

A DAZZLING PARTY. A DARING HEIST.
NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE WOMEN DOWNSTAIRS.

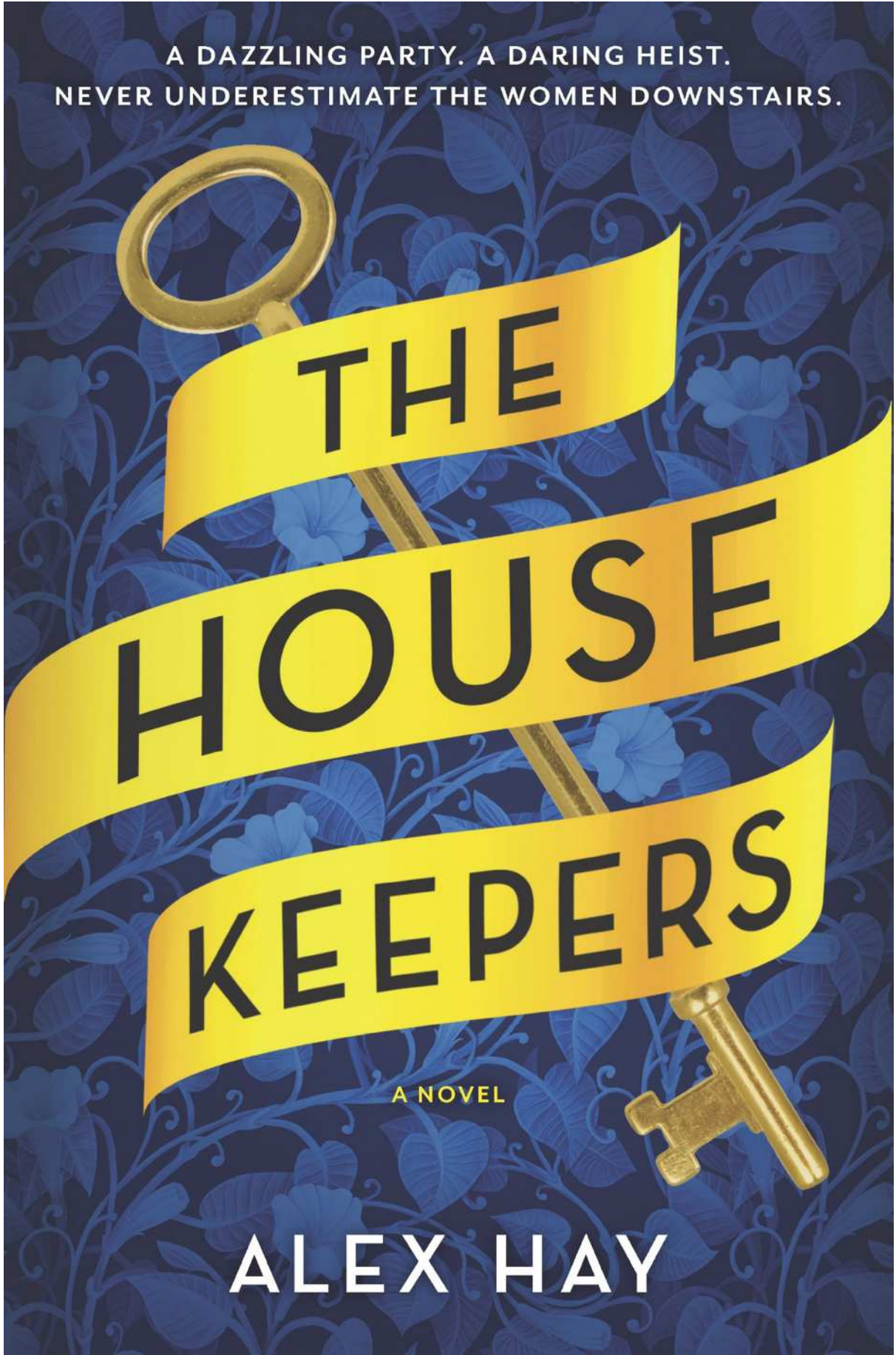


THE
HOUSE
KEEPERS

A NOVEL

ALEX HAY

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Advance Praise for The Housekeepers

“Rollicking fun and entirely original. Readers will find themselves rooting for the cunning Mrs. King and her peculiar cast of co-conspirators.... Anyone who relishes a good party gone wrong will devour this.”

