

PROLOGUE

9:25 a.m.

The top of the Grand Alpine gondola

Swiss Alps, 1950

The gondola rises silently through the bank of clouds into the frozen world at the top of the mountain. It is a wonder of modern engineering, gliding between stanchions drilled into ancient rock, the red lacquer of its body gaudy against the bleak palette of white and gray.

There's someone in the gondola. One of the hotel guests, most likely, eager to make the first tracks of the day. Fresh snow fell last night, leaving a pristine covering of powder over the mountain and softening the glacier that sweeps down one side. In the early morning light, it gives off a nacreous glow. Faint bluish indentations on the surface whisper of hidden, lethal chasms beneath.

In the tiny cabin beside the lift the attendant stamps his feet in his boots, blows on his hands to keep warm. He's looking forward to interacting with another human being, however briefly. It's a lonely existence up here with only the eagles for company, the only sounds the otherworldly groaning and cracking of the glacial ice as it continues its endless creep toward the town. He knows the fears of his ancestors, how they believed in malign mountain spirits and giants living among these peaks, why they shunned them as a place of dark magic. Sometimes—when the *seracs* fall with crashes that seem to echo infinitely among the surrounding rock, or when a winter storm crackles with purple lightning, or when the low growl of an avalanche

sounds at a distance—he's not completely sure he doesn't believe in such things himself.

The shadowy figure in the gondola sits with their head thrown back against the rear window; perhaps in awestruck appreciation of the view.

The mechanism grinds to a halt. The doors begin to open. The seated figure does not move.

The attendant peers through the cabin window. Are they asleep? Are they not intending to get out? Perhaps they've come up here for the sights and will simply stay put and travel back the way they've come. More snow is on the way, after all: a great deal of it.

And yet . . . there's something odd. A peculiar stillness about the scene. The attendant feels that he is just as alone as he was before the gondola and its occupant emerged through the clouds.

Should he go and see?

He doesn't want to see.

He's struck by the sudden impulse (odd; he's a good Swiss Protestant) to cross himself.

Just as he steps out of his cabin into the freezing air the gondola gives the mechanical shudder that locks it into the final position. This is when the seated figure falls, stiff and inert as a Dresden doll knocked from a mantelpiece, keeling face-first onto the metal floor of the cabin.

For a moment the attendant watches in horror. Then he springs into action. But he knows, even as he hastens along the ice-slick path, that it is no use. The gondola's passenger is already dead.

PART ONE

Two days earlier

DIANA GLASS

The Help

“Oh, look!” Mrs. Bantry says. “How charming! I can’t remember the last time I saw skaters at home. Can you, Jane?”

The Grand Alpine Express is skirting a frozen lake. The skaters are bright points of color and movement against the paleness of the scene as they flit to and fro.

“No, my dear,” says Miss Marple. “Yet for those of us who had a Victorian childhood it was such a mainstay of the winter.”

“Diana,” Mrs. Bantry turns to me. “Did you check the timetable, for the trains? If we should want to come back down the mountain for anything?”

“Yes, Mrs. Bantry,” I tell her. “The last one down’s at ten p.m., the last one up half an hour later. And in the morning the first one down is at eight, the first up at eight-thirty.”

“I wonder why they run so late?” Mrs. Bantry says.

“I suppose so that guests can visit the town for dinner,” I say. “And there’s a casino—one of the only legal ones in Switzerland.”

“Well, we shan’t need that, shall we Jane?” Mrs. Bantry says. “But perhaps a nice supper . . .”

“I do enjoy a game of bridge,” Miss Marple says, thoughtfully. “But I would never play cards for money. It has never seemed to me something a real lady should do. Perhaps I am very old-fashioned.”

Mrs. Bantry's friend is the perfect image of a little old lady—almost too perfect, in fact—with a pile of fleecy wool in her lap and her knitting needles clicking together almost in time with the clackety-clack of the cog railway system. Nothing puts her off her rhythm: not the juddering of the carriage or the jostling of the man's shoulder beside her, nor the sudden change in gradient as the train begins its climb up the mountain.

"The hotel does have its own games room," I say. "Just off the library, according to the brochure."

"Diana," Mrs. Bantry tells her elderly friend, "is frightfully efficient and really makes life so much easier, especially now that I don't seem to be able to hold a fact in my head for longer than a couple of minutes."

