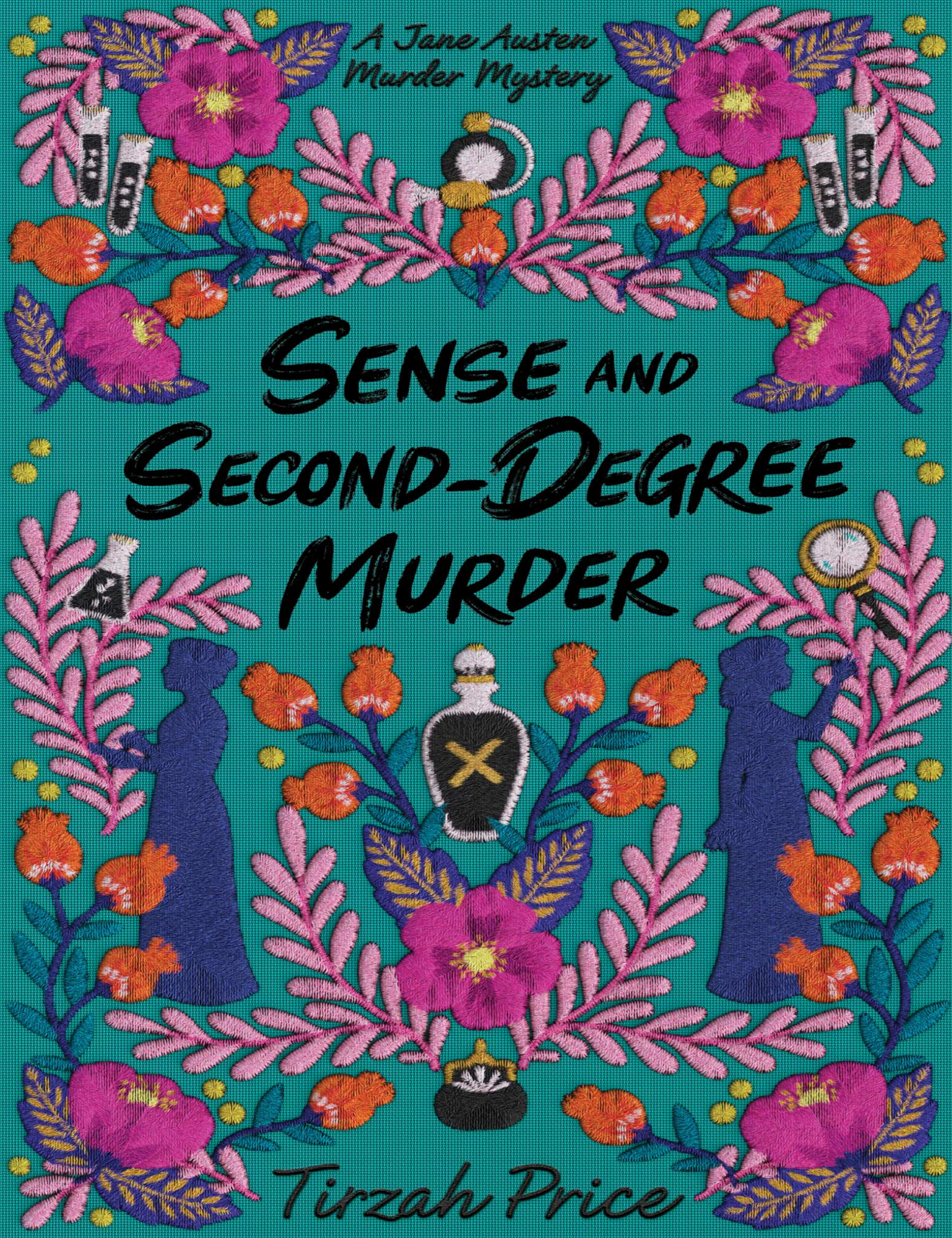


*A Jane Austen
Murder Mystery*

SENSE AND SECOND-DEGREE MURDER

Tirzah Price



SENSE AND SECOND-DEGREE MURDER

A JANE AUSTEN MURDER MYSTERY

TIRZAH PRICE

HARPER TEEN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*To all of the friends
who taught me the meaning of sisterhood.*



Epigraph

“I wish, as well as everybody else, to be perfectly happy; but, like everybody else, it must be in my own way.”

