



One Last Regret (The Governess #7)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Governess Mary Wilcox travels to the sultry Garden District of New Orleans, where she goes to work for a family amidst Spanish moss-draped mansions.

During preparations for Mardi Gras festivities, one of the children under Mary's care uncovers old sheet music that plays an eerie lament when performed.

Soon after, a series of chilling incidents strikes those connected to an old jazz club the family owns. Plagued by the ghostly echoes of a love lost to music and a disappearance shrouded in silence, Mary must untangle the notes of the past from the present.

In this symphony of suspense, is every tragedy merely coincidence, or is something more sinister at play in the rhythm of the night?

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I expected to feel something standing here. Anger, grief, closure, perhaps even comfort. I expected to remember my mother and feel relief at her passing and remorse that our relationship was never... well, never. Never anything that could be described as a relationship, at least.

But I feel nothing. I look at the marble slab in the dirt with my mother's name etched into the stone, her birthdate, her date of death seven years ago, and the caption, MAY GOD GRANT HER PEACE.

That caption is the only thing that sparks a memory. I recall being asked what I wanted her gravestone to say. At first, I was confused. I answered, "Well, her name and the appropriate dates." The poor funeral home director had to explain that I could choose a wish or a statement in her memory. I chose the first one that came to mind that wouldn't appall people.

My name is Mary Wilcox. The woman buried here is Angela Wilcox, my mother. She died seven years ago today. She was a bitter woman until the end, and the last words she spoke to me while still of sound mind were, "I can't believe what a fucking waste you turned out to be."

I don't typically swear, but there is no need to soften my mother's hate. And hate is exactly what it was. It took me decades to admit it to myself, but my mother hated her children. She saw me and my sister Annie as the reason for her misery and boredom. I don't know for sure that she was narcissistic, but she was certainly uninterested in anyone's happiness but her own. A pity, since she was never happy.

Next to her grave is that of my father, Bernard Wilcox. He died twenty-three years

before my mother, felled by a stroke when he was not much older than my current age of fifty-two. He was happy once. I recall him smiling, laughing and behaving affectionately with us. By the time of his death—actually for several years prior—he was like her, miserable, bitter, and sarcastic.

But never cruel. No, my mother's cruelty was a specialty all her own.

I look at the plat to the left of my mother's grave. It's blank. Nobody occupies it. It was intended for my sister, Annie, which I find odd considering that she hated Annie even more than she hated me. Perhaps she wanted Annie within reach even after death.

In any case, it's empty because we don't know when my sister died. Or even if she died. She ran away when she was twenty-one years old. I've never heard from her since. However, my beau, Sean, discovered that she wasn't murdered in Boston but managed to travel across the country to Monterey, California. She was there for six months before moving on to parts unknown.

I'm going to find her. I'm going to find out what happened to her. Then, if I must, I will purchase a gravestone and place it here next to my mother and father. I am not so superstitious that I feel I will be disrespecting the dead by placing two women who hated each other near each other. Despite my brushes with paranormal experiences, I don't truly believe in ghosts. Only memories.

I leave the gravesite and return to the house. I have no interest in remembering my mother right now. As for my sister, I will learn nothing more of her past from staring at an empty grave.

I walk inside and see that Sean has returned. His coat hangs on the hook just inside the door. I hear him in the kitchen and call, "Sean? You'd better not be grabbing a beer before even saying hello to me."

He pokes his head out of the kitchen. “Hello.”

I hear the top of a beer bottle pop a moment later and roll my eyes. Sean’s drinking has toned down considerably since he’s moved in with me. He drinks only on his nights off now, and never more than two. Still, I feel it’s my duty to disapprove of his drinking lest it get any worse.

I have to admit I’m excited to hear the beer open. It means he has the night off, which means he has tomorrow off. That means he and I will have some time to spend together. Call me a silly old woman if you’d like, but I still get giddy when I can enjoy my boyfriend’s company.

“How was your day?” he asks. “Did you make any progress?”

I sigh. “No, I didn’t do much investigating today. It’s the anniversary of my mother’s death.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. She was a cruel woman, and I’m better off without her.”

“Ouch. Strong words, my love.”

“And yet true.”

He comes to the living room and wraps his arms around me. I sigh and melt into him, grateful for his comfort even though I’m not nearly as upset as I’m pretending to be. “If I told you not to dwell on the past, would you listen?” he asks.

I smile. “You know the answer to that question.”

“I do,” he agrees, “but I had to ask anyway. I care for you, you know.”

“I know.” I push away from him. “But I don’t dwell on my mother. It’s Annie I want to know about.”

“Oh, I know. You only remind me every single time we have a conversation.”

“Do I? I’m sorry to bore you,” I reply cheekily.

“You could never bore me, Mary,” he assures me.

“Thank you. I’m glad to know I excite someone.” Before he can reply with a cheeky comment of his own, I ask, “How was your day? Have you made any progress on the Cheetah Fur Bandit?”

Sean is a private investigator. He had a practice in Wales before we met. He put it on hold to help me find Annie, and when I decided months ago to stop searching for her, he opened a new practice in Boston so he could stay with me. When I resumed my search, I told him to keep his practice. I would have felt terrible asking him to put his life on hold again. It’s enough to have him near me, and besides, he helps when I ask.

He chuckles at my question. “What would you say if I told you that the Cheetah Fur was in Mrs. Owens’s closet this entire time?”

“I would tell you that I’m not surprised.”

“Nor am I. She was quite put off when I informed her that I would still charge my fee despite the fact that it was her own stupidity and not a criminal act that resulted in the loss of her cheetah fur.”

“I’m sure she was.”

I open the coat closet to hang his coat in its proper place. Unless it has rained or snowed outside, I see no reason to clutter the foyer with our coats and boots. “Do you think she’ll be prosecuted?”

“I doubt it,” Sean replies. “The police don’t want to bother with cases like that. She’ll probably be fined, and if she doesn’t pay it, they’ll probably just drop the case.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate for cheetah lovers.”

“It’s unfortunate, but that’s the way it goes.”

I start to close the door, but I stop when I see a scrap of paper poking out from underneath one of the floorboards. I carefully remove it from a crack in between two of the boards.

It’s a playbill. Or a portion of a playbill. It advertises that a musical act called Jasper Jones and the Jazz Kittens will play at the Kensington Jazz House in New Orleans. The date of the show is twenty-eight years ago.

Why would this be in my house? My mother hated jazz, and my father didn’t care much for music in general. I was fond of jazz for a time, but I’ve never been to New Orleans, and Annie... well, I can’t remember what music she was into, and anyway, she disappeared nearly two years before this date.

An image floods my mind, visceral and vivid. I gasp as I see my sister, her body swaying as she played a tenor saxophone, her face twisted in the fervor of the piece, her soul swept away by the music.

“Mary? Mary!”

Sean pulls me from the closet, and my vision vanishes. He cups my face and looks in

my eyes. “Are you all right?”

I nod and reply breathlessly. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine.” I take a deep breath and add, “I want to go to New Orleans.”

“New Orleans? Why?”

“Call it a hunch. I believe I’ll find evidence of my sister there.”

“In New Orleans?” His eyes fall to the floor where the playbill now rests against his boots. “Because of that?”

He stoops down and picks the playbill up. “Well, the date fits. This would be soon after she left California. But she never returned here. Why do you think she went to New Orleans?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him, “but I’m sure.”

He frowns, clearly not agreeing with my reasoning. He knows, however, not to argue with me anymore when I am determined to do something.

“All right. I’ll pack you a bag.”

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I would blame no one for thinking me a hypocrite if I were to assert that fate intervenes by finding me a position in New Orleans less than a week after my arrival in the city. I don't need money, but I do need information, and the family who hires me happens to have a long and storied history in the local jazz scene.

Marcel Lacroix is a man of no small renown in the world of jazz. An accomplished pianist, his career saw him work with the most celebrated names in the genre in addition to amassing a very respectful discography of his own. He was taken from us five years ago, victim of a heart attack in the middle of a performance, but his wife, Josephine, maintains an active presence in the scene as a connoisseur and occasional financier.

It cannot be coincidence that we meet at a local record store and I find that she has need of a governess for her twin grandchildren. Their mother is dead, and their father is often away on business. She is elderly, so she needs help with their day-to-day care.

Early in my life, I wished to be a psychologist. I believed my childhood with dysfunctional parents and a sister clearly impacted by her father's indifference and her mother's cruelty inspired me to want to understand the way people think and feel.

Once Annie leaves, however, I suffer a breakdown and spend eleven weeks involuntarily committed in a sanitarium. I remember only a little of my time there, but what I experienced must have been enough to turn me off to the profession because not only did I change my focus to education and become a schoolteacher instead, but I also developed a deep-seated distrust of psychologists that persists to this day.

I spent twenty-five years as a schoolteacher, but for reasons I'm not entirely sure of myself, I develop an urge to learn once and for all what happened to my sister. I should mention that I only learned recently that she left Boston of her own accord. Prior to that, I knew only that she had disappeared.

Another piece of evidence that proves there must be some such thing as fate is the fact that I choose the career of governess. That career somehow affords me opportunities to help others solve mysteries much like my own mystery while also leading me closer and closer to the truth of my sister's disappearance.

All of this is to say that being offered a position here in New Orleans confirms in my mind that I am meant to be here.

And today, I am here, in the famed Garden District, staring in awe at the ornate mansions draped with Spanish moss and protected with forbidding wrought-iron gates.

The gates remind me of another wrought-iron gate, this one in the garden of a home in Savannah Georgia. That mansion is the site of a double mystery that I solved to the satisfaction of far fewer than I would like, least of all myself.

Still, I don't regret my time there. The lessons I learned at that home inspired me to take the next step in searching for my sister. That next step was to hire Sean, so if nothing else, I've gained the love of a wonderful man.

I hope to gain a little more than that here.

I step through the gate and walk toward the mansion. It is a glorious house in the unique style of the neighborhood, two stories tall with ornate Corinthian pillars covering the ubiquitous covered porch and supporting the equally ubiquitous balcony. Unlike many other homes of such design, it is not the centerpiece of a plantation and

lacks the typical wings which would house servants' quarters.

That's not to say the house or the property are small. On the contrary, the house sits on twelve acres of luxuriously sculpted gardens and is itself thirteen thousand square feet. Or so Josephine tells me when I speak with her over the phone about this position.

Speaking of Josephine, the door opens before I reach the porch, and the woman herself comes out, arms outstretched, a beaming smile on her face. She walks with the natural poise of a woman who's spent her life in high society and carries the enviable figure of a woman renowned in her youth for her surpassing beauty. Even at sixty years old, she is still breathtaking, at least in my opinion.

"Mary! Oh, how delightful!"

She speaks with a cultured accent that reminds me more of the Ivy League graduates of the Northeast than of the Southern debutantes of New Orleans. Not that I'm one to draw conclusions based on a person's accent. I've lived in the United States since I was eleven years old, but still speak with a British accent.

"It's lovely to see you again, Mrs. Lacroix."

"Oh, please, it's Josephine. We're friends now, you and I."

As though to emphasize the point, she greets me in the European manner with kisses on either side of my cheek. Strange that this is considered European, as I've only rarely encountered it outside of America.

She takes my arm and leads me up the stairs. "The twins are on an outing with their father, but I know they'll be just as overjoyed to meet you as I am. In the meantime, let me show you around the house. I trust Henri has taken your bags."

“Yes, he was kind enough to retrieve them this morning.”

“Oh that’s right, I remember now. You had business to take care of in the city so you had to arrive later.”

“Yes, that’s right.” My business was to call Sean and ask him to find any possibility of a connection between my sister and New Orleans, but I don’t want to share that with Josephine at the moment.

She asks. “You should have had Henri chauffeur you. I wouldn’t have minded.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

We enter the house, and I am not surprised to find it as grand inside as it is outside. The flooring is of polished marble tile, and the furniture all of maple and very luxurious.

The foyer is dominated by a massive seven-foot-tall grandfather clock with a shining mother of pearl face inlaid with gold filigree and a heavy bronze pendulum that swings regally back and forth with the passage of the seconds. Three exquisitely designed brass chimes hang near the pendulum, silent at the moment.

“My grandfather’s,” Josephine informs me when she notices my interest. “My favorite keepsake of his. Marcel was kind enough to allow me to place it in the foyer.”

“It’s stunning.”

“It’s a Howard Miller original,” she tells me proudly. “Grandfather purchased it from him the day his company opened. Between the two of us, we’ve resisted several offers to sell for truly exorbitant amounts of money.” She leans closer as though

sharing a deep secret. “I’ll never sell. I’m too fond of it.”

It chimes then, four deep, resonating tones to signify the hour. The sound is pleasant but somehow ominous as well. It’s as though the clock is warning me that I have left the outside world behind. Like it or not, I am a member of this household.

Perhaps it’s warning me that I should have been careful what I wished for.

Josephine leads me through the grand dining room. It contains an enormous table for twenty lit by two equally impressive chandeliers that I am quite sure are real crystal. “My son, Etienne, has begged me for years to replace them with electric lights, but to what purpose? These are elegant. They are timeless. ”

She says that word in a slight hiss. I am reminded of the grandfather clock, the symbol of time’s inevitability. I wonder if perhaps a part of Josephine resents that inevitability.

Then I wonder if I’m just reading too much into things. After all, I’ve only spent a few minutes around her. I chuckle at myself and follow her from the dining room into the parlor.

Here is where the true grandeur of the Lacroix legacy is revealed. The parlor is arranged like a massive amphitheater with curved sofas and delicately carved coffee tables separated by artfully placed decorative tables topped with plants and sculptures. This opulence, however, pales in comparison to the single most important and elegant piece in the entire house.

The piano.

I have read the history of this instrument. A 1913 model Bluthner Model 1 in polished ebony, this piano once adorned the home of J.D. Rockefeller. Upon the

magnate's death, the piano was sold to a museum in New Orleans, where it remained until a young Marcel Lacroix, perhaps not realizing how sacred the piece was or perhaps not caring, sneaked past the ropes onto the display and began to play. The museum's director was so awed by the young man's playing that he agreed to sell the instrument. It was the instrument on which Marcel recorded every piece he ever wrote.

"Oh, yes. Marcel's piano." Josephine scoffs. "I keep meaning to sell it, but I never get around to it. I kept it for Marcel, but it's such an eyesore in the parlor." She sighs. "I really should list it. Anyway, come along. I'll show you to your room."

I am taken aback by Josephine's dismissal of her husband's legacy. She shows such love for her grandfather clock, but to scoff at her husband's instrument?

This is where Sean would warn me once more not to read too much into something. Perhaps I should follow that advice, but I can't help but let my mind wander to dangerous places.

Perhaps due to fate or perhaps due to coincidence, most of the families I have worked for as a governess have harbored dark and deadly secrets. Sean says that it's my subconscious need to reveal what's hidden that leads me to find these places without realizing that I'm looking for them. He could be right.

Whatever the reason, I begin to wonder if there isn't at least a slight chance that Marcel Lacroix's death wasn't accidental.

But that's foolish and more than a little rude. I have no concrete reason to suspect Josephine in her husband's death. Besides, he didn't die at home, but in concert, and Miss Josephine was said to be so distraught that her son had to physically restrain her from attacking the coroner taking his body.

And it's not my business anyway. That's not why I'm here. I intend to solve a mystery, but not the mystery of whether or not Marcel Lacroix was murdered. I am here to learn whether or not my sister ever visited New Orleans. I won't learn the answer to that worrying over an old piano.

We reach my room, and I am stunned by its opulence. The room is spacious with a king-sized bed, a table with two upholstered chairs and a master bathroom with a hot tub. I am used to being somewhat spoiled in my accommodations, but this is another level entirely.

Seeing my reaction, Josephine says, "This was my daughter's room. Sylvie. She married and moved to Austria thirteen years ago. I've kept the room in case she visits, but she never does, so it's yours now."

My head is reeling too much to make sense of things at the moment, so I limit myself to, "Thank you. This is wonderful."

She smiles and squeezes my hand before saying, "Well, I'll let you get settled. I do hope you'll join us for dinner, though. You'll get to meet Etienne and the twins. Oh, I just know they'll love you!"

She leaves me then. I sit on the edge of the bed and wonder if I've allowed my whims to carry me too far once more. I came here to find Annie, but whether it's the ominous chime of the clock, the disdain Josephine shows for Marcel's piano, or the shocking revelation that her own daughter refuses to visit, I can't help but feel that I've been pulled into yet another mystery.

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I head downstairs for dinner with a somewhat better command of my thoughts. It's hypocritical of me to travel to New Orleans on the strength of a vision connected to a concert flyer only to dismiss Josephine's behavior around Marcel's piano as unimportant, but I can rationalize my decision to come here based on the fact that my repressed memories have come to the forefront before in meaningful ways. Perhaps the same thing is occurring now. I can't rationalize interpreting Josephine's offhanded comment in front of a stranger as meaning that she murdered her husband.

So I reach the dining room focused only on meeting Josephine's son and two grandchildren, the latter of which I'll be caring for in my capacity as governess. As I near the dining room, I hear what sounds like an argument between Josephine and an adult man I assume is Etienne.

"Of what importance is legacy when we face ruin?" Etienne asks.

Josephine scoffs. "Oh please, you always exaggerate. We are nowhere near ruin."

"The club hasn't made money in years, Mother. Not since—"

"Hush. I think I hear her."

A moment later, the door opens, and Josephine smiles at me. "Mary! Come on in. You're just in time. Philippa is just about to serve the hors d'oeuvres. Children? Stand, be polite."

I step inside to see a tall, dark-haired man with aquiline features standing in between two twelve-year-old children. One of the children, the girl, is tall and dark-haired like

her father with the same aquiline nose. The other, the boy is shorter with blonde hair and round features with an adorable, upturned nose and strikingly bright blue eyes. It is clear that they aren't identical twins. I assume the boy takes after his mother.

The father smiles at me and extends his hand. "How do you do, Miss Mary? I'm Etienne Lacroix, Josephine's son."

"She knows all that, Etienne. Introduce her to the children."

Etienne starts to roll his eyes but stops. "Of course, Mother." He gestures to his daughter. "My daughter, Amelia."

She steps forward, extending her hand and boldly saying, "How do you do, Miss Mary?"

I smile and bow slightly as I take her hand. "I am well, thank you, Amelia. And how are you?"

"I'm good." She quickly corrects herself. "Well."

Etienne smiles tenderly at her, then lays his hand on his son's shoulder. "This is Gabriel, my son."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "Well, obviously he's your son."

"Amelia, hush," Josephine says without a trace of anger.

Gabriel says nothing, but he takes my hand when I offer it. "It's lovely to meet you too, Gabriel."

"He doesn't talk much," Amelia informs me. "But that doesn't mean he doesn't like

you. He's just a little shy."

"That's perfectly all right. I'm shy too."

She cocks her head. "You don't look shy."

"I've had many years to practice looking that way," I tell her with a wink.

The door to the kitchen opens and a pretty young woman in her late twenties walks into the room with a plate of breaded shrimp wrapped in puff pastry. There's a name for this dish, I'm sure, but it eludes me at the moment.

We sit to eat, and I notice that the servant—Philippa, I assume—blushes deeply whenever she's around Etienne. For his part, he seems not to notice her attraction. I can't tell if that's because he truly doesn't see it, or if he ignores it out of politeness. Or perhaps he ignores it because he doesn't want his mother to know he returns the feelings.

Amelia notices, however. As soon as Philippa leaves, she leans to me and whispers, "She likes Dad, but she's afraid to tell him. She thinks he won't like her because she's a servant."

I lift an eyebrow. "That is an interesting observation," I reply, "However, it's not polite to whisper about others behind their back."

Amelia receives her correction with good grace. "Okay, Mary."

"And in any case," Etienne adds, "Philippa is an employee of your grandmother's, a very valued one. We shouldn't be spreading rumors about her."

"Why don't you like her back?" Amelia asks. "She's pretty."

“That is not a conversation for dinner, Amelia,” Josephine corrects, with slightly more irritation than her earlier reprimand.

Amelia once more lets the reproof roll off her back. “Yes, Grandma.”

“Have you told Mary the story about the piano?” Etienne asks.

Josephine tenses slightly. “I haven’t gotten around to it. I wanted to allow Mary to get settled before we bore her with tales of family history.”

“Oh please,” I say, “I’d love to hear it.”

I say that only to be polite to Etienne. Well, not only to be polite. I notice how Josephine tenses, and I’m curious to know why. But I don’t really need to hear the story. I know it already.

“Well, it was actually made for J.D. Rockefeller.”

He looks expectantly at me, and I feign surprise. “Really? The J.D. Rockefeller?”

Etienne grins, pleased at my shock. “Is there any other? Well, Mr. Rockefeller bought the piano for entertaining, of course, and would hire musicians to play for him at his parties. When he died, the estate donated it to the Musee Musique here in New Orleans. They owned it for many years, but when my father was twelve years old, he sneaked into the display and began to play. I believe the piece was a Nocturne by Chopin, but I could be wrong. Anyway, his playing was so soulful that the museum director allowed my grandfather to purchase the instrument at a steep discount.”

“I hardly think two hundred fifty thousand dollars is a steep discount,” Josephine says, “especially fifty-three years ago.”

“It is when the instrument is worth over ten million,” Etienne counters.

“Oh please, there’s no way it’s worth that much. Just because Rockefeller owned it?”

“Your grandfather clock has never been owned by anyone of note, but weren’t you offered eight million dollars for it by that collector in Boston? To the right people, that piano is just as much a work of art.”

Josephine purses her lips, frustrated at being beaten. There can be no mistake now at the animosity she feels when hearing of the piano. But it cannot be a simple instrument that causes her to feel such vitriol. I wonder what lies behind that feeling?

"My father would allow no one else to touch that piano," he says, "not that anyone else dared to try. I still remember growing up listening to him play. He became famous as a jazz pianist, of course, but that was by choice. He could have played anything he wanted and become world-renowned. Some people have a connection to music that goes beyond talent. It's a visceral thing, spiritual. It comes from their very soul."

The memory—if that’s what it is—of Annie with her saxophone comes back to mind. I can see as though she stands right in front of me, the furrow of her brow, the earnest pout of her lips, the tension in her shoulders—not stiffness, but a lithe energy, like a snake prepared to strike or a wave about to crash onto the shore. “I believe I understand.”

He smiles sadly. “No, you don’t. No one understands unless they feel it. Not even me.”

“That’s rude, isn’t it, Dad?” Amelia crows triumphantly. “Telling her she doesn’t understand like that.”

Etienne replies tolerantly. “Yes, it is. Forgive me, Mary.”

His eyes look past me as he says this, though. I see in his expression the deep love he has for his father and the deep sadness he still feels at his passing. I glance at Josephine to see her shoulders up by her ears, tension that is absolutely stiffness and nothing like lithe energy. Maybe she’s jealous of the love Etienne feels for his father. I imagine it must be difficult to live in the shadow of a great artist like Marcel Lacroix and even more difficult when one’s children worship that artist and not you.

Philippa returns, this time with oysters on the half-shell served in ice with lemons and chili powder in a dish on the side.

“You must forgive us,” Josephine says, “We are a New Orleans family to the core, and that includes our fascination with spice.”

“No need to be sorry,” I reply, “Although I hope you’ll forgive me if I partake only modestly.”

“Of course, of course. I asked Philippa to make the jambalaya mild with hot sauce on the side just in case.”

I feel an odd relief when I hear we’re having jambalaya for the main course. I am used to fancy dinners, but I am not so fancy an eater myself. The fanciest thing I make at my own home is freshly baked crumpets to enjoy with my tea.

The arrival of the appetizers breaks the spell Marcel’s ghost holds over the table, and the conversation turns to more mundane matters.

“The children have music lessons from seven to nine every morning prior to breakfast,” Etienne tells me. “They’re very good at waking up on time, so you shouldn’t have any trouble on that front.”

“I’m learning violin,” Amelia says proudly. “Gabriel’s learning piano. He’s really good, but he doesn’t like to show people, so it might be a while before he plays for you.”

Gabriel reddens at his sister’s praise, but I notice a small smile as well. It’s clear that Amelia truly loves her brother. That’s good. Often when one child is outgoing and the other is reserved, there is conflict between them. I am happy to see that isn’t the case here, although I will need to work with Amelia on not speaking for Gabriel and allowing him to work up the courage to speak for himself. All things in their time, though.

“The noise won’t bother you, will it, Mary?” Josephine asks.

“Of course not. I can’t wait to hear them both play.”

“Oh good. I completely forgot to mention the early lessons.”

“Early is good,” I tell her. “We retain what we learn in the morning more easily.”

“That is the opinion of Messrs. Franz and Gilroy,” Josephine says. “Oh, that’s their instructors.”

“Mr. Franz is very good at violin,” Amelia informs me. “Mr. Gilroy’s good at piano too.”

“I’m sure they would have to be for your father and grandmother to entrust your musical education to them.”

Amelia nods. “Oh, by the way, don’t freak out if you hear music at night.”

The mood at the table instantly changes. Josephine blanches, and Etienne frowns and

snaps, “That’s enough of that, Amelia.”

“What? I wasn’t going to—”

“Then don’t,” he says. To me, he explains, in a voice no less stern, “The wind blows sometimes at night, and Amelia’s imagination runs wild. I see no need to indulge such fantasies.”

The instruction is clear. I am not to indulge such fantasies.

Amelia, sensing that this instruction is more serious than her previous reproofs, hangs her head. “Yes, Dad.”

Gabriel looks down at his food, his cherubic face twisted in a pout. I’m not sure how to respond, so I only say, “I see.”

The conversation turns to lighter subjects, but now that my curiosity is piqued, I can’t help but wonder what this nighttime melody might be and what secrets it might hold.

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I stay awake late into the night hoping to hear the promised music that Amelia speaks of. I hear nothing, however, and even my dreams—long a blessing and a curse to me for their vividness and their tendency to awaken the deepest secrets of my subconscious—reveal nothing. I wake wondering if perhaps their truly is no secret music and Etienne is simply overly concerned with his daughter's active imagination.

But then there was the terror in Josephine's eyes. No, there is a secret here. I am sure of it. That could explain why the children are homeschooled rather than placed in a local private school or sent away to boarding school. Perhaps that secret is known among the community and keeping the children home is a way to protect them.

But you're not here for that secret, are you?

I sigh. I'm not here for that secret, but then again, I have stumbled across many secrets that have led me to useful discoveries about Annie. Perhaps fate has led me here for the same reason.

Still, there's no use prying at something when I have no idea where to look. Besides, I can't neglect the children to focus on my own problems. I'll take today to introduce them to their lessons and learn how they might best benefit from my instruction.

As promised, the children are awake and dressed already when I leave my room at six-thirty. I find them both downstairs tuning their instruments. Well, Amelia tunes hers. Gabriel is practicing scales to warm up. As I observe, he finishes the scales and launches into a simple melody.

I am not a musical genius nor anything close. Because of that, I can't properly

articulate to you what I feel when Gabriel's fingers move over the keys of that piano, nor could I tell you what about the player or the instrument makes it the most beautiful sound I've ever heard in my life. I can only tell you that I'm utterly transfixed. It is as though the soul of the universe were laid bare and its meaning and purpose translated into raw emotion through the piano.

And he's only warming up! Good lord, what shall I feel when he plays in earnest?

"Listen to this, Mary!" Amelia says brightly. "I'm learning to play Vivaldi!"

She launches immediately into a dazzling recital of Vivaldi's Spring Concerto. I am amazed at her speed and prowess with the instrument. For one so young, she has an ease in her playing that suggests decades of experience. She is indeed, as she tells me last night, very good.

But as impressive as her playing ability is, Gabriel's piano playing is on an entirely different level. Amelia is skilled and immensely talented. Gabriel has his finger on the fabric of melody itself.

Boy, listen to me! He's only warming up. He's not done anything particularly virtuoso. No doubt it is the instrument that sounds so perfect. I'm sure Gabriel's good, but I don't know enough about music to trust my opinion of it.

Then he begins to play in earnest, and I know instantly that I am right about him. He plays Claire de Lune, perhaps the most well-known classical composition for piano of all time, but when he plays, it is as though I hear it for the first time. His eyes are closed, and his body sways in time with the music, but his hands! Goodness, it's as though they have a mind of their own. They move over the keys like water flowing over smooth stones, like... well, come up with any metaphor you like. It is perfect. Utterly perfect. He has inherited his grandfather's gift. Even Amelia stops her violin and stares at him in rapture.

The door opens, and the music abruptly stops. A mellow voice calls to Gabriel, “Showing off for your new governess, I see.”

