

“The Bartlett Affair”

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Part One: The Dinner-Party

I believe that what made the horrid affair of September 15th, 1862 so, well, *horrid*, was the fact that the whole mess began on the very eve of old Sir Bartlett’s knighthood anniversary. The whiskered family patriarch had made his fortune in the railroad, and the date of the knighting for his service was always celebrated by the entire family. It *had* catalyzed their ascent into high society. The 1862 celebration was to be no different.

Not being a born Bartlett myself, I feel as though I am best suited to give the recount of the events of that fateful night and the disaster that spiraled from it - not to mention, I played a unique role in the discovery of the truth.

I was already in Bartlett Manor the day of the party. It was really my home as much as it was the home of old Sir Bartlett and his eldest son. I had my own little room in the north corner of the manor. The butler always called me Ernest instead of Lord Rhodes - most of the other servants knew me by my first name, as well. Being engaged to marry Sir Bartlett’s granddaughter, Miss Catherine, I was treated almost as a grandson myself in that house.

I hadn’t had a lick of contact with my own blood family since the engagement, but that is a note for a later time. On the night of the dinner-party, I was perfectly content to be a Bartlett instead of a Rhodes, and the Bartletts were perfectly content to indulge me.

The dinner-party itself went along with hardly a wrinkle, considering what would come after it. Old Sir Bartlett had four children, each with their own family. I shall set the scene.

The Holts, true to form, were the first to arrive. Catherine embraced her cousin Nathaniel with great elation the moment he set foot through the door, and I shook the young man’s hand with equal vigor. I’d always liked Nathaniel Holt. The boy had locks fairer than the sun and a personality to match. He could have been my dear Catherine’s brother in that way, and anyone who reminded me so closely of my beloved fiancée was immediately a wholesome man in my book.

Old Sir Bartlett did not greet his grandson and son-in-law with nearly as much hospitality, but that wasn’t much out of the ordinary for him.

The Kensington Bartletts drew up in their carriage outside just as the first round of hors d'oeuvres began making its way around the sitting room. Catherine, Nathaniel, and I pressed our hands to the window glass to catch the first glimpse of them. Theodore and Anne, the fifteen-year-old twins, caught sight of us immediately and pressed their own gloved hands to the other side of the pane, grinning from ear to ear. My mother would have scoffed at their indecorum, but I found their casual behavior endlessly charming.

Sir Bartlett met his second-eldest son, the captain, at the door with a hearty shake of the hand, and was quickly followed by the rest of the gathered guests. Everyone loved Captain Bartlett. He had served against the Indian Mutiny in 1857, and he wore his bright red uniform with pride to every family gathering. Theodore even sported a red neckerchief in solidarity. Anne wore ruby earrings - I remember how they flashed in the light.

The Andakhars were nowhere to be seen. The night stretched darker and cigar smoke pooled upon the ceiling.

“Typical,” muttered Sir Bartlett from his ornate chair.

Catherine’s father set his chin in an air most reminiscent of the patriarch. “They’ll be along,” he assured him. “They’ve got much farther to travel. You know Eliza wouldn’t miss your party for the world.”

Sir Bartlett merely sniffed.

Catherine’s Aunt Eliza, the youngest of Sir Bartlett’s children, had taken her share of the railroad fortune and traveled the world from colony to colony. She’d met her husband, a high-caste Indian lawyer, during her travels, and married him overseas. The couple still traveled often, though after the birth of their baby they’d settled down somewhat in Holland.

Catherine’s father, Mr. Bartlett, had been the one to issue the invitation.

It was nearly half past eight when Mr. and Mrs. Andakhar finally appeared at the door, apologies and travel-dust tumbling off them with equal vigor. Their carriage had been held up in town. Upon their entrance, Theodore had practically leapt up from his seat as though it was scalding iron and migrated towards the dining room door, hands folded behind his back to dispel suspicion. Anne broke up the discussion between us older children and subtly herded us in that direction, as well.

“Aren’t you just starving?” Anne asked us with a look that implied that there was a correct answer.

“Give the Andakhars a moment to compose themselves, at the very least,” Catherine chided lightly.

“Spoken like a lady who’s been in the same house as the cook all day,” said Nathaniel with a playful elbow and a wink. “Only such a lady would put off the wonderful-smelling meal that’s been tormenting me all night.”

“And us!” Theodore insisted.

“The Andakhars have been traveling all day.”

“Oh, certainly, but so have we!”

Catherine waved off her cousins. “A moment more, then you shall have your feast - *if* Grandfather is able to get out of that old chair of his by then.”

“He *has* been settling ever lower into it,” I noted with a casual glance at Sir Bartlett stewing in the chair.

“I think he’s halved his stature in the past two minutes alone,” wondered Anne.

“Well, you know how he is when poor Andakhar’s about,” Catherine murmured. Her cousins muttered in agreement, nodding their heads.

With the final family unit in the manor, all the guests migrated into the dining room in no time at all. The Kensington Bartletts practically dove for their seats. Old Sir Bartlett took his place at the head - Catherine’s father on one side, the Captain on the other.

On the wall behind the head of the table, the sapphires on the Bartlett family crest glittered in the light of the candelabras.

I sat between Catherine and Mr. Andakhar. I must admit, it always gave me a slight surprise to see such a dark-complexioned man in high English fashion, but aside from his features there was truly no discernable difference between Mr. Andakhar and the other gentlemen at the table in my book. His English was impeccable, his sense of humor light. And he gave his wife the dearest smile all while she talked and talked.

“The sunset between the innumerable cathedral spires - oh, it was just glorious,” Aunt Eliza gushed over soup. “Barcelona is truly a jewel this time of year.”

“Sounds so,” Mrs. Holt beamed.

Mr. Bartlett nodded. “And where was the baby during your expeditions?”

“My sister recently moved to Amsterdam with us to look after him,” Mr. Andakhar replied.

“There were no nannies already in Amsterdam?”

Sir Bartlett spoke with a casual air, spooning his soup, but the atmosphere seemed to tighten. Mr. Andakhar straightened in his chair. If I hadn’t been seated next to him, I daresay I wouldn’t have noticed it. “I’m glad to spend time with my sister,” he said.