—*Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen

“Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions.”

—*And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

One: In Which the Dashwood Sisters' Lives Are Forever Changed

Two: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive Shocking News

Three: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Make a Shocking Discovery

Four: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Begin Asking Questions

Five: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Make the Acquaintance of Mr. Brandon

Six: In Which a Dashing Young Man Comes to the Dashwood Sisters' Aid

Seven: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive Two Gentlemen Callers

Eight: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive an Unexpected Referral

Nine: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Consult an Expert

Ten: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Uncover More Questions

Eleven: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Have a Horrible Fight

Twelve: In Which One Dashwood Sister Decides to Break the Law (in Pursuit of Justice)

Thirteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive a Warning

Fourteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Come Clean—for the Most Part

Fifteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Discover Father's Secret Case

Sixteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Face a New Disaster

Seventeen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Track Down a Rat

Eighteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Rather Inadvertently Start a Brawl

Nineteen: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Face Their Darkest Hour

Twenty: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive Some Unexpected Callers

Twenty-One: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Serve Tea
Twenty-Two: In Which the Dashwood Sisters Find Closure—or Something
Like It
Epilogue

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Books by Tirzah Price

Back Ad

Copyright

About the Publisher

One

In Which the Dashwood Sisters' Lives Are Forever Changed



ON THE DAY THAT her life was to change forever, Elinor Dashwood awoke late with a wild hope fluttering in her rib cage. But, being the sensible sort, she kept it hidden as she rose, dressed, and joined her family for breakfast, stifling a yawn as she sat down at the table. It was a sunlit, cheerful morning, but her mind was still tucked between the pages of the book she'd stayed up far too late reading, so she didn't notice her younger sister's arched brow.

"You look as though you've been trampled by a horse," Marianne announced with her usual upbeat honesty.

"Marianne!" their mother admonished as Margaret, the youngest Dashwood, giggled. "That's hardly kind. Although, Elinor dear, you do look a little . . . peaked."

"I feel quite well," Elinor assured her mother and sisters, and attempted to look more alert by sitting up even straighter. "I was reading the most riveting study about oxygen. Did you know that a French chemist discovered that in order for combustion to occur, oxygen is essential?"

Mrs. Dashwood gave an uncertain smile, as she always did when Elinor began speaking of the sciences. But Margaret drew in an excited gasp. "Is combustion related to the smoke bombs you promised you'd make me?"

"In a way," Elinor said, helping herself to a piece of toast. "For smoke bombs to work properly, something needs to be lit with fire, and fire can't

occur without oxygen, which is in the air all around us.”

Marianne looked around, as if she could spot the oxygen lurking in the corner of the room, like dust motes. Not that there would be dust motes in the Dashwoods’ breakfast room—the staff kept the place in impeccable order.

“You can’t see it, Marianne,” Elinor said with a little laugh. “It’s invisible air—gas.”

“It sounds unpleasant,” Marianne said as assuredly as if she were proclaiming a new recipe wasn’t to her taste.

“That’s quite enough talk of gas and combustion at the breakfast table, girls,” Mrs. Dashwood said. She knew from experience that when Elinor began speaking of science, and Margaret took an interest in various uses for gunpowder, Marianne was surely just a moment away from adding her thoughts about crime, and then a perfectly nice breakfast would take a darker turn. “Where’s your father? I’m of half a mind to have Stewart fetch him.”

The butler hovered by the door, ready to do Mrs. Dashwood’s bidding.

“I think Father has a new case,” Marianne informed the table. As the Dashwood sister most interested in the family business—Mr. Dashwood was the proprietor and chief investigator of Norland and Co.—she was privy to such knowledge. “He probably fell asleep at his desk again.”

Mrs. Dashwood tsked. “That man will work himself to death, and he already has a cold.”

Before Stewart could be dispensed for the task, Elinor leapt up. “I’ll fetch him. He won’t be able to say no or ask Stewart to bring in a breakfast tray if I tell him he’s missing a perfectly nice meal with his family.”