—Sarah Penner, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Apothecary*

“Meet the most likeable group of criminals since Robin Hood’s merry men. *The Housekeepers* is fast-paced but thoughtful, vengeful but compassionate, satisfying but completely unpredictable, a deliciously clever novel.... You’ll never have so much fun cheering on grand larceny.”

—Nina de Gramont, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Christie Affair*, a Reese’s Book Club Pick

“A glamorous, fast-paced historical heist novel that kept me hooked ’til the last page. The strong, determined, and memorable female characters pull you into their web of intrigue—it’s so much fun!”

—Jennifer Saint, author of *Ariadne*

“My lords, ladies and gentlemen, I think you will love *The Housekeepers*. Imagine *Ocean’s 8* had an illegitimate baby with *Fingersmith*. A big fat diamond of a book, sharp and shiny, joyful and generous, intricately plotted.”

—Erin Kelly, author of *He Said/She Said*

“Punch-the-air good, this is the Edwardian heist novel you never knew you needed. Flawless, lawless fun.”

—Kiran Millwood Hargrave, author of *The Mercies*

“A rollicking romp of a book, tinged with fury, sadness, and mischievous delight.”

—Claire North, author of *Ithaca*

“Fun, fast-paced, and totally immersive, *The Housekeepers* is a rare jewel

worth coveting. Combining vivid characterization, irresistible historical detail, and a rip-roaring plot, it delivers on every page. Sensational!”

—Emma Stonex, author of *The Lamplighters*

Alex Hay grew up in the United Kingdom in Cambridge and Cardiff and has been writing as long as he can remember. He studied history at the University of York and wrote his dissertation on female power at royal courts, combing the archives for every scrap of drama and skulduggery he could find. He has worked in magazine publishing and the charity sector and lives with his husband in London. *The Housekeepers* is his debut novel and won the Caledonia Novel Award.

AlexHayBooks.com

The Housekeepers

A NOVEL

Alex Hay



For my mother, for getting me started.

And for Tom, for cheering this book every step of the way.

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The House of de Vries
Requests the honor of your company at a
Costumed Ball
On Monday, the 26th of June, 1905
Nine O'clock
Park Lane, W1 Full Dress

An Acknowledgment is Requested,
Addressed to the LADY of the House

* * *

Post Office Telegraphs

Handed in at 11:02 Charges: £0.0s 0d. PAID

**BE ADVISED MARKET IS OPEN [STOP]
TAKING BEST BIDS ONLY [STOP]
FELICITATIONS ALWAYS [STOP]**

THE HOUSEKEEPERS

1

*Friday, June 2, 1905
Park Lane, London*

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

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

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

Too perfect, she thought, skin prickling.

A shadow fell across the wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m still doing my rounds, Mr. Shepherd,” she said.

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

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

“I never leave my work half-finished, Mr. Shepherd,” she said as she slid around him. “You know that.”

And she made for the door.

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

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

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

“I know,” said Mrs. King over her shoulder.

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

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

He continued to follow, sending a tremor through the staircase.

Come on, thought Mrs. King, *chase me.*

“You stay right here,” he said, reaching to pull her back.

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

He got her by the wrist, his stubby fingers pressing into her veins. His

breath smelled stale, but she didn't recoil. She did the thing he hated most. Looked him straight in the eye.

He said, "What were you *doing* last night, Mrs. King?"

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

"Perhaps I was sleepwalking."

"Perhaps?"

"Yes, perhaps."

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

"But, then again," she said, "perhaps I was wide-awake."

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"Any others?"

She shook her head.

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

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

She kept her navy coat and her hatpins, and everything else she folded

away into her black leather Gladstone. There was only one more thing she needed to remove. Pulling open a drawer in the bureau, she rummaged for a pack of papers.

She threw them on the fire. One neat move.

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

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

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

"The what?" His eyes hurried around the room, disturbed, as if he were looking for things he'd missed, secrets stuffed and hidden in the walls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And everywhere, in every room, from floor to ceiling, such *treasures*:

stupendous Van Dycks, giant crystal bowls stuffed with carnations. Objets d'art in gold and silver and jade, cherubs with rubies for eyes and emeralds for toenails. The zebra-hide sofas in the saloon, and the baccarat tables made of ivory and walnut, and the pink-and-onyx flamingos outside the bathrooms. That library, with the most expensive private collection in Mayfair. The Boiserie, the Red Parlor, the Oval Drawing Room, the ballroom: all dressed with peacock feathers and lapis lazuli and an endless supply of lilies.

