



One Last Secret (The Governess #5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Mary Wilcox, the perceptive governess with a knack for untangling family secrets, finds herself in a new role amidst the haunting beauty of the Monterey Peninsula.

Tasked with the care of a once-renowned artist's enigmatic daughter in their cliffside mansion, Mary quickly learns that her charge is no ordinary child.

When the artist vanishes, Mary is thrust into a labyrinth of art and illusion.

Was it an abduction? A murder?

With each step further into the mystery, she risks losing her own sense of self, as she risks losing her grip on reality.

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“It’s quite beautiful, though, isn’t it, Mary?”

I look over the canvas and try to think of a diplomatic way to respond to Annie. I enjoy art as much as anyone, but my sister has a love for it that goes beyond simple enjoyment. Still, I can't for the life of me see how a few intersecting shapes painted in primary colors can command the same reverence as the sculptures of Raphael or the murals of Michelangelo. Surely, the Mona Lisa is a better example of a masterpiece than what looks to me like a child's drawing.

Eventually, I chose a non-answer. "It's really something."

She smiles at me. “You don’t like it.”

It’s not a question, and there’s no point in denying it. “I don’t understand it,” I explain. “It’s just shapes and colors.”

“Everything is just shapes and colors.”

“Yes, but... you know what I mean.”

“I do. Come on, let’s go look at the pottery. Those have different shapes and different colors!”

I roll my eyes, but I start laughing as Annie pulls me along.

"Now boarding all military members, passengers with disabilities, and members of our Admiral's Club."

The announcement pulls me from my memories. My group won't board for a few more minutes, but I stand and gather my things anyway. My companion frowns at me. "Why are you getting in line already? We're not boarding until group two. That's at least five more minutes."

"I might be five minutes early?" I reply. "Perish the thought."

My companion, Sean O'Connell, rolls his eyes. "Well, I'll sit if you don't mind."

"Of course not. After all, you only have six and a half hours to sit on the flight. Then only two hours to sit for the drive to Monterey."

"Have I ever told you that you have a lovely gift for sarcasm? Perhaps instead of a career as a detective, you should consider a career in film?"

"I'm not a detective, I'm a governess."

"Who has solved four murders and is now attempting in earnest to solve a fifth."

"We don't know that she was murdered," I remind him, my tone sharp.

He lifts his hands placatingly. "Right. Sorry. A disappearance."

My sister Annie vanished without a trace thirty years ago. The police looked for her for several weeks before telling me and my parents that there was no evidence. Not just not enough to continue the investigation. No evidence at all.

I've spent the past thirty years convinced that answers are out there, but only within the past two years have I made an effort to find her, and only within the past few months have I pursued that in earnest. It's the reason I hired Sean in the first place.

As for me being a detective and not a governess...

"I'm only behaving as any decent person should. When one is made aware of the fact that innocent people are being denied the justice they deserve, one should do whatever is in their power to bring them that justice, no?"

Sean sighs. "Let's not argue, Mary."

I press my lips together and turn away. This is a common disagreement between us. In four of my past five places of employment, I have been thrust into scandals and forced to solve murders. Sean would argue that I take it upon myself to solve murders.

But what am I to do? Should I just look away as everyone else has done and let their memories fade to dust? Should I let my sister fade to dust?

You did for twenty-eight years. Why change now?

Fortunately, the gate agent calls our group to board, and I'm able to push those thoughts to the background and board our flight. Sean and I take our seats in the cramped aircraft, and I wish that I'd spent a little more money for business class tickets. The older I get, the more legroom matters to me.

"Not bad for steerage, eh?" Sean says, settling into the seat next to me.

"Steerage?"

"Economy class. They called it steerage on the old transatlantic ocean liners."

"Why do you call it steerage?"

He shrugs. "I like the word better."

I smile slightly at him. He's among the most frustrating men I've ever met, but I must admit he's also one of the most adorable. "I was actually thinking that I should have spent more money and purchased business-class tickets."

He chuckles. "For a woman so concerned with comfort, you sure have a knack for getting yourself into uncomfortable positions."

My smile fades. "I thought we agreed not to argue."

"Right. My apologies."

We fall silent for a while as the rest of the plane fills up. I watch them board: harried parents leading exuberant young children, stressed businesspeople whose thoughts are already on their next meeting, old people with the sage smiles of contentment that most elderly people find when they near the end of their lives and realize that very few things truly matter as much as they thought they did when they were younger.

All of them are living people with thoughts hopes, and dreams that matter. All of whom deserve to live their lives—whatever they might be—to the fullest. None of whom deserve to have those lives cut short due to the selfishness of another.

"Have you learned anything new?" I ask Sean.

"Nothing more than I told you the last time," he says. "A woman matching Annie's description was seen in Monterey shortly after disappearing from Boston thirty years ago. She stayed at the Bayside Hotel for a few months, then disappeared again. No one knows what she did after that."

"Your contact. How did he know her?"

“He used to run the hotel. Sold it six years ago. The developer planned to convert the units into condominiums. The company folded a year later, and the building was left abandoned.”

“When we arrive, I’d like you to examine it.”

He looks at me. “First of all, I won’t find evidence of a woman who stayed thirty years past in a building abandoned five years ago. Second of all, even if I could, the demolition process began yesterday, so it’ll be rubble before I have a chance to get in.”

“One might say that there was no need to make the first point,” I reply drily. “In that case, I’d like you to talk to your contact again.”

"I would, but he's gone on, I'm afraid. I called him yesterday, and his granddaughter answered."

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

He shrugs. “He was ninety-seven years old and died a millionaire. He lived a full and a good life.” He turns to me with an expression that looks altogether too close to contempt. “Sorry. No mystery there.”

I turn full on him, and his contempt turns to consternation. “If you’d like to say something, perhaps you should say it clearly and stop hinting at it.”

Rather than hastily apologizing as I expect, he holds my gaze. “Everything I have to say I’ve told you before. I can’t stop you from doing what you’ve already decided to do.” His face softens. “But please be careful. You’ve been lucky so far. Your luck’s bound to run out eventually.”

“Annie’s luck has already run out,” I reply tersely.

The flight attendant begins the safety announcement, forestalling any response he might have. I keep my eyes firmly on the flight attendant during the demonstration. He’s a tall, well-built young man with a charming smile. At my age, thoughts of romance are purely academic, but they’re fun to indulge in on occasion and far more palatable than my irritation with Sean.

My lips burn as I remember the kiss we shared when he rescued me from Sophie Lacroix, the housekeeper who murdered my former employer and tried to murder me when I learned the truth. It’s the impulsive act of a woman who’s just escaped death, but it lingers in my mind far more pleasantly than I care to admit.

“What do you know of your new employers?” he asks.

I welcome the interruption from those thoughts and reply, “His name is Victor Holloway. He’s an artist of some renown, I understand. I am to care for his daughter, Celeste.”

When I learned that my sister went missing in Monterey, I looked for employment. I don’t need to work, since the money my father leaves me is managed well, but I couldn’t sit around and do nothing, so I looked through advertisements for governess positions in the area. Victor’s was the only one in the city itself, so I applied and was promptly hired.

I feel a touch of guilt. I tell myself that it’s better to allow Sean to do most of the digging when it comes to my sister’s disappearance, but a part of me wonders if it’s simply a reflexive action. It’s been suggested to me by others that I don’t truly want to know what happened to Annie. My guilt drives me to find her, but my fear drags out the process as much as it can.

You feel guilty for what you did to Annie.

Those words were spoken to me by a truly horrible woman, a therapist and a snake like most therapists are. It's preposterous. I would never harm my sister.

But...

But it's best I not argue, especially with myself. I push these thoughts aside once more and settle in for my flight to Monterey. Whatever else happens on the West Coast, I will learn what happened to my sister after she left Boston.

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The flight lands at six in the evening. The airport is crowded, and it takes nearly an hour for us to disembark, retrieve our luggage and obtain a car. Sean will keep the car, so I allow him to drive.

The view is beautiful. Northern California has one of the most scenic stretches of Pacific coast in the world. Towering evergreens crowd on the edge of majestic cliffs. The smooth blue waters of the ocean lap against the rocky bluffs. Soft gray clouds hover over the horizon.

It's breathtaking, but as with many beautiful things, it hides a terrifying truth underneath its pristine surface. The cliffs are majestic, but at any moment, they could fall into the ocean, taking with them miles of the highway on which we now drive, along with numerous homes that people have spent fortunes to own. The clouds on the horizon will be a dense thicket of fog in the morning. The ocean that seems so peaceful seems that way because we are several hundred feet above it. At surface level, those waves crash forcefully against the rocks. Anything caught by that fury will be dashed to pieces or else pulled out to sea by the strong rip current and left to drown.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" Sean asks. "I'm not a lover of America, but there's places that make for pretty postcards."

I don't feel inclined to a philosophical debate, so I only say, "Yes. It is beautiful."

The drive takes another two hours, and it is nine o'clock when Sean drops me off in front of a squarish, four-story house with a gently sloped shingled roof. The house is of dark varnished wood and contains wraparound decks on each floor. The look is

unusual and somewhat old-fashioned but not unpleasant. At least from the exterior, it is by far the smallest house I've worked in so far. That's not to say it's small. It appears to be around five thousand square feet, which is quite a respectable size for an oceanfront home and it's probably nearly as expensive as the much larger Ashford estate in inland New York, my first posting as a governess.

I quite like it. Perhaps I'm superstitious, but the smaller size and more quaint appearance of the home makes it seem unlikely to me that secrets could be hidden here.

"Shall I walk you to your door?" Sean says. "He asks, knowing that you'll refuse but unable to forget his parents' lessons on gentlemanly behavior."

I give him a smile. "You are a gentleman. And I do refuse. You may, however, help me remove my luggage from the trunk."

He dutifully exits the car. "You must be the only Englishwoman I know who doesn't call it the boot."

"I am also American." I remind him, "and I have lived all but twelve years of my life here."

"Fair enough. You're sure you don't want me to walk you to the door? I've almost certainly been seen already, so if you're trying to hide me, it seems a waste of effort."

"I can say that you're a rideshare driver," I reply. "I don't need to tell anyone that you're a private investigator looking for my sister missing these thirty years."

"Of course not," he said drily. "Wouldn't want anyone to worry. In that case, have a good night, Mary. Try to stay out of trouble. I'll call you as soon as I have information for you."

“Thank you, Sean. Be safe.”

He laughs. “If I were to take that advice, I’d drive straight to the airport and lose your number.”

I roll my eyes. “In that case, be good.”

“Even less possible.”

He gets in the car and pulls out with far more speed than is necessary for anyone to drive. For all Sean’s professed disdain for America, he’d fit right in here.

I walk to the front door with my luggage and knock. I told Victor I would be here late, so he should be expecting me.

No one answers. I knock again, and still, no one comes to the door.

I press my lips together. I would rather not have to call Sean back to pick me up. It’s not that I mind starting in the morning, but I don’t fancy hearing him gloat that he should have walked me to the door. He’s full of himself enough as it is, and he enjoys pointing out when I’m wrong and he’s right.

I lift my hands to knock again, but the door opens, and I get my first good look at Victor Holloway. He’s tall, well over six feet, and rail thin. His hair is a mop of unkempt gray that hangs thickly over deeply lined brow ridges and eyes as bright and gray as the fog creeping in from the horizon.

“Yes? What is it?” He snaps. “What could possibly be so important at nine o’clock at night that you need to come here and bang on my door?” Then he frowns. “Who are you?”

I take a step backward. "I... I'm Mary. Mary Wilcox." When he continues to stare blankly at me, I add, "the governess?"

"Governess." He blinks, then says, "Yes. Yes! Of course. Mary Wilcox. Come in, come in."

He grabs my arm and pulls me inside without waiting for my response. He doesn't seem to intend rudeness so much as he seems distracted and only somewhat aware of what's happening. His eyes look everywhere but my own, and when he releases my arms, he takes six steps forward before crying out, "Luggage! Yes, your luggage. "Excuse me."

He brushes past me, nearly knocking me over. I decide it would be prudent to stay well out of his way, so I walk into the foyer and step to the side.

This turns out to be a wise choice as he nearly runs into me again while dragging my luggage behind him. He sets the suitcases in the middle of the foyer, then stands and sighs in satisfaction. "There you are. Your luggage is inside, and so are you."

A slight smile spreads across my face. I have a fondness for eccentric people. I have a feeling that Victor and I will get along handsomely once he gets used to my presence.

He turns to me and smiles. It's a good look for him. His wrinkles soften, his eyes brighten, and his posture no longer seems so... looming. "Welcome to Holloway House, Miss Wilcox. Or is it Mrs. Wilcox? Perhaps Ms.?"

"Miss," I reply, "and thank you."

"Come! Let me show you around."

He heads into the living room and gestures around expansively. "This is the living

room, of course. The sculptures are mine. Well, of course, they're mine. I mean, I made them."

The living room floor is of varnished hardwood, brown rather than the gray of the exterior. The furniture is homely but of exceptional quality and arranged in that strange combination of tasteful and devil-may-care that only artists seem to achieve. From where I'm standing, the dining room is similar, the appliances and furniture modest but of high quality.

The statues to which he refers are the only off-putting elements of the décor. They're not ugly by any means. In fact, even my unartistic eye can see the talent Victor must possess to create them. They look like they belong in a museum.

That museum look is what makes them off-putting. The statues are of humans, I think, but they aren't representational. They look more like fluid shapes and forms caught at the precise moment they happened to resemble something vaguely human. One towers over me with a boneless spine, its arms wide as though to embrace me. Another leans back, its arms raised as though in a warding gesture, its angular knees bent at impossible angles. Another occupies a pose that I have great trouble discerning but I guess is some sort of interpretive dance. They are all constructed of a highly polished blue-black stone that sparkles with included minerals.

They're actually quite beautiful, but the presence of something not quite human in a house that is otherwise so cozy and quaint makes it odd. They are something to be viewed with detachment and analytical appreciation, but here in the house, I cannot detach myself from them.

Before I can settle on what exactly disturbs me about them, aside from the vague belief that they belong in a museum, Victor grabs my hand and leads me up the stairs.

"The basement just contains showers and lifejackets, towels, stuff like that. The back

door leads to a private cove.”

“How wonderful!”

His smile fades a little. “Yes, I suppose. Anyway, I’ll show you that during the day. This second floor is where the home theater and study are. Oh, there’s a laundry room on the first floor, but you’ve seen those before.”

“I am familiar,” I agree with a slight chuckle.

The home theater continues the homely but elegant theme. The two dozen chairs are upholstered easy chairs with cloth bolsters. The screen is perhaps twelve feet long by seven or so high, and the lights are recessed and covered with what looks like real crystal.

"Unnecessary, I admit," Victor said. "The realtor told me this drove the price up by a full million dollars. It would have cost five times that much to have it removed, so I just kept it. Not much of a filmgoer myself, but Celeste watches them from time to time. If you care to indulge, there's a snack room through the door in the back. Evelyn keeps it stocked. Between you and me, I think she uses this more than Celeste and I do. She chooses to remain here on her days off. Odd. Not that I mind, of course."

"Evelyn, is your housekeeper?" I guess.

“Yes! Charming young woman. Lovely. Anyway, the study is through here.”

He leads me to a door on the side into a much smaller room containing a large desk in front of a wall-to-wall window and a smaller desk in front of the larger desk. A bookcase filled with precisely organized textbooks and teaching aids occupies one of the side walls.

“I don’t have a lot of books other than what the state sends for her classes, I’m afraid,” he says with a sheepish smile. “But we both have library cards, and it’s a short drive to the Shoreline branch. Do you have a car?”

“I can get one. I have a friend who lives in the area.” The library might be a good place for Sean and I to meet to touch base on his investigation into Annie’s disappearance.

“Wonderful! On to the third floor then. That’s where the bedrooms are. Mine is the one nearest the staircase. Celeste is in the middle, and yours is at the end by the window. The fourth floor is my studio. That is off limits.”

“Of course. I would never dream of disturbing you.”

He gives me another dashing smile, then says, “Celeste is sleeping right now. I’m afraid she retires early these days. She’s excited to see you in the morning, though.” He sighs and looks toward the staircase. “Anyway, I should get back to work. I’m in the middle of a very big project.”

“Of course. Thank you, Victor. I look forward to getting to know you and your daughter better.”

His smile widens. He seems genuinely touched to hear that. “Thank you , Mary. I can’t tell you how... your luggage!”

“I’ll get it,” I tell him. “Go work on your project. You’ve been very kind.”

“Nonsense. I can’t let a lady lift such heavy suitcases up the stairs by herself.”

I am about to insist, but the suitcases are very heavy, and the staircase is one of those narrow circular ones that I find quite beautiful and also quite challenging to navigate.

“Thank you. You’re too kind.”

He rushes down the stair, making so much noise I wonder how her daughter can sleep through it. He returns just as fast, seeming not to feel the weight of the suitcases. He might be thin, but he’s far from frail.

I can see that he intends to carry the suitcases straight to the room, so I rush ahead of him to avoid being stampeded. I open the door, and he sets the suitcases next to the bed, then turns to me and grasps my hand, shaking vigorously.

“Good night, Mary. A true pleasure to meet you.”

He rushes from the room before I can reply. I chuckle to myself and open the suitcases. As I unpack, I feel high hopes that this stay will be a break from the sorrow and intrigue of my other positions. Yet the images of those statues, not-quite-human, intrude on my mind as they intrude on the perfection of this house.

It’s as though they say to me that they are perfectly at home here. It is I who don’t belong.

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I wake early, as I always do. The morning light filters gently through my windows. They face the west, so the light is soft and gray, made softer and grayer by the dense cloud layer that has moved in over the night.

I don't like gray, but I feel a sense of peace come over me as I dress. My bedroom walls are paneled with the same varnished gray hardwood as the exterior of the house, and the floor is a softer brown than the living room. Despite the varnish, the texture is muted rather than bright. The furniture is of oak and like the walls and the floor is unstained but coated in a thin layer of varnish. The bed is a plush queen, and the quilt is filled with down and immaculately hand-stitched. The pillow is a gel foam that makes me regret leaving it. It comes with a private bathroom as well, floored in sensible white tile with somewhat less sensible granite countertops. It is small but has enough room for the toilet, sink, shower and small vanity.

Overall, the room, like the house, is cozy. I step onto the balcony to see if the view can match it.

It's beautiful, but I wouldn't say it's cozy. Looking down, I can see that the lower floor's deck extends for several yards beyond the balconies of the upper floors. A wooden fence encloses each deck, and the lower floor's has a gate that leads to a steep path with wooden steps set in the dirt. The path leads down to the cove, a narrow but deep inlet that extends for half a mile beyond the house on either side, widening considerably when it reaches the ocean. Rocks at its more distant end moderate the crashing waves, leaving the water that enters the cove far calmer. I don't see sand or a beach of any sort near the bottom, but from this angle, it might be hidden.

It's peaceful, but with the ocean crashing a half mile away and the path so steep with no sign of a plateau or landing, I feel the same sense of foreboding that comes over me during the drive. I head back inside, keeping my eyes firmly fixed ahead. I am determined not to allow superstition to cloud my thoughts.

Downstairs is still empty. I head to the kitchen to see what's available for breakfast. My compensation includes board, so I'm not stealing or trespassing.

I am greatly relieved when I look at the statues and no longer feel disturbed by them. They're out of place and perhaps a little garish, but they're not omens of darkness. I laugh at myself a little as I start coffee. Sometimes I am as imaginative and flighty as a girl.

I make eggs and toast with jam for breakfast. When Celeste wakes, I'll make her food as well. She retires early the night before, so I assume she'll wake early.

She doesn't. Neither does Victor. Neither does Evelyn, the housekeeper I have yet to meet. I finish breakfast and coffee and wash my dishes alone.

I check my watch. Eight o'clock. Not late, I suppose, but I will want Celeste ready for breakfast no later than seven-thirty during the school year. We'll work our way there, I suppose.

I head to the second floor to prepare the study for today's lessons, and when I walk in, Celeste sits at the small desk, hands folded, face fixed on the ocean visible outside of the window. She is tall, like her father, and just as thin, but where his hair is nearly as gray as his eyes, hers is jet-black and hangs in loose waves below her hips. Were she standing, it would reach down to the small of her back.

She turns to me, and I stifle a cry. For a moment, her eyes appear to be empty black holes. I blink, and my vision adjusts to reveal eyes that are perfectly normal, albeit

with very dark brown irises.

I remember myself and smile. “You must be Celeste.”

“I must be,” she replies.

Her face doesn’t change. I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or not. “I’m Miss Mary, your governess.”

“Hello, Miss Mary.”

Once more, her expression doesn’t change. Her eyes focus on me with a disconcerting steadiness, and when I walk to the front of the larger desk, they follow me.

“You don’t want breakfast?” I ask.

“I’ve eaten,” she replies. “I usually eat in my room.”

“Ah. You enjoy the view?”

She looks beyond me at the ocean beyond. “No. Not really.”

“You’re not a fan of the ocean?”

“All I see is the vanishing point.”

My brow furrows. “The vanishing point? What’s that?”

“It’s where they vanish.”

“Who?”

“Everyone.”

I don't speak for a moment. I'm really not sure where to go from here. What I want is to ignore this and move on with a more ordinary and more pleasant introduction.

But my curiosity is piqued. The urge to know , to have nothing hidden or secret or kept from me, is nearly overwhelming. It's the curse that has gotten me into trouble with so many employers in the past.

I really don't want it to get me into trouble now, though. I like this house, and I had a great first impression of Victor. I don't want that poisoned by another mystery. Anyway, I'm here in the first place to try to figure out what happened to Annie. It's high time I stopped worrying about other people's problems and addressed my own.

I fight the urge to probe further and say, “Well, I'll be honest, I'm not a huge fan of the ocean either. What do you like?”

“Drawing.”

“Ah. An artist, just like your father. What do you like to draw?”

“People and places.”

I can see I'll have my work cut out for me. My experience with children has taught me that forcing them to open up to me is rarely effective. I'll need to be patient.

“I would love to see some of your work sometime. If you're willing to share it, of course.”

“Sure.”

Her facial expression doesn't change the entire time. It's almost vacant. Her lips remain flat, not smiling and not frowning. Her hands stay folded on the desk, and she sits... it's hard to explain. Almost as though she's been placed there and lacks the will to move.

"So," I begin. "For today, I thought we'd review what you've been working on last semester. Over this week, we'll make a plan for the rest of the year. We'll identify any areas that you might need extra help with, as well as areas of aptitude we can leverage for your college applications. How does that sound?"

“Fine.”

She really will have to speak more than that at some point.

“So you have an interest in art. That's good to know. I think I'll let your father handle your instruction in that area, though. I'm afraid I—”

“He won't teach me,” she says.

The interruption stuns me less than what she says. “He won't? Why?”

“He's rarely available,” she says. “He's working all the time. He doesn't seem to like it.”

I'm wholly unprepared to deal with this admission. Celeste's attitude makes far more sense knowing that her relationship with Victor is strained, but my impression of him was so good that it's hard for me to reconcile the charming if distracted man I meet with the neglectful parent Celeste describes.

Then again, the line between distraction and neglect can be a thin one, and to a lonely child, Victor's distraction might be mistaken for disinterest. Also, I don't know Victor or Celeste well. I should reserve judgment for the moment.

"Well, we'll work on that," I say with a wink. "Now, let's get to your lessons."

I review the key subjects and competencies that a senior in high school must have a firm grasp of. Today is a very broad review, mostly to gauge her interest and get a general impression of where she stands.

I find that exceedingly difficult to do. Celeste gives only brief answers to my questions and shows no emotion. She rarely makes eye contact with me, choosing to spend most of her time staring at the ocean, out to the "vanishing point." When she does make eye contact, those dark eyes unnerve me. I assume she blinks, but I have yet to see it happen. It's almost as though I'm speaking with a computer program and not a real person.

Superstition aside, I sense a deep sadness in her. I've seen such melancholy in only one person before.

Annie was always cheerful. She was a very bubbly and outgoing young woman, never introverted or emotionless like Celeste. Behind her smile, though, was a sense of isolation, much like what I see behind Celeste's unnerving stare.

I never took that melancholy seriously. I assumed it was the struggle of reaching adulthood that we all go through. I'm afraid I scoffed at Annie's depression, not believing that my cheery sister could really suffer from anything more than surface sadness.

I won't make that same mistake with Celeste.

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I finish the first day's assessments shortly after lunchtime. Celeste is a very bright young woman and her schoolwork ranges from above average to brilliant. She doesn't struggle in any subject, but based on her academic history, I can see that she has a great deal more affinity for mathematics and science than for literature and history.

I am surprised by that. In my experience, artistic people are generally not great mathematicians. Often, this is due simply to disinterest in the subject rather than a lack of competence, but Celeste is the first artistically gifted student I've seen who possesses a near-genius level understanding of math. She has already completed the highest levels of math offered at the high school level and is ready for multivariable calculus, a course typically offered to college math students in their third semester.

I am grateful for the online resources available to teachers now. There is no way I'd be able to teach her this information on my own knowledge. I was a middling math student at best, and I've not yet encountered a student who requires instruction in such high-level calculus.

Literature, history, and the science that doesn't rely directly on mathematics will be far easier for me. I have a great fondness for literature and history and an armchair fascination in science. Her knowledge of science likely far outstrips mine, but I will be able to guide her toward avenues of interest to her.

Academically, she will do quite well. Her mathematical skill alone will be more than enough to earn her entry to any STEM school in the nation. If she does as well in her final semester as she has so far, she will have little trouble earning a grant or scholarship to help her complete her education.

Socially, however, she is as stunted as she is brilliant academically. That is the area of her education that I must work hard to improve. The old saying that it's not what you know it's who you know holds true, even in staunchly academic fields. She must learn to interact with others if she is to succeed.

I must get her to open up to me first, though. I will be pushing her outside of her comfort zone socially, so she must at least trust that I am doing so with her best interests in mind.

So, when her schoolwork is finished, I ask if she'll join me for some afternoon tea. She seems stunned by the request, more evidence that she's not used to others taking an interest in her. Eventually, she accepts, a little warily, and I lead her downstairs to the kitchen.

"I've never had tea before," she confesses to me as I set the kettle to boil.

"Tea is one of God's greatest gifts to man," I say with a smile. "I confess that I enjoy coffee more, particularly in the mornings, but no Englishwoman could call herself such without at least some fondness for tea."

"Do you believe in God?"

The question brings me up short. I intended the comment as a pithy saying more than a statement of faith, but she wouldn't know that since she has limited experience with conversation.

"Well... I believe that there are forces that work for good in the world and forces that work for evil. To the best of my ability, I ally myself with the forces working for good."

She nods. Her face still hasn't changed expression since I first saw her, but at least

she's talking now. "I believe in God."

"That's wonderful."

"Devils exist for sure, and if they exist, then God must exist."

That's a lot less wonderful. I consider how far I should probe, but after all, she's reaching out to me. If she closes the door, I won't force it open, but as long as it's open, even a crack, I'll reach through. "Why do you say that?"

She frowns slightly, the first time her face has moved. "Because there's so much evil and pain in the world. There wouldn't be so much if there wasn't something causing it, right?"

"I find that people are more than capable of causing evil without help from devils," I reply. "Likewise, people are capable of great kindness without urging from a God."

She gives me something that just might be a smile. "I'm glad that you think so."

"I know so," I reply. "Now, would you like toast with jam?"

She nods, and the movement is so innocent that it sets my heart aglow. There is a child behind that shell, after all. I finish the tea and toast, and we sit to eat.

"Why did you decide to leave England?" she asks.

"Oh, I moved here when I was a child," I reply. "My father received a very lucrative job offer and moved the family to Boston when I was eleven years old."

"Do you like America better or England?"

“Both places have excellent qualities. The English countryside is breathtaking, and the American cities are just as breathtaking in their own way.”

“Are people nicer in England?”

I sip my tea to hide the way my lip curls upward. “People are people everywhere. There are good people and there are bad people.”

She nods. “I would like to visit England one day.”

“We shall plan a summer trip. I’ll take you to see the places I loved most when I was a girl.”

“Oh, Dad would never let me go. He says it’s dangerous outside of the house.”

I feel a slight chill, though I can't explain why. "Why does he say that?"

She shrugs. “He says people vanish.”

This is the second time she’s brought up vanishing. “What does he mean by that?”

