



One Last Smile (Governess #2)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

Category: Horror

Description: In the lush, rolling hills of the Cotswolds, governess Mary Wilcox finds her latest charge: the Carlton family. With wealth and elegance that could rival royalty, the Carltons are the epitome of modern aristocracy.

But beneath their polished exterior lies a tangle of silent grudges and family secrets.

And one of them may lead to murder.

Someone in this household harbors a sinister story, cloaked in aristocratic civility—a story that could turn her into the confidant of a troubled soul or the next unsuspecting victim.

As Mary digs deeper, she encounters inexplicable occurrences that mirror her own sister's disappearance, causing her to question if she's uncovering truth or falling prey to her own haunted psyche.

In a house full of masters and secrets, who can she truly trust?

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If the Carlton estate could be described in one word, that word would be perfection. The driveway is lined with perfectly manicured hedges and planters filled with flawless rows of orchids, primroses, and foxgloves. In the center of the courtyard is a pristine marble fountain featuring the Virgin holding the infant Savior surrounded by cherubs. Surrounding that fountain is another planter filled with exquisitely trimmed rosebushes, their flowers a bright scarlet. The house itself is just as orderly, the brick siding and shingled roof polished to near smoothness. Not a single blade of grass is out of place. Not a single stain mars the perfection of its facade.

One might think that after my time at the bleak Ashford estate I would be relieved to see its polar opposite, but my experience with the wealthy tells me that the more perfect the exterior, the more rotten the interior. So it's with some trepidation that I climb the steps to the house and prepare to greet my new employers.

The door opens before I reach it, and I am surprised when I'm greeted not by a butler but by Veronica Carlton herself. She appears to be around my age, so fifty, give or take a few years, but she has the polished beauty that the wealthy seem to value more than any other class, not so much an attempt to look attractive as to look cultured. Her elegant silk dress complements her form perfectly, and her makeup is tasteful and gives her an almost ageless appearance.

Not that she isn't attractive. On the contrary, she is blessed with the perfect figure and noble features that most of us can only dream of. The fact that her blonde hair is as natural as her bright blue eyes is icing on the cake.

"Welcome!" she cries. "Oh, we're so delighted to see you, Mary! Lucas has been so excited!"

I return her smile and—somewhat awkwardly—her embrace. “I’m delighted to hear that, Mrs. Carlton.”

“Oh, please,” she says, flipping her hand. “Call me Veronica.”

“Thank you, Veronica.”

Lucas is Veronica’s youngest child. I’ve been hired to tutor him for his final year of sixth form. It’s a quite different situation than I’m used to. My teaching experience is with elementary school students—primary school, as it’s called in England—so tutoring a young man in his final year before university will stretch my faculties to their limit. However, since he’s older, I’ll be required to do less of the other work of a governess, so that should allow me more time to plan lessons and ensure he’s prepared for his examinations at the end of the year.

“Come in! Come in!” she says. “You must meet the others! Don’t worry about your bags. Horace will take them in. Oh, we’re just delighted! Delighted!”

I manage to keep my smile and avoid letting my unease show as she leads me inside. And it’s foolish anyway. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m probably still upset from my experience with the Ashfords and assuming danger where none exists.

“Children!” Veronica calls. “Come meet Mary!”

Children is a relative term. The oldest, Eliza, is twenty-three, and the middle, Oliver, is twenty. Only Lucas is still a child and at seventeen, he only barely qualifies.

Eliza descends the stairs. I can’t help but notice that her posture is perfect. She traces the fingers of her left hand lightly on the banister and looks over her shoulder at me with the perfect balance of regality and grace. In her shimmering white silk dress with her golden locks cascading in gentle waves over her shoulder, she could easily

be mistaken for a princess.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mary,” she says, extending a hand as she reaches the bottom step.

I take it and reply, “Likewise. You are every bit as beautiful as your mother described.”

She laughs and flips her hand in an astonishingly exact imitation of Veronica. “Mother likes to talk. You mustn’t believe a word of what she says.”

“She’s right,” a bright tenor concurs.

I turn to see a tall, handsome young man with a devilish smile approach from the right. His hands are in the pockets of very well-tailored slacks worn above polished oxfords and below a white shirt and blazer that he wears thrown open lazily but that somehow looks perfectly suited to his personality.