They didn't impress Mrs. King at all anymore.

* * *

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

"Do."

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

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

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

Her first theft.

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

2

Indoors, upstairs, in the fortified silence of the saloon floor, Miss de Vries inspected the invitation list for her ball.

The preparations had been in motion for weeks. The date had been set: the twenty-sixth of June. Three weeks and three days, and she was counting every moment.

Truthfully, of course, it had been conceived months before, the very moment Papa set sail for the Continent in search of spa cures and the best gaming tables, entirely distracted from home affairs. *He* would not have held any sort of party. No breakfasts, luncheons, high teas or dinners were permitted at Park Lane. Those things would put Miss de Vries entirely on display, up for auction on the market. He refused to countenance that.

Papa went *out* into the world: to the Royal Regatta, and the diplomatic dinners, and the Queen's Drawing Room, and the gymkhana. He wore his yellow-spotted neckerchiefs and his most vulgar waistcoats, and spent lavishly on the charity dances—and people roared for him. They feasted on anecdotes of his extravagance and lowborn manners and brilliant buttons.

She remained home: preserved, contained, scratching at the walls.

After Papa's funeral, Miss de Vries had summoned Mrs. King. The housekeeper entered the room quietly, smoothly, already wearing a black armband. The sight of it sent a shiver through Miss de Vries's chest.

"I'm minded to hold a ball," she said.

She expected astonishment, demurral, doubts about propriety. Or better still: a rebuttal. Loyalties to Papa were shifting and eddying: things felt febrile. Certain members of the household might be reconsidering their options altogether. Miss de Vries welcomed some aggression, even insolence. It would provide a reason to give certain people their notice.

"Have you considered a date, Madam?" asked Mrs. King, unruffled.

It was already high season: Miss de Vries had missed the private view at the Royal Academy; she had no costume for Ascot Week. "Before the end of June. No later," she said, knowing what a strain it would cause for the household. A ball was an entrance, an entrée: it had to be enormous, gargantuan, the best in the calendar.

"I quite agree," said Mrs. King, in an obliging tone. She took on the whole operation, almost as if it were of her own design, startling Miss de Vries with her efficiency. She worked up the menus and managed the

worst negotiations with Cook. Ordered the flowers, new linens, fresh crystal ware, waiters, tents and tarpaulins, entertainments. Listed out the necessary staff: new house-parlormaids, daily women, even a *sewing* maid to help with the costume. Closed off half the rooms, opened up others, rearranged the furniture, clearing drawers, putting things in packing cases.

“You can leave all that to the girls, Mrs. King,” Miss de Vries said, uneasily, seeing her rifling through one of the closets. “You shouldn’t exhaust yourself.”

Mrs. King had given her a steady gaze. “I’m never exhausted, Madam,” she said.

* * *

It was Mr. Shepherd who brought the news. He’d come at dawn this morning, flustered, wearing an entirely disagreeable expression.

“I thought I’d better tell you at once, Madam,” he said. “The lamp-boy caught Mrs. King entering the gentlemen’s quarters. We think she was planning an *assniation*.”

Miss de Vries had dressed in deepest mourning, no jewels, her hair concealed beneath Chantilly lace. Entirely modest, virtuous.

“Which footman?” she asked.

He paused, just a half second. “William,” he said.

“How disgusting,” Miss de Vries said, without emotion. “Do the other servants know?”

“I fear they may, Madam.”

“Then we need to set an example. She must leave today.”

She could feel pleasure tingling in her veins. *One by one*, she thought. *I’ll get them out one by one*. Shepherd’s eyes flickered in their sockets. Ever since she’d left the schoolroom and Papa had given her charge of the housekeeping, Shepherd had been chasing her for decisions. Appointments, expenditures, complaints, approvals. He came through the door every hour, bringing cards, notes, tea, messages, deliveries. It was as if he had leashed himself to her leg, spying on her. Miss de Vries sometimes wondered what he would do if she lifted a hot poker from the hearth and pressed it to his skin. Would he sink to his knees, would he scream, would he beg her to do it again?

