

GOLDEN IN DEATH

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

NEW YORK

Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides:
Who cover faults, at last shame them derides.

—William Shakespeare

'Tis education forms the common mind;
Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.

—Alexander Pope

I

DR. KENT ABNER BEGAN THE DAY OF HIS DEATH COMFORTABLE AND CONTENT.

Following the habit of his day off, he kissed his husband of thirty-seven years off to work, then settled down in his robe with another cup of coffee, a crossword challenge on his PPC, and Mozart's *The Magic Flute* on his entertainment unit.

His plans for later included a run through Hudson River Park, as April 2061 proved balmy and blooming. After, he could hit the gym and some weights, grab a shower, have a bite in the café.

On the way home, he thought he'd pick up fresh flowers, wander through the market, and get the olives Martin so enjoyed, maybe a nice selection of cheeses. Then he'd meander to the bakery for a baguette and whatever else appealed.

When Martin came home, they'd open a bottle of wine, sit and talk and have some bread and cheese. He'd leave the choice of eat in or eat out to Martin, with, hopefully, a romantic ending to the day—if Martin wasn't worn out.

They often joked Kent as a pediatrician handled the adorable babies and charming kids, while Martin as headmaster for a K–12 private academy juggled charming kids with hormonal and broody teens.

Still, it worked for them, Kent thought as he filled in 21-Down.

Toxic.

He spent an entertaining hour with the puzzle, tidied up the kitchen while music filled the air of their townhome in the West Village.

Kent changed into his running clothes, added a light hoodie. He packed his gym bag, deciding he'd drop it off in his locker before his run.

As he zipped it, the doorbell rang.

Humming to himself, he carried his bag out to the living room, set it on the coral sofa he and Martin had chosen when they'd redecorated six months before.

Out of habit, he checked the door monitor, saw the delivery girl he recognized with a small package.

He disengaged the locks, opened the door.

“Good morning!”

“Morning, Dr. Abner. Got a package for you.”

“So I see. You just caught me.” He took the package, offered her a smile as the Queen of the Night's vengeful second-act aria poured out to Bedford Street. “Beautiful day!”

“It sure is. You have a good one,” she added before she walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

“You, too.”

Kent closed the door, studying the package as he carried it back to the kitchen. Since it was addressed to him, he opened the drawer for the box cutter. The return label had a Midtown address and a shop name—All That Glitters—he didn't recognize.

A gift? he wondered as he cut the box.

Inside the box, under the packing, another box. Small, simple, he

thought, smooth, dark faux wood closed with a small lock, the key attached with a thin chain.

Baffled, he set it down, unlocked the clasp.

Inside the box, nestled in thick black padding, sat a small—undeniably cheap—golden egg, closed tight with a tiny hook.

“All That Glitters,” he muttered, flipped the hook. The lid stuck a bit as he started to lift it. He gave it a harder tug.

He didn’t see the vapor, didn’t taste it. But he felt the effects instantly as his throat seemed to snap shut, his lungs clog. His eyes burned, and his well-toned muscles began to tremble.

The egg dropped from his fingers as he stumbled blindly toward the window. Air, he needed air. He tripped, fell, tried to crawl away. His system revolted, expelling the light breakfast he’d had with his husband. Fighting through the tearing pain, he tried to drag himself across the floor.

He collapsed, convulsing as Mozart’s Queen hit high F.

On a bright spring afternoon, Lieutenant Eve Dallas stood over the body of Dr. Kent Abner. That late-afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows he’d failed to open, spilled over the pools of body fluids, the shards of broken plastic.

The victim lay faceup—though the contusions on his forehead, temple indicated to her he’d fallen face-first. His eyes, red, swollen, with the film death had painted over them, stared back at her.

She could see, clearly, the smears feet, hands, knees had swiped through expelled body fluids. Footprints outlined with blood, bile, puke tracked the kitchen floor.

Her crime scene, she thought, had been shot to shit.

“Let’s hear it, Officer Ponce,” she said to the first on scene.

“The vic’s Kent Abner, a doctor, lives here with his husband. Had

the day off. Husband—that’s another doctor, but the Ph.D. type, Martin Rufty—comes home from work—headmaster at Theresa A. Gold Academy—at approximately sixteen hundred. Sees the body. He walked right in the body fluids, Lieutenant, turned the body over, actually tried to revive him before he called the MTs.”

