

The thief stole through moon-dappled darkness to the wood’s edge. Kneeling in damp grass, he panned the lens of his brassbound spyglass over the hollow below, where a house of baronial aspect blazed with light. Lionsgate, sheltered among lofty elms and copper beeches, symbolized an order of wealth he could never hope to attain. He could, however, earn another feather for his cap by plundering the country seat of Charles Villard—aristocrat, prominent Philadelphia merchant, the fifth generation of inherited rank and fortune.

As a breeze drifted up from the vale, the thief could smell the riches displayed so lavishly before him. Head inclined, he inhaled the bouquet of fragrant phlox and coreopsis blooming in manicured gardens, sweetening the late September night. Smoke from cook fires flowed from a great quadruple chimney atop the mansion’s east wing, wafting tantalizing aromas from a busy kitchen.

Lionsgate, with its liveried servants, Scottish head gardener, elegant stable, and well-kept groves, rivaled the most impressive English ménage. The house itself was a masterpiece of order and symmetry, influenced by the classical designs of Greek architects. Broad flights of stone stairs with marble balustrades led to doorways of grand proportion. Above each entryway, Palladian windows of clear, rose-tinted glass glowed like fine wine in candlelight. The grounds before the great house sloped gently away to a landing on the Schuylkill River, where an array of pleasure craft swayed on the outgoing tide.

Money. Everywhere the thief looked, the spoils of obscene wealth dazzled his eyes. If the rumors he had heard were true, those hewn stone walls harbored treasures beyond imagining. He might lay hold of a strongbox full of coin, or a silver service presented to Charles Villard’s late father by King George the Third. A clever thief, a daring thief, could profit tonight if he kept his wits about him.

Training his spyglass on the long, curved driveway, he spotted two pinpoints of golden light bobbing in the distance. Before long, he heard the rumble of iron-rimmed wheels crunching gravel, the clip-clop of ironshod hooves. A gilded black coach-and-four materialized from the gloom with a full complement of attendants, including two mounted footmen armed with blunderbusses. From the enameled crest emblazoned on the door panel, the thief identified the equipage of Charles Villard’s aunt, Evelyn Wright, an aging paragon of Philadelphia society.

When the vehicle halted before Lionsgate’s white-pillared portico, the attendants opened the doors and let down the steps. Three passengers alighted, an elderly gentleman and two primped ladies. The thief paid particular attention to the women, whose suites of jewelry glittered in the light of the coach lanterns. Around Evelyn Wright’s throat lay a substantial gold necklace set with sapphires and rubies graduating in size to an impressive diamond center stone as big around as a crownpiece. A wonder her skinny neck could support the weight of all those gems. To hell with a cumbersome strongbox or silver service. That necklace alone would fetch a king’s ransom. The thief meant to have it.

A bewigged butler in gilded livery ushered the guests into the house. After lugging two carriage trunks and a portmanteau inside, the footmen mounted up. The coachman cracked his whip. As the coach rumbled away, the thief smiled. Charles Villard’s company, along with their valuables, would spend the night. A few minutes later, the glow of candlelight illuminated several second-floor windows of the west wing, marking the thief’s objective, the guest chambers.

Compacting his spyglass, he backtracked through the woods to the clearing where he had tethered his horse, a dark bay mare with one white front stocking and a bright star centered on her forehead. Although unremarkable at a glance, the mare had been bred for speed and stamina, essential qualities for a robber’s mount. As her master approached, she raised her head, ears pricked forward, and whickered a greeting.

“Shhh,” he cautioned, gentling her with an affectionate hand, “the dogs might hear us.” He fed her a piece of carrot from his pocket and spoke softly while she crunched. “Secret, you should see what’s down there, a bloody fortune in stones just waiting to be pinched.”

The mare’s alert eyes, agleam with moonlight, seemed to ask him a question.

“I ain’t scared,” he told her, though he supposed he should be. In his short career as an outlaw, he had never attempted anything this risky, but the temptation of bagging that magnificent necklace beckoned him. “What about you? You won’t be scared out here all alone, will you?” He rubbed her velvety muzzle. “I didn’t think so. You’re a good, tough little girl.”