“She’s been such a help,” Aunt Eliza piped up. “And we thought it would be nice for our son to know his aunt.”

“Speaking of,” said Mrs. Holt, “When can *we* next see the little darling?”

“Yes, when?” The other ladies perked up.

“Well,” replied Aunt Eliza, “we were hoping he’d be strong enough to travel by the time our dear Catherine’s wedding rolls around.” She leaned to offer Catherine and I a smile. “Still on for next April, I assume?”

“Oh, yes,” Catherine beamed, radiant as the sun. She and I snuck a glance, and her cheeks blushed the same rose pink as her gown. “We’re terribly excited.”

“More excited than we probably ought to be, with the date still so far away,” I admitted, unable to contain a smile of my own. “I don’t know how we’ll survive the wait.”

“I’m sure the planning will keep you busy enough,” said Captain Bartlett with a grin.

“Oh, for sure,” I nodded. “I had no idea of the sheer volume of things to get done before the date. The number of things to arrange!”

“And half of them so terribly tedious! *I* skipped ahead somewhat.” Catherine leaned forward in a mock-conspiratory manner. “Just the other day, some friends and I went into town to look at gowns. I’ve found one or two styles I’m fond of and I’m starting a list.”

“Window-shopping? And I wasn’t invited?” Anne exclaimed, ruby earrings flashing.

“Nor I?” said Nathaniel. “Why Catherine, I’m offended.”

“Whenever the two of you are in town next, I’ll be happy to take you both shopping with me.” She raised her brows at Theodore. “You too, Theo.”

Her cousin sniffed. “I’m afraid I shall decline.”

“Well, you’re going to need some new frocks eventually, son,” said Captain Bartlett. Theodore scowled into his soup.

“We all will,” said Mrs. Holt, nodding to her own son and husband. “I think we can afford new outfits for Miss Catherine’s special day, if money isn’t too tight.”

“Indeed, that *would* be a good reason to start saving up,” murmured Catherine’s father. Sir Bartlett harrumphed in agreement. Mrs. Holt shot them both a look.

“And what about you?” she asked, raising her eyebrows at the Kensington Bartletts. “Won’t *you* be limiting your expenses in order to present yourselves well at your niece’s wedding, as well?”

“Certainly.” Captain Bartlett’s words were clipped and he avoided looking any of us in the eye as he sipped his wine.

Sir Bartlett nodded tactfully. “Good,” the whiskered man declared. “I won’t have any misconduct at such a blessed occasion.” His gaze flicked to Mr. Andakhar, whose jaw clenched a little more. Aunt Eliza sent her father a scornful glance.

“After all,” the patriarch continued, unmoved, “we’ll be welcoming Mr. Ernest Rhodes into our family, and we wouldn’t want to debase ourselves before the fine young gentleman, now would we?”

Embarrassed heat crawled up my collar as the family nodded and hummed agreement amongst themselves. “You needn’t be like that,” I assured them. “Truly. I wouldn’t mind how you act, I’ll be glad if you just attend.”

“Nonsense.” Mrs. Holt waved a hand. “You’re a titled gentleman marrying into our humble family. You deserve our highest propriety.”

“Hear, hear,” nodded Captain Bartlett as he took another drink.

I pressed my lips together, but there would be no arguing with them. Besides, each of the families seemed to avoid meeting one another’s gazes at that point.

Except for Sir Bartlett, who was frowning at the Andakhars as though they’d already committed a grave indecorum. Mr. Andakhar frowned back. His expression looked almost pained. Under the table, Aunt Eliza took her husband’s hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

I suddenly felt very much like an outsider.

Nathaniel, ever the arbiter, resuscitated the conversation after an exceedingly uncomfortable pause. “Theodore,” he piped up, “I’m still a bit hung up on your earlier statement. Are you saying you *don’t* enjoy a nice shopping trip in the city once and awhile?”

“That’s correct,” the twin replied, a spoonful of soup halfway to his mouth.

Nathaniel looked personally victimized. “Why the aversion?”

“Why? Because it’s a terrible bore.”

“You only find it a bore because the only colors you ever wear are gray,” Anne said plainly.

“That’s not true, look at my neck kerchief.”

“Yes, look at how pristine and unworn it is. I think I still see a crease from being folded in its box.”

“I’ve been saving it for a special occasion, is that morally reprehensible?”

“*Fashionably* reprehensible, perhaps,” said Nathaniel, shaking his head.

“Oh, come along with us the next time we go out, Theo,” Catherine grinned. “We’ll have fun together.”

Theodore sighed. “Only if Ernest comes along. He’s the only one who can get the rest of you to take a break for lunch.”

“Fair enough,” said Nathaniel.

Catherine looked to me, placing her hand on mine. A fair curl brushed her cheek, her brown eyes alight with admiration. “You’d stay with us for a trip into the city, wouldn’t you, Ernest? No matter how much we quarrel, nor how many follies we’re sure to make along the way?”

“Of course,” I smiled. And I meant it, looking out over the dinner table, to the faces all around it that were pleased and relaxed once more. “I’m too fond of you all to abandon ship over something like that.”

“See here! *That’s* our boy,” grinned Captain Bartlett, raising his glass. “I knew we approved of you for a reason, Mr. Ernest.”

“You children aren’t intending on causing mischief in public, are you?” Sir Bartlett narrowed his eyes just slightly at the grandchildren.

“Oh, of course not, Grandfather, Catherine was just poking fun,” Nathaniel insisted lightly.

The patriarch huffed in an ‘I-should-hope-so’ manner, and we all returned to our meal.

Dinner progressed late into the evening and conversation continued for twice as long. Soup was followed by the main course, which was followed by dessert. Theodore, true to form, filled his plate and cleared it to the crumb every time. Nathaniel and Captain Bartlett kept up the cheerful conversation. Aunt Eliza and Mr. Andakhar regaled us with more tales of their exotic travels.

“All this talk of India and America and the Ottoman Empire makes me want to see these places myself,” I mentioned to Catherine after dinner while the family milled throughout the house, gathering and talking while the men lit cigars. The butler supervised the servants as they discreetly cleared the table of our platters and cutlery.

“Doesn’t it, though?” Catherine sighed. “Ernest, once we’re married, let’s travel the world.”