Gabriel flushes beet red and looks down at his keys, grinning bashfully. I turn toward the sound of the voice to see a handsome man around my age dressed in a brown suede suit and wearing polished black shoes. He carries himself with the swagger of an old-time jazz musician, and indeed, that’s exactly what he looks like to me. He smiles and bows deeply. “Charles Gilroy, ma’am. Pianist ordinaire and teacher extraordinaire.”

“He’s lying,” Amelia informs me. “He’s really good.”

“And someday,” a second voice—this one less mellow but still kind—interrupts, “you will be too, Amelia, if you can focus on your own practice and not your brother’s.”

Amelia sticks her tongue out at a thin, balding man in a gray pinstripe suit. The gentleman—Mr. Franz, I assume—remarks drily, “Very ladylike of you, Miss Amelia. Shall we practice violin perhaps, or would you rather blow raspberries?”

Amelia giggles. “That’s okay. I’m ready to practice. Bye, Gabriel! Bye, Mary!”

She skips out of the parlor, and Franz gives me a resigned look as he follows her. I am enough a student of human nature to see the affection behind his forced impatience, though.

“We should get to practicing too,” Gilroy says.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s waiting for me to leave. I smile at him and say, “Of course.” To Gabriel, I say, “I look forward to hearing you play again.”

He releases a small sound that might have been, “thank you.”

That’s progress. He’s starting to sort of speak to me. Not bad for only twelve hours.

I leave the room, and shortly after, I hear the piano again. It is hauntingly beautiful, but for some reason it doesn’t pierce my soul as it does before. Perhaps I need to be there to watch it, or perhaps Gabriel plays differently when he’s not in the middle of a lesson.

Normally, I would make myself breakfast and coffee or tea at this time, but instead, I choose to explore the house a little more. Josephine showed me the main rooms on the first floor, but she only showed me my room on the second floor.

This is another habit of mind that Sean decries. He calls it snooping. I call it curiosity. And even he can’t deny that my curiosity has revealed many secrets that shouldn’t remain hidden.

In this case, my curiosity is toward my sister. I don’t know why I’ve been led here, but I am convinced there’s a reason. Maybe it has nothing to do with this house and only has to do with New Orleans. Maybe it doesn’t even have to do with this city but only the memory that’s resurfaced of Annie’s old history with music. Either way, I must know what this house is hiding.

The second floor is rather disappointing. It contains only bedrooms, most of them not in use. Nothing hidden in closets, nothing written in journals or slipped in between mattresses. Just ordinary bedrooms. In my past places of employment, the most damning secrets were found in studies and master bedrooms, but I’m not going to sneak into Josephine’s room while she’s sleeping in her bed.

That leaves the attic.

I feel a slight chill as I ascend the staircase. Attics have revealed their own secrets, but those secrets always trigger the darkest memories I have. I worry that I will find something in this attic that triggers a memory I'd rather leave forgotten.

But if I am to find out what happened to my sister, I must be brave. So, I take a deep breath and open the door.

Lights come on automatically when the door opens. I'm grateful for that. This attic is cluttered, and several of the shapes of old furniture, coat racks, clothing and stacks of keepsakes and decorative items could look rather sinister in darkness.

As it is, I find nothing immediately frightening, so I start to look around. As I do, the music drifting to my ears from the first floor brings more flashes of Annie with her saxophone. I see her practicing in her room, and in the backyard. I see her performing at our high school and then again at our university.

How is it that I don't remember any of this? Most of my repressed memories are isolated incidents, usually moments of extreme danger or of violence or conflict. These memories seem rather ordinary.

And I can't remember how she sounds. I can see her body moving, her hips swaying, her fingers pressing and releasing valves on the saxophone, but I can't hear any noise but the noise of the children practicing downstairs. Could I have repressed the memory of how she sounded when she played, or has the memory faded to the point where I can't remember what she sounded like?

I find a bookshelf on which are stacked hundreds of spiral bound notebooks. I open the first one and see that each book contains compositions written by Marcel Lacroix.

I peruse some of them, but I'm truly not skilled at music. I can read simple notes, but the complex pieces jotted in these books are beyond me. They look jumbled and

erratic, and while I'm sure that's not at all the case, I can't hear what any of these are supposed to sound like by reading the notes.

I look through a few, then decide I won't find anything interesting. Just before I turn to leave, though, I catch a glimpse of yellowing paper out of the corner of my eye. I turn back to the bookcase and see a sliver of the paper sticking out in between two notebooks.

I carefully remove the composition and hold it to the light. The papers are old and yellowing, but not yet cracking. The notes written on the page are faded but still readable.

And they're complex. I don't know how to read them well, but I know enough to see that this piece is extraordinarily technical and extremely demanding. I feel a touch of anxiety looking through it, funny since I can't even play the Happy Birthday song on any musical instrument.

The title of the piece reads *Vie Apres a la Mort*. Life after death.

Something stirs in my mind when I read that. The sound from downstairs fades. My hands begin to tremble, but though the composition vibrates in my hand, the words remain steady. Something about the handwriting lends a vicious animation to the letters, as though they would jump off of the page and force into my mind the understanding of a terrible secret not meant for the living.

"What's that?"

I gasp and spin around to see the twins staring at me. Amelia's smiling at me, her brow furrowed in curiosity. Gabriel is pale and when I turn to him, he quickly looks away.

“It’s a composition by your father,” I tell Amelia. “Aren’t you two supposed to be practicing?”

Amelia frowns. “It’s almost ten o’clock, Mary. We were looking for you to begin our lessons.”

“Ten? But that’s...”

My voice trails off as I check my phone and find that it is indeed almost ten. I’ve somehow spent over two hours in this room.

My blood chills. “Right. Well, let’s get to it then.”

“What were you looking for?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I reply, a little too crisply. She raises her eyebrow, and I soften my voice.

“Nothing. Let’s get your lessons done, shall we?”

Amelia sets the composition down, and we head downstairs. I have to fight a powerful urge to look back at those papers.

I don’t yet know why, but that composition is central to the secrets of this house. I also am not sure if I still want to know that those secrets are.

Life After Death. To many, a promise of eternal rest. To some, a promise of eternal damnation.

But which does that piece promise? Rest or damnation?

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Just as I finish with the children's lessons, Amelia says, "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to tell you that you're invited tonight."

I frown. "Invited? To what?"

"The party."

"What party?"

"Grandma's hosting a party for her club. The Midnight Melody. It's the biggest jazz club in New Orleans."

She delivers the last line proudly.

"I see. Well, your grandmother hasn't invited me."

"She told me to invite you. She does this every year for employees of the club and some musicians and visitors."

"Oh. Oh, I appreciate that, but I believe your grandmother means for it to be only for employees and patrons of the club."

"No, she invited you," Gabriel insists.

When I turn to him, he pales as though shocked that actual words escaped his mouth. I could well believe Amelia choosing to invite me herself, but if Gabriel corroborates her story, then I can believe that Josephine does want me there.

“Well, I’ll ask her, and if she says yes, then I’ll be happy to join.”

“Gabriel’s going to play,” Amelia says proudly.

Gabriel snaps his eyes to his sister. “Shh! No one’s supposed to know!”

“What? She isn’t going to tell.” She looks at me. “You’re not going to tell, are you, Mary?”

I hesitate before answering. The sensible thing to do would be to tell Amelia that I can’t keep secrets from her grandmother. Had the grandfather clock not picked that moment to chime and fill my ears with its ominous ringing, I might have been sensible.

Instead, I say, “Of course I won’t tell.”

“Good!” Amelia crows. “Grandma doesn’t like when people play on the piano. That’s why she always sleeps through our lessons. But she won’t tell him to stop in front of everyone, so he’s going to play that new music you found.”

A chill shoots down my spine. Something inside me screams to stop him, but really, this is too much now. Surely I don’t believe that playing a jazz composition on piano will cause something terrible to happen?

I’ve been superstitious enough about all of this. I do not consider myself flighty or prone to fancy. I must start to think rationally again, or I won’t be able to distinguish between the truth and a lie anymore.

“That sounds exciting! But are you sure it’s not unkind to your grandmother?”

Amelia scoffs. “It’s not going to hurt her. Besides, we miss Grandpa too.”

A part of me thinks she might be invoking his memory to get what she wants, but the emotion in her eyes seems real. I remember that the most confident children are often the most fragile as well.

“Do you want to hear Gabriel play because it reminds you of him?” I ask.

Gabriel shifts uncomfortably. “I’m only going to play the one song. But you should come. Grandmother gets upset easily when people decline her invitations.”

“Well, I will absolutely attend,” I tell him. “And I can’t wait to hear you play either.”

Amelia beams. “Awesome! Plus, you’ll get to meet Claude. He’s cool. I like him.”

“Who is Claude?”

“Mr. Durand,” she replies. “He’s the club manager. He’s cool. He’s like a Santa Claus type, but not creepy.”

I’m not aware of a creepy Santa Claus type, but I smile. “He sounds wonderful.”

“He’s cool.”

“Yes, of course.”

Josephine waltzes into the study room and says, “Mary! There you are. I meant to invite you to my soiree tonight.”

Amelia rolls her eyes, then says in a mocking voice, “Oh, yes, the soiree. You must come, Dahling.”

Josephine slaps her playfully on the arm. “Enough of that. The word party is vulgar.

I'm not inviting her to drink beer and listen to pop music."

"Oh, perish the thought!" Amelia cries in mock terror.

Gabriel chuckles at that, and Josephine rolls her eyes at both of them. The movement reminds me a lot of Amelia. I'm glad to see healthy banter between the three of them. I can't express enough how important it is for children to be allowed to banter with their elders. It might seem trivial, but feeling safe to speak their minds—within reason—is critical for their self-confidence and esteem later in life.

"You two are having quite too much fun at my expense," Josephine teases, hands on her hips. To me, she says, "You'll meet Claude, my manager. He's a sweetheart. His wife, Audrey is just darling as well."

"Just dah ling," Amelia echoes.

"You two hush. Go on and play."

Amelia grabs Gabriel's hand and leads him from the room. Josephine watches them leave, an exasperated smile on her face. "She has all of her father's energy," she says. "All of my energy, if I'm being honest," she adds with a wink.

"You two clearly love each other very much," I tell her.

"Yes, we really do," she says. "It's the most wonderful thing to be a mother. And a grandmother."

Her smile fades after that. I wonder if she's thinking of her estranged daughter or her deceased husband. Perhaps she is thinking of the twins who have lost their mother at such a young age. I don't quite feel brave enough to ask, though. We are still only just acquainted.

She takes a breath and smiles again. “I haven’t told you about my club yet, have I?”

“No, but Amelia told me it’s the biggest jazz club in New Orleans.”

“It certainly was,” she agrees, “when Marcel was alive. It was his club more than mine. When he performed, he would draw crowds that rivaled the largest nightclubs in the city. Even in the age of electronic music and raves and LED lights, people would still cram every corner of the Midnight Melody to hear him play.”

There’s a touch of bitterness when she says that, though. I risk a soft probing statement. “You must miss him very much.”

She laughs, not quite a scoff. “Of course I do. I was married to him for thirty-three years. You don’t stay married to someone that long unless you’re in love with them or you need their money. And I never needed his money. I had my own.”

I notice that she says had her own money and recall Etienne’s argument the night before about the club facing ruin. I wonder how much of her money was wrapped up in Marcel’s career. It would certainly explain some of her bitterness.

“But we don’t get to choose when our loved ones leave us, do we?” she says.

My sister’s face crosses my mind. “No, we don’t.”

She takes another deep breath. “Well, he left us this beautiful home, the club, and a wonderful legacy. Not many can say that. We must go on for his sake.”

“And for your own,” I add. “It’s all right to consider your own needs.”

“All right, yes,” she agrees. “Simple, no. But I don’t wish to bore you with my complaints. I have some work to do to get ready for dinner, so I’ll leave you to

recover from your day's work. I look forward to seeing you tonight."

She leaves, and I head to my room. I don't really need to rest, but a strange disquiet comes over me at the thought of the dinner tonight. I can't put my finger on it. There's really no logical reason for me to feel worried about a party. A soiree, dahling.

I do what I usually do when I'm worried, and I don't know why. I call Sean.

He answers on the first ring. "Hello, my love. Tell me, what great mystery have you discovered this time?"

Heat climbs my cheeks. "I didn't say I've found a mystery."

"Ah, but you didn't say you haven't. So now I know you have. Mary, Mary, you are nothing if not predictable."

"I love you too," I say drily. "I'm so glad I called to talk."

"Me too," he says cheerily. "But don't keep me in suspense. What juicy secrets have you discovered about the Lacroix family?"

"I don't know."

"But?"

"But that's it. I don't know. Marcel died, but he died in a performance in full view of a crowd of people, and his death was ruled a heart attack. There are no other skeletons in their closet, nothing except an old composition."

"Composition?"

“Yes, a music piece.”

“I know what a composition is, Mary. What kind of composition is this one?”

“A jazz one, I assume.”

“My, my, what an astute observation. Your detective skills truly amaze me.”

My cheeks heat further. “I’m not a musician, Sean. It’s just... I get a feeling around this composition.”

“Like the feeling you got when you saw an old playbill and decided to look for work in New Orleans?”

“Stop teasing me!”

He chuckles. “I will never stop teasing you. But I’ve also learned not to discount your feelings, no matter how emotional, illogical, flighty, baseless—”

“Watch yourself, Mr. O’Connell,” I warn him.

“Silly, whimsical, fantastic—”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“All right, all right,” he says placatingly. “I’ll stop. But seriously, much of what you say makes no sense to me. Then, somehow, it eventually does. My only question to you is does this musical composition have anything to do with Annie?”

“It... I don’t think so, but... when I looked at it, I remembered her. I mean, I remembered her again. She played saxophone.”

“A lovely instrument. The American version of the bagpipes. I mean that as a compliment, by the way.”

“But I never remembered that before. I mean, I never remembered that she played music. How could I have blocked that out?”

Sean hesitates before answering. I trust him with everything about me, but he is still uncomfortable at times addressing my past mental health challenges. I don’t blame him. I am equally uncomfortable if not more so.

But this sense of dread I feel continues to grow with each passing second, and I need to know why. I need to know what makes me feel this way on the basis of evidence that even I can admit is whimsical and baseless.

“That’s not a question I can answer, Mary,” he finally says. “But if the memories are pleasant, then I don’t see a reason not to explore them.”

“That’s just it,” I tell him. “I don’t know if they’re pleasant.”

He hesitates again, then says, “If you’re looking for me to tell you what to do, I can’t do that. But I know that you’re going to do what you feel is right already. In my experience, it usually is right, even if it’s not comfortable. Call me if you need a shoulder to cry on when you uncover what’s behind that door.”

I smile. “I will. Thank you.”

I hang up feeling somewhat better. The unease I feel hasn’t gone away, but it means the world to know that I don’t face it alone.

I think of Josephine and my heart softens toward her. She has lost her partner. Perhaps what I interpret as bitterness toward his memory is only the natural anger one

feels when one of the pillars of one's life crumbles. Heaven knows I still feel anger towards Annie.

Oh, Annie. Where did you go? Did you find what you were looking for?

Or did your pursuit lead you to your death as Marcel's led him to his?

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Claude Durand is indeed a sweetheart. He is a robust, portly man around Josephine's age with a full white beard and round, wire-rimmed glasses that sit low on his nose. He does indeed remind one of Santa Claus, and he is not creepy at all. When he arrives at the house, he smiles warmly and kindly, just like that jolly old Christmas elf, and I am immediately fond of him.

His wife, Audrey, is not a sweetheart, nor is she darling. If Claude is Santa Claus, then Audrey is Jack Frost—or Jane Frost, I suppose—cold, aloof, and barren. She doesn't smile when she greets me, nor does she smile when she greets anyone.

Meeting her teaches me one useful thing, though. Josephine most definitely did not despise her husband. There is a difference between the occasional irritation Josephine shows and the naked contempt with which Audrey regards Claude.

Claude seems not to notice it at all. He smiles as he tells me how the two of them met, and when he looks at her, his eyes shine with real love.

"I was a talent scout for the Houston Philharmonic Orchestra at the time," he says in a mellow Cajun baritone. I was auditioning cellists and I'd taken a break for lunch in the park. I came across the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen playing a harp on a bench. I remember I stood there for hours listening to her. Do you remember, dear?"

"How could I forget?" she says drily.

"I watched her, ignoring all of the increasingly panicked phone calls from the other scout traveling with me, and finally, she looked me up and down and said, 'If you're going to stand there all day, then you can at least introduce yourself to me.' Well, I

did, and a year later, we were married.”

He beams at her, and she makes the saddest attempt at a smile I've ever seen. Or rather, the angriest. Her lips stretch in something that resembles a crone's leer more than an expression of joy. "Married fifteen years next week," she says.

Her tone is flat and emotionless. It reminds me of my mother's, and my skin crawls. I can't help but wonder if Claude is in danger. Not a kind thought, I know, but remember, I have some experience with vindictive wives.

Etienne and the children enter the room, and several of the other guests offer greetings. Audrey's eyes move to Etienne, and a wave of longing crosses her face. Etienne, it seems, has quite a way with women.

Neither Etienne nor Claude seem to notice Audrey's reaction, even when she greets him with an embrace that lingers longer than it should. "It's so good to see you, Etienne," she says.

"It's wonderful to see you both as well," he replies.

Audrey flinches at the word both and casts a brief, sidelong look of hate at Claude. Claude is looking at Etienne and doesn't see it. "You look wonderful," he tells the younger man. "When are you going to do the Christian thing and find a young woman to settle down with?"

A horribly inappropriate question, but I get the impression that Claude is viewed as a dear uncle to the Lacroixs. Either way, Etienne handles the question beautifully, laughing politely, then saying, "But remember, Claude, Christ never married. In any case, I did find a young woman to settle down with, and she lives fondly in my memory every day."

A touch of grief crosses Claude's face. "Yes. I miss her too."

"We all do," Josephine says.

Audrey mutters something, but no one seems to hear it. That's probably for the best.

The children scamper up, and Amelia throws her arms around Claude and Audrey. Gabriel grins at them and offers a bashful handshake. I'll give Audrey credit. She softens immediately once the children show up and even bends down to give Gabriel a kiss on the cheek. "Hey guys! I'm so glad your grandma let you stay up!"

"I always let them stay up," Josephine protests. "Do I look like I have the energy to enforce a bedtime?"

"We always go to sleep by nine," Amelia retorts. "It's just that we don't have lessons tomorrow."

"Only because Mr. Franz and I intend to drink until we're forced to impose on Miss Josephine's hospitality tonight," Mr. Gilroy says.

The two teachers approach the group arm in arm. Franz casts an affectionately irritated look at Gilroy. "You will have two drinks and if you want anymore, it will wait until we're home."

Gilroy pats Franz's hand. "Of course, dear, of course."

Franz rolls his eyes. "I'll make sure he behaves, Miss Josephine."

A single note sounds from the piano. That one note is enough to silence the crowd and turn everyone's attention to the instrument.

A brief arpeggio follows, and gasps fill the room as the attendees see Gabriel sitting on the bench with sheet music in front of him. Claude lifts an eyebrow to Josephine. “You didn’t tell me we were going to be blessed with a performance from your grandson, Miss Josephine.”

Etienne frowns at Amelia, who beams gleefully at her grandmother. When she sees her grandmother’s shocked eyes and thin, bloodless lips, her smile fades into a look of confusion that quickly transforms to irritation. “This will be good,” she says, “You’ll see. Gabriel found a new piece.”

“What new piece?” Etienne demands.

Gabriel himself answers that question when he starts to play. I’ve already spoken a little about how his playing affects me, so I won’t belabor the point except to say that it becomes immediately clear that I am not the only one so affected. The room stands in awe of the melody that pours forth from the old piano. Claude and most of the room are enraptured. Even Audrey appears entranced. Etienne and Josephine appear more terrified than charmed, but they stand stock still, seemingly unable to move or react in any way to the music. It is as though Gabriel has placed the room under a spell.

As for me, the awe and joy I feel the first time he plays fills me for the first few measures, but as the piece progresses, those emotions alter. The piece itself begins as a beautiful, romantic overture, more classical than jazz. After a minute or so, the tempo increases, becoming jaunty and playful. Gradually, this playfulness becomes mischievous as the melody leads the ear toward familiar phrases only to switch directions seemingly out of nowhere, taunting the listener with its approach to a conclusion but refusing to reach that conclusion.

This mischievousness becomes irreverent, and the music itself takes a darker tone. Now, it is no longer playful but biting and sarcastic. It mocks us for being unable to

follow or understand it, and this is when my joy turns slowly to fright.

As the next movement begins, that fright takes a visceral turn when a flash of memory fills my mind. I no longer see Gabriel in front of me but Annie. We're no longer in the Lacroix home but in our high school in Boston. Annie is seventeen years old and performing in our school's talent show. Her performance—I recall now—began like Gabriel's, gentle, sweet and light-hearted. As it progresses, though, it becomes aggressive, almost violent.

As Gabriel's piece crosses that threshold from sarcasm to violence, the sound of the piano fades, replaced by the sound of Annie's saxophone. The notes are wild, frenzied, and slowly lose all pretense of composition and phrasing, becoming an assault of sound that drowns out all others, subdues all thought, forces itself on one's mind until it overwhelms us and pushes us to the brink of insanity.

Eventually, the notes are no longer even notes but discordant shrieks, the snarls of some otherworldly monster rather than the voice of a woodwind. Annie gyrates on stage, and at first I can't tell if she is controlling the music or controlled by it.

Then she looks down at me. Her eyes are filled with hate, and I understand suddenly and completely that this is her curse to me. She is pouring every ounce of her disdain and hurt into this song and wishing that it would drown me, suffocate me, pull me under until I can't breathe, can't think, can't feel anything but her hate.

I close my eyes, press my hands to my ears and open my mouth to scream.

“Claude? Claude!”

That isn't my voice.

I open my eyes. I'm no longer in our high school. I'm back at the Lacroix house, and

I'm looking up at Gabriel's shocked face. I follow his eyes and see Claude Durand stumbling backwards, his hand clutched to his breast. Audrey has her hand on his shoulder, her eyes wild with terror. It's her voice I hear, calling her husband's name.

Claude opens his mouth and breathes something, but I can't hear what he says. Then his eyes roll back in his head. He stumbles backwards and falls onto one of the tables. The table collapses under his weight, and the guests cry out with fear and concern.

Audrey drops to his side and grabs his face, tilting the sightless, lolling eyes up to hers. "Claude! Claude ! Oh my God, No !"

Etienne is the first among us to recover. He pulls his phone from his pocket and quickly dials nine-one-one. His hands are trembling. Josephine mutters something under her breath, staring at Claude's body, and even as Etienne calls for an ambulance, I know that it is his body and no longer him. He is gone, felled by what appears to be a heart attack.

"It was just supposed to be fun," Amelia whispers. "We were just showing off how good of a piano player Gabriel is."

I blink and remember the children. Amelia's face is ashen, and her lips are nearly as pale as Claude's. I quickly gather her into my arms and call to Gabriel. "Gabriel! Come with me now."

Gabriel rushes towards me, but Josephine catches him, gripping his arms and pulling him close to her face. Her lips are pulled back from her teeth, and she hisses like a harpy, "What did you do? What did you do ?"

Before I can react, Etienne pulls her arms off of him and says, "Enough, mother! Stop it!"

I step forward and grab Gabriel. “Come on. Let’s go.”

As I lead the children from the parlor, I hear Etienne speaking with emergency services while Audrey weeps and continues to scream her husband’s name.

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The children are awake late that night. I take them to Amelia's room and put a movie on for them, a happy movie where smart children outwit foolish adults and save the world from destruction. I remain with them, choosing to focus on my responsibility rather than slake my curiosity.

Noises from downstairs filter up occasionally. Audrey's wails continue for several minutes, only stopping when the sirens drown them out and signal the arrival of the ambulance. As the sirens fade, the noise of car doors slamming shut and engines starting tells me the other guests have fled. I don't blame them. Were it not for the children, I would probably have left myself.

I look at the children and see their eyes wide and staring with shock. Gabriel in particular, is trembling, probably because of his grandmother's odd accusation.

And what was that about? Why would she ask Gabriel what he had done? Claude clearly had a heart attack. How could Gabriel have done anything to affect that? I've heard of shrill high notes causing eardrums to burst and deep low notes causing nausea, but not from a piano. And anyway, those anecdotes are unconfirmed and involve electronic amplification far beyond the ordinary power of a musical instrument.

But of course, she couldn't possibly have a scientific reason to think Gabriel is at fault for Claude's death. It must be something else.

She expresses disdain for Marcel's piano. She allows Gabriel to take lessons, but she remains upstairs and away from the instrument when he does. She is clearly unhappy when Gabriel starts to play, and...

No, not unhappy. Terrified. When Gabriel begins to play, the expression on Josephine's face is not one of anger, but one of fear. Come to think of it, Etienne also seemed afraid. Why would they be afraid?

And why would Amelia apologize after? I suppose she didn't exactly apologize, but her words after Claude's heart attack suggest that she feels that somehow they are responsible. Then Josephine stops only just short of stating that outright.

Because of a music piece? Surely, they couldn't feel a jazz composition could have the power to murder someone.

The image of Annie's eyes as she plays her saxophone piece comes back to me. The hate in her eyes chills me.

It's ridiculous to think, but...

I shake my head firmly. No. I have been superstitious enough already. There is no chance that Gabriel's playing piano could have killed Claude Durand.

Still, something happened, and it seems that the Lacroixs, at least, don't believe it was an act of God. I must discover why they think this, and if there's a danger I should be concerned with. Could Marcel's heart attack have something to do with that composition?

Sean's voice echoes through my head. I thought you came here to look for your sister.

"I did," I reply. "But I have to figure out what happened here before anyone else gets hurt."

"What did you say, Mary?" Amelia asks.

I realize I said that last thought out loud. “Nothing,” I reply. “Forgive me, dear. I was only thinking aloud.”

“Do you think Claude will be all right?” Gabriel asks in a small voice. “Do you think... I mean, do you...”

He can’t bring himself to ask the question, and I can’t quite bring myself to answer. “I know the doctors will take the very best care of him,” I tell him. “And I know that you did nothing wrong.”

“Grandma seems to think I did.”

“Your grandmother is in shock. We all are. When we’re in shock, we say things we don’t mean. But you didn’t do anything wrong by choosing to play that piece.”

Amelia shivers when I say that, and when I look at her, she bites her lip and looks away. I turn back to Gabriel and see his head hung in shame. Why do they think they’re guilty? These aren’t looks of fear but of remorse.

I hear shouting downstairs. Etienne and Josephine are arguing. I try to resist my curiosity, but the urge to know is too great. I put a new movie on and tell the children, “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Please stay inside the room.”

The children don’t reply, but Amelia nods softly. She reaches for her brother’s hand and grips it tightly. He returns a grip just as tight, and I nearly reconsider leaving them alone.

Then the noise of the argument reaches my ears again, and curiosity overwhelms me. I must understand why this family reacted the way it did to the musical performance and Claude’s heart attack.

I turn the volume up on the TV so it drowns the sound of the argument. Then I head to the top of the stairs and listen from just out of view.

“We can’t afford to keep the club, Mother.” Etienne says. “Hasn’t it cost us enough?”

“We can hire a new manager,” Josephine replies. “Or we can give Parker the job. He’s competent.”

Etienne scoffs. “Really, Mother? Claude’s not even buried yet, and you’re already thinking of replacing him?”

“You brought the conversation up! Why are you jumping straight at the opportunity to shut your father’s club down? You seem almost happy that Claude is dead!”

“Oh, stop it. You’re being ridiculous. Of course, I’m not happy.”

“Then why are you so eager to shut the club down?”

“Because I don’t want anyone else to die!” he thunders.

My eyes widen. So now the club is part of Claude’s death?

“You’re acting a fool,” Josephine spits. “You can’t possibly believe that Claude’s death has anything to do with your father’s.”

“You seem to believe it. You accused my son of murder to his face.”

“I...”

Josephine’s voice trails off. For several seconds, the only sound I hear is the pounding of my own heart.

Then Josephine sighs. “I reacted badly to the shock. I’m sorry for that. And I’ll apologize to Gabriel, but—”

“Yes, you will. And to Amelia. And to Mary. She was trying to take them away so this wouldn’t traumatize them, but you made damned sure it would.”

“You’re changing the subject, Etienne. I’m not shutting down the club.”

“And what happens when we’re ruined? What happens when we’re bankrupt? What do we tell the children when we have to move to an apartment in a dangerous neighborhood and they have to quit their music lessons? The money I make as a salesman won’t be enough to cover our debts.”

