



# When You're Forgotten

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** Recently put on leave and divorced after he caught his wife cheating on him, Finn needs a fresh start in life. He thought a visit to an old friend in a tranquil small town in England would be a good step—until his friend needs his expertise with a series of murders in spectacular estates. With the local police chief impressed, Finn is asked to stay on, as they need his help.

As Finn's eyes are opened to a world of storied wealth, history and privacy, he realizes that he has much to learn—but that killers are universal....

A page-turning crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured FBI agent, the Finn Wright series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 46

## PROLOGUE

James Penrose stood in the wide doorway of Brynmor Hall, one hand resting against the carved oak frame as he took a measured drag from his cigarette. He was fifty-three years old, though the lines on his face and the subtle stoop of his shoulders made him appear slightly older. His hair, once dark, had gone silver at the temples in the last few years, and he wore a tailored tweed jacket that had served him well through many a Welsh winter. Tonight, the jacket shielded him from the crisp April breeze that drifted across his estate, carrying with it the soft smell of damp grass and the threat of an oncoming chill.

Outside, the final hues of dusk clung to the sky, a deepening purple stretched over the rolling landscape. If there was one time James cherished most, it was this fleeting hour of transition—the hush between day and night when the world seemed to hold its breath. The solitude calmed him far more than the social demands of the day. Usually, the manor's staff would still be bustling around, but he had dismissed them the day before. His wife and their two children were away visiting relatives in Devon, leaving him sole master of Brynmor Hall for the next couple of days. He had seized the opportunity for solitude the moment the idea took shape. Things were on his mind. Things that threw dark shadows on his mood. Things that stretched out like spider legs across his soul.

Brynmor Hall itself rose behind and above him like a silent sentinel, its tall stone walls tracing centuries of family history. Out front, an impeccable lawn fanned out, meticulously mown and vibrant green even in the dim light. A gently curved gravel path cut through the grass, leading to a circular fountain that was currently still—he had asked the staff not to run it until they returned. The lawn gave way to a ring of

ancient woods—gnarled oaks and looming pines that bordered the estate. Beyond the treetops, the rugged silhouettes of the Welsh mountains framed the horizon, their peaks lost in the twilight haze. It was a breathtaking tableau, one that had sustained generations of his ancestors, binding them to this place.

James took one last drag, exhaling slowly. As the night encroached, he reveled in the rare, absolute quiet. No children's laughter or staff footsteps to break the calm. Even the birds settling into the woods behind the manor had gone silent. He flicked the cigarette ash onto the smooth stone step, about to turn inside, when a sudden movement on the lawn snatched his attention.

He squinted. At first, he thought it was a deer emerging from the tree line—a not uncommon sight at dusk. This shape, however, moved oddly, padding forward on all fours. He blinked, expecting to see antlers or some flash of white tail. Instead, the figure seemed low-slung, half-crawling in a disturbingly fluid way. A chill lanced through him, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

He swallowed, eyes straining to track it in the fading light. The shape edged closer, hugging the dark pockets along the hedge. His pulse beat in his temples; he felt the distinct prickle of being watched, though the creature's face—if it had one—remained lost in shadow. He exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and in that small moment of distraction, the figure vanished. Gone, as though it had melted into the gloom.

Shaken, James ground out his cigarette underfoot. A childish urge screamed at him to run inside and slam the door. Muttering a quiet curse, he listened for any sign of an intruder—footfalls, panting, a crack of branch—but heard only the hush of the Welsh evening. No hint of the bizarre shape remained.

Stepping briskly back into the foyer, he pulled the massive door shut with an echoing thud, turning the iron key to secure the lock. Normally, he would have felt safe in his

ancestral home, but that crawling silhouette troubled him deeply. The heavy hush of the hall's interior didn't help. With his family gone and all the servants dismissed, the manor's echoing corridors felt suddenly ominous, as though they might swallow him. He began to wonder if the solitude he required for a specific task was worth the risk.

A wave of discomfort tight in his chest, James ascended the main flight of stairs. The wide, carpeted steps were flanked by mahogany banisters polished to a mirror sheen. Rows of ancestral portraits seemed to watch him pass. Their painted eyes, stern or sorrowful, glinted eerily in the low lamp glow from the chandelier overhead. He paused at the top of the stairs, glancing back as if expecting the shape to have followed. Of course, there was nothing there—only the yawning silence of the foyer below.

He shook off the unease, continuing down the corridor toward his study. Dimly lit lamps revealed the proud decor of Brynmor Hall: antique side tables with potted plants, a few crystal vases reflecting that faint light. At every step, he had the nagging feeling that someone, or something, trailed behind just out of sight. Turning on his heel, he caught only flickering shadows.

Somewhere past a half-closed door, a soft shuffle or drag drifted to his ears. He froze. It wasn't the typical groan of old pipes or floorboards; it was too deliberate, too nearby. He steadied his breathing, stepping forward to peek into a guest bedroom. The overhead light flickered on, revealing a spotless bed, duvet neatly folded, nightstand uncluttered. Nothing out of place. No sign of anyone. His heart hammered as he stepped back into the hallway. He forced a laugh, which sounded hollow against the silence. It's just nerves, he told himself. The odd shape on the lawn had gotten under his skin.

At last, he reached his study, a place he hoped would offer some comfort. The moment he entered, he slammed the door shut behind him, turning the latch. The

study was a world of wood panels and old leather, with two aged armchairs arranged near a cold fireplace. His large desk in the center was tidy—he prided himself on organizational discipline. High shelves on every wall brimmed with hardbound volumes, the collected works of classic authors and genealogies of the Penrose line.

He moved to a sideboard and poured a finger of single malt into a crystal tumbler, lifting it to his lips. The whiskey's warmth coursed through him, chasing off some of the tension. Sighing, he wandered to the shelves, searching for a distraction in the spines of his books. One collection caught his eye: W.W. Jacobs's ghost stories, bound in a somber red cloth. He drew a volume free, but an immediate shiver traced his spine. After what he'd seen outside, ghost tales would be the last thing to calm him. With a quick shake of the head, he returned the book to its place.

Scanning a lower shelf, his gaze lingered on an ancient family ledger, reminding him of his father's dire tales about Brynmor Hall. Supposedly, their ancestors haunted these corridors, vowing vengeance on any descendant who besmirched the family name. As a boy, James had been terrified by such talk. His father likely meant it as a cautionary tale, good old-fashioned scare tactics to keep a rebellious son in line. Nevertheless, it unsettled him now, in the hush of an empty manor.

A noise from the hallway—closer this time—yanked him from his memory. It was a muted bump, then what sounded like a door hinge squeaking. Tense, James went to the study door and opened it a crack. The corridor was unlit except for a single lamp at the far end. All seemed still. Yet a strange, cool breeze wafted past him, stirring the edges of the rug. That meant somewhere, a window or door stood open.

He grimaced. He had asked the servants to lock and shutter everything before leaving. Another bump echoed, like a door swinging shut. He jerked fully into the corridor, heart racing. Was someone inside? An intruder? The notion flooded him with alarm. Brynmor Hall had no shortage of valuables—antiques, paintings—ripe targets for thieves.

A sudden slam rang out, resonating off the walls. James's breath caught in his throat. He physically jumped, nearly dropping the whiskey tumbler. That was definitely a door closing with force. He felt a stabbing sense of vulnerability. He had no staff to call on, and his wife wasn't here.

Without delay, he set the glass down on a small table and hurried toward the gun room. Built beneath the main staircase, it was a locked chamber lined with racks of hunting rifles. Flicking the light switch, he found everything in its usual place—at first glance. With trembling fingers, he selected a sturdy hunting rifle from the largest case. Relief wavered through him, only to vanish a second later when he opened the ammunition box. It was empty. He scrabbled through drawers and compartments, only to discover not a single bullet left.

A chill swept up his spine. Someone had deliberately removed the ammunition, leaving him defenseless. This was no coincidence. Fear shot through his veins as he snatched his cellphone from his pocket and dialed the local police. His voice wavered.

"Police, fire brigade or ambulance?" the operator answering asked.

"Police," James said, still gripping the gun.

"You've reached the police, what's the nature of your emergency?" another operator asked.

"There's been a break in at Brynmor Hall, I am in the house with the intruder," he said.

"I understand, sir. We'll send a car over. In the meantime, please do not engage with the intruder. Find somewhere to hide and stay on the line," the operator said.

"Thank you," he said. "But I have a panic room, so I'll make my way there. I won't

have a phone signal.”

He hung up, adrenaline pumping. James knew it would be about half an hour before any car showed up. God only knew what would happen to him in that time. He needed to get to the panic room. The sense that he was being stalked thickened, pressing on him like a physical weight.

He dashed from the gun room, the click of his shoes echoing. Torchlight from outside flickered across a window, or perhaps it was just his imagination. The corridor felt labyrinthine, every corner a potential hiding place for the intruder. His father’s ghost stories sprang unbidden to mind, though he doubted any spirit meddled with bullets. This was flesh and blood.

He made for the rear corridor, where the family’s secure panic room lay behind a false panel. His chest tightened as he heard footsteps rush behind him—footsteps far too close. A glance over his shoulder confirmed his worst fear: a tall, dark figure sprinting after him, face half-obscured by shadows. James’s heart threatened to burst. The figure closed in, arms outstretched.

They collided near the hidden doorway. James’s useless rifle clattered to the ground as the attacker slammed him into the wall. Gasping, James twisted free, snatching the hidden latch. The door swung open. A savage jolt of pain seared his shoulder when the intruder seized him again, but James managed to fling himself into the panic room, tumbling onto the floor.

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He spotted the emergency switch on the wall—if he could press it, the door would seal automatically, locking him safely inside. Summoning every ounce of will, he lunged. His fingertips almost brushed the red button, but just as he was about to reach it, the attacker dove forward in a desperate final leap.

James tumbled onto his back.

“Dear God... You’ve come for me...” James let out in disbelief.

A sudden jolt ran up from his chest to his neck and jaw. It was agony as terror gripped him. The last thing he saw was that dark figure bending down towards him.

### CHAPTER ONE

Amelia paused in the shadow of a gaping doorway, heart pounding against her ribs, the sting of sweat in her eyes. The mid-afternoon sun, bleached and glaring, cast rectangles of harsh light through the shattered windows of the abandoned school. Dust motes swirled in the beams, and every faint noise echoed in the eerie hush of a place long forgotten by time.

She pressed her back to the wall, inhaling slowly. Over the crackle of static in her earpiece, Inspector McNeil’s voice came through, sharp and displeased. “Winters! Report. Are you seriously alone on the east side of the building? I told you not to run off!”

His words grated on her already-strained nerves. She closed her eyes for a moment, collecting herself, before lifting a hand to the small device at her ear. “I’m handling it,



Inspector,” she whispered. “I saw movement in the corridor and had to follow. I can’t let Wendell Reed slip away again.”

“That’s not your call!” McNeil’s frustration nearly crackled into a shout. “We are doing a coordinated sweep, do you understand? Detective Constable Clint and I are on the northwest end. You were supposed to wait for us. You’re risking your own safety—and, might I add, interfering with our operation.”

Amelia swallowed back a retort. She understood McNeil’s logic, but she was beyond caring about protocol. The entire task force had converged on the decrepit school after security footage from a nearby construction site had captured someone matching Wendell Reed’s description entering and leaving these premises. Any lead had to be followed, especially when it involved such a dangerous killer moving around in the public.

Already, the building’s labyrinth of corridors and classrooms threatened to devour them. Broken desks, ragged posters on peeling walls, shards of glass beneath sagging windows—everything reeked of disuse and decay. But Amelia’s mind kept dredging up more pressing concerns: Wendell Reed had singled her out, watched her every move, and threatened her loved ones. He had already harmed innocents in his twisted pursuit. If she lost him again, who knew how many more lives he might destroy?

“Amelia.” McNeil’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Are you listening? Fall back to the entrance. If you don’t comply, I will have you thrown off this task force. You’re a liability.”

She set her jaw and answered in a whisper, “Inspector, I can’t stand by. Wendell Reed directly threatened me—threatened my family. I won’t let him vanish. Not again. I’m moving carefully, but if there’s a chance he’s right here, I can’t waste time.” She waited for the scolding she knew would come.

A sharp exhale filled her ear. “Do what you want, it’ll be the last time you work with us. You’d better keep your line open, and the second you see anything conclusive, you report in. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” she said tightly, easing forward a step.

She was in what used to be the ground-floor wing for younger students, if the cheerful (though now half-torn) alphabet murals on the walls were any indication. The hallway was a broken mosaic of debris: crumpled children’s chairs, a collapsed coat rack, damp patches of mold creeping where the roof had leaked. The air felt close and heavy. Amelia stifled a cough as her flashlight beam skimmed across a series of closed doors, each battered with years of neglect.

Where are you? She wondered, imagining Wendell’s mocking grin in every shadow. Her insides twisted with a mixture of dread and grim resolve. Memories of his recent kill, tying the bloodied body of a woman to the undercarriage of a train, churned in her mind. She wished she could borrow Finn’s steady calm, his knack for diffusing the fear that clenched her insides. If Finn were at her side, she might feel more confident—less alone. But Finn had been blocked from being part of the task force by McNeil. She had to push forward without him, trusting her own instincts.

A scuttling noise echoed from up ahead, beyond a door whose glass pane had been shattered. Amelia’s entire body tensed. Could that be Wendell, or just some vagrant? She advanced, flashlight raised, while her free hand hovered over the holster at her waist. The midday sun did little to illuminate the dank interior; she forced her eyes to adjust.

Soft footfalls sounded again, closer this time. She managed two more steps before McNeil’s annoyed voice piped up. “Winters? Where exactly are you now?”

She nearly jumped, but clutched at the earpiece. “Ground floor, still on the east

side. I'm passing what looks like an old coatroom," she murmured. "He might be close." Without waiting for McNeil's response, she pressed the device a bit more snugly into her ear so she wouldn't miss anything if the team gave a warning.

Another scuffling noise—a distinct scrape against the dusty floor—echoed through the corridor. Amelia's pulse thundered. She swung the flashlight beam sharply to her left. For a split second, she caught a glimpse of a figure—tall, lean, wearing what seemed like layers of ragged clothing and something wrapped around the lower half of his face. Before she could call out, he vanished into the adjoining hall.

She dashed forward. "Stop!" she shouted, voice ringing in the emptiness.

Her earpiece crackled. "Winters, what's happening?" McNeil demanded.

"I've got eyes on a suspect," Amelia panted, already in motion. The hush of the building exploded with her footfalls as she sprinted into the corridor. Broken ceiling tiles crunched underfoot. She fought her way past toppled chairs. "He's heading—" She stumbled briefly, trying to keep track of the man, but he darted out of sight again. "He's heading deeper into the east wing!"

Her only answer from McNeil was a burst of static and a muffled oath. Possibly the signal was degrading in these walls. She pressed on regardless, refusing to let her target escape. The next hall was narrower, with doors leading to what might have been administrative offices. Posters tacked on the walls hung in tatters, their messages of school spirit unreadable. A stale odor of rot made her stomach lurch. The overhead lights were long dead, leaving only patchy sunlight from high windows, most broken and boarded over.

Rounding another corner, she glimpsed him again: a figure draped in a threadbare coat, face covered by a strip of cloth. He moved with swift certainty, as if he knew the building's layout. Amelia's breath came in ragged gasps as she accelerated, boots

pounding the corridor. She was close enough now to see the tension in his shoulders, to note how he clutched something in his right hand—something slender, maybe a blade or a narrow piece of pipe.

A rotted door loomed up on her left, the sign too faded to read. Without hesitation, the figure slammed a shoulder into it, vanishing through. Amelia skidded to a stop, gun half-drawn, unsure if he'd laid a trap. He was definitely leading her away from the main hall, away from backup, but this was the best chance she had. If it was Wendell—if it was truly him—she might be seconds from nabbing him once and for all. The weight of his threats, the memory of terror he inflicted on so many, fueled her determination.

“Amelia, come in!” McNeil’s voice crackled in her ear. “We lost track of you. Where are you?”

“He’s leading me into some side offices,” she said under her breath, stepping warily over the threshold. The room she entered was more of a large storage area, piled with rusted metal shelves and scattered textbooks half-eaten by mold. A single row of windows near the ceiling admitted watery light. The figure was already on the far side, rummaging in a corner.

“Wendell, stop!” she barked, raising her flashlight. “Police!”

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He responded by hurling a broken chair in her direction. She leapt aside, the chair splintering on the floor. “Stay back!” Amelia shouted, but the man lunged. She barely brought her arms up in time to block a blow aimed at her head with what looked like a jagged pipe. The impact rattled her forearms, her flashlight spinning away, clattering under a shelf.

She twisted her body to deflect another wild swing, then pivoted on her left foot, landing a strike with her right palm to the man’s shoulder. He grunted, staggering. For an instant, Amelia tried to see if he was indeed Wendell—did the eyes match the criminal’s typical glare? But the cloth around his face and a low cap prevented a clear look.

He recovered swiftly, surging at her with renewed force. Amelia ducked, hooking a leg behind his knee. He half-fell, but before she could capitalize on it, he wrenched free, landing a glancing blow against her side. Pain flared. She reeled. Meanwhile, the man bolted for the door leading out of the storeroom.

Gasping for breath, Amelia steadied herself. “You’re under arrest!” she yelled again, lurching forward. She couldn’t see a weapon in his hand anymore—he might have lost the pipe or thrown it aside. In two swift strides, she was at his back, grappling to get an arm around his midsection. She wasn’t about to let him slip away.

He twisted viciously, elbow slamming into her ribs. The shock sent a burst of agony through her chest, and her grip slackened. He tore himself free, sprinting through the exit. Cursing, Amelia forced her feet to move, ignoring the throbbing in her side.

Her earpiece crackled again with McNeil’s frantic voice. “Winters, are you engaging

him?For God's sake, you do not have clearance to proceed alone!We can't get a fix on your location.Clint and I are heading upstairs from the west side."

She couldn't spare the breath to reply, adrenaline surging as she tried to keep the figure in sight.He was heading deeper into the building, likely searching for a route to vanish.The corridor ahead angled sharply, and she realized he was making for the stairwell—maybe planning to cut across the second floor or find a roof exit.She willed her lungs to keep working as she barreled after him.

A battered sign pointed to the second level.The man took the steps two at a time, boots thudding on warped wood.Amelia was only steps behind, close enough to see the tension in his stance.The midday light from broken windows turned the battered stairwell into a patchwork of brightness and gloom.She set one foot on a half-rotten step that gave a warning groan.Still, she continued upward, determined not to lose him.

Her mind raced.If this was Wendell, she was on the cusp of bringing him down.All his vile intimidation, all the pain he caused—she could end it.She pictured Finn's face, how he'd told her to be careful.She pictured Inspector McNeil's anger.None of it mattered now.What mattered was stopping the man who haunted her life, threatened those she cared about, made her second-guess every shadow.

The second floor hallway stretched out in front of her, even more decrepit than the first.Sections of ceiling had caved in, and water damage turned the floor planks spongy.The air smelled of mildew and stale fear.She glimpsed the man darting into a side room.

Teeth gritted, she pressed on."Inspector, he's on the second floor, heading west," she panted into her earpiece, hoping the signal would carry.

"Christ!"McNeil's exasperation was clear."We're on the west side, second floor, but

the corridors here are blocked. We're going to have to find another route. Stay put, do you hear me? He's too dangerous."

But the man was just a few paces away, the door to that side room half open. Amelia inhaled, half-lunged, half-ran. She spotted the figure again, stumbling across a chamber that might once have been an art room—broken sinks, dusty counters, and scattered chairs. The large windows on the far side let in swathes of cold sunlight. Some of the floor near the center looked dangerously cracked.

For a moment, the man spun to face her, cloth still obscuring his features. She saw his gaze flick to the compromised floor, then to the door behind her, as if measuring distances. Amelia circled warily, arms raised, stepping closer. "Wendell?" she demanded. "If that's you, it's over. You have nowhere to run."

He didn't reply. Instead, he crouched, preparing to spring. She tried to gauge her footing, noticing how the boards at the center sagged ominously. The man lunged first. Amelia pivoted to the side. Their bodies collided in a brief, frenzied scuffle. She shoved him away, boots slipping on a rotten patch. He tried to sidestep, but the floor shuddered under their combined weight.

Her earpiece crackled again with McNeil's voice, barely audible: "Winters, get out of there—the floor can't—"

The words came too late. A deafening crack echoed through the empty school. Splinters flew as a large section of the floor gave way beneath them. For one heart-stopping instant, Amelia seemed to hover, arms flailing, before gravity seized her. She felt the man's shoulder slam into her torso as they dropped. Her mind registered the sight of dust and debris swirling around them, the second-floor windows receding above her.

She crashed into something hard—wood or plaster—somewhere below. A searing jolt

of pain shot up her right leg, and her head snapped back. Everything spun, a kaleidoscope of falling rubble and swirling dust in the half-light. She saw the figure land a short distance away, the impact jarring. Her vision blurred.

Then, in a haze of confusion, she slammed onto the final floor with bone-jarring force. The wind left her lungs in a ragged whoosh. Another wave of dust and debris rained down, striking her arms and shoulders. Her earpiece dislodged, crackling and sparking. The last thing she heard was McNeil's distant holler, mingled with static.

## CHAPTER TWO

Finn pressed down on the accelerator harder than he ever dared under normal circumstances, weaving in and out of the afternoon traffic with all the precision he could muster. He barely registered the blare of angry horns or the irritated gestures from other drivers. His focus was singular: the phone call that had told him Amelia was hurt and was waiting for him at Hertfordshire Constabulary HQ.

He was so locked into that focus that he almost missed the first warning sign from his red Corvette. A deep metallic clunk sounded somewhere beneath the hood, like two pieces of heavy machinery colliding. Gritting his teeth, Finn ignored it, urging the car forward. The engine gave a tortured groan, but he refused to relent.

Still, the car protested with renewed vigor. A thin thread of smoke curled out from under the hood and trailed along the side of the windshield. The smell of heated metal and burning oil seeped into the cabin. Finn's heart lurched with a new concern: if the engine seized up entirely, he'd be stranded. Clenching the wheel, he forced the Corvette onward, eyes scanning the upcoming signs for the turnoff to the constabulary.

"You've got this, old girl," he muttered under his breath, giving the dashboard a reassuring pat with one hand. "Just get me there."



Moments later, the sprawling brick building of the Hertfordshire Constabulary HQ came into view at the end of a one-way street. Finn could see a smudge of black smoke now pouring out from under his hood, but he refused to let up on the gas. Only when he pulled into the parking bay, screeching to a halt with tires squealing, did he allow himself to turn the key off. The engine sputtered in indignation, but Finn was already out the door, pushing aside a swirl of smoke as he bounded toward the entrance.

Inside the station, he jogged past the reception desk—ignoring a startled shout from a uniformed officer to sign in—and took the stairs two at a time. His pulse thundered in his ears. He'd been told Amelia was on the second floor.

He burst through the second-floor door. A cluster of detectives turned wide eyes on him, but he didn't pause to explain. Racing down the hallway, he spotted a half-open conference room, fluorescent lights spilling across the threshold. That had to be it. Heart hammering, he swung into the doorway.

Amelia was there—bandaged hand resting on the table, a small bruise visible on the side of her face. Instantly, relief and worry flooded him in equal measure. Rob, seated next to her, raised a quick hand to calm Finn's near-frantic expression.

"Whoa," Rob said, half-rising. "She's all right. Take a breath."

Amelia stood gingerly, meeting Finn in the middle of the conference room. He fought the urge to crush her in a hug, uncertain how badly she might be hurt, but the tension in his chest demanded some contact. He reached out; she rewarded him by stepping closer, letting him gently take her uninjured hand.

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“You’re okay,” he murmured, his voice rough with emotion.

Amelia nodded, biting her lower lip. “I’m sore, but yeah... still in one piece.”

“What happened?” he asked, eyes flicking from her face to the bandage. “They said you fell through a floor? And you were chasing Wendell—”

She exhaled, raking her free hand through her hair. “I was with the task force checking out that old school. The tip said Wendell Reed had been captured on camera going in and out of there. We set up a sweep, but I got separated from the others.” She shot a look at Rob, who nodded for her to continue. “It was a bust. I mean—someone was there, but it wasn’t Wendell. The floor caved in during the fight, and we both went down.”

Finn’s gaze dropped to her bandaged hand. “Let me guess, you couldn’t wait for backup? You know how dangerous that psycho is!”

Her eyes flashed with a mix of frustration and affection. “Finn, you would’ve done the exact same thing,” she pointed out. “Besides, we did have backup. They were just... too far behind.”

A reluctant grin tugged at his lips. He couldn’t deny the truth in that. “All right. Fine. I just don’t like you facing him—or his stand-in—without me.”

Amelia sighed, her shoulders drooping slightly. “I hate it, too. But Wendell’s out there. I can’t just... stand aside.”

Finn gave her fingers a gentle squeeze and was about to respond when Rob interjected, “She was knocked unconscious for a few minutes. Luckily, the suspect ended up pinned under debris, and we managed to secure him. The paramedics gave Amelia the all-clear after checking her for a concussion.”

“So it’s not Wendell?”

Amelia shook her head. “No. Not Wendell. Just one of his pawns. Probably working for him. Wendell deliberately showed up on a security feed, but he left someone else behind in that school—someone who dressed like him, tried to lead me on a wild chase.”

Finn’s brief surge of excitement dissolved into anger. “So it’s another trick. He knows you are in the task-force looking for him.”

A sudden voice behind them made Finn turn. Inspector McNeil stood in the doorway, arms folded. His eyes flicked disapprovingly from Amelia to Finn, then to Rob. “That’s precisely why I never wanted her on this task force— she can’t be objective about Wendell Reed. She keeps charging in alone, risking everything.”

Finn bristled, but before he could speak, Rob spoke up. “I seem to recall stories about a certain hotshot McNeil taking all sorts of reckless risks in his younger days. With more than a few bruises to show for it.”

McNeil’s frown deepened, but his gaze remained locked on Amelia. “It doesn’t matter what I was like before. All that matters now is stopping Wendell Reed before he kills someone else. Winters is a liability, and I’m petitioning the Home Office to remove her from the task force.”

The words hung in the air like a hammer blow. Amelia’s cheeks flushed, but she raised her chin defiantly. Finn’s pulse spiked with anger, fists clenching at his sides.

“You can’t do that,” he said in a low voice.

McNeil’s expression hardened. “I can and I have. She’s too deeply involved. It’s not just about her—it’s about public safety. She’s a risk to the operation, the public, and herself.” He glanced at Rob. “You can fight it all you want, but I suspect the Home Office will agree with me. Good day.”

With that, McNeil turned on his heel and strode out, ignoring Finn’s glare.

“Charming fellow,” Finn remarked, voice laced with sarcasm.

Amelia turned to Rob, tension visible in every line of her posture. “Is he serious? Am I really going to be taken off the task force?”

Rob gave a heavy sigh. “I’m not in control, Amelia. It’s a Home Office matter. If he’s made an official application, they’ll at least consider it. That means a mandatory suspension from the team for a number of days while they review. Possibly longer, depending on their verdict.”

Amelia gritted her teeth in frustration. “So I can’t do anything about Wendell—he’s out there, threatening everything, and I’m stuck on forced leave?”

Finn turned to Rob. “Then I’m not leaving her. If she’s at risk, I stay.”

Amelia’s eyebrows rose. “What do you mean? Are you assigned somewhere?”

Rob nodded. “Finn’s been tapped to investigate a suspicious death in Wales—some critical lead the Home Office wants him to follow. He’s supposed to leave soon, but—”

Finn turned fully to Amelia, expression resolute. “I won’t go if you need me here.”

She inhaled slowly, wincing as the motion strained the bruise on her ribs."Actually, I have an idea.If I'm off the Wendell Reed case for a few days anyway, why don't I go with you?It'll keep me out of the crosshairs and stop me from going mad pottering around my flat or the cottage."She allowed a small, hopeful smile to break across her lips.

Rob, arms folded, studied her."Are you sure you're up for traveling?You literally crashed through a school floor."

Amelia gave a half-shrug."I'm bruised, not broken.Maybe some distance from Wendell's direct line of sight wouldn't be the worst thing."

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Finn felt a sense of relief and something akin to excitement. Investigating with Amelia—like old times. The mention of traveling side by side gave him a renewed surge of energy. “If it helps you heal— physically and mentally— I’m all for it. But only if you’re certain.”

Rob nodded. “It actually sets my mind at ease, too. At least you won’t be going off on your own around here with McNeil breathing down your neck. The question is: Are you both okay with being out of the Wendell loop for a bit?”

Amelia managed a wry smile. “For a bit, yes. Though I’ll definitely want updates if anything changes.”

Finn turned serious. “Speaking of updates... Did that man you were chasing—the one who fell with you—give you anything on Wendell? Any leads?”

A frustrated look crossed Amelia’s face. “I haven’t been allowed to question him. McNeil’s running that show. He’ll only share details if he sees fit. So I’m in the dark right now.”

Finn stepped forward, folding Amelia into a gentle hug. She sighed into his chest, relief warring with her frustration. “I hate not knowing where he could be hiding,” she murmured against his jacket.

He kissed the top of her head, letting himself savor the closeness. “At least you’re safe. And hey, the bright side is that we’re heading off together on a new case—just the two of us again.”

She pulled back enough to look up at him, eyes glinting. “Think you can handle me telling you how to do your job?”

He allowed a teasing grin. “Only if you can handle my sparkling wit.”

Rob cleared his throat, stepping away from the table with a slight grin. “And that’s exactly why I’ll be staying put. Do me a favor, you two—keep me in the loop on whatever you find in Wales. We’re not sure if it’s murder, but the victim is an important figure, and he died running into his panic room.”

Finn dipped his head. “We will. You keep an eye on any Wendell developments here, yeah?”

“Count on it,” Rob replied, moving toward the door. “Good luck, both of you.” He ducked out into the hallway, leaving Finn and Amelia alone.

Finn offered Amelia his arm, which she took with a playful flourish. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “You ready to bail on this place? The Corvette might still be smoking, but I promise to fix it before we head anywhere far.”

She laughed softly, a sound that eased the tension in the room. As they strolled out, side by side, Finn murmured, “Once more unto the beach, dear friend.”

Amelia smiled, leaning into him. “Let’s take a work car. I’ve had enough danger for today.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Finn guided the black sedan along the winding Welsh road, the gentle growl of the engine the only real sound in the still, early-afternoon air. Far beyond the windshield sprawled a sea of green hills and farmlands, with rugged mountains peeking over the

horizon.Hills dotted with grazing sheep and lonely stone walls rolled past on either side, and every few miles, an ancient ruin or quaint village chapel broke the expanse.The sky hung low in a tapestry of moody gray clouds, promising either a light shower or a brilliant break of sunshine—one could never be certain here.

He glanced over at Amelia, who was tapping her fingers against her seat in a restless cadence.The bruise on her face had faded slightly with makeup, but it was still noticeable, and a bandage was wrapped neatly around her hand.She leaned forward, as though itching to do something, anything.Their eyes met, and she arched an eyebrow.

“So,” she said, in an offhand way.“Is it my turn to drive yet?I do know how to handle a car, you know.”

He smiled.“I know, but last I checked, you’ve taken a knock to the head.Probably not the best idea for you to be behind the wheel right now.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh.“It’d take a few more head knocks for me to get down to your IQ level, Finn.”

He mock-wincing, placing a wounded hand over his heart.“Ouch.Well I have other numbers that are much more...impressive.”

She swatted his arm lightly.“Your mind is in the gutter.Stop while you’re behind.”

Grinning, he turned the wheel, avoiding a patch of loose gravel.The countryside around them felt like a patchwork quilt of ever-shifting greens, dotted with ancient stone cottages and grazing animals.Rain-soaked lanes wound around hills and through valleys.In the distance, the sun broke through the clouds in a single golden ray, illuminating a distant peak.If it weren’t for their weighty mission, Finn might have slowed to truly savor the serenity.



He took in Amelia's quiet profile—she was staring at the road, her expression tense. After a moment, she spoke, almost timidly, "I need a break for a week or so. Even if McNeil reverses his decision. He will, won't he? Don't you think?"

Finn tightened his grip on the steering wheel, exhaling. "I was going to bring that up, actually. We both know Wendell Reed's fixated on you, and that might not change. Even if McNeill reinstates you, maybe you're better off out of it."

She shot him a sharp sideways look. "So you don't want me back on the task force? Great. Glad to know where you stand."

"That's not it." He forced calm into his tone. "I'm worried about you, that's all. McNeil might be right: it's personal for you—"

"Since when did you care if something was personal?" she snapped. "You're the one who refused to step back when Max Vilne came to the UK gunning for you last year. Remember how everyone told you to take a step back, and you wouldn't?"

His cheeks colored at the memory, especially how she'd put herself on the line to protect him then. "Yes, but that was—"

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She cut him off, voice curt. “Are you implying I’m somehow less capable than you?”

He dropped a hand from the wheel to squeeze her forearm gently. “No. If anything, I think you’re more capable. I just—it wouldn’t make losing you any easier.”