I like Mrs. Bantry, even if she does sometimes talk about me as though I'm not there. Now she turns to me: "How many languages is it that you speak, Diana?"

"Three," I say.

"You met one another on a train, I think?" Miss Marple asks.

"Yes," I explain. "I was coming down from London to visit my aunt, in Much Benham. Mrs. Bantry and I began talking and she mentioned she needed someone to help get her affairs in order after—" I pause, not quite sure how to go on.

"After Arthur's death," Mrs. Bantry supplies matter-of-factly.

"Yes," I say, gratefully. "And to help with booking some travel. I was ready to drop my secretarial work at the War Office down to a day a week, so we made a plan there and then."

Mrs. Bantry smiles approvingly. "You have been such a comfort to a lonely old woman these past few months, my dear. Of course, I have my four and they have made sure to visit their old mama, but they're all so busy with their own lives!" She sighs, then seems to rally as she takes in the view. "And it was you who suggested this place, wasn't it, Diana? Or . . ." she frowns, "or did I read about it in the paper? See! I'm becoming so forgetful."

"I think you received a brochure, Mrs. Bantry," I say.

"Yes, I remember it! A glorious full-page color thing. One wonders if they specially target widows looking to fritter away their husbands' estates. And they always make things seem rather better than they really are. Though this may be the exception. Just look at it!" She sweeps a hand at the view through the train windows.

The carpet of fallen snow seems to glow as though lit from within. A tiny, downy black squirrel springs from one laden fir branch to the next, showering snow. And as we round the next bend, I catch a shiver of movement among the dark sentinel firs and three chamois, shaggy in their brown winter coats, spring gracefully away from the red metal monster that has just disturbed their peace.

The little train is really grinding its way up the mountainside now. You can feel the weight of it being tugged effortfully up the slope as the cogs clunk into place with the teeth on the track. There are exclamations as several traveling cases and a couple of bags begin a slow slide down the aisle.

Through the trees on the far side of the train one has glimpses of St. Celeste down below: a toy town now, any signs of life lost to view. We pass through a brief band of cloud and everything disappears for a few moments—then we are above them and I am reminded of the few times I have been in an airplane: that strange sense of disconnection from the world below. A Frenchman points out an eagle soaring in graceful arcs some way beneath us.

Inside the train there's a press of bodies, our fellow hotel guests, a moist fug of breath. Static prickles as fur-clad shoulders rub together. There was a slightly unseemly rush when we boarded for the windows on the side with the better views of the peaks. The British in our group were left huffing crossly about continental sharp elbows.

I look about at our fellow travelers—our fellow guests. The Americans appear slightly healthier and more prosperous than the rest—the lack of rationing. The French have the best furs, the Italians

the most elegant luggage. The English, unfortunately, seem rather gray and dull. There are even Germans. Every time they speak the old British army type across the aisle visibly bristles. There are also some five or six groups of nuns, differentiated by slight differences in their robes: navy, black, pale blue.

I look back at the two elderly women and experience a small shock as I realize that Miss Marple is watching me with those china-blue eyes, her head tilted slightly to one side. I smile, politely, wait for her to glance away. She doesn't, apparently entirely unembarrassed to have been caught out in her curiosity.

I can't help wondering what she sees. Is she looking at me with a kind of fellow feeling? Another spare woman. The four or so decades that separate our ages don't signify. We are just as useful (or useless) to society. Neither of us is *productive*—of children or anything else. We are the companions. The left-behind women. Mrs. Bantry, as a married woman—albeit recently widowed—is of a different register. She carries with her an authority that we will never achieve. I like helping Mrs. Bantry, though. It gives me a sense of purpose and also camaraderie—a definite improvement on some of the duller work in the War Office.

"That's a beautiful necklace, dear."

I take a moment to realize that Miss Marple is speaking to me, looking over her knitting needles.

"Thank you."

"May I . . . ?"

"Oh, of course." I lift it out of the neck of my shirt to show her the ring on its chain.

"Silver," she says, almost like a jeweler appraising it, "two hearts and seven garnets. How charming."

"Thank you." She lets go and I sit back, rather relieved when Mrs. Bantry turns to Miss Marple and says, "What would you like to do while we're here, Jane?"

