



THE MASK

by Harper J. Quinn

May, 2026

PROLOGUE

THE NIGHT OF THE GAME

Thirty years earlier, no one present had ever been able to agree on when that night had truly ended.

Montvale Manor stood isolated, perched atop the cliff.

Seven people arrived over the course of the afternoon.

Victor Delmar owned more land than he had ever walked across. He practiced law out of habit, not necessity. He enjoyed hearing his own voice turn guilty men into innocent ones.

Clara Montvale had become a widow far too young and obscenely wealthy. She wore grief like an expensive accessory. Boredom was the only thing in her that still seemed alive.

Dr. Adrian Vane came from generations of physicians. He had immaculate hands and exhausted eyes. After his third brandy, he always began speaking about death as though it were merely a bad human habit.

Lucas and Nathan DeWitt speculated on anything that produced fear, scarcity, or addiction. They no longer distinguished money from blood. And likely had not for years.

Isabelle Montvale owned the manor and the surrounding land. Her husband had died of a heart attack — officially, at least. Too many people had found it convenient to believe.

Henry Valcor had inherited from his grandfather a small commercial fleet and enough wealth to convince himself almost everything could be bought.

He was the one who had arranged the game.

They arrived one by one. Little luggage. No real greetings.

They knew each other too well for greetings to matter.

In their rooms they found clothes and masks waiting for them.

The rules were simple: seven new names. Seven new roles. No consequences.

Valcor called it “a controlled experience.” No one asked controlled by whom.

The woman arrived later. She was not part of the group. She had never been meant to participate.

She was introduced only as “an external element.”

Isabelle, in agreement with Valcor, merely said: «She’s the child’s mother.»

And the sentence remained suspended in the air, without immediate consequence.

At first, it was only theater. Then, it was not.

The masks stopped separating the game from the people wearing them. The boundary collapsed, vanished altogether.

The woman played no role. She was simply there. At first as a spectator.

As the center of attention. And that was enough.

When she fell from the cliff — somewhere between laughter and drunken voices — no one reacted immediately.

Not out of shock. Out of instinct. Out of the game itself.

The problem was not what had happened.

It was that all of them understood, at the exact same moment, that from then on they would have to call it the same thing.

The version of events came before grief. Silence came before memory. And memory before guilt.

It was decided that it had been nothing more than a tragic accident.

A sentence sufficient to close everything without truly closing anything.

The woman disappeared from the story long before she disappeared from official records.

Victor Delmar learned how to transform facts into defensible narratives.

Adrian Vane learned that a signature could stop suspicion more effectively than truth.

The DeWitts learned that silence always has a price and all of them could afford it.

Clara learned how to look without seeing.

Isabelle learned how to keep everything inside the house, even the things already rotting.

Henry Valcor learned the simplest lesson of all: a lie, repeated by enough people, eventually stops sounding like one.

The woman's daughter had not been included in the game. And she was never handled. Never even considered. She was too young to understand.

And that was the moment the game stopped being a game.

Thirty years later... the temptation to close the circle became too strong to ignore.

An invitation was sent. Heavy cardstock. Elegant. Expensive.

When Evelyn Ashford arrived at the Montvale estate, she immediately understood that something had already been decided before her arrival. Another game?

The house dominated the cliffside, seeming almost fused to the stone itself.

The tall windows reflected the storming sea in warped fragments, as though the water had seeped into the rock and never stopped moving.

A white-haired servant opened the door before she knocked.

«We've been expecting you, Miss Ashford.»

There was nothing welcoming in his tone. It was not a greeting. It was a fact.

Evelyn slowly removed her gloves. She studied the dark wood-paneled entrance hall, the low chandelier, the smell of wax and salt in the air.

She had seen photographs of the manor years earlier.

In newspapers. After the trial.

Seven guests sat in the drawing room.

No one spoke. Glasses were raised. Cigarettes burned down. However, silence remained there with them, seated among them like another guest.

