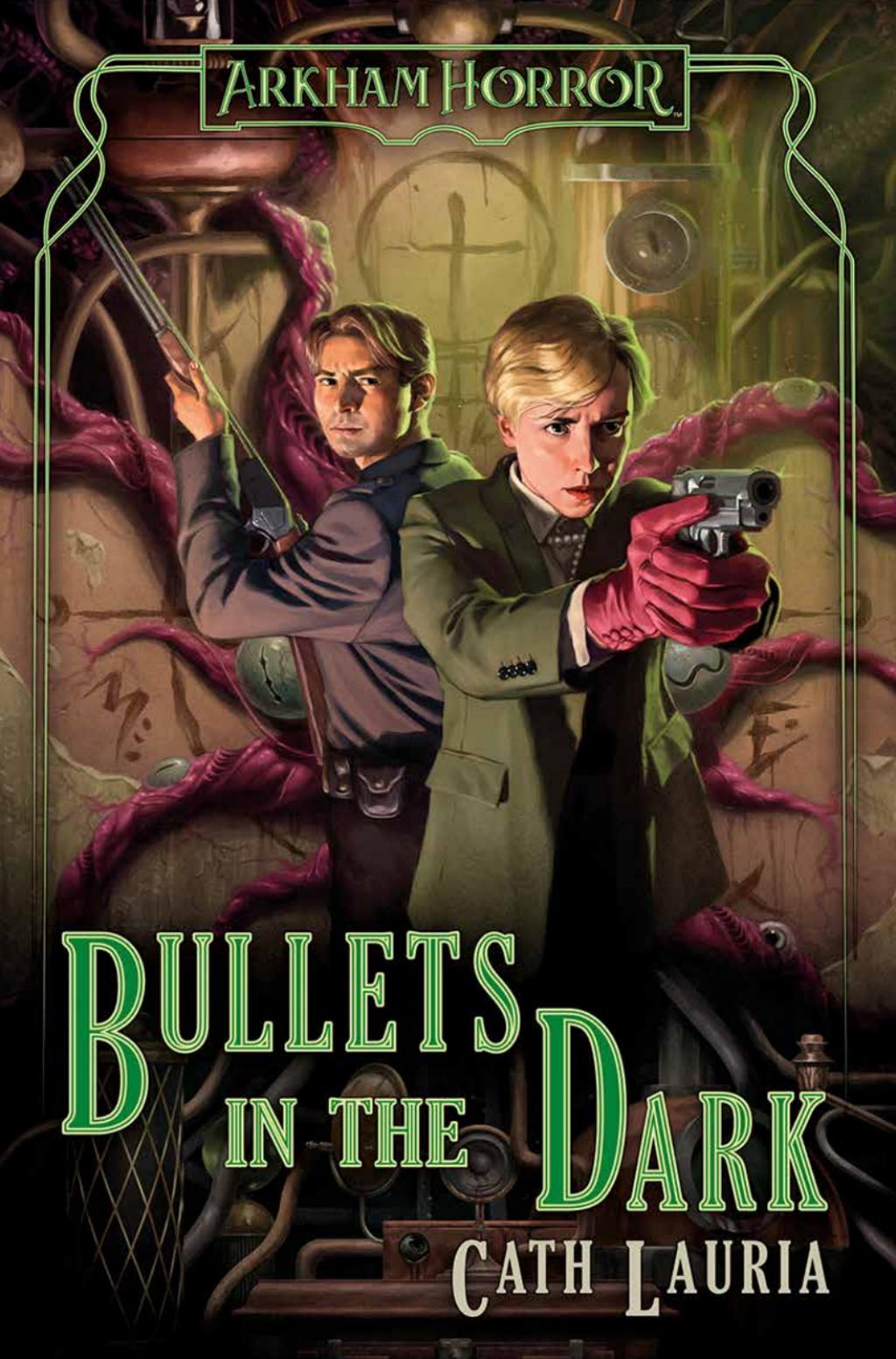


ARKHAM HORROR™



BULLETS
IN THE DARK

CATH LAURIA

This is an excerpt from

BULLETS *in the* DARK

AN ARKHAM HORROR NOVEL

BY CATH LAURIA

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The detective work of Isabelle Barnes and Tommy Muldoon reveals Arkham's dark underbelly full of murder and eldritch mayhem in this thrilling noir adventure, accompanying the release of *Arkham Horror: The Card Game Chapter 2*.

Long-missing and feared dead, Isabelle "Izzie" Barnes has returned to Arkham after escaping a sinister cult that planned to make her the final piece in their dark, twisted ritual. But Isabelle's freedom has come at a terrible cost, and now she demands justice.

When bodies start to show up with strange glass orbs burned into their mouths and uncanny links to a series of cold cases emerge, Isabelle partners with police officer Tommy Muldoon to unravel an arcane plot and uncovers an evil that runs both deep and dark through the city of Arkham. Something only a bullet can kill...

CHAPTER ONE

The courtroom reeked of smoke.

Not the familiar burn of a Lucky Strike or one of Auggie's awful Chesterfields, but the murky, acrid smell of burning lumber mixed with the dank fog rolling off the water. The combination seeped through any and every crack it could find, and given that most of Arkham was still being rebuilt after the cataclysm that had leveled good portions of the city not six months ago, that meant the smell was everywhere. It seeped into the clothes you wore, the food you ate, the bed you slept on. Only the strongest coffee or gin could hide the scent of it.

God, what I wouldn't give for a glass of gin right now.

Someone cleared their throat.

“Miss Barnes.”

Isabelle startled in her seat, reflexively clutching the cloche handbag she held as she looked up at her lawyer, George Barnaby. “Oh, forgive me,” she said, feeling her cheeks catch fire from embarrassment. “I’m afraid I got a bit distracted by the, ah, the noise of the construction.”

“Perfectly understandable,” George said soothingly, a gentle smile appearing from within the depths of his long white beard. George had all the social graces of a gentleman

and dressed himself to match, which made the roughness of his facial hair all the more striking. “This is a chaotic time in Arkham, after all. But back to the subject at hand, Miss Barnes. Tell me about the last time you saw Betty Wellington.”

“Yes, of course.” Isabelle did her best not to shift or shimmy in her seat as she readied herself. She and George had practiced this, gone over how she was meant to deliver her testimony for maximum effect.