A taut silence filled the car. Amelia stared out the window, and Finn let the hush linger, hoping she sensed his genuine concern behind the awkward words. He wasn’t great at articulating how much it gnawed at him to see that bruise on her face, to think of her in danger and getting hurt.

Before he could figure out a better way to express it, the car rumbled up to a pair of tall iron gates, painted black and ornate with delicate swirls. A discreet sign affixed to the metal read Brynmor HALL. Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Finn slowed, opening the small console by the driver’s seat to check the address. This was it: the estate where James Penrose had been found dead under suspicious circumstances two days earlier.

“Looks like we’re here,” Finn murmured.

Amelia peered through the windshield. The gates were slightly ajar, enough to let the sedan pass. He inched forward, guiding them through into a long, tree-lined driveway. On either side of the drive stretched a vast lawn—a sea of manicured green that rivaled any he’d seen in grand English manors. Ahead, Brynmor Hall loomed: sprawling and imposing, all aged stone, tall chimneys, and ivy creeping along the walls. It dominated the landscape with an air of silent authority.

“Wow,” Amelia said under her breath. “It’s huge.”

“Must cost a fortune to keep somewhere like this running,” Finn added.

Finn parked near the front steps, where a semicircle of gravel formed something akin to a courtyard. The sedan’s engine clicked off, leaving only the faint rustle of a mild breeze. He caught sight of a woman descending the wide stone steps—a housekeeper, apparently. She wore a conservative dark skirt, hair pinned neatly back. As she came closer, Finn noticed her right hand trembling slightly.

Amelia reached for the door handle, but Finn got out first, circling around to open her door with a gallant flourish. She shot him a mock-smile that said, I’m still mad at you, but I’ll accept this courtesy. They both stepped forward as the housekeeper approached.

“Good afternoon,” the woman said, a faint quaver in her voice. “You must be from the police?”

Finn gave a nod, extending a hand. “Hello. Yes, we’re here from the Home Office, I believe the called ahead? I’m Finn Wright, and this is Inspector Amelia Winters,” he said. “We’re here to look into James Penrose’s sudden death.”

The housekeeper managed a small smile, though the tremor in her hand persisted. “Ms. Margaret Hughes. I do hope we can be of service. Please, pardon my...” She glanced at her shaking hand. “It’s a neurological tremor, you see. My doctor says it’s nothing to worry about.” She lifted her left hand, which was perfectly still. “You see—no tremor there.”

Finn nodded understandingly, aware that she still looked rather tense. If the trembling was purely neurological, her nerves weren't being helped by the circumstances of a murder in the manor. "I'm sorry for your loss," he offered gently. "I imagine it's been difficult losing Mr. Penrose."

Mrs Hughes's eyes flicked downward. "Yes, sir. Terrible business. I've worked here for thirty years now." She squared her shoulders. "My husband used to be the butler for the family—he got me the job. Passed away some years ago not long after Wilkie Penrose, James's older brother, unfortunately."

Amelia's expression softened. "I'm sorry to hear that. Must be very hard continuing on after losing him."

Mrs Hughes pursed her lips with a tight nod. "One does what one must. Even the old house, as it is creaking at the edges, she carries on so I will, too. The Penroses have stipulated that you should stay to sort out this mess. So let's get you settled, yes?" She turned, waving up the steps. "We've prepared rooms for you in the west wing."

At that moment, a young man emerged from the doorway behind her. He was perhaps eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a neat but slightly ill-fitting servant's uniform. Scruffy blond hair flopped over his forehead, giving him a boyish, unkempt look that contrasted sharply with the polished facade of Brynmor Hall.

"Ah, Evan," Mrs Hughes said. "Would you take the luggage from our guests, please? Show them inside."

Evan hesitated, blinking at Finn. "Luggage, Sir?"

"Yes," Finn replied, inclining his head toward the sedan. "It's in the trunk."

The boy looked at him as though he'd just spoken nonsense. Amelia let out a short laugh. "He means the boot," she clarified, giving Finn a playful nudge.

"Oh! Right, the boot." Evan jogged to the car's rear, popped it open, and pulled out a single large suitcase. He swayed slightly under the weight, expression twisting in surprise. "Blimey, that's heavy."

Mrs Hughes raised an eyebrow, folding her arms primly. “Just the one suitcase? I assumed you’d want separate rooms. I’ve got them ready.”

Amelia exchanged a quick glance with Finn, then offered a polite smile. “We just put our things together to cut down on the load—thank you, Mrs Hughes. Separate rooms is quite all right.”

Mrs Hughes accepted the explanation with a slight purse of her lips, then watched as Evan, red-faced with effort, lugged the suitcase toward the steps. Meanwhile, Finn opened the back door of the sedan, retrieving a thick folder from the seat pocket. “Case files,” he explained softly to Amelia.

As the young man paused for breath near the top of the stairs, Finn turned to Mrs Hughes. “Mrs Hughes, do you happen to have any ideas about who might want Mr. Penrose dead? Anything from within the household you’ve noticed?”

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t try to think about such things. It’s not my place, and...” She shook her head, words caught in her throat.

A clatter drew their attention: Evan had nearly dropped the suitcase. Huffing, he exclaimed, “It’s gotta be the ghost, right? Everyone says the place is cursed.”

“Evan!” Mrs Hughes admonished in a sharp tone, turning on him. But before he could be properly scolded, Amelia fixed him with a curious gaze.

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“What ghost?” she asked, tone light but inquisitive.

Evan shrugged. “The Penrose ancestors, of course. Folks say they haunt the halls. Some even say they come back to claim vengeance if the family line is dishonored. All that old nonsense—but I reckon there’s some truth.” He nodded knowingly.

Finn raised an eyebrow. “You believe in that?”

Mrs Hughes sniffed, cheeks pink with embarrassment. “He’s just a lad. Pays too much heed to stories. We’ve got enough tragedy without such superstitions.”

“Yet,” Amelia said softly, “you were about to hush him. So maybe you’ve heard something yourself?”

Reluctantly, Mrs Hughes glanced around, as though checking no one else was in earshot. “A few nights before Mr. Penrose’s murder, I heard a... shriek. Horrible, echoing through the corridors. I can’t say it was a ghost, but the tales do tell that when a dire calamity is about to befall the Penrose family, something howls in the night.”

Evan, his arms shaking under the suitcase’s weight, nodded vigorously. “See, I told you. I believe it. Don’t you?”

Finn eyed Amelia, his mouth quirking. He turned back to Evan. “I’ve seen a lot of strange things in my line of work. But...” He paused, letting the grin spread. “This might be a new level of weird for me.”

Amelia brushed a hand on Finn’s shoulder, stepping closer. “We’ll see,” she said

quietly. “But I’m intrigued.”

The boy started to wrestle the suitcase up the final few stairs. With a sigh, Finn placed the folder under one arm and extended his free hand. “Here, let me—unless you’d like to trip up into another concussion, Amelia?” He shot her a teasing glance, but she merely rolled her eyes. Finn took the handle from Evan and hoisted it. “Lead the way.”

Evan darted ahead through the main doorway—massive, ornate doors that creaked on their hinges. Amelia glanced over her shoulder at Mrs Hughes. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

Mrs Hughes lifted her chin, trying to mask her anxiety. “I’ve things to attend to, Miss. I’ll let Evan show you the rooms. You’ll be comfortable there, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Amelia said gently, then stepped over the threshold, following Finn and the boy.

As soon as they were inside the grand foyer—a marvel of marble floors and lofty ceilings—Finn caught up with the boy, suitcase in tow. “So, Evan,” he ventured. “Do you really believe in these ghosts?”

Evan turned with wide eyes. “Yes, sir. You never experienced anything like that?”

Finn exchanged a quick glance with Amelia, who offered him a faint grin of anticipation. He exhaled, turning back to the boy. “Once... On a case with my partner here on a Scottish island, but I can never be sure.”

“Lead on, Evan,” Amelia said. “I’m sure the ghosts of Brynmor Hall will make us quite welcome.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Finn followed Evan down a long corridor lit by antique wall sconces, the soles of his shoes scuffing softly against the polished wood floor. The boy led them past a series of ornately framed paintings and an occasional window that let in slices of the Welsh afternoon light. At last, Evan stopped before a modest wooden door, pushing it open to reveal a cozy bedroom with a high, timber-beamed ceiling.

A large bed sat in the middle, layered with a thick duvet and plush pillows. To one side rested a small writing desk, and to the other stood a narrow armoire with an oval mirror on its door. A flicker of the old fireplace in the corner gave the room a welcome warmth, and soft drapes lent a faint sense of privacy from the broad windows looking out onto the estate grounds.

“Here you are, sir,” Evan said, dropping Finn’s suitcase by the foot of the bed. “I, uh, hope this suits you.”

Finn gazed around appreciatively, inhaling the faint scent of aged wood and lavender polish. “It’s great, thank you,” he replied. “Looks like I’ll sleep well here.”

Amelia, peering over Finn’s shoulder, gave a small smile. “Cozy indeed,” she commented.

Evan nodded, smoothing out his uniform. “Then I’ll show Miss Winters to her room next.” He started toward the corridor, but Finn interjected, “That’s fine. We’ll be staying in the same—”

“I don’t know about that,” Amelia cut in, arching a playful brow at him. She turned to Evan. “I don’t think the housekeeper was too keen on that idea. We best do as our hosts wish. Lead on, Evan.”

Finn sighed, resigning himself to the arrangement. He snatched his jacket off the suitcase and followed Amelia and Evan back into the corridor. They walked a short



distance—down a corner, past two more doors—until they reached another bedroom, this one located at the far end of the hall. Evan swung it open.

This space was significantly larger than Finn's. A grand four-poster bed stood in the center, draped in ivory linens. A chaise lounge nestled by the tall windows, which offered a wide view of the estate's rolling lawns. An intricately woven rug covered the floor, depicting what looked like Celtic knots. The overall effect was more spacious and just a touch more luxurious than Finn's cozy nook.

Amelia set down her small carry-on bag, eyeing the tall windows. "I guess I get the scenic route," she said, turning to Finn with mock triumph.

He gave the bed a once-over, then shook his head. "You get a bigger room, too. I see how this is."

She half-laughed. "Don't start. Anyway, it's not that much bigger."

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“It’s at least twice the size of mine,” Finn pointed out, glancing around. Then his expression turned mildly concerned. “I don’t like that it’s so far away from my room. If you need me...”

Amelia rolled her eyes gently. “You’re being overprotective. I’ve survived falling through a floor, remember?”

Evan, hovering at the doorway, gave a sheepish grin. “Are you two married, by any chance?”

Amelia let out a brief laugh. “He wishes.”

Finn turned to Evan, though he wore a crooked smile. “She loves me, really.”

Amelia’s cheeks colored slightly, but she cleared her throat, shifting into a more businesslike tone. “Evan, could you show us where James Penrose was found? We’d like to see the room. The, uh... place of death.”

Evan’s previously bright expression dimmed. “Sure. It’s just... well, it’s a bit of a walk from here, in the older part of the house.”

“That’s fine,” Finn said. “Lead the way.”

They retraced their path down corridors that seemed increasingly antiquated—dustier paintings, older furniture, and occasional dark patches on the walls where tapestries once hung. The lighting also changed, becoming more sparse, so that they relied on overhead bulbs that flickered under old wiring. They entered a pristine study, and then

Evan stopped at a thick wooden door reinforced with metal edges.

“This is the panic room entrance,” he explained softly. “Where... well, where we found Mr. Penrose.”

Finn noted how the corridor around them felt narrower and more enclosed, the floorboards creaking as if seldom trodden. He remembered the summary in the case files describing how James was found inside this panic room—never to emerge. The door, lying open like a gaping maw, revealed a small vestibule, the actual reinforced room behind it.

Amelia stepped closer. “Don’t worry, Evan,” she said. “The body’s long gone. We’re just here to check the scene.”

Evan swallowed. “It’s not that,” he mumbled. “I’m... I’m more afraid of what might linger. Y’know, people say that the spirit of anyone who dies like that—” He cut himself off, seeming to regret his words.

Finn offered a reassuring nod. “We’ll be fine. Go ahead, if you need to get back to your chores.”

“Yeah, I—I’ll leave you to it,” Evan murmured, backing away. “You can just come find me if you need anything.” With that, he turned and quickly retreated down the corridor.

Finn and Amelia stood there in silence for a moment, taking in the heavy hush. The door itself looked battered but functional. Inside the panic room, the single light fixture cast a stark glow over the steel walls. It was small, intended only for temporary refuge. The floor was empty, no visible stains or chalk outlines, but a subtle sense of dread lingered in the still air.

Opening the case file, Finn flipped through a few pages. “So, the official report says James Penrose was discovered lying on the floor, with the panic door wide open. Preliminary forensics suggested no immediate sign of external injury.”

Amelia rested a palm against the cold metal wall. “Any autopsy results yet?”

He shook his head. “Not complete. Preliminary notes say it appeared to be a massive heart attack. Which makes sense, except there were some odd details. For instance, although the body was found in the middle of the panic room, there was evidence of a struggle elsewhere down the hallway. And the paramedics described the angle of his fall as if he’d been thrown or knocked over.”

She exhaled. “So maybe a confrontation triggered a heart attack? Or there was foul play.”

Finn snorted wryly. “Or maybe a ghost jumped out at him. We are hearing about Penrose ancestors haunting the place.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “The only thing scaring people away right is your sense of humor, Finn.”

With a grin, he closed the file partially. “But seriously—if the cause of death was a heart attack, why treat it like homicide?”

She pursed her lips. “Could be the Home Office wants to be thorough. Plus, if you read in the report, there was that figure caught skulking around outside on the estate’s very few security feeds.”

Finn nodded. “The grounds have limited cameras, but enough to see someone prowling not long before James died. Then inside, evidence of a scuffle. So... maybe an attacker confronted James, forced him to run here, and that triggered a lethal heart

attack.Or maybe they physically hurt him, and there are no obvious signs yet."

Amelia's gaze swept around the compact space."It's possible.We should keep our minds open.The Home Office basically hands us any case where a high-profile individual dies under murky circumstances.In my opinion, they do it so they can say they've covered all bases.Even if it's not murder."

Finn tapped the file."Best to treat it as one until proven otherwise."

Just then, footsteps approached.They turned to see a woman entering the corridor—tall, slender, with dark hair twisted into a neat chignon.She wore a well-fitted black dress and carried herself with a calm elegance that spoke of wealth and breeding.Her eyes, however, looked tired, rimmed with worry.

"Good afternoon," she said, voice tight."You are with the police, aren't you?I'm Catherine Penrose—James's sister."

Finn straightened, closing the file."We're sorry for your loss.I'm consulting detective Finn Wright, and this is Inspector Amelia Winters.We've been asked to investigate your brother's death."

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Catherine gave a short nod. “Yes, Mrs Hughes said you arrived. We appreciate any answers you can give us, though... I’m not entirely sure there’s a murderer to be found. I do wonder if this was a simple heart attack. I hate to even consider that someone felt they had to murder him.”

Amelia stepped forward. “We’d still like to ask a few questions about James leading up to that night.”

Catherine folded her arms, gaze drifting over the panic room. “Go on.”

“Did your brother have any enemies? Anyone who might want to hurt him?” Finn asked gently.

She shook her head, mouth drawn. “Not that I know of. James was always very composed, almost distant. Lately, though, he grew... tense. I don’t deal with family business much, so I’m not certain what was the cause. He was anxious in a way I’d never seen.”

Amelia exchanged a look with Finn. “Was he worried about money? Enough that it could cause a heart attack?”

Catherine exhaled, brushing imaginary dust from her skirt. “Potentially. He did speak of selling off assets, or letting go some staff. The estate and house are very expensive to run. Then, bizarrely, he sent all of the servants and others away the night he died. Including Mrs Hughes. He said it was just for the evening, that it was a trifling matter, but... well, you saw how that ended.”

Finn frowned. “Do you think James expected trouble that night?”

Catherine’s eyes flickered with a weary sorrow. “It’s possible. Or maybe he just wanted privacy. I do wonder if something or someone spooked him.”

Amelia glanced at the metal walls of the panic room. “Did he ever mention being followed, or threatened?”

Catherine considered. “No direct threats, at least not that he told me. But he was definitely secretive these last few weeks.”

Finn nodded, scribbling a quick note in the file’s margin. “Where are James’s wife and children now?”

Catherine’s lips thinned. “They’ll be arriving within the hour. They were still in Devon when this happened. They’re—devastated, of course.”

He cast a quick look at Amelia. “We should speak to Mrs Penrose, see if she has any insight into who might have meant James harm. Or if she noticed any suspicious behavior.”

Catherine lowered her gaze. “Please do. She might know more than I do.”

A hush fell over the corridor. Finn and Amelia exchanged a determined look. They had more pieces to gather—family perspectives, staff observations, forensic details. If James Penrose’s death was murder, they needed to uncover that motive. And if it was something simpler—a heart attack brought on by fear—they owed it to the family to confirm.

“Would it be possible to have a room where we can set up our laptops and a few things we might need?” Amelia asked.

“Of course,” Catherine replied. “I’ll have Evan direct you to one of our sitting rooms that isn’t often used.”

“Thank you,” Finn said quietly. “We appreciate your help, Ms. Penrose.”

She dipped her head. “Anything you need, you can ask me or Mrs Hughes.” With that, she turned and left, her footsteps echoing down the ancient hallway.

Finn watched her go, mind spinning with questions. Amelia’s brow knitted, presumably matching his thoughts.

Finally, he pulled the door of the panic room shut, slipping the file under his arm. “Should we get properly unpacked and go meet the family?”

Amelia nodded, but a small frown tugged at her lips. “Yeah. Let’s see if they suspect something that Catherine doesn’t.”

Side by side, they headed back along the corridor. Outside, a sudden gust of Welsh wind rattled the old windows, but the house stood firm, for now.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Finn sat in the warm glow of a table lamp inside a sitting room on the ground floor of Brynmor Hall, the late afternoon sun slanting through tall windows. The room felt comfortable yet dignified, with an ornate fireplace at one end—a small fire crackling within—while thick drapes of a deep burgundy bordered each window. A few well-stuffed armchairs and a floral sofa encircled a low wooden table. On that table lay a pot of steaming tea, mismatched cups, and Finn’s open case file.

He leaned forward in one of the armchairs, flipping through typed pages and crime scene photos of James Penrose’s final moments. He frowned at a line about “possible



signs of a struggle,” lightly drumming his fingers on the paper. A hush filled the room except for the soft crackle of fire and occasional rustle of Amelia’s teacup.

Opposite him, Amelia perched on the sofa near the window. One leg tucked under her, she sipped from a porcelain cup. A patch of bandage still showed on her right hand, a physical reminder of her recent misadventure with Wendell Reed’s decoy. She hadn’t spoken much for the last few minutes, simply gazing outside where well-tended lawns rolled toward the distant tree line.

After a stretch of silence, Finn couldn’t resist nudging her thoughts. “Penny for them?” he asked, setting the file aside. “You’ve been quieter than normal.”

Amelia lowered her cup, letting out a thoughtful sigh. “It’s just...how a person’s world, no matter how rich and influential, can come to an abrupt end without warning. Places like this estate appear calm, wealthy, and untroubled. But you peel back a layer, and there might be murder, conspiracy—who knows?”

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Finn tilted his head. “So you’re turning philosopher on me now?”

She gave a half-smile. “Not quite. Just can’t help noticing the difference between appearances and reality. Sometimes, I wonder if that’s true everywhere: calm on the surface, murky underneath.”

He nodded, swirling the last of the tea in his own cup. “It’s like people. They put on a polished face, but get them under pressure, and suddenly cracks appear. The best version of themselves is often just a mask.” He paused, setting his cup on the table’s edge. “Guess that’s why we do what we do—figuring out what’s real, even if it’s ugly. I mean, on the face of it, this seems opulent this place, but I bet underneath it’s falling to pieces. It’s already been mentioned a couple of times how expensive it is to run. People cut corners but still try to keep up appearances.”

She looked at him, eyes reflecting a mixture of agreement and fatigue. “I suppose that’s true. Finn, do you keep up appearances or wear a mask?”

A knock on the door interrupted their reflective moment. Finn straightened in the chair, sharing a questioning glance with Amelia before calling out, “Come in.”

Mrs Hughes entered, gently pushing the door open. Her right hand, Finn noticed again, trembled with that faint yet persistent tremor. Still, her posture remained poised. “Excuse me, Mr. Wright—Miss Winters,” she said with a small bow of her head. “The Penrose family have just arrived.”

Finn exchanged a quick look with Amelia. “Thank you. We’ll be right out.” He snapped the file shut, reorganizing the scattered pages. Amelia finished her tea in one

last swallow, then placed the cup on the tray.

Mrs Hughes gave a polite nod. “They’re pulling up to the main entrance now.” She lingered briefly, as though pondering whether to say more, then stepped aside.

Finn gathered the file under his arm. “Let’s go easy,” he murmured to Amelia, who stood and smoothed a crease in her blouse.

They left the sitting room, passing through a short hallway and out onto the mansion’s front steps. Outside, the late-day sun tinted the sky with a faint rose hue. Gravel crunched under their feet as they moved toward the circular driveway, where a sleek black limousine glided to a halt.

A uniformed driver hopped out, opening the passenger door. Finn watched as a woman in her early forties emerged, clad entirely in black—dress, coat, gloves. She had an elegant, almost regal bearing, though her face was drawn with grief. A faint breeze stirred her dark hair.

Finn stepped forward, raising a hand in gentle greeting. “Good evening. I’m Finn Wright, and this is Inspector Amelia Winters. We’ve been sent to look into Mr. Penrose’s death on behalf of the home office.”

The woman drew a shaky breath. “Yes. I know. I’m glad. I am Marianne Penrose,” she said in a low voice touched by a French accent. Then, her lip quivered. “His widow,” she added, almost choking on the word.

Amelia offered a sympathetic smile, mindful of her own bruised face and bandaged hand. “Mrs. Penrose, we’re so sorry for your loss.”

Marianne swallowed, blinking back tears. She half-turned to address the driver, who stood by the limo. “Hobbs—please see the children inside.”

At the mention of children, Finn glanced at the back seat. Two young faces peered out: a boy around nine and a girl perhaps twelve. Their expressions mirrored the mourning clothes they wore—solemn, overwhelmed. Finn felt a pang of empathy, remembering the swirl of confusion and pain he'd suffered when he lost his own mother young.

He crouched down to the boy's level as the child stepped onto the driveway. "Hello there. I'm Finn." He held out his hand gently.

The boy stared at him, then accepted the handshake with a small, polite grip. "My name is Charlie," he replied quietly.

"Nice to meet you, Charlie," Finn said, giving him a kind nod. "I'm sorry about your dad."

Charlie nodded but didn't speak further. He glanced at his older sister, who lingered at the limo door. Amelia approached, a soft greeting on her lips, but the girl leveled a heartbreaking glare at them both.

"I know why you're here," she said in a tight voice, then spun around and bolted toward the entrance. "Come on, Charlie," she called over her shoulder.

Hobbs, the driver, signaled to Charlie. "We'll get you settled in your rooms," he said, gesturing for them to follow. Mrs. Hughes, who had emerged discreetly, hurried forward to guide the children.

Finn and Amelia watched them go. The sorrow in those young eyes weighed on Finn's heart, unearthing memories he'd rather keep buried. He let out a breath, straightening as Marianne turned back to face them.

She swallowed. "Bella—my daughter—she's... taking this very hard. They both

are. James doted on them, in his way.”

Amelia stepped closer, her voice gentle. “Children handle grief in different ways. Sometimes it’s anger, or they just shut down. It’s never easy.”

“Yes,” Marianne whispered. She paused, scanning the estate’s facade, then turned to Finn. “So. Are you certain my husband was murdered? That’s what rumors say—some homicide inquiry.”

Finn exchanged a subtle look with Amelia. “We aren’t certain, Mrs. Penrose. Some evidence suggests a possible struggle before his death, but the autopsy hasn’t been concluded yet.”

Marianne exhaled a short, bitter laugh. “I’ve seen you two on news reports—cases involving high-profile killings.” Her shoulders slumped. “Then I discover you’re here investigating James’s death. This must mean they truly suspect foul play. Otherwise, the local police would handle it.”

Amelia offered a slight nod. “Officially, the forensic team found a few puzzling details: signs of a scuffle, possible footprints outside. But it could mean nothing, that’s what we’re here to find out. And your husband, through his dealings with business and political figures, was an important man, influential enough that the Home Office wanted extra eyes on the investigation.”

“Important,” Marianne repeated, voice tinged with sarcasm. “He was a ‘person of notes,’ to coin a phrase. James thrived on money. If it wasn’t financial, it barely registered for him.”

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Finn carefully kept his expression neutral. He wasn't here to judge family dynamics, only to uncover the truth. "Did he mention any threats against him, or was there anyone he argued with frequently?"

She shook her head. "No direct threats. Just tension over the estate's costs. He was obsessed with solutions to our financial issues, but no one threatened him that I know of."

Amelia glanced at the house behind them. "When you left for Devon, was it James's idea that you and the children go away?"

Marianne frowned slightly, recalling the memory. "Yes. He insisted. Said he needed time alone, no distractions. I assumed that meant staff would be kept to a minimum, but I had no idea he actually sent them all away, too. That's... very unlike James. He relied on them constantly."

Finn's mind clicked through possibilities. "Might he have been expecting a private visitor or business partner that he didn't want people knowing about?"

She folded her arms, clearly drained. "I wish I knew. But I'm sorry—this journey has been exhausting. Could we continue tomorrow? I need to rest and check on my children."

Amelia placed a comforting hand on the woman's shoulder. "Of course. We're not in a rush. We just wanted to express our condolences and gather a few initial details."

With an appreciative nod, Marianne turned and moved inside, footsteps echoing on

the stone entry. The door closed gently behind her, leaving Finn and Amelia in the late-day hush.

Finn turned to Amelia, noticing how the setting sun cast long shadows across the gravel driveway. “So. We have conflicting clues: James was apparently tense about money, but did that lead to someone wanting to harm him, or did it push him to do something reckless that put him in jeopardy? Plus, there’s the question of who might’ve come to see him that night, or if he was meeting anyone at all.”

Amelia folded her arms. “We should talk to the staff individually—people who come and go around the property. There could be ex-servants, relatives, business partners. Anyone he’d have a reason to meet privately.”

He tilted his head in agreement. “And maybe go through visitor logs, if they keep them.” He paused, scanning the old manor’s facade. A subtle movement near the upper eaves caught his attention—some small dome or lens nestled among the stonework. “Look at that camera,” he pointed out, eyebrows lifting. “Could give us a vantage of who arrived or left.”

Amelia followed his gaze, eyes narrowing. “If it actually works.”

Finn exhaled, picturing the swirl of leads they already had. “So far, we have staff interviews, possible camera footage, and at some point we’ll want to search James’s study or personal office. We can’t assume it was just a heart attack.”

A faint smile touched Amelia’s lips. “Well, I guess we’ve found our next steps.”

He gave a mild shrug, flipping the top folder in his hand closed. “My next step is straight into a kitchen to find something to eat.”

Amelia laughed softly. “Focus, Finn. Not everything’s about your stomach.”

“It’s about my brain power,” he teased. “Feeding it is crucial for a thorough investigation. Besides, we might be able to question the cook about what’s going on around here.”

She smirked and gestured toward the door. “C’mon then, detective.” As they crossed the threshold, the shadows of dusk began to make themselves known, stretching out across the lawn until they soon swept over the house itself like a black tide.

## CHAPTER SIX

Finn felt a distinct hush settle over Brynmor Hall as evening descended upon the estate. The corridor lamps, turned low, cast soft halos of light against the paneling. Shadows stretched along the walls, and a stillness, tinged with the faint scents of varnished wood and old upholstery, clung to every corner. He and Amelia made their way toward the kitchen, guided by a subtle glow deeper in the hallway. Donald Jones, the cook, was supposedly inside, and Finn was keen on hearing the man’s perspective on James Penrose’s final night.

As they approached the kitchen door—a sturdy wooden affair with a wrought-iron handle—Finn caught a whiff of something both savory and buttery. He swung the door open for Amelia and stepped in behind her, taking in the scene:

The kitchen was large, reflecting the manor’s old-world grandeur. A looming, iron-enamel stove occupied one entire wall, its surface cluttered with pots, some still warm from the day’s cooking. Rows of copper pans hung overhead from a pot rack. A broad wooden island dominated the center of the space, scoured clean but scarred with the marks of countless chopping sessions. Along the far side, two ample sinks and a marble-topped counter gleamed under the gentle overhead lights. A few herbs in tiny pots stood on the windowsill, faintly silhouetted against the dark outside.

A heavyset man in his late twenties—a round, ruddy face and thick arms—stood



behind the island. He wore a plain white chef's jacket stretched over a solid belly and had a dish towel flung over one shoulder. At the sight of Finn and Amelia, he stiffened, setting aside a knife he'd been wiping.

"Evening," Finn began, offering a disarming nod. "Are you the cook here?"

Donald bobbed his head, eyes flicking from Finn to Amelia. "Yes. That'd be me. Donald Jones. Usually just 'Don' is enough."

Amelia, stepping forward, gave a polite smile. "I'm Inspector Amelia Winters, and this is Finn Wright. We're investigating Mr. Penrose's death."

Donald's gaze dropped to the floor for a beat. "Right. Heard folks say they were bringing in experts or something. So... how can I help?"

Finn took a moment to note the man's posture. He seemed nervous, shoulders hunched slightly, brow damp with perspiration. "We'd like to know where you were two nights ago," Finn said softly, "the night James Penrose died."

Donald set down his dish towel, glancing away. "I—I was out. Not here. Went to Myrlin's Nook." His voice wavered just enough for Finn to sense tension. "It's a pub in the nearest village, about seven miles down the main road."

"People saw you there?" Amelia prompted, crossing her arms loosely.

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Donald lifted a shoulder, trying to appear casual. “Plenty did. It was quiz night.” He cleared his throat. “Even had a team with a few villagers I know. We were... trying to beat the local champions, but we lost, of course.”

Finn studied the cook’s face for any flicker of falsehood. “That’s good,” he said, letting the man sense his calm. “So if we ask around, folks’ll confirm you were there all evening?”

“From about half-six to half-ten.” Donald shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Didn’t get back to my Aunt’s house in Blethyn village until near midnight, once I walked some of the distance. My car’s on the fritz, you see. But my Aunt can vouch for that. I usually stay here on the estate, but we were asked to leave for the night.”

Amelia glanced at the expansive counters, an array of utensils neatly arranged. “What did you think when Mr. Penrose asked the staff to leave that night? We heard that was unusual.”

Donald wiped his hands on his apron, expression turning guarded. “Did you talk to Mrs Hughes or something?”

Finn gave a nod of acknowledgment. “We’ve spoken to a few staff. They said sometimes Mr. Penrose dismissed you all, but you said it was different this time?”

A faint quiver of nervousness crossed Donald’s features. “Aye, it was. Usually if he wanted quiet, he’d mention it a day or two ahead—maybe he had a big meeting or wanted the place to himself. But two nights ago, it was last-minute. He seemed...

anxious, telling us we had to go. I said I could put food out for him and anyone else that might be here. But he kept looking at the time, saying he'd handle everything for the evening himself."

Amelia exchanged a glance with Finn. "Did he give any explanation for why he wanted everyone gone?"

Donald spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "None that I heard. Listen, I'm not exactly in the loop. I live and breathe this kitchen—when they want food, I make it, but I don't pry into their business. It pays better if I just keep my head down, you know?"

An edge of discomfort laced his voice, making Finn suspect the man didn't relish being drawn into the estate's drama. With the corners of his mouth turned down in a mild frown, Finn decided to dial back the directness. "That's fair," he said. "We appreciate your cooperation."

Visibly relieved, Donald exhaled. "Sure. I'm not trying to hide anything. Sorry if I seem jumpy—I just never expected Mr. Penrose's passing."

Amelia offered him a small smile. "We'll let you get back to work. Before we go, we might want dinner in the blue jay sitting room, if that's okay? Unless you'd prefer we eat here? We don't want to add to your workload."

Donald waved a dismissive hand. "No, no. I'll have your meal brought to you if you'd like. I can do a roast leftover or something quick. Send one of the staff to deliver it, yeah?"

"That'd be great," Finn responded. "Thanks for your help."

He and Amelia turned, stepping from the kitchen back into the corridor's dim

hush. Behind them, the cook cleared his throat, seemingly relieved to have them gone. The door swung shut with a soft thud, leaving them enveloped once again in the manor's quiet atmosphere.

"Interesting," Amelia said, her tone low. "He clearly wanted nothing to do with James's personal life."

Finn nodded. "Which might be honest—some employees just keep to themselves. But the way James insisted on the staff leaving at the last minute stands out."

"Agreed. Let's see if Mrs Hughes can help fill in the gaps," Amelia replied, and they strolled deeper into the hallway. Oil paintings hung on the walls—stately portraits of men and women in old-fashioned attire, presumably the Penrose ancestors. The faint tang of dust and polish lingered as they walked.

They found Mrs Hughes in a small side office, hunched over a desk with a ledger open, flipping pages in the low lamplight. Her trembling right hand hovered over a notepad while her left turned the page. At their footsteps, she glanced up, startled.

