years made automatons,

mechanical wonders, but I've learned something. Many men can make things beautiful on the outside, but it is whirring mass of poetry and symmetry inside that gives life to the object. You, Annabelle, are poetry inside and out."

He pushed his glasses back up on his nose and they immediately slipped back down. But he continued on, gathering speed now: "Your kindness is obvious. Despite your wealth, you love each member of the staff regardless of how high or low-born they are. You could not, I think, care less whether the people in front of you are wealthy or not. And you could not, I think, care less whether you yourself are wealthy or not."

And at this, Annabelle laughed and said, "It's honestly a bother sometimes."

Drummond Junior and Senior looked offended. But Viktor pressed on.

"But I know that you're entertaining this offer of engagement because you care about your father and your grandfather. You don't want them disgraced or living in poverty. You'd do anything to save them. Well, I have a way to do it. Only, it, er... Well, you see if you'd consider..."

And he began fumbling in his pocket for something as well as fumbling his words.

"What I have to say will help your family. But that's not why I'm saying this. Really, I'm saying this, what I'm about to say, for an entirely different reason. Here then is what I have to say..."

I caught his eye and nodded encouragingly. He smiled back, took a deep breath, and continued: "I'm saying Annabelle that you are a wonder. I'm saying that I could create a thousand wonders and still never find your equal. I'm saying I could solve a thousand secrets in my life but the only secret I care about is what's behind your smile. I'm saying that you are poetry and symmetry and wonder all at once. I'm saying...not I'm asking..."

He jumped off the table and landed in front of Annabelle. He dropped to one knee. He produced the ring I'd given him earlier.

"I'm asking Annabelle, if you will marry me."

He gulped and took a deep breath. "Well, eventually of course. Perhaps not next week. Of course. I am not wealthy, I have no title or name, but I can provide a home for you and your father and even grandfather if you wish it. It'll not be a mansion. But it'll be a large enough house. It will be respectable. You'll not fly in such high society. But among the merchants and inventors of the country you'll be known and loved — if you even care about such a thing."

And as if remembering something he'd thought of earlier and forgotten he said, "Oh!

And of course! We couldn't employ many of your household here as servants. I confess I don't have a single one. But I do have quite a need for assistants in my workshop. I daresay I'll have a job for anyone here in the household who wants to come with you." At this, Annabelle beamed. These people really were her family.

"Oh, and one last thing. Doubtless you'd be engaged for quite a while to the Duke. I'm willing to wait as well. I'll wait until you and your father find it suitable for us to wed. Whenever that is. Be it a year or five. I don't know. What I do know is —"

And he took Annabelle's hands in his. A smile was slowly spreading from one end of her mouth to the other.

"What I do know is that I love you," Viktor said.

And Annabelle threw her arms around him. She leaned in and rested her nose on his.

"Oh Viktor...I never imagined...never hoped..."

And they leaned toward one another. But their embrace was interrupted with a shout.

"He's running!" a servant yelled. "The old man is running for it!"

And I looked down and found that the documents I'd handed to Drummond Junior were gone. The son looked up and said, "He grabbed them and ran. The documents. I was so shocked that I — I couldn't stop him —"

And I looked up just in time to see the old man running out the front doors, running into the falling snow, at first I didn't understand what he was doing. Then I saw where he was headed.

He was running straight for the mechanical ballerina.

**11:20pm**

**11:20pm**

### **In Which Cutter Dashes Through the Snow**

I'll admit gladly that Drummond Senior was faster than any old man had any right to be—powered, no doubt, by sheer force of resentment and fury over decades. As I saw the first time I ever looked into his eyes, this was a dangerous man.

He'd spent the last 50 years of his life trying to protect this family's reputation. He'd abandoned a son and early marriage like a soiled place setting at the dinner table. I was now sure, seeing his desperate actions, that he must have been the one to set fire to the old mansion. And I scarcely wanted to believe it, but that old villain had probably done it simply to free his son from an entanglement with a young woman he considered beneath their station. And now he was forcing his only granddaughter to marry someone for money. No, not for money—for preserving the family legacy. For the sake of that old museum of Drummond family heirlooms.

This was a dark man, an unpredictable man. But even so, I never imagined what he'd do next.

Viktor and I ran after him into the snow with a handful of the house servants. Snow flurries were swirling around and making it hard to see. The cold was biting. But through the snow, I could see that old villain run up to the ballerina and pause there with the sphere for a moment.

"Oh no," Viktor said beside me. "Don't let him do that!"

"What?" I said not understanding. "What's he doing?"

"Remember the dance didn't you wonder how it did all that?" Viktor said desperately. "I could never program something like that into it. Far too complex. Impossible."

"Well then, how?"

"Somehow the electrical energy bonds you to the automaton if you concentrate hard enough. It takes on your commands and...your energy...your mood... Essentially it takes your *intent* and then acts accordingly. I'd seen Annabelle practice that dance many times as I worked on other mechanical creations at the manor. I loved it and treasured it up in my heart. I told it to dance like her. Or at least, I set that intention."

"How could that possibly work?" I said. I'd seen some things but nothing like this.

"The truth is I don't know how it works," Viktor said. "After Drummond called me in to

work with it, I started exploring its properties in every direction possible. But I soon realized that it didn't just store electrical energy, somehow it stored *intent* as well. If the intention and mood is dangerous then... Well, you saw what happened when you tried to get close to him and were struck by the energy earlier. And I fear this old man's intent is anything but good."

"That's outside the realm of science!" I shouted over the wind. "That's the realm of some kind of magic."

"Don't you think I know that!? I tracked down its location as far as I could with Drummond. We both wanted more. The dealer said somewhere in North Africa. Mount Elgon I think. It was in an old volcanic crater — probably laid there for thousands of years. But despite us paying him handsomely he visited it himself and claims there was no more. It is no normal property. It is paranormal. It is, as you say, magic."

For a moment I remembered what you'd told me about the origins of your mysterious element that powers your invisibility serum. I wanted to ask more. But there was no time.

We ran on. Before we could reach him though, the old man placed the glowing sphere into the ballerina. It rose up. But this time rather than delicate and fluid it was stiff and harsh in its movements. It seemed as if its very mood had changed if such a thing were possible. Its steps were sharp and it held its hands ready at its sides as if they were weapons.

One of the servants shouted, "You stop there right now!" and attempted to run past the ballerina toward Drummond Senior.

But as soon as the servant came within a few feet of the automaton the thing twirled in the air once and struck him full across the chest. The servant flew backward into the air and landed with a groan. The automaton twirled again and brought its hand down on the man with a sickening sound of metal on bone.