The uniform, a burly vet, shook his head at the scene. “Then they come in, and we’ve got them all over it before we’re called in. Did what we could to secure it at that point. Vic’s been gone for hours. MTs said he was cold and stiff. And how it looked like some kind of chemical poisoning.”

“Where’s the spouse?”

“We got him upstairs. My partner’s with him. He’s a mess.”

“Okay. Stand by.” Eve turned to her partner.

“Peabody, I’ll take the body. Find the security feed, take a look.”

“Got that.” In her pink cowboy boots, Peabody stepped carefully as Eve opened her field kit, crouched down.

She’d already sealed up, turned on her recorder, and now took out her Identi-pad to verify the victim’s ID.

“Victim is identified as Kent Abner of this address, age sixty-seven. Contusions and lacerations on the forehead, left temple, also on left knee. They look consistent with a fall. Got some burns on the thumbs, both hands. The body’s in rigor. The eyes are red, swollen.”

Carefully, she opened the victim’s mouth. “So’s the tongue. Looks like . . . bits of foam and saliva, vomit. Blood and mucus, dried now, from the nose.”

She took out her gauges. “TOD, nine-forty-three. Peabody! Run the feed back to this morning. Check when the spouse left, if anyone came in after that.”

“I’ve got a male—tweed jacket—mid-sixties, about six-three, one-eighty, carrying the briefcase on the floor in there, coming in a couple

minutes after four. Uses a swipe and code. And he's letting the MTs in at sixteen-ten. Two uniforms arrive at sixteen-sixteen."

Peabody, her dark hair in a short, bouncy tail, peeked around a door. "I'll run it back."

Eve continued with the body. "No defensive or offensive wounds. Head and knee—possible blow, but more consistent with a fall. He's a well-built man, looks strong. He would've fought back if fighting back was an option. Did he eat something, drink something . . . ?"

"Same male—has to be the spouse—walking out at oh-seventy. No activity prior. And . . . we've got a female in a Global Post and Packages uniform. She's ringing it at oh-nine-thirty-six. Vic answers—friendly, like they know each other. He takes the package in; she leaves."

Eve rose, walked to the counter. "Standard delivery box? Say, ten inches square?"

"That's the one. I'm zipping through—nothing after the delivery and before the spouse comes back."

Peabody stepped out.

"Box cutter's right here. He's dead seven minutes after he takes the package. He brings it in here," Eve said. "Opens it. Takes out this other box—cheap fake wood, little lock and key. Opens that. We've got broken bits of colored material and shards—shiny gold color maybe on the outside, white interior—on the floor. Maybe hard plastic. Something in the box. Open that and . . ."

"Fuck." She stepped back. "Call the hazmat unit."

"Oh, shit."

"The spouse isn't dead, or the MTs, or the first on scene. Whatever it was must be dissipated enough, but call them in, let them know we have an unknown toxic substance."

Eve eased around, read the return address on the box.

“All That Glitters.” She ran it. “Bogus name and address on the shipping box.”

“They’re on their way,” Peabody reported, “and advise us to evacuate the premises.”

“Too late for that. Seven minutes, Peabody. Subtract the couple minutes to walk back here, get the box cutter, open everything. He was basically dead when he opened the box over seven hours ago.” And still, she thought. “Get Uniform Carmichael and Officer Shelby over to Global Post and Packages, find out where this package was dropped off for shipping, who signed it in, if there’s any security feed. Then contact the morgue team, and tell them we may have a hot one.”

“Dallas, you touched him—”

“I was sealed,” Eve reminded her. “His spouse, the MTs touched him, too. Whatever killed him, it’s done its work. It’s finished.”

She stood a moment, a tall, lanky woman with a choppy cap of brown hair, brown cop’s eyes, wearing a bronze leather jacket, good brown boots.

Basic precautions, she told herself.

“I’m going to scrub up, just to cover protocol. When I have, we’ll talk to the spouse. We’re going to want whatever he was wearing when he touched the vic bagged for the hazmat team.”

She grabbed her field kit, started off to find a powder room or bathroom. “Contact the shipping company first. We need to talk to the delivery person.”