“Will you stop ? You go straight to the worst possible scenario every time! That’s not going to happen! We’re in a slight bit of trouble, yes, but nothing that’s worth the catastrophe you’re predicting! We’ll hire another manager, and we’ll—

“I’m done with this,” Etienne says curtly. “I can’t talk to you when you refuse to listen to reason.”

I hear heavy footsteps start up the stairs and rush back toward Amelia’s room. I close the door behind me and listen, heart pounding, as the footsteps approach. For a moment, I’m terrified that Etienne’s seen me and is now coming to shout at me for eavesdropping on his conversation, but the footsteps proceed past me, and a moment later, I hear the door to Etienne’s room slam shut.

I sigh with relief and turn to the children. They sit slumped forward in their chairs, their bodies bent at unnatural angles. For a terrible moment, I am convinced that they’re also dead, that whatever curse afflicts this family has taken them to.

Then Amelia stirs, and I realize that they’re not dead, only asleep. I sigh again and

carefully lift her into bed. I strain a little with the effort, and when I lift Gabriel from his bed, I abandon my intention to carry him to his room. They are no longer small children, and I am a rather petite woman and not young anymore. I normally wouldn't approve of two children of this age and of the opposite sex sharing a bed, but I think I can make an exception given the circumstances.

I lay him next to his sister and regard them for a moment. They're still so young. What happened today will stay with them for the rest of their lives. I will do my best to help them navigate this grief, but nothing I can do will ever remove the image of a man they loved dying horribly in front of him.

I return to my room, disturbed by the day. It is not the first time I've seen a person die, but it's the first time something's happened that I truly can't explain. There's a hint of the fantastic in all of the mysteries into which I've been thrust, but I can always see that the truth must be mundane and explained by human behavior rather than by ghouls or ghosts.

But this time, I can make no sense of it. Perhaps it's the fact that the entire Lacroix family seems to think—whether they like to admit it or not—that Gabriel's performance somehow contributed to Claude's death. Perhaps it's the vision I have of Annie playing her saxophone while Gabriel plays his piano.

Whatever it is, a part of me wonders whether there could indeed be something unexplainable at work here. And if so, what can I possibly hope to do to prevent it from happening again?

I wake to the sound of Gabriel's piece filling the house. At first, I'm certain that I'm dreaming because I can't believe that Gabriel would play that song again so soon after what happened.

But as the piece progresses from the romantic opening to the jaunty, playful second movement, I realize my ears aren't playing tricks on me. I step out of bed and quietly put on my slippers. I suppose my plan is to tell him to stop playing and go back to bed, but I don't really think that through all the way. The truth is that a part of me is just drawn to the piece somehow.

I head downstairs as the piece progresses to its mischievous third movement. I realize that no one else is awake. I find that disturbing. Can't they hear this? Why aren't they coming to stop it? Could they be too frightened by it to leave their beds?

Almost as if reading my mind, the music changes to the irreverent fourth movement. But that can't be possible. It's several minutes before we should be at that point in the composition. I've only just started downstairs.

I look down at my feet and realize with alarm that I'm still upstairs. I thought I was moving, but once again, the piece has transfixed me.

I start downstairs again, looking at my feet to ensure that they are moving. Still, the song seems to be advancing far too fast. The sarcastic fifth movement is already giving way to the angry final movement. The arpeggios are rapidly growing dissonant and chaotic.

I tear my eyes from the floor and look up at the piano as I enter the parlor. I catch a brief glimpse of a tall, lithe silhouette with flowing golden hair.

Annie?

I blink, and the silhouette is gone. So is the music. The piano is silent and empty, the room still.

I walk to the keys, unsure if I'm still dreaming or if when I blink I awaken from the

trance.

I lay a finger on the keys, and when I find them warm to the touch, I gasp and pull my hand back.

A soft sound of laughter, so faint I'm not sure I even hear it, echoes through the house. I look around, but no other specter reveals itself, and the laughter doesn't repeat.

I turn back to the piano and remove my fingers. My hand trembles as I return it to my side.

What have I gotten myself into?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:42 pm

The morning greets us with somber news. Claude Durand has died in the hospital. It seems his heart stopped around four in the morning, and the doctors were unable to restart it. I recall the dream that woke me and wish that I'd checked my phone. A part of me can't help but wonder if his death coincides with the ending of that second performance.

The Lacroixs react predictably. Josephine bursts into tears at the news. Etienne hides behind stoicism. Amelia weeps softly, burying her head in her hands, and Gabriel simply looks shocked.

"There was nothing they could do?" Josephine asks.

"Well, if there was, I'm sure he'd still be alive," Etienne replies coldly. He almost immediately regrets his statement and says, "I'm sorry. I'm just... this is..." He lifts his hands and lets them drop.

It's not my place to speak, or I would tell him that his feelings are valid, but perhaps everyone should take some time to themselves for a moment. I'm about to leave with the children when Josephine asks, "How is Audrey?"

I don't feel good about hesitating, but considering the disdain she showed for her husband up until his heart attack, I am interested to know exactly how Audrey is doing.

"She's barely coherent, apparently," Etienne replied. "I guess their marriage hadn't been doing well, and she feels guilty that they fought so much before he died."

Amelia releases a soft sob, and Etienne lowers his head. “Mary, will you take the children away, please? This isn’t a conversation they need to hear.”

Heat comes to my cheeks. I knew that, but I allowed my own selfish curiosity to get in the way. There's no indication that there's foul play involved in Claude's death. For Heaven's sake, I saw him die with my own eyes. There's no murder here. For the first time, I have to agree with Sean. I'm simply being a busybody.

“Come along, children.”

I take them away again, but this time, instead of going upstairs, I take them outside to the gardens. Fresh air can work wonders for grief.

It seems to help Amelia. She stops crying after a few minutes and looks around at the delicately pruned trees and carefully cultivated flowers arranged in pleasing patterns. This garden is small compared to most of the estates I’ve worked for, but I rather enjoy that. It doesn’t seem to swallow you up or overwhelm you the way so many larger estates do.

Gabriel, on the other hand, still seems to be in shock. His eyes are large and staring, and his shoulders are slumped. He shuffles his feet rather than walks, and several times I have to call to him when we turn because he continues on in the direction we’re walking without paying attention to us.

I decide I must talk to them. We reach a bench, and I sit both of them down on either side of me. “I am so sorry for your loss, children. I know you loved him very much.”

“He was nice,” Amelia says. “He was really kind to us when Grandpa died, and he’s always encouraged us and talked to us when no one else would. People always treat us like we’re stupid because we’re kids, but he’d listen to what we had to say and talk to us like we had a right to have an opinion. I know that seems silly, but that meant a

lot to us.”

“That doesn’t sound silly at all,” I tell her. “Adults have a difficult time remembering childhood. We want to protect children, and that colors all of our interactions with them. It’s hard to understand that sometimes what children need is to feel validated and appreciated.”

I turn to Gabriel. “How are you feeling? I know that sounds like a foolish question, but when we’re grieving, it can help sometimes to express that grief.”

He blinks but continues to stare straight ahead. When he replies, his voice is wooden. “I’m sad.”

"I know. I'm sad, too."

“Why?” Amelia says, a slight edge to her voice. “You didn’t know him.”

That reaction is common, too. Children don’t understand their grief, and it’s natural to resent people who act as though they do.

“I’m sad because Claude has left behind several people who love him very much. Those people will have to mourn him and carry on with their own lives without him, and that’s always a sad and difficult journey. I’ve lost both of my parents and my younger sister. I was very sad to lose them. I feel sorry that you two have to feel the same way.”

That is a lie, but a noble one. I felt some grief when my father died, but I don’t miss my mother at all. As for Annie, losing her was more than just grief. It broke me, and I’ve come to learn that not all of the pieces were put back together.

That being said, my role here is not to convince the children that I suffered a worse

tragedy than they have but to show them that I do understand grief and really do sympathize with them.

Amelia's lip trembles. "Audrey's going to be sad. I know she was angry with him, but she loved him. She's going to feel really sad."

"Yes," I agree. "She will have perhaps the most difficult journey of anyone."

That isn't quite a lie since I don't know for sure whether to believe Audrey's disdain, Audrey's grief, both or even neither. But it's probably the truth regardless of the answer to that question.

I turn to Gabriel. I really would like to engage with him a little. I know I shouldn't push for him to break out of his shock, but the sooner he can do so on his own, the easier things will be for him. If I can just nudge him in the right direction, then he'll recover sooner.

"What's your favorite memory of Claude, Gabriel?"

Gabriel doesn't say anything. He only stares blankly ahead into the distance.

"He dressed up as Santa Claus one year," Amelia said. "And brought us presents. He bought me a brand-new horsehair bow for my violin, and he gave Gabriel a framed picture of Herbie Hancock."

"Oh?" I turn back to Gabriel. "Who's Herbie Hancock?"

Gabriel doesn't answer. Instead, he gets abruptly to his feet. "I'm sorry, Miss Mary. I don't feel well. May I go lie down?"

"Of course, dear. But before you go, I need to make this clear to you. You did

nothing wrong. Regardless of anything else, you need to know that this wasn't your fault."

He holds my gaze for a moment. When I don't say anything else, he says, "Okay," almost as an afterthought.

I nod, and he walks back to the house. I feel terrible for not being able to get through to him, but perhaps I was being too aggressive after all. Grief is not something one can rush past. I'll allow him some time to process this on his own and then approach him later when he's ready.

"He feels guilty, you know," Amelia says. "We both do."

"Why do you feel guilty?" I ask her.

She shrugs and says glumly, "We played the piece. We weren't supposed to play that piece."

Annie's hate-filled eyes flash across my mind again. I blink the image away and ask, "Why would you think that playing a song would kill..." I catch myself and amend the question. "Why aren't you supposed to play that piece?"

Amelia looks back toward the house and bites her lip. I follow her eyes and see Gabriel climbing the steps to the back door. When the door closes behind him, she turns to me and says, "You can't tell anyone else about this, all right? Promise me."

A chill runs down my spine, although I don't quite know why. "I promise."

Her lip trembles again, but before she can start crying, she takes a deep breath and says, "That song is cursed."

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it’s true. Jacques Poitier cursed that song, and now anytime anyone plays it, someone close to them dies.”

I don’t respond right away. The truth is that I’m not sure how to respond. The sensible woman in me denounces the claim as rubbish, but of course I can’t say that to a grieving child, not so bluntly, at least.

And then there’s the part of me that can’t help but wonder if there’s a kernel of truth to it. I’ve encountered several legends before, and while it’s true that no voodoo curse has been proven true, there has always been an element of truth, a thread that, when pulled, unravels the true mystery behind the legend.

And while there is still no hard evidence to suggest that there is foul play in Claude’s death, there is now enough soft evidence that I feel justified in pulling that thread and finding that truth.

“Who is Jacques Poitier?” I ask.

“He was Grandpa’s biggest rival. He died before I was born, but I guess he and Dad were the two biggest jazz pianists in New Orleans a long time ago. They were both on the radio a lot, and they both worked with a lot of superstars like Louis Armstrong, B.B. King and Ray Charles.

“But Grandpa started getting bigger than Jacques, and Jacques didn’t like it. He wanted to be the best. So he challenged Grandpa to a contest, and whoever lost had to stop playing piano in New Orleans.”

“Where did you hear this story?” I ask.

“I heard bits and pieces of it from Claude, Dad and Grandma. I listened in and eventually figured it all out.”

“I see. Go on.”

She took a deep breath. “So the contest was held at the Midnight Melody. At the time, Grandpa didn’t own it. I think it was the same guys who owned the Disco Dynasty club.”

I have no idea what the Disco Dynasty club is, but it’s not really important to me, so I only say once more, “I see.”

“Anyway, they had the contest. Grandpa won with that piece. Jacques was so angry that he couldn’t play piano in New Orleans anymore, that he cursed Grandpa’s song and said that whoever played it again would lose someone close to them that night.”

“How horrible.”

“Yeah. He wasn’t a very nice guy.”

“It doesn’t sound like it. But Amelia, you and Gabriel just found that song in the attic the other night, right?”

“Actually, you found it,” she replies.

I stiffen as I recall that. It was I who found it. And if that music really is somehow connected to Claude’s death, then I bear the responsibility for it.

I swallow and say, “Yes. You’re right. I only mean... how do you know that this piece is the cursed piece?”

“Because Grandpa never played it again. Not until the night he died.”

“But how do you know that’s the piece he played? It was buried behind compositions from decades of work. How do you know that your grandfather played that particular one?”

“The name. Vie Apres a la Mort. Afterlife. That was the name of the song he played to win the f and the name of the song he was playing when he died.”

She looks back at the house. "And it's the song Gabriel played when Claude died." She looks at me and says, "Now you know why Grandma got angry with us and why Dad was so scared. They both know about the curse, and even if they say they don't believe it, I know they do."

She shivered. “I hope they burn that music. I hope no one ever plays it again.”

Tears well in her eyes. I’m about to comfort her when she stands abruptly and runs toward the house. I call her name, but she ignores me.

I sit on the bench for a while, trying to make sense of what I've heard. I don't believe that the song actually cursed anyone.

But Josephine was angry. And both she and Etienne were frightened. I must understand why. Perhaps then I’ll learn the true nature of this “curse.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:42 pm

In my lifetime, I have been to three funerals. The first was for my grandmother when I was seven years old. I don't remember much about that one other than that I was very sad. I remember my grandmother as a rosy-cheeked, smiling woman who always had a lollipop for me when we would visit, but I remember nothing else. That grief, I'm sure, was powerful in the moment, but it hasn't lingered with me.

The second was for my father, and that was a different kind of grief. It was marked not by sadness so much as envy. He had been miserable for the past twelve years of his life, and while his death wasn't at all timely, it meant he had escaped my mother, the source of his misery. Annie had disappeared by then, and that meant I was left alone to handle my mother. So, I envied him for his freedom even as I mourned his passing.

The third was for my mother. Grief was nowhere near my mind. I felt only anger. Anger that she had gone relatively peacefully. Anger that she had lingered as long as she had. Mostly, I felt anger that I had cared for her for years and eased her suffering when I believed then and still now that she was the source of all my suffering.

This fourth funeral is the first I've attended, where the deceased is surrounded only by people who mourn him truly. There are about one hundred fifty people in attendance, and there's not a dry eye in the place. Tears even well in my own eyes as I observe the dejection the children feel. Gabriel is no longer stoic but weeps bitterly as he clings to his father's sleeve. Amelia is nearly inconsolable, and she and Josephine hold each other like lifelines in a storm.

The auditorium is filled with musicians, producers and technicians, along with some other employees from Midnight Melody: doormen, servers and the like. It seems

Claude was very well-liked. I overhear several of the employees remark glumly that they'll never have a boss as cool as Mr. Durand.

Perhaps the greatest surprise to me is Audrey. I suppose I took her display of grief with a grain of salt, considering my first impression of her relationship with Claude, but looking at her now, there is no doubt in my mind that her grief is real. I consider myself to be very skilled at understanding human emotion, and I see no sign that she is exaggerating her feelings. She alternates between bouts of weeping and periods of vacant staring, exactly as I would expect from someone burying someone they love. And the slump of her shoulders, the bags under her eyes, the distracted manner of speaking when she does talk... There's no doubt about it. She is grieving.

That doesn't mean that she's innocent. Many murderers truly grieve their victims. Many killers feel remorse. Even serial killers recount instances when they regret their choices and feel true empathy for those whose lives they've affected.

I don't suspect Audrey of murder, though.. I want to know more about this cursed piece and what connection it may have to Claude's death. Of course I don't believe a song killed him, but my instincts tell me the composition is at least tangentially related to the truth. It's easy to believe the widow to be responsible for the older man's death, but I can't jump straight to that conclusion. Not when there's another mystery lurking over his passing.

When the service ends, Audrey waits next to the casket to accept the condolences of all present. She looks so tired. The caretaker in me wants to whisk her away somewhere she can rest and mourn in private without having to put on a face for so many others.

The attendees one by one offer words of encouragement to Audrey before leaving for the reception. I've never understood the purpose of a reception after a funeral. Why do we force grieving people to host others as though they're celebrating something

and not enduring the worst pain of their lives?

I hold onto my indignation until the person in front of us approaches Audrey. He's a gray-haired man of around fifty with a tall and regal bearing, handsome in an academic sort of way. He smiles and takes Audrey's hand in both of his. "If you need anything, Audrey, anything at all, please call me. Claude was always an earnest supporter of my music history channel. The very least I can do is ensure his wife is well taken care of."

She smiles and squeezes his hand. "Thank you, Louis."

I commit Louis's name and face to memory. If Louis knows music history and was personally acquainted with Claude Durand, then maybe he knows about this so-called cursed composition. Maybe he can tell me the history of this piece, and I can learn the truth behind the curse.

We reach Audrey, and the room seems to cool by ten degrees. Audrey's smile vanishes, and Josephine's shoulders stiffen like boards. Josephine lifts a hand as though to embrace Audrey but stops herself and only says, "I'm sorry for your loss, Audrey. If you need anything, please call me."

Audrey nods and offers a curt "Thank you."

I expect a warmer interaction with Etienne. Even if her crush on him was ultimately harmless, his sorrow for her appears unfeigned, and I would think she would want even the brief comfort of an embrace.

Instead, she seems even colder, and when a somewhat confused Etienne says, "We'll miss him very much," her lip curls.

"I'm sure you will," she says.

Once more, her tenderness is reserved only for the children. They, of course, burst into tears when they see her. I see the ice in her expression crack, then melt. She pulls them both to her and embraces them fiercely. They repeat over and over, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” and she repeats over and over, “I know. It’s all right.”

I wonder if Audrey understands the true meaning of their apology or if her words are only intended as generic comfort for the children.

Finally, we leave. The reception is held at the Midnight Melody. I am excited for my first chance to see the club, but it turns out the reception is limited to the lobby, and the rest of the club is locked and off-limits. At least Audrey doesn’t have to host it.

I’m not surprised when Audrey takes advantage of that fact and makes only a token appearance before leaving. I’m also not surprised when Etienne approaches me and tells me quietly that the family will be leaving for a private dinner. I’m welcome to stay as long as I’d like, and Henri will pick me up when I’m ready to return home.

Of course, I understand that. I have only been governess for three days, and I’ve arrived just in time for a terrible tragedy to strike the family. I don’t at all expect to be treated like family myself.

Besides, I might possibly learn something useful from the others here. I don’t know exactly what yet, but I’ve learned that when one uses one’s ears more than one’s mouth, one is likely to learn much.

So, I walk around the lobby, engage in small talk when it’s unavoidable, but mostly listen.

And I do learn much. First, I learn that Louis’s last name is Thibodeaux, and that not only does he have an online channel about music history, but he is also a professor of music history at Loyola University. When I meet with him, I can be assured that he

knows his subject well. Perhaps he will be willing to share with me the true nature of the rivalry between Marcel Lacroix and Jacques Poitier.

I believe that's enough for a good start and decide to leave for home. I'll take advantage of my night off by making an appointment with Professor Thibodeaux.

As I walk toward the door, though, I overhear something that stops me in my tracks. The speakers are all musicians—a fact I've gathered from other overheard conversations. They're talking about the relationship between the Lacroixs and the Durands, and what they have to say is shocking.

"What do you think Josephine will do now that Claude's out of the way?" asks a tall, rail-thin young man.

"I think she'll have to watch out for Audrey," replies a plump woman with long curly hair.

"Oh yeah," a second man, rugged and bearded and sporting earrings in each ear. "Audrey's going to be out for blood."

"What can she do, though?" the first man asks. "She has no idea how to run a music business."

"And the Lacroixs do?" the second man challenges.

"Etienne can run the business."

"Etienne wants to sell the business," the woman replies. "Josephine can't run it, but she'll be damned if she lets a Durand get her hands on it. Audrey probably can't run it, but she won't forgive Josephine for outliving Claude. I think we're looking at a vicious fight."

“Yes, but how does it end?” the first man asks. “Who wins?”

“None of us, that’s for sure,” the other man says.

“I’m just glad I have other gigs,” the woman remarks. “Whoever wins, I can’t see the Melody open for longer than two more seasons.”

“You think it’ll make it that long?” the first man asks.

“Considering it’s Josephine Lacroix we’re talking about, I think it’ll have to be pried from her cold dead hands.”

“Well, that might be exactly what happens.”

They turn toward me, and I start walking. I smile and nod at them as though I’ve only just arrived and haven’t heard their conversation for the past several minutes.

My smile vanishes when I step into the parking lot. Audrey’s behavior around Josephine makes a lot more sense now. I still think Etienne is somewhat oblivious to the dynamic there, but I’m beginning to get a picture of a rivalry between the elder Lacroixs and the Durands. In a macabre sense, Claude’s death makes them “even.”

But if there was a rivalry between them, then why did Claude work for Josephine and Marcel?

I shake my head. There are still questions to be answered before I know for sure what the truth is. I only hope that Professor Thibodeaux can help shed some light on all of this.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:42 pm

Funerals are perhaps the darkest moments in the lives of those who lose a loved one. The day after the funeral, however, is like the sun rising from the darkness. It's a reminder that life goes on in spite of grief, that joy can be found in the ashes of sadness, that the memory of the one we've lost is not an impediment to the memories we create after their loss.

This is true for the Lacroixs as well. They are not joyful, per se, but grief no longer settles over them like a blanket. The children eat well, and even Gabriel seems a little less dejected and dissociated. Etienne and Josephine are tense, no doubt in part because of the awkward interaction between them and Audrey at the funeral, but Josephine no longer trembles like a leaf, and Etienne doesn't seem quite so stoic.

When breakfast is finished, Etienne announces, "Children, your grandmother and I are going to take you on an outing. Mardi Gras is not for young children, but there's a celebration in Audubon Park that's more family-friendly. Mary, you're welcome to join us if you'd like."

I open my mouth to accept, but then I think about Professor Thibodeaux. I might not get a better chance to meet with him. "Thank you," I reply, "but I have some personal errands to attend to. If it's all right with you, I'll make it up to the children by preparing dinner and snacks, and we can watch a movie together tonight."

Etienne smiles gratefully, and I'm relieved to realize that he once more wanted this to be a family-only outing. "That sounds wonderful to me. What do you think, children?"

Gabriel nods. "That's all right."

“Can we make ice cream sundaes?” Amelia asks.

I smile at her. “I am famous for my ice cream sundaes.”

She grins, and I feel a touch less guilty about leaving them to go snooping. Josephine gives me a smile of her own and says, “I’m so sorry, Mary. It must be awkward for you to be here just when we happen to suffer such a tragedy.”

“I’m well experienced with tragedy, I’m afraid,” I reply. “My only concern is that you all remember that you love each other and you’ll get through this tragedy no matter how terrible it seems now.”

“We’ll certainly remember that,” she says. “It’s hard to face one’s grief in the moment, but the sun rises nonetheless, doesn’t it?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

I take the children upstairs to get ready. Amelia is excited about her day, and while subtle differences in her tone of voice and posture tell me she hasn’t fully processed her grief just yet, I can tell that she’s ready to move on.

Gabriel is harder to read. He doesn’t seem as excited for this outing as Amelia, but he’s a far more reserved person than she is, and it’s difficult to know how much of his shyness is due to grief and how much is his ordinary personality. He does mention that he’d like a particular brand of caramel sauce for his Sundae, and the fact that he can think about that is an encouraging sign. I promise him I’ll buy that sauce on my way home from my errands, then send him on his way.

Once the family leaves, I return to the parlor. The composition Gabriel plays—the one supposedly cursed by Jacques Poitier—remains on the piano. The family hasn’t touched it since the night Claude died. In fact, the entire parlor is as it was when he

died. I'm sure they'll clean it soon now that the funeral is over, but perhaps their superstition will prevent them a while longer.

I realize I'm stalling when the grandfather clock chimes the hour, and I still stand in front of the piano staring at the sheet music. I reach for it with trembling hands, terrified for reasons I hesitate to express. Foolish as it sounds, a part of me fears that when I touch the music, my sister's vengeful spirit will attack me.

There's really no reason for me to feel this way. Annie and I didn't part on good terms, but I've not felt so frightened of her in months, not since my first governess position when I have another nightmare of Annie. Interestingly enough, this one also involves her eyes, though in this case, they are empty black sockets rather than orbs of hate.

Finally, I grab the sheet music almost aggressively. When nothing happens, I sigh, partly in exasperation and partly in embarrassment. I look wryly at the yellowed paper and say aloud. "You've caused quite a bit more trouble than you're worth."

The sheet music has no response to that.

I dress and leave for Loyola. Henri has taken the car, but it's only an hour's walk to the University, and I enjoy the chance to stretch my legs every now and then.

The city is alive with anticipation. Mardi Gras is to New Orleans what... actually, I don't know of any local celebration in the United States as important as Mardi Gras is to New Orleans. I am aware of the salacious rumors and stories that surround Mardi Gras, but to the people here, the holiday is not a lewd celebration of drink and debauchery but a chance to exhibit their culture and their uniqueness. New Orleans truly is a city unlike any other in the United States. It is a culture that grew apart from the Spanish and English influences that shaped most of the nation, and its distance from France means that it differs even from the culture of its founders.

As I observe the wreaths, banners, flowers and even costumes adorning the places and people of the city, I am struck by this uniqueness, this otherness. In a way, it feels as though I've traveled to a foreign nation, one that is neighbor to the nation I call home but not an identical twin. Much like Amelia and Gabriel, New Orleans is sister to the rest of the United States, but still separate. They cling fiercely to their traditions, and that pride is evident on every face.

I reach the University to find a much more sanitized version of Mardi Gras preparations. The banners are more generic, the costumes softer—at least among the staff—and signs everywhere warn students that drinking and drug use on campus will not be tolerated and campus police will patrol the university grounds.

I chuckle in amusement at that. I doubt anyone seriously worries about the state of the school, but I am certain the janitorial staff is not looking forward to the cleanup.

Professor Thibodeaux's office is on the third floor of the College of Music and Media. He is in a meeting with a student when I arrive, but a friendly receptionist in the lobby of the college informs me that he will make time to see me when he's finished.

As I wait, I glance at the sheet music again. I'm not sure what I expect when I look at it. It's not as though the notes are going to move to reveal a hidden message or the song is going to play itself like...

Like it did the other night.

Now I'm being foolish. That was clearly a nightmare. I very rarely sleepwalk, but it's happened before.

I just feel silly about this whole thing. Maybe I should put the sheet music away and just ask about the rivalry.

“Miss Wilcox?”

I lift my head, and the receptionist says, “He’ll see you now.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I take the elevator to the third floor and soon find myself in a cozy but comfortable office. Like the offices of many professors and academics I’ve known, the walls of Professor Thibodeaux’s office is lined with bookshelves, and each bookshelf is crammed with books: textbooks, notebooks, composition books, and even large, leatherbound manuscripts that are properly described as tomes.

Louis smiles at me when I enter. “Miss Wilcox. You’re the governess for the Lacroixs, right?”

And now I realize that everything I talk to him about will get back to Josephine. I should have known better. I’ve mingled with high society before. They talk to each other.

But I’m here now. I can’t just leave. So I have to make up an innocent reason to talk to him. That means I can’t show him the sheet music.

“Yes. You saw me at the funeral for Mr. Durand.”

His face falls. “Yes. I’m so sorry for Audrey.”

“It’s a tragedy. I feel terribly for her loss.”

He shakes his head. “I feel even worse for her future. I’m afraid she has a fight ahead.”

“Oh?”

He sighs. “Between you and me, there is a great deal of tension between Josephine and Audrey. It’s not appropriate of me to tell you this, but you’ll be in the middle of it soon enough, so I suppose there’s no harm.”

I’m encouraged by this. If he’s comfortable speaking this openly with me, then maybe I can risk probing a little myself. I’ll let him share first, though. As I said before, one learns more with one’s ears than with one’s mouth.

"There's a great deal of rivalry between the musical families in this city," he says, taking a seat behind the desk. "It's unfortunate that something as universal as music can lead to such bitterness between people, but it's the truth. The Durands are one of the most longstanding musical giants in New Orleans. Their patriarch, Pierre Durand, arrived in 1729. They founded the first musical theater in the city the following year, and for two hundred years, they were the premier... shall we say, emperors of the music scene in the city. If you wanted to succeed in any of the musical styles that were popular between 1730 and 1930, and you were from New Orleans, you worked with a Durand.

"Then the Great Depression hit. The Durands had much of their money invested in ventures that collapsed when the stock market crashed. They were able to survive the Depression, but to do so, they had to sell a great deal of their properties. By the end of the Second World War, the city no longer had a musical czar."