"Do you see?" the old man shouted with near glee in his voice "You stay back now. I'm going. I'm off to deliver these documents to my lawyer for safekeeping and off to deliver this mechanical wonder to my future in-laws. Once they hear my story I have no doubt Annabelle and her father will see things my way. For there will be no other way to see it."

The old man moved to the last well-to-do carriage in the yard. It had just been about to pull out of the driveway and its occupant had been delayed, looking for some kind of



missing item inside. Well, the old man attempted to kick the driver off the carriage and a scuffle ensued. But the ballerina soon came and knocked the poor driver onto the cold ground.

Viktor held his head in his hands. “There’s got to be a way. We must get the documents and the sphere. But I can’t see it. Why can’t I see it.”

“How long will that mechanical thing be up and still have power?” I asked.

“Far too long,” Viktor said. “That gem stores an enormous amount of power. It might make it halfway to London before running out of power. And that’s running. If he manages to get it loaded onto the train he could get nearly anywhere within a journey from here before the mechanisms stop.”

Vergeten cleared her throat. Her face was more regal and determined than I would expect under the circumstances. And for her calm and her poise in the moment she was all the more beautiful.

“This is tragic but not impossible. We can still do this. We need only either stop the old man from getting on a train out of the village or take the documents and sphere. Either will work.”

“But with that mechanical terror,” I said, “We stand no chance. No one could get by it.”

“We could if someone could keep it occupied,” Vergeten said.

“Surely they’d be killed, or nearly,” I said. “Who would volunteer for that? None of the servants surely, no matter how much you pay them or plead with them. Helping only makes you poorer and these people are already poor enough.”

Vergeten looked at me with sadness now. “My boy, for many years I thought just like you. The world had hurt me and I wanted only to hurt it back. To take what was mine. But years of that will leave you only a cold husk. When you take and take it means you’ll give up the one thing most important — yourself. In your taking you find yourself impoverished of all that matters.”

Before we could ask more, or she could say more, two things happened nearly simultaneously.

The first was that the old man, Drummond Senior, had climbed to the top of a nearby carriage, and with a yell took off toward the town. He was getting away.

But at the same time, another carriage came around from the back of the house into the front. It was one of the Drummond family carriages. And at its head was James, the house manager. He brought it up and reared back with the reins to stop the horses,

shouting, "I thought he'd run! Well, come on then! Get in!"

I glanced and Viktor, he nodded and leapt up onto the driver's seat with James. Behind me Annabelle and Vergeten leapt into the carriage.

I looked back to see Drummond Junior about to get in, but he hesitated. And in hesitating we saw Mrs. Drummond, his wife, faint on the steps of the home. Evidently the excitement had simply been too much for her.

"Go take care of your wife," Vergeten called to him and shut the carriage door. Then we were off.

## 11:30pm

11:30pm

### **In Which Cutter Bounces Uncomfortably, Then Crashes Spectacularly**

The wind was simply howling now and the snow was coming down thicker and harder. When the moon shone the path in front of us was clear, but when a cloud passed overhead we were in near dead black but for the small torches fixed to the front of the carriage. At any moment we might hit a fallen tree or slick patch of road and careen out of control.

Inside the carriage, Annabelle and Vergeten were on one side and I sat on the other. All three of us were bracing ourselves against the unpredictable motion of the carriage. Viktor and James were up front in the driver's bench. James was driving the horses hard and Viktor was calling out what he could see up ahead.

But do know what I thought as I look around at these people? Our own family. Do you remember, brother, the winter nights when we were huddled together in our small home in the cold? Likely, it was so cold because father had neglected to chop enough firewood and now the wind was whistling with icy cold, or because mother foolishly burned through too much of it during the day. But after they hissed and argued we'd settle in around the last few fire embers, with thick blankets, bunched together. Father, you'll remember, would tell a story or hum a song. Mother would attempt to be annoyed but fall to his charms eventually. Even you, who didn't normally like others touching you or being too close, would give up and lean in. Eventually you'd all fall asleep. But I'd stay up as late as I could, because with the wind whistling outside and the warmth of the blanket and the last crackles of the fire, I felt... happy.

These people reminded me of our family huddled in a blanket. Annabelle appeared to have a genuine affection for James as a second father. Whatever Vergeten and James had shared over the years seemed genuine and caring. Viktor by virtue of his love for Annabelle had been grafted into the family. I nearly wished for a moment I could stay in the carriage — forget about the sphere — and perhaps be a footman in the household. The days would be long but the nights around the fire would be warm. But I had no time for further thoughts, because we had a madman to catch. James opened a small flap at the top of the carriage and yelled in, “He's headed for the

town square, but he can't drive straight across to the train station without turning around the village green. Don't worry. I'll stop him!"

"Very well!" Vergeten said. "Do what needs doing James, no matter what."

James closed the flap and all three of us faced one another. I had a few minutes and I needed a question answered before we arrived. It was uncomfortable, but I had to do it.

"Vergeten. I have to ask. Who are you? You can't possibly be just a seasonal worker. Who are you, really? Does James know your real identity?"

The gypsy sighed as the carriage around her bumped and shuddered. "Very well. Not even James knows it all. You've earned the truth. I was there years ago at the house when there was a great fire. I was part of the household."

At this James handed the reins to Viktor and leaned back toward the carriage, listening to Vergeten continue.

"I stayed there in the ruins of the fire and asked all the questions the police were not. Their investigation was shallow and far too trusting. I asked questions until I was sure that the old man had indeed been the one to set the fire. I determined to seek him out and get revenge. I lost several household friends in that fire."

She looked into the flickering lamps mounted to the carriage for a long moment, then continued: "I searched and searched for them. I wanted to make that old man pay. I finally found them nearly six years ago. But finding Annabelle changed me. Seeing her even as a small child did something in me. The first time I was hired on as a seasonal worker she brought me a flower from the garden and sat there as I washed dishes and talked to me."

At this Annabelle blushed a little and said, "You were very kind."

Vergeten looked as if she wanted to say something to Annabelle, but didn't. Instead, she looked back at me and continued her story.

"So, I determined to do something else," she continued. "I decided I would watch over Annabelle. I would take seasonal work. So that I would not be recognized I dyed my hair, I spent hours in the sun, and the age lines and graying hair took care of the rest. I was never recognized. And I learned, slowly, that if you give yourself away you don't become poor, but truly rich. I watched this young woman blossom. I watched this house serve as happy employment for many. I watched this town be slowly revitalized as they invested and spent their money. Even Drummond Junior who I had hated for years I saw differently. He wasn't a bad man, just a foolish one. But always, I distrusted the

grandfather. Always, I determined to stay close for exactly an occasion such as this.” She said all of this with fluid grace, but matter-of-factness as well.

