



# One Last Night (The Governess #8)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** In Marthas Vineyard, 50-year-old governess Mary Wilcox expects to nurture young minds, not unearth dark family secrets.

But as the Bellamy estates harvest season buzzes with activity, Mary stumbles upon diaries veiled in dust and scandal, revealing forbidden passions that have fermented like the wines around her.

As she delves deeper into the past, sabotage strikes at the heart of the Bellamy vineyards, and Mary must discern whether these echoes of yesteryears are warnings—or if history's poisonous roots are sprouting once more beneath her feet.

In this tale where every whisper through the grapevines might hold a clue or a threat, can Mary trust her instincts to disentangle truth from treachery before the estates lush facade wilts to reveal decay?

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# Page 1

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Memory is a tricky thing.

In many ways, we define ourselves by our memories. Who we are is little more than a distillation of who we have been, the many droplets of our past condensed into the glass of our current self. Eventually, our glass is full, and we sit, elderly, left with nothing but our memories.

Something so critical as memory ought to be reliable. One ought to be able to think about one's past and know that their thoughts are at least in general an accurate representation of the experiences one has had. Sure, the details might be foggy as time passes. A name might be misplaced here and there. A date might shuffle between one month and the next or even one year and the next. But by and large, one should be able to think of one's past and know that the picture they see is generally complete and generally true to reality.

When memory betrays us, the effect is jarring. One must not only question one's record of events but—if the betrayal is great enough—one's own sense of self.

My memory has betrayed me so often lately that I wonder at times if the woman I think I am is the woman who truly exists or only a construct formed from the fragments of an incomplete mind. Am I a full glass, or am I only a small puddle left behind from a glass that shattered long ago?

“Mary?”

I stiffen and press my hand to my heart. According to Dr. Berat, I'm in excellent health, and my heart is strong, but I turned fifty-three last week, and at my age, I

would prefer not to strain that organ any more than I must.

The owner of the voice that startles me winces when he sees my reaction. “Sorry, Mary. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Normally, I would snap at him good-naturedly. Friendly banter is the highlight of our relationship. At this moment, however, I am too out of sorts from what I’ve discovered to do so. “That’s all right, Sean. I was just... distracted.”

A look of concern comes to his face. He’s been with me long enough now to know what I mean when I say that. He gestures at the open shoebox on our bed. “Those letters are from Annie then?”

Annie Wilcox was my younger sister. Or possibly my younger sister. She disappeared from the apartment we shared one afternoon over thirty years ago. I assumed when I was younger that she had been caught and murdered by some fiend, but I discovered recently that she had run away on her own accord and survived for at least two years, traveling the country and enjoying adventures.

Well, experiencing adventures. I suppose I can’t know for sure that she enjoyed them.

I spent twenty-eight years convincing myself I had moved on from the past, but as middle age replaced my youth, I realized that I was far from over her loss. I’ve spent much of the past three years looking for her and trying to find out how she spent the last three decades of her life.

No, that’s not true. I’ve spent half of those past three years looking for her and half of them distracting myself with the mysteries of other families so I can have an excuse to avoid the mysteries surrounding my own.

But her mystery keeps thrusting itself back to the forefront of my mind.

“Yes,” I tell Sean. “Well, no. Not from her. From me. To her. I... I didn’t know they were still here.”

Sean crosses the room and sits on the bed next to me. He wraps his arm around me and kisses my forehead. That is normally enough to slay any dragon that plagues my thoughts, but today it doesn’t rise to the challenge.

“Have you read them yet?” he asks.

I haven’t read them, nor have I told him the entire truth about their existence. I didn’t know they were still here because I didn’t know they were ever here. I didn’t know they were ever here because I didn’t know they ever left my apartment. Our apartment. Mine and Annie’s.

“No,” I reply. “I haven’t had a chance.”

Another lie. According to my cell phone, it is two-fifty-nine p.m. That means I’ve been sitting in this exact spot for nearly three hours. On occasion, when experiencing extreme distress, I will go into a dissociative state and awake with no memory of how I spent my time.

That is not the case this time. This time, I am fully aware of every single second that passes while I stare at letters that I forgot I had written and try to work up the courage to gather more droplets of the memory I’ve left behind.

“Well,” he says, reaching for one of the letters. “Let’s have a look together, shall we?”

“No!” I shriek, tearing the envelope from his hands and flinging it against the far wall.

Sean pulls away from me, and now his concern is mixed with sternness. “Why not? What’s wrong, Mary?”

“I... I want to read them alone. By myself. At least at first. Please understand. This is very personal for me.”

Sean understands very well how personal Annie’s mystery is to me. He also understands that my reticence when it comes to her is sometimes motivated by a desire to hide the past rather than reveal it.

As in this case. I have lied to him once more. I don’t want him to read those letters, and I don’t want to read them either because I am not at all certain I’ll like what I learn. Not about Annie, but about myself.

That is why I fear my memory. The more of my memory that returns to me, the more I see that my sister and I did not enjoy the perfect friendship I thought we did. I fear that if I remember more, I’ll have to come to grips with the fact that I was no friend to her at all.

Sean sighs. “All right. We won’t read them then. But you will.”

“Yes. But not now. I... I have to pack. I have to leave early in the morning.”

Sean sighs once more, then smiles at me. I love the sympathy in his eyes, but oh God, do I hate it as well. “All right, love,” he says. “If you can make it downstairs in time for dinner, there might be some wine left.”

“There will be some wine left because you’re only allowing yourself a single glass per evening, remember?”

“How could I forget with this mosquito buzzing in my ear all day?” I glare at him,

and he grins. “And what a lovely mosquito it is.”

The corners of my lips turn up. “You’re talking as though you want to sleep on the couch, Mr. O’Connell.”

“I’ll sleep anywhere as long as your arms are wrapped around me.” He winks. “Your legs as well.”

I gasp and slap him. He catches my wrist and pulls me close so he can kiss me.

I am grateful for that kiss. It helps me forget.

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I wake before dawn the next day. I have a three-and-a-half-hour drive to Martha’s vineyard, but if I’m caught in the Boston rush hour, that will become a five-hour drive.

Sean is already out of bed. When I come downstairs, dressed and ready to leave, he meets me at the foot of the stairs. “Luggage is all ready to go. It’s in the boot for you.”

I blink. “The boot?”

He rolls his eyes. “The trunk.”

“Oh.” I blush. “Right. Thank you, my love.”

“You’re sure you’re British?”

“After forty-two years in America, I’m as British as you are American,” I tell him.

Then I kiss his cheek. “Thank you for last night.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He grins. “My very great—”

I roll my eyes and push him away. “I meant the dinner and the cuddle by the fire, Sean.”

“That’s not all you meant.”

I don't respond with words, but I'm sure the heat in my cheeks gets the point across. "Well, I'm going to leave now so I don't risk getting caught in traffic after all of my best efforts not to. I love you, for some reason, in spite of everything. I'll call you when I arrive."

“Perhaps I’ll come visit you,” he says. “We can have dinner and cuddle by the fire some more.”

“You will not visit me,” I counter. The last thing I need is my overly amorous fiancé arriving at my employer’s house while I’m in the middle of a lesson. “But,” I add, slipping my arms over his shoulders, “if you’re extremely lucky, I might make the drive back on my nights off.” I kiss him softly. “So we can ‘cuddle.’”

He swallows and says somewhat hoarsely. “I’d like that.”

“I’m sure it would please you greatly,” I tease.

I kiss him a final time, then head to my minivan and begin my journey south. I hold onto the image of Sean’s face for as long as I can, but the image of my handwriting on those letters hovers over the back of my mind like a thundercloud waiting for the proper moment to burst into violence.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

I have mixed emotions as I approach the island of Martha's Vineyard. A part of me is excited to spend the winter on the picturesque island. I've spent four-fifths of my life living in Boston but never so much as stepped on one of Massachusetts' most storied vacation destinations. A walk along the shores or through the grassy hills sounds invigorating. And, since my hosts have a vineyard on their property, I'll be able to taste some of the finest wines produced on the East Coast.

At the same time, I can't shake the feeling that I'm walking into a trap. I've learned from hard experience that the wealthy in this world often harbor secrets that trap people like flies in a spider's web. Sometimes, they are cobwebs, only the memories of past horrors—but then, I know that memory can be dangerous too.

But sometimes, the spiders still live, and as the flies flounder in their web of intrigue, they strike and suck the life out of them.

I have worked for many wealthy people since leaving my teaching job and becoming a governess three years ago, and many of their webs have spiders that are alive, well, and hungry. What makes Martha's Vineyard different is that this entire island is filled with the wealthy. And it's an island. I am taking a ferry to it. If I want to escape, I shall have to do so slowly and on a schedule with which all the spiders will be familiar.

I make no claim that these thoughts are rational, only that they're inescapable. Since they refuse to leave my mind, I push them to the background. Perhaps they'll crowd out the shoebox of letters resting there now.

I focus instead on the beauty of the island as I drive my minivan off of the ferry. The



surf gently caresses the white sand beaches and grassy bluffs. The trees—their leaves still green as it is only late September—sway in the gentle breeze and seem to welcome me joyously with their slowly waving branches. The houses gleam elegantly under the bright morning sun, tall and statuesque yet somehow modest despite their covered porches and elegant construction. Perhaps it's because no house stands out more than another. Each is different, but none are superior.

I relax slightly. After all, not all wealthy people are venomous. The George's—the family I worked for over the summer—were delightful people. And the Tylers were wonderful as well. I worked for them two summers before this one. And really, most of the others were perfectly decent. It's only that they had creatures crawling in their corners. I can't blame them for not seeing what hid in the shadows.

I chuckle to myself. "Look at you, Mary. Once again, trying to read a novel from the back of a soup can."

That's something Sean says to me sometimes. I look at something simple and infer all of this hidden meaning from it when there's nothing to read into. The day is beautiful, and the houses are pretty. The island is full of wealthy people, and the leaves are green. There's no need for any of that to mean anything more than it does.

I reach my employer's residence fifteen minutes later. This residence is very much not like the others. The house is more of a mansion than a house. It is, I would guess, twelve thousand square feet and three stories tall with an attic above. It sprawls luxuriously over a beautifully sculpted front lot, and behind it stretches forty acres of prime vineyard.

While grapes grow well all over Martha's Vineyard and many homes have an acre or so of land dedicated to personal winemaking, there were no commercial winemaking concerns on the island until two families opened small prestige vineyards on land behind their homes. One family, the Cartwrights, has a vineyard adjacent to this one.

This one belongs to Victoria Bellamy, matriarch of the Bellamy family, the owners of Continental Vineyards. The bulk of their commercial enterprise is located on thirty-five thousand acres on the mainland, most of it in Massachusetts, with some satellite wineries in California and Oregon. However, they've converted their home vineyard into a commercial one. I understand they intend for this vintage to be their finest and sold in exceptionally limited quantities at quite steep prices.

I'm not here to concern myself with their business, however. I am here as a tutor for Victoria's grandchildren, Nathan and Luann. Their old tutor left over the summer due to a death in their family, and I'm taking over for the last two years of their high school education. I sometimes find it odd that wealthy families so often choose to educate their children at home, but if they didn't, I would have trouble finding work as a governess, so I suppose I can't complain.

I park the minivan in front of the house and step out. Before I can retrieve my luggage, a stately voice calls, "Please don't trouble yourself, Miss Wilcox. I'll have Grant take your luggage."

I turn to the voice to see a woman as stately as her voice descending the steps. As a semi-public figure, her age of sixty-seven is well-known, but she appears a full twenty years younger. It's not until she reaches me, that the weight in her eyes and the lines at the corners of her mouth give away her true maturity.

I smile and bow slightly. "It's wonderful to meet you in person, Mrs. Bellamy."

She laughs. "Please, call me Victoria. Ever since Parker died, I've rather enjoyed using my given name rather than my married one."

I'm not sure what to make of that, so I only say, "Victoria, it is."

A tall, beautiful god of a man approaches the minivan and says in a mellifluous voice,

“I’ll take your luggage for you, ma’am.”

I am in love with Sean, but I must admit I blush when the Adonis takes my luggage. My admiration must be noticeable, because Veronica winks at me and says, “I hired him for his work ethic and gentle spirit, but it doesn’t hurt that he’s beautiful either.”

My blush deepens. “Are the twins here?”

“No, they’re out at the beach with their father. Enjoying the warmth before it’s gone. You’ll meet them tonight at dinner.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Come!” she says, “Let me show you around. Grant will leave your luggage in your room, and... Oh, leave the car keys on the driver’s seat. He’ll park your van as well.”

I comply, then follow her up the porch into the house.

“You’ve seen the gardens,” she says. “Though Julian—that’s my son—says I shouldn’t call them that as they’re only a lawn with bushes. ‘Not even a proper fountain,’ he says. Ha! As though we’re English Lords or something.” She stops and looks at me with chagrin. “Oh, Mary, I’m so sorry. How rude of me.”

“Nothing to apologize for. I was just telling my fiancé that I’m far more American than I am British.”

“Have you lived here long, then?”

“Ever since I was eleven years old.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, wow! But your accent is so strong!”

My accent is actually quite mild, more of the softened one known as a Transatlantic accent than a British one, but I don't correct her. "It's one of the few things I've retained from my British heritage. That, and my love of tea, although even then, I prefer coffee in the mornings."

"So do I," Victoria agrees, leading me onward. "We'll have to share a cup or two. Anyway, the house is large, but fairly typical of New England."

She's right, but I am a little surprised that she would be so dismissive of her own home. "Your furniture is lovely," I tell her. "Is it all mahogany?"

"Black maple, actually. I thought it was mahogany too." She laughs. "You should have seen Julian's face turn red when I told him that. You would have thought I called it cheap plywood."

That's the second time she points out a disagreement with her son. I wonder if this is how they show affection or if there's truly conflict between them.

Not your business, Mary. You're here for the children.

"The first floor is the living room—I refuse to call it a parlor—the dining room, kitchen, and the great room. That's where we entertain. The children take to school in the den on the other side of the great room. It used to be Parker's study, but after he passed, I saw no need to keep a bunch of old books and a massive globe that showed the world as it was two hundred years ago."

Once more, I don't know how to respond to that.

"The servants are on the third floor, but I've given you the guest room on the second floor so you can be close to the children. They're sixteen years old, so I doubt they'll have nightmares or anything like that, but I'm sure they'll appreciate having you

close. I understand you're an excellent confidant."

"I try to be," I say modestly.

Victoria tells me about the house, but she doesn't bother to lead me to any of the rooms. Instead, she leads me straight through the foyer and the great room—a truly impressive structure with a gorgeous crystal chandelier—and out into the vineyard beyond.

She turns to me with a gleam in her eye, and it's clear that this is the true source of Victoria Bellamy's pride. "Aren't they gorgeous?"

I look at the rows of vines, their grapes swollen nearly to bursting. They are beautiful. In every academic and aesthetic sense of the word, the rows of Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Noir are breathtaking.

But as my eyes travel over the sinuous tendrils crawling over the stakes and lattices of their supports, I am reminded that in the wild, grapes are parasites, clinging tightly to other plants and burdening them with the weight of their prolific bunches of fruit.

"They're lovely," I tell her.

She takes my hand and—giddy as a schoolgirl—leads me into the first row. I nearly cry out when the lattices overhead block the sunlight.

"These are my Chardonnay," she explains. "My favorite white varietal. It's often called the red wine of white wines. Don't tell Julian I said that, though. He gets all huffy about things like that."

She leads me to another row and says, "The next several rows are Riesling. I don't enjoy them as much, but they make for very popular wines, and they grow so well out

here, so it makes business sense to reserve some acreage for them. The Pinot Noir is on the far end, but we've already harvested those. Usually the Chardonnay is the first to ripen, but ours are a unique cultivar that matures later in the season." She grins at me, "And believe me, Mary, it is so worth it."

Her love for her work eases some of the disquiet I feel, but I am still grateful when we return to the house. "I'll show you more later," she tells me. "And I just know we'll spend a lot of time among my grapes. But you've had a long drive, so I'll let you get settled and get some rest before dinner." She squeezes my hand. "Welcome to the family, Mary."

"Thank you, Victoria. I look forward to meeting your grandchildren."

I head upstairs to my room. Fortunately, Grant is there, perhaps knowing that his employer will forget to tell me where it is. I thank him for his help, but though he really is easy on the eyes, I am very relieved when the door closes, and I am alone.

I sit on the edge of my bed and try not to fixate on the vines. The image of spiders is gone, replaced by the sinuous and far more venomous image of snakes slithering through the shadows.

## Page 3

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I take Victoria's advice and rest for a few hours. Then I unpack my luggage and enjoy a brief call with Sean where he carefully avoids mention of the letters on my bed at home and I carefully avoid mention of the disquiet I felt earlier in the day.

I am in a better state of mind when Grant fetches me for dinner. There's nothing sinister about grapevines, and while they might be parasites, they're not the sort that kills plants or leeches resources from them. Victoria and her son might not see eye to eye on everything, but find me the family that does, and I'll find you a family that's lying.

Victoria is waiting for me in the great room. Three others are with her, a tall man in his early forties with curly ash-blond hair and piercing gray eyes set in an austere but handsome face and two children who share their father's piercing gray eyes but carry them underneath straight hair that is flaming red.

The children are identical in nearly every sense. In fact, the only visible difference between them is that one is a boy and the other a girl. They have the same upturned noses—another trait they must have inherited from their mother, since Julian has his mother's aquiline nose—the same high cheekbones and the same sloping shoulders.

They regard me with the same serious expression too. From what I understand, their previous tutor was with them for ten years. It might be some time before they welcome me into their family as easily as their grandmother did.

Julian steps forward and extends his hand. He smiles, and the look drives the austerity from his face. "Julian Bellamy. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Wilcox."

"It's wonderful to meet you, too," I reply. "And this must be Nathan and Luann."

The children bow formally. I laugh and return a curtsy of my own. "A pleasure to meet the two of you as well. I look forward to getting to know you."

Luann manages a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Mary."

Nathan offers neither a smile nor a greeting, but that's all right. It's common for one child to be more outgoing and the other to be more reserved. Even identical twins aren't ever completely identical.

"Well!" Victoria says, clapping her hands. "I, for one, am starving, and I know Beatrice has prepared a lovely meal for us. Shall we?"

"We shall," Julian announces.

He seems to share his mother's ebullience. It must only have been my imagination that there is conflict between them.

We head to the kitchen, following Victoria's lead. The children stay close to their father, and I give them space. I've learned the hard way that pushing children to accept me is likely to have the opposite effect.

The dining room is just as grand and impressive as the great room and sports an equally gorgeous chandelier. This kind of opulence is more common in the plantation houses of the South than in the country homes of New England, but I happen to appreciate such Old World elegance. The table is also black maple, and the chairs are beautifully carved and high-backed, and light during the day is provided by an expansive window that faces the vineyards outside.

"So Mary," Julian begins. "My mother tells me you come highly recommended."



I smile graciously. “I’ve been fortunate to enjoy positions with many wonderful families.” And a few less than wonderful families . “I’m happy to know that I was able to provide as much joy as I received.”

“Well, I hope you’ll enjoy your stay here just as much. The children are excited to have a new tutor.”

Nathan and Luann look far from excited, but I smile and thank them anyway. “Luann,” I ask, “what is your favorite subject in school?”

She blinks, evidently surprised by my question. “Um... History’s okay, I guess.”

“I love history,” I reply. “It’s so fascinating to think about all the events that took place to lead us right to this very moment.”

She shrugs. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Very effusive, these children,” Julian teases. “Nathan, tell Miss Mary what your favorite subject is.”

Nathan’s lips thin. He doesn’t seem to appreciate his father’s prodding. I’m about to tell him that it’s all right if he wants to tell me another time, but he says, “Science.”

“Oh, how interesting,” I reply. “I’m afraid I was a poor scientist. I could never keep all the different math straight.”

“It’s not that difficult,” he says. “If you think of each science as requiring a different set of distinct formulas, you can then categorize the formulas according to their primary characteristics. You can actually determine a lot about the nature of a science by determining the formulas that govern it and comparing them to other sciences. For example...” He catches himself and blushes prettily. “Well, anyway, I guess I just

never found it difficult because I like it so much.”

I might have decided too prematurely who the outgoing one of the two is. “You sound like a very bright young man,” I tell him. “I hope I can keep up with you.”

The meal is brought out, and my eyes widen in amazement. The cook, Beatrice, has the body of a mountain and the face of an ogre. Not that she’s ugly. She’s actually quite pretty. But her expression reminds me of someone who eats children rather than feeds them.

Whatever her faults might be, she can cook. The centerpiece of each plate is a steaming lobster tail served with a light butter sauce. With that, she includes corn on the cob and macaroni and cheese—real macaroni and cheese with a rich, creamy sauce made of real cheeses rather than the horrible gunk that comes in boxes in supermarkets.

“There’s coleslaw if you’d prefer, Mary,” Victoria tells me. “The children like mac and cheese, but I understand if you want something different.”

“This is perfect, Victoria, thank you,” I reply. “It’s very generous of you to include me in your dinner.”

“Of course,” Julian says. “We’d be bad hosts if we made you eat by yourself.”

This courtesy doesn’t seem to extend to the other household servants, but it’s not my place to comment, so I only thank him again.

The meal proceeds with more small talk. I share some of my experiences at other positions—though I leave out the various scandals I end up in the middle of—and the Bellamy’s tell me a little about their business. The children are quiet unless prodded, but they are polite enough and no longer seem wary of me.

All is well until Victoria mentions the vineyard. “I showed Mary the vineyard this morning, Julian.”

A wall instantly comes up on Julian’s face. He keeps his tone mild when he says, “Oh?” but I can tell he’s not pleased. Why would it bother him that his mother showed me the vineyard?

“Yes. She thought the Chardonnay was particularly exquisite, didn’t you, Mary?”

“The entire vineyard was lovely,” I reply. “Thank you for showing me.”

“It’s too bad about the fire the other day. It would have been fun to show her the press.”

Julian’s lips thinned. The children—always the most sensitive members of the family—look simultaneously embarrassed and downcast. It’s clear that I’m not meant to be involved in this portion of the conversation.

Julian responds before I can change the subject. “Fires happen, Mom. The important thing is that no one was hurt. We caught the man who sabotaged the winery, and we’ll have a new press installed by the end of the week, and we’ll upgrade our fire suppression equipment before next season. Besides, this year’s just a test year. We’re giving a few bottles to some hobnobs and stuffed shirts and a few more to friends. It’s not the end of the world if we lose some of the yield because—”

Victoria snaps her head up at Julian. Her eyes flash, and there's no more pretense of politeness. "I would think that after a Harvard education, you'd be smart enough to know that it's bad business sense to dismiss losses so easily."

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Julian snaps. “What should I do instead? Be pissy about it? Bring it up every dinner for the next several months?”

He blinks and looks nervously at me. I gather that he forgot about me for a moment. He forces laughter and says, “Anyway, it’s happened, right? Nothing we can do about it now. We’ll take more precaution in the future.”

Victoria's lips thin. She stands abruptly and says, "Mary, I apologize for leaving you early, but the older I get, the less tolerance I have for late nights. Julian, please give Beatrice my apologies. The food was quite lovely. I’ve just lost my appetite. I’ll see you all in the morning. Nathan, Luann, come give your grandmother hugs. Surely you’re not too old for that.”

The children acquiesce, and some of Victoria’s happiness returns as the two of them embrace her. “You two are so beautiful,” she gushes. “Just like your mother was.”

Julian stiffens when she says that, but he looks grieved more than angry. The children don’t show the same grief, so I guess that their mother died when they were both very young.

Julian confirms that fact a moment later. “My wife, sadly, was taken from us early, Mary. She survived long enough to see the children start their schooling, but she... Well, she lives in our memories, right kids?”

“Right,” the children echo.

They look embarrassed at their adults, and I don’t blame them. I don’t blame the adults either, though. Julian will spend the rest of his life grieving the woman he loved, and there’s precious little anyone can do to help him with that. I know what it’s like to lose the person one loves the most.

As for Victoria, I get the sense that her disagreements with Julian over the family business hurt more than Julian realizes. She is older now, but her vibrant personality suggests to me that she’s not used to her age. She likely resents being condescended

to, even when the intention isn't to humiliate her.

Of course, I could be reading far too much into all of this. If there was a fire at the winery, then it no doubt caused stress for all of them.

We finish dinner with no further incident. The conversation, however, is forced from that point, and the three remaining Bellamy's are clearly grateful when the meal ends, and they're able to retreat to their rooms for the evening.

There's nothing to suggest that I'll end up embroiled in another scandal, but it's clear that this family is divided. Perhaps this will be my chance to do good for someone without getting caught in a web of intrigue.

Or perhaps I've only just glimpsed a single bone in a closet full of skeletons.

## Page 4

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Julian encourages me to feel free to explore the house before he goes upstairs. “Don’t feel like you need to stay cooped up in your room when you’re not with the children. The house is a lot more hoity-toity than we are.”

I laugh at that. “You’re very generous, Mr.—”

"Ooh, no. Not hoity-toity remember. Mr. Bellamy sounds like a judge's name. Julian, please. It’s bad enough I have to spend most days wearing silk suits. Do you know how uncomfortable suits get after a while? One of these days, I'm going to show up to a board meeting in flip flops and a wifebeater just to see how the others react.”

He catches himself and blushes a little. “Well, I guess you know we’re crazy now.”

I smile at him. In truth, this little display of honesty has warmed me to him and eased some of the worries that linger after dinner. “All of the best people are crazy. Don’t be fooled by my proper English manners. My own insanity will evidence itself soon enough, I’m sure.”

He laughs, a rich, hearty sound that warms me to him further. “I look forward to seeing it. In the meantime, there’s a television in the living room with far more channels than any reasonable human being needs to watch and a library on the far end of the house with far more books than any reasonable human being needs to read.”

“A library?” Victoria didn’t mention that.

“Yes. It was Dad’s old library. Mom cleaned out the study when he died, but I persuaded her to keep the library. I was a big reader when I was a teenager. If you

follow the hallway past the den—that's the old study—you'll reach it. Read whatever you want. We're not trying to preserve the classics or anything."

"I think I'll take you up on that offer. Thank you."

He heads upstairs, and I eagerly head to the library. I'm not planning to snoop, only to read. I do enjoy reading and spend most nights sitting in bed, curled up with a book before I fall asleep. In fact, I'll probably just select one to start with and head upstairs to my room.

I remain convinced that all I plan to do is read right up until I open the door and step inside. But the library has a smell to it that lays bare my true feelings. It's an old, musty smell, not unlike a graveyard, but instead of frightening me with the aroma of death, I am drawn powerfully to the secrets held here within tomes rather than tombs.

This is the part of my personality that gets me into trouble. It's not something I'm born with but rather something that develops after Annie's disappearance and becomes more powerful when I leave my teaching job and begin searching for her in earnest.

I can't stand secrets. I must know them. I must expose the harmful ones, and in my experience, they're all harmful.

I believe this stems from the fact that my sister betrayed me with a secret. She never told me where she was going or even that she planned to leave in the first place. Her disappearance damaged me. I mean that word literally, too. She didn't just hurt me, she damaged me. That's what secrets do. They damage people. Dishonesty is cruel, and the decades have only strengthened my belief that it's better for all concerned that secrets aren't allowed to exist.

I feel a sharp pain in my hands and snap out of the short fugue. I lift my hands and

see that I've dug my nails into my skin. The wounds are shallow and not serious, but they're irritating. I have no reason to suspect that there are any secrets in this family, certainly none that are any of my business to know.

But as Sean is fond of pointing out, I am as much a slave to my curiosity as the cat was. Of course, we all know what happened to that cat.

I shake my head, exasperated with myself. "Just pick a damned book, Mary. Something with pictures you can stare at so you're not stuck with your nightmares."

I'm not sure exactly what I mean by this self-deprecating insult, but it calms me down enough that I'm able to move among the shelves and explore the different options available to me.

The library itself is slightly dusty but not so much that it appears abandoned. I know from the company website that Parker Bellamy died when his boat capsized at sea twenty-seven years ago, four years after my sister disappears, not that the two events are connected. It seems Julian has enjoyed good use of his father's collection. Most of the books are well-worn and when I leaf through old copies of such classics as *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*, I find stains from food and occasionally from tears.

I don't find the residue disgusting. Rather, I find it endearing. Books are an excellent escape, especially for older children who are approaching adulthood and beginning to see for the first time how frightening it is.