“I’ll go,” Marianne said, also standing. “You’ve hardly eaten a thing, and I was going to ask him about the case—”

“I’m already up,” Elinor said, waving a carefree hand at her younger sister. It was a gesture that she knew for a fact infuriated Marianne, and yet what was the point of being the oldest if Elinor couldn’t pull rank at times?

Besides, she knew that Father would be curious to know what she thought of Antoine Lavoisier’s scientific discoveries, and he would not be shocked to learn that Lavoisier had met his fate at the guillotine in the French Revolution—and such talk was hardly acceptable in Mother’s perspective.

And then there was the matter of Elinor's secret hope: she wanted to attend a scientific lecture, one of the ones given by the Royal Institute. Mrs. Dashwood was permissive when it came to her daughters' unconventional interests, but it was difficult enough for their family to gain the respect of their peers in society, given that Mr. Dashwood engaged in an occupation. The fact that he was so successful at it, and had solved a good number of mysteries that were regularly reported in the papers, earned the Dashwood family a modicum of popularity, if not respect. But Elinor didn't just want to attend a single scientific lecture—she wanted to study chemistry. Her mother would probably prefer that Elinor spend more time finding a husband than discovering a new element or compound, but Elinor was only eighteen! She wasn't inclined in the slightest to think about marriage. And she was certain Mother could be convinced . . . if Elinor could convince Father first.

She walked down the hallway to Father's study, which sat rather unconventionally at the front of the house. She practiced what she would say until she stopped in front of the closed doors—what might normally have been a formal parlor in any other house was where her father received clients. The only sound as she approached had been the soft echo of her footsteps on the marble floor, and now she pressed her ear to the crack between the doors, listening for sound. Nothing.

She knocked, brisk but light, and opened the door before waiting for a response.

The morning sunlight slid through the half-drawn drapes, and a slight chill clung to the room. Elinor looked to the fireplace, which was cold and empty—not surprising, as Father didn't allow even the maids to clean his sanctum without overseeing to ensure that nothing was disturbed. They wouldn't build a fire unless summoned.

Elinor looked next to the chaise longue in the corner, where her father sometimes slept while working a case, when he deemed it too late to ring for his valet to prepare for bed. But it too was empty, and she realized with a strange stirring in the pit of her stomach that the window behind the chaise longue wasn't latched.

Elinor's gaze flitted across the study as goose bumps raised on her arms and the back of her neck, her eyes skipping over stacks of books, piles of papers, and cabinets bursting full of disguises that Father relied on in his trade—clothing, fake mustaches, spectacles, and various other items that

allowed him to transform into a slightly different person. Finally, her eyes settled on the great desk in the center of the room, and the chair behind it where Father sat, slumped over so that his head rested on the paper-strewn surface.

“Father?” Elinor asked, shocked by the waver in her voice.

A surge of fire rushed through her veins, and even though she knew that something was very wrong, she walked over to the unlatched window and closed it before facing Father. Even as she drew close enough to see the gray pallor to his skin and the way his eyes were almost—but not quite—closed, she knew.

She knew that her beloved father was dead.

Still, she forced her hand to reach out and touch not his face—no, she couldn’t bear that—but his arm, still covered in his jacket. It was cold, and not chilled from the open window. This was lifelessness.

Elinor wasn’t certain how long she stood there, hand resting on her father’s arm, mind churning with senseless thoughts that she couldn’t grasp. This could not be—how could this be? Finally, she knew that she had to do something, and the one thought that surfaced with any clarity was that she didn’t want her mother or sisters walking into Father’s study to this shocking sight. Somehow, thinking of them allowed her to withdraw her hand and step away.

She left the study and shut the door gently behind her but was startled by Stewart. She saw a flash of concern and wariness before he masked it with a cool professional air. “I’ve come to see if Mr. Dashwood requires anything,” he said.

“A doctor,” Elinor replied, surprised by the words that sprang from her lips. “Please ring for a doctor.”

“Miss?” Stewart asked, his professionalism slipping altogether.

Steady, Elinor told herself. She had to remain composed. So much had to be done, and she could not, would not, dissolve into tears. Not now. Not yet.

“Can you please ring for a doctor?” she asked, holding Stewart’s gaze. “Please watch for him and then show him to my father’s study immediately. I must go inform my mother and sisters.”