"I think I shall mainly enjoy sitting inside and looking out at the mountains," Miss Marple says. "I feel their freezing majesty can be best appreciated from a position of warmth and comfort. Also, there is my rheumatism. I've brought my bird-watching binoculars, too."

"But Jane," Mrs. Bantry says, "it's wintertime! Surely there won't be any birds worth watching."

"Oh," says Miss Marple, widening her faded blue eyes just a little, "but do you know, I'm sure that I will find there is enough to look at. There usually is. Certainly, that is the case in St. Mary Mead."

"Jane," Mrs. Bantry says, indulgently, "somehow you manage to look the very picture of innocence saying that. And yet I'm sure you are being rather devious."

Miss Marple pats the pile of fleecy wool in her lap as though it were a small patient dog. "But not at all, Dolly. Not at all."

"What is that you're making, dear?"

"This? Oh, it's an Alpine sweater for dear Raymond. I think it will suit him so well, if he can be persuaded to wear it: he does like to dress in such a *modern* way. Do you know, I think this will be one of the first times in recent years when I have been on a little holiday without Raymond's patronage. He is so generous. But at the same time, one can feel somewhat . . . beholden. Oh, perhaps that isn't the right word. But he does like to express—opinions on where I travel, that sort of thing." And then, hurriedly, "Only, you know, because he is so protective."

"Well, I forbid you to feel beholden to me," Mrs. Bantry says. "We have dear old Gossington Hall to thank, really—may its new owners treat it well."

The train lets out a long, mournful howl as it enters the mountain tunnel, the staccato of the cog mechanism sounding now like a gigantic sewing machine, echoing off the rock. I read that they had to bore the track into the rock here because the mountain is completely sheer outside.

The train feels warmer, even a little stifling, as the outside world recedes. And suddenly the window has become a black mirror. My face is reflected back at me: paler, stranger, hollows where the eyes should be. A death's head. I turn away.

And then we are out of the tunnel again. My ears pop from the altitude. The world below us is completely lost to view beneath a swirling layer of cloud. The snowpack is visibly thicker up here, the branches of the trees, too, laden with snow unlike the ones below. We have our first sighting of the hotel between them: like glimpses snatched through a torn white curtain.

Waiting for us—which only adds to the sense of otherworldliness—are several horse-drawn sleighs, the horses tossing their heads with a cascade of sleigh bells, and huffing white steaming breaths into the frigid air. Each one is helmed by a driver in red and gold livery, gold-braided pillboxes atop their heads.

“Jane,” Mrs. Bantry cries, in delight. “Aren’t you glad we’ve come?”

“Yes,” Miss Marple says, “but I’d *almost* rather they let us walk. It’s not such a great distance. Horses, you know. I do wonder if we put too much trust in such giant, unruly beasts . . .”

But she is ushered firmly into the back seat of the sleigh by another liveried member of staff with a red, frost-nipped nose. “We have had new snow up here, Madame. . . . It is very thick, difficult for walking. And be especially careful after dark too . . . it turns so quickly to ice.”

We are whisked along an avenue of firs, the snow whispering beneath the runners of the sleigh, faces tight with cold in the freezing air. Then the trees recede and the Grand Alpine stands majestic in front of us, blazing out in all its glory, emanating strains of music and the voices of unseen guests. I take in the fairy-tale gothic towers at either end of the building, the painted red shutters, the hotel’s name picked out in ornate gold letters that stand on proud stilts above the central part of the leaded roof. The light pours rose gold from every window:

a warm and welcoming contrast from the freezing gray wilderness without. Two liveried footmen stand either side of a revolving door, ready with gold luggage carts.

A bustling terrace is just visible around the corner, facing the majesty of the peaks above. I made sure to read the brochure from cover to cover so I would have a working knowledge of the place from the outset. There is the famous red gondola, tracking its way up the mountain, also a couple of chair and button lifts; the very latest technology and a sharp contrast to the romantic timelessness of the sleighs. The serpentine groove twisting down the mountainside must be the infamous Verglas toboggan run. Scattered across the broad white slopes are tiny, colored dots—the skiers—like hundreds-and-thousands shaken onto the cream top of a trifle.