Besides the American classics, there is an entire bookcase dedicated to the great British novelists. An entire shelf is filled with copies of every one of Dickens' works, and another is filled with the collected plays of Shakespeare. Another contains the works of the great Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the highest—accessible to me only with the rolling ladder in the room—contains the wonderful mysteries of that great



authoress Agatha Christie. I am quite the fan of Miss Marple, and yes, I am very much aware of the irony in that.

I select a copy of *A Caribbean Mystery*, one of my favorites of the series, and step down the ladder. I'm delighted to revisit the book, and for a moment, I am able to put my own nosiness aside out of excitement for Miss Marple's.

But then I see the safe. It sits at the bottom of the corner of the library, nearest the door. Its own door—a cast iron object with a cross-shaped handle and a dial lock—hangs ajar.

So you see, Sean, I think drily. I had no choice. Fate overwhelmed me.

I set the Christie book on the top step of the ladder and walk to the safe. Perhaps it will be empty. Perhaps nothing will be there that will require me to look further and involve myself in a mystery that's none of my business.

But instead, I open the door and find the safe filled with notebooks. I spend a perfunctory second trying to convince myself to be respectful of the family and another wondering why the safe is open in the first place, but I know the moment I see that open safe door that I'm going to read whatever's inside. I am a slave to my own nature, as Miss Marple is. As we all are.

I select the first notebook. It is an old, leather-bound journal, its cover cracked and its pages yellowing. I open the journal and gasp when I see the date across the first entry. November fourth, 1861.

My guilt fades. Surely I can't be that evil for reading a diary written by someone who died well over a century ago?

I read, eager to slake my nosiness with this relatively harmless bit of ancient history.

Dear Diary,

It's over now. Roger has left me, gone west to flee the war and the memories that haunt his dark eyes. I am lost without him. Henry, the poor dear, thinks I am taken ill with a fever, and I allow him to believe that. He is a gentle soul and will not survive if he discovers that I have been in love with a Rebel soldier.

I gasp and glance at the door, struck with a fresh rush of guilt. It seems that this family has its own history of scandals. There's no one there, of course, so I continue.

The baby is kicking. I lay my hand over my stomach and wonder if the child I bear will belong to Henry or to Roger. I would not regret it should Henry prove to be the father. He is a good man and kind even if he is not strong or courageous. A child bearing those traits would be a service to the world.

But I can't lie. I hope, I plead, I beg that in this child's face, I will once more see the dark, brooding eyes of the only man I ever truly loved, the man I could never have but who will own my desire until I leave this Earth. May God forgive me for this prayer, but may He also please grant that the child I bring into this world will be that of Roger Harlow.

With love as always, Marianne Bellamy.

I close the novel and stare at the wall in wonder. There is no mirror to show me my reflection, but I'm sure that my eyes are wide and gleeful.

Gleeful? For goodness' sake, what is my problem?

I sigh and replace the diary. "For what it's worth, Marianne, I hope you learned to appreciate gentle, good Henry. God knows a man like that is worth a thousand strong men."

That's a tad hypocritical, I suppose, since I find my own man's strength and brooding personality deliciously attractive. But I'm not cheating on my man, so there.

I grab *A Caribbean Mystery* and leave the library, leaving the safe as I found it. I've gotten my fill of gossip for the evening. It's time to read my novel and leave the past where it belongs.

I make it to my room, but when I open the door, a memory hits me as sharp and clear as day. I am looking out of my bedroom window—not this bedroom but the one I sleep in as a child—and I'm watching my mother kiss another man in our backyard.

I recognize the man. His name is George Terrell. He is an employee of my father's who often visits when Annie and I are very young. I like him. He brings us sweets when he visits, and he's especially gentle with Annie, who is very small and very fragile when she is younger.

I have a round face with medium brown hair and eyes, just like my father. George Terrell has noble features with bright hair, the color of sunshine, and eyes, the hue of a summer sky.

The same hair and the same stunning eyes as my sister, Annie.

I don't remember how old I am when I catch my mother kissing him and see his hand travel downward to touch her in places that no one but my father should touch her. Five, maybe six. It's a very old memory.

But despite my tender age, I know the moment I see the kiss that George Terrell is Annie's father.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

“How dare you threaten me?”

Julian's voice snaps me out of my memory. I blink and look around, disoriented. I'm no longer standing in the doorway of my room. I'm sitting on the edge of my bed. I'm showered and wearing my nightgown. I've somehow managed to prepare for bed without any conscious realization that I'm doing so.

Well, that's good. I've dissociated in the past and ended up getting myself into very compromising positions. Perhaps my subconscious is choosing to be kind and keep me out of trouble.

“Should we talk about you ? You have secrets too. Let's talk about those. Oh, you don't want to get into that?”

I hear Julian's footsteps as he walks past my doorway. A moment later, I hear him on the staircase as he walks to the first floor. I don't follow him, but I have a feeling I know where he's going.

My room has a balcony, like most upper-floor rooms in houses like this. Rather than follow him downstairs. I pull on my sweater and walk quietly onto my balcony.

The moon is bright, and the night is clear. It's a beautiful, soothing night, but the vines below me glow like ghostly fingers in the moonlight.

No, not like fingers. Like a giant, sprawling web.

As I suspect, the back door opens a moment later. I see the light from Julian's cell

phone move beneath the vines as he walks deeper into the vineyard. “Threaten me again. Go on, I dare you. Oh, come on, you’ve been swinging your dick around like you’re King Kong. Let’s see it. Let’s see how low your balls hang.”

I blush a little at the locker room talk, but behind Julian’s bravado, I detect fear. What threats could the person on the other end be making? What secrets could he know that would unnerve Julian Bellamy this much?

“Bullshit. By the time I’m finished with you, you’d be begging to change your name and leave the damned country.”

I don’t hear the rest of his argument. He’s too far away now.

I remain on the balcony. The moonlit sky really is soothing, and though the grapevines still appear sinister, they are below me, and I am safe behind the wrought-iron grating of my balcony, so I would rather enjoy the cool air while I try to make sense of what I’ve heard.

Really, there’s not much to decipher. Someone is threatening the Bellamys, or at least Julian Bellamy. This threat involves exposing a secret that the stranger—and, I suspect, Julian—believes could ruin Julian. Julian is responding by threatening to expose the caller’s own secrets.

But I don’t know what those secrets are or why the stranger made those threats. Was he—or she, I suppose—trying to get something from Julian? Was the caller simply angry with him? Did they feel hurt, somehow, and they’re trying to get restitution?

And what could those secrets be?

I think back to the diary. Marianne Bellamy cheated on her husband and possibly fathered a child with another man. It is a tale as old as time for a woman to bear

another man's child and pretend it's her husband's baby, but a wise man once said that a tale that's boring to one person is the spice of life to another person.

Or perhaps I'm misremembering that quote. In any case, the children definitely don't look like their father or grandmother. I assumed when I met them that they took after their mother, and Victoria herself said they looked like her, but Julian reacted strangely to that. I put his reaction to simple grief at the time, but could there be an element of shame as well?

I hear footsteps and look back down at the vineyard to see Julian stomping back. I can only see his silhouette in the dim light, but that is enough to see that he's furious. He mutters under his breath, every third word a curse word.

I return to my room and hear him continuing to curse as he marches up the stairs and passes me on his way back to his room. I manage to deduce that he considers someone—presumably the caller—a “Goddamned son of a bitch,” but no more helpful piece of information drops from his lips.

His door slams, and the house falls silent. I sit on my bed and begin my mystery, but the book holds no interest for me now that I find myself in the middle of an actual mystery. I struggle through the first two chapters before giving up, then set the book down.

I feel a growing sense of irritation at myself. I can't do this. I can't keep meddling in other people's affairs. It's not my place to snoop in this family's secrets. I can't pretend that the children are in danger. Sure, it's not ideal that Julian and his mother squabble, but there's been no murder here.

But then, what secrets could Julian's enemy expose? Those secrets could endanger the children. They could be anything from an embarrassing but harmless scandal all the way up to criminal action. Even murder.

I have to know. I have to at least determine this secret for myself. If it's harmless, I'll never speak of it. I'll lock it away and carry it with me to my grave. I'll leave Julian and Victoria alone and focus on my job teaching the children.

But if it's not harmless, if the skeletons in the Bellamys' closet are alive and hunting the living, then I'll have no choice but to do what I've done before and drag that secret kicking and screaming into the light of day.

More footsteps sound outside my door, but they're far softer than before. They're not the footsteps of an angry adult man stomping back to his room. They sound much more like the footsteps of a teenager sneaking out of his or her room.

Or back into it.

This is an instance where it is not only acceptable but right for me to snoop. I leave the room and look down the hallway for the source of the footsteps. When I see it, I call in a soft voice, "Luann? Is everything all right?"

The poor girl jumps nearly out of her skin. She gasps and spins around, staring at me in shock.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I say. "Are you all right? Did you hear your father on the phone?"

"Shh!" she hisses, looking around anxiously. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned that I overheard her father.

She rushes to me without warning, gripping my arm so hard that it makes me wince. She pulls me into her room, shuts the door behind her and says, "Swear to me you'll keep it secret."

I blink. "That you heard your father on the phone?"

She rolls her eyes. "No . Just... Swear that you'll keep it secret."

"Keep what secret?"

"No! You have to swear."

I give her a frank look. "I can't make that promise if I don't know what your secret is. Part of my job is to keep you safe. Young women sneaking out of their rooms at night is hardly safe."

She flinches at that, then turns away and looks pensively at the wall. I notice a mark on her neck, and the secret becomes a little clearer. "Is this about a boy, Luann?"

She flinches again. Oh yes, this is certainly about a boy.

"You can't tell anyone," she begs. "Please."

Tears are forming in her eyes. I have to stifle a smile. I can't recall the number of times I caught Annie sneaking out to meet boys. I was always more sensible myself, but I can't fault a young woman for behaving the way most young women do. "How old is this boy?"

"He's my age. Okay? He's sixteen. We didn't do anything either. We just made out a little bit. But if my Dad finds out, he'll kill me. Like literally kill me."

"I'm sure your father won't actually murder his daughter for sneaking out to meet a boy," I tell her, "but I won't tell anyone. However, I can't allow you to be sneaking out of the house at night. There are worse things than teenage boys lurking in the shadows. You and your paramour will have to find another way to meet."



“Okay,” she says quickly. “That’s fine. Just please don’t tell anyone .”

No doubt she’s only agreeing with me to shut me up. I’ll have to keep a close eye on her. Still, she isn’t in any danger at the moment.

“All right. As I said, your secret’s safe with me.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

I grin. “So tell me about this boy.”

“No. Get out.” She sighs. “Sorry, I... It’s personal, okay? I’m sure you’re nice, but I’m not going to talk about my boyfriend with you.”

I lift my hands in surrender. “All right. You’re right, that was too personal of a question. I only hope you’re being safe.”

She shakes her head and waves her hands. “Oh my God, I’m being safe. I told you we’re not doing anything. Can we just not talk about it anymore? Please?”

“Very well,” I say gently. “I won’t talk about it anymore. Good night, Luann.”

“Good night, Mary. Sorry, I just... Well, good night.”

She opens the door for me and just manages not to slam it when I leave. I chuckle as I return to my room. It’s rather fitting that the night of mystery begins with an old scandal of a child born from adultery, progresses to a serious mystery that could possibly threaten the family, then ends on something as harmless as a sixteen-year-old girl sneaking out of the house to make out with her boyfriend. Perhaps this is a sign that I should stop imagining the worst. Not all secrets are damaging. Some are just embarrassing.

Still, the argument Julian was having seemed more than just embarrassing. Whatever scandal he's hiding is a little more serious than an innocent tryst under the moonlight.

Or perhaps it isn't. Trysts aren't always so innocent. Julian has been widowed for a long time. Perhaps he felt the urge to sow some wild oats and planted them in someone else's garden. If that secret were exposed, it would be both embarrassing and damaging.

But is it really the sort of damage that I need to interfere with? I've solved murders and dealt with traumatic histories before this. A sex scandal isn't usually something so traumatic it needs immediate attention from the nosy governess playing at being a sleuth.

I decide to leave this alone. I'll keep an eye on Luann and make sure she doesn't get herself into real trouble. As for Julian? He's a big boy. He can take care of himself.

I return to my Miss Marple book. With the mysteries in my own life put in their place, I'm able to read three more chapters of her riveting tale before sleepiness finally overcomes me. My eyes closed, and tonight is one of the few nights when I'm not plagued with any nightmares.

Save for one brief dream—more of a fleeting image, really. I am lying on a web of grapevines while a spider with glowing red eyes approaches me.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

I wake at six-thirty the next morning, as I usually do. I like to begin my days with a cup of coffee and sometimes toast with jam. I adore children, but I am not young anymore, and even older children require a great deal of energy to care for.

Usually, I am the first one up, though, in a fully staffed house like this one, it's not uncommon for the cook to be awake as well. I don't mind company. Servants generally get along well with me, and they often know all of the skeletons hiding in their employers' closets. I am firm in my commitment to stay out of this family's drama, but that doesn't mean I won't pick the low-hanging fruit. I am, after all, a slave to my nature, just like the venerable Miss Marple.

The fruit this morning isn't low-hanging, and I don't pick it so much as it's flung in my face. I nearly collide with Victoria downstairs, and after we both recover from the shock, I notice that the entire family is downstairs with her. The children are holding hands, their knuckles white and their eyes huge. Julian is red-faced and furious, and Victoria looks like she's just witnessed a murder.

That thought, of course, sends a chill down my spine. I've known many people who've actually witnessed a murder, and I've seen a few murder victims myself. "What is it?" I ask. "What happened?"

"Did you see anything last night, Mary? Anything at all?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Luann flinch, but I remember my promise. There's no way on Earth that Victoria could be sent into such a state over her granddaughter's crush. "No, ma'am, nothing at all. I stepped out of my room for a breath of fresh air on my balcony, but I didn't see anything."

“You didn’t see anyone walking around the vineyard?” Julian asked.

I blink. Is this a test? Is he trying to see if I overheard his conversation? But no, that wouldn’t have anything to do with the rest of the family. “No. I’m sorry, will someone please explain what’s going on?”

“My Chardonnay vines were destroyed,” Victoria laments. “Not all of them, thank god, but I’ve lost nineteen bushels, at least.”

She crosses her arms and shakes her head. Her lips are trembling, and now her eyes show the same rage Julian’s do. “I can’t believe this. How does someone get over our fence without tripping our alarm and then proceed to destroy a quarter-acre of vines?”

“Well, if we’d installed cameras like I asked you to do, we’d know, wouldn’t we?”

“It’s Robert,” Julian says curtly. “I swear to God, it’s him. I’ll bet you anything he hired the asshole who set fire to the winery too.”

Victoria rolls her eyes. “It’s not Robert, Julian.”

“Well, who the hell else would it be? You think some teenager hopped the fence and chopped down our vines for fun?”

I glance briefly at Luann, but she doesn’t react to that. In any case, it would be pretty foolish for a boy to damage a vineyard belonging to the grandmother of the girl he fancies.

“No, I don’t think that,” Victoria says in a tone she might use talking to a willful child, “but I don’t believe it’s Robert either.”

Julian lifts his head to the ceiling. “For God’s sake, Mom. Why are you so blind

when it comes to Robert? Are you in love with him or something?"

Victoria reacts viciously to that. She spins around and shrieks, "Julian Bellamy, shut the fuck up! Robert Cartwright is not stupid enough to destroy our property over some petty rivalry that doesn't mean shit in the real world. Are you stupid enough to go cut down his vines? Do you hate him enough to set fire to his winery? Hmm?"

Julian blinks, chastised into contriteness by his mother's outburst. He lowers his eyes and says softly, "No. I'm sorry. I'm just mad."

Victoria takes a deep breath and rubs her temples. "I know. I'm mad too. But we need to think about this, not just point fingers at the nearest asshole we despise." She looks at me. "Mary, I'm very sorry to start your morning like this. Will you take the children, please? Somewhere out of the house. I don't care where as long as you have them back before dark."

"I think that's an excellent idea, ma'am. Children, let's go upstairs and dress. We can go to the beach, or we can enjoy a picnic breakfast. Or perhaps we can go to the movies if you prefer."

Nathan's eyes widen. "Can we see—" He stops himself and looks sideways at his dad. "The movies. Let's go to the movies. Is that okay, Luann?"

Luann nods distractedly. I get the sense she's more disturbed by what happened last night than Nathan is. Or perhaps more guilty?

"Fine with me," Julian says. "Go see whatever you want, but if it's some scary movie that gives you nightmares, don't come crying to me about it."

Nathan rolls his eyes. "Dad, I'm sixteen. I don't get nightmares anymore."

“Yeah? Good for you. I’m forty-three, and I have nightmares every day.”

Julian is venting his frustration and means no harm by what he says, but he forgets how much of an impact a father’s words have on his children. The twins both pale and look at each other with naked fear.

“Come, children,” I say firmly. “The adults have business to tend to.”

When we are upstairs and out of earshot of the adults, I tell them, “Don’t take their words too seriously right now. They’re both angry and afraid, and when people are angry and afraid, they behave differently than when they are composed.”

“Well, they’ve been angry and afraid a lot lately,” Nathan retorts. “It feels pretty normal by now.”

He walks into his room and slams the door without waiting for my reply. Luann shakes her head and mutters, “What a lovely morning.”

She heads to her room, but I grab her arm and stop her. She flinches a little but doesn’t pull away. Her face reddens, and she lowers her eyes, not a good sign for her considering the question I’m about to ask.

I don’t want to scare her into shutting down. I can’t entirely avoid the risk, and in fact, it’s not likely she’ll be honest with me. But I have to ask, and if her skill at lying is as poor as it seems to be, then I might be able to discern the truth anyway.

“Luann, you have my word that nothing you tell me now will reach anyone’s ears but mine, no matter how horrible it is. But I need to know for your own safety: could this boy you’ve been meeting have anything to do with the sabotage on your grandmother’s vineyard last night?”

She looks at me in shock, but there's no guilt in this shock. She's just surprised. "What? No! There's no way he'd be that stupid."

"Forgive me for being blunt, but young men are always stupid when it comes to the young women with whom they're infatuated."

"Okay, but why would he destroy my grandmother's vines? Like, how would that make me like him more?"

"Perhaps he's upset that your father wouldn't approve of your relationship."

Her eyes shift to the left. I can tell I'm onto something here. "Your father wouldn't approve of your relationship, would he?"

"He wouldn't approve of me dating anyone. You know how fathers are."

She's deflecting. I press further. "Yes, but he wouldn't approve of this young man specifically, would he?"

Her eyes shift again, this time to the floor. She's about to tell me the truth and now feels guilt instead of fear. "No, he wouldn't."

"As I said, plenty of young men behave foolishly in such situations. I'm sure you don't think that the young man you fancy is violent or dangerous, but has he ever expressed frustration or irritation at the fact that the two of you have to sneak around instead of being open with your relationship?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh my God." In an exaggerated singsong voice, she says, "No, he just loves it! We're so glad that our families hate each other and we have to hike to a... somewhere else to spend time together. It's the best !"

I frown. “Your families hate each other?”

She blanches, aware of her mistake. “I mean... They would hate each other... I mean, Dad would hate it if we were dating.”

The pieces are falling into place. Julian’s angry phone call the night before. His argument with Victoria this morning. Luann’s late-night excursions and her fear of her father learning of the boy she likes.

“He’s Robert Cartwright’s grandson, isn’t he?”

Luann flinches and looks quickly left and right. Then she grabs my arm and pulls me into her room. Once the door is shut behind us, she grips two fistfuls of her hair and groans, “Ugh! Why can’t people just leave me alone?”

“When it comes to your safety, Luann, I can’t leave you alone.”

“I can handle myself!”

I give her a frank look. “If I had a dollar for every teenager who said—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” She sighs. “Ugh! It’s just not fair!”

“Many things in life aren’t fair. Including the destruction of nineteen bushels of your grandmother’s—”

“I know, I get it!”

I frown and say sternly, “Do not interrupt me, young lady.”

She blinks, stunned into silence. I’m not sure what her experience is with her



previous tutor, but she clearly isn't ready for me to discipline her like that.

"I need to make sure that you're not acting in a way that's going to endanger you and your family. I know you'd rather not tell me about your activities with your beau, but I have to make sure that you're not in danger. If you are honest with me, I can possibly do that without getting your father involved. If not, then I'm sorry, but your safety matters more than your privacy."

Her lower lip trembles a little. She frowns and crosses her arms, looking past me at the wall. "It's Kevin Cartwright. And he's Robert's son, not his grandson. And he's the sweetest boy on Earth, and he wouldn't do anything like this. He doesn't even care about the vineyards or whatever rivalry bullshit is going on. He just wants to be with me."

I resist the urge to correct her language. What she's just revealed to me is more serious. I am willing to give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment that Kevin isn't responsible for the attack on the vineyard last night, but I must investigate further if I'm to know for sure. Even if Kevin isn't the one responsible, it's still possible that their relationship precipitated an escalation to the feud. Even if they're both completely innocent, they could get caught in the crossfire if things between Julian Bellamy and Robert Cartwright have risen to violence.

So instead, I say, "Very well. I believe you. But there is someone out there sabotaging your grandmother's vineyard. You returned home mere hours from his arrival, perhaps even minutes. Until we know what's happening, there will be no more late-night excursions. If I catch you sneaking out again, I will tell your father."

Her lips tremble some more, and tears come to her eyes. "Get out of my room."

"I will," I reply, heading for the door, "but I mean what I've said. Your safety comes first."

“Too bad my happiness doesn’t count for shit.”

Before I can scold her further, she opens the door, pushes me out and slams it shut behind me. I find myself in the hallway staring at a stunned and very confused Nathan.

“She needs privacy,” I tell him. “So she can get ready.”

He gives me a slow, wary nod, and neither of us speaks further about it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

Much to Nathan's disappointment, we don't see the horror movie he wanted to watch. I have experienced enough horror that I'm not frightened by those films, but gore and violence turns my stomach even if it doesn't chill my bones. We end up watching an action film that is far less gory, even if it's still rather violent.

Nathan enjoys himself, but Luann is preoccupied. She spends most of the movie texting, keeping her screen dark and hiding it from view. I'm sure she's texting her boyfriend, but I've involved myself in her personal life enough for one day. As long as she isn't sneaking off alone at night, I don't need to be involved any further.

Still, I fear what will happen when the truth comes out. And it will come out. Secrets like these keep poorly even when handled well. At some point, the parents of these two lovebirds will catch wind of the relationship. What happens then could be messy for all concerned.

When we return home, Julian and Victoria aren't there. A note left on the refrigerator tells me that they've left for their offices to ensure that security for their commercial vineyard is prepared for any threat that might come their way tonight.

The note also informs me that while I was out, their security company visited and upgraded their entire system so that any further incursions onto the property will trigger an automatic call to the police as well as set of lights and sirens to alert everyone inside. I tell this to the children. Nathan replies with the disinterest most children would show in such news. Luann responds by deflating slightly and swearing under her breath. I gather that she was planning on ignoring my warning to stay home and now realizes that her late-night escapades will have to end regardless.

I leave the children to in their rooms. I don't love allowing children to spend all day on their cell phones, but I feel a restless pull to the diaries in the library. There's no logical reason for this, at least none that I can articulate. But in past mysteries, I've felt such hunches, and following them has always led me closer to the answer. So it isn't just idle curiosity. So I tell myself, anyway.

I wait until the children are engaged into the story then excuse myself and head to the library. The safe is still ajar, as I left it the other night. I imagine that Julian's been too preoccupied to visit the library lately.

I select a different diary this time. Like the first one, it's old and its pages are faded, but its not so old as the first. I turn to a random page and find the following entry.

New Century's Day, 1/1/1900.

Well, here it is. A new day. A new month. A new year. A new century.

Same old Beatrice Bellamy. I suppose it was silly of me to expect I would wake a princess today and have the freedom to give my hand to whomever I choose. I guess I hoped that maybe the dream of a child might overcome the dreariness of the woman. Father says I'm a woman now, but really, who decides that someone is grown just because they've turned eighteen? I feel no different than I did when I was seventeen and precious little than I did when I was sixteen. But I'm a woman now? I guess so. Mother was eighteen when she was wed and only twenty when she gave birth to me.

I am a woman, but I don't have a choice in who I love. Such bitter irony! I must love Vincent Manderley because he is of "good breeding" and stands to inherit his father's business. I don't know what his business has to do with anything. Jacob will inherit Grandfather's business one day, and he'll see to it that I'm cared for. And it's not as if Nathan is poor. He's only not wealthy. Must everyone be wealthy? We're wealthy, but Grandmother is sad and father is angry all the time.

And I love Nathan. He's not foppish and arrogant like Vincent. He's strong and passionate and so handsome! When I feel his arms around me, it's like lightning striking me everywhere! When Vincent kissed my hand the other day, it was as though a fish had pressed cold, wet lips to my skin. Ugh!

I won't settle for a fish, no matter how much money he has. Give me a tall man with the strength of a bull and passion to match!

The rest of the entry consists of several paragraphs extolling the Nathan's virility and emphasizing how poorly Vincent compares. It's fairly immature stuff, but the name stands out to me. I wonder if the Nathan in my care now owes his name to a great-great-great-grandfather Nathan? Perhaps things end well for Beatrice Bellamy and her paramour.

I flip ahead and land on an entry dated for December 2, 1903.

Dearest Diary,

I look at myself in the mirror today and try to see the bright, happy girl who once stared back at me, but she is gone. In her place is a woman, a creature far sadder and more hopeless. Can it be that at twenty-two, the best years of my life are already behind me?

I feel horrible for thinking this. I have a good life. I have all the money I could ever hope for, and all of the comfort that provides. I have married the man my parents wished for me to marry, and they have shown their approval by ensuring that my material needs will be met for the rest of my life.

And Vincent is not so terrible a man as I once feared. He is a competent businessman and humble enough to realize that our future is best secured by selling his enterprise to my father. He is foppish, but he is not as self-absorbed as I once believed. He is

gentle with me and demands little of what a husband is entitled to.

And he loves Walter in spite of everything. When he smiles at him, I see no disgust or hatred. When he plays with him, I see real affection. He talks often and at length of his hopes for Walter's future and his desire that his son grow up with pride and strength.

His son. Even though I can see in his eyes that he knows the truth, he still considers Walter his son. He is a good man, and I am a wretch.

And that is why I am miserable. I am a wretch. I have betrayed a man who is good to me. It's not his fault I loved another. It's not his fault that I chose to conceal my love and pretend to a love I didn't feel that I might please my parents. Vincent is a good man. He could have found a woman who loved him, one who would respond to his touch with genuine desire and not hidden disgust. I have denied him that chance.

And I see it in his face when he looks at me and sometimes even when he looks at Walter. He sees those blue eyes and knows they could not come from my gray eyes or his brown ones. He sees that jet black hair and knows that our blonde could not have produced that. He looks at me and knows that I gave to Nathan Grant more than I can ever give to him. And he does not hate me for it. He is a good man, and I am a wretch.

But I will live with my choice. I will love my son, and I will raise him as the son of Vincent Manderley. It is the right thing to do. I will bury my misery and live privately with the guilt that consumes me, as I deserve.

With a heavy heart and a weary soul,

Beatrice Manderley.

I close the diary and stare at the wall for a while, digesting what I've read. The emotions described here are so raw, so vivid! I could almost imagine that I have read an entire history of this poor woman and the trials she faced.

Perhaps I find this so fascinating because I see a parallel between poor Beatrice and Luann. Luann is not being asked to accept the hand of some prearranged suitor, but she is forced to hide her true feelings. Even without the presence of a competing lover, couplings between two individuals whose families are at odds with one another rarely end well. Few result in such violent tragedy as Romeo and Juliet, but all too many end as Beatrice and Nathan did.

There is nothing here to suggest that Nathan Bellamy's name is related in any way to Nathan Grant's name, and anyway, the Manderleys would have a different last name, but perhaps a nephew or niece was named in his honor. Though that would mean that someone else knew of Beatrice's illicit affair or deduced it. That individual would also have had to approve of her affair.

But I've been here a while. If I wish to learn more of the adventures of Beatrice Manderley and the Bellamy family into which she was born, I will have to revisit these diaries another time.

Still, I can't help but note that scandal has continued to follow this family. Aside from Luann and Kevin, there is this rivalry between their fathers. And then there was the odd way Victoria reacted to Julian's joke that she and Robert Cartwright were in love with each other. Could it be that Victoria, like Beatrice, harbored a secret affair?