His eyes brightened. “Until Marcel.”

“I hear he was a prodigy.”

"The word doesn't do him justice. He was brilliant in ways that only a few in history can match. If jazz enjoyed one-hundredth of the popularity of rock or pop music, he

would be considered one of the greatest to ever live. When Claude Durand met him, he thought him the salvation of his family."

My eyes widen. "Claude gave Marcel his start?"

"Claude gave Marcel everything. When he heard about the young Marcel's performance at the Musee Musique, he immediately endowed Marcel's musical education."

"I thought Marcel's father did that."

"Marcel's father purchased the piano. Claude purchased the finest music teachers on Earth and ensured Marcel had access to them at all times. He was only a few years older than Marcel, but he was a shrewd businessman."

The brightness fades from his eyes. "Not shrewd enough, unfortunately. Marcel had a natural talent for business as well as music. When he began to grow famous for his talents, he went behind Claude's back and signed deals that not only freed him from Claude's grasp but also gave him control of much of New Orleans' music scene."

"Oh my!" I exclaim. "Claude must have been furious!"

"For a time, yes, but eventually, he forgave Marcel. At least, he seemed to. The belief among those in the know is that when Claude went bankrupt, he had no choice but to accept Marcel's offer to manage the Midnight Melody. Some consider it an ignominious and humiliating end to the Durand family legacy."

"Including Audrey?"

"Oh yes. She never forgave Marcel for what he did to her husband. I don't know if she loved Claude, but she saw in him a chance to be at the pinnacle of high society.

To end up instead the wife of a second-rate failure? That's not something a woman like Audrey can handle."

He falls silent, and I sit there, stunned. After a minute, he smiles. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. I've been somewhat wistful lately, I'm afraid. What is it you wanted to see me about?"

I hesitate a second, then pull the sheet music out. His eyes widen when he sees it. I hand it to him and ask, "Can you confirm that this is the piece Marcel played when he passed?"

"Well, I can confirm that this is a Marcel Lacroix composition. I can't say for sure that it's the one he played when he passed away. The truth of that evening is, unfortunately, obfuscated by conjecture. But this is definitely his piece."

"And Jacques Poitier? Is it true he placed a curse on this piece?"

Louis frowns and looks sharply at me. "Who told you about that?"

The change in demeanor knocks me off balance. "I... I heard rumors," is all I manage to stutter out.

"Rumors are better ignored," he replies, gently but firmly. "Especially when they concern one's employers." He stands and says, "I apologize again for telling you so much that is none of my business or yours. Let's make a pact that we will speak no further of this. To anyone."

"Yes. Of course. I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"No need to apologize. It was I who stepped out of line."

He escorts me to the door and leaves me with an admonition. "Care deeply for those children, Miss Wilcox. They will need you. And by the end, I'm sure you will need them as well."

The end? The end of what? What is he talking about?

Before I have a chance to ask him, he closes the door in my face. I stand there, heart pounding, and wonder for the first time if I might be in danger myself.

Vie Apres a la Mort might not be cursed, but there is no doubt a hex surrounds this family. I fear that by involving myself, I am bringing this hex down on my own head.

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On my way home, I call Sean. He answers on the first ring. I love him for that. It's a simple thing, and maybe a somewhat silly thing, but it means a lot to me to know that he's always available for me.

"Hello, my love. No doubt you're calling to tell me you miss me very much and can't wait to come home."

I smile softly. "I do miss you. And I do look forward to the day when my travels will be over, and I can enjoy a peaceful retirement with you."

"But you need something from me."

I frown. "Don't be so catty about it."

"I'm not being catty. I just like reminding you every now and then that I know you well enough to read your mind."

I roll my eyes. "How proud of yourself you must be."

"I am quite proud," he agrees, "but before I push you too far and make you actually angry with me, tell me what you need."

"I need you to research a gentleman named Jacques Poitier, a jazz pianist. Find me whatever you can on a rivalry between him and Marcel Lacroix."

"Ooh. Drama in the Gem of the South. What is this Poitier alleged to have done?"

“He cursed one of Marcel’s compositions.”

Sean is silent for a moment. Then he says, “Mary... you don’t actually believe that there could be a curse, do you?”

Now, I am irritated. “No, Sean, I don’t actually think there’s some sort of witch’s curse. But I do suspect that Marcel’s death as well as that of Claude Durand could involve some foul play.”

“Claude Durand? Who’s he?”

“He’s the manager of the Midnight Melody, the jazz club Josephine Lacroix owns. He died a few nights ago after Gabriel—that’s Marcel’s grandson—played the piece Poitier is alleged to have cursed. I want you to look up that piece too. It’s called *Vie Apres a la Mort*. I’ll send you a picture.”

There is another silence. Then Sean says with a touch of concern in his voice. “Oh, Mary. What have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“I’m not in the mood for patronization, Sean. Can you help me?”

"Obviously, I can help you, Mary. But I don't think it's evil of me to express concern for you. You said you were going to New Orleans to look for signs of your sister. Instead, you're in the middle of another scandal that isn't properly your business, and—"

“Must we have this conversation again, Sean? You know I can’t just allow innocents’ deaths to go unavenged.”

He sighs. “We don’t need to have this conversation again yet. But there’s an entire other side to the conversation that you’re glossing over, and we will have that part of

the conversation again. Not now, though. Send me what you have, and I'll see what I can learn. But for God's sake, Mary, remember you have a man who loves you at home and will be very sad if you're dead. Please don't make me come save your life again."

I feel a touch of guilt when he says that. In several of my past mysteries, Sean has arrived in the nick of time to do exactly that. I confess I don't think often enough about how much worry he must feel for me.

"I will. I won't put myself in danger. To be honest, this is probably nothing, but..."

"But you have to know."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

His voice is playful now, and the tension leaves my shoulders. "Well, I love you."

"Yes, I suppose you do. I love you too. Talk to you soon."

He hangs up, and I send him pictures of the front page of *Vie Apres a la Mort*. I feel a little better with his help. The truth is that I was starting to worry about the danger I was putting myself in. The high society of the New Orleans jazz scene is a lot more cutthroat than I imagined, and they don't like having their secrets exposed. With Sean on the case, I don't need to put myself in the middle as much.

And I really should focus my attention on Annie. I've once more traveled somewhere to find answers about her only to become embroiled in a scandal that isn't any of my business.

My brow furrows in annoyance as I realize that Sean is right. He does know me very well.

When I arrive home, I see the car in the driveway. I freeze, my mouth open in shock. I thought I would have more time, but the Lacroix's are home now.

And I'm carrying the cursed music in my purse.

I quickly zip the bag up so the music isn't visible and pray that they haven't noticed it missing from the parlor yet. My heart pounds as I walk up the steps, and when I walk inside and find the family in a state of near frenzy, my fear increases.

Etienne is arguing with his mother. The children are nowhere to be seen.

"This foolish rivalry will bankrupt us!" He shouts. "No, I misspoke. It will bankrupt you. I'm going to make sure that your stubbornness doesn't impact my children."

Josephine's eyes are red and puffy. She's not crying right now, but the tracks in her makeup show clearly that she has recently. I don't hear her response to Etienne's attack because she sees me and hisses, "Etienne, hush!"

Etienne turns to me and presses his lips together. He lowers his eyes and says in a calmer voice. "I apologize, Mary. You weren't meant to hear that."

I don't have the presence of mind to say anything but a rather flimsy, "That's all right."

"I'll be leaving on business for the next four days. I entrust the children to your care, Mary."

"Of course. Travel safely, Mr. Lacroix."

He gives me a brief smile, then heads upstairs. Josephine doesn't meet my eyes. I hesitate, unsure if I should offer her some tea or coffee or if I should just leave her alone.

The spell is broken when the grandfather clock chimes the hour. Josephine stirs and lifts her eyes to mine. She smiles sadly and says, "Tragedies ripple across lives like water, don't they?"

I understand exactly what she means. "Yes. Across time too."

Her eyes widen slightly at that. She opens her mouth as though to say something else, but then her eyes shift to the right, and she closes her mouth. She nods and says, "You should go tend to the children. I'm afraid they likely heard that argument."

"Of course. Don't worry about them, ma'am. They're in good hands."

She nods, but her eyes have moved from me and lost their focus. I don't impose on her energy anymore.

Etienne and I pass each other on the stairs. He's carrying his own luggage, and a disconcerted Henri is following him. Henri gives me a longsuffering look, one I've seen on the faces of many household staff when their employers are in the middle of a temper tantrum. Etienne says nothing to me.

The children are in Amelia's room. It occurs to me that I've never seen them in Gabriel's room. I've never actually seen Gabriel's room. I wonder why that is, but my curiosity is not important right now.

The children have clearly heard the argument. They sit on the edge of the bed, slumping forward with their eyes downcast. The TV is playing a cartoon I don't recognize, something about a young boy whose wristwatch allows him to shapeshift

into aliens.

In my twenty-five years as a teacher, I dealt with many cases of children upset because of family conflict. I know from experience that approaching the subject directly will cause children to close off more often than not.

So I start with what truly matters. “How are you feeling, children?”

Rather than answer me, Amelia stands and takes Gabriel’s hand, leading him from the room. I assume they’re going to Gabriel’s room, and I don’t intend to force them to talk, but I do need to make sure they’re not trying to leave the house. Running away is another all too common response to this kind of conflict, especially after a tragedy like the one this family has suffered.

They don’t enter Gabriel’s room. Instead, they enter their grandmother’s room. I frown and call, “Children, let’s leave your grandmother alone for now. Why don’t we—”

“Grandma,” Amelia interrupts. “Can Mary take us to Mardi Gras?”

“That’s enough, Amelia,” I say firmly. “Come on out of your grandmother’s room.

“Sure,” Josephine says. She’s sitting on her bed and looking at a picture of Marcel. She seems distracted.

Amelia turns to me and says triumphantly, “Come on, Mary. Let’s go.”

“Absolutely not. Your grandmother needs time to rest, and Mardi Gras is not appropriate for—”

“It’s fine, Mary,” Josephine interrupts. “Just... it’s fine. Please, no more fighting.”

My brow furrows. “Perhaps it would be better to keep the children home, ma’am.”

“No!” Amelia shouts. “I want to go! I’m twelve years old! I’m not a baby!”

“When you’re older, you’ll—”

“For God’s sake , Mary!” Josephine interrupts. “Just take them! Enough!”

I press my lips together, and very much against my better judgment, I nod.

Amelia pumps her fist and kisses Gabriel on the cheek. “You’ll see, Gabriel. This will be fun.”

Gabriel offers a wan smile. I look hard at Amelia, and she tosses her hair saucily. “We’ll be dressed in twenty minutes, Mary.”

She leads Gabriel from the room. I look at Josephine, but she’s back to staring at the picture of her husband. It’s not worth my energy to argue with her now.

I leave the room and steel myself for what I imagine will be the most nerve-wracking night of my life.

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I have no idea how right I am about that.

I understand the importance of Mardi Gras to New Orleans culture, and I also understand how important tourism is to the city, but I take no joy in the holiday. It's an excuse for humans to behave like animals, and while I'm sure that natives of New Orleans value the spiritual and traditional components of the holiday, the streets are not filled with Catholics considering which sins to confess and which burdens to lay at God's feet.

They are filled with men and women—most of them in their early twenties—drinking, eating, littering, fighting, and behaving lewdly and, in some cases, even wantonly sexual. Drug use is primarily confined to marijuana, but in the dark shadows of the alleys, I see people swallowing pills and, in a few cases, using needles.

I was a fool to bring the children here. I should have refused regardless of what Josephine said.

Amelia, of course, is having the time of her life. Her eyes take in the sights around her with all the wonder of a child too young to understand that just because someone is smiling and laughing doesn't mean they're truly enjoying themselves. Or maybe they are enjoying themselves, and I just can't understand why.

Gabriel clings to me. I feel another rush of guilt at subjecting him to this. I'll have to make this up to him. Perhaps this weekend, I'll take him alone to a nice, quiet walk in a nice quiet park. I'm sure Amelia means well by trying to get him outside, but she's trying to cheer him up the way she would like to be cheered up.

And I'll admit it. I'm angry with her. She took advantage of her grandmother's weakened emotional state and the fact that Josephine is my employer. She manipulated both of us so she could go to a party that all three of her guardians had made clear was not appropriate for her.

She's a child, a young child, whether she likes to admit it or not. This sort of manipulation is common and to be expected. But still, it makes me angry. I am not enjoying myself, Gabriel is not enjoying himself, Amelia shouldn't be enjoying herself... this is all just so wrong and deplorable and frankly embarrassing. I wonder how many of these people truly reach maturity and look back fondly on the night they exposed themselves to strangers then vomited into a storm drain.

"Look at the street performers!" Amelia cries.

She points toward a street corner where men and women in colorful costumes wearing ornate masks dance and twirl sticks of fire, batons with streamers, and staves with feathers, ribbons, and other decorations attached. A growing crowd gathers around the performers, awed by the display.

I'd much rather the children observed this than people spilling beer all over themselves, so I allow Amelia to lead us closer. Gabriel shows excitement, too, and I decide that perhaps tonight will be salvageable. If I can make this portion of the night more memorable than the less palatable sights, then maybe not all is lost.

And I must admit, the dancers are mesmerizing. Annie and I learned cotillion when we were young, but ballroom dancing is a slow and orderly process, and for children, it's simplified into extremely basic movements. Even then, I was well known for having the proverbial two left feet. Annie did well, but she had little interest in dancing, let alone stilted, slow-moving, and frankly boring ballroom dancing.

Needless to say, the dancers here are far more coordinated than I was. Their bodies

gyrate wildly, their limbs moving frenetically. There seems to be no pattern, but at the same time, there is clearly a very precise intricacy to their actions. It is, in its own way, just as impressive as Gabriel's piano playing.

I am lost in the performance before I realize it. The crowd fades away, and the dancers seem to loom closer. They seem to grow taller too, somehow, until they are no longer human but strange, godlike beasts that channel primordial energies and release them in displays of ecstasy and excitement.

But much like the *Vie Apres a la Mort* , the tone of the performance changes. The ecstasy changes from joyful to taunting, the excitement from gleeful to frantic. The masks leer at me, their smiles communicating both laughter and anguish. My heartbeat quickens, and I try to leave, but my feet are rooted to the spot, and I can only watch as the dancers surround me, laughing, jeering, spinning and roaring. The anguish turns to anger, the smiles to snarls. My lips begin to tremble, and I try desperately to beg for mercy, but there is no quarter to be given. There is no sympathy in these fantastic visages, only derision, only judgment, only hate.

The music fades in an instant. All sound fades, in fact. The dancers continue to dance, but they pull away from me, leaving me alone with only one dancer.

Except she's not dancing. She's standing still in front of me, the two of us forming an eye in the middle of this storm.

She is tall and lithe, her skin supple, her form graceful and sensual. Long hair the color of fire shimmers falls over her shoulders, outlining the swell of her breasts. Her face is covered by a mask, but this mask isn't colorful like the others. It is pale and ghostly, almost translucent. Behind the mask, the performer's eyes are painted in a pigment that is darker than black, twin holes that swallow all light.

I recognize this image. It has lived in my nightmares ever since I left my teaching

position and began my new life as a governess and an unofficial investigator of the mysteries that hide in the shadows of wealthy and dysfunctional families.

My sister steps toward me, and a soft cry escapes my throat. I want to run, to hide, to beg, to die, to do anything but stand there and wait for her, but it doesn't matter what I want. Annie is in control.

The dancers move until they are no longer distinguishable from one another. Reds, greens, yellows and oranges blend together in a whirlpool of fire around us. The specter approaches until she is inches from my face.

She opens her eyes, and—

“Ma’am. Ma’am!”

I gasp and open my eyes. The performance is over. The street corner is quiet now as the spectators move to more crowded areas to continue their party. The voice calling for my attention belongs to a young man of around twenty-five wearing shorts and body paint designed to make him look like some sort of bird. His mask completes the motif with macaw feathers stuck into a beaked, plastic face.

“Are you all right? Do you need some help?”

I blink. “I... I’m fine.”

“You were screaming.”

“I... I was?”

“Yes. Hold on, let me get you some help.”

He reached for his phone, and reason reasserts itself. I can't have it reported to Josephine that the children and I were interviewed by police for—

The children!

I look around, and my heart sinks to the floor. They're not here.

"Oh God," I whisper. I grab the young man's arm hard enough to make him wince. "Have you seen two children?" I ask him. "A girl and a boy? They're twelve years old; their names are Amelia and Gabriel. Have you seen them?"

He shakes his head. "No, ma'am. But I'm calling the police, and they'll—"

I pull away from him and rush toward the crowd, ignoring his cries behind me.

Oh God. Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.

I should never have brought them here. I should have known better. I did know better. What the hell was I thinking? They're so young! So many terrible things can happen to them!

My mind fills with images of all of those terrible things, and tears stream from my eyes as I push and jostle through the crowd, screaming their names and begging God not to let me find them dead or hurt.

A voice in my head taunts me. You're begging God? Tonight? Here?

I ignore that voice. Now is not the time for me to succumb to whatever insanity possessed me during the street performance.

"Amelia!"

People laugh and jeer around me, and in my panic, I feel that they're laughing and jeering at me. Every face is unfriendly, every voice mocking, and I am so alone. I'm so alone, and I've lost my children! I've lost the children!"

Finally, I catch a brief glimpse of Amelia's face near the back of a cluster of college students. She's on her knees, and she's crying.

"Amelia!"

I push through the crowd, ignoring cries of anger and frustration from people I shove past. When I see Amelia again, only a few yards in front of me, I expel a huge sigh of relief.

"Amelia!"

I pick her up from the ground and carry her to an alley that is fortunately empty of drug users and amorous partygoers at the moment. I set her down and ask, "Are you hurt? Are you all right?"

She nods, and since I don't know which question she's answering, I ask again, "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head and wipes tears from her eyes. "I'm not hurt. I just got lost."

"I know," I say as I embrace her. "I know, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Amelia." I push her to arm's length and ask, "Where's Gabriel?"

She sobs and says the words I most fear. "I don't know. He left me. He said he had to go find the music."

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“I’m sorry!” Amelia cried. “I’m so sorry, Mary! You were right! This isn’t for kids. This is scary and stupid and dangerous, and I lost Gabriel, and I’m sorry!”

I am angry right now, but none of my anger is toward Amelia. I feel terrible that I ever thought it was her fault in any way. This was my mistake. I’m a fifty-two-year-old woman who knew better, and...

And the time for self-recrimination has not arrived. “Hush, Amelia. This wasn’t your fault. Where did you last see Gabriel?”

“He... we... we were together at the performance, and then he asked me if I heard something, and I was like, what, and he said, that, do you hear it, and I said you mean the dancers, and he said, no, that, it’s like Grandpa’s jazz piece, the Vie Apres a la Mort , and I said, no, and he said he had to find the music, so he left, and I ran after him but I lost him and I couldn’t find him, and... and...”

She gives me that explanation in a single breath, then bursts into tears again. Strangely enough, my panic has subsided. I’m terrified, of course, but if I show it, then Amelia will completely lose her control, so for her sake, I keep myself under control.

“Where was he headed when you saw him last?”

She points up the street. “That way.”

I follow her gesture and realize that I recognize the street we’re on. In the distance, I can see the lights of the Midnight Melody. The club is hosting a Mardi Gras

performance, and I have a feeling that the music Gabriel heard came from there.

I grab Amelia's hand and say, "Come with me."

She allows me to lead her out into the crowd, which has now grown stifling. People are packed into the street so tightly that if the crowd were not moving in the direction I want to travel, I would be forced the other way. Bodies soaked in sweat, beer, food and vomit press and rub against us. Not all of them are fully clothed. None of them seem to notice us or anyone else. During the brief instances my eyes move over their faces, their eyes appear glazed and out of focus. They laugh and cheer and leer, but their expressions are dead. Their souls are not their own, not tonight.

I pull Amelia in front of me and place both arms around her, protecting her as much as I can from the press. I let my eyes roam around the crowd as we move toward the club, just in case I see Gabriel. Twice, Amelia stumbles, the second time nearly pulling us both down with her. The crowd continues to move, and had I not managed to keep my feet, I am certain we would both have been trod to death.

If Gabriel has fallen...

No, I can't think like that. He could still be alive. I have to hope he's still alive.

In front of the club, the moving crowd on the street collides with a stationary crowd gathered outside of the club. Hundreds throng the door, and my glimpse inside the window tells me that there are thousands inside. Dozens of security try in vain to keep the throng organized. Perhaps the Midnight Melody is struggling as much as Etienne believes, but they are certainly making their money tonight.

Slowly but surely, Amelia and I reach the door. A burly man in a t-shirt with white block lettering that reads SECURITY stops us. "There's a cover charge of twenty-five dollars," he informs us.

“I’m looking for her brother,” I tell him.

“Please!” Amelia adds. “He’s missing!”

The guard appears utterly unmoved by her tears. “Twenty-five dollars.”

“This is Amelia Lacroix,” I tell him sternly. “The missing young man is Gabriel Lacroix. They are Josephine Lacroix’s grandchildren.”

“Mmhhh. Ma’am, I need you to step to the side so I can—”

“So help me, God,” I shriek, “If you don’t let me in this building right now, I will tell Josephine herself that you are responsible for her grandson’s death! Do you want to take that chance? Are you that sure I’m lying so I can take a twelve-year-old girl into a Mardi Gras performance?”

The guard looks at Amelia, who is still weeping. He looks back at me and frowns. He mutters, “Ain’t my fault these kids are out here.”

He steps aside, though, and Amelia and I enter the club. The crowd is even more tightly packed inside than outside, and to make matters worse, when I push through the crowd, people angrily tell me to stop cutting.

“We got here early,” a woman about my age wearing a revealing outfit that likely didn’t even look good on her thirty years ago snaps. “You can deal with it and stand in the back.”

“I’m looking for a missing boy,” I tell her.

"Tough shit. He can stand in the back, too."

“He’s not with me. I’m looking for him.”

“That’s your problem. We got here early.”

I try to push past her, but her husband—a fat, greasy hippopotamus of a man—shoves me backwards and stands in front of me, parking his enormous backside in between me and the doors to the auditorium. His wife gives me a smug look and puts her arm in between the hippo’s arm and his flank.

My hands tremble with rage. Amelia’s weeping has shifted from terror to despair. How can people be so selfish? How can they act this way and then go home at night, look themselves in the mirror, wake up the next day and not hate themselves?

You’re one to talk.

That is Annie’s voice, taunting me. A memory flashes through my mind of our final argument when Annie accuses me of being just as cruel and spiteful as our mother. You were smiling, like this.

She gives me a grin that reminds me of Satan’s host then, and I lose control. I don’t remember the fight after that, but I do know that she leaves that night, and I never see her again.

Annie, I reply silently, I’m looking for a missing twelve-year-old boy. A child. If you’re doing something to keep him from me, please think of his family. Think of his sister and stop standing in my way.

I won’t attempt to justify the superstition that prompts this action. I’ll only say that after I think that, I see my opportunity.

A fight breaks out in front of me between the hippopotamus and a thinner but much

more muscular man. The fight seems to be about—of course—cutting in line. The hippo slaps the muscular man, who immediately throws a powerful right cross that drops the bigger man. The wife shrieks, and the crowd—now alerted to something far more exciting than whatever’s happening behind the auditorium doors—parts to allow the two combatants room to fight.

I pull Amelia along the outskirts of the crowd and head to the door. Behind me, I hear shouts of encouragement as the muscular man makes the mistake of dropping on top of his opponent, allowing the heavier man to roll him onto his back where it’s far from likely he’ll be able to get up.

I open the auditorium doors, pushing with all my might to make some room. The crowd in the auditorium is nearly as thick as the crowd outside, although thankfully I don’t run into any rude people here.

The stage is occupied by a typical jazz outfit. Eight people wearing black suits with white shirts and bowties—even the women are dressed this way—playing the full array of instruments: Piano, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, drums, guitar, double bass and clarinet, deliver a lively tune. Meanwhile, a female singer wearing about as little as possible without being arrested—and in New Orleans on Mardi Gras that is almost nothing—croons over the instruments, ignoring the catcalls of the men who have crowded near the stage.

Gabriel has given me no sign that he would care about the nearly nude woman on the stage, but this music is no doubt the mesmerizing sound to which he was referring. It’s not *Vie Apres a la Mort* , but it’s sprightly tone falls somewhere in between the jaunty second movement and the taunting third movement of that piece.

I make my way slowly toward the stage. The crowd is too captivated by the music to care that I’m “cutting.”

Amelia has stopped crying. She stares in fascination at the stage. It seems she's just as mesmerized by the music as her brother.

I open my mouth to call Gabriel's name when a loud whine of feedback courses through the auditorium. The crowd shrieks, and the performers stop, stunned by the sudden whine. The singer casts an irritated look at the sound booth, and the sound engineer lifts his hands to indicate he has no idea what's happened.

Then a new song starts.

The soft, romantic beginning of *Vie Apres a la Mort* confuses the crowd. The singer looks back at the band, and when she sees they're not playing, she asks into the microphone. "Can we get a sound check, please?"

The sound engineer lifts his hands higher, then begins fiddling with his soundboard.

Then the final movement, the one filled with rage and hate, begins abruptly. The effect is jarring, especially because it coincides with a significant increase in volume. Those nearest the stage cry out and cover their ears. The performers react similarly, and the sound engineer throws his hands into the air again, wondering why he can't change or stop anything that's happening.

I look for Gabriel. The piece has the same effect on me now that it has earlier, but I push through it. If this piece is playing, it's a sure bet that Gabriel has something to do with it.

The crowd begins to panic and flee the auditorium. The volume increases until I can feel it pounding in my skull. I feel a touch of nausea, but I push through that too. Poor Amelia is not so lucky. She bends over, and I pull her hair back just before she vomits.

I call Gabriel's name, but I can't hear my own voice, so there's no point. I look for him, and when I see a silhouette standing at the back of the stage, I pull Amelia on top of it and rush toward the back. The performers have all fled, and when I reach the back, I see no sign of Gabriel or of anyone else.

Fear begins to return to me. Could I have been wrong? Could Gabriel have gone somewhere else? Could he have come here but been hurt before he could make it? Could someone have taken him?

The music stops abruptly, bathing the room in silence. I blink, stunned by the sudden change. My ears echo with the final discordant notes, and it's not until Amelia calls, "Gabriel!" that I snap out of it.

I turn around and see Amelia rushing toward the piano. Gabriel sits on the bench, pale and staring. The *Vie Apres a la Mort* sits in front of him. I don't remember taking that out of my bag.

I open my bag, and sure enough, the piece isn't there. Gabriel must have taken it from me when he left. Yes, that must be it.

Amelia throws her arms around Gabriel, weeping and sobbing her apology. Gabriel sits still, his eyes locked on the piece. I step forward and pull it from his gaze. My first instinct is to tear it to pieces, but it's not my property, so I shove it into my bag instead and say, "Come on, children. Let's go home."

"Did you hear it?" Gabriel asks. His voice is hollow. Empty. "It was here. The music. Everywhere. Could you feel it?"

A chill runs through me. I don't respond to him. Instead, I take his hand and Amelia's and lead them out the back of the *Midnight Melody*.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:43 pm

I arrive home to see police cars in front of the house. I remember the young man who offered to help me when I went a trance on the street. I didn't tell him the children's last name, but the Lacroix's are a prestigious family in New Orleans, and once the police hear their first names, they must know immediately who is missing.

I steel myself for the coming storm. I have a feeling I'll end this night unemployed. Perhaps that's for the best. I need to focus on finding Annie, and the dysfunction surrounding this family might be greater than I can handle.

In some ways, this is like the position in Monterey. There, I care for a seventeen-year-old girl, the child of an artist. It turns out that the artist knew Annie many years ago, and there is strong evidence to suggest that Annie's departure from that coastal town triggered the depression that caused his mentor to commit suicide. This, along with the artist's infatuation with Annie, leaves him deeply depressed and sometimes dissociative. Raising his daughter in that environment causes her to be emotionally stunted, withdrawn and suicidal.

I don't believe Gabriel is suicidal, but he is withdrawn and prone to dissociation. Amelia is showing signs of diving deeply into rebellion, a path that leads nowhere good. Both children are emotionally stunted, and while neither Josephine nor Etienne are as disturbed as the artist in Monterey was, cracks are showing in Josephine's facade.

There is no logical connection between the level of dysfunction in these two families and the possibility of my sister's presence in both cities, but should I discover a connection, it will be one of the least surprising things to happen to me since beginning my search for Annie.