As they step down from the sleighs each guest is handed a small cup of hot chocolate by a red-and-gold-uniformed member of staff. The chocolate is dark and glossy, so thick it hardly moves when you tilt the cup, and delicately spiced with cinnamon. I can't remember ever having tasted anything as rich as this: certainly not since the war.

"*Oh*," Mrs. Bantry says, in an awed voice, after taking a sip. "It makes you question whether the sad affair we have in England really *is* chocolate. No wonder it was booked up every weekend besides this one!" She pulls a face. "Though I'm not sure Arthur would approve of all this. He was very upset with the Swiss for their neutrality. And then . . . well, he really didn't like spending money. I'm sure he would see this all as rather profligate. But I live in such a small way now that he's gone. I'm not extravagant in anything else. And with his death . . . it was a reminder of how very fleeting our time is. Of all the things one hasn't done, you know—"

She halts at the sound of a far-off mechanical howl. I turn and can just make out the red gleam of the distant train, gathering pace as it enters the trees, then disappearing out of sight as it begins its journey back down the mountain.

Mrs. Bantry says, "It does make one feel rather—odd. To know

that now the train has gone we're rather marooned up here. I am glad to be here with you, Jane. Your company is always a comfort. And you, Diana, you are so very *capable*." Then she frowns. "Listen to me! How melodramatic I sound. But once one has had the experience of waking up to a body in one's own library, one never really loses the sense that just about anything might happen."

CATHERINE NARRACOTT

The Wife

Through a gap in the curtains of our room I can see a row of small peaks—like the frill of white lace on a collar I once embroidered for myself in needlework class at Cheltenham Ladies’—and a little of the glacier, which I am surprised to learn is not blue and clear but mainly covered in snow and a rather off-putting dirty white at the bottom. Higher up it curves up around the mountainside and is lost to sight.

A charming view, I will write in my letter to Mummy. *And a beautiful room*—if a little masculine—its dark wood paneling and coffered ceiling mercifully softened by patterned rugs on the floor and richly upholstered armchairs.

My husband sighs. “It’s no good,” he says. He rolls away from me and lies back against the pillows. He is cross; I can feel the crossness coming off him like heat. I don’t say anything, I know it won’t do any good. And all the while I can’t help feeling a little relief that it is over for the time being.

“It doesn’t help,” he says, “that you society girls aren’t taught anything about how to please a man,” he says. “You think it’s enough to lie there like a plank of wood staring at the view.”

It’s odd: really my whole education has been about how to please a man. But of course, I don’t say any of this. *Poise, grace, and a smiling face*. I do not think I had realized it would be possible to be so lonely

when married to someone else. "Love will grow over the years," Mummy said.

"Shall I make you a drink, darling?" I ask, as he begins to light a cigarette. There is a cocktail table in the corner of the room beside a sweet little chaise. A good society hostess knows how to observe others, to learn to anticipate their needs. My husband seems a man who needs a drink.

He runs a hand through his red-gold hair—his crowning glory. It is growing a little thin but I think only he and I know, because it is only noticeable from very particular angles. "Fine. Yes, please. A gimlet."

As I cross the room I feel watched by the portraits on the walls—oils of various serious-looking women and men in traditional Alpine dress: full skirts and brown woolen trousers, plentiful embroidery, *supremely* unflattering hats. I catch sight of myself in the gilt-framed looking glass above the cocktail cabinet. The surface is a little foxed but what stands out are my dark hair, my dark eyebrows, my pale skin. I have learned to bring out these features with clothes: pastels and grays make my skin look luminous, while I avoid white and strong colors because they wash me out. My wedding dress was a very light pink, which Mummy thought a little non-U, though she also understands the importance of making the best of oneself. I am pretty, I know, but a cold sort of prettiness. Not the kind that excites a man.

My pink lipstick is still perfect, which at one time might have seemed odd to me. I had an idea that when a man made love to you it should be "kissed off." That must have come from the romance books girls passed around at chalet school. But then all my knowledge of the world before marriage came from school. Cheltenham, Switzerland to finish, then coming out as a deb.

I do know how to make a good gimlet at least; or indeed any other cocktail my husband might happen to ask for. I was always a diligent student at school. I was the one who read all of the books, did all of the homework. I've taken the same approach to being a

wife, always, really from the moment I arrived at finishing school. I paid attention; I learned exactly how to set a table, to write an invitation. The preparatory work is all so important. It has brought me a strange kind of satisfaction, being good at it.