“Where would you like to go first?”

“India, I think,” she replied, casting a smile towards the Andakhars standing at the other end of the dining room. “Wouldn’t it be grand? A honeymoon in the colonies? I’ve wanted to visit the Hindu temples ever since Aunt Eliza sent her first letter about them.”

“Just watch your purses if you do go,” Captain Bartlett interjected cheerfully. “Ernest, I’d expect you’d keep a close eye on Miss Catherine - and yourself, for that matter. The colonies are always packed to the brim with rogues of the most unsavory sort, and Her Majesty’s India is no different.”

Catherine’s smile faded into an expression that was a little firmer. “Mr. Andakhar is no rogue,” she said, “and he’s from Her Majesty’s India.”

“Well, of course he’s not! I would never disparage his character with such an accusation. Mr. Andakhar is a most upstanding gentleman despite his heritage - one of the respectable ones, I’d say. Why, one could hardly distinguish him from the rest of us Englishmen - aside from his complexion, of course.”

Mr. and Mrs. Andakhar had heard him. It was hard not to. The captain *had* refilled his wineglass at dinner several times. “An upstanding gentleman despite my heritage, sir?” Mr. Andakhar said, folding his hands behind his back.

“Certainly!” Captain Bartlett clapped him on the shoulder. “One can hardly tell you’re colony-born at all. I met my fair share of scoundrels in the Mutiny, but I’m pleased to declare that my sister married a proper Indian.”

Mr. Andakhar’s mouth firmed into a line, but he forced a smile nonetheless. “Proper by British standards, you mean?”

“Well, naturally. What other standards could there be?”

“Well.” Mr. Andakhar nodded stiffly. “Your approval is... encouraging, Captain. If only more of Eliza’s society held me in a similar regard.”

“What, you mean our father?” The captain lifted his nose in the direction of Sir Bartlett, sequestered in serious discussion with Catherine’s father under the sapphire family crest. Captain Bartlett laughed. “Don’t worry yourself too much about him, Andakhar. He’ll see that you’re no rogue sooner or later. He’ll come around - I did, after all.”

Sir Bartlett was well within earshot, but he made no motion to acknowledge his son. Nor his son-in-law.

“No,” the latter murmured, “I don’t think he ever will.”

“Well, someone ought to make him,” Catherine muttered.

No one responded to that comment. The other conversations around us seemed to lull, as well, as though everyone took a moment to glance at the family head.

Conversation petered out around eleven o’ clock. I was stifling yawns toward the end - and not just because I had been looped into Mrs. Holt’s discussion about the Holt family’s plans for renovating their estate. “Of course, nothing’ll happen until we finish our dealings with the contractors from the *previous* projects,” she’d laughed, oblivious to the narrow-eyed glance that Catherine’s mother gave her. Captain Bartlett had retired early, partly due to Anne and Theodore ushering their father upstairs with that clever, subtle way of theirs - probably to avoid a half-drunken scene, I assumed. Nathaniel declared loudly and genially that he had had enough of arbiting the family’s shenanigans and was off to bed, which prompted the rest of us to call it a night as well.

Catherine and I got distracted by the Kensington Bartlett twins in the sitting-area alcove off the main stairwell landing as we migrated upstairs, and despite our exhaustion we stayed up for at least another hour, chatting quietly amongst ourselves. At last, we bade the twins goodnight and parted ways for real. I stole a kiss from Catherine outside her door when the hall was clear of guests and staff.

My room was upstairs on the other side of the manor house. As I passed the main staircase, I thought I heard the sound of the front door closing, but when I stopped to listen, I heard nothing more. Thinking nothing of it, I ascended the stairs.

That was the end of the anniversary dinner-party. When we woke the next day, everything rapidly fell apart.

The Bartlett Affair

Part Two: The Investigation

The discovery of the crime did not enter with a bang, but rather with a steady crescendo of concern.

According to the official record, Nathaniel was the first to notice something was amiss.

He rose earlier than the rest of us and went downstairs to see if breakfast had been set out in the dining room. Upon entering, he noticed that the Bartlett family crest wasn't hanging on the wall at the head of the table. He assumed it had been taken down by the servants for cleaning.

Mr. Bartlett was next down. Nathaniel greeted him and asked if he'd ordered the crest cleaned this morning. Perplexed, he said he hadn't. They decided that perhaps the butler had taken the initiative to take it down.

More guests arrived downstairs before they could look into it further, drawn by the smell of cooking from the kitchens. Catherine's mother and Mrs. Holt noted the absence of the crest immediately and snagged the butler to ask after it.

Surrounded by the family, it was then that Mr. Mulaney, the butler himself, realized that the crest was gone, and was forced to admit that he had no idea where it was.

I was downstairs by this point. I felt the tension in the room spike in that moment.

The servants were roused. The kitchens and servants' offices downstairs were swept. Catherine descended the steps amid the growing whirl of frantic people, and I explained that the crest, the Bartlett family's most prized heirloom, was unaccounted for.

The sweep revealed nothing.

Sir Bartlett was still asleep upstairs.

"Someone ought to rouse him," Mrs. Holt said.

"And tell him what?" Captain Bartlett retorted. "That his priceless heirloom has been stolen out from under our very noses?"

"It has a defined price," countered Mr. Bartlett.

"Yes, a *high* one," Mrs. Holt said.

“Indeed. The perfect motive for theft, wouldn’t you agree?” said Captain Bartlett, his gaze lingering a little too long on her.

Nathaniel took a wary step in front of his mother. “You’re not *suggesting* anything, are you?”

“He’s suggesting nothing,” insisted Aunt Eliza, stepping between the two. “Nothing’s been proven. We don’t know if a theft even took place last night.”

“The crest isn’t in the house, Eliza,” Catherine’s father said.

“Have you checked anyone’s bedchambers?”

“For it to have made it into somebody’s bedchambers, a theft would have to have taken place,” Captain Bartlett declared, “and I’m not suggesting anything, only that all of those sapphires would fetch a pretty penny in town, so the thief is most likely someone in dire financial straits, wouldn’t you say?”

“A wastrel, you mean?” Mrs. Holt’s eyes flashed as she and the captain glared each other down.