Again, I am struck by unease. Nothing should be this flawless.

And again, I tell myself I’m being foolish. For heaven’s sake, complaining about the young man’s clothes? How paranoid can I be?

The young man in question extends his own hand. “Oliver Carlton, at your service.” He lifts my hand to his lips, and I remind myself that I’m being ridiculous when my skin crawls at the contact. “I must say, Mother didn’t warn me you’d be so beautiful.”

The compliment is clumsy and immature. That makes it the most beautiful thing I’ve experienced since arriving here. I smile gratefully and say, “It’s wonderful to meet you, Oliver.”

I look around for the youngest of the Carlton brood, the one I will be tutoring for the next ten months. Veronica laughs nervously and asks Oliver, “Have you seen your brother?”

A slight irritation crosses Oliver’s face. “Not recently, no. I assumed he was on the grounds with his camera as usual.”

“That’s all right,” I say. “I should get settled anyway. I’ll have a chance to—”

“Ah!” Veronica cries. “There he is! Lucas, you kept Mary waiting.”

I follow her eyes to the top of the landing and see a young man staring down at me with wide, dark eyes. He is tall, taller even than Oliver, but far more slender. His pale skin and gentle features bear a far closer resemblance to his sister, in fact, than to his brother. He wears a suit of a similar cut to his brother’s but keeps his jacket buttoned. The outfit is too large and appears almost to swallow him whole. Another imperfection, but this one does nothing to quell my unease.

He alone of the three doesn’t smile. He inclines his head and says in a soft, lilting voice, “Welcome, Mary.”

I remember to smile and say, “It’s wonderful to meet you, Lucas. I look forward to our time together.”

Lucas doesn’t reply, only continues to stare at me with those dark, serious eyes.

When the silence continues long enough to be awkward, Veronica says, “Well, I’m sure you’d like to rest after your long journey. Horace will show you to your room. I would love it if you joined us for dinner tonight at seven. If you’re rested enough, of course.”

I smile at her. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you, Veronica.”

I turn back to the landing to see that Lucas has gone. My smile fades a little, and I keep my eyes trained to the spot where he stood a moment ago.

“Right this way, ma’am,” Horace says. He’s quite a bit older than me, and, while he doesn’t look unfriendly, he seems like a man who likes to keep his distance.

I nod and allow him to lead me up the stairs to my room. I don’t see Lucas again, but I feel as though his eyes continue to bore into me as though he stares at me from the walls.

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“I do apologize for Sebastian’s absence,” Veronica says. “Work keeps him away so often these days.”

“Oh, it’s perfectly all right,” I reply. “I understand.”

“People need their internet, after all,” Oliver adds. “Nothing is more important than instant connection to everyone everywhere anytime for any reason.”

I detect a hint of bitterness in his statement and feel a touch of sympathy. I wonder how much Sebastian has missed for the sake of his business.

Not that it’s my place to pry. My own father was frequently absent due to his own work, but I must not allow my own resentment to poison my opinion of a man I haven’t even met yet.

“Mary, you must save room for dessert,” Eliza interjects. “Henri makes the most delightful pudding.”

“I’ll be sure to allow some room,” I reply.

“Would you like some wine, Mary?” Before I can decline, she calls, “Hazel! Please fill Mary’s glass! I think we’ll start with the Sauvignon Blanc to pair with the salad.”

A thin, sallow woman around my age appears noiselessly at my side and just as noiselessly pours from the bottle into the glass next to my salad plate. I am not given to alcohol, but I haven’t been given a chance to refuse, and frankly, I don’t know if I would. Veronica’s politeness seems intense, almost aggressive, as though she dares

anyone to tell her she's not a perfect host.

The woman disappears as noiselessly as she appeared, and I realize I haven't thanked her. The family doesn't appear to notice this. I'm not sure why that bothers me so much.

"I heard you served in America prior to coming here," Eliza says. "How was that?"

I consider my answer carefully. "I suppose it could have been worse."

The three of them seem to find that utterly hilarious. They throw their heads back and burst into laughter, chests heaving with mirth. I smile and offer a forced chuckle, then take a sip of my wine. Perhaps it's not a bad idea to allow alcohol to loosen my spirits for this meal.