"Oh—Mr. Wright, Miss Winters." She stood respectfully. "I was... updating accounts." Her voice wobbled a touch, and she quickly moved the ledger aside.

Finn smiled gently. "We won't keep you long, Mrs Hughes. We wanted to ask if we can have a list of everyone who works here regularly—the staff, maybe even part-timers. We're trying to see who might have any insight into James Penrose's final day."

"Of course," Mrs Hughes replied. "I'll compile something promptly. Most are here daily, some only monthly for special tasks. The gardener is a part-timer, for example." She shut the ledger and rose fully. "When do you need it?"

“As soon as you’re able,” Amelia said. “Tomorrow morning would be fine, if that’s easier.”

Mrs Hughes dipped her chin. “I’ll have it ready for you immediately.”

“Thank you.” Finn cleared his throat. “Also, I recall you mentioned there’s a place the security cameras feed into—some kind of monitoring room, perhaps? Could we see it?”

The housekeeper’s brows lifted. “Certainly. Right this way, please.” She guided them back into the corridor. They wove through a couple of winding passages until Mrs Hughes paused at a narrow door that might have been easy to overlook. She pushed it open, revealing a cramped space lined with shelves stacked with supplies: extra linens, cleaning materials, old boxes. At one end stood a desk with a modest setup of screens and a bank of electronic equipment humming quietly.

“This is the security station,” Mrs Hughes explained, stepping aside so Finn and Amelia could enter. She turned a switch on the wall, and the overhead light brightened, illuminating the screens. Each displayed a grainy black-and-white live feed of the estate’s exterior: one pointed at the front driveway, another at the back gardens, and a couple more capturing side angles of the sprawling grounds.

Finn leaned in for a closer look, scanning the monitors. “So no interior coverage at all, I see.”

Mrs Hughes shook her head apologetically. “The family insisted on privacy. Mr. James Penrose didn’t want cameras inside. He thought it invasive, especially when he’d have important guests here like politicians. He believed the staff should be trusted and that the family deserved not to be watched in their own home.”

“That’s fairly normal for old families,” Amelia muttered. “Though with all these

valuables, you'd think they'd want internal security. Especially if finances were a concern."

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Mrs Hughes pressed her trembling hand to her chest. “It was Mr Penrose’s choice, not mine. I wish we’d had some cameras inside now... If there’s nothing else...?”

Finn glanced at Amelia, who shook her head. “No, thank you, Mrs Hughes,” Finn said. “We appreciate your help.”

With a slight bow, Mrs Hughes stepped back. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Good evening.” She slipped out, the door closing behind her, leaving the faint hush of electronics filling the space.

Finn hovered near the screens, scanning each camera angle. “Just exterior coverage,” he said quietly. “Nothing inside.” He turned to Amelia. “Strange, isn’t it?”

She folded her arms. “You mean the fact that they protect the grounds but not the interior? Maybe James was worried about trespassers, but not so worried about theft from within.”

“Or he had reasons not to have his own activities recorded,” Finn suggested. “He might’ve wanted privacy for... well, who knows what. Considering the staff were told to leave that night, it might be connected.”

Amelia leaned against a stack of boxes. “So you think he was up to something behind closed doors?”

Finn tapped his fingers on the corner of a monitor. “It’s possible. The entire scenario—the last-minute dismissal, no one else around, no cameras inside—it begs the question of what he was doing in here alone. Maybe a meeting with a secret

associate. Or a transaction he didn't want overheard." He paused. "If he was stressed as his sister Catherine claimed, maybe James was engaging in something shady."

Amelia's gaze flicked to the screens. "Right. That could lead to a confrontation, which might have escalated."

She moved to stand beside him, eyes tracing the camera displays. The front drive showed a patch of gravel and the distant gate illuminated by weak floodlights. The rear garden feed displayed a softly lit stone path and swaying silhouettes of hedges in the breeze. Two side-camera feeds took in partial angles of the manor's flanks, but as Amelia pointed out, "I notice the entire eastern side is missing. Large chunk of ground there with no coverage."

Finn frowned. "Yes. If the system's meant to safeguard the perimeter, leaving an entire approach uncovered is odd. Why bother with cameras at all if you leave a blind spot?"

"It doesn't cost much to have a camera feed like this. You'd think they'd install a complete setup," Amelia said, rubbing her chin. "So if an intruder came from the east—"

"—the cameras wouldn't see them." Finn finished. "That might be how that prowler got close on the night James died."

Amelia gave him a small nod. "In the initial report from the local cops, it was mentioned there was a shape on the lawn, captured by one of these cameras, right?"

Finn opened up his phone and read one of the notes he'd kept. "Yes," he said. "It says, 'Unidentified figure glimpsed on feed, approaching from the front but then moving out of frame.' Then it disappears." He turned to the console, scanning for the playback controls. "Let's see if we can load the footage from that night."



After a minute of fiddling, he located a panel with labeled discs or memory cards. The date stamp read the night James died. Toggling a small screen, he found a black-and-white recording of the front lawn, time-stamped around 9:45 pm. He and Amelia bent closer, eyes locked on the fuzzy image.

At first, the lawn looked empty, just faint shapes of shrubs trembling in the wind. Then, around the corner of the screen, a shifting silhouette appeared. Grainy and dark, it edged along the grass in an unnatural crouch.

“That’s it,” Amelia whispered, tapping the screen gently.

Finn slowed the playback. The shape inched forward, almost on all fours. With the poor resolution, it was impossible to discern if it was human. The figure stopped near the boundary of the camera’s coverage, paused as though sniffing the air, and then slunk out of view to the east side.

His skin prickled. “It does look... animal-like,” he said slowly.

Amelia inhaled. “If it’s a person, that’s a bizarre way to approach. Maybe they were trying to remain inconspicuous. With poor lighting, it’s easy to mistake them for a dog or something.”

Finn clicked through additional frames, but the figure never reemerged. “So it’s gone to the east side. Where there’s no camera.”

A hush settled between them, the only sound the faint whir of the recorder. Amelia straightened. “If it is a person, it’s possibly an intruder who confronted James. It would explain why he ran to his panic room. Alone on the estate at night. I can’t imagine...”

Finn shut down the playback, slipping the memory card out. “We’ll hold onto this. But for now, there’s only one way to see if we can glean anything else.”

Amelia arched an eyebrow. “Which is...?”

He grabbed a flashlight from a nearby shelf, presumably used by the security staff. “We go outside, check that east lawn ourselves.”

She pursed her lips, giving a half-laugh. “It’s pitch-dark out there, and we might be rummaging through wet grass. Perfect plan.”

Finn shrugged, a wry grin on his face. “You’re the one who used to say I was never adventurous enough.”

They left the small security room, stepping into the corridor. The house felt even quieter now that night had fully settled in. Dim sconces lit the hallway with a weak glow. The shift from the mild warmth of the manor to the crisp Welsh night air struck them the moment they passed through a side door leading onto the veranda.

Outside, a gentle wind rustled the lawn and hedges, carrying a mild scent of damp earth. The estate’s floodlights offered a patchwork of light and shadow, leaving swaths of lawn in near-blackness. Finn clicked on the flashlight, its beam cutting a narrow path across the grass.

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“Let’s see if we can find anything resembling footprints or tracks,” he said, taking a step forward.

Amelia followed, hugging her arms against the chill. Together, they navigated around shrubs and flowerbeds, occasionally wincing at the soft squish of sodden ground underfoot. The hall’s lights behind them seemed distant, giving the impression of stepping into another world, cloaked in darkness.

“So,” Amelia murmured quietly, “someone decided the side-lawn approach was best. Minimal chance of detection, apparently.”

Finn swept the beam across the grass, half-hoping they’d discover footprints or some clue. The ground showed faint impressions here and there—possibly from staff or deliveries, but none obviously human. After a few minutes, they reached the eastern edge of the property, where a tall hedge curved along the boundary.

“This is about where the footage cut out,” Finn said, shining the light around. He crouched, peering at the ground more closely.

The grass was uneven, dotted with patches of muddier soil. Something at the edge of his flashlight beam caught his eye—a set of faint depressions forming a sort of trail. He leaned closer, heart ticking up a beat. The shape didn’t look like a simple shoe print.

Amelia knelt beside him, flattening her bandaged hand on a drier patch to steady herself. “What is it?” she asked under her breath.

Finn directed the flashlight carefully, illuminating a small cluster of prints: elongated, smeared, palm-like. The muddy outlines suggested a broad shape—like a human hand. Then, further along, another partial imprint, as if the person had used both hands and knees to move forward.

“They look like... hands,” Finn said, voice hushed with a flicker of unease. “Whoever was crawling out here was literally on all fours.”

Amelia’s breath caught, a swirl of tension filling the dark air around them. “Why crawl around the grounds unless you’re trying to appear as an animal? Or they truly didn’t want to be recognized as human from the cameras’ vantage?”

Finn rocked back on his heels, scanning the rest of the lawn. “The shape we saw in the footage was exactly that—someone or something creeping along. And these tracks confirm it was a person, or at least a person with full use of their hands.”

Amelia’s features tightened. “This is more unsettling than I expected. Could be a burglar, an intruder, maybe a killer.”

Finn shut off the flashlight, letting only the faint glow from the manor windows outline their silhouettes. A swirl of night wind rattled the nearby hedges, sending a sudden chill down his spine. The thought of a figure slinking across the lawn on hands and knees, approaching unseen, triggered an uneasy feeling in his gut.

“Maybe James saw whoever it was,” Finn said, “and panicked. That might account for a heart attack—fear or a confrontation.”

Amelia nodded slowly. “Maybe this intruder sneaked into the house when James thought he was safe. I don’t think there’s much more we can get from here tonight.”

He rose, offering her a hand to help her up. “Agreed. No point in stumbling around

more now. Let's head in before we start conjuring monsters in every shadow."

She accepted his hand, grimacing slightly as she stood, bandaged fingers pressing into his palm. With a wary look over his shoulder at the dark grass behind them, Finn led the way back toward the manor's warm glow. Each step echoed softly in the hush.

At the threshold, he paused, glancing over the estate's silhouette. The security lights revealed just enough to see the imposing structure, windows reflecting moonlight. Brynmor Hall seemed to watch them in turn, tall and silent. Another swirl of wind brushed across the driveway, and Finn had a horrible, illogical thought: What else crawls around this estate at night?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Finn felt a mild draft follow him and Amelia into the sitting room, as though the corridor behind them exhaled cold air that seeped in around the edges of the heavy double doors. The clock on the mantel indicated it was late—closer to ten than nine—and Brynmor Hall had a hush about it, a quiet thick with shadows. He shut the door behind them, casting a quick glance at the carved wooden panels, as if half expecting another mysterious knock or creaking footstep to chase them.

The sitting room, which during the day had been filled with soft natural light, now glowed under the warm radiance of several lamps and a candelabra on a side table. Mrs Hughes had prepared a small dining setup near the hearth: a round table with a crisp white cloth, two place settings, and an arrangement of silverware that looked almost formal. A subtle aroma of roasted meat, herbs, and warm bread hung in the air, making Finn's stomach rumble.

"I could get used to service like this," he murmured, sharing a conspiratorial smile with Amelia.

She gave a small laugh, but her mind seemed partially elsewhere, eyes flicking across the room's plush chairs and the flicker of flames in the fireplace. "True. At least we don't have to do dishes tonight."

Before they could approach the table, Mrs Hughes glided in, her right hand still trembling lightly at her side while she left clutched a folded piece of paper. She offered a polite bow of the head. "Mr. Wright, Miss Winters—your dinner is ready. And here..." She extended the paper. "This is the staff list. Everyone I know who's employed here regularly or stays on the estate."

Amelia accepted the paper with a polite nod. "Thank you, Mrs Hughes. We appreciate it."

As Finn watched Mrs Hughes, he noticed a thread of apprehension in her expression. Not fear exactly, but a sort of tension. He took the opportunity to inquire about something that had been needling him. "Mrs Hughes, can I ask—why isn't there a security camera on the east side of the house?"

She seemed briefly flustered, blinking and straightening her back. "I'm afraid I don't know, sir. That business was arranged by Mr. Penrose, and I wasn't consulted. It's been that way for years, as far as I recall."

"Right," Finn said, letting it go for now. "Thank you."

She offered a tiny dip of her head, turned to Amelia, and spoke softly, "You'll find a few more staff names on that list than you might expect. Some are part-timers who come and go on a monthly basis. But that's everyone I'm aware of."

Amelia glanced at the paper. "We'll look it over. Thanks again."

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Mrs Hughes's eyes flickered to the table. "I'll leave you to your meal. If there's anything else you need, please ring." She managed a small, polite smile before retreating.

Finn took a seat at the small table, gesturing for Amelia to join him. The moment they settled in, the aromas of the food hit him full force: a savory roast with herbs, roasted vegetables glistening with butter, and fresh bread so warm it still emitted gentle steam. A small dish of creamy sauce sat to the side, next to a bowl of crisp salad topped with toasted seeds.

"This might be the highlight of the day," Finn said, draping a napkin over his lap. He'd had no idea if they'd even manage dinner tonight, considering the swirl of investigating they'd done.

Amelia helped herself to a slice of the roast, eyes widening in pleasant surprise. "Donald might be nervous, but he sure can cook."

Finn cut a piece and savored it. "Not sure I want to go back to my own cooking after being treated like nobility."

She snorted a laugh. "Yeah, how am I going to survive off your questionable spaghetti again?"

"Questionable? I'll have you know I've perfected my tomato sauce," Finn teased, savoring another bite. "But fine, maybe it's a rung or two below this."

They spent a few minutes enjoying the meal, the tension of the day easing under the

comfort of good food. Occasionally, the logs in the fireplace crackled or a distant floorboard groaned, a reminder they weren't in some cozy inn but in a sprawling estate with secrets behind every door.

Eventually, Finn's phone rang, buzzing against the edge of the table. He glanced at the caller ID and grinned. "It's Rob," he announced, picking it up. "Wonder what he's up to at this hour."

He tapped the screen. "Hey, Rob. How're things?"

A brief burst of static came through, followed by Rob's familiar tone. "Finn, you busy?"

Finn cast a playful look at Amelia, who rolled her eyes. "We're just having a gourmet meal, thanks to the local cook. Why, you want to join?"

Rob gave a soft chuckle. "I'd love that, mate, but I'm a bit far away, you know? By the way, there's someone here who wants to say hi." A muffled exchange sounded through the phone, then Finn heard a distinct female voice—Eleanor's—call something in the background about "popcorn."

Finn shot a grin at Amelia and returned to the phone. "Eleanor's with you, huh? She doing better?"

Rob cleared his throat. "She's fine now that she doesn't have to put up with your big-headed jokes, apparently."

Feigning wounded pride, Finn huffed. "Oh, come on. We had fun working together, and she knows it. How many times did I save her from boredom?"

"That's your definition of fun?" Rob teased, his voice faintly muffled as if he was



speaking from behind his hand. “I recall it more as a series of near-catastrophes. Doesn’t your brand of fun usually involve some explosion?”

Amelia, hearing that, chuckled quietly while slicing another piece of roast.

“Anyway,” Rob continued, “I just got some news that might help you. Wednesday, our pathologist, she got the official autopsy results for James Penrose’s body. I’ll email them, but I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

Finn sobered, leaning forward. “Go on. Did she find anything unusual?”

Rob’s tone shifted to a more professional one. “He had a heart condition, quite severe. Wednesday says it was basically a ticking clock for him. A big shock or confrontation might have been enough to push him into arrest. So, obviously, that doesn’t confirm murder or no murder, but... it means the cause of death was definitely a heart attack.”

Finn glanced at Amelia, who met his gaze in silent question. “So that’s official? The actual blow to the system was his failing heart, not a poison?”

“Exactly. Preliminary toxicology is negative for known toxins—though Wednesday’s still waiting on a couple of specialized screens. For now, it’s consistent with a fear-induced or stress-induced cardiac event. He was going to pass sooner or later, apparently. We don’t know if he knew about this.”

“Hmm,” Finn murmured. “So we’re not sure if someone physically attacked him or if he just freaked out, then collapsed.”

“Bingo,” Rob said. “But the Home Office wants you to spend a couple more days confirming there’s no foul play. Word is James Penrose was connected in higher circles, so they want to be absolutely sure there’s no scandal or homicide cover-up.”

Finn nodded, swirling a last mouthful of water. “Understood. So we’ll keep investigating, see if anything suggests a killer lurking around. Or if it was just... natural but unfortunate timing.”

“That’s the plan,” Rob affirmed. “Anyway, I’ll send those files. Gotta run—Eleanor’s calling me to watch a film. She’s apparently made popcorn.”

Finn broke into a grin. “Enjoy your night in. Tell her she can’t fully escape me, we’ll cross paths again sometime. The four of us should have dinner soon.”

“Will do. Good luck, mate.”

With a tap, Finn ended the call. He placed the phone beside his plate and leaned back in his chair, eyes drifting to Amelia. She’d slowed her eating, evidently listening closely to the conversation.

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“What’s the verdict?” she asked, pushing aside her vegetables.

"Penrose had a bad heart. The autopsy says he died of a massive heart attack. They found no direct sign of foul play or obvious toxin." Finn rapped a knuckle on the table. "So... might be natural causes."

Amelia set down her fork, crossing her arms. "But it might also be that someone knew about his condition and exploited it."

"Exploited it how?" Finn raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "If you scare someone with a cardiac problem enough, if you chase them, threaten them... they might collapse. It wouldn't necessarily constitute homicide, but morally, it's still murder."

Finn grimaced, picturing that grainy figure crawling across the lawn. "You're suggesting he literally died of fright?"

Amelia sipped water thoughtfully. "It's possible. If that figure in the footage confronted him in some horrifying or menacing way, that alone could trigger a fatal shock."

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "So, if that's true, it's still a homicide in a sense—someone intentionally caused that shock. But we have no proof, just the presence of some prowler. And we don't even know if James saw them."

A pause settled in. Then a soft, distinct rap sounded at the door—three short

knocks.Finn shared a look with Amelia, a prickle of caution along his spine.He rose, crossing the sitting room to open it, but found only empty hallway.The corridor lamp flickered and cast shifting shadows, revealing no one.

“Hello?”Finn called softly.No answer.He leaned out, scanning left and right.Silence.The floor creaked under his weight.After a final check, he pulled the door shut again, returning to the table.

“No one?”Amelia asked, eyebrows raised.

He shook his head.“Not a soul.This place can be downright creepy, I swear.”

She let out a half-smile that danced between amusement and concern.“We can rule out Brynmor’s ghosts as suspects... right?”

He exhaled with a sardonic look.“I’m not so sure.Between the bizarre shape outside, the empty hallway door knocks, and everything else, we might be dealing with more than ghosts.Or maybe nothing at all.”A wave of tension rippled through him; the manor’s atmosphere was certainly living up to its haunting rumors.

“But the Home Office wants us to see if there’s an actual murderer,” Amelia said, picking up the folded list Mrs Hughes had given her.“And if this is purely natural... at least we can confirm that.”

Finn dropped back into his seat, feeling the day’s events weigh on him.“We’ll look at these names tomorrow, see who might have had reason to be here after hours or to do something that spooked James.”He gestured at the list.“Anyone jump out?”

Amelia glanced over the sheet.“Donald, Mrs Hughes, Evan, Catherine, Marianne and the kids—those we’ve met.But there’s a handful of others we’ve yet to encounter.”

Finn nodded. “We’ll have to talk to James’s wife, Marianne, more thoroughly, as well as the children, though obviously they’re in mourning. And Catherine’s perspective might be crucial. She was around, or at least close by.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Amelia set the list aside, finishing the last few bites on her plate. “I’m about done. You ready to call it a night?”

His stomach felt content, but a small part of him resisted the idea of wandering these corridors alone. Still, the day’s fatigue tugged at him. “Yeah, let’s head up.”

They tidied their plates on the table, the remains of dinner left neatly for the staff. Amelia stretched her arms overhead, stifling a yawn. Together they left the sitting room, stepping into the corridor that led to the main staircase. The manor’s nighttime hush pressed in around them once more, an odd hush broken only by their footsteps.

Halfway up the stairs, a wave of nostalgia for simpler cases washed over Finn. He stole a glance at Amelia, noting the faint bruise near her temple that refused to fully fade. She caught his look, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Everything okay?” she murmured, voice echoing softly in the lofty stairwell.

He mustered a wry grin. “Just glad you’re here, even if this place unsettles me a bit.”

She smirked, gently bumping his shoulder with hers. “Sure does beat falling through a floor, that’s for certain.”

They reached the landing. The corridor lights here flickered as though the wiring might be outdated. At last, they arrived at Finn’s bedroom door—his cozy chamber from the other night. The door stood closed, the antique knob polished to a dull shine. Finn paused, turning to Amelia.

“Care to come in?”he teased lightly.“At least so I can be sure a ghost doesn’t drag me under the bed.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled.“I’m not sure being your girlfriend necessarily includes checking under the bed for monsters.”Then, in a gentler moment, she stepped forward, placed a light kiss on his lips.“But thanks for the invitation.”

A pleasant warmth spread through him.“Any time.”

Drawing back, she smoothed a hand along her blouse.“We need to be professional, though, right?We’re not on holiday.We’ve got an investigation to handle, and I’m sure if the Home Office caught wind of us being... Affectionate with each other around here, we’d be in a whole heap of trouble.”

“True,” Finn conceded, letting out a faint sigh.

“Good night, Finn,” she said, turning toward the corridor that branched off to her room. “Try not to conjure any poltergeists.”

He watched her slip away, footsteps fading until she disappeared around the bend. A fleeting pang of loneliness hit him, but he shrugged it off. They both needed rest for the day ahead.

Stepping into his bedroom, he closed the door behind him. The room looked much as it had that first night: a cozy bed with thick blankets, a small writing desk near the window, and the same old fireplace, now unlit. The only difference was the nighttime hush creeping through the window’s drawn curtains, amplifying every shift of wood or rattle of the old glass.

He flicked on the solitary lamp by the bedside, the faint glow revealing the large bed. The space was undeniably comfortable—warm colors, plush duvet, the faint floral scent of fresh linens. Yet a chill, perhaps from the old stone walls or the ghostly rumors swirling in his mind, made him shiver.

Dropping his jacket on the back of a chair, Finn glanced around, half-smiling at the thought of ghosts after everything he’d faced. He moved to the desk, where he’d left a few personal items. The old wood creaked under his palm.

“Ghosts? If you’re in here,” he whispered dryly, “keep the noise down. I’m exhausted.”

With that, he switched off the lamp, leaving only the corridor's glow under the door seam. He sank onto the bed, the mattress dipping comfortably beneath him. Outside, the wind sighed through the Welsh countryside. In the stillness, his mind churned with images: a dark shape crawling across the lawn, a frantic heart failing in a locked panic room, and the knock that led to an empty corridor.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Finn rose early, spurred by restless curiosity as much as by habit. The morning light filtering through his bedroom curtains had grown bright and welcoming—an invitation to begin the day's inquiries. After dressing quickly in a crisp shirt and slacks, he decided to look in on Amelia. His footsteps echoed along the manor's corridor, the floorboards creaking in protest. Despite Brynmor Hall's looming presence and the undercurrent of tension from the previous day, the early sun lent the estate a peaceful hush.

Stopping before Amelia's door, he rapped his knuckles softly. "Amelia?" he called. No response came from within. He tried again, only to be met by continued silence. Worry prickled at him—Amelia rarely left without a quick word. Still, he reminded himself she was an investigator through and through; perhaps she'd simply gotten a jump on the day.

Finn tested the door handle. It turned easily, and the door swung inward, revealing the room lit by the cheerful glow of morning. However, Amelia was nowhere to be seen. The bed was made with neat corners, her overnight bag resting on a chair. A fleeting frown pulled at Finn's mouth. If she'd left, she hadn't taken her belongings, so presumably she was still around somewhere.

He stepped back into the corridor, gently shutting the door. A waft of warm air from a nearby vent teased the back of his neck. He started down the stairs, the sunlight spilling through high windows onto the wide steps. In the foyer, a quiet hush



prevailed—he glimpsed no staff scurrying about, no housekeeper waiting.

Rounding a corner, he nearly collided with Evan, the young servant. Evan recoiled with wide eyes, then relaxed when he recognized Finn.

“Morning, sir,” Evan said, blinking. “You almost made me drop these linens.”

Finn nodded an apology at the stack of folded sheets in the boy’s arms. “Sorry about that. Have you seen—Inspector Winters? I looked for her in her room, but she’s not there.”

Evan shifted his grip on the sheets. “I believe she’s outside, sir. Talking to someone, looked like a gentleman. She went out not long after dawn, I think.”

“Thanks,” Finn replied, pausing a moment. “Any idea who the gentleman was?”

Evan just shook his head. “Didn’t get a good look. Sorry.”

“No problem.” Finn offered the lad a quick smile, then headed toward the front doors. If Amelia was outside, he might catch up to her easily enough.

Pushing open the large oak door, he stepped onto the manor’s wide stone steps. A flood of brilliant morning sun bathed the front drive. The Welsh countryside sparkled under a sky of pale blue, a refreshing change from the gloom of the night before. The gravel crunched underfoot as he descended, scanning the expansive lawn.

No sign of Amelia. The breeze carried the scent of dew-laden grass, and faint birdsong chimed from the distant woods. He noticed footprints leading away from the gravel path—two sets, by the look of it—though one might be from earlier staff. Still, they looked fresh. He took a chance and followed them, the soles of his shoes trailing lightly in the disturbed gravel.

The footprints curved behind a row of ornamental bushes, where he spotted two figures standing near a trimmed hedgerow. They weren't Amelia and her unknown companion, however. Instead, he found a man and a woman, both in their early thirties. The man, dressed in a casual blazer and jeans, had short, dark hair and an angular jaw that tightened when he saw Finn approach. The woman wore a stylish spring coat, her blonde hair swept into a loose updo. Both had the slight air of travelers who arrived in a hurry.

The man glared at Finn, brow furrowed. "Who the devil are you? This is private property."

Finn halted, raising both palms in a peaceable gesture. "I'm Finn Wright, with the Home Office. Are you by chance members of the Penrose family?"

"Home Office?" The man's suspicious gaze flicked to Finn's ID badge. Then he softened, nodding once. "I'm Richard Penrose, James's younger brother. This is my wife, Jenna."

Jenna offered a polite, if reserved, smile. "Pleasure," she said, tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

Finn pocketed his badge. "Apologies for startling you. We've been asked to investigate the circumstances of James's death."

At the mention of James's death, Richard's frown deepened. "Yes... It's... we're all in shock. Catherine and Marianne called us to return and help with arrangements."

"So you weren't here when it happened?" Finn asked gently.

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Richard exhaled. “No, we only just arrived last night. We’d been living away for some time, partly to avoid the family’s... ongoing drama.” He stiffened slightly. “But with James gone, we felt obliged to come back to Brynmor Hall.”

Jenna cast him a glance, then turned to Finn. “We wanted to support Marianne and Catherine, you see. In a time like this, the family should be together.”

Finn nodded understandingly. “I see. Do you have any thoughts on what caused James’s sudden death?”

Jenna pursed her lips, sadness in her eyes. “He...overworked himself. Always worrying about the estate finances, trying to keep the family afloat.” She paused, casting a sidelong look at her husband. “He never took a break.”

Richard released a disapproving grunt. “James never recognized boundaries, is more accurate. He didn’t know when enough was enough. Always meddling, always deciding for us.”

Finn sensed tension crackling between them. “Meddling how?” he asked softly, curious about the undercurrent of resentment.

Before Richard could answer, Jenna gave a small sigh. “Let’s just say James was the one who secured funds for everything around here. And he often expected the rest of the family to toe his line. We...disagreed on methods.”

Richard’s jaw set. “He used his money as leverage. If it weren’t for him, we’d be just fine,” he said, but his tone faltered unconvincingly.

Jenna flashed him an exasperated look. "Oh, don't pretend. We needed his help more often than not. You know that. He bailed us out time and again. That's the only reason we had a place to live after your last business fiasco. The only kindness we could do in return, was put in our wills that James and Marianne's children should inherit our wealth... If we ever have any."

Anger flared in Richard's eyes, and he took a sharp step away, hand curling into a fist. "That's enough, Jenna." She folded her arms, looking equally frustrated, and a heavy silence fell.

Awkwardness weighed on Finn's shoulders. He cleared his throat, aiming to diffuse the moment. "It sounds like finances were a stress for James, as well as the rest of the family. If he was supporting you all, that might have taken its toll."

Richard's temper flashed. "We didn't ask for the man to meddle in every aspect of our finances or to lord it over us every chance he got." He pointed a finger at Finn. "You want to know if he was killed? Let me say this: James was perfectly capable of bringing about his own downfall with his controlling ways."

With that, he spun on his heel, striding angrily back toward the manor. Jenna watched him go, a mixture of embarrassment and regret on her face.

She forced a small shrug as an apology to Finn. "He's just upset," she said quietly. "All the Penroses are quick to anger—James was no different. If Richard doesn't watch his blood pressure, he might end up just like his brother."

Finn frowned slightly, uncertain how to respond. He settled on, "Thank you for your time under the circumstances," which he meant sincerely. "We appreciate any help you can give us."

Jenna nodded, exhaling. "I should go inside and calm him down. Good day,

Mr. Wright.” She offered a slight wave and followed her husband’s path up the gravel, heading back into the house.

Finn stood there for a moment, processing the encounter. A flurry of tension indeed simmered within the Penrose clan. If finances had caused friction, it might explain James’s stress—and maybe the impetus for someone to want him out of the picture, though none of that was certain. Could someone in the family have murdered him over such tensions?

Remembering Amelia, he turned in a slow circle. The estate grounds stretched out under a pleasant morning sun, but he saw no sign of her. Eventually, he noticed an arched opening in a tall stone wall just beyond some hedges—a path leading to what looked like a walled garden. He ventured toward it, following a faint murmur of voices carried on the breeze.

Through the arched entrance, he stepped into a private garden enclosed by old stone walls draped in climbing roses. Within, neat paths wound among flowerbeds bursting with early-season blossoms, and a small fountain trickled at the center. The sun’s rays slanted over the wall, giving the space a tranquil warmth. It was in stark contrast to the tension swirling around the estate.

Ahead, Amelia stood talking to a man in his early sixties, with salt-and-pepper hair and a genial expression. The man wore a rumpled tweed jacket, a notepad tucked under one arm, and carried a certain air of officialdom. At Finn’s approach, Amelia glanced over, relief softening her features.

“There you are,” she called. “I was wondering where you’d got to.”

Finn raised a hand in greeting. “I might ask you the same question. I knocked on your door, thought you’d vanished.”

Amelia offered a half-smile. “I woke up early and went for a walk. Then I bumped into DI Lloyd here.” She nodded to the older man. “Detective Inspector Thomas Lloyd from the local station. Thomas, this is Finn Wright, my partner in this case.”

Thomas Lloyd stepped forward, extending a hand. “A pleasure, Mr. Wright. Good to see more official involvement in James Penrose’s death. We could use all the help we can get.”

Finn took Lloyd’s hand, noting his firm grip. “Nice to meet you, Inspector. Are you investigating the same circumstances?”

Lloyd nodded, adjusting his jacket collar. “Yes. I was assigned to look into it, but as soon as the Home Office declared interest, I was told to coordinate with you. I gather there’s suspicion it might be murder?”

Crossing his arms, Finn exhaled. “That’s not confirmed yet. The autopsy suggests James had a failing heart. He may have died from natural causes, possibly triggered by shock or fear. So at this point, it’s uncertain if we’re dealing with a homicide.”

Thomas Lloyd’s expression shifted, almost disappointed. “Oh, I see. Well, let me tell you—I’m not convinced it’s a simple heart attack. I suspect he was killed or threatened. Could be anything from a grudge to a financial dispute.”

Amelia spoke up softly. “We’ve reason to think James sent everyone away that night and then ended up in the panic room. If someone cornered him... well, that would certainly fit your theory that a confrontation killed him. But the official cause of death might still be the heart condition.”

Thomas pursed his lips. “Heart conditions can be exploited, can’t they? Put enough fear into a man like that, and it’s as good as murder.”

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Finn considered the detective's eagerness. "Either way, we're checking the finances, among other things. We've heard James was supporting the family after some rough times, and he might've gone too deep into risky dealings."

Lloyd's eyes lit with recognition. "So you've heard. The Penrose clan used to be among the wealthiest old families in Wales—centuries of inheritance. Then came James's so-called 'ventures.' A handful of unwise, high-stakes investments decimated their fortune. They sold off antiques, mortgaged properties to keep afloat."

Amelia folded her arms, brow creasing. "So we suspect maybe a loan shark or unscrupulous partner demanded repayment and threatened James? If he couldn't pay, that confrontation might've ended badly."

"Exactly," Lloyd confirmed. "He may have promised future returns or used the house as collateral. Then, when it came time to pay up, he had nowhere to turn."

Finn rubbed his chin. "That explains his anxious state: he might have arranged a meeting that evening—hence sending everyone away—so he could negotiate or hand something over." He glanced at Amelia. "If the person demanded more or used intimidation, James's weak heart could have collapsed under the stress."