“Jane, Henry,” Mr. Bartlett demanded, “Stop this at once. We’ll get to the bottom of this, and we’ll get there *properly*. I’ll not have you picking unnecessary quarrels.”

“And *why* are my children picking quarrels this early in the morning?”

Everyone turned to the stairwell.

Old Sir Bartlett loomed over the scene, one hand on the banister, whiskers still uncombed from sleep.

We were silent. Catherine and I shared a glance, as we always did when trouble was rising - and the scene we’d woken up to the morning after the dinner-party was turning into trouble like we’d never seen.

Catherine’s father was the one to explain the predicament to him. The family crest was missing. Possibly stolen. All we knew was that it was nowhere to be found in the house outside of the private bedrooms, and everyone was rapidly forming their own explanations as to its whereabouts.

“I was intending on searching the servants’ quarters,” Mr. Bartlett offered. “Interrogating everyone who was in this house last night -”

“You will do nothing.” Sir Bartlett sharply held up a hand.

His son blanched. "Father -"

"No one is to do anything," the patriarch repeated as he surveyed the assembly of family members. "No one is to leave this house or touch a single thing until the authorities are contacted. Gideon?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Bartlett.

"Ride into town and bring back an inspector. As for the rest of you," he declared, eyeing us all, "there will be no quarrels. We all have our own suspects as to who committed this wicked slight against this family, myself included, but not one of us has a shred of hard evidence beyond slander at this point."

Captain Bartlett sniffed.

"So. Without proper evidence that will hold up in a court, I forbid any further speculation. The true villain will be revealed in due time - and through due process of the unquestionable law."

And so it was.

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Mr. Bartlett left alone and returned in the company of a lady. We met her on the manor front lawn.

"What's this?" Sir Bartlett grumbled as the woman stepped from the carriage in a deep blue day frock buttoned up to her neck, a small dark hat upon her dark, pinned hair. Sir Bartlett looked to his son. "I thought you were bringing Inspector Ragland."

"That would be my father, sir," said the lady, extending a gloved hand to him with a flat, prim smile. "He's called out of town on a case. Inspector Emily Ragland, at your service, sir."

"I see." He shook her hand briefly, still somewhat in shock.

"Mr. Bartlett informed me of the situation on the ride over," she said. She squinted up at the manor house, then acknowledged us standing before it. "It seems you've got quite the conundrum on your hands."

"I'm afraid so, ma'am," said Captain Bartlett.

"No developments since Mr. Bartlett's departure?"

"We haven't touched a thing."

Inspector Ragland nodded to herself. “Well, first things first. I’d like to have a look around the estate myself. Mr. Bartlett, I’d like to place you in charge of the family and staff. Keep them close, and keep them calm. Sir,” she said now to Sir Bartlett, “I’d like for you to accompany me about the scene. Your granddaughter, as well. Is there a Miss Catherine present?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Catherine.

“Ah, good. Come with me, miss. As for the rest of you,” she said to us, “don’t fret. We’ll get to the bottom of this sapphire affair one way or another.”

“Keep the cousins in line for me while I’m gone,” Catherine said to me, giving my hands a gentle squeeze. She smiled, but the radiance from last night was much dimmed, and it saddened me to see.

Inspector Ragland took the better part of an hour going through the manor with Sir Bartlett and Catherine. I sat with Nathaniel, Theodore, and Anne on the lawn. The adults migrated to the gardens to sit on the benches or stand about uncomfortably while they waited. The servants, under the supervision of Mr. Bartlett and the butler, gathered near us on the grass.

The sleuthing trio appeared at the front door at one point, but the inspector only began investigating the exterior of the house, as well as the immediate grounds - the stables, the gardens, the cellar patio round back. She studied the windows, the doors, asked questions of her guides.

“Well? Have you found anything?” asked Captain Bartlett as they finally reconvened with the rest of us. Theodore abandoned the grass clumps he’d taken to pulling up by the root.

Inspector Ragland glanced back up at the house. “No evidence of forced entry anywhere around the premises. No horses or tackle missing from the stables,” she said plainly. “If there was a thief, the perpetrator was either someone in the manor last night, or someone with a key to the door.”

“No one outside this manor owns a key,” Mrs. Bartlett said.

“Why, Ernest is the only person outside the family and staff who does,” said Catherine, “and he’s lived exclusively with us for months.”

“You wouldn’t accuse your own fiance, would you?” Captain Bartlett exclaimed. “Robbing the very family he’s to marry into!”

“Of course not.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing,” I insisted, neck growing warm and insides lurching anxiously.

Inspector Ragland merely held up a hand. “You’re certain that everyone in the house last night is accounted for here?”

“Correct,” said Mr. Bartlett, joining the group.

“Have you searched their bedrooms yet? Have you found a clue?” asked the captain.

“I have not searched anyone’s private chambers yet,” she said. “I’ll request that permission during each person’s interview.”

“Interview?”

“I’ve heard Mr. Bartlett’s account of what happened last night, but in order to gather the full story, I’d like to conduct an interview of everyone on this lawn, family and staff. Privately.”

“So you have nothing.” Captain Bartlett ran his hands through his hair.

Inspector Ragland pinned him with a look. “I will require more information before I make that deduction, Captain.”

Sir Bartlett and Catherine accompanied the Inspector back into the house, presumably to set up an interview room. One by one, the serving staff and family members were called in for their questioning. Waiting outside, several of the adults grew irritable in the climbing afternoon sun.

“It could be sitting under some scoundrel’s bed right now, and we’re bandying about with questions,” the captain muttered.

“The Inspector knows what she’s doing, Father,” Anne mumbled back. “Though I do wish we could wait our turn inside. It’s getting dreadfully hot.”

“I’d say,” panted Mrs. Holt, fanning herself.

“Nervous, are we?” clipped the captain.

“Not at all,” she snapped back. “You?”

“Enough,” growled Sir Bartlett from his perch on a bench. “We’re all hot. If anything, I’d say Andakhar has the greatest reason to sweat, with that dark vest he’s got on.”

Mr. Andakhar, who had been patiently standing to the side with his wife, cut his gaze to the patriarch.

I was called in next, and I was more than happy to escape the rising temperatures outside.