Going to be late, she thought as she used the scrub in her kit in a stylish powder room with maroon walls.

According to the Marriage Rules—self-written and -enforced—she needed to let her own spouse know. Roarke understood the job’s screwy hours, but you had to follow the rules.

Peabody stepped up to the door. “Carmichael and Shelby are on their

way to GP&P, and I have the name of the delivery person for this route. Lydia Merchant. She clocked out at her usual time, but I have contact info on her.”

“Let’s run her in the meantime. Seems long odds she’d make the delivery if she decided to poison a customer, but people can be stupid.”

Eve waited for the special team, tolerated the scan to make certain she hadn’t contracted some toxicity from the body—wanted to balk when the lead tech insisted on drawing some blood to test on the spot. But figured not only better safe than sorry, but quicker to deal with it and move on.

Cleared, she and Peabody headed upstairs to talk to the spouse.

“Lydia Merchant, age twenty-seven,” Peabody began on the walk upstairs. “Employed by GP&P for six years. Clean employment record, clear on criminal.”

“We talk to her anyway.”

Rufty’s clothes had already been bagged and sealed. In gray sweatpants and a navy sweatshirt with TAG in gold across the chest, he sat, shocked and grieving, on a curvy love seat in a sitting area of a bedroom done in rusty reds and old gold.

He had a neat brown goatee streaked with blond to match a shaggy mop of hair. A tall, gangly man, he had a long, thin face, dark, currently watery brown eyes.

He wore, as the victim did, a white gold band on the third finger of his left hand. And his hands stayed clutched together as if they alone kept him from shattering into pieces.

Eve signaled to the uniform who sat with him.

“Start the canvass with your partner. Anyone who saw anything, I hear about it. If you touched the body or anything in or around the crime scene, the hazmat unit needs to clear you.”

“Yes, sir.” He glanced back at Rufty. “He wants to call their kids, but I’ve held him off. He for sure touched the body, sir.”

“We’ll get to that. Take the bagged clothes down with you, give them to hazmat. Have one of them come up to scan and clear him.”

She moved to Rufty, sat on the deep red chair facing him. “Dr. Rufty, I’m Lieutenant Dallas. This is Detective Peabody. We’re very sorry for your loss.”

“I—I need to talk to the kids. Our children. I need—”

“We’ll let you do that very soon. I know this is a difficult time for you, but we need to ask you some questions.”

“I—I came home. I called out: ‘Jesus, Kent, what a day. Let’s have a really big drink.’” He covered his long, thin face with his long, thin hands. “And I walked back to the kitchen, and—Kent. Kent. He was on the floor. He was . . . I tried to . . . I couldn’t. He was . . .”

Peabody leaned over, took his hand in hers. “We’re very sorry, Dr. Rufty. There was nothing you could do.”

“But . . .” He turned to her, and the look, Eve thought, said: Help me. Explain. Make it stop.

“I don’t understand. He’s so healthy. He’s always nagging me to exercise more, eat better. He’s so fit and strong. I don’t understand. He was going for a run this morning. He always goes for a run on his day off, and on his lunch hour if he can squeeze it in during office hours. He was going to finish the crossword and go for a run.”

“Dr. Rufty.” Eve waited until those shattered brown eyes focused on her. “Were you expecting a package today? A delivery?”

“I—I don’t know. I can’t think of anything.”

“Have you ever ordered from an outlet called All That Glitters?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You get deliveries from Global Post and Packages?”

“Yes. Yes, Lydia delivers. But I . . .” He pressed a hand to his temple. “I don’t think we ordered anything. I don’t remember.”

“That’s all right. Look at me, Dr. Rufty. Do you know of anyone who’d wish to harm your husband?”

“What?” He jerked. Fresh shock. “Hurt Kent? No, no. Everyone loved Kent. Everyone. I don’t understand.”

Eve countered the spikes in his voice with absolute calm. “Someone from his office, from his practice, from the neighborhood.”

“No, no. Kent has such a lovely practice. All those babies and little kids. It’s all so happy there. He worked so hard for his children, his patients. You can ask,” he said, his voice spiking again. “You can ask all of them, all of the people who work there. They love Kent!”

“All right. You’ve been married a long time. Were there any problems?”