“Juries believe what they see just as much as what they hear,” he’d told her while they’d prepared. “It is not enough to tell the truth. You have to *look* truthful, too. The more you move around, the more you stumble over your words, the harder it’s going to be to convince them to take you seriously. Be solemn but not dour, speak forthrightly, and most of all, rein in your emotions. It’s going to be twelve men judging your words, after all.” He hadn’t needed to say anything else. Isabelle had heard it all before, most recently from her ex-boyfriend.

“Women are so ruled by their emotions.”

“God, I loathe the sight of tears.”

“Do you think that display is going to make me feel sorry for you? Do you? You’re a bigger fool than I thought.”

Just picturing Auggie’s sneer was enough to get her ire up, but Isabelle crushed the surge of grief and anger within her. She forced herself to focus on George’s slow pacing in front of the witness stand rather than glance at the gathered crowd and said, “The last time I saw Betty was at one of Augustus Olmstead’s parties nearly a year ago. I noted her in particular because she was wearing a strand of pearls that went almost all the way down to her knees.”

“Quite the showpiece for a woman who worked as a switchboard operator,” George noted.

“Yes,” Isabelle agreed. “When I asked her where she got them, Betty told me they were a gift from her new beau.”

“And did she tell you who her new beau was?”

Isabelle nodded. “She did.”

George stretched out a hand toward the jury. “Please share his name with the rest of us.”

“It was Ferdinand Olmstead.” She stared straight at the elegant, cold-faced man sitting next to his lawyer at the head of the courtroom. He had the look of an Olmstead – dark hair sleek against his head, a three-piece suit worth more than a girl like Betty would have made in a year, and a slight tension in his nostrils that made it seem like he was smelling something beneath him.

A murmur went through the jury as the men whispered to each other about the defendant, who was now glaring at Isabelle like he might be able to light *her* on fire if he glowered hard enough. Isabelle tore her eyes away from him and turned back to George, who nodded in encouragement. “And did you see anything that made you believe Betty was telling the truth?”

“Oh, she was hanging off Ferdinand’s arm all night,” Isabelle confirmed. “They danced every dance together – he even turned down a spin with Jeanette Martingale, who took it rather hard.” That was a key point to bring up. Jeanette was another member of the Arkham elite, a woman whose observations couldn’t be as easily dismissed as Isabelle’s might.

“I see. What happened next?”

“We danced for hours.” It was almost tempting to get lost in these particular memories, one of the last good nights Isabelle had before the mask was removed and she saw the true face of the Olmsteads beneath it, rotten with greed and

hungry for even more power. Abigail might have been their ringleader, but her son Auggie had been all-in on her quest.

“The party ended around two in the morning,” Isabelle went on. “I shared a car with some other girls back to our boarding house. We asked Betty to come with us – she was real tipsy by then – but Ferdinand told us not to bother. He said he would see to it she made it home safe.” Isabelle gave him a pointed look once more. “I never saw her again.”

“A tragic story,” George said somberly as he turned to face the jury. “Indeed, after that party Betty Wellington was never seen by *anyone* again. Not the matron at her boarding house, not her coworkers, and not her friends. She simply disappeared. But even in Arkham, where so many people have disappeared, there is often a trail left behind. All one must do is be bold enough to follow where it leads.” He inclined his head to Isabelle, then looked at the judge. “I have no further questions for this witness, Your Honor.” He walked back to his table, and then it was time for the cross-examination.

Keep it together, you dumb Dora. Just keep it together.

Olmstead’s lawyer got to his feet and walked over with a slight swagger. He was younger than George, slick and sleek like his client, and from the way his eyes roved over Isabelle where she sat, she knew he was just as slimy as his employer.

“Miss Barnes,” the lawyer said, his gaze lingering on her neck. “I see *you’re* wearing a very nice pearl necklace.”

Isabelle’s hand instinctively rose to her neck, where her short strand of pearls laid close to her collarbones. “I... it’s an heirloom, sir.”

“From whom, may I ask?”

Isabelle swallowed hard. “My sister. My older sister.”

“Ah, so not from a great-great-grandmother, but a gift from someone young, like yourself. Someone with an income like Betty, say. Where would your sister have bought these pearls?”

Isabelle ground her teeth. “I’m not sure. They could have originally been a gift from my father.”

“And we know all fathers are excellent at discerning real jewels from fake ones.”

Tittering laughs erupted from the jury.

“I highly doubt that these are costume jewels, sir.”

“But they could be, couldn’t they? Have you ever heard of Majorica pearls, Miss Barnes?”

“I...” Isabelle’s response didn’t seem to matter. The lawyer was already turning to speak directly to the jury.

“Majorica pearls, for those of you who don’t know, are fake pearls made so convincingly, you can hardly tell they’re not the real thing unless you split ‘em open. As pretty as real pearls and a tenth of the price. I daresay even a young woman on Miss Wellington’s income could afford a string of those.”

Isabelle glanced over at George, not sure what to make of this. What did the pearls have to do with anything? He nodded steadily at her, and when the Olmstead lawyer looked back her way, Isabelle’s hands were in her lap, folded and sedate.

“I’m sure you, Miss Barnes, never questioned whether your own gift was real or not. Thus, it’s not surprising a girl like Betty Wellington might tell people she was given a gift when she really bought the pearls for herself. Pearls she could afford to use and pass off to fit in. Real enough, until you crack ‘em open, that is.”

Isabelle frowned. “But she didn’t buy them for herself.”

“Do you know that for certain?” the lawyer pressed her. “Were you there when my client supposedly bought her said pearls?”

“No, but—”

“No, but you’re willing to lie for her anyway.”

“Objection,” George said immediately. “Your Honor—”

“Yes, yes.” The judge waved a hand. “Get on with it, Mr Jackson.”

“Of course, Your Honor,” Jackson said genially. He turned back to Isabelle. “Miss Barnes, what were you doing at the Olmstead’s that night?”

Was that a trick question? “Attending the party,” she said. “Dancing, having fun.”

“Yes, I’m sure you were.” Jackson’s piercing gaze sharpened. “You’ve got a history of having fun, don’t you, Miss Barnes? Probably more fun than is good for you.”

Isabelle felt a cold lump form in the pit of her stomach. Surely, he didn’t know... surely he wasn’t going to...

“In fact, you’ve had so much fun in the past that I believe you were confined to a sanitorium for a while, weren’t you?”

Oh, you rat! Isabelle did her best not to glare at him.

The way he smirked made it clear that he sensed how she felt and didn’t care. “Answer the question, Miss Barnes.”