Inspector Ragland sat on a chair in the corner of the sitting room, sunlight filtering through the tall windows. She looked up from her little notebook as I entered. “Do sit,” she said, gesturing to the chair opposite her. “It’s Ernest, is it not?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, fidgeting on the edge of the cushion. “Ernest Rhodes. Lord, technically.”

“Lord,” she nodded, scribbling in her book. “You’re not a Bartlett, are you? What brought you to the dinner party last night?”

“I live here,” I replied. “I’m engaged to marry Miss Catherine in the spring.”

“Ah, congratulations.”

“Thank you. I have a room on the third floor, actually. You’re plenty welcome to search it,” I hastened. “I haven’t anything to hide, I swear -”

“Slow down, Lord Rhodes,” she said, holding out her hand and offering a brief smile. “We’ll get there in due time. Now. When was the last time you saw the Bartlett family crest?”

I paused to think - and to calm myself down. “After dinner,” I decided. “I noticed Sir Bartlett and Catherine’s father talking underneath it.”

“What were they saying?”

“I... didn’t hear,” I admitted. “Captain Bartlett was speaking too loud, I couldn’t make it out.”

More scribbling. “About what time was that?”

“Perhaps... half past ten?”

“I see.” Scribble, scribble, scribble, a hair-thin noise in the otherwise quiet room. A cooled bead of sweat trailed down into my collar. “When did you notice the crest was missing?”

“I came downstairs at about quarter to nine. Mrs. Bartlett and Mrs. Holt were talking to the butler about it.”

Inspector Ragland nodded. “Did you notice anything strange in between those two times? Anything you heard or saw that was out of the ordinary during the night or early in the morning?”

I went to say no, but then a memory tapped at the edge of my mind. “Actually, there was something unusual,” I said. “After I went upstairs, I talked with Catherine and the Kensington Bartlett twins for a while before going to bed. As I was heading for the steps afterward, I... could have sworn I heard the front door close.”

“Why did you think that was unusual?”

“Well... it was past midnight. Almost one in the morning, I think. The butler locks up the house at ten sharp every night. No one should have been opening that door that late.”

“I see.” She nodded as she wrote, then closed her little book. “Several of the other people I’ve interviewed also recalled noises from the front door around one in the morning.”

“Do you have a suspect?”

“Do you, Lord Rhodes?”

I shook my head. “No. I can’t imagine anyone who would want to do this, especially not from within the family. They quarrel, certainly, but you haven’t seen them at ease. Usually, they get along just fine.”

Inspector Ragland nodded. “I’ll take your endorsement into consideration. You may go.”

I hesitated in the doorway, feeling like I should say more, but decided against it and turned away.

The interviews concluded shortly after that. We were all invited back into the house, to everyone’s relief. Inspector Ragland stood beside her chair in the sitting room, hands folded before her dress and chin set.

“Well?” asked Sir Bartlett, crossing his arms.

The inspector looked between us all - to the butler standing just outside the doorway. “Mr. Mulaney,” she said, beckoning him. “Your perspective last night was most unique. I think the family ought to hear it.”

Mulaney, the butler, swallowed and stepped into the room, wringing his hands. Every eye bore down upon him. He looked to old Sir Bartlett. “Forgive me, my lord,” he said, the Irish in his wavering voice growing stronger with his unease. “I should have told the family sooner...”

Mr. Bartlett’s eyes went wide. “Mulaney,” he exclaimed.

“It was you all along?” Theodore’s mouth fell open into an O.

“Forty-five years of your service to this family, and this is how you repay us?”

“Let him speak,” the Inspector demanded, silencing us.

Mulaney wrung his hands some more. “I didn’t touch the crest,” he said. “But... I did see who did.”

“Well, speak, man!” Captain Bartlett cried.

“I was doing my final rounds,” the butler explained, his eyes flicking across every face. “The lights were all down. All of the guests had gone upstairs - I could hear the young cousins talking in the alcove, like they do. All the servants were abed... when I heard a sound like the front door unlocking.”

We all practically leaned forward to hear every word.

“I thought it was the madam returning from one of her nightly walks to the frog-pond, although I was sure I’d seen her go upstairs,” he continued, nodding to Catherine’s mother. “I assumed it was just my old brain mixing it up. But the steps were heavier than the madam’s. I went to investigate... and I saw *him* in the dining room.”

“Him?”

“Who?”

“I didn’t get a good look at his face. But he had a most disagreeable air about him, sir. He moved like a villain - most snakelike.” Mulaney’s trembling calmed as he settled into his conviction. “I knew as soon as I laid eyes on him that he had to be up to terrible mischief.”

“Did you see this man take the crest?”

“Yes,” the butler said. “He looked about him before he reached for it - he had most untrustworthy features, a dark roguish character, and I knew I had to put a stop to it, no matter what the family might think. I snuck to grab a gun from the cabinet in the back to scare him off... but when I returned, he was gone, and so was the crest. Like smoke in the wind.”

“Around this same time is when several others noted the sound of the front door closing,” Inspector Ragland added. “The man must have slipped out of the house, crest in tow, while Mulaney was in the back.”

“What did you mean by ‘what the family might think,’ Mulaney?” asked Mr. Bartlett.

The butler blanched once more, avoiding everyone's gaze. "I've been in this family's service for a long time, sir," he stammered. "And I knew I had a duty to protect it from any threat of villainy, no matter who it came from."

"Who *did* it come from, man? *Who did you see?*"

"I couldn't see his face well, but I knew who it had to be the moment I saw him." The butler raised a trembling finger, his eyes wide but firm. "It was him. Andakhar!"

"*Andakhar!*" Several gasped. The collective attention immediately rounded on the wide-eyed Indian man standing at the back.

"You!" Sir Bartlett spat.

"Please!" Mr. Andakhar held up both palms. "There has been a misunderstanding! I never touched the crest!"

"Search his room!" cried Captain Bartlett.

"You'll find nothing," Aunt Eliza insisted, taking her husband's arm and lifting her chin. "My husband is innocent of this crime. I never left his side the entire night, not once!"

"She's in on it, too! Eliza, dearest Eliza, why now do you betray your family?"

"She betrayed us long before last night when she married *him!*" Sir Bartlett roared. "I refuse to stand by idly any longer. I refuse to submit to his continued slights against us!"