The moment I step in the door, the chaos begins. We walk inside to find Josephine and Etienne talking to two police officers. As soon as Josephine sees the children, she shrieks and rushes to them, wrapping them in a bear hug and weeping loudly.

Etienne sighs with relief and collapses into a squat. “Oh, thank God. Thank God.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma,” Amelia whispers through her tears. “I didn’t mean to.”

Gabriel doesn’t cry. His lips move, and while no sound comes out, I can read the movements well enough to know what he means to say. Did you hear it?

Another chill runs through me, but that chill is dispelled an instant later when Josephine stands and slaps me hard enough that I see stars. I stumble backwards, my hand to my cheek, my mouth open wide.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Josephine cries. “What the hell made you think you could take them outside?”

I’m too stunned to respond, but Amelia comes to my defense. “You said we could go, Grandma! I asked you and you told us, remember?”

“The hell I did!” Josephine cries out. “This bitch took you outside without my permission!”

“That’s not true,” I protest. “You did tell me to take them. I told you it was a bad idea, and you—”

She moves to slap me again, but Etienne grabs her hand. “Children, go to your room.”

“Let’s walk this way, ma’am,” one of the officers says, touching my arm and

gesturing for us to step outside.

I follow him, my cheek stinging from the slap. I can't bring myself to feel angry. I deserve it. It's true that I only took them out because Josephine instructed me to, but I knew that she wasn't in her right mind when she gave me permission, and I knew it was a terrible idea to bring children into that environment. I didn't anticipate that I would have a fugue while watching a street show, but it was my fault for putting myself and them in that position. With a sinking heart, it occurs to me that my own resurging mental health issues are another excellent reason to leave my employ with the family.

I should have just rented a room here and looked for sign of Annie. Looking for a governess position was a mistake. One that could have gotten these children killed.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

I stir at the officer's words. "Mary. Mary Wilcox."

He repeats my name as he writes it down on his notepad. "I'm Officer Nathan," he tells me when he's finished. "Can you tell me what happened tonight?"

I swallow. "I... I took the children out to enjoy the street fair. I didn't want to take them, but Amelia asked her grandmother, and her grandmother said it was all right."

"And what is your relationship with the Lacroix's?"

"I'm their governess."

The officer nods and makes the note. "All right. And do you know why we're here tonight?"

“Um... I assume the young man called me. The one at the street corner with the dancers.”

He nods. “Yes. We received a call about a woman in severe distress asking for the whereabouts of missing children by the names of Amelia and Gabriel. My watch commander is an amateur jazz musician familiar with the scene in the Garden District. He suggested we contact Miss Josephine. As you see, we did, and we learned that her grandchildren had been missing for some time. She claims not to have given you permission to leave.”

I blink. “Well, as Amelia said, I was given permission to leave. In fact, I was instructed to leave, to take them with me to the fair.”

“I see.” He makes another note, then asks, “So what happened after you left the street corner?”

I am hugely relieved that he doesn’t ask me how I lose the children in the first place. “I followed the crowd. Amelia seemed fascinated by the party, and her brother usually goes where she goes, so I looked for her there. When I found her, she said she had been separated from her brother. I know he adores music and he’s shown a great deal of interest in playing like his grandfather, so I decided to check the club.”

“Which club?”

“The Midnight Melody. That’s the club the Lacroix’s own. I found Gabriel there as expected, and we returned home at once.”

I leave out the part about Vie Apres a la Morts playing at random and driving the patrons and performers from the venue. I also leave out the seemingly sudden appearance of Gabriel behind the piano.

Officer Nathan makes another note, then looks me squarely in the eye. "At any time, did you consider contacting the police?"

Heat climbs my cheeks. "I... I assumed the young man had made the call."

"And if you'd been wrong?"

"Well... I wasn't wrong. And I found the children."

Nathan nods. He does a respectable job of keeping an even tone, but there is judgment in his eyes, another condemnation I absolutely deserve.

Still, I was not wrong to look for the children. "If I had called your department, you would have told me to stay where I was and talk with officers. Then you would have looked for them only after you finished talking with me, and you might not agree that I knew where they would go. At best, it would have delayed their rescue and, at worst, prevented it. I knew where the children would be, so I found them."

Nathan crosses his arms. Thankfully, he seems to be truly weighing my response. "It worked out this time," he finally admits, "and the only way this could have worked is sheer dumb luck or you actually did know them well enough to track them down. That being said, I think we can both agree that it was irresponsible to take the children to Mardi Gras with only you to watch them. If someone had really wanted to take them from you, you wouldn't have been able to stop them."

I lower my eyes and reply softly, "Yes."

He nods again and says, "Hang tight for me while I talk to the Lacroixs and see what they want to do."

Another chill runs through me. "Are they going to press charges?"

“We’ll talk to them and see what they want to do,” he repeats.

He walks inside, and I look away from the house to the city beyond. The lights and sounds of Mardi Gras are as loud and boisterous as ever. Even in this quiet residential neighborhood, groups of revelers stumble through the streets, laughing and slurring as they look for more private places to continue the night’s enjoyments. Soft moans in between the louder sounds tell me that some have already found their places.

There are three officers outside of the house. They stand in front of their vehicles, talking in low voices. They pay no mind to the debauchery going on right in front of their faces, but from time to time, they steal a glance at me. For me, they make no attempt to hide their judgment.

After a few minutes, the door opens, and Officer Nathan steps out. Etienne shakes his hand at the door, and Nathan turns to me and nods. “Have a good evening, Miss Wilcox.”

He walks down the porch steps toward his car. The other detective inside says his goodbye to Etienne and follows him. A minute later, the officers pull out of the driveway, and I am alone with Etienne on the porch.

I’m afraid to look him in the eye, but I am a grown woman, and if I am to be dismissed for my mistake, then I will take that dismissal with dignity. I turn to him, intending to apologize, but I stop when I find a pensive look on his face rather than the angry one I expect.

He starts to speak but stops himself several times. Finally, he nearly blurts out, “My mother is not well, Mary. She’s been despondent ever since my father died, and lately it’s affected her perception of reality along with her memory and her decision making. I spoke with the children, and they both confirmed that Amelia pressured my mother into giving you permission to take them to Mardi Gras.” His lips thin a little.

“I’m afraid Amelia has learned when to take advantage of my mother’s moods.”

He meets my eyes. "I'm telling you all of this because I want you to feel empowered to deny my grandmother's wishes if necessary to protect the children. Don't allow Amelia—or Gabriel, for that matter—to use her word against yours. I fear... Well, I'll stop there. Thank you for finding them. In the future, if you're ever unsure about something my mother says, feel free to call me."

“I will. And I’m very sorry about all of this. I’m sorry we had to pull you away from your business trip.”

He shrugs, and his face falls further. “It doesn’t matter. That wasn’t going to go through anyway.” He sighs. “Sometimes I really do feel this family is cursed.”

He looks past me at the party, and his lip curls in disgust. Absently, he says, “You can come in now if you want. The children are in bed, and Mother’s cloistered in her room. I’ll stay here until things smooth over, and then I’ll see if I can repair things on the business end. Thank you.”

I bow slightly, then rush inside and head straight to my room. I strip quickly and step into the shower, eager to wash away the stench of the day—both literal and figurative. As the water washes over me, I close my eyes and sigh with relief.

“Do you feel it?”

I shriek at the sound of the voice, but when I spin around, no one is there.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:43 pm

I finish showering and dress in my nightgown and slippers. After checking to make sure the coast is clear, I head downstairs to make myself some coffee. Like most Englishwomen, I drink tea regularly, but I am also American, and when I've had a particularly trying day, I find the bold richness and greater kick of coffee more helpful than the soothing warmth of tea.

Heaven knows today has been trying.

It's after two in the morning when I sit at the table with my coffee and a few butter cookies, but the party still rages outside. I wonder what the city will look like in the morning. I wonder what the partygoers will remember of the night before and what emotions will linger once the fog of debauchery has worn off.

Marcel's piece, the *Vie Apres a la Morts*, fits perfectly well with Mardi Gras. It is excessive, aggressive, mischievous and leering, just like this holiday. I can only wonder what on Earth possessed Marcel to compose something so disturbing.

I scoff lightly. Considering the effect the song seems to have had, perhaps possession is the right term. I wouldn't be surprised at all to learn that some demon truly did have a hand in all of this.

Soft footsteps approach. I spin quickly toward the noise, but it's only Philippa. In the chaos of the past few days, I've completely forgotten about her.

She lifts a hand in apology. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

I sigh. "You are among the least startling things to happen to me today."

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “When I was young, my mother told me that Mardi Gras was a day of witchcraft. Here, it’s worse than Halloween. I think she was right.”

“I think so too,” I agree. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, thank you. No don’t get up, I’ll get a mug.”

She returns a moment later with a mug of coffee and sits across from me at the table. She bites her lip pensively and says, “I heard about what happened at the club tonight.”

I sigh again. “Forgive me, Philippa, but I really don’t want to talk about that right now. The children are safe. That’s what’s important.”

“They’re not safe,” Philippa says with sudden vehemence. “Gabriel is not safe.”

A chill runs through me, but at this point that’s so common I might as well not bring it up. “What makes you say that?”

She looks upstairs as though afraid Josephine might come shrieking after her, claws extended like a harpy. On second thought, that’s not at all unlikely.

She turns back to me and says, “That music is cursed.”

“So I’ve heard,” I say drily.

She mistakes my sarcasm and says, “No, you must listen ! I know it sounds crazy, but there is dark magic in that music. Marcel, he was not well at the end of his life. He spent most of his time at the piano playing. Much of what he played wasn’t any sort of music that people should hear. And he had this look about him, like he wasn’t

really here anymore. He would whisper to himself too, like he was communing with spirits beyond. I believe he was communing with spirits beyond.”

The sound of nearby laughter reaches our ears. I look out the rear window to see a young man who must be still in college atop the backyard fence. He sees us looking at him and giggles, then lifts his hand and bows to us before dropping back over the fence. More laughter reaches us as he and his friends move on to find a more private location to finish their evening.

“My mother was a Voudou priestess,” Philippa continues. She pronounces the word with a Creole accent. “Not the sort who would summon the dead or curse others. She would make charms for people and ask for protection from benevolent spirits on their behalf. But she knew all of the old magic, even the darker sides of it. When she was a girl, her own mother summoned zombis . She told me that they weren't gross, monstrous creatures like you see in movies. They looked like men. They walked like men, too, and sometimes even talked like them. But you could always tell by their eyes that their bodies were possessed by inhuman spirits.”

Her lips tremble. Her hands are folded tightly on the table, the knuckles white. She lifts her eyes to me and says, “Mary, you must believe me. Marcel was possessed by inhuman spirits when he died, and Gabriel is possessed by those same spirits now. It’s that music! You must burn that piece. I know you have it. You must burn it so the spirits attached to it can depart this place. Otherwise, they will steal Gabriel’s soul.”

I don’t reply right away. I admit I’ve behaved quite superstitiously—hypocritically so, even—since I find the playbill in my closet at home, but I’ve not become so superstitious that I can countenance this claim. Still, Philippa is obviously very upset. When I reply, I phrase my response gently.

“Philippa, grief affects people in terrible ways. I can’t speak for Marcel because I didn’t know him, but speaking for Gabriel, I can assure you that he’s not possessed.

He is a young boy dealing with a tragic loss. When young people suffer tragedy, they act out. Some behave rebelliously and try to push boundaries, like Amelia. Others withdraw into themselves and seek the comfortable and familiar. Gabriel's obsession with his grandfather's composition is him seeking to focus his attention on something comfortable and familiar, like his grandfather's memory. It will take time for him to recover from Mr. Durand's death, but he is not at risk of having his soul stolen by demons."

Philippa sighs and wipes tears from her eyes. She clasps her hands in front of her and says, "Mary, please. You've seen the demon. You have the gift. You're the only one who can stop it. I can't see like my mother and grandmother could. The spirits haven't blessed me like they blessed you."

"I can't see any demons, Philippa."

"Yes, you can! You see the woman!"

My smile fades. "The woman?"

"Yes! The tall spirit with the empty eyes. I know you see her because I heard you calling her name the other night when you were playing the piano."

I am trembling now. "Excuse me?"

"The other night," she explains patiently. "You were in a trance. You came downstairs and played *Vie Apres a la Mort* on the piano. You were whispering the spirit's name while you played. Annie."

I rise slowly to my feet, my entire body shaking. "You lie," I hiss.

She blinks. "You... you didn't know? I thought... You seemed so calm. I thought

you were experienced with trances.”

Before I can reply to her, the music starts again. The damned hellish composition that the universe insists truly is at the center of all of this nonsense. Philippa shrieks and makes the sign of the evil eye as she scrambles to pull an amulet out of the folds of her dress.

Perhaps Philippa is right, and my experience gives me the calm I feel now. Perhaps I am simply so disturbed by her claim about the other night that nothing else can disturb me right now. Whatever the reason, I leave Philippa there and stride boldly into the room, intending to tell whoever’s playing the piano to knock it off. Or perhaps I’ll smash the instrument and have done with this.

I step into the living room, and all of my strength leaves me.

Gabriel sits at the piano. His eyes are opened, but the whites are rolled back into his head. His lips move soundlessly, and his fingers fly over the keys with exceptional speed. He’s playing the song, but somehow even faster than the already breakneck pace of the composition. The movements progress in a whirlwind, and when he reaches the end, he repeats from the beginning, a frenzied, cacophonous sound that makes the piano seem like a living thing.

It’s not his playing that freezes me, though, but the apparition standing next to him while he plays. A tall woman with a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder, the other hand turning the pages of the music—how the hell did that piece leave my bag again?—and staring down at him with dark, empty eyes.

This isn’t real. This is a dream. I’m in my bed having a nightmare. At any moment, I’ll wake, covered in sweat, feeling nothing but the vestiges of my own nightmares.

The apparition turns to me. My jaw grows slack, and I feel my mouth drop open, but I

can't tell if I'm screaming because I can hear nothing over the sound of the music.

The creature—I can't bear to call it by my sister's name—smiles at me.

Then Etienne rushes past me. He steps boldly to the piano and tears his son off of the bench. The apparition vanishes, and Gabriel begins to shiver uncontrollably.

“Get blankets,” Etienne says. He lifts his head and repeats, “Mary! Get blankets! Philippa, quit blubbing and make some tea. Now!”

I blink and rush upstairs, nearly colliding with Josephine and Amelia, both of whom rush downstairs calling Gabriel's name. My breath comes in quick, short gasps, and I have to use every ounce of my willpower to keep from bursting into tears.

I have been plagued with visions like this for years, but they only arrive when I dream, never when I'm awake, and never so vividly. Never like they've plagued me here.

But it can't be real. It can't be that my sister's ghost, or a demon in her image, or a voodoo zombie, or whatever the hell this is... It can't be real. There must be an explanation for this. I can't—

“Mary! The blankets, damn it!”

I jump and rush into Gabriel's room. When I walk inside, a soft cry escapes me.

The walls are covered in drawings, ostensibly by Gabriel's own hand.

Every single drawing has an image of my sister on them, the ghostly, pale version of her, staring at me with empty, soulless eyes, her lips split in a mocking grin.

The grandfather clock chimes the hour, and I rush headlong from the room. My sister's mocking laughter chases me as I run downstairs.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:43 pm

The next morning, we all sit silently at breakfast. The events of the night before have left all of us shaken. Josephine is stiff as a board. She looks toward the parlor, and when the grandfather clock chimes the hour, she flinches, spilling her coffee. Etienne looks exhausted. His face reminds me of my own father's near the end, when he didn't even have the energy to be angry anymore.

The children are similarly affected. Amelia stares down at her plate, her lips pushed out in a frown, her shoulders as stiff as Josephine's. Gabriel's eyes seem somehow wider and darker than usual. The rest of him is pale, and he seems smaller somehow, as though a part of him has been sucked away.

Philippa enters the room with a pot of coffee. She glances at Gabriel, then shivers and pours the coffee for each of us from as far away as she can. When Gabriel turns toward her, she flinches and looks down at the floor.

"May I have some water, please?" he asks.

Philippa nods once, then rushes from the dining room. She returns a moment later with a glass of water. She sets it in front of Etienne, then runs back to the safety of the kitchen.

I hand the glass to Gabriel, who thanks me in a slightly bewildered tone.

We complete the meal in silence. I should really start some sort of conversation with the children, at least, but I can't bring myself to speak. My own memory of the night before is among the more terrifying of my entire life, and while the sunrise has convinced me that demons and ghosts still don't exist, the other option is that I'm

losing my sanity for the second time in my life, and that's not encouraging in any way.

When the meal is finished, Amelia asks, "Can we have the day off of school, Mary? I don't feel well."

I don't know if Amelia is telling the truth or if she's being manipulative again, but frankly I don't care. "Sure. I think that's best."

Josephine and Etienne make no protest to my decision. Etienne stands and says, "Keep the children inside today, Mary. Maybe you can watch movies again. Anything to take their mind off of... anything to help them feel..."

He sighs and leaves the room, giving up on finding an explanation that doesn't involve acknowledging as reality what we dealt with the night before.

Josephine speaks next. "I've asked Dr. Yarrow to visit today, Etienne."

Etienne shrugs at the door. "Sure. Fine. Whatever you feel is best."

I frown. "Who is Dr. Yarrow?"

"He is a psychologist. He worked with Marcel for years. I think... I think the children need professional help. To overcome their grief."

My frown deepens. I explain earlier that I have no love for psychologists. Perhaps a few of them are genuinely caring people, but most only exploit people at their most vulnerable. A reprehensible lot. "Ma'am, in my experience—"

"I wasn't asking for your input, Mary."

She's not angry when she says that, but it's clear that she's firm in her decision. My lips are thin, but what can I do? The last time I did anger this woman, she assaulted me. And it won't help the children to get myself fired. "Very well, ma'am."

Gabriel pushes his plate forward. Seeing him do this, Amelia follows suit and asks, "May we please be excused?"

Josephine's lip curls. "Why don't we let Gabriel speak for himself?"

Gabriel turns slowly to his grandmother. "Do you hear it, Grandma?"

Amelia squeaks. I pale. Josephine only allows her sneer to turn into a bitter smile. "I've been hearing it every day for years, Gabriel."

We all sit in silence for a long moment. Finally, Gabriel averts his gaze. He stands and heads slowly from the room. Amelia and I follow. I risk a glance back at Josephine as we leave and see the same cold sneer follow us outside.

Amelia and I keep a safe distance from Gabriel as we head upstairs. I don't feel good about this, but I'm too overwhelmed by everything that's happened recently to feel much guilt.

It can't be demons. It can't.

But then, how did Philippa know Annie's name?

She didn't, I tell the mocking voice of my conscience. She heard me say Annie's name aloud when I was sleepwalking. As for claiming to have seen me play the piano, that's just not true. She must have been mistaken. Or perhaps she mistook my talentless fumbling as one of the discordant elements of one of the later movements of Marcel Lacroix's macabre magnum opus.

We reach Amelia's room, and Amelia asks me, "Can you bring us some snacks? I'll put on a movie."

Under ordinary circumstances, I would chide her for waiting to ask until we've already reached the room. Today, I don't have the energy.

I head downstairs and retrieve some snacks: cookies, chips, sodas, and popcorn. All of the essentials for a day of watching movies with children. On my way back upstairs, I catch a glimpse of the foyer out of the corner of the eye. Josephine stands in front of the grandfather clock, her lips moving soundlessly, her eyes swaying back and forth with the movement of the pendulum.

I sigh. Damn it, I don't have time for this. There are too many demons in this house.

I walk to the foyer, my arm full of snacks, to confront this latest messenger from Hell. "Ma'am?"

"I'm fine, Mary," Josephine replies. "I just need a moment."

She says this without changing the movement of her eyes. She's clearly not fine, but I'm too tired to deal with whatever's happening to her. We're all going insane, and as long as I'm not in the middle of an episode myself, I should focus my attention on the children.

I return to the room and place the snacks on the table. This movie is a new one, rented from a streaming service. It depicts a robot who crash lands on an island and ends up raising a gosling as her own. It's a testament to the insanity surrounding this house that I find her story not in the least bit odd.

Gabriel sits close to the tv, his eyes riveted on the screen. I wonder if he remembers last night, or if it was all only a dream to him.

“I’m worried about him, Mary.”

Amelia’s voice is barely a whisper, too low for Gabriel to hear. I turn to her, and the fear in her eyes cuts through my own fright. I smile tenderly and admit, “I’m worried too.”

“He’s sleepwalking again,” Amelia says, “Well, you know that since you were there when he sleepwalked last night. And he keeps mumbling in his sleep.”

“What does he mumble?” I ask.

I don’t realize that I fear her answer until she says, “I don’t know. I can’t understand most of it. Sometimes I hear him say Grandpa’s name, but that’s the only thing I can tell for sure.”

I nod and put a protective arm around her. She sidles close to me and watches her brother with a mixture of love, grief and terror. “He did this before, when Grandpa died. He shut himself in his room and only came out for meals and showers. He wouldn’t even let me talk to him.” She sniffles. “I know he’s sad about Claude, but... I mean, it wasn’t like it was when Grandpa died. We liked him, but not that much.”

“People process grief in different ways,” I tell her.

I realize for the first time how utterly foolish and unhelpful that statement is, but what am I supposed to say? Your brother’s going insane, and I know this because I’m right behind him if not a few steps ahead?

She shakes her head. “This isn’t grief, though. This is... weird.”

I try to think of something more reassuring and land on, “Some people need to believe in spirituality to overcome tragedy. Your brother might feel that by

channeling those he's lost, he's making it possible for them to live again."

Yeah, I'm making this so much worse. I can't believe I'm about to say this, but... Well, I had my chance to help. I failed badly. "Dr. Yarrow will be able to help you two understand the way you're feeling a lot better than I will."

Amelia bites her lip. "I just don't want him to hurt himself. Last night really scared me, Mary."

"It's just music," I say. "It can't be as powerful as everyone's making it out to be."

"Not that. I mean, when he ran off in the city to go find the music."

"Oh." Heat climbs my neck. "Of course."

"What if he wanders off one night? What if no one hears him get up, and he just goes away? What if he thinks he needs to join Grandpa or something?"

I look at her and say firmly, "That will not happen. I promise you. I won't let something that awful happen to your brother."

She looks at me with despair. "You can't stop him, Mary. If that's what he really wants, no one can stop him."

"Amelia, I don't know what's happening here," I admit. "I don't know if we're all sleepwalking or having nightmares or hallucinating or just grieving. But I will promise you one thing: whatever's happening here, it will all be nothing more than a memory someday. One day, years from now, we'll look back on this. Maybe the memory won't be pleasant, but it will be over. And we all will survive to keep it in the past where it belongs."

She smiles softly. "You're very brave, Mary. Thank you for helping me feel better."

Oh no, I'm not. Not even close.

I kiss her on the forehead and limit my response to "Thank you."

We both turn toward the tv to see Gabriel staring at us. I feel the blood drain from my face and see Amelia's expression mirror that feeling. Gabriel looks between both of us. Then he says, "I'm not going to kill myself if that's what you're worried about, Amelia."

Amelia's lip trembles. "I just want you to get better, Gabe. You're my brother. I love you."

"We all want you to get better," I add. "And I really hope you'll listen to Dr. Yarrow. He'll help you learn how to deal with everything you're feeling."

"Maybe you should talk to him too," he suggests. "So you can deal with what you're feeling."

"Don't be rude, Gabe," Amelia scolds. "She's trying to help you."

"I'm trying to help her," he replies. "She played the piano first, you know."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"She played it first. The night Claude died. She went downstairs and played the piece."

"She doesn't even play piano!"

“She played it a few nights ago.”

“Enough,” I say curtly. “We’re all upset. There’s no point in taking that out on each other.”

The children fall silent, but as he turns back toward the tv, I am almost certain that I catch a leer on his face. It reminds me of the smile the ghost of my sister wears the night before, the one present on all of the drawings hanging in Gabriel’s room.

As the movie continues, I find myself watching Gabriel with the same wariness his sister shows.

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Dr. Yarrow arrives just after the movie finishes. He's a kindly, bespectacled man who looks so small and harmless that I'd give myself even odds in a fistfight with him. I realize this is no reason for me to trust him, but I feel somewhat better knowing that the psychologist looks so unassuming.

He introduces himself to me, and after some small talk, he says, "I'll be some time with them, Miss Wilcox. I'll need to speak to them separately and together, probably more than once. Then, if you don't mind, I'll have to talk to you as well."

I blink. "To me?"

"Yes. You've spent more time around the children than anyone recently. I'll want your input on the current tragedy and how it's affecting them."

I sigh with relief. "Right. Of course."

He gives me a smile that reminds me of Santa Claus, only much more diminutive. Then he takes the children with him.

While the children talk to him, I walk downstairs. The parlor is empty, and it hits me that I've almost never seen this family outside of the dining room or their own rooms. At least, it seems that way. It's as though the house itself is cursed, and its inhabitants scurry furtively between the only spaces they now are relatively safe.

The sheet music is still in the parlor. I stare at it, almost surprised that it doesn't burst into flames or begin whispering to me. Instead, it looks only like a regular sheaf of old, yellowing paper with faded handwriting and notation. The piano only looks like

a quite beautiful and well-crafted musical instrument.

Philippa has begged me to destroy this piece. She says I'm the only one who can. I see the demon, the woman she mentioned by name as my sister.

How could she know my sister? Forget all the nonsense about voodoo and spirits. Maybe she heard me mention Annie's name, but after all, I'm here to learn about my sister's past. I should at least talk to Philippa to determine if she knows something.

I head to the kitchen, hoping to find her there. I do, with Etienne. He's on his knees in front of her, both hands on her hips, his head pressed against her waist. I'm quite ashamed to admit that my first thought is a very salacious one, and I gasp and turn to leave.

Then I hear him speak, "Please reconsider. We have no one else. My mother is..."

"Your mother is insane," Philippa says.

Her voice is curt and accusatory. I turn around and see in her eyes that whatever attraction she felt for Etienne is gone. She stares at him, hard-eyed and unpitying. "I'm done, Etienne. I'm done with your family and done with your bullshit. All of you. Your mother, your son, your governess..."

She sees me, and her face pales briefly. Then it hardens again. "Yeah, that's right," she says to me. "I'm done with your bullshit too. You know what you have to do, but you're not gonna do it because not so deep down, you're just enjoying the show. Well, I'm not, and I'm leaving."

She pushes Etienne off of her and I step aside before she can shove me out of the way too. As she passes me, she shoots me a hateful glare, and I have to resist an unexplainable urge to hiss at her. I don't like that urge. It makes me feel that I might

have already lost control of my faculties.

Etienne sighs and straightens. He gives me a tense smile and says, “Well, that’s one of you down. We’ll see how much longer you last.”

“What was that about?” I ask. “I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Neither have I. I suppose it didn’t help that I turned into a fool.” He shakes his head. “Begging a woman to stay on my knees... Julia would have loved to see that.”

“Julia was your wife?” I ask.

“She was. She died when the children were young. She had a wonderful sense of humor, and I have a feeling she would have gotten a kick out of everything that’s happening to us.” Seeing my expression, he clarifies, “That was a joke. Frankly, if she were alive, we’d probably be staying in a motel somewhere in Wyoming while she worked a bartending job to support us.” He laughs, a disturbing and sickly titter. “Maybe that’s what I should do. Could you imagine that? The scion of the Lacroix family pouring whiskey for ranchers and getting my ass slapped by middle-aged women too deep in their cups?”

I don’t quite know that such a career would turn out the way he thinks it would, but I don’t want to do anything to trigger the breakdown he’s close to reaching. I don’t think I can deal with yet another nervous collapse in this house.

He takes a deep breath and asks, “Dr. Yarrow is with the children?”

“Yes.”

He nods. “Good. Maybe he can help them make some sense out of everything.” He looks past me into the parlor and pales a shade. “I need to get them out of this house.”

He's leaping from subject to subject. "Would you like some coffee?" I ask. "Or some tea?"

"You're English, right? Let's try tea. I'm sure you can make it better than us poor Americans can." He laughs at his joke, then says, "Will you join me? I've been going insane keeping all of my thoughts to myself, and since you're the last composed person in this house, maybe it will help to talk to you."

I am far from composed, but I would appreciate his perspective on the situation. "Of course. Do you take your tea with cream or sugar?"

"I defer to the expert," he replies. "However, you think I should drink it."

I make breakfast tea and serve it with cream and sugar on the side. Etienne waits for me in the dining room, and when I arrive with the tea, I find him tapping his finger rapidly on the desk, staring once more at the parlor. From where he sits, the piano is visible, the cursed sheet music on the stand above the keys.