She looks out the window toward the ocean and doesn’t answer. When she speaks again, she says, “The tea is really good.”

My curiosity is burning. I am desperate to know what this vanishing point is and who has been lost to it that it should so seriously have affected both Victor and Celeste.

I don’t push any further, though. Celeste has closed the door, and if I hope for it to open again, I must not pound on it. “Thank you. It’s Earl Grey. It’s my favorite.”

“Are you supposed to dip the toast into the tea?”

“You may drink it any way you like. But no, that’s not how it’s usually done.”

She takes a bite of the toast, then sips the tea. “Do all English people drink tea?”

“Everyone I’ve ever met.”

She nods and sips more of the tea. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

It might be my imagination, but beneath the flat politeness of that statement, I detect a hint of real gratitude. I smile at her and say, “Thank you, Celeste. Tea is far better when drunk with a friend.”

There's no mistaking the smile that comes to her lips now. It's small, barely there, but they are all the same. A moment later, she catches herself. The smile vanishes. She finishes the last of her toast and takes a hearty sip of tea to wash it down. "I'm going to go draw now," she tells me.

“Of course. I’ll see you at dinner.”

She nods, then rushes up the stairs. I watch her, the smile still on my face. She is unsure and a little frightened, perhaps, of how quickly she opens up to me, but she has responded well to my overtures. That’s all people really need is kindness.

I finish my tea and clear the dishes. As I wash them, I hear a cry of frustration above me. It’s faint, but noticeable. I pause and listen. A moment later, it comes again, followed by a muffled thump.

I set the dishes in the sink and shut off the water. More noises filter down, so I head to the stairs and climb slowly.

As I climb, the noises grow steadily louder. When I reach the second floor, I realize

the voice is male. This is a relief to me at first. If Celeste had retired to her room to have some sort of mental break, I would be greatly concerned for her health.

That relief fades when I reach the third floor and hear the anger in Victor's voice. My first impression of him is good, but now that I think back, my very first impression of him is his rude greeting when he opens the door and doesn't realize who I am. His awkward charm after that greeting endears him to me, but what I hear now isn't endearing at all.

I reach the fourth floor. It ends in a small landing with a single door. I pause in front of this door and listen.

"Damn it, it's not there! It's not there!"

This is followed by a heavy sigh and the sound of footsteps as Victor moves around the studio. "It's not just reality we must capture, Elias! Reality is a facade. The true essence of art is underneath. I must strip reality away and get to the truth!"

I feel a confusing array of emotions at this. On one hand, this impassioned rant is par for the course with artists, particularly successful artists. The stereotype is accurate in this case.

On the other hand, the nature of his comments disturb me, especially after what Celeste has told me about him keeping her inside. To say reality is a facade and art must capture essence is perhaps trite, but not alarming.

To say reality is a facade while neglecting your daughter and also refusing to let her leave your home for fear she might vanish is very alarming. It is not the behavior of someone who is well. After my tea with Celeste, I don't believe she is unwell, but her father's behavior is clearly affecting her. She looked out at the "vanishing point" with an almost religious somberness.

“I have to capture the essence ,” Victor mutters. “I have to transcend reality. I must, or I will vanish like the rest.”

I can’t ignore this any longer. I screw up my courage and knock on the door.

He instantly goes silent. No speaking, no moving. I tense a little, but there’s no other reaction. I clear my throat and call, “Victor? Are you all right?”

There’s a half-second of pause, then heavy footsteps. I backpedal and nearly slip down the stairs, only just catching myself on the banister.

The door flies open, and Victor stares at me. I flinch at the sight of him. This is not the awkward but charming artist I meet last night, nor is it the irritable homeowner who greets me wondering who’s interrupting his rest. This is the face of someone caught in the grip of an anxious mania.

His eyes are wide and bloodshot. His hair—unkempt when I first meet him—is now wild and damp with sweat. The lines in his forehead are sharp cracks, and his lips work as though muttering something silently, even while staring at me.

He seems to loom over me, towering like one of his statues downstairs. “What are you doing here?” he barks. “I told you the studio is off limits!”

“I... I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Get out of here!”

He slams the door, causing me to flinch again. I turn and rush down the stairs, not stopping until I reach my room.

I sit on the bed and catch my breath, staring at the door, as though if I turn away,

Victor might come bursting through, claws and fangs extended like a vampire.

My first impression is shattered. The peace I hope to find here vanishes in a puff of smoke. It's clear to me now that there is a rot in this house, one that may be greater than I can heal.

I remain where I am for over an hour before I have the courage to head downstairs. The living room is empty, and I return to the kitchen to finish washing the dishes. Behind me, the statues loom, their mocking judgment echoing in my ears.

Leave now , they seem to say. Before you vanish.

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I just set the last of the dishes to dry when I hear Victor's voice, "Ah, Mary! There you are!"

I spin around, startled. Victor regards me with the same charming smile he wore last night. He has one hand behind his back and one arm on Celeste's shoulder. Celeste stares at me with the flat, wide-eyed expression with which she greets me before.

Because she is here, I choose not to mention the encounter I have with him earlier in the afternoon. I only return his smile and say, "Hello. I was washing my dishes from earlier. Celeste and I enjoyed tea together after school."

"Ah, how wonderful. I forgot we had tea. It was a gift from a gallery owner in New York a few years ago, but I don't drink tea, so I just stuck it in the cabinet and forgot about it. I'm glad someone's using it."

"Yes, Celeste and I both quite liked it."

"Good, good." He leaves Celeste and heads to the kitchen. His eyes move everywhere but me as he opens cabinets and mutters to himself. "We can do the pork roast—no, no, the beef. We'll serve rice on the side... Hmm, the pork roast after all. Rice and maybe steamed broccoli."

"Celeste is a very bright young woman," I interject, watching him flit about. "I believe she will have no trouble earning a scholarship in mathematics. Or perhaps you have connections to art schools that she could take advantage of? I hear she's inherited your talent."

He smiles briefly at me. “Yes, she’s very smart. Good artist too. If we serve pork, should I go for a spicier wine, perhaps? A Malbec or a Syrah? No, no, no, a white. It will be roasted with herbs. A Condrieu.”

I feel a touch of irritation. If this is how he behaves all the time, as though Celeste were an afterthought, then it’s no wonder she feels neglected. “She’s agreed to show me some of her work,” I tell him.

That does cause him to stop. He turns to me, a somewhat thin smile on his face. “Yes. I apologize for earlier. I know I was short with you. I did warn you that the studio was off limits, though.”

I hadn’t meant to bring that up. “Of course,” I reply. “I only meant to say that I’m enjoying getting to know your daughter.”

“Yes.” He gives Celeste a smile, and I’m encouraged to see his face soften. “She’s wonderful.”

I turn to Celeste, but instead of the gratitude or perhaps awkward shyness I expect, she is tense. Her shoulders are taut, and her gaze turned away from both of us. I have pushed too far.

“She is,” I say, then change the subject. “As for dinner, if you intend to roast the pork with herbs alone, then a condrieu is the perfect choice. If you intend to serve the pork with any kind of sauce, I prefer a Syrah. It is more peppery than a Malbec and not so heavy.”

“No sauce, no sauce,” he says, flitting around the kitchen again. “Condrieu it is.”

“If you’d like, I’d be happy to cook for you.”

“Nonsense,” he says. “Evelyn will cook. I’m just making sure we have everything we need in case I need to call her to pick up some ingredients along the way. I don’t leave the house much anymore.”

I want to ask him more about that, but this is hardly the right time. Instead, I turn to Celeste and ask, “Would you like to join me on the deck for some fresh air?”

She shakes her head without looking at me. “I’m going to draw.”

I let her leave. Part of me is upset at myself for causing tension, and part of me is upset at Victor for being more concerned with dinner than with his only child.

“Is this a special occasion?” I ask him.

He scoffs. “Not really. Lisa and Marcus are coming over.”

I lift an eyebrow. “And who are Lisa and Marcus?”

“Lisa’s my dealer and Marcus is the owner of the Carmel Art Gallery.”

It takes me a moment to deduce that he means Lisa is his art dealer and not his drug dealer. Considering his manic and distracted behavior so far, I hope I can be forgiven for wondering. “Ah. A business dinner then?”

“No,” he says tersely.

I can’t imagine for the life of me how my innocent question can be taken so poorly, but it’s been made clear enough that I’m in the way. “Well, I hope you two enjoy it.”

“Us three. You’re invited too.”

I am not really in the mood to have dinner with him after today, but I can't leave Celeste alone to be ignored the entire meal. Besides, I should meet Evelyn. "Thank you. I look forward to it."

I head to the deck and gaze out on the Pacific. The heat of the day has driven the fog away and left a brilliant blue that complements the soft sea breeze perfectly. It does little to dissipate the cloud hanging over this house.

Evelyn Torres is a petite but sturdy woman in her mid-thirties with a deep olive complexion and thick, luxurious hair that she keeps tied in a sensible ponytail. We have little time to speak when she arrives, but her businesslike greeting and firm manner with Victor when she chases him from the kitchen speaks to a woman with a strong will and thick skin. I would do well to learn from her example.

The guests arrive shortly after. Neither of them make the mistake of intruding on Evelyn's kitchen.

Lisa Reinhardt is a tall, stately woman in her late forties with chestnut brown hair helped to that color with an ample amount of dye. Her eyes are sparkling emeralds that are nearly as intense as Victor's silver orbs. She greets me politely enough, then engages Victor in conversation about people I don't know. I'm not offended by her disinterest. I am, after all, only a servant.

Marcus Fairfax is of average height and stocky build, the sort men who were once wrestlers or football players reach when they don't exercise after leaving high school. He's younger than Lisa but older than Evelyn, perhaps a year or two shy of forty.

He greets me with an energy that rivals Victor's, though his appears far more tightly controlled. His eyes are shrewd and calculating. It's a look I've seen on the faces of

many business owners, and only rarely an indicator of poor character, so I decide it's only my harrowing experiences so far in this house that makes me fear him.

Like Lisa, his greeting to me is perfunctory before he joins Victor and Lisa. I watch the conversation a moment, noting that they seem to flank Victor, almost as though attacking him. For Victor's part, the mania is gone. I am seeing a third Victor Holloway now, a calm but fearless man who stands his ground in this little social tussle with the relaxation and strength of one confident of victory.

I consider myself quite a good judge of human character, and after a few minutes watching the three of them, it becomes clear that there is a great deal of animosity between them. It's buried beneath the surface of a friendly business relationship, but there is resentment between all three of them. I wonder if that subsurface conflict is what causes Victor's anxiety.

Evelyn announces that dinner is ready, and I turn to fetch Celeste, only to find her standing at the foot of the staircase. I flinch when I see her erect posture and unblinking eyes. How long has she been standing there?

Fortunately, I recover quickly. "Oh, Celeste! I was just about to fetch you. Evelyn's just finished dinner."

"Thank you, Evelyn," she replies.

Evelyn beams at her with the affection of a beloved aunt. "You're welcome, honey."

Celeste takes her place at the table. The others follow. I move ahead of them, ensuring that I can sit on Celeste's right. Victor, thankfully, takes his place at her left.

I suppose my mistrust of Lisa and Marcus is more intense than I believe it to be at first. I can't help but feel that Victor and I are protecting her from them somehow.

“So how’s your drawing coming, Celeste?” Lisa asks, opening the conversation.

“It’s good.”

“Anything you want me to know about?” Lisa gives her a sharklike grin. “It’s never a bad idea to get your name out there early.”

“Or to sell your work early,” Marcus added. “Victor’s loaded, but you don’t want to have to rely on Daddy’s allowance your whole life, right?”

Victor tenses at that. Even Lisa seems put off. She frowns at Marcus and scolds gently. “There’s no need to be crass, Marcus.” She smiles again at Celeste. “Art should be an expression of your spirit, not a commercial act.”

“Says the woman whose job it is to sell art,” Marcus countered.

“She certainly doesn’t have a problem commercializing my work,” Victor added.

Lisa’s smile fades. It’s clear she didn’t expect the two men to gang up on her. She delicately cuts into her pork roast and says, “You didn’t seem to mind the check you were cut for that commercialization.”

Marcus belts laughter and elbows Victor. “She’s got ya there, Vic. Principles pale when you’re looking at dollar signs.”

I stiffen a little, but the situation defuses when Victor bows with a flourish. “Alas, I cannot tell a lie. We wouldn’t have the wine we’re drinking now were it not for Miss Lisa’s adept marketing skills.”

Lisa returns his bow, and the conversation moves to other subjects. I turn to Celeste to make an aside about adults and their obsession with money, but I stop when I see

her face. Her dark eyes stare at Lisa, but it's not her eyes that startle me. Her lips are pressed into a thin line, and she grips the handle of her knife almost lovingly as she slices into her own pork roast.

I turn away and focus on my own dinner. The tension between the adults must be more serious than I thought. I know children have a tendency to exaggerate such interactions, but the degree of animosity that radiates from Celeste is not the simple dislike of someone who is at odds with her father. There is a cold hatred there that in its disturbing way is the most mature emotion Celeste has expressed.

I wonder if this hatred has anything to do with those who have vanished. I remember that Celeste's mother isn't in the picture. Perhaps Celeste has a more concrete reason for her hatred of Lisa than the tension with Victor.

I must learn more about this vanishing point. I must learn too who the mysterious Elias is that Victor talks to. Has he vanished along with Celeste's mother? Does Lisa have something to do with it somehow?

My desire for peace and quiet makes one more cry for attention in my mind before it too vanishes. There is an innocent and suffering girl here under my care, and I will learn what troubles her and who is responsible for it.

And if their actions call for justice, I will ensure that Celeste receives it.

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Annie smiles genially at Mother, but I see the contempt behind her gaze. There is little love between my sister and our mother. I can't blame Annie for that, but I do wish she would make more of an effort to hide it at family dinners.

"I just don't understand the point of a career in art," Mother says. "Artists are never independent. They rely entirely on others for their support."

"I wonder how many businessmen are as well-renowned as Rembrandt?" Annie asks innocently.

"I wonder how many artists are as nameless as the manager of the car wash your father takes his Mercedes to? At least that manager can pay his bills."

"Well, as long as you have television, that's all right."

Father, of course, ignores the tension as he ignores everything that interferes with his carefully constructed world. I wonder sometimes if he would have been happier being a bachelor. And so it falls once more to me to be the mediator.

"Annie and I have found a place in the city," I tell Mother. "It's near the University, and the subway station is right in front of the building."

The temperature in the room instantly falls by twenty degrees. Annie stiffens and presses her lips into a thin line. Mother turns her ice-cold eyes to me, the same blue as Annie's but far sharper. "You're moving?"

I look between the two of them and stammer. "I... I thought that would be good

news.”

“You thought it would be good news to hear that my daughters are living like bohemians in some apartment building near a university?”

“Well... Father won’t need to let us borrow the car, and you won’t have us coming and going at all hours. We’ll still visit, of course, but you’ll have your privacy.”

“You don’t think I care about you.”

It’s not a question. It’s also not the conversation I want to have right now. I try to back off politely. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought this up right now. Let’s just enjoy our dinner. The food is lovely, Mother.”

“What have I ever done to either of you to make you hate me so much?”

“Mother, that’s not—”

Annie scoffs. It’s a wicked sound, bitter and contemptuous. I am as shocked as Mother. Annie notices our shock and seems to delight in it. “I could talk for hours about that, Mother,” she sneers. “But I won’t. It would be a waste of time. I’ll only say that Mary and I are moving this weekend, so if you hope to kill us before then, you’ll have to do it before Saturday.”

“Annie!” I cry.

Mother's lower lip trembles once. Then, she stands abruptly and leaves the room. Father finishes the last of his roast, then wipes his mouth and stands. He leaves without looking at us, and my sister calls back to him, "Lovely talking with you, Father."

When the door closes behind him, I swallow and say, “I’m so sorry, Annie. I only meant to smooth things over.”

She nods. “Well, I’m sorry that we just aren’t sensible enough for you.”

I flinch again. Now Annie thinks I’m attacking her? I didn’t mean—”

“You never do. I notice that about you. You do quite a lot of things, but you never seem to mean any of them. So what do you mean?”

“That’s not fair!”

“It never is. That’s another thing I notice about you.”

She stands and beams at me. I feel the ghost of an old jealousy as I look up at my tall, statuesque sister with the crystal blue eyes and the smile that instantly wins the heart of every man who meets her.

“I can’t wait to live with you, Mary.”

She leaves, and I am left alone to wonder what on Earth I’ve done wrong.

I open my eyes. My heartbeat is normal and my breathing steady. There’s no sheen of sweat, no trembling in my extremities. The sense of dread I feel tells me I’ve just had a nightmare, but my body isn’t reacting the way it normally does when I wake in the middle of the night.

I sit on the edge of the bed and press my feet into the floor. It’s solid, and the carpet is soft. I rub my hands over the quilt and feel the silky smoothness of the hand-stitched

material. I am awake.

I sit for a while and try to recall my dream, but the details have vanished. It's extremely frustrating to me that dreams so rarely remain clear upon waking. I am not fond of secrets in general, and this feels as though my mind is keeping a secret from me. It feels almost like self-betrayal.

Finally, I give up. I sigh and put on my slippers, then head out of the room.

Some would say that snooping is a rude habit of mine, and I wouldn't argue with them. I would, however, remind them that in my past places of employment, snooping has allowed me to find answers to mysteries. This house is shrouded in mystery, and the more I dwell on it, the more convinced I am that this mystery must be solved.

The logical place for me to look would be the studio, but after yesterday, I'm not sure I'm brave enough to risk that yet. It would be just my luck for Victor to be there and catch me breaking the one rule he's given me yet again. Anyway, if he's not in there, it's probably locked. I can pick locks, but I am not quite prepared to be that disrespectful to my employer.

Instead, I head to the basement. Victor's description isn't of a basement but of a sort of beach room with the supplies one would need for swimming. Perhaps, if there's a flashlight, I'll brave the path that leads to the cove and see if there are answers awaiting me down there.

I dismiss that thought almost immediately, though. A flashlight beam would be starkly visible against the blackness. All Victor, Celeste or Evelyn would have to do is look out the window to see me. I could claim that I enjoy nighttime walks, but if anything suspicious is going on here, the person responsible would know the real reason for my actions. The same is true if they find me in the basement, but there's

less risk with that.

The door to the basement is unlocked. It opens to a long, tile-floored room with four showers spaced every five yards or so. Behind the showers is a shelf with sinks and various shampoos, soaps, conditioners, sunscreens and lotions. A towel rack occupies the far wall, and when I open the tall cabinet on the nearer end of the sinks, I see various swimsuits, some trunks for men and some two piece bathing suits for Celeste. I blush a little and close the cabinet. It seems Victor was telling the truth after all. This is just the room they use to get ready for the beach. At least I know they leave the house once in a while.

I turn to leave, and I'm surprised to see two doors. The first is the door I enter through, but the second one I don't recognize.

I step to it and test the handle. It opens with a smooth click and swings inward. The space beyond is pitch black. I consider heading back to my room for a light, but curiosity propels me. I feel for a light switch and find one a moment later.

The lights come on, bright enough that I wince. I shield my face with my hand and wait for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I gasp.

The room is full of paintings. Dozens of them, some displayed as though at a museum, some stacked and others left unfinished and tossed insolently on the various tables and even the floor.

These paintings are very unlike the abstract statues in Victor's living room. I am not gifted enough to know if he would be satisfied with the essence captured by these images—I guess not since they are left forgotten in a basement closet—but they are very real. Some of them are so real that I must look closely to know they are not photographs.

There are paintings of a much younger Victor without the gray hair, wild eyes or deep lines in his forehead. There are paintings of a much younger Celeste. My heart breaks at the bright smile and the laughter in the eyes of this young girl. Time has been unkind to them.

There is a box on the table. Inside are old newspaper clippings of articles about the illustrious artist Elias Blackwood. In one article, I learn that he takes Victor Holloway as his apprentice. This is the mysterious Elias that Victor consults with when he paints.

I turn away and walk deeper into the room. There are many paintings that contain no people but simply studies of the various California landscapes that exist around Victor's home. There is the ocean at sunset and sunrise, a crowded beach at high summer, a storm cloud on the horizon, and a forest at dusk. There is a particularly charming painting of the neighborhood at night. The homes are decorated with lights, and a couple stands on their porch with their arms around each other, smiling at the children walking along the sidewalk to gaze on the festive decorations.

Two paintings capture my attention above all others. One is of the inlet as seen from the second-floor balcony through the window in the schoolroom. The vanishing point is highlighted with an ethereal glow. The tall cliffs that border the inlet seem to pinch the inlet, towering over as though imprisoning the water while simultaneously pulling the viewer toward that mythical point where Celeste says everyone vanishes. Even without delving into the abstract, Victor's talent is clear in this painting.

His talent is just as clear in the second and most powerful painting, but I don't have room to feel admiration for the skill it takes to perfectly capture the curve of a delicate cheekbone, the sparkle in a crystal blue eye or the weightless rays of blonde hair cascading around smooth, creamy skin. I have room for nothing but shock as the image of my sister meets my eyes.

This Annie is not the ghostly apparition I first see in a similar art closet at the Ashford House. The eyes are not empty black holes, and the skin is not gray and translucent.

No, this is no specter. This is my sister, as she was alive and vibrant. This is she as she looked when she vanished from my life never to return.

I take a picture and send it to Sean. His work has proven valid. My sister was here in Monterey. And somehow or another, she knew Victor Holloway.

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I return to my room, intent on asking Victor about the painting the moment I see him in the morning. I don't sleep a wink the rest of the night. It's all I can do not to dash to his room that instant and demand to know how he knew my sister.

But I don't. Victor is mercurial, and I'm not sure yet how far that pendulum swings. He certainly won't take kindly to being woken by his new governess hysterically asking about the subject of a painting he completed over thirty years ago. Besides, if that was Annie, then it's certain that she didn't use her real name. There is precious little family resemblance between us, and what little there is must certainly have vanished after thirty years, so it's not like he could look at me and know that I'm the sister of a woman whose portrait he painted when he was in his twenties.

As soon as the sun is up, though, I shower and dress hurriedly and rush downstairs. I am the first up, of course, but if I greet Victor with coffee and breakfast, then he might be more amenable to talking.

I nearly run headlong into Evelyn. She starts slightly, then sighs. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," she scolds. "Would you like some coffee?"

Apparently, I'm not the first person up. I'd completely forgotten about poor Evelyn. "Oh. Yes, thank you. I'm so sorry. I'm used to being the first person awake."

She smiles. "Well, you'll have to work pretty hard to get up before me. I get up before dawn."

"I don't think I'll try to beat you at that."

She laughs a remarkably pretty sound. "Cream or sugar?"

"Just cream, thank you." I often take my coffee black, but the cream will help it go down faster, and I must speak to Victor as soon as I can. To that end, I ask, "When does Victor usually wake?"

"He's probably awake now," she said. "He's usually in his studio by five in the morning."

I look at the clock on the kitchen wall. The time is six-fifteen. My heart sinks. If he's in his studio, he'll be in no mood to talk to me about an old painting. Perhaps Evelyn knows something.

I take the coffee and risk asking. "I found a painting last night in the basement. There's a woman in the painting: tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes. Do you perhaps know who she is?"

Evelyn shrugs. "Probably an old crush. I don't know, though. I've never seen a woman like that here. Victor doesn't date much anymore, but when he does, he goes for dark hair."

I think of Celeste's raven-black locks and decide that makes sense. She certainly couldn't have gotten that from Annie.

That, and she's twelve years too young to be Annie's daughter. I need to get myself under control.

"Well, I suppose I'll ask him later."

"Just don't interrupt him in his studio," Evelyn warns. "He doesn't like that."

“Yes, I’ve learned that the hard way.”

“Ah. I’m sorry. He’s normally a very sweet man, but he gets weird about his art. I guess that’s normal with painters.”

“I imagine so.” I sip my coffee and ask, “How long have you worked for him?”

“Four years. He hired me after his last housekeeper retired.”

“She vanished?” I probe.

Evelyn frowns. “Huh?”

“Never mind. How have you enjoyed working for him?”

She shrugs. “He pays well, and he stays out of my way. I like when people let me do my job.”

“And do you get on well with Celeste?”

She smiles sadly. “Celeste is a very sad girl. I think you can see that. It’s hard to grow up without a mother.”

“Her mother’s dead, then?”

Evelyn nods. “Passed away when Celeste was six years old. Pneumonia, I’m told.”

“How sad.”

“Yes. It’s too bad Victor’s never remarried. A girl should have a mother.”

“Well, she has you,” I say. “And now me.”

“Yes. But it’s not the same. I have my own family at home to care for, and she is seventeen now. You can help her, but she’s nearly grown. At this age, it will be hard for her to grow past the suffering she’s endured.”

“Has she suffered a lot?”

“I can only think so. It’s hard to grow up without a mother.”

I don’t think I’ll learn anything more from Evelyn, so I turn the conversation to more mundane subjects. I learn that she works here from six in the morning until seven in the afternoon on weekdays. She takes the weekends off as well as three weeks’ vacation during the winter so she can be with her family during the holidays. She is a polite and kind woman, but it’s clear that she values the ability to keep a professional distance from Victor and Celeste, her sympathy for Celeste notwithstanding. I can understand that, but it makes me feel even more alone here. I can’t count on her as an ally as I seek to uncover the mysteries that shroud this house.

That’s all right. I’ve had a poor track record with allies so far. Only Sean has been...

Sean! I’m such a fool! I need to tell him about the painting!

“Are you all right?” Evelyn asks. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Something like that. “I’ve just remembered something important,” I tell her. “I need to go make a phone call. Thank you for the coffee.”

I rush to my room and step onto the balcony to call Sean. The air is chill, but I ignore the cold and dial his number.

He responds groggily. “Mary. It’s been almost a day and a half. I’d dared to hope that you’d forgotten about me.”

“No such luck,” I reply. “In fact, I’ve discovered that Annie knew Victor.”

“Right. The painting. You’re certain that’s Annie?”

“Who else could it be? You’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

He pauses briefly, then admits, “It certainly looks like her. Have you asked Victor about it?”

“Not yet. Do you think I should?”

“Yes, but don’t mention that she’s your sister. Just see what he says. In the meantime, I’ll look into this and see if I can learn anything. I’ll look into Elias too. There might be a connection there. And Mary?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

I frown. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a bad habit of yours, so I thought I’d say that just in case.”

I’m about to retort when I hear Celeste’s voice. “Mary?”

I close the phone and turn to see her standing outside of her bedroom. I almost ask how long she’s been standing there. For all I know, she’s just heard my entire conversation.

“Celeste! I’m sorry. Did I wake you?”

She shook her head. “I was already awake.”

“Ah. Well...” I look out at the ocean, and an idea comes to me. I smile at Celeste. “How would you like to spend today at the beach instead of in class? There’s no marine layer, and if it’s anything like yesterday, it will be pleasant and warm in a couple of hours.”

Her eyes brighten a little. “I’d love to.”

“Wonderful. I’ll change into my swim clothes and meet you downstairs.”

She nods, and I even see a little smile on her face as she returns to her room. I feel a touch of triumph. I might be too late to be a mother figure to her, but I can still give her the care and support she needs.

And perhaps when she is separated a little from the stress of this house, she will have answers to some of my questions. Perhaps that’s expecting a lot, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

When I meet Celeste downstairs fifteen minutes later, I am stunned by the change. It’s as though I’m looking at an entirely different girl.

She is beautiful. She is certainly not ugly when I first meet her, but like many introverted children, she wears baggy clothing and hunches when she sits. Seeing her now, I wonder how she could lack the confidence of a beautiful woman.

It’s not just her appearance that strikes me, though. She stands tall and straight, and her eyes are bright and eager. I wonder how long it’s been since she’s left the house. Clearly, she’s excited to have the opportunity.

She hands me a towel and says, “I’ll go down the path first. You kinda have to watch your step, so just follow me.”

I can’t help but smile at the joy in her voice. She sounds like a young woman and not just a shell. “Lead the way, my princess.”

She giggles and practically bounces through the door to the gate. The path is, as she warns me, steep and slightly treacherous, but I follow her lead and I’m able to avoid the more dangerous portions. The sun is already warming the air, and the breeze is just soft enough to refresh without chilling. It really is a good day to be outside.