After looping the reins about her neck, he set out along a little-used path into deeper woodlands. Like a well-trained dog, Secret followed his lead, nudging his back from time to time with her nose. In a clearing traversed by a shallow brook, the thief secured her to a sapling, positioning her reins low to the ground to allow her to drink in his absence. He withdrew a brace of pistols from leather saddle holsters, handsome, graceful weapons of exceptional quality, the brass barrels and ornate silver mountings highlighted with gold wash. Stolen weapons. He slipped them into his belt. From his saddlebag, he removed a black cloth hood, which he fitted over his head, and a durable black sack, which he tied to his belt.

Leaving the woods behind, he crossed the lawn in a half-crouch, using shrubs and trees to break up his silhouette, his footfalls deadened by evening dew on the grass. He worried about the kennel full of foxhounds, whose sharp ears and baying throats could rouse Charles Villard’s watchmen. From surveilling the estate all week, he knew that Lionsgate’s master employed two night watchmen, irresponsible men presently playing cards and swilling ale in the porters’ lodge near the main gate. Still, an alarm would bring them running with weapons drawn.

The thief reached the great house without incident. Hunkering down among the concealing branches of a rhododendron, he heard music emanating from within, the high clear notes of a violin accompanied by a pianoforte. Soon, he imagined, Charles Villard would usher his guests into the formal dining room to savor a sumptuous meal at a long, linen-covered table adorned with gleaming silver and imported Chelsea porcelain. Servants would pass around bread, oil, and vinegar, whisk away glasses to be washed, and replenish drinks as soon as the diners emptied them.

The thief made his way to the bank of dining room windows open to the warm night. Easing behind a screen of yew bushes growing beside the house, he settled himself on the ground beneath one of the windowsills. Presently, he heard the sound of men’s voices, a woman’s lilting laughter, the movement of chairs around a table as waiters seated the diners. Curiosity needled him. Inching his hooded head above the sill, he peered inside and choked back a laugh. Two couples occupied the enormous dining table, not seated at one end for ease of conversation but spread to the farthest reaches, requiring them to speak up to be heard. The better for him to eavesdrop.

He recognized all four people at the table, though he had met only one: Charles Villard, the lord of Lionsgate, a descendant of British nobility. As always, Villard looked every inch the aristocrat, resplendent in a suit of black ribbed silk over an ivory satin waistcoat embroidered in a leaf pattern. His thick blond hair framed his handsome face, curled into three perfect rolls above each ear, the length in back wrapped with a black velvet ribbon.

Rising from his chair, Villard addressed his female guests in a voice full and resonant. “Aunt Evie, Alexandra, I count myself fortunate indeed to have the fairest of Philadelphia grace my table tonight.” He bowed to his aunt, seated to his right, and then fixed his attention on the young woman to his left. He held her gaze while raising his wineglass high. “To you, Alexandra, on your twenty-first birthday. For days, I’ve searched for the right words to honor you on this special occasion, but alas, no words can fully define your charm. As a wise man once said: ‘Thou hast no faults, or I no faults can spy; thou art all beauty, or all blindness I.’”

The thief rolled his eyes. *Is that the best you’ve got?* On second thought, the swellhead did have a point. Alexandra Pennington truly was beauteous, with a pleasant voice that complemented her looks.

“Thank you, Charles. Although,” she added, “I’m certainly not without faults. Were John still alive, he would second that.”

“That’s news to me,” said her brother-in-law, George Pennington, whose twinkling brown eyes revealed a spirit undimmed by his advanced years. “So far as I remember, my brother liked to sing your praises from the rooftops.”

“In company, perhaps. In private he professed great faith in my shortcomings.”

Laughter filled the dining room.

The thief scrutinized John Pennington’s young widow, who sat facing the windows. He had glimpsed her several times across the crowded floor of the High Street Market. Now, admiring the deep blue of her eyes, he wondered why he had never taken a closer look. In the radiance of tiered chandeliers, her skin seemed to glow with a golden hue suggestive of honey. He liked the color of her hair, dark brown shot with amber, full of shine. That she wore it unpowdered, upswept in a modest style also appealed to him, as these days many fashionable ladies piled up their locks into ridiculous beehives, necessitating the use of wire supports and additional hairpieces. Her plain yet elegant widow’s weeds exemplified the proper mode of mourning for her station. She might be a silk-stocking, but her natural demeanor intrigued him, kindling a desire to know more about her, intimate things.