It seems absurd. It's not like infidelity is a trait that can be inherited. Still, the coincidence is striking. Both Marianne and Beatrice bore a child that didn't belong to their husbands. Could it be that Victoria might have done the same?

I scoff and quickly put the notebook away. I'm letting my imagination run away with

itself. To think that I would judge that poor woman based on the private thoughts of her husband's ancestors long dead.

I return to the children and try to put those past scandals out of my mind. This current scandal is no doubt some business rivalry that has unfortunately spilled over into their private lives. Luann and Kevin are young, and even in the best of cases, first loves are rarely last loves. I will focus on caring for the twins and keeping them safe. I should treat those diaries as nothing more than entertainment.

Besides, the real danger isn't who is conducting what affair with whom. Someone invaded this property and destroyed some of Victoria's choice vines. The damage done is minimal in a financial sense, but the symbolism of the attack is sobering. Was the attack simply a warning?

Or was the fire a warning and this is a sign that worse is on the horizon?



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

The rest of the week passes without incident. The police interview us about the attack on the vineyard, but nothing is concluded. There are no more attacks, and Luann no longer sneaks out at night. Julian makes no more late-night phone calls, and I hear no more mention of Robert Cartwright.

The children begin their lessons, and I am not surprised to find them both very bright and even less surprised to find Nathan near genius. Indeed, I am poorly equipped to teach him, particularly in the hard sciences, where his intuition surpasses anything I have seen in any young person before him. I can only hope that my guidance in other subjects is appreciated.

As for myself, I slake my desire for scandal by immersing myself in the diaries. There is more than enough there to satisfy me. Beatrice's premarital affair with Nathan Grant pales in comparison to her numerous marital affairs, and her amorousness doesn't end when Vincent finally tires of her infidelity and leaves both her and the Bellamy family business. Her niece Caroline continues the family tradition of scandals by sleeping with her father's next business partner, an affair which—according to the diaries—continues successfully for thirty years with no one but the principles ever aware of it.

Caroline's sister-in-law, Elizabeth—who is also the late Parker Bellamy's great-grandmother—does not cheat on Travis Bellamy, and her marriage to Jacob's son remains unblemished by scandal. However, she meets Travis while married to another man and only leaves her husband for Travis after the poor man catches the two of them in bed.

Various other Bellamys make an appearance in the journals, and none of them can

seem to avoid infidelity. It's as though this family were cursed never to love who they ought and always to betray who they love.

I feel guilty for my interest in their scandals, but I can't pull myself away. It's like a soap opera. And in any case, it keeps me from meddling further than I must in the current scandal plaguing this family. So what harm can it cause?

Saturday is a big event at the Bellamy estate. The first vintage of the Bellamy Estate Pinot Noir by Continental Vineyards is bottled and ready for sale. Victoria is hosting a wine-tasting party. She's invited sommeliers, wine-tasters, critics, and other vintners from all over New England to attend. In all, over ninety people arrive, and the staff is run ragged, tending to everyone.

The guests of "honor" command the most of my attention. Robert Cartwright attends the event with his son Kevin. The two of them are granted a place near Victoria's own table, an interesting move on Victoria's part considering the two are rivals. Perhaps she prefers to keep her enemies close.

I am allowed a seat at Victoria's table. The children are inside since they're not of age to drink alcohol, but I've been allowed to join the event as a courtesy.

As soon as Robert arrives, Victoria approaches him. She wears a smile, but I detect a fierceness in her eyes and anticipate a fight. I am not proud of this, but I stay quiet in hopes she won't notice me and I can overhear the argument.

Robert is a dashing handsome man of sixty-one with a movie star smile and a build that is lean and fit in spite of his age. Were he not plagued with such a haughty attitude, I might find him very attractive indeed, but his arrogance ruins his looks.

"What an interesting quality you've layered into this Pinot, Victoria," he says after tasting his first glass of the vintage. "It's practically dripping with acid. Not what I

would choose to highlight, but then, you've always had such a unique perspective when it comes to winemaking."

Victoria, for her part, doesn't budge an inch. She laughs and says to the smug Robert, "Well, you don't become the most successful winemaking family in New England for generations running by sticking to tradition. Not that there's anything wrong with tradition. There will always be a place for more easily accessible wines such as yours."

The young Kevin—the spitting image of his father with the same bright blue eyes and trim physique—chuckles and hides that laughter badly. Victoria's grin widens, and Robert flashes his son a glare before turning a smile back to Victoria. "There can be no doubt that you market your product better than anyone, Victoria. If there's one thing you can do well, it's make something appear enticing."

Victoria keeps her own smile, but her eyes harden. "It's quite easy to appear enticing when one's target audience lacks willpower."

Robert is prepared for this. "Why appeal to the strong when the weak are so easily overcome?"

Victoria is equally prepared. "A question the weak must struggle with every day."

Julian arrives before Robert can retort, Nathan and Luann under his arms. I gasp in surprise. What are they doing here? Why would he bring them to a wine tasting? Was he simply trying to rebel against his mother's wishes?

For their part, the children appear less than enthused at this forced meeting. Luann blushes deeper red than the wine, and Kevin looks at Luann with a longing so clear I find it hard to believe that Robert and Julian can't see the attraction between the two of them. As for Nathan, he looks between the other two with an expression halfway

between amusement and disgust.

It's the adults who react most forcefully, however. Robert looks coldly at Julian, making no pretense at politeness, not even the thin veneer he wears while sparring with Victoria. Julian curls his lip upward in a sneer and likewise makes no pretense. "I see mother has once more extended an olive branch to a snake."

"Unlike some, your mother understands politeness." Robert shifts his gaze to Victoria. "Even if her honey is laced with venom."

Perhaps it is the presence of the children that causes Victoria to have a stronger reaction to this than his earlier comments, but she reddens and says, "The children don't need to be a part of your foolishness. Either of you. If you insist on having an argument, do it outside of my house."

Nathan and Kevin both chuckle at this, then shoot each other the look of camaraderie children often share when they catch their elders behaving like fools. Luann's eyes are fixed firmly on the floor.

I snap out of my funk and get to my feet. I clear my throat, and the three adults flinch and turn to me. "Perhaps I should take the children inside."

Julian reddens. Clearly, he didn't realize I was listening in. "Yes. That's probably best. Nathan, Luann, go with Mary. Robert, would you like to send Kevin with them? He can't participate in a wine tasting, and I'm more than happy to keep him occupied while you find some vapid excuse or another to insult your betters."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Kevin does no such thing, and he and Luann share a look that tells me both of them have spent much of their private time complaining about their fathers' pettiness.

A pettiness Robert is all too happy to contribute to. "I need no excuse to point out the inferior quality of your product, Julian. Perhaps instead of reacting negatively to criticism, you might accept that others occasionally know better than you. It might prevent you from finishing three places behind me in Wine magazine's annual vineyard rankings."

Kevin stands. "You know what, I think I will go inside with Luann." As an afterthought, he adds, "And Nathan. Dad, Mr. Bellamy, enjoy your argument. If you end up slap fighting, take a video so I can laugh at it later."

Robert snaps to his son in horror. "Kevin! That is not appropriate! Apologize to Mr. Bellamy!"

Kevin scoffs. "Okay. Mr. Bellamy, I'm sorry. Dad, I'm not sorry."

Robert gets to his feet so abruptly that his knees slam into the table, and he nearly knocks over the wine glasses. He grabs Kevin hard enough to make the boy wince. "I see we're not truly welcome here," he says coldly. "Victoria, I would think you'd made enough of a joke of my family. It seems I was wrong."

"You're a joke all on your own, Robert," Julian retorts. "You don't need my mother's help."

I take Nathan and Luann inside before they can witness any more of this. They are all too eager to follow me.

When we're inside, I turn to the children and say, "I'm not in the habit of apologizing for my employers, nor am I in the habit of speaking ill of one's parents and grandparents. However, I am heartily sorry for what you two just experienced. It was inappropriate and uncalled for. Those three shouldn't have made you witness to whatever petty argument they're having."

I really shouldn't be this blunt, but I'm infuriated. Does no one think of the children? Does no one think of the damage that can be done by treating them like furniture? They should be grateful that Nathan is well-behaved and Luann is only meeting the neighbor boy at night. If this is typical behavior from Robert, Julian and Victoria, then it's a wonder they haven't turned out worse.

The children both laugh. I'm surprised by the reaction, but I suppose it's encouraging that they can let what happened outside roll off of their backs. "New in town, Mary?" Nathan jokes.

Luann affects a Southern drawl. "Why lawd, Miss Mary. The feud between the Cartwrights and the Bellamys has been going on since the dawn of time." She switches to a normal tone and says, "Seriously, though, it's no big deal. All they do is trade playground insults. Nathan and I joke all the time that we should give each of them boxing gloves and stick them in a ring just to watch them stutter and huff and shuffle around without throwing a single punch."

Nathan laughs at that as well, but his face grows more serious a moment later. "Honestly, I wish sometimes that they would just fight. Maybe they'd get over it. Whatever it is."

"Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with you two or with Kevin. Pay them no mind. They're grown men, and they can either choose to act like it or suffer the consequences of their own poor behavior. Now, shall we play a board game together? I've had my fill of movies."

The children giggle. "A board game?" Luann says. "Come on, Mary. You're not that old."

"Gee. Thank you, Luann," I reply drily.

Instead of a board game, the children coax me into playing video games with them in their room. I perform about as well as I would expect a fifty-three-year-old woman to perform and beg off after one round. I watch the children play and resign myself to the fact that the children of today prefer electronic stimulation to conversation. At least they're having fun.

I try to focus on that, but in the back of my mind, my worries for this family have returned. After the argument I've just witnessed, the idea of Robert sabotaging Victoria's vineyard or Julian's winery isn't so far-fetched anymore.

And with things so heated between the families, how much further will they take this feud? I have been fortunate not to encounter a murder here as I have at so many other positions. But perhaps my luck—and theirs—is running out.

## Page 9

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The event ends shortly after dark. I admonish the children to remain in Nathan's room for the time being. I don't say aloud that it's to avoid exposing them to any more pettiness from Julian and Victoria, but they catch on.

"Trust me," Luann says, "we don't want to listen to the two of them bitch about the Cartwrights either."

"That's not appropriate language for a young lady." Nathan opens his mouth, and I quickly add, "Or a young man. Just stay in here and don't worry too much about what the adults do."

"Easy for you to say," Nathan retorts. "They just pay you. You don't have to listen to Dad moan about it all the time."

"I know. I'm truly sorry that the two of you have to deal with it. I'll talk to Victoria and Julian and impress upon them the importance of leaving you two out of their business."

"Good luck with that," Luann says morosely. "In case you couldn't tell, minding their own business isn't something either of them are very good at."

If I were to diagnose the problem with the Bellamys, it would be that they're too obsessed with their own affairs, but I glean that Luann is referring to the need to hide her relationship with Kevin. I can't offer much encouragement there, so I leave them and head downstairs to help the rest of the staff clean up.

The servants don't seem fazed at all by their employers' behavior. I mention the



argument to Grant, and he only chuckles. “Yes, the Bellamys and the Cartwrights have been at each other’s throats ever since Parker’s father purchased Granger Vineyards in nineteen-sixty-nine. It’s become something of a legend here on the island.”

“So they’ve been rivals for over half a century now.”

“Looks that way. From my perspective, there’s no reason for them to be rivals. They’re both successful and wealthy. I’ve never understood why people with everything are so unhappy.”

“It’s the curse of human nature,” I opine. “We always want more. We always believe that once we get what we want, we’ll be happy, but we only end up wanting even more. It’s sad, really.”

Grant raises an eyebrow. “That’s remarkably wise of you, Mary.”

I feel a touch of guilt at the blush that comes to my cheeks, but what Sean doesn’t know won’t hurt him, and in any case, I don’t intend to act on my attraction the way seemingly every Bellamy woman since the Civil War has done.

We finish cleaning an hour after nightfall. Grant and the others thank me for my assistance and retire to bed. I am just as exhausted as they are. Physical labor has never been a strong suit of mine.

I head inside, intending to shower and turn in early. As soon as I walk through the door, though, I hear an argument from the great room. Nathan is arguing with Julian.

I remain in the foyer and listen.

“So I can be miserable like you?”

That is Nathan. His father replies somewhat weakly. “I’m not miserable because of my job, I’m miserable because... I mean, I’m not miserable. I’m frustrated with Robert Cartwright over things that are a private matter between us.”

“Yeah, I could tell. You acted like a brat at the wine tasting.”

“Don’t talk to me like...” Julian pauses for breath, then says in a tightly controlled voice. “I apologize. I know that my behavior wasn’t ideal, but—”

“Not ideal? You two were like children. Don’t act like you weren’t.”

“This has nothing to do with Robert Cartwright! This is about you and your future.”

“Yeah. My future. Not yours.”

“Don’t be na?ve, son. Winemaking has been a part of our family for generations.”

“I’m happy for it,” Nathan quips.

“So what then? You’ll sit in a lab? Write papers on how a particular weak acid is better at breaking down organic materials than this other weak acid?”

“I’m leaning toward astronomy, actually, but A for effort,” Nathan retorts. “For a moment, it was almost like you actually gave a crap about me.”

“It’s because I care about you that I want you to have a career.”

“I don’t want to run the damned winery!”

“Watch your language!”

“Oh, whatever. It’s not like you ever cared about me. It’s always ‘the family this, the family that.’ I’m your family, Dad! Me and Luann! And guess what? We’re both miserable .”

I hear footsteps as he storms up the stairs. I wait for Julian’s footsteps to follow, but instead, I hear him approaching the foyer. I gasp and look for a way to escape, but the foyer leads only to the great room, so I stand there lamely when Julian walks inside. He sees me and smiles tightly. “You must think me a very poor father.”

“Not at all,” I say, my compassion overcoming my embarrassment. “You carry a lot of weight on your shoulders. It’s very difficult to raise two children as a single father while also managing a major business and dealing with aggressive rivals.”

Julian chuckles. “I don’t know if Robert’s aggressive. He barks loud, but he has yet to bite. Not that I’ve bitten much. As for the kids...” His smile fades. “I just want them to have pride in what we’ve built. I know the modern world looks down on old money. Everyone assumes we’re just aristocratic pricks, but we built something. Henry Bellamy purchased this property in eighteen-fifty-eight and turned it into a successful vineyard, one of the first truly successful vineyards in Massachusetts. My great-great-grandfather expanded the business until we distributed wine across the country, and my Dad turned us into one of the premier winemakers in the United States. And not to toot my own horn, but we’ve gained international attention since I took the company eleven years ago.”

He looked around, desperation turning his pride fierce. “This means something, damn it. This matters . I just wish Nathan could understand that.” He sighs. “But he doesn’t want anything to do with the family business. He’s fine just letting it get sold. Never mind that all of his wealth comes from this company. Never mind that this is something we’ve maintained for generations.”

He meets my eyes. “I’m guessing you’d probably tell me to let him pursue his own

dreams. And I wish I could do that, but..." He lifts his hands and lets them drop. "What happens to all of this? What happens to the Bellamy name." He finishes with an almost pleading. "Damn it, this matters."

"You could leave the business to Luann," I suggest helpfully.

He chuckles bitterly. "She has no more interest than he does. Besides, if she ever did marry, her last name would change, and it would be someone else's family business. Maybe I'm an asshole, but I want someone with my own last name to run this business. I want that legacy to continue."

He sighs and smiles. "But it's nothing you need to worry about. You're doing exactly what you should do, intervening when Mom and I are acting like idiots. Thank you for caring for them. Hell, maybe it'll be better for this all to fall apart. With no legacy comes no stress." He shakes his head. "I'm going to bed. Maybe I'll get lucky, and dream of a world where Robert Cartwright doesn't exist, and my son gives a damn about the family name."

He heads upstairs, leaving me wondering what future this family can have when their father is so unstable. Those poor children.

Still, I'm not without sympathy for Julian. The world is changing, and not all of the changes are comfortable for those of us raised to believe that families matter more than individuals. Even when we know that it's wrong of us to cling to those priorities, that knowing is often not enough to overcome the truths ingrained in us from our childhood. I know that better than most.

I head upstairs to check on Nathan, but there's no answer to my knock. I decide he's either asleep or he needs some time to myself and return to the library. The drama the current generations of this family is facing is stressful enough that escaping to the drama of the past is almost an escape.

I pull a diary from the safe and begin to read. The first entry here is dated April sixteenth, nineteen-eighty.

Dear Diary,

I don't know what to do.

As I write this, I am sitting naked in bed, moments removed from the most intense bout of sex Parker and I have ever enjoyed.

I blush when I read this. I can't pretend I haven't enjoyed the salacious details these diaries contain, but I think I've finally crossed a line. I'm not interested in hearing this woman—whoever she is—share detailed opinions on her husband's prowess in bed.

I close the diary and start to put it back when the name finally hits me. Parker. Victoria's husband, Parker.

With a gasp, I snatch the journal back and look at the name on the bottom of the entry. Sure enough, it's Victoria's diary I'm reading.

I hold the diary for a long while, forcing myself to read Victoria's name over and over. These are not the thoughts of a dead woman I'm reading but the thoughts of my own employer. I should put this away. I should stop reading now. I shouldn't involve myself in their family business anymore. It was a mistake to ever open this.

But as I've mentioned before, I am a slave to my nature. As I put the diary away a second time, I feel another one of those pulls, another hunch like those that have proven so useful to me in the past. I can't articulate why, but I am certain that this diary contains the answers to every question surrounding this family.

I take the diary back out and keep reading.

I'm going to seduce him again tomorrow night, and I'm going to make damned sure that it's just as good as tonight was. Hell, I'll screw his brains out again the night after and the night after that. Parker's going to think he married a girl from a stag film.

And then the weekend is going to come, and I'm going to give Robert all of that and more. More because I won't have to fake it with him. I'm not in love with Robert, but there's no contest between him and Parker in bed. Robert finds places in me that I didn't know existed and makes them feel heavenly.

It's horrible because I AM in love with Parker. I just can't stop with Robert. I can't. Ever since the New Year's Eve party, I can't stop thinking about how much better it feels with him. It's like he was born to make a woman feel completely satisfied.

So there you have it, diary. I cheated on my husband with his business rival. And his business rival was better. So now I'm going to keep sleeping with Robert and giving Parker the best sex of HIS life so I can feel less guilty about sneaking off every weekend so that I can enjoy sex too.

I put the diary away without reading the following essays. I feel guilty for reading that, but I am grateful for listening to my hunch. The reason for the current conflict between the Cartwrights and the Bellamys is much clearer now.

And the squabbling between Julian and Robert is far more serious now. I wonder if the affair between Robert and Victoria is what Robert threatened to expose. Or maybe Julian threatened to expose the affair in retaliation for a threat Robert made. Or maybe...

The image of George Terrell kissing my mother in our backyard sears itself into my

present thoughts. I stiffen, filled again with the certainty that George Terrell was Annie's father and that she is only my half-sister.

That renewed revelation should tear my thoughts far away from the Bellamys, but it's not my sister's parentage I'm concerned with anymore. It's Julian's.

Julian takes after his mother. It's impossible to tell by appearance if he's Robert Cartwright's son, but the timing is right. Granted, Victoria was apparently giving Parker more than his fair share of "attention," but that doesn't mean there's no chance that Robert could be Julian's father.

And if Julian is Robert's son and they discover the truth of their relationship, then their conflict could vanish.

Or it could become deadly.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

The following Sunday, a new emergency greets the family. I head downstairs at six-thirty, as I always do, and hear Victoria shouting. I stop halfway down the stairs, just out of sight, and listen in.

“How the hell does this happen, Julian? Listeria? Listeria? For God’s sake, do you understand that could be fatal?”

“Yes, I’m well aware. Mr. Pelton was very clear about that when he called to let us know he was in the hospital.”

“Then why are you sitting there so calmly? Why aren’t you outraged? Why aren’t you terrified?”

“Why isn’t shouting solving the problem?” Julian replies impudently. “I mean, doesn’t the bacteria know how angry you are?”

There’s a smacking sound, and I flinch. Victoria has just slapped her son. “This isn’t fucking funny, Julian.”

“I’m not laughing.”

He’s not laughing, but he does seem eerily calm. Considering that he’s been the more volatile one thus far and Victoria the more levelheaded one, the difference in their demeanors now is striking.

“This could ruin us, Julian. Damn it.”



“It’s not going to ruin us,” Julian says soothingly. Maybe that is the reason for his calm. “We’re going to shut down the winery, deep clean the hell out of everything, and put it back together. It’ll take two weeks, four tops. We’re well ahead of our production schedule. We’ll be fine.”

“And what happens when all of those professional wine tasters writes about how we almost killed them? What happens if they do die?”

“No one’s going to die. We’re going to pay for everyone’s medical treatment, and we’re going to pay for their discretion as well.”

“Oh great. So we’re going to toss our morals out of the window too.”

“Now’s not the time to be concerned with morals, Mom. I’m being calm, but I’m very much aware of how much trouble we’re going to be in if this gets out.”

“Oh good,” Victoria scoffs. She sounds like she’s been crying. “Good, because for a little bit, it seemed like you didn’t give a shit.”

Finally, Julian shows some emotion. “I care, Mom, I’m just not going to panic. Panic won’t solve anything.”

“Nonchalance won’t solve anything either.”

“I’m not...” He sighs. “Mom, we’ll handle it. Businesses like ours deal with this crap all of the time.”

“If Robert hears about this, he’ll ruin us.”

“No one will ruin us, least of all that prick. Look, take the day off. Take the kids out. Let me handle everything. It’s going to be fine. I promise.”

Victoria sighs. "Okay. Okay, I'll... God. I'll tell Mary to take the day and the kids and I can go... oh Hell, I don't know."

"Go to the mainland," Julian suggests. "Get off of this island for a while. Hell, make it an overnight trip. Go to Boston. Get your head out of all the crap."

"I'm not going to take two days off. I'll take the kids to the lighthouse, and we can have a picnic on the beach. Tomorrow, I'm back in the saddle."

"Tomorrow, you're not doing anything out of the ordinary. I will handle the Listeria emergency. It's only the barrels that came from this estate. We'll be fine."

"Well, this estate is important to me, Julian. I wanted to showcase our family's history here. We're just another commercial winery to everyone. I wanted to prove that we haven't lost sight of our legacy."

Julian sighs again. "We'll figure it out. I can't snap my fingers and make this unhappen, but if you let me work on it, I can make it go away. Just please stop panicking."

"Oh, sure. I'll get right on that."

Her footsteps stalk toward the stairs. I prepare to flee, but it's too late. She sees me a moment later. "Oh, good. You're up. I'm going to take the kids out today, so you can take the day off."

"Oh, of course, Victoria. I'll wake the children and have them get ready."

She pushes past me without a reply. I don't blame her for her rudeness, but Julian apologizes anyway. "Sorry for her attitude, Mary. We're in the middle of a very stressful situation."

He doesn't seem stressed as he says it, though. I finish my descent so I can get a look at his face. Often when people are faced with an extraordinarily stressful or traumatic circumstance, they will present a calm demeanor, but their terror will be betrayed by their eyes. This is why people pulled from horrific car accidents can often understand questions from emergency services and provide articulate answers even while severely injured or having witnessed horrible injuries.

Julian doesn't show the same signs. His eyes aren't wide or staring. He doesn't appear distracted. There's no tension in his shoulders but there's no slackness either. He looks as though he's woken to a normal morning.

He smiles at me, not a warm smile or a false one worn over fear but a perfunctory greeting. "You should take some time to explore the island. The beaches are an obvious choice, but the state forest is also beautiful. There's a quaint little cottage in West Tisbury that's been converted into a restaurant. It serves the best clams I've ever eaten."

"Thank you. I'll give it a visit."

He nods, another perfunctory response. "Well, I hate to leave you so early, but I have some urgent business things to deal with. The work never stops."

He heads out of the house, and I only just now realize that he's fully dressed. I understand that executives are often up early, but in my experience, Julian begins his day at around seven and isn't ready to leave the house until eight-thirty. Why is he up so early today?

Voices call down the stairs. Victoria is returning with the children. Nathan and Luann are dressed in comfortable casual clothing, but Victoria wears an elegant black silk dress that looks more like something she would wear to a formal dinner rather than a day outing with her grandchildren. Her eyes are wide, and her shoulders stiff as

bricks. She gives me a smile that looks more like a grimace. “I’m taking the children out today. We’ll see you later, Mary.”

“Bye, Mary,” the children reply. They are bleary-eyed and clearly unhappy with being woken this early. Nathan even asks, “Why can’t we leave in a few hours? I’m tired.”

“We’re leaving now,” Victoria says crisply. “And we’re going to have fun. Wipe that look off of your face.”

Nathan rolls his eyes, and the children trudge after their grandmother out of the house.

When they are gone, I go to the kitchen and prepare my coffee and breakfast. The difference between Victoria’s reaction and Julian’s reaction is stark. Victoria is acting like a woman on the brink of scandal. Julian is acting like it’s just another day.

It could mean nothing, but the disquiet I feel only grows as I eat my breakfast. I’ve managed so far to deflect my interest in the family’s drama by burying myself in past scandals. Perhaps it’s time I involve myself in the present a little more.

When I finish eating, I put on some warm clothes and head out. I think I’ll visit the forest. The beaches are likely to be crowded, and I’d like some time alone with my thoughts.

The forest is a mile from the house and easily accessible from the main road. I pass the occasional traveler on my way, but it seems I was right to believe the forest the less popular choice of diversion.

When I am alone among the trees, I call Sean. He answers right away, a trait of his that I absolutely love. “Hello there, love. Have you decided to come visit your poor

old fiancé at last?”

Heat flames my cheeks when he says that. I’ve spent two weekends here when I’d promised to spend them with Sean. I’ve been so caught up in the drama here that the thought completely slipped my mind. “I’m so sorry, Sean. I’ve been in the middle of a whirlwind here.”

“Of course you have. You’re Mary Wilcox. Whirlwinds follow you.”

“It certainly seems that way sometimes,” I reply morosely.

“Well, out with it,” he says. “If you’re caught in a whirlwind, you’re no doubt asking me to help you sort it all out.”

“Only if you can. I know you’ve been busy.”

Sean’s detective agency has become quite popular. He’s had to hire a personal assistant to manage his calls and his schedule, and he’s been talking about hiring another investigator.

“I shouldn’t have any trouble moving things around. What do you need from me?”

I feel a sudden and powerful longing for him. I spent nearly all of my life alone, but since meeting Sean, I’ve grown used to having someone close. It’s challenging to hear his voice and know that he’s not here with me. “A hug would be nice,” I say softly.

“You have to come see me for that,” he replies. “But while we’re waiting for that, what can I do for you right now?”

I take a deep breath. “I need you to follow my employer. Or rather, my employer’s

son.”

“Julian Bellamy?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Am I allowed to know why?”

“Well, there have been some strange goings on here. Before I arrived, the winery on the mainland suffered a fire. My first night here, a portion of the estate vineyard was destroyed.”

“Destroyed how?”

“Chopped down.”

“So no fire?”

“No, not here.”

“Interesting. Go on.”

I see movement out of the corner of my eye and glance to my left, but it’s only a family of geese waddling down the path. As I watch, they leave the road and move to a small pond ten yards inside the trees.

“Mary?”

“Yes, sorry. I thought I saw someone. “So the vineyard was damaged, and just this morning, it appears that the Pinot Noir the estate prepared for a wine tasting last weekend was poisoned.”

“Poisoned? With what?”

“Listeria.”

Sean’s breath sucks in. “Oy. That’s a bad one. Anyone taken ill?”

“Yes. I’m not sure how many, but Victoria Bellamy was beside herself this morning.”

“I can understand that. How are you feeling? Did you drink any of the wine?”

“I did, and so did the Bellamys. I suppose it’s possible that we could still get sick.”

“It’s also possible that not all of the wine was poisoned,” Sean deduces. “The saboteur could have targeted specific barrels or been interrupted before he could finish.” He hesitates for a moment, then says almost reluctantly. “Or the wine could have just been accidentally contaminated. Listeria is a very common infection. Frankly, it’s remarkable that there aren’t more outbreaks.”

“That’s true,” I agree, “and if this was the only instance, I would believe that the fire was unrelated, but with that, the Listeria and the destroyed vines... It seems suspicious to me.”

“Suspicious enough to make it worth a look,” he concedes. “Now for the big question: why do you suspect Julian?”

“I’m not sure I do,” I reply. “But he behaved oddly this morning. He didn’t seem overly concerned with the claim, even though it could mean an enormous scandal for his company.”