I remember her telling me that she didn’t like the ocean. In hindsight, I think it might be her father that doesn’t like the ocean. She’s happier than I’ve ever seen her.

The beach doesn’t reveal itself until we are near the bottom of the path. A staircase—hidden by an outcropping for most of the journey—descends the final twelve feet to a soft white sand beach about thirty yards long and twenty deep. The back ten yards of the cove are sheltered by a smooth limestone outcrop.

“This is beautiful!”

She grins at me. “I call it Fairy Cove. It’s hidden at high tide, but at low tide, it looks like this.”

“It’s wonderful.” I return her grin. “And you said you didn’t like the ocean.”

She blushes bright red, and I’m so glad to see it that I forget about Annie for a moment. These beach outings will have to be a regular thing.

“I want to show you something,” she says.

She sprints toward the water, and old woman though I am, I follow her. The freezing water causes my teeth to chatter almost instantly, but I couldn't care about that in the slightest. I am witnessing a young girl bloom in front of me, and I will gladly brave the icy waters of the Arctic if I'm called upon to do so.

We wade out about forty feet. The beach slopes very gently, and the water is only at hip height right now. The rocks at the front of the inlet keep the surf mellow, and I'm easily able to keep my balance.

She kneels down and points behind me. "Look."

I turn around and see sparkling under the water. The sun is behind us now, and the sparkles are soft, but I can easily imagine the fire I would see if the sun was at its opposite point. "How gorgeous! Are those crystals?"

She nods. "Quartz and amethyst. Which I guess is just a different kind of quartz that turns purple because it has iron in it." She sighs. "It's so pretty, though. It's like a buried treasure."

"A fairy treasure, though, not a pirate treasure."

She giggles. "Maybe they're fairy pirates."

"That would be interesting. Perhaps you should draw a fairy pirate."

Celeste laughs. "Okay. I'll draw you one."

"Mary! Celeste!"

Evelyn's voice pierces through our happiness and drags us viciously back to the Earth. It's not her voice itself that does it but the terror in her tone. Celeste and I share

a look of alarm, then look back at the beach to see Evelyn wading into the water. She is wearing her pants, shoes and apron.

A chill courses through me. I have seen too much tragedy than to hope that this is some sort of false alarm or minor issue.

We rush back to the beach, thoughts of treasure and fairy pirates vanished from our minds. As we draw closer, I see that Evelyn is crying.

“What is it?” I ask her, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Victor,” she says. “He’s gone.”

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Celeste easily outstrips us, bounding up the path with the lithe grace that only the young possess. “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Celeste!” I call. “Wait! Don’t go inside alone!”

I fear that the cause of whatever has happened to Victor might still be there. “Wait for us! It might not be safe!”

Celeste ignores me and rushes inside, still calling for her father. I feel a rush of grief for her that mixes with my fear. Whatever trouble might exist between them, he is still her father, and the tenderness I see in his eyes last night shows me that he loves her.

Please let him be alive. God, please let him be alive.

I am not a religious woman, and if God does exist, my feelings for Him can best be described as ambivalent. I do ally myself to those forces that strive for good in this world, but I wonder sometimes whether God is truly one of those forces.

I pray anyway. I am near the point of panic, and Evelyn and Celeste are far beyond that point.

“Victor!” Evelyn calls, her voice carrying strongly enough that I see heads poke out of windows from the neighbor’s house fifty yards away. “Victor, if you can hear us, please say something!”

I rush into the house and hear Celeste wailing, “Daddy, please, where are you?”

My heart pounds in my chest, and my stomach turns sickeningly. “Celeste! Please wait for us!”

Evelyn outpaces me finally, rushing up the stairs toward Victor’s studio. A moment later, I hear an ear-splitting scream.

“Oh, God, no,” I whisper.

I force my nausea down and rush up the stairs. What I wouldn’t give to be thirty years younger right now.

The door to the studio stands ajar. I hear Celeste wailing from inside and Evelyn’s voice trying ineffectually to soothe her.

I run into the room and look around.

The room is trashed. Canvases lay scattered on the floor, most of them torn. Some appear to be half-finished works—abstract forms similar to the statues downstairs—but they are all covered in thick, goopy splotches of paint. That same paint covers nearly every surface in the room. Some of it mixes with the water dripping from all three of us to form a washed-out oil slick of fluid on the floor. Paintbrushes and bottles are tossed here and there. There’s a half-empty bottle of whiskey on a small table near the window, the only item in the room that appears untouched.

The window is shattered. Jagged spears of glass extend inward from the frame, seeming to point to the void in the center. It looks as though something—or someone—was thrown through it.

I share a look with Evelyn. She nods and holds Celeste tight. I’m glad she understands what I want. If Victor lies broken on the ground below, then Celeste

must not be allowed to see him.

I move carefully to the window. I test my weight on the table, and when I'm satisfied it will support me for a brief glance, I look down.

The height is not particularly great—maybe sixty feet or so—but vertigo grips me almost immediately. I pull back and take two deep breaths, then look outside again.

There's nothing there. The view straight down leads to a fairly flat portion of rocky ground. I see the glint of the shattered glass below. It sparkles with a disturbing resemblance to the quartz and amethyst in Celeste's treasure trove.

But there's no body. No blood. No clothing. Nothing to suggest that anyone fell through the window.

Something must have occurred here, though. There was clearly a struggle. Either someone attacked Victor, or he had a mental break fueled by alcohol and trashed his own studio.

Considering what I've seen of him, that's actually not unlikely. Perhaps this story can have a... maybe happy isn't the right word, but a less tragic ending.

"He's vanished!" Celeste weeps. "He's gone to the vanishing point and disappeared just like mom!"

"No, sweetheart, he's not vanished," Evelyn says. She looks at me, and I say, "He's not fallen through the window."

Evelyn's eyes widen hopefully. "No? You're sure?"

"I'm sure. You can look for yourself if you want."

“Daddy?” Celeste gets to her feet and runs for the window. I catch her just before she can leap through. She struggles through my arms. She’s petite and thin, but she is young and panicked. I nearly lose control of her, but Evelyn wraps her arms around Celeste and pulls her backwards.

“No! Let me go! I have to see!”

“He’s not down there,” I repeat. “I promise you. We can’t let you go because you could fall, but he’s not there.”

I expect that to comfort her somewhat, but she only shrieks again, “He’s vanished! He’s gone to the vanishing point!”

“He’s not in the ocean, or we would have seen him,” I say.

That finally seems to calm her a little. She meets my eyes and says, “You didn’t see him?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. He hasn’t fallen, and he hasn’t vanished. I’m going to go look for him. I want you to stay with Evelyn.”

“No, I want to help. I want to look for my Daddy.”

“It’s not safe right now. We don’t know where he is. Stay with Evelyn. She’ll take care of you while I—”

“Please.”

“No, Celeste.”

“ Please!”

“All right,” Evelyn says before I can reply. She meets my eyes and says, “You can help me, Celeste. Do you want to help me look for him?”

She nods, and Evelyn helps her to her feet. I can accept that compromise.

It's not until we reach the first floor that I think to suspect Evelyn. The thought stops me dead in my tracks. In my last place of employment, the housekeeper was the murderer. Evelyn was the one who discovered Victor missing, and she did so when Celeste and I were out of the house.

And I've just placed Celeste into her care.

I curse and turn to Evelyn to suggest that I take Celeste while she searches alone, but the two of them are already moving toward the front door. Well, I can at least follow the two of them. Besides, the neighbors will no doubt have heard the commotion. If not, then I have my phone, and I can call for help the minute Evelyn tries anything.

I hope that Evelyn is innocent. It would be so devastating if Celeste had to learn that her housekeeper murdered her father.

We step outside, and as I suspect, there is a small crowd of people standing outside, staring at us with a mix of uncertainty and fear. “Is everything okay?” a woman of around forty asks.

I recognize her as the one who looks out her back window as the three of us run up the stairs. Celeste lifts her eyes to the woman and sobs, “Have you seen my Daddy?”

The woman pales and looks up at me. “Victor’s gone missing,” I explain. “His studio is ransacked, and he’s not in the house.”

The woman blinks. “Um... have you checked the basement? Sometimes he goes in there when he’s... in a mood.”

I feel a rush of hope at that. We’ve only checked the studio. I assumed he would be there, but I don’t even think about the rest of the house.

Celeste pulls away from Evelyn and rushes inside. Evelyn looks at me and says, “I’ll check around here with the neighbors. Maybe someone’s seen him.”

“I’ll check inside.”

I rush back into the house, relieved that Evelyn is no longer with Celeste. I hate to think this way, but she was the last person to see him. I follow Celeste’s voice as she calls her father’s name. A quick glance at the living room and dining room shows he’s not there. I rush to the basement and see Celeste on her knees in the middle of the room, weeping and staring out at the horizon.

“He’s gone,” she whimpers. “He’s gone to the vanishing point.”

I look pensively out at the balcony. The door to the path is ajar. I don’t want Celeste to run, but I don’t like my chances of moving her when she’s hysterical like this.

“Stay here,” I tell her. “I’ll check the closet.”

I walk into the small room where I find the painting of Annie earlier that morning. She’s still there, beautiful and haughty and alive, but Victor is not there. Nothing appears disturbed either.

I return to Celeste and kneel beside her. “He’s not down here, Celeste.”

“He’s vanished.”

“He has not vanished,” I say firmly. I hate that I lie to her, but I must break through her hysterics. “Come upstairs with me and look for him. He could be in his bedroom, or in the schoolroom or the theater.”

“He’s not,” she weeps. “He’s vanished.”

I press my lips together. I can’t leave her here.

I wrap my arm around her and lift her up. To my profound relief, she doesn’t resist but allows me to help her up the stairs.

Victor isn’t in the theater or the schoolroom. We check his bedroom and find it unkempt but not ransacked. Most importantly, we also find it empty.

We check our own rooms, and finally, we check the laundry room and garage. Nothing. There’s no sign of him.

“His car’s still here,” Celeste sobs. “He’s vanished. He’s gone to the vanishing point.”

I want to snap her out of this, but I don’t think there’s anything I can say to make this better. Not right now. I help her downstairs instead. She allows me to lead her, but there’s no strength in her body. She’s lost all hope.

A part of me feels an intense anger toward Victor for this. It’s unfair because it’s almost certainly not his fault, but I feel it anyway. I was just getting through to Celeste, and now he’s gone and ruined all of the progress I’ve made.

And I'll never know how he knew Annie. I was right on the cusp of an answer to the greatest mystery of my life, and now that answer has vanished.

And despite my words of encouragement to Celeste, so has Victor.

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I sit on the couch in the living room, exhausted in all ways by the events of the morning. The lights from the police cars outside flicker through the house.

Celeste has stopped weeping. She sits next to me, a vacant expression on her face. I have my arm around her. Evelyn is outside talking to the police detective.

Officers move through the house, checking thoroughly for anything that might indicate what happened here. The studio is roped off, and soon, crime scene investigators will arrive to take photographs, dust for prints, test for blood spatter and dig through every little thing that might shed some light on Victor's disappearance.

From time to time, they glance at the two of us as we sit and wait our turn with the detective. Their faces are stony. I find that incredibly frustrating. I know they have jobs to do, and they can't allow emotion to interfere with their work, but would it kill them to have a little compassion for a poor young girl whose only surviving family is missing?

I offer Celeste a smile of my own. If she notices, she doesn't react to it. Her eyes remain riveted out the window, staring at the vanishing point where the Pacific Ocean meets the inlet that leads to the magical Fairy Cove.

Not so magical today. Not the kind of magic that warms hearts anyway.

"Come on," I tell her. "Let's sit somewhere else."

She doesn't react, but when I try to lift her to her feet, she remains rigidly planted where she is. I recognize this as a symptom of shock. She's dissociated enough that

she can't focus on anything but the vanishing point outside, and her body is semi-consciously reinforcing her superstition by stolidly refusing to allow her perspective to be changed.

There's nothing I can do to help with that right now. It'll have to run its course.

In any case, I wouldn't have the chance to move because a voice calls, "Mary Wilcox?"

I stand and smile at Celeste again. "I'll be right back."

Evelyn takes my place at Celeste's side. The place is crawling with police officers, so I'm not worried about Evelyn trying anything here, but I still hesitate before following the detective outside.

Instead of leading me outside, though, she takes me up the stairs. We walk into the theater and through there to the schoolroom.

"Trying to get out of this heat," she explains as she takes a seat.

She's a thick-bodied woman of around forty with a flat face and hair, a cross between a crew cut and a pompadour.

She gestures for me to sit. The only other chair here is Celeste's school desk, so I reply, "I'll stand, thank you."

She shrugs and folds her hand on top of the table. "I'm Detective Andrea Reyes, Monterey Bay Police Department."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Detective. Well, not really, but you know what I mean."

She smiles slightly. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry that you’re all going through this right now.”

“Me too. Poor Celeste.”

“How has she been?”

“Celeste?”

“Yes.”

She looks at me with the peculiar bored but shrewd expression I’ve seen on the faces of so many police detectives. I wonder if that’s something they train to affect or if it’s just a natural look for the sort of people who gravitate toward police work.

“She’s devastated,” I reply. “Up until five minutes before you arrived, she was hysterical.”

Reyes nods. “Yeah, I can imagine.” She leans back and folds her hands across her midsection. “How long have you worked for Mr. Holloway?”

I chuckle mirthlessly. “This is my second full day.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Really. I arrived at nine in the evening two days ago.”

“Hm. And what was your impression of Mr. Holloway?”

I hesitate briefly. I want to help, but I don’t know how much I can say that will be of use to them.

Reyes seems to sense my uncertainty. “Just answer the questions, Mary. I’ll take into account that you didn’t know him well.”

I take issue with her use of the past tense. “Do know him well. Until we know that he’s dead, let’s not assume.”

“Of course. Please answer the question.”

I still hesitate. I have had mixed experiences with police officers, and I fear that what I have to say could predispose them to think that Victor hurt himself. Admittedly, that looks likely to be the case, but I don’t want them to dismiss the possibility of foul play the way the Boston Police dismiss the possibility that Annie could have come to harm and not simply chosen to leave.

Then I remember the painting and the evidence Sean finds of Annie’s arrival in Monterey. It hits me rather hard that the evidence now suggests that Annie did choose to leave.

I realize I haven’t spoken yet. With no convenient lie coming to mind, I have no choice but to offer the truth and hope that Detective Reyes uses it well.

“I thought he was distracted.”

“Distracted?”

“Yes. He... well, he seemed to be all over the place. When I arrived, he didn’t know who I was at first.”

“Was he expecting you?”

“Yes. I’d spoken to him over the phone that morning and told him I was arriving late

that evening. It was resolved quickly, but he was overall just very preoccupied. He seemed very focused on his art.”

“Did he seem depressed or unhappy?”

I hesitate again, not to think of a lie but because I’m actually not sure how to answer that. Had she asked me before Victor’s disappearance, I would have said he didn’t seem depressed, but now I don’t know.

“He seemed anxious,” I finally say. “I wouldn’t say unhappy. Just... I overheard him when he was painting, and he seemed very desperate that this particular work of art meet his expectations.”

“Which were?”

“The art or his expectations.”

“His expectations. Both, if you know the answer to both.”

“I’m not familiar with what he was working on,” I say, “but he said that reality was a facade, and he needed to transcend that facade and find the true essence underneath.”

Reyes's expression remains mostly unchanged, but the slight lifting of her eyebrows tells me that she finds that intriguing. "He said this to you?"

“No, I overheard it.”

“How?”

Heat climbs my neck. “I heard noises coming from the studio and climbed the stairs to see if he was all right. When I reached the studio, I hesitated and listened.”

“Why did you hesitate?”

“I was told the room was off limits.”

“So you heard all of this through the door?”

“Yes.”

She taps her finger twice, then asks, “You were present at the dinner last night, yes?”

“Yes.”

“How was Mr. Holloway’s behavior during dinner?”

“During dinner? He was... well, he was polite and charming. An excellent host.”

“You paused when you said that.”

I’m starting to feel uncomfortable with Reyes’s probing stare. I shift on my feet and say, “Well, prior to dinner, he was anxious once more. He was concerned that dinner be perfect. He was worried about wine choice and searched his kitchen several times, but I’m not convinced he was looking for anything. He said he was, but it seemed almost...”

“Compulsive behavior?”

“I don’t want to make that claim,” I demure. “I’m not a psychologist.”

She nods. “And these guests were his art dealer and a local gallery owner, right?”

“Yes. A Miss Lisa Reinhardt and a Mr. Marcus Fairfax.”

“And what was your impression of them?”

“Normal enough. Marcus was a little uncouth when the wine got to him, but he seemed pleasant. Lisa was rather uptight, but—if you’ll forgive me—not much more so than most people of a certain class.”

She gives a half-smile which is probably the closest to laughter she ever comes, then says, “And how did Mr. Holloway seem to like them?”

"It was hard to tell. There was definitely some tension between the three of them, however all three seemed very concerned that the tension not become an actual fight. Marcus and Lisa seemed to respect Victor's talents, and Victor seemed to respect their business acumen."

“So it was important to them that they maintain a positive working relationship.”

“Oh yes. That was more important to them than anything.”

She nods. “That matches Mrs. Torres’s version of events. What about Celeste?”

My hackles rise slightly. I have a feeling I know where this is going. “What about her?”

“How did she feel about the guests?”

I don’t answer right away. It is important to me to protect Celeste. I’m not above thinking that children are capable of malice, but Celeste clearly couldn’t have been responsible for her father’s disappearance.

Then again, the way she looked at Lisa... I chalked it up to jealousy, I suppose, but now that I think about it...

“She didn’t like them at all. She particularly seemed to dislike Lisa.”

“She said so?”

"No, but she looked at the woman with a great deal of anger. I thought that she was jealous. Her mother died when she was very young. Victor is the only family she has, as far as I know."

“She has grandparents in Utah, but they’re estranged,” Reyes replies.

I’m not sure why she volunteers this information or why she searches my face when she does. “I see. Well, I’m sorry to hear that. Maternal or paternal?”

“Maternal. I guess they blame Victor for Julia’s death.”

Again, she watches me closely. I still don’t know what she expects to find.

“Well, in any case, Celeste was very disdainful of Lisa. She didn’t seem so angry with Marcus, just a little disgusted.”

“Because of his uncouthness?”

“That would be my guess.”

Reyes nodded. “How long have you known Lisa and Marcus?”

I stare at her for a moment. That question is entirely out of left field. “Well, I don’t know them. I’ve only just met them last night.”

“And you’re already on a first-name basis with them?”

I stare for another moment. What on Earth could she possibly be insinuating? "They asked that I call them by their first name. That's fairly common."

"Sure. Of course." She stands. "Okay, Miss Wilcox. Thank you for talking to me. One last question: do you intend to remain here?"

"Yes," I reply firmly. "I was hired to care for Celeste, and that's what I'll do."

"Good. That's what I want to hear."

She gestures for me to leave, but I lift my hand. "Please go easy on Celeste, Detective. I know that you have to interrogate her, but she couldn't have been responsible for what happened to Victor. She was with me at the beach when Victor went missing. She's very much in shock and she's very worried for him. Please don't be hard on her."

"We won't. Mrs. Torres already told us that you two were at Mr. Holloway's private cove when she discovered he was missing." She searched my face again. "You care a lot for Celeste."

"I do."

"Why?"

I'm once again surprised by the question. "Because she's an innocent young girl who needs someone to care for her. Is it really so shocking that I do?"

Reyes doesn't respond to my question. She only nods and gestures again for me to lead the way from the schoolroom.

I do, and my head spins as I try to figure out what just happened. I think one thing

that frustrates me about police officers is that they're far more difficult to read than the average person. I can't tell if Reyes suspects me or Evelyn or Lisa or Marcus.

It might be prudent for me to look over my shoulder every once in a while. I am sure that if Detective Reyes digs far enough, she will learn of my past employers and wonder if my arrival here has brought death to her quiet town.

I must confess that I wonder the same thing.

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The police remain until well after sunset. Search parties scour the cove and the rocky land to the rear of the property. Boats patrol the sea beyond, and officers interview the other homeowners in the neighborhood. If they learn anything, they don't choose to share it with us.

Evelyn stays until the officers leave. Rather than cook dinner, she orders us pizza. Celeste doesn't touch her food. Evelyn and I discuss whether we should push her to eat and in the end decide to give her the night to process her emotions.

After dinner, Evelyn leaves. She seems very guilty but explains that her husband works nights, and she has no one else to watch her children. I'm still not sure how suspicious I am of her, but it's nice not to have to worry about her presence in the house.

Celeste allows me to lead her to bed after Evelyn leaves. I don't expect her to sleep, but she is out like a light as soon as her head hits the pillow. I remain with her for a while after she falls asleep. She looks peaceful in rest. I hope her dreams are kind to her. Her waking moments will be very challenging for a while.

Eventually, I do leave the room. There is a mystery to solve now, and while I am not lying to Sean when I say I do not consider myself a detective, I am also not lying when I say that caring people don't allow themselves to ignore the plight of the innocent. Celeste is innocent, and until I find incontrovertible proof otherwise, so is Victor. If there's anything I can learn that will shed light on what happened to him, then I want to learn it.

I head downstairs and return to the art closet in the basement. The room is entirely

rearranged after the police look through it, but they don't take anything with them that I can see. They must have decided that there's no evidence here.

I happen to disagree with them. The art in this room speaks of a very different person than the art in Victor's studio. This room is not a storage closet. It's a shrine to a past life, a different Victor. Somewhere in here is the secret to his transformation and quite possibly the secret to his disappearance.

I start with the box of newspaper clippings. It makes sense to save copies of his old artwork, and if some of this is Elias Blackwood's work, then I understand that too. But the newspaper clippings? That doesn't make sense on the surface. There's a reason he chose to save these.

The articles don't appear to be organized in any meaningful way. Some of them are from dates long before Victor's apprenticeship. I look through them, and I'm able to put together a rough timeline of Elias Blackwood's life.

He begins—as many artists do—as a poor Bohemian living off of the kindness of friends and the charity of strangers. After struggling in this way throughout his early twenties, he strikes gold at the age of twenty-seven when one of his paintings is selected for the Monterey Art festival. After that, his star rises steadily until by his mid-thirties he is continued the premier neorealism artist of the United States. He is in his late thirties when he takes Victor as an apprentice and his mid-forties thirty years ago when my sister was here. That makes him about twenty years older than Victor.

He died twenty-eight years ago. I skim that article, and my eyes widen. It seems that Elias Blackwood didn't die of accident. He actually walked into the ocean and drowned.

Then I learn that he committed suicide in the very cove sitting below Victor's house.

I gasp, and my hand flies to my mouth. The article shows a picture of the cove from the same perspective as Victor's painting. The point where the ocean meets the protected inlet is labeled "Vanishing Point" by the newspaper.

I stare at that image and slowly set the paper down. When Celeste says that, I assume it's something esoteric, some concept created in her mind. At most, I assume it's where the inlet "vanishes" into the ocean. In that second respect, I'm not wrong, but seeing evidence here that the spot was called the vanishing point before Celeste says that is shocking.

Could Celeste have seen this article? Probably not, but she may have overheard Victor talking about it. He may even have told her about it. Her mother died of pneumonia, and she never met Elias, but Victor's grief has clearly affected her. It makes sense that she would attach strong emotions to this vanishing point even though she's never experienced it personally.

I look through the box. There's nothing helpful until I pull one article from the bottom that isn't about Elias but instead about Victor. The headline reads **YOUNG ARTIST CHANGES STYLE IN SPLIT FROM MENTOR'S TEACHINGS.**

The publication is a journal called Bay Area Art Roundup. I look it up and learn it goes defunct twenty years ago. Perhaps I'll pass that information to Sean later.

I read the article. It says that Victor Holloway, a noted portrait artist and student of the incomparable Elias Blackwood, has released a new series entitled Transcendence. The author goes on to explain that in this new semi-surrealist abstract style, Victor pushes the boundaries of perception and begs the question, what is reality?

It's typical magazine schlock, but what I note is the end when the author mentions that after the death of Elias the year prior, Victor went into seclusion. He remarks that Victor's emergence reveals a man and an artist changed forever by the tragedy

they've suffered. "Only time will tell if this change is for the better," the author opines.

More schlock, but it answers one crucial question. The impetus for the change in Victor's style and personality is the loss of his mentor.

The article shows only a few grainy pictures of the Transcendence series, but the style is clearly the same as that Victor uses to make the statues in the living room and that I see reflected in the paintings his assailant—or perhaps he himself—ruins.

I must look further into Elias Blackwood. Victor's descent into what I cannot help but call at least a mild form of madness seems to hinge on his disappearance. His "vanishing."

I find nothing else helpful in the art closet. I am tempted to climb the stairs to Victor's studio to see if I can find anything in there, but police caution tape still surrounds the room, and I'm afraid to disturb the scene only to learn the police were waiting to see who would be the first to return.

I'm probably being foolish. If they still considered the studio an active crime scene, we wouldn't be allowed to remain in the house. Still, I didn't like the way Detective Reyes looked at me during the interview. I can't understand why I would be a suspect since witnesses corroborate the fact that I wasn't present when the disappearance took place, but I also don't trust police officers to follow any form of logic that normal people would follow.

Instead, I sit in the living room. Victor's statues loom over me, but their appearance seems panicked and distraught rather than menacing. It's as though they can tell that their maker has disappeared, and they are anxious for his safe return.

I am far too overwhelmed to sleep, so I make myself some tea and return to the living

room. I replay every event that led up to Victor's disappearance in my head and try to come to some hypothesis about what might have happened.

The strongest and most unfortunate possibility is that Victor disappeared of his own accord. His sanity was hanging by only the slightest of threads. I can't discount the hypothesis that he simply had a mental break and left for parts unknown. Perhaps he will return some days later, thin and subdued, but sobered by his experience and purged of whatever demons plagued him.

But I don't think so. He was unwell, but he loved his daughter. That brief glimpse in the kitchen was enough to show me that whatever his faults, he would never abandon Celeste. Perhaps he'd wander off for a few hours, but he would return.

No, something happened to him. Someone attacked him, and if they didn't kill him, they kidnapped him.

But why? Who could have such a motive?

Evelyn is the obvious first choice. Sophie Lacroix—the murderer of my last employer—worked for my employer for over thirty years only to learn that he had liquidated her life's savings. She took revenge on him. Like Evelyn, Sophie seemed to care deeply for his children, so Evelyn's affection for Celeste is not an indicator of innocence.

What is an indicator of innocence is the fact that she lives in her own home with a husband who also works and children of her own, children to whom she returned tonight. She cares for Celeste, but she is also removed from her and from Victor. She has a life outside of this job that she has worked hard to maintain. It's not proof of innocence, but it does raise doubts that will have to be resolved before I'm comfortable naming her the murderer or kidnapper.

The other suspect is Lisa Reinhardt. Celeste's hatred of her was palpable. Prior to the beach outing, it was the strongest display of emotion I'd seen from her. There must be a reason for that, and I doubt that it's just jealousy or ordinary dislike. I'll have to ask Celeste about it when she's ready.

My own impression of Lisa is as I relate to Detective Reyes. She's uptight and self-important. Because of this, she has a fragile ego. She took Victor's jibe about commercializing his art personally.

But then Marcus called Victor on his hypocrisy and Victor admitted to it. She won that little verbal sparring match. And if Victor makes her money being alive and completing art, then why on Earth would she want him lost or dead and not making art?

It's a frustrating conundrum in which I find myself. The most likely suspect based on concrete evidence is Evelyn. The most likely suspect based on subjective analysis is Victor himself. The most likely suspect based on my own observations is Lisa. As for my intuition?

I don't have one yet. This is still too new and shocking.

The only intuition I have is that this vanishing point is at the center of it. I must learn from Celeste exactly what that is. Does it refer specifically to the spot in the cove where Elias Blackwood committed suicide? Or does it refer to the general loss of people important to her? Or perhaps it means something else entirely?

I have finally fatigued myself with the whirlwind of thoughts my mind is dealing with. I head upstairs to my room and go to bed, leaving the door open so I can hear if Celeste wakes.

A part of me hopes that the dawn will rise on Victor's safe return, or at least on some

clarity surrounding his disappearance.

But I know better. Things are never that easy. If I ever learn what happened to Victor Holloway, it will be after grueling deduction and observation.