His gaze wandered to her necklace, a crowned heart locket encrusted with sapphires and diamonds, certainly not as valuable as Evelyn Wright’s but a choice piece nevertheless. Something to bear in mind later on, if the opportunity to snatch it arose.

For now, he made himself comfortable, his back against the house wall, and listened to the conversation in the dining room. When the discussion shifted to the political upheaval engulfing the Thirteen Colonies, he stifled a sigh. Nowadays such talk was on every tongue. He found the collective viewpoint in the dining room predictable, for Villard and his guests were Loyalists, faithful subjects of King George, fiercely protective of their status and privilege.

“Our city’s become a cesspit of rebels,” said a tart female voice. Evelyn Wright, a sparrow-like woman who once shared her nephew’s fair good looks, seethed with indignation. “Honest people are terrified to speak out against them.”

“I’ll not hold my tongue,” said George Pennington, scowling his disapproval. “If you ask me, the devil stands behind that infernal Congress. They’ve passed more measures to enslave the colonies than all the acts of Parliament taken together. Impertinent hotheads. They’ll not prevent me from speaking my mind.”

“Nor will they continue to ignore you,” said Alexandra. “One more contrary word could get you dragged before the Committee of Safety, or worse, set upon by those ruffians who style themselves the Committee for Tarring and Feathering. If you’re lucky, they’ll only leave you tied to a tree on a dark road.”

The old man shrugged off her concern. “I cannot stay silent while a handful of high-flown smugglers and pompous lawyers incite the lower sort with lies. The royal navy disrupted their illegal shipping, so what did they do? They accused the king of restricting American trade. As for the taxes they so love to decry, the people of England pay much higher taxes on goods. What stuff and nonsense they spew! The scoundrels should all hang.”

“Oh, they’ll hang,” said Evelyn Wright. “Once the die is cast, Mr. Washington and his army will be powerless to save them.”

“His army?” Charles Villard smiled. “Aunt Evie, you make too much of them. Mr. Washington commands a mob of yokels and shopkeepers, all come together like a flock of migrating birds. I understand the world has never seen so many captains in one place than at Cambridge. Everyone wants to be an officer, and no one wants to follow orders. And those poor fools are begging a fight with the British army.”

“Let’s pray it doesn’t come to that,” Alexandra said.

“We should avoid bloodshed at all costs,” Villard agreed. “I, for one, will continue to push for reconciliation.”

“Meanwhile, the rabble are running amok in our streets,” said his aunt. “The sheriff must take steps to restore law and order, or else we’ll find ourselves at the mercy of men like Jack Flash.”

Outside in the darkness, Jack Flash sat up alertly.

George Pennington said, “I heard he robbed Jeffrey Warren the other night.”

“On the Frankfurt Road,” Villard confirmed. “Jeffrey spotted a body lying in the middle of the road. Naturally, he stopped to investigate. It turned out to be a ruse, old clothing stuffed with straw. The villain dropped from a tree and robbed poor Jeffrey and his wife.”

“Bastard,” Pennington swore, then caught himself. “Pardon my language, ladies.”

Jack Flash smiled a little.

“Are they certain the robber was Jack Flash?” Alexandra asked Villard.

“Oh yes. He wore a black hood, black clothing, and brandished two fancy pistols. Most definitely him.”

“A lot of poor people look upon him as a hero,” said Evelyn. “Their approval seems to be making him bolder. Who knows where he’ll strike next?”

Jack Flash, felon of the broadsheets, tipped his head back in amusement.

“We can be sure of one thing,” Villard remarked. “His next victim, like all the rest, will be a Loyalist.” He directed a servant to pour more wine all around. “Enough of this melancholy talk. We’re here to celebrate a delightful young lady’s birthday. Let’s not let her evening fall short of a marvelous time.”

Jack Flash shot a glance heavenward. *Oh, sound the trumpets*.