Elinor saw the understanding dawn on Stewart’s face, and the shock. She nearly broke apart in that moment, but she had to be strong.

“Of course, miss,” Stewart said, looking at the closed door behind her. “But . . . I mean, that is to say—miss?”

Stewart had been with the Dashwoods since before Elinor was born, and never once had she seen him so ruffled. Another small piece of her heart broke and she nodded once, sharply. “He’s gone. I must inform my mother and sisters,” she repeated, and took two faltering steps, then turned back to Stewart, who hadn’t yet moved from where he stood, immobile with shock. “Once you’ve called for the doctor, could you please send Mrs. Matthews to the breakfast room? I think . . . that is, my mother might . . . there will be arrangements to make.”

“Yes, miss,” Stewart said, emotion thick in his voice.

Elinor blinked back tears and turned to leave the butler behind. Seeing Stewart affected, when it was his job to be unaffected by anything, started to unravel something inside her. She quickly retraced her steps down the grand hall, not allowing herself to pause outside of the breakfast room, because if she did, she might not be able to force herself to go in, and if she stood out in the hall, she might fall apart.

She opened the door, then paused at the sight of her sisters and mother. Marianne was in the middle of telling their mother a tale, her arms spread wide to illustrate her point, a look of seriousness on her face as she tried to convince Mother of something. Margaret was laughing, and she had raspberry jam smeared in the corner of her mouth. Mother wore a look of patience and fondness, which lingered when she turned to Elinor and said, “Oh, there you are. You were gone so long I sent Stewart to find you. . . .”

The room grew quiet as they took in her stricken expression. Elinor blinked against the cheery brightness of the room and then steeled herself to share the terrible news that had crushed that fluttering hope inside her.

Two

In Which the Dashwood Sisters Receive Shocking News



MARIANNE DASHWOOD WAS BORN to an extraordinary fate.

She knew it from the moment she learned how to read, when she clambered into her father's lap as he sat at his desk, pointed to a word scrawled in his notebook, and pronounced, "Ar-son! Papa, what's arson?"

Mr. Dashwood gaped at her in startled delight. "Arson is when you set fire to something on purpose," he finally said. "Because you want it to burn down."

"Oh. That's bad," little Marianne said after a moment's thought.

Her father nodded gravely. "Very bad. Which is why your papa will find out who would do such a thing."

Marianne looked at him and said, "And I'll help, Papa."

From that moment on, investigating cases with her father was all Marianne wanted to do. Although her mother fretted about propriety and safety, she never barred Marianne from spending hours in her father's office or accompanying him around the city on perfectly safe and (if Marianne was being honest) somewhat boring reconnaissance missions. Father had understood that there were certain things young ladies could do or ask that a middle-aged man could not, and even though he was careful to keep her away from the more dangerous elements of his work, Marianne had been his confidante. His protégée. His secret weapon.

And now he was gone.

And Marianne didn't even get to say goodbye.

By the time the horrific news had set in that morning around the breakfast table, the doctor had already arrived and inspected their father's body. He then came upstairs, where the Dashwood sisters and their housekeeper, Mrs. Matthews, had gotten their inconsolable mother into bed. The doctor prescribed a dose of laudanum to help her sleep, and Marianne had stayed and held her hand until she'd drifted off, with Margaret curled next to her in bed, face streaked with tears. Marianne hadn't even noticed that Elinor followed the doctor out into the hall, and by the time she'd left Mother's side and found her older sister, Elinor was standing in the threshold of the front door, watching as the undertaker's wagon rolled away, rattling like an omen.

Marianne felt as if the moment she'd learned of her father's death were replaying once more, only this was somehow worse, because he was truly *gone*. No longer in the house, no longer within Marianne's grasp.

"Why . . . you sent him away," she said, a hint of accusation in her tone.

Elinor turned, looking older than her eighteen years. Marianne felt older than sixteen, so it made sense. "The doctor said it was a heart attack," she said, answering the question that was next on Marianne's lips. "They'll prepare him for burial."

"How could you?" Marianne asked. "Before I could see him?"

She thought she saw a flicker of regret in her sister's face, and Marianne was ready to forgive her then. If Elinor had offered an apology, or simply hugged her, Marianne would have forgiven her.