“Probably will mean one,” Sean says. “If this is traced back to an official company event, then the attendees will almost certainly blow the whistle.”

“Exactly my point. He didn’t seem like he was trying to seem calm, he seemed genuinely calm.”

“That’s an odd reaction, yes,” Sean replies. “But it doesn’t mean that he sabotaged his own means of financial support.”

“I know. As I said, I’m not sure if I suspect him of wrongdoing yet. I just want to rule him out, I suppose.”

“Very well. I’ll look into him. If you can do so safely and discreetly, you might consider investigating the servants. As you know, it’s not unheard of for household staff to be behind these sorts of crimes.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea. I will.”

“Be careful, though. Please. I don’t want to have to shoot another cook.”

I grimace a little. At one of my positions, I discovered the dead body of my employer on his boat. I eventually learned that his killer was the household cook, who murdered him out of revenge for his cancellation and absorption of her pension. In the ensuing struggle, she nearly killed me, but Sean rescued me in the nick of time.

My grimace turns into a smile. “That was our first kiss.”

“I prefer to keep the memory of the shooting and the kiss separate,” he says. “But either way, I’d like you to be more careful this time.”

“I will. Thank you, Sean.”

“Of course. I love you, Mary.”



I will never get tired of hearing him say that. “I love you too.”

## Page 11

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He hangs up, and I breathe a sigh of relief. With both of us investigating this circumstance, we're sure to discover the truth soon.

I turn around, ready to return to the house, but instead, I freeze.

I am still in the forest, but it's not the forest I entered an hour ago. The trees here are not lush and green but bare and skeletal. Their branches loom over the path; pale, twisted and sharp like crooked, needle-sharp teeth.

Ahead of me is a woman as tall and pale as the trees. She stands with her back to me, and blonde hair so light it's nearly white hangs down to the small of her back.

I know where I am. This is the forest through which Annie and I would occasionally walk home from university, twisted and made macabre by my own violent imagination.

I know who it is that stands in front of me, too. Even facing away from me, I can see the too-pale skin and hollow but not-quite empty black holes of my sister's eyes. I've had this nightmare many times before, but this is the first time I've seen it outside while I'm wide awake.

Panic chills me, accentuated by confusion. I'm not dreaming. I'm not dissociating either. I know exactly where I am, and I know that what I'm seeing isn't real. So why am I seeing it? Why is this plaguing me now?

A shiver runs through me, and I release a soft whimper. I'm not dreaming or dissociating. I'm hallucinating. I studied psychology in university, but I don't need to

have background in understanding the human mind to know that seeing things that aren't there when one is fully awake and aware is a very bad sign.

I've been committed before, once for eleven weeks after the police closed the investigation into my sister's disappearance. I have fought grimly for my sanity ever since.

And I've been doing well. I haven't had nightmares in months. Other than my brief relapse in New Orleans, it's been a while since I've had a dissociative state as well. Why am I suddenly skipping those two symptoms and going straight to hallucinations?

My fear turns to anger. It's not fair! I'm getting better! I'm confronting my past and accepting the pain I've suffered. I'm in the middle of another mystery, but this isn't a murder mystery. There's no great fear prompting this episode. Why am I suffering again?

I open my mouth to vocalize these thoughts, but all that comes out is a soft squeak when I see that Annie's ghost is no longer thirty yards away but is standing right in front of me. She doesn't have her back turned to me either.

And she's not a ghost. She's my sister as I remember her, as she was thirty-one years ago. She's smiling her usual impertinent, playful smile. Her blue eyes are dancing with mirth, and her blonde hair shimmers like the sun.

The forest around me is just as black and forbidding as before. The contrast is, if anything, more unnerving than when I expected to see a specter.

"You're not really getting better, though, are you, Mary?"

I jump, surprised to hear her speak. That happens sometimes when I have a flashback

of a repressed memory, but not often in my nightmares. Then again, this isn't a nightmare.

"I was ," I reply morosely. "I was moving on from losing you. I was focusing on building a life with Sean. I was going to be an ordinary governess focused on helping the people I work for. Then I found that damned flyer and remembered that you liked jazz, and—"

"And that was enough to send you into a tailspin. You went to New Orleans, had a few dissociative episodes, almost lost two twelve-year-olds on Mardi Gras and hallucinated a demon-me possessing one of them."

"I didn't... That... That's not a fair representation of what happened."

Annie shrugs. "Okay. Then you really saw my vengeful ghost try to possess a little boy to get back at you. That sounds like something you would do."

Anger flares in me again. "You were very vengeful. You could be so vindictive."

"So could you. That's why you don't want to read the letters you wrote me."

I feel as though the wind is knocked out of me. "What? How do you..." I realize the absurdity of that question and don't finish it.

Annie laughs. "Poor Mary. You might want to think about talking to someone. You're carrying all of this guilt, and you're terrified of confronting it. It's driving you very close to insane. It would be a pity if Sean had to begin his marriage visiting his wife in the mental hospital."

My hand swings out in a flash. Annie catches the blow, and her smile disappears, leaving behind a cruel sneer. "You don't want the truth, Mary. You don't want to

know why I really left. You want to believe that I was selfish, capricious and cruel. You want to keep believing that you're smart and sensible and kind and that it's everyone else's fault that you suffer. What will those notes say, Mary? What did you write me after I finally got away?"

Images flash across my mind: weeping in my room, crying out in anger, writing furiously, weeping again, smashing Annie's picture and—

I cry out and snatch my arm away from her. "You're wrong!"

I freeze again. Annie is gone. The forest is as it was before, lush, green and beautiful. I am alone save for an elderly couple walking fifty yards ahead of me down a path that crosses mine. They give me a cautious, pitying look and continue on their way.

I sniff and return the way I came, walking swiftly and keeping my eyes fixed firmly ahead. The sky is a little darker now, but I refuse to look at my phone and discover the reason, even though I know what the reason is. It's not until I leave the forest and have to acknowledge that the sun is on the opposite side of the sky that I pull my phone out and check the time.

It's five o'clock. The sun will set in an hour and a half. I've been at the park for over seven hours, and nearly six of them were spent standing on a forest path talking to a hallucination of my sister.

Hot tears sting my eyes. This isn't fair. This isn't even much of a mystery compared to the others. No one's dead. No one's having a current affair that I know about. At worst, this is a family feud spilling over into business interests. I shouldn't be so badly affected by this.

Annie's voice echoes in my head. You keep acting like this is about the Bellamys. It's not. This is about you running away. You can't do that forever, Mary. You're

older and tired now. It takes a lot of work to keep up this facade. Eventually—

“Oh, shut up,” I mutter.

And thankfully, she does. Or I do. Whatever. I wipe the tears from my eyes and since I don’t want to return to the house right now, I walk to the seafood restaurant that Julian tells me about.

The hostess frowns when she sees my puffy red eyes, but before she can ask me if I’m all right, I force a smile and say cheerily, “I can’t wait to try your fresh clams. My employer tells me they’re the best he’s ever had.”

The hostess gets the message that I don’t want to talk about it and returns a smile as forced as mine, except that hers contains an element of pity that I absolutely hate. “We catch them fresh every day. I’ll have a plate made up for you right away. Would you like to sit at the bar or at a table?”

“The bar is fine, thank you.”

“Of course. Sit anywhere you like.”

I take my seat and enjoy what really is a very fine meal. After the clams, I eat a dinner of pasta with fresh-caught shrimp in a lemon-garlic sauce. For dessert, I accept the server’s recommendation of blackberry pie topped with fresh cream.

It’s a delicious meal, and I wish I could have tasted it. But what I experienced today drives all enjoyment from the food. What I want more than anything else is to feel Sean’s arms around me, but I don’t call him. I can’t tell him what happened. He’s been pushing for me to talk to a therapist for months, and if he learns what happened today, he might call one himself. I can’t let that happen. I can’t risk being committed again. If I go inside again, I don’t know if I’ll ever get out.

It's dark when I finish my meal. When I leave the restaurant, I realize that my long absence might have caused concern with my employers. I check my phone, terrified that I might have to come up with a reason not only why I'm home late but why I've ignored calls all day.

But no one has called me. No one has wondered where their governess has gone to all day. It's a relief, really. The only silver lining to one of the darkest clouds to ever block the sun.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

It's well past nightfall when I return to the house. The family has finished their dinner already, and the children are both in their rooms. If I were in a better frame of mind, I would visit with each of them and talk about their day, but I'm too overwhelmed by what happened at the park to be up to conversation. What I want more than anything is a long shower and a restful night.

Alas, it's not to be. The children are in their rooms, but Victoria Cartwright is alone in the great room. A half-open bottle of wine sits on the coffee table in front of her, and by the looks of it, she's responsible for the half that's missing.

She sees me and smiles, lifting her wineglass which is nearly empty, a good thing since she doesn't hold it steadily. "Mary! What a pleasant surprise! Come, join me."

"Oh, I appreciate, Victoria, but I'm very—"

"Come on. I insist. I have no one to talk to but my family, and I can't really talk to them." She leans forward and lifts the bottle. "There's wine in it for you. Don't worry, it's not from the estate."

I remember at the last second that I shouldn't understand why she says that. I frown and ask, "Pardon?"

She flips her hand. "Never mind. Come sit with me. Please."

I sigh inwardly and join her on the couch. She heads to the kitchen for another glass, swaying a little on her feet but not stumbling. When she returns, she has a second bottle of wine. I can't imagine she'll last long enough to open it, but I don't say



anything. I'm too exhausted to be her moral center.

"O kay !" she says cheerily, pouring the wine. Her pour is outstanding, her hands perfectly steady in spite of the alcohol. I suppose nearly five decades of experience makes up for a bit of intoxication.

She hands me a glass and says, "So karma's a bitch, isn't it?"

"So I hear."

I sip my wine. It's quite lovely, but I'm not sure I should compliment it since she points out that it's not one of their wines.

"You make a mistake and you think you can get away with it, and you do. For a while. Hell, for a really, really, really long time. Then karma shows up, and"—she makes a popping noise and drops down into her chair—"Everything falls apart."

I think of my "encounter" with my sister earlier today and nod. "The past has a way of catching up with us whether we want it to or not."

She chuckles bitterly. "You can say that again."

She falls silent for a while. I sip more of my wine, then notice that she's not drinking. She's only staring moodily into the fireplace. It's dark right now, and when the silence becomes too awkward, I stand and offer to build a fire.

"Suit yourself. It's propane, so you just need to add the logs, press the ignition and turn the light. Kind of like a barbecue."

I place two of the available logs into the fire and soon, a roaring flame is warming the room. Remarkably, it actually manages to soothe me a little.

It seems to soothe Victoria as well, at least enough for her to talk some more. “It wasn’t even that much of a mistake, either. Just a little bit of stupidity in my twenties. It lasted... like seven months, I think?” She laughs. “I can’t even remember.”

I know exactly what she’s talking about, but I can’t let on that I’m aware of her affair with Robert Cartwright, so I ask, “What lasted seven months?”

“Stupidity,” she replies vaguely. “I married Parker young, and I got scared that I had chained myself to the wrong man. I convinced myself that I didn’t love him, that I just wanted his money, that the sex was bad. It wasn’t bad. It was good. Not mindblowing, but I mean, it was good enough.”

I sip more of the wine. It’s starting to take effect, which is probably a good thing considering the direction of this conversation. I’m starting to regret letting her talk me into listening to this.

She sighs. “Anyway, I did something stupid, felt bad about it, and never did it again. And I really didn’t. I mean, for the next twenty-one years, I never did anything . I was a saint to that man.”

She finally drinks her wine, swallowing the entire glass in one gulp. Her pour is a little less steady when she refills her glass.

I try for something comforting to say. “So many people who marry young make similar mistakes. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You realized you were wrong and changed your behavior. You don’t need to feel guilty.”

She reacts differently from what I expect. She points at me. "Exactly. I shouldn’t have to feel guilty. For God’s sake, it was just a fling when we were younger. Why the hell is everyone—is everything... Why the hell is everything falling apart around me?”

Her words are slurring badly now. I think this last glass will leave her prostrate.  
“Perhaps you should lie down for a moment, Victoria.”

She giggles at that, laughing until she’s red-faced and tears are streaming down her eyes. “Oh, Mary. You’re so sweet. I’m drunk on purpose. I intend to be absolutely shitfaced right now.”

I think you’ve accomplished that , I don’t say.

“Did you know that the wine was poisoned?”

It's a testament to her inebriated state and my frayed nerves that, for a split second, I'm terrified that she means the wine I'm drinking. A powerful shiver runs through my body before I remember the wine from the tasting last week.

“Oh. Which wine?” I ask, remembering that I don’t know about the Listeria .

“The Pinot from the tasting last week. Not all of it, I guess. Just three of the barrels. The rest of them were fine. That’s why we’re not puking our guts up.”

I have my wineglass to my lips when she says that, but the image her words conjure up cause my stomach to turn, so I take it away. “I’m grateful for that,” I reply drily.

“Yeah, me too. Kind of wish we hadn’t gotten ten different prestigious wine critics violently ill, but hey, that’s the price you pay, right?”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, ma’am. Is everyone all right?”

"No one's going to die if that's what you mean. But unless Julian knows where all the skeletons are buried, we're going to deal with a scandal that's going to ruin this vineyard. I mean, the company will be fine. But this vineyard..." She looks out the

window at the vines. “Those grapes can trace their lineage back to the very first vines that grew on this estate over one hundred sixty years ago. There’s history here. There’s meaning. We’re not just some pretentious rich family playing at winemaking because it’s fashionable and we can afford it. We’ve been doing this for generations. It’s in our blood. I can’t stand the thought that a youthful indiscretion could ruin all of that.”

“I can’t imagine it’s that serious. I don’t pretend to understand the wine business, but surely the contamination of a few barrels with a very common parasite has nothing to do with whatever might have happened in your past, and I truly can’t believe that Continental Vineyards will be devastated by this.”

She scoffs. “You sound like Julian. ‘You’re overreacting, Mom. It’s no big deal, Mom. I’ll take care of it, Mom.’”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, ma’am,” I apologize quickly. “I’m very sorry if it—”

“You’re fine,” she interrupts, flipping her hand. She finishes her glass but thankfully doesn’t pour herself another. “It’s not like you can say, ‘Oh yeah, you’re right, Victoria. You fucked up, and this is gonna suck.’” She giggles. “God, I sound like one of the twins.”

Her smile fades rapidly. Emotional instability is a ubiquitous trope of drunkenness. I have seen situations like this turn violent before. I believe it’s time for me to leave. I start to stand, but Victoria speaks before I can excuse myself. “I’m just afraid that I’ve cursed the family. Not just me. Sorry, the wine’s getting to me. I mean... I feel like the family is cursed. I’m not the first person to make this kind of mistake. I’m not the first person to suffer consequences for it either. Henry Bellamy’s wife had an affair with a rebel soldier, and she killed herself.”

I blink. That was mentioned nowhere in the diaries I read.

“Then the granddaughter... I forget her name... Um... whatever. She married a man she didn’t love, and he left her. The rest of the family never talked to her again. Then Parker’s grandmother... I think she cheated on another guy with his grandfather. God, I’m drunk. Anyway, she ended up getting dementia and forgetting that she married Parker’s grandpa. Kept asking for the other guy, the first one she married.” She giggles. “Oh boy. I think you’re right, I think I’ve had enough.”

Once again, her emotions flip. She stares at me with a vaguely frightened expression. “I loved Parker. I loved him so much. He was the only one I ever loved. I just made a mistake. It was nothing. It meant nothing. But it cost me everything .”

It’s definitely time for this conversation to end. I can’t just leave her alone like this, though. “Victoria, let me help you to bed. We’re both exhausted and neither of us are entirely sober. It sounds as though you’ve had an incredibly trying day on top of all of this. Let’s get some rest. Things will seem better in the morning.”

“It’s my fault really,” she says. She allows me to help her up and lead her to the stairs, though, so that’s progress. “I just hate that Robert and Julian are fighting. Luann, you know, she fancies Robert’s boy, but they can’t do anything about it because Robert and Julian would be so angry.”

“I’m sure they’ll manage somehow,” I say drily.

I lead her carefully up the stairs. She clings to my arm tightly, as though afraid if she lets go, she’ll fall through the floor and straight to the hell she’s created for herself. She might not be wrong.

“I just want everyone to get along before it’s too late,” she continues to lament. “Before something worse happens. I just hate that everyone’s fighting, and now we’re going to lose the vineyard on the estate.”

We reach her door, but she stops before walking inside. She turns to me and says in a clearer voice than I've heard her use all evening. "I did this to make it up to Parker. I wanted his family's legacy to survive. I wanted it to mean more than just a business. Julian doesn't understand. He doesn't know how important this was to Parker. I just wanted to do something for Parker so I didn't go to my grave feeling like a complete traitor to his memory."

I don't know how to respond to that. I'm not sure there's anything I can say. She seems to realize this because she smiles and pats my shoulder. "You don't need to worry about all of that, though. You just take care of the kids. Let me deal with the ghost of my dead husband."

I know a thing or two about ghosts, so I do respond to that. "Just remember, Victoria. Ghosts are ghosts. They can't hurt you."

She gives me a sad smile. "I think you know that's not true."

She leaves me there, once more stunned into silence, and heads inside her room. I force myself to return to my own room and go through the motions of getting ready for bed, but her words stay with me as I finally lay down to sleep.

She's right, of course. Ghosts aren't floating specters that can fling objects across rooms, but that doesn't mean they aren't real.

Ghosts are memories. And I know very well that memories can hurt a person more deeply than anything else.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

“Do you ever think about leaving, Mary?”

I blink in surprise. “Leaving? Leaving where?”

Annie shrugs. “Anywhere.”

"Well... Not really. I hope to travel, of course, but I enjoy living in Boston. It has everything I need. It has all the conveniences of a large city, but there are also quaint and quiet suburbs. There are parks, and the ocean is beautiful. The winters are cold, but I like the snow, and I like that we have four seasons. The people... well, the people can be difficult, but I'm used to them. Why are you thinking about leaving?"

Annie scoffs. “I think about leaving all the time. Doesn’t mean I’ll ever do it. I just... Forget it. It’s not important. I think I’m just pissed off with Mom right now.”

I smile slightly. “When aren’t we pissed off with Mother?”

She turns to me. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Put on airs like that.”

“Like what? I was agreeing with you.”

“Like calling Mom ‘Mother’ and Dad ‘Father.’ Walking with your purse held in front of you like that. Wearing hats when you go out.”

Heat climbs my cheeks. “What does that have to do with anything? I was sympathizing with you. Mother is very hard to deal with, and Father’s not much better lately. I understand how being around them might make you want to leave.”

“Why does it have to be about them? That’s another thing you do. You make everything about me about them. I want to study music, and it’s because Dad doesn’t want me to. I want to take a gap year, and it’s because Mom says that only losers take gap years. I have an American accent, and it’s because Dad prefers a British one.”

“I never said it’s about them. I just... A lot of what children do is because of their parents’ influence, whether positive or negative.”

“So I can’t do anything for myself? I can’t just want something without it being a reaction to them?”

“Of course you can. I’m only saying... Why are we arguing? I was agreeing with you!”

“So why are you a prissy, intellectual, proper English gentlewoman who wears gloves when she drives and sips her tea in a china cup? Is it because Mom’s a drunk English housewife who lounges around in sweatpants all day and drinks gin like most people drink water? Are you just rebelling against her and becoming the ideal Englishwoman?”

My face is flaming now. She’s very clumsy with her analysis, of course, but she’s not entirely off the mark, and that exacerbates my anger. “I’m not going to do this again. Everything’s an argument with you lately. You have such a problem with people who don’t believe exactly the same thing you do. No, Annie, I don’t want to leave. I like Boston. I will sensibly live here in sensible Boston and sensibly travel from time to time. I’ll go to the theater on weekends and I’ll have wine and chocolate with my other sensible friends and titter about everyone’s gossip, and you know what? I’ll be



happy. I'll be so much happier than you because instead of bemoaning the life I live, I'll enjoy it."

"Oh, good for you. Congratulations, Mary. You settled."

"And you gave up."

She flinches. "What?"

Elation rushes through me, as it does whenever I have an argument with Annie and get to her with something. I lift my chin and repeat. "You gave up. A long time ago. It's like you said earlier. You think about leaving all the time, but you'll never do anything about it. You'll graduate from school and get an ordinary job just like everyone else. You'll complain about that job. You'll live in an ordinary apartment and complain about that apartment until you meet an ordinary husband who you'll complain about all the time. You'll joke about cheating on him and imagine all of the affairs you'll never have. You'll live in an ordinary house and complain about that house.

"And you know what will happen then? You'll have a child. Maybe even children. And you'll look at those children and realize finally that it's too late. You'll have nowhere to run, not even in your own head. You'll finally understand that at the end of it all, you were too cowardly to do anything but settle for a safe life. And just like Mother, you will hate those children because they will remind you every day that you trapped yourself in a life you despise because you didn't have the courage to pursue the life you truly wanted."

I expect her to slap me then. She's done it before when we've argued like this. We've engaged in some true tussles over the years. She usually gets the better of me, but that's all right. I don't mind a few scratches and a bruise or two. I've won, and she knows it. That victory is sweet enough to overcome any pain I've earned.

But she doesn't slap me. Instead, she nods. "You're right."

I almost wished she had slapped me. At least I'd know how to react to that. As it is, I am stunned into absolute silence.

She smiles at me. There's no humor behind that smile, but there's no threat either. "You're probably right. You and I will both end up living painfully ordinary lives, but you'll be okay with it. You'll be happy. I envy you that. More than anyone else I've ever met, you know how to decorate a cage."

She leaves the room, carefully avoiding contact with me rather than brushing past me. I remain where I am for a while before I close the door, sit on the edge of the bed, place my head in my hands and weep.

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Thunder crashes, and my eyes open. Driving rain patterns on the roof and on my window. I remain in bed until the pounding in my heart subsides. It's been a day for the record books. I hallucinate my sister in the park, then dream of an argument we had when we lived together.

The dream, unfortunately, is very real. It's not a new memory, either. That argument took place a year before Annie left. Up until recently, I believed it was one of the very few arguments we'd had, but as the fragments of my memory have returned, I understand now that there were many such arguments, and I also remember that some of those arguments turned violent.

I roll out of bed and dress. I've learned from experience that I won't be able to sleep anymore after a nightmare like that. Since I'm stuck awake, I might as well distract from my own history by focusing on the mystery at hand. Victoria believes that her past indiscretions have led to the suffering her family is experiencing now. It comes

across as superstition when I talk to her downstairs, and that very well might be all it is, but these superstitions often have a basis in fact. Perhaps it's time for me to take a closer look at these diaries and see if there's a clue that might help me understand what could motivate this sabotage.

I head downstairs, but as I approach the library, I hear Julian's voice. It seems I'm not the only person woken by the storm. I nearly turn around, but I catch a snippet of conversation that piques my interest.

"Why is this so important to you, Robert? You hate us. Yes, you do. You've been a prick to me every time I see you, you're rude to my mother, and the most respect you can show the twins is to ignore them. Anytime Luann looks at Kevin, you get all red-faced and huffy like she's some diseased slut determined to corrupt him. Yes, you do. And what do you hope to gain, anyway? What kind of validation do you get if I come out and say, 'Yes, this is the way it is.' You're sixty-fucking-one years old. Why do you need to hear this bullshit? Why is it so important for you to get this victory?"

There's a long pause, presumably while Robert responds. I press my ear to the door, eager to hear what Julian has to say. I can't hear Robert's side of the conversation, but maybe something Julian says will make it clear what they're talking about.

After a few minutes, Julian says, "But what do you gain? Think about it. This will ruin both of us. We're dealing with enough scandal as it is, and let's just be honest, your reputation's already shot. You've won too many second-rate awards to recover. A personal scandal would be the final nail in your coffin. Is ruining us really worth the consequences to you? To Kevin? Think of the kids. Just please think of the damned kids."

His footsteps increase in volume. I realize a moment too late that he's walking toward the door. I push away from the door, but it opens before I can turn around.

Julian stares at me for a moment, blinking in surprise. Then he frowns. “Really, Mary? Now you’re eavesdropping on a private phone call?”

“I... I wasn’t. I didn’t mean to, sir, I was just coming downstairs for a book.”

“A book or a diary?”

I flinch. “I... I didn’t...”

“Yeah, I thought so. Guess I should be more careful about keeping that closed. Pretty good stuff, right? All the sex secrets of the Bellamys. Gotta be better than a soap opera, huh?”

“Sir, I’m so sorry—”

"No, you're not. Don't bullshit me. I read you like a book the moment you showed up. You're nothing but an old English busybody."

Embarrassment and anger rise in equal measure at first, but embarrassment wins out. I could argue that I’m not an old English busybody, and I would be right if I reminded him that it’s incredibly rude of him to say so whether or not it’s true, but he is right to say that it’s incredibly rude of me to eavesdrop on his phone call, whatever my intentions are.

“Stay out of our family’s business,” he warns me. “Your job is to tutor the kids. The rest is none of your concern.”

My chagrin must show on my face because he sighs and says in a slightly gentler voice, “Look, forget about it. It’s no big deal. We haven’t exactly been quiet about our issues. Let’s make a deal: we’ll keep our drama outside of the house, and you keep your nose to yourself. Sound good?”

I nod. “Yes, sir. I apologize again.”

“No worries. Excuse me.”

I stand aside to let him pass. He doesn’t look over his shoulder to see what I’m doing, but I suppose he doesn’t have to. I glance into the library just long enough to see that he’s closed and locked the safe. His family’s secrets are safe for the moment.

I return to my room and spend the rest of the evening with Miss Marple. No disrespect to the great Agatha Christie, but I find the story far less engaging than the one I’m in the middle of right now.

But at least I know that *A Caribbean Mystery* has a happy ending. As for this story? I’m not nearly so confident.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

The following week proceeds without major incident. There are no more sabotage attempts. Luann has either stopped sneaking out, or she's found a way to do so without alerting me. Victoria is quieter and more subdued than she was when I met her, but she is calm, at least. Julian's late-night phone calls with Robert either cease, or he keeps his promise to me and takes them outside of the house.

There is a slight scandal over the poisoned grapes, but it is quickly hushed. Julian apparently is aware of the skeletons in the various closets because, other than a brief report in the local news and a short post in an online wine review magazine, I'm not aware of any press coverage regarding the Listeria outbreak. The entire Pinot Noir harvest is purged, and a process is put in place to inspect the Chardonnay and Riesling prior to bottling.

Speaking of the white grapes, the harvest begins this week. There are a dozen employees visiting from the commercial vineyard, working from sunrise to sunset. Perhaps that is why there are no sabotage attempts. The harvesters stay at the house, sleeping four to a room in vacant servants' quarters.

With the adults kept busy with the harvest, I am able to find a routine with the children. Over the course of the week, they settle into the routine and just like their mother, they relax.

Best of all, I am able to relax too. I have no more nightmares and no more concerning breaks from reality like the scene in the forest. I enjoy my coffee in the mornings, teach the children, enjoy afternoons at the beach or in town with them—I won't go back to the forest—and return home to enjoy my evening with a book. I've finished *A Caribbean Mystery* and moved on to *Nemesis*.

In this novel, Miss Marple once more encounters a mystery with Jason Rafiel, although the poor Jason is deceased at the time of this novel. It's a rather darker adventure than the previous book, but once again, I have the comfort of knowing that it ends happily.

I'm beginning to hope that this story will end happily. Sean calls me that Saturday morning and announces that after a week of investigating Julian, he is confident that Julian had nothing to do with the sabotage attempts.

"The fire was started by a disgruntled employee who wasn't happy with his severance package. I was able to trace his movements for several days prior to the fire. I also read some very informative social media rants. Julian was definitely not in cahoots with him."

"And Robert Cartwright?"

"No, he's not involved either. As for the Listeria, that's a bit harder to tell, but I'm still leaning toward it being an accident. There were thirteen reports of Listeria contamination in the United States last year, and one of them resulted in a far worse outbreak than this one. I think this is just part of the job."

That's more or less what Julian said to Victoria. My suspicions ease somewhat.

"I'm delighted to hear that," I reply. "I'm glad he isn't a bad sort. It's always nice to find that I'm not working for a terrible person."

"You do seem to have a type, don't you?"

"What does that say about you?" I retort.

"I've always known that I'm a horrible person."

I roll my eyes. “You’re lucky that’s not true.”