He continued to wait, and wait some more. His neck grew stiff, his backside numb from sitting too long in one position. After what seemed an eternity, he heard chair legs scrape against floorboards as the company left the dining room.

Jack Flash moved out, slipping wraithlike along the wall of the great house to a raised, slate-floored terrace standing higher than his head, enclosed by a marble balustrade. Concealed in shadows below the front edge, he surveyed the candlelit windows of the second-floor guest chambers. An ivy-draped trellis, anchored to the house wall abutting the terrace, offered easy access to one of the rooms, hopefully that of Evelyn Wright and her impressive bauble. His plan was simple: hide under her bed, wait until she slept, bag her necklace, and be gone. Nothing to it, assuming the old lady was a sound sleeper.

He froze as a door leading from the house onto the terrace opened. Footsteps resounded on slate paving. As he flattened himself against the terrace wall, mirthful voices penetrated the night. The conversation grew louder until the intruders seemed to be on top of him. He tilted his head back to look up.

Charles Villard and Alexandra Pennington stood at the railing, so close he could have reached up and touched the toe of Villard’s red-heeled shoe. Had the couple glanced down, they might have noticed him, but he could have been standing on the moon for all they knew, so intent were they on each other. He held still, scarcely daring to breathe as the scene above him unfolded.

“At last we have a quiet moment alone,” Villard said. “I love Aunt Evie, but she does babble at times. I almost feel guilty for leaving poor George alone with her.”

“You needn’t worry about George; long-winded intercourse is his specialty. I only wish he would learn to bite his tongue in public, but that’s like asking the wind not to blow.”

Villard laughed. “Alexandra, you’re a breath of fresh air. The more time I spend with you, the more I enjoy your company.” The warmth in his voice intensified. “Dare I ask if you feel the same?”

“If I didn’t, our first meeting would have been our last,” she said and made him laugh again. “You did make a poor first impression.”

“In my defense, I had never negotiated a business deal with a woman, let alone one so clever and informed.”

“John taught me a great deal about fair trade, and your offer seemed to me unfair. A ship like *Golden Fleece* doesn’t come along every day.”

“Nor does someone like you. Your husband was a lucky man indeed, and well he knew it. Whenever we chanced to meet, he spoke very highly of you.”

“And never mentioned my imperfections?” she inquired in a humorous way.

“You have none. For heaven’s sake, did you not hear my tribute at supper? When God created you, He cast a female masterpiece.”

Jack Flash groaned inwardly. First the never-ending meal, now this.

“I mean that sincerely, Alexandra.” Villard’s tone had changed, lower and earnest. “You embody every virtue a man could desire in a woman. In the short time I’ve known you, I’ve come to believe that our meeting was destined.” Clasping her hand, he raised it to his lips for a brief kiss. “You must know why I brought you out here.”

Jack Flash waited in suspense, interested despite himself.

All at once, Villard sank to one knee. “I can wait no longer,” he said with naked yearning. “Alexandra, I adore you. I’ve never cared this deeply before about anyone. I want you to be my wife. Say yes, and I’ll be the happiest man alive.”

Jack Flash felt a jolt of surprise clear to his boots. His annoyance forgotten, he angled his head for a better look at the widow’s face. Argent light from the night sky reflected in her eyes, but her expression gave away nothing. For a moment, he felt as if he were the one on bended knee, flush with hope, awaiting her answer with his heart beating against his ribs. Charles Villard had fallen for a mighty creature, an earthly goddess with the power to crush or uplift him with a single word, yet she did neither.

She kept her voice calm and steady, serene in its gentleness. “Thank you, Charles. I feel honored that you would want me to be part of your life. Your friendship these past few months has meant the world to me, but I’m not yet ready to contemplate marriage. It’s simply too soon.”

Villard rose to his feet, his face a picture of disbelief. Clearly, he had not anticipated a refusal, and his tone revealed his chagrin. “You’ve been widowed nearly a year, Alexandra, time enough to mourn your loss.”

“I believe I’m the best judge of that.”

Jack Flash smiled behind his hood. *Bravo, woman*.

“Forgive me,” Villard said. “That was presumptuous of me.”

