

"Last Night at the Golconda"

(an attempt at the start of a mystery story by Mayumi Hirtzel, ©2019)

Eve stomped up the heavy wooden stairs to the room second from the landing, walked over to the big four-poster bed, grabbed the closest pillow, pressed it to her face, and screamed.

She loved George. Having never really known their parents, and with their age difference so pronounced, she'd long considered him more like a father to her than simply brother. He was generous as well as genius...but also patronizing and infuriating. He'd spent most of his life making himself, to fruitful and fulfilling ends, but one result was that he always thought himself right. Incontestable. Infallible. Those times, Eve *hated* him.

She heard an uneven gait climbing the stairs, and she knew before the knock at her door that it was Alan.

"Eve?" he called gently.

She threw the pillow back to the bed, causing the light cotton blanket to billow around it. "I am *not* going back down there, Alan," she cried; "and don't you *dare* try to convince me! How- How- *How* Judith can stand being married to a man so self-righteous and exasperating as my brother is beyond me!"

Standing at the threshold of the room, Alan gave her a placatory look from beneath his heavy brow. "She loves him," he said, ever the diplomat. "It's easier to forgive the faults of someone you love."

Eve stood straight and locked onto his deep-set gaze. "Is that directed at me?"

Alan swung his head low. "No." He paused. "Well, maybe a bit. George has always valued his control," he said when Eve scoffed and threw up her arms. "You know that. This whole thing with Lerner has turned him upside-down."

Eve dropped to the bed with a *whumpf!* of cotton blanket and dress. "He blames me."

"That's not true," Alan crooned as he came to the bed and settled beside her.

"If I hadn't brought Sean to the house, he'd never have learned about Rhonwen and the baby, which means he'd never have tried to blackmail George. And he'd never have gone to prison, never have escaped, and never have thrown this spanner into our lives again."

Alan put his arm around her. "It wasn't your fault then, and it's not your fault, now. Lerner is...disturbed. He always has been." He pulled her close, bringing her head to his shoulder. "But everything will be all right. I'll ring Lionel in the morning, see if he can arrange for some protection. Or at least a constable to come round a few times a day."

Eve deflated against his chest. "George won't allow that. Not if it could cause trouble for his precious image. 'Think of the gossip!'" she said in exaggerated mockery of her brother.

Alan, bless him, gave a quiet laugh beneath her cheek. "Image be damned. Your safety is more important."

She paused to consider the connotations of that, how Sean's single-minded envy had threatened their lives and livelihood over a decade ago...and how that same perilous obsession loomed over them once again. She craned her head up to Alan.

"Do you really think we're in danger?" she asked from between barely parted lips.

He pulled them into a cuddling embrace. "I'm not going to take any chances where you're concerned." He planted a light kiss to her crown, murmuring there, "Which is why I'll stay downstairs tonight. I don't want you out here all alone."

"George is here—"

"George went out," he corrected. "Left just after you came upstairs."

Eve pulled back and blinked at him. "And you let him?"

Alan frowned. "I have as much control over him as I do over you. Which is to say, none at all. You Suttons are notoriously willful."

Eve couldn't control a brief snicker for his pains. "It's a good thing we have you to keep us mostly in check."

"Mostly," Alan agreed with a chuckle.

She sighed. "If I know George, he'll drive straight to the theatre, where he'll bury himself in work."

"He did always say he thinks best in the wings." Alan bumped her with a little squeeze and said in a quieter voice, "Is that all right? If I stay downstairs?"

She smiled tightly. "You're welcome to stay up here. With me."

He smiled back in the same way. "I'm afraid I'd make for a dreadfully unromantic companion, at the moment."

Eve wound both arms around him and snuggled into his chest. "I just want you close."

He seemed warm to that notion, squeezing her for it. "Then close is where I'll be."

They held each other in silence a minute until she said:

"Maybe I shouldn't have sold all the old hunting gear to Colson. But I didn't think we'd need to keep any protection in the house."

Alan grunted. "I got enough of guns in the war. Everything downstairs is locked up, though. Are there any spare keys about?"

"Mrs Goodrich has one." She giggled suddenly. "But she can scare anyone off."

Alan stayed sober. "Then it's just us."

"Yes," she said, and stretched her neck up to kiss him.