As the woman spoke, I felt I’d met someone who finally understood our own life, brother. This was someone who knew what it was to suffer and scrape and fight and have tragedy fall upon you like a landslide. But here was a woman that seemed to have crawled her way out of the rubble. But she didn’t crawl out thinking about herself. She crawled out thinking about others.

“Does that satisfy you? Does it prove I’m here to help Annabelle no matter what? I hope so.”

I nodded.

“Then James will distract the mechanical monster with Viktor’s help. You will steal that infernal thing from the old man with our help. Maybe Annabelle can even talk sense into him.”

I knocked on the window up to the driver’s seat and James slid the window open.

“Think you’re up for distracting a mechanical monster James?” I asked. “Viktor can help.”

“My young man I’d love nothing more than turn that thing into a trashed box of gears. Do you know how often I’ve had the urge to punch something the last twenty years? Twenty years of household frustrations all pressed down ready to explode! And tonight is the night!”

“Very good, James, I knew you had it in you,” Vergeten said, smiling. “And I must say this martial and forceful persona is one I find highly attractive.”

At this James blushed and said, “Just doing my duty of course.”

“What about the cards? Can’t you try something with them?” I asked.

“No, that won’t work. The hypnosis requires focus and concentration to work. In a dark place with motion all around the powers of suggestion are limited. The cards would be useless.”

At this James called back down into the carriage, “Cards? What cards? What do you mean?”

At this Vergeten muttered to herself, “Well I guess all the secrets are coming out tonight anyway...”

Then she called up to James, “I can hypnotize people James! With the cards! I’m actually quite good at it!”

“You can what? Hypnotize?? Like some carnival magician?” he yelled as he kept glancing back into the carriage.

“It’s not magic -- it’s really just the colors and motion!”

“Well, my goodness woman. Who have you used it on?? Hopefully not our staff!” James shouted down.

“A few people!” Vergeten said. “But only when I absolutely need to.”

James eyes went wide for a moment. “Wait. Vergeten! Tell me you’ve not used it on *me*. You wouldn’t would you??” James’ face was red with embarrassment as I’m sure he remembered the many times he’d looked at those cards.

“Keep driving!” Vergeten called up to James. “Don’t let him get away.”

Then she slammed the compartment to the driver’s seat shut and held it there as James tried to open it from the outside.

“He’s not going to be happy about that,” I said to Vergeten.

“He’s a blustery old codger of a man,” she said, her voice raspier than normal as it caught with emotion. “But his heart is right. I think he’ll forgive me eventually. He cares so much for others but hides it under a scowl. I love him for what he’s done for Annabelle.”

“No,” I said gently, “I think you love him for more than that.”

She looked up through the small window at him driving the carriage onward furiously. James was still trying to open the compartment but she held it closed.

Just then, the lights of the town suddenly emerged out of the swirling snow. Each home had lights hung outside and Christmas decorations in the windows.

Vergeten opened the compartment to James again and then I shouted up, “Don’t let him get to the train station! If he gets on that train I fear we’ll never catch him!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll stop him!” James shouted back.

“Wait how will you —” I started to ask.

But I never finished the sentence.

Because indeed the carriage in front of us had slowed just enough to try and make a hard turn. James, however, did not slow. And when the carriage in front of us turned, James barreled in front of it then pulled back on the reigns sharply. This left our carriage sliding ahead of the old man’s carriage, blocking his way. The old man attempted to stop before hitting us but was too slow. The two carriages collided with an enormous crash. Our own carriage wheels were broken and the door was flung open.

The old man's carriage was in even worse shape and was broken nearly in half. He was thrown from the top of his own carriage and I saw him rolling across the grass.

## 11:40 pm

### 11:40 pm

#### **In Which a Blow Falls and a Secret Tumbles Out**

Pieces of wood had splintered all over the ground, the horses were running wild in the streets, and the gears of the mechanical ballerina were grinding as it attempted to stand up again. Evidently, part of the carriage had smashed into the side of the ballerina as it ran alongside. The snow wind howled around us and my ears were ringing.

We all tumbled out of the open door of our broken carriage— a mess of limbs and bruises. By chance or ill-luck Annabelle was the one that got out of the carriage and upright first. She ran, calling out to her grandfather. “Grandpapa!” she shouted, out of genuine concern he’d been hurt or killed.

“No wait Annabelle, stay back from him! I think the automaton is set to protect.” Viktor shouted.

“He’s still my grandfather!” she shouted back.

But just as she was getting close to the old man, she was intercepted by the automaton. The thing towered over Annabelle, huge and white, with a serene smile still on its face, pink cheeks shining in the faint light of nearby lamps, and painted hair in a ballet dancer’s bun. The mechanical monster clearly saw her as a threat moving toward the old man and intended to stop her forcefully. She tried to back up and stumbled. The robotic thing stood towering. The young girl raised her hands to ward off a coming blow. But just then someone crashed into Annabelle: Vergeten.

The gypsy woman had been the next out of the carriage and moved with desperate and incredible speed. She saw that the thing wasn’t going to stop, that its blow was intended for Annabelle. So, she ran and my breath caught as Vergeten leapt on top of the young girl.

Then the metal hand fell.

Vergeten’s body went limp.

From the ground nearby the old man called for the mechanical thing to stop. It slowly turned to follow his voice, clanking away from the gypsy’s body. I saw the old man hesitate—perhaps wanting to check on his granddaughter. But once Annabelle stirred, the old man turned and fled.

We were all up now and quickly surrounded the gypsy woman’s body. A long



uncomfortable moment passed — was she dead? Then we heard her cough. She was alive. Annabelle threw her arms around her and tears welled up in her eyes.

Vergeten's voice, softer than before, said "Oh my. Dear don't cry."

"You shouldn't have done that," Annabelle said, "There was no reason to do that."

"My dear, there was all the reason in the world to do that."

Vergeten coughed slightly. I guessed that she'd broken several ribs.

The gypsy raised a hand to Annabelle's face and said, "My dear you are..." but she began coughing again. She was trying to say something but her current pain made it difficult, and so did a sudden swell of emotion I saw in her eyes.

What she had to say was such a heavy thing I wasn't sure she could say it in her current state. I was sure, however, that it needed to be said. So, I decided to help her say what she couldn't.