Mr. Andakhar's expression hardened with pain and outrage. "I have done everything in my power to try to win your favor, sir, since the very moment we met," he insisted. "None of it has ever been enough. I've borne more slights from you than any I've unwittingly given - now this! What more would you ask of me?"

"The location of the crest, for one!" said the captain.

"I don't know where it is, Mulaney was mistaken!"

"Mulaney!" Mrs. Holt, being closest to him, took hold of his arm. "Can you be sure it was Mr. Andakhar you saw in the dining room?"

"Well... I can't be completely certain, ma'am, it was dark..."

"See!" Aunt Eliza cried.

"But there could be no denying the color of his face," the butler continued. "That I saw clear as day, the swarthy look of a scoundrel, to be sure."

“A scoundrel *because* he’s swarthy?” Catherine challenged, outraged.

“And such a look couldn’t *possibly* be anyone other than Mr. Andakhar, is that what you’re saying?” Nathaniel exclaimed.

“He’s the only man of his looks who owns a key to my front door,” said Sir Bartlett.

“I assure you, I did not steal your family’s crest!”

“Wasn’t it just last night, Andakhar, that you were lamenting about our father’s treatment of you?” asked Captain Bartlett. “Didn’t you say that someone ought to make him change his mind?”

“That was *me* who said that, not him,” exclaimed Catherine, “but I didn’t mean for anything to go this far!”

“Silence!” shrieked Mrs. Bartlett. The angry glares and snarling words cut out as we rounded on Catherine’s mother. Her eyes were bright, her expression fiery. “This is speculation. Aren’t we forgetting that *every person in this room also owns a key to the door?*”

“What has that got to do with any of this?” Mrs. Holt said.

“Mulaney isn’t certain who was in the dining room. He can’t say for sure it was Mr. Andakhar. All we know is that it was someone who had a key to this house. If we’re content to hurl accusations at one another, then no one here is above speculation - the man in the room could have been hired by any one of us, and given the key to the door.”

“Aha!” Captain Bartlett stuck a triumphant finger in the air, which he promptly leveled at the Holts. “So I was right from the beginning! Andakhar might not have been the one to act on *his* motive, but *you* are the ones who acted on *yours!*”

“Oh, Henry, would you *please* not shout?” Mrs. Bartlett pressed her fingers to her temple.

“What now?” Aunt Eliza lamented.

“Are you going to accuse us outright at last, Henry?” Mrs. Holt glared at her brother. “With what you hide, yourself?”

“*You are a debtor!*” The captain blazed with righteous fervor. “Your whole family unit there - you spent your whole share of Father’s fortune, and then you spent even more. You can’t do any more of those renovations until you pay off your debts - and what a *spectacular* fortune the sapphires on the family crest must bring in!”

“Oh, let he who is without sin cast the first stone, then,” Mrs. Holt retorted. “If you insist on being so generous with your words, then why don’t you tell the family where *your* money goes?”

“Mother,” Nathaniel implored.

“My money goes toward my health,” the captain proclaimed.

“It goes toward your *opium*, more like.”

“For my health!” he cried. “I told you about the nervous affliction that’s attacked me ever since the combat in the Mutiny, Jane, I confided in you. I told you I had been prescribed that medicine.”

“I’m aware. You also told me how you sneak extra during particularly bad episodes.”

“And I trusted you to keep that confidential.”

“That was before you accused my family of *theft!*”

“Enough! How can we prove that either of you orchestrated this plot?” demanded Mr. Bartlett. “How can we prove that any of us did?”

“We already have a witness placing the true perpetrator at the scene,” Sir Bartlett insisted with a glare at Mr. Andakhar.

“And another placing me secure in my room all night,” Mr. Andakhar shot back.

“The Holts have a much stronger motive,” Captain Bartlett said, “and *no* alibi outside their family unit.”

“You don’t have one either!” Mrs. Holt argued.

“Who’s got a key? Everyone prove your key is in your possession, and not that of some hired vagabond off the street.”

“Better yet, let’s just scour the bedrooms like we should have done in the first place!”

Their shouting bounced off the walls in a cacophony of anger and panic and desperation.

Somehow, Inspector Ragland managed to regain control of the situation, after standing stunned while the whole mess disintegrated. I found myself nearly pressed against the wall while the family tried to scramble for the truth.

That was something else about this family I'd adopted. Their emotions ran strong and hot. They might have been well-off, but they were unlike any of the other highborn members of society I'd ever met as Lord Rhodes.

I wasn't sure which was better.

It took a good while, but eventually people stormed out of the room, scattered to the far reaches of the house to cool off. The Inspector facilitated the dispersal, assuring us we'd sort out this whole mess once we all had time to absorb everything that had just happened.

I ran into Captain Bartlett in the dining room a few hours later, his head leaning on his hand. "Quite a mess, isn't it, Ernest?" he said when he noticed me. "Never thought I'd see such uncivilized behavior outside of the colonies. And from a family like ours..."

I avoided Mrs. Holt, who was weeping quietly on her husband's shoulder in another room, and searched for Catherine. I found her standing in the garden outside.

"How are you faring?" I asked her.

She jumped, placing a hand over her heart. "You frightened me."

"That deep in your thoughts, were you?"

She sighed and leaned her fair head on my shoulder. The two of us stared at the beds of roses, the blooms twining up the trellises, the arches of shrubbery. A cool September breeze rustled the nearby leaves. Cooling us off.

"What are we going to do?" she muttered at length.

I curved my mouth to the side in thought. "We... do seem to be at an impasse," I said. "It's Mr. Andakhar's word against Mulaney's if he was the one in the dining room, and I don't think Inspector Ragland's come up with a way to prove for certain if anyone hired someone to steal the crest for them."

"The key plan didn't work?"

"Everyone's got theirs, I think. None are missing."

She scoffed. "This is such a puzzle. It's foolishness. Who'd even want to steal it? It's smaller than a dinner plate, there are plenty of other things in the manor worth just as much or more."

"Maybe whoever did it wanted to make it a clear slight against the family," I offered. "Like your grandfather said."

“Grandfather.” Catherine scowled off into the garden. “Can you believe his behavior? I’ve never seen him so rude.”