“Objection,” George said. “This question has no relevance to the case at hand.”

“On the contrary,” Jackson said smoothly. “Miss Barnes’s personal history is instrumental to establishing her reliability as an impartial observer, Your Honor. Much like the pearls, it’s important to crack them open and see if they’re real or not.”

The judge looked down at Isabelle from the bench, and it took everything in her power not to quail as the weight of

his scrutiny struck her like a fist. She'd seen that look time and again, usually right before someone said something that made her stomach turn.

"I'll allow it," the judge said after a moment, and there went her stomach, twisting with embarrassment and anger.

Jackson snapped his fingers – actually snapped them at her, like she was a dog he was bringing to heel. "Well, Miss Barnes? Answer the question!"

"Yes," Isabelle said stiffly.

"Yes, what?"

"I did spend a short period of time in a sanitorium."

Jackson smiled. "So you did, so you did. But you must not have learned your lesson, because then you came to Arkham and started working your way up the line, didn't you? I hear you dated all sorts of men before you finally settled on Augustus Olmstead."

"That is *not* true," Isabelle insisted. "Auggie asked *me* out, not the other way around."

"So you admit you were dating an Olmstead yourself. You, a woman of..." He sneered at her as he took in her dark brown day dress and simple felt cloche hat. "Clearly modest means, bagging an Olmstead. You must have been rather pleased with yourself."

Isabelle's cheeks blazed with mortification. "I–"

"That wasn't a question, Miss Barnes. Do be silent unless an answer is required." Jackson began to stride back and forth in front of the jury. "Here we have an unstable young woman, a woman fixated on climbing the social ladder, as the prime witness to the involvement of my client in the disappearance of Betty Wellington. I must say, she seems far from reliable to me. Not to mention..." He lowered his voice and leaned in toward the jury.

“I’ve got it on good authority that Auggie Olmstead was fixing to move on from Miss Barnes and settle down with a nice local gal from one of our own upstanding families. Who’s to say that Miss Barnes didn’t decide to make a play for Ferdinand Olmstead herself?”

“Objection!” George shouted as he stood up. His support would have been heartening, if Isabelle was capable of feeling anything other than a hot sense of shame raking its claws across every inch of her body.

“Who’s to say that he didn’t turn her away, leaving her feeling vindictive toward him?” Jackson persisted. “Indeed, who’s to say that Miss Barnes didn’t take matters into her own hands and remove a potential rival for my client’s affections by—”

“*Objection, Your Honor!*”

“Sustained,” the judge finally said. “This courtroom is not to become a den of gossip, Mr Jackson.”

“My apologies, Your Honor,” Jackson said mildly. “I’m afraid I let my sense of justice get the better of me.”

Someone in the back of the room muttered something that sounded a bit like “bastard” to Isabelle. She couldn’t make out who it was, but it was nice to know that she had support apart from George. She managed to square her shoulders and meet Jackson’s eyes directly as he turned from addressing the jury back to her.

“Regardless of your personal inclinations, Miss Barnes,” he said with heavy emphasis on “inclinations”, like he could paint a picture of debauchery with one word, “the fact of the matter here is that all you’ve got when it comes to linking my client and Betty Wellington is a night of partying in an environment where alcohol was being consumed.

“Alcohol.” Jackson shook his head. “The great downfall of our society, if you ask me. My client has admitted to providing it already, even gave up the distiller to the authorities to show how willing he is to cooperate with the police. Booze has brought down many a great man, my friends. How could we expect a little lady like the one in front of us to handle it?” He looked at Isabelle with a faint smile on his lips. “Am I correct in assuming that you imbibed that night, Miss Barnes? Never fear,” he added, “you will not be charged for partaking in that devil drink at Mr Olmstead’s party.”

“I – it was in the punch,” Isabelle said. “I did have a few glasses, but nothing that would have made me lose my head.”

“A few glasses of highly alcoholic punch wasn’t enough to make a slip of a thing like you lose her head?” The greasy lawyer leaned forward until his arm rested on the banister in front of her. “You must be accustomed to drunkenness then, Miss Barnes.”

“No, sir,” she insisted.

“How else can you explain being so clear-headed as to keep an eye on Betty Wellington while minding yourself as well?”

“It wasn’t just me,” Isabelle replied. “There were five of us in that car, and everyone saw Betty stay back with Mr Olmstead.”

Jackson pursed his lips in faux sympathy. “And yet you’re the only one who’s here testifying to that effect, aren’t you?”

Isabelle’s stomach clenched. It was true. She was the only one of their group of girls who’d opted to testify for George. Millie was engaged now and wanted nothing to do with that time of her life. Rosie and Diane both declined, citing

being afraid of retaliation, but Isabelle had gone along with George to ask, and she'd noticed the fine clothes both of them wore, and the long, glimmering chandelier earrings. "Bought off," George had said with a sigh after they left, and Isabelle knew he was right. And Ada ...

Ada had vanished too, not long after that night.

"So," Jackson continued, "on the basis of seeing Mr Olmstead dance with a girl on a night when you were admittedly drinking, an evening that no other witness can directly attest to, you are attempting to cast aspersions on his character. Is that right, Miss Barnes?"

"These aren't aspersions," Isabelle insisted. "Ferdinand was with Betty all night, right up until me and the girls left. We looked for Betty the next morning and her room was empty, and when we went back to Ferdinand's home to ask about her, he refused to speak to any of us. He had his butler show us out instead, but her coat, I saw it hanging in the hallway."

"I think it's time to close that chatty mouth of yours." Jackson smirked.

"The coat was brand new, and it was a cold night. Betty would never have left it behind."

"I'm *done* with you, Miss Barnes."

"Betty would never have simply run away, especially not without her *coat*, she—"

Bang bang bang! "Miss Barnes!" the judge roared from the bench. "You will speak when spoken to and only answer the questions posed to you. We're not here to listen to your speculations on the whereabouts of Miss Wellington, do you understand me? One more word from you, and I'll hold you in contempt of court."

Isabelle looked frantically toward George, who shook his head. Grim, she pressed her lips together and stared down

at her clutch. Her hands were shaking, but not from nerves anymore. No, now they shook with rage, with the desire to stand up, grab the gavel from that judge's hand, and whack the insidious Mr Jackson right across the head with it.

But you can't. Calm, remember? Calm and forthright. She'd messed that part up to hell and back, hadn't she?