But when I get to the cocktail cabinet, I let out a little scream.

Anthony comes out of the bathroom. "What is it?"

"There!" I show him the offending item on the brass tray. There among the other items—the shaker, the bitters, the Rose's lime and the atomizer—is a small jar with a white label and angry red letters reading: RAT POISON. An icon: skull and crossbones. *Danger of death*. A prettily ornate silver spoon is stuck into the white powder inside, as though inviting one to take a scoop.

He stalks across the room to take a look. "Rat poison?" he says, reading the label. "But what on earth . . ."

"I—I just found it here," I say. "Just sitting there with the spoon stuck into it, as though it were another cocktail ingredient. Oh, it's horrible!"

There is a long pause as he stares hard at the thing. "A foolish prank," he says, finally. Confidently, even. My husband is very good at sounding confident; I suppose it is what makes him such a successful politician. But he has been something of a target of "Red" activists, of late, and I know it has rattled him more than he admits.

"A very *macabre* prank!" I say. "And who on earth would do such a thing? We don't know anyone else here. It makes my skin crawl. I think we should tell the hotel, don't you? Move rooms? Because perhaps if someone else has a key for this one . . . the thought, that someone could just come in here whenever they wanted . . . in the middle of the night, say, while we were sleeping, oh it's horrible, just horrible—"

"Stop," he says, cutting me off. "You are being completely hysterical." He doesn't raise his voice. My husband almost never raises his voice; he doesn't need to.

I nod. "Sorry, darling."

"I'll call Reception." He picks up the receiver.

To a stranger he might seem completely unconcerned. My husband is known as a cool head in politics, even when other men are shouting at him across the House. Daddy was not like that at all; he would work himself up into rages about things. But he *is* perturbed. I can see it. He slams down the receiver. "No answer," he tuts. And then, in a hiss: "Bloody backward establishment. Come on, we'll go down."

Just before we leave the room, I see him glance back at the offending jar. Yes: definitely perturbed.

Downstairs in Reception, I feel I am being watched. I glance across and see three unmistakably English women standing there. One of them, the littlest and oldest—a frail-looking creature with fluffy white hair and a coat that can only be described as Late Victorian Provincial—is studying me. I give her my most gracious "old-dear" charming smile (I am a politician's wife, after all) and she smiles back. The elderly women like me: often even more than they do my husband. I remind them of a time when things were done properly, when women behaved themselves, protected their delicate skin from the sun, and their delicate hands with gloves that matched their hats. I am to them the very picture of duty, honor and decorum and that is perhaps an accurate representation of how I have lived most of my adult life. I look like an angel in the house.

"You, my dear," my husband likes to say, "are my secret weapon." I remember how I was filled with pride the first time he said it.

Anthony is asking the man behind Reception about us changing rooms. "Actually," he says, "we'll take the suite; if it's available. Yes, yes, fine if it's a little dearer. Though," he murmurs to me, "really, they should give it to us for no extra cost. Rather too fond of the gold here. That's why they stayed neutral in the war, no matter what they might claim about pacifism. To the highest payer the spoils."

"Darling," I whisper, touching his arm, "I know I am so *very* stupid about such things. I thought . . . well, with our having to let Mrs. Grady go just the other week . . ." Mrs. Grady was our housekeeper, who was very efficient, if a little less refined than the one I grew up with, who Mummy got straight from one of the Royal households. "And . . . what with having to sell the Rolls . . . can we really afford it?"

"Of course we can, *darling*," he mutters, with a smile, though his jaw is tight. I see the quick glance he makes about the room, to check that we have not been overheard—the prospective leader of the Conservatives, and perhaps one day of the country, cannot be seen to have any financial irregularities in the cupboard. Then he lowers his voice. "I expect to be coming into a little money soon enough. An investment—it's about to pay out very handsomely."

It would be the first time any of his investments have come to good. My husband brought a small inheritance to our marriage, and I, a substantial sum. Alas the remaining pot is nothing like what it was. Not that anyone would know it, of course. Whilst my husband is widely recognized as a very brilliant man he isn't all that clever with money. He is very good at spending it, though. Sometimes I have wondered if he is the sort of man Daddy might have called a bounder, for all his Good Works in politics and his war record. Sometimes I have even allowed myself to wonder whether if *I* had been the one to invest it, we might have done better. At school I was told I had a fine head for numbers. And I have been brought up to enjoy and require money. That is how girls like me *are* brought up.