Fortunately, I am no stranger to this situation. I will find an answer. Celeste will receive justice, and so will Victor.

With that affirmation, I finally close my eyes and allow myself to sleep.

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I call Sean first thing in the morning. He answers on the first ring, far more alert than he usually is at this time of day. “Hey, Mary. I’m afraid I don’t have any new information yet. Other than what I sent you before we came here, there doesn’t seem to be anything floating around out there about Annie. Have you had a chance to talk to Victor?”

“You haven’t heard?”

He pauses. “Christ in Heaven, Mary. Don’t tell me he’s dead.”

“I very much hope not.”

Another pause. “Why does that sound worse somehow? What happened?”

“He’s vanished.”

“What do you mean, he’s vanished.”

“There aren’t very many possible meanings to that, Sean.”

“All right, all right,” he says in an injured tone. “So he’s missing.”

I rub my temples. “Yes.”

“Well, shite. That complicates things. Foul play?”

“I believe so, yes. I was at Victor’s private beach with Celeste yesterday morning

when the housekeeper alerted us to his disappearance. His studio had been torn apart and one of the window shattered. There was a bottle of whiskey in the room, so the initial assumption was that he had a meltdown, but we found no sign of him, and the neighbors didn't see anything."

"What about the housekeeper?"

"She's the most likely suspect," I admit, "but she's not acting like a suspect."

"Neither did Sophie Lacroix," he reminds me.

"Actually, she did. I just didn't see it at first. Perhaps it's the same with Evelyn, but if she's acting like a suspect, it's differently from how Sophie did. You should look into her, just in case. Her name is Evelyn Torres."

"That's a very common name."

"She's Hispanic, in her mid-thirties, with a dark complexion. She has a husband and young children and doesn't live in the house."

"You mean she lives in her own house?"

"Yes."

"All right. That's enough for now. Besides the housekeeper, who have you got in mind?"

"Victor's dealer, Lisa Reinhardt."

"Dealer? Like drug dealer?"

“Art dealer.”

“Artists don’t ‘have’ dealers. They have agents. Is she his agent?”

“He introduced her as a dealer.”

“Then she’s someone he’s trying to sell to. That’s important to know because an agent relies on their clients to survive. Dealers can pick and choose who they work with.”

That does challenge my earlier conclusion that Lisa couldn’t have allowed Victor to disappear. “She had dinner with Victor and Marcus Fairfax two nights ago. He’s the owner of the Carmel Art Gallery.”

“Got it. I’ll look into all of them.”

“Do that. Also, look into Elias Blackwood.”

“That’s one lead I can close right away. He’s dead. He committed suicide twenty-eight years ago.”

“Yes, by walking into the ocean. Victor went into seclusion immediately after that and emerged a year later as a changed man. And not for the better.”

Sean chuckles. “Did you ask me to look into Elias so you could brag that you already had?”

“Much as I love bruising your ego, no. The timeline is suspicious. Annie arrived here thirty years ago. Victor painted her portrait. Elias was a fixture in Victor’s life, which means he would have known Annie too. Annie disappears again, then Elias commits suicide. After that, Victor becomes a manic-depressive person who paints in the

abstract because ‘reality is a facade.’”

“And then he marries a woman and has a daughter with her. He can’t have gone too far off the deep end.”

“I wish I could agree with you that women only marry sensible men.”

“Fair enough. So this is related to Annie then, not the current mystery.”

“Actually, it’s related to both.”

“Both?”

I take a deep breath. “The newspaper article I read in the art closet labels the mouth of the inlet that feeds Victor’s cove as the Vanishing Point.”

“Does that mean something?”

“It’s where Elias killed himself.”

“Hold on. Elias killed himself in Victor’s cove?”

“He did. And both Elias and Celeste have referred to people vanishing. When Victor went missing, she wailed that he’d gone to the vanishing point.”

“I assume the police searched the cove.”

“They did, but I don’t know if the cove itself is what’s important. I think that vanishing is the word they use when someone disappears from their life, and I suspect it specifically refers to something tragic or traumatic.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Mary,” he says patiently, “but that’s not really a connection.”

“Not yet. You’re going to find out if it is. And if it’s not, then yes, it’s just a lead to Annie.”

“I assume you want me to prioritize finding Victor if I have to choose.”

I pause, but only briefly. “Yes. Finding him is more important.”

“Right. I’ll keep working. In the meantime...”

“I know, I know. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Good girl.”

He hangs up, and I take a deep breath and release it in a heavy sigh. The play is in motion now. I can only hope—

“Get out!”

Celeste’s voice awakens some primal protective instinct in me. I am inside the house and rushing toward the stairs before I register my movement.

"Get the hell out of here, you fucking whore!"

I sprint downstairs and arrive to see Evelyn holding Celeste back. Celeste is purple with rage, kicking and snarling at Lisa Reinhardt, who stands in the foyer, shellshocked.

“Get out of my house! I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you, bitch!”

Evelyn picks Celeste up off of the floor and carries her away. I rush to Lisa and grasp her arm firmly. “Let’s go outside.”

“I just wanted to—”

“Outside.”

I lead her outside. In the house, I can still hear Celeste screaming. I keep my hand on Lisa’s arm until we’re a good twenty yards away from the door. Then I release her and say, “I’m sorry about that.” I’m not really sure if I am, but there’s no gain from impoliteness right now.

“Yeah,” Lisa says, reaching into her purse. “It’s all right.”

She withdraws a cigarette and lights it. Her hands shake badly, and it takes several tries, but finally, she takes a grateful puff. She offers me one, and I shake my head. When she replaces the pack into her purse, she says, “So she blames me. Guess I’m not surprised.”

“Why does she hate you so much?” I ask.

Lisa scoffs. “Who the hell knows? I’ve worked with artist types for thirty years, and I still don’t know how the hell their minds work.” She catches herself and offers a half-hearted, “Sorry. I’m just a little shaken up.”

“I don’t blame you.” I hesitate before probing, but if I am to find gold, I must be willing to dig. “However, I find it hard to believe that there’s no reason for her behavior.”

Lisa scoffs again. “She thinks I’m the reason for her father’s stress.”

“Are you?”

She sighs heavily. “I don’t see it that way, but I don’t know. Maybe he does. Look, I’m a dealer. I have to sell stuff. Victor’s an artist. Things like food and shelter are inconveniences, not necessities. He doesn’t like when I tell him that such and such won’t work if he wants his art to sell. It’s not about money, right? It’s about beauty and art and legacy and all that other crap.”

“So you two argue about his work?”

“Every artist argues with me about their work. I’ve handed people one-hundred-thousand-dollar checks that I’ve earned for them selling their paintings, and they’ll start an argument about how they can’t ‘suppress their vision’ anymore.” She releases another sigh, then gives me a tight smile. “But that’s the job.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with Celeste.”

She takes a deep drag on her cigarette. I see her hands are shaking again. “It’s really not my place to comment on Victor’s parenting, but he’s made damned sure the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“How so?”

She takes another puff, then says, “She’s moody, she’s manic-depressive, she has a very... I’m not sure how to put this... different understanding of reality. To Victor and Celeste, art is life. It’s everything. More important than eating, breathing, paying bills, everything. They harbor deep resentment to anyone who suggests that anything should ever get in the way of their artistic expression. Victor resents me because I’m the voice of reason who has to tell him that an abstract painting of someone disemboweling themselves and laughing about it isn’t going to pay his mortgage. Celeste is a child, so she hears us argue and mistakes Victor’s resentment for hate. So

she amplifies that hate because he's her father and the only family she has."

She drops her cigarette and stamps it out, then stoops to pick up the butt. "That's my opinion, of course. I could be wrong, but that's what it feels like to me."

Her curt tone and stiff shoulders make it clear to me that this subject is closed. I still think she's deflecting and avoiding an honest answer to my question, but I leave it for now. "Has Victor always been this way?"

"More or less. It got worse when his mentor died."

"Elias Blackwood."

"Yes." She raises her eyebrow. "Are you familiar?"

"I heard him mention Elias once."

"Ah. Well, yes, it got worse after Elias died."

"They were close then."

"In the most dysfunctional way I've ever seen two people be close, yes."

This is surprising to me. "Really?"

"Oh yeah. Elias was like Victor is now but without the anxiety. That made him even more demanding and inflexible. Anything that didn't meet his standards of beauty or brilliance was worthless. There was no in-between. Hell, I used to have Victor crying on my shoulder because of something Elias said to him." She pulled a new cigarette from her pack and lit it. "Good times."

“Was there anyone else in Victor’s life?” I ask, “someone he lost that might have contributed to his behavior?” It’s as close as I want to get to asking explicitly about Annie.”

“Well, Julia, but he didn’t really change after losing her. Or rather, he changed when he had her and went right back to who he is now when she passed on. She was a smart woman. If she hadn’t gotten sick, things would be so much easier now.”

She takes a heroic puff from this cigarette, then puts it out. “I should get going. I pushed back a lot of work to come check on Celeste. My mistake.” She smiles one last time. I can’t tell if the frost in that expression is for me or just general irritation. “It was nice talking to you, Mary.”

She stalks off, leaving me with more questions than answers. I suppose it’s not all that surprising to learn that Victor’s relationship with Elias wasn’t entirely healthy. It certainly explains why his personality shifted permanently upon his loss.

But I still don’t know what might have finally pushed Victor over the edge. I still don’t know where Annie fits into all of this. I still don’t know who might have been motivated to hurt Victor.

One thing I am certain of. She avoided giving me a real answer to why Celeste hates her. She’s hiding something, and whatever it is, I feel that uncovering it will solve this mystery.

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I return to the house to find Celeste and Evelyn sitting on the couch. Evelyn has her arm around the young woman and looks at her with a mixture of sadness and sympathy.

Celeste stares mutely out at the ocean, toward the vanishing point. I give Evelyn a look, and she nods and gets to her feet. "I'm going to shop for some food for lunch, okay?"

Celeste doesn't reply. Evelyn looks at me again, then leaves the house. When she does, I try to talk to Celeste.

"Hey. What happened earlier? Why are you so upset at Lisa?"

Celeste's jaw tightens a little, but she doesn't answer. I try a little firmer hand.

"I know you're upset right now. I understand that this is very difficult for you. I've lost both of my parents, and my sister disappeared without a trace when I wasn't much older than you. But your outburst earlier wasn't acceptable. I'm not upset with you, but I need to understand why you behaved like that."

Instead of answering me, Celeste asks, "Did your sister travel to the vanishing point?"

An image flashes through my mind of the forest path where I last saw my sister alive. The trees seem to stretch until oblivion on either side.

"Not exactly," I reply. "But she found a vanishing point of her own."

Celeste takes a deep breath and pouts. “I hate Lisa because she’s a bitch. She shouldn’t be in my house. I hate her, and I want her to go away.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s a bitch.”

“Why is she a bitch, Celeste? What has she done to make you feel this way?”

Tears come to her eyes. “She treats Dad like crap. Dad will work really hard on something, and she’ll call it junk or tell him that no one will ever buy it. Dad argues with her, but she’s the one with all of the power. If she won’t sell his stuff, then he can’t make money off of it, so he has to do a lot of stuff he doesn’t really like just to keep her happy.”

It seems Lila might have been honest after all, or at least correct. “Has he tried selling to different dealers?”

"No." Her lower lip trembles now. "I keep telling him to just ignore her and find someone else, but he won't. He thinks she's a brilliant woman, and he does whatever she tells him to do. But she's stupid. I mean, look. All of these statues in the living room? She said no one would ever want these in their home but Dad. Can you believe that?"

I absolutely can, but I don’t tell her that. Instead, I say, “She’s trying to do her best to make money with this work. It’s a difficult thing to do. She’ll make mistakes sometimes, but—”

“Why are you defending her?” she snaps. “Do you like her?”

Her voice is rising in pitch. I need to be careful not to push her over the edge. “No. I

don't care for her."

"Then why are you defending her?"

"Because I want to find your father, and I want to take care of you. If we fixate on Lisa because we don't like her or because she argued with your father, then we might not see the truth when it arrives."

"How are you gonna find Dad?"

I look away. "I don't know. But I do know that if we build our understanding of reality based on emotional assumptions we'll set ourselves up for disappointment."

She takes a long, slow breath and looks past me back out at the ocean. For a while, she says nothing but just stares at the rocks that form the neck where Fairy Cove meets the ocean proper. I let her process what I've told her and process her own emotions.

When she speaks again, she doesn't mention Lisa. "I keep having a nightmare about Dad drawing a portal in his paintings and walking through it."

"The Vanishing Point?"

"No. Maybe? I don't know. I can't see exactly what he's painting. It's just... blurry. But I see him painting, and I call out to him, but he can't hear me. He starts to walk through, and I try to run to him, but I can't move. Then he disappears."

"Nightmares are common after traumatic events like this one," I tell her. "If you'd like, I can make you some chamomile tea tonight before bed. I find it helps sometimes with my own nightmares."

She shakes her head. "I've been having this nightmare for the past five years."

"The offer of tea still stands." I smile at her and take her hands in mine. "Don't lose hope. I know you'll worry, and that's all right, but don't lose hope. There's no blood and no sign of your father's body. No sign that he was injured and nothing in the ocean that suggests he came to harm. I have a feeling that soon enough, he'll come back to us safe and sound."

She doesn't say anything. Her hands are limp in mine. She stares at the ocean, and I watch her face slowly soften as she slips into another fugue. There's not much more I can do right now. I don't think it's a good idea for her to stare at the vanishing point for so long, but I'll only make things worse if I try to force her to look away.

I prepare to stand, but before I do, she gets abruptly to her feet and brushes past me, nearly knocking me over. I regain my balance and watch wide-eyed as she rushes up the stairs.

I follow, alarmed. I worry that she might run into Victor's studio. The window is still unrepaired, and in her current mental state, I fear she might harm herself.

"Celeste? Wait!"

"I'm going to draw!" she shouts back.

I follow her to the third floor and hear her run into her room, slamming the door shut. A moment later, I hear rustling and soft thumping. I open the door to see her quickly arranging paper and pencils on the floor. She looks up at me, and her lips pull back in a feral snarl. "Get out!"

I don't need to be told twice. I close the door and remain where I am, heart thumping in my chest. I hear soft scratching and muttering coming from the room. The poor

girl. She is on the edge of insanity. I have no love for therapists, but she may be beyond my capacity to help.

I return downstairs just as Evelyn comes in through the front door. She looks around and frowns. “Where’s Celeste?”

“She’s drawing in her room.”

Her frown deepens. “What happened? You look terrified.”

“She... She’s having... Well, she was calm and quiet, and then she became very agitated.”

Evelyn sighs. “Yeah, I figured that would happen.” She shakes her head and begins to unload the groceries. “It’s really unfortunate how that sort of thing runs in families.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Mental illness. Not that I’m saying she’s crazy, but... well, Victor’s always had manic-depressive tendencies. I’m not a psychologist, but that sort of thing where he goes from sitting and staring at nothing for hours to a burst of energy like that happens all the time.”

“Has it happened with Celeste before?”

“Not like this. I think that Victor running off triggered her.”

“You think he’s run off then? You don’t think he was taken?”

“I don’t think so. Who could have taken him? I would have heard someone come in. Not that I could have stopped anyone, but I would have known.”

Unless you were the one responsible.

"I just feel bad for her," she says. "I don't know what she's going to do. Her grandparents don't talk to her, and I'm going to have to find new work if Victor doesn't come back. I'm paid through the end of the month, but after that, I'll need to find another job. I assume you will, too."

I will be all right financially, thanks to my inheritance, but I can't stay in the house indefinitely. It will eventually move into foreclosure or probate or whatever the equivalent is when the owner is declared legally dead.

I feel a touch of suspicion when she mentions leaving soon. The reason she gives is perfectly valid, but so is receiving a financial windfall due to her late employer's "generosity." And she may have killed him for reasons other than money. It might be worthwhile to have Sean pay her home a visit or delve more deeply into her financial situation.

For now, I say, "I'll look into therapists for her. She'll need professional help to cope with Victor's loss if he doesn't return."

She shakes her head. "Therapists never help. My uncle had a therapist when he got sick, and all the therapist did was ask him about his feelings. There was never any growth or improvement. She just took his money, gave him happy pills and came back next week when nothing worked."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, it sucked. I'm just glad I didn't get it, too. There are five men and two women in my family with schizophrenia. I'm one of the lucky ones who didn't inherit it."

"I don't think Celeste is schizophrenic."

Evelyn sighs and folds her arms. "I hope not. But she talks a lot about things that aren't there, and a lot of times, her lips will move like she's talking, but no sound will come out. She's a lot like Victor, and lately, Victor's been so much worse." She shakes her head. "I'll be honest, Celeste is the only reason I stayed. I like Victor, but I was sure that one of these days, he was going to lose his shit and hurt me. Instead, he lost his shit and hurt himself."

That sparks a memory. I push it away. It's not a pleasant memory.

"I think I'll leave anyway if he comes back," she says. "The two of them need more help than I can give them."

She starts water for pasta and says, "I'll have spaghetti and meatballs ready for lunch in an hour. It's a heavy meal, I know, but it's simple and one that a child should enjoy."

"Thank you. I'll fetch her in an hour."

"Don't hold your breath. When they're like this, God himself couldn't snap them out of it."

I head upstairs with more questions than answers. I text Sean to look deeper into Evelyn, but my gut tells me that she's not responsible for what's happened here.

I fixate on Celeste's discussion of a portal. It could just be her mind playing tricks on her, but I can't help but wonder if there's a truth hiding behind her nightmare. Could Victor have a secret place somewhere? Could he be hiding in plain sight? Or could his killers have been lurking in the shadows to strike unseen before fleeing back to that same shadow?

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“Let me go! Let me go, you bastard!”

That shout is followed by a thump, then a scream. I rush downstairs and see my father struggling to hold my mother still. She's flailing and shouting something unintelligible as she fights him. I see a flash of silver, then hear my father cry out. He releases Mother, and she pulls away from him. She stumbles and falls, then gets to her feet and faces him.

In her hand, she holds a letter opener, the glint of silver I see. Blood wells up from a wound on my father's arm. She stares at him, eyes wide and bloodshot. “Back off, or I'll kill you too!”

I hear a whimper and assume it's coming from me. Surely, I'm terrified enough to be crying. But then I feel a hand slip into mine and realize that Annie's woken as well.

The cry attracts my mother's attention. Her eyes snap toward us, and I flinch. Her lips pull back in a snarl. “You. You little cunts! You've taken everything from me! My whole life! How dare you!”

She rushed toward the stairs with snakelike speed. Annie screams and tries to run, but I remain rooted to the spot, frozen in fear.

She's going to kill me , I think. She's going to kill me and Annie. She's finally going to do it.

She reaches the foot of the stairs, but before she can climb, Father grabs her around her waist and throws her across the room. The sight of my father lifting her bodily off

of the ground and throwing her through the air is just as shocking and disturbing as my mother's threat to kill us.

She lands with a cry of pain. The letter opener skids across the floor and clatters against the far wall. Mother curls into a ball, weeping and muttering epithets.

"Mommy?" Annie asks tentatively.

My father looks at us, and in his eyes, I see the same hate that blazed in our mother's eyes a moment earlier. "Go to bed!" he roars.

That finally snaps me out of my funk. I rush to my room, Annie at my side. We close and lock my door, then bury ourselves under the covers and cling tightly to each other until the morning. We didn't sleep alone for years after that. Not until Annie finally...

I gasp and sit up in my bed. This time, the symptoms of my night terrors are in full force. I am dripping sweat, trembling and hyper ventilating. I look around wildly, and it takes me a moment to remember where I am and to realize that I've woken.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair, then check my phone. It's just before midnight. I've slept for less than two hours.

I get out of bed and head to the shower. It's doubtful I'll get any more sleep tonight, but if I do, it won't come for a while. I take my time in the shower, allowing the warm, soothing water to slow my heartbeat and calm my trembling muscles.

When I am finished and dressed in fresh nightclothes, I leave my room. I check on Celeste, carefully opening the door and peering inside. She sleeps on the floor, surrounded by drawings pencils, and other implements. Crumpled papers lay

scattered everywhere, rejected drawings, I suppose. I can't see what she's drawn without turning on the light, and I don't want to risk waking her right now.

I close the door and head downstairs. Celeste spent the entirety of yesterday after our conversation in her room, refusing to come down for lunch or dinner. I called Sean at one point, but only received a brief text in response. Still working, will call when I have news.

I wanted to do some investigation of my own, but I still don't feel comfortable leaving Celest alone with Evelyn, so instead I help complete chores. When Evelyn leaves, I call Sean again, but once more, he only texts me, this time a somewhat irritable. I haven't called, so that means no news. Be patient.

I consider calling Detective Reyes. The studio is still taped off, and there's been no word from the police department. I think it would be helpful to Celeste if we could tidy up, but I don't want to do that if the police still need the scene. I can't imagine why they would leave it as it is for over a day if they still needed it, but I don't want to risk putting myself on their radar.

So I head to bed frustrated. Apparently, I'm also troubled by Evelyn's comment about mental illness because I dream of my mother's own episode shortly after we moved to America.

But now I am awake, Celeste is asleep, and Evelyn isn't here. I won't sleep again for hours, so I return to the art closet to continue to look for anything that might help me understand what might have happened to Victor now and what might have happened between her and Annie thirty years ago.

I spend the first hour looking through the paintings, but I don't find anything there. They're all portraits of people I don't recognize or landscapes of various local scenery. The box of newspaper clippings I've already examined. There's nothing

there that I don't already know.

Besides the painting and the box, there is a small desk with file cabinets. The smaller ones on top are filled with old bills of sale for art sold many years ago. There might be something useful in there, but I don't find it especially likely.

The next one, however, reveals a faded, leatherbound journal. I pick that up and open it to see it signed by Victor underneath the title, MY LIFE followed by dates that begin thirty-two years ago and end twenty-eight years ago, a few weeks before Elias's death.

This could be a gold mine.

I start at the beginning and skim the entries. The thoughts are those of a much younger man and full of hope and optimism. How often the young squander such gifts.

The first entries are all about Elias. Victor's admiration for him borders on obsession. Elias's criticisms cut deeply, and his praise lifts him to exultant heights. It seems Lisa wasn't wrong about their relationship.

Speaking of Lisa, she is mentioned in a few entries, but never treated with any importance. Victor talks of Elias's agent as a pretty enough girl but too sensible for my taste. I smile drily at that. It seems Lisa wasn't wrong about Victor's opinion of her either. Perhaps I've thought too harshly of her.

Others float through from time to time. An art dealer named Sampson is reported to have enraged Elias enough that the man physically threw him out of his house. Lovers come and go—all Elias's, I notice—and once, Victor's sister visits him. He speaks with vitriol of her attempts to "separate him from his idol."

I wish I could have met Elias. Perhaps if I knew him personally, I might have a more intimate understanding of Victor and maybe know where he might have gone, assuming he left of his own accord and wasn't taken by another.

I reach the entries near the middle of the journal, around the time my sister would have arrived. I actually hesitate before reading further. A part of me, I suppose, is still frightened of what I might find.

You feel guilty for what you did to Annie.

I flinch at the memory of that uncalled-for and utterly untrue accusation. Dr. Strauss never even told me what it was I was supposed to have done to her.

That's because you slapped her immediately after she said that.

I turn the page fiercely, determined to forget that hateful woman.

Annie isn't mentioned directly at first. It's not until around a month after her disappearance that Victor mentions the arrival of a truly beautiful woman, perhaps even a goddess, who instantly captures Elias's fancy.

That sounds like my sister. She had a gift. Men would indeed fall for her on sight, as though by her very presence she cast a spell on them.

I read further. Victor's mentions of Annie grow longer and more involved. It's clear that Elias isn't the only one captivated by her. A few weeks after the first entry, he leaves a long love letter to her, praising her as something that transcends reality, a fairy princess in whose presence I am lucky to bask, whose favor I am lucky to enjoy, though such favors are never as much as I wish for, never what I long for. Oh that just once she might look on me with the same love with which she gazes on him!

Poor Victor. I feel sorry for him. Annie was not an unkind woman, and I am sure she never teased Victor or led him on. She always preferred older men as well, so it's not a surprise to me that she fancied Elias, especially if Elias was the dominant partner in his pseudo-romance with Victor.

But I feel for Victor. I know what it's like to live in the shadow of such light, to hate it as much as you love it, to wish that you could possess it, that you could drive it away, that you could belong wholly to it, that you could erase it from existence if only to breathe without suffocating.

I gasp and sit bolt upright. I stare ahead, disoriented for a moment. My thoughts have run completely away from me. What have I been on about?

I sigh and turn the page again. Annie remains in the entries for about three months before a final entry. I do find it odd that she's never mentioned by name. Perhaps Victor simply preferred to use his pet name for her.

The Fairy is departing today. She told me this morning over breakfast. She hasn't told Elias yet. She doesn't want to see him when he finds out. I can't blame her. He's grown steadily more cruel to her. The love he felt for her in the beginning has twisted into something rotten. He would never hurt her, and when I tell her this, she assures me that she knows, but she can't stay here anymore. It's not good for her or for him.

I feel a touch of sympathy at that. Poor Annie. To have fought so hard to find a place where she could feel safe and loved only to learn that love doesn't always last, nor does it always guarantee safety.

Behind that sympathy, I feel a touch of cruel satisfaction. I hate myself for it, but I am beginning to resent Annie for leaving the way she did. All these years I had to live with the fact that she might be dead, and now I find that she was alive, that she took a lover and had friends, that she built an existence without even doing me the courtesy

of sharing why she was shattering mine. Knowing that the life she tried to build without me failed is a pleasantly bitter pill.

Would you rather she had been kidnapped or murdered?

That thought is enough to banish my cruel thoughts and replace them with guilt. I won't allow myself to feel that way again. I won't let resentment motivate my actions. I keep reading.

She joined me in the cove today, not the large one but the hidden one that only I know of. She could not give me all I asked for, but she let me gaze upon her beauty unhidden. I tried to put this beauty to canvas, but I could not. I lack the talent to capture the true essence of what she is. So I wept on her breast, and she held me while we said our tender goodbyes.

I would blush at the reference to my sister's nakedness, but I am more interested in the first sentence of that paragraph. There's another cove! One only Victor knows about!

Hope springs within me. Perhaps Victor is alive after all.

It is late, and the world is black as pitch, but I cannot rest. I must find this cove!

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I skim the rest of the journal, looking for any reference of the cove. The entries revert back to their youthful exuberance upon Annie's departure. Victor either moves past his feelings quickly or chooses not to confront them again.

The change in Elias, however, is notable. Victor writes that his mentor dies the day he wakes and finds his Fairy has flown. Victor even shows a little remorse for their tryst, writing that I would tear the heart from my breast that I might never have stolen even a drop of what wasn't mine.

Quite romantic, really. He might have made an excellent poet had he chosen not to pursue the visual arts. No mention of the cove, though, and that's what really matters to me.

The entries continue. Elias is a shell of himself, no longer angry and no longer passionate. He changes his behavior toward Victor, treating him like a son more than a student. Victor is grateful for his affection but fears that Elias has lost all that makes him who he is.

The entries continue in a similar vein until the final entry. Victor never records any mention of Elias's suicide. He also never mentions his hidden cove or how one might find it. I sigh in frustration and prepare to look through the rest of the papers in the desk when my eyes fall to the inside of the journal's binding. There I find, scrawled in ink, the following.

1. Go where the fairies bathe
2. Walk to the treasure

3. The door will be hidden in shadow. Enter it.

4. Do not fear the path. Brave it, and you will reach heaven.

This is it. This is a step-by-step instruction of how to get to his cove. I pump my fist joyfully and rush from the room. I don't have a flashlight, but my phone's light is bright enough that it should work if I'm careful.

I pull it from my pocket and start toward the cove, but I stop when I see the time. It reads four-thirty. I've spent over three hours in the art closet. That can't be, though. I spent an hour looking through paintings and perhaps another hour looking through the journal. It's not an especially thick book, so it can't have taken me as long as that to go through all of it.

I look back at the staircase and bite my lip softly. Evelyn will be here soon, and I don't want Celeste to be by herself. I don't want to share this evidence with either of them until I know for sure that it will reveal Victor's whereabouts.