Amelia nodded. "So, murder in spirit if not in direct action. But either way, we can't ignore the possibility that it was all accidental. He might have just had a random heart attack at the worst time, especially if he was under a lot of stress."

Thomas Lloyd pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I'm leaning toward the 'someone came calling' theory, personally. But I can't prove it...yet. I'd appreciate being kept in the

loop if you find anything concrete.”

Finn offered a wry smile. “Sure. As long as you share what you learn with us. We need local insights, after all.”

“We think someone was definitely here,” Amelia explained. “Finn and I had a look over the security footage, and we found hand prints in the ground. It was as if someone was crawling around under the cover of dark, heading towards the east side of the house where there was no camera coverage. Our best guess is that’s how the intruder would have gotten into the house.”

“I see,” he grimaced, then looked at the building as if it were a threat. “But no idea who it was?”

Finn shook his head.

“Okay,” Lloyd said. “I have to go about my rounds, but let’s keep in touch. If you need anything, I’m your man.”

“Absolutely,” Amelia smiled.

A small grin curled Lloyd’s mouth. “Good hunting to you both, then.”

He turned to leave, stepping across the garden’s neat paving slabs. The vines rustled in a mild gust, the floral scent mingling with the faint tang of damp stone. Amelia and Finn watched him head for the gate. Just before stepping out, Lloyd paused as Finn called after him:

“Detective—one last thing. We keep hearing about ghost stories here. You must’ve heard them too?”



Thomas's posture stiffened as he half-turned, a cagey look crossing his features. "I have. Some of the more famous folklore around these parts. Local chatter claims the Penrose ancestors haunt the halls. Some believe that they come to forewarn of calamity. But I stick to the living, Mr. Wright. I'll leave ghosts to the historians and mediums."

With that, he tipped his head in parting and disappeared through the walled gate, letting it swing quietly behind him.

Finn let out a long breath. "At least he was open about his suspicions," he mused.

Amelia turned, gazing over the rose-laden trellis. "He seems to be a capable inspector. He might be too keen to label this a murder... Still, if there was a shady deal going on here at night with everyone else away, he might be right."

They wandered deeper into the walled garden, stepping past rows of neatly trimmed hedges and a small fishpond at the center. Bees buzzed around the blossoms, the morning sunlight lending everything a gentle warmth.

Finn lowered his voice. "The bit about James arranging a covert meeting is bugging me. Why ensure the house is empty, especially if he was worried for his safety? Unless he believed that secrecy was paramount."

"Or maybe he thought he could handle it himself," Amelia added, lightly touching a vine of pink roses. "He might've miscalculated his trust in whoever was coming here, or the intruder's presence ended up terrifying him to death—literally."

Finn nodded, mind churning. "One detail that keeps returning: the figure we saw on camera. Crawling around the lawn. If that was the visitor, they approached in a bizarre, almost animalistic way. It's not how you'd walk up to a front door if you had a legitimate appointment."

“It’s more how you’d move if you wanted to spook someone,” Amelia agreed grimly.

He paused at the pond’s edge, peering at a few koi gliding beneath the surface. “So, how do we proceed? We talk to the rest of the family? See if there’s any mention of James scheduling a meeting or dealing with shady contacts.”

She nodded. “And keep an eye out for that ghost story background—someone might have exploited it to unnerve him. Detective Lloyd was cagey about it, but these local myths can shape people’s fears. Superstition can be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

Finn stepped back from the pond. “All right, let’s go find some more people to pester. The day’s young, the suspects are plenty.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Finn walked across the lawn with Amelia at his side, morning sunlight warming his face after their talk with Inspector Lloyd. The Welsh sky was a luminous shade of blue, the grass still jeweled with dew in places. Brynmor Hall loomed before them, an imposing structure of timeworn stone and ivy-covered walls. Despite the manor’s dark undercurrents, in this light, it appeared almost welcoming.

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“Looks calmer in the daytime, doesn’t it?” Amelia remarked softly, shielding her eyes to glance at the upper windows. A mild breeze stirred her hair, causing a few strands to brush against the bandage that still covered her hand from the chase back in England.

Finn nodded, letting out a faint breath of agreement. “Yes, but a day’s worth of sunshine can’t change the fact that something’s off here.” He caught a glimpse of the side lawn beyond where they stood, recalling the shape they had seen on the security footage, creeping on all fours. That memory prickled at him.

They climbed the front steps, the manor door standing ajar. Upon entering the main foyer, they were met by a burst of activity. Charlie and Bella—James Penrose’s children—darted across the polished floor, apparently mid-game of chase. Bella squealed when Charlie nearly tagged her, and she scrambled behind a decorative pedestal to hide.

A few steps away, James’s widow, Marianne, stood watching them, arms loosely folded as though she were trying to stay composed. Her face carried the remnants of grief, but she managed a gentle smile at her children’s antics. Yet the sadness in her eyes suggested she was only half-present in their merriment.

When Marianne spotted Finn and Amelia, she straightened, lifting a hand in greeting. “Good morning,” she said, her voice subdued but polite. “How was your first night under this roof?”

Finn briefly remembered the restless night, the uneasy dreams that came after the chase in the orchard. But he forced a mild shrug. “Slept well, thanks,” he lied, offering

a small, courteous smile.

Amelia gave a tiny nod as well. “And me, too. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Marianne’s gaze flicked to her children. “I see you’ve already encountered the chaos,” she commented, nodding at Bella and Charlie, who’d switched roles: now Charlie crouched behind the pedestal while Bella scampered away, giggling. “They’re trying to go on as though everything’s normal. Children do that, playing right through their tragedies.”

Amelia’s mouth curved in sympathy. “It must be hard. Have they... come to grips with it yet?”

Marianne exhaled shakily, a shadow crossing her face. “I’m not certain it’s truly sunk in that they’ll never have Daddy reading them bedtime stories or playing hide-and-seek again. I suppose in time, it will. For now, I let them run, I let them laugh—maybe it’s the only way they can cope.”

Finn felt a twist of empathy in his chest. His own mother had died when he was about Bella’s age, and he remembered using childish games to block out the ache. “I’m sorry they have to face that kind of loss so young,” he said softly.

Marianne nodded, swallowing. “I keep telling myself I have to be strong for them. But it’s—well, it’s all so difficult. Everything here reminds me of James.”

She fell silent for a moment as Bella dashed across the foyer again, nearly tripping on an ornate rug. Charlie squealed with delight, and Hobbs, the family driver, discreetly appeared from a side hallway, presumably to keep an eye on them.

Amelia cleared her throat, pulling a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “Mrs. Penrose—Marianne—I was going over the staff list Mrs. Hughes

provided last night. One name caught my eye: Judd Aspen. He isn't listed as family or staff. Do you know him?"

Marianne's face shifted, the sorrow replaced briefly by annoyance. "Judd was James's best friend," she said. "He'd pop in whenever it suited him. Lately, he was staying here more frequently because his marriage hit a rough patch. So he used Brynmor Hall like a hotel."

Finn noted her disparaging tone. "You don't sound very fond of him."

Marianne gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "He never approved of my marriage to James. Called me a gold digger, or at least insinuated it. Said I was after the family wealth. So, no, I'm not his biggest fan."

"Does he stay often?" Amelia asked, glancing at Finn as though to confirm her curiosity.

"Recently, more on than off," Marianne replied dryly. "Though if you ask me, it's hardly convenient. But apparently it's what James wanted, so I bit my tongue."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "We'd like to talk to him, if possible—just to see if he knows anything about James's final days."

Marianne shrugged. "No need to look far. Judd arrived this morning. Surprised you haven't bumped into him yet. He's probably in one of the rooms, or outside."

Her words were interrupted by a sudden, piercing crash from somewhere above them. The sound reverberated through the foyer, echoing along the mansion's corridors. Bella and Charlie froze mid-game, eyes wide. Marianne's face blanched, alarm flashing in her eyes. "What was—?"

Another loud smash came from upstairs, as if something heavy had been toppled. Marianne's worry twisted into fear. "Hobbs!" she called, her voice quivering with urgency.

The driver promptly stepped forward, guiding the children behind him. "Yes, ma'am."

"Keep them here. I need to see what on earth is happening," Marianne said, throwing a quick glance at Finn and Amelia, silently pleading for their help. Finn gave a curt nod.

The three adults—Marianne in the lead, Finn and Amelia at her side—hurried up the central staircase. Their footsteps thudded on the carpeted steps, hearts pounding in an adrenaline surge. At the landing, they paused, listening. Another smash rang out, sending a jolt through Finn's system.

"It's coming from down that hallway," he said, pointing toward a dim corridor leading to the east wing. Marianne, breath shallow, spoke in a trembling voice: "James's study is that way. He spent hours there..."

"Stay close to Amelia," Finn advised. "We don't know who's there. Let me go first."

"Finn..." Amelia began to protest, but Finn had already started forward, lengthening his stride. The hallway was lined with framed paintings and occasional decorative statues perched on pedestals—he hoped none were the cause of those loud crashes. The door to James's study, near the end of the corridor, stood ajar.

He reached it just in time to see a masked figure slip out, clad in dark clothing and wearing some kind of balaclava hood that concealed their face. The intruder spotted Finn and reacted instantly, ramming a shoulder into him. The impact drove Finn backward into the wall, and a painting rattled precariously above his head.

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Finn clenched his fists, trying to grapple the man, but the intruder twisted nimbly, breaking free. A fleeting scuffle ensued—Finn lunged, hooking an arm around the intruder's midsection. For a moment, he thought he had the advantage. But the intruder struck Finn's thigh with a quick, precise blow, causing Finn's leg to buckle. The attacker tore away, sprinting down the corridor.

A flash of frustration and pain surged through Finn. Gritting his teeth, he hauled himself up and gave chase, ignoring the twinge in his leg. The figure careened around a corner, feet pounding on the wood floor. Finn thundered after him, mouth dry with adrenaline. He glimpsed a fleeting silhouette as the intruder vaulted through an open window near the far end.

Finn skidded to a halt at the window's ledge, saw the masked man drop to the lawn with a thud and roll fluidly. A hiss of anger escaped Finn's lips. He clambered onto the windowsill and, pressing his palms on the sill, hopped down outside, landing roughly. Pain flared in his ankle, but it wasn't enough to stop him.

The intruder was already darting across the lawn. Finn sprinted behind, breathing hard. The morning sun bathed the grass in golden light, but it did little to quell the tension. They neared the treeline on the eastern side of the estate, where shadows clustered under the thick canopy.

Finn barreled in among the trunks and undergrowth. Twigs snapped beneath his shoes, and the greenery rustled as he passed. The masked figure was nowhere in immediate sight, so Finn slowed, scanning the dim pockets of foliage. A single bead of sweat trailed down his temple. He heard only the rustle of leaves, his own heartbeat in his ears, and some distant birds chirping overhead.

“Come out,” he muttered under his breath, pivoting in a slow circle, ready for any sudden movement. The smell of damp earth filled his nostrils, and the hush of this woodland patch felt claustrophobic. The intruder had vanished into the gloom, silent as a wraith.

A faint sound to his right made him whirl, but before he could defend himself, something struck him sharply at the back of his head. Stars flashed in his vision, and he stumbled forward, catching himself on a mossy log. The blow’s aftermath reverberated through his skull, dazing him. He spun around, wild-eyed, but saw only swaying branches and filtered sunlight.

No footsteps, no figure. The intruder had vanished as surely as a phantom. Finn cursed under his breath, wincing as he touched his scalp. His hand came away damp with a smear of blood. Wonderful, he thought grimly, definitely needed that.

Every sense on alert, he tried to listen for any sign of breathing or motion, but the intruder had melted away into the underbrush. Left with an aching skull, he recognized the futility of stumbling blindly after a foe who knew the terrain better. Exhaling, he started back the way he came, weaving between pines and oaks until he reached the estate lawn again.

As he walked, he felt a trickle of blood tracing a line down behind his ear. Each step sent a dull throb through his head. He glanced over his shoulder every few yards, half expecting the intruder to reappear, but the morning remained deceptively quiet and still. Brynmor Hall’s silhouette soon re-emerged from behind the treeline.

When he reached the manor’s side entrance, he realized how unsteady he felt, adrenaline receding into a pounding headache. Yet he forced himself to stand tall. The front door came into view, and there, under the arch, stood Amelia and Marianne, both looking anxious, scanning the property.



A man in his forties stood with them. He was tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a casual but expensive-looking jacket over a simple shirt. His hairline was receding slightly, and his expression was tense with concern. Upon spotting Finn's disheveled state, he took a half-step forward.

Amelia's eyes widened. "Finn! You're bleeding!"

Marianne gasped, pressing a hand to her mouth. "Oh my goodness! What happened?" She hurried closer, voice trembling. "Was it the intruder?"

Finn forced a small, unconvincing smile. "They got away. I'm... fine, just a bump on the head." He lifted a hand, showing the smear of blood, and Amelia grimaced.

"This is Judd Aspen," Amelia said, nodding at the man. "He was just introducing himself."

The man offered a stiff nod, stepping forward. "You must be Finn Wright. James told me about you, years back. Said you were some hotshot from the Home Office. We need to talk about him as soon as you're sorted out," he added quietly, flicking a cautious glance at Marianne.

Finn eyed him, taking in the keen intelligence in Judd's gaze. The man certainly exuded confidence, and he seemed guarded around Marianne. "You're the friend James let stay here, right?" Finn asked.

"Yes," Judd murmured. "We'll talk later, away from prying ears."

Marianne rolled her eyes.

Amelia frowned. "For now, let's get Finn inside. That head's bleeding quite a bit."

“Agreed,” Marianne said, beckoning them. “We have first-aid supplies in the study—or the kitchen, whichever you prefer.”

Finn nodded wearily. “Kitchen might be better. Less chance of disturbing any evidence in the study.” He gestured toward the direction of the crash, though now the intruder was gone. “We’ll check it out afterwards. Right now, a bandage would be appreciated.”

Amelia lightly touched his elbow, steering him gently toward the door. Judd stepped aside, letting them pass. He held Finn’s gaze for a fleeting second, something unreadable in his expression, then inclined his head in silent acknowledgment.

“Thanks,” Finn muttered, feeling the sting at the back of his scalp intensify. Already, an uncomfortable trickle of warmth had snaked down to his collar. Through the haze of his headache, he wondered what Judd Aspen knew about James’s final days. And why he insisted on talking away from Marianne’s presence.

Inside, the house’s relative dimness enveloped them. Marianne hurried off, presumably to fetch a first-aid kit or a cloth. Amelia stayed close, one hand bracing Finn’s arm.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” she asked softly, searching his face with worried eyes.

He forced a reassuring nod, though each pulse hammered against the bruise. “I’ve survived worse,” he said, injecting a wry note. “Just didn’t expect to be ambushed out there. The intruder was fast—and strong.”

Amelia’s lips pressed into a thin line. “They must’ve been rummaging through James’s study. Maybe we can figure out what they were after.”

Finn winced as a particularly sharp throb lanced his skull. “Let’s handle that once I’m not about to pass out. Then we can check the study, see if anything’s missing.”

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Her hold on his arm tightened fractionally. “Deal. Don’t you dare pass out on me again.”

A faint grin twitched at the corners of his mouth, but he couldn’t quite muster a full smile. The day had escalated from sunshine and family chatter to violence in the span of minutes. As they moved deeper into the hall, Hobbs came into view, the children nowhere to be seen (likely guided back to their game or to a safer room). Next to him, Marianne reappeared with a small kit in her hands, face etched with concern.

“Come on,” Marianne said, voice trembling a bit, “let’s get that wound cleaned up.” She cast a glance at Judd, still lingering by the front door, arms crossed. “Judd, would you mind giving us some space?”

He huffed a quiet breath, nodded, and stepped aside. But as Finn passed, Judd leaned in just enough to whisper, “We really do need to talk. I might know things James didn’t share with anyone else.”

Finn lifted his gaze, catching the seriousness in Judd’s eyes. “I’ll find you later,” he murmured back. Then Amelia tugged Finn forward gently.

They proceeded into the hallway leading to the kitchen, dim lamp sconces lighting the path. The hush enveloped them again, disturbed only by their footsteps and the faint echo of children’s voices somewhere deeper in the house. Finn’s head pounded in sync with his heartbeat, a reminder of the intruder’s unexpected blow.

Yet a flicker of triumph darted through his thoughts—someone was desperate enough to break in, rummage through James’s private papers, or the study. This had all the

hallmarks of a secret worth killing for, or at least a secret that demanded stealth at any cost. The puzzle's pieces kept multiplying: the siblings at odds, the best friend with unspoken knowledge, the ghostly shapes on camera, the hush around James's finances, and now a masked assailant rummaging in the very room James likely kept the estate's records.

Clenching his jaw, Finn resolved not to rest until he uncovered the truth. Even if it meant another unexpected brawl or a blow to the head. He had come here with Amelia to determine whether James Penrose truly died from a mere heart condition or if forces more sinister lay behind the tragedy. The day's events only strengthened his resolve to see this through.

Amelia guided him through the kitchen doorway, and he allowed himself to be led inside. The scent of coffee and fresh bread lingered from the morning preparations. Marianne set the kit on a small table, pulling out antiseptic and gauze with shaking hands.

While Amelia helped dab at the cut on Finn's head, Finn couldn't help but recall Judd's cryptic words. "We need to talk." That meant more potential revelations. With the stinging sensation of disinfectant pressing into his scalp, he cast Amelia a sidelong look. She gave him the slightest nod, as if reading his mind: they'd chase down Judd's confession, figure out what had triggered James's final, fatal crisis, and hopefully do it before another masked menace ambushed them.

## CHAPTER TEN

Finn sat in one of the worn wooden chairs by the large kitchen table, head throbbing from the strike he had taken earlier. The midday sun, pouring through the high mullioned windows, brought a gentle warmth that clashed with the tension coiled inside him. Amelia hovered at his side, worry flickering in her gaze as she examined the shallow but persistent cut on his scalp. Across from them stood Marianne Penrose,

her posture taut with concern. The kitchen itself, large and built for bustling household staff, had a certain rustic charm—pale stone floors, a wide hearth, and countertops of scuffed but sturdy oak.

Amelia set down a dishcloth she'd been using to dab at Finn's cut, exhaling in frustration. "We came here thinking it might be a closed book—heart attack, end of story—but with an intruder rummaging around and you taking a blow to the head, I'm starting to think Brynmor Hall is more dangerous than we realized."

Finn tried to smile through the dull ache radiating across his temple. "Yes, well, I can confirm that the blood coming out of my head feels pretty active. If that's a gauge for how lively this case is, we're in trouble."

Before Amelia could muster a retort, Mrs Hughes entered, her right hand trembling slightly, carrying a ceramic bowl of water and a small tray loaded with medical supplies—cotton pads, antiseptic, and gauze. "Mr. Wright, Miss Winters—here you are," she said. "I'll leave these for you. If there's anything else you need, please call." She set them on the table, gave a respectful bob of her head, and then exited, disappearing through the kitchen's open doorway.

Amelia reached for the antiseptic bottle first. "Let's get you cleaned up, partner." But before she could begin, Marianne lifted a hand in gentle protest.

"Let me," the widow said softly. "I trained as a nurse years ago, before I married James. I might be a bit out of practice, but I can handle a cut on the scalp."

Finn offered a nod. "I appreciate it, truly." He glanced at Amelia, who shrugged and stepped aside.

Marianne rinsed her hands in the bowl of water, then eased onto the seat beside Finn. She dabbed a cotton pad with antiseptic and leaned in, her expression grave. She

touched the cloth to his wound with a gentle pressure, and he winced at the sting.

“Sorry,” Marianne murmured. “Almost done. We need to stop the bleeding.”

As she worked, Finn studied her face. Pale from shock or from sorrow, or both, her eyes carried faint rings of fatigue. She’d done her best to remain poised—especially around her children—but the strain weighed visibly on her.

Just then, the kitchen door swung open. Donald, the cook, stepped inside. He wore a stained apron from his morning’s labors. “What in the—?” he blurted, halting at the sight of Finn’s bloodied hair.

Finn forced a reassuring half-smile. “Don’t worry. I had a bit of a scuffle. Nothing too grave.”

Donald let out a short sigh, leaning one hand on the table. “A scuffle with what exactly? The entire house is talking about how you chased someone out to the woods. Is that true?”

Amelia nodded. “He was definitely an intruder—broke into James’s study upstairs, rummaging around, then fled.”

A grim line formed on Donald’s lips. “If it’s that dangerous, maybe us staff should pack up. We’re not paid to wrestle with criminals.” He turned to Marianne. “Ma’am, if the house is under attack, you can’t put us in harm’s way. Might be wise to close the place for a bit.”

Marianne set aside a bloodstained pad and reached for a fresh one, her voice tense but firm. “I’m not shutting Brynmor Hall just because someone broke a vase or two. I won’t let phantoms chase me and the children away.”

Donald's eyebrows rose. "Well, the phantoms might not give you any choice, ma'am," he murmured under his breath. Then, shaking his head, he ducked out of the kitchen, perhaps returning to his cooking domain.

Finn twitched at the sting when Marianne pressed a final wad of gauze to his head. He noticed Amelia cast him a concerned look.

"Thanks," he murmured to Marianne. "So, you think you can patch me up with that nurse experience?"



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Marianne placed a strip of bandage carefully over the cut, securing it. “I think so. At least until you can get it checked properly. There.” She gave the gauze a final pat, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Apologies if I was too rough, I’m a bit out of practice.”

He offered a mild grin. “You’re doing fine. And I’m a big boy—some bruises and head wounds come with the territory.”

Amelia cleared her throat, speaking up. “Marianne, any idea who might want to break into James’s study? Do you know of someone with a motive to dig around in his business affairs?”

Marianne’s eyes flashed, frustration threading her voice. “It could be anyone, honestly. James had so many business pursuits—some legitimate, some riskier. I never knew all the details. Maybe they came to find documents or blackmail material. Or the combination to a safe. Who knows?”

Amelia leaned in. “So do you suspect they’re unrelated to his death, or do you think his demise is part of the same mess?”

With a heavy sigh, Marianne shrugged. “I truly can’t say. The children are here, so this is terrifying.” Her gaze turned inward. “I might send them away after all, somewhere safer. Their grandmother is in Devon. Maybe they should go back to stay with her.”

Finn, pressing a hand lightly to his newly bandaged scalp, nodded. “Yes, that might be wise, if you suspect more trouble is on the horizon.”

Marianne looked relieved to have someone second the idea. “Thank you. I can’t... I

can't let anything happen to them."

She glanced at the half-open kitchen door as though expecting the masked intruder to crash in again. Amelia set a hand on the widow's shoulder. "We'll keep an eye on things here. The local law enforcement should also be notified. Inspector Lloyd will want to know about the break-in, I'm sure. Maybe he can spare some patrol cars to keep a watch on the entrance to the estate."

Marianne gave a swift nod. "Yes, do let him know. Thomas Lloyd, right? Please make sure he investigates swiftly."

Finn rose from his chair, testing his balance. "Marianne, you make a great nurse. The bandage feels secure."

A faint traced her lips, and she looked oddly bashful. "You're just saying that. I bet you're a charmer with the ladies."

He smirked softly, winced at a jolt of pain, then pointed playfully at Amelia. "Especially this one. Though she's used to patching me up after I do something reckless."

Amelia rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "Too many close calls, that's for sure."

Marianne mustered a small laugh. "I'll leave you two be." She paused, drawing a breath as if gathering courage. "Thank you, for everything. I hope you can keep us safe."

Finn offered a grave nod. "We'll do our best. We'll find out who is doing this."

Marianne turned and left, her footsteps echoing in the corridor. A moment later, Mrs Hughes reappeared briefly to collect the leftover medical items, and then retreated

again, leaving Finn and Amelia alone. The quiet buzz of the refrigerator under the counter and the soft hiss of the stovetop pilot flame were the only sounds.

Amelia settled across from Finn, arms folded. "That was quite a chase you had. And from the look of your head, you nearly had it worse."

Finn rubbed the side of his temple. "Whoever it was, they were agile. The short fight in the corridor proved that. They outran me handily."

She raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Maybe you should hit the gym more often."

He made a mock-offended face. "It's not about me losing shape, all right? That intruder was just... well-trained or something."

Both of them chuckled, tension easing momentarily. Then Finn grew more serious. "Before I left the house, Judd Aspen whispered he needs to talk to me about Marianne. He specifically asked for it to be away from her presence."

"Think he's got something big to spill?" Amelia asked. "He seemed a bit secretive."

"Probably," Finn answered. "He's known James forever, so maybe he's suspicious about how James died or about Marianne's involvement in something. I'll find out soon enough."

Amelia patted his hand, leaning in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Go talk to him alone. If it's personal, he might hold back if I'm around. Meanwhile, I'll be in the sitting room, cross-referencing the staff lists and the timeline from last night's incident."

Finn gave her a grateful look. "Thanks. I won't be long."

They parted ways, Amelia collecting her notes off the nearby counter as she slipped out. Finn let out a slow breath, running a hand through his hair. The day had barely reached midday, and he'd already been assaulted. Something about the entire situation screamed deeper conspiracy—and Judd might hold a crucial piece.

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Leaving the kitchen behind, Finn ventured into the maze of hallways that composed Brynmor Hall's interior. The house, built over centuries, had mismatched wings and corridors that twisted unpredictably. Some were lined with medieval suits of armor, others with portraits of stern ancestors. Ornate rugs covered the wooden floors, muting his footsteps.

He kept an eye out for any staff or wandering family members, but the house felt strangely empty at this hour. The faint hum of conversation from some distant part of the manor wafted through the thick walls, but each corridor he passed was deserted. Sunlight filtering through high windows created patches of brightness on the floor, leaving the corners in half-shadow.

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Amelia had suggested Judd might be in one of the rooms. Finn checked a couple of side parlors—each empty, with chairs and tables arranged neatly, no occupant. He moved deeper, steps echoing until he glimpsed a shape crossing a hallway far ahead.

He hastened his pace, suspecting it might be Judd. Rounding the corner, he saw a door shutting, as though someone had just entered a room. However, when Finn opened that door, he found the place vacant. Dust motes floated in the beam of a single window. A hush pressed on him. He muttered under his breath, “This place is going to drive me mad.”

He shut the door behind him and wandered on, eventually noticing a wide double door with frosted glass panels—perhaps a games room or lounge. Sure enough, from inside came the faint click of billiard balls. Finally, he might have found Judd.

Pushing the door open, he discovered a spacious games room with tall windows letting in bright sunlight. A green-felt billiards table dominated the center, polished cues resting along one side. Shelves on the walls housed board games, old trophies, and a few dusty sports paraphernalia. There, leaning over the table to line up a shot, stood Judd Aspen—tall, broad-chested, mid-forties, wearing a casual jacket that looked a bit too nice for every day.

At Finn’s entrance, Judd straightened, pressing the cue lightly against the table. “Finn,” he greeted in a low voice. “Thanks for coming. Or... finding me, rather.”

Finn offered a polite dip of his head. “You asked to speak, so I’m here. Did you want privacy?” He glanced around, verifying the room was empty aside from the two of them.

Judd waved a hand, though he kept his voice low. "I'd rather no one else overhear, yes. Particularly Marianne." He set the cue aside on the table's edge.

Finn folded his arms, feeling a faint twinge in his still-aching scalp. "All right. Let's talk. Something we should know?"

Judd hesitated, then beckoned Finn closer, so they stood by the side of the billiards table, away from the door. "First, let me say that James was my best friend since we were boys. He took me in when my own marriage failed. Let me crash here because my ex-wife booted me from the house. James was a decent man—if a bit misguided near the end."

"Misguided how?" Finn asked.

"He got into questionable deals, tried to keep the estate afloat. But that's not what I'm here to talk about. I'm more concerned about Marianne and James's relationship. He never had an easy time with her from the start. I told him not to marry her. She—"

Judd's voice caught, and he sighed. "I believe she was after his money. Or at least, the perception of his money. The entire Penrose fortune was crumbling, but she didn't know that initially."

Finn gave him a measured look. "Suspicion of her motives is one thing, but do you think she had anything to do with James's death?"

Judd's lips thinned. "Yes, I do. I suspect she might've hired someone or orchestrated it in some way. I can't prove it. But I found this." He slipped a folded piece of paper from an inner pocket, then handed it to Finn. "Found it rummaging around in her private drawers. I was worried she might be up to something after James told me they'd had huge fights about finances."

Finn carefully unfolded the letter. The handwriting was neat, but the content was partial. It was addressed to someone only identified as “B,” and it read: “Sometimes I wish something would happen to James, so the children and I can have a new life. I’m tired. Tired of this old chilly Hall full of relics. It feels like a millstone around our necks. I’m tired of everything.” At the bottom, it was signed Marianne.

Finn felt a prickle run up his spine. “This is... quite direct,” he said, eyebrows raised. “But it’s not proof she hired a killer, just that she was frustrated or resentful.”

Judd nodded, expression grim. “Sure, but put it together with her potential gold-digging motives, and you see why I’m worried.”

Finn’s gaze drifted to the letter again. “Does she know you took this?”

Shaking his head, Judd answered, “I doubt it. She likely suspects someone found it, but not who. The drawer was locked. I may have forced it a bit.”

A moment of silence passed. Finn folded the letter, returning it to Judd’s hand. “You realize you’re accusing her of possible murder with very little evidence beyond a letter expressing exasperation.”

Judd’s jaw clenched. “It’s more than exasperation—she was wishing harm on her own husband. Doesn’t that raise alarms?”

Finn slipped his hands in his pockets, trying to remain objective. “Yes, it does. But people say a lot of things in anger. Still, we’ll keep it in mind. Thank you for coming forward with this.”

Judd took the letter back, tucking it away. His gaze flickered toward the door, as though worried Marianne might stride in any moment. “Listen, maybe I can’t prove it. But James confided in me that Marianne was demanding more money, that she

threatened to leave with the children if he didn't maintain their lifestyle. He was already in deep trouble financially. If you ask me, she saw how precarious it was and saw only one way to fix it: get rid of him—inherit what was left, maybe. Insurance, the house, everything.”

Finn pressed his lips together. “We’ll investigate. Just... keep your eyes open, and if you recall anything else, let me know.”

Judd dipped his head. “I will. I just want James’s death avenged if it was a murder. He deserved better than a traitor wife.”

Finn offered a mild nod, letting Judd’s words resonate. The man was clearly emotional, fueled by loyalty to James and bitterness toward Marianne. But whether those emotions translated into facts was another question. “I appreciate your candor,” Finn said quietly. “Let’s keep this between us for now.”

Judd exhaled, nodding in agreement. Then he turned back to the billiards table, picking up the cue. “All right. Thanks, Finn. Good luck figuring out the truth.”

Finn stepped away, heading back toward the door. “The truth has a way of wanting to be found,” he replied softly.

As he left the games room, the corridors of Brynmor Hall once again surrounded him with hush and old grandeur. The midday sun poured in, lighting dust motes drifting in the beams. Clutching the possibility of a new suspicion—that Marianne Penrose might have had reason to want her husband gone—Finn felt a fresh wave of uncertainty. The letter, the break-in, the ghostly rumors, the financial meltdown: each strand knotted into a tapestry of hidden motives and possible deception.

Still, he had a job to do, and an entire family—plus staff—on edge. Soft footfalls echoed down the corridor, Amelia’s voice calling from somewhere. Finn closed his



eyes momentarily, letting the swirl of thoughts settle. Then he moved forward, returning to the manor's heart to report what he'd learned, even as a quiet foreboding nagged at him: if Judd was right, and Marianne truly wanted James gone, how far would she go to achieve that?

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Finn stepped out onto the gravel path encircling Brynmor Hall, a flashlight in hand, the crunch of small stones underfoot echoing in the quiet dusk. Next to him, Amelia held her own flashlight, its beam sweeping across the manor's stone facade. A faint orange light clung to the horizon where the sun had just set, and the sky above was a stretch of purpling clouds. The air carried a mild chill, and each breath felt crisp with the scent of dew-coated grass and distant pine.

He cast Amelia a sidelong glance. The bruising at her temple had faded slightly in the day's time, though the bandage still covered her knuckles. "The last thing I want is another intruder slipping in," he said, scanning the low windows along the eastern wall.

She nodded, directing her flashlight over an old side entrance. "At least it's quiet tonight. Maybe too quiet. The way this place is built, there are so many ways in or out—subtle doors, old servant entrances, basement-level hatches. We can't check them all thoroughly in one go."

Finn grunted agreement. "Well, we'll do our best. If the intruder wants in badly, he'll find a way."

"Inspector Thomas has posted a watch on the gates of the estate," Amelia offered. "And one of his men will patrol the perimeter fence as best as possible, but it's such a large estate, he'd need at least fifty constables to guarantee no one gets in, and he doesn't have those kind of resources."

Finn nodded and then paused, shining his flashlight onto a patch of ivy creeping up from the foundation. “You still rattled from what happened earlier?”

Amelia hesitated, momentarily flicking the beam of her torch across his face. “A little. I keep picturing your masked man rummaging around. Then I remember the shape we saw on the security feed, crawling on all fours.” She shuddered lightly, turning away. “I can understand why the locals tell stories about the house and its grounds, this place could make a person believe in ghosts.”

Finn gave a half-laugh, though he felt a twinge of unease. “So we’re ghost hunters now, as well as homicide investigators?”