But "Oh," is all I say, "really? Well, that's lovely news."

He chuckles. "It's more than lovely, my sweet. It will change *everything*."

DIANA GLASS

The Help

As I hand over the passports to be checked, I gaze about me at our surroundings: a mix of the grand and the rustic that seems peculiarly Alpine. At the long desk before us three receptionists work busily away, all dressed in the red and gold regalia of the hotel. Patterned Persian rugs reveal glimpses of an intricate parqueted floor, chandeliers coruscate above our heads and wood paneling makes the whole room glow with a rich amber light. Antlers bristle from brackets and pine branches intertwine in picturesque arrangements about sconces. The scent of their resin fills the air, mingling with woodsmoke and the various perfumes worn by the guests. Paintings showing forbidding mountain scenery are hung all about and to the right, huge windows display the real thing: a view of three white peaks that seem to fit the apertures so perfectly they seem hardly real, as though they too have been painted on the glass in *tromp l'oeil*. Staff flit hither and thither in what seem almost choreographed movements, collecting luggage on golden carts, leading guests into elevators or to the bank of phone booths tucked away beyond the Reception desk.

“Look at that funny little dog!” Mrs. Bantry says.

I watch as an older gentleman with something regal about him—perhaps the long, fur-trimmed cape about his shoulders—walks in with a tiny dog in tow, spilling snow onto the richly patterned rugs at the entrance. One of the staff dashes over and begins to clean the

snow from the animal's fur with a brush that looks specially made for the purpose.

"That," murmurs a little man with the authoritative air of a hotel manager, appearing as though from nowhere, "is one of our most distinguished guests. Prince Gustav of Yugoslavia. And Heracles."

It takes me a moment to understand that the latter refers to the dog.

Now the hotel manager begins his introductions. He is a compactly rotund, neat-looking man with a luxuriant moustache and a slightly fastidious manner.

"The whole resort is built upon its tradition first as a site of holy pilgrimage and then as a spa resort," he tells us. "And though we find ourselves situated a little way up the mountain we have a spa par excellence here: all of the latest *thérapies* available." He pronounces "therapies" in the French way. "There is skiing—two marked runs and some excellent *hors piste* on the glacier," he looks at us doubtfully, "and of course never forgetting the Verglas toboggan run. It was the English that brought it here. Late in the last century our founder persuaded some English guests to stay for the winter—*gratis*—to show them the beauty of the mountains at that time. They introduced the toboggan racing as a way to pass the time. Then of course the skiing followed." A tight little cough. "Do any of you *mesdames* . . . ski?" He looks as though he can hardly bring himself to ask such an absurd question. "Or . . ." he says, with the same pained expression, "sled?"

"Oh, I used to go sledding as a girl," says Miss Marple. "Didn't you, Dolly? But I rather think the relatively gentle Downland slopes don't quite compare to the sort of thing you have here, Monsieur."

"Indeed," the manager says, swiftly. "Perhaps you would rather . . . spectate? In two days' time we will have our first race event of the season. You *have* heard of the Cresta Run, in St. Moritz?"

Miss Marple shakes her head. "I am afraid," she says, very apologetically, "that you will think us very stupid. But speaking for myself, I am so very unworldly . . ."

"Well, Madame," says the manager with a rather studied patience, "you will discover that ours, like the Cresta, is made by hand from the snow and ice itself. A very beautiful piece of design. Speeds of forty miles per hour have been achieved on it. It is open to all, *unlike* the Cresta, which is barred to women and . . . to all ages. But I think perhaps—"

"We will spectate," Miss Marple says, firmly, reassuringly. "Won't we, Dolly?"

"Goodness, yes," says Mrs. Bantry. "I have come to look at mountains, to be among mountains, not to hurl myself down them risking life and limb. If man were meant to travel at breakneck velocities down slopes of frozen water, one does rather think the Lord would have made him with skis or a toboggan attached."

The manager gives a tight little smile. Behind it I sense something sorrowful, as though he wishes we were more glamorous, like the couple who have been talking to his colleague at the next desk along.