But I don't want to wait any longer. If Victor is there, then I might be able to convince him to return home. If he is injured, I might be able to help him. At the very least, I can bring news of him to Celeste. Perhaps I can even get him to tell me about Annie and help me know where to look for her next.

I stand to gain too much to allow this opportunity to pass me by. I'll simply have to hurry.

I start down the path, placing each step carefully. I slip once on a loose step, but I catch the banister before the stumble sends me falling down toward the sea.

I reach the beach after perhaps ten minutes. I am now where the fairies bathe.

I take my slippers off and wade into the water. I should probably have changed into my bathing suit before I went out here, but it's too late to turn back. Besides, I have little time.

It takes me a while to find the quartz and amethyst "treasure." There is no moon in the sky, and the light from my phone reflects off of the water, not the crystals buried underneath. After several minutes of wandering in circles, though, I catch a dull purplish gleam under the surface and breathe a sigh of relief when I realize I've found the place.

Now to find the door hidden in shadow. This will be even more difficult since the night is already dark.

Well, Victor would be looking for this place during the daylight when the treasure would sparkle brightly. Anything facing that treasure would reflect some of their light back, so it wouldn't be hidden in shadow. The "door" must be behind the treasure.

I step carefully over the treasure and find myself on a shelf of rock two feet higher than the rest of the inlet. The water that was at my waist is now only halfway to my knees.

I move forward. Ahead of me is a pitch-black void. A cold wind seems to emanate from that void, as though the shadow is warning me that I have reached it during its time of strength.

But I press on. There is a young girl up in that house who needs her father, and the answer to a thirty-year-old mystery may await me on the other side of this door. I walk until my light reveals a jagged hole in the rock. I stoop down and shine my light into the hole. It disappears without reflecting on anything.

I move carefully and enter the tunnel. The water level remains low, and when I lift

my light above me, I see that the ceiling is twelve feet above me. I can walk without fear of bumping my head.

I proceed about seventy yards when my light shines on the opposite opening. Thirty more yards brings me to the end of the tunnel, and I step through and find the cove. It is small, only ten yards long and the same amount wide. The cave continues overhead past the edge of the water into the open ocean.

The surf is more powerful here than in Fairy Cove, but still moderated significantly by rocks a few dozen yards past the entrance.

I have found haven.

I look around. Visually, the place is not that impressive beyond the fact that it's a beach in a cave. There are no shimmering crystals, and the sand is coarser than the fine silt of Fairy Cove.

But it's hidden, and to a sensitive young man suffering under the force of Elias's personality and the pain of watching the woman he fancies choose another, it could easily be a haven.

More importantly, I find evidence of a campfire. There is ash and charcoal on the ground. I approach closer and find a few crumbs of beef jerky. They are old and stale, but not that old. This cove has been used recently.

I feel a leap of excitement. Victor was here! Almost certainly, he was here after the incident in his studio.

I must tell the police. They must know that he's still alive and somewhere close.

I dial the number, but the phone has no signal. I'll have to go back through the tunnel

first.

I turn to leave, but I stop when I see the back wall.

Victor may not have been able to capture my sister's beauty on canvas, but he captured it well enough on granite. Heat climbs my cheeks as I look upon her form in a way I never desired to see her, but my eyes can't look away. Victor has chosen abstract art as a means to transcend reality, but what I see before me is transcendent because it is real. I should not be surprised if Annie stepped from the wall and greeted me.

She is beautiful. She was always so beautiful. I look at her, and my mind drifts back.

I feel a pang when I see her kiss him, but at least this time, I don't fool myself into thinking he might fancy me. They separate, and John whispers something into her ear. She laughs and slaps him playfully on the shoulder before skipping toward the house.

"She'll open her legs for him soon," an unpleasant voice to my left says. "If she hasn't already."

My wistful smile twists into a frown. "There's no need to be unpleasant, Mother. I'm sure you were young and in love once."

She laughs bitterly. "I was young and obsessed with sex once. As for love? That didn't happen until your father."

I sigh and leave my place by the window. There's no talking to Mother when she's like this. Which means there's no talking to Mother ever.

"It'll happen for you one day too, Mary. You're plain and sensible, so you think it

won't happen, but it will. Be careful when it does. It seems sweet at first, but that sweetness will suffocate you. And by the time you learn that love is only a precursor to hate, it's too late to stop."

This is just too much. I spin on my heel to snap at her.

And water floods my mouth. I flinch and flail my arms, falling to the ground as the water drags me backwards. I cough and spit and gasp and look up just in time to see another wave coming toward me.

I shriek and close my eyes just before the wave hits me. It throws me back into the rock, and it is only luck that keeps my skull from slamming into Annie's image.

The water recedes, and I rush for the tunnel. The water has risen to my chest. The tide! The tide has come in!

I wade forward as fast as I can. Another wave comes and floods the tunnel, dashing me once more against the rocks.

When the wave recedes, I see light ahead. I swim toward it, weeping with fright, but beneath the fright, I realize that it's after dawn. I've somehow managed to daydream again. How long was I standing in front of that drawing?

The water floods the tunnel again. It carries me toward the door, but I crash against the entrance. A sharp pain courses through my head when I strike it on the rock.

I don't waste time trying to assess how badly I'm hurt. I just pull myself through the tunnel and into Fairy Cove.

The water is tumultuous. The tide has risen above the rocks and is now unleashing the full power of the ocean on me. The calm of the night is an odd contrast with the

violence of the morning. It's as though the ocean is mocking me, flaunting the danger I'm in despite the illusion of safety that daylight should bring me.

I was just out here in the morning! It was calm! How have the tides changed so rapidly?

No time to dwell on that. I swim toward shore, diving under the waves when they retreat and letting the momentum carry me forward when they arrive.

It's painfully slow progress. Salt stings my eyes, and I don't know if it's blood or the water. My arms and legs burn with effort. I don't know if I've lost my phone or if it's in my pocket, but even if the water hasn't ruined it, there's no chance of calling for help and less chance that it would arrive in time.

I struggle forward, and my hands nearly grasp the banister, now partly submerged in the water. I sob with desperation and reach again.

A hand grasps mine and pulls me from the water. I scream and fall into the arms of Sean O'Connell.

"Mary! What the bloody hell are you doing out here? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

I fling my arms around him and cling tightly to his shoulders. I try to speak, but I can only sob.

He wraps me in his embrace and says softly, "It's all right, Mary. It's all right."

I close my eyes and bury my face in his neck. Slowly, the terror recedes. I'm safe. He's got me.

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I wince as the doctor snips the end off of the sutures. “These are the kind that dissolve after a while,” she says, “so you won’t need a follow up appointment unless you get an infection. If you have a fever or feel nausea or dizziness, you need to call me. Everything else is just mild bruising. I can prescribe you something for the pain, if you’d like.”

I shake my head. The last thing I need right now is a substance that will cloud my mind even further. “No, thank you. I’ll take ibuprofen if I need something.”

I am in the living room on Victor's couch. Celeste and Evelyn are standing on the other side of the coffee table. Celeste is puffy-eyed from crying. I feel terrible for frightening her so. Evelyn looks at me with anger that I probably deserve, unless of course, her anger is because I've found a secret she wished would remain hidden. I can't believe that Victor would tell her about the haven, but if I can snoop, so can she.

I need to talk to Sean. He’s standing next to me and frowning down at me with his arms crossed. He’s not happy with me either, not that I blame him.

The doctor leaves, and the others watch me, waiting, I assume, for some explanation. When I don’t offer one right away, Evelyn says, “What the hell were you doing out there at six o’clock in the morning? Were you trying to get yourself killed?”

She sounds almost exactly like Sean did earlier. I hesitate before answering both of them. My initial desire to tell the police what I’ve found remains, but now that I know the dangers someone down there could face, I don’t want to reveal it in front of Celeste. I fear that Victor may have been caught at high tide in one of his own dissociative episodes and been swept out to sea.

Sean senses my hesitation and says, “Why don’t you take Celeste out to breakfast, Evelyn? I’ll stay with Mary.”

“Is she okay?” Celeste asks. “She’s going to be all right?”

“She’ll be fine,” Sean says, “Honestly, she could use a little knock around the head every now and then. Helps get rid of the fool ideas she takes to sometimes.”

“No,” I say, staring hard at Sean. “I’ll be all right. It’s best if Celeste remains here for now until we know what happened to her father.”

Sean rolls his eyes. “Go ahead with her, Evelyn. I’ll talk to Mary.”

Evelyn nods and leads Celeste away. I glare at Sean, but he meets my gaze impassively. When the door closes behind them, I say, “I hope like hell that you have proof Evelyn’s not involved.”

“There’s no sign of Victor at her house, her bank account is clean, and she nearly stabbed me when Celeste answered the door to a strange man. She loves that girl like she’s her own, and if I hadn’t been able to show them the texts you’d sent me, then I’d never be let inside.”

My eyes widen. “You showed them that I was investigating Victor’s disappearance?”

“No, just the ones about coordinating your ride here when you arrived. You mentioned you had a friend in town, and I’m that friend. Also, since that’s probably not enough for you, I have security cameras from the house across the street showing Evelyn in the kitchen until something makes her jump and drop a tray of hot coffee. Putting two and two together, I’m thinking she was startled when the glass blew out in the studio.”

I sigh. "Okay. I just needed to make sure."

"So what did you need to make sure of that you nearly got yourself killed down there?" he asks. "Or do you just enjoy frightening me?"

"I thought you said I deserve a knock on the head every now and then."

"Go to hell!"

He says this so bluntly and forcefully that I flinch. His face is terrible, like a thundercloud, but there is fright behind his eyes, the same fright I see in Celeste's eyes when she learns that her father is missing.

I feel guilty seeing him like that, but I also feel a strange warmth knowing he cares about me so. I'll have to deal with that emotion later, though. I have no time for... whatever this is. Anyway, it's probably only my gratitude that he's rescued me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know the tide was so ferocious."

"But you knew it was pitch bloody black out there. You knew you were swimming through a rock tunnel that you didn't know where it led to. Or did you know?"

"I knew. I found Victor's journal. He wrote of a tunnel that led to a hidden cove. I thought he might have fled there after the attack. Or if he simply went insane, maybe that was where he would go."

"And you found this cove?"

"I did. And he was there. I found the remains of a campfire and bits of beef jerky."

His eyes widen. "Bloody hell."

"Will you watch your language?" I scold. "Every time with you, it's bloody this and Christ that and to hell with all the rest."

"Will you stop endangering yourself like you're the hero of an action movie?" he retorts.

I glare at him, and his lips curl in a smile. "Good work, Mary," he says softly. "So where did he go from there?"

"That's just it. I don't know. And after that tide..."

I don't put my fears into words, but Sean does. "He might have been washed away."

I nod. "That's why I didn't say anything in front of Celeste."

I meet his eyes. "There's another thing I have to tell you."

"What's that?"

"I saw Annie there."

He raises an eyebrow. "You saw Annie?"

"Yes. Not her, of course, but a painting of her on the walls of the cave. She and Victor... well, I don't know if they were lovers or if she only posed naked for him, but there's no mistaking that it's her. She lived with Elias for months, and Victor was smitten with her."

"You know all of this from his journal?"

"Yes. He spoke of her as a fairy princess of transcendent beauty."

“How romantic.”

“Yes. The painting in the cave... he made that the day before she left. Or he started it the day before she left.”

“You think he might know where she went?”

“I think so. If anyone still living would know, he would. We must find him, Sean. For Celeste’s sake, and for Annie’s.”

“Well,” he says, “Evelyn has nothing to do with it, but I have an idea who might.”

I sit up, ignoring the aches in my body. “Who?”

He grins. “Lisa Reinhardt.”

“I knew it! How did you find out?”

He chuckles and lifts a hand. “Hold on. I said might be. I haven’t confirmed anything yet. But I followed up on the names you gave me. I headed to the Carmel Art Gallery and pretended to be a journalist for Art magazine. I told Mr. Marcus Fairfax that I was writing a piece on Victor Holloway.”

“You said his name? When he’s missing? You fool, what if he reports you to the police?”

“I don’t think he will. He doesn’t want to be next after all.”

I sigh and rub my temples. “Your confidence is endearing and infuriating.”

“Do you want to hear what I have to say, or—”

“Yes, I want to hear what you have to say.”

He gives me a look of mock sympathy. “Poor Mary. If only everyone was as sensible as she.”

“Sean—”

“All right, all right. In my defense, you bloody Christing deserve it to hell.”

I can’t quite stifle a chuckle at that. “Fair enough. What did you learn from Marcus?”

“Well, I took the jolly lad to a pub on the beach. Got him a couple of cocktails and a couple of beers. Boy did his tongue loosen after that.”

I settle in for an unnecessarily long story. It would be nice if Sean was the sort of person who got to the point quickly, but one can’t win everything, I suppose.

“Anyway, it turns out that Miss Reinhardt is not in the best straits financially.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Oh, oh. It seems that she is relying quite heavily on Victor for income. Evidently, he’s the only artist who will work with her after a few scandals suggested that Miss Reinhardt might not be entirely honest in her dealings.”

“But why would she kill him then? If she needs his money, she would want him alive and well and working.”

“She would, if he were willing to listen to her. Unfortunately, Victor is a rather stubborn artiste .”

This matches what Lisa herself told me. “So he was refusing to make his work more commercially palatable.”

“The way Marcus put it is that Lisa believes that Victor has lost his edge. She thinks his work is repetitive and hasn’t changed significantly in style in over twenty years. People were buying it for a while, so she didn’t really care, but they’re not buying it now, so she cares.”

“And he’s refusing to change.”

“He is. He likes his work and scoffs at the idea that money should matter. And Lisa is desperate and, according to Marcus, has quite the temper.”

This makes sense the more I think about it. If Lisa has managed her money poorly, she may be in a hole and feeling like Victor—who has managed his money well and lives comfortably—is ignoring the financial aspect of art because he doesn’t need to worry about paying the bills like she does. It’s very close to what Lisa herself said about him, except in this version, she’s the one who needs the money.

“We need to go talk to Lisa,” I tell him.

"I plan to. Same disguise. It turns out that I am a very convincing journalist. Not all that different from an investigator, really. Only when you're a journalist, there are fewer rules."

“Good. We’ll go now. Evelyn can watch Celeste. We know she’s not the killer, so—”

“No.”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not coming.”

His smile is gone. He’s looking sternly at me now, and some of that fear is in his eyes again. “You’re not putting yourself at risk right after nearly drowning yourself. You’re staying here and resting, and I’m going to talk to Lisa.”

“With me.”

“No.”

I stand and dial a number. Sean frowns. “Who are you calling?”

When Evelyn answers, I say, “Hi Evelyn. Thank you so much for taking Celeste with you. Listen, I have some errands I need to address, and since my friend is here already, I’m going to have him take me into town.”

"Oh, no, you don't," Sean says.

He swipes at the phone, but I twist and stiff-arm him. "Yes, I'll be back well before dinner. I'm all right. No concussion, just the cut. And I really do need to get into town."

“You’re lucky I’m not the sort of man to hit a woman,” Sean grouses. “Because I could easily take that phone from you.”

“Thank you, Evelyn.” I hang up and admire the phone. “It’s amazing how well these new phones are protected from water. It just needed a few hours of drying, and it’s good as new.” I smile at him, and he glares back at me. “And yes, I rely on the fact that you’re a gentleman and won’t physically stop me. So I’m going to talk to Lisa, and you can come if you’d like.”

“I have the car keys,” he reminds me.

“I’ll walk.”

I head toward the door. When I hear him sigh and follow me, I smile again. He really is adorable sometimes.

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Sean is in a mood as we drive to Lisa's apartment. He glares at the road, and his hands sit stoically at the ten and two position on the wheel. He doesn't speak to me, and when I try to initiate conversation, he only gives one-word answers. I can see he's more upset than I thought he was.

"Sean, please don't be angry with me," I finally say. "I did what I thought was best."

"A child who sticks a knife into a socket does what he thinks is best too," Sean replies. "He's just a bloody idiot."

"I am not a child."

"Well, you are a bloody idiot." He sighs. "Mary, look." He rolls his eyes and says, "Don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way, but I care about you, all right? You matter to me. I don't want to show up and find you dead one of these days. And you know that's what almost happened, right? Twice now. First you get into it with a woman who's much bigger and stronger than you, and if not for me and the fashion agent, Hugo whatever his name was, you'd be dead. Now I find you nearly drowned. What would have happened if I'd shown up one minute later?"

"I find it's best not to dwell on what might have happened."

"Oh, don't give me that load of crap. Your entire life is about what might have happened. You have a drive to protect and find justice for everyone but yourself."

"Have you finished?" I say tersely.

He gives me a sideways look, then says, "Sure. No point in arguing with a stone wall."

I know I'm being unfair. I know it was hard for him to see me hurt. Even if the fleeting romantic thoughts I have for him earlier are foolishness borne of adrenaline, he is a friend, and he's said he cares for me.

I sigh. "I'm sorry, Sean. Truly, I am. If I could allow myself to step back, I would, but I can't. It's a compulsion in me."

"It's a mental illness is what it is."

"Maybe so," I allow, "but I can't stop it any more than you can help the fact that you're here. You've put your life on hold to help me find my sister. I'm so grateful for it, and I am so lucky to have found you, but you're not doing this for me. If you were, you would have pulled away a long time ago."

"I am absolutely doing this for you," he says.

I look at him, and he chuckles bitterly. "Don't flatter yourself. You're paying me well, that's all."

His words pierce far more deeply than I care to admit to myself. I look away and stare ahead at the road, waiting for the pain to subside before it causes me to say something I'll regret.

It's just as well. I can't afford foolishness.

"I am paying you very well," I agree. "So let's have no more argument about how much I can and can't afford to involve myself in the case."

We fall silent after that and remain that way until we reach the modest apartment building that Lisa Reinhardt calls home. The building is situated near Monterey's downtown, and the traffic is quite crowded.

Sean parks across the street, and we enter the building. "The problem with you being here," he tells me, "is that she'll recognize you. So I can't use my cover of being a journalist."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Because I only thought of it just now."

"Then that wasn't the only problem."

"Not the only one. I just keep hoping you'll listen to reason one day."

He leads me to the third floor of the nine-story mid-rise. "Hers is the second on the left."

"How did you get her home address?"

He laughs. "Any ten-year-old with internet access can find a person's home address."

"Well, that's disturbing."

"All the things that have happened to you, and public records are what you find disturbing."

The conversation stops because we are in front of her door now. Sean lifts his hand to knock, but I notice something and lift my hand. "Wait."

“What is it?”

“The door. It’s open.”

“What?”

I push gently. The door moves easily. It was nearly closed, but not shut enough for the knob to latch.

Sean frowns and draws his handgun. “Stay outside.”

“No.”

“Mary, for the love of—”

“If there was someone here, then they’ve probably already left, or the door wouldn’t be open. And if they’re still here, the safest place for me is next to you—the man with the gun.”

He glares at me for a moment, then rolls his eyes. “Bloody... All right. Fine, come with me.”

He leads me into the apartment. There is no foyer, merely a short hallway that leads to an arched entryway. We step through that entryway, and I gasp.

The apartment is ransacked. The couch is overturned, and the coffee table and tv smashed. Vases and books and various other items lay strewn about.

Sean curses and moves through the apartment. He moves with the lithe grace of a jaguar, pushing open doorways and training his weapon everywhere an assailant might show. It’s impressive watching him work, I must admit.

What is also impressive, though in a much different way, is the destruction I see evidenced in each room. The bedroom is torn up like the living room, and the bathroom mirror is shattered. The kitchen cabinets are opened, and a chef's knife sits in the middle of the floor. The microwave has been pulled from the wall and hangs by its power cable.

"There was a fight in here," I say.

"Gee, what makes you say that?" he replies sardonically. Then he frowns and says, "This doesn't look right, though."

"What do you mean?"

He shakes his head. "It's so much damage. How could no one have heard this?"

"It's the middle of the workday," I reply. "Perhaps no one was here. The attackers would have staked this place out and known when it was safe to make their move."

"Maybe," he agrees. "Yes, you're probably right." He sighs. "Well, let's call the police then."

"Wait! We should search the place first, shouldn't we? Perhaps the killer left a clue behind."

"That sounds like a good reason to call the police."

"Can we just look first, please?"

He rolls his eyes. "Of course. Your wish is my command."

We move more slowly through the house. I note right away that, like Victor's scene,

there is no blood.

“They were kidnapped,” I say.

“More than likely,” Sean agrees. “You’re sure your boss is well off?”

“I thought so. I assumed he would have to be if he could afford to live in that house. Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m trying to think of who might have had a motive to grab both of them. We know Lisa was in trouble financially. Maybe she’s crossed the line with a loan shark, and he’s sent goons after her. Might have sent them for Victor first. Or he might have just taken Victor for information on Lisa.”

“Perhaps Marcus is involved,” I say. “He could have lied to you to direct your attention toward Lisa.”

“And then once I was looking her way, he kidnaps her? No, if he wanted to kidnap her, he should have made me look the other way.”

I purse my lips. We’re in the bedroom now. I open the desk, one of the only furniture items not damaged, but there is nothing inside. “It seems they took paperwork with them too.”

“Hmm. Odd.”

“The whole thing is odd,” I say. “I thought for sure Evelyn was involved, but now she’s another victim. The only suspect remaining is Marcus Fairfax, but... well, frankly, I wouldn’t think him capable of this. Perhaps he could kidnap Lisa, but I feel that Victor would be more than a match for him.”

“Marcus certainly doesn’t exude danger,” Sean replies, “but plenty of killers don’t.”

I straighten and sigh. “All right. Well, I don’t think we’ll learn anything else. Go ahead and call the police.”

"Let's get out of the building first. They'll know we were here, or we wouldn't know she was missing, but it'll look a lot less suspicious if we're not in the apartment."

I follow him outside, and my phone buzzes as soon as we step through the door. It’s Evelyn.

“Hello? Is everything all right?”

Evelyn sounds harried when she speaks. I can hear screaming in the background and guess the reason. “Umm... there’s a social worker here to take Celeste.”

I blink. “Take Celeste? Take her where?”

“To her grandparents in Idaho.”

I stiffen. “What?”

“She says that since we’re not relatives, we can’t care for her. She has to go to the next of kin, and that’s her grandparents.”

“Her grandparents who she hasn’t spoken to in years? The ones who hate her father?”

“They agreed to take her, I guess.”

I hear more screaming and crashing over the phone. “I take it Celeste is not enthused by the idea.”

"She's tearing apart the house, trying not to go."

"Okay. I'm on my way. Don't let her leave before I get there."

I hang up and turn to Sean. "I'm sorry, but it's an emergency. I need to take the car."

Sean hands me the keys without fuss. He might not be happy with me right now, but he knows when to argue and when to let me win. "Go. I'll take a cab to my hotel."

I rush to the car and speed off toward Victor's house, heart pounding.

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I reach the house fifteen minutes later and pull to a halt behind a police vehicle. I half-expect to see Detective Reyes there, but instead it's two uniformed officers I don't recognize. They give me a warning look as I approach, and one of them says, "Be careful. It's a madhouse in there."

I return a scathing glare to him, then walk inside.

Rude or not, he's right. The living room and kitchen are trashed. Coming straight from a similar environment gives me an odd sense of déjà vu as I look at the overturned furniture and strewn upholstery.

A woman in a business suit stands in the foyer, her hands lifted placatingly. Evelyn stands in front of her, one hand lifted toward the woman I assume is the social worker and the other lifted toward Celeste.

Celeste stands behind the coffee table, sniffing and glaring fiercely at the social worker. She holds a marble coaster in her hand, lifting it high over her head.

I quickly move toward her. "Celeste," I say firmly. "Put that down."

She shakes her head. "No. I'm going to throw it at the bitch if she tries to take me away."

"Celeste," the social worker calls. "We need to talk about this. This is for your own good."

"You don't even know me! Get out of my house!"

I step in between Celeste and Evelyn. I'm sure she won't throw the coaster at me. I turn to the social worker and command, "Outside."

She frowns. "I will be taking Miss Celeste with me. The court has ordered—"

"I will be smashing your head in if you touch me!" Celeste interrupts.

"Celeste, enough! You, what's your name?"

"Jasmine. And I have—"

"Jasmine, read the room. Look at the situation and ask yourself if you're handling it in a productive manner or an unproductive manner."

Jasmine looks around at the carnage. Her lips thin, but she takes my point. "I'll go outside. But I will —"

"It's not always necessary to get the last word in," I interrupt.

Jasmine gives me an ugly look, but she stays silent as she leaves the house.

"Lock that fucking door!" Celeste shouts."

"Celeste, there is no call for that language! Evelyn, please lock the door."

Once the door is locked, Celeste calms. She sets the coaster on the coffee table and crosses her arms, sticking her lower lip out in a pout. "I'm not going."

This sort of age-regressive behavior is quite common in older children and even adults who have suffered serious emotional trauma. That idiot social worker has worked Celeste into a state of extreme terror. I understand that the system exists to

protect children, and I don't have an issue with it or even with their preference for placing children with relatives, but I do wish the process involved building trust with the children and taking time to determine what is best in each case rather than reading a report and finding the solution that checks off the appropriate boxes.

"Please sit," I tell Celeste, gently but firmly.

She shakes her head.

"I'm not asking you to go, I'm asking you to sit so we can talk."

"We can talk while I'm standing."

"Not while you're this worked up. Sitting will tell your mind and body that you're calm and allow you to—"

"Well, I'm not fucking calm, Mary."

"—to think logically about what's happening," I finish. She starts to protest again, and I lift my hand. "I'm not saying I'm sending you anywhere. I'm only saying that we need to talk about this like adults. Threatening a person with violence whether you intend to follow through on that threat or not is not an appropriate way to handle this. The fact that the woman you threatened is the social worker assigned to your case makes it worse. The last thing you want is to convince her that you're a danger to yourself and others."

That gets through to her. She blinks and looks between me and Evelyn. I sit in one of the upholstered chairs and look expectantly at her. She slowly sits on the couch, but she moves her gaze away from us and bites her lip to keep from crying.

"Do you know your grandparents?" I ask.

“Barely. I remember they came to visit when Mom died, and they called Dad a bunch of names and said they were going to take me away from him.”

“They’re your mother’s parents.”

“Yes. And don’t give me the bullshit about ‘Oh, well they just lost a daughter, and it’s hard.’ That doesn’t give them the right to take me away from my Dad.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I agree. “But this is a different situation.” She stiffens, and I add, “I’m not saying I agree with the court decision to place you with your grandparents, but—”

“This was a court decision? Why wasn’t I involved?”

“I think you should be. And I will speak to the social worker and tell her that you must be advocated for. There should have been an interview with you prior to any decisions being made as to your care. We’ll ensure that the process is followed properly. But you cannot lose your temper like this. If they believe you’re dangerous, you’ll be placed in a juvenile mental health facility. Trust me, you do not want to end up there.”

Evelyn shudders and crosses herself. Celeste pales a little. I feel bad for frightening her, but I’m not telling an untruth. Facilities like that are not designed to help their charges, merely to contain them. Celeste’s mental health already rests on a knife edge. Sending her there will cause her to tumble down an abyss from which she may never leave.

I stand. “I’m going to talk to Miss Jasmine. Stay inside with Evelyn. Please do not panic. Evelyn and I both care for you very much, and we will not let anything happen to you.”

She nods. “Okay, Mary.”

Evelyn smiles gratefully at me. As I head for the door, she says, “I’m going to make myself some coffee. If you promise not to go crazy and throw it at me, I’ll make some for you too.”

Celeste chuckles softly. “Okay.”

I step outside and see Jasmine speaking to the officers in low voices. When she sees me, she crosses her arms and says haughtily, “Well?”

I smile sweetly at her. “May I have your supervisor’s number, please?”

She rolls her eyes. “You can have any number you want, but I’m taking Celeste with me today.”

“I don’t think so. You’ve failed to conduct a wellness check and a psychological evaluation of Miss Holloway. I feel safe assuming you’ve failed to conduct a background check of her intended guardians as well. You’ve failed to allow Miss Holloway the legal advocacy to which she’s entitled. You’ve trespassed on her property, and you’ve—”

“I get your point,” Jasmine interrupts. Ooh, I don’t like her at all. “We have screened her grandparents, and prior to placement, we will conduct a psychological evaluation. As far as a wellness check, based on what I’ve seen, she is very un well. I’m considering recommending hospitalization.”