"Tell me, was it the weather or the people you found intolerable?" Oliver asks. "Or both?"

"Now, Oliver," Veronica says, "there's no need to be rude."

"I'm only stating a simple fact, Mother," he says, grinning cheekily at her. "It's common knowledge that America is a dreary place filled with dreadful people."

"And you're one to talk," Eliza retorts. "If you had your way, you'd still be carrying on with those heathens from Eton."

"Well, if you had your way, you'd still be carrying on with those heathens from Cambridge."

"Children!" Veronica scolds. "Enough of this! I am sure Mary didn't come all this way to hear you two squabble!"

“Relax, Mother, we’re only teasing,” Eliza says with a grin. “Oliver knows I love his friends.”

“Too much, if you ask me.”

Eliza scoffs and slaps him playfully. “It’s not my fault they can’t keep their eyes to themselves.”

“Well, you don’t have to wear a two-piece to go swimming, you know.”

I have a feeling they’re not all that interested in my experiences in America. I take another sip of my wine and hope that the smile I wear doesn’t appear as forced as Veronica’s.

“There’s my little darling!” Veronica cries with clear relief. “Lucas, where have you been? We’re nearly ready for the appetizer!”

The other two quiet and look over at Lucas. He still wears his suit from earlier and approaches the table slowly, wide eyes fixed on me. He takes the seat next to his mother, and she puts a protective arm around him. “You know you must eat, Lucas. It’s not healthy for you to peck like a bird at your food.”

“You haven’t served him any food, Mother,” Oliver reminds her.

There’s an odd tension in Oliver’s voice, and when I turn to him, his eyes have hardened into diamonds. I can’t tell if that anger is directed at his mother or his younger brother.

“Nonsense,” Veronica says. “Here, have some of mine.”

She stabs a few leaves of lettuce with her fork and lifts it to Lucas’s mouth. I watch in

horror as the boy opens his mouth and takes the forkful like an infant. Lucas's face remains expressionless as he allows his mother to feed him several more bites of the greens.

"Mary was about to tell us of America," Eliza says, breaking the silence. "I'm sure you have wonderful stories."

The truth is that my time in America, especially my time at the Ashford estate, was trying and even frightening, but I sense that Eliza is desperate for something to break through the discomfort of the moment. So am I, to be honest.

So, I bend the truth.

"Yes, the weather was somewhat dreary, but not so terrible as you might expect. There's a certain beauty to be found in its wildness. And we had a family of mallards in our pond at the Ashford estate who had given birth late in the season, so—"

Veronica gasps. "Oh, how precious! I just love ducklings!"

"They were very precious," I agree, "and the children were wonderful."

That last part is not a lie. Elijah, Isabella, and Samuel were the only good parts of my tenure at the Ashford estate. I still miss them.

"Were they as precious as Lucas over here?" Oliver asks lightly.

Veronica's smile vanishes for the first time since I met her. In its place is a look that I hope never to see directed my way. Eliza pales and looks desperately between her mother and oldest brother. "Mother, perhaps you could show Mary the garden tomorrow. I'm sure she'd love to see the wonderful work Niall has done."

The door to the dining room opens before Veronica can respond. Hazel quietly serves the appetizer—puff pastries filled with spinach and cream cheese—and refills my wine. It's only then I realize I've finished the glass.

Lucas takes advantage of the stare-down between his mother and brother to take his plate and quietly move his chair far enough away that he can feed himself. Oliver sees this and smiles. "I'm only joking, Mary. That being said, I'm sure you'll find Lucas a thoroughly pleasant person to be around. He's quiet, but what he lacks in gregariousness he makes up for with a gentle soul and inquisitive spirit. I know you two will get on well."

Veronica's smile slowly returns, but her eyes remain nearly violent. "Yes. Of course she will."

I take another sip of my wine and wonder if I can feign illness and retire early to bed.

As it turns out, even four glasses of wine and more food than a person should consume in a week is not enough to cure my insomnia. That night, as I lay in bed, I find myself gripped by an urge to wander. So I pull on my slippers and creep softly from my room.

The Carlton house is not as large as the Ashford house, but it is still quite spacious and grand. The first floor is dedicated to entertaining and like most English country homes is quite concerned with the aesthetic of its interior architecture, containing several studies each evoking a certain theme. I find such excess quite pretentious, but then, it's not my place to judge.