She shook her head, stepping cautiously over a small puddle. “I’m usually not one for haunting stories. But something about Brynmor Hall unsettles me. The wind in the rafters, the old halls... it gets under your skin. And the woods... It feels like I’m being watched whenever it gets dark. It makes my skin crawl.”

Finn began to say something reassuring, but a noise from the bushes made him pivot. A sudden rustle, then a snap of twigs. “You hear that?” he hissed, focusing his flashlight on a row of neatly trimmed hedges at the perimeter of the lawn.

Amelia whipped her beam around too. “Yes—someone’s there?”

Without waiting for an answer, Finn broke into a swift jog toward the sound, adrenaline kicking in. Amelia matched his pace. They parted the hedge branches, scanning for any sign of movement. A fleeting dark shape darted off deeper into the lawn’s edge.

“Stop!” Finn shouted, though his rational side knew it might just be an animal. Even so, his pulse hammered. He and Amelia plunged into the grass beyond the manicured hedgerow, flashlights bobbing wildly. His shoes slipped on a patch of soft earth, but

he caught his balance just in time—only to feel Amelia’s grip on his sleeve falter.

She let out a startled yelp. “Oh—!”

He turned to see her foot slide in a muddy patch, sending her sprawling. Reflexively, she grabbed at him, yanking him down. With a muffled thud, Finn landed half on top of her, arms braced to keep from crushing her entirely. Mud splattered across his arm and onto Amelia’s jacket.

They lay there for a disorienting second, breath coming in short gasps, flashlights shining random angles across the grass. Then Amelia gave a breathy laugh. “Well, that was graceful.”

Finn braced himself on his elbows, feeling the wet suction of the ground on his knees. “Yeah... real smooth,” he said. “At least it wasn’t a six-foot ditch.” He rolled to the side, half-smiling at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Amelia, giggling, tried to wipe mud from her sleeve. “You okay?” she asked, concern flickering in her eyes even as she snickered.

“Just bruised my pride.” He went to help her up but froze when they both noticed a movement just a few yards away. In a sudden burst of motion, a deer bounded past, graceful legs cutting through the grass. The creature vanished swiftly, hooves clattering on a stony patch before it disappeared into the dusk.

Relief poured through Finn. “So we have a ghost deer, apparently,” he joked, a grin tugging at his lips. “At least it wasn’t the masked intruder or some undead ancestor.”

Amelia shook her head in amusement. “I can’t believe we ended up chasing a deer. Must’ve spooked it as badly as it spooked us.”

Finn carefully got to his feet, offering Amelia a hand. Her palm was slick with mud, but she took his grip, letting him tug her upright. The comedic moment soon overshadowed the earlier tension. He flicked on his flashlight again, assessing her jacket for damage. "You're an absolute mess."

She snorted. "Takes one to know one."

He smirked, reaching out to brush a smear of mud off her cheek with his thumb. "You've got a little... right there."

She placed her hand over his, a quick warmth in the contact. "Oh, Finn," she murmured, a note of endearment and exasperation mingled.

He leaned in, drawn by her voice and the way her eyes caught the dim glow of the flashlight. She began to tilt her head, but then pressed a muddy finger to his lips. "Not here," she whispered, half-laughing. "We're supposed to stay professional, remember? Wait until I get you back to the cottage in Great Amwell."

Despite the rebuff, Finn grinned. "All the more reason to solve this case quickly, then?"

She lowered her hand, her cheeks slightly flushed, and turned to gather her flashlight. "Come on, charmer. Let's see if we can salvage our dignity. The house is as secure as it can be, from what I can tell."

Finn swept the flashlight around, verifying no more shapes or suspicious figures lurked. "I guess we can call it for the night. Marianne and the kids are in the master bedroom, and they've locked the door. I just hope that masked figure I chased off was a simple thief rather than a killer—someone rummaging for valuables or documents, and then spooked away."

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They trudged back toward the manor, footprints squelching in the muddy patches. At the main porch, a lantern cast a warm glow across the steps. Hobbs—Marianne's driver—stood by the half-open door, arms folded. He seemed about to go inside when he spotted them.

"Mr. Wright. Miss Winters," he said, dipping his head. "I was just turning in for the evening. Everything all right?"

Finn exchanged a look with Amelia, noting the mud stains on both their clothes. "We're fine. We chased a noise out in the bushes, turned out to be a deer. How about you?"

Hobbs sighed, shifting his stance. "I took dinner trays up to Mrs. Penrose and the children. She wants them in bed early. Tomorrow, I'm to drive them to a friend's place for their own safety."

Amelia nodded sympathetically. "They're going away, then? Probably a good idea for everyone's peace of mind."

Hobbs pursed his lips. "It's... an unfortunate business. They're grieving their father, and now the house is full of uncertainty. Hardly restful for children." He ran a hand over his short-cropped hair. "I hope this is over soon."

Finn considered the stoic figure of Hobbs in the lantern light. "Do you personally believe James was murdered?" he asked quietly.

A flicker of emotion crossed Hobbs's face—fear, perhaps, or reluctance. "I'd rather

not stir the pot, sir. Some things at Brynmor Hall are best left alone.”

Amelia took a step closer, her tone gentle yet insistent. “We appreciate your caution, but we need every perspective. If you know something that might help us—”

Hobbs drew a slow breath. “There’s a story. Maybe it means nothing, but...well, James had an older brother, Wilkie. Died nine years ago, also under strange circumstances.”

Amelia’s interest sharpened visibly. “Mrs Hughes mentioned him briefly when we arrived.”

“Yes, Wilkie and Armand, that was Mrs Hughes’ husband...” he almost trailed off for a moment. “They were very close, actually. I don’t think Armand was ever the same after Wilkie passed. He died a couple of years later.”

“What did you mean by strange circumstances?” Amelia asked.

Hobbs scanned the dim yard, as though searching for eavesdroppers. “I was here that night. Wilkie vanished. We only found him the next day. By then, he’d—” Hobbs paused, swallowing. “He’d died in the cellar. Inside an old wardrobe, of all places. Shut himself in, apparently.”

Finn felt a chill prickle along his neck. “That’s... unusual. Why hide in a wardrobe?”

Shrugging unhappily, Hobbs continued, “We never knew. He was slumped over inside. Rigor mortis had set in. Terrible sight. Me and the groundskeeper at the time—Edwin Pierce—found him. It was like he’d tried to claw at the door from the inside. His hands were up over his face, locked that way, like he was fighting off something.”

Amelia let out a hushed breath. “That’s horrifying. Do you think it connects to James’s

death?”

“I can’t say. But I do know that after Wilkie died, James became terrified. That’s when he had that panic room built. He said if something like that ever came for him, he wanted a safe place.” Hobbs paused, shoulders tensing. “Seems like in the end, it got him anyway.”

Finn’s mind churned with the parallels: Wilkie dying alone, presumably from a fear-induced or unexplained cause, James with a heart condition, alone in a panic room. “Sounds like the family’s ghost stories have fed into this. If Wilkie died under bizarre circumstances, James might’ve truly believed something haunted them.”

Hobbs regarded Finn with a sober gaze. “They’re not stories. I’ve seen them—spirits roaming the halls: a woman in a Victorian dress gliding through walls, and a man in old fox-hunting gear glaring at me. Then they vanish. They look angry, as if they blame us for something.”/

Finn didn’t want to challenge him on this, it wasn’t the time or place. He just nodded.

Amelia folded her arms around her muddy jacket, her flashlight clipped to her belt. “Either Wilkie and James were both victims of some intangible fear, or someone alive used that fear to kill them. If it was murder, terrifying them—especially if they had health conditions—would be enough, wouldn’t it?”

Hobbs nodded. “Perhaps.” Then he seemed to catch himself, glancing at the door. “Anyway. Enough talk of the dead. They say you’ll believe once you see them for yourself. I hope you never do.”

Before Finn could respond, an earsplitting scream cut through the evening air—a piercing shriek from somewhere within the manor. All three froze, hearts in their throats.



“That came from upstairs,” Finn gasped.

Amelia whipped around, yanking out her flashlight even though the hall was lit. “Is someone hurt?”

Hobbs’s face went pale, and he gestured for them to follow. Without further thought, Finn and Amelia bolted back into the house, the scream echoing in their ears like a dreadful call from the grave.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Finn dashed up the main staircase with Amelia a pace ahead, the lingering echoes of a woman’s scream ringing in his ears. Behind them, the steady footfalls of Hobbs pressed close, his breath ragged from the sudden sprint. The manor’s architecture seemed to warp in the panic—hallways that felt straightforward hours earlier now appeared twisting, lit by wall sconces casting ghostly shadows on the floral wallpaper. The old wood underfoot groaned and popped, as if the house itself disliked being so quickly traversed.

He thought of the children—Bella and Charlie—hoping they hadn’t heard the scream or, if they had, that Marianne managed to keep them calm. The entire family had endured too much tragedy already. More fear at this juncture would only compound the pain.

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Amelia reached the landing first, skidding to a halt and peering down the intersecting corridors. “Which direction?”

Finn’s heart thumped. He listened for any continuing shout or sob, but the house had fallen into an ominous hush. Then, as though on cue, Marianne’s voice drifted from the left corridor: “Finn! Amelia!”

A jolt of relief coursed through him—at least Marianne was unhurt enough to call for help. Without waiting, they hurried left, footsteps pounding on the runner carpet. Hobbs followed, glancing over his shoulder nervously as if expecting another intruder to appear.

At a small door at the corridor’s end, Finn heard Marianne call out again, “Finn, please, hurry!” The desperation in her tone sent a chill down his spine. He rapped on the door quickly. “It’s Finn,” he announced, pressing his ear to the wood.

The handle turned from within. The door opened, revealing Marianne’s drawn face. Her cheeks were flushed, strands of her dark hair escaping the neat chignon she usually maintained. In the dim glow of a single overhead lamp, he saw that Bella and Charlie huddled close, eyes wide and frightened.

“Thank God,” Marianne breathed, hand shaking as she eased the door wider. “The children heard it—they’re terrified. We couldn’t tell where it came from, just that it was a woman screaming.”

Amelia hovered beside Finn, scanning the small sitting room behind Marianne. A single armchair stood by the window, and a tea tray lay abandoned on a side

table. “Are you injured?” she asked.

Marianne shook her head quickly, hugging Bella’s shoulders. Charlie peered out from beneath Marianne’s arm. “No... but we’re rattled. Please, is anyone else hurt?”

Finn stepped inside just far enough to see that no danger lurked in the corners of this room. Satisfied, he said to Hobbs, “Stay with them. Don’t let anyone in or out unless it’s us or the authorities. Lock this door behind you.”

Hobbs bowed his head. “Of course, sir.” He guided the children gently into the center of the room. Charlie clutched the bottom of Hobbs’s jacket, while Bella held her mother’s hand. They appeared spooked enough to cling to any adult who offered security.

Marianne nodded, meeting Finn’s gaze. “Please be careful,” she whispered, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes. “I— I can’t lose anyone else.”

Finn gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “We’ll do our best. Tell the children it’ll be all right.”

Her lips quivered in a faint attempt at a smile. Then Hobbs quietly pushed the door shut, and they heard the lock click from inside. The corridor outside felt abruptly colder, the faint lighting an uneasy contrast to the burst of alarm that spurred them moments ago.

Amelia exhaled, placing a hand on her hip. “So if it wasn’t Marianne, who screamed?” She shot a meaningful look at Finn. “We know Mrs Hughes, Catherine Penrose, and Jenna Penrose are the only other women in the house, right?”

“Yeah,” Finn responded, rolling his shoulders to shed the tension. “That narrows the possibilities, though not by much. Catherine and Jenna are both capable of holding

their own. Mrs Hughes... well, she's older, but I wouldn't bet against her in a panic."

Amelia's expression darkened. "If it was fear or distress, it suggests something real happened. We should figure out where exactly we heard that scream."

Finn nodded, taking a cautious step forward. "You lead or me?" he teased gently, remembering how she'd wanted to rush ahead.

She tipped her head in a half-smile. "I'll go first, but I promise not to run off. Someone could be hurt, though—I can't just dawdle if a person's life is on the line."

He rubbed the sore spot at his temple, recalling the blow the masked figure dealt him the night before. "I'm just worried about another ambush. That intruder could still be around." Finn's stomach knotted at the memory of losing that chase, and the possibility that the masked assailant had returned to strike again.

Amelia exhaled, adjusting the flashlight she carried. "Point taken. Let's keep our eyes open. And I wish we had a weapon." Her small joke about a ghostly presence hours ago felt considerably less amusing now, overshadowed by the genuine danger. "Let's check the corridor leading away from Marianne's room. That scream seemed distant—probably deeper in the east wing."

They set off, flashlights scanning the gloom, though overhead lamps cast flickers of warmth at intervals. The manor's old portrait paintings loomed on the walls, capturing stern Penrose ancestors in oils and gilded frames. In this unsettled atmosphere, the faces seemed almost to shift with each step, as if condemning their intrusion. A shiver crawled along Finn's spine.

Suddenly, a muffled sound reached them—a quiet, uneven sob. A woman's voice, though hoarse with emotion. Amelia caught Finn's eye, half-laughing in nervousness. "You think it's a ghost wailing away?"

Finn forced a grin. "If it is, I only need to outrun you." The attempt at humor belied his pounding heart. "Come on."

They followed the sound, turning at a junction and pressing deeper into the east wing. The sobs grew louder. Finally, they turned the corner and found Jenna Penrose, Richard's wife, collapsed on the corridor floor, weeping into her hands. Her posture was one of utter despair—knees pulled close, shoulders trembling. She wore a blouse and trousers that now looked rumpled, as if she'd sprinted or wrestled with something intangible.

Amelia crouched beside her, gently resting a hand on Jenna's shoulder. "Jenna... hey, what's going on? Are you hurt?"

Jenna lifted her tear-streaked face, eyes glazed with horror. Her lips moved, but words refused to come. In her trembling right hand, she still clutched a small handkerchief bunched in a tight fist. She raised her other hand to point down the corridor at a single door, closed and unremarkable except for a faint glow of lamplight slipping under it.

Finn's heart sank. He exchanged a knowing look with Amelia, then straightened. "Stay with her, okay?" He had no illusions about what he might find beyond that door. The tension in the air was thick, and Jenna's sobs echoed with true terror.

As Amelia tried to coax words out of Jenna, Finn steeled himself. He moved down the corridor—one that felt narrower than any other in the house. The lamps overhead flickered. Cold air seemed to cling to the walls. He reached the door, breath catching in his throat. It was slightly ajar, revealing a sliver of an interior room.

He paused, forcing himself to remain calm. If an attacker was inside, he needed to be prepared. Taking a deep breath, he nudged the door open. The sight that greeted him made his stomach twist in revulsion.

The room was modest—only a small desk, a couple of chairs, and a tall window that overlooked the side lawn. But the first thing he noticed was the toppled chair in the middle of the room, the seat cushion torn. Nearby, papers were scattered underfoot, as though someone had rifled through them in haste. And in the corner, a heap of thick red curtain lay crumpled on the floor, evidently pulled down from the window rail.

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“Hello?” he called softly, though he already suspected there's be no answer.

He approached the curtain and realized there was a shape beneath it—a still form. Prickles of dread skittered over his skin. Kneeling, he gently lifted the curtain's edge. The color drained from his face as he recognized the motionless features of Catherine Penrose. Her eyes stared wide and lifeless, mouth parted in a silent gasp, and her skin felt chill to the touch. In her hand, rigid with apparent rigor mortis, she clutched a letter opener, a dark stain of dried blood marking its handle.

Finn swallowed hard, pressing two fingers to her throat. The pulse was non-existent, and her body had begun the early signs of stiffening. Whatever had happened to her must have occurred hours ago. The pose—her arm half-raised as if in defense—spoke of terror or a final desperate attempt to fend someone off.

“Damn,” he whispered, his voice shaking. Another grim end within these cursed walls. Another dead Penrose sibling, not even days apart from James's own suspicious demise. He carefully lowered the curtain back over Catherine's torso, a muted wave of sorrow coursing through him.

Stepping back, he inhaled a steadying breath. “Focus,” he told himself. He might need to check around the room for clues, but first he had to calm the hysterical woman in the corridor and ensure no immediate threat lurked. If the killer was still inside, they could be anywhere.

He ducked out of the room, wiping clammy sweat from his brow. At the far end of the hallway, Amelia held Jenna in a loose embrace, murmuring soothing words. Jenna stared at Finn, tears brimming anew as she read the truth in his expression.

“Is it—Catherine?” Jenna managed in a trembling voice.

Finn inclined his head gravely. “Yes. I’m... I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

Jenna released a stifled sob, half-collapsing against Amelia’s shoulder. “Oh God... oh God. I knew it. I saw the door open and—” Her words dissolved into anguished crying.

Amelia bit her lip, sadness darkening her eyes. “We have to call the police. Inspector Thomas Lloyd should be notified. Now it really looks like something sinister is going on.”

Finn nodded, fists clenched at his sides in a mix of anger and dread. “Agreed. I’ll phone him immediately.” He glanced at Jenna, whose sobs had subsided to ragged gasps. Despite his sympathy for her distress, part of him felt a cold suspicion coiling: how had she come upon Catherine’s body so fast? Could this have been a set-up?

But he pushed those thoughts aside—nothing in Jenna’s hysterical state suggested cunning. “Amelia, can you stay with her for a minute?” he asked gently. “She’s traumatized.”

Amelia nodded, one arm around Jenna. “I will.” Then she flicked a questioning glance at Finn. “What did it look like... in there?”

Finn inhaled, choosing words carefully. “There’s a letter opener in Catherine’s hand, a curtain pulled down over her. She must have tried to defend herself. Or someone staged it like that. It’s not fresh, though—her body’s cold. She’s been dead for a while, presumably.”

Amelia closed her eyes momentarily, fighting back a wave of shock. “So maybe that scream we heard was Jenna’s discovering the body, not Catherine. Catherine could’ve been killed hours ago.”



Jenna whimpered, her face buried in Amelia's blouse, and Amelia's hold tightened in a gesture of comfort.

Finn stepped away, taking out his phone. The corridor's overhead lights buzzed slightly, adding to the surreal, tension-laden atmosphere. He scrolled to Inspector Thomas Lloyd's number. Pressing the dial, he raised the phone to his ear. The ring sounded painfully loud in the hush. The seconds dragged. Finally, Lloyd's voice answered, somewhat breathless.

"Inspector Lloyd here," he said, as though he'd been rushing.

Finn steadied his voice. "Detective Inspector, it's Finn Wright at Brynmor Hall."

Lloyd's tone sharpened with concern. "Is everything all right?"

"We just found Catherine Penrose." Finn paused, grappling with how best to phrase it. "She's deceased, and it looks suspicious, like... like a possible homicide. We need more backup here. It's not safe. This is the second Penrose sibling dead under strange circumstances, and I don't want a third."

A moment of static-laced silence passed before Lloyd responded in a grim voice, "I'll gather some officers immediately. Stay at the scene, don't let anyone tamper with evidence. I'm on my way."

Finn ended the call, pocketing his phone, and rubbed a hand over his face. His thoughts tangled: James's possibly forced heart attack, an intruder rummaging for secrets, and now Catherine found dead with a letter opener in her cold hand. A wave of frustration rose. He wanted to chase the masked intruder down, force out confessions. But he had only the immediate facts: Catherine was gone, and the killer could still be among them.

He returned to where Amelia crouched with Jenna. The younger woman's sobs had eased slightly, though tears continued to streak her cheeks. Her gaze flicked to Finn's phone.

"Did you speak to the police?" Jenna asked, voice small.

Finn nodded. "Inspector Lloyd is coming with a team. We'll keep the area sealed off." He forced his posture straighter, adopting a professional calm that felt hollow. "Jenna, I know this is painful, but can you tell us what you saw or heard?"

She swallowed, trembling. "I was heading to find Catherine because we... we'd had an argument earlier this morning. I wanted to make peace, you know?" Her lips quivered. "But when I got here, the door was partly open, I... heard no noise, so I peeked in and— and that's when I saw her. Lying there under that curtain. I... I screamed and ran."

Amelia nodded, expression compassionate. "And you ended up in the corridor. That's when we found you?"

Jenna closed her eyes. "I've never seen a dead body before. Not like that. Oh God, Catherine..." She pressed her knuckles to her mouth, stifling another sob. "We didn't get along, but I never wanted this."

Amelia patted her shoulder, exchanging a look with Finn. Finn offered a faint nod, sensing nothing contrived in Jenna's distress. "Listen, you should probably go to your room or somewhere safe. We can help you get there, and the police will be here soon to talk with you."

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Jenna shook her head slowly. “I don’t want to be alone. Please—take me to Marianne or Richard. I need... I need them.”

Amelia stood, helping Jenna up. She murmured quietly, “Of course. We’ll see if Richard’s in the house or if Marianne can—”

Finn cut in softly. “Better not disturb Marianne with the children unless necessary. Let’s see if we can find Richard or Mrs Hughes to watch her. We have to keep the corridor to Catherine’s body unoccupied until Lloyd arrives.”

Amelia nodded in agreement. She slipped an arm around Jenna, guiding her gently in the opposite direction from that door. Finn cast one last glance at the closed door down the corridor. Catherine’s final resting place. He felt a wave of sorrow for the proud woman who had told them she suspected no direct threats—just typical Penrose drama. She was gone now, likely murdered.

As they walked, each step echoed in the oppressive hush. The hallway’s lamps flickered, casting dancing shadows along the tapestries. The gloom of dusk through the high windows made the interior lighting seem feebler, as though the house were descending into darkness both literal and metaphorical.

Halfway toward the main staircase, Amelia paused, lips pressed in a flat line. She pivoted to meet Finn’s gaze. “So that’s two Penroses dead within a short span. If we didn’t suspect foul play before, we do now.”

Finn exhaled, nodding grimly. “James died suspiciously, but plausible as a heart attack. Now Catherine. This can’t be coincidence.”

Jenna shuddered between them, tears slipping free again. She mumbled, “Who would kill Catherine? She... she was just trying to hold the family together. It was James who... who had all the money stress.”

Finn’s mind reeled with possibilities. Some unknown foe picking off family members? Or was it a twisted internal power struggle? The masked intruder? And where did that letter about Marianne wanting James gone fit in?

He led them onward, forcibly quelling the swirl in his thoughts. The hallway opened onto a broader landing near the stairwell. From here, he could hear faint voices below—servants, possibly. The entire estate had come alive with quiet panic after the scream.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Amelia turned to Finn, her expression grim but resolute. “We should wait for Lloyd. Try to keep the scene untouched. Then we’re going to have questions for everyone.”

Finn nodded curtly. “We’ll handle it by the book, but I also want to check on Marianne and the children soon. This is only going to heighten their fear.”

Jenna seemed to pull herself together slightly, wiping her nose with the rumpled handkerchief. “Please, can I stay with Marianne for now?” she asked in a shaky voice. “I need to see the children are okay.”

Amelia exchanged a look with Finn. “Sure,” fair enough said gently. “We’ll bring you there, but be prepared—Marianne has her children with her, so let’s be mindful.”

“Thank you,” Jenna whispered.

Finn’s mind lingered on the unsettling final expression Catherine wore, those wide eyes locked in an unspoken terror. As they began descending the stairs, he resolved

not to let fear overshadow the logic of their investigation. This was no random haunting or petty burglary—it was purposeful, violent. A killer prowled Brynmor Hall, and if two Penroses were gone, who might be next?

They reached the corridor below, near Marianne's makeshift hideaway, noticing that the door was still shut. Through the heavy wood, he heard murmured voices—Marianne likely consoling Charlie and Bella. Gently, Finn knocked. "Marianne? It's Finn and Amelia. And we've got Jenna here."

A tense moment passed before the latch clicked. Hobbs's face appeared, eyes darting over them. "All clear?" he asked in a whisper.

Finn tilted his head. "We found..." He swallowed. "We found Catherine. She's... she's dead, Hobbs." The words felt bitter on his tongue.

Hobbs visibly paled, bowing his head in dismay. "Not another Penrose..." he muttered.

Inside, Marianne's gasp cut through the hush. Bella clutched her mother's arm, clearly sensing the tension, while Charlie stared with fearful curiosity. Marianne stepped forward, her knuckles white on the door handle. "C-Catherine... are you sure?"

Amelia nodded gently. "Yes, I'm so sorry. We've called Inspector Lloyd again. Please, stay here, keep the children close. We can't risk them wandering around."

Jenna, tears brimming anew, ducked past Hobbs to wrap her arms around Marianne. "I... I'm so sorry."

Marianne staggered under the weight of the news, her composure fracturing. "This can't be happening," she choked out. "Why Catherine? She never harmed anyone."

Finn felt a surge of sympathy, but time pressed. “We’ll let you grieve, but please lock the door again. We’ll talk once the inspector arrives.”

Hobbs inclined his head, eyes downcast. With a gentle pull, he ushered Jenna inside, and Marianne gave Finn a hollow nod before shutting the door. The latch clicked again, enveloping the corridor in tense quiet.

Amelia turned to Finn, voice quivering with controlled anger. “That’s it. Two members of the Penrose family dead in under a week. We can’t treat this as an isolated incident any longer.”

Finn closed his eyes briefly, letting a wave of grim determination settle. “Agreed. We either have a killer systematically targeting them, or it’s some twisted series of accidents— which is unlikely. Catherine’s death looked like an outright murder.”

She pursed her lips. “We need to question everyone again—Donald, Mrs Hughes, Richard, Jenna, Marianne— figure out who might have a motive. And then there’s the masked intruder, if he’s not one of them. Or maybe James’s finances led to some outside threat. It’s a lot.”

He gave a short nod. “We’ll handle it. Let’s wait for Lloyd, secure the scene, and then piece it all together.” He let out a shaky breath, eyes lingering on the window at the end of the hall, outside which dusk was fast deepening into night. A chill wind gusted against the panes, rattling them. “This estate is going to be crawling with local police soon.”

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Amelia rubbed her own arms as though warding off a sudden chill. “In the meantime, we can check the corridor near the body, make sure no one else stumbles in. The less contamination, the better for forensics.”

Finn nodded. “Right. Let’s go back. And... be cautious. I can’t shake the feeling that the masked figure might still be around.”

They turned on their heels, moving along the corridor that led to Catherine’s final resting place. The manor’s lamps glowed weakly now that night was properly closing in. Every corner felt ominous, every tapestry looking as though it harbored secrets. A hush blanketed the house, as if it too grieved the loss of another Penrose. Time would only tell if more would join them in the family cemetery.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Finn glanced out the broad kitchen window, observing the dark silhouette of police cars parked near the edge of Brynmor Hall's gravel drive. Their headlights were off, and the interior lights had been extinguished. It was late—well past the usual hour for household bustle. If not for the glow of lights in the kitchen, the estate might have seemed deserted. But inside, tension gripped everyone in the aftermath of Catherine Penrose's death.

He turned back to the large farm-style table at the kitchen’s center, where Marianne, Richard, and Jenna sat in subdued silence. Donald the cook bustled at the stove, heating milk and whisking cocoa powder. Despite the dire atmosphere, the aroma of rich chocolate rolled through the air, offering a small comfort in an otherwise grim evening.

Amelia sat beside Finn, pen and notebook at the ready on the tabletop. She studied the trio with concern. "I know it's a horrible time," she said softly, "but we need to ask some questions about Catherine. Is that all right?"

Richard sat hunched forward, face buried in his hands. His shoulders trembled, betraying quiet sobs. Jenna rested a hand on his back in a gesture of solace, though her own eyes were red-rimmed. Marianne perched across from them, wringing her hands in her lap, eyes distant and haunted.

Donald turned, ladle in hand, and cast a glance at Finn. "Would hot chocolate help them relax, do you think?"

Finn managed a wan smile. "It couldn't hurt. Thank you for making it." He found it surreal that only hours before, they had discovered Catherine's body, and now they sat like a group of weary travelers around a kitchen table at midnight. The presence of the cocoa's homey scent felt jarringly at odds with the tragedy that had befallen the household.

"Where is Judd?" Richard asked.

"He's been sick with a migraine," Marianne answered. "I just checked on him and he's out like a light with the painkillers he's on. He'll wake up in the morning to all... To all this."

Richard sniffled, wiping his nose on a handkerchief. He spoke in a raw, low voice, "I—I can't believe she's gone. My sister... it feels unreal." Jenna leaned her head against his shoulder, offering silent support.

Amelia's gaze softened. "We're very sorry for your loss, Richard. Catherine seemed—from what little we saw—kind, thoughtful. It's devastating to lose someone so suddenly."



Marianne lowered her gaze. “She was a good friend. We might have had disagreements, but never over anything that should end like... like this.” Her eyes dampened, but she held herself resolutely, likely for the children’s sake—though they were now sleeping (or attempting to) in another room. “She was always the voice of reason in this family, more than you’d expect from someone with so many burdens.”

Finn gently cleared his throat, leaning forward in the chair. “We need a timeline of the evening, if you can manage it, Richard. Where were you when... things happened?”

Richard sat back slightly, the question seeming to jolt him from his grief. “I was in my bedroom reading an old novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I—I do that sometimes when I can’t sleep. I must have been there from about nine o’clock onward. Jenna had gone to bed earlier, or so I thought. I only found out about Catherine when people started shouting.” His voice trembled, and he looked at Jenna. “I... I still can’t believe we’re talking about her in the past tense.”

Jenna squeezed his arm gently, eyes glistening. “Shh. We’ll get through this, Richard.”

Amelia scribbled notes. “When did you last see Catherine alive?”

He frowned, brow creasing in thought. “We had a meal together—just a light supper—in the upper sitting room around seven. Then we parted ways. She said she had something to do, some personal matter, but didn’t elaborate. I went to my room after that.” A wave of anguish crossed his face. “I never realized that would be the last time I... spoke to her.”

Finn’s gaze flicked to Jenna. “And you, Mrs. Penrose? You discovered Catherine’s body, correct?”

Jenna nodded, tears threatening again. “Yes. She seemed... upset at dinner. Catherine and Richard had words, and I—I couldn’t sleep thinking about it. So I got up and

decided to see if she was all right.”She gave Richard a sideways look, but he simply bowed his head in silent regret.“When I reached her door, it was slightly ajar.She didn’t answer when I knocked, so I stepped in... and that’s when—when I saw her under that curtain.”

Her voice trembled, recalling the grisly sight.Amelia reached out, placing a comforting hand over Jenna’s.“You said she’d seemed upset.Was that just from an argument with Richard, or something else?”

Jenna glanced at Richard, but he stared down at his hands.She swallowed.“It... it wasn’t anything catastrophic.Catherine and Richard disagreed about the... the potential sale of Brynmor Hall.Catherine and Marianne were apparently considering it—”

Richard jerked upright."Considering?They were practically in agreement, from what Catherine told me.Talking about how the estate's upkeep was too great a financial burden that it made sense to sell."

Marianne, seated a short distance away, stiffened, shooting him a sharp glare.“I was only discussing options,” she insisted.“I never promised anything to Catherine.You can’t blame me for exploring possibilities.”

Richard’s eyes flared with anger.“But you had no right to do that behind my back.This is my ancestral home, the place I grew up—where James grew up, Catherine, Wilkie— all of us.It’s Penrose property.”He inhaled shakily.“Just because my parents decided to leave me nothing in the will doesn’t mean you can brush me aside.”

“Calm down,” Jenna whispered, rubbing his arm soothingly.“We don’t need more drama.Right now, Catherine’s gone... that’s enough heartbreak.”

Amelia's pencil hovered over her notebook. "So, you argued over the idea of selling Brynmor Hall?"

Richard pressed his lips together. "Yes. I couldn't stand the thought of strangers owning it. Catherine insisted it was best for the family to clear debts. And apparently, Marianne was open to that."

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Marianne turned, eyes brimming with resentment. “James left me half the house upon his death in his will. Catherine had the other half. We were discussing options, that’s all. I wasn’t about to finalize anything without consulting you and the rest. But I can’t ignore the monstrous upkeep costs. This place is a fortress.”

Finn spoke up, trying to maintain calm in the face of Richard’s rising temper. “So Catherine and Marianne jointly owned the estate after James passed. Richard, you inherited nothing from your parents’ wills?”

Richard stood abruptly, voice choked with frustration. “Yes, nothing! They all thought I was irresponsible with money, James included. He and Catherine locked me out. And now—Catherine’s death changes everything.” He paused, glancing at Marianne as though wanting to fight on, but Jenna tugged at his sleeve, urging him to sit. He dropped back into the chair, seething.

Fin tapped a pen against the tabletop. “In a practical sense, who inherits Catherine’s share now?”

Richard paled, color draining from his cheeks. He slumped, shoulders sagging. “She told me once, long ago, that she had changed her will. Should anything happen to her... her share would pass to me. She said she felt guilty that I got nothing from our parents.”

A charged silence filled the kitchen. Finn cast a sidelong glance at Amelia, noting how her lips pressed in a thin line, the same conclusion forming: Richard stood to gain from Catherine’s death. Whether or not he was responsible, it presented a motive as glaring as a searchlight.

Donald, returning from the stove with a tray of steaming mugs, paused awkwardly. He set the cocoa-laden tray on the counter, making no move to pour. "Here we are," he said. "Sorry." Then he retreated a few steps, looking discomfited.