“And I will be making a formal complaint about how the state has handled her case. May I have your supervisor’s number?”

“Like I said, you can take the number, but it won’t change what happens here.”

I direct my attention to the officers standing next to her. “Officer, do you have the legal right to forcibly remove Miss Holloway from the home knowing what I’ve just told you?”

The officer shifts his feet nervously. “The court order does say she needs to be removed.”

“May I see that order?” I ask Jasmine.

She hands me a file, somewhat reluctantly. I look through it and see that all of the items I’ve pointed out have been checked. I meet her eyes. I no longer wear a facade of sweetness. “This information is falsified. That’s fraud.”

Her lower lip twitches once. “I’m just here to pick her up. They handed me the paperwork and said go pick her up.”

“You aren’t her caseworker?”

“I am, but—”

“Then aren’t you responsible for all of these items being completed?”

“I am. But it’s not uncommon for the preliminary work to be completed prior to the first meeting. It expedites things.”

“Then I’d like to speak with your supervisor and make him aware that they haven’t been completed.”

Jasmine hesitates. She appears to wrestle with whether or not to acquiesce or press the issue. Unfortunately, she chooses to press the issue. “Miss...”

I don't reply. I'm in no mood to be polite to her. She frowns and continues, " Miss. I have a court order to take Miss Holloway from the premises and deliver her to her grandparents. That will happen. If you'd like to file a complaint, you may do so, but I will carry out my instructions."

"And I will call every news agency in Northern California and tell them that you forcibly removed a grieving young woman from her home without following a single step in the legal process required to do so. I will name you personally and detail your arrogance, petulance and lack of any concern or regard for the girl under your care, including your admitted negligence in ensuring that the pre-transfer care Miss Holloway is supposed to receive at your hands was completed. Further, I will contact a friend of mine who is an excellent private investigator. He will scour every case you've ever managed and discover every single shortcut you've taken, every rule you've broken, everything you've done that is even the slightest bit unethical and he will publish those findings nationwide."

She pales. "That's illegal."

"He's very adept at finding legal ways to hold people accountable for their actions. Since you are a public servant, I imagine it will be very easy for him to find such a way in your case." I turn to the officers. "The same, of course, applies to you. I don't hold you two any ill will, but that girl was placed into my care by her father, and I will be as vicious as any mother if she is harmed due to this woman's negligence and your choice to enforce it."

The officers look very uncomfortable now. I turn to the discomfited Jasmine and say, "Now. For the final time, I would like your supervisor's—"

"No!"

The shout is loud enough to carry through the door and interrupt my conversation.

It's followed by a crash and a scream. My heart falls to my feet. I turn and sprint into the house.

Evelyn is on the floor of the living room. I see red, and for a terrifying moment, I think she's bleeding, but when I look again, it's only a red coffee mug that's been shattered.

"What happened?" I cry out. "Where's Celeste?"

"She's run," Evelyn says, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I tried to stop her, but she panicked again, and she wouldn't listen."

"Where did she go?"

"She went downstairs. She said she's going to the vanishing point."

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A chill ripples through me. I forget about Evelyn. I forget about Jasmine and the officers outside. I forget about Victor and Lisa and Sean. In my terror, I even forget about Annie.

I rush down the stairs, ignoring the people calling my name above me. I shout for Celeste as I scramble onto the basement floor and onto the deck. I lean over the railing and look for her, but I don't see her.

"Celeste! Wait! Don't do this!"

There's no answer.

I jump over the ledge, and for the second time that day, I rush down the path that leads to Fairy Cove, the magical place where only a few short days ago, I took the first steps to breaking through Celeste's depression and leading her to a better future.

"Celeste!"

I reach the cove and still don't see her. The tide is low, but if she's going where I think she is, then it won't matter. I rush into the water and sprint out to sea. "Celeste! Where are you?"

There's no answer. The slope is gradual, but the fairy treasure is only forty yards from the shore. The inlet stretches for hundreds of yards beyond that.

When I am one hundred yards from shore, the water is up to my shoulders. I swim, my eyes stinging from my tears as well as the saltwater. The water is clear in the calm

of low tide, but I see no sign of her.

My arms start to burn, and water stings my injured scalp, but I don't stop. I swim all of the way to the vanishing point, ignoring the fatigue that threatens to be my undoing. When I reach the row of rocks that protect the inlet from the might of the Pacific, I grab on and look for Celeste.

I don't see her. Not out to sea and not in the waters of the inlet. She couldn't have made it out here so fast, could she? I wasn't that far behind her.

It occurs to me that I might be wrong about the vanishing point. This is the point the newspaper labels as the vanishing point, but Celeste may never have seen that article. It was written over a decade before she was born.

She might know about her father's hidden cove, though. She might have followed him there. Hell, she knows about the quartz and amethyst geode near the tunnel. She might have found it by accident.

I swim back. I am a good swimmer, but I rarely indulge, and the distance I have to swim is grueling. It's only my fear for Celeste that moves me forward, and by the time I can walk, I am utterly spent. I see figures on the shore and recognize Evelyn, Jasmine and the officers. Jasmine cups her voice and calls for me to come back, but I ignore her.

I stumble toward the tunnel and pray that the tide will hold.

I move through the tunnel, calling her name. "Celeste! Please wait! Don't do this!"

There's no answer. When I burst into the cave, I see no sign of her. For a sickening moment, I think she's gone to sea already, but then I look at the sand. It is still moist from the recently receded tide. It's comforting to know that the water won't rise

anytime soon, but I don't feel any relief. I walk onto the cave-sheltered beach and the sand molds to my feet, leaving perfect footprints behind.

There are no footprints here but mine. Celeste didn't come this way.

I collapse to the sand and bury my head in my hands. I've lost her. She's vanished, just like Victor. Just like Lisa. Just like Annie.

I force myself to my feet and back through the tunnel. I know if I stop for long, my muscles will cramp. Already, I can feel them starting to seize. I rub my arms and roll my ankles as I walk to try to stifle the inevitable stiffening. I need to reach shore first.

When I reach the shore, I see the officers rushing down the path towards me. I think they're arresting me at first, but they are gentle, and when I collapse onto the sand, one of them asks with genuine concern if I'm all right.

"I'm all right," I assure him. "I'm just exhausted."

"Yeah, I'd say so," the second officer says, looking at the vanishing point at the mouth of the inlet. "You must have swum close to a mile. I don't think I could do that."

It was probably less than half that distance, but it certainly felt like a mile. My legs and arms are spasming, and I have to lie on the sand and submit to the indignity of letting the officers massage them to soothe the pain.

That indignity pales in comparison to the smugness on Jasmine's face. "If you'd just let me take her, this wouldn't have happened."

I don't give her the satisfaction of a response. I stand by my actions regardless of what's happened. Celeste made a poor choice that I should probably have foreseen,

but there is no world where going to estranged family far from her home is beneficial to her right now.

Still, she would be safe. I don't even know if she's alive now.

And where could she have gone? I've found the vanishing point, and I've found the portal she's dreamed about. Where did she go? What "vanishing point" did she travel to this time?"

Maybe the portal is different too. I realize that I've made the same mistake I made earlier. I assume the vanishing point is the one labeled by the article, the mouth of the inlet that feeds Victor's private cove. Then I assume it's the hidden cove, the haven that Victor writes about in her journal.

But I'm not looking for Victor. I'm looking for Celeste.

Inspiration strikes me. Victor recorded his vanishing point. Perhaps Celeste recorded hers.

I get to my feet, grimacing as a final few spasms run through my legs. Evelyn comes quickly to me. "You should rest, Mary. It's hours until high tide, and if your leg cramps on the way up, you might fall."

I start climbing anyway. "We need to look in Celeste's room," I say. "She might have drawn something that can tell us where she is."

Jasmine's been on the phone since scolding me, but when she hears that, she says, "Hold on," then looks up at me. "You're saying she might have told us where her destination is?"

"It's possible," I admit. I have no love lost for the woman, but now's not the time to

fight. She has access to resources that can find Celeste safe and sound.

They follow me upstairs, and we head to Celeste's room.

The room is a mess, but not the way Victor's studio is when he leaves or is taken. It's just covered with different artwork, all in various stages of completion.

The drawings are mostly abstract, like Victor's work but somehow even less representational. Instead of vaguely humanoid shapes engaged in exaggerated but readily identifiable activities, there are just shapes and colors arranged in patterns I can't understand.

A few are less abstract, and it's those that draw my eye. In these drawings, a tall, thin silhouette steps for a bright blue light with yellow rays surrounding it. In some drawings, the light is circular, in others rectangular. In one, the light fills the entire page, and the silhouette is a small, dim shadow near the center.

This is the portal her father steps through, but I have no idea what it means. I'm sure it means something, but I won't find out what that is anytime soon. Certainly not soon enough to find Celeste.

There's a loud knock on the door, and I jump. A moment later, one of the officer's radio chirps. "Four-five-four, what's your twenty?"

The officer answers, "We're in the subject's bedroom inside the house. The tutor believes there might be evidence here."

"I was wrong," I say. "There's no evidence."

"Negative on that evidence, two-two-three. Is that you at the front door?"

“Affirmative. We have four units, and we’re canvassing right now.”

“Ten-four. Are we ten-fifty-three for this call?”

“Negative. Subject is on foot, so we’re assuming no ten-fifty-three.”

“Roger that. We’re heading downstairs.”

When we make it outside, I expect to see Detective Reyes. Instead, the officer in command is a sergeant I recognize as one of the subordinates who searched the house when Victor went missing. Jasmine stalks toward him, her chin lifted. She points her finger at me and says, “Sergeant, this woman interfered with a lawful order to remove this child from the premises and place her into the care of her maternal grandparents. I’d like formal charges to be filed against her for interfering with a lawful court order.”

“And I will follow through on every threat I made, Miss Jasmine. You neglected all of your responsibilities in this case. It’s not acceptable that you—”

"I don't give a shit," the sergeant snaps. "No one's leaving the premises right now. We're going to tear the neighborhood apart for the second time this week, looking for another missing person from this house. If we arrest people, it'll happen when I'm ready for it. Don't talk to me again."

Jasmine turns to me with a haughty smile. She thinks she’s won, I suppose. “I’ll be heading to my superior to report the exact reason why the girl under my care is now missing instead of safely with her grandparents.”

I meet her eyes and feel a disturbingly cold sensation run through me. At the same time, I decide I will ruin her. I will have Sean discover every law she’s ever broken and every policy she’s ever flouted. I will tell her superiors, the news media, social

media and the police. She doesn't give a damn about Celeste. She's just an arrogant little bitch who wants to prove that she's the biggest fish in the small pond of Monterey, California's Child Protective Services. I'll—

“Mary.”

I start, and Evelyn pulls away. She looks at me warily. “Are you all right?”

I sigh. “No. Not even close.”

“Come sit down.”

“I can't sit. I need to help look for her.”

“You're shaking. Your legs are spasming again too. You need to rest. You're not a young woman anymore.”

When she says that, I feel the pain in my legs again. Pins and needles accompany that pain. She's right. I'm not a young woman, and I've exerted myself physically more than I have in perhaps my entire life.

I let her lead me inside. As my anger toward Jasmine fades, my guilt increases. I've failed. I've lost Celeste. I feel another flash of anger, this time toward whoever took Victor. This girl needed me, maybe more than anyone has before. And I was helping her. I was going to bring her out of her shell. Instead, she's had a mental break and now she may be lost for good.

I hate people sometimes. I know it's not kind to say, and I know it's not helpful to feel this way, but I do. People are selfish and cruel, and those that aren't selfish and cruel are crushed and beaten by those that are until they break.

Someone broke Celeste. I will find whoever that was, and I will break them in return.

I only wish that I was confident in my ability to do that.

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Detective Reyes finally arrives an hour later. I am still resting on the couch when she storms in. She sees me, and her brow furrows into a scowl. She jams a finger at me and says, “You. With me.”

“She can’t walk right now,” Evelyn says. “She’s injured.”

“She doesn’t look injured.”

“I’m fine,” I tell Evelyn.

I do wince a little as I get to my feet, but now I’m only sore. The spasms and cramps are gone. I follow Detective Reyes, giving Evelyn an encouraging smile as she leads me outside to the balcony.

“Close the door behind you.”

I comply, and she turns to me with her arms crossed. “It’s time for the truth, Mary.”

I wait for her to continue, and her scowl deepens. “Sometime today would be nice.”

I realize with some shock that she means for me to tell her the truth. “I’ve been honest with you,” I tell her.

She sighs and rubs her temple. “Okay. We’ll chop this up into bite-size pieces. Question one. You should recognize it because it’s a familiar one. How do you know Lisa Reinhardt?”

I feel a touch of irritation. "I've already told you I met her over dinner."

"How does your partner know Lisa Reinhardt?"

"My part... is this because we reported her kidnapped?"

"See, that's really interesting. Because her apartment was trashed, and when we show up, the only person there is an Irish guy who says he's your friend, and that you two showed up and discovered Lisa was kidnapped."

"Is that not what I just said?"

"The kidnapped part is what interests me. How do you know she was kidnapped? Why not killed? Why not drive away? Or hey, maybe she had a mental breakdown and trashed her own place?"

"There was no blood at the apartment," I reply. "So she wasn't killed."

"She wasn't killed there . Doesn't mean she wasn't killed elsewhere."

I sigh. "All right. Well, I'm not a detective, but I guessed that she was kidnapped."

"You're not a detective, but you're the first person on the scene when Lisa Reinhardt goes missing. So why were you there if not to detect something?"

I don't like the way this conversation is going. "Are you insinuating that I am responsible for the crime?"

"Not yet," she says, "but I'll be honest even if you won't. I'm coming damned close to insinuating it."

My jaw tightens. “Shouldn’t your energies be more focused on finding Celeste Holloway?”

“That’s the real kicker. See, I have you arriving late at night, dropped off by your friend who is not a U.S. citizen and who tells me his work visa is ‘in process.’ The next night, I have Victor Holloway missing, and his studio trashed. Three days later, I have you and this same Irishman showing up at Lisa’s apartment, and wouldn’t you know it, the place is trashed, and Lisa Reinhardt is missing. Then, he stays there and calls me while you come back here and less than an hour later, Celeste Holloway goes missing. So I’m getting the feeling that if I want to find Celeste Holloway, I have to become real good friends with Mary Wilcox and Sean O’Connell.”

“I couldn’t have been responsible for Victor or Celeste,” I remind her. “I was with Celeste when Victor was taken, and I was with the social worker when Celeste ran on her own.”

“So now we know that Victor was taken and Celeste ran off on her own. We know that Lisa was kidnapped. We know an awful lot, don’t we?”

“You’re avoiding the point.”

“No, you are. But since you bring it up, Evelyn Torres has been in some pretty interesting places too. You get Celeste out of the way, and she’s alone to ‘take’ Victor. Then you leave her alone with Celeste, and all of a sudden, Celeste is gone.”

My eyes narrow. "You're trying to make a square peg fit in a round hole. Just because I happened to be nearby when the crimes were committed doesn't mean I committed them. The same goes for Evelyn Torres."

“But you do happen to be nearby, don’t you? In fact, looking back at your history, you happen to be nearby when a lot of crimes are committed. You were pretty close

by when Sophie Lacroix murdered Frederick Jensen. Come to think of it, so was Irishman Sean O'Connell. How odd."

"So we're somehow to blame for Sophie's actions?"

"She was a housekeeper too."

"Evelyn is not the criminal responsible for these kidnappings."

"Now they're all kidnappings. Boy, we can't even stick to a story, can we? And how is it that you know Evelyn is not responsible? Is it perchance because Irishman Sean O'Connell illegally obtained security camera footage from a neighbor and confirmed that she was startled by the sound of his studio window shattering?"

I don't reply, but the expression on my face must tell Reyes all she needs to know.

"Who are you, Mary? What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to care for a young girl," I insist. "A young girl who's suffering and scared."

"I wish I could believe that," Reyes replied, "but your work history doesn't track. You were governess to the Ashford family in New York for about five weeks before you happened to force a confession of murder from Mrs. Cecilia Ashford. The children then moved with their uncle and aunt. You then worked for the Carlton family in England for the same amount of time and broke the lid on a cold case involving a murdered young friend of their adult children. The whole family ended up in trouble for that one except for the two sons, both of whom promptly moved to Japan with their cousin. Then you have a nice incident-free six months with the Tylers before flying to Baltimore and exposing two more cold cases. Immediately following the conclusion of those cases, you leave. What happened to the children you were supposed to care for? Do you even know?"

“The Greenwoods were paying me. When they left, I had no income.”

“Except for the millions of dollars you have in your inheritance.”

I don't have an answer to that.

“Then we have Frederick Jensen. You left the house once his murderer was caught too. Now the Holloways. I'm sensing a pattern here.”

“What pattern? In the first three cases, the murders occurred before my arrival.”

“I'll give you that,” Reyes says. “But not in the past two cases. I'll just focus on this case, though. You arrive, and days later, your employer goes missing. Soon after that, a close business associate of his goes missing and now his daughter's run away moments before she was going to be removed from the house. Moments after you arrived to prevent that.”

“Once again,” I reply, trying to keep myself calm in the face of these accusations. “You're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. This is all coincidental.”

“Hell of a coincidence.”

“But far from proof.”

She doesn't answer. I hold her gaze. For the moment, I've maintained my innocence.

“What happened to your sister, Mary?”

I stiffen. “Excuse me?”

“Your sister, Anne Wilcox. What happened to her?”

I'm no longer able to keep calm. "I fail to see what that has to do with Celeste."

"I just find you to be a fascinating person," she says with a touch of contempt. You present yourself as a sensible and proper English gentlewoman, but when I look at your history, there are a lot of holes. Your sister disappears five years before your father dies. You end up inheriting all of the money that would have gone to your sister."

"Oh, please," I scoff. "This is ridiculous. I assure you, I would have been quite as happy with a half million dollars as I was with one million."

"Except that you would have inherited nothing. Your father's will left everything to Annie up until a week before his own death."

I stare at her in shock. I wasn't aware of that. "I didn't know that. I assumed we would be left with an equal gift."

"You can see why I might find the timeline suspicious, though. We have you and your sister getting into a fight the night she goes missing, never to be seen again—"

"We didn't fight! We—"

You feel guilty...

"We argued, but it wasn't—"

What you did...

"You are completely out of line! I would never have harmed my sister! I don't need money. I would have been perfectly content without it!"

Reyes's face remains as cold and hard as stone. "Then you asked the police to close the investigation into her disappearance."

"I did not! I begged them to keep it open!"

"Then you spend three months in a mental hospital alternating between catatonia and bouts of hysteria where among many other things, you scream, 'It's my fault. I'm so sorry, Annie.'"

An image flashes through my mind of pale walls and blurred faces in white gowns crowding me and whispering unintelligibly to themselves. I don't remember anything she says, but I don't remember anything about my time in the facility. Only these occasional flashes. "You had no right to obtain my medical records without a court order."

"Okay. I'll strike that from the record," she says sardonically. "But I'm trying to find three innocent people who have now gone missing, and the only thing that's changed in their lives in over a decade is the arrival of a formal mental patient whose associates drop like flies everywhere she goes and a private investigator who helps her break into one of our victims' apartments. As you pointed out, it's a lot of coincidence, but as I pointed out, it's a hell of a coincidence. A lot of them. More than one. I have to try to figure out who is most likely to have committed these crimes, and from what I can see so far, the most likely culprit is staring me in the face in shocked guilt."

It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. I knew Reyes was considering me as a possible suspect, but I didn't realize how hard she was looking at me. I certainly didn't expect that she'd dive into my past so thoroughly.

I think of something else and frown. "Where is Sean right now?"

“Sean’s hanging out at the station for a little while. We’re going to follow up on his work visa.”

My eyes widen. “You’re going to deport him?”

“That’s outside of my authority,” Reyes replies. “I just want to know why he’s here. If you think of another reason besides breaking into an innocent woman’s apartment and stealing home security footage, feel free to call me.”

“Perhaps instead of investigating my past and abusing your authority with my friend, you should try to find the three people who have gone missing.”

Reyes gives me an icy smile. “That’s exactly why I’m investigating the two of you.”

I return a stare as frosty as hers. “Am I being detained, Detective?”

She chuckles. “No.”

“Then this conversation is over.”

She lifts her hands slightly. “All right.” She heads inside, stopping at the door to say, “Get some rest, Mary. You look exhausted.”

I stand where I am as she closes the door behind her. My thoughts move to the picture of Annie in the basement and the mural of her in the hidden cove. If Reyes discovers those and compares them to pictures of Annie, then it will only reinforce her belief that I’m behind these kidnappings. I’m caught between a rock and a hard place. On one side, an innocent girl and two others are missing and perhaps dead. On the other side, my own freedom hangs by a thread.

I look out the window again. The tide has risen once more, and the calm waters of

Fairy Cove are replaced by the raging might of the dark and cold ocean.

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I am terrified that the police will remove me from the property, but Reyes and her officers leave without saying anything to me. Evelyn tries to convince me to come home with her so she can care for me, but I assure her that my injuries aren't serious and I want to be here in case Celeste comes home. That last part convinces her, so after eliciting a promise from me to call her if she returns, or if I need anything, she heads to her place.

My body aches deeply, and from time to time, a stray spasm will cause me to wince. I'm more hurt than I let on to Evelyn, but I really do want to remain here. Celeste is an emotionally troubled girl, but she's intelligent, and I believe she has enough of her wits about her to know that she can't wander on her own forever. She'll come home, and when she does, I want to be here. Maybe this is a foolish hope, but I'd rather cling to a foolish hope than no hope at all.

I make myself some tea and ruminate on the position in which I find myself. As Reyes points out, I use kidnapped and missing interchangeably in our conversation. The problem is that I don't know myself what the truth is. Victor's behavior makes it easy to believe that he finally broke from reality and ran off somewhere after trashing his studio. Celeste ran away, but while her own mental state is troublesome, I don't believe she's so far gone she would harm herself. I think she acts based on fear more than dissociation.

The complicating factor is Lisa. She strikes me as very well composed. Perhaps she's not the most pleasant person, but she doesn't seem remotely the sort to have a mental episode and run off. It's far easier to believe that she was forcibly removed from her home, and if she was, then it's likely that Victor was also taken.

But by who? Marcus comes to mind, but I don't believe he could have overpowered Victor, and I certainly don't believe he could have done so without Evelyn hearing the struggle.

But Sean could have. Sean is younger than Victor and more powerfully built. He's also a private investigator with decades of experience sneaking into places unnoticed. He could have made his way into the house through a window or a back door without Evelyn realizing. He could have quickly overpowered Victor and moved him outside before Evelyn was able to reach the studio. It would be difficult but not impossible for him.

My lips turn down as I realize that Reyes's suspicion of me isn't entirely unreasonable from her point of view. Reyes doesn't know me or Sean. As far as she knows, we're strangers who appeared out of nowhere shortly before the master of the house went missing. Sean is my friend, and we've both been caught breaking and entering into Lisa's apartment. Of all the people in proximity to Victor recently, Sean is the one most capable of kidnapping him. Money isn't a motive for either of us, but if Reyes discovers that Annie once knew Victor, then that will be motive enough to convince her of my guilt.

I regret telling Sean to call the police. I should have let someone else discover her apartment. The door was ajar. Reyes would certainly dust for prints if she hasn't already. Someone would have realized soon enough that the two of us were there. I just didn't think how it would look to have the two of us the first ones there.

I have to learn what really happened. I have to find the answer quickly before Reyes learns about Annie and arrests me. I may have to do it without Sean, too, since he's now suffering legal trouble on my behalf.

That thought sends a wave of guilt through me. He warned me not to go with him, and I forced him to take me. He's experienced with this sort of thing, and I'm not.

Now, he's suffering because of my own stubbornness. I have to learn what really happened for his sake as well as mine.

The tea has soothed me enough that I'm able to move with only mild soreness. I head upstairs to Victor's studio. I've only had a brief look at the room, but if there's a clue to Victor's recent actions, it's probably hidden somewhere in the abstract drawings that to his mind transcend reality.

The room is still taped off, but at this point, the police have had their chance to look. If entering here makes me even more a suspect, so be it.

There is a thin layer of dust over everything. Dirt and leaves have blown in through the shattered window and every now and then my eyes fall on the corpse of an insect, legs stiff and curled in the throes of death. It makes the room look like a tomb. Perhaps it is.

The paintings in immediate view are unfinished. They're mostly of the angular pseudo-men that seem to be the subject of Victor's most recent artistic inspirations. Some of them are only line drawings.

There are several cabinets in the room. A few of these are opened and their contents scattered on the ground. Paints, brushes, oil pens, and a few other odds and ends.

Two remain closed and undamaged. Their presence is an almost stark contrast to the state of the rest of the studio. I open these and find dozens of completed paintings placed carefully into felt slides. I pull a few of these out and look at them.

They are of a different style than the other works I've seen. They aren't wholly abstract the way his current paintings are. They're not realistic or representational either. I am no art student, but the closest analogy I can give is that they appear to be images captured through dense fog from a great distance.

Despite the blurry impressionism of the pieces, the subject matter is clear. The paintings are of bodies of water with a figure or figures in the distance. I pull more paintings out and compare them. In some of the paintings, the ocean is a wide and flat expanse. In others, a massive rock can be seen to the right of the figures.

Again, in some paintings, there is only one figure, while in others, there are two. In the paintings with one figure, the figure is male, and in the others, a female stands next to the male. The male in the figure is either Elias Blackwood or Victor himself. The female must be Annie.

What could this mean? Is it an homage to his mentor and to Annie? An homage to Victor's own grief and an attempt to cope with the loss of two people who were very important to him? Is it a symbol of the end he sees coming for himself, perhaps the end he wishes for?

A more sobering thought occurs to me. The female could be Celeste. This could be Victor expressing the slow collapse of his own mind, his downward spiral into grief. He could have seen himself falling faster and faster toward the "vanishing point" when his sanity would fail him. He could have seen the same tendencies in Celeste and fear that she would join him in his descent into madness.

A chill runs through me. I am not a believer in prophecy, but Victor's self-awareness has borne itself out in reality. He may not have been kidnapped after all but simply lost himself to the vanishing point. And Celeste may not have simply run from fear but instead suffered the same collapse.

But what about Lisa? She still doesn't make sense. Unless... perhaps Victor kidnapped her?

I shake my head. Enough speculation. I must find an answer, not try to guess it.

I look at the rock. Were there an equivalent edifice on the other side, I would say it was representative of Fairy Cove, but there is only the structure on the right. Could this be yet another vanishing point?

I look through the rest of the studio, hoping to find something, some hint that might tell me exactly where to look, but these two cabinets are the only ones that hold completed works, and all of them are variations on the same painting. There is no paperwork or writing of any kind, no journal that might give me a deeper insight into Victor's mind.

I head to Celeste's room. She is an extremely sensitive and intuitive girl. She may have gleaned a deeper understanding of her father's plans and recorded them somewhere. I know I'm grasping at a straw, but I feel very strongly that I'm right on the cusp of understanding this mystery, and if I could only find the one missing piece, then everything would make sense.

The search begins much as it does in Victor's studio. There is no journal or diary anywhere to be found, and most of the paintings are incomplete sketches that don't seem to have anything to do with a vanishing point. The glaring exceptions are the drawings of her father stepping through a ring of light. If there's a clue to be found in that dark blue water and the halo of brighter blue light, then it's lost on me.

I look through her closet for other drawings. I feel a touch of guilt spying on her like this, but nothing is more important than getting her home safely, and the clue to that might be here among these drawings.

I find stacks of paper that reveal nothing. The subjects range from fantasy sketches of dragons, knights and princesses to still lifes and landscapes of everything but a vanishing point. When I finish looking through everything, I release a soft cry of frustration. There has to be something ! I will not accept that they simply vanished without a trace.

I sit on the edge of Celeste's bed and wait for my breathing to calm. Celeste has a mirror on top of the desk in her room. The reflection that stares back at me is shocking. My eyes are wild and bloodshot, and my hair is matted. Wisps hang over my forehead, a few strands even touching my lips. I don't notice them until I see them in the mirror.

I look back at the image of Victor stepping through the blue halo above the water. For a moment, I envy the man. Wherever Victor is now, he no longer needs to worry about his walls crumbling down. They've already crumbled, and he can finally be free. Perhaps I'll be so lucky one day.