“ You’re lucky that’s not true. But what about the servants? Have you found any leads with them?”

My cheeks flame, and I suppose my hesitation answers his question because he says, “You haven’t investigated the servants, have you?”

“I can’t believe it, but it’s slipped my mind again. I just... I was caught up in—”

“That’s all right. No need to make excuses. I investigated them myself. Grant was once arrested for aggravated assault.”

“Grant? The driver?” I can’t picture the gentle, softspoken Grant being violent with anyone.

“That’s the one. Fortunately, it was quickly established that Grant was not guilty, being that he was in an entirely different city at the time. As for the rest, they’re clean as a whistle. Not proof that nothing’s going on, but that combined with the Bellamys’ good reputation as employers suggests to me that this isn’t an inside job like we believed it was.”

I smile. “Thank you, Sean. You really are a lifesaver.”

“I really am. Do you know why else I’m a lifesaver?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not going to give you hell about the other thing that’s slipped your mind.”



“The other...” Then I realize. It’s the weekend again, and I haven’t even thought to come visit him. “Oh, Sean! I’m so sorry!”

“That’s all right. I said I won’t give you hell, and I won’t. But you should look out of the kitchen window.”

I frown and do as he says. When I see him there with his roguish smile and a bouquet of flowers in his hand, I lose myself. The next thing I’m aware of is being in his arms, my lips pressed against his, weeping into his shoulder.

“There, there, love,” he says softly. “That’s all right. I’m here.”

"Oh, Sean. I've missed you."

“I know. I suppose I’ve missed you too.”

I slap his chest lightly, and we both laugh. I pull away just in time to hear Victoria behind me. “Why Mary. You didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.”

I redden a little more, and then further when Sean jokes, “That’s all right, Ms. Bellamy. She has a habit of pretending I don’t exist. Out of sight, out of mind, and all that.”

I roll my eyes. “Victoria, this is Sean. Sean, you appear to already know Ms. Bellamy.”

“By reputation alone, but I have to say, she’s far more beautiful than her reputation suggests.”

Victoria raises an eyebrow. “So my reputation suggests that I’m ugly.”

Sean stammers, “Oh. No. I... I meant that you’re rumored to be beautiful, but you’re even more beautiful than that rumored beauty.”

“Ah, I see. I’m glad to know I’m more beautiful than myself.”

I have never loved Victoria more. Sean shakes his head and says drily, “I can see why you two get along so well.”

Victoria laughs. “Well, come on in. No need for you to stand outside in the cold.”

“Actually, I was hoping I could steal Mary for the day. I’ve recently emigrated from cold, dreary Wales, and I’ve been longing to visit the picturesque sites of Massachusetts.”

“Of course. The children have the weekend off of school, and they’re old enough to manage without constant supervision. I do hope you’ll join us for dinner, though.”

“Count on it, ma’am.”

I manage to control myself until Sean and I are in his car, but then I throw my arms around him and kiss him again. He returns the kiss for a moment, then pulls away laughing. “See, if you came to visit, you wouldn’t have to miss me this much.”

“Oh, shut up. You love the attention.”

“Yes, but you hate admitting how much you like me. You’d spare yourself the embarrassment if you didn’t allow your desperation for my company to grow so strong.”

I roll my eyes and pull on my seatbelt. “Well, you’ve managed to remind me of your least attractive quality of arrogance, so I don’t miss you nearly as much now.”

“You’re welcome. Just thinking of you.”

I laugh and shove him lightly. “So where do you want to go?”

“I was thinking we could explore the state forest. I hear there are miles of scenic—”

“No. Not the forest.”

He blinks. “Oh?”

I don’t like the searching quality of his gaze. “It’s not that much fun, really. Let’s visit the beach.”

“The beach it is.”

He takes me to the nearest beach. This far from the denser portion of the island, the beach isn’t crowded, and we’re able to keep mostly to ourselves as we walk. For a while, the conversation is lighthearted. He tells me about the candidates he’s interviewing for his agency, and I tell him about the children and about the mysteries I’m reading.

Eventually, though, he turns to me, and I see in his expression that the lighthearted portion of the day is over. “Mary. I’m worried about you.”

“About me? Why?”

“You made a promise to me that you haven’t kept. And I’m fine with that. I understand if you can’t see me. I even understand if you just don’t feel like making the drive. But forgetting about visiting me is another thing entirely. And forgetting three weeks in a row is... well, worrisome.”

I lower my eyes. “I’m sorry, Sean. I’ve just been so caught up in all of the drama at the Bellamy house. You know how I am.”

“I do. Well enough to know that if it was the Bellamy drama bothering you, you would have already investigated all of the servants yourself. You would have talked to people in town about the Bellamys. You would have called me with more than just Julian’s name, and you would have been much closer to an answer than you are now.”

I blink, unable to find an answer. He’s right. I’ve done little more than speculate about the attacks on the family, and on the rare occasions I notice how little I’ve worked, I excuse it by saying it’s not that much of a mystery. But if it were true that I wasn’t interested in an answer, I would never have bothered Sean in the first place.

“What’s going on, Mary?” he presses. “Is it Annie? Have you learned something about her?” He follows those questions up with the one I dread the most. “Did something happen in the forest?”

I pull away from him and cross my arms over my chest. Once more, my education isn’t necessary to recognize that as a defensive reaction.

He recognizes the same thing. “It’s me, Mary. I’m not going to hurt you, and I’m not going to run to the nearest psychologist and tell them to hunt you down and force you into a therapy session.” I lower my eyes and feel tears approach. “Is that what you thought I’d do?”

I sigh heavily. “I’ve just been... a little off. Seeing those letters... I’m worried about what they say. I... I don’t know if I’ve told you this before, but I don’t remember everything about my life before Annie’s disappearance.”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice.”

“Oh. Well, it’s true. But since I left teaching and found myself in the middle of mysteries involving other families, I’ve been fixated on the mystery involving mine. You know that part, of course. But the closer I get to the truth, the more frightened I am. The more I remember...”

My lips tremble. I have to fight to get this last part out. “The more I remember, the more I think that I might have been the one to drive her away.”

He smiles softly. “You’ve mentioned that too.”

“I know. But I’m afraid to find out that it’s true. If I’m responsible for Annie leaving, then that means it’s my fault that I’ve spent my whole life miserable. Not my whole life, but you know what I mean. I’m just... I’m afraid, Sean. I’m so afraid. I feel like I’ve fought hard to achieve some closure, but I’ve only brought myself more confusion. And now I feel like I can’t even trust my own memory. What if I hurt her? We used to fight, you know. What if we fought too hard one day, and I hurt her, and that’s why she left?”

Sean doesn’t answer me right away. His face suggests that he doesn’t know how to answer me. I don’t blame him for that at all. I don’t know how to answer myself either.

“Let’s go get some lunch,” he offers. “We’ll think better with food in our bellies, yes?”

I manage a watery smile, and he pulls me close. “It’ll be all right. We’ll work this out. You’re not alone.”

Those three words have to be the most beautiful words in any language.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

Sean takes me to the seafood restaurant in West Tisbury that I ate at the day after my episode in the forest. The hostess recognizes me, and her eyes widen in surprise when she sees Sean. No doubt she's amazed that I could manage to attract a man like him. Or a man at all.

Or maybe it's only my insecurity telling me this. After all, I was only red-faced and puffy-eyed in front of her, not mumbling to myself or staring insanely at someone who wasn't there. At least, I very much hope I wasn't.

We sit, and the hostess has an order of clams on the half shell brought to our table. Sean's eyes widen when he tries the appetizer. "Wow. Yelp wasn't lying."

"Who wasn't lying?"

"Yelp. The app."

"The what?"

He chuckles. "The phone app Yelp. It's an app that rates and reviews businesses."

"Oh, Yelp. Right." I chuckle and rub my forehead. "God. I'm so out of it."

"You really are, though. I know you're not so old that you don't know what Yelp is."

"Will you go easy on me, please? It's been a trying few weeks."

"I'll go easy on you if you promise to be honest with me and tell me everything that's

happened to make the past few weeks difficult.”

I feel a pang of guilt for having to lie to him, but I don’t really have a choice. I have to tell him something, and I can’t tell him the whole truth. “I’m just worried about the letters. If I discover—or rediscover, I guess—that I was a bitch to my sister, it’s going to hurt. I’ve always carried this belief that Annie and I were close and that she left because of our mother. If I find out that it was because of me, then I won’t recover.”

Sean nods and eats another clam. When he swallows, he says, “There. I’ve given myself time to bite back what I wanted to say, which would have been very uncomplimentary toward your sister.”

I chuckle and say, “Well, I appreciate that.”

“What I will say is that those letters were written after your sister left. First of all, you didn’t know she’d left at the time. You thought she was dead or kidnapped. Second of all, even if you did, you would have been grieving, and sometimes when people grieve, they get angry. Your sister abandoned you, and whether you believed then or now that it was her fault, you felt betrayed by her. I’m sure there are some strong words in those letters, and I’m very sure that whatever they say has nothing to do with the relationship the two of you had before she left.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, though. What if... what if they hint at something? Some great wrong I did her?”

“Not everything is a drama, Mary. Not every event is a momentous, shocking thing that causes women to gasp and men’s eyes to widen. My next point is that your sister left when you two were very young. I’m exposing my own age a little by saying this, but at twenty-two years old, you know exactly fuck all.”

I giggle, nearly spilling the water glass I hold in my hand. The vulgarity is fairly

tame, at least my English standards, but it catches me off guard.

“It’s true, though,” he insists. “I remember enough about being twenty-two to know that I was an idiot. I’m sure you were too. I’m sure Annie was too.”

He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. “You have to let this go. I’m not going to tell you to stop looking for Annie. We tried that once already, and it didn’t help. But you have to forgive yourself. Whatever happened between you and Annie happened thirty-two years ago. You’ve lived so much since then, and you have so much life ahead of you now. Don’t throw it away on one event from your childhood.”

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. “I wish it was that easy.” He lowers his eyes, and I plead with him, “Please understand. Growing up the way we did, Annie and I were all the other had. Our mother hated us. I mean, she hated us, Sean. She tried to kill us both more than once. Father was good to us at first, but being married to our mother killed his soul long before it killed his body. I know that I’m older now, and I know that I’ve lived a lot of life free from my mother’s grasp, but...”

I stop myself before finishing that sentence. Sean finishes it for me. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair that the one person who should have been by your side through everything left you instead.”

I nod, afraid that if I speak, I’ll burst into tears again.

Sean squeezes my hand. “I won’t try to argue with you anymore. I know that letting go is much easier said than done. But I love you, for some reason.” I chuckle at that. “And because I love you, I’m not going to hide the truth from you. Obsessing over this isn’t healthy for you. Let go of Annie. Wherever she went, she made a choice to go without you. She doesn’t deserve any more of your attention.”



I nod again. “I can’t let her go. Like you said, I’ve tried. I need an answer. I need closure.”

He smiles sadly. “I know. So the next thing I’m going to suggest is that you let me help you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that. You have your agency.”

“I do, and it will be a little while before I have two assistants selected, but once they are, I’ll turn operations over to them, and we’ll work together just like we did before. We’ll get you the answers you need. And if you want, we can wait to open those letters until we can open them together.”

I grimace. “I don’t think I want you to see them. I don’t want you to know how cruel I can be.”

“You say that like I don’t live with you and haven’t seen you on mornings when the water’s not hot right away.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m serious. I think that’s something I have to do myself.”

“I think it’s something you have to do whether it’s by yourself or not. And it might be nice for you to reveal to me that you once strung your sister up by her stockings and whipped her with a spatula in front of the whole school and realize that I love you anyway.”

I stare at him incredulously. “You have the most ridiculous imagination.”

“And I know that. And I’m not ashamed of it. And you love me anyway. See? We’re both disturbed people. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

I laugh and say, “Well, I’ll consider it. That’s the best I can do right now.”

“Fair enough. I can work with that.”

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The rest of the day is quite fun. We visit town, and Sean buys me a stuffed teddy bear—a winner for any woman, no matter the age—and a new winter coat. We take a scenic drive around the island and find a little bluff where we spend the afternoon all to ourselves.

I’m glad he’s come. As absurd as it sounds, I was beginning to feel that my first impression of the island as a giant spiderweb was true, and that I was trapped here in this alternate reality where ghosts ruled the day and the past held the present in a firm grip. It’s nice to be reminded that there’s an entire world outside of this island, and that I have a life outside of my missing sister and the Bellamy family drama.

We return for dinner just as the sun sets. Julian is there, and the children are very nicely dressed. I feel a touch of pride when I introduce Sean, especially when I overhear Luann tell her grandmother. “Wow! He’s so handsome!”

Beatrice has prepared roast duck for dinner and served it with wild rice and roasted turnips. It’s served with a bottle of Chardonnay—not the estate’s wine but from the main Continental vineyard—and sparkling cider for the children. Nathan makes the obligatory grab for his father’s wine glass and receives the obligatory slap on his wrist. Sean delights the children with tales of his days as a Scotland Yard inspector and private investigator in Wales, and he and Julian discuss the winemaking business and trade opinions on who will win the Stanley Cup this year. I make the mistake of asking what the Stanley Cup is, for which I receive a sound shellacking from the New England natives. It seems that it’s inexcusable for a Boston woman like myself not to be familiar with hockey.

It's a good meal. Everyone is happy. Even the stone-faced Beatrice wears something that might loosely be called a smile when Sean compliments her on the Boston Crème pie she makes for dessert.

When dinner is over, Sean pats his belly. "Well, that was easily the most delicious meal I've had in a long..." He looks at me. "Since Mary was home to cook for me."

The Bellamys laugh, and I roll my eyes. "Don't let him lie to you. He's the cook in our household."

"I'm the person who knows how to use the microwave," he corrects. "But I'm not nearly the cook Beatrice is."

"Yes, we'll have to consider a larger Christmas bonus for her, won't we, Julian?" Victoria says.

"Hell, if she wants to ask for a raise, now's the time. I'm at her mercy."

"Sean, must you leave right away?" Victoria asks. "We've really enjoyed your company, and we would love—"

A loud slapping sound causes us all to jump. We look at each other with identical expressions of surprise and consternation. Then we hear it again.

"It's coming from outside," Sean says. "From the backyard."

Victoria flinches. "Oh my God. The vineyard!"

We're all on our feet in an instant. We rush out of the dining room into the great room just in time for another loud slap to greet our ears.

The cause of the slap becomes clear when we see water trickling down the glass door leading to the vineyard. A ropy silhouette catches my eye. In the darkness, it looks like a snake curling up to strike.

“That’s one of the hoses!” Victoria cries. “It’s the irrigation system!”

The good feeling I had only a moment ago vanishes instantly. It was too soon to hope that the sabotage afflicting this family was over. A predator still lurks in the darkness, and when all of our eyes were away, it struck again.

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Sean is the first to act. “Where is the water shutoff?”

“It’s outside,” Julian says. “But you need a passcode to use it.”

“I’ll go with you,” Sean says.

He pulls a firearm from his coat pocket. Luann and Victoria shriek when they see the weapon. I don’t cry out, but my legs go numb, and I say Sean’s name weakly.

“Stay inside,” he says. “All of you. And get away from the windows. Back to the dining room. We’ll come get you when this is over.”

“Oh God,” Victoria hisses. She recovers quickly, though. “Children, come with me. Mary, help me.”

I take Luann’s arm, and Victoria takes Nathan. We return to the dining room. Another loud slap of pressurized water greets our ears when we close the doors behind us.

Beatrice comes out of the kitchen just as we leave the great room. She wears a fierce snarl and carries a rolling pin, a weapon I have no doubt she could use to great effect.

“Where are they?” she growls. “I’ll do the lot of ‘em!”

“Stay with us, please,” Victoria says. “In case they come inside.”

She knows her cook well. Beatrice takes one look at her mistress and the children and nods grimly. She takes position in front of the four of us, standing with her rolling pin

raised, arms flexing with muscle. For the sake of whoever's responsible for this, I hope they stay outside.

The minutes pass. My heart thumps loudly in my chest. The children whimper, and I hear Nathan ask Victoria, "How long does it take to shut off the water?"

"I don't know, dear," Victoria says. "Just stay with me."

Beatrice remains planted firmly in between us and the doorway, ready to bash in the head of the first person who threatens her employers. A moment later, there's a knock on the door. "Ms. Bellamy? Nathan, Luann, are you in there?"

"That's Grant," Beatrice says. In a louder voice, she says, "They're in here. Who's out there besides you?"

"Just me. Julian and a gentleman I don't know are trying to get the water under control. Someone broke the control panel, so Julian's calling the city while the other man ties the hoses so they spray water away from the property."

"Go help him, Grant," Victoria calls. "Save the vines, please."

Grant hesitates. "Julian sent me back here to protect you. Just in case whoever is responsible for this comes back."

"Please Grant." Victoria's practically sobbing now. "Please. I'm begging you, protect the Chardonnay. It's the last of the harvest. I don't want to lose it."

"I've got 'em locked tight in here, Grant," Beatrice says. "You go on. Tell Julian no one's getting to his ma or his kids."

"All right. Thank you."

His footsteps thunder down the great room as he runs to assist Sean and Julian. I start to pace the room, unable to quell my worry. The saboteur, whoever he is, hasn't been violent so far, but he's escalating. Destroying the estate's irrigation system is an incredibly costly act of sabotage. I shudder to think how much farther he'll go.

I stop when I remember the harvesters. "Where are the harvesters, Victoria? The man and women you had here to harvest the Riesling."

"I sent them home today," Victoria says. Her voice is steady, but her hands tremble as she wipes tears from her eyes. "The Chardonnay needed another week, so I sent them home and told them to come back the following week."

I frown. "Then your saboteur must have known. It must be someone close enough to you that he could know your schedule."

"That's not necessarily true," Nathan points out. "He could have been watching with binoculars from one of the bluffs and seen the harvesters leave."

"Wouldn't even need to be that close," Beatrice said. "Could've watched the ferry and seen them board."

I sigh. They're right. "I'm so sorry about this, Victoria."

"Well... we're safe right now." She smiles at her grandchildren. "That's what matters."

My phone rings. The sound causes us all to jump. I pull it out and see Sean's number, so I answer. "Hello?"

"All right. It's safe for you all to come out. A great big handsome fellow named Grant helped me tie off the water. They're still spitting a little, but Julian's going to

get the county to shut off water to the whole property. We'll have to disconnect the irrigation system before we can start it again, so it might be a minute before we can shower, but we're all right."

I sigh with relief and deliver the good news. The children slump with relief. Victoria begins to weep softly. Beatrice nods and asks, "What about the vandal? He still out there?"

"Sean, did you see anyone who might be responsible?"

"No. There were footprints by the water shutoff, but by the time we got there, the ground was too wet for me to tell what kind of shoe or even if it was a man or a woman. Whoever it was left before the damage occurred, though."

"So how did they damage the water lines?"

He doesn't answer right away. When he does speak, it's in a softer voice. "Can anyone else hear me right now?"

"No. Why?"

"I haven't told Julian this yet, but the lines were damaged by ANFO. Are you familiar with that?"

"No."

"It's an explosive. Ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. It's a commonly used explosive for demolition because it's low velocity and safer than dynamite. But it's still a bloody explosive."

"And you're sure of this?"



“I’m sure. It has a very distinct smell.”

I shiver. An explosive? Even a “safe” explosive, is still—as Sean so elegantly puts it—a bloody explosive.

This saboteur really is escalating. It's time for me to put my fears over my past with Annie aside. Now, the family under my care really is in danger.

“Mary?” Beatrice asks again. “Is the bastard out there?”

“No,” I reply. “No, they found footprints, but he was gone before this started.”

Beatrice cursed. “God damned little coward. Sorry for my language, ma’am. But he’s a god damned little coward.” She sighs and looks at the children. “Poor babies. I’m going to serve you some ice cream. Least I can do. Ma’am, do you want some?”

“No, thank you.”

“Coffee then. I’ll bring it outside to the vineyard after I get the children their ice cream.”

That wasn’t a question. She heads to the kitchen to fetch the children their ice cream and the adults their coffee. Victoria wipes tears from her eyes and says, “Children, stay here. Mary, if you don’t mind staying with them, please.”

Nathan hops to his feet. “I want to go outside. I want to help Dad.”

“Stay here,” Victoria says firmly. “Whoever did this is gone now, but if they come back—”

“They won’t come back,” Nathan insists. “That would be stupid.”

“Everything they’ve done so far is stupid,” she counters, “but they’ve done it.”

“Don’t be rude to Beatrice,” I tell Nathan. “She’s making you ice cream. Your father’s all right. Sean would have told me something if he wasn’t.”

Nathan frowns, but he nods. "Okay. I just hate... I'm not a kid."

“I know that,” I tell him. “But sometimes being an adult means knowing when to act and when to wait.”

Nathan sighs. “All right.”

Victoria smiles gratefully at me and heads outside. Beatrice arrives a moment later with the ice cream and a cup of coffee for me. “Ms. Bellamy is outside?”

I nod, and she returns a curt nod of her own and heads outside. I notice that the hand not carrying the coffee holds the rolling pin. A part of me hopes that the coward who did this—and Beatrice hit that nail on the head—is still out there. I’d love to see him get brained for this.

In the meantime, I can do nothing but sit with the children and wait.

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The police arrive five minutes later and stay for six hours. Sean isn’t able to keep the secret of the ANFO anymore because the police bring dogs, and those dogs immediately identify the explosive.

I am only able to pick up bits and pieces of the investigation. The police quickly determine that I was inside the entire time and once they learn that there was sabotage before I was hired, they rule me out as a suspect, a possibility I doubt they took

seriously to begin with.

I stay with the children. Nathan, surprisingly, quickly loses energy. He falls asleep in the dining room, and after a half- hearted protest, I'm able to coax him upstairs to bed. Luann comes with me, and when Nathan is in bed, I turn to her.

She is trembling on her feet, and tears stream from her eyes, which she aims everywhere but mine. She knows something, or at least suspects it.

“Luann,” I say gently but no less sternly for my gentleness. “Someone just detonated explosives on your grandmother’s property. Had they miscalculated, they could have destroyed your house and possibly killed you and your family. Had any of you been outside for any reason, you could have died regardless of his calculations. Or hers. What if your grandmother wanted to show Sean the vineyard? That was the first thing she did when I arrived.”

She sniffs and hugs her arms across her chest but remains silent.

I drop the sternness and remain gentle. “Luann. If you know anything, you need to tell me. Whatever this is, it’s gone too far. Someone’s going to get hurt. Is that what you want?”

She takes a shaky breath, then shakes her head.

“Then tell me. Who did this?”

“I don’t know.”

“But?” I press.

She takes another unsteady breath and says, “But Kevin told me that he overheard his

dad arguing with my dad on the phone the other day. He said when they hung up, his dad said, 'Fuck this. We need to do something drastic. This baby shit isn't working.'"

A tremble runs through me. I try to conceal it and hope I do well enough that Luann doesn't notice. "When did he tell you this."

She shrinks back and replies in a small voice, "Yesterday."

"So you two have been seeing each other still."

She nods. "He's been sneaking over here on Friday nights instead of me coming to see him."

"And you're sure Kevin had nothing to do with—"

"No!" she insists. "I promise you, he didn't! He wouldn't do that to me!"

"Keep your voice down."

She flinches and looks at the stairwell in terror. "Are you going to tell them?"

"I have to tell them. Your family is in danger."

"No! Mary, please!"

"Your family is in danger , Luann," I repeat.

"Well, don't tell them that I'm still seeing Kevin. Please. I'll get in so much trouble. And don't tell them, Kevin told me."

My first instinct is to be angry with her for being more concerned with her and her

boyfriend getting in trouble than with the fact that her family was nearly gravely injured. But after all, she is still very young. Death isn't real to a child unless they've seen it firsthand. Getting in trouble with their parents, especially for dating the child of their parent's sworn enemy, is very real.

Still, this is more serious now. I can't make a promise I can't keep. "I'll do what I can, Luann. But as I told you before, your safety matters more than anything else right now."

She lowers her head and nods miserably. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. This is a terrible situation."

She nods again. "I'm going to bed. Good night, Mary."

"Good night." Something occurs to me, and I add, "Don't text Kevin. If you warn him, the police can trace that message, even if you delete it. It can look like you were an accomplice to any crime he may have committed."

She pauses with her door halfway open. She doesn't say anything and enters the room a moment later.

I sigh and shake my head. Those poor children. This has gotten so much worse for them.

And it now falls to me to make sure it doesn't get even worse.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

I head downstairs just in time to find Sean coming up the stairs. “Mary. There you are. The children are asleep, then?”

I nod. “Luann just went to bed. Are the police still here?”

“They left a few minutes ago. Julian and Victoria are in the great room drinking some coffee. I wanted to see if you’d join us. I think the adults should discuss what happened without the children here.”

I nod again. “Before we go in, can I talk to you?”

His eyes narrow slightly. “Did the children say something?”

I take a deep breath. This is the right thing to do, but I feel horrible for revealing Luann’s secret, even if I am completely justified in doing so. “Luann’s boyfriend is the son of Julian Bellamy’s business rival, Robert Cartwright. Did I tell you that?”

“You did. And their family rivalry goes further back than the two of them. The police asked about Robert Cartwright straight away when they took his statement.”

“I see. So this is an old family feud.”

“Well, I only meant further back than Luann and Kevin, but it’s likely that they’ve been rivals since at least Parker Bellamy’s day. What did Luann tell you?”

I take another deep breath. “Kevin overheard an argument between their fathers. When it was over, Robert said that they had to do something drastic and stop taking

baby steps.”

Sean frowns. “When did he tell Luann this?”

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday? I thought they weren’t seeing each other anymore.”

“He’s been sneaking over here.”

“Without you noticing?”

His words are a knife to my chest. I’ve been failing these children. Even if Kevin and Luann are wholly innocent—and I still believe they are—the situation is too volatile for them to continue in this way. I should have paid closer attention. I thought that by preventing Luann from sneaking out, I had handled the situation. I assumed that if Kevin were to try to sneak in, I would notice him, but I was clearly wrong about that.

“They’ve managed to sneak around my back, it seems,” I reply. “I should have noticed, but I didn’t.”

He chuckles ruefully. “Kids are good at sneaking around when they get to this age. I’ll have to share some of my own stories with you later. In the meantime, this puts us in a bit of a predicament. Julian feels very strongly that Robert is behind this. Victoria feels just as strongly that Robert couldn’t be involved.”

“Victoria’s perspective might be a little... skewed.”

He stares at me. “Don’t tell me they’re sneaking around too.”

“I don’t have any evidence that the affair has continued,” I reply, “but they certainly

had an affair when they were younger. Victoria all but admitted it to me the other night.”

He runs his hands through his hair. “Bloody Hell. It’s the damned Desperate Housewives here.”

I don’t think that’s an entirely accurate analogy, but I understand his point. “We need to tell them, Sean. If anyone had been outside when those charges went off, it could have killed them.”

“They would have had to be hugging the water lines for that little bit of ANFO to kill them, but the water pressure was no joke. It wouldn’t have killed anyone, but if it caught someone in the face, it could have meant an eye. You’re right. We need to tell them.”

He turns to head back to the great room, and I grab his arm. “Is there a way to keep Luann out of this? She’ll be so devastated.”

He meets my eyes. “I think you know the answer to that question.”

I lower my head. He’s right, but this is terrible. Those poor children.

The two of us enter the great room just in time to catch Victoria shouting, “You can’t blame Robert for every bad thing that’s happened in our lives! He’s an arrogant asshole, but he’s not this... stupid.”

“You and I have different opinions about his intelligence,” Julian retorts.

“So you think he’d try to kill us?”

Julian rolls his eyes. “No, I don’t think he’d try to murder us, Mom, but I do think



he'd sabotage us. I do think he'd do everything he can to make our lives harder. He can't handle the fact that he's number two, and instead of finding a way to beat us fair and square—which he can't do—he's looking for a way to chop us down at the knees."

Victoria sighs and rubs her eyes. "Look, I don't like him any more than you do, but we can't get caught up in this fantasy like this is the War of the Roses."

"Then who else, Mom? Who else?"

She lifts her hands and lets them drop. "It could be an employee."

"You think one of the servants did this?"

"Not one of the household staff, no. Most of them have been here since your father was alive, and they'd never dishonor his memory. But I think that one of the employees could have been paid."

"Exactly! Paid by who?"

"Paid by whom," she corrects.

"Now you're just being petty."