While he'd warned her he'd be unromantic, and in his kiss there was no press of passion, his mouth was soft and seeking and his embrace tender and cherishing. She caressed his face, even the sharp, raw-boned angle of his cheek smooth beneath her palm.

She broke from his lips for a heavy breath then kissed him again, this time with her hand in his hair, the strands thick and slick between her fingers. He cupped the back of her head the same, his grip firm.

She hummed across his lips. Then she took one of his hands and led it over her breast, directing it into a squeeze. He made an equal noise of desire and started his own rubbing rhythm, leaving her the freedom to lay her hand over the front of his trousers.

He eased away with a gulping breath. "George," he began, his tone thick with caution.

"I don't want to talk about George," Eve told him. "I don't want to think about him." If her brother didn't care to listen to her advice or acknowledge her fears, why should she reciprocate?

She pushed at Alan's hard shoulders. "I want to be with you," she said, climbing for another kiss even as he drifted to his back.

They undressed leisurely by layers, slipping under the lightweight blanket when there was nothing left between them save for his sheath. There, they started slowly and side-by-side, in a gentle and shallow rhythm, stroking and fondling the inches of warming flesh left out of their embrace. But soon that wasn't enough to satisfy, and they tossed off the blanket.

Their difference in size often prompted him to keep her on top, to control what he felt and saw of her. But sometimes he'd indulge her with a more vigorous position of dominance that allowed her to enjoy the sight as well as the motion of him. This time he did the latter, not so much thrusting as waving into her as he held one of her legs high, her ankle almost over his shoulder. His gentleness didn't stop him from pushing her to a point of gasping excitement, though. Her breaths started to come faster, and she scraped one hand through her hair and clutched her breast with the other.

“Oh,” Alan wheezed and pulled her against him, his tall, lean body all taut and sweaty sinew.

They slapped together at a frenzied tempo, each swing of his hips like a cymbal crash in her head, setting off burst after burst of blinding sensation behind her eyes.

“Oh. Oh! *Oh!*” Alan said, faster and harder until an almost angry, “Damn it!” escaped him, and he pushed himself away.

Eve looked up at him. His skin was blotched with color and his dark hair was a flapping wet mess as he stalked out of the room still naked, his limp more pronounced for the awkwardness his erection gave his gait.

“Alan?” she called, only then noticing the shrill chime of the telephone from the hall. She snatched the blanket from where they’d tossed it at the foot of the bed and wrapped it around herself to follow him. He was already standing at the short table with the telephone next to his ear, talking in a low and controlled voice very different from his breathless exhilaration of less than a minute ago.

“I’m here with Eve,” he was saying, his tone quizzical.

She touched his arm, mouthing, *George?*

Alan shook his head, then squinted. “What?” His skin went clammy beneath her fingers and his nipples poked hard as though from a chill. She felt the hairs rise on his arms as he muttered, “Good Lord.”

Something hard and heavy clenched in Eve’s chest. A dull drone started in her inner ear, and she backed away a step, her hand rising to her mouth. Alan continued talking but she didn’t hear him. Her focus was set on his eyes, which looked troubled and dark in their hollows. At last, he set the receiver in its cradle and turned to her.

Don't say it don't say it don't say it, she thought in a panicked flurry.

Alan opened his mouth, paused, then spoke in an unsettlingly croaky variation of his normally smooth, clear voice. "That was Lionel. They've found Lerner."

The knot in Eve's chest relaxed in relief; Lionel March was earning his new Inspector promotion. "Where?"

"The Golconda," Alan said, his tone dubious.

"The theatre? What was he doing there?"

"I don't know. But he's dead."

The word snapped the knot tight again. "Dead?" Eve echoed.

Alan nodded. "It seems he fell from the balcony onto the seats of the parquet circle. Broke his neck, apparently."

She tried to get rid of that gruesome image from her mind with an unconscious shake of her head. "Why would he...?" She froze as a new horror gripped her from the inside. "Oh, God, Alan. You don't think George...?"

"No," he said quickly. "Of course not." But that haunted look stayed in his eyes.

She stepped into his arms, pressing her cheek to his chest. She didn't want to see the fear in his face. Or the suspicion that brewed behind it.

Even with his arms around her, they both felt very cold.