*Downright rude, you numbskull.*

“Thoughts of John will always lie near my heart,” she said, “but it’s more than that. To tell the truth, I’m enjoying a bit of independence. I’ve never been in this position before.”

“A woman like you shouldn’t live alone. You should be protected and cherished in all the ways you deserve.”

“You say the kindest things, Charles. I appreciate your concern, but I feel I should get to know you better before making a deeper commitment.” She placed a hand on his arm, her eyes mirroring the moonlight. “I hope I haven’t given you offense.”

“Dear lady, I don’t believe there is anything you could say that could possibly offend me. I shall wait for you as long as need be. For now, I ask only the privilege of courting you, that I may prove myself worthy of your affection.” Stepping closer, Villard cupped her chin, tilting her face up to him. “But know this, Alexandra: I intend to win your heart as well as your hand.” He leaned down to kiss her.

Moments later, she whispered, “You are persistent.”

“My feelings for you make me so,” he murmured and kissed her again.

Below in the darkness, Jack Flash assessed their intimacy with an experienced eye, and what he observed seemed to him a contradiction of nature. For someone claiming to be head over heels, Villard betrayed none of the trembling excitement a man ought to feel with a woman like Alexandra Pennington at his disposal. His approach to the business of kissing was as starched and impeccable as his manner, devoid of imagination, chastely executed, as if this was his first real indulgence in the art of oral pleasure. His hands never strayed from her shoulders, his mouth pressed against hers, bearing down on her lips rather than savoring them. Even more disturbing, his eyes remained open the whole time. To gauge her enjoyment? To be ready to catch her in case she swooned from his devastating assault?

*Jesus God, get it over with*.

Villard straightened. He caressed her cheek, declaring with confidence, “Now my evening is complete.”

*A complete waste of a damned fine wench*.

“Not quite,” she said. “You promised to dance with me again.”

“Indeed I will,”—Villard offered his arm—“as much as you like.”

At last the couple strolled away, the terrace door closed, and the night again belonged to Jack Flash. He scaled the terrace wall with ease, gained the vine-draped trellis rising toward the eaves, and gave a hard tug on the wooden structure to test its sturdiness. Stealthy as a cat, he climbed to a softly lit window, delighted in finding the sash unfastened, his first stroke of luck in an otherwise frustrating venture. Easing his tall frame inside a spacious bedchamber, he drank in opulence worthy of royalty. Light from a single candle gleamed on polished mahogany furniture, tooled leather wall coverings accented with gold leaf, a gilt-framed looking glass positioned to reflect daylight on gloomy days. The twelve-foot-high ceiling dwarfed even the massive four-post bedstead hung with yards of floral curtains. A pink sleeping shift laid out on the mattress drew his attention. Finely woven linen flowed like silk through his fingers. Evelyn Wright’s or Alexandra Pennington’s?

The walnut carriage trunk at the foot of the bed held fancy toiletries in a lift-out tray, garments of the latest fashion, expensive shoes in silk bags, but nothing to identify the trunk’s owner.

He heaved a sigh. Why make this easy for him?

Then he spied an ivory-handled hairbrush lying on the vanity. Strands of long dark hair, caught in stiff boar bristles, told him what he needed to know. As he prepared to seek out Evelyn Wright’s room, footsteps sounded in the hallway, accompanied by high-pitched giggling that grew louder, closer. The door handle jiggled. Under the circumstances, Jack Flash did the only thing he could. Hissing a curse, he dove to the floor and crawled under the bedstead just as the door opened.

“I’ve never seen him act like this,” said an amused female voice, “fawning like a lovesick puppy. Bobby says he’s a changed man, real pleasant these past few weeks.”

“You think he’ll marry her?”

“That depends on her, I suppose.”

“She ought to be throwing herself at him. With his looks and money, he could have his pick of the lot, you know.”

“He doesn’t seem interested in anyone else.”

Jack Flash inched his way to a corner post and peered through a slit in the bed skirt. He beheld a pair of chambermaids lounging in cushioned armchairs before the hearth, looking for all the world as if they owned the place. Teeth gritted, he lowered his head onto folded arms.