But they were disturbed by a clatter of horseshoes and a shout. The sisters looked up to see their older brother, John, dismounting from a horse. The poor animal's sides were heaving and its coat was wet with sweat. A groom rushed forward to take the horse and Elinor whispered quickly, "We'll see him once more at the funeral," and turned to face their brother.

John rushed forward, his ruddy face nearly purple with exertion and alarm. "Where is he?"

"The undertaker fetched him," Elinor said, drawing him inside. Stewart appeared to take John's coat.

"I came as soon as I heard—we were at Fanny's family's estate. What happened?"

Elinor explained in a patient, tired tone. How she'd found him, how the doctor had proclaimed the death a heart attack, the arrangements, and

Marianne stood in wretched silence, wishing that she could say or do something that might help.

John stared at their father's study door, which was shut. Marianne noticed that John hadn't asked about their mother or how they were holding up. This wasn't entirely surprising—Mrs. Dashwood was their father's second wife after all, and although she and John had always gotten along tolerably well, there was no closeness between them.

"This is miserable," John finally proclaimed.

Marianne shook her head, but Elinor merely murmured, "I know."

"Who will pay for it?"

It took Marianne a moment to realize that he meant the funeral, and she had no idea how to begin to answer him. What did it matter who paid for their father's burial? Elinor's mouth tightened ever so slightly as they exchanged puzzled looks, but neither spoke. John was the son, the eldest, and, more important, the one with the most money.

John had grown up in his uncle's house after his mother's untimely death, when he was just an infant. Father hadn't the means to care for him—or to hire a staff to do so. This was a good year before Father had started Norland and Co. and another year before he'd become a financial and professional success and was in a position to remarry and take back his son.

But by then, John's aunt and uncle had come to think of him as their own. Mr. Dashwood rarely spoke about the decision to allow his son to remain with his first wife's family, but it seemed reasonable when their mother had explained it to Marianne and Elinor when they were little. John would live with his aunt and uncle and become their heir because they had no children of their own. John was still their brother, and Father loved him very much.

Yet it had always felt as though John were a distant cousin they ought to be nice to, not a brother. And from where Marianne stood, it didn't seem John was inclined to take on the responsibilities of a son.

"Well," Elinor said carefully, after a lengthy pause. "I had hoped that you might see to the expense?"

John stopped pacing and considered Elinor's suggestion while Marianne watched him closely. He seemed to gaze off into the distance, and then his head tilted slightly to the side. His blond curls were sweat soaked and had been flattened by his hat and swift journey. Finally, he shook his head, as if

his mental calculations pained him. “Fine. Send the bills to me.” Then, in a murmur, he added, “It’ll all shake out anyway.”

And at that moment, Marianne became suspicious.

The reading of the will occurred three days later, the afternoon of the funeral. The day had threatened rain all morning, and it finally gave way to a downpour just as everyone made a dash from their carriages into the Dashwoods’ town house after the graveside service. As a result, everyone was rather damp and irritable as well as sad, although some were notably more irritable than sad.

“It’s only my second-best mourning gown, and yet I’m afraid my maid will never get the mud from the hem,” John’s wife, Fanny, could be heard saying to a mourner. “If one must attend the graveside, then a proper day must be chosen for it.”

“I hardly think there’s a proper day to bury anyone,” Marianne said to Elinor, just a touch louder than a whisper in the hope that Fanny would hear. “But next time we bury our father we’ll wait for some sunshine.”

“Shh,” Elinor whispered, eyes darting around the room.

“*She* ought to be shushed.” Marianne stared at Fanny and relished in her dislike of the woman—it was a welcome distraction from the sharp stab of grief that never ebbed, buoyed by her suspicions. She hadn’t told her sister of them yet, even though she longed to confide in her.

Instinct will put you on a case, Father used to say, *but it won’t close it*.

Instinct told her that her brother’s first thought of money was suspicious. That the way Fanny flitted about the room with an appraising gaze while John kept his glass full of their father’s best whiskey spoke of something other than genuine grief. That proved nothing, of course, but if there was something to prove, then Marianne would find it. Preferably sooner rather than later, given that Fanny was getting on Marianne’s last nerve.