Like the Ashford house, it contains a kitchen that is so modern as to be incongruous with the rest of the house. At least here, the coffee is made in a proper press rather

than one of those awful automatic machines. I rather suspect I'll be the only one drinking coffee, however. Like a good English family, the Carltons take their tea seriously and display a gorgeous, high-quality set of china cups and saucers on their counter.

The second floor contains the bedrooms for the family, while the semi-basement contains the servants' quarters, including my own room. I have no interest in knowing what goes on in those places, so I take the staircase to the attic.

I don't know what draws me to attics and other forgotten spaces. Ever since my sister was lost to me, I find myself gravitating toward the hidden things of the world, as though by exploring each nook, I might someday find her waiting for me with open arms.

Annie, my beautiful younger sister, disappeared nearly thirty years ago. No trace of her has been found, and while the official position is that she must have died, I can't help but wonder if the answer to that question is more complicated. Perhaps she is even still alive somewhere, having fulfilled her promise to escape the life she felt trapped by when we were younger.

One day, I'll find answers. For now, I only want to know what I can about my new employers.

The attic here is an entire floor rather than a large closet or room as it is in many American houses. Though it is used for storage in the same way, the open floor plan makes it seem far less claustrophobic. I feel my restlessness calm as I use my cell phone flashlight to look through old statuary and portraits scattered among languishing furniture and odds and ends.

The unease I felt earlier today fades along with my restlessness, and I consider the family's behavior with a more practical eye. It's clear that Veronica is a domineering

mother and hides her need for control behind a veneer of carefree joviality. The older two have managed to escape her clutches, and Lucas now exists as the lightning rod for Veronica's attentions. Eliza seems to have distanced herself somewhat from her emotions on the subject, but Oliver still holds her in resentment.

What's not entirely clear is their opinion of Lucas. Do they resent him too, or do they simply resent their mother's behavior toward him? Oliver seems to both pity him and resent him, and Eliza, once more, seems to have distanced herself. I can only wonder how this all affects poor Lucas. It's no wonder he's such an odd young man.

I shake my head firmly and put those thoughts out of my head. I'm not here to be the family's psychologist, and I have no interest in becoming involved in their drama. I am here to tutor Lucas and ensure he graduates from sixth form. That is all I was hired to do, and it is all I will do.

To force my mind to occupy itself with something other than the Carlton family dynamic, I stride toward a portrait covered by a sheet and boldly throw the sheet back to see what it hides. I aim my phone light at the painting and...

My breath catches in my throat, and my jaw goes slack.

The forest is different this time. It's not the dusky pine forest where I last saw Annie, nor is it the skeletal elm graveyard shrouded in fog where the ghostly woman tortured my likeness in the Ashford estate. It is the rolling woods of central England with modestly sized green oaks and poplars lending a gentle green to the landscape.

There is no mistaking the girl in the painting, though. The tall, lithe figure, the shimmering golden hair, the high cheekbones and the delicate lips pursed into a cupid's bow underneath playfully seductive blue eyes.

I stare at my sister's image and try desperately to convince myself that it's only my

imagination. I'm dreaming again. Just as I did at the Ashford estate, I'm only imagining this painting. I'll wake up and learn that this painting, like the one at the Ashford estate, doesn't even exist. It's not real. It's not—

"I wouldn't stare at her too long if I were you."

I cry out and spin around toward the noise. Lucas stands in the doorway of the attic, his dark eyes as wide as a vampire's in the dim light of the stairwell.

"She hides in the walls now," he says. "If you stare at her for too long, she'll come visit you as she does me."

To say I'm frightened would be an understatement. I'm convinced now that I'm having a nightmare, and it's not until Lucas reaches toward the wall and flips on the attic's lights that my fear begins to recede.

I click off my cell phone light and turn back to the painting. It's an image of a beautiful young girl. She does bear a striking resemblance to Annie, but in the improved light, I can see subtle differences that show that she isn't a doppelganger. My cheeks burn slightly with embarrassment. I turn to Lucas and say, "What are you doing up so late? It's after midnight."

"I rarely sleep through the night," he says.