These people, Papa’s people—Mrs. King, Mr. Shepherd, the lawyers, the rest—they simply wouldn’t *do* anymore. Of course Papa had done his best. Furnished her with nannies, ayahs, everything one could pay for. But that only took you so far in life. She wished to operate at the very top of

the ladder, right up in the heavenly heights of society: among cabinet ministers, earls, dukes, princes. She just needed to leverage herself properly. Clear out the deadwood. Build on clean, fresh ground.

Mrs. King was out of the house by breakfast time. Miss de Vries came down for luncheon at noon, studied the invitation list, making corrections. The lawyers arrived at two o'clock, per appointment. Mr. Lockwood led the pack, silver-haired and perfectly groomed, concise as always. She ordered him to stay for tea.

"I'd like you to open negotiations for a marriage settlement," she said, pouring the tea, playing mother.

He took the saucer from her, eyes narrowing. "Mr. de Vries always headed off those discussions. I don't know that we have any takers in mind."

That didn't seem like a particularly agreeable response. "Perhaps we might set out some attractive terms," said Miss de Vries.

He considered this. "What is your objective?"

She smiled, adjusted her voice down a notch. "Love," she said. "What else?"

What couldn't she achieve, once she sold off Papa's positions? A first-rate alliance, a title, installation at a house on Berkeley Square, or any address equal to it. She hated this place, the stench of motor oil, its shiny newness. She wanted to live somewhere ancient. Sink her roots into lovely old ground. Papa's address book repulsed her. Steel merchants and newspaper proprietors and *Americans*. She was after eminent men. Blue blood.

Mr. Lockwood had summarized their trading position. His assessment infuriated her. "Overextended," he'd said. As if the de Vries empire had eyes bigger than its stomach.

"I'm not sure the accounts will bear close scrutiny," he said. "Better to wait a year or two."

A year? Another season? Six of those had passed already. And clearly, he was talking nonsense. The household bills were always paid on time, weren't they? Loans came in, payments went out. Of course a fortune fluctuated, when it was as colossal as hers.

Confidence, she thought. *We must project wealth. Splendor.*

She was her father's daughter, after all.

"I'm holding a ball, Mr. Lockwood," she said. "Did I mention it?"

The lawyer seemed smooth, but he only *seemed* it. Really he was serrated all over, knicked and ridged from top to toe. You could prick your skin if you got too close.

“I’m not at all sure about that,” he said. “It hardly seems—proper.”

“I’m in mourning, Mr. Lockwood,” she said. “Naturally the arrangements will reflect that. You needn’t be alarmed. I won’t be dressed as a chorus girl.”

“But aren’t *you* alarmed?” He was giving her his usual look, implacable and unrelenting. “By the risk?”

A motor engine coughed outside on the road.

She gave him a level stare. “What risk, Mr. Lockwood? A ball in this house has been long expected. I am *pressed* for one, day and night.”

“By whom?” he asked, dubiously.

“I have already commenced the preparations. It would be a great inconvenience to cancel it now.”

“You know it’s my duty, Miss de Vries, to give you good counsel,” he said quietly.

“*Legal* counsel, Mr. Lockwood,” said Miss de Vries. “I didn’t have you down as chaperone.”

“A young lady’s reputation,” he said, with that same fishlike smile, “is a fine and delicate thing.”

“It is immeasurably precious,” she agreed. “Of near-incalculable value. It should be burnished, brightened, properly displayed.”

Something flickered in Lockwood’s eyes, a flash of—what? Recognition? Papa would have said, *Do what I want—make it happen*. He made himself *especially* vulgar for Lockwood, wore his biggest gold rings, placed gigantic fuchsias in his buttonhole. He liked battering the man over the head.

“Modesty,” said Mr. Lockwood, “is the most bewitching virtue in the world. It has enormous currency in these affairs.”

“Affairs?”

“In the conveyancing of a marriage.”

He studied her mildly, one hand in his waistcoat.

The motor outside barked and roared to life.

Of course it wasn’t *proper* to hold the ball now. The notion that this hadn’t occurred to her, made her stomach churn with anger. It was improper. That was precisely the *point*: she needed to stand firm, deviate not an inch. No bets came without risks. They gave a game its dimensions, its oxygen. She needed to catch the world’s attention. Now was the moment. Now, more than ever, while her power was still fresh and newly minted.

Mrs. King had said as much herself when they’d first discussed the arrangements. “You’ve only got one life to live, Madam. Don’t spare any