

NANCE O'NEIL by David Foley
Excerpt

[NANCE in her hotel room. She sits in an armchair, head back, eyes closed. McKEE enters.]

McKEE: You fled.

NANCE: I was exhausted. Sometimes I can't bear all that—adulation.

McKEE: It's a curse.

NANCE: People mean well, but they say the silliest things. I've just crawled up from the blackest depths, and they want to know how I do my hair.

McKEE: Well, you must missed one fan who was dying to meet you. Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner. Yes, *that* Isabella Stewart Gardner. Heiress. Art patron. Has a small museum. She came tonight. Was hoping to meet the great Nance O'Neil. Now she wonders if you'd be free for a little supper. Just her and a few carefully chosen friends. Next Monday evening.

NANCE: But, McKee, that's Lizbeth's party.

[Pause.]

McKEE: I would suggest to you, Nance, that Isabella Stewart Gardner outranks Lizbeth Borden.

NANCE: I've never cared for rank.

McKEE: It's time you started. Your standing's a little shaky these days. Frankly, I'm surprised she's asked you. But a woman who once walked two lion cubs down Commonwealth Avenue must enjoy an occasional walk on the wild side. The rest of Boston society is looking at you a little askance, my dear. Lizzie Borden—

NANCE: *[angrily]* Lizbeth! She asks to be called Lizbeth. Everyone calls her Lizbeth. Why you persist in—

McKEE: I'm not the only one who calls Lizzie Borden one thing to her face and another behind her back.

[Pause. She studies him.]

NANCE: How did this invitation come about?

McKEE: I told you. She was at the performance tonight, and she—

NANCE: But Monday night. Who suggested Monday night? Was it she? Or you? *[He doesn't reply. Contemptuously:]* What a child you must think me. I am not nineteen anymore. I am not your plaything now.

McKEE: I am only looking out for your interests.

NANCE: Which, you are pleased to presume, coincide exactly with your own.

McKEE: Don't they? In the long run? Don't we want the same thing? The love of a good audience. Night after night. And it's a tricky thing, that love. One day you've got it, then it's gone. How long do you think your audience will stomach Lizzie Borden?

NANCE: They thrill to Magda and Camille. Can they not extend their sympathy to another wronged woman?

McKEE: They thrill to Lady Macbeth, too, but they don't want her in their homes.

NANCE: Lizbeth is not Lady Macbeth!

[He looks at her a long moment.]

McKEE: Have you not, in all this time, tried to learn what happened?

NANCE: What happened?

McKEE: On that August morning so many years ago.

NANCE: You mean have I asked her? Of course not.

McKEE: I mean have you done your homework? Have you read up?

NANCE: No.

McKEE: Well, it's an interesting case.

NANCE: Nor do I need to. I'm not the slightest bit interested.

McKEE: House locked. Nobody in it but Lizzie and the maid. Father comes home. Maid goes up to take a nap. Fifteen minutes later Lizzie shouts up to the maid, "Someone's killed father." The neighbors come round. The police come round. They search the house and find the mother, dead in an upstairs bedroom. How does that happen?

NANCE: I haven't the least idea.

McKEE: You're not curious?

NANCE: Such things don't pique my curiosity.

McKEE: Then you're not human. What you mean is you'd rather not think about it.

NANCE: Well, then I suppose some maniac came in.

McKEE: Lizzie steps outside for a few minutes. Maniac comes in. Whack whack whack. Runs off—seen by no one.

NANCE: Why not?

McKEE: Unhappily the mother had been killed an hour and a half earlier. So the maniac hid out in the house for an hour and a half. Seen by no one. Didn't touch Lizzie. Didn't touch the maid. Waited for the father to come home. Got him. Ran off.

NANCE: Or perhaps the maid.

McKEE: The maid was sleeping upstairs. She and Lizzie agreed on that.

NANCE: McKee, neither you nor I can pretend to know what happened. She was pronounced innocent by a jury of her fellow citizens. I think we can defer to their judgment.

McKEE: *Pronounced* innocent, yes. But there's a difference between *pronouncing* someone innocent and *thinking* her so. As near as I can figure, only two people in Fall River *think* Lizzie Borden's innocent: you and Emma Borden. And I wouldn't swear to Miss Emma. Cancel this party, Nance. For me. Cancel it.

NANCE: I can't. Nor would I dream of it. Lizbeth would be heartbroken. She's been looking forward to it. As, indeed, have all the members of our company.

McKEE: Of course they are. Who'd pass up a chance to get a peek inside Lizzie Borden's house? Except the people who won't have you in *their* parlors after you've been in *hers*. The people who matter.

NANCE: You have small ideas about what matters.

McKEE: Only one thing matters to me. Nance O'Neil. You pretend not to believe that, but you know it's true. Think about it, Nance. I've acted in every theatre worthy of the name, all across this country and Canada besides. I've raised companies, built theatres, and staged the greatest masterpieces ever written. And I've made and lost several fortunes doing it. But for the last ten years only one thing has mattered to me. You. Or not you. Not gangly Gertrude Lamson who can't step into the street without tripping over her own overlarge feet. But Nance O'Neil. Who just might be the finest actress of her generation. Because I found her. And I made her. One thing of beauty that I gave the world. You may call that a small idea, but I think it's a big one. How many people can say that? That they gave the world a thing of beauty.

NANCE: But I am not a thing, McKee. And I am not yours to give.

McKEE: More's the pity.

NANCE: And you know me very little if you think I would desert a friend because of a lot of cruel and silly talk.

McKEE: Know you? I invented you.