I hand him his tea and lift mine to my lips. Just before I sip, he asks, "Do you believe in curses, Mary?"

I have no idea anymore. "Not in the spiritual sense, no. But I believe that actions have consequences, and those consequences affect people long after the memory of the action fades. If those effects are sufficiently strong and sufficiently negative, and if they affect enough people, then it can seem to be almost supernatural and could properly be called a curse."

He nods. "Maybe that's what it is. Maybe it's just Dad's insanity spreading until it consumes us all." He taps the table again, then looks at me. "Dad was famous in the world of jazz."

“Yes. I’ve heard he was very well respected.”

“He was revered. The general public never knew who he was, but a lot of people the general public would know owe a lot of their success to him. He was a brilliant composer. Too brilliant. He was... Shall we say, tortured by success.”

“All too common a story with creative people,” I reply.

“Yes, but he wasn’t... Well... How should I put this?” He cocks his head, and a moment later, he says, “Dad was a perfectionist.”

“Another common failing,” I say with a wry smile.

“Yes, but perfection wasn’t even good enough for him. He wanted to create a melody that was beyond anything anyone had ever composed before, something that could tap into the fabric of nature itself.”

He meets my eyes and says, “Do you believe in the supernatural, Mary?”

“I believe that some things are difficult to understand and describe,” I say carefully.

He nods. “Well, my father’s skill was supernatural. I can think of no other way to describe the power his talent held over people. It compelled them. He knew this, too. But he wanted more. He wanted to be able to shape their lives, to shape the world. It drove him mad in the end. You’ve heard that his death was a heart attack, yes?”

I nod. “Yes. During a performance at the Midnight Melody.”

“Well, I don’t believe it was a heart attack.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“No. I think he succeeded.”

“At creating a melody that could shape the world?”

“Yes. I think this piece, this *Vie Apres a la Mort* , broke through the barrier that separates the physical and spiritual world. I know you’ll think me insane for talking like this, but for people here, the spiritual world is an integral part of who we are.”

“I won’t pretend that I believe everything you’re saying,” I reply. Although I’m starting to seriously consider it. “But I do understand how important spirituality is to the people of New Orleans, and there’s no doubt that this piece is a very powerful piece.”

“It is,” Etienne insists. “But it’s come at a terrible cost.” He shivers and sips his tea. “I think my father opened a door he wasn’t prepared to open. I think that he viewed his talent as being able to manipulate the spiritual realm or even create a separate realm for his own spirituality. But all he did was open a door. And I think something came through that door.”

He hesitates a moment. The look in his eyes reminds me uncomfortably of Amelia’s expression earlier when she tells me almost the same story he’s telling me. “The night he died, I was managing the theater. Claude had the night off due to some family emergency, so I was overseeing things. I’ll never forget that night. He collapsed on the stage, Mother and I rushed to his side, and...” He shivers again. “And I swear on the life of my children, Mary, when I reached him, he was still alive. And he was laughing. I looked into his eyes while he chuckled with glee, but it wasn’t my father looking back at me. I think...” He looks toward the parlor again. “I think something came through that door and took him back where it came from. I think that piece opens the door, and each time it does, something comes through. It tried to take my son last night. And it won’t be the last night.”

“Why don’t you destroy the composition?” I ask. “Burn it or tear it up?”

He smiles thinly. “What makes you think I haven’t?”

I look back at the piece and recall that a moment ago, I was prepared to destroy it myself. I could do it now. I could stand, walk to the parlor and tear the sheets to pages.

I could do that, but I don’t. I sit right where I am, looking stupidly at it like some sort of Neanderthal.

“Exactly,” he says after a moment. “It won’t let itself get destroyed. It finds a part of you that’s weak enough to let it through, and it works its way into your head. That’s how it protects itself. That’s also how it spreads.”

A knock on the kitchen door causes us both to jump. A moment later, Dr. Yarrow pokes his head around the corner and smiles at me. “Are you ready, Miss Wilcox?”

I look at Etienne, but he’s already standing. “She’s all yours, Doctor.” He turns to me and says, “Thank you for talking to me.”

Then he leaves me alone to wonder anew what mess I’ve gotten myself into and how much danger I’ll face trying to climb out it.

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I offer Dr. Yarrow some tea, which he gratefully accepts. When I serve it to him, he sighs with contentment. “That’s quite good. A skill you retained from the old country?”

“Actually, I spent most of my life in Boston,” I reply. “My father moved the family across the Atlantic when I was eleven years old.”

“Ah. I see. Well, it must be instinct then.”

He smiles, and the look is so disarming that it... Well, disarms me.

“How are the children?” I ask.

“They’re not well.”

The bluntness of his response discourages me. My lips tremble, and I ask, “How unwell?”

“Not severely, not at the moment. I’m worried about them, however. Gabriel has withdrawn very deeply into his shell, and to make up for his lack of emotional access, he’s adopting, or attempting to adopt a personality that reminds him of his grandfather. Amelia is completely avoiding her own grief and focusing all of her attention on her brother so she doesn’t have to confront her own sorrow.”

I sigh. “I was afraid of that.”

“Of Gabriel’s withdrawal or Amelia’s avoidance?”

“Of both. Of the two of them not being able to process grief. Their... I don’t wish to speak out of turn.”

“Oh, you are covered under the laws of doctor-patient confidentiality,” he assures me.

“I’m not your patient, though.”

He smiles again. “For today’s purposes, you are.”

My next argument would be that he just shared confidential information about the children with me, but after all, I’m their guardian, so I really should be kept in the loop about anything that affects their health.

“Very well. What I was going to say is that their father and grandmother don’t seem to have overcome their own grief regarding Marcel’s loss.”

“Oh, hardly. They refuse to speak to me, so I can’t tell you anything that would breach confidentiality, but it appears as obvious to you as it is to me that they’ve both chosen their own coping mechanisms. Interestingly enough, it is Etienne who chooses avoidance and Josephine who chooses withdrawal even though personality wise, Josephine is most like Amelia and Etienne is most like Gabriel. But I wanted to talk about the children.”

He sips his tea and asks, “How are you feeling, Miss Mary?”

I blink. “This is a question about the children?”

“You’re their caretaker. My first impression is that you’re the most stable influence in their lives right now. So I am interested in ensuring that you receive any care you might need.”

I blink. “Well... I’m not happy with the situation here. The children are deeply disturbed. They saw a man die in front of them. We’re all deeply disturbed.”

He leans forward slightly. “How are you , Mary?”

I hesitate for a moment. His eyes are still kindly, but I can sense the shrewdness behind the kindness now. I swallow before replying, “I’m...” I look past him to the parlor where the cursed composition sits mocking me. “I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of losing.”

He leans back in his chair. “Hmm... That’s much the answer I expected.”

I blink and frown at him. “What do you mean, you expected? I thought we were talking about the children.”

“You’re their caretaker. Your mental health is vital for their own recovery.”

“I didn’t agree to be seen by you.”

“If you do, then I assure you, we will dive far deeper into your psyche than I am now.” Before I can reply, he lifts his hands to quiet me. “Let me explain, though. You seem very strong-willed, Mary. You are very protective of those you care for, and you are very firmly rooted in your interpretation of reality.”

Two for three, doc , I think somewhat pettily. “Yes? And?”

“And you don’t like losing, because losing means one or more of three things: one, it doesn’t matter how strong you are; two, you aren’t able to protect those you care for;

or three, your interpretation of reality is false.”

I stare at him for a moment. His expression no longer seems kindly to me. Behind his rosy cheeks and gentle eyes, he’s just as smug as all psychologists. “I assure you, I am quite grounded.”

“Yes, you are,” he agrees. “Which means you are vulnerable when the ground underneath you isn’t solid.”

I stiffen and demand, “What exactly is it you’re trying to say?”

Instead of answering my question, he asks one of his own. “What is your interpretation of what’s happening to this family? If you had to give it your best guess, what would you say?”

I want to tell him to do something vulgar to himself, but he is the children’s doctor, and my performance upstairs has made it clear that the children need help I can’t give. I have to put my personal opinions aside and focus on their wellbeing.

“I would say that they’ve never recovered from Marcel’s death,” I reply. “Losing their grandfather, father and husband devastated them. He was the glue that held this family together, and with him gone, the family is unraveling. Josephine is struggling with a business she likely never expected to manage and navigating a rivalry with... navigating business rivalries—”

“There is no need to be coy,” Dr. Yarrow interrupts. “I’m well aware of the rivalry between the Lacroixs and the Durands.”

I nod. “I don’t think Josephine enjoys it. Not just the rivalry. The business, the legacy, the shadow of Marcel... I think if she could manage it, she would be free of all of it. But she feels trapped by her love of Marcel and the responsibility she feels

she has to maintain his legacy.”

“I think you’ve hit the nail on the head. I don’t even know if she loved Marcel or only worshipped him. I trust I don’t need to tell you the very crucial difference between the two emotions.”

“No.”

He nods. “And Etienne?”

I frown again. “Why are you asking me for my opinion? Why not ask them?”

“I will. And they’ll stonewall me. You’re very observant, and I must know the situation in which the children find themselves. If I hadn’t heard Philippa quit rather convincingly, I would be asking about her too.”

I purse my lips and sip more of my tea. "Etienne feels conflicted. He doesn't want to leave his mother to fail on her own, but he doesn't want his children to suffer anymore. He wants to leave the house, leave the Midnight Melody, and start a new life free of the darkness surrounding his father. I suppose he feels trapped too. After all, he's still here despite his many attempts to leave."

Dr. Yarrow nods. “Yes. I agree with that too. Has he shown any anger since you’ve been here?”

“Anger? No. Frustration at times, but nothing that rises to the point of violence. Nothing that makes me feel threatened at all. In fact, the only—”

I stop myself, but not in time. Dr. Yarrow raises an eyebrow, and when I don't continue, he prods, "The only what?"

“Nothing. I... No. Etienne is perfectly safe.”

“But you’re not?”

I frown at him. “Is that a question?”

“Is there an answer?”

“Stop being coy,” I snap. “If you have something to say, just say it.”

“Do you feel safe here, Mary? Do you feel all right?”

"Of course, I don't feel all right," I snap. "I've been here for a week, and already I've seen a man die in front of me, watched all four members of this family have a nervous breakdown, watched the maidservant have a breakdown and then quit, and nearly lost the children during Mardi Gras."

I realize what I’ve said, and my eyes widen. Damn it! He tricked me!

“Yes, I heard about that. Amelia tells me that when Gabriel wandered off, she tried to get your attention, but you just stood still and watched a street performance like you were hypnotized by it. Her words.”

The blood drains from my face. She never tells me this. I swallow and say, “It was a serious oversight to bring them to Mardi Gras.”

“I’m not trying to accuse you of anything, Mary. As I said, I believe you are the most stable influence in the children’s lives right now. But these are two very young, very vulnerable minds we’re talking about. There’s no shame in admitting it if you don’t feel you can protect them.”

“I am quite capable of performing my job duties, thank you,” I reply.

“Do you have lapses in your memory, Mary?” he asks. “Any periods of lost time or sleepwalking?”

I stand abruptly. “Thank you, Doctor. This conversation is over.”

“Do you feel it? Can you hear it, Mary?”

I flinch and take a step back. “Excuse me? What the hell—”

My phone rings. I blink and find Dr. Yarrow looking at me with wide, concerned eyes. His hands grip the edge of the table as though he’s preparing to push himself away should I attack him. It disturbs me how much the thought of attacking him pleases me.

I take a deep breath and say, “I have to take this call. Thank you for your time, Doctor. Unless it directly concerns the children, I don’t think there’s a need for us to speak again.”

I step into the foyer and pull my phone out. The grandfather clock picks that moment to chime because why not? I cry out and drop my phone, and the only reason I don’t shout a curse is because I don’t need to give Dr. Busybody yet another reason to call for a padded van and a straitjacket for me.

I pick the phone up and answer. “Yes, who is it?”

“Just me, Mary. Jeez. Is everything all right?”

I sigh. “No, Sean, not really.”

His voice instantly shifts to concern. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. I just... Just tell me why you called.”

“I have some information about that pianist, Jacques Poitier.”

My eyes widen. “Oh?”

“Yes. I looked him up. It turns out that his mother, Genevive, was a well-known spiritualist in New Orleans during the sixties.”

“I see. And by spiritualist, you mean?”

“I mean voodoo priestess. Crystal ball and everything.”

“I believe that is considered Gypsy magic.”

“Whatever. Don’t be pedantic. My point is that there appears to be some truth to the rumor that Jacques Poitier cursed Marcel. Not the composition. There’s no record of that. But he cursed Marcel. Well, he didn’t, but he spoke about a curse. Not that I believe in that, but—”

“Get to the point , Sean.”

“Jacques Poitier died thirty years ago. On his deathbed, he said he’d spoken to his mother, and his mother said that soon, Marcel would meet a beautiful woman, tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes.”

My jaw goes slack. “What?”

“Yes. And this woman would carry a curse that would be the downfall of his family.”

Dr. Yarrow enters the room. I blink and say, “Thank you, darling, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Mary? Is everything—”

I hang up and look at Dr. Yarrow. He gives me a wary smile, then walks out the door. As soon as it closes behind him, I drop to my knees and grip my hair in both my hands. My heart pounds heavily.

Could Annie be responsible for the plague that is consuming this family?

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When I have recovered enough to think more clearly, I take a walk through the gardens. Fortunately for the Lacroixs, other than the group of young people who attempted to scale the fence but left when they saw me and Philippa, no one else uses their yard for trysts or drug and alcohol abuse. There are a few pieces of trash that I assume were thrown over the fence, but nothing that can't easily be cleaned in an afternoon.

Well, I need something to occupy myself, and Philippa isn't here. I return to the house for a garbage bag and a pair of rubber gloves, then start cleaning.

Beyond the property, the city looks like it's been through a war. Garbage lies thick on the ground, and even at this late hour, there are people lying in yards or staggering down the street. I see police lights on the next street over as the officers attempt to help those most deeply affected by the party, so I assume they'll make their way here soon enough.

My heartbeat slowly calms as I clear that trash. By the time I finish, I'm more rational. There are millions of blonde, blue-eyed women in the world. Jacques's "curse" is a parlor trick, nothing more. As for the things I've experienced, well, Dr. Yarrow isn't here now, so I can admit that they were likely hallucinations I conjured up. When I studied psychology, I heard that there are occasions when people afflicted by similar maladies can experience complementary hallucinations, so perhaps that's what's happening here. The Lacroixs believe in this curse hogwash, and I'm operating on superstition to look for my sister.

That's what it is. I read that stupid playbill and allowed myself to come here to New Orleans based on nothing more than a triggered memory of my sister playing

saxophone. I left myself vulnerable, and all of my old fears latched onto the fear and grief with which this family struggles. It's brought all of my old symptoms back with a vengeance.

I need to leave here. It's cold of me to say that, but it's true. This place isn't good for me, and as much as I hate leaving the children behind, I won't help them if I lose control of my own faculties.

I'll let Etienne know tonight. I'll alert Dr. Yarrow too. Maybe he can visit them more often. Or, if he thinks it best, he can remove the children or coerce Etienne into doing it.

I toss the trash into the large garbage can on the side of the house, then head inside and upstairs to shower. When I'm finished, I'll talk to the children. I won't tell them I'm leaving yet, not until I talk to the adults, but I'll give them some advice to keep when I leave.

I don't remember until I'm lathering myself that I showered only a few hours ago. Well, whatever. I'll be even cleaner. I just need to get this stench off of me. All of it. It's...

"It's too much," I say aloud.

And for reasons only God knows, that sentence is enough to trigger another memory.

"It's too much," Annie says, setting the saxophone down and plopping onto the bed. "I can't do it, Mary. My lungs aren't big enough."

"You forget I live with you," I remind her. "I've heard you scream loudly enough to wake the dead. Your lungs are fine. It's your work ethic that's inadequate."

She cocks her head. “Do you think someone could scream loudly enough to wake the dead?”

“No. I’m not getting into one of your metaphysical conversations right now. Practice.”

She grins mischievously at me. “I will if you will.”

“I don’t have ambitions to be a successful musician,” I counter.

“Neither do I. I’m doing this for myself.”

“Then practice for yourself.”

“But what if I’m not enjoying myself anymore?”

“Then give up. Never work for the things you want. When the going gets tough, throw your hands in the air and say, ‘Oh well, at least I sort of tried for a little while.’”

She giggles, and I roll my eyes, but also laugh with her.

“You make me laugh, Mary. You’re always so certain that you’re right.”

I stop laughing. “Well, I am. This time, I am.”

“Of course you are.”

“How could I be wrong about encouraging you to practice?”

“Okay.”

I frown. “You know what? Do whatever you want. I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“Like what, Mary?” she asks innocently.

I turn to reply, but when I see the look in her face, I don’t. She looks innocently at me, but there’s hate in her expression. Maybe hate is too strong a term, but I can tell in her eyes that she wants to anger me. She’s being difficult on purpose because she resents me for holding her accountable for her own decisions. If only she knew how much like Mother she looked right now.

I smile. “You know what? You’re right. I lapsed in my musical studies years ago. I shouldn’t taunt you. If this isn’t something that fulfills you, then you should give it up, just like I did.”

She blinks, and her smile fades. I feel a leap of joy when I see the frustration that flickers across her eyes. I’ve won.

Without another word, she picks up her saxophone and begins to play. The improvement is immediate. Where before she struggled to keep her breath and her fingers moved stiffly over the valves, she now sways as though the music is a living thing moving through her and not from her. Her fingers dance, and her eyes blaze with fire.

She meets my eyes, and the hate in hers fills me with glee. Go ahead and hate me, but I won. I made you do what you needed to do even though you didn’t want to. You can hate me, but I’m right, and you know it.

I gasp and shut the water off. I haven’t gone into a fugue, but the effect of that memory is the same as if I had. I replay it in my mind, but it’s just as clear the second time as it is the first time.

I wasn't frightened of her hate. I enjoyed it. I wasn't disturbed by her disdain of me, I reveled in it. I manipulated her into practicing saxophone, knowing that she couldn't stand to be compared to me. I knew that she had to beat me, and I used that knowledge to beat her.

Spelling all that out makes it sound utterly childish, and of course, it was. But then, we were children. She was seventeen, and I was eighteen.

Still, it shakes me that I was so cruel. Had things turned out differently for me and Annie, I might be able to dismiss it as childhood pettiness, but it was only a few years after that Annie left my life for good. I spent most of the years after believing that she was hurt or killed. Then, when I learned that she had instead left by choice, I assumed it was hatred for our mother.

The more I remember, though, the more I wonder how much of her hatred was for me.

I am numb as I towel off and dress. I feel adrift, as though life is happening to me, and I can't control any of it. Was all of this suffering fated? Has my past informed my future and prevented me from any agency? And if so, what is the purpose? What realization must I come to in order to reconcile what I feel should be the truth with what is actually the truth? And what is actually the truth?

This is when Sean would tell me that I must just accept things as they are, including the fact that I may never know the truth.

But I can't . I can't just now know. It's not fair.

I sit on the edge of my bed, bury my head in my hands and cry. I'm sure I would look pathetic to anyone who walked in and saw me like this, but I can't help myself. It really isn't fair. Whatever pain I caused Annie, we could have worked through it

together. Instead, she walked out of my life and derailed me. Because of her, I changed my career. Because of her, I lived friendless and alone until very recently. Because of her, I have nightmares and worse. Because of her, I can't allow for secrets to continue but must expose them no matter how much pain it causes me to expose them. And now, all I want is to know what happened to my sister and why she felt she had to abandon me.

I am ruined. And it's not fair.

The smell of smoke pulls me from my pity party. I frown and wonder if perhaps it is a lingering odor from last night's festivities. Something in the back of my mind tells me that's not the case.

I put on my slippers and leave the room. As soon as I enter the hallway, the smell strengthens, and an alarm sounds in my head. I run downstairs, and once more, my greatest fear is realized when I see smoke coming from the parlor.

A silhouette catches my eye. Amelia is in the living room on her knees, weeping in front of a fire that is rapidly consuming Marcel's piano.

"Oh, God!" I cry out. I rush toward her and half-drag, half-carry her from the room. "Etienne!"

"I had to," Amelia weeps. "I had to, or it was going to kill all of us."

"Hush," I command firmly. "Etienne!"

Footsteps rush down the stairs, and a moment later, he cries, "Oh my God !"

He rushes toward the piano, tearing his shirt off and beating at the flame with it. I stare at the blaze in shock, but behind the shock is a kernel of hope that Amelia will

have succeeded, that with the piano, the cursed music will have also burned.

It is not to be. After thirty seconds or so of watching the fire slowly spread across the instrument, Henri brushes past me, holding a fire extinguisher. “Stand aside, Mr. Lacroix!” he calls.

Etienne backs quickly away, and Henri blankets the fire in foam. The blaze is quickly extinguished, leaving only haze behind.

“Open the kitchen windows,” Etienne commands.

Henri moves to obey while Etienne opens the windows facing the yard. A draft blows through the house, and the smoke begins to clear.

Josephine arrives a moment later. When she sees the piano, she releases a scream like a tea kettle boiling.

“I had to,” Amelia weeps. “I had to stop it before it...”

Her voice trails off. Her eyes grow wide, and her mouth pops open. “No,” she whispers. “No, no, no !”

I follow her eyes, and a shiver runs through me when I see the sheet music, untouched and unburnt, lying atop the otherwise completely charred music stand above the keyboard.

The grandfather clock chimes the hour. To my ears, it sounds like monstrous laughter.

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The family sits in the dining room, speechless. I sit in between the children while Josephine and Etienne sits across from us. Henri stands in front of the door leading to the parlor, as though to protect the charred remnants of Marcel's piano in case Amelia decides to make a second attempt at destroying the sheet music.

No one is cleaning up the parlor. The splintered coffee table remains exactly where it was when Claude Durand crushed it in his death throes. Now Marcel Lacroix's piano is a half-charred centerpiece, covered in foam, Vie Apres a la Mort still resting on the burnt sheet music stand.

Amelia hasn't stopped crying since seeing the undamaged music. I keep my arm around her while she weeps, but like the rest of them, I say nothing.

"Where were you, Mary?" Etienne asks.

"I was in my room," I reply. "I cleaned trash from the yard, then went upstairs to shower. I came downstairs when I smelled the smoke."

"Where were you , Etienne?" Josephine asks. "They're your children. You're so concerned I'm going senile, but instead of caring for them yourself, you hire a stranger? Don't try to take the moral high ground here. This wasn't Mary's fault."

I don't respond to that. It was Josephine who hired me, not Etienne, but perhaps she did so at his insistence. As for the rest, I can't quite blame myself for Amelia's choice to set fire to the sheet music while it was still on the piano, but I suppose I can't quite absolve myself from blame. The children have proven themselves unreliable. I suppose I just didn't consider how far they could take things.

I can't quite blame Amelia either. She's in the middle of the worst crisis of a very young life and doesn't know how to react. I can help, but I've only just arrived. And I was about to leave. I don't know if I can anymore. If I hadn't come downstairs when I did, they might have lost the house, and Amelia might have lost her life. Neither Etienne nor Josephine is in any shape to care for the children, and I can't bring myself to abandon them now that I understand how dangerous their grief is.

Only Gabriel seems unaffected, but of course, he seems that way precisely because he's affected. He doesn't seem upset at all that the piano is likely ruined beyond repair. He's dissociated so much from reality that he probably won't even realize what's happening until much later.

I wish I had a place to take the children. They're not safe here. I may have to try to have them removed. If I can, which considering my lapse in judgment yesterday is probably not likely.

Good God, was that only one day ago? This is ridiculous. So much has happened so fast. No wonder the children are reacting so poorly.

Etienne sighs and rubs his eyes. "Amelia, why did you burn the music on top of the piano? Why not take it outside?"

"I didn't want to touch it," she admits in a small voice. "I was afraid it would hurt me."

He chuckles, more in exhaustion than anger. "How could it hurt you? It's a piece of paper."

"You destroy it then," she said.

"No. I'm not going to do that."

“Exactly. You can’t.”

“I can , but if I do , then I’m admitting that there’s something supernatural going on here.”

Which he did only a couple of hours ago to me.

“You don’t?” Amelia challenges. “What do you think is going on?”

He sighs. “I think we’re all doing an utterly terrible job of handling grief. Me included. Yes, I’ll admit, I had some thoughts that stretched logic, but I never acted on them. I knew that my mind was lying to me. But this... this could have killed us all.” He shakes his head. “If I give in and tear those notes up, I’m validating dangerously poor behavior from all of us. I won’t do that.”

“You see?” Amelia cries. “It’s manipulating you. It’s trying to keep itself alive so it can keep hurting us.”

“The only person hurting anyone is you,” Etienne counters. “You nearly burned us all alive.”

Finally, I speak up. “Perhaps it’s best we all take some time away from this house. We’ll gain nothing at each other’s throats.”

Etienne sighs. “Right. You’re right. Sorry. I just...” He chuckles and lifts his hands, then lets them drop.

Amelia turns to me, pleading. “Can you destroy it, Mary? Please?”

I blink, and my back stiffens with a fear I don’t entirely understand. “I...”

I am saved from having to give an answer when Josephine's phone rings. She frowns and mutters, "Why would Audrey want to call me?"

She answers, and I watch her face go from irritation to shock to wooden blankness within a few seconds. She says nothing for a while, and then when she does speak, it's only one-word acknowledgments. "I see. Yes. Of course. Thank you."

Then she says, "Of course. We'll help with the arrangements in any way we can."

Etienne sits bolt upright. The children flinch, and even Gabriel appears concerned. Josephine is as straight and stiff and fragile as crystal. Eventually, she says, "Thank you. Please call me if you need anything," and hangs up.

She drops her head into her hands, grabs a fistful of hair and squeezes until the knuckles turn white. The rest of us watch her warily. Amelia is the one to finally break the silence. "What's wrong, Grandma?"

Josephine sits up and begins to chew on the nails of her right hand, her left still gripping her hair. The effect is frightening. She looks like a madwoman.

"Grandma?" Amelia begins again, her lips trembling.

"God," Josephine breathes, dropping both hands to the table.

I stand and put my hands on the children's shoulders. "Gabriel, Amelia, come with me. We've put school aside long enough. It's time we returned to our lessons."

I'm not really concerned that they'll fall behind academically, but getting them back into a normal routine might be the best weapon I have against the growing mania affecting this family.

Once more, my best-laid plans are not to be.

“Forget about school, Mary,” Josephine says. “We have another funeral to plan.”

I shake my head, cautioning her not to speak of this in front of the children. She doesn’t get the hint.

“Audrey Durand was found dead in her apartment this morning.”

“What?” Amelia cries.

“How?” Gabriel asks. “What happened?”

It’s a testament to my own fragile mental state that my first reaction to Gabriel’s concern is relief that he shows any. Reason asserts itself, though, and anticipating the worst, I reply before Josephine can, “Now is not the time for that conversation. Children, we must let your father and grandmother talk. I’m sure they’ll answer whatever questions you have when they’re ready, but this is not a time for children. Come upstairs.”

“It’s the music!” Amelia says. “It’s that damned composition!”

“Watch your language!”

“Fuck my language! That thing is going to kill all of us unless we kill it !”

“No music killed Audrey,” Josephine snaps. “She killed herself. She cut her wrists in the bathtub.”

“Josephine, that is enough!” I cry.

The thunder in my voice shocks everyone at the table. Josephine and Etienne stare at me in shock. The children are also shocked, but I'm sure it's the news of Audrey's manner of death that shocks them more than my rebuke of their grandmother.

"Children, go upstairs," I command. "Now."

Amelia stands up so abruptly that her chair clatters to the floor. Tears streaming from her face, she brushes past Henri. Henri follows two steps to make sure she doesn't run into the parlor, but she heads straight for the steps. He turns around and meets my eyes, and I see naked despair in his. I know less about him than anyone in this household, but I can only imagine how hard it is for him to watch a family he's known for decades fall apart in front of him.

Gabriel carefully puts Amelia's chair back where it belongs before leaving. The numb expression he's worn for the past several days is replaced with a look of concern and worry that is far too mature to belong on the face of a twelve-year-old. When he leaves the dining room, Henri squeezes his shoulder, and Gabriel brushes his hand over his.

Henri looks at his employers, both of whom sit wearing pouts that would look far more appropriate on the faces of the two young people who just left the room. A sigh of disgust escapes his list, and then he says, "I'll clean the parlor, ma'am."

I half-expect Josephine and Etienne to stop him, but they offer no objection as he steps out of the room and closes the door.