Richard swallowed, tears glinting anew. "I would never... She was my sister," he murmured defensively. "This house or no house, I— I'd never want her gone." Then, as though the emotional toll broke him, he pressed his palms to his eyes, suppressing sobs.

Jenna wrapped an arm around him. "We know," she whispered, voice tight. "We know."

Finn was about to speak when a figure appeared in the doorway—Inspector Thomas Lloyd. He wore the same tweed jacket as before, shoulders tense. "Finn, Amelia." He gave them a curt nod, then focused on the others in the room. "We've taken Catherine's body away," he announced gently, though his words resonated with finality.

Richard crumpled, burying his face into Jenna's shoulder as heartbreak poured out. Marianne turned away, gripping the edge of the counter top for support, eyes shut in despair. Silence fell, broken only by Richard's muffled sobs.

Amelia rose, guiding Thomas away from the table toward the corridor. Finn followed, glancing back once to see Marianne kneading her brow as she stared at her half-full mug of cocoa with unseeing eyes. For a few moments, the trio—Finn, Amelia, and Lloyd—stood in the hallway, close enough to hear the quiet weeping but giving the Penroses space.

Lloyd sighed, crossing his arms. "This is worse than I feared. First James, now Catherine. The entire family is under siege. But by who?"

Amelia nodded, her brow furrowed. “Are you done with the initial scene examination?”

He gave a sharp bob of his head. “For now, yes. My officers will remain on site, but we can’t do much else until we get more forensic results. I’m recommending the family vacate the premises. It’s not safe here.”

Finn let out a sigh. “I doubt Marianne or Richard will agree to that. They keep insisting Brynmor Hall is their home, that they won’t be driven off. The children, at least, will go away for a bit, but I don’t see Marianne leaving. Not with the ghost rumors, not with the legacy.”

Inspector Lloyd rubbed his temples as if staving off a headache. “Well, it’s their risk, I suppose. I hope they realize caution might save their lives.” Then he lowered his voice. “What about Catherine’s body? The forensics team gave me a few preliminary remarks.”

Amelia’s eyes sharpened. “Anything we should know?”

Lloyd’s expression darkened. “They said there’s no obvious wound, no bruising consistent with strangulation or a blow. She was found with that letter opener clutched in her hand, but there’s no sign of actual stab wounds. It’s eerily reminiscent of James—dying, seemingly, from shock or fear. Another Penrose apparently succumbing to ‘fright’ in the dark corners of this house.”

Finn grimaced, memory flashing to Catherine’s rigid posture, wide-eyed and cold. “So, basically, no direct cause besides a plausible ‘heart stopping’? Another difficult-to-prove homicide if it is one.”

“It’s possible she had the same heart condition as James,” Amelia offered. “If it’s congenital.”

Lloyd shrugged, frustration evident in the tense lines around his mouth. “We’ll keep investigating. But it looks more and more like this could be the same pattern James exhibited—fear-induced cardiac arrest, or something that left no physical trace.”

Amelia tapped the side of her notebook. “Which means we’ve got to figure out who or what is terrifying them to death, if that’s indeed the method.”

Finn let out a slow breath, recalling Hobbs’s stories of Wilkie Penrose’s odd demise in the cellar years back. Another Penrose found with no outward injury, only an expression of frozen horror. If a pattern truly existed, it spanned nearly a decade or more of uncanny tragedies. “We’ll do everything we can, Inspector.”

“Good,” Lloyd replied. “My men are outside, but we’ll keep a perimeter watch. Meanwhile, I strongly advise you to push them to leave or, at least, keep everyone in locked rooms for the night. If a murderer’s prowling, or if some intangible phenomenon is at play, nobody should wander about alone.”

Finn felt a pang of weary determination. “We’ll talk to them. Thank you. The day’s been... quite a shock for all.” He rubbed the tension in his neck, hearing Richard’s muffled sobs from the kitchen behind them. He pictured Marianne’s pale face, Jenna’s tears, and the stoic hush from Mrs Hughes. The entire household quivered under fear and heartbreak.

Amelia mustered a tight nod. “We appreciate your help, Inspector. Let’s keep each other updated, yeah?”

Lloyd inclined his head, the overhead corridor lamp casting sharp lines across his features. “Of course. I’ll be here a while longer, then I’ll leave a couple of uniforms. If anything else happens, you call me immediately.”

And with that, he turned and walked away, footsteps fading toward the foyer. Finn

exhaled, shoulders heavy from the day's emotional toll. The corridor felt eerily silent again, the hush broken only by faint voices from the kitchen and a distant shuffle of movement from the direction of the house's side wings.

Amelia touched his arm softly. "Two siblings dead, a possible masked intruder, and a swirling rumor about ghosts. I'd say Brynmor Hall's being unsafe is an understatement," she said bleakly.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

Finn swallowed, recalling Catherine's lifeless eyes. "All we can do is keep watch and keep asking questions. The family are frightened, perhaps by the old myths surrounding their ancestors. Someone is deliberately stoking that fear."

She gave him a solemn look, pushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Then we need to shine a light on it."

He nodded, turning them back toward the kitchen. The overhead lights flickered slightly, adding an ominous note to the hush. Within the next few hours, or days at most, they needed to pry open the Penrose secrets, unearth the truth behind these bizarre deaths, and stop a cunning killer—if indeed that's what haunted these halls. Because if they failed, there was no telling who might be next in line to meet a tragic, fear-laced end.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Amelia awoke with a start in the middle of the night, her heart beating so fiercely it felt almost painful against her ribs. The only illumination in the guest room came from a narrow sliver of moonlight shining through the tall windows, leaving the rest of the space sunk in heavy shadow. Brynmor Hall, in these dark hours, belonged to a realm of unsettled dreams and long-forgotten secrets.

She lay there for a moment, blinking as she tried to grasp what had roused her. The covers felt stifling, and she eased them away to breathe more freely. Then she heard it again: a faint scraping sound, like something dragging across the corridor's floor outside her door. Immediately, her pulse kicked into a higher gear.

A wave of tension coiled through her muscles. She pressed her palm to the side of her neck, feeling the hairs stand upright. It sounded as though something heavy were being pulled along the wood, an irregular friction that caused a dull, repetitive thump. For an instant, she hoped it was the wind or a caretaker's tool clattering. But her intuition insisted otherwise—too deliberate, too ominous.

She slid out of bed, bare feet touching the chilly boards. Her breath caught in her throat. The hall outside was only a few steps away, separated by a single locked door, but the notion of leaving her safe bubble made her skin prickle. She stared at the door handle, her mind a jumble of possibilities: had the murderer who killed Catherine returned? Had someone else fallen prey to that masked figure?

A quiet beep from her phone on the nightstand snapped her out of the swirl of dread. She snatched it up, her mind grasping for a lifeline. She dialed Finn's number—he'd insisted she call if something happened before leaving her room to investigate. She pressed the phone to her ear, practically willing him to answer. But it rang and rang, no sign of picking up. Anxiety rattled her chest. Could he be sleeping through it, or maybe he was out patrolling?

She stared at the phone in dismay. With no immediate help, she knew she had to handle this alone. Another scrape echoed from behind the door, followed by a faint thud. It was drifting away now, as if whatever was being dragged was heading down the corridor.

Swallowing her misgivings, she crept toward the door. Even if danger lurked, how could she remain behind locked doors, not knowing who might be in trouble? Her sense of duty—as well as raw curiosity—propelled her. The handle felt cool under her palm. She tugged the door open slowly, bracing for confrontation.

The corridor beyond was dimly lit by a single wall sconce halfway down the hall. The flicker cast dancing shadows along the wallpaper. For a moment, Amelia could see

nothing but the hushed emptiness of old portraits and the runner rug underfoot. Then her eyes caught a movement at the far end—something being pulled around the corner, disappearing from view.

Her heart stuttered. The shape on the floor was definitely human in outline—legs trailing, arms limp, with a swirl of what looked like long hair. A body. A woman's body being dragged by an unseen force, so quickly that Amelia barely had time to react. She parted her lips to shout, but only a hoarse whisper escaped. Adrenaline finally spiked, and she yelled, "Stop!" letting her voice ring through the corridor.

No one answered. The body vanished around the corner. She forced herself into motion, the next footfall more a leap than a step. Her pulse pounded so loudly she could barely hear her own ragged breathing. Who was being dragged? Mrs Hughes? Marianne? Jenna? Some staff member she wasn't aware of?

At the corner, she skidded, the soles of her feet nearly slipping on the rug's edge. She turned and aimed her phone's flashlight down the next stretch of hallway. The smell of old dust and furniture polish tinged the air, thick in her nostrils. She glimpsed the figure again—a masked silhouette, half-hidden in gloom, hauling the limp form up a short flight of narrow stairs that led to the third floor. The dragging sound resonated unnervingly, each scrape adding to the sense of nightmare.

"Stop! Police!" she cried again, voice echoing off the walls, but the masked figure did not pause. The body's legs bumped each step, a sickening sight that made her chest constrict. Amelia cursed under her breath. She had no weapon—only the phone clutched so tightly in her hand that her knuckles whitened.

She closed the distance, ascending the stairs two at a time. Her lungs burned from the sudden burst of exertion. A swirl of fear hammered in her chest, battling with her determination. Was the woman alive? If someone was in mortal danger, she had to act, but her mind also screamed that she might be running headlong into a trap.

At the top of the narrow stairs, she emerged onto a cramped landing. Moonlight spilled through a dusty window, illuminating the masked figure kneeling in front of a door at the end. The body lay on the floor, half-covered by a thick red curtain. Bizarrely, it reminded Amelia of how Catherine had been found. But this time, the intruder was actively dragging the body—why?

Fueled by adrenaline, she rushed forward. “Let her go!” she shouted. The masked figure twisted around, silent as a phantom. She caught a glimpse of dark eyes—male, probably. The figure gave a single, sudden thrust, shoving her aside. The blow connected with her shoulder. Pain radiated through her arm, and she stumbled into the wall, letting out a gasp.

In that fleeting instant, the figure wrenched the window open. Without hesitating, he slipped onto the sill and dropped out of sight. Amelia stumbled to her feet, ignoring the sharp ache in her shoulder. She lunged to the window, breath straining, just in time to see the figure scramble down the ivy-laced exterior. His athletic grace in the moonlight seemed surreal—a living shadow bounding across the lawn. Then he vanished into the darkness.

Her heart hammered. She pivoted on a heel, searching for the body. It lay on the floor, the same red curtain draped across it that the masked figure must have used to conceal it. The overwhelming dread she felt earlier returned in a crushing wave. Kneeling, she reached out trembling fingers to pull the curtain aside, fearful of which family member or staff she might find.

She peeled back the thick fabric. In the faint light, she saw...herself. Her own features, pale and lifeless, eyes wide and staring. The hair matched her color, her shape, everything. For an impossible moment, she stared at her own dead face. A scream caught in her throat, half-choking her with raw terror.

Her phone clattered to the floor, the flashlight spinning and casting eerie arcs of

illumination across the walls. Amelia jolted backward, every nerve in her body ignited by sheer disbelief. She wanted to cry out but found her voice gone, smothered by a horror so profound it defied words. She had to be losing her mind. But the stare of that corpse—her doppelganger—seared into her consciousness.

Then, the entire scene fractured like a pane of glass. She jolted upright in bed, drenched in sweat. Her pulse thundered in her ears, and her chest rose and fell with labored gasps. Moonlight streamed through the windows of her guest room, exactly as before, but the door was closed, no dragging noise outside. She lay tangled in the sheets, which clung to her clammy skin.

A dream. A nightmare of unimaginable intensity. For several seconds, she remained frozen, half expecting the masked figure to barge in or to find her own corpse at the foot of the bed. But all was still. The corridor outside, if she strained her ears, revealed no suspicious sound. She pressed a hand to her forehead, finding it damp with perspiration.

“Oh God,” she whispered shakily. Releasing a trembling exhale, she swung her legs out of bed, letting them dangle over the side. Her heart still pounded as if she’d run a marathon. The thought of trying to fall back asleep in this room—this place where her dream horrors played out—sent a shiver through her.

She cast a glance at her phone on the nightstand. She could call Finn again. This time, he would answer. But she knew the corridor was silent, the house presumably locked down for the night. The masked figure, if real, was unlikely to be near at this moment—she’d have heard something. Yet the dread refused to release her. She felt so vulnerable.

Gathering her courage, she rose, slipping into slippers and pulling a light cardigan around her. The corridor might not be safer, but she could not remain in this room—she needed Finn’s calm presence to anchor her from the lingering terrors of

that dream. She inched the door open, scanning the hallway with her phone's flashlight. Only the hush of an old manor met her, punctuated by the distant hum of a wind current through some half-sealed window.

Stepping out, she closed the door behind her. Each board complained softly underfoot, but the corridor was otherwise empty. She recalled her dream's terrifying chase, how the body had been dragged up these halls. A wave of disorientation washed over her, but she forced it down. "Just keep moving," she told herself under her breath.

She navigated the hall, turning corners, passing by silent portraits and occasional unlit side passages. Her phone's dim glow gave enough light to avoid collisions, though the oppressive darkness beyond her narrow beam unsettled her. At last, she spotted the door to Finn's room. She paused, feeling awkward at how it might look to arrive unannounced in the middle of the night, but she doubted he'd mind given the circumstances.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

She rapped her knuckles gently on the wood. No immediate response. She tried again, a little louder. After a few seconds, she heard a rustling from within, then the door clicked open to reveal Finn's tousled hair and half-lidded gaze. He wore a plain T-shirt and track pants, blinking in the faint corridor light.

"Amelia?" he mumbled, squinting. "What's—are you all right?" The concern in his voice, even through his grogginess, made her exhale a shaky breath she'd been holding.

She tried a wan smile, but it wavered. "I'm sorry for waking you. I just... had a nightmare. A bad one."

Instantly, Finn's expression sharpened with worry. "Come in," he said, stepping aside so she could pass. The warmth of his room enveloped her, and she found some solace in the faint whiff of his usual cologne drifting from his clothes.

She shut the door behind her, leaning against it for a moment. A small lamp on the bedside table cast gentle shadows, revealing the unmade bed and a couple of case files sprawled over a chair. "I didn't feel comfortable staying alone," she admitted. "Everything's been so grim. And that dream..." She shuddered.

He offered a gentle nod, guiding her closer. "What was it about?" he asked softly, pressing a hand to her shoulder. She noticed the slight bruise near his temple from his earlier tussle with the intruder—a reminder that nightmares weren't the only dangers lurking.

Her words emerged in fragments: "A corridor. Dragging. A body. I tried to stop it,

but... it was me.I was looking at my own dead face.”

Finn sucked in a sharp breath.“Damn.”He brushed a strand of hair from her cheek.“That’s horrifying.Hey,” he said softly, “it’s not real.You’re safe.I’m here.”

She closed her eyes, grateful for the contact.For a moment, the day’s tension receded.She swallowed, opening her eyes again.“It felt so real.I was sure the murderer was out there, hauling me off to... to wherever Catherine ended up.It’s just the sort of thing I’ve feared knowing that... That Wendell Reed is out there.”

Finn gently tugged her toward the bed.“Sit, please.Catch your breath.I can get some water or something.”

She let him guide her, sinking onto the mattress as he perched beside her.The warmth of his presence steadied her, dispelling the last vestiges of her dream.She scooted back, curling her legs under the covers, tension finally ebbing from her shoulders.

He watched her for a silent beat, then mustered a half-grin.“So... about that ‘professional’ boundary we talked about, eh?”

Amelia’s cheeks flushed faintly.“Tonight, I’m not feeling so professional, sorry.Just... scared.This place, the murders, the nightmares.”She turned her gaze away, embarrassed by her vulnerability.

Finn’s voice was gentle as he brushed a reassuring hand across her forearm.“Hey, no apology needed.We’re both in over our heads with spooks and conspiracies.Let’s do what we can to keep each other sane.I’d want the same if I had a dream like that.”

She let out a tremulous laugh, leaning her head against his shoulder.“Thank you,” she whispered.For a moment, neither of them spoke, letting the hush fill with unspoken comfort.Outside, the wind sighed across the manor’s stone walls, prompting a faint



rattle from the window frame.

Eventually, Finn shifted, sliding properly under the covers, leaving enough space for Amelia to join him. She hesitated only a moment before nestling beside him, the shared warmth banishing the memory of that lifeless self she'd seen in her dream. She closed her eyes, focusing on the steady drum of his heartbeat rather than the terror locked in her mind.

He tucked an arm around her shoulders, his breath lightly stirring her hair. "Try to get some sleep," he murmured. "If anything else weird happens, we'll handle it together."

She nodded. The thought of returning to her lonely bedroom held no appeal. The tension swirling around Brynmor Hall might remain unsolved by morning, but for now, she'd accept Finn's presence as a shield against the intangible horrors haunting her subconscious.

Her eyes drifted shut. The dream's nightmarish images still lurked behind her eyelids, but they were fainter, buffered by Finn's warmth.

She nuzzled into the pillow, letting exhaustion claim her. The last conscious thought she had before drifting off was of Catherine's wide-eyed corpse, and how easily Amelia's mind had twisted that sight to show her own face in place of Catherine's. Perhaps that was the house's power—magnifying every fear. But as she drifted off, Finn's arms around her offered the fragile hope that fear could be kept at bay, at least for one night.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Finn sat in the Brynmor Hall sitting room, a stack of case files spread across the low coffee table in front of him. The large windows let in a cool, gray morning light that revealed the estate's grounds drenched from a recent drizzle. Amelia sat opposite him,

perched on the edge of an armchair, her own batch of paperwork balanced on her knees. Both looked weary, dark smudges under their eyes from another restless night. Yet the tension in the air compelled them to keep working, sifting every clue to solve the mysteries plaguing the Penrose family.

He glanced up from a document about James Penrose's finances, exhaling quietly. "Judd Aspen," he mused. "You believe his story about Marianne? That she was threatening James for more money, maybe even wanting him gone?"

Amelia closed a file, setting it aside. "I'm not sure," she replied softly. "Going by your conversation with him, he obviously has a strong opinion of her, calling her a 'gold digger.' It wouldn't be the first time there was a bit of bad feeling between the best friend and the partner. And from what I've seen of Marianne, she's grieving, anxious—like any widow in this situation."

Finn nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. The sitting room felt warm enough from the small fire crackling in the hearth, but the atmosphere was thick with the weight of their conversation. "Judd claims he found that letter where Marianne wrote she wished something would happen to James. That's direct enough to be a red flag."

"True," Amelia allowed. "But she clearly hadn't delivered it yet to whoever 'B' was, and maybe she never would. Perhaps she was just venting. People say things in anger or frustration that they never intend literally. Still, we can't dismiss it. Judd insists Marianne wanted him gone—that's motive if we put it plainly."

Finn tapped a pen against the table, mind swirling with the conflicting images: Marianne's tear-streaked face, her genuine worry for the children, the letter Judd brandished implicating her. "She hasn't struck me as the type who'd orchestrate two murders," he said, voice hushed.

"And yet, we know next to nothing about her background," Amelia pointed out. "She

used to be a nurse, but we don't have details on how she and James met, or her financial situation. People can hide a lot behind a polished exterior."

Finn frowned, recalling the evening prior when they found Catherine's lifeless body. The grief and chaos that followed still haunted every corner of the house. Marianne had looked genuinely shaken, yet... so had most others. "I guess we need more than just impressions," he said. "We need proof or a reason to confirm or refute Judd's accusation."

Amelia nodded. "Agreed." She started to say something further, but Finn's phone rang. "Is it Rob? Probably got news from London."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

Finn picked up his phone, and in unison they answered. He put his device on speaker for Amelia to hear. “Rob,” he greeted, leaning forward. “Are we in for more complications?”

Rob’s voice came through with surprising clarity, though a hint of background noise suggested he might be in a busy station hallway. “Complications? You have no idea. If Amelia is with you and you two are alone, mind if we go loudspeaker? I’d rather talk to both of you.”

Finn’s eyebrows rose. He turned the volume up. “You’re on. Amelia’s here.”

“Hey, Rob,” Amelia chimed in, curiosity lacing her tone.

“Good,” Rob said. “Well, I’ll cut to the chase. Have you two caught the news broadcasts these last twenty-four hours? Because James Penrose’s death is front and center.”

Amelia exchanged a glance with Finn, tension crackling in the quiet sitting room. The only sound beyond Rob’s voice was the hiss of the low-burning fire. “We’ve not had time for TV,” she admitted. “We’re up to our ears in the local tragedies.”

Rob gave a short, humorless laugh. “I know you’re still dealing with James and Catherine Penrose’s untimely deaths, and I hate to complicate things... Well, apparently someone caught wind of the Home Office involvement and snagged the story—there’s speculation swirling about James’s suspicious death and now Catherine’s. They named you both on camera, said ‘Famed Home Office consultant detective team, Finn Wright and Inspector Amelia Winters, are investigating to see if

it's murder.'"

Finn scrubbed a hand across his face. "Not great. The last thing we need is the murderer or potential suspects seeing a sensational angle on the news."

"That's not why I'm calling," Rob said, tone dropping. "Wendell Reed must've seen it, too. He sent me an envelope this morning, addressed to me personally at HQ. Inside was a photo of Brynmor Hall, with these crude drawings. He scribbled in bodies hanging from the windows by their necks... it's vile. It's obviously a threat, a message that he knows where Amelia is, and that you're both in danger."

A cold wave prickled over Amelia's arms. She leaned in, voice lowered. "Wendell? Are you certain he did it?"

Rob's sigh transmitted through the line. "The envelope has his handwriting on it. Listen, if he's got a personal vendetta, and now he's seeing you at Brynmor Hall, it means he's aware of your location. Could be planning to come after you, especially you, Amelia."

A hush fell. Finn felt his pulse tick up, spiking adrenaline at the mere mention of Wendell returning to their orbit. "So he's not content with scaring Amelia in London, now he's pointing at Wales," he murmured. "We thought bringing you here would take you away from the danger, but this definitely blows that."

Amelia's mouth set in a grim line. "He's trying to separate me from the case, isn't he? He's threatening me so I'll leave Brynmor Hall, leave Finn alone to handle it. He's... he's intimidated by Finn's track record."

Rob cleared his throat. "It's possible. Specifically, his track record with Max Vilne. Wendell Reed knows how that ended. So yeah, maybe he's aiming to rattle you, get you out of the picture."

Finn felt a flicker of fierce protectiveness surge. He recalled how Amelia had nearly died chasing Wendell's phantom once before. "Amelia," he said softly, "Rob might be right that it's too dangerous for you. Wendell's proven he can be relentless. And if the murderer inside Brynmor Hall is also active—that's a double hazard."

She bristled, narrowing her eyes. "I'm not leaving. We're in the midst of a murder investigation. Catherine's been killed, James possibly murdered. I can't just pack up because Wendell's sending pictures."

"Don't be reckless," Finn urged, swallowing a pang of frustration. "It's not just about finishing the case. It's about your life."

Amelia let out a tense breath. "My life matters, obviously, but so do the Penroses. If Wendell is trying to scare me away, that means he's counting on me to panic. I won't give him that."

A moment of awkward silence ensued. On the phone line, Rob cleared his throat again. "I get where you're coming from, Amelia, but from a purely tactical standpoint... it might be wise to remove yourself from a location Wendell can identify. We can't risk him showing up, guns blazing, while we've got a vulnerable family already being picked off."

"I'm not leaving," Amelia repeated, voice firm. "I appreciate the concern, but if Wendell's truly on the warpath, he could find me anywhere. At least here, I have Finn and the local police inspector's constables. I'm not going into hiding."

Finn felt caught between worry for her safety and respect for her resolve. He exchanged a look with Amelia, reading the determination in her eyes. "We can't make Amelia do anything," he said quietly, addressing Rob. "But we can up the security on the estate. That might help. The local police can patrol more heavily, set up a tighter perimeter."

Rob exhaled. “Right. I’ll liaise with them, request additional units from Inspector Thomas Lloyd’s station. But if something else happens, or if Wendell escalates, promise me you’ll reconsider, Amelia.”

Amelia nodded once, even though Rob couldn’t see. “All right. If there’s a direct threat, I’ll think about it. But for now, we press on.”

The tension in the call was palpable, but Rob’s voice softened a fraction. “Okay, be safe, both of you. Wendell’s not a subtle person—he might want to sabotage your presence or push you to slip up. Don’t give him that opening.”

“Understood,” Finn said. “Anything else from London?”

“No real updates beyond that,” Rob replied. “The Home Office is still cautious about labeling James’s death homicide. With Catherine’s death, though, they might shift stance. Let me know if you need any resources from my end.”

Amelia forced a small laugh. “We need resources for everything, but we’ll be fine. Thanks, Rob.”

“Good luck,” Rob said, and the call clicked off with an air of lingering concern.

Finn dropped his phone onto the table’s surface, letting out a tight breath. “Damn Wendell. He never misses a chance to rattle us, especially you.” He shot Amelia a worried glance. “I’ll keep an eye out, day and night. We’ll coordinate with local police for extra patrols.”

Amelia exhaled, leaning back in the armchair. “I hate that he still has this power to unnerve me, but I won’t let him succeed. Meanwhile, we can’t forget the suspicious deaths under this roof.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

Finn nodded, eyes scanning the case files splayed across the table. They'd drawn genealogies of the Penrose family, tallies of who inherited what, old records of James's business. "Right, back to that. Where were we? Judd Aspen told me that Marianne demanded more money from James to keep up her lifestyle. We suspect that was one reason he believed she orchestrated his death."

Amelia wrinkled her nose. "It doesn't quite fit the Marianne I've seen—worried about finances, yes, but also genuinely caring about her children. She doesn't come off as a shallow trophy wife who'd murder for a bigger bank account."

"Yet Judd insists otherwise," Finn pressed, rifling through the typed notes from his interview with Judd. "He says she was deeply unhappy with James's tightening wallet, threatened to leave him if he didn't keep funding her tastes."

Amelia shrugged. "People can be complicated. Maybe Marianne vented frustrations to Judd or others. That doesn't automatically mean she plotted murder. But we do have that letter Marianne supposedly wrote, wishing something would happen to James so she could be free. It's fairly damning if genuine."

Finn drummed his fingers on the coffee table, considering the swirl of conflicting narratives. "It's possible she was venting. Or maybe she was testing a hypothetical. We can't know until we dig deeper."

Amelia tapped a pen on her notepad. "We need more data, specifically about finances. If James's life insurance and Catherine's inheritance are factors, we might see who stands to gain. We also don't know Marianne's personal finances—did she have large debts? Was she forging any business deals without her husband? So many



unknowns.”

Finn gave a resolute nod. “In that case, let’s phone Rob or local authorities, see if we can push for a warrant to examine everyone’s finances. We want to see bank statements, debts, those sorts of details for Marianne, Richard, Jenna, and even Mrs Hughes if necessary. Maybe something will leap out—like a huge debt or suspicious transfer.”

Amelia grimaced at the thought of more bureaucracy, but she recognized the necessity. “You’re right. If we can get those records quickly, it might break this case wide open.”

Finn caught her eye, remembering the phone conversation not five minutes prior. “Want to call Rob back for that? Or should we go through Inspector Lloyd?”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed her expression, but she squared her shoulders. “I’ll call Rob first. He’s more likely to expedite the request with the Home Office. Lloyd might be supportive, but we’d still need higher clearance. Let’s go for the direct route.”

She reached for her phone, sighing at the prospect of another tense conversation. “Though I hope he doesn’t try again to talk me into leaving Brynmor. I’m definitely not in the mood for that fight.”

Finn nodded, picking up a stray file. “I guess we’d better get used to it. Wendell’s threat changes the game. Everyone who cares about you is going to push for your safety.”

Amelia half-laughed, a bitter note there. “I’ll manage just fine.” She flipped open the phone, preparing to dial. “We can handle both: track a murderer in Brynmor Hall, and keep Wendell at bay with the local cops.” She paused, thumb hovering over the

screen. "We have to."

Finn leaned back, letting the muted crackle of the sitting room's fireplace fill the silence. He studied Amelia's determined posture, reminded again how strong she was—even if fear lurked beneath her calm veneer. "I'm with you," he said quietly. But in his bones, he felt that something had shifted and that the fear of losing Amelia was only going to grow.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Finn rubbed a thumb against the dull ache in his forehead, trying to stay focused on the immediate task. It was midday, or perhaps a bit past—time seemed to blur in Brynmor Hall's oppressive atmosphere—and he and Amelia were still waiting on the promised financial information that might shed light on the Penrose family's motives. The latest tragedies—the suspicious death of Catherine, and the lingering questions around James—had left them scrambling for any solid lead.

He sat at the end of a velvet-cushioned settee, leaning forward with his elbows braced on his knees. Amelia had taken a seat on the couch across from him, tapping away at her phone, presumably coordinating with Rob about the upcoming warrants. The crackle of the fireplace undercut the conversation's tension, giving the sitting room a semblance of warmth that neither of them truly felt.

"What next, partner?" Amelia asked, lowering her phone. "Rob's working on the warrants, but we might not get them until tomorrow."

Finn nodded, scanning the notes they had on the table. "While we wait, I've been thinking; maybe it's time we dig deeper into Wilkie's death. The older brother's demise seems to have set the stage for a lot of these... family fears. And both James and Catherine's deaths mirror his, even though it happened several years ago."

Amelia frowned, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Judd mentioned Wilkie’s name only in passing, and Hobbs gave us that story about Wilkie being found in the cellar. But we need more detail if we’re to find any deeper connection to what’s happened to James and Catherine.”

Finn let the files fall closed, exhaling. “Mrs. Hughes might be our best bet. She’s been around the family for decades—her late husband was apparently close to Wilkie. She might know what truly happened back then.”

Amelia nodded. “Good idea. Let’s see if we can get her to open up.” She rose from the sofa, letting out a tired sigh.

Finn stood and followed Amelia out of the sitting room. The corridor beyond was bright from tall windows letting in a mild midday sun, a welcome break from the gloom of the previous evenings. Paintings of stern-faced Penrose ancestors seemed less menacing in the daylight, though the residue of tragedy still clung to the walls.

They found Mrs. Hughes in the large hallway near the base of the main staircase, quietly organizing a silver tray with tea cups as though trying to maintain normalcy. When she noticed them approaching, her shoulders tightened. She set the tray on a small table and turned to greet them with a forced half-smile.

“Mr. Wright, Miss Winters,” she said, bobbing her head slightly in acknowledgment. “Can I get you anything? Tea, or—?”

“Not at the moment, thank you, Mrs. Hughes,” Finn replied gently. “We actually wanted to speak with you about Wilkie Penrose. Hobbs mentioned the other day that your husband knew him well. We realize it may be a painful subject, but it might hold clues about what’s going on around here.”

A flicker of apprehension crossed her features. Her gaze darted from Finn to Amelia

and back. “Why bring up Wilkie? That was so many years ago. The police back then concluded it was a heart condition, or at least that’s what was... rumored.”

Finn exchanged a knowing glance with Amelia. Another Penrose death explained away as “heart condition” or “fear.” “We suspect Wilkie’s death might be relevant to the pattern of tragedies. You see, James built the panic room after Wilkie died. And now we have James and Catherine dead under suspicious circumstances. If there’s a link—any small detail might help us. It feels like this could have all started with Wilkie.”

Mrs. Hughes pressed her lips together. “I don’t see how raking up the past helps anyone,” she said quietly, though there was a tremor in her voice. “Wilkie was a sweet man, if troubled. My husband—God rest him—was pained by that death for months. They were close, you see. I...” She trailed off, eyes distant, as though recalling the pain.

Amelia softened her tone, stepping closer. “We understand it’s painful, but can you recall any odd details about Wilkie’s final days? Who was around him, how he acted? Maybe an argument, or a fear he voiced?”

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Mrs.Hughes looked down, fingering the edge of her apron.“He... he had nightmares.Terrible ones, so my husband said.Wilkie often roamed the halls at night, claiming he heard voices.James teased him for believing ghosts haunted the place, but Wilkie never found it amusing.Then one night, he locked himself in that... that wardrobe in the cellar.”She paused, chest rising with a shaky breath.“But I can’t speak more of it.I’m sorry, I—”

A sudden chime sounded from her phone.Mrs.Hughes fished it from her apron pocket, glancing at the screen.In an instant, her face paled further.She quickly tapped to read the message, an anxious flicker in her eyes, then stuffed the phone away.

“Is something wrong?”Finn asked, suspicious of how flustered she looked.

She forced a stiff smile.“Pardon me, Mr.Wright, Miss Winters.I must attend to something.Excuse me.”Without waiting for their response, she turned on her heel and hurried off, leaving the silver tea tray abandoned on the side table.

Amelia raised her eyebrows at Finn, who exhaled heavily.“She knows more than she’s saying.”

“No doubt,” Amelia muttered.“But pressing her further now might push her into shutting down completely.Let’s regroup.”

They walked back toward the sitting room they’d just left.The hallway felt cooler, as though a draft had sneaked in from somewhere.A pair of uniformed officers lingered near a side entrance, conferring in low voices.With so many potential dangers—an unknown masked figure, or even external threats from Wendell— the police presence

was a welcome relief, albeit minimal.