Evelyn observed each of them in turn.

Victor Delmar, the lawyer, standing beside the fireplace.

Clara Montvale seated with her hands intertwined, rings catching the flicker of the flames.

Dr. Adrian Vane, immaculate as ever.

Lucas and Nathan DeWitt, identical even in the way they avoided everyone else's gaze.

Henry Valcor, studying the room as though measuring it.
And the elderly Isabelle Montvale beside the fire.
Seven. Exactly seven.

Old Isabelle stared at her for a long moment. A suffocating stare.

Then, she murmured:

«You have your mother's eyes.»

For a brief instant, Evelyn froze. Only for an instant. Then, she smiled. Barely. Polite. Almost fragile.

«I hear that often.»

Dinner unfolded slowly. No one ever mentioned the past directly, but the past sat at the table with them all the same.

Evelyn listened more than she spoke.

Occasionally, someone let slip a broken sentence.

"That night..."

"If we had only..."

"It wasn't supposed to..."

Subsequently, silence. Always silence.

At eleven o'clock, Victor Delmar disappeared. At first, nobody noticed. The lawyer drank heavily. He was the sort of man who vanished easily from a room.

However, when the servant discovered his body in the greenhouse the following morning, the silence became unbearable.

Victor lay on the damp floor among the orchids. Eyes wide open. His throat cut cleanly across.

Beside the body rested a white Venetian mask.

Dr. Vane immediately dropped to one knee.

«My God...»

Evelyn observed the corpse without stepping too close. She looked pale. More startled than horrified.

The storm isolated the manor before dawn.

The phone lines were dead. The road had become impassable. No way remained to reach the coast.

Isabelle Montvale felt the cold settling into her bones and began trembling before the fire.

«We have to call someone...» she whispered. It sounded like a plea.

And outside, the storm showed no intention of ending.

The second death came the following day.

Clara Montvale was found in the bathtub. Still water. Red. Her wrists slit.

A suicide, apparently.

But Isabelle, horrified, hands pressed against her face, noticed the detail immediately. The woman's fingernails were broken. She had fought back.

Henry Valcor stopped drinking.

«This isn't an accident,» he said. «Someone is killing us.»

Lucas DeWitt laughed nervously.

Nathan did not laugh at all.

The manor began to feel smaller. The rooms oppressive. The hallways too dark.

And every door seemed slightly heavier than it had the night before.

That night, Dr. Vane vanished.

There were no screams. He simply disappeared. Maybe, he had gone to the cliff. Maybe, he had fallen.

Only a chair still warm beside the table remained. And a white mask resting near his plate.

Lucas DeWitt was found in the main hallway. A knife through the heart.

Nathan did not remain alone for long. He died the following night. In another room.

Again, without witnesses. In silence. His eyes frozen wide open.

Henry Valcor tried to force open a window. It would not move.

«Someone is still here...» he whispered.

And this time, no one contradicted him.

Isabelle Montvale began trembling again.

«She should never have come back...» she murmured.

And the sentence did not seem directed at anyone in particular.

When only three remained, the manor had become something entirely different.

A cage. Claustrophobic. Dark. Too narrow.

The storm raged endlessly against the cliffs. The wind howled. The telephone... remained dead.

Henry Valcor was the second-to-last.

They found him near the study. Seated. As though waiting for help that would never arrive.

Poison. Beside the whiskey glass sat... another white mask. Like death.

Like the others.

That evening, Isabelle Montvale asked to speak with Evelyn.

In the old second-floor study, the fire crackled softly.

The old woman poured brandy with visibly trembling hands. That was the moment she stopped pretending.

«You know what happened here. You are not here by accident.»

Evelyn slowly toyed with her gloves.

«No one is.»

Isabelle inhaled shakily.

«Your mother didn't deserve that ending.»

A pause. Silence. Then, she continued.

«It was a game. It was never supposed to end like this.»