He glances back at the painting, and I ask, "Have you had a nightmare?"

"No, not recently. I only have trouble resting in such a restless house."

I stand in the silence of the manor and can't help but come to the conclusion that it is Lucas and not this house that is restless.

“Did you know this girl?” I ask him.

He starts slightly and turns to me. “Oh. Not really. She’s just a girl in a picture to me.”

That’s an odd way to answer the question, and I stare at him a moment longer, wondering if I should pry more. In the end, I decide now isn’t the time. And do I really want to get involved in another mystery so soon after the mystery of the Ashford family? Sticking my nose into my former employer’s business nearly got me killed. I’d much rather not repeat that experience.

“Well,” I say. “If she’s only a girl in a picture, then there’s nothing to worry about. Anyway, it’s late. I should get back to bed. You should, too.”

He nods once. “Yes. I just wanted to warn you.”

He turns and leaves me standing speechless in the attic. A shiver runs down my spine, and I hurry out, only just remembering to shut off the light.

I am sure now of one thing. The perfection of the Carlton estate is indeed only a facade. Behind its manicured gardens and pristine walls, rot festers here just as surely as it did with the Ashfords.

It seems my hope of an easy and relaxing tenure here was a false one.

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The next morning dawns bright and beautiful. Songbirds greet the sun cheerfully, and I open the curtains just in time to see a bumblebee drift lazily past my window. I take a deep breath and release it in a cleansing sigh. Today, I am determined to leave behind the unease of the day before.

It's my own fault, really. I'm a fifty-year-old woman. Why am I wandering around someone else's house like a girl? That portrait is none of my business, and it clearly isn't my sister. It was only a trick of the light and my own mind.

A thoroughly unpleasant memory comes to mind of a conversation I had with a psychologist visiting the Ashford estate. The man, a slimy and unscrupulous individual by the name of... was it Harlow? No, Harrow. This Dr. Harrow suggested that I had complained to him about nightmares of my sister. I was having nightmares, but I never once mentioned them to him in our brief interaction together.

Why am I thinking of Dr. Harrow now? I've admitted that my association of the portrait with Annie is nothing more than a trick of my mind. Perhaps that reminds me of his insinuation that I am unwell. It's true that I suffer from occasional nightmares, but to suggest that I need professional intervention was wholly unprofessional on his part.

I sigh and shake these troublesome thoughts from my mind. I will have a good day today. I will enjoy a cup of coffee and a light breakfast, and I will spend the day exploring the beautiful grounds of the Carlton estate. If I can, I will endeavor to get to know Lucas better before I begin his instruction tomorrow. I will be an excellent tutor, and when he graduates, I will part from this family on good terms. Their infighting is of no concern to me, and whatever affliction Lucas suffers from that he

imagines seeing a girl from a painting in his walls... well, I will do my best to relieve him of his fear, but at the end of it, I'm only hired to ensure he passes sixth form. It's best if I don't allow myself to get too close to my charge this time.

I head to the breakfast room, a smaller dining room with a large window that opens to the west garden, and I find Veronica there enjoying a cup of tea. It seems she is an early riser as well.

She sees me approach and practically hops to her feet. "Mary! How delightful to see you! Sit. I'll bring you a cup of tea."

I'm about to protest that I prefer coffee in the morning, but she's already on her way to the kitchen. I drink tea in the afternoon rather than the morning, but, as they say, when in Rome one must do as the Romans do.

She returns a moment later and sets a cup and saucer in front of me. She beams at me as she takes her own seat and asks, "Tell me, how do you like it here so far?"

I think it's prudent that I not answer that question with perfect honesty, so I only say, "You have a lovely home, and Lucas seems a very bright child."

"He is brilliant !" she replies, practically glowing at my compliment. "He takes the most after me."

I doubt that. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Oliver is a carbon copy of his father. You'll meet him tonight, by the way. He returns this afternoon, so he'll be home in time for dinner. But that rakish attitude and rather... well, I don't want to say lazy."

And yet, the word leaves your mouth so easily. I sip my tea, hoping the caffeine will

soften some of the sarcasm in my head.

“And Eliza... well, Eliza is special in her own way. She takes more after her grandmother, I feel. Sebastian’s mother, that is.” She chuckles. “My mother was a hard-drinking and harder-swearing sailor’s daughter who disowned me when I married for wealth.”