“No. No. We love each other. We have our children. We have grandchildren. I need to call our children.”

When he started to weep, Peabody moved over to sit next to him. “I know this is hard. Did Kent mention anyone who worried him? Did he say anything about someone or an incident that upset him?”

“No. Nothing I remember. No. I don’t understand. What happened? What happened? Did someone hurt Kent?”

“Dr. Rufty.” With no choice, Eve gave it straight. “We believe Dr. Abner received a package this morning, and that package contained a toxin, which caused his death.”

Tears fell still, but Rufty’s body straightened. “What? What? Are you saying someone killed Kent? Someone sent something into the house, into our home that killed him?”

Eve rose at the knock on the door, let in the white-suited sweeper. “We need to take precautions. We need to ask you to submit to a scan, to allow us to test your blood, as you touched Dr. Abner. It’s possible the package he opened this morning contained a toxic substance.”

“It’s not possible.” He dismissed it outright, and with the ring of certainty. “No one would do that. No one who knew Kent would do that.”

“We need to take precautions.” Eve sat again, looked directly into

Rufty's eyes. "We're going to do everything we can to find out what happened to your husband."

"You loved him," Peabody said gently. "You want to do whatever needs to be done to find out what happened."

"Yes. Do whatever you have to do. Then please, God, please, let me call our children. I need to talk to our children."

Eve waited while Rufty was scanned, tested, cleared. Whatever had killed Kent Abner had dissipated before anyone else had come in contact with the body.

"You can contact your children," Eve told Rufty. "Is there somewhere you can go, stay for a few days? It would be best if you didn't stay here."

"I can stay with our daughter. She's closer. Our son lives in Connecticut, but Tori and her family live just a few blocks away. I can stay with Tori."

"We'll arrange to take you there, as soon as you're ready."

Rufty closed his eyes. When he opened them, the tears had burned away to reveal the steel. "I need to know what happened to my husband. To the father of my children. To the man I loved for forty years. If someone did this, someone hurt him, I need to know who. I need to know why."

"It's our job to get those answers for you, Dr. Rufty. If you think of anything," Eve added, "anything at all, you can contact me."

"He was such a good man. I need you to understand that. Such a good man. A loving man. He never hurt anyone in his life. Everyone loved Kent. They loved him."

Someone didn't, Eve thought.

"I believe him," Peabody said as they finally left the crime scene. "That guy was cut off at the knees, and he honestly didn't know anything or anyone that put Abner in the crosshairs."

“Agreed, but a spouse doesn’t always know everything. We need to dig into Abner, his work, his habits, his hobbies. Any extramarital relationships.”

As she nodded, Peabody glanced back at the pretty brownstone with tulips blooming in its little front garden. “It’d be worse if, you know, it was just bad luck of the draw. If this was random.”

“A hell of a lot worse. The package was addressed specifically so we’ll look specifically. Let’s talk to the delivery person asap.”

Peabody programmed the address on the in-dash. “You feel okay, right?”

“I’m fine. Didn’t the vampires draw my blood and clear me?”

“Yeah, but I’ll feel better when they ID the toxin.” Peabody frowned out the window of the car. “He laid there for hours. The good of that is whatever it was dissipated, so we’re all not dead. The bad is he laid there for hours.”

“Yeah, and think about that. Have the delivery in the morning, knowing nobody’s going to go in there until late afternoon. It makes it look like a specific kill. Just Abner.”

As she pushed through traffic, Eve took a contact from Officer Shelby on her wrist unit. “What’ve you got, Shelby?”

“They tracked the package to a drop-off kiosk on West Houston, sir. It was logged in through the after-hours depository—that’s self-serve—at twenty-two hundred hours.”

“Security cam?”

“Yes, sir. And the cam had a glitch at twenty-one-fifty-eight until twenty-three-oh-two.”

“An idiot would call that a coincidence.”

“Yes, sir. Officer Carmichael, who is not an idiot, has requested EDD examine the security camera and feed at this depository. However, if the killer proves to be an idiot, she used her credit account, via her

'link, to pay for the overnight shipping. Said payment was charged to the account of a Brendina A. Coffman, age eighty-one, apartment 1A, 38 Bleecker Street.”

“We’ll check her out now. Good work, Shelby.”