Once inside the sitting room, Amelia paused, letting out a frustrated sigh. “We’re stuck. The financial records aren’t here yet, and Mrs. Hughes just ran off before telling us about Wilkie.” She plopped down on the sofa, tapping her phone screen. “I’ll keep an eye on my messages in case Rob sends the warrants soon.”

Finn glanced at the large window that overlooked the estate grounds. Through the tall panes, he noticed a figure moving across the lawn. Squinting, he recognized Mrs. Hughes’s shape. She moved briskly, glancing over her shoulder as though ensuring nobody followed. Then she disappeared in the direction of the walled garden at the corner of the estate.

Finn’s heart quickened. “There’s Mrs. Hughes, leaving the house. Could be the ‘something’ she had to attend to. Perhaps I should stretch my legs, I feel like visiting that walled garden.”

Amelia followed his gaze. “I get the feeling you’re about to go sneaking.” She smiled, knowingly.

“I shouldn’t leave you,” Finn said.

“If you think we can glean something more, you need to go,” Amelia said, her voice laced with reassurance.

He hesitated, remembering how they were both prime targets—Amelia for Wendell’s threats, and either of them for the masked figure. “I hate leaving you alone. With Catherine’s murder fresh, we can’t be sure it’s safe.”

She frowned, standing. “I’m not fragile porcelain, Finn. The police are patrolling the outer edges of the estate, and the sitting room is well within their territory. I’ll be

fine.I'll keep my phone on, obviously.”

He opened his mouth to object further, but caught the steely determination in her expression.“All right,” he conceded.“If you hear anything or sense trouble, call me.I won't be long.Mrs.Hughes might vanish if I don't move now.”

Amelia nodded, crossing to a side table to gather a stack of case notes.“Go.Meanwhile, I'll dive back into the files.If the financial data arrives, I can start sifting through it.”

Finn mustered a half-smile, stepping forward to brush a reassuring hand along her arm.“Stay safe, okay?”

“You too,” she replied, leaning into his touch for the briefest moment.Then he grabbed his jacket from the back of a chair, striding out of the sitting room, leaving Amelia with a watchful look in her eyes.

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Outside, the sky was patchy with clouds, the sun drifting in and out.Patches of damp lawn glistened, and the fresh air tasted cleaner than the hushed corridors of Brynmor Hall.Finn walked a brisk pace across the grass, crossing to the high stone walls that enclosed the walled garden.The gate stood slightly ajar.Through the arch, he could see rows of flowering bushes and neatly trimmed hedges—though the flowers were past their prime in the current season, many still offered a subdued, pleasant color.

He heard voices drifting from inside, low and urgent.Slowing, he moved with care, slipping to one side of the gate to peer in.Mrs Hughes was there, in her usual black dress and apron, her posture tense.And she was not alone.

She stood near a stone bench, talking to a man who kept his back half-turned to

Finn's vantage point. The man was at least in his fifties, broad-shouldered but lean, wearing a dark jacket and a flat cap. He gestured with animated hands, though the words came in hushed tones that made them difficult to decipher.

Finn edged closer, picking his steps gingerly on the damp ground. He paused behind a tall hedge, leaning just enough to overhear fragments of their exchange.

"...Now they want to know about Wilkie," Mrs Hughes said, voice trembling with evident worry. "They keep pressing me. I can't hold them off forever."

The man replied in a raspy whisper, "This is all going to blow over soon, and once it does, we'll be able to make plans." His accent was local, but the tone bristled with secrecy.

Finn's pulse quickened. Plans about what? Another cover-up about the Penrose tragedies? He crouched lower, shifting to see the man's face. Mrs Hughes nodded anxiously, glancing around as though spooked.

Suddenly, the man stepped away, out of the walled garden's far opening. Mrs Hughes lingered a moment, then followed a different path around the shrubs. The conversation had ended abruptly. Finn had only gleaned a snippet, but it was enough to confirm Mrs Hughes was indeed hiding something related to Wilkie's death, or perhaps the more recent murders.

He decided to keep spying—maybe the man would show himself fully. Making a silent pivot, Finn circled the garden's perimeter, his shoulders tense. Reaching the far side, he glimpsed Mrs Hughes departing toward the house, a worried expression etched on her features. She must not have spotted him. But the man...

Finn crouched behind a short hedge. A moment later, a figure emerged from behind the tall rose trellises. Even from this partial vantage, Finn could take in the man's



details: mid-fifties, with strands of gray hair peeking from under that flat cap, a lined face that spoke of a rugged life, possibly working outdoors. His jacket was scuffed in places, and though his posture was upright, he moved with cautious precision, glancing around as if checking for witnesses.

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Finn shrank lower, holding his breath. The man paused at the garden gate, scanning left and right, face partially revealed in the daylight. He had a hawkish nose and a faint scar across his left cheek. Then, evidently satisfied he was unobserved, he slipped through the gate.

Finn let the man gain a few yards' distance, then stealthily followed. The man cut across the lawn toward the tree line, edging the estate. His stride had a certain nimbleness that reminded Finn of the masked intruder's agile moves, though he couldn't be sure. The man paused once by a tall oak, glancing over his shoulder. Finn ducked behind a stone planter, heart thudding, relieved that the man didn't spot him.

Continuing on, the man entered the woods, the canopy swallowing him. Finn lingered at the edge, eyes narrowed, uncertain if he should attempt to trail him further. The occupant of the walled garden might well be the same person who rummaged through James's study or maybe an accomplice. In any case, he was suspicious.

Finn debated calling for backup: if he confronted this man alone, he might end up outnumbered if there were others in the woods. He reached for his phone, only to remember how easily a simple chase could end in an ambush. Catherine's fate weighed heavily on him.

Yet the pull of the unknown was strong. He had a chance to uncover the masked figure's identity, or at least someone with knowledge of the family's secrets. Gritting his teeth, he pulled up short. The man's silhouette vanished behind a cluster of pines. If Finn didn't act now, he'd lose him.

He swallowed his doubt, glancing behind him—no sign of Mrs Hughes or any

policeman. The estate's perimeter was guarded, but these woods offered countless hiding spots. Tensing his shoulders, he started forward, easing into the undergrowth to follow. If this man was linked to Wilkie's or Catherine's demise, capturing him or gleaning a clue might prove vital.

Stepping over a low branch, he inhaled the earthy scent of moss and decaying leaves. The forest shadows loomed, dense enough to block direct sunlight. Every twig underfoot threatened to snap, potentially alerting the unknown man. Finn tried to tread lightly, senses on high alert for a glimpse of movement or a cough in the gloom.

The hush of the woods closed around him, reminiscent of the time he chased the masked figure at night. But this was day, and he felt more confident in the partial sunlight filtering through the canopy. Still, his heart thrummed, a taut readiness coiling in his stomach. If the man was indeed the masked attacker, then caution was essential.

He spotted a flash of that scuffed jacket through a break in the trees. The man pressed on deeper. Finn inhaled, summoning nerve. He'd follow carefully, track the man's route. Perhaps it would lead to a hideout or a meeting with an accomplice.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Finn advanced cautiously through the dense cluster of oaks and conifers, the thick canopy above allowing only faint slivers of daylight to break through. Even though it was midday, the forest floor lay in an eerie twilight, steeped in greenish shadow. He walked slowly, mindful not to snap too many twigs or rustle the underbrush more than necessary. Every sense stayed on high alert—if this was the masked man or another threat, Finn wanted to avoid another ambush.

A bird's sudden flutter caused him to freeze, heart thumping loudly. For a moment, he thought it might be the man he'd followed from the walled garden. But no, it was just

a startled thrush flapping to a higher branch. Drawing a slow breath, he pressed on. The figure he trailed—an older man in a flat cap—had vanished among the trees moments before. With each step, Finn watched for footprints in the loamy soil, for broken branches or any sign of passage.

Gradually, the woods grew denser, trunks closing in so that the path was little more than a faint gap in the greenery. Moss hung from low branches, and damp leaves clung to Finn's shoes. He paused intermittently, listening for a stray footstep or the rustle of movement. It felt like an unspoken cat-and-mouse game: each time he paused, the forest returned to a hush, broken only by the soft drip of condensation from leaves overhead.

Then, in the distance, he saw a glow that stood out from the natural gloom—a weak, steady light. At once, Finn's heart gave a lurch of adrenaline. Could it be a lantern or lamp at some hidden hideaway? He pressed forward, weaving past a cluster of ivy-choked trunks. As he drew nearer, the shape of a small cabin emerged from behind a bramble of wild holly. The structure had a makeshift look: rough-hewn logs, a slanted tin roof, and a single window that glowed faintly from within.

Holding his breath, Finn edged closer, stepping lightly over a muddy patch. The cabin had no sign of electricity aside from that lamp, which cast a flickering glow on the wooden walls. Carefully, he peered around the corner, hoping to glimpse whoever was inside. He managed to get close enough to see a window on the side. Rising onto the balls of his feet, he angled to look through.

No immediate figure was visible in that portion—just a small table with scattered gear, a coat thrown over a chair. He strained to see further, leaning a fraction more. Before he could fully adjust, something cold and unyielding pressed against the back of his head. Instantly, his pulse spiked, and he froze. It was a gun barrel.

“Never hunt a man in his own woods,” a voice growled behind him. It was deep,

raspy, and unmistakably the same older man from the walled garden. "Turn around slow-like, hands where I can see them."

A jolt of fear flashed through Finn, but he forced a calm tone. "Easy," he said, raising his palms. "I'm not hurting anyone. I'm a detective. Others know I'm here, so let's not do something we both would regret."

The man let out a short, humorless laugh. "I already know who you are, Finn Wright. The fancy detective staying at the Hall with that lovely partner of yours." He withdrew the gun from Finn's skull with a careful motion, though he didn't holster it. "But you're pokin' your nose where it doesn't belong."

Slowly, Finn turned to face him. The older man's cap shadowed a rugged face lined by years of outdoor living. In the gloom, Finn saw the glint of steel in the firearm, a standard shotgun with a shortened barrel—legal for pest control on large estates, perhaps. The man gave him a cold, assessing stare, then lowered the muzzle slightly.

"My gun's licensed," he said in a calmer tone. "I use it for pests and vermin around these parts. Nothing illegal about that."

Finn lowered his hands, though he remained tense. "Sorry for trespassing," he said evenly, "but I saw you talking to Mrs. Hughes in the walled garden. We suspect someone's been committing murders, or at least scaring the Penrose family to death. So I'm investigating."

A flicker of frustration crossed the man's face. He gave the briefest nod and then stepped back toward the cabin door. "Well, come inside if you want answers. I'm not about to shoot you in cold blood. Long as you mind your manners."

Finn's heartbeat still pounded, but relief flooded him at the man's shift in stance. "All right." He followed the man up two wooden steps onto the small porch. The older man

shoved open the door and beckoned Finn in, keeping the shotgun at his side. Inside, the cabin smelled of pine resin, wood smoke, and something sharper—perhaps homemade spirits. Finn noticed many different plants, some local, some obscure, cultivated in different pots.

The single room boasted a stone fireplace, a narrow bed with rumpled blankets, and a small table. A lantern hung from a hook on the wall, casting dancing shadows. The man nodded to a battered wooden chair near the center. “Sit.”

Finn perched on the edge, scanning the walls. Animal pelts hung in places, and some old photos of hunts or gatherings adorned a makeshift shelf. “I appreciate you not pulling the trigger back there,” Finn said, attempting a half-joke to break the tension.

The man shrugged, setting his shotgun aside on a rack near the door. “You’d only have yourself to blame, creeping up on folks. I’m Edwin Pierce, by the way.”

Finn’s eyes flickered—he recalled the name from Hobbs’s account. “Edwin... you discovered Wilkie Penrose’s body years ago, right?”

Edwin's weathered features twisted in a grim half-smile. "Hobbs told you, did he? Indeed, that was me. Used to be the groundskeeper at Brynmor Hall. Now, I just keep to these woods. Mind my own business mostly."

Finn nodded. Mrs. Hughes hadn’t mentioned Edwin’s name or presence in the official staff list. “Why did Mrs. Hughes not mention you live out here? She’s given me a list of all the people working on the estate. You weren’t on it.”

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Edwin sank onto a stool by the fireplace, picking up a jug from the floor. “Because I’m not working on the estate, strictly speaking. Officially got let go a while back. The Penroses don’t pay me because they don’t have the cash it appears. I just... remain in the area.” He offered Finn the jug with a wry tilt of his head. “Moonshine, in case you’re thirsty. Or is that too folksy for a big city detective?”

Finn considered it, then took the jug with a polite nod. He raised it but only sipped a tiny measure—the pungent flavor burned his throat with surprising intensity. “That’s strong.”

Edwin chuckled softly. “Right, city boy.”

“Actually, I’m from a small town in Florida,” Finn said. “Spent a lot of time in the swamps there as a kid. My uncle used to make something that tasted just like this.”

“The farther you go, the closer to home you are,” Edwin said, cryptically.

Finn set the jug aside, leaning forward. “So you were dismissed. Because the estate was failing financially? That’s what you said?”

Edwin’s expression turned bitter. “Yes. The Hall couldn’t afford me, so said James. But Catherine actually had a soft spot for me—she urged him to keep me on. Sometime later, James forced me out anyway. Reckoned I was stirring up superstitions or something about Wilkie’s death.”

Finn remembered how Catherine’s kindness was noted by others. “So you ended up in these woods. A man’s got to live somewhere, I suppose?”

“Exactly,” Edwin said. He rested an elbow on his knee, eyes shadowed by the flickering lantern. “My family’s from this area for generations. I’m more at home among these trees than the brick walls of that Hall. And I had reasons to stay close—Catherine didn’t want me to vanish. She’d let me rummage for supplies in one of the old sheds. Now... well, she’s gone.” His voice turned somber.

Something like regret flickered across Finn’s mind. “I’m sorry for your loss. We don’t have the autopsy yet, but it seems likely Catherine was murdered.”

Edwin took a breath, voice raw. “I know. Heard about it. She was the last decent Penrose in that line.”

Finn studied his weathered face. The man’s bitterness indicated a deeper story. “Speaking of Wilkie—Hobbs told us you found the body in the cellar, inside a wardrobe. That’s quite a horrifying image.”

A shadow crossed Edwin’s features. “Yes, it was. Wilkie’s face was wide-eyed, stiff, like he’d seen the devil himself. I knew it was a heart attack caused by fear, but the official records just wrote it off as a medical oddity. James never forgave me for telling Wilkie tales of the old estate’s curse. He thought it caused problems for the man.”

Finn’s ears perked. “The curse?”

Sighing, Edwin rose and opened a small chest by the fireplace, rummaging until he found a rolled piece of parchment. “I’m seriously into folklore. I recorded bits of the estate’s history, scribbles about the Penrose ancestors. There’s a story that the ghosts of their lineage kill any descendant who brings disrepute on the family name—by terrifying them to death. Wilkie vaguely knew about it, so I filled in the details. He seemed different after that. The man had an imaginative mind, and it spooked him something fierce. I also think it might have been more than superstition that got



him. Some places have things in them that you wouldn't want to run into."

Finn felt a chill prick the back of his neck. "So you think Wilkie's death was caused by some supernatural fright?"

Edwin half-shrugged. "I believe in many unexplained phenomena. And I do know that after Wilkie died, James was convinced that the curse, and the stories of the curse, had something to do with it. He insisted I peddled ghost stories to Wilkie, twisted his mind. That's part of why James wanted me gone from the estate—he blamed me for fueling Wilkie's fears. It just took him years to finally do it because Catherine always pushed back. But once it was a question of money, I was a goner."

Finn tapped a finger on the chair's worn armrest. "Do you believe it's a real curse? That these ghosts are killing the Penroses who shame the family?"

A strange light filled Edwin's eyes, a blend of conviction and sorrow. "I've roamed these woods at night. Heard knocks, seen strange lights that move among the trees. Could be illusions. Could be something else. All I know is Wilkie's face was locked in a terror I've never seen before—like something unnatural got him. And James was sure next, or so he feared. Now look: James is gone, Catherine's gone. The curse seems alive, doesn't it?"

Finn inhaled slowly, forcing rational thought. "It could also be a human culprit exploiting these superstitions. James was terrified enough to build a panic room. And indeed, he died alone, apparently frightened. Now Catherine's also dead. If you didn't do it, do you suspect someone else is leaning into the ghost story to kill them discreetly?"

Edwin snorted, a humorless sound. "Haven't you considered that the Penrose themselves brought misfortune by their actions? James especially. He ran the family fortune into the ground, took up with... questionable company—escorts, rumor

said—disreputing the name.If that's true, maybe the old ghosts had the last laugh."

Finn's eyes narrowed."Escorts?That's new info to me.You're certain?"

Edwin scratched his gray stubble."Heard rumors from staff.James was partial to unsavory amusements.Enough to stain the family name, especially if word got out."A wry shrug."Maybe that was enough to seal his fate, if you believe in curses."

A short hush followed as the man's words sank in.Finn had suspected James had financial secrets, but a hidden vice with escorts might tie into blackmail or other shady dealings.Perhaps that was one motive for murder.It also made sense as to why James would have wanted the house to himself the night he died.

"That's a serious allegation," he said quietly."We'll see if the estate's financial records show anything like that.Another question: how did you remain here after James fired you?He never forced you off the property grounds?"

Edwin's mouth twisted in a half-grin."James dreaded these woods.He never ventured past the edges.So I lived out here.Catherine knew, kept my presence secret.She'd occasionally drop supplies near the walled garden.It was no picnic, but better than driftin' off to some city.No one ever bothered me from the Hall."

Finn nodded, absorbing the man's honesty."And where were you the night James died?If we're thorough, we must ask."

A flicker of defensiveness crossed Edwin's face."Here, in my cabin, alone.No alibi, if that's what you're after.I rarely leave these woods."

Finn pursed his lips."Did you want James harmed in any way?A personal grudge?"

Edwin lifted a brow."I hold no illusions about him.He scorned me for the ghost

stories, blamed me for Wilkie's breakdown. But I'm a peaceful man. I let nature and fate take their course. If something haunted that Hall, it was bound to end him eventually."

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Finn pressed. “How do you mean, you knew it would end him?”

Edwin sighed, looking older and more weary. “He brought disrepute on the Penrose name— squandered fortunes, disrespected his obligations, and if he truly took up with... questionable company, that’d tarnish them further. The ‘curse’ or fate or what have you was going to claim him. Even Mrs Hughes thought so, though she’d never say it aloud. She’s a loyal soul.”

“Speaking of Mrs Hughes, I saw you at the walled garden...”

Edwin looked uncomfortable. “Some people have no manners, sneaking about.”

“I heard you mention a plan that you both had,” Finn pushed.

Wilkie let out a loud laugh, deadened by the cabin walls. “It’s nobody’s business. But Mrs Hughes has a private pension that comes into effect in a few months. All she wants is that she get what’s hers, and we leave here... Together...”

“I see,” Finn said, not sure whether to believe him. “Where will you go?”

“Somewhere green,” he smiled, as if basking in an imaginary sunset. “Away from all this.”

Finn felt a knot tighten in his stomach. “All right, thanks for telling me. Let’s keep this cordial, but I do want to confirm some of what you’re saying. And I’d like you to stay here until I’ve done that, to rule your involvement out.”

Edwin's eyes flashed. "I had no reason to kill Catherine. She was kind to me. And James... well, maybe I disliked him, but I'm not a killer. I told you— I think something else lurks around that place, older and more dangerous than me."

A final wave of tension bristled. Finn believed Edwin's sincerity for the most part—but the man's convictions about curses and ghosts raised the possibility of psychosis or delusions. It was not improbable that Edwin might commit murder under that impetus. Still, no direct evidence pointed that way.

Finn stood, pushing the rickety chair back. "We'll see. Either way, we might need you for further questioning. If you recall anything else about Wilkie or the Penrose history, let me know. And, uh, thanks for the drink."

Edwin nodded, not quite smiling. "Sure. I don't plan on running. These woods are home until Mrs Hughes comes with me. If the law wants me, they know where to find me now."

Finn cast one more glance around the cramped cabin—the unmade bed, the homemade moonshine jug, the hunting paraphernalia—then turned to the door. Stepping out onto the porch, he was struck by how much gloomier the sky had become, clouds blotting out the sun. The forest crackled with a faint breeze, leaves shaking in rustling waves.

He descended the two steps, noticing the short barrel of Edwin's shotgun leaning near the threshold. The older man stood behind him, arms folded, watching Finn's every move. "Don't get lost," Edwin said softly. "These woods go deeper than you think."

Finn gave a curt nod and strode off into the undergrowth, retracing his path. He had to keep a close watch on the subtle footprints he'd made earlier, ensuring he didn't wander off track. The hush of the trees felt heavier now, as though the woodland was aware of his conversation. If any watchers lingered, he saw no sign.

His mind churned with new revelations. So Catherine had kept secret the presence of this old groundskeeper living out here, presumably because she sympathized with him. James had scorned him, associating him with Wilkie's deadly terror. The curse story, the ghost rumors, the alleged prostitutes James hired— a tapestry of threads to pull at. If the soon-to-arrive financial records indeed revealed payments to escorts, that might add an entire new dimension to James's downfall.

After about ten minutes of careful navigation, the forest thinned, letting in more light. He glimpsed a clearing ahead and recognized the path that led back toward Brynmor Hall's rear grounds. Exiting the dense woods, he caught the scent of damp grass and saw the estate's tall chimneys rising in the distance. The sky overhead churned with dark clouds, threatening rain.

He paused to gather his thoughts. The day had started with him rummaging through files with Amelia, then discovering Mrs Hughes's secret meeting with Edwin Pierce. Now he had a partial story from the ex-groundkeeper, including revelations about James's probable adultery. In any normal murder case, that alone might be motive enough for someone—Marianne? Catherine? Another family member?— to lash out.

He trudged across the lawn, keeping an eye on the walled garden to see if Mrs Hughes had returned there. No sign of her. Likely, she'd gone back inside. A pair of uniformed officers patrolled the estate perimeter, nodding in greeting to him from afar. He lifted a hand in acknowledgment, relieved they were still on alert, especially with Wendell's threats looming.

As he neared the manor's back door, drizzle began to fall, pattering lightly on the stone walkway. He quickened his steps, slipping inside to the estate's mudroom. The sudden warmth made him exhale in relief. Not that safety was guaranteed in these corridors, but at least the gloom of the forest was behind him for now.

Heading through a smaller passage, he made for the main hall. On the way, his mind kept turning over Edwin's last remark: that James's alleged misdeeds had guaranteed some cosmic or ghostly comeuppance. Even if it was all folklore nonsense, it might have shaped James's decisions or mental state, and possibly given others the impetus to exploit his fear.

He sighed, wiping drizzle from his jacket sleeves. He'd update Amelia about Edwin's claims. She'd want to keep an eye out for references to escort payments or hush money in James's financials. That sort of revelation might spark deep resentments or be fodder for blackmail. Another thread in the labyrinth.

Rounding a corner, he spotted a dim corridor leading to the sitting room. Flickers of lamplight spilled out, indicating Amelia might already be inside. The overhead lights flickered from an electrical quirk. His footfalls echoed on the polished floor. Even though it was midday, the gloom thickened around Brynmor Hall as if dusk approached early, a harbinger of something unseen.

Before stepping into the sitting room, he paused, scanning the corridor behind him, half expecting the masked figure or Mrs Hughes to appear. Nothing. He inhaled, steadying himself.

He pushed open the door, crossing into the light, eager to share his discoveries with Amelia. He only hoped they had enough time to put it all together before the darkness—or the murderer—claimed another life.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A subdued hush fell over Brynmor Hall as night settled in, lending the corridors a hushed, almost reverent air. Finn ambled alongside Amelia, traversing a long gallery on the second floor, dim lighting flitting over oil paintings and centuries-old tapestries. The household had gone quiet after dinner—what little dinner there was,

given the tension of Catherine's death and the swirl of investigations—yet the two of them couldn't rest just yet, they felt a walk around the house to make sure all was well was the right thing to do.

Amelia paused before a particularly grand tapestry depicting a knight in battle against a mythical beast. She brushed her hand near the embroidered edges, not quite touching it. "This Edwin Pierce you mentioned, I still think it's strange that the ex-groundskeeper is living out in the woods," she said, her voice soft enough to not echo too far. "I wonder if his story about James using escorts is true."

Finn nodded, turning to the tapestry before them. Its colors looked muted, possibly from decades of dust and time. "Yes, we can't take anything at face value. Still... Edwin said James wasn't exactly... faithful to Marianne. Called them 'escorts.' How high class, I don't know. He claims James spent a fortune on them, which might tie into the family's finances, if he was secretly living a life of excess."



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Amelia inhaled, letting the hush of the hall press in around them. “I can’t quite imagine Marianne tolerating that if she knew. Still, could be a reason for some deep resentments. Or, if she didn’t know, maybe others did—like Catherine or even someone on the staff like Donald. All potential triggers for blackmail or conflict. We already know Mrs Hughes knew.”

Finn glanced at a painting of a Penrose ancestor, scowling from his ornate frame. “Plenty of motives for those to resent James, maybe. But who’d go so far as to kill Catherine, too? Unless it was to stop her from revealing something to us.”

She shook her head, footsteps measured against the stone. “That’s the burning question.” She eyed a portrait with mild fascination. “Look at that expression,” she murmured. “He looks half-ready to come out of the frame and scold us.”

Finn offered a quiet laugh, unspooling some tension. “No wonder people tell stories about these ancestors’ ghosts roaming the halls, dooming those who dishonor the family.”

Amelia’s mouth quirked. “Maybe they still believe it.” She pivoted to a smaller painting—a woman in a Victorian gown, her eyes so sharp and lifelike it was unnerving.

They continued along the gallery, turning a corner where a line of suits of armor stood at attention. Amelia let her gaze pass over them, remarking in a lower voice, “If only they could stand guard for us, we might sleep better.”

“Agreed,” Finn said.

A distant sound carried from somewhere below—like a muffled argument, pitched with urgency. He stilled, then Amelia caught it too. They shared a look, adrenaline snapping awake.

“That’s coming from the downstairs, I think,” Finn said, heart picking up pace.

They hurried back the way they came, descending the wide staircase with careful haste. The manor’s hush gave way to a distinct shouting. As they neared the ground floor corridors, the voices grew clearer. Finn recognized the raised tones of Marianne, her accent taut with emotion, and Donald’s gruff baritone:

“You can’t pin that on me!” Donald barked.

“Who else could have done it?” Marianne retorted, equally livid.

Amelia shot Finn a quick glance. “Are they talking about the murders?”

They moved toward the kitchen, rounding the final bend into a broad passage. The door to the kitchen was lying open. Donald the cook’s bald head gleamed with sweat, and Marianne stood facing him, arms tense at her sides. Donald’s apron was stained from the evening’s meals, and his eyes blazed with anger.

“I told you, James never had an issue with my methods,” Donald spat, throwing his arms wide. “I cook the same as I always have. If Evan’s got food poisoning, it’s not my fault.”

Marianne’s voice shook with frustration. “Evan is in the hospital and very ill! He is certain it was the soup you gave him yesterday evening for supper. That alone is serious. If you served something contaminated—”

Donald let out a scoff. “Wasn’t my cooking. Maybe the fool ate something else, he

isn't the brightest. You can't just blame me for someone falling ill!"

Marianne cut him off with a sharp gesture. "I'm just glad it wasn't given to the rest of us or our guests. It's not the first time. Remember, a year ago, we all fell sick with a mystery bug. James said he thought it was food poisoning. I stuck up for you! This is the last straw. I have enough nightmares around here about a murderer in our midst without staff carelessness doing the deed for them! You're fired, Donald."

Silence clapped down, thick and charged. Finn exchanged a worried look with Amelia. He saw Donald's face flush, his fists clenching. "Fired? You can't do that. I've been loyal to this household for years—since before you even married James."

Marianne stood her ground, voice brittle. "James is gone! I have that authority, and I'm using it. Take your severance from Mrs Hughes tomorrow morning, or if you wish to dispute it, talk a solicitor. But you're no longer welcome here."

Donald let out a bitter laugh, turning to see Finn and Amelia standing at the threshold. "Wonderful. The detective duo's arrived. Well, you two, I hope you fare better than me in this madhouse. This place is cursed—everyone wants to kill someone else, this time it's my career that's dead." He hurled the last words with venom, then tore off his apron and tossed it onto a counter. His face twisted with bitterness. "Good luck with the murders or ghosts or whatever. I'm out."

He stormed past, shoulders brushing Finn's. "Watch your back, detective," he muttered, then vanished down the corridor, footsteps echoing. Marianne stood trembling, eyes red-rimmed, as though she'd had enough crisis for a lifetime. She noticed Finn and Amelia, gave a weak shake of her head, then stalked off in the opposite direction without another word.

Finn let out a sigh. Amelia murmured, "This house is creaking under the strain."

He nodded grimly, seeing the empty apron on the counter."And now Donald's out. Another staff member is gone. The tension's boiling over for everyone." He glanced down the hall where Marianne had disappeared, uncertain if he should follow. But the sound of her fading footsteps told him she needed a moment alone.

Amelia set a hand lightly on his arm. "Let's leave her be. We should probably call it a night."

Finn rubbed his forehead, a dull headache forming from the day's upheavals. "Yeah, best. We can pick up in the morning, see if the local police have gleaned anything new about Catherine's murder or the intruder." He glanced around warily. "Anyway, are you all right staying alone? With Wendell's threat and the masked figure still out there...?"

She pressed her lips together in thought. "Actually, I was going to suggest we share a room tonight. We keep talking about being careful, and... I'd feel safer if we stick together. This house is big and full of nooks for someone to hide in."

Finn felt relief mixed with an amused warmth. "You sure about that? Doesn't that break your 'professional boundaries' rule?" He tried a teasing grin, though concern for her safety underpinned his question.

Amelia gave a small, wry laugh. "Business now, pleasure later, remember?" She gently patted his cheek. "I'm not up for a chase in the dark if I hear something in the hall. I'd rather have you right there next to me if something goes wrong."

He nodded, feeling both protective and quietly thrilled at her closeness. "All right. My room, then. Let's go."

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They turned away from the kitchen's lingering tension, heading up the grand staircase once more. The gloom in the corridors pressed in, but at least they had each other. Finn knew there were police officers at the gates of the sprawling estate, but he hoped Rob's reinforcements would arrive in the morning.

Upon entering Finn's dimly lit room, Amelia exhaled heavily, scanning the plush bed and the small reading lamp on the side table. "At least there's a lock on the door," she said, crossing over to secure it.

Finn peeled off his jacket and draped it on a nearby chair. The tension in his limbs told him how physically and mentally exhausted he was.

A faint smirk broke across her face, though she tempered it, stepping to the bedside. She sank onto the mattress, letting out a tired groan. "This day felt like a week."

"True. And we still have no real suspect pinned down." He moved to the lamp, dimming it, letting the glow drop to a softer ambiance. "We'll see what tomorrow brings."

Amelia settled under the covers. Finn did the same, flicking off the overhead light. Darkness fell, relieved only by the faint glow of the small lamp. Outside, the wind sighed against the window. They both shut their eyes, hoping for a few hours of rest.

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About 45 minutes later, Amelia's phone pinged, echoing in the quiet. She jolted, rummaging on the nightstand. "That's my email alert," she murmured, sitting up. She tapped the screen and read, eyes widening. "Finn, the warrants just came through. The financial data on everyone in the house."

Finn blinked away the fog of near-sleep, propping himself on an elbow. "Now? It's nearly two in the morning."

She nodded. "Yes, Rob must've pulled strings. Should we wait until morning or...?"

He exhaled, pushing off the blanket, and smiling knowingly. "I know you won't be able to sleep. If we can find a lead, we might prevent more chaos. Let's do it now."

She agreed with a firm nod, swinging her legs out of bed. They pulled on their clothes and grabbed their phones. Finn unlocked the door, scanning the corridor for movement. It remained empty. Together, they headed out, footsteps muffled by the runner rug. The hush of the house deepened, and all that lingered was the distant howl of wind outside.

They made a beeline for the sitting room—their makeshift command center. On the way, a faint shuffle of footsteps made Finn pause. "Hello?" he whispered. No answer. He saw nothing but the staring eyes of several portraits on the walls. He exchanged a concerned look with Amelia, who shrugged. Possibly it was just the house settling. Finn preferred a mundane explanation to the alternatives.

Once in the sitting room, they shut the door and switched on a standing lamp. Amelia opened her laptop on the coffee table, quickly tapping through her email attachments. "Let's see... everyone's finances: Marianne, Richard, Jenna, Ms. Hughes, and so forth. But we mostly want James's transactions first, right?"

Finn slid beside her on the couch, leaning to see the screen. "Yes. Let's see if James

was funneling money to an escort agency or someone else.If we find that, it's a potential motive for murder or blackmail."

Amelia nodded, scanning the lines of account statements."So many entries... let me search for suspicious vendor names."She typed a quick find function.Within seconds, a highlight appeared:Dream Meetings, Inc.

Her eyes lit with uneasy triumph."There.A payment the night before he died.Let's see if there are more."She scrolled."Yes, multiple transactions in the past six months, all spaced out by a few weeks.Fairly large amounts."