I shiver at that thought. I think myself perfectly lucid, but the woman in the mirror is not a sane woman. I can't help but wonder how close I am to falling into my own vanishing point. How much more can I endure before I close my eyes and open them to find myself surrounded by people in white coats?

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“So you just want to stay here for the rest of your life? Get your degree, marry an Ivy League brat, join a country club and chuckle at all the fools who don’t want to live like rich snobs?”

“What on Earth are you on about, Annie? I’m in school here. I can’t just leave that behind because you don’t get on with Mother.”

Annie chuckles and looks up at the ceiling. “Oh my God! Do you even realize how pretentious you sound? ‘Mother,’ and ‘Father.’ Like we’re all characters in some Victorian novel.”

“Do you realize how childish you sound?” I retort. ““Oh, I’ve had such a rough life. I should throw away all of my opportunities and hitchhike across the country until I find myself. And while I’m at it, why not convince my sister to do the same thing?””

“I don’t want to be here anymore!” she shrieks. “God damn It, Mary! I don’t want to be here! I don’t want to fucking be here!”

She falls silent, breathing heavily. Her face is filled with color, and her expression mirrors my own shock. We stand there for several minutes before she says again, “I just don’t see the point. So we have money. So what? We’re not happy. Dad’s pulled away from everyone and everything. Mom’s either going to kill herself or all of us one of these days. Maybe both. You’ve put on a shell of aggressive ordinariness and convinced yourself that you’re the only sane person and it’s everyone else who’s troubled.” I roll my eyes, but she ignores me. “And I can’t breathe anymore. It’s like I’m just screaming internally, but I can’t show it on the outside.”

“You did a pretty good job of screaming on the outside a few seconds ago.”

She meets my eyes. I see hurt in those eyes, but beneath the hurt, I see accusation, the same accusation she wore on her face when mother placed her next to the stove at five years old, and I didn’t warn her about the heat, the same accusation she wears when I watch mother try to drown her when she’s nine and do nothing to save her.

Then that hurt and accusation morphs into understanding. She sees me, or at least thinks she sees me more clearly than ever before. She scoffs and says, “You know, underneath it all, you’re just like Mom.”

I recoil as though slapped. “That’s enough, Annie.”

“It’s true, though. You hide it better than she does, but you’re just like her. You come across as sweet and nice and responsible, but there’s an evil streak in you that shows itself when push really comes to shove.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Do you remember when Mom tried to drown me?”

My lower lip twitches. “I was ten years old. There was nothing I could do.”

“You’re right. She would have just killed you too. But you know something? When Dad showed up and pulled Mom off of me, and I finally lifted my head out of the water, you were the first person I looked at. And guess what? You were smiling. Just like this.”

She smiles at me, the bare-toothed grin of a witch. Reason flees me, and I rush at her, lips pulled back in a snarl, fingers extended like claws. “You lying bitch!”

I scream and flail my arms in front of me. They slice through the air but find no purchase on my attacker. I cry out again and shake my hair from my eyes.

The room is empty. I am staring at the drawings strewn on the floor. It's dim, the only light present coming from the moon, unencumbered by clouds this night.

I've fallen asleep in Celeste's room. I don't remember lying down, but I must have. It's still light out when I enter here, and now it's the dead of night. I look at my phone. Two o'clock in the morning. I've been sleeping for hours.

I look up at the mirror then quickly away from the harpy that looks back at me. I try to remember my nightmare, but this one flees the instant I wake. It's probably just as well. Whatever it was has frightened me to the point of nausea.

I release a ragged sigh and get slowly to my feet. Once again, I am too awake to expect any more sleep. I head downstairs to Victor's art room instead. I don't know what I'm looking for exactly, but as long as I'm awake, I might as well look through the rest of the drawers in the desk where I find his journal.

The stairs are dim as I descend them, and the basement is ghostly in the soft gray light of the moon. When I flip the switch in the art closet, and the bright yellow light tears the shadows from existence, the effect is jarring. I have another sigh, then walk into the room.

I open the top drawers and begin looking through the financial paperwork. I don't expect to find anything here anymore than I did when I first looked, but I need something to do to calm the animal terror lurking in the recesses of my mind.

The paperwork is hundreds of sheets thick. Most of them are bills of sale for artwork

dating back to when Victor was a student under Elias's tutelage. A few record purchases of art supplies. Rarely, I'll pull out a sheet with comic doodles on them, evidence of a bored Victor killing time while he waits for inspiration. None of the doodles appear connected with Victor's or Celeste's disappearance.

My mind slowly calms. When it does, it turns to the problem of Lisa. She is the odd woman out, but at the same time, not so much. She knew Elias, and she's worked with Victor for many years. She would have known Annie at least in passing, and Celeste hated her enough to attempt violence on her.

But why would she also be targeted? I have reason to believe that she would come after Victor herself but not reason to believe that someone would attack and kidnap both of them. I don't believe Sean's speculation that this is some sort of debt collection attempt. If it were only Lisa taken, I could believe it, but Victor is Lisa's source of income and by extension the source of income for whoever she owes money to. I suppose that criminals aren't logical, but it stretches reason to think that Victor could simply have been caught up in Lisa's troubles.

It's not so unreasonable to think that he's also in financial straits. If, as Marcus told Sean, he's been unsuccessful commercially in recent years, he might be in debt as well. It still seems rather cartoonish that he would be taken by some cigar-smoking gangster in a pinstripe suit, but I suppose it's at least conceivable. Maybe I'll find more recent records here that will reveal if Victor was also in trouble.

I find nothing in the two smaller drawers more recent than twenty-nine years ago. I wonder if Victor even remembers that they're still here. The thoroughness of these records indicates that at one point, at least, Victor was fastidious when it came to tracking his money, but the age of these records suggests that it may have been Elias pushing him to take care. Or perhaps part of his personality change when Elias was killed was to become more flippant about money in his quest to honor the artistic legacy of his teacher.

My mind is wandering again. God, I just hate not knowing! I hate swimming in a sea of secrets without understanding what the truth is! If only everyone could just be out in the open with everything. It might be possible to trust people then.

I open the last drawer, the larger one opposite the one that contains Victor's journal. There are more financial records in there, and they appear far more recent than the ones in the smaller drawers. That's promising.

The top papers are from six years ago. They include bills of sale for more recent works, commissions paid to Lisa, and gallery fees paid to Marcus and a few other gallery owners from venues outside of the Bay Area. It seems Victor was doing well for himself as recently as a few years ago.

In fact, as I leaf through the papers and come to more recent records, it appears that Victor has continued to do well. I don't take time to do the math, but just from what these records indicate, he's sold over one-point-five million dollars' worth of art over the past six years. That is not extravagant wealth, to be sure, but it's enough to support the lifestyle he enjoys.

And there are indications that he remains responsible, too. One of the records is the title to his home with a statement from his mortgage lender that the loan has been paid in full. This is dated eight months before he hires me, which explains how he can afford my salary without difficulty.

So he can't be in debt. Unless he has a second home in Monaco and sails there on his four-hundred-foot superyacht, he hasn't squandered his money.

I leaf to the last few pages in this stack and my eyes widen when I see them. They're bank statements with four particular transactions highlighted. The statements begin ten months ago and end four months ago. Every four to eight weeks or so, Victor transfers twenty thousand dollars to Lisa Reinhardt, totaling eighty thousand dollars

during the six-month timeframe he loaned her money.

But why? And what does this have to do with their disappearance?

One possibility is that Victor and Lisa are in love with each other, and Celeste's hatred of Lisa is motivated by jealousy. Lisa may have come to Victor for help, and he paid her a great sum to cover her debt. Then, once it became clear that his help wouldn't be enough to save Lisa, he staged their disappearances so they could leave and be together. It's a fanciful idea, but not less fanciful than any of the other possibilities, and certainly not unheard of.

The other possibility is that Victor's mental break was unrelated to Lisa's debt, and Lisa staged her own disappearance because she lost her source of income. That explains the tension between the two of them at dinner. Victor may have been refusing to help her recently, and she may have come to beg him for money again. Celeste's hatred would in that case be contempt for Lisa and protectiveness toward her father.

I sigh and bring my hands to my chin, interlacing my fingers in front of my mouth. I'm so close. I'm right on the cusp of an answer, I can feel it. It just won't come to me. The fate of an innocent young girl may rest on the answer to this question, not to mention mine and Sean's fate.

And time is running out.

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A thought comes to me as I ruminate on what I've found. My immediate reaction to the thought is to dismiss it out of hand, but it refuses to depart.

The thought is that I might find more information at Lisa's apartment. When Sean and I investigate, we look for blood or footprints or scraps of clothing that might lead us to our pursuers. I open the desk and look for paperwork in there, but I don't thoroughly examine the apartment. There may be answers hidden there that I haven't found yet.

The reason to dismiss this thought is obvious. Sean and I are already suspected of being involved in these crimes. If I'm caught snooping at that apartment again, it will be the final nail in our coffins.

I'm not sure what I expect to find either. I don't know if I suspect Lisa of some nefarious plan to kill Victor and run away with... with what? What would she gain from that other than the certainty that she will never have his money again?

Or do I suspect the two of them are working together? I guess that's possible, but I can't believe that Victor would be so callous as to leave his daughter behind.

Then again, Celeste told me that he had been neglectful of her. She didn't use the word, but her meaning was clear. Perhaps it's time I stop looking at Victor through rose-colored glasses.

I sigh and lean back in the chair. The fact is that I still don't know enough to be sure of what's happened. That's why I want to go to Lisa's apartment. It's the only place I haven't scoured from top to bottom.

And that's why, even though it's an enormous risk, I stand and head to my room for my car keys. Reason screams at me to stop, but I have long since accepted that I'm not capable of sitting around and twiddling my thumbs when I have the ability to do something to help innocent people. I don't know if Victor and Lisa are innocent anymore, but I am certain that Celeste is. For her sake, I must find the answer to this mystery.

I check for police cars when I leave the house. I don't see any. I get in the car and drive toward the apartment. I remember the way from when Sean drives the other day.

My heart pounds as I navigate the nearly empty roadways. I don't see any police officers, but it's possible that they're hidden from view. It's also possible that there is a car assigned to watch Lisa's apartment, to say nothing of what will happen if the neighbors catch me breaking in.

But I have to try. I have to do something.

I park the car across the street from the building and look around. Once more, I don't see any police officers. Once more, I remind myself that just because I don't see them doesn't mean they aren't there.

I check my phone. Four o'clock. The sun will rise at six, and more importantly, Evelyn will arrive at Victor's house by then. I must leave the apartment no later than five-thirty to ensure I'm home before she arrives. That gives me very little time to find anything. I'll have to hurry.

I leave the car and walk into the building. No one pokes their head out to wonder why a stranger has turned up in the wee hours of the morning. I'll have to hope that, like most Americans, the residents here care little about the comings and goings of their neighbors.

I reach Lisa's apartment. There is no police tape on the door, probably because leaving it there would alert potential thieves that the owner isn't home. I test the handle and find it locked.

This is when things become really dangerous. I need to pick the lock. If I'm discovered before I finish, I will be in serious trouble.

I look around. There's no one in sight, but all of the doors face the same hallway. It would be as simple as stepping outside for someone to discover me.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," I whisper.

I quickly retrieve a bobby pin and a small jeweler's screwdriver from my purse. I buy the screwdriver after working for the Carlton family and breaking into a doctor's office to look for evidence of a missing young woman who I later find out was murdered by that same doctor.

I kneel in front of the door and get to work. Fortunately for me, the lock is simple and cheaply made. It's the work of only a couple of minutes to pick the lock and enter the apartment. I close and lock the door behind me, then debate whether I should turn the lights on or use my cell phone's flashlight. In the end, I decide to use the flashlight. I'll just have to be careful to keep the beam from shining on the windows.

Since I have limited time, I start in the bedroom. The room looks as it does when Sean and I first investigate. If the police looked through here, they were careful not to disturb the scene.

I check the desk again just in case I missed something. It's still empty. I move on to the drawers, digging through the clothing Lisa left behind. I feel odd digging through these very personal belongings to look for evidence, but I must uncover the answers to this mystery, and I'm running out of time. Celeste is running out of time.

Celeste! I've completely forgotten that she might come home and find the house empty! What will she do if she returns to find herself alone?

That thought stills me for a minute, but I shake it off. I'm already here. I'll be back soon enough, and I really do need to see if there's anything helpful here. Still, I am left with a great deal of anxiety as I continue to search Lisa's apartment. I can only hope that my time will yield something worthwhile.

When I finish in the bedroom, I head to the kitchen next. For some reason, people tend to keep important paperwork in a kitchen drawer when they don't keep it filed somewhere in their bedroom. I hope Lisa is one of those people.

I find the famous paperwork drawer, and my heart leaps when I see papers left there. The first few papers are receipts for household goods: a hair dryer, a laptop, groceries from the previous summer. How strange the bits of detritus that collect in people's lives.

I dig deeper and find a sheaf of bills and advertisements. Many of the bills have bright red PAST DUE notices stamped to them. I can well understand the stress Lisa must experience.

The final item is a brochure for real estate in Costa Rica. Or perhaps a resort vacation? It's written in Spanish, and I don't read the language, so I can't tell. Something in the back of my mind makes me feel that this is important, though, so I pull it out of the drawer for a closer look.

When I turn it over, I see handwritten notes on the back. One reads Stop by dealer first. Meet in a public place. The others are six-digit numbers that don't make sense to me. Each number ends with the same two digits, though. I read them again, and I gasp when I realize that the two final digits represent the year. This year. From there, it's easy to see that the other numbers are the day and month. There are four dates in

total, and they all occur between a month ago and tomorrow.

Lisa was planning something. But what? Who is the dealer? Marcus? And why does she want to meet him in a public place?

Could she have feared for her safety? Maybe Marcus is more dangerous than he seems. He could employ people who might have harmed Lisa and Victor. Maybe Lisa was trying to find a way to pay him off before he came for both of them. Maybe Marcus decided it would be more lucrative to just get both of them out of the way.

And what? What else could he be planning? Or am I completely mistaken?

I hear a noise and freeze. It's people talking. Have I been found out?

I quickly put the paperwork back in the drawer and look for a place to hide. The voices are growing louder. One male and one female. I overhear the male ask, "Do you have the key?" and the female reply, "Of course I have the key, dipshit."

I recognize the voices. The man is Marcus, and the woman is Lisa. I rush from the kitchen and into the bathroom, then close and lock the door. I can't think of anywhere else to hide.

A moment later, I hear the front door open. Marcus and Lisa continue to argue.

"We should have just waited for him to turn the paintings over to you," Marcus says. "His new series wasn't bad. He'd find buyers for them."

"His new series was crap, and I didn't want to wait ten months struggling to find the right medium-sized business who needed some post-modern schlock to decorate their leased offices."

“And you think Pacific landscapes are going to sell better?”

“I think they’ll sell faster. That’s more important right now.”

“Not if we can’t pay Rizzo.”

I stifle a gasp. So Lisa is trying to pay a loan shark. She must have ransacked her own apartment after all, and she is almost certainly behind Victor’s disappearance.

She confirms that a moment later when she says, “We will pay Rizzo. We’ll meet Jesus in San Diego, unload the paintings, then wire Rizzo some money right before we board the train to Mexico. We’ll keep the rest of the money and use that to buy a plot in Costa Rica where we can live like royalty for the rest of our lives.”

I hear them rifling through the kitchen, possibly looking for the same brochure I was looking at a moment ago.

Marcos laughs. “Royalty? We’ll be lucky to buy a hut and a couple of fishing poles.”

“You want to go there or prison?” she asks drily. “Or maybe Skid Row.”

“I’m just saying. I think we should manage our expectations for once.”

“Good idea. Keep that in mind when you get stupid enough to try to make a pass at me again.”

He scoffed. “A pass? At you? Look, I’m a depressed slob, but I have some self-respect.”

“Go to hell. All right, here’s the brochure.”

“Why do you need that anyway?”

“So I know where to go in Costa Rica. Unless you think we can just guess.”

“Okay, there’s no need to get pissy,” Marcus replies, injured. “I just hate being here. The cops could be looking at us.”

“The cops are looking for me. They think I was kidnapped. They’re not going to look for us in the place I was kidnapped from. They’re not going to look for you at all.”

“Unless they see me here. Then they’ll be very interested in finding me.”

“So maybe shut up. That’s all we need. Now we need to go to Victor’s place and get the paintings. Then it’s off to Mexico, my darling love.”

She says the last part sarcastically, and Marcus replies with equal sarcasm. “Oh, what a joy to run away with such a beautiful and kindhearted woman.”

The front door closes, and I hear their footsteps retreating. My heart pounds as the truth settles in my mind. Lisa staged her own kidnapping and is now planning to steal Victor's life's work to pay her and Marcus's debts. They must be behind Victor's disappearance as well.

And now they’re going to his house to finish the job and then flee the country. I can’t allow them to do that.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm

My phone rings, and I stifle a scream. I quickly pull it from my pocket and silence it. I stand still for over a minute, listening intently. When I don't hear anyone coming, I breathe a sigh of relief.

Then my phone rings again. I look at the number. Sean.

I answer and hiss, "Will you stop that?"

"Will I stop it? Are you delusional? You left me to rot in a jail cell overnight. You should be grateful that Immigration confirmed my right to be in this country, or I'd come after you out of spite."

"So you're out of jail?"

"Yes. Over Detective Reyes's strong objections. She has nothing to hold me on. Actually, she does. We both trespassed, and you bloody admitted to it. I managed to convince her that we were friends of Lisa's and acted the way any naturally concerned friend would."

I sigh. "Well, I told her I only just met Lisa, so that explains why she thinks I'm lying."

He offers a sigh of his own. "Christ, what a clusterfuck. I warned you about this, Mary. I told you not to come with me. If you'd let me handle things my way—"

"You're right. You're right, and I'll apologize later, but I need you to listen right now. I'm at Lisa's apartment. I just saw—"

“You’re what? Are you serious?”

“Sean, listen to me, please.”

“No! No, I will not listen to you! Are you kidding me? For the love of... you’re mental! You know that, right? You’re bloody mental?”

“That seems to be the consensus,” I reply drily, “now if you will shut the hell up for one moment, I’ll tell you what I saw here.”

“By all means. I’ve already nearly gone to prison for you. Why not again?”

I roll my eyes. I’m not interested in having this fight right now. “Lisa faked her kidnapping, Sean. She was just here with Marcus. They owe debts to a loan shark, just like you speculated. They’re going to steal Victor’s artwork and sell it to a dealer in San Diego. I suspect a criminal one because I found a note that said to meet him in a public place. Then they’re going to pay the loan shark and flee to Costa Rica to escape their other debts.”

“Slow down. You saw Lisa and Marcus at the apartment?”

“Yes. They just left. They’re going to Victor’s place right now.”

It hits me that I’m still in the bathroom of Lisa’s apartment while the two criminals are on their way to make good their escape. I leave and rush to my own car. I don’t care if I’m seen now. If the police follow me to Victor’s place, so much the better.

“Shite,” Sean breathes through the phone. “They’re probably the ones that offed Victor then, too.”

I don’t care for his flippant way of saying it, but he’s not wrong. “Yes. I believe so.”

“And Celeste? We’re sure she’s run away?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think Evelyn took her somewhere?”

“No. She wouldn’t have been able to hide her.”

“Maybe she threw her over the balcony.”

“We would have found the body then. No, listen. Lisa and Marcus are behind this. I don’t know how they got rid of Victor, but they did. Or Victor ran off on his own, and they saw the opportunity. Either way, they’re going to be free and clear soon, so let’s talk about all of this after we stop them.”

“Wait, we?”

I jump in the car and speed back toward Victor’s place. “Yes. I’m heading there now. Get to me as soon as you can.”

“What? Are you stupid? You can’t go alone!”

“That’s why I told you to meet me there.”

“How? You have the car, you bloody imbecile!”

“So get another one! Or call the police and have them meet me there. Actually yes. Do that.”

“Or, you go somewhere safe and let the bloody police handle it!”

“I can’t. I might not have time.”

"What the hell... Mary, for the love of God, do not confront them on your own! You'll get yourself hurt!"

“You said you care about me, right?”

“What? You want to talk about this now?”

“If you care about me, then you need to understand something about me. I can not sit back and hope that others will protect the people I care about. I’ve done that before, and I’ve suffered greatly for it. I won’t do it again. You’ve pointed out before that I repeatedly risk my life for others. Well, here I am doing it again.”

“But there’s no need, Mary! Let the police—”

“I can’t trust the damned police!” I shout. “Like you’ve said, they think I’m the murderer! Instead of trying to figure out what actually happened, Reyes dug into my past and decided that because I lost Annie and spent time in a mental hospital thirty years ago that this is somehow my fault. She tried to deport you when all you did was alert them to what we both thought was the disappearance of another innocent person! They’ve had their chance to do the right thing, and they’ve failed. The only way they do their job is if the answer is shoved right under their bloody noses! So that’s what we’re going to do. Call them and get to Victor’s house as soon as you can.”

Sean is silent for a while. When he speaks again, there is resignation in his tone. “All right. I’ll get them there as fast as I can. Please be safe. Record their conversations. Take pictures. Don’t try to fight them. You’re a fifty-two-year-old woman, and you’re not invincible. I’ve saved your life twice already. I don’t want to have to save your life again.”

I smile sadly. “You may have to care for another woman then.”

“Damn it, Mary.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

I hang up and take a deep breath. I will reach Victor’s house in ten minutes. Lisa and Marcus will still be there. They won’t have had enough time to load their car with Victor’s art.

I look at my phone. Five-thirty. Evelyn will arrive for work twenty minutes after I do. If I’m lucky, she’ll arrive before Lisa and Marcus are finished. If I’m very lucky, Sean and the police will arrive before then.

We can stop them. We might not find Victor or Celeste, but at the very least, we can stop these two hateful people from capitalizing off of their demise.

I feel a wave of sadness when I think of Celeste. She was right about Lisa the whole time. She might not have known what Lisa was planning, but her instincts were correct.

“I’ll stop her,” I whisper. “For your sake, Celeste, I’ll stop her.”

I reach the house precisely ten minutes later. There’s a van parked in the driveway with the rear panel doors open and facing the house. Apparently, Lisa and Marcus aren’t worried about being seen by the neighbors. Maybe they’re hoping no one will question why Victor’s belongings are being removed since he’s been missing for days now.

I park the car and quickly make my way inside. The front door is open, but there's no one in the foyer. I hear footsteps ascending the stairs, however, so I quickly rush behind one of Victor's statues and turn my body so the stone profile hides me from view.

Lisa's and Marcus's voice carries up the stairs. I pull my cell phone from my pocket, open the camera, and turn the volume down so I can record without them hearing my phone chime.

"How much are you planning to take?" Marcus asks.

"All of it," Lisa replies Here and in the studio. Not the statues. Those are too heavy."

"It'll take forever to load all of that."

"No, it won't. There's only a few dozen upstairs, and none of them are framed. Two more loads from the basement and one upstairs, then we're gone."

"What if the maid gets here? Or the nanny?"

Lisa scoffs. "They're not going to work for free. Victor's dead. Who's gonna pay them?"

My breath catches in my throat. So they did kill Victor!

"How do we know Victor's dead, though?" Marcus replies. "The hitman never got back to me."

"He told us he'd never get back to us."

"He never sent me a picture, though, or anything. Don't they have to provide proof of

death?"

They exit the front door, so I can't hear them for a few seconds. I process what I've just heard. So a hitman was hired to kill Victor, but there was no proof of death. Could Victor have survived the assault somehow?

He must have. I found the evidence of a camp in the hidden cove. So then where did he go from there? Did he go into hiding? Why would he do that without Celeste?

My speculation is cut off when I hear them returning. "It won't matter anyway. If we're in Costa Rica, they can't get us. It's not like Victor can send people after us down there."

Marcus replies to Lisa. "What about the girl? What if she's told people?"

"Then they'd be here. Relax, Marcus. Seriously, what are the chances Celeste is still alive anyway?"

They start descending the stairs. I hear Lisa add, "Good riddance too. The little bitch hated me."

"Well, you were planning to kill her father."

"So? She didn't know that. She just thought I was trying to marry him or something."

Their voices fade again. I stop the video and send it to Sean, just in case something happens to me or my phone. I look at the time. Five-forty-five. They said two more loads from the basement and one from the studio. That has them leaving right around six o'clock.

I listen for sirens. Why am I not hearing any? What's taking the police so long?

Maybe I should call them myself. I could dial nine-one-one and let them listen in on the conversation. They could—

“Should we be worried about the nanny?”

That’s Marcus’s voice.

“Why would we worry about the nanny?” Lisa replies wearily. “What’s she gonna do?”

“Well, she was asking you a bunch of questions.”

“She wanted to know why Celeste went psycho-ape on me. I told her the truth. Who the hell knows when you’re talking about insane artists?”

There’s a thump, and Lisa snaps, “Hey! Be careful!”

“Sorry. Look, I just don’t like this, okay? I’ll feel better when we’re in Costa Rica.”

“Well, quit whining, all right? The nanny has no reason to be here anymore. Not with Celeste floating with the fairies somewhere.”

“Hey! What are you two doing here?”

I jump at that voice. At the same time, my heart leaps with joy. Evelyn’s here early!

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Lisa shrieks, and Marcus releases an oath. “Shit. I told you the maid would still be here.”

“What are you doing here?” Evelyn repeats. “Lisa? I thought you were missing.”

Lisa laughs nervously. “Why would you think that?”

“Someone trashed your apartment. Badly. The police thought you were kidnapped.”

“What? That’s so weird. I mean, I haven’t been home yet since I got back from visiting my sister, but... oh my God. Was I robbed? Did someone break in?”

“I... I guess so,” Evelyn says warily. “Why are you here so early?”

“We’re picking up the last of Victor’s artwork,” Lisa explains. “Marcus and I are going to sell them in his gallery. He opens at nine, and we want everything ready for display by then. We’re going to use the money to help Celeste. The poor dear. How is she?”

“She... she’s not here. She ran away.”

Lisa gasps. “Oh my goodness! Why? What happened?”

My blood boils at Lisa’s lies. I’m beginning to wish I’d allowed Celeste to attack her.

Unfortunately, Evelyn seems to be falling for it. “The social worker came here to take her to her grandparents. She didn’t want to go. Mary tried to calm her down, but

when she went outside to talk to the social worker, Celeste freaked out again. I tried to stop her, but she knocked me down and ran away. Mary went looking for her, but she had already gotten away.”

Damn it, where are the police? I open my phone to dial nine-one-one. Instead, I find the battery dead. I nearly scream in frustration. I’ve been so out of it that I’ve forgotten to charge it.

"That's horrible!" Lisa says. She sighs. "Oh, it's just awful! I was worried something like this would happen. I love Victor like a brother, but he's been so depressed lately. He's never been the most stable of individuals to begin with, but with his depression getting worse and what with all of the trouble he's had with his latest series, I worried he might snap and hurt himself." She sighs again. "I wish I had stepped in and gotten him help before it was too late. Or at least take Celeste somewhere safe."

“Well, we’ll make sure this money goes to her somehow,” Marcus added. “We can start a foundation for them. Maybe use it to research undiagnosed familial mental health issues.”

“Yes. What a wonderful idea, Marcus.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence. Then Lisa asks, “Um... would you mind? These paintings are heavy, and we’re trying to get them to the van.”

After another pause, Evelyn says, “Sure. All right. Do you need help with them?”

"Oh, no, thank you. We can handle it."

Still no police. No sirens within earshot. I curse softly and step out from behind the statue. Lisa and Marcus are carefully maneuvering a stack of paintings around a perplexed Evelyn.

“Stop!” I cry.

Lisa shrieks and drops her end of the painting. I hear a frame crack, and Marcus curses.

“Evelyn, close the door,” I say to the equally shocked maid. “These two are lying. Lisa faked her own kidnapping, and Marcus hired a hitman to kill Victor.”

Evelyn gasps, and Lisa and Marcus go white as sheets.

“It’s true,” I insist. “They’re stealing Victor’s artwork to sell to a dealer in San Diego. They owe money to a loan shark, and they’re trying to pay him off so they can go to Costa Rica and flee their debts.”

Lisa laughs, a sound that reminds me of nails falling onto aluminum sheeting. “That’s insane! What the...” she laughs again. “My, what an active imagination you have.”