She laughs as though she’s just said something hilarious, then stands. “Shall we take that walk I promised you yesterday?”

I blink and look down at my barely touched cup of tea. I take one more sip—it’s really quite good—and set it on the table. “That sounds wonderful.”

The air is crisp despite the bright sunshine, and I find myself wishing I’d brought my coat when we step outside. Veronica has her arm in mine, and she leads me on like we’re childhood friends. She talks nonstop about the different flowers, trees, and shrubs represented by the various meadows, copses, and gardens present. She seems particularly proud of the “genuine Kentucky bluegrass” that forms the carpet of the expansive east meadow.

We walk through that meadow toward a fenced arboretum dominated by a large tree of curious shape in the center of the four-acre space surrounded by many different exotic species of shrubs and flowers.

“That’s a baobab tree,” she explains, gesturing toward the broad-trunked plant with its short crown of five-pointed leaves. “Sebastian had it shipped from Africa. He just loves Africa. We honeymooned there.”

“Oh, you went on safari?”

“Goodness no!” she says with a laugh. “Could you imagine me holding a gun?” She

laughs again. “No, that was Sebastian’s thing. We simply took a vehicle tour of the grasslands and the forests.”

I decide it’s not worth my time explaining to her that what she’s described is a safari and that what her husband engages in is called a hunt.

“I just love plants,” she says. “When I was a girl, I would pretend that I was a fairy princess. I would run through the grounds at my father’s house, commanding the fairies to bring me the sweetest fruits and the most beautiful flowers! Their estate wasn’t so impressive as this, of course. Where did you grow up?”

She speaks with a manic intensity that belies a deeply anxious personality. I try not to psychoanalyze everyone I come across, but she radiates tension from every pore. I wonder what it is that makes her so nervous.

“I grew up in London as a young girl,” I reply. “My family moved to Boston when I was eleven.”

“Oh, how wonderful! Did you find the city exciting?”

I shrug. “I found it the same as any other city, I suppose. My sister loved it. She always said that things happened in the city. She didn’t think she could stand living somewhere quiet.”

Speaking about my sister reminds me of the portrait I found in the attic the night before. I feel a strange compulsion to learn what I can about that girl, whoever she might be. A quiet voice in the back of my mind warns me I should leave this be, but the memory of my sister laughing and dancing in the streets of Boston causes a fixation that will only dissipate once my curiosity is satisfied.

I find myself sympathizing very much with the unfortunate cat who allowed curiosity

to overwhelm her.

“I was exploring the attic last night,” I begin.

“The attic?” She looks at me quizzically. “Whatever for?”

“Oh...” I redden, realizing only now how presumptuous it was of me. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been snooping.”

She laughs. “No need to apologize. My Lucas is curious much the same way. He just loves finding hidden things: hidden rooms, hidden spaces, hidden stories. He’s quite inquisitive. You two will get along famously.”

I think of his wide, dark eyes staring unblinkingly at me in the attic and suppress a shiver. “Yes, I’m sure we will. Anyway, I came across a portrait of a beautiful young girl who bore a striking resemblance to... to Eliza.”

Veronica’s smile fades, and I feel a rush of fear. “It could simply have been a trick of the light. My cell phone light, that is. I... well, once the attic lights were on, the resemblance wasn’t as strong.”

Her smile returns, but it’s more forced than before. “No need to apologize. The girl was blonde with blue eyes, and she was walking in a forest, yes?”

“Yes. Not like...” I gesture around at the eclectic collection of plants that surround us. “More like a normal English forest. Not that this is... not that there’s anything wrong...” God, I’m getting discombobulated.

“That was Minnie,” Veronica says. “Minerva Montclair. Oliver used to call her M&M.”

“Oh. A girlfriend of his?”

She laughs, and there’s a shocking degree of bitterness in that laugh. “One can never tell with Oliver. He doesn’t take anything or anyone seriously.” She catches herself and says, “But no, not a girlfriend of his. A friend. Sometimes a friend of his and sometimes of Eliza’s.”

I should leave it at that, but my curiosity refuses to release me. “I take it she’s not a friend anymore?”

“She’s gone,” Veronica replies. “She