"No further questions for this witness, Your Honor," she heard Jackson say in his oily voice before sauntering back to his table. When Isabelle risked glancing up, she saw Ferdinand grinning at his lawyer as the man sat down, the pair of them pleased as punch with how she'd been riled and reviled for the whole courtroom to see. The shame came back, so thick it was nearly suffocating.

"Step down now, Miss Barnes," the judge said.

Step down? How was she meant to take a step when she could hardly force her lungs to keep breathing in the foul miasma that seemed to have settled in this place? Nevertheless, Isabelle nodded and, gripping the banister, pulled herself to her feet. Once she was sure her legs would support her weight, she turned and, with only the slightest stumble, stepped down from the witness box and back to her place at George's side.

"I'm so sorry about that, Isabelle," he whispered, his eyes shining with genuine regret. "I didn't think he'd go so hard on you."

"It's all right," Isabelle replied, barely able to keep the tears she felt washing around inside of her from showing in her voice. George was a good man, a driven man; ever since his wife's disappearance, he'd been taking on the worst kind of scum that Arkham had to offer in the courtroom and beyond. He wasn't the one at fault here.

She was.

“Any last witnesses before we proceed to closing arguments?” the judge asked.

George stood up. “Your Honor, I’d like to call Officer Thomas Muldoon to the stand.”

Isabelle turned in her seat to follow the sound of footsteps as Officer Muldoon walked to the front of the courtroom. He was young, probably a few years older than her, with dark brown hair and a serious demeanor. His uniform was pressed and his badge polished to perfection, but he didn’t look like some kind of dandy. He looked like a man who respected his job, and that respect came through loud and clear as he swore on the Bible to tell the truth, then sat down.

George put his hands behind his back as he made his way over to the witness stand. “Officer Muldoon,” he began, “would you mind telling the jury how you and I came to meet?”

“Objection,” Jackson called out, not even bothering to stand up. “There’s no relevance.”

“Relevance will be made plain in a moment, Your Honor,” George said, and the judge – reluctantly, it seemed – nodded his head.

“You and I met over a year ago, sir,” Officer Muldoon replied. “I came to you for advice on a missing person’s case I was working. You mentioned that you recalled a similar incident several months earlier, and that got me digging into a series of missing persons cases going back for the past five years. The deeper I dug, the plainer it became that a lot of the cases I was finding appeared to be linked.”

“Linked in what way?” George asked.

“There are plenty of similarities,” Officer Muldoon replied. “For the men, the disappearance was almost always linked to a job offer, usually a big step up. They might work it for a few days, but none of them ever made it past the

first week. With the women, they all went missing after attending a society party, including several from events that were held at one of the Olmstead mansions—”

“Objection, Your Honor, this is pure speculation!”

“But the cases aren’t similarly linked solely due to their circumstances,” Officer Muldoon continued doggedly. “In a few cases, the bodies of those who went missing were recovered with their mouths burned, jaws either fused together or containing a round, blackened piece of glass that no one has been able to—”

Bang! “I suggest restraining yourself to the case at hand, gentlemen,” the judge said.

“We’re establishing a means with this testimony, Your Honor,” George interjected. “That’s what makes it relevant to Miss Wellington’s case.”

“Nonsense,” Jackson snapped. “Mr Barnaby is attempting to course correct after his disastrous prior witness by calling a man of the law to the stand, but his connections are even more specious than Miss Barnes’s were. I move for his testimony to be dismissed.”

“These cases *are* linked,” Officer Muldoon insisted. “And Miss Barnes’s testimony is valid as a witness, despite how you’ve tried to smear her personally.”

“Spoken like a true bleeding heart,” Jackson said with a sneer. “I thought you were supposed to be an officer of the law, not a willing party to the lies of a malicious woman.”

Officer Muldoon’s jaw tightened. “Sir, I must protest that description of the previous witness.”

“Oh, must you? Does that mean you have a problem with acknowledging the truth?”

“Order!” *Bang bang bang!* The judge hammered his gavel so hard Isabelle thought she heard something crack. “I will

have order in my courtroom!” He glared at both Officer Muldoon and Jackson before pointing the gavel at George. “This man’s statements are immaterial to the case at hand and are officially to be stricken from the record. Officer Muldoon, you may step down.”

Isabelle’s heart sank as she watched George’s shoulders sag with disappointment. “Understood, Your Honor.”

Officer Muldoon left the witness stand, but his expression made it perfectly clear that he didn’t agree with the judge’s reasoning. He even nodded at Isabelle as he walked by, and she felt her cheeks flush. Not with shame this time, but with appreciation.

He believes me. At least someone out there believes me.

“Gentlemen, I don’t believe we need to drag this out any longer. It’s time for your closing arguments,” the judge continued after a moment. “I advise you both to keep them brief. Mr Barnaby, you shall go first.”

“Of course, Your Honor.” George got back to his feet and walked around the desk to face the jury. “You’ve been given a lot to think about with this case,” he said, studying the line of men like he was searching for something. A hint of compassion, maybe. If it was there, Isabelle couldn’t see it. “I’m asking you to set aside any notion you might have about any of the witnesses and consider the straight facts. In this case, the trail is plain.” He pointed at Ferdinand. “Everything in the disappearance of Miss Wellington leads back to this man here.

“Mr Olmstead may protest that he knows nothing – indeed, he did so during his own testimony – but Miss Barnes places him as the last person to know the whereabouts of Miss Wellington, and she’s not the only one who confirmed that the two of them were together that evening. His

refusal to answer plainly, to even entertain the notion that he *knew* a woman he was seen dancing with *all night*, is a clear indicator that Mr Olmstead is lying to you. To all of us. Even if he's not solely responsible for the disappearance of Betty Wellington, he certainly knows more about it than he's letting on. To imply otherwise is pure sophistry.

"Mr Olmstead shouldn't have more protections under the law of this great country simply because he can afford a more expensive – forgive me, I meant to say, a *louder* lawyer than Miss Barnes." George straightened his back, his gaze piercing. "Betty Wellington deserves more than to be forgotten by the law," he said firmly. "It's up to us now to make sure that she gets justice, and that Mr Olmstead is finally forced to answer for his lies. The prosecution rests."

Isabelle summoned up a smile for George as he came to sit back down beside her. It was a good effort, and for a moment she felt like they had a real chance despite how she'd mucked things up.

Then Jackson began to speak.

"Esteemed gentlemen," he said as he swanned over to the jury box once more, "what we are dealing with here is a simple matter of hearsay. This is not about the sad case of Miss Betty Wellington. Rather, it is an attempt by the other side to smear the character of one of our city's most important and elevated families.