When it's only us inside, I face the two of them with my hands on my hips and say, "The two of you need to get over yourselves now. I understand how difficult these circumstances are for both of you, but you're grown adults, and you need to act like it. Those children are on the verge of lifelong trauma. I've only just arrived. There's only so much I can do to protect them. You're their father and grandmother. You need to

stop behaving like spoiled children, angry that Daddy isn't here to make everything better. The truth is that we are all three of us responsible for Amelia's actions today, but I feel no guilt saying that the greater fault lies with you two. They are your priority now. Focus on them . Not your club, not your fear, not your anger, your children . If you can't do that right now, then you need to let me take them somewhere else until you can."

Etienne shifts in his seat. "That won't be necessary, Mary. You're right. We've behaved very poorly lately, and I'm sorry for the impact that's had on the children. But we'll compose ourselves. We can't break the family up. If we do that, we won't get back together." He shifts again. "I apologize for our earlier conversation as well. I know I said some things that were very shocking and concerning. I spoke out of turn, and what I said isn't really how I feel."

Josephine frowns and narrows her eyes, but she doesn't address Etienne's admission. She only says to me, "I'll keep the worst of my feelings to myself, Mary. But I've just lost my manager and his wife within a few days, and a part of me wonders if foul play isn't involved."

"Mother—" Etienne warns.

"Oh, hush. She was going to find out eventually."

I tilt my head. "Foul play?"

"Of course. Audrey didn't love Claude. What you saw at the funeral was only a show. She had no reason to kill herself now that she's been handed the life she's always wanted: money to spare and no one's feelings to consider but her own."

Etienne sighs and rubs his temples. "Perhaps you should go tend to the children, Mary."

“If you suspect foul play,” I reply, “you should call the police.”

“Who do you think I was on the phone with just now?” she replies. “Etienne’s right. Go take care of the children. As you said so eloquently, we must clean up our own messes.”

I leave the dining room, shocked off of my temporary perch of self-righteousness. Audrey murdered? But why? The only people who might have a reason to want her dead are the Lacroixs. And if they’re not responsible, then who is?

I look into the parlor and see Henri pick up the cursed sheet music and toss it into a garbage bag. He meets my eyes, and an unspoken understanding passes between us. There is no curse here. No music is responsible for the pain this family suffers. That is entirely the result of human actions and accidents of fate.

Knowing that only makes me more afraid of what’s to come.

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I don't know if I should tell Amelia that Henri has removed the cursed sheet music from the parlor. No doubt this would comfort her greatly, but despite his own superstitions, Etienne has a good point. Perhaps it would be better not to validate such superstitious concerns. I decide not to bring it up. The children are calm right now, and that might be the most I can expect from them right now.

They're sitting on Amelia's bed and holding hands. The movie of the day is about a racecar who has to learn humility by repaving a street in a small town. I'm sure there's more to it than that, but I'm not paying particularly close attention.

I glance at their plates and see they've eaten the chicken fingers and carrot sticks I made for them. That's good. If they can eat, then they're not in too poor of a mental state.

They just look so tired. They're so young to have to deal with all of this.

I reach over and brush hair out of Gabriel's face. He glances at me and smiles softly. That encourages me more than anything. He's shown far less resilience than Amelia thus far. It's nice to see that he can still smile.

"Would you children like some ice cream?" I ask.

Amelia scoffs. "Ice cream isn't going to make this better."

"Well, I'm going to get some for myself," I reply. "And no, it won't change things, but I think it will make me feel better, and there's nothing wrong with making yourself feel better when things are difficult. Gabriel, would you like some?"

“Yes, please.”

“Very well. Amelia, I’ll bring you some too.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I head downstairs and prepare bowls of ice cream. It won’t really do much to make me feel better, but Amelia needs to see me eating some so she doesn’t feel guilty about it.

When I return to the room, she’s crying softly. Gabriel is holding her and telling her everything is going to be all right.

I quickly set the ice cream down on her desk and rush to their side. “What is it, Amelia? What’s wrong?”

“What do you think is wrong?” she cries out. “People are dying, and everyone else is going insane, and no one’s doing anything about it! The music is killing people, and no one wants to admit it, and... and... and it’s all my fault! I just wanted...”

She bursts into tears. Gabriel holds her close and gives me a bleak look. I sit next to her and say, “None of this is your fault, Amelia. None of it.”

“Yes it is,” she insists, rubbing tears from her eyes. “I just... I was so bored . I hate being here in this stupid house with all the stupid people talking about music and business and asking us all the time about Grandpa... like... it’s just annoying! We’re kids! We’re cooped up here doing nothing, and...” she sniffles and wipes more tears from her eyes. “I just thought it would be funny. I know everyone talks about the legend of the curse, and when I saw you holding the cursed piece, I thought it would be funny to have Gabriel play it and watch everyone freak out. But then Claude died , and...”

“Henri threw the sheet music away,” I blurt out. “It’s gone.”

They both look at me. Amelia’s eyes are wide with hope. Gabriel’s with horror. I take note of that, but I’ll deal with it later.

“Really?” she asks. “It’s gone?”

"It's gone. He threw it away. You'll never have to worry about it again." I put my hands on her shoulders and say, "but listen to me, Amelia. The music was never the problem. There is no such thing as curses. There is no such thing as vengeful spirits. What happened to Claude was a terrible accident. What happened during Mardi Gras was the result of my very irresponsible decision to take two grieving children out to a party that they had no business attending. And what happened to Audrey is only a tragedy. Grief affects people terribly, and we often fight to look for explanations, but sometimes there is no explanation. Sometimes bad things just happen. It’s horrible, painful and tragic. But it’s not magic.”

She looks away from me, her lips trembling. I tilt her eyes back up to mine and say, “I’m glad the music is gone, but you need to realize that bad things will happen whether or not there’s a cursed piece of music to make it happen. But guess what? So will good things. So will great things. The wonderful thing about life is that there is good along with the bad. And just like we can't stop all of the bad things, we can't stop all of the good things either. Those, too, will happen whether we want them to or not. So let's enjoy the good things, like ice cream, movies and good company."

She smiles at me, a half-smile but a real one. Then she throws her arms around me and squeezes me tightly. I hold her just as tightly and feel a great deal of my own fear disappear. When I release her, I bring the ice cream to the children, and we finish the movie. The racecar eventually learns his lesson, of course, and decides to move to the small town with his new friends. It’s a simple, silly, heartwarming story, and it’s exactly what these children need.

After the children are asleep, I head downstairs and make myself some tea. This time, I need soothing warmth rather than rich boldness.

Rain is falling outside. A thunderstorm has moved in after sunset, but it is the soft, soothing kind of storm. The rain is steady but not torrential, and the lightning and thunder is distant.

I take my tea to the parlor and sit on one of the couches. The room is clean now save for the charred husk of the piano. Things are moving back to normal. Even the rain feels as though it's washing the memory of Mardi Gras away and giving New Orleans a chance to reset after what I'm sure was a trying night for many.

I am exhausted as well, but sleep won't find me for a while, I fear. I reflect on what I tell Amelia earlier. Sometimes bad things just happen. Sometimes there is no explanation. Sometimes there is an explanation, and we're just not meant to know it.

I hate that. I hate that I might never know what happened to Annie or ever truly understand why she left. I hate that I might have to accept that I'm wasting my time looking for the truth.

But what can I do, really? When I look back on my life, I have to admit that I'm happier accepting than I am searching.

I suppose what makes it difficult is accepting that Annie was happier living without me than with me. My memories lately have all been of the worst of our childhood, but most of the time we spent together was good. Most days we weren't rivals or enemies. We were friends. We were companions. We were sisters. And it hurts me immensely that Annie preferred to live her life without her sister.

A loud thunderclap causes me to flinch and spill some of my tea onto my lap. The heat shocks me out of my melancholy. I grimace and set my tea on the coffee table in front of me, then utter an oath that would amuse Sean greatly if he heard it.

I stand so I can return to the kitchen for a napkin, but before I can take a step, another thunderclap sounds, and the house is bathed in darkness.

For a frightening moment, I think that I'm having another nightmare, but when I start to flee and only succeed in banging my shin on the coffee table, the pain assures me that I am very much awake. This isn't a nightmare, just a thunderstorm. The power has gone out.

I hiss and rub my shin, cursing softly at the pain. After a moment, I stand again and very carefully move around the coffee table. Amelia and Gabriel are sharing a bed again tonight, but if they both wake and find the power out, they will be frightened. I'll stay in their room tonight.

I reach for my cell phone, but when I try to unlock the screen, I find that it's turned off. I frown and turn it back on, but all I receive is a brief, dim low battery symbol before it dies completely.

That's odd. I'm certain I charged it earlier.

Well, I'll have to make my way upstairs very carefully. And I'll have to make myself aware of where the flashlights are in the morning.

I take a step forward, and the song starts playing. The same damned song. It starts with the romantic first movement, but there's a jocular undertone behind it. The notes are played with a taunting character that mocks the romance. It's as though the piece is gloating.

My shin still radiates pain, so I know I'm not asleep. I can't understand how the piano is still making noise, but it's clear that it's not the storm because thunder and wind couldn't approximate the soft chords and arpeggios of the music.

I head toward the piano, but after what feels like a full minute, I still don't reach it. I frown and feel around, but I feel nothing.

This makes no sense. It shouldn't be this dark. There should be light from the city outside, at least.

Then I hear the children scream.

My heart falls to my feet. I burst into a run, crouching low with my hands outspread to catch whatever furniture or wall I encounter. I will find the stairs eventually and reach them.

I feel nothing. I run for far longer than I should need to, but I feel nothing.

Now I'm beginning to panic. "Children! Amelia! Gabriel!"

"Mary!" Amelia calls back. "Help!"

"It's killing us!" Gabriel adds.

I change direction and break into a dead run. The music rises to its enraged crescendo, and I flail my arms around and scream, "Children! Where are you!"

A loud clap of thunder shocks me into stillness. The power comes back on, and the lights return in the parlor. I stand still, arms outstretched, mouth open. The only sound now is the soft rain and the low hum of the refrigerator.

I'm dripping wet. I look down and find that I'm standing in a puddle formed from the water that streams off of me in rivulets. My hair is matted around my shoulders, and besides the water, there is dirt and debris on my slippers and on my hands.

I lift my head up and gasp. Sitting on the piano's sheet music stand, also wet and covered in debris but with its notes and handwriting still clear is the *Vie Après a la Mort*.

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My heart pounds as I mop up the last of the water. A floorboard creaks, and I flinch and look toward the stairs, terrified that someone has seen me.

There's no one there. I take a hesitant step forward and hear another creak. It's my own footsteps making that noise.

I press my lips together and hiss, "Damn it. Damn it all to hell."

I can almost hear Sean laughing at my vulgarity. Although I'm not sure he would laugh if he knew that I had an episode just now and decided to walk into a thunderstorm in my nightgown and slippers and pull a cursed musical number from a garbage bag so I could put it back on a piano.

I don't dwell on that. If I think about it too much, I'll panic, and I can't panic right now. I'm clearly in a great deal more mental distress than I realized, but there are practical considerations to deal with before I can address that.

I take the mop back to the cleaning closet, then head to the kitchen. I'm going to destroy that blasted manuscript. Philippa was right. I should have done away with it a long time ago. I'm the only one who can destroy it because, for reasons I can't comprehend, my own damaged psyche is the reason it's still here.

I will destroy that manuscript, and then I'll leave this house. I'm the one who's put this family through so much. I don't know what happened to push me so far over the edge, but for the sake of the children, I need to leave this house. I probably need to leave this city and return home. My search for Annie has once again...

Later. I'll figure all of this out later. Right now, I need to right the wrong I've committed, then shower, dress, pack my things, and leave. I'll email Josephine and Etienne later and have them give my apologies to the children.

God damn it! Just when I thought I was doing some real good here!

I grab the kitchen shears and stock to the parlor, my jaw set firmly. I half expect to be struck by lightning when I grab the composition and start cutting it, so when the scissors bite easily into the paper, I hesitate a second.

Then I cut again. Then again. Then again.

With each shred of paper that falls to the floor, I feel myself grow bolder. I grin and even start to chuckle as the cursed composition falls to pieces under my hands. It's just a few sheets of paper, after all. Nothing to be afraid of.

When I'm finished, I gather the pieces and step to the front porch. The rain is pouring, and the wind has picked up, driving it into my face. I'll have to grab a towel from the linen closet to dry off and mop some more water off of the floor, but that's all right. It'll be over soon.

I toss the fragments of paper into the air, and the wind carries them away until the rain drives them to the ground. A few fragments get caught in the bushes around the property, but most of them flutter over the fence and are gone.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. My shoulders slump, and with that all-important task done, I finally feel weary.

I trudge inside and clean up the new mess I've made. It's after midnight by the time I head upstairs, shivering and still soaking but dry enough that I don't track wet footprints behind me.

When the warm water of the shower hits me, I sigh with relief. Why can't my fugues lead me to relaxing showers or comfortable nights in front of the fire?

That thought opens the can of worms I've kept tightly closed up until now. I am in serious mental distress. There can be no doubt now that I've been sleepwalking, and evidently it's my subconscious desire to torture this family and myself because I bring back the symbol of all of the tragedy this family has suffered. Part of me fears that I'm imagining things now, and I'll wake to find myself on my knees worshipping the piece while chanting something demonic.

It's never been this bad. Not since Annie leaves. Not since I was hospitalized for a psychotic break.

This place. This city. This house . It's put more of a strain on me than anywhere else I've been. In the past, I've had episodes of sleepwalking or fugue states, but I've never endangered anyone under my care before. I'm endangering these children.

Tears come to my eyes. Those poor kids. I'm so glad I didn't hurt them. If I had...

But I can stop here. Things didn't get that bad, so there's no need to imagine it. I'll get home. That's the most important thing. I'll leave this environment, and if I still have trouble, then I might need to consider professional help, much as I hate it.

I finish showering and dress in clean clothes. That makes me feel somewhat better, but losing the fear only makes the grief worse. I don't know how Amelia and Gabriel will do without me. I only know that they'll be worse with me, and that hurts.

I open my closet to retrieve my suitcase, but I stop when I see a book on top of it. It's an unnamed leatherbound book with a clasp on the front. How on Earth did it get there? Was someone in my room? Did I have another dissociative episode and steal this somehow?

Leave it, Mary. That's enough. Just take your things and leave.

I am so disturbed by tonight's episode that I nearly do. But my curiosity gets the better of me. It killed the cat, and it will almost certainly kill me eventually.

I pick the book up and head to the small table. When I undo the clasp and open the book, the spine creaks softly, showing the book's age.

The notebook's age. It's not a novel or a treatise, I find, but a journal. The first entry confirms that this is the personal journal of Marcel Lacroix.

I wrestle for a moment longer, but the answers to all of the mysteries surrounding this family may have just fallen into my lap, and I can't resist.

Once more, the parallel between this family in New Orleans and the painter I work for in Monterey is stunning. In Monterey, I also come across a journal, and that journal lays bare the angst and brilliance of its author but also the fragility of his mind. The painter's journal also talks of a fairy, who I later confirm to be Annie.

This journal references no fairy, but it demonstrates an almost identical mind in every other case. Marcel was a brilliant but tortured composer. This journal begins about seven years before his death. It starts fairly tame, but as I skim through the entries, the decline of his emotional state becomes clear.

He starts by expressing melancholy at achieving the peak of his musical journey at such a young age. Where am I to go when I've already reached the summit?

As the entries progress, he offers increasingly fantastic suggestions to himself. Composing freeform music influenced by his emotional state at any given moment. Creating pieces to mimic the cries of children, the moans of women in ecstasy (I roll my eyes at that one), the calls of animals and the sounds of storms and tides. Studying

the effects of music on human behavior and creating pieces to influence certain behaviors. Studying the effects of music on the inanimate world and creating pieces to influence that.

As the suggestions become more fantastic, the rest of the writing follows suit, gradually growing disjointed and less coherent. Even the handwriting loses its clarity, becoming little more than a scrawl near the end of the journal.

I feel guilty for reading this, and at the same time, I feel terrible for Marcel. I'm observing his descent into madness.

That madness takes a dark turn when Marcel decides that his ultimate accomplishment will be to create a piece that will open the gate between the world of the living and the world of the dead. He raves about how he will write a piece that will close the gap between the spiritual and the physical and allow—in his words—"life and afterlife to understand each other as intimately as two lovers understand each other in the throes of passion."

The final entry is on the day of his death. The handwriting is back to its original clarity here, and the message is no longer disjointed or incoherent.

It is still every bit as sobering.

June 27

I fear that I've gone too far. I allowed my frustration with the process to lead me to seek shortcuts. Rather than allow the music to guide me and put to paper the energy the Universe wished to send through me as its conduit, I have tried to force the music to adapt to my own incomplete understanding.

It began last week when I finally despaired of the original piece I've been slaving

over for five years. In a rage at my inability to capture the essence of the soul's travels when it leaves this world, I returned to my own feeble initial attempt, the piece I wrote to lay to rest once and for all the question of my superiority compared to M. Poitier.

I took this vanity piece and layered over its framework all of my passion, all of my anger, all of my frustration and all of my vindictive rage at being denied the secret I felt I deserved.

And I succeeded. I will never forget the moment when the last notes escaped my fingers, and I stared in awe at the sheet, knowing that I had finally discovered the true door to the afterlife. Great was my joy in that moment, but greater still was my terror. Like a child who reaches for a hot stove only to understand how frail the human form is compared to the heat of a fire, I understood how utterly unprepared we are to know what lies beyond.

But my arrogance overcame that fear. I presumed myself great enough to handle the terror that comes with this knowledge.

I was wrong. I was so wrong. The Universe has indeed made me a conduit, but not of joy, not of life. I am become an unwilling angel of death. I have tried thrice to burn this composition, but each time I only stand in front of the fire, sweating and trembling, my fingers clutching the papers as though their life depended on it. Perhaps it does. Perhaps the price I will pay when this is over will be my own death. I don't know.

But even as I write this, I do know. I can feel death coming for me. I can see her empty, hollow eyes, her seductive and yet terrible form, her mocking, sinister smile. Perhaps for some her smile is tender and her embrace sweet, but for me, it won't be, that I know. I have committed a great sin. My eternity will not be spent in Paradise.

I will play this piece tonight. I will pour every ounce of my soul into it as I always have. And when death comes to take me, I will see her coming, and I will do nothing to stop her. I can do nothing.

I am doomed.

I close the journal and set it on the table, staring ahead at the wall. The storm has passed, and sunlight streams through the window. Dawn has arrived. I've spent yet another night without sleep.

I don't believe in superstitions. I can't accept that Marcel could have written a song with the terrible power he ascribes to it.

Yet tragedy continues to strike despite my disbelief. Perhaps, I, like he, am fated to act as a conduit until death finally takes me to whatever punishment awaits for me beyond.

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I finish packing and arrive downstairs to find the family at breakfast. The children brighten when they see me, and Amelia gives me a brief hug when I sit down. My heart breaks at their affection. Of course I would determine to leave just as I finally break through their grief.

But I must leave. I must do what Marcel couldn't and remove myself from a circumstance that is causing me to spiral into madness.

Josephine and Etienne don't seem much improved, but they do seem relieved to see the children happier. Josephine even suggests that the five of us go on an outing this afternoon. I accept only because I can't refuse without admitting the reason in front of the children.

I will miss them terribly. I've known them for only a short while, less time, in fact, than I've spent at any of my positions. Still, I feel that I've helped them cope with the worst of the pain the tragedies they've experienced will bring them. I wish I could be here to hold their hand through the rest of their journey, but...

Well, I've belabored the point long enough. I am far too close to being out of my right mind to risk staying here. I can only hope that I've given them enough to hold onto as they pull themselves the rest of the way out of despair.

When we finish breakfast, Gabriel asks, "Can we resume our lessons today, Mary?"

Amelia giggles and says in a mock posh accent, "Oh yes, Mary, can we resume our lessons? I'm just aching to return to my studies."

Gabriel shoves her playfully and teases, "At least I know how to speak properly."

"Oh yes, indeed, good sir," she replies. "How droll, how quaint, and may God save the King."

I grin, and Etienne chuckles. It's good to see the children playing with each other again, and of course, that only makes my decision even more painful.

Still, I suppose if I leave in the evening, it's no different than if I leave in the morning. I'll give the children one good day. "Of course we can. Only a half day, though. Your grandmother has something special planned for us."

Josephine smiles gratefully at me, and I feel another pang of guilt. I have been most unkind to her. She is, after all, only a woman approaching old age without the love of her life and with the knowledge that everything he worked for is almost certain to fall apart. She is going through a very hard time. I regret now being so harsh with her.

The children walk to the study room with a bounce in their step. As we pass the parlor, I look at the piano apprehensively. I almost expect to see the *Vie Apres a la Mort* on the piano, taped together and looking good as new otherwise.

It's not there. I've finally sent it somewhere even I can't get it back.

I give the children their lessons, and they dive into the work eagerly. This is good. They're getting a routine back, and as I mentioned earlier, that is the most effective way for them to overcome their grief.

And I'm about to throw that routine under the bus.

Maybe, with the manuscript gone...

No. I can't risk it. I can't have another episode and make things worse.

A chill runs through me as I anticipate my return home. What if leaving New Orleans doesn't stop the nightmares? What if I try to stop looking for Annie, but she doesn't want to leave me alone? What if I end up losing control in Boston and hurting Sean?

I really don't want to talk to a psychologist. If I do, then they might decide that I deserve to be incarcerated again. I can't be committed. If I am forced to step foot in another sanitarium, I will never leave.

My earlier good mood fades. The work never ends. Maybe I'll be better off if I can finally give up on my need to solve my sister's mystery. Maybe I'll never be better off. Maybe, like Marcel, I'm too far gone.

"Mary? Are you all right?"

I stir and smile at Gabriel. "Yes, I'm fine. I just didn't sleep well last night."

"The storm kept you up?"

"Yes. Wide awake." I stand from my desk. "I'll make myself some coffee. Don't worry about me. Worry about those math problems I see untouched."

He grins sheepishly and turns his attention back to his work.

I head downstairs and find Josephine in the parlor, staring at the husk of the piano. I am not interested in being roped into any more nonsense, but when I try to walk past, she calls to me. "Mary? May I have a word?"

I force a smile and sit across from her. "Of course. What is it?"

She takes a deep breath and asks, “Have you read the journal yet?”

I sit, frozen. At this moment, I regret not announcing my departure immediately and leaving the house before I can get roped into staying the extra day. “I... You... Did you leave that in my room?”

She nods. “Sorry. I meant to give it to you in person, but I was worried what you would think of me.”

Better than I would learning that you invaded my privacy.

That thought is followed immediately by guilt. After all, I’ve made a career out of invading the privacy of my employers, and it’s my snooping through the Lacroixs’ attic that causes this mess with the music to begin with.

When I don’t reply right away, she says, “Well, it’s true. Every word of it.”

“The journal?” I ask.

“Yes. It’s true. He...”

She takes a deep breath and smooths her dress. “Marcel was a passionate man. Fiery. Intense. That’s why I fell in love with him, although I suppose in awe of him would be more accurate. When he was in the middle of a mania, he had an energy about him that was just indescribable. I was swept up.”

She flips her hand, “Anyway, we married, and the passion continued into our marriage of course. I thought I was the luckiest woman alive. I don’t really care for music. I suppose I’m insane for admitting that.” She laughs nervously. “The wife of the greatest jazz pianist of the past fifty years, and I’m admitting that I don’t care for music.”

I don't know how to respond to her. She seems to be loosely following a thread, and I fear if I speak, I'll snap it. So, I say nothing, and eventually, she continues.

“Eventually, I stopped caring for him too. I...” She sighs. “That’s not true. I never stopped caring for him. I just resented his passion. I grew older, and we had Etienne and Sylvie, and I was ready to be a family and leave the business to others. You wouldn’t believe how cutthroat it is, Mary. How vicious. It makes no sense to me. It’s jazz , for Heaven's sake. How many people even listen to jazz anymore? Who are we showing off for?”

She shakes her head and looks at the piano. I resist the urge to follow her gaze.

“But Marcel...” She lifts her hands and lets them fall onto her lap. “He didn’t care about the business either. He didn’t care about us either. He cared about the music. He cared about doing something momentous. Transformative. It wasn’t enough for him to be the best. He had to change the fabric of reality. I know you read that, Mary, but can you imagine my reaction when he said those words to me? When he actually told me that he wanted to change the world by writing a jazz composition? It’s... ludicrous, it’s insane!”

I speak for the first time. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“But he did it!” she hisses, staring at me with wild eyes. “That’s what’s really crazy! He did it! He said that he was going to open a door between this life and the afterlife, and he did ! I still remember the first time he played that song. I swear I saw her. I saw her, Mary.”

My blood freezes. “Saw who?”

“ Her . The Angel of Death.”

I sigh and lean back on the couch. Josephine mistakes my reaction and insists, “I swear it! And then each time he played, something bad would happen! A speaker would explode, there would be a fire in the club, his car wouldn’t start... And eventually, people would die.”

She leans forward. “Marcel wasn’t the only one to die from this song. Neither were Claude and Audrey.”

“Audrey killed herself,” I say tersely. “Unless you were lying about that.”

“I wasn’t lying. But her death came about as a result of Cluade’s death, and Claude was murdered by this music!”

I stand abruptly. “Mrs. Lacroix, I am tendering my resignation effective immediately.”

She recoils as though slapped. “What?”

“I’m leaving. I can’t do this. I...” I take a breath and compose myself. “I am aware of the power that Marcel’s legacy has over this family, and I confess that I also felt as though I was under a spell cast by Gabriel’s performance of *Vie Apres a la Mort*. But I am a grown woman, not a child, and I can’t believe that a jazz composition has somehow opened a portal to the world of the dead, nor can I believe that it has cursed people to die.”

“Then how do you explain what you’ve seen? What we’ve all seen?”

“Mass hallucinations brought on by grief. We were all in highly suggestible states and ready to believe the most fantastic explanations so that we might have some answer, even if it was a foolish one.”

“But why would you grieve? You didn’t know Claude or Audrey or Marcel?”

“I grieve my sister.”

She blinks. “Your sister?”

I sigh. "I came to New Orleans to look for signs of my sister, who disappeared thirty years ago. I found a playbill from twenty-nine years ago for a jazz show in New Orleans. My sister played jazz saxophone. I... I thought that it was a sign. But that was foolish of me. I am a sensible woman, and I allowed myself to behave insensibly. I came here and unfortunately found myself surrounded by grieving people who were also behaving insensibly. None of that is your fault, but it's the truth. We're not compatible because this house needs a voice of reason, and none of us can be that voice. I tried, but as you've pointed out, I'm also seeing things that aren't there, things that can't be there. Your children need someone who can keep them grounded in reality. I implore you to find someone somewhere who can accomplish that. But it's not me. I'm sorry.”

She stares at me for a long moment. Then she says in a brittle voice. “I see. Very well. I will leave you to tell the children.” She stands. “They’ll be quite disappointed, but that’s life, oui ?” She smiles bitterly and with more than a hint of contempt. “I wish you well, Mary Wilcox.”

I don’t bother to return the sentiment. I don’t think she particularly wants me to. She leaves the parlor, and I sigh and press my fingertips to my eyes for a long moment before returning upstairs to break the news to the children.

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The children don't take the news well. The life that has only just started to return to Gabriel's eyes dies instantly when I tell them. Amelia's lips tremble for a moment before she rushes from the study room, weeping. Gabriel gives me a softly accusing look that twists like a dagger in my heart before he follows her.

To say I am ashamed would be an understatement. I feel like the worst slime to ever slither across the Earth.

But that doesn't mean that I'm wrong. I've given too much credence to the supernatural from the start of this adventure. The more I think about it, the more I believe that coming here on what amounts to nothing more than a hunch based on a piece of trash I find in my home allows the worst portions of my imagination to run wild. Perhaps if I had come here purposefully and not simply to have a place to stay while I look for Annie, I would have been better prepared to survive the challenges this household presents and be able to help the children more.

But I can't. I worry very seriously that if I stay here much longer, I will endanger my sanity. Hell, I've already endangered it.

So, a few minutes after the children leave, I blink away my tears and head to my room. The door to Gabriel's room is open, and I glance inside to see him consoling a very distraught Amelia.

Then my eyes lift to the drawings that cover his walls. The demon Annie's mocking smile leers at me from a dozen papers. I shiver and continue to my room.

Just before I reach it, I hear heavy footsteps behind me. I turn to see Etienne striding

toward me. His face is dark and forbidding, and for a moment, I fear he will strike me. But he stops several feet from me and simply asks, “Why? Why now?”