"She is your daughter," I said.

And at the word "daughter" every eye there widened and looked between the two of them. Now, in much closer proximity, right next to one another, the resemblance was obvious. The gypsy woman had let her hair grow wild and had likely dyed her light hair darker, but she couldn't hide the nose and eyes they both shared. Annabelle's pretty face was soft and beautiful. But Vergeten's face, though it had more lines, was more regal and elegant. Yet, they were clearly related.

James gasped. Viktor's knees buckled.

Annabelle's face was unreadable as she said, "But my mother died in a terrible fire."

"In a way, your mother did die in that fire. Others surely did..." Vergeten said. "A handful of poor servants perished, dear people I'd come to care about. I wanted to disappear. I took the name 'Vergeten' because it means 'forgotten.'"

"What? Why do that?"

"Because of what happened before the fire. Your father had married me barely a year before. We were in love. I was young and more than a bit impulsive and foolish, letting his attention get the better of me too quickly. My family was very against the marriage. They threatened to disown me and declare me dead if I didn't return home. But Aiden said he didn't care. He said we'd run away and live a simple life. So I agreed. And my family disowned me—it wasn't an idle threat. Nearly immediately after our wedding, I became pregnant. And Aiden really was a decent sort of man, though a little shallow, and too willing to do whatever his father told him. But then one day I awoke to find him

gone and find a letter he left me.”

It must have been the one I'd seen over Drummond's shoulder in the house.

“At first,” she continued, “He said he was just going to get more money from his father. But then days turned into weeks. I told him that I was coming to meet him and there was no stopping me. He reluctantly agreed. I brought you, my infant daughter, to the old manor. But the old man had already been manipulating him. The old man insisted the family would be ruined with such a scandal as our marriage. We argued back and forth for weeks. Finally, Drummond Senior said he'd agree to the marriage if we gradually introduced me out into their society. But I grew impatient and said I refused to be confined to the house anymore.”

She sighed and coughed, and I could tell she still wasn't sure she'd made the right decision.

“That's when the old man's true nature was revealed. He threatened me. He said he'd testify that I had fits of madness, he told me that if I didn't go along with his plan I'd be taken away from the house into a sanitarium. He showed me signed doctors' notes testifying to my 'madness.' But I refused still. I think he actually only succeeded in making me more stubborn. Aiden didn't seem to be taking my side but his father's. So I left and went to sleep in the opposite end of the house one evening. I woke up to flames.”

I knew it then, clearly: The old man set the fire. He must have.

Wait a minute, I thought, where was the old man now?

I turned and saw Drummond Senior still sprawled out on the grass not far from us, nursing an injured leg. He was trying to stand but having trouble and fell back down. I didn't think he'd move again anytime soon.

Vergeten continued: “When I awoke that night I was so drowsy I could barely see. I think someone had put something in the drink the staff brought me before bed. I'd taken to drinking a small glass of port to help with the sleepless nights. I might never have awakened. The only thing that shook me was dreaming my baby was in trouble, waking in a panic was the only reason I woke in the middle of the night. And when I woke, it was all screaming and shouting as the house burned down around me. I barely made it out alive.”

She shuddered at the memory.

“The situation was too monstrous for me to believe. Had the old man really tried to kill

me? Had my own husband Aiden helped? I wasn't completely sure but it seemed likely. I know there was no future for me there. But I had nowhere else to go. I had few relatives, and none that were even speaking to me, so I wandered. Eventually, I was taken in by gypsies. They cared for me. Became my family."

She coughed again. She was in pain, but this was a long time coming and she was determined to get to the end now.

"But why didn't you come back for me?" Annabelle asked.

"Oh my dear. My dear I tried. But once I began looking it took me quite a while to find you. I didn't expect your father to pick up and move entirely across the country. And when I found you again your father...well...he was remarried already. Likely his father had found a willing woman with just enough noble blood to make him respectable. I knew that if I revealed myself all it would do would be to cause you scandal. So I contented myself with watching over you. I thought if I couldn't be your mother I could at least be your guardian angel."

And she tenderly touched Annabelle's face. "So that's what I've done. Watched you from a distance. You are wonderful, my dear. Far better than you have any right to be with this kind of family story. But you're more than your family story. You are your own story."

Annabelle hesitated then wrapped her arms around her mother.

It was such a happy moment on such a dreadful night that something pricked in the back of my mind. I knew instantly — this was all too happy — something bad will happen now.

You've told me again and again brother, not to get wrapped in any distractions when I'm on a mission. You've told me not to get too close to anyone. And really, I should have listened.

Because when I glanced up the old man was gone.

## 11:50 pm

### 11:50 pm

#### **In Which Cutter Faces a Mechanical Terror**

I looked around and saw that there were dark shapes moving all over the village green. These were the last of the Christmas festival revelers going back to London or the last of the seasonal workers determined to make it home before dawn. But in the dim streetlights and blowing snow, I couldn't spot the old man.

And you'd think that a seven-foot mechanical ballerina would be easy to spot, wouldn't you? Well, not with large trees and shadows all around.

Annabelle looked down at her mother and said, "She needs a doctor, and badly. We've got to find one. I need to try to get her to one. Somehow."

James said, "Stay here with her. The old man will be heading for the train. It leaves in just a few minutes. It's the last one to London. If he gets away with the sphere and automaton and the fraud evidence this was all for nothing."

I know you'll not like the next decision I made, brother. I hope you can forgive me.

"Viktor, I have something to tell you," I said quietly.

"Don't tell me you've got a family secret too," he yelled back with a smile. "Don't tell me you're a long-lost cousin or something! A duke in disguise perhaps!"

"No, no, nothing like that!" I said. "It's just that I can become invisible."

"I'm sorry, say that again," he said. "It's quite windy. I thought you said you could become invisible?"

"I can. But just temporarily."

Viktor looked at me, scrunching his face up behind his glasses. He could tell I was serious.

"Well," he said, "It's quite a day when that's the *least* remarkable thing I've heard in the last hour. So, you can become invisible. What then?"

"I have one last dose left," I said. "We'll only have one chance at this. It's very temporary. Only a few minutes. I'll need to use my serum to go invisible, disable the mechanical thing first, then get the documents, then escape. But Viktor there's something else I need to tell you."

"By all means, go on," he said. "I'm not sure I'm capable of being surprised again."

"I was sent here to steal that electrical sphere."

“You WHAT.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you. Obviously. But my brother needs it, or at least he might. He has a terrible condition Viktor. He’s searching for a cure. My brother is brilliant. Just like you. But until he finds a cure he’s...” and I didn’t want to even say it.