"To think that my client" – his voice took on a throaty timbre – "one of the only Olmsteads left after the terrible tragedy that claimed the lives of so many other stalwarts of society, should be maligned by greedy individuals the likes of which we've seen come out of the woodwork for this farce of a trial." He shook his head. "It is not to be borne, gentlemen. Such attacks on his character are not to be borne.

“Now, is my client a perfect man? No, he is not, and he’s already admitted to providing that demon drink for the event, which is against the law. He’s willing to pay whatever price you deem suitable in recompense for that wrongdoing, but can he be held responsible for the actions of every boozy floozy within ten miles who flocks to events such as these looking for alcohol and entertainment? I say no, and I believe you do too.” He smiled one last time at them, then turned to the judge. “The defense rests, Your Honor.”

CHAPTER TWO

Court was adjourned to give the jury time to deliberate, but the judge warned them not to go far. “I expect we’ll be able to wrap this up shortly,” he said, with the air of a man giving a warning.

Ferdinand Olmstead and his slimy lawyer immediately left the courtroom. They didn’t go far, though, only walked right into the room across the hall, where a group of similarly garbed men were sitting and laughing together without a care in the world.

Isabelle stared at them as she stepped out of the courtroom, wishing that arson wasn’t just the province of the city lately. What she wouldn’t give to be able to set that man’s pants aflame with her mind...

A warm touch to her elbow drew her out of her reverie. “You did a good job up there,” George said kindly.

Isabelle scoffed, bitter. “You don’t have to lie to me. I know I let him rile me something awful.”

“What that awful man was saying would rile anyone with a sense of decency.” George’s mouth pressed so tight it flat-out disappeared beneath his beard. “Shame that decent people seem to be so hard to come by in Arkham these days.”

It was a shame... and yet, it wasn't a surprise either. Isabelle should never have gotten her hopes up. Or George's. "I'm sorry I mucked the whole thing up for you."

He shook his head. "I should have branched out and got more people to testify before taking it to court, but I didn't trust that Olmstead wouldn't take his money and run before we could make it happen." He sighed. "And instead, he gets Mr Jackson to invoke his right to both a speedy trial *and* a jury trial. If it were just the judge we had to convince we'd have more of a chance, but a man of means speaking to more men of the same stripe... it's a hard sell, my dear."

Oh, didn't she know it. Women weren't allowed to serve on juries, of course, but none of these men were laborers, either. All of them were either society folk or gents who *wanted* to be society folk, and you didn't have to spend long in Arkham to see how birds of a gilded feather flocked together.

"But I'm not hopeless either," George went on. "The other thing about men of that sort is that they're ruthless with each other when they scent weakness, and Ferdinand Olmstead is weak now that his family is gone."

Isabelle listened to George with half an ear, her mind going back to the word "gone". Such a small, simple word for what had happened to Abigail Olmstead, and Auggie, and so many of their followers. It was a word that didn't even get within spitting distance of how Isabelle would describe what had happened to the people who'd tortured and tormented her, lured her into their sphere only to use her as a sacrifice. "Gone" didn't encompass any of the emotions that accompanied the cursed Olmsteads, the pain they'd caused and the grisly ends they'd met. Isabelle's sole consolation from the entire hideous, malevolent affair was

knowing that the Olmsteads had paid for the pain they dealt out with their own suffering and death.

It was still nowhere near enough to make up for the fact that Jenny was gone, too.

The courtroom door opened, and the bailiff came out. “Deliberations are over,” he grunted when he saw Isabelle and George. “Get in here.”

Oh no. There was fast, and then there was quick as lightning, and that had been lightning. Her heart sinking, Isabelle followed George back in and up to the table they’d been sitting at all day. More people filed in behind them, including Ferdinand and his lawyer, still chuckling to each other over something.

She couldn’t look over at them right now; she might just lose her head if she had to see either of their smug smirks again. Instead, Isabelle risked a glance at the jury, hoping for some sort of sign. They were all seated, appearing somber and respectable in their suits and ties, but when one of them noticed her staring, his somber mien vanished, replaced by a look of such blatant disgust that Isabelle wondered if someone had gone and painted a giant red A on her chest while she wasn’t looking.

Once the door finally closed, the judge turned to the jury foreman. “Has the jury reached a verdict in this trial?”

The man stood up. “Yes, Your Honor. We the jury find the defendant, Ferdinand Octavius Olmstead...” He paused, then put Isabelle out of her misery in the worst way possible. “Not guilty in the disappearance of Miss Betty Wellington.”

There were murmurs through the courtroom, but no one seemed surprised by the outcome. Even Isabelle couldn’t say so. Terribly disappointed, sure, but not surprised.

“Thank you for your hard work,” the judge told them.

Yes, thank you for sparing Betty a whole five minutes of your precious time, you lousy-

“There remains, however, the issue of the alcohol,” he continued, then looked over at Ferdinand and his lawyer. “Despite the pressures you’ve been under, Mr Olmstead, you are still expected to abide by the law. Giving in to the temptation posed by alcohol is unacceptable, as is offering it to your social circle. For this, the court fines you in the amount of one hundred dollars.” The judge banged the gavel one last time. “This court is adjourned.”

Isabelle’s jaw dropped. *One hundred measly bucks?* That was nothing more than a slap on the wrist to someone like Ferdinand! Not even a slap, a tickle!

“Let’s get you out of here, old boy,” Jackson said loudly as he looked over at Isabelle. “Away from all the filth.”

Filth? *Filth?* From a man whose client was a dirty, rotten cultist?

For a second, rage burned up inside of Isabelle. It was a rage so potent she could barely breathe around it, anger that she thought she’d lost the capacity for once she’d gone from socialite to sacrifice, anger that she’d thought permanently snuffed in the wake of her sister’s death. It shocked her so much that she didn’t even try to muster a comeback, just sat there and let the burn fill her, brighten the parts of her spirit that she’d thought had permanently gone dark.

But anger, no matter how potent, couldn’t burn forever, and this flame was no different. It went out the second Ferdinand stepped through the courtroom door, waltzing back into his former life without so much as a backward glance.

“Isabelle.” George’s gentle voice drew her back to herself. She shook her head and looked over at him. He was already

standing, leather satchel under one arm and a worn but compassionate expression on his face. “It’s time to go.”