“Mulaney, too,” I agreed. “That talk of a ‘villainous swarthy complexion.’ One’d think he’d learn to show a little more respect to folk from the colonies ever since Andakhar joined the family.”

“Truly. They’re made for each other, he and my grandfather.” Catherine suddenly looked up at me. “I did have a thought, Ernest.”

“About the mystery?”

“No... about us.” She sighed once more. “That talk of our honeymoon. Where we’d like to go.”

“Catherine, I’m still marrying you. No family quarrel will change that.”

“I know, it’s... well, today’s just given me an idea of how we might like to... change the plan a bit.”

I frowned.

She shrugged. “We can both agree that we’d like to see India, can’t we?”

“Of course.”

“How’d you feel if we did a little more traveling after that?” she asked. “See all those places Aunt Eliza was telling us about? Maybe, I don’t know... find someplace to spend an extended stay in Amsterdam, perhaps?”

“You mean... not return home?”

“Well, obviously we’d visit home, I couldn’t bear to be apart from them forever, and I daresay neither could you. I was just thinking that maybe... you and I would want to make our *own* way in the world these first few years into our marriage. Out from under the rest of my family.” She looked up at me. “I know you love them, and I love them too, but...”

“Maybe it’s not the best environment for a couple of newlyweds,” I finished. She nodded, and I looped an arm around her. “I understand. I think I like that plan. One condition, though.”

“Oh?”

“Nathaniel and the twins must be invited to visit us often.”

“Oh, of course,” she smiled. “They’d have an open invitation. They can drop by any time they like.”

We admired the gardens in each other’s company for a while more, then hazarded a peek back inside. A late tea had been set out in the dining room, and family members were picking at it every once and awhile. I glanced up at the empty space where the crest used to hang and sighed.

“Oh, Mr. Ernest,” said the butler as he entered the room. “There’s a letter for you.”

“For me?” I blinked. In the frenzy of the morning and afternoon, I’d completely forgotten about the post. I took the letter off his hands and opened it. Catherine, picking up a biscuit, watched me.

I read the letter. And frowned.

Catherine frowned. “What is it?”

“It’s from my mother,” I said, somewhat incredulously.

“I thought you said you hadn’t spoken for months.”

“We haven’t.” I turned over the paper, but there was nothing more than her brief note. I turned a saddened glance on my fiancée. “She says there’s an urgent family matter and I’m to visit her in the city townhouse as soon as possible.”

“Not *another* urgent family matter,” she bemoaned.

“I’m so sorry, Catherine,” I pleaded. “But she never writes, ever. Something must be seriously wrong for her to call me away.”

“You don’t think someone’s died, do you?”

“It doesn’t say. I hope not.”

“Then go.” She patted my arm, smiling weakly. “I don’t think there’s a person in this house who’d stop you from leaving, the Inspector included. Go see what your mother wants. Write me when you get there.”

“You’ll be alright here?” I asked.

“I think the cousins and I can handle it.” She kissed my cheek. “Go.”

Farewells were brief. I made my rounds throughout the estate, finding each family member in turn to say goodbye. The twins embraced me. Nathaniel shook my hand firmly with a tight smile.

“I wish I could do something to help,” I told him.

He merely waved me off. “It’s alright, Ernest. This family will pick up the pieces somehow. We always do.”

Catherine kissed me before I stepped fully into the carriage. As I watched the Bartlett family ground roll by, I knew deep in my heart that Nathaniel was right. The crest affair was awful, but if any family could find a way to come back together in its wake, it was the Bartletts.

I just had no idea how they’d do it without their crest back home with them.

The Bartlett Affair

Part Three: The Townhouse

I stood, anxiously tugging at my vest, on the stoop of the Rhodes townhouse in the city. The setting sun cast knives of golden light between the rows of chimneys and alleys, lighting up the wide avenue. A city worker was lighting the lamp-posts a little ways off.

It had been months since I'd seen my family, least of all my mother.

So, naturally, I was feeling flushed and nervous as our butler opened the door and I stepped into the hall. Not to mention, the chaos of the day was finally starting to settle on me.

"She's waiting for you in the drawing room, my lord," said the butler, bowing away.

My lord. No one had called me that for some time. It was almost a shock to hear it again. I steeled my anxious hands and cracked open the double doors to the drawing room.

My mother, Lady Rhodes, sat on one of the dark chairs in the center of the room, reading a book. Her dark brown hair - my hair - was pulled into its chignon as tight as ever.

She noticed me at the door. "Ernest," she said.

"Mother," I said, slipping into the room but leaving the door open behind me. "Did something happen?"

"Come sit."

I complied. I couldn't shake the feeling, sitting there stiffly before my mother, that this was to be my second interrogation of the day.

She folded her little book closed and raised her brows at me. "I heard the Bartletts are having a spot of trouble," she said.

I fidgeted. "It's nothing serious," I assured her. She had no business learning all of the family's problems. "Why did you write to me so urgently? Has something happened?"

"I wanted to have a discussion with you, Ernest."

Oh, this was most certainly a second interrogation. I frowned to divert the pressure. "Where are William and John? Father?"

"Your father and brothers are still in Dublin," she said.

“I thought you said this was a family matter. If it’s not urgent, I’d really prefer to return to Bartlett Manor -”

“It does concern our family, and you will stay to listen.”

Her stare was like a pin through a bug on a wall. Emotionless. The proper British stiff upper lip. I closed my mouth and sat mute.

My mother folded her hands before her, keeping her gaze on me. “How is the wedding planning going?” she asked.

Of course that was what this was about. I almost relaxed from the understanding. “It’s coming along,” I said. “I wasn’t aware that you were interested, after we didn’t receive a response to our invitation. Have you changed your mind?”

She lifted her brows another fraction in a decisive gesture that implied she hadn’t. “Do you know why,” she asked, “I never approved of your match with Catherine Bartlett?”

“You never gave me an explanation.”

“Then let me do so now.” Lady Rhodes scraped a fleck of dust off the ruffles of her gown as she spoke. “The Bartletts. I’m sure you’ve noticed that they don’t... act like any modern genteel family we know. Haven’t you? Do you know why they don’t?”