Viktor thought about it for a moment. Finally, he said, “Okay. Okay. If you help me, I will let you take the sphere. I won’t stop you.”

“And I can’t say I will either,” James added.

I was incredulous. “But Viktor, that powers your life’s work. It’s your future.”

“No, no,” he said. “It was my life’s work. But not anymore. Now Annabelle is. She’s worth a thousand spheres.”

The way he said it—so matter-of-factly, so quickly—amazed me. He said it as if it were an equation with an obvious sum. He said it as if it were the color of the sky.

And strangely, it shifted something in me, brother. I need you to understand that before I tell you the rest. I knew well that under the Christmas veneer, underneath the layers of warm ciders, and holly and ivy there was a seeping evil at work in the world. I knew that there was a darkness crawling in the veins of humanity. I’d seen it from a young age. So had you, brother.

But now I wondered: Could there be something else in the world too? Could there be something shining in the dark? Could there be another power at work in the world?

Tonight, I’d met some of them. I’d found people who, pushed to their utter limit, turned not to the dark but to the light. I glanced at the shops, each with a single candle burning, ringing the town square. I glanced at the church, doors still flung open in the icy air, and saw the candles and fire burning inside the old church, too.

I realized then, that faced with the cold of the world I’d turned cold myself. In the darkness of the world I’d begun to see the shadows everywhere. But there were also candles shining out in the dark, too.

Viktor said, “Listen. The train is approaching the station. He has to make his way to the train station before it leaves. We’ll grab him then.”

“Distract him and I’ll do the rest,” I said. “Just don’t do anything foolish.”

“Like building a mechanical ballerina that I didn’t realize could be put to deadly use?”

Viktor said with a sheepish smile.

“Yes, don’t do anything *else* foolish.”

The village grounds around us were taking on heavy snowfall now. The wind howled. It

would have been a difficult night in the best of circumstances, much less trying to chase a crazy murderous old man and a deranged mechanical monster. Dark shadows were everywhere.

I surveyed the area: There was the grassy area with a large pond in the center. To one side was the train station — small but serviceable. Next to the train station was the large church, its doors still open wide despite the cold.

“We’ll split up,” James said. “I’ll take the shops. You take the center green Viktor.”

“What about the church?” I asked.

James laughed without humor. “I can safely say that the last place in the world we’ll find the old man is in a church. Even tonight.”

“Very well, the shops and the green it is then,” I replied.

“You’re up now, invisible man. We’ll try to flush him out for you.”

I pulled the vial out of my coat pocket to discover a problem. It had been cracked.

At some point in the commotion I’d fallen or stumbled and the glass vial, tough as it was thanks to your design, had cracked and the very last dose of the invisibility serum had begun leaking out. There was barely a swallow left now. Would it work? I’d never taken so little before. I had no idea. But I uncorked the vial and drank it anyway.

But should I follow James into the shops or Viktor onto the green?

I knew I needed to use my brain and not my eyes now. I needed to put this together, I felt it on the edge of my mind. I could remember every word the old man had said and every move he’d made in the last few hours. I knew that above all he trusted no one but himself. But running into a shop would mean trusting someone to keep quiet, to react the right way. Running into a shop was a situation he couldn’t control, and how he loved control. He wouldn’t chance it, I thought. The old man would trust his own smarts and cunning.

Finally, it was clear: He must be in the green. So, I followed Viktor there.

It was hard to see much of anything in the green because there were no lights there — they’d been extinguished for the town ceremony where they’d float a barge with a “star” light across the pond representing the star of Bethlehem. The moon was out but it was covered and uncovered repeatedly as clouds moved across it. The shapes of large trees cast shadows of grasping claws on the ground when the moon came out. We moved slowly and methodically, working our way by every large bush that could be a hiding spot. The problem was that there were hundreds of them. And if he’d gotten into

a shop storeroom it could be hours until James found him.

We spent more than a few minutes in tense silence, searching.

I glanced down at my watch. It was close to midnight when the last train would pull into the station. Time was running out.

We had finally searched up to the edge of the pond facing the train station. Large bare trees cast shadows from the moonlight onto the pond. But suddenly I heard a metal scraping. One of the branches seemed to move.

But it was no branch.

The mechanical ballerina's arm came down hard and smashed a bench near where Viktor was standing. I could see that the weather had worn down some of the face paint, giving it a scarred appearance, but its mouth still turned upward into a smile. This once beautiful and delicate thing had turned hideous and scarred.

The thing clanked its way forward, stepping lightly on the snow, twirling once, and then raising its hands in the air to strike at Viktor again.

But I was running as fast as I could now. Invisible or not my footsteps were crunching into the fresh snow. But the sound made the automaton pause and turn toward me. The metal thing looked confused, searching back and forth.

I cursed silently. My plan wouldn't work if it was facing me.

Just then a clank of metal reverberated across the ballerina. Then another. The ballerina turned back to find Viktor picking up stones and throwing them. The metal thing seemed confused as to whether to keep looking in my direction or to turn its attention back toward Viktor.

Clang. Another stone.

Clang. Another.

The thing finally turned toward Viktor, giving the tinkerer its full attention. Good.

I tried to close the distance but was too slow. For the mechanical thing paused for only a moment then with one great leap closed distance to Viktor, and struck. He scarcely managed to duck below the swipe. Instead, the metal automaton struck a lamp post—toppling it to the ground. Viktor rolled underneath a nearby bench and the ballerina leapt down and smashed it, wood splintering into the air. I expected to see Viktor impaled but caught him in the corner of my eye rolling deftly away again. This small tinkerer was more nimble than I imagined.

Meanwhile, I was chasing behind the automaton, trying to keep up with it. But it moved

faster than I could.

Where in the world was James when we needed him?

Just then I heard James' voice echo out into the green: "Look here, you enormous windup toy!"

I turned and in a day of surprising things, I still found myself surprised at what I saw. James was there, and I expected that. What I did not expect was that he'd be wearing a suit of medieval armor. He must have found it in one of the shops — the kind of suit normally sold to gullible tourists from the city with a complicated story of legend. I'd assumed there were no real knights left anymore. Well, apparently I was wrong. James strode out onto the road now, clanking. It was a little tight on him around the middle, if I'm honest. But he smashed his hands together and called to the thing — "Not so tough are we now, eh?"

The mechanical ballerina paused a moment, looking puzzled. James rushed toward it, yelling and clanking.

The thing finally responded. It clanked its hands together in response as James had done, then ran toward him.