“Yes,” she agreed, suddenly more than ready to cast off this room and its façade of justice. She stood, smoothed out the line of her jacket, and followed George all the way to the street.

“I’m sorry it went that way,” he told her heavily.

“You did your best,” Isabelle assured him. It wasn’t George’s fault. She wanted to apologize again but stopped herself. There was no sense in beating that dead horse. “What happens next?”

“I’m afraid Miss Wellington’s case is at a standstill for the moment,” he said. “I’m not giving up, but I’ve got to return my attention to other things for now.”

He meant his wife’s case, of course. “I understand.”

“However,” George went on, “just because I’m not the one working on it doesn’t mean no work can be done. Officer Muldoon has proven to be an excellent resource, and he seems just as inspired to find the truth as you are, Miss Barnes. I suggest discussing things further with him.”

Huh... that wasn’t a bad idea, but she doubted that Officer Muldoon would really believe her. It was hard for her to believe herself some days. “Thanks, George. For everything. For...” She gave him her best attempt at a smile. “For believing me when no one else did.”

“My pleasure, Miss Barnes.” He shook her hand, then turned and walked away down the street. Isabelle watched him go until he disappeared from view and tried her best not to feel abandoned.

You’re not a child. You’re a grown woman. Take responsibility for yourself.

That felt hard to do when the faint hopes she'd been harboring for months had all come to nothing, when her handbag was down to its last few dollars and her stomach was tight from hunger, and rage still played across her nerves like a violin, slowly building up to another crescendo that was probably going to burst out of her when she least wanted it to, and...

“Excuse me, Miss Barnes?”

Isabelle gasped out an exhale and met the eyes of Officer Muldoon, standing a few feet away from her and looking a combination of solicitous and concerned. “Yes, officer?” she managed in what she hoped was close to a normal tone of voice.

“I just...” He doffed his official flat-topped cap and held it in both hands as he said, “My sergeant told me to drop the missing persons cases if I didn’t get any traction with this trial.”

Of course he did. And here came the feeble apologies.

“But I want you to know that I’m not giving up.”

The axis of Isabelle’s world tilted once more, straightening out from the disorienting angle she’d been left at with Ferdinand’s swift acquittal.

“There are just too many similarities out there for me to give up on finding the truth, and when you add in the glass talismans and the burn marks...” Officer Muldoon shook his head. “That sort of thing, that’s not a run-of-the-mill disappearance. That’s damn dangerous.”

Any disappearance is dangerous, she wanted to say. It was different for men, she knew; men didn’t hurry their steps at night for fear of being dragged down an alley or shoved into a car. But the last thing Isabelle needed was to start an argument with the one person left who might support her

efforts. “I agree,” she said instead. “You’ve been looking into people who originated from all over the country, haven’t you? Not just locals?”

“I have,” he said, somber. “This is bigger than anyone wants to admit, and that makes working on it tougher than I’d like, but I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

“I...” She was about to offer her help, but the wounds from her last efforts at assisting in a case were still too fresh to ignore. *You wanna muck up his chances the same way you mucked up George’s?* “I’m real glad,” Isabelle said, instead.

“Oh, well. Thanks.” Seeming embarrassed, Officer Muldoon put his hat back on and gave her a nod. “You take care of yourself, Miss Barnes. And come and talk to me if you get any more information about the case, all right? Or...” He paused, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “These are some of the ladies who’re on my list of suspicious disappearances,” he said as he handed it to her. “If you’d keep your ear to the ground when it comes to any mention of them, I’d appreciate it.”

It felt like a bit of a sop to her ego to be given a “to-do” list, in a way, but Isabelle still tucked the piece of paper into her handbag. This was a vote of confidence in her, something tangible that she could work with even though Betty’s case had gone so poorly. He was giving her these names because he knew she took their disappearances as seriously as he did.

“I will,” she promised, and then Officer Muldoon was gone as well, and she was left alone with her thoughts in the middle of Armitage Street. Or, what used to be Armitage Street. Nobody was quite sure if they were going to keep the old names, not after... well.

Not after the “incident”.

CHAPTER THREE

Nobody talked about what happened on the day Arkham was ravaged. It was like the horror of it was so intense, so unbelievable, that it *became* unbelievable. Isabelle had been here when it happened, suffering through days and days of endless rain, and even now when she tried to remember that night it seemed to slip right through her mind. All she could recall was the ground shuddering under her feet, cobblestones shifting and slate tiles falling from rooftops as the water from the rivers and then the ocean swelled, higher than the buildings, propelled by something... *something*... *oh my god, something*...

The edge of her shoe snagged on a half-buried piece of timber, and Isabelle barely caught herself from going down face-first in front of the partly-repaired bridge over the Miskatonic River. Her faithful feet had carried her in the direction of her boarding house even while her mind was a hundred miles away, shaking and terrified as flashes of some kind of horrible terror awoke from the deep. Isabelle wrinkled her nose at how the damp from the river mingled with the scent of fresh smoke... wait, fresh? She turned and watched with a complete lack of surprise as the stack

of thick wooden pylons not twenty feet away went from smoldering to outright burning in a matter of seconds.

“Fire!” a man yelled from nearby. “Fire here!”

There was a hubbub, and then Isabelle was shoved aside as a convoy of laborers carrying buckets slipped and slid down to the riverfront, making a mess of it instead of forming an organized line to get the buckets over to the fire faster.

She probably ought to be more concerned, and yet... Isabelle stared at the flames and found them a perfect analogy for the state of Arkham. Scratch that, for the state of her *life*.

You barely got the building blocks of something good assembled before something you couldn't control came and set them on fire.

Maybe the flames would die out in time for some blocks to still be usable, but when the burn never really went away – when the embers stayed buried, smoldering in the depths of your mind like a curse – eventually there was going to be nothing left but ash.

Jenny. Her sister. Jenny was Isabelle’s ember, the memory she could never let go of, the one that would ruin her life if she let it. Jenny had given everything to protect Isabelle, to *save* her. Jenny would do anything to protect her younger sister, after all. Was Isabelle going to take her sister’s gift and use it to live a good life?

Things weren’t looking great on that front.

“This is Kane’s fault,” one of the men snarled as he heaved his way up the slippery embankment, water tipping over the edges of his bucket as he struggled. “Useless dewdropper, he ain’t done nothing right for this place lately.”

“None of the old guard’s any use,” another man commiserated. “Gotta throw ‘em all out and start fresh. That

Morse fella, though, he seems like he'll be able to get the job done."