Peabody didn’t have time to grab the chicken stick before Eve wheeled sharp around a corner to change direction.

“Get a warrant,” Eve ordered Peabody. “We need to look at Coffman’s credit history.”

“Brendina Coffman.” Peabody read off her PPC as Eve fought her way to Bleecker. “Married to Roscoe Coffman for fifty-eight years, lived at the current address for thirty-one years. A retired bookkeeper who worked for Loames and Gardner for—wow—fifty-nine years. No criminal in the last half century or so, but a couple of dings in her twenties. Disorderly conduct and simple assault. They have three offspring—male, female, male, ages fifty-six, fifty-three, and forty-eight. Six grandchildren from ages twenty-one to ten.”

“Start running the rest of them,” Eve ordered. “It’s not going to be an idiot,” she muttered. “We don’t have that kind of luck. But run them.”

“Okay, well, the oldest offspring is Rabbi Miles Coffman of Shalom Temple, married to Rebekka Greene Coffman for twenty-one years—and she teaches at the Hebrew school attached to the temple. They have three of the kids—twenty, eighteen, and sixteen, female, male, and male, respectively—nothing flagged on the kids, no criminal on the parents.”

With no available parking in sight, Eve double-parked, causing much annoyance on Bleecker. Ignoring it, she flipped up her On Duty light.

“Keep going,” Eve said as she got out, studied the sturdy old residential building. A triple-decker of faded brick, no graffiti, clean windows, some of them open to the cool spring evening.

“Marion Coffman Black, married to Francis Xavier Black, twenty-three years—no, twenty-four as of today; happy anniversary—is cur-

rently employed, as she has been for twenty years, as bookkeeper in the same firm as her mother was. Couple dings in her twenties for illegal protests, nothing since. Son, twenty-one, a student at Notre Dame, daughter, age nineteen, also at Notre Dame.”

“Hold that thought,” Eve advised as they approached the gray door of the entrance to 1A.

Decent security, she noted, but nothing fancy. She pressed the buzzer.

The woman who answered looked pretty good for eighty-one. She had a bubble of ink-black hair Eve figured wouldn’t move in a hurricane, lips freshly dyed stop-sign red, rosy cheeks, and eyes heavily shadowed and lashed.

She wore a deep blue cocktail dress with a high neck, long sleeves, and gave Eve and Peabody a frowning once-over from nut-brown eyes.

“We’re not buying.”

“Not selling,” Eve said, and held up her badge.

Brendina’s face went sheet white under the rosy. “Joshua!”

“No, ma’am.” Peabody spoke quickly. “It’s not about your son. Mrs. Coffman’s son Joshua’s on the job,” Peabody told Eve. “It’s not about Sergeant Coffman, ma’am.”

“Okay. Okay. What is it then?”

“If we could come in for a moment,” Eve began.

“We’re leaving—if Roscoe ever finishes primping.”

“We’ll try not to take much of your time.”

With a nod, Brendina stepped back to let them straight into a tidy living area. So tidy, Eve thought, dust motes must run in fear. The furniture was old, like owned since their marriage began, and polished to within an inch of its life. A half dozen fancy pillows smothered the sofa.

A small piano against one wall with family photos crowded over it.

The air smelled of lemon.

“Is that your needlepoint, ma’am?” A craftsman to the bone, Peabody admired the pillows. “It’s beautiful work.”

“My daughter-in-law got me into it, and now I can’t stop. What is this about?”

“Mrs. Coffman, did you overnight a package to a Kent Abner, for delivery this morning?”

“Why would I? I don’t know any Kent Abner.”

“Your credit account was charged for the shipment.”

“I don’t see how when I didn’t send it.”

“Maybe you’d like to check on that, while we’re here.”

“Fine, fine. Roscoe, we’re going to be late again. Been waiting for that man for decades. He never can get anywhere on time. It’s our daughter’s twenty-fourth wedding anniversary,” she said as she walked to a—very tidy—little desk and sat down at the mini-comp on it. “Married a Catholic. I never figured it to last, but Frank’s a good man, good father, and he’s given her a happy life. So we’re— Well, son of a bitch!”

And there you have it, Eve thought as Brendina turned.