Sean clears his throat, and the two of them look at us. Julian reddens and looks away, a dark frown on his face. Victoria chuckles ruefully. "Hello, you two. Sorry that you once again caught us jawing away."

"I'm afraid we have some rather sobering news," Sean said.

Both of them turn back to us. "What news?" Julian asks.

“Tell them, Mary.”

I wish wholeheartedly I could make Sean tell them, but it is my place, not his. I take a deep breath and say, “Luann spoke with Kevin Cartwright yesterday.”

Julian blinks. “What? When?”

“I assume after we went to bed,” I reply. “The children were with me all day, so that’s the only time she would have had a chance.”

“What did she say, Mary?” Victoria says curtly.

“She says that Kevin told her that he overheard an argument between his father and Julian.”

Victoria’s head snaps around to Julian. A guilty look flashes across his face. It seems Victoria wasn’t aware of his late-night phone calls to the Cartwright patriarch.

“When they finished speaking, he—Kevin—told Luann that he heard his father say that they needed to take more drastic steps.”

Victoria gasps. Julian pales. We’re silent for a minute, then Julian asks, “Was that all?”

“That’s all,” I confirm.

“When did she tell you this?”

“Just now before she went to sleep.”

Julian nods and runs his hand over his face. “Well, that’s it, then. I guess we know for

sure.”

Victoria sits ramrod straight. Red flecks have formed in her pale face. She stares ahead at the fire and doesn’t respond when Julian challenged, “Still think he’s innocent, Mom?”

He turns to Sean and me. “Have you told the police?”

“Not yet. I only just found out a few minutes ago.”

“Right. Well, we have to tell the police.”

“I know.”

“And they’ll have to talk to her.”

“I know.”

He sighs. “What a fucking mess. How’s Luann?”

“Not good, sir. She really fancies him. Kevin, I mean. She’s afraid…”

I stop myself and leave it at that. I have betrayed Luann’s confidence as much as necessary. I don’t need to reveal anything else. In any case, it’s obvious what Luann is afraid of.

“Yeah, I know. Damn it. Okay, I’ll call the police.”

“Do you have to call them tonight?” Victorias asks, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yes, Mom, I have to call them tonight. They just blew up the damned water system.

We're going to lose the Chardonnay, you realize that, right? We can try to harvest some of it, but we're losing at least ninety percent of the yield."

Victoria doesn't protest further. She only hangs her head in her hands and begins to weep. Julian deflates a little when he sees that. Rather lamely, he offers, "Well, at least no one got hurt."

"I'll call the police," Sean says. "You stay with your mother."

Victoria gets abruptly to her feet when she hears that. She brushes past me and stalks up the stairs, her footsteps echoing through the house. Julian stares morosely at the floor, then laughs softly. "I guess I'll call the police. It's my responsibility, anyway."

"No! No, Grandma!"

The cry chills me to the bone. The slap that follows it chills me further.

Sean and I share a horrified look. The scream that Luann releases after the slap galvanizes us into action.

The three of us rush up the stairs. Nathan stumbles out of his room. He looks at us in confusion, then looks toward his sister's open door.

"Grandma, stop!"

We enter the room to see Victoria grabbing Luann's shoulders. Her lips are pulled back from her teeth, and her eyes are wild. She shakes Victoria back and forth, her nails digging into the girl's arms.

"How dare you!" Victoria shrieks. "How dare you talk to that boy after we told you not to? Do you see what happens? Do you see what you did?"

“Mom!” Julian shouts.

He grabs Victoria and pulls her roughly away. Luann sobs and lifts her hands to her shoulders. Bruises are already beginning to form.

I step forward to pull her away, but she slaps me hard across the face. “You stupid bitch! You promised you wouldn’t tell them!”

The slap stings my face, but the physical pain is nothing compared to the shock. I stand rooted to the spot until Sean grabs me and firmly pulls me out of the room. “Let Julian handle this, Mary.”

“What’s going on?” Nathan asks. “What’s happening?”

“Ask your sister!” Victoria shrieks.

“Enough!” Julian shouts before dragging his mother from the room. “That’s enough!”

“What happened?” Nathan repeats, tears welling in his eyes.

“Nothing,” Julian calls before I can answer. “We’ll talk about it in a moment.”

“Help your sister,” Sean tells the boy. “Get her some ice and some bandages.”

Nathan rushes to Luann's side. They're both weeping now. Luann lifts her eyes to glare at me with pure white-hot hatred. Then, she allows Nathan to lead her from the room.

Footsteps pound down the stairs, and a moment later, I hear Beatrice call out, “Luann? What happened?”

I look to the end of the hall and see Grant behind Beatrice, the rest of the staff crowded behind him. The audience does nothing to help poor Luann, who bursts into tears and buries her face into her brother's shoulder.

I stand where I am, my cheek stinging, powerless to do anything but watch this family fall apart.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

The first gray tinge of dawn rises in the sky when the police return. Only two cars this time. Two of the four police officers talk to Julian, while two more talk to Luann. At her request, Nathan goes with her. Sean and I wait in the living room. For the time being, Victoria is allowed to remain upstairs, but the police make it clear to Julian that they'll need to speak to her, too.

Grant and Beatrice are in the great room with the servants. The police will want to take statements from them as well. Now that there's evidence to implicate Robert Cartwright, the police will seek to gather any more evidence as they can.

"Are you all right?" Sean asks me after a few minutes.

I can only shake my head in reply.

He puts his arm around my shoulder and kisses my cheek. "You did the right thing. We did the right thing. This is painful, but it's a lot less painful than Robert deciding he's had enough and sending some thug with a gun."

That sparks a thought in me. "Do you think he hired someone to do this?"

"I think so. I can't imagine he's so bloody foolish as to get his own hands dirty. Be a bit easier on all of us if he did, but that doesn't seem likely."

"I've been thinking about what Victoria said. Do you think it could be one of their employees?"

"I'm still leaning toward one of the staff," Sean replies.

“I thought you said you’d investigated them.”

“I found that they had no reason to betray their employers, but plenty of people do things without good reason.”

“The police searched the house, though.”

“The tools wouldn’t be here.”

“But there would be trace evidence, wouldn’t there? ANFO is hard to clean up, isn’t it?”

“Not especially. Not more than any other explosive. I don’t know, it might not be a servant. Robert’s a man of means. He could afford to pay someone an exorbitant amount to do this. It could be anyone. I just feel like a member of the staff is more likely to have convenient access to the home.”

Guilt stabs me again. “I could have stopped this. If I had paid more attention, I could have noticed the servants behaving unusually. I could have gotten to know them and determined who would be likely to hurt the Bellamys this way.”

“You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself. You’re a good detective sometimes, but you’re also a governess. You’re not meant to solve everyone’s problems. Grant and Beatrice would have been more likely to know if someone was behaving strangely, and neither of them said anything.”

His words fail to comfort me, but that’s not his fault. I am a good detective sometimes, but this isn’t one of those times. My past has caught up to my present and blinded me to what’s happening around me. In past mysteries, I would have gotten to the bottom of this long before. The moment Luann told me about her secret meetings with Kevin, I would have made the connection between the two of them and the



sabotage and pulled at that thread until I discovered the extent of Robert's hatred. I wouldn't have given up so easily getting to the bottom of the feud between Robert and Julian. I would have seen those diaries as more than just a salacious novel.

I've been a very poor detective indeed and not a better governess. I could stand on the technicality that I'm a tutor and not a babysitter in this case, but that's a poor excuse. I should have done better.

The door opens, and Julian enters, followed by two police officers. He smiles thinly at me. "You're up."

"Miss Mary Wilcox?" the senior officer asks. "I'm Detective Jaleel. Will you please come with me?"

I stand. Sean squeezes my hand, and I manage a smile for him before following the officers into the hallway. They lead me to the library. That feels ironic, though I can't say exactly why. It's not as though the diaries have anything directly to do with the sabotage.

Except they do. Victoria's affair with Robert is motive. If he resents her for breaking off their affair, then that might prompt him to these extremes. But should I tell the police what I know, or should I leave that to Victoria?

"Have a seat, Miss Wilcox."

I take the offered seat—one of the two easy chairs in the room—and Detective Jaleel takes the other. The other officer remains standing off to the side with his hands clasped behind his back.

Detective Jaleel leans forward with his forearms on his thighs and folds his hands in front of his knees. "Why didn't you tell us about the meetings between Luann

Bellamy and Kevin Cartwright?”

I hesitate for a moment. The question doesn't exactly surprise me, but I didn't expect to get so quickly to the point. “I... I'm sorry.”

“I appreciate that, Miss Wilcox, but that doesn't answer my question.”

I sigh heavily. “Luann asked me to keep that secret in confidence.”

“Did she volunteer this information, or did you catch the two of them together?”

“I caught Luann sneaking home late one night. She told me she was meeting Kevin secretly because their fathers wouldn't approve of their relationship. She asked me not to tell anyone, and I agreed on the condition that she stop sneaking out of the house at night.”

“Were you aware that Mr. Cartwright has allegedly been sneaking out of his own house to visit Miss Bellamy here?”

“Not until earlier tonight, no.”

“So when we first talked, you weren't aware that Mr. Cartwright had been here as recently as yesterday evening?”

“No.”

He nods and leans back, folding his arms across his chest. He regards me for a moment, then says, “What other secrets have you kept on Miss Bellamy's behalf?”

“That's the only one.”

“So you didn’t tell Mr. Bellamy that his daughter claims that Kevin Cartwright overheard his father threatening to take unspecified drastic measures to resolve the alleged feud between himself and Mr. Bellamy?”

“I did, but I didn’t keep that secret. I told Julian and Victoria Bellamy right away and then called the police. Well, Julian called the police after...”

I stop myself, but too late. The officer lifts an eyebrow. “After?”

I sigh. “After... There was a confrontation between Victoria and Luann after we told the two elder Bellamys what Luann told me. She was very upset that Luann was still meeting with Kevin.”

“Victoria was upset?”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe this confrontation?”

I hesitated again. I don’t want Victoria to be charged with abuse over an isolated incident caused by extreme emotional distress.

“Miss Wilcox, it’s crucial that you be honest with us right now. I’ll be honest. It looks very bad that you and Miss Luann conspired to withhold information that is turning out to be critical to this investigation.”

I frown. “But I didn’t withhold that information. I told the Bellamys right away, and you were called within minutes. As for Luann, she’s a child. She can’t be expected to have the same maturity as an adult.”

“But you can. And you didn’t tell us about the meetings between Miss Bellamy and

Mr. Cartwright until after she revealed the likelihood that the elder Mr. Cartwright was involved in the attack on the Bellamy residence.”

“I was protecting a young woman who doesn’t deserve to be embroiled in a conflict between two adults,” I protest. “I saw no reason to expose her to the police when she’d done nothing wrong.”

Detective Jaleel takes a deep breath. His tone is mildly irritated when he continues. “Because you withheld this information, you allowed Mr. Cartwright additional time to dispose of evidence that might link him to this crime. I’m not going to charge you with obstructing a police investigation yet, but I must emphasize that yet is the operative word here, Miss Wilcox. Luann might be a minor, but she can also be charged with obstructing. I appreciate that you sympathize with Luann, but your choice to protect her feelings could have put her life in danger. Do you understand that?”

My heart breaks. He’s right. I’ve told Luann more than once that her safety is more important than her feelings, but I haven’t practiced what I’ve preached.

I lower my head and nod. Detective Jaleel’s partner shuffles his feet and sniffs. The sound seems to reverberate loudly in the room.

Jaleel sighs. “Anything else we need to know, Miss Wilcox?”

I swallow. “There have been other incidents of sabotage.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Other than the attack on the Continental Vineyard last month and the attack last night?”

“Yes. There was an attack three weeks ago. Someone chopped down some of Victoria’s Chardonnay vines. And there was a recent instance... I suppose this hasn’t

been confirmed, but several barrels of the Pinot Noir harvested from this estate were found to be contaminated with Listeria . Well, that part's been confirmed, but we don't know for sure that it was sabotage."

"Do you have reason to suspect that it is?"

"I don't know," I reply. "I mean, Robert Cartwright has a reason to sabotage the Bellamys, but I don't know how someone would introduce Listeria into wine barrels."

"There are ways to do it that are very low-tech," Jaleel says, half to himself. "Manure, contaminated samples from other harvests, untreated soil... but it would be next to impossible to prove unless there were fingerprints on the barrel, and we haven't found fingerprints anywhere else." He looks back at me. "Let's go back to the statement you made about Robert Cartwright. What reason does he have to sabotage the Bellamys?"

I blink. "Well... they're rivals."

"And that's the only reason?"

My lower lip trembles. I am ordinarily not so bad at keeping things to myself, but I've lost much of my self-control since finding my sister's letters. It appears that I'll have to betray yet another confidence. This one is all the worse since I'm not supposed to know what I'm about to say.

I take a deep breath and lower my eyes. "Victoria had an affair with Robert over forty years ago. It... It's possible that they still harbor some resentment over that affair."

"How did you hear about this affair?"

“Her diary. I found it in the safe right there.”

I point to the safe. Detective Jaleel looks at his partner, who says softly, “We can get the code from the homeowner.”

Detective Jaleel nods. “We’ll bring her in next.” He turns to me. “Miss Wilcox, you’re free to go for the moment. I appreciate your honesty. In the future, please be honest from the beginning. We’re not here to make any more trouble for this family than we need to, but information like this is critical, especially in the early stages of an investigation.”

I nod, unable to meet his eyes. I was only trying to help everyone, and instead, I’ve made everything worse.

I return to Sean, and when I see that we’re alone in the room, I bury my head in his shoulder and weep.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

“When were you going to tell me?” Julian shouts. “Damn it, Mom!”

“I thought you knew!”

“That you fucked him? Yeah, I knew that. Hell, everyone knew that. You two eyefuck each other every time you’re in the same place. What I didn’t know was that he might be...”

He stops himself and lowers his voice enough that Sean and I can’t hear him from the living room. Actually, he’s probably more concerned with his children upstairs than with the two of us.

It doesn’t matter. I know what he’s going to say. He might be my father.

“What should I have done? They didn’t have DNA tests back in the eighties. Should I have told your father—”

“Which one? The one you married, or the one you opened your legs for when the one you married wasn’t looking?”

“That’s not fair, Julian!”

She’s weeping now. Her sobs echo through her words.

“The hell it isn’t!” he shouts. “I could be a bastard, and you never had the courtesy to tell me!”

"You don't know what it was like!" she shrieks. "I was twenty-three years old, and my life was over ! I wasn't Victoria anymore, I was Parker's wife. I was the 'lucky girl' who snatched up the heir to the Bellamy wine empire. It didn't matter that I had an MBA when most people were finishing their bachelor's degree or that it was my idea to partner with Picard wines in Bologne and open up the European market. I was the damned trophy wife!"

"So you became the trophy whore?"

"That's not fair !"

"No, you know what's not fair? Telling Dad you loved him then writing in your diary about how much better Robert was in bed?"

There's a moment of shocked silence. Sean and I share a look. He appears just as miserable hearing this as I feel.

"Yeah. That's right. I read the diary. The police wanted to know if I was aware of what it said. I wasn't, but I sure am now. And hey, good for you. Every girl deserves the best sex she can get right? Even if it means fathering a bastard child and making your cuckold husband raise it. I hope it was good enough, Mom. I really do."

Victoria mutters something through her sobs, and Julian says, "Don't blame Mary for this. She's trying to protect Nathan and Luann. If she wasn't here, Robert might have caught her with Kevin and taken his anger out on her instead of me. Think about that for a bit, Mom. Think about Robert catching Luann with Kevin and deciding to punish her for the fact that you used him."

"He used me , Julian! He used me ! We were going to..."

She cuts herself off, but not in time. "Going to what, Mom? Run away together?"



Abandon your marriages and your businesses and sail away across the sea where you could live in bed forever?"

"It wasn't just the sex, Julian. Stop fixating on that. I loved him. He was... You don't understand."

"So help me understand. What was it? Was he more handsome? Was he going to tell everyone how much smarter you were than he was? Was he going to let you run the business while he—"

"He was a man, Julian. He was a man . Parker was sweet, and he was kind, and he was tender, but he wasn't strong. If I hadn't stood with him, this company would have folded forty years ago. Robert is strong. He built his business, and he ran it with authority and assertiveness. Parker would have wilted if a secretary yelled at him."

"Is that why the Cartwrights are a failing winery, and we're the most successful wine business in New England?"

" I'm the reason we're successful! Me! I ran the fucking company, not your father. And you should know that because you worked for me for twenty years before you took over."

"Well, great job, Mom. Thank you for sacrificing the love of your life to help my poor dad. Or is he my dad? We'll never know. Actually, we will know. I'm going to find out for sure. And if I find out that Roger Cartwright is my father, the children and I are going to leave. We'll never see you again. Honestly, I should get a restraining order against you anyway after you assaulted Luann last night."

"She... I didn't... The vineyard is destroyed because of her!"

"The vineyard is destroyed because of you, Mom. You and your asshole boyfriend."

And for God's sake, Mom, it's a forty-acre plot in your backyard. It's a foolish vanity project that I allowed you to have because you're my mother."

"It's our legacy!"

"It's your legacy, Mom. Except it isn't. Your legacy is betrayal and selfishness."

The door to the great room slams open. Julian's footsteps echo through the house as he storms up the stairs. I take a deep breath and grip Sean's hand. A moment later, the door to the living room opens. Victoria Cartwright stands in the doorway and looks at me with naked hate. It reminds me disturbingly of the hate in Luann Cartwright's eyes last night.

"You're fired," she hisses. "Get out of my house."

"No, she's not!" Julian calls down the stairs. "I don't want you alone with the children."

Victoria grabs two fistfuls of her hair and releases a sob of frustration. "God damn it, Julian, I..." She throws her hands in the air. "Fine. Do whatever you want. My feelings don't matter at all."

"Not anymore," Julian calls down.

"No, you're right. Forget about me. I'm just an old whore."

She slams the door behind her. A moment later, I heard the front door slam shut, too. Sean and I remain where we are for a long while. Eventually, Sean says, "I should go."

"Please don't," I whisper. "I don't want to be alone here."

“ We should go,” he corrects. “We’ll get a room in town, and we’ll cooperate with the police until this investigation is over. Then we’ll go back to Boston. I know you tried, but this is out of our hands now.”

The door opens before I can reply. Julian stands where his mother stood a few minutes ago. He looks miserable.

“Mary, I understand if this situation is too uncomfortable for you, but I would really appreciate it if you and Sean could stay for a few more days. I’ll pay double your salary, but I don’t want the children to be alone with my mother right now, and I don’t have anywhere else I can take them. I don’t want them alone in a hotel room, and I can’t stay because I have to keep this from becoming yet another media clusterfuck, pardon my language, and I have to handle it. Once things calm down, I’ll take the children with me to the mainland, and my mother can deal with her own problems, but right now... just for their sake, can you stay.”

I nod. “Yes. Of course I will.”

Sean doesn’t look pleased to hear that, but he also nods. “We’ll keep them company, sir.”

"Thank you. I'll pay you as well, Sean. I just can't deal with all of the bullshit at once." He turns to leave but pauses at the doorway. "How long have you known, Mary?"

“Known what?”

“About Robert Cartwright and my mother? How long?”

I swallow. “I... I read the diary a couple of weeks ago.”

He chuckles bitterly. “Well, it’s not your shit to wade through. I guess I can’t blame you for not telling me. Do me a favor and don’t tell the kids yet, okay? I’ll handle that when the time comes.”

“I won’t,” I promise him. “I’m so sorry, Julian.”

“Doesn’t really matter.”

The door closes behind him, and I sink onto the couch cushion. Sean sits next to me, but he offers no words of comfort. There’s really nothing to say.

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The family is together for dinner that night. I’m somewhat surprised by that, and not very happy with the choice. I suggest to Julian that Sean and I should take the children somewhere else for dinner, and he very firmly replies, “If my mother’s uncomfortable having dinner with her family, then she’s welcome to leave.”

Sean’s lips thin, but he refrains from speaking. Victoria sits primly in her chair, eating her salad with dignity that I’m sure she doesn’t feel. Nathan and Luann sit on the opposite end of the table, a gap of two chairs in between Julian and I. Sean sits in between me and Victoria.

Beatrice quietly serves the meal, a simple one of roast beef, peas and mashed potatoes. The men and Victoria eat in silence. I manage a few bites out of politeness, but my stomach turns too much for me to finish. The children don’t eat at all. Luann keeps her eyes on her plate. Tear tracks stain her cheeks, and her shoulders slump in dejection. Nathan, on the other hand, sits ramrod straight in his chair. He stares hatefully at his grandmother, who ignores his look and continues to eat her meal.

Beatrice brings dessert out a half hour later. She clears the empty plates and the

nearly full ones without a word.

Dessert is ice cream sundaes. Once more, I manage a few bites out of politeness, and Victoria and the men finish theirs, more out of stubbornness than anything else, I believe. The children let theirs melt.

For a while, anyway. As Victoria finishes the last of her meal, she says cattily, "Hate me if you'd like Nathan. One day, you'll be a man. When you are, I suggest that you not treat your wife as property. Then you won't have to deal with her looking elsewhere."

Julian snaps his eyes up to her. "Mom, shut the—"

He doesn't finish his sentence. Nathan lifts his ice cream dish and sends the dessert hurling across the table. It strikes Victoria's face, splattering on her forehead and trickling down over her nose and cheeks. She doesn't so much as flinch.

"I hope you die alone, you old bitch."

"Nathan, that's enough!" I snap. "Go to your room!"

Both of the children leave. Luann keeps her head on the floor, but I notice that she takes Nathan's hand when they exit the room. I suppose it's a silver lining that the two of them have each other to cling to.

Beatrice enters the dining room and gasps when she sees Victoria. Victoria wipes her face with her napkin, as dignified as before. Then she stands. "Thank you for the meal, Beatrice. It was lovely."

She leaves the dining room then. The rest of us remain for a few more seconds before Sean nudges me. "We should go upstairs, Mary."

Julian leaves with us. He doesn't say a word to us as he stalks up the stairs and heads to his own room. Sean and I peek our heads into Nathan's room and find Luann weeping on her brother's shoulder. He glares at us until we close the door.

We head to my room and sit on the bed. I'm exhausted, but I don't expect to sleep until Sean lays me gently down on the bed. Then, mercifully, the day is over.

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The harvesters arrive early the following day and remain throughout the week. The Chardonnay must be harvested immediately, or they'll be ruined by the overwatering. As it is, the Pinot and Riesling vines are lost. The vineyard will have to be cleared, drained, resodded and replanted for the following season. Were it not for the Riesling that's already been harvested, the first growing season for the estate would be an entirely unmitigated disaster.

I don't hear anything from Robert Cartwright, but I'm sure there's a reckoning coming should Robert turn out to be innocent of this crime. For the time being, the police are watching him closely, and he'll have to play nice during the investigation. I hope that Luann is right and Robert is responsible, if for no other reason than that it would put an end to that portion of the drama, at least.

As it is, the successful harvest of the Riesling and the partial success of the Chardonnay is a very thin silver lining. The Bellamy family is falling apart. Perhaps it's already fallen apart.

The presence of the harvesters is a somewhat brighter silver lining. With their employees present, and the emergency harvest occupying most of their energy, Julian and Victoria don't have time to fight with each other or with the children. Julian is also able to remain at the house rather than leaving as he feared he would have to, so Sean and I are not the only buffer between Victoria and her grandchildren.

However, things between me and the children have soured. They obey my instructions well enough, but they don't talk to me at all. Luann looks at me with hurt and Nathan with anger. It's clear that both of them feel that I betrayed Luann.

Sean has some more success. He carefully avoids mention of the drama and asks general questions about their interests. He receives curt, one-word answers in reply, but it's far better than nothing and better than what I get. He truly is a godsend. The children need anything right now to take their mind off of things, and since they won't allow me to help with that, Sean has stepped up.

And that leaves me alone, ashamed, and miserable. I've struggled with families in the past, but I've never failed so utterly. Even in New Orleans, when I nearly lost two children in the peak of Mardi Gras, I still managed to keep things together better than I have here. It's going to be a very long winter.

That thought comes to me as I eat a toasted cheese sandwich and drink a cup of Earl Grey tea for lunch. I chuckle bitterly and remark to myself, "I won't be here through winter. The Bellamys will be glad to be rid of me just as soon as Julian can take his children somewhere else."

"That might be for the best, Mary."

Sean's voice startles me. I sigh heavily and agree, "Yes, you're right. It still hurts, though."

"I know," he says gently. "You've had a good run. In spite of all the odds, you've left each family you've worked for better than when you arrived. This might have just been a little beyond even you."

I give him a morose look. "If you're trying to comfort me, you're doing a very poor job."

He smiles sadly. "I know. I don't think there's anything I can do to make you feel better."



“I had a very high opinion of you a moment ago,” I remark. “Please don’t force me to change it.”

He wisely keeps silent. I take a deep breath and offer him my perspective. It doesn’t really make me feel better, but it might inform his responses better.

“I understand that it’s not realistic of me to expect that I can fix every problem every family faces. What frustrates me is that I was left with no choice but to betray Luann’s confidence. What frustrates me even more is that I failed badly at investigating the sabotage taking place here.”

“I actually can say something about that which might help,” Sean says. “You were actually right to suspect Robert Cartwright’s involvement. You didn’t investigate the servants, but that was a procedural mistake which didn’t really matter in the end. Your instincts overcame that mistake and led you to the right answer anyway.”

“So you think it really was Robert Cartwright?”

“I don’t see who else it could be,” he replies. “I doubt it was Robert himself, but I could believe he paid someone. Not one of the household staff, though. They’re too loyal. I’ve gotten to know them a little over the past few days, and none of them would do anything to betray the Bellamys. I think I’ll take my investigation over to the employees.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re going to continue investigating? Now that the police are here?”

“Of course. I have more freedom to maneuver than the police do. They’ll be hamstrung by Robert’s legal team and prevented from investigating with any speed or efficiency. I don’t have to worry about that constraint.”

I nod. "That's good. I think you can really help."

I smile, but I feel a pang in my chest. It's selfish of me, and a little silly, but it hurts that I have to remove myself and let Sean handle the investigation. I think of this as "my" case, and knowing that I can't act on it anymore is painful.

But it is what it is. Perhaps now that there's been some time, the children will be more receptive to my company. I finish my lunch and squeeze Sean's hand. "I'll check on the children."

"I think you should. They're mad at you, but they understand that they're wrong to blame you. I think a good conversation between the three of you should help them mend a little."

I smile a little more genuinely and kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you."

Thus encouraged, I head upstairs to talk to the two of them. I won't push for anything today. I'll just see if I can take them outside for some fresh air. It's a good place to start.

I go to Luann's room first. Nathan is protective of his sister and won't be willing to reconcile with me unless Luann is willing to mend our bridges.

The door is slightly ajar when I approach, and I hear Luann's voice inside. I lift my hand to knock, but when I hear what she's saying, I pause.

"What was I supposed to do, Kevin? I didn't have a choice. People could have gotten hurt. I know it was an accident, but I didn't think it was gonna be that bad. The police came here and everything. If someone had been outside... Kevin, did you hear me? The fucking police came! What should I have done?"

I lower my hand. Some instinct tells me that Luann might reveal something important about the case, something that could give everyone the answers we all need.

"Is your dad okay?" Luann asks. Apparently, she doesn't get the answer she was hoping for because I see through the crack of the door as she sits on the edge of the bed and wipes tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't want anyone to get in trouble. I just didn't know what to do."

She sniffles and wipes more tears from her eyes. "What did you tell them?" She nods, then adds, "Okay. Yeah, that's what I said too. I didn't say anything more specific. If we want the police to believe it, we have to be vague."

My eyes widen. The hunch I feel strengthens considerably and brings with it a new thought. Luann and Kevin are lying. Robert Cartwright isn't responsible for the sabotage on the vineyard.

That might not be true. God knows I don't want to believe it's true. It's possible that they're concerned that the police won't believe the truth, but her second comment, about being vague...

But I can't believe that Luann could be behind this. I don't know Kevin well, but Luann? Sabotaging her own grandmother's vineyard? Jeopardizing her father's business? It's too much for me to accept.

That doesn't mean it's not the truth, though.

"Well, nothing's going to happen to him, right? I mean, he has an alibi, doesn't he? And he has a really good lawyer. He'll be fine."

Something Kevin says frightens Luann. She pales and jumps off of her bed. "No, Kevin, don't do that! We'll be in real trouble! Like jail trouble! Maybe, but do you

want to take that risk? It's not just my family who lives here. The servants are here, and the new tutor is a prissy goody-two-shoes. She would think she's morally obligated to tell on us."