"Hold it still James!" I called out. If I could get on its back maybe I could get the gem out and remove its power source.

The two metal figures impacted each other and fell rolling into the grass. I knew that James couldn't win but he was putting up a heroic struggle to distract the thing and hold it still so I could get at it. The automaton's arms fell on him in blows that dented his armor severely. The strength of this thing was enormous.

I followed the two figures rolling around and tried to look for an opening.

Finally, the mechanical thing got the better of James and pinned him to the ground with one arm. James had lost his helmet, which had rolled away. The metal arm rose into the air and it looked like a final blow would be struck.

Yet a figure emerged from the darkness shouting "Wait!"

For a moment I thought it was Viktor, but when then I saw in the corner of my eye that the tinkerer was still at least 50 yards away.

It was Drummond Senior.

The old man shouted, "Incapacitate him *only*, we need him alive for someone to blame for all this!"

The mechanical ballerina held still for a moment then something clicked and an arc of



electricity shot from the gemstone into its arm. Its hand became a sputtering and hissing charge of energy. It slammed its sparking arm into James and the electricity shot into the suit of armor. James cried out in pain and then dropped limply onto the ground.

Clang. Clang.

More rocks pelted the side of the metallic ballerina.

“Come on you tin monster!” Viktor called, throwing. “Listen to me. I made you. There must be something good in there. Stop listening to this old villain.”

But the ballerina’s eyes were cold and impassive.

“You can finish that tinkerer off though!” Drummond Senior said, pointing at Viktor.

“We don’t need him alive.”

The ballerina leapt into action, clanking toward Viktor.

“Distract it as best you can! I need it to hold still!” I called out to Viktor.

The old man and ballerina looked around confused. They couldn’t see where I’d shouted from.

Viktor nodded and ran back toward the green, running as hard as he could, dodging the metal thing as it swiped at him. He was heading for the pond in the middle of the town square. That could work, I thought. He was backing up, ducking behind trees, still throwing rocks at it.

Clang. Clang.

He’d worked his way close to the pond now. I thought that if he could lure it into the pond perhaps he could use the water to his advantage.

But just then one of the metal arms caught Viktor just as he reached the edge of the pond. The blow impacted the tinkerer’s shoulder with a terrible crack. Viktor was flung forward into the water and came up sputtering and shivering. I could see one arm bent and likely broken. With the other arm, he flailed wildly.

It did not appear, based on the wild flailing he was doing, that Viktor could swim.

“Finish him!” the old man shouted.

The metal thing stepped forward, holding its arms out. The gem in its back sparked electricity. I realized it meant to electrocute the entire pond now, and there was no telling if Viktor would survive.

But the thing had miscalculated. It was standing in a shallow pool of water itself. When the gem sparked the electrical energy arced up and down its own body. There was a

sizzling and popping sound and then it froze.

I saw my opening and leapt upon its back.

Something began to hum deep inside the thing's chassis. I realized it was trying to restart. But trying to climb onto the back of a 7-foot-tall ballerina was not as easy as it had seemed in my mind. I could hear its gears groaning again. My palms were sweaty and struggling to get good holds.

But I finally found the latch I needed. I clicked it and the sphere rolled out of the mechanical slot onto the ground. The thing shuddered to a stop in mid turn toward me. I fell off the metal creature and rolled, receiving more than a few bruises along the way. But turning back to find the sphere I saw the last thing I wanted:

Drummond Senior was there smiling, the sphere already in his hand, crackling with energy.

# Midnight

Midnight

## **In Which Cutter Confronts a Villain, and Himself**

“Where are you?” the old man yelled across the green. “I can’t see you, but I know you’re here. Come out so we can talk, young man.”

I was invisible after all. But there would be no telling how long it would last.

“I can hear the train pulling into the station now!” he said triumphantly. “I’m getting on that train and that’s the end of it. You’re quite intelligent. You know this only ends one way.”

I could the steam engine ramping up now. It blew a long blast to signal last call for passengers. I had mere moments. I needed to grab that sphere no matter what.

But I also heard Viktor splashing in the pond behind me. It wasn’t very deep but injured and in freezing water, I worried he’d not survive long enough to find his way to one of the banks.

“Listen to me, young man, be smart about this,” the old man said, holding the sphere out and looking warily around him. “I don’t know what my son promised you, but I can do far better. Do you want money? Were you paid to retrieve it? Soon I’ll be able to pay you far, far more. All I need to do is deliver this to my future in-laws.”

The wind whistled and Viktor continued to splash in the water but above it all I felt my heart beating loudly in my chest. I needed to make a move.

“Or perhaps it’s something else, entirely,” the old man yelled now. “Perhaps you seek knowledge. You want to know how the sphere works. Perhaps you need its secrets. I can give them to you. Allow the marriage to go through, you’ll have all the access to it you need. Viktor is a genius but I suspect the key element isn’t his mind but the remarkable property of this stone. He merely learned to harness it. Think of what you could do with it. Fame? You could have it. Knowledge? It’s yours.”

He was slowly backing away through the park and had neared the place where the nativity scene was set up. Behind him, the large chapel and its open doors beckoned. He was slowly moving toward the church. Perhaps he realized invisibility was less useful in closed spaces than open spaces where I could approach from any angle.

“Tell me what it is you want,” he said. “There are very few things impossible if you have the favor of one of the richest most powerful families in England. Because that is what

we will be. That is what we were but what we will be *again*. All I need is to deliver this. But maybe..."

And he smiled a cruel smile then as if he'd just discerned a secret.

"Maybe you're not the one in charge. I doubt you developed that remarkable power yourself. No. No, you must have been sent. You have employers. Or masters. What would they say? What would they want you to do? What report will you bring back?"

I thought of you, brother. And that did give me pause. I wondered if you'd tell me to make the deal for access to the sphere. I wondered if you'd be disappointed if I returned empty handed.

I nearly agreed there and then.

After all, I owed you. You'd given me a place to live. You'd rescued me (perhaps for your own purposes but rescued me nonetheless). You looked high and low for a cure. And in that sphere, perhaps there were answers? I could bring home money, access to the sphere, and perhaps the favor of a powerful family in England. What a Christmas gift for you, brother.

Maybe then I could stop these errands for you. Maybe then I could live my own life and go where I wished and do what I wished.

The trade was simple. All it would take would be to sacrifice Viktor and Annabelle and the rest. I didn't even know them, not really. And our father's words came back to me once again *helping only makes you poorer son, and we're already poor enough*.