I shook my head slowly, my shoulders rising in a half shrug. “Family culture?”

“It’s because they *aren’t* like the other genteel families we know.”

“Well, they socialize in the same circles we do,” I frowned. “Sir Bartlett’s coffers run nearly as deep as ours.”

“They are still not the same as us. They will never be the same. It does not matter how much money the railroad brings them, because it will always be the *railroad* bringing them that money.”

I stared at her. “That’s it?” I asked. “Mother... you don’t approve of Catherine Bartlett because her family wealth isn’t based on *inheritance*?”

“Ernest, I don’t approve of *any* of the Bartletts.” Her eyes flashed. “And for more reasons than their sudden rise to prominence and their... emotional vivacity.”

“I love Catherine,” I said. “I love her vivacity. The source of her wealth doesn’t bother me, I love her. I can look past all that.”

“Can you look past her aunt? The one who intermarried with an Indian?” My mother’s tone almost fell to a fervent mutter, as though she feared such a statement being overheard. “Her uncle, the captain from the Mutiny? I’ve never met a more abrasive man. To think he can be called genteel.”

“Mother,” I attempted, but she cut me off.

“And the debtors. The Holts. Part of the Bartlett circus, as well.”

“Yes, they have their flaws, but they’ve been nothing but kind to me -”

“Because *they know*.” She pulled herself to her full height in her chair. “That you come from a family better than theirs can ever dream of being. That your family isn’t disgraced by unpaid loans, colonial fraternization, an obscene lack of decorum -”

“Stop.” I shot to my feet. Glared at her. *Glared*. Anger simmered through my limbs and I clutched my fists at my sides. “Stop this. I won’t sit here and listen to you slander them. If you’ve only called me here to criticize my fiancée’s family, then I’m going to leave. Good evening, mother.”

“How did they react, Ernest?”

I stalled in my tracks as I turned for the door.

My mother’s hard gaze remained fixed on me from where she sat. “Who did they blame? The Indian? The debtor? They showed their emotional side, didn’t they?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, but my voice had gone very quiet.

“When they learned that their family crest was missing. How did they react?”

I stared at her. She stared back. Unmoving, unforgiving, unemotional...

And then my mother, Lady Rhodes, reached behind her seat and removed a small, plate-sized sack.

And pulled the missing Bartlett crest out of it.

My breath froze in my throat, staring at it. The sapphires. The glint of gold. It looked wrong there, it should have been on a wall, *it should have been on the Bartletts’ wall...*

“Such a fuss over such a pitiful thing,” she mused, turning it this way and that, studying it with disdain like she was holding up something putrid.

“It was you,” I breathed. I couldn’t pry my eyes away from the crest in her hands. “You... you hired the man.”

“You didn’t know?”

I couldn’t believe it. My mother. Lady Rhodes. Orchestrating a theft. “How?” I managed to eke out. “Mother... why?”

“I took the liberty of making a copy of that key of yours the last time you set foot in this house,” she said, placing the crest down on the side table. “The day you told us you’d proposed to Miss Catherine Bartlett.”

“You told me not to speak to you again.”

“I thought that might deter you from your foolish endeavor. Clearly, I underestimated your willingness to abandon your family.”

Or perhaps, I merely found a new family that accepted me as I was, respected my choices, without this elitist nonsense...

“So you hired an Indian man to steal her family’s crest?” My voice felt dry. My head was swimming, overwhelmed with this shock.

“I needed someone with a proper villainous air. I thought it might also make the fools think twice about their decision to allow one of them into their family.”

“Good *lord*, mother, do you even hear yourself?” I exclaimed. “I can’t believe this. I cannot believe you orchestrated a theft just to... what, win me back? Convince me that I shouldn’t marry the woman I love?”

“Love has nothing to do with this, especially for a young man of your title. I will not have my family tied to theirs,” she demanded. “They may prance about with their bejeweled family crest, but that does not change the fact that they came from the bottom of the barrel. And no amount of jewelry can mask the stain that such an upbringing has on a family culture. They have no decorum. They do not deserve you.”

“*No*,” I snapped. “Love has *everything* to do with this. I will stand by Catherine through any hardship you throw our way. You thought you could show me their flaws by bringing out the worst in them all? You may have succeeded in that, but you are gravely mistaken if you think that their shortcomings will sever our ties.”

“You cannot tell me that you still have any respect for them.”

“Yes, I can. Because that’s how a true family will behave.” I drew myself up tall. “You managed to bring out the worst in them all. Their anger. Their panic. You brought prejudices into the light, and yes - those? I cannot easily forgive. But time and patience will be this family’s saving grace in the end. People *can* change their minds. Prejudices can fade. Loans can be paid off. And in a generation or two, perhaps even families like the Rhodes’ can forget that the Bartletts were a ‘new money’ clan.”

“That’s foolishness,” my mother hissed. “If you marry the Bartlett girl, you will be throwing away a life among the upper echelons for a life of squabbling and shame.”

I stared down my mother, still seated in her chair. Her knuckles were bunched white on her dress, her mouth firm and downturned. At length, very slowly, trying to keep my voice steady around the tremble coursing through my body, I said to her, “If the upper echelons would renounce a good man like Mr. Andakhar on account of his origin, but covet a thief like you... then I think I’d prefer the squabbling.”

Lady Rhodes said nothing.

Gingerly, like a hunter approaching an elephant, unsure if the beast was truly down, I reached down and picked up the Bartlett family crest from the side table. The metal and jewels were heavier than I was expecting.

She watched me the whole time. Shocked still. She made no move to snatch it back.

“Now,” I said, tucking it safely under my coat, “I think there’s a houseful of people and an exasperated inspector who have been looking for this.”

“You think they’ll accept you back?” she seethed.

I nodded as I stepped back towards the door. “They’re my family,” I said. “They might be angry, but it’ll be just like anything. People will make any amends if it means they can laugh in the company of the people they love again. Given time, we’ll heal.”

And I left the drawing room, letting the door close behind me.

The sun had set when I stepped outside. The golden rays of sun had faded to soft, deepening gray. The breeze blew chilled.

My carriage was waiting at the curb.

I smiled, feeling the comforting weight of the crest in my jacket, and stepped inside the carriage to take us both home.