Over the next hour, he learned their names were Holly and Susan, and they prattled on about someone named Bobby, who was hung like an ox and apparently just as brainless. The longer he lay in cramped confinement, the more his muscles ached. Adding to his discomfort, the jaw screws of his pistols dug into his belly, such that each passing minute felt like forever.

Well after midnight, Susan bestirred herself, announcing, “I’d better go next door before Mrs. High-and-Mighty arrives. I wish that bitch would quit asking for me. I’m sick to death of her nasty airs, and I don’t just mean her temper. She always smells like rotten old licorice.”

Holly laughed. “Mrs. Pennington seems nice.”

“Don’t rub it in.”

After Susan left, a bored Holly soon dozed off in her chair, her mouth slack and shapeless, her rhythmic snoring lulling Jack Flash into a kind of lethargy. Hearing the door open, he perked up again.

The Widow Pennington entered the room in a whispering of black silk petticoats. When she shook Holly awake, the girl sprang from her chair and apologized for falling asleep.

“Nonsense,” Alexandra said with a laugh. “Waiting is the most tiresome job in the world.”

*Amen*, thought Jack Flash. It occurred to him, as he watched her remove her slippers and unpin her stomacher, that his long wait might yield an unexpected reward.

With Holly’s help, Alexandra drew the gown off her shoulders, taking care not to damage the delicate lace trim. Next, she shed two under-petticoats, followed by linen hoops stiffened with whalebone.

“I’m to ask if you’d like a bath, ma’am,” Holly said as she placed the garments in an armoire. “There’s heated water downstairs. I could have a tub brought up. Won’t take but a minute.”

Alexandra indicated the washstand. “Is there water in the pitcher?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That will do. I’m too tired to bathe.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jack Flash’s mouth had gone dry. She wore boned stays that laced in the back. God only knew why, for her slender waistline needed no whalebone to achieve definition. Rising from her waist to the center of her bustline, the corset displayed the high, rounded fullness of her bosom, the sight of which quickened his blood. He figured those beauties would settle once she removed the stays.

He was wrong.

“Thank you, Holly. I can manage now.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The young woman dipped a curtsy. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else, ma’am?”

“Quite sure, but thank you for asking.”

“Very good, ma’am. Good night.”

The door closed. Wearing only a linen shift, Alexandra opened her trunk and removed a leather jewelry case, into which she placed her locket necklace and earrings. Under Jack Flash’s watchful gaze, her jeweled enameled hair bows followed suit. Standing before the vanity mirror, she brushed out her hair with long, smooth strokes until it shone with burnished fire, cascading in waves down her back. As she plaited the length into a thick braid, candlelight defined her suppleness through gauzy linen.

Jack Flash bit his lip, held in thrall by the sight of her long legs rising into gently flared hips. Villard was right; she was exquisite.

She reached down and began to raise her shift. After a moment, without realizing it, Jack Flash stopped breathing, simply stared as the world stood still and his imagination soared to a dizzy, impossible height.

*Jesus God*.

The voice of his conscience said he ought to look away. Instead, angling his head for a better view, he watched in singular fascination as she bathed at the washstand, her movements efficient yet sensual, anointing all the secret places Charles Villard had vowed to possess. He winced at the thought of her submitting to that arrogant nob.

After drawing the pink sleeping shift over her head, she blew out the taper, plunging the room into semi-darkness. From above him came the rustle of wool, cotton, and coconut fibers as she stretched out on the mattress. Lying motionless on his stomach, he listened to her fuss with the bedcovers to get comfortable.

Quiet descended. Soon he heard her deep, even breathing and knew she was asleep. With painstaking caution, he eased from concealment then rose to his feet, expecting at any moment to hear her cry out in alarm, forcing him to resort to hostile measures he preferred to avoid, particularly with a woman. To his relief, she slept on, unaware of the figure looming over her like something conjured from a nightmare—lean, powerful, garbed all in black. Against his better judgment, he lingered a moment to gaze upon her. Faint moonlight, filtering through curtained windows, revealed serene features reminiscent of a child, except for those rosy lips. Beautifully shaped, generously proportioned, hers was a mouth meant for kissing. He shivered a little. Breaking off his stare, he crept to the vanity and slipped her jewel case into the sack at his belt.