Fanny sat at the center of a cluster of guests, which included their father’s solicitor, Mr. Morgan, a handful of past associates and clients, and a young man with curly brown hair. Marianne vaguely recognized the young man but couldn’t recall where she had seen him before or what his connection to their family might be. The Dashwood sisters sat on the periphery of the small group as Fanny announced, “Our father died five years ago, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Mr. Morgan murmured, looking into his tea.

“It was gout that did him in, in the end,” Fanny continued, but the young man with curly hair interrupted her.

“Fanny, I hardly think—”

“Now, Edward, let me finish! I was just going to say, it was a dreadful thing but he was no longer in pain. And our dear mother—Mrs. Farrows, you know of her?—made sure to tell everyone who came to pay their respects, ‘Don’t grieve, for he is at peace!’”

Fanny smiled, as if she’d bestowed a gem of wisdom upon the assembled group, and Marianne suddenly remembered Edward Farrows now. He was Fanny’s younger brother and he’d been a lanky boy of fourteen or fifteen at John and Fanny’s wedding five years earlier. He was taller now, and his lankiness had grown into a lean physique. His curly brown hair was slightly longer than the fashion, and his skin was tanned, as if he spent a lot of time outdoors. He was probably a great horseback rider, Marianne deduced. She also noticed that he appeared to be thoroughly scandalized by his sister’s cavalier attitude.

“Sister,” he began, but whatever he was about to say next was cut off by Margaret, who’d been very quiet all afternoon.

“Our papa didn’t have gout.”

Margaret’s tone was all petulance and defiance, and she could get away with such rudeness because she was only eleven.

“Oh, I know, dear,” Fanny said, smiling still. “But this is the way of the world. One day, you are going about your business and then the next, you catch a cold and it quite does you in. It isn’t fair, but there’s no use lingering over it. Life must go on.”

“It wasn’t a cold, it was—” *A heart attack.* That’s what Marianne wanted to say, but she was interrupted by Elinor.

“Mr. Morgan, when should we proceed with the reading of the will?”

“Oh, whenever you like, Miss Dashwood,” he said, looking up. “But surely not in front of your guests?”

“I think it’s time we see to business,” Elinor said firmly, and stood.

The remaining guests took their leave and Marianne gathered Margaret while Elinor went over to their mother and began whispering to her. Mrs. Dashwood had refused to take laudanum today, wanting to be fully present

for the funeral, but she looked as though she desperately wished for bed even as she nodded at the departing guests.

The only person who remained in the room that was not family was Edward Farrows, who hovered off to the side as if he weren't quite sure if he should stay or go. Marianne leveled a sharp look at him and said, "The solicitor will read the will for the family now."

He opened his mouth to say something, but Fanny cut in. "Oh, Edward came with us. He must stay!"

Mr. Farrows looked as though he'd like to disappear into the drapes, but Marianne took no pity on him. "All the same, the will reading is for beneficiaries only. Unless I am mistaken and Mr. Farrows is somehow named in my father's will?" *First John and Fanny don't act properly bereft when Father dies, and now Fanny's brother is lurking about?*

"Perhaps those named in the will would like to retire to the study?" Mr. Morgan suggested.

"No," Mrs. Dashwood said, her refusal cutting through the tension in the room. "Not the study."

"I'm more than happy to step out," Mr. Farrows said, and Fanny began to protest.

Elinor caught Marianne's gaze, and her eyes silently pleaded with her.

"Fine," Marianne said, taking the seat on the other side of her mother. "Stay."

Mr. Morgan sat in their father's chair—it was the only empty seat in the drawing room. He withdrew a sheaf of papers from his case, and Marianne thought that they seemed rather thin. Was their entire future to come down to just a handful of papers? Surely that meant Father's will was straightforward . . . but then why was Fanny looking at those documents as if they were a dress box containing the finest gown of the season?

Mr. Morgan cleared his throat. "I've had the honor of working with Mr. Dashwood since we both started in business, and I knew him to be a true gentleman—a bit eccentric at times, I hope you don't mind me saying." He looked to Mrs. Dashwood.

"I'm aware of my husband's eccentricities," she said quietly. "And I loved them dearly."