"He's got Wilkes on his side, too," the first man said. "Owns the New Horizon factory, there's a lotta money in those hands. If they're that good at their own businesses, they gotta be good at city business too, right?"

That was a familiar refrain these days. Charlie Kane, the current mayor of Arkham, seemed to have lost all support in the city since the... the... incident. He'd stumbled in the wake of a ferocious tide, and now that current looked like it was going to carry him right out the door in the next election.

Isabelle didn't know anything about Howard Wilkes other than his name, really, but Jared Morse was more familiar to her. She'd met him a time or two back at parties when she'd enjoyed them, and he'd come off as quite the sheik – a sharp dresser with a handsome face and a fat wallet, just the kind of man to draw people to him. Even Auggie had admired him, especially when he won the election as Ealdorman.

Isabelle shook her head sharply. She wasn't doing this; she wasn't going to think about the old days like there was anything redeemable about them. Everything she'd once loved, every happy moment and bit of fun, was poisoned in her memory by what came after. She couldn't look back without pain, so she needed to look forward, she *had* to. And it had been working, she'd finally felt the hope that had been missing from her life for so long with this trial, but now...

"Excuse me, Miss Barnes?"

Isabelle turned in a daze to look at the woman who'd called her name. "Do we... know each other?" she asked tentatively. She couldn't remember meeting this lady before.

Short and round, with a graying bob, a conservatively cut jacket that covered most of her beige dress, and a gaze that was disconcertingly direct.

The lady shook her head. “Not in person, no, although I tried to catch your attention back at the courthouse. I was watching the trial.” She smiled in commiseration. “I’m sorry it went the way it did.”

Isabelle resisted the urge to scoff. *Sure you are. You and nobody else.*

“You can call me Esther,” she went on, “and I’m here because I wanted to offer up my assistance if you’re in need of food or housing.”

Wait... what? “What kind of game are you playing?” Isabelle demanded. What else could it be?

“Oh, Miss Barnes.” Esther shook her head sadly. “It’s a poor state of the world when a genuine offer of charity is taken as a game. Please, though. Hear me out.”

The tired part of Isabelle, the part that was still reeling from having her character ripped to shreds in front of a crowd in that courtroom, wanted to say no. It wanted to snap and snarl, to tell this lady to mind her own business and slink back to her room so she could lick her wounds in peace. But the ember inside of her, the one that refused to be put out, the one that burned in Jenny’s name, flared with interest.

“All right,” Isabelle said reluctantly. “I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“That’s all I ask,” Esther replied. “Come, let’s walk while we talk.” She held out her arm, quite an incongruous gesture in the chaos and smoke that surrounded them, but there was a kindness inherent in it that Isabelle couldn’t ignore. She stepped forward and took Esther’s arm, and the pair

of them began to walk down Water Street toward the next bridge across the river.

It felt like being in the center of a hurricane, a haven of calm within the rush of humanity all around them. Where there had once been somber gray storefronts and cobblestone streets, there was now a sea of raw pine, churned-up mud, and opportunists as far as the eye could see. Established shops of ancient lineage had fallen, and a dozen imitators had leapt out of their ashes ready to sell something half as good for “a bargain, I tell ya, great deals here!” Whether it was food stalls, vendors selling handkerchiefs and parasols, or whispered promises of something more intimate that could be found if you followed them just down the road, the gravitas of the old city was gone, quite possibly for good. Arkham was something new now, something different than it ever had been before.

“I must first ask if I can count on your discretion with what I’m about to say,” Esther said, her stodgy face serious. “Nothing I’m about to reveal is dangerous, but it is private. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but what I tell you affects far more people than just me.”

Isabelle’s curiosity was certainly piqued. “You can trust me, absolutely. I’ll be the soul of discretion.”

“I thought as much.” Esther smiled. “Well then, I am a member of an organization here in Arkham.”

Isabelle immediately chilled. That sounded like a recruitment pitch, something she’d heard before. Well, she’d be damned if she was going to be cozened into joining another group of—

“An aid organization,” Esther went on, and Isabelle’s ire paused, unsure whether to rise or fall. “For women who’ve fallen on hard times. We call ourselves the Gray Pearls.”

Isabelle shook her head, the denial instinctive. “I’ve never heard of you.”

“Why would you have?” Esther asked gently. “You never needed us before, Miss Barnes. I’m afraid the same can’t be said of Miss Wellington, though.”

Her breath caught for a moment in her throat. “You knew Betty?”

“I did,” Esther confirmed. “Back when she first moved to Arkham. A little under a year ago, Miss Wellington was going through a rather rough patch. The things she was running from... it’s nothing I haven’t seen before, I’m afraid to say, but in Betty’s case her prior circumstances were *particularly* bad. We found her, we helped her while we could, and then...”

She sighed. “Some people we assist, they want to continue to be part of the organization. Spread the good, do the work. Others, all they want is to put the hard times behind them, and Betty fell firmly into that category. Once she was back on her feet she wanted nothing to do with us. I worried about her, of course, but she seemed quite determined.” Esther shook her head. “I was so sorry to hear about her disappearance, and sorrier yet to see the outcome of her case, but I can’t say I’m surprised.”

Isabelle scarcely knew what to think as they turned onto the walkway section of the bridge. Motorcars zoomed by beside them, gleaming metallic beasts speckled with mud from the filthy streets and honking at each other like it was going to do anything but make the guy in front of them mad.

One of the cars caught her attention. A sparkling silver Duesenberg Model J, sleek and roaring like a lion as the driver maneuvered it around humdrum Model Ts.

It was Ferdinand's car. She caught sight of him laughing where he sat behind the wheel, his crony Jackson beside him.

"You could have spoken at the trial." Isabelle sounded very far away even to her own ears as she watched her nemesis speed out of sight. "You could have."

"What could I have said?" Esther asked, sympathetic but keenly practical as they kept going. "That I knew Betty was desperate to escape her past? That she was vulnerable to attention and wanted to be treated like a princess? I couldn't say anything at the trial that would have helped sway the tide, Miss Barnes. Moreover, I can't afford to draw the wrong kind of attention to the Gray Pearls, and that courtroom was filled with the wrong kind of attention."

Isabelle frowned. "What do you mean?"

Esther's look was wry. "Miss Barnes, we're a women-focused charitable organization that runs on anonymous donations. We pay no taxes, we have no formally declared offices or official oversight. We're ghosts. And we can't help the people we need to by being otherwise."

"But..."