I gasp. She's all but admitted now that she and Kevin are responsible for the sabotage.

That gasp is a mistake. Her eyes whip toward the door, and a moment later, she says, "Oh, shit. Kevin, I gotta go."

I nearly turn and flee, but that won't change anything, and besides, I want to talk to Luann and see if my suspicions are correct. If they are, then I'll have a very important decision to make.

Luann whips the door open and blanches when she sees me. Her lower lip trembles. "Mary? What do you want?"

I'm surprised to find my voice steady when I reply, "The truth, Luann. All of it. Now."

She stares for a long moment without saying anything. When she does answer, her voice is calm, but her eyes are still wide with fright. "No. The truth about anything having to do with me or my family is none of your business. You're not my aunt. You're my tutor. You're a servant . You don't have a right to talk to me like this."

I give her a stern look. "My dear, you're not going to insult or intimidate me into refraining from investigating an action that could have killed people."

"And you're not going to intimidate me into telling you things that are none of your business," she snaps back. Her anger has overridden her fear again. "You're. A. Servant . Get over it. If you want to give me a pop quiz on my math homework, go

right ahead. That's as much a part of my life as you get to be. In fact, it's Saturday now. You don't get to talk to me at all until Monday. So goodbye."

She slams the door in my face. I remain where I am for a moment, but I decide not to knock on her door again. She's not going to give me an answer.

And once more, I'm at a loss. If I tell anyone what I overheard, she'll deny it. The police are already investigating, and I'm sure that Julian and Victoria aren't interested in any of my nosiness or speculations right now.

I can tell Sean. That's what I'll do. He can investigate them, and if he finds an answer, he can pass that along to the people who need to hear it. It hurts to once more remove myself from active participation in this mystery, but my ego isn't important right now. I need to put a stop to the danger, and if turning control of this to someone else is the way to do that, so be it.

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I head downstairs, but Sean isn't in the dining room anymore. He must have left already. I pull out my phone and begin to dial his number, but Julian's voice interrupts me. He's in the living room, and he's on the phone. For the second time in ten minutes, I eavesdrop on a conversation between a Bellamy and a Cartwright.

"I'm just saying that it would be nice to know the truth. It doesn't have to mean anything, Robert. I just want to know. Because I do, damn it! You and Mom... God, it's like you two think you're the only people who exist. You guys don't get to sweep your sins under the rug. It hurts. You hurt people, both of you. You don't get to wash your hands and spit pithy bull crap about moving on and letting go of the past. I'm not saying that I want anything from you. I just want to know if you're my father or not."

There's a brief pause that ends when Julian says, "You'll never be my dad, so don't worry about that. Parker Bellamy was my dad. But... damn it, there doesn't need to be a practical reason. I have a right to know. What are you so afraid of, anyway? Donna died fourteen years ago."

There's another brief pause. Then Julian sighs. "I thought you didn't like Kevin with Luann. Yeah, I know. But they're not doing anything wrong. Why would it? Who gives a shit? They're not brother and sister. They're the same age, and they started dating before all of this. Wait. What do you mean you didn't know?"

There's a longer pause now, interrupted every so often with a half-phrase from Julian. "Yeah, but..." "Okay, listen..." "Julian, come on..."

The pause ends when Julian says, "All right, you know what? Fine. Go to hell."

You're already on the hook for the sabotage. Oh, you don't think so? Yeah, good luck with that. I'll bet you the next time I talk to you, you'll be in a damned jail cell."

His tone changes slightly. "Or... Maybe you work with me on this, and I work with you on the other thing. Right now, all we have is the conversation between Kevin and Luann. It wouldn't be too hard to make that go away. Mom's crops can be replaced, and as long as you behave yourself and don't act out like a moron, this won't..." He sighs. "Okay, sure. Fine. The point is that if you do a DNA test, I'll stop pursuing you for the vandalism, terrorism, and assault. Because I want to know, damn it! There doesn't need to be a practical reason! I just need to know whose fucking DNA I'm carrying."

Another long pause, this time uninterrupted. At the end of it, Julian sighs again. "Okay. Sure. Get back to me once you've made up your mind. Keep in mind that you're in the middle of a police investigation, though. I'm not going to make the cops wait while you figure out if you have the courage to do the right thing. Yeah, you first."

He hangs up, and I back away from the door so that when he opens it, it appears that I've just entered the dining room. He scoffs a little when he sees me. "Hello, Mary. Join me for a drink?"

I hesitate. I wanted to talk to Sean about what I overheard Luann say, but maybe it's better if I tell Julian. It would be betraying her confidence again, but I don't want an innocent man to suffer for a crime he didn't commit.

Then again, it would take Julian's leverage away if Luann was involved in the sabotage. And I definitely don't want her in jail. Maybe it would be better to just let things work out as they will.

That's a question I'll have to answer later, though.

“Very well,” I reply. “Have a seat. I’ll bring you a drink. What would you like?”

He chuckles. “I’d like to wake up six weeks ago and know about Robert and Mom before all of the bullshit escalated.”

“Well, I can’t help you with that, but I can bring you some wine.”

“Forget the wine. There’s a bottle of vodka in the cabinet above the stove. Bring me that. And whatever you want for yourself.”

I fetch the vodka and opt for a glass of the freshly bottled Riesling. I would rather not drink right now, but it would be impolite of me to refuse, so I’ll nurse a single glass over the course of the conversation. Hopefully, by the end of it, I’ll know if I should tell Julian about the children or keep it to myself.

Julian pours himself a double shot and downs the entire glass, then pours himself another double shot. He sips this one, thankfully, but he keeps the bottle open.

“Did you overhear the conversation I just had?”

I decide it’s prudent to lie about that, so I reply, “No. I just arrived here. I was looking for Sean.”

“He mentioned going out for the day. Something to do with his business. He said he’d be back tonight.”

“Ah. Very well.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“He might have texted me. If it was an emergency, he might not have had time to tell



me in person.”

Julian nods. “So it’s normal for people not to talk to the people they love.”

I purse my lips and sip some of my wine. He sighs. “Sorry. I’m just pissed off about the whole thing.”

He downs the rest of his vodka and pours some more. “You know, the worst part of the whole thing is that I’ve suspected for a while that he might be my father. We don’t look much alike, I guess, but growing up, I had a lot of his mannerisms. We both have a certain swagger when we walk and a lot of smiles that look the same. Not that you would have noticed that since neither of us has had any damned reason to smile lately. And Mom...”

His voice trails off. His fingers tap on the table, and he stares at the wall. “That’s another thing that sucks. She really did love Dad. They had their ups and downs like any couple, but I remember the way she looked at him. I remember the love in her eyes. I even”—he chuckles—“I even remember them flirting with each other. She’d sneak up behind him and nibble on his ear, and he’d kiss her... Well, you don’t want to hear this. I’m sure they didn’t want me to see it. It wasn’t dirty, though. I liked seeing them be attracted to each other. It was enough to ease my doubts about my own parentage.”

He sips his vodka. “I kind of wish I looked more like Robert. Or more like Dad. As it is, Mom’s genes are so strong that I’m basically the male version of her. Anyway, I’m rambling. The point is that Mom did love Dad, so hearing all of the shit she said about him the other night really sucks. And knowing that those old doubts I had are founded, and she actually slept with him really, really sucks.” He shakes his head. “I just hate that she had to screw him right around the time I was conceived. Three months earlier or a year later, and fine, whatever, go be a slut if you want to. But... Damn it, I don’t want to have to wonder who I am at forty-three years old.”

He falls silent. After a minute, he finishes his glass and pours some more. He's six shots in now, and these two will make eight. He'll be drunk soon, not just buzzed but drunk, and he's in clear emotional distress. Perhaps now is not the right time to tell him that his teenage daughter might have conspired with her boyfriend to sabotage his mother's vineyard and framed his possible biological father for the act because she was angry that he wouldn't let her date his business rival's son.

I try to offer some comfort instead. "Who you are has nothing to do with them, Julian. It has nothing to do with Robert and nothing to do with your mother. It doesn't really even have anything to do with your father. You've become the man you are all on your own.

"As for your mother and Robert, they've been incredibly selfish about all of this, but try not to judge them too harshly. Marriage is hard. Building a life with someone takes every ounce of a person's energy, and starting that journey at such a young age is terrifying and exhausting. I believe that your mother did love your father, very much. She allowed something superficial to get in the way of that for a moment, but even then, it had far less to do with Robert and far more to do with her own fear. It was a selfish and foolish act, yes, but it doesn't detract from the love she had for your father or for you.

"You'll need time to be angry, of course. But I hope that when your anger fades, you'll be able to forgive your mother, at least. She made a horrible mistake, but she shouldn't be punished for it for the rest of her life."

He nods. "Maybe. I just..." He lifts his hands and lets them drop. "I'm just tired of constantly putting her emotional needs above my own. That's what it's always been about with her, and I'm over it. Between you and me, I'm glad that the vineyard is ruined. I'm glad that her petty little vanity project is falling on its face. It's frustrating that this is going to affect the business, but we'll survive it. I just want her to feel for a little bit what it's like for her needs to matter less than other people's needs."

I don't respond to that. We sit there for several minutes, sipping our drinks and staring past each other without making eye contact. Finally, I finish my glass of wine and stand. "Thank you for the drink, Julian. Whatever happens, I trust that you'll weather the storm."

"Oh, I will," he says. "I'm just worried how much of me will make it out and how much will be left behind."

I know that feeling very well. We're both shattered glasses trying to collect the memories that give us meaning, only to cut ourselves on the slivers of broken truth floating in those memories.

My thoughts move to Annie and the unopened letters in my bedroom back home in Boston. Perhaps it would be better to leave the truth behind and allow a comfortable memory to exist in its place. The truth is important, but not at the cost of so much pain.

This family is learning the truth of their past, and it's tearing them apart. Maybe it would be better to lay the truth I now know about Luann and Kevin to rest rather than add more fuel to the fire.

But then there's Robert to think about. He has his part to play in all of this, but he shouldn't suffer prison time for something he didn't do.

I need to know more before I can be confident how to act. I know only one side of this feud. It's time I discover the other side. But I can't talk to Robert. He's too embroiled in the past to have a clear view of the present. I need to talk to someone focused on the present and the future.

I need to talk to Kevin.

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The question, of course, is, how do I talk to Kevin? I could ask Sean to do that, but Sean is busy investigating the more logistical aspect of the sabotage. If Robert is the culprit, then almost certainly he paid someone else to accomplish it. I can leave Sean to focus on that side of the case while I explore the potential that Kevin and Luann could be involved.

That's what I tell myself, at least. Deep down, I suppose I know that the real reason is my desire to be involved in this case. I want to find the answers, not Sean. I want to prove to myself that I can still help people like the Bellamys. I can still expose or, in this case, lay to rest the scandals that plague them.

Of course, learning that Kevin and Luann are behind the sabotage will only allow me to help Robert Cartwright, not the Bellamys. I'll have to hope that the fear both children feel will prevent them from doing anything foolish in the future.

Still, right is right. Robert has his faults, but he should not suffer for a crime he hasn't committed.

None of this tells me how I can talk to Kevin. I pace my room back and forth and try to think of a way to approach him without Luann or Robert knowing.

The answer comes to me with a burst of inspiration. The Bellamy children are tutored at home, but Kevin attends the island's private preparatory academy. If I could meet him there, maybe I can convince him to talk to me. It's a long shot, but it's worth the effort.

Keeping this from Sean over the weekend is difficult, all the more difficult when he

confides in me Sunday evening that he's found nothing to connect either the Bellamys' employees or Robert Cartwright to the sabotage. The police, it seems, haven't found anything either, and no arrests have been made.

But if I tell Sean my plan, he'll disapprove strongly, and I don't want to hear his reproof right now. So, I keep it to myself, and on Monday, I am ready to put it into action.

I inform the children that today will only be a half day of school because I have an errand to run in the city that afternoon. Sean is a little harder to convince because he offers to chauffeur me, but I convince him to let me go on my own while he doublechecks the servants just to ensure we didn't miss anything. That will keep all of them at the house and give me time to work. And if I learn what I hope to learn, then I'll come clean to Sean. I'll still get a reproof, but it will be far more gentle if I come to him with evidence.

St. Agatha's Preparatory Academy is located in the town of Aquinnah on the extreme southwestern portion of the island. I learn from the school's website that instruction ends at three-oh-five, and I park across from the school at three-oh-three. I spot Kevin at three-oh-eight walking with a group of four other boys.

I curse inwardly. I need to get him alone if I'm going to talk to him.

His friends follow him to a bright red late-model sports car, and my heart sinks further. I'm used to walking most places, but most people, especially younger people, prefer to drive even very short distances. It looks like I might have completely flubbed my first attempt at talking to Kevin.

When the other four boys enter the car and Kevin waves goodbye to them, I release a huge sigh of relief. He walks away from the school and starts alone down the road that will lead to his home four miles away. It's a bit of a walk, but not an issue for a

strong young man like Kevin.

I wait until he rounds a corner out of sight of the school, then pull the van out of the parking lot and follow him. I catch up to him a minute later. He gives the van a casual glance, then goes back to ignoring it until I park twenty yards in front of him and step outside.

“Kevin?” He looks up at me and flinches. “I’m Mary Wilcox. Do you remember me?”

He grows instantly wary. “Yes, I met you once. What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping to talk to you for a bit. It’s about Luann.” That’s not exactly a lie. This does concern Luann.

His wariness turns to worry. “What happened? Is she all right?”

“She’s all right,” I admit, “but I need your input on something serious.”

He hesitates. “I’m... not sure if I should.”

“It has to do with the attack on the vineyard the other night.”

He pales and looks around quickly. When he sees that we’re alone, he meets my eyes. I keep my gaze steady, and after a moment, he sighs. “Damn it.”

He gets into the car quickly, choosing the rear compartment rather than the front seat. When I return to the drivers’ seat, he says, “There’s a park up ahead on the second left. Pull up there and we can talk in the car.”

I oblige, and when we’re parked, he asks immediately, “What did she tell you?”

I consider lying and telling him that she's spilled everything to me, but I've lied enough lately, and there's no need to make Luann appear untrustworthy.

"She didn't tell me anything. I overheard her on the phone with you the other day. You were both worried that the police might discover that it was you who sabotaged the vineyard and not your father."

I look at him and see that his face is pale, and his shoulders are stiff as a board. "She said that?"

"She was trying to reassure you that your father would be all right and that you two shouldn't tell the police a different story than the one she provided to me initially."

So you were the one who told the cops that Dad did it."

"That was me," I confirm, "because of what Luann told me."

He sighs and crosses his arms. "Well, Dad's been working sixteen-hour days trying to manage his company while also proving he's not trying to kill anyone, so that's been fun."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I believe that you and I can help put a stop to that."

"I'm not going to confess to the attack," he blurts out, quickly adding, "If I didn't do it."

"I don't know that you'll have to tell the police anything," I reply. "I can't promise that you won't, but I can promise that your parents love you very much. They won't want anything to happen to you."

"Dad won't want anything to happen to me," he corrects. "Julian Bellamy won't give

a shit, and Victoria Bellamy will be calling for the death penalty.”

“Not if you and Luann come forward together.”

He laughs. There’s more anger than bitterness in that laugh. “She doesn’t give a shit about Luann. All she cares about is that damned vineyard. I don’t even know if she cares about that or if she just wants to beat my dad.”

“I understand the two of them have quite the history.”

“Oh, they sure do. Victoria’s never forgiven Dad for buying the Leander wine estate from under Parker Bellamy’s nose.”

I raise an eyebrow. This is something I haven’t heard before. “When did this happen?”

“I don’t know. Before Parker Bellamy died, so long before I was born. Dad said they used to be friends before then, but once he bought the Leander estate, everything got all cold. Then, when Parker died, Victoria started being a real bitch.”

“How so?”

“She would pay for people to say things that weren’t true in the newspaper. Like how we used dangerous pesticides, or our employees didn’t wash their hands. I don’t know, I never read the articles. I just know that the company was almost ruined, and Dad had to take out a bunch of loans. This all happened before I was born.”

“If it happened before you were born, then how do you know it’s true?”

He blinks. “I mean... I don’t get why Dad would lie.”



Many reasons. Then again, Victoria Bellamy isn't exactly known for her honesty either. "It sounds like your families have good reason to hate each other."

"I mean... I guess so. That doesn't mean Dad's the one who did this, though."

"Yes, I know that already. But you're letting the police believe that he is."

He swallows and looks away from me. "They'll figure out that it wasn't him. There's no evidence."

"Perhaps not. But as far as the police know, you overheard him say that he needed to take drastic measures. What will happen when the police tell him about that conversation?"

He goes white as a sheet. I press my advantage. "The police will try to keep your name out of their investigation. I'm sure they told you that, just as I'm sure they told you that they couldn't promise to keep your name out of their investigation. What happens when they get frustrated with their lack of progress and try to goad a confession out of him?"

He leans forward and runs his hands through his hair. "Oh man. I hate this. I hate all of this."

I have shown the stick. Now I will show the carrot. "Talk to him. To Julian as well. If you and Luann can be honest with your parents, then I'm sure that there is a way out of this without anyone suffering legal trouble. But you need to come clean. The damage this lie is causing is going to tear both of your families apart. I'm sure you two had your reasons for doing what you did, but it's gone too far. Put an end to it now. Please. Before it's too late."

He bites his lip and rocks back and forth for a minute. I say nothing else. Either he'll

cave, or he won't.

He doesn't. He takes a deep breath and gives me a hard look. "I don't know what you thought you overheard, but Luann and I didn't do that to Victoria's vineyard. I don't know who did. I thought I overheard my dad saying some crap, but maybe I was mistaken too."

He reaches for the door handle and seems surprised to find it unlocked. He hesitates before stepping outside. "I need to go home now."

"All right," I reply. "I hope you think about what I've said, though."

"Yeah. Sure."

He starts away, walking fast and looking around fearfully. No one stops to ask what he's doing or what I'm doing. I wait until he's out of sight, then sigh and start the engine.

I didn't achieve the result I wanted, but I'm not losing hope. If I were Kevin, the next thing I would do is try to warn Luann. Maybe if she knows that the walls are closing in, Luann will be more willing to come clean. It's a step in the right direction.

I can only hope that going about it the way I am won't cause more harm than good.

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That hope is dashed within minutes of my return to the house. I hear shouting as soon as I walk inside, and when I follow the noise upstairs, I find Nathan and Luann arguing with Sean. Sean has his hands up and is trying to placate the youngsters, both of whom are red-faced and crying. When Sean looks at me and frowns accusingly, there can be no misunderstanding what they're arguing about.

Luann sees me and shrieks, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out of my fucking life!"

I'm too stunned to come up with a better response than, "Pardon?"

"Don't act stupid," she snaps. "My God , you're like sixty years old! Grow up!"

"All right," Sean says sternly. "That's enough!"

"You're not my dad!" she retorts, whirling on him.

"Dad's barely our dad these days," Nathan adds bitterly.

"Well, he's definitely not our dad, and he can't tell us what to do." She spins toward me. "And neither can you! You're the fucking tutor ! Jesus Christ !"

"You can get your point across without that language," I say, frustration overwhelming my guilt.

"Can I? Because you don't seem to get it no matter what I do. It's none of your business what happens between me and Kevin, none of your business what happens

between us and our dad, none of your business what happens between us and our grandma, and none of your business what happens on the vineyard.”

“What exactly happened?” Sean interrupts. “I’m still not sure what you two are so angry about.”

“She went to Kevin’s school,” Nathan replies, frowning at me with his arms crossed.

“Like a fucking creep,” Luann adds. “Told him to get into a van and then tried to get him to confess to sabotaging the vineyard. Which he didn’t do, by the way.”

The look Sean gives me cuts me to my core. It’s the sort of look a tired parent would give a toddler after coming home to find that the toddler had spread peanut butter all over the carpet. “Is that true, Mary?”

Luann plants her hands on her hips and stares haughtily at me. “Go ahead, Mary. Tell your boyfriend that you were stalking my boyfriend.”

I gather my thoughts and reply in as steady a voice as I can, “I am concerned that Robert Cartwright is going to suffer for a crime he didn’t commit. I’m also very concerned that you and Kevin have been sabotaging—”

“We haven’t! You don’t know that!”

“You can deny it all you want, Luann, but I do know that, and it’s a very big problem.”

“How do you know that?” Nathan challenges. “Did you see it happen?”

“I overheard her talking to Kevin. They were discussing how they were going to cover up the crime.”

"Jesus Christ," Sean mutters.

"You're a liar !" Luann shrieks.

Her eyes are huge with terror, and her face is pale rather than red-faced. I look at Sean, pleading with him to look at her and know that I'm telling the truth. Instead, he looks at me, still like a parent, this time like one learning from the police that his child has been caught vandalizing a school.

"You two could get seriously hurt!" I protest for Sean's sake as much as for Luann's. "You two could have hurt someone else. You could have gotten your grandmother killed, or your father, or any of the household staff. Or yourselves. The explosives you carried could have been mishandled and exploded."

"That's not a very high risk," Sean interrupts. "ANFO is very stable."

"Is that important right now, Sean?" I snap.

He narrows his eyes and holds my gaze. "No, Mary. It isn't."

I feel my lower lip trembling. But I was only trying to help! I just wanted to put an end to all of this! It's not fair!

I am keenly aware of how childish I sound, and that does nothing to improve my attitude right now. "Listen, this can all end if you and Kevin just come clean. You need to tell the truth. You acted irrationally because your parents were being unfair, and they were. You two should feel free to date each other regardless of your family history. You made a poor choice, but it's nothing you should be punished for the rest of your life. You made a mistake, and you've learned your lesson. Can you honestly tell me that your parents will put you in jail?"

Luann leans forward, hands still on her hips. “Read my lips, Mary. We! Didn’t! Fucking! Do! Anything! ”

“That is enough shouting and swearing,” Sean says. “Unless you want the other servants to hear.”

“Oh my God, I love that you said that,” Luann replies. “The other what? What was that word?”

“Luann—”

“Oh, right. Servants . The other servants .” She snaps her eyes back to me. “Tutor me, servant. That’s what your job is. The rest is none of your business.”

“I told you before,” I counter. “Your safety is more important than anything. I won’t let you and Kevin run around with loaded guns just because you want to act out against an unfair rule.”

She grabs fistfuls of her hair and shakes her head. “Oh my God. It’s none of your business. It’s none of your business. It’s none of your business! It’s none of your fucking business !”

“I think we’re done for now,” Sean says. “Children, go to your rooms. Mary, you and I will go to our room and have a little talk.”

“Good idea,” Luann says. “You two go talk, and I will do whatever the fuck I want because you can’t tell me what to do.”

She stalks toward me, glaring fiercely at me as though daring me to stop her. I don’t. She stalks past me and descends the stairs. Nathan takes the time to shake his head disapprovingly at me and say, “Thanks for the help, Mary,” before following his

sister.

The front door slams shut, and I stiffen, then turn to follow them.

“Leave it, Mary,” Sean calls.

“But—”

“Leave it.”

“But they’re going—”

“Mary, for the love of God, leave it!”

I stiffen when he raises his voice. This is only the second time he’s raised his voice to me. The first time he raised his voice was out of concern for my safety. This time is different.

“Inside the room!”

I feel an irrational urge to stalk defiantly down the stairs, but that would make me no better than the teenagers who’ve just done the exact same thing. I walk into the room instead, wiping tears from my eyes and preparing for the scolding to come.

When Sean closes the door behind me, I ask, “Where are Julian and Victoria?”

“They left for a board meeting. The company’s in the thick of it with the attacks on the vineyard, and it looks like Robert Cartwright is preparing a countersuit for defamation.”

His tone is calmer now, and for a moment, the irrationality returns, and I hope that I

might get away without being scolded. I turn to him, and that hope vanishes immediately. The tired parent is there, but it's the pity I see in his eyes that truly hurts.

He sighs and sits on the bed. He looks past me and takes a deep breath, which hurts like hell because I know he's preparing for a frustrating argument with a grown woman acting like a child. But I'm right, damn it! I'm right !

"I think we should leave, Mary."

I blink. I expected an argument, but I didn't expect it to start this way. "What?"

"I think we... No, forget that. I know we should leave. We should leave."

"Leave... what? Leave the house?"

"The house, the island, the family: all of it. We should leave and allow them to pick up the pieces without us here to rip them apart again."

My stomach turns. He's using the word us, but it's very clear that he means me. "But... what about them? What about the children?"

"Oh Christ, Mary," he says, rubbing his face and looking past me again. When he meets my eyes, the pity is stronger, and I hate it so much I want to scream. "We're not helping the children."

"Don't say we if you mean me," I snap.

He shows some emotion at that. "Well, I can't bloody talk to you straight, can I? You're going to get all pissy and hurt and tell me that you did all of this for the children, and I just can't understand, and you can't leave mysteries unsolved, and you



need to speak for the people who can't speak for themselves, and so forth and so on, and you know what? Maybe that's all true. But you're wrong. This time, you're wrong."

"No, I'm not !" I stamp my foot when I say that, and when I realize what I've done, heat floods my cheeks. "I'm not wrong. Luann and Kevin are behind this, and they need to be honest before an innocent man gets hurt—"

"Robert's richer than God, Mary. He's not going to be hurt. There's going to be a highly publicized scandal, and the two of them are going to come to an agreement and then probably never talk to each other again. Which is for the best. The children are going to stop acting out because nearly burning down their own house is much more frightening than their nosy tutor threatening to tell on them. Julian is going to take the children away from their grandmother, and Victoria is going to be able to focus on her pet project vineyard without her family and her old flame getting in the way. They're going to move on, and they're going to have an easier time doing it without you."

Once more, my stomach turns. I actually sink down into a chair. "Sean, why are you talking to me like this? You never talk to me like this."

Sean chuckles in frustration and gives me a tight smile. "I'm sorry, Mary. This isn't the right time for me to be gentle with you. I'll be as gentle as I can, but the main point that needs to get across is that you need to leave this house before nightfall. Your presence here is damaging this family, and it's not doing you any favors either."

My breathing quickens, and my hands start to tremble. These are the beginning symptoms of a panic attack, but I refuse to succumb to one of those now. "Someone needs to help them."

"No, Mary. They need to figure it out on their own. And you need to accept that

sometimes things don't get figured out. Sometimes people hurt, and trying to stop that hurt only makes it worse. Sometimes bad things happen, and no one gets punished for them. Sometimes people cheat and get away with it. Sometimes families split up. Sometimes bad things happen, and there's nothing you can do to stop it or fix it. It's a shite truth, but it's a truth."

My whole body is trembling now. I look up at him, pleading silently for him to understand, for him to see that I can't do that. I can't give up. It's not right. It's not fair .

I see no understanding in his eyes. No agreement. Sympathy, but no agreement. "Start packing," he says. "I'll call Julian and let him know that we're leaving."

The last of my strength leaves me. I don't have the energy to do more than nod as tears stream silently down my cheeks.

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I zip up my suitcase while Sean talks with Julian. "I understand this isn't ideal for you, Mr. Bellamy. Believe me, we wish we could be of help, but I think that strangers being here right now is making things harder for the children, not easier." A brief pause, then he says, "They're..." He sighs. "I'll be honest. There was an argument between me, Mary, and the children. I'm not sure exactly what it was about. I was only in the middle of it because it became heated. They stormed out of the house. I talked to Grant, and he told me that the children often visit a beach nearby, and they've been known to run there when they're angry. Grant is looking there while Beatrice checks the mall in town. I understand that's another favorite hangout."

I sit on the edge of the bed and stare out of the window. The sun is setting, and the shadows of the vines below are lengthening. Already, some brown is showing in the vines as the drenched soil causes their roots to rot. The disease afflicting this family is spreading.

"I'm afraid not, sir. It's no offense to you and none to Victoria. We just feel it's best we leave before the children get back. Yes, I'm afraid it was that heated. Oh, no, no, nothing like that. Just words. It's just... well, at that age, they don't really respect strangers. I didn't respect strangers when I was a teenager. Hell, I didn't respect my own parents. It's nothing to feel so terribly about, sir. This is just a trying time for your family and one that we're not very well-equipped to help with. I wish the best for all of you, but we just can't be of much help. And... well, I hate to say it this way, but we couldn't even keep the children in the house. Not unless we physically restrained them, and I think it goes without saying that would be a poor way to keep them safe."