Lost in thought I stumbled into something on the grass. Metal clinked on the ground around me.

Coins.

I looked down and saw I'd stumbled into the open chest of the wise men, the chest where the town placed alms for the poor every Christmas. It was the one I marveled at earlier that it hadn't been stolen. It was now even more full than this afternoon, and it had all tumbled out onto the ground.

"Got you," the old man said, "You're faint, but I can make you out. Listen to me, son. What is it that you want?"

What *did* I want? I thought I knew. I wanted to keep the little I had. I wanted to stop hurting. I had so little, I just wanted to keep it.

But the coins all over the floor around my feet glinted in the faint light of the moon. This village had so little. The homes were humble. Yet, they gave their coins on Christmas

Eve to the poorest among them.

And not just the village. I thought about the Drummond house. Downstairs James had little outside of a household manager position but was willing to give it for a girl he'd seen grow up. Upstairs Annabelle was wealthy but willing to give it for her household friends. Viktor had no title or wealth but what little chance he had at them he'd give for someone else.

Do you know what I realized then, brother? I realized that all these people should be poorer for their giving, but they weren't. Somehow, they were richer. Somehow the village was happier. Somehow Viktor was smiling at the thought of giving up what he had. Somehow James and Vergeten gave gladly.

Because it was in the giving that they gained. It was in the loss that they found something precious.

The Drummond family kept repeating its mistakes generation after generation. I realized that unless I was careful I would repeat our own family's mistakes too. Father lived trying to keep what little he had and gather more. But he ended up all the poorer. I didn't want to become our father. Neither, I think, my brother, do you.

I made my decision.

The old man was backing up the stairs toward the church now. He was moving across them trying to work his way toward the train station next door. The whistle blew again, and the train very slowly began to chug and pull away from the station. The old man turned to look and was about to run for it.

That's when I made my move.

I ran as fast as I could, trusting not to stealth but to surprise. Drummond Senior heard my footsteps coming, but could only tell the general direction. Yet, he held out the sphere menacingly toward me. He squeezed it tightly in his bony hands and it sparked and hissed.

But I had something in my own hand.

There in my palm were a handful of coins I'd picked up from the Christmas offering. I threw them as hard as I could behind the old man. He turned to face the sound behind him. He yelled and the sphere's energy shot out in that direction. But now his back was toward me. And it was just the opening I needed.

I threw myself at him and we both tumbled to the ground. I grasped for the sphere but he was twisting and turning and striking at me, all elbows and sharp angles. We

wrestled back and forth. He was surprisingly strong. But eventually, I got a hand around his and began to slowly claw the sphere away from his grip.

“No!” he screamed. “No!”

And as he screamed an arc of electricity shot out into the air. He screamed again and the electricity shot through both of us, and we both cried out.

“It’s over! Give it to me!” I shouted.

“Noooo!” he continued to scream and thrash around, and he managed to bash the sphere against the step as we tumbled together. An even stronger bolt of electricity leapt out and into both of us again. It racked my body with sharp pain, but I managed to hold on.

The old man struck the sphere against the step again in anger to try to wrestle it away from me. Then again. Then again. Each time bolts shot out into both our bodies. I did my best to keep my arms from going slack. He was screaming in rage each time.

Then finally with one last blow, he raised the sphere into the air and brought it down on the step with all his might.

It exploded.

I felt all my muscles go limp at once. I saw the steeple of the church silhouetted against the moon. The bells tolled midnight. The train’s whistle sounded.

I thought: it’s Christmas Eve.

Then my vision went white.

# Christmas Eve

## Christmas Eve

### **In Which Cutter Observes Christmas for the First Time In a Long, Long Time**

Brother, as you can probably guess since you are reading this:

I did not die.

Here is what happened: When the sphere exploded in an arc of electricity, it knocked the old man and I out cold. No, more than that — the electrical pulse stopped our hearts dead in our chests.

Left there, I would not have survived. You'd have read about all this in the paper.

But while the old man and I had been wrestling, a remarkable thing had happened. As Viktor was yelling and flailing in the pond some brave seasonal workers huddled in the train station had seen him. Despite their fear of a mechanical monster, and despite them not knowing how to swim either, they went to help. In fact, several of them worked together to form a chain and pull him to safety.

Viktor had just reached the bank when he saw the explosion of electrical energy. He ran toward us both and quickly after a short examination realized that our hearts were stopped. The sphere lay there, its light dying, cracked in half on the steps of the church. Desperate, Viktor thought that if the electrical impulse had stopped our hearts perhaps it could restart them. A wild theory, to be sure, but he'd been studying cadavers and had begun to theorize about this in his previous research. Yet, he'd never put it to the test before then. And he had no other options left. So he took the two halves, placed them on my chest, and pressed as hard as he could. He sent the intent of the spheres to something profoundly simple — *life*.

It jolted me, apparently so hard my body convulsed violently, but my heart started beating again.

Yet, that was the end of the sphere's charge. When Viktor looked down at the two broken halves of the sphere he saw that the light was now gone. The remarkable storage of energy had finally been expended.

The old man, Drummond Senior, had already expired on the steps of the church. He was gone.

So it was that I finally blinked my eyes open, hours later, in a warm bed, in a well-appointed room, to the first rays of sunlight coming in through the window. I was back

in Drummond Manor.

“Well, well,” I heard Vergeten’s raspy voice say, “I knew I’d read your cards correctly.” She sat near the edge of my bed reading a book. She had changed and bathed and her old clothes had been exchanged for a new, simple, green dress. She looked for the first time, like a lady who once moved in distinguished social circles — no, someone who commanded attention in them. The lines on her face were still there, but they added a distinguished look to her. Her voice was still low and raspy and it finally occurred to me that it was likely from the smoke and the fire so long ago.

“I know your secret,” I said to her.

“I think we’ve been over this already,” she said with a smile.

“No, no, about the cards. They’re not real. They’re not real gypsy cards. I’d never seen anything like them. In fact, it’s how I figured out who you really were before you told anyone.”

“Do tell.”

“The cards are all inspired by ballets,” I said trying to sit up in bed. “Characters from them. Scenes. You drew them yourself. I realized that no gypsy would know ballet like that. I only recognized them because I have perfect memory and can recall every discarded program I’ve ever seen on the street, every advertisement, every newspaper clipping.”

“Very good. I did make them myself. I was taught to use shapes and colors for hypnosis but I decided on my own method. I went often to the ballet with my family growing up. When Aiden and I came together we saw every ballet we could. Even today, I still can’t help but follow the accounts of the ballets in the newspaper. Sometimes I’ve managed to sneak away to London and hide behind the theater, listening to the music.”