For the first time, a chill passed through Evelyn's expression.

«It will end exactly the way it began.»

A pause.

«Only now, someone has decided to remember all of it.»

The silence in the room became deafening.

«Who are you really?» Isabelle asked.

Evelyn Ashford looked at her calmly without replying. She let her tremble.

«I'm not the first version of this story.»

A pause.

«I'm the one you chose to ignore.»

Isabelle took a step back.

«That game... it wasn't real...»

Evelyn tilted her head slightly.

«A woman died, Isabelle.»

Silence.

«And all of you called that death... an accident. Inside some cursed little role-playing game.»

She watched the old woman shake.

«That's what you told the court. Masks. Sedatives. Alcohol. Simulated scenes.»

Another pause.

«A wealthy aristocratic depravity that got out of hand. But, none of you truly paid for it. Your damned money.

Attorneys. Contradictory testimonies. A compliant judge.»

Another silence.

«The case slowly evaporated. But not for everyone,» the woman hissed while Isabelle trembled violently. She struggled for air; her lungs seemed to have locked shut.

Outside, the sea roared. The cliffs groaned beneath the relentless crashing of the waves.

Isabelle slowly collapsed into the armchair.

Evelyn remained standing before the fireplace. Very elegant. Wrapped in the dim glow of the flames.

Then, she smiled.

Eyes cold as ice.

«The real Evelyn Ashford would never have walked into this house.»

Isabelle's face slowly drained of color.

«No...»

«She remembered everything.»

A pause.

«She remembered her mother begging.»

A pause, again.

«She remembered the seven of you laughing while the night screamed in pain.»

The wind slammed violently against the windows.

Isabelle flinched and burst into tears.

«We were out of our minds. Drunk... drugged... we never meant...» she sobbed.

«No.»

The woman's voice was calm. Frozen. Sharp as a lash.

«You wanted entertainment. A real death became something thrilling... part of the game.»

Silence.

Then, Evelyn — or whatever her real name was — slowly slipped on her black gloves.

«The real Evelyn only turned your damned game into reality.»

Isabelle looked up, confused.

«She didn't want revenge... only justice.»

A pause.

«I'll do the rest of the job.»

Isabelle Montvale's body was found at dawn. Seated in the main hall.

The manor completely silent.

And a white mask resting at the center of the table.

By the time the police finally reached the estate, Evelyn Ashford had vanished.

No luggage. No trace.

Only rainwater sliding down the stone steps.

Inside the library fireplace, they found a half-burned photograph.

It showed a young woman smiling while seated on the grass.

Beside her were two little girls... identical.

Same pale eyes. Same dress. Same age.

Twins.

On the back, a sentence had been written in elegant handwriting:

“One screamed in the dark.

She remembered everything.

The other one listened to the nightmares for years, until the final night.

Then, the silence came, a rope

and a death too young to deserve a name.”

The rain had only just stopped when the woman crossed the gates of the small cemetery on the outskirts of town.

The air smelled of wet earth and moss.

She walked slowly between the gravestones without looking at the names. She had known the path for years. She wore a dark coat. No umbrella. No hurry. When she reached the grave, she stopped. Two names. One beneath the other. The stone was plain, anonymous, like thousands of others. She removed one glove and rested her hand against the cold marble. For several seconds, she remained silent. The wind barely stirred the cypress trees behind her. Then, she lowered her eyes. «They don't scream anymore, Evelyn.» Her voice was calm. Gentle. Tender. «None of them.» Silence. Her fingers slowly tightened against the stone. «They left you alone inside that night for far too long.» She closed her eyes. For a moment, she seemed on the verge of collapsing. Her eyes filled with tears. But, it did not happen. «Now, the circle is closed.» A pause. «You can finally rest in peace... little sis.» The wind passed through the cemetery without a sound. The woman remained motionless for a few seconds longer. Then, she left an old white mask on the grave, cracked along one side. And she walked away without ever looking back.