"We help women – and men, too, to an extent – escaping the worst sort of situations." Esther's voice was determined, the light of pure conviction in her eyes. "Women and men who have been disinherited by their families or committed to sanitoriums against their will. We help women who are suffering from unwanted pregnancies and who are trying to preserve their reputations. We help women who are fleeing abusive marriages, or women who are left reeling from the loss of a husband or child, who are dealing with the aftermath of terrible physical and mental trauma. Do these sound like the kinds of ladies that the men who run our society care a whit about?"

Isabelle had to admit that it didn't. And worse, if the people in power were connected to any of these women trying to flee... "I think I understand," she said softly. "You have to keep it quiet in order to keep those you help safe."

"That we do."

"But then... how do you go about getting donations if you have to be so concerned with keeping yourselves under wraps?"

"We're quite fortunate in that one of our founders left us a considerable sum to maintain our buildings with when she departed," Esther said. They stepped off the bridge and onto River Street, then turned left toward French Hill. On this side of the Miskatonic, there was less of the hustle and bustle of rebuilding and more of loading and unloading the barges that were docked all along the quays. "For the rest, we've helped enough people and made sufficient connections over the years that the donations which do find us keep us quite stable. Outreach to those donors is one of my responsibilities as the head of the organization, but fortunately meetings like that don't take up a significant amount of my time."

She led the way across the busy street to a three-story building that, miraculously, looked as though it had escaped the worst of the damage from late last year. She pulled a key out of her pocket and unlocked the heavy front door. "We've got an office on the bottom floor here," she told Isabelle as she drew her inside. It was terribly dark in the hall and smelled of mildew – just like everywhere along the river did these days – but when she opened a door on the left and guided Isabelle inside, the windows gave her plenty of light to see by.

"I'm afraid we don't have electricity back just yet," Esther said apologetically as she took off her coat. She hung it

on the rack by the door, then carefully took off her hat, complete with a gray pearl hatpin, Isabelle noticed, and set it up there too. She didn't ask for Isabelle's things, which was oddly comforting, in a way. This was a woman who seemed to understand how, when you had very little, you wanted to keep that little bit close. "Soon, hopefully. Would you care for a glass of water? Or I can make some tea?"

"No, thank you."

Esther nodded. "Then please, sit down."

Isabelle settled in the tall-backed chair on the near side of the desk and waited for Esther to sit before asking, "What do you want from me?"

Esther tilted her head. "What makes you think I want anything from you, my dear?"

"Well, you brought me here." Isabelle indicated the little office. "You even stayed through that awful trial to make sure you could meet up with me. I simply want to know why."

I want to know your angle. Everybody's got an angle. Even George, beneficent as he was, had an angle when it came to taking Betty's case. He looked at it as a stepping stone to finding out more about the disappearance of his own wife. Everyone wanted something, and Isabelle would be damned if she was taken for a ride again.

Esther blinked at her, looking genuinely taken aback. "Oh... no, Miss Barnes, I don't want anything from you. That's not why I asked you to join me at all."

"Then what *do* you want?" Isabelle demanded.

The older woman sighed, one slender hand rising to her temple to rub for a moment. "I only want to ask if there's something I can do for *you*, Miss Barnes."

Wait... no. Surely not.

“Miss Barnes,” Esther went on like she hadn’t just rocked the foundation of Isabelle’s world. “Actually, may I call you Isabelle?”

Isabelle shakily nodded.

“Lovely. Isabelle, as much as I mourn the ladies who fall through the cracks here in Arkham, and as much as I regret what happened to Betty, I’ve long since come to the conclusion that the best thing I can do, both for myself and for the people around me, is to focus on those who remain. If you try to walk forward while facing backward, you won’t be able to avoid the obstructions ahead, after all.”

She looked down at the desk for a moment. “There are *always* new people to help,” Esther murmured, her voice turning reed-thin and quavery. “I want to do good in their lives while I can. Which brings me to you, my dear.”

“Oh.” That was genuinely not what Isabelle had expected to hear. It had been a very long time since anyone had looked at her and wanted to help her simply for existing. Even with Jenny... well, Jenny had saved Isabelle because they were sisters, and Jenny had loved her. But how many Bettys out there didn’t have a Jenny on their side?

At least Betty had Esther for a time.

You have no right to her help, the sharp-toothed voice in Isabelle’s mind snarled. *Everything that happened to you happened because you were a fool, so gullible, so willing to believe in love and gamble everything on it. You gambled your own life and nearly lost. You gambled Jenny’s life, and she lost too.*

Don’t drag this woman into your sphere. Not when you’re more poison than penitent.

If only she’d met with an Esther earlier, before she’d ever been sent to the sanitorium. Someone who could have given

her compassion instead of condemnation. Someone who'd have made an effort to understand instead of castigating her for her poor judgment over and over. Getting out of there had felt like having a new lease on life, but looking back now Isabelle saw how it had made her reckless.

Coming to Arkham only made that recklessness worse.

"I very much—" Isabelle paused to clear her throat. "I very much appreciate your offer of assistance, Esther, but... I think there are women out there who have a far greater need of it than I do."

"No two women are alike," Esther said. "Nor are their needs. But just because you don't have it as bad as some doesn't mean you don't have any use for a bit of help at all."

Isabelle smiled, and for the first time today it came easily to her face. "You've already helped me," she said honestly. "You made me feel like that whole circus back at the courthouse wasn't entirely useless, and I'm so grateful to know that you and the Gray Pearls are doing what you can to look out for the ladies who need a hand up. But I'm doing all right."

I could be doing better. But that was Isabelle's problem, not Esther's. She wasn't going to steal from an organization helping people with no recourse when she still had a roof over her head and change in her pocket. That wasn't to say she'd be good for ever – or even for the full week, when her rent ran out – but Isabelle would get by. She could find some sort of job and get enough in the kitty to keep her here in Arkham a while longer so she could...

Do what? What's left, after this? Isabelle wasn't sure, but she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she couldn't leave Arkham yet. Not while the last of her sister's killers hadn't been brought to justice.

“Thank you though, Esther,” Isabelle said, getting to her feet. She was exhausted, more than ready to be back in her room and away from the world for a while, even this kind and gentle piece of it.

Esther, to her credit, simply nodded. “Whatever you think is best,” she said. “But should you change your mind at any point, you can usually find me here mornings during the week. I’d be happy to see you again in the future, Isabelle.” They nodded to each other, their respective sides completely understood, and Isabelle took her leave.

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