

## **The Dance Had Only Just Begun**

Bethany Moxhay ©

Rain whispered against the stained-glass windows of Greystone Manor as midnight neared. Inside, masked guests swirled across the ballroom like ghosts in velvet and lace. Chandeliers flickered overhead. Laughter danced between sips of champagne. It was a perfect night for a celebration—or a murder.

Arthur Lemaire, the media tycoon, had spared no expense. His masquerade ball was infamous—an annual gathering of society’s elite and the morally questionable. This year, however, the celebration took a chilling turn.

At precisely midnight, the music halted. A scream rose above the silence.

Arthur Lemaire lay sprawled on the floor of the study, his silver mask askew, eyes staring blankly at the coffered ceiling. A crystal paperweight had caved in his skull.

Detective Julien Ward arrived fifteen minutes later, summoned from the city. He entered with a trench coat dampened by rain, removing his hat with an expression of grim focus. He didn’t flinch at the sight of the corpse.

Julien was known for his calm. Almost too calm, some whispered.

Arthur’s wife, Isabella Lemaire, wept delicately on a divan, her red silk gown untouched by the horror around her. Her mask dangled from one hand like an afterthought.

“I just found him like this,” she said through muffled sobs.

Ward nodded, gently touching her shoulder. “I’ll find out who did this. I promise.”

Five guests had been near the study when the murder occurred, all with plausible motives.

Suspect 1: Claudia Mayfield, Arthur’s business partner. Ruthless, brilliant, and known for feuding with him over control of the company.

Suspect 2: Elias Voss, an artist whose controversial paintings Arthur had purchased—then sold for millions without giving him a cut.

Suspect 3: Margaret Chen, a former employee. She sued Arthur for harassment last year. Settled out of court. Bitter ever since.

Suspect 4: Vincent Harrow, a gambler deep in debt. Arthur held the loan note.

Suspect 5: Leo Duvall, Arthur's estranged cousin. Arthur had recently cut him out of the will.

Each had motive. Each had opportunity.

Julien began questioning.

Claudia claimed she was in the conservatory. "With Leo. He's my alibi."

Leo confirmed it—but stumbled when asked about the exact time. Julien made a note.

Elias had been in the gallery upstairs. "Painting a live sketch of the ballroom. Alone," he said. Convenient. Too convenient.

Margaret had been by the fireplace in the parlour. "I was watching Arthur all night. I had nothing to gain from this."

Interesting. Julien remembered her exact words.

Vincent was drunk, sweaty, and paranoid. "I was in the wine cellar! Ask the butler!" The butler claimed Vincent had stumbled in just after the murder, not before.

The clues were scattered like the glittering confetti still stuck to the carpet.

The paperweight was from Arthur's desk.

A red thread had been found clutched in Arthur's fist.

A single muddy footprint by the French doors led out to the gardens.

Someone had tampered with the security camera in the hallway just before midnight.

Julien worked quickly, cross-referencing timelines, checking alibis, watching Isabella carefully between questions. She seemed to mourn, yet never once asked to see her husband's body. Curious.

At 2:00 a.m., the security footage from earlier in the evening was finally recovered. It showed Vincent and Margaret arguing in the garden. She slapped him. He shoved her. Motive for both? Possibly. But that also placed them away from the murder scene.

Julien smiled. He called everyone into the ballroom.

"I believe I know who the killer is," he said. Gasps rose.

Everyone turned to Leo, whose alibi with Claudia was the weakest. Julien laid out the motive: revenge over the will, the opportunity, the red thread—matching the embroidery of Leo's costume.

"I didn't do it!" Leo cried. "You're framing me!"

Julien approached him. "Then explain this." He held up the red thread.

Claudia stepped forward. "Wait," she said slowly. "That's from my gown. Not Leo's."

Julien paused. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes," Claudia said. "I had it custom-made."

The room fell silent.

Leo smiled grimly. "Check your facts, Detective."

Julien sighed. "Very well." He turned to Isabella. "Do you know what else the cameras showed?"

Her eyes flicked to him—briefly.

“They caught someone tampering with them an hour before midnight. A woman in a red gown.”

Julien walked closer. “And this footprint?” He held up a photo. “Size six. Muddy heel. From the garden. You claimed you never left the ballroom.”

“I... I was getting air,” Isabella said, voice trembling.

“And then there’s the paperweight,” Julien added. “Cleaned of prints—except one. Mine. From when I picked it up.”

Silence. Breath held. Then Julien said, calmly:

“I killed Arthur Lemaire.”

Gasps turned to stunned silence.

Isabella fainted—beautifully, theatrically.

Julien caught her gently. “She’s not to blame alone,” he said. “We did it together.”

One Week Earlier..

Arthur had grown suspicious of Isabella’s late-night walks. He hired a private investigator. He found out about the affair. About Julien.

Julien found out too—first.

“We have no choice,” he told Isabella. “It’s him or us.”

The masquerade provided the perfect cover. A house full of masks, lies, and noise. Julien arrived late, as planned. Isabella lured Arthur to the study with a letter faked in Claudia’s handwriting. While he read it, she turned her back. Julien slipped in through the garden door and delivered the blow. Clean, quick. She screamed at the right moment. The guests played their parts.

He laid the trail of clues carefully. A red thread. A muddy footprint. A tampered camera. Suspicion bouncing between five guilty-looking guests.

The perfect crime.

Julien turned himself in before the guests. “Love makes you do strange things,” he said.

But he knew the truth. He had no intention of spending his life behind bars.

Because as the officers led him away, he glanced back at Isabella.

She nodded, ever so slightly.

In her clutch? The antique key to the evidence locker—and his freedom.

But what Julien didn't know... was that Isabella had slipped a second letter into Arthur's pocket before the murder. A confession. A love letter. Not addressed to Julien.

But to Claudia.

She hadn't loved Julien at all.

Just needed a man with a badge—and an ego—to clean up the mess.

And now, both her problems were solved.

The tycoon was dead.

And the detective would rot in his place.

She smiled behind her mourning veil.

The masquerade was over.

But the dance had only just begun..