“It’s not imagination,” I tell her. “I sent the police video recording of you two talking about your plan five minutes ago.”

Lisa’s forced smile vanishes. Marcus glances nervously at her. Evelyn looks between us, and the expression on Lisa’s face convinces her of the truth. She gasps and takes a step away from them. Her hand comes to her mouth, and she whispers, “Oh my God.”

“You’re lying,” Lisa says.

“No. I’m not. I was in your apartment earlier. I heard you and Marcus talking, and I followed you here. I called the police. They’ll be here any minute.”

It’s not exactly the truth, but I need them to think they’re in danger. It seems to work.

Lisa pales a shade further and says, “Marcus, lock the door.”

Evelyn cries out and rushes for the door. Lisa catches her, and with a snarl, throws her against the kitchen counter. The back of Evelyn’s head hits the counter, and she collapses to the floor. I cry out and stare at her in horror as Marcus locks the door.

Lisa points a finger at me and hisses. “This is your fault! You meddling... Why were you in my apartment?”

“I needed to know,” I tell her, still shocked by the violence I’ve just witnessed. “I needed to know what happened.”

“How did you guess that I was... how did...”

She presses her lips together and doesn’t finish her question. I reply anyway. “I didn’t know. I thought you and Victor might have been conspiring together to flee the country. I thought you might be lovers.”

Marcus chuckles at that, but his smile fades when Lisa doesn’t laugh. Her lip trembles slightly, but then she gets control of herself. “We might have been. But I was never pretty enough for Victor. First there was that blonde girl Elias shackled up with, then there was Julia. Both pretty, stupid and submissive. Just like Victor likes. Never mind that I’m the only reason he’s not selling caricatures on a boardwalk in Venice and living in a porta-potty.”

I should be focused on the imminent danger I’m facing, but my curiosity overwhelms me. “Who was that blonde girl?” I ask. “The one Elias Blackwood was living with. Did she ever give you her name?”

Lisa laughs. “I don’t remember. God, that was thirty years ago. Besides, she was Elias’s squeeze, not Victor’s. He just thought she was pretty.”

When I realize I'll learn nothing more about Annie from her, reason reasserts itself. I need to keep them talking. I need to keep them here and keep myself alive until the police arrive. "So you're angry at Victor for never returning your affection?"

"Oh, please. I got over him twenty years ago. Artists are irresistible to girls because they're soft and sensitive, and they worship beauty the way addicts worship needles. Then, we grow up to be women and realize that men become artists when they don't have the maturity or the emotional stability to be anything else. I'll make money off of them, but I would never marry one."

"So you two are together now?" I ask.

This time, Marcus laughs. "Hell no. She's fifteen years older than me."

Lisa gives him a venomous look. It might behoove Marcus to remember who he's dealing with. Then again, he's no better than she is. In a way, they're perfect for each other.

"You can't actually believe you'll get away with this. Do you think those paintings will sell enough to pay Rizzo?"

Lisa flinches at the mention of his name. "God, you really were at my apartment. What the hell... you're my age! What are you doing snooping around trying to solve mysteries?"

"I'm trying to find justice for an innocent girl whose father was taken from her because of the selfishness of a woman who thinks the man who jilted her owes her a rescue from her own poor decisions."

Lisa flinches again. Her face turns ugly. "Marcus, kill her."

I pale, but Marcus doesn't move. He looks at Lisa and says, "Really? Shouldn't we just leave? I mean, you already killed the maid. We're getting into this really deep."

"She's the only other person who knows about the plan," he reminds her. "Kill her, and there will be no one to tell on us."

"The police know too," I reminded her. "I sent them evidence."

"I don't believe you. If you'd sent anything, they'd be here right now."

Marcus still hesitates, so Lisa says, "Oh for God's sake. Whatever happened to the men of the world? Fine. I'll kill her."

She stalks into the kitchen and pulls a knife from the block on the counter. I cry out and rush toward the stairwell, but Marcus is over his hesitation now. He grabs me and throws me back onto the ground. I get to my feet and see both of them stalking towards me, blocking both the stairwell and the front door.

I run back into the living room, narrowly avoiding a grab from Marcus. They move toward me, trying to cut me off again. Marcus heads inward, away from the staircase, while Lisa stalks me like a cat, heading straight forward.

I wait for my moment, then feint toward Lisa. She stabs at me, and I grab her wrist, then shove with my other hand. She stumbles, and I rush for the front door.

I make it two steps when I feel lightning strike my left leg. I shriek and turn around to see Lisa drawing her knife back for another swing. Marcus barrels around her toward me. On instinct, I grab the bannister and pull myself up the stairs.

Tears stream down my face as I run up the stairs. For Heaven's sake, where are the police? What could be taking them so long?

Despite the injury to my leg, I manage to remain ahead of them, but when I reach Victor's studio, I realize I have nowhere to go. I've backed myself into a corner. I look around wildly for something to defend myself and pick up a shard of glass. It's a poor weapon, but I have no other choice.

As I pick the glass up, I see a note on the ground. It's in Celeste's handwriting. I can only read part of it. The part that I can see reads second inlet.

Before I can wonder what that means, the door bursts open, and Marcus and Lisa rush inside. Lisa cackles madly. "You idiot. You've boxed yourself in."

"Don't stab her," Marcus says. "Let me push her through the window. Then we can say she fell by accident."

"It won't really matter with the maid's body in the living room," Lisa says drily.

"Yes, it does. The police are already looking at her. They'll think she was up to no good, and Evelyn tried to stop her, so she offed her, then fell to her doom when she was looking for something up here."

Lisa sighed. "Whatever. Just do it quickly. The sun's already up, and if this bitch hasn't called the police yet, someone will soon."

"Fine," Marcus says.

He begins moving toward me, and I lift the glass. "Stay back!" I cry. "I'll kill you!"

He chuckles. "Cute."

Then, with one swipe of his fat paw, he smacks the glass from my hand. It shatters on the ground, leaving nothing between me and the man who intends to kill me.

And that's when I finally hear sirens.

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Marcus and Lisa turn white, and I laugh with relief. "I told you they were coming."

Marcus swears and looks wildly around, as though for a place to hide. Lisa looks at me and bares her teeth. "You bitch."

I smile sweetly. "Right back at you."

The door bursts open, and I hear Detective Reyes exclaim when she sees Evelyn. Marcus gives Lisa a terrified look, but the harpy only has eyes for me. She shrieks and rushes me. I parry the knife blow, but her momentum carries me to the window. I stop myself just before she pushes me through, and we struggle, straining for purchase against the glass.

She is a few years older than me, but she's taller and heavier. I struggle with all my might, but because I need to worry about the knife, I can't get the right leverage to keep myself steady. I feel the glass from the window cutting into my back, and fear lances through me. Another instant, and I'll fall.

I meet Lisa's eyes and see a wicked grin of triumph. A memory flashes across my mind.

You were smiling. Just like this.

I'm not sure what comes over me then. I only know that the world around me seems to fade. I release a cry not of fear but of rage and rake my fingernails across Lisa's face. She flinches and claps a hand to her cheek, horrified.

This momentary distraction allows me to grab the knife and knock it from her hand. I grab her by the hair with both hands and twist cruelly. She shrieks, and with another vicious twist, I have her halfway out of the window.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide with terror. “No! No, please! Don’t hurt me!”

Blood trickles down her cheeks where my nails scored her skin. I tighten my grip in her hair and hiss, “You took that girl’s father from her. You deserve worse than what I’m about to give you.”

“Shit!”

Marcus’s cry snaps me out of my fugue. I blink and turn around to see police rushing into the room. Marcus lifts his hands and says, “I’m unarmed!” right before Reyes hurls him to the ground with less effort than a child might use to toss a pillow.

More officers rush into the room, and after them comes Sean. He sees me, and relief floods his eyes. “Oh God! Thank God, Mary.”

Tears come to my eyes. I pull Lisa away from the window and push her to the ground. She remains there, weeping, and two officers come to arrest her. I go to Sean and collapse into his arms, sobbing.

“It’s all right,” he says, holding me close. “It’s over now.”

“Sean,” I weep. “I... I...”

“Shh. It’s all right. I’m here.”

I bury my head in his chest and allow him to hold me while I cry, relief and shame filling me in equal measure. I don’t recognize the woman I was a moment ago. Lisa

may have deserved it, but to know that I'm capable of that kind of violence terrifies me.

You were smiling. Just like this.

I remember now. I remember the fight I had with Annie the night before she left. For thirty years, I remembered a sanitized version of that night where we had our short talk in front of the ocean and then I left for home alone. I'd blocked the fight from my mind.

Now I remember. Now I know exactly how much darkness rests in me.

"It's my fault," I whisper. "It's all my fault."

"Enough of that," Sean says roughly. "None of this is your fault."

I don't respond. He doesn't know what I'm talking about, and I don't want to tell him. Let him think that I'm the good, noble woman he believes I am. At least for a while longer.

I sip my coffee and stifle the grimace that comes to my lips. Sean always makes his coffee too strong.

He sits next to me, his arm over my shoulders. We watch soberly as the paramedics lift the gurney that holds Evelyn Torres and carry it from the house. I shiver when they leave, and Sean squeezes my shoulder. She's alive, but only just. One of the EMTs shares with me before he leaves that if she survives, she will face a long and hard road to what will likely never be a full recovery.

Reyes walks inside a moment later. She looks ten years older. She says something to the other officer in the building, and he nods and leaves.

She turns to us, but she doesn't meet our eyes. "Miss Reinhardt and Mr. Fairfax will be seen this morning. I am absolutely certain they will be held without bond, so you don't need to worry about them posting bail and coming after you."

I nod, then ask the question I'm sure she's dreading. "What took you so long?"

She presses her lips together and looks down. "The story Mr. O'Connell related to me seemed unbelievable. I sent units to Lisa's apartment first when he told me you were there. I was... coming to arrest you. When I realized you had already fled the... had left the apartment, we came here."

I don't have the energy to be angry at her right now, but there's accusation in my voice when I say, "Evelyn Torres nearly died because of that assumption."

"Yes," she says, her voice hollow. "When I am finished with my duties as it pertains to this investigation, I will tender my resignation. I know it's worthless right now, but... I'm sorry."

I don't reply. She's right. Her apology is worthless. After a moment, she clears her throat. "My preliminary conversation with Mr. Fairfax indicates that he hasn't received proof of Mr. Holloway's death. For the time being, we're still treating it as a missing persons case. I've assigned detectives to follow up on the contact information Marcus provided me for the hitman. As for Celeste, we still have an APB out on her. She's only been missing for twenty hours, so we're confident that she hasn't gone far. She might even come home soon."

"You can't know that," Sean replied, a trace of contempt in his voice. "She could have hitchhiked to Tijuana by now. Or she could have jumped off a cliff in despair."

You guys have mishandled this thing every step of the way. I've seen a number of clusterfucks in my day, but you've found new and inventive ways to fuck this cluster more royally than I've ever seen."

My eyes widen as I remember the scrap of paper from the studio. "She's alive."

They both turn to look at me. "You know this for sure?" Reyes asks.

"No," I admit, "but I think I know where to look for her."

"Where?"

I get up and rush up the stairs to the studio again. My battered body screams at me for rest, but I ignore it once more. Soon, but not yet. Not until we find Celeste.

They follow me up the stairs. I look around the floor for the note, retracing my steps from the earlier fight.

"What is it, Mary?" Reyes asks. "What are you looking for?"

"A note," I reply. "From Celeste. It looks like... there!"

I see the scrap of paper and pick it up, then read aloud. It's not very encouraging.

"If I want to vanish, I think I'll go to the second inlet, the one with all of the wildflowers just past the lighthouse. I'll wait for a clear morning so I can see them shimmering in the sunlight reflecting off of the water. Then I'll drift out to see and disappear in a pool of light."

I look out the window. There's no marine layer today. Not a cloud in the sky.

My blood runs cold. I turn to the two of them and see the same worry on their faces.

“Point Pinos Lighthouse,” Reyes says. “It’s ten minutes north of here. There’s a meadow just on the other side of the lighthouse near a shallow lagoon.”

“We’ll take your car,” I tell her. I meet her eyes and say, “This is your chance to redeem yourself.”

“Come on,” she says. “I’ll call ahead and have units meet us there.”

We run downstairs to Reyes’s waiting cruiser. A few neighbors are still gathered around, for the third time witnessing catastrophe at the eccentric artist’s house. Several of them ask what’s going on, but we ignore them and jump into the vehicle.

Reyes is off before we’re even strapped in. As she speeds toward the lighthouse, she calls for backup in the radio. “I need units to Pinos Point Lighthouse, ASAP. We’re looking for a Caucasian female, seventeen years old, dark hair, dark eyes, five-foot-two, around one hundred twenty pounds. My name is Celeste Holloway. She is possibly fifty-six, repeat, possible ten-fifty-six in progress. Get Harbor Patrol out there too.”

“Ten-four,” a metallic voice replies. “All units, please respond to a possible ten-fifty-six at Pinos Point Lighthouse.”

“Will they get there before us?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Reyes replies. “But I’ll sure as hell try to be the first one there.”

She guns the motor, and my head is pressed back into the seat. Reyes maneuvers like a racecar driver, weaving through the traffic that doesn’t have time to get out of our way and skidding around corners, tires screeching. Ahead of me, I see the lighthouse,

a bright white-brick building sitting atop a tall promontory that juts out into the ocean.

“Come on,” Reyes whispers. “Come on.”

Hang in there, Celeste, I think to myself. Don’t give up.

We reach the lighthouse six minutes later. Reyes pulls off the road onto a meadow just on the other side of the lighthouse parking lot. The meadow is breathtaking. Marigolds, poppies and sunflowers blaze in bright oranges, yellows, reds and purples. It’s glorious. I can understand why Celeste would have chosen this spot.

It hits me rather poignantly that there’s nothing abstract about this beauty, nothing transcendent. It’s the simplest, most natural expression of beauty possible. One doesn’t need to wrack their brains for the essence of these flowers. It’s plain and obvious and easy to see. One need only look at them. Perhaps Celeste will look at them. Perhaps she’ll see them and remember that there’s something left that’s worth living for, that even when life seems bleak, there is joy to be had.

Reyes slams on the brakes, and the car comes to a stop right before a slope that leads down into the ocean. We get out of the car, and Reyes immediately cries, “Shit! God damn it!”

I follow her eyes and see the reason for her cry. My heart sinks to my chest. In the water, fifty yards past the shoreline, a figure bobs up and down on the waves.

We’re too late. Celeste has already begun her journey toward the vanishing point.

We try anyway. We sprint down the slope, shouting her name, begging her to come back. Reyes calls into her radio, asking where the hell her harbor patrol is, calling for the helicopter and asking for someone to please give her a damned ETA.

Sean outstrips me, tearing his jacket and shirt off as he runs. I see he intends to swim after her. I intend to follow him, but I feel something tear in the calf Lisa stabbed, and I fall to the ground with a cry of pain.

Sean skids to a halt and looks back at me. “Mary?”

“Go!” I shout. “Go get her! Please!”

He turns around and starts to run, but after a few feet he stops. His eyes widen, and a grin breaks out on his face. “Hell yeah! Yes! Go, Victor!”

I pull myself to my feet, grimacing and favoring my injured leg. I look for Celeste, and my own eyes widen when I see the reason for Sean’s cheer.

Ahead of me, just before the point where the shallow inlet vanishes into the ocean, Victor Holloway has reached his daughter. Tears of joy fall from my eyes as I see Celeste wrap her arms tightly around him. They embrace in the water for a long moment, then both of them swim back toward the shore.

A soft breeze blows in from the sea, and the flowers rustle, a soft cheer to the triumphant end of the story.

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Victor sits on the couch next to his daughter, softly stroking her hair while she sleeps. She is freshly showered and in clean clothing, and the only sign that she's spent the past twenty-four hours missing are slightly darkened circles under her eyes. Reyes stands in the foyer, watching the scene with a smile on her face.

There's a great deal of pain in that smile. Her misstep earlier allowed Lisa enough time to hurt Evelyn. I imagine she will still be handing in her resignation once the paperwork for this case is completed. But Celeste and Victor Holloway are still alive. There is bitterness in this ending, but there is sweetness too.

I sit in one of the upholstered chairs, enduring the slight embarrassment of baring my left leg to the knee so Sean can bandage my wound. He gives me an irritated look and mutters something about "this crazy old bag." I'll scold him for it later.

Victor looks at me and smiles. "Thank you. For not giving up on her."

I return his smile. "Of course not. She's worth all of the effort it took to save her."

He looks at her. There's sadness in his smile too. "Yes. Yes, she is." He looks back at me and says, "I think we'll move from here, Mary. It was a mistake for me to stay here after Elias died."

My eyes widen. "This was Elias's house?"

"Well, no, but this was his town. Everywhere I go, I see him. It's... hard to explain what he meant to me."

Grief washes over his face, and for a brief moment, he's the harried, broken man I hear ranting in his studio days ago. That look vanishes when he looks back down at his daughter. "But she means more. It's not healthy for me to be around here, and it's not healthy for her to be around a not-healthy me. My sister has a place in Nevada. I think we'll stay with her for a while. At least until Celeste is well enough to go to school." He gives me a sheepish look. "I'll make sure you're paid in full for the semester you're owed."

"Give that money to Celeste," I tell him. "I don't need it. Just keep in touch with me."

"I will. I promise."

I'm saddened to hear that I won't get to be her governess anymore, but I can't wait to watch her grow into a wonderful young woman, even if I'll only see it from afar. I smile at her sleeping form and say, "I'm so glad you found her."

"Yes, how did you find her?" Sean asks. "And where have you been? What happened, why didn't you call, and so forth?"

Victor's smile fades. He lifts his shirt up to reveal a crude bandage taped to his abdomen. "I was shot by a dartgun."

My eyes widen. "A dartgun?"

He nods. "Through my studio window. It hit me, and I looked out the window and saw the man who attacked me. There's a hidden staircase behind one of my cabinets that leads to a secret gate behind the property. It was meant to be... Actually, I'm not sure why it's there. But it helped me."

"So you used that to get away."

“I did. I chased my attacker and caught him just before he got into his car. We fought, and I overpowered him and demanded that he tell me who sent him. I have to say, the answer didn’t surprise me.”

“Marcus Fairfax.”

Victor nods. “And Lisa. I knew Lisa was mad at me for not lending her any more money, but I never figured she’d go this far. Marcus... well, he was just a sleaze. I knew he couldn’t have come up with this plan on his own, so I figured Lisa was the mastermind.”

“So why didn’t you call the police?” I ask. “Why did you go into hiding?”

His face falls. “I thought it would be safer for Celeste if I disappeared until Lisa and Marcus were gone. I figured they’d take what they wanted and leave, and then I’d come back. I can always paint more, so I wasn’t worried about losing the art. I stayed at the hidden cove to bandage my wound, then swam to shore a few dozen yards past the cave.” He chuckles. “Then I had to bandage my wound again, of course. I didn’t really think any of this through. Anyway, I know Celeste always liked this meadow by the lighthouse, and I knew that if I stayed out of the way while the lighthouse was open, I could avoid being seen. I guess I got lucky. If I hadn’t been there...”

He looks at Celeste and leaves the thought unsaid. Sean, Reyes and I share sober looks. It's remarkable how thin the line is between survival and death sometimes. One poor decision can nearly cause the death of an innocent woman, while another seemingly trivial decision can save the life of an innocent girl. Perhaps we are all alive simply because we're lucky to have accidentally made decisions that keep us that way.

“I think I will sell the art I have,” Victor says. “I’ll use the money to cover Evelyn’s medical expenses.” His face falls again. “God. I can’t believe you two were hurt. All

because of me.”

I have to think about my response for a moment. It’s true that Victor is, in a way, responsible for what happened. But he is on a better path now, one that will lead to healing for him and for Celeste. For her sake, it’s better that he doesn’t fall into depression over mistakes that, while tragic, are also innocent.

“You did what you thought you had to do to protect your daughter,” I tell him. “Now you’re going to make a better decision: one that will help both of you. Do what you can for the Torres family. Then do what you must for your family.”

He gives me a soft smile. “Thank you.”

We fall silent for a moment. There’s more I want to ask Victor, but I don’t want to talk to him about it in front of Reyes. Or Sean. I’ll end up sharing everything important with him later, but I am in too fragile of a state emotionally to have him here when I ask Victor about Annie.

I look at him, and thankfully, he understands my meaning. He stands and nods at Reyes. “Unless you have any questions for Mr. Holloway, Detective, I think we should let them rest. What do you say?”

Reyes nods. “I’ll need a statement from both of them, but I can get that later. I’ll see you later, Mr. Holloway.” She nods at me. “Mary.”

“Goodbye, Detective.”

Sean and Reyes leave, and I turn to Victor. “May I talk to you on the balcony for a moment?”

He lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t question the favor. “Sure.”

He kisses Celeste's forehead, then follows me outside. My calf still aches, but I limp only slightly on my way to the table outside.

He takes a seat across from me and waits. I look out across the ocean for a moment. The sun is high in the sky. It's already nearly noon. How swiftly time flies.

I turn to him and say, "You painted a picture of a woman. A blonde woman with blue eyes. Who was she?"

His eyes widen in surprise. "A blonde woman?" Then he laughs. "Oh my God. Where did you find that picture?"

"In the little art closet in the basement. I... well, I have trouble sleeping at night, so I went exploring. I do hope you'll forgive me for intruding."

"Oh, that's fine," he says. "I didn't want you in the studio because I thought it would interrupt my process." He laughs again. "God, that sounds so stupid now." He looks out over the ocean. "Wow. I haven't thought about Grace in... God, not since I met Julia. Over twenty years ago."

"Grace? That was her name?"

"That was her name. Grace Wilson." His eyes grow slightly wistful. "She was the first woman I ever loved. Or thought I loved."

"You were together then?"

"Oh no," he says with another chuckle. "No, she was Elias's girlfriend. Elias Blackwood. He was my mentor. He dated her for... a few months. I forget how long. Less than a year. Anyway, she just showed up out of nowhere one day, but poor Elias was just completely smitten. He introduced me, and I could see why."

His eyes take on a wistful look again. "I think it's a folly of us artist types. We're always looking for the perfect expression of beauty, and anytime we see something or someone that fits that ideal, they instantly become the most important thing in our lives. Grace was tall, naturally blonde, blue eyes, beautiful, soft features, good hips"—he glances at me and reddens a little— "well, I was young, and she was hot. So she became my ideal someone."

I smile at him, not without some wistfulness of my own. "I certainly understand what you mean."

"We never did anything," he continues. "She was loyal to Elias. She let me paint her n... um... well, she let me paint her once, the day before she left. Gave me a kiss, too. That was as far as it went." He laughs again and shakes his head. "I held onto that kiss for five years. Then I accidentally bumped into Julia in the grocery store. She turned around, freckled and wearing glasses, and shouted, 'You want to watch where you're going, dipshit?' And just like that, I forgot all about Grace."

I laugh, but my smile fades quickly. I feel sorry for Annie. She never could find a place where she truly belonged. "Where did she go?"

"I have no idea. I asked her when she left, and I think she gave me some bullshit answer like, 'Wherever the wind takes me,' or something like that." He gives me a quizzical look. "Did you know her?"

I think for a moment before I reply. When I began this conversation, I intended to tell Victor who she was to me, but now...

"I thought she was someone I recognized," I reply. "But I was wrong."

"Ah. Well, wherever Grace is, I hope she's happy."

"Yes," I agree. "I hope so, too."

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I sit on the balcony and overlook the smaller, colder and even more violent ocean I called home for most of my life. Sean stands next to me with his jacket pulled tightly around him. “Christ, you’re not cold?”

I shrug. I’m wearing a nightgown, slippers and a thin knitted shawl. The wind is gentle, at least where I sit, so I’m not particularly cold. “Not very.”

“Well, I am. I don’t suppose I could convince you to join me inside?”

“I’ll sit out here a while longer.”

He sighs and takes the chair next to mine. “You’re welcome to go inside if you’d like,” I tell him.

“It’s fine,” he says. “I’ll wait with you.”

I smile softly. Since California, he’s been attached to my side like a dog. It took an hour of coaxing to get him to accept a different hotel room. I won’t lie. I considered allowing him to share a room with me, but I mustn’t allow myself to feed that fantasy. It’s a pretty one, but I’m too old and too damaged to ask someone else to share the burden of my life.

I don’t begrudge his company now, though.

We watch the ocean for a while. The waves crash against the shore below. White-tipped crests extend in orderly rows as far as the eye can see. All the way to the vanishing point.

My smile fades. Annie is out there somewhere. I'm sure of it. I know for sure now that she didn't die when she left Boston. She fled, and she did so of her own accord with her own purpose in mind. She found love, even if only briefly. She inspired an artist. She built a life of her own.

But she also left destruction in her wake. She found love, but she wasn't fulfilled by it. She built a life only to tear it down, and with it, she tore down the life of the man who loved her and by extension the life of a younger man who depended on both of them for his happiness. That younger man recovered, but not fully. Not for many years. In her own small but very meaningful way, Annie is also partly to blame for Victor's mental health struggles and the depression that nearly drove Celeste to suicide.

Perhaps blame is the wrong word. After all, one can never truly predict the effects of their actions. Annie could never have guessed that by leaving Elias, she would drive him to suicide and for thirty years alter the course of Victor Holloway's life. She simply dipped her hand in the water and then moved on, not knowing how far the ripples of her touch would extend.

And can I not also be said to share blame? It was my fight with Annie that drove her to leave. I still can't remember all of the details, but I remember that I attacked her. Her image in Victor's painting showed no scars, so I must not have injured her badly, but I laid my hands on my sister.

And I failed to protect her. She wasn't wrong about that. I stood by and kept silent while Mother enticed her to burn herself on the stove. I watched while she held Annie's head under the water and whispered for her to stop struggling and just go to sleep. I remember pushing her behind me while Mother attacked us with the knife, but now that I think back on it, I think I just brushed against her in my own attempt to flee.

I was a poor sister. Annie grew up beautiful, but that beauty earned her nothing but

jealousy, hatred, contempt and neglect from those who should have loved her the most. I can blame my father and especially my mother for Annie's eventual escape, but my hands are not innocent.

I turn to Sean and see a look that's as pensive as mine. I wonder for the first time what secrets he might hold that he carries deep within his heart. What does he hide, even from himself, that haunts his nightmares?

I lay a hand on him, and he flinches a little and looks at me. I squeeze it and say, "Thank you. For everything. For saving my life, for helping me solve these murders, for helping me learn what happened to my sister."

His eyes widen. "Oh, shite. I completely forgot about your sister. Did you ever figure out how she knew Victor?"

I smile softly. "Yes. They were lovers." And that's true. In the most important sense of the word, it's true.

"Well, what happened? Where did she go?"

"I don't know."

"Right. Well, we know she was there for a while, at least. I'll call Victor again and get every bit of information I can. Then I'll reach out and see who might have seen her after she left Monterey. Don't you worry, Mary? We'll find her."

I lift a hand and caress his cheek. He falls silent, and a strange look crosses his face. "I don't think so," I say softly. "I... I don't think she wants to be found."

He blinks. "You're sure?"

I turn back toward the sea. "Annie and I did not get on well at the end," I say. "I

thought we did, but the more I remember, the more I realize how unhappy she was. She wasn't taken from me. She left. Of her own free will. She left to find a place where she could feel safe and loved." I swallow over the lump in my throat. "And that wasn't with me."

He touches my own cheek and pulls me to face him. His hand is rough and leathery and not at all soft, but it's the most soothing touch I've ever experienced. I look into his eyes, as blue and brilliant as Annie's were, and he says, "You're not a bad person, Mary. You're stubborn, arrogant and irritating as all hell. But you've got the best heart of any person I've ever seen. No disrespect to your sister, but if she's not able to see that, then she's a bloody fool."

I stare at him for a moment. Then I laugh. "Sean. You're—"

He pulls me close and kisses me. The shock lasts for a moment. Then it fades into an ocean of bliss. I wrap my arms around him and let myself vanish into his love.

Wherever Annie is, I hope she's found happiness like this. Even if it's only for a moment. Even if it fades away and becomes nothing more than a fond memory. And from time to time when she thinks on the past, I hope she thinks of the sister she left behind, and I hope she wishes the same happiness for me.

That's all any of us really need.