Now for the crowning glory.

Opening the door a crack, he peered into a deserted hallway. Approaching Evelyn’s room, he could hear her wheezing and snorting in her slumber, loud as a drunken sailor. The door opened soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. Once inside, he breathed in a miasma of almond oil pomade, camphor, milled hair powder and something else, a cloying odor similar to licorice, just as the maid had said. In near blackness, he negotiated his way to the vanity table, discovering there an assortment of ointment and cosmetic jars but no jewelry case or necklace. Goddammit, where had she put it?

As he turned, his hand brushed a tall silver candlestick. Hearing it wobble, he groped for it but missed. The heavy piece struck the floor with an ungodly clatter. Frozen in place, the hair on his nape prickling, he listened to Evelyn stir, smack her lips, and mutter something unintelligible. A moment later, her sonorous snoring resumed. Incredible. The sleep of the dead.

His heart was beating too quickly. He quelled the urge to flee, not about to give up after coming this far. Perhaps he should wake her, shove a pistol under her nose, demand his loot or else. As this idea took shape, he stepped to a window and parted the drapes, admitting moonlight into the room. A wink of ruby red on the bedside table caught his eye. Smiling now, he scooped up his prize. As he slipped from the bedroom, Evelyn’s necklace joined Alexandra Pennington’s jewelry case.

With a quick glance in both directions, he padded toward the servant’s stairwell at the end of the hall, alert for the slightest noise, his courage bolstered by the weighted sack bumping against his thigh. He had taken but a few steps when the door beside him swung open. Dropping both hands to his pistol grips, he spun toward the threat.

Framed in the doorway, Alexandra Pennington recoiled in horror. As she opened her mouth to scream, he lunged for her, clamping his hand over her mouth to smother her cry. She fought him like a wildcat, but he was stronger, propelling her backward into the room while shutting the door with his boot heel. After careening with her across the floor, he pinned her against a bedpost. By now, another woman might have fainted from fright, but not this one. No, she pummeled him with her fists, thrashing in his grasp with maddened strength, a veritable fireball of resistance. Determined to prevail, he managed to withdraw one of his pistols, no easy task while fending off blows to the head and vicious knees aimed at his gingamabobs, all while muffling her cries. One short sight of the pistol did the trick. She tensed up like a corpse, breathing hard through her nose, the full measure of her terror evident in her eyes. For a moment, he considered clubbing her senseless to make his escape, but a pang of conscience stayed his hand.

He caressed her cheek with the cold brass barrel, conveying a warning more effective than any words he could have uttered. He could feel her heart beating against him, fluttering in her chest like a trapped bird. As her womanly fragrance invaded his senses, a fierce desire to taste her lips swept over him. He reined himself in. Any man who could rob successfully while kissing a pretty girl wouldn’t be giving the kiss enough attention.

Gradually he removed his hand from her mouth. Thus released, she began to breathe in short, harsh gasps. “What do you want?” she whispered in dread.

He wanted to get far away from Lionsgate, the faster, the better. He hadn’t planned to return to this bedroom, but now that he was here, he would leave through the same window he used to enter the house.

He motioned with his pistol for her to get back into bed. When she failed to obey, he seized her arm and shoved her onto the mattress, in the same motion drawing the covers over her trembling form. Leaning down, he tapped her cheek to command her attention, and then placed his finger against her lips for silence, his featherlight touch at odds with his threatening demeanor.

She nodded, her eyes round as shillings.

After replacing the pistol in his belt, he tucked the covers around her as he might a child, his manner now easy, almost tender in his bid to pacify her. He straightened and held up his hand, palm out, his meaning unmistakable. *Stay put*.

With a few quick strides, he was at the window. As he slipped outside and began to descend the trellis, he wished he had bound and gagged her, or at least treated her to a real kiss, for her frantic cries resounded in his wake, rousing servants and Lionsgate’s master, who rushed to her side.

By then, Jack Flash had vaulted over the terrace railing. He hit the ground running as if he had never left it. Light-footed as a deer, he sprinted across the lawn with his plunder and melted into the tree line, becoming just another shadow among shadows.