I swallow. “I’m sorry, Etienne.”

“Damned to your sorry. Why now? Why when the children were just starting to recover?”

Tears well in my eyes. “I thought I could be of help to you, but—”

“You were of help to us. Don’t act as though you’re leaving for our sake. Do me the respect of being more honest than that.”

My face falls. “I... I can’t... It’s too much, Mr. Lacroix. The curse, the music, Claude’s death, the superstition... I know none of it is real, but there were moments when it felt real, and that’s a road I can’t risk traveling again. I won’t share details, but I have experienced things in my past that made me question my sanity. Working here has made me question it again, and I can’t afford to put my mental health at risk. I don’t blame you or anyone in your family for this, but I can’t continue here. I’m sorry.”

Etienne takes a deep breath and releases it slowly through his nose. He looks past my shoulder and nods. “I see. Well, I thank you for the help you’ve been so far. I hope that wherever life takes you, it takes you far away from the mental break that you fear. As for us... I think it’s best that you be gone before the evening. The children will have a very rough night, but it will be harder if you’re here resting peacefully in your bed while they weep for the loss of the only good influence they’ve had in recent days.”

I nod. “I agree. I’ll leave within the hour.” I don’t tell him that this is his chance to be the positive influence his children need, and I certainly don’t tell him that I haven’t

had a single peaceful night since arriving here.

“Will you be needing the car?” he asks.

“No. I will call a rideshare to the airport.”

He bows stiffly, then turns and walks away, his back ramrod straight, his hands curled into loose fists. I sigh and walk into my room.

I call Sean while I finish the last of my packing. He answers on the first ring as always. “Mary, Mary, quite contrary, why have you called my phone?”

“I’m coming home, Sean.”

His jocular attitude disappears instantly. “What happened? Are you all right?”

I take a deep breath. “No. I’m not all right. I think this is the first time I can honestly say I’ve failed.”

“Uh oh. What happened, love?”

My lips begin to tremble. I try to hold it together, but I’m just so tired and so overwhelmed and so defeated. I sit on the edge of the bed and weep softly.

“There, there,” he says tenderly. “It’s all right. Those fingers you feel creeping over your shoulders? That’s just me giving you a supportive hug. It’s not a ghost or anything like that.”

I chuckle. “Go to hell, Sean.”

He laughs. “I would never put Hell through the pain of dealing with me. But tell me

what happened.”

I take another deep breath and explain to him everything that’s happened since I arrived here. I tell him of the dreams I’ve had both sleeping and waking and about the trances I’ve gone into where I’ve developed a sudden skill for playing piano and where I go out into a thunderstorm to retrieve a cursed piece of music for no apparent reason other than to further torture an already tortured family.

I finish by telling him about the conversations I had a moment ago with the family. “And on top of all of it, I’ve learned nothing about Annie. Philippa mentioned her name, but I’m convinced she only heard me whisper it while I was sleepwalking. I know you found that bit about Jacques Poitier mentioning a blonde woman with blue eyes, but he could have been talking about the entire population of Norway for all I know. I just... I was wrong to come here. Through all of my journeys, I’ve held onto the belief that I am sensible and logical. This was the first time I did something that I know to be insensible and illogical, and I’ve hurt myself and an innocent family because of it.”

“Stop,” he says, gently but firmly. “You’re beating yourself up far too much.”

“Am I? It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Of course it doesn’t. You’re upset now. You feel bad for the children, and I don’t blame you. This will be hard for them. But you’re doing the right thing. I’m not going to call you all the terrible names you’ve just called yourself, but I agree that you need to come home and get yourself away from this situation. Honestly, when you told me you had to go to New Orleans because of that old playbill, I feared you were putting yourself at risk. I should have said something then, but I didn’t want to hurt you. I don’t want you to think I believe you’re insane. You’re not. But that was selfish of me.”

I sniff and wipe tears from my eyes. “Oh. So it’s your fault. You bastard.”

He laughs loudly, and I smile and chuckle along with him. “That’s what I get for falling for your bloody gray eyes.”

“I thought it was my godlike physique you fell in love with.”

“That too. I hope you’ve kept in shape for me because I’ll be home within twelve hours.”

“Ooh, Mary. Please, let’s keep this conversation appropriate for all audiences. What if the children hear?”

I chuckle again and wipe more tears from my eyes. “As long as you promise to hold me, I don’t really care what we do or don’t do. I just need to feel safe again.”

“Mmm, nah. I don’t think so.”

I roll my eyes, “Oh, go stuff yourself.”

“I’d rather stuff you.”

I gasp, “Sean! What happened to appropriate for all audiences?”

"There's no children here." In a tender voice, he adds, "Travel safe, my love. I'll make you a lovely dinner, and we'll stay up late watching those boring old movies you love for reasons I can't possibly understand."

“That sounds lovely.”

“Goodbye, Mary.”

“Goodbye.”

We hang up, and I feel a little better. It’s so wonderful to have someone to come home to. I don’t know how I’d survive the guilt to come without him.

But I must get through the hard part first. I’m packed and dressed. All that remains is to say goodbye to the family one final time, then leave them to their fate. I can only hope that salvation will find them through some other means.

I call a rideshare, then gather my luggage and leave the room. No sooner do I open the door than I run headlong into Amelia. She is weeping, and fresh tears come to my eyes when I see her.

I smile at her and say, “I’m so sorry, Amelia. I wish I could stay. I’ll tell you what, though. I’ll give you my phone number and my address. You can call—”

“Mary, Gabriel’s missing again.”

My smile fades. Oh God no. Please not again. “What? You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. He’s nowhere to be found.”

“Have you talked to your father or your grandmother?”

She shakes her head. “He’s not with them. They left an hour ago. I know they didn’t take him because we were both in his room. He said he wanted to watch a movie and asked me to get snacks, so I went to the kitchen, but when I came back up, he was gone.”

My knees began to tremble. He sent her away. He wanted to run, so he sent her away to give himself time.

“I looked everywhere. I checked the garden, the garage, the attic... everywhere. He’s gone.”

“All right. Okay. It’s all right, Amelia. Hold on. I’ll call the police and—”

And my phone’s out of battery. Again. Of course. Because why would one bloody thing go right for me?

“Come on,” I say, grabbing her hand and leading her downstairs.

We rush outside, just in time for my rideshare to pull up. The driver steps outside to open our doors, and I say, “I’ve got the doors, just get us to the Midnight Melody.”

His brow furrows. “The where?”

“The Midnight Melody. It’s a jazz club.”

“I’ll give you directions,” Amelia says. “Just hurry!”

The driver looks at the weeping girl, then at me and says warily, “I thought you needed a ride to the airport.”

I reach into my purse and pull out a fifty-dollar bill. “This is yours,” I say, stuffing it into his hand. “Just get us to the Midnight Melody.”

He takes the bill, still looking warily at me. “This isn’t a drug thing, is it?”

“Do I bloody look like a drug runner?”

He lifts his hands. “All right. All right. Just making sure. I don’t want to get shot or nothin’.”

We step inside and buckle ourselves, and the car pulls into traffic. Amelia sobs and shivers with fright, and I take a deep breath and pray that I'm right and Gabriel has gone to find the music.

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When we reach the club, I tell the driver to call the police. He frowns and says, “Damn it. This is a drug thing.”

“Why would I tell you to call the police if I was planning to deal narcotics?” I ask. “There’s a boy in danger. Call the damned police.”

He blinks and shakes his head, muttering under his breath about taking the wrong job. Amelia and I jump out of the car while he reaches for his cell phone.

The club is closed. The sign on the door says the closure is indefinite due to damages during Mardi Gras. I don’t know if that’s true or if the employees here have just refused to return to work after the cursed music plays for no reason over their speakers.

Amelia tries the door, and when she finds it locked, she releases an anguished cry. “It’s all right,” I assure her. “I know how to pick locks.”

I kneel and pull two bobby pins from my hair. Her eyes widen when she watches me insert both pins into the lock and slowly engage the tumblers. Fortunately for me, the club’s financial troubles have apparently forced them to forgo anything more sturdy than a simple lock, so as soon as the tumblers are engaged, the door swings open, and Amelia and I rush inside.

The song is playing. It is in the middle of its fourth movement, mocking and mischievous but not yet aggressive. I wonder at this for a moment, then remember that the last time the music played here it wasn’t for no reason. Gabriel played the song. He played it on the piano on the same stage where his grandfather died after

performing that song, and now he's playing it again.

Or so I desperately hope.

When we reach the auditorium and I see him playing, I release a sigh of relief.

That relief is short-lived. He is playing, but he is not conscious. His eyes are rolled back in his head, and his head lolls oddly as his fingers fly over the keys. Amelia cries out and rushes the stage, but out of nowhere, she falls to the ground. The way she falls is almost as though she is shoved to the ground by some unseen force.

She cries out and rolls over, gripping her ankle and grimacing. I pick her up and carry her away from the booming speakers. The volume is so great that I feel nauseous. It's the same as before when the noise was loud enough to drive the patrons out of the theater.

I set her down at the back of the auditorium and shout, "Cover your ears! Stay here! I'll go get him!"

She nods, grimacing and weeping. She doesn't cover her ears, so I move her hands over her ears, then head back toward the stage.

The music is in its final movement now. It snarls at me, pummeling me with hellish rage. My muscles go slack under the force of the onslaught, but I force myself forward anyway.

Just as I reach the stage, I see a silhouette standing next to Gabriel. At first, it is barely visible, an afterimage of a shadow. As I pull myself onto the platform, though, it coalesces, first into a wraith, then into a clear figure. My sister's ghost glares at me with dark, empty eyes. Lips that aren't there peel back from pale teeth, and the fingers that rest on Gabriel's shoulder grip hard.

He winces from the grip and tilts toward the side on which the demon is squeezing. I falter, convinced for a moment that this is no hallucination but is truly some monster of hate stealing this poor boy's soul.

But I am not insane. I may suffer from hallucinations when the memory of my past collides with the tragedy of my present, but I know the difference between what's real and what isn't real.

So, I get to my feet, face the creature that isn't there, and say boldly, "Gabriel, she isn't there. This isn't real."

The demon opens its mouth and releases a scream so powerful it seems to course through me rather than at me. I stare it straight in the eye and repeat, "That's enough, Gabriel. Stop playing this instant."

She opens those empty eyes, and flame shoots through them. She points at me, and my body trembles uncontrollably.

But I don't move. I step closer and lay a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. My hand passes through the specter's hand, and I say, "Gabriel, it's all right. She isn't here. You're safe."

The specter snarls in impotent rage, but I ignore it and use my other hand to caress Gabriel's cheek. "Your sister loves you, Gabriel. Don't leave her like this."

The music stops. The specter vanishes. Gabriel blinks, and when his eyes open, his irises are back where they should be. He looks down in confusion at the piano where his finger presses hard against the final note of *Vie Apres a la Morts*.

It doesn't play. The key has jammed.

“Gabriel!” Amelia cries.

Gabriel and I both look to see her limping down the aisle toward him. His face changes, and he leaps from the bench and rushes toward her. They meet in the middle of the aisle and collapse to their knees, holding each other close. Gabriel’s shoulders begin to shake, and he weeps loudly and bitterly, for the first time allowing himself to release the grief that has nearly driven him insane.

I collapse to the floor, breathing heavily, exhausted and still shaking from my battle with the demon that has plagued both of us. The doors to the auditorium burst open, and Josephine and Etienne rush in, followed by a dozen police officers. The Lacroixs drop to their knees and wrap their children in a tight embrace, sheltering them and sharing in their grief and their relief.

They’re a family again. I’ve done it. I’ve helped them find each other.

The officers spread out throughout the auditorium, sharing looks of confusion as they try to figure out exactly why they were called here. One of them approaches me, and I recognize Officer Nathan from Mardi Gras night.

“What happened, Mary? Are you all right?”

I nod. “Yes. Everything’s all right. It’s over now.”

“Got something in the piano,” another officer says. “Underneath one of the hammers. Looks like a note.”

My eyebrows lift. I get to my feet and take the note from him. The officer frowns and moves to take it back, but Nathan waves him off.

I open the note and read.

To any who care to read but especially to Gabriel and Amelia,

I am so sorry. I have hurt you more deeply than anyone has a right. I have taken a loved one from you because of my own selfish bitterness. I am a horrible, mean woman, and I'll never forgive myself for hurting you like this. I won't ask you to forgive me because I don't deserve to be forgiven. I'll only ask you to forget me because you deserve a better memory than the one I'm leaving you.

I killed my husband. I killed Claude. I hated him, but what I really hated was myself for marrying a man I didn't love just for money. I loved Etienne Lacroix, but he had no interest in me, and I hated Claude because I wore his ring and couldn't express to Etienne how desperately I wanted him.

So I poisoned him. A little at a time, I put blood coagulants into his coffee so I could choke his heart. It wasn't until I saw him die that I realized what a terrible and unforgivable mistake I'd made. I killed a good man who loved me and loved music and didn't care at all that he'd lost some bullshit competition with the Lacroixs that never mattered in the first place.

I poisoned him, and when he died, I saw how much it hurt Gabriel and Amelia, and I realized finally what a worthless piece of shit I was. I tried to go on, but I can't. I can't. If you find this note, then you've probably found me already. Just know that I deserved it. Don't feel bad for me. Feel bad for yourselves for having to endure the hate of a pathetic and bitter woman who killed the best thing that ever happened to her because she couldn't understand when she had it better than she deserved.

Goodbye. I'm so, so sorry.

Audrey Fontaine (I don't deserve Claude's last name).

I fold the note and look at the piano. It's a nice instrument, but not nearly as nice as

the one Amelia accidentally destroyed. It's just an ordinary piano in an ordinary music club. There is no demon. There is no curse. There never was. The only specter terrorizing this family was that of a bitter and remorseful woman who couldn't cope with the loss of her dreams and the mundanity that comes with time and age.

“What is it?” Nathan asks. “What does it say?”

I hand him the note. “See for yourself. It says this is over.”

I leave the stage and return to the family. The children have dried their tears and stand with their arms around each other, twins now in every way that matters. Etienne and Josephine stand on either side of them, their faces filled with love and relief and no trace of the selfishness and insanity that plagues them ever since I first meet them.

They smile at me, and Josephine says, “Thank you, Mary. Thank you for not giving up on us.”

“It wasn’t me who saved Gabriel today,” I reply. “It was Amelia. So thank you , Amelia, for not giving up on me.”

She and Gabriel both smile, and Amelia says, “I knew you could do it.”

We all laugh, and Etienne says, “Josephine, why don’t you take the children home while I finish with the officers? Mary, you’re welcome to stay a while longer if you’d like.”

I return their smile. “I think I can stay for a while longer.”

The children rush forward and wrap me in a bear hug. I return their embrace with equal fierceness, then hold their hands in mine as we leave the Midnight Melody and the curse of Vie Apres a la Morts behind us.

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I kiss Gabriel on the forehead and straighten. I look at his drawings and smile ruefully. The witch depicted in the drawings is quite terrifying with her snaggle teeth and her large black eyes, but she looks nothing like the ghost that haunts me. It's incredible the lengths to which the mind will go to convince oneself one is too far gone to save.

I tiptoe out of the room and head back downstairs. Josephine and Etienne sit in the parlor with coffee and donuts on the table in front of them. A cup waits for me, and I smile gratefully as I sit across from them. Tonight feels more like a tea night than a coffee night, but if I'm going to eat donuts, I suppose coffee is a better companion than tea.

My phone charges in the outlet near my seat. I've resolved to have it connected to a charger constantly unless I'm actively using it. Part of me feels that my subconscious allowed the battery to run down just so it could justify its choice to feel hopeless.

It will have to content itself with a half victory. I've found nothing here to suggest that Annie ever set foot in New Orleans. I suppose I could remain in the city and look in earnest now that my employment with the Lacroixs is coming to an end, but I am too exhausted to put myself through that strain right now. I haven't given up on learning the truth about my sister, but I think it's time I admit that I'm not up to the effort of doing so full-time. What I want now is to return home to my lover and forget about all of this for a while.

Speaking of that.

I unplug my phone—not before confirming I have a full charge—and text him. Slight

delay. All good news. Talk later. Love you.

I set the phone down and take a bite of my donut. “Well, that’s done, then.”

“Do you think so?” Josephine asks. “Do you think that’s it?”

I sip my coffee as I think of my answer. “I think you’ve all turned a corner,” I say. “I don’t think you’ll be imagining any more spirits of vengeance or cursed musical numbers. There will be hard times ahead. The children will want to know what that note said, and you will have to tell them eventually. That will be difficult no matter what age you choose to reveal that information. But I do feel that the worst is behind you.”

“I just can’t believe it,” Etienne says. “I mean... I suppose I knew she was attracted to me. A lot of women find me attractive. I think it’s the money they think I have more than anything else.” He chuckles. “If only they knew. Anyway, I didn’t imagine it was motivation enough to kill Claude.”

“I don’t think that’s why she killed him,” Josephine said. “I think she felt trapped. I think when she met Claude, he was larger than life to her. I think she was awed by him more than she was in love with him, and I think when she realized that, she reacted badly to it.”

She and I share a look, and I realize that it’s not just Audrey she’s talking about. She didn’t kill Marcel, but the rest of it applies.

Etienne shakes his head. “That’s still no excuse. She might not have loved him, but he loved her. She was the most important thing in the world to him.”

Josephine lowers her eyes and smiles sadly. That, unfortunately, doesn’t seem to have applied to her and Marcel. “Yes. He did.”

He sighs and reaches for another donut. “What do you want to do about the piano, Mother?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we should have it restored, if we can. It’ll never play again, not the way it used to. Maybe that’s a good thing. Your father had a wonderful talent, but it consumed him, and... well, I fear it risks consuming Gabriel too.”

“Yes. I’ve considered canceling their music lessons. Amelia probably wouldn’t mind, but Gabriel would likely tie himself to Mr. Gilroy’s boots if he heard that.”

“Don’t cancel their lessons,” I implore him. “It’s possible to explore a talent without letting it consume you. You just need to guide them and make sure they have other things to love besides music.”

He nods. “Yes, you’re probably right. But not here and not at the club. I’ll send them to their house to study. Franz will like that. He’ll send them home stuffed with strudel every day. You know he makes it himself?”

“His mother’s recipe,” Josephine confirms. “He’s quite proud of it.”

“He should be, at least to here Mr. Gilroy talk.” He cocks his head. “I wonder why he never took Franz’s last name?”

“Does it matter?” Josephine asks. “Names are only names.”

“I suppose not,” Etienne agrees. “I only wondered.” He laughs. “You know, I’ve never seen them fight? I’ve never even seen them argue. They pretend to argue, but I’m convinced it’s only how they express their love.”

"They met when they were older," Josephine speculates. "They had time to learn who they were. When they met, they weren't children looking for an identity. They were

adults looking for companionship.”

“Well, I envy them,” Etienne says. “I don’t think even Julia and I were ever that close.” He looks at me. “So Mary, I suppose I know the answer to this, but I have to ask. Are you still determined to leave us?”

I nod. “I’m afraid so. I’ll stay for a few days longer, at least until after Audrey’s funeral. But I do need to get home. I have my own demons to face that have nothing to do with what your family’s overcome.”

“I understand,” he replies, “but I do hope you’ll visit us. Mother is planning to sell the club—Oh, Mother, I’m sorry. I should have let you reveal that.”

Josephine flips her hand. “It’s all right. And you must visit us, Mary. We’ll have you over next Mardi Gras, and this time we’ll all go out. There are places you can go that aren’t full of drunk college kids trying to show as much skin as possible.”

“Yes, we did see a stunning street performance,” I tell her.

She smiles wryly. “Amelia told me. She said you were so enraptured, she couldn’t get your attention.”

Heat climbs my cheeks. “Yes, well... I’ll have to make sure I’m not quite so enraptured next time.”

“That’s why we’ll come with you,” Etienne says. “Between the three of us, I’m sure we can handle two teenagers.”

Josephine scoffs. “You’ve clearly forgotten how you and your sister were.”

Their smiles fade as they think of their estranged sister. I sip my coffee and weigh the

risks of talking about them. In the end, I decide to risk it. “You should call your sister,” I suggest. “I’m sure she would love to see her niece and nephew.”

Etienne smiles ruefully. “I wish it were that simple. I’m afraid the rift between us is a lot wider and more long-lasting than can be solved with a phone call.”

“Call her anyway,” I insist. “Believe me when I tell you that the worst thing you can do is cut your sister off and leave her to wonder.”

I share another look with Josephine. She knows a little about my history with Annie now. She squeezes Etienne’s hand and says, “I’ll call her. We’ll work our way up to reconciling.”

Etienne nods curtly. He finishes his coffee and stands. “Well, I’ve had a long day. I’m going to bed. Mary, you’re welcome to stay as long as you wish. And please visit us. That isn’t an empty request.”

“I will,” I assure him. “I still need to experience a Mardi Gras not filled with abject terror.”

He laughs. “I’ll admit it’s a damned fun night if you know how to do it right. For people our age that means a lot of great food, moderate alcohol and good entertainment.”

“I look forward to it.”

Josephine waits until the door to Etienne’s room closes. Then she looks at me. “What did you see? In the club. When you rescued Gabriel?”

My shoulders tense slightly. “It’s nothing that matters.”

“Humor me.”

The sternness in her voice shocks me. A touch of my old fear returns, and I reply, “Well... I saw... I imagined that I saw a woman.”

“A blonde woman with blue eyes?”

I blink. The fear I feel strengthens. “N—well... she would have had blue eyes, but I didn’t see them.”

Josephine nods. Her lips are pressed in a thin line. She sips her coffee and clears her throat. “I didn’t tell you this before, Mary, but when you told me you came here to look for your sister... Well, I think she may have been here.”

I stare at her for a long moment without answering. When I finally reply, I can only offer a hoarse, “Oh?”

“Yes. Marcel and I married thirty-eight years ago. Twenty-nine years ago, I was pregnant with Sylvie. It was a hard pregnancy, and I wasn’t quite able to care for Etienne. He was six at the time. Anyway, Marcel could never be bothered to be there for his children, so he hired a nanny.”

My heart pounds thickly. I can see where she’s taking this, but I can’t allow myself to hear it. It’s so strange that I spend so much of my energy and time hoping for news of my sister, but whenever I’m about to discover that news I’m terrified of it.

Then again, maybe it’s not so strange at all.

"This nanny was easily the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," she continues. "She was in her early twenties, which made her about five years younger than me. She was tall with long, flowing blonde hair, bright blue eyes, full lips and a body that almost

made me wonder.” She scoffs and smiles tightly. “Well, I think you can guess. He fell for her. She never loved him, but she had no problem taking advantage of his affections. I knew about it from the beginning, but I never said anything. I was too exhausted with the pregnancy and Etienne.

“So, I waited. She stayed with us for ten months, and when I finally weaned Sylvie, I prepared a surprise for them. I’d been gathering evidence: pictures, videos, phone recordings... enough to prove that they’d been carrying on under my nose. I waited until Marcel’s birthday, and then I arranged a special surprise party. When everyone arrived, I revealed everything. I had pictures taped to all of the walls, a video of them on the television, and tapes of them talking to each other.” She chuckles bitterly. “You should have seen the look on his face.”

My heartbeat quickens. “Do you still have those pictures?”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “No. After the party, I burned them.”

She gazes out the window, a faraway look in her eyes as she reminisces. “I forgave Marcel. Not really, but enough to stay with him. For his part, he was smart enough never to cross me like that again. As for Debra—that was the name she used when she was with us—she left five minutes after I exposed her. I’ll never forget the look she gave me before she left. The hate. The hurt. As though I was somehow in the wrong for the fact that she was underneath my husband half of the time she was in the house.”

She starts and lowers her eyes. “I’m sorry. That was... I suppose I don’t know for sure that she was your sister.”

“It was,” I reply. “I’m sure of it.” Unfortunately.

She nods once, slowly. “Well, I’m sorry if I’ve painted a picture of her you’d rather

not see. But I felt you had the right to know. Your hunch wasn't baseless. She was here. She was my husband's lover, though I use the term as loosely as possible."

I sip my coffee. It's gone cold. I set the cup on the table and sigh. "I came here looking for truth. I'm grateful to have found it, no matter how painful it is."

She laughs. "Well, if so, you're a better woman than me."

I tense slightly. "I don't suppose you know where she went when she left?"

She shakes her head. "No idea. I know Marcel tried to call her once after she left, but when I found out, I smashed the phone and told him if I caught him calling that—calling her again—I would leave him. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. I'm only sorry that my sister hurt you as well."

She sighs, and her shoulders relax. "You know, it's strange. I remember feeling angry with her. I remember hating her. But now, when I try to feel the same hate... I just can't. It's too much work. Is that odd?"

I don't know how to answer that. It takes me no work at all to hate my mother, and I watched her die in her bed. So I have to make up a response. "I think you've managed to overcome the pain you've suffered. I think that you chose to rise above, and I think you should choose to stay above."

"And you? What will you do?"

I laugh and shake my head. "Josephine, I truly wish I knew." I stand. "I think I'll go to bed too. Thank you for talking to me."

"Thank you for listening. I hope that telling you this hasn't put you off of visiting us."

“Of course not. You still owe me a Mardi Gras.”

She grins. “You’ll get it. Good night, Mary.”

“Good night, Josephine.”

As I head upstairs, my smile vanishes. When I finally close my eyes, I see my sister’s mischievous smile. Her eyes above that smile dance with mirth, but at the same time, they are hard and cold.

Our mother’s eyes.

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I don't realize how drained I am emotionally until I collapse into Sean's arms and immediately burst into tears. He wraps me up and holds me close, saying nothing until my shoulders stop shaking, and I end my weeping with a deep, cleansing breath. Then he says, "All right now, love?"

"Well enough," I say.

"Good. Because I have completely forgotten to make dinner and had to order takeout Chinese instead."

I laugh and kiss his cheek. "I love takeout Chinese."

"A fact for which I am eternally grateful. Come on. It's all set in the living room. I have four movies queued, and not one of them was released after 1970."

He walks away, holding my hand. I squeeze his hand and remain where I am. He turns around and lifts an eyebrow. "Yes, Miss Wilcox?"

I blush and glance toward the stairs. His eyebrow lifts higher. "Ah. Well, if you insist."

Two hours later, we start the first movie and enjoy our lukewarm takeout Chinese. I am wearing a thick, plush robe and I am finally relaxed and completely content. Sean wears a matching robe, and judging by the expression on his face, he looks just as content as I am.

So, of course, I have to ruin it. My smile fades, and I say, "Sean... I need to tell you

something."

"I knew it," he says immediately. "You're leaving me. That was the wonderful goodbye sex all the lads warned me about."

When I don't laugh, his expression grows sober. "Uh oh. This is something serious."

"Yes."

"About Annie?"

I nod.

He reaches for the remote and pauses the movie. "Ah. You'd better tell me then."

I tell him about my conversation with Josephine. He listens without interrupting—another truly wonderful quality of his—and when I finish, he says, "I'm sorry. That must have been hard to hear."

"It was," I reply. "It... I have this image of Annie, you know. She was this beautiful, funny, kind, good person. I mean, she had her faults, but they never seemed grievous to me. I've always believed that she was a good woman who left because she was smothered by bad people. But the more I learn about her, the harder it is to justify her actions. I just don't know how to reconcile the girl I knew with the woman she seems to have become. She's almost like..."

I stop myself before I can say, like my mother. One day, I'll have to tell Sean about her, but that's a can of worms that will take more energy to get through than I have to spare right now.

"She was flawed," Sean finishes for me. "And some of her flaws were serious."

I nod slowly. “Yes. Very serious.”

“But she had good qualities. And some of those qualities were wonderful.”

I nod a little less slowly. “Yes. Very wonderful.”

“That means she was human, love. Not all of us tend to those extremes, but some do. And we love them anyway, don’t we?”

I nod once more, not at all slowly. “Yes. We do.”

He kisses my forehead and says, “Don’t judge her too harshly. Not all of us have your willpower. Besides, there’s twenty-eight years of history we still need to discover. Odds are she learned her lesson eventually.”

I laugh. “Yes. I suppose you’re right. Perhaps one day we’ll know for sure.”

“You will. You’re Mary Wilcox. No mystery can evade you forever.”

I smile at him. “You’re damned right.”

I settle in next to him and enjoy lukewarm chow mein and orange chicken while I watch Jimmy Stewart learn to appreciate his modest life. I can hardly call my life modest, but as I snuggle next to the man I love and indulge in the simple pleasure of comfort food and comfort films, I can say honestly that I appreciate my life.

Sometimes that’s all one needs.