Finn inhaled sharply, referencing his phone to look up the company."I'll do a quick search.'Dream Meetings, Inc.'... Wait, there's a mention in some online boards about them being an exclusive escort agency.High-end, hush-hush."He whistled low."James was consistent in booking them, then?"

Amelia closed the statement."So it's true.He was paying for escorts.If the last payment was the night before he died, maybe he expected someone to visit.Did that someone kill him or scare him to death?"

Finn nodded, his mind racing."We should contact Dream Meetings in the morning.They might confirm if an escort came over that night or if James canceled last minute."

She started typing notes into the computer."Yes.Meanwhile, let's see if there are other suspicious outflows.Could be hush money or blackmail payouts."

Just then, a softcreakechoed at the door.Both froze, exchanging tense glances.Finn's pulse sped up.Amelia set her laptop aside, the glow still illuminating spreadsheets.She pivoted in her seat, eyes pinned to the door.

Finn rose quietly, stepping over to the handle. Another faint scuff sounded as though someone outside had moved too quickly. "Hello?" he said in a low tone, laying a hand on the knob. Instead of a reply, he heard brisk, retreating footsteps.

He yanked the door open, heart jolting. The corridor lay dimly lit by an overhead lamp, but a figure vanished around the far corner, footsteps echoing in flight. Without hesitation, Finn sprinted into the hall, calling, "Amelia, stay here! I'll handle it."

But Amelia was already behind him, phone in hand. "Let's see who it is!" she whispered fiercely.

They dashed down the corridor, the shape darting further away. Finn recognized the swift, silent pace reminiscent of the masked figure from earlier. The person was running deeper into the mansion, not out. They passed a side corridor where faint moonlight from a window cast harsh angles on the floor. Rounding that corner, Finn cursed as the overhead lights flickered and then abruptly died, plunging them into darkness.

He skidded to a halt, disoriented. "Amelia!" he hissed, spinning back in the pitch black. "Amelia?"

No answer. He heard a strangled shout of his name—"Finn!"—from somewhere behind him, laced with alarm. A rush of dread crashed over him. He flailed a hand, trying to find the wall or anything solid, but found only emptiness. The corridor might stretch ahead, but Amelia's voice sounded offset, as though she'd turned down an unseen passage.

"Amelia?" he called louder, chest tight. Still no reply. Fear coiled in his gut: had Wendell Reed really arrived, or the masked attacker who murdered Catherine? If they'd grabbed her in the darkness...



He clenched his fists, inhaling a ragged breath. The stark truth pounded in his skull: if this was Wendell or some equally dangerous figure, Amelia could be in immediate peril. Gritting his teeth, Finn forced himself to advance into the black hallway, trusting his memory of the floor plan. He had to find Amelia fast. He pulled out a pocket flashlight and swept around.

Nothing.

The corridor's gloom pressed in, thick with a sense of looming threat. Footsteps... breath... any clue, he craved, but only a yawning silence greeted him. Fear spiked his heartbeat. "Amelia!" he shouted once more, and his voice reverberated off the walls.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Finn's shoes thudded on the ancient floorboards of Brynmor Hall as he sprinted through the winding corridors. His heart hammered inside his chest, his pulse roaring in his ears. Only moments before, everything had gone dark and Amelia had screamed his name. But now, as he rushed with a pocket flashlight clutched in his sweating hand, the silence felt louder than any shout. He had to find her.

When the building's lights had suddenly failed, he had lost sight of Amelia, her last call of "Finn!" echoing in the gloom. Now he navigated by the thin beam of his small flashlight—barely enough to illuminate the corridor's edges and keep him from slamming into the walls. The hush felt suffocating, as though the house itself held its breath. His mind spun with possibilities: Was it Wendell Reed? The masked figure from before? Or some other conspirator?

Turning a sharp corner, he recognized the path leading to the sitting room, where Amelia and he had been combing through case files. He knew that, if Amelia had decided to stay quiet in the dark due to a threat nearby, she would head back to the sitting room and wait for Finn. This is what he hoped for.

He found the door slightly ajar, lamplight flickering within. He shoved the door

open—and froze at once.

Amelia was nowhere to be seen. The table was still piled with folders, haphazardly pushed aside, and a chair lay overturned, legs in the air like a dead beetle. Papers lay scattered, suggesting a sudden disturbance. Dread coiled in Finn's stomach. Had she made it back there? She wouldn't just vanish without a fight. Or had someone else been rummaging through their things? He moved closer, the flashlight beam revealing a single page from James's financial documents lying crumpled near the seat. His breath came in sharp bursts, panic rising.

"Amelia?" he shouted, voice echoing off the high ceiling and the drapes covering the tall windows. No answer. Outside, the night pressed against the glass, as though waiting for the final blow.

He fumbled for his phone—inspector Thomas or Rob had men at the gates and wall perimeter. With trembling fingers, he unlocked the device. The corridor behind him remained in darkness. He started dialing, but a sudden rustle from the shadows made him spin around, flashlight darting over the corners of the room.

"What—?" he managed. Then a piercing brilliance flooded his eyes, so white-hot it felt like a camera's flash magnified a thousand times. He cried out, blinded, phone dropping from his ear but still in his grip. Staggering back, he tried to blink away the searing afterimage.

In that moment of disorientation, someone lunged forward. He felt a jerk at his wrist. His phone wrenched free of his hand. He attempted to pivot and latch onto them, but he only caught the air. Then a violent smash from the floor told him they'd destroyed his phone.

Adrenaline roaring, Finn stumbled backward, half-blind. "Who are you?" he demanded. No one answered. A swirl of movement behind him—someone's hands

scrabbling for his arms. He tried to swing the flashlight around, but he felt them clamp around his head, forearm hooking under his chin. Another set of fingers pressed a cloth to his face, reeking of something pungent. Chloroform. The chemical sting assaulted his nostrils.

He realized his only chance was to not breathe it in. Gasping out, he forced the air from his lungs, twisting his head sharply. A muffled voice cursed, and a second pair of hands gripped, trying to hold the cloth in place. Half-blinded, he flailed an elbow back, connecting with a solid mass. A grunt told him he'd struck flesh, but the arms clung, persistent.

Stars danced in his already overwhelmed vision, the swirl of random shapes from that blinding light. Fighting the urge to gulp air, he hammered backward with his shoulder, stomping down at unseen ankles. A hissed expletive came from behind, and the grip loosened just enough for him to tear free. Another wild swing with the flashlight struck something. He heard a crack. Shouts of pain and dismay rose from the attackers.

Blinking rapidly, he staggered forward, nearly tripping over the fallen phone. When he turned around, heart pounding, the shapes had melted back into the dark corridor, leaving behind only the tang of chloroform lingering in the air. He coughed, letting the rancid smell out of his lungs.

He braced on his knees, blinking away the last of that brutal glare. The darkness around him formed again into the edges of the sitting room's furniture. Slowly, his sight returned enough to see the shattered remains of his phone lying near the threshold, the screen flickering out. "Damn it," he gasped between gulps of oxygen. "Amelia... Where are you?"

His mind reeled. He'd been attacked by more than one assailant, no doubt about that. They'd tried to knock him out with chloroform. That meant a coordinated plan, not just a lone murderer. Everything he and Amelia had deduced about the conspiracy

flared in his thoughts, coalescing into a grim certainty. He pressed a hand to the wall, mustering his strength.

He licked his dry lips, voice shaking with rage. "The Penrose were murdered by a conspiracy," he whispered. The final piece had snapped in place: James, Catherine, perhaps even Wilkie—someone or a group orchestrating everything behind the scenes. The people inside this house. And they'd taken Amelia.

Finn's chest tightened with fear. If multiple killers were working together, Amelia's life hung by a thread. He needed help, but his phone was trashed. Inspector Thomas's men were posted at the estate perimeter, but that was a fair distance. Would he risk leaving the house to find them, losing precious minutes that might seal Amelia's fate?

He clenched his fists. "No time to run outside," he muttered, eyes scanning the gloom. "But maybe there's another phone or some staff." He recalled the watchers on the perimeter, but the idea of sprinting across the vast grounds in total darkness, with multiple attackers inside, felt like condemning Amelia to whatever fate they had planned.

Taking in a ragged breath, he called out again, "Hello? Anyone?" The echo returned hollow. He exited the sitting room, stepping into the corridor. The sconces along the walls were all extinguished—someone must have cut the power or switched them off. Another sign of a planned assault.

He roamed quickly, peering into side rooms, kitchens, and small parlors. Empty, deserted. "Mrs Hughes?" he called, voice tight. No reply. "Richard? Marianne?" Only silence. The estate, once filled with staff, felt like a ghostly labyrinth. Finn's breath rasped in his throat, frustration pounding.

He paused near a tapestry in the hallway. It depicted a knight kneeling at the foot of a monstrous creature. Finn felt sick with worry.

Each step he took deepened the sense that the conspirators had carefully orchestrated the entire scenario to isolate him. A swirl of dread wrapped around his mind as he realized that the only two staff who might not have motives—Donald, recently fired, and Evan, in the hospital with food poisoning—were conveniently off the premises. Everyone else, from Marianne to Ms. Hughes, from Richard to Jenna, might well be complicit.

He found himself returning to where he and Amelia had been separated. Something on the floor caught the light under his flashlight's beam—a tiny scrap of white paper. He stooped, picking it up. A piece of a paper handkerchief, raggedly torn. Instantly, hope welled in him. Amelia had used a tactic like this once before, leaving small breadcrumbs if she was forced along.

“That’s my girl,” he murmured, voice breaking with relief. He scanned the corridor. And yes—another scrap lay a few feet away, trailing further down. So she was conscious enough, or at least recently so, to leave him a sign. He nodded to the darkness with gratitude. Carefully, he followed the scraps, each piece of thin tissue reflecting in the small glow of his flashlight.

The hush of the house added to the tension as he moved deeper into the labyrinth of hallways. Footsteps echoing, he advanced to a short flight of stairs that climbed to the next level. The scraps formed an uneven line up the steps. He counted them carefully, ensuring he missed none. Each sign reaffirmed that Amelia was trying to guide him. But how far had they taken her?

At the top of the stairs, the corridor branched. He panned his flashlight left and right, spotting more torn pieces leading left. He carried on, the dryness in his mouth intensifying. The house seemed to exude a stale smell, like old dust and fear. After a final turn, the scraps stopped outside a heavy oak door Finn recognized as James Penrose’s study. The same place he had first encountered the masked intruder.

He heard hushed voices inside. Immediately, adrenaline spiked in his veins. One voice belonged to Jenna Penrose, if he wasn't mistaken. The other was deeper—Richard, James's youngest sibling. A coil of fury and concern twisted in his chest. They might have Amelia in there. He eased closer, pressing his ear to the door. Inside, he caught fragments:

“What do we do now?” Jenna’s voice, high-pitched with panic.

“We stick to the plan,” Richard answered. “Finn will come for her. When he does, we knock him out again with the chloroform. Same as we did her. I managed to smash his phone.”

Amelia was inside, presumably unconscious. The next line froze Finn’s blood:

“You think the police will buy it that they died of food poisoning?” Jenna asked.

“Evan’s in hospital with the same,” Richard said, tone smug. “They’ll believe we all ate the same meal. We can blame that horrid cook. We’ll keep them sedated long enough for the poison to kill them in the night. We’ll say they died in their sleep. This stuff is hard to pick up in an autopsy.”

Finn’s anger surged, fists clenching at the knowledge that they were about to stage Amelia’s (and presumably his) demise as a tragic outbreak. Food poisoning was their cover. He heard a tiny clink of metal—someone messing with an object.

“Open her mouth,” Jenna said, quieter now. “I’ll put the poison in.”

Finn’s chest pounded. He couldn’t wait any longer. He shoved the door open, flashlight raised. The sight was exactly as he feared: Amelia slumped in a chair, head lollled, her arms drooping. Richard stood behind, leaning to hold her in place. Jenna held a syringe-like implement, presumably loaded with poison. They spun around at Finn’s intrusion, eyes wild with shock.



“You put one finger on her, I’ll kill you both with my bare hands,” Finn roared, stepping forward. His voice trembled with raw fury. The flashlight shone on them, revealing the pale glimmer of fear that crossed their features.

Amelia’s breathing looked shallow. She didn’t stir. He prayed she was only unconscious, not already beyond saving. Richard’s face twisted, as though mentally calculating how to respond. Jenna’s eyes darted toward the door.

Just then, footsteps resounded from outside, and Mrs. Hughes hurried in. She froze mid-step, gasping at the scene: Finn brandishing a flashlight like a weapon, Richard and Jenna mid-poisoning, Amelia limp in the chair. The older woman clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Stop playing innocent,” Finn snapped, fury lancing through him. “You’re part of this, aren’t you? The entire time, you’ve been covering up Wilkie’s death and lying about everything else. No more secrets, Mrs. Hughes.” He glanced about. “Edwin, you might as well join us. I know you’re in on it, too.”

At that, a tall figure materialized in the doorway behind Mrs. Hughes, holding a small-caliber rifle pointed at Finn. Edwin Pierce. The same ex-groundskeeper who had brandished a gun at Finn in the woods. A hush fell, thick with dread.

Edwin’s eyes glinted in the glow of Finn’s flashlight. “I let you go once out of courtesy, but not this time, Mr. Wright,” he said in a low, menacing tone. He stepped fully into the room, pressing the barrel of his gun forward. “We can’t let you and your partner ruin everything.”

Finn’s heart thundered. He stood outnumbered and outgunned. Amelia was unconscious, Richard and Jenna seemed prepared to poison her, Mrs. Hughes in the background, and now Edwin with a firearm. The entire conspiracy was laid bare. He clenched his teeth, raising the flashlight a fraction, not sure if it would help or simply

provoke them to shoot.

He flicked a glance at Amelia's pale face. "Amelia," he whispered, forcing calm. But she didn't stir. White-hot rage melded with fear. For a moment, time itself seemed to freeze: Richard pivoting behind Amelia with that lethal tool, Jenna clutching the toxin-laced syringe, Mrs. Hughes wringing her hands in horror, and Edwin aiming the gun.

Finn swallowed, mind racing for a strategy to save them both. The hush deepened, the crackling tension practically throbbing in the air. With the light flickering off the dusty corners of James's once-proud study, the conspirators stood in silent standoff with Finn, who realized with ice-cold clarity that he had mere seconds before they moved to subdue him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Finn swallowed, heart thudding. He had no weapon—only the urge to keep Amelia alive. She slumped in the chair, eyes half-lidded, breathing shallow. A faint chemical reek suggested they'd used chloroform or something similar on her already.

"What do you want from us?" Finn forced his voice steady, scanning each conspirator. They all stood in menacing tension, like a savage outline from an old painting.

Richard squared his shoulders. He was disheveled, sweat shining on his brow. "We want you both out of the picture," he replied, voice quivering with anger. "We can't let you ruin everything when we're so close. We had a plan."

Mrs. Hughes, trembling, finally found her tongue. "W-we never meant for it to end this way... we just... If you had left well enough alone..." She glanced guiltily at Amelia, then away.

The shattered remains of two earlier murders weighed on Finn's mind—James and Catherine, plus the possibility they'd arranged Wilkie's death. Fury mixed with a terrible clarity. "So all of you conspired to kill the Penrose siblings," he said quietly. "James, Catherine—maybe more. And now you want Amelia and me gone to tie up loose ends?"

"We knew you were getting close to the answer," Mrs Hughes said. "We set you up in the sitting room where we knew we could listen from the next room."

Jenna's face twisted. She clutched the syringe, knuckles going white. "We had no choice. James was bleeding the estate dry and the banks were threatening to come in and seize his assets, including half the house. Richard actually didn't want to keep the house, he only acted like he did, but he and Jenna did want his fair share of the money from the sale. But that wouldn't happen with James and Catherine alive. Despite saying she felt Richard was hard done by, Catherine threatened the final sale behind Richard's back to settle all James's debts so the family could live more humble lives without financial ruin always over their heads. That would have meant nothing for us, when the family had promised a good pay off when I retired. None of them cared about us." Her lip trembled, tears battling resentment. "James and Catherine both had to go, otherwise we would have been left with nothing... And... Edwin and I are... in love. We deserve better! All those years we put into serving this family, and Edwin gets fired and I get left with nothing when I retire. We deserve a life together that isn't one of servitude!"

Edwin's rifle steadied on Finn's chest. "Time for talking is done. They'll find your bodies in the morning, and with the estate in chaos, your partner died at the hands of the killer, and you in the crossfire."

Finn's pulse hammered. He needed to stall. Glancing sideways at Amelia's unconscious form, he tried to keep his voice calm. "If you kill me, the police will suspect you. Inspector Thomas's men are out on the estate. They'll know something's

off.”

Edwin’s eyes narrowed, lips curling in a half-snarl. “You’re wrong. We’ll spin a story. The power cut out earlier. We can claim the killer was lurking in here, attacking Inspector Winters. Shots were fired in confusion. You got caught in the crossfire. The end.”

Finn looked around, searching for a wedge in their plan. “But you’d still need someone to blame as the killer. Who did it? Another staff member? This story of yours has more holes than a sieve.”

Edwin shifted the gun’s aim, gaze flicking among them. “You’re right. We’d need a scapegoat.” His eyes landed on Richard. “I suppose we can adapt.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

Richard's eyes widened. "Wait—no!" he gasped.

The muzzle barked in a flash of fire. The shot was deafening in the enclosed space. Richard jerked backward, chest blossoming red. He hit the floor with a sickening thud. Jenna let out a shriek, her hands flying up as though to ward off the horror.

"God, no!" she cried.

Edwin pivoted and fired again, not giving Jenna time to run. She, too, collapsed in a heap, the syringe clattering from her limp hand. Blood pooled rapidly on the polished boards, her final breath escaping in a ragged exhalation.

"They were the killers," Edwin said with a grin. "If only I could have gotten there before they murdered Inspector Winters. Brave Finn struggled with the killers as he tried to save his partner, but I guess I'm just not as good a shot as I used to be..."

Mrs. Hughes stumbled forward, kneeling on the floor near the two corpses. Tears streaked her cheeks. "Edwin... how could you?" Her voice cracked with the betrayal of seeing him execute co-conspirators.

Edwin's features hardened. He gave a bitter shrug, stepping sideways to keep the rifle trained on Finn. "They were losing their nerve. We need everything neat if we want to collect the spoils. You and I will be fine. We'll say Richard went insane and killed them, or something. We can spin it. With Catherine and Richard dead, the estate goes to where we need it."

Mrs.Hughes bowed her head, shaking in silent sobs.“I never wanted this.”

Finn seized on the moment to push for answers.He raised a trembling finger at the two bodies, heart pounding.“Why kill them?They were your allies.Wasn’t the plan to share the inheritance from the estate once it sold?”

Edwin gripped the rifle, ignoring the question.He addressed Mrs.Hughes: “Help me tie him up.Let’s finish off the girl.”

Amelia moaned softly, stirring in the chair.Finn’s protective instinct surged.He shifted to position himself between her and the rifle’s muzzle.“Edwin,” he said in a low tone, “I get it.You were cast aside.James used you, then threw you away.Catherine championed you for a while, but apparently that wasn’t enough.You were forced to live in the woods.But you expect to escape murder charges now?”

Edwin's eyes burned."I dedicated my life to the Penrose.Because of Wilkie's death, James hated me.All for telling Wilkie old folklore.Then James cut me off, refused me a livelihood.Catherine tried to help me, but once she took up with that plan to sell the house, taking half of the money with her, it wasn't enough.We had to act."

“I do wonder if Wilkie was the first kill...” Finn said.“When I was in your cabin, I noticed a lot of local plants being grown, cultivated.You said yourself you loved folklore, does that include knowledge of poisonous plants that might be undetectable in an autopsy, unless you’re specifically looking for it?”

Mrs.Hughes sniffled.“You’re wrong, Finn.Edwin, he suspects we used poison for Wilkie.But Wilkie simply died.He was frightened by the old stories and he was a paranoid poor soul...”

Finn took a bold step forward.“Stop lying, Mrs.Hughes.Did you or Edwin kill Wilkie with poison that simulates a heart attack or fear-induced seizure?Was it put in his

food?Edwin could cultivate it, you would have opportunity to put it in any served food.Have you been planning this for years, finishing off the family one by one?I do wonder if you even killed your husband that way so you could be with the man you love.”

Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly.Finally, tears glinting, she stammered, "James reneged on the lump sum for me, yes.I was old.I had no future.Meanwhile, he spent it on prostitutes... that vile man."She spat the last words with surprising venom."So yes, we conspired because he spent all that money on his own pleasures while we starved in service.But we never did anything to Wilkie or my husband!"

A flicker of guilt crossed Edwin’s face, as though old secrets weighed him down.“Enough of the lies!Yes, Wilkie had to go.But I did that alone.I was furious he had told James about the stories I shared, knowing full well James wouldn’t approve.That brought pressure on me.But Mr.Hughes’s passing... that was a mercy.He was a depressed man who was in between me and the woman I loved... I did that because it was necessary.Mrs Hughes didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Mrs.Hughes pressed a hand to her mouth, sobbing harder.“Edwin, no...”

Finn felt sick to his core.He spotted the splatters of Richard’s and Jenna’s blood shining under the lamp.The entire house reeked of betrayal.

“Enough chatter,” Edwin snapped, lifting his rifle.“We have to finish.Finn, step away from the girl.”

Finn’s mind raced, scanning for a weapon.On the desk behind him lay a heavy paperweight—he recognized the same object he’d used earlier.But before he could reach for it, a sudden noise erupted from somewhere in the corridor—

A horrible, unearthly scream.It sounded like Marianne.

It came from another part of the house, echoing with inhuman volume. Everyone froze, eyes wide. Even Edwin's finger twitched off the trigger. A hush followed, thick with a sense of dread.

Seizing that instant, Finn lunged for the paperweight. He swung it in a wide arc, aiming squarely for Edwin's temple. Edwin tried to pivot, but the blow connected with a dull whack. The gun fired wide of its mark, burying a bullet in the wall. Finn threw himself forward, arms up to shield Amelia from stray fire, but no further shots followed.

Amelia moaned more strongly, blinking as she fought off the remnants of the drug. The loud shot must have jolted her nearly awake. "Fi...nn," she slurred.

Mrs. Hughes, eyes wild, grabbed a candle holder from the floor and made a desperate swipe at Finn. He ducked her swing, pushing her back into the desk. She tumbled, sprawling on the ground. Meanwhile, Edwin, bleeding from a fresh wound on his scalp, raised his rifle once more.

Finn grappled with Edwin, the man's grip slippery from the blood coursing down the side of his face. They wrestled across the floor, furniture scraping. The rifle muzzle pinned at awkward angles. Amelia groaned unable to help from her chair.

At last, Finn overpowered the older man, forcing him face-down with a knee to his spine. But as he pinned him, he felt a sudden, stunning blow—Mrs. Hughes had seized the paperweight, smashing it against Finn's skull. Pain exploded across his vision, sending him reeling onto his side on the floor, choking on a wave of dizziness.

Edwin propped himself up, rifle still in his grasp. "Chloroform! Quick!" he rasped.

Finn's head spun, disorientation pressing in. Mrs. Hughes and Edwin converged, cloth in hand, forcing the chemical-laced rag toward his face. He tried to thrash away, but



half his senses reeled. The pungent odor battered his nostrils. This was it.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:04 am*

Right as blackness threatened to claim him, a flash of movement behind them: Amelia leapt forward, adrenaline fueling her half-lucid form. She kicked Edwin in the back of his skull, the blow snapping his head forward. He collapsed with a grunt. Mrs. Hughes spun, raising the paperweight again, but Amelia slammed her aside into the nearest wall. The older woman slid down, breath leaving her in a harsh gasp.

Finn coughed, blinking away the swirling colors of near-unconsciousness. Amelia crouched over him, helping him sit up. Her hair hung loose, eyes blazing with fierce relief. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, ignoring the throbbing in his skull. "Better than them." He got unsteadily to his feet, retrieving Edwin's rifle. He ejected the remaining shells from the chamber, letting them clatter to the floor. "Thanks... for that rescue."

Amelia offered a wan smile, swallowing. "I was in a horrible daze from the chloroform, but I came to when I heard that... scream from outside. Must've jolted me. Then you were in trouble. Couldn't let them kill you. I am quite fond of you, you know."

They locked eyes, exhausted but alive. Then Finn's memory flashed: the scream—someone else was in danger. "Marianne," he blurted. "We heard her scream... Or someone else. She might be in trouble."

He turned to see Richard and Jenna's bodies sprawled in a pool of blood, Mrs. Hughes and Edwin moaning on the floor. A wave of nausea hit him. Amelia, swallowing hard, helped him secure the conspirators. They cuffed Edwin and Mrs. Hughes to a radiator pipe with a pair of improvised restraints from Finn's and Amelia's pockets, ignoring

their curses and pleas.

“Where is Marianne?” Finn said, to Mrs Hughes. “If you have any feeling for her...”

“She’s in her bedroom, upstairs to the east wing,” Mrs Hughes said looking defeated.

They exchanged a look, then sprinted from the study into the corridor. The house lay in darkness. Their footsteps echoed as they raced through the halls, ascending the main staircase once again. On the next level, they hastened down a long corridor to a heavy oak door—the entrance to Marianne’s suite.

The door stood ajar, revealing a lamp-lit interior. Finn slowed, heart pounding. He slid the door open fully, stepping in with Amelia at his side. The room smelled faintly of perfume and damp sheets. The large four-poster bed dominated the space, curtains drawn. A figure sat upright in the bed under a white sheet.

Finn approached warily, calling, “Marianne?” But there was no reply. He lifted a corner of the sheet and pulled it down, a chill skittering up his spine. Beneath it was Marianne, wide-eyed in death. A mask of terror warped her once-refined features, mouth half-open as if caught mid-scream.

Amelia’s hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp. “Oh God... She’s... dead,” she whispered, stepping back. “Why?”

Finn felt his stomach twist, and then a speculative thought drifted through him. “She was part of the conspiracy, so I guess someone or something turned on her.”

Amelia gazed at Marianne’s contorted expression in horrified fascination. “How was she?”

“Marianne was the one who fired Donald, so he wasn't here tonight,” Finn

explained."And I will bet the farm on Hobbs the driver having been sent away for the evening.The only people who remained here at Brynmor Hall were the conspirators and their next two victims: you and me.That way, they could all get their stories straight.When Edwin said 'the estate will go where they need it' after Richard and Jenna were shot... That meant the only people alive in the family were Marianne and the children.I'll wager that Richard and Jenna's wills state that the kids should get anything of theirs, since they don't have children of their own.I'm assuming Marianne conspired with Edwin and Mrs Hughes because she would end up being left with everything, herandthe children.And if Marianne sold the house, she'd settle her dead husband's debts and give Edwin and Mrs Hughes a hefty amount of it so they could live their lives as they saw fit."

"Marianne would have had motive to kill because of James's escorts," Amelia added."She must have conspired with the rest to have Catherine killed and then split the money from the house up between them.All of them were in on it, and all of them wanted to sell the house, even those who acted like that was the last thing they wanted."

Finn nodded.

"But wait," Amelia said."Who killed her?She didn't have that heart condition?She wasn't like James or Catherine.She wasn't a Penrose by birth."

Finn exhaled shakily, glancing around the dim bedroom."No, but she brought the family name into disrepute."

Amelia frowned, eyes darting to the open door as if expecting the same phantom footsteps."You're not suggesting..."

Finn forced himself to remain calm, his voice hushed with dread."Perhaps something came and visited her tonight.She is a Penrose, after all..."

They both jolted as footsteps—soft, measured—sounded in the corridor. The floorboards’ ancient squeak made it impossible to gauge location. Finn and Amelia froze, each swallowing anxiety. They shared a swift glance, then rushed out into the hallway, scanning the gloom. But the footsteps receded, fading beyond the corridor’s distant bend. By the time they arrived, no shape or silhouette remained. Only emptiness, a hush echoing with possibility.

Amelia clasped Finn’s arm. “Let’s get back up and get the hell out of here.”

“Agreed.”

Finn glanced back to Marianne’s door, a bleak sensation washing over him. He couldn’t help but think that had Marianne not screamed in horror when he did, Finn and Amelia would have been shot. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?” Amelia asked.

Finn smiled and they walked out of Brynmor into the estate, which seemed quieter than it ever had before.

## EPILOGUE

Two days had passed since the blood-soaked chaos at Brynmor Hall. Two days of statements, police reports, and long nights rummaging through the fractured remnants of a family conspiracy. Two days in which Finn had barely left Amelia’s side, ensuring she recovered from the ordeal of chloroform and near-poisoning. But something had spurred them into action: a message.

Now, they roared down a London street in Finn’s red Corvette, the engine’s low growl resonating beneath a gray sky.

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Amelia sat in the passenger seat, jaw set with a tension he knew well. She fiddled with the seat belt strap, gaze alternating between the looming cityscape and the phone in her lap, as though bracing for a call that might never come. Finn glanced at her between shifting gears.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

She nodded, though worry etched her features. “Rob’s message sounded urgent. But I can’t imagine what he and Inspector McNeill would want face-to-face that they couldn’t say over the phone.”

Finn frowned, memory flashing back to the dark hallways of Brynmor Hall, the swirl of ghosts, conspirators, and near tragedy. “Well, we’ll find out soon enough,” he said, pressing the accelerator. The day’s light rain streaked across the windshield as they navigated the congested London streets.

Eventually, they pulled up outside a squat, utilitarian government building not far from the Thames. Concrete steps led to double glass doors. Finn parked the Corvette with a squeak of tires, ignoring the drizzle that dotted its bright-red hood.

Amelia unbuckled and hopped out, tugging the hood of her jacket over her hair. “We’d better hurry,” she muttered, shutting the door. Finn locked up and followed her up the steps.

Inside, dull fluorescent lights illuminated a sterile reception area. Rob awaited them by the security desk, tension in his posture. At his side stood Inspector McNeill, who gave a curt nod in greeting.

“There you are,” Rob said, relief flickering in his expression. “Come on. We have a private room.”

He led them down a corridor with worn linoleum floors. Amelia cast Finn a questioning glance, but he only shrugged. Inspector McNeill kept his usual stern air, but even he looked unsettled.

In a small, windowless briefing room, Rob pulled the door shut behind them. An overhead strip light buzzed faintly. A simple table stood in the center, four chairs arranged around it. McNeill gestured for Finn and Amelia to sit.

“Can we get to the point?” Amelia asked, voice tight. “Your text said we needed to come in person. Why the secrecy?”

Inspector McNeill cleared his throat. He slipped a file from under his arm, laying it on the table. “Amelia,” he began quietly, “I need you to answer something directly: do you have any siblings?”

Amelia blinked, confusion mixing with a flicker of apprehension. “No. At least, not that I know of. I was in foster care for a lot of my childhood. I bounced around for years. No one ever mentioned a brother or sister.”

Finn felt a prickle of tension. “Is that what this is about? A lost relative?”

McNeill cast Rob a brief, somber look. Rob exhaled softly, nodding for McNeill to continue. The inspector opened the file, revealing a single photograph. He slid it across the table. Amelia leaned in, and Finn followed suit—his stomach dropped at the image.

It showed a man in a drab room, tied to a chair, face bruised, eyes brimming with terror. Red scrawled letters spanned the photo’s lower corner: IF AMELIA WON’T PAY FOR HER SINS, HER BROTHER WILL.

Amelia's lips parted, shock blanching her face. "Brother...? That's impossible," she whispered, breath trembling. "Who is this man?"

Rob laid a hand gently on the photo's edge. "His name is Brendan Wilson. We've uncovered evidence that he is indeed your brother. You were separated from each other when you were two years old. We believe Wendell Reed discovered this fact—and kidnapped him."

For a moment, Amelia just stared, the color draining from her cheeks. Her eyes brimmed with a sudden sheen of tears she tried to blink away. "I can't take this in... Kidnapped? But... I never even knew he existed!"

Finn reached out and clasped her shoulder. He saw her struggling, the swirl of confusion and dread visible in her eyes. He recognized the name that had haunted them: Wendell Reed, Amelia's old adversary, whose threat at Brynmor Hall had loomed like a stormcloud but never quite came out into the open.

Amelia remembered then, how Wendell Reed had killed the sister of a prison guard he didn't like, just to prove a point. She shuddered at the thought.

Inspector McNeill's expression was uncharacteristically sympathetic. "We wanted to verify the details before telling you. We've run DNA checks on record—Brendan Wilson is your brother. He's about five years older. Wendell got wind of it somehow. We suspect he's using your unknown sibling to force your compliance."

Amelia choked back a surge of emotion, tears starting to slip free. "He... he said, 'If Amelia won't pay for her sins...' Sins? I—I never did anything to him except put him behind bars once." Her voice hitched.

Rob stepped closer. "That's enough for Wendell. He's threatened you before, tried to isolate you. Now he's escalated. We found this photo in an envelope this morning, left at the station front desk. We believe he's holding Brendan somewhere. Amelia, we



wanted to deliver this bad news face to face.I'm so sorry.”

Amelia looked stricken, shoulders trembling.“I—I have to help him,” she rasped, voice tight.“Wendell can’t use him as bait.We have to go now and find him before it’s too late!”