"Well, we have an excellent library and reading room. And the spa—I think perhaps that will be more to your liking. It is situated just a little above the hotel, only a twenty-minute walk away, so"—he casts another dubious eye over Mrs. Bantry and Miss Marple—"it should be easy for all to access."

I think he continues to talk them through the facilities, but I have stopped listening. I'm watching the couple at the next desk. She wears an elegant interpretation of mountain attire: wool slacks and a powder blue cashmere sweater with a small gray fur tippet around her neck that sets off the immaculate chignon of dark hair pinned up from a long, slender neck. She brushes invisible threads from her shoulders with a manicured hand and the lights catch and glitter on a huge diamond on her ring finger. Everything about her speaks of refinement. It's impossible to imagine her bleeding or sweating like the rest of us. She moves with precise, economical movements, back straight as a ballet dancer's.

He, meanwhile, is patrician of profile and elegant as she, but in an entirely masculine vein: broad-shouldered and long-legged, his hair a reddish gold: handsome as the hero of a wartime poster with a well-molded chin and strong brow. It's not like me to stare at men like some schoolgirl but I find it hard to take my eyes off him.

"Isn't that . . ." Mrs. Bantry is looking at them too. "I'm *sure* it is. Jane, do look! Isn't that man something in politics? Something . . . Narracott." To Miss Marple: "Oh, what was his name . . . Alistair?" Miss Marple looks blank.

"Anthony," I say. "Anthony Narracott: new candidate for leader of the Conservatives. He works in the War Office, so I occasionally see him about the building."

"Yes!" Mrs. Bantry exclaims. "Of course it is." She turns to Miss Marple. "But Jane, I'm embarrassed that neither of us could name him!"

"Well," Miss Marple says. "I'm afraid I'm rather ignorant about that sort of thing. I just like to know that the country is being well taken care of and my taxes well invested. The ins and outs of Westminster are a different matter. If you were to ask me who the new mayor of Much Benham is, then I could tell you everything about him. Sir Hodgson—a fine cricketer and collector of rare orchids, something of a roguish little boy in his youth but very much a reformed character . . . at least one certainly *hopes* so. Goodness me! Here I go, twittering away and you undoubtedly know all this anyway, Dolly, and you, my dear"—this to me—"have I'm sure no interest whatsoever in the subject. Oh dear . . ." Her fingers flutter in the air like startled birds for a second and then settle upon the clasp of her sensible handbag.

She is the very picture of a slightly dithery village spinster, prone to rambling and finding herself in confusing conversational cul-de-sacs. But I remember that assessing look on the train; those soft china-blue eyes suddenly turned as bright and cool as ice.

"Anthony Narracott's rather impressive from what I remember,"

Mrs. Bantry says. "Wartime hero—escaped a prisoner-of-war camp, the story goes. Oh—"

I look up and realize he is approaching our group. He limps slightly, but there is an elegance to the movement, like a panther with a thorn in its paw.

"An old war wound," he says as he draws near, with a rueful smile. "Gives me more trouble in the cold. But luckily it doesn't give me any jip skiing or even climbing. In fact, I think it's positively good for it! May I introduce myself?" He does so, with a great deal of modesty. But surely, I think, he senses that we're all aware who he is. "What an unexpected joy it is to hear other British voices in this out-of-the-way place!" He smiles graciously at us all. "What brings you here?"

I turn to collect the passports from the receptionist, but can still overhear the conversation. He is so interested, so solicitous, asking Miss Marple about the village she hails from. "Near Much Benham, you say? I think I *have* heard of it. I'm almost certain. Well, what a pleasure to meet you all. I am sure we shall all become *great* friends staying here together."

He turns back to his wife, who is looking at a spot beyond us, through us—one of the mountain scenes on the wall, perhaps—as though she is completely unaware of our existence.

Just then another man enters the room. His eyes are fixed on Anthony Narracott. He is as coarse as Narracott is elegant: large and ungainly, a snub nose that looks like a mistake in his wide, pitted face. Every item of clothing he wears seems ill-fitted, either too tight (his trousers) or too loose (his jacket, with the creasing and shapelessness of cheap old wool). His expression is wary. I sense he is enjoying having the opportunity to size up the other man before he has been spotted in return.