Rather than look reassured, Mr. Morgan seemed even more nervous. "Well then, I believe that it won't be news to any of you that Mr. Dashwood inherited this house and a small amount of money from his uncle in his

youth. He spent it on much-needed improvements, and lived on the fortune of the first Mrs. Dashwood while she was alive.”

Marianne knew all of this. When John’s mother died, her money had gone not to her husband but to her son, held in trust until he came of age, which was why Father had to send John to his uncle.

“In recent years, Mr. Dashwood made his living,” Mr. Morgan continued with a small cough. “And he even put away a tidy savings.”

Marianne felt relief wash over her. She wasn’t quite certain what a tidy savings meant in the language of pounds, but surely it would be enough to see them through this period of mourning, and she could sort out where they stood with Norland and Co.’s clients. . . .

“However,” Mr. Morgan said severely, “the house is entailed on his male heir.”

Hope plummeted into despair. *Of course* their home would go to John, and of course that was why Fanny had been eyeing every detail since the moment she stepped foot inside, as if it were hers for the taking. Because it was. And naturally Fanny didn’t possess the tact to hide her eagerness to get her hands on everything they owned, that wench. . . .

Marianne’s train of thought was interrupted by Margaret grasping her hand in a viselike grip. Mr. Morgan was saying, “I advised Mr. Dashwood to arrange his affairs for years, just in case. He was always so healthy and strong, and he kept putting it off.”

“What is there to put off?” Fanny asked peevishly. “One does not simply break an entail.”

Marianne rolled her eyes. Just because the archaic entail dictated that Father’s property must go to his male heir didn’t mean that Father wouldn’t have provided for them monetarily.

“I don’t speak of the entail,” Mr. Morgan said, casting an apologetic look at the settee upon which the Dashwood sisters and their mother sat. “I speak of the will. Mr. Dashwood had only the one, and it’s twenty-two years old.”

Silence fell across the room as Marianne’s mind raced with calculations. Twenty-two years ago would have been just around the time of John’s mother’s death. Before Elinor and Marianne and Margaret even existed. Before her parents had married. Which meant . . .

“We aren’t named in his will?” Marianne said. “Not at all?”

“But why wouldn’t we be in Papa’s will?” Margaret asked, and it wasn’t clear if she was addressing Mr. Morgan, their mother, or her siblings.

Mr. Morgan took the liberty of answering. “Your papa loved you very much, Miss Margaret. But this will was drawn up before he even married your mother. He simply hadn’t gotten around to updating it.”

“I don’t understand why not,” Margaret said, a sharp crease appearing between her brows. The Dashwood ladies knew that it was the only warning of their youngest sister’s sass. “He had plenty of time to see to it.”

“Even so,” Mr. Morgan said kindly, “your papa was not the type to think of dying. He kept busy working, and being a good father, and a good husband. He simply never thought that he would . . . pass.”

Marianne hadn’t thought it possible, either. She knew, logically, that Father would one day die, and Mother, too. But she had simply chosen to believe that day would be far off, decades away.

“Don’t be cross with Father,” Elinor said to Margaret. “He never would have left us if given the choice. He was always so *healthy*.”

Margaret huffed. “In novels, nothing good ever comes to those who die without an updated will. I shall always have a will, and I will update it every year on my birthday.”

“What a thing to say, Margaret!” But the admonishment did not come from her sisters or Mrs. Dashwood—it came from Fanny. “You’re a young lady. Young ladies don’t need wills.”

“It’s not illegal, is it?” Margaret challenged Fanny.

Marianne sighed heavily, not wanting her horrid sister-in-law to shatter Margaret’s innocence regarding unfair property laws concerning women. “Not if you’re unmarried,” she told her younger sister, shooting daggers at Fanny.

Margaret looked at her sister. “Why should it matter if I am married or not?”

Fanny was the one to respond. “Because, dear, ladies cannot own anything of value. Our husbands are our stewards, and if one is unlucky enough not to have a husband, then our fathers or sons see to that task.”

“And brothers, in a pinch?” was Marianne’s sarcastic response. The entire room looked to John, whose whiskey glass was, for the first time all afternoon, empty. “Right, John?”

“Of course,” John said, not convincingly. “I mean, Father would have wanted . . . that is to say, no one will be cast out into the streets.”