There's a long pause, then he says, "No need to apologize, sir. You've been perfectly

polite. Don't be too hard on the children, either. They're young. This is just the way things have shaken out, unfortunately. All right." He nods. "Yes, that's a good point. We'll wait for the children to get back before we leave. You take care, sir."

He hangs up, and sighs heavily. "I told him we'd stay until the children got back. Then we'll leave."

"Yes, I heard you."

He rolls his eyes but doesn't call me out for my attitude. "I'll bring the luggage to my car. We can put everything in my boot." He smiles slightly. "Sorry, my trunk."

I don't react. His smile fades after a moment. He sighs again, then begins taking the luggage downstairs.

I remain where I am on the edge of the bed. It's probably not healthy for me to do this, but I think about what will happen to the Bellamys after I leave.

The children will suffer. Their father is embroiled in the company concerns, and their grandmother is in severe emotional distress. They won't have anyone to advocate for them and no one to be concerned for their feelings.

Then again, I haven't done much for them there, have I?

Tears swim in my eyes, and I brush them away. I meant to do so much good. I only wanted them to be safe. I only wanted to stop all of the secrets and all of the aggression.

But that's not exactly true either. Like Julian intimated when he caught me eavesdropping on his phone conversation in the library, I treated this family's past drama like a soap opera.

But not their current trials. I never treated their current problems like entertainment. I might have failed, but I did try very hard to do what was best for the children. I did try to help them. That's not much comfort to me as I hear Sean's steps return up the stairs and try to wipe the tears free of my eyes, but it's better than nothing.

When the door opens, I get to my feet. "I'd prefer to wait in the dining room," I tell Sean. "I'd like some coffee before we begin the drive home."

"I was thinking we'd spend the night at the Avalon Hotel in town," Sean says. "We can drive home in the morning after a good night's rest."

"No. I don't want to be here another night. You're right. We should be gone completely as soon as possible."

He looks like he's going to argue further, but he stops himself and only nods. We head downstairs, and I make a pot of coffee for us. Sean stays silent and avoids eye contact with me. At some point, we'll need to talk through our frustration with each other, but we're a while off from being able to do that.

I finish the coffee and serve a mug to Sean and one to myself. I'm just about to take the first sip when the door flies open, and Nathan rushes into the dining room.

My blood chills when I see him. He's covered in dirt, and his eyes are wide with terror.

Then I smell him. He's not covered in dirt. He's covered in soot.

"What is it?" Sean asks, recovering from the shock faster than I do. "Where's Luann?"

"She's at the barn on the Cartwright property. She went there to meet Kevin. I don't

know what happened, but the barn's on fire now, and I can't hear either of them."

My stomach turns somersaults. "Does she have her cell phone?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You call her," Sean says. "I'll call nine-one-one."

"Take us to the fire, Nathan," I command. "Sean, you drive."

"Right."

Nathan leads us to the car. I hear Sean on the phone with emergency services while we run.

"When did the fire start?" I ask Nathan.

"Umm... I think... Fifteen minutes ago? It was still small when I left, but they weren't answering, and the door was locked."

"All right. Thank you," Sean says. He hangs up and tells us, "Emergency services says nine minute ETA. That means we'll beat them by four minutes. Have you called Julian yet?"

I shake my head.

"Do so," he says. "Nathan, do you have Robert Cartwright's number?"

Nathan nods. "Yeah, I know it."

"Do you have your phone?"

“No, I lost it on the way over.”

“Use mine,” Sean says. “Call him now. He might be able to have someone on the property get into the barn.”

When we pull onto the main road, I see the black smoke billowing up from the barn. My heart sinks to the soles of my feet. I hope desperately that Luann and Kevin aren’t inside there anymore.

“I don’t know,” Nathan says. “They just went inside. I figured they wanted to make out or something, so I just left them alone. I didn’t think they were going to get hurt. I’m sorry.”

I can’t hear what Robert says in return, but Nathan says, “We’re on our way back now. The fire department is supposed to get there a few minutes after us. Okay, yeah, please. If they can get in before us, maybe they’ll be okay.”

He snuffles, and I feel a pang of sorrow and fear on his behalf. I know how terrifying it is to lose a sister.

At that thought, I am filled with resolve. Nathan will not lose his sister today. I don’t care what else happens, but Nathan will not lose Luann. He won’t suffer the way I have. He won’t be plagued by bad memories the way I am.

Sean’s car is not at all suited for rough roads, but he bounces the car up the gravel and dirt drive toward the Cartwright house with no regard for his suspension. The barn is located behind the house to the right, and he leaves the drive behind and bounces over the loose ground until he comes down hard and snaps something in the front. The car skids to a halt, but if Sean is concerned about his vehicle, he doesn’t show it. We rush from the car and sprint to the building without a look back.

The barn is completely engulfed. Smoke billows from the windows, and yellow flame licks out between the boards. The fire appears concentrated in the upper half of the building, a good sign. The lower portion might be relatively free of smoke and flame.

“Call them, Nathan,” Sean commands. “See if you can... Mary! Mary, no !”

It’s too late. I’m already running for the nearest window. I don’t have anything to shield myself, so I cover my face with my right arm and throw myself through the glass. I feel a sliver of the material slice my back, but I don’t stop to see how bad the wound is.

The heat is enormous. The smoke is a thin haze near the ground, but the heat is unbearable. It’s like being caught in a broiler. I am in for only a few seconds before I’m gasping for air.

A strong hand grabs my arm, and a moment later, Sean hisses, “Mary! Get the hell out of here!”

“No, Sean. Help me find them.”

“Are you insane? We need to get out of here! The fire department will be here soon.”

“I’m not leaving them.”

He looks at me for a long moment. Then he curses. “Damn you. Fine. Two minutes. Not a second longer.”

That’s fine with me. Two minutes will be more than enough time to cover the ground floor of the barn. And if Luann and Kevin are on the upper floor...

No. I won’t think about that.



We begin the search, looking through the different storage areas of the barn. The dairy cow is bellowing madly for release, so Sean lets her out while I check the chicken coop. The chickens themselves have already fled outside through the little door cut into the wall.

Sean rejoins me when we begin looking through the feed stores. I am beginning to lose hope when I see a soft white hand lying outstretched behind a stack of grain sacks.

“There!” I call out. “Look!”

Sean turns to the hand. “Good eye, Mary. I’ll get her out of here. Keep looking for Kevin.”

“He might be with her,” I protest, following him to Luann.

I’m right. Kevin lies half atop Luann, arms splayed out to the side. Both of them are in an awkward position and neither of them are moving.

“They’re unconscious,” Sean says. “Take Luann. I’ll take Kevin.”

He hefts the young man over his shoulder. With somewhat more difficulty, I manage to lift Luann off of the ground, though I need Sean’s help to keep from losing my balance.

“Okay,” he says. “Out the way we came—”

Before he can finish that sentence, a loud groan sounds, and a moment later, a massive section of the flaming upper story crashes in front of us. Soot and smoke billow into our faces, causing us to choke and cough.

The heat is beyond unbearable now. It's all-consuming. I can almost feel my skin blistering.

Sean grabs my arm and pulls me toward the back of the barn. Luann is a petite girl and not very heavy, but I am not a young woman, and my arms and legs burn when we finally reach the door.

A loud crack sounds behind us, but I don't risk stopping to see how close we are to being crushed. It's not until a loud thump sounds behind me and the ground shakes a little that I realize how near it was.

We keep running until firemen pop up in front of us and stop us. A light shines in my face, and a stern-faced but compassionate woman with a sturdy build asks my name.

I don't answer her right away. I collapse to my knees, unable to hold onto Luann anymore. I look down at her, terrified that she's not going to wake up, but just before the paramedics tend to her, she gasps and opens her eyes.

"Oh God," I breathe. "Oh, thank God."

She looks at me. "Mary? You came for us?"

"I'm so glad you're all right."

The paramedics rush her away, and two more sit me down and examine me. I look back at the barn just in time to see the engines start and begin to douse the flame.

It's all right. The children will be okay. That's all that matters.

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On the whole, the Cartwright house is just as impressive as the Bellamy house. It's two stories rather than three, but it's more spacious. The design is as modern as the Bellamy house is classic, with dark leather furniture and bright aluminum appliances sitting on granite tile floors. There is a den rather than a separate living room, and the great room is much larger, with a large flat-panel tv embedded into the wall above the fireplace and seating for at least a dozen on the massive sectional.

At the moment there are nine of us seated: The Bellamys, Sean and I, and the Cartwrights.

Sean and I are cleared by the paramedics on the property. Luann and Kevin were taken to the hospital for treatment. Robert, Victoria, and Julian spent the night with them at the hospital and returned here after the children were released.

Now everyone is here. It's almost surreal to see the Bellamys and the Cartwrights in the same place without being at each other's throats. Julian and Robert are talking in low voices, and looking at their faces, you wouldn't know that they're embroiled in a feud that has escalated into a police investigation and a lawsuit.

It appears that the lawsuit is a thing of the past. They are talking quietly, but I hear Julian say that the person who set the barn on fire is probably the same person who sabotaged Victoria's vineyard.

I look over at Luann and see guilt in her eyes. I give her an encouraging smile, hoping to ease some of her worries. I'm quite sure she and Kevin didn't try to burn the barn down on top of themselves, but I know she feels guilty for the sabotage. That's less important than the fact that they're both alive right now.

Then Luann surprises me. She looks at Kevin, and the two of them squeeze each other's hands. Then Luann turns to the adults and says in a clear, strong voice, "Kevin and I sabotaged Grandma's vineyard. I came up with the ideas, and Kevin did the work."

The room instantly falls silent. Victoria gasps, but it's hard to tell if it's hurt, anger or only simple shock that causes it.

I see a similar expression on the faces of the men. Sean gives me a searching look, but I shake my head. The children are doing this all on their own.

"It's true," Kevin adds. "We were angry at you two for not letting us date. We were going to sabotage both vineyards, but then Dad put in that new security system with cameras, so we just sabotaged the Bellamy vineyard. I chopped the vines down, but when I almost got caught, I panicked and ran. I used Dad's company card to buy some ANFO and had it shipped to our house while Dad was out of town. I stored it in a woodshed and took it with me to sabotage the water system. I watched a Youtube video that told me how to use it. The Listeria wasn't us, though. I promise that. We would never try to get anyone sick, and if we'd known how dangerous the explosive was, we wouldn't have used it either."

The adults still don't say anything. Victoria lowers her hand and swallows. The room is quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

Luann breaks the silence. "We're sorry. We were just so angry." Tears come to her eyes, and she wipes them away. "You guys were just fighting all the time. Dad and Mr. Cartwright, Grandma and Mr. Cartwright, Grandma and Dad... And we liked each other, but all you guys did was act like the other family was evil and stupid and talk about how much you hated them."

Robert and Julian glance quickly at each other, then at the floor. A flush spreads over

both faces. It's a wholly inappropriate time for me to think this, but I see the family resemblance now.

"And you said a lot of things, Dad," Kevin says softly. "About Luann."

The two men look at each other again, then Robert slumps even more.

"You don't even know her," Kevin continues. "And Mr. Bellamy, you don't know me. Just because I'm Robert's son doesn't mean I'm your sworn enemy. And Luann's not your sworn enemy, Dad. Hell, none of us even want to be in the wine business, not even Nathan."

Nathan nods. "And we don't want to fight. We really don't want to fight."

"So you sabotaged the vineyard?" Victoria asks. She doesn't sound angry, only shocked.

"We're sorry," Luann says again, her voice shaking. "We were just mad. You guys wouldn't listen to us. All you cared about was that stup—was the vineyard, and Dad and Mr. Cartwright just wanted to hate each other over some business thing that happened before any of us were born. And..." She looks up at Julian. "And... I think the whole thing between Robert and Grandma just kind of threw you three off."

Victoria gets to her feet and crosses her arms, looking away from them. I can see tears trickling down her cheeks.

Robert takes a deep breath and rubs his face. "Yeah, that's been a whole thing too."

Kevin frowns. "What whole thing between you and Victoria?"

Robert sighs. "We... had an affair about forty years ago."

“Forty-four years ago,” Victoria corrects. “For seven months, and it ended when I found out I was pregnant with Julian.”

Kevin’s eyes widen. He looks at Julian. “Wait... Does that mean... Are you...”

Julian and Robert look at each other. Then they look at Kevin and Luann. Both children are white with terror. If Julian is Kevin’s brother, that means that Kevin is dating his half-niece.

“We’re going to get a DNA test to be sure,” Robert says. “But... it’s possible.”

Kevin’s eyes flinch to Luann. Her lower lip trembles, and she buries her face in her hands.

“That doesn’t mean a damned thing,” Julian says with surprising strength. “Whoever we are, it doesn’t change what you two are to each other. You two were close before all of this came out, and as far as I’m concerned, nothing has changed. What you two did was wrong, and it could have gotten people hurt. But... I think we can all agree that the adults didn’t help with any of this.”

We all nod, me included. The children haven’t exactly been saints, but we’ve not done any better than they have.

“So here’s what I propose,” Julian continues. “The feud is over. Completely. Robert and I can work out an agreement to smooth things over on the business side, but personally, the animosity ends today, between all of us. Luann and Kevin can continue to see each other if they’d like to, but they don’t have to hide anymore. Mom and Robert can stop being at each other’s throats in public, and if you two can’t, then you can agree to at least avoid each other. Same goes for me and Robert. We’ll be neighbors, and if we don’t want to be any more than neighbors, so be it. But we’re not enemies anymore. We can start there and then see where things lead. All

right?”

The others murmur agreement. There aren't really smiles on anyone's faces after this, but no one's weeping anymore, and no one looks tense or angry. Mostly, they just look tired. I can understand that. I'm utterly exhausted myself.

Victoria breaks the silence this time. “We should go home. I’m utterly spent, and I’m sure everyone else is too. This has been a hellish day to cap off a hellish past several weeks. I hope that we’ve all turned over a new leaf, but frankly, I’m too tired to know for sure how I feel about any of this. Let’s just take the night to decompress, and we can move forward with all of this in earnest tomorrow. Does that sound all right with everyone?”

The others murmur agreement again, and the families separate without goodbyes.

Almost without goodbyes. Kevin and Luann share a tight embrace on the porch before they leave. Both children are crying softly. Kevin whispers through his tears that everything will be okay, and Luann buries her head in his shoulder and sobs.

Nathan stands nearby, waiting to comfort his sister when Kevin finally lets her go. The adults stand awkwardly at the bottom of the porch, looking like they hate themselves. They probably do right now. Or maybe Victoria's right, and everyone's just tired.

The two children finally separate with a chaste kiss. Nathan puts his arm around his twin, and the two of them enter the Bellamys’ car. Sean blinks and says, “Crap. I forgot about our car. The tie rod’s snapped in half.”

“I’ll have it towed and repaired,” Robert says behind him. “It’s the least I can do after you saved my son’s life. I’ll have Horace take you two back home.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cartwright,” Sean replies. “That’s very kind of you.”

Robert chuckles. “I don’t know about that, but it’s a step in the right direction.” He looks at Kevin and smiles. “At least he turned out all right in spite of his father.”

“We all make mistakes,” I tell him. “Sometimes grave ones. But how we get up is more important than how we fall down.”

“Very wise words,” Robert agrees. “I hope we’ll have a chance to meet in better circumstances, Miss Mary.”

“Well, we’ll have to come back for the car,” Sean says. “We can have an ordinary dinner at a restaurant like friends instead of all the craziness. Could be nice for a change.”

Robert laughs, and even Kevin smiles. It’s nice to see that. “It’s a date.”

“I’ll be staying on until winter break as well,” I tell him. “The children must at least finish this semester before they have to adjust to a new governess. If the Bellamys will have me, that is.”

“I’m sure they will after all you’ve done for them. For us.”

Horace arrives a moment later with the car. Sean and I don’t say anything as we return to the Bellamy estate, but as we pull out of the driveway, he reaches over and takes my hand into his.

I look to my right and smile at him. Behind him on the eastern horizon, the light of dawn is beginning to drive the darkness away, just as it always does, no matter how dark the night.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:25 am*

The families are gathered in the great room, this time of the Bellamy estate. The adults stand, their faces taut with trepidation. The children sit together on the couch. Luann and Kevin are holding hands so tightly that their knuckles are white. Nathan sits near them, gripping his own hands with equal ferocity.

Robert moves to put his arm around Victoria, then catches himself and quickly pulls it away. Victoria reaches for his hand and grips it just as tightly as Luann holds Kevin's hand.

Julian's hands are steady as he opens the envelope, but his own fear is written on his face. This is the moment of truth. The results of the DNA test are in, and despite Julian's insistence that it won't change anything, we all know that it will.

Julian pulls the letter from the envelope and gives everyone a nervous smile that isn't returned. His hands are finally shaking as he opens the letter. We all hold our breath. The only sound in the room is the ticking of the clock hanging above the fireplace.

After a small eternity, Julian looks up at Robert and grins. "Robert Cartwright, the results are in, and you are not the father!"

The rest of us breathe a collective sigh of relief. Victoria bursts into tears, and Nathan collapses back onto the couch. Luann and Kevin throw their arms around each other and kiss just barely on this side of appropriately. They separate quickly, red with embarrassment but grinning with joy at learning that they're not related by blood.

"Thank God for that," Robert says, wiping sweat from his brow. "What a mess that would've been."

“I still insist that it wouldn’t have changed anything,” Julian said, “but I’m very glad that I don’t have to prove that.”

“We all are,” Victoria says, wiping tears from her eyes. She gives Robert a slightly flirtatious look and says, “See? Nothing to worry about.”

Robert laughs. “Oh yes. Nothing at all.”

“Well, I don’t know about you guys,” Julian says, “But I feel like pizza for dinner.”

“You’ll have to contend with Beatrice,” Victoria replies. “I’m not going to be the one to tell her that the roast she planned isn’t happening anymore.”

“She can make dessert. She’s been waiting for an opportunity to show off something called Baked Alaska. Hell if I know what that is, but I’m sure it will taste delicious.”

“Watch your language,” Luann scolds.

I can’t resist lifting an eyebrow at that. “You’re one to talk.”

Kevin finds that hilarious and earns himself a slap on the shoulder.

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The pizza is enjoyed in the living room, mostly because that's where the tv is. Sean and I enjoyed our fill of pizza, but the most satisfying part of the meal was watching both families laugh and joke and enjoy each other's company like they were one family. They might not be a family in the strictest sense, but it'll be good for all of them to at least be friends and good neighbors.

“You remember how our parents always got angry at us for watching television

instead of spending time with our families?" Sean asks me.

"No. We never had a television growing up."

He lifts an eyebrow. "Really? My God, your mom was terrible."

I roll my eyes. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

"That's not a proper use of that word," he retorts.

"It's still true."

"Fair enough." His smile fades. "I'm sorry. I said a lot of terrible things to you that you didn't deserve to hear."

I shake my head. "No, you didn't. You said a lot of terrible things that I needed to hear. It's one of the reasons I love you. You won't let me lie to myself. And you were right about some things. I had a meltdown when I saw those letters I wrote Annie. It took a while for that meltdown to manifest fully, but I've been completely off balance since I saw them. And I think you're right. I should read them. When we get home, you and I can look through them together."

His smile returns. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

I start to smile, but irrational fear seizes me. I grab his arm and say, "You have to promise to still love me after, though. No matter what you read, no matter what horrible thing I've done, you have to promise that you won't look down on me after."

He puts his hands on my shoulder and says seriously, "Mary, there is nothing on Earth that I could find in those letters that will make you any less the most perfect, most beautiful woman who's ever lived. And if that's the reason you've been afraid

to read them, then shame on you.”

That’s not the reason I’ve been afraid to read them, but that doesn’t change that Sean’s given me just about the perfect response. I laugh softly and pull him into my arms, kissing him deeply.

I don’t think about the others in the room—children included—until Kevin teases, “Hey, if Luann and I can keep our hands to ourselves in front of people, then so can you two.”

Sean and I separate and turn to see Robert, Julian and Victoria staring at the two lovebirds. Luann has her face buried in her hands, and Nathan is laughing so hard tears are rolling down his cheeks. Kevin turns beet red and points at the tv. “Look, the Patriots just scored a touchdown!”

We all laugh at that.

Baked Alaska turns out to be a sort of pie lined with cake, filled with ice cream and topped with browned meringue. It’s incredibly delicious, and though Beatrice makes a point to tell everyone that she’s disappointed about the wasted roast, she is clearly pleased when everyone asks for seconds of the dish.

After dinner, the children are allowed upstairs on the condition that Nathan remain in the room with the other two. The adults retire to the great room for drinks.

Victoria, Julian and Robert end up involved in conversation about their shared past—both as individuals and as a family. I am amused to hear many of the stories contained in the diaries traded amongst the three of them. Sean and I are left out somewhat, but that’s all right. I came here hoping to help this family, and it seems that against all odds, I’ve succeeded.

We continue talking late into the night, and when we finally give up the fight, Victoria offers to allow Robert to spend the night. "In the guest room, of course."

Robert smiles a little. "That means Kevin spends the night too. You realize that, right?"

Victoria sighs. "We tried to keep the two of them separate for months, and they still found a way. At least this time, they don't have to sneak around."

Robert shrugs. "I guess you're right about that. God, they grow up fast, don't they?"

Victoria smiles at Julian. "Yes. They certainly do."

Julian shuffles uncomfortably. "Well, I'm glad you two can be so sanguine about it, but I think I'll just go check on the two of them before I go to bed."

"Good luck," Robert calls after him.

He and Victoria laugh. Sean joins them, but I can only manage a smile. When Victoria looks at Julian with the love only a mother can show, something bleeds inside of me. Sean notices my expression and frowns, but I shake my head before he can ask what's wrong.

We say our goodnights and then head to our room. The children are still in Nathan's room, laughing and talking quietly. I'm sure Julian is very comforted to know that Nathan is still with them.

When the door to our room closes, Sean says, "All right, Miss Mary. Out with it. What's the matter?"

I fold my arms across my chest and sigh. "Did you see the way Victoria looked at

Julian?”

“Like he was her son, and she loves him. Yes.”

I meet his eyes. “My mother never looked at me like that. Not once.”

He nods. “Ah. I should have figured that’s what it was.”

“It doesn’t usually bother me,” I tell him, “I always felt that I did very well for a child whose parents couldn’t care less for her. Although my father loved us, at least in the beginning. Just not enough to make up for the hatred my mother showed.”

I wipe tears from my eyes. “But I just feel... cheated sometimes. I was given all of the material things I’ll ever need. My father left me a good sum of money, and the house went to me after Mother died. I had a good education, and I was able to work for twenty-five years in a profession I enjoyed. But I never felt my mother’s love. By the time I was a teenager, my father’s love had changed to indifference. He was depressed, and I understand that he was suffering, but I was a child.

“All I had was Annie. At least that’s what I believed. Father was gone, but I had Annie. Mother was a bitch, but I had Annie. We had each other. It was us against the world.” I laugh. “I had this fantasy of us buying neighboring houses and having dinner every night and calling each other to gossip while our husbands were at work. I imagined our children playing together and both of us being better mothers than our own mother ever was. I thought... if I could have that forever, just one person who loved me, then it was all right. It would all be worth it.”

“You do have one,” he says. “You have me.”

“I know, and that’s wonderful. And I am so grateful for you. But... It still hurts. It hurts that my mother was so evil. It hurts that Annie didn’t feel the same love for me

that I felt for her. It hurts that I have had to fight so hard just to keep from literally losing my mind, and I still live on the edge of insanity most of the time.”

I wipe more tears from my eyes and admit the deepest truth. “I’m afraid to open those letters because I sometimes hate Annie. I sometimes hope that she was hurt. Even when I thought she was murdered through no fault of her own, I hated her for leaving me. I’m afraid that I’ll open those letters and read all of the horrible things I said to her. And I’m afraid that a part of me will still hope that it’s true.”

I fall silent. For a minute, Sean doesn’t say anything. Then he says, “Well, you know how I feel about your sister, so I won’t tell you how much of me hopes that it’s true.” I give him an exasperated look, and he raises his hands defensively. “I said I won’t say it. What I will say is that I will still love you, no matter what. And I will also point out that as a former psychology student, you know that it’s perfectly natural for grieving people to feel angry at their loved ones for leaving them, even when it’s not the loved ones’ fault.

“ And , I will make you a ribeye steak with mashed potatoes for dinner that is almost as good as Beatrice’s and a storebought tub of ice cream that is not nearly as good as her Baked Alaska. And, in honor of your most recent successful stint as a tutor, I will also buy a bottle of Continental Wines Bellamy Estate Reserve Riesling to drink with the meal.”

I laugh. “That sounds wonderful.”

He smiles, and for a beautiful moment, I am purely, completely happy. I pull him close, and when we kiss, Annie is nowhere in my thoughts.

Six weeks later.

Sean takes the suitcases downstairs and loads them into my minivan. Our eyes are still red from the emotion of our goodbyes. Julian has decided to place the children back into private school, a decision I wholeheartedly agree with. They're exceptionally bright children who don't need a tutor to unlock their full potential, but it would be very beneficial for them to interact with other children their own age, especially as they prepare for their university education. In any case, this family has just begun to heal, and while I'm grateful for the part I've had to play in that, I believe that my work here is complete. The rest of this journey, they'll have to take on their own.

The Bellamys and the Cartwrights leave early this morning to go to the lighthouse, a Sunday tradition for both families now. The servants have the day off to complete their Christmas shopping. They'll have two weeks off for Christmas and New Year's, assuming Beatrice can stand to tear herself away from the kitchen.

As for me, I'll be returning to Boston for the holidays. Perhaps for even longer than that. I need to take some time to focus on my mental health before I take on the responsibility of another position.

Sean has been back home for six weeks now, but he visited me every weekend. Now that he has a full-time investigator working with him, he can afford to take days off. The children have made us promise to visit them at least once a month, and since they live close by, that's a promise we can keep when I'm not hired on somewhere else.

We'll remain close to the family, but not too close. Eventually, the monthly visits will



become a few times a year, then eventually once or twice. That's just as it should be. We will be good friends, but we have our own lives to live and our own struggles to overcome.

For now, though, I feel the ache that always comes with goodbye. Life is a collection of memories, and it's always bittersweet when a good memory comes to an end.

I suppose that's why I find myself in the library in my final moments at the Bellamy house. The safe has been left open since the family reconciles with each other, a symbol that they will no longer hold secrets from each other.

I feel a little pang of guilt looking through their secrets, but I am not reading them to be reminded of the salacious details of their indiscretions but of the fact that in spite of all of these missteps and trials, they remained together, a family through it all.

I can't help but think of Annie. We didn't get to remain a family. That hurts me, but I am beginning to realize that it's a hurt I'll come to terms with eventually. It will always hurt, but it won't always rule me. That's good enough.

I reach for a diary but stop when I catch a glimpse of something crumpled up in the corner of the safe. I pick it up and unfold it to reveal an old letter. When I open it, the world comes to a screeching halt. I spend several minutes reading the salutation before I'm able to move on to the rest of the letter.

My dearest love, Annie.

I'm not even allowed the luxury of hoping this is someone other than my sister. A photograph is attached to the letter, faded, but not so much that I can't recognize the sunny blonde hair, noble cheekbones and gorgeous blue eyes of my sister.

My dearest love, Annie.

It's nearly time. The final preparations are almost complete. Julian is near enough to adulthood that my absence won't stunt him. Victoria can handle the business well enough that she won't be destitute. I know that it frustrates you that I have to take care of her, but she is the mother of my child. She was a shit wife, but she was a good mother, and I have to give her credit for that, at least.

Still, I can't wait to be free of her. I saw the shit she wrote about me. I saw the way she talked about Robert. Even if I hadn't met you, I wouldn't want anything to do with you.

I'm only telling you this because I want you to know that the love I feel for you isn't a reaction to the hurt I feel toward Victoria. I love you because I love YOU. You are the most beautiful and most perfect girl I've ever met in my life. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you.

This letter will arrive with all of the documents you'll need in Geneva. I kept your first name the same and gave you a last name as close to Wilcox as I could. I'll have to practice a little harder with my name, but I'll make it work.

I love you so much. I'm so damned excited to start my new life with you.

Parker Bellamy

My hands shake as I fold the letter and put it in my pocket. I'll take it with me. Better that this family believe that their father is dead than that he valued a woman twenty years younger than him more than he valued a relationship with them.

The door to the library opens, and Sean pokes his head through. "You ready, Mary?"

A renewed sense of purpose fills me. I meet his eyes and nod. "Yes. I'm ready."