“It was connecting Annabelle’s love for ballet and your own that finally brought it together for me.”

“You should be a detective,” Vergeten said smiling and patting my cheek.

“Oh no,” I said. “Far too much excitement.”

I spent the morning recovering, at the insistence of everyone else. They simply wouldn’t let me leave until we all had a lovely and lengthy brunch together. There were piles of sweet and savory scones, plates of crisp turkey and gravy, savory quiches baked fresh from the oven, and many cups of strong tea. They asked me to stay for Christmas. I was tempted. But I told them I really must get back to you and that we’d keep Christmas in



our own peculiar fashion.

Here's then what became of everyone else:

The tentative engagement with the Duke's family was cordially ended after a letter from Drummond Junior, explaining the tragic death of his father, the loss of the wedding present, and hinting that there may be more scandal yet to come that the Duke's family would do well to steer clear from. The Duke's family was more than happy to quietly break the relational ties and move on.

Mrs. Drummond was unwell on Christmas Eve and didn't join us for brunch. Apparently, the shock of what happened and all the subsequent revelations had so affected her she had a breakdown of nerves. She was a simple woman who had chosen to see the world in simple terms. The dark revelations about her household left her reeling and confined to bed rest. The physician said it was one of the worst cases he'd seen and that it may be a long road ahead for her.

I saw little of Drummond Junior that morning because he only briefly left his wife's side. "I will do what I should have done years ago," he told me when I said goodbye, "I will take care of my wife." After all this, he'll need to move to a smaller home with his family's decidedly lower standard of living, of course. But he seems determined to see his wife returned to health.

Annabelle has accepted Viktor's marriage proposal. Her father, Aiden Drummond, has given the marriage his blessing but asked them to wait until Annabelle turns 18. He doesn't want them to rush into anything so young. Normally I'd assume that an infatuation at age 16 would quickly fade, but these two seem to have something much deeper.

Annabelle told me happily that she's always felt more comfortable in cheery and unstuffy rooms. She's excited to wear her large eyeglasses around the house all day so she can see clearly and let her hair out wild and free. When I saw her this morning, she'd already started. The only part of her old life she wants to keep is attending the ballet at least once a year. Viktor promises they'll go far more often than that.

James has decided to retire. He proposed this morning to Vergeten today on Christmas Eve and she happily accepted. This was only after she'd made it blindingly obvious to him that it was the thing to do. She did it with one final card she'd been saving in her pack — a bride in a white wedding dress. Dense as he was, James got the hint. While Vergeten and her former husband Drummond Junior will never be friends, they are

determined to be what family they can for Annabelle. Oh, and of course Vergeten isn't her real name. It's actually Sadie. Quite a lovely name actually.

Now, finally, the matter of the sphere. They have all sent it with me, damaged as it is. Drummond Junior has given me what notes he can about where he obtained it, and its possible origin in volcanic rock from North Africa. Viktor has added to this his research notes and his observations about the sphere. He swears that under great magnification there is still some faint electrical activity. We'll see what you can make of it.

So here is what you can expect coming back with me:

- (1) One broken electrical sphere in two halves
- (1) One notebook of detailed research about the sphere from Viktor
- (1) One pack of ballet gypsy cards and Vergeten's notes on hypnosis (she insists she doesn't need them anymore)
- (1) One bag of sweets the household staff has sent with their compliments

As Viktor took me to the train station this afternoon, he thanked me.

"Thank you Mr..." Viktor trailed off looking at me. "I may not actually know your real name. After all this. Can you believe it?"

"Cutter. It really was Cutter. I'm Ethan Cutter." I said it quietly, knowing you'd not want me to reveal my name. But I felt I owed him at least that much.

"Mr. Ethan Cutter," he said, holding his hand out to me as if for the first time in mock greeting, "I'm Mr. Viktor Frankenstein." I shook it warmly.

"I wish you could meet my brother someday," I told him. "I have a feeling you'd find a great deal in common."

"I'd love to. There's so much more I want to ask him about. Seeing your heart come back to life has made me wonder—could there be more there? Could even hearts long stopped return to life? If it could, think of the possibilities. At any rate, that can all wait for a while. There's so much to do. I fear my little workshop has been far outgrown. Especially with all our new employees coming from the Drummond house."

"Well, perhaps you can do what my brother did. Find an old country estate somewhere. Even an old castle far away, derelict, get it for cheap. Then you'll have both peace and quiet as well as room to expand."

"I like the sound of an old castle," he said laughing.

We parted as friends. He may be someone, brother, to keep in touch with. I have a feeling he'll do great things.

Oh, and I'm bringing one more thing back with me:

-(1) One Christmas present for you, wrapped beautifully and covered with a large red bow.

What is it? You'll just have to wait and see, brother. I know you hate Christmas presents, but this year your gift to me will be receiving my present, saying, "Thank you," and pretending to enjoy it. After all I've just gone through, I will demand this of you.

Because our father was wrong. Giving never makes you poorer, brother, at least in any of the ways that really matter.

Giving is what makes you rich.

And look at that — the clock has just struck midnight on this long train journey home.

Merry Christmas.

# Author's Note

Author's Note

To my Friends and Family:

I didn't expect this to be my first fiction work to make it into printed form. After all, there is another whole novel-length adventure I wrote before this one called *The Paranormal Dinner Club* and it's waiting to be published. But when Jenn and I started discussing Christmas gifts this year it reminded me of a half-formed idea I'd had for a prequel to *Paranormal Dinner Club*. And I thought that maybe, just maybe, it would make a good Christmas present.

I first began writing *The Paranormal Dinner Club* about a year ago for my boys aged 9 and 11. I wanted two things for them in that story:

First, I wanted them to lose themselves in good stories the way I did as a child. I loved reading Jules Verne and the *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, loved Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective adventures, loved the idea of *The Invisible Man* from H.G. Wells. What if I could go back into those worlds and rediscover them one more time? What if there was a world where all these characters could meet and have adventures? That's what I wanted to give my boys.

Second, I wanted them to lose themselves in stories that mattered. The world is a dark and monstrous place many times and I can't protect them from that. But I can help them learn to deal with it. I can remind them that there are Good and Beautiful and True things in the world. And I can remind them that in the darkest of hours, there is a bright Providence shining around the edges of things if only they know where to look.

So, dear reader, I couldn't think of any better gifts to give you this Christmas than this. Remember, it's not the giving that makes you poor —  
It's the giving that makes you rich.