“I’ve been charged for that shipment. That’s a mistake—it says my account was charged at ten last night. I was sitting in bed watching *Junkpile* on-screen at ten—or trying, as Roscoe snores like a freight train. I keep good records, so I know what I spend and how I spend it. I was a bookkeeper for more years than either of you have been alive!”

“We don’t doubt any of that, Mrs. Coffman.”

But Brendina’s ire hadn’t yet peaked.

“Well, GP&P is going to hear from me, you better believe.” She fisted her hands on her hips, her eyes shooting daggers at Eve as if she’d been responsible. “And they’d better make this good. I’d like to know how somebody got my information, if that’s what happened, or if some careless finger at GP&P hit the wrong key.”

“We believe it’s the former, ma’am.”

“I’ll be changing my codes asap, you can be sure of that! And I’m going to have my boy look into this. He’s a police officer.”

“Yes, ma’am. You can have your son contact me, Lieutenant Dallas at Cop Central. In the meantime, can you tell me who would have access to your account?”

Brendina stabbed a finger in the air, then tapped it between her breasts. “Me, that’s who. And Roscoe, but he has his own, and only has my codes in case something was to happen. Same as I have his. Roscoe!”

“Stop yelling, stop yelling. Heavens to Murgatroyd, Brendi, I’m coming, aren’t I?”

When he came out, *dapper* was the word that sprang to Eve’s mind. He wore a pale blue suit chalked with white stripes, a white shirt, and a bright red bow tie with a matching pocket square. His hair, candlestick silver, was slicked back and shined like moonlight on water. His silver moustache was perfectly trimmed and groomed.

His eyes matched his suit.

“You didn’t say we had company.” He beamed at them.

“Not company, cops.”

“Friends of Joshua’s?”

“No, sir,” Eve said. “We’re here about a package that was delivered this morning. The shipment was charged to your wife’s account.”

“What did you send, Brendi?”

“Nothing! Somebody got into my account.”

He looked at her with affection, and mild surprise. “How’d they do that?”

“I don’t know, do I?”

“Ms. Coffman, do you have your ’link?”

“Of course I have my ’link. I was just changing purses when you buzzed.”

She marched into what Eve assumed was the bedroom, marched

back out with a gargantuan shoulder bag in vivid purple and an over-size evening purse in glittery red—to match Roscoe’s tie, Eve assumed.

“I was just taking out what I need for tonight,” she said, and dug in.

Her annoyed expression changed to alarm. Now she marched to the coffee table, dumped the contents of the shoulder bag.

Eve decided if the woman ever faced an apocalypse with that bag in tow, she’d survive just fine.

“It’s gone! Oh my God, my ’link’s not here.”

“Where is it, Brendi?”

“For God’s sake, Roscoe!”

“Don’t worry now. I’ll help you look for it.”

Brendina’s expression softened. “No, honey, it’s gone. Somebody must’ve taken it out of my bag.”

“When’s the last time you used it?” Eve asked.

“Just yesterday—we were all out shopping. My girls and I—my daughters-in-law, my daughter. Marion wanted new shoes for tonight, and she needed to pick up the wrist unit she got for Frank—she had it engraved. And— God, we were all over. Had a late lunch. I used it to call my sister, to tell her we were changing our lunch reservation to two-thirty because everything was taking so long. She was meeting us, and she gets cranky if she has to wait.”

“Where did you use it?”

“Ah . . .” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “On Chambers and Broadway—I’m nearly certain. We’d only just left the jewelry store, and it’s right there.”

“As far as you remember you didn’t use your ’link since that point?”

“No. I know I didn’t. We went shopping some more, met my sister for lunch. We had a long lunch, and Marion insisted Rachel—my sister—and I take a car home. She called for one and paid for it—insisted. I came home, took a nap. Long day. Roscoe and I had dinner,

watched some screen. I didn't go out today. I needed to clean the house, then get ready for tonight.

"I only keep one account on my 'link: my shopping and household account. But—"

"It's all right, Brendi." Roscoe put an arm around her. "I'll help you. And it's time you had a new 'link."

Sighing, she leaned into him. "Let me use yours, Roscoe, so I can deal with all this. We really are going to be late."

"Peabody, why don't you leave the Coffmans our cards? You can have your son contact us."

"Yes, fine, thank you. I really need to deal with this. You can talk to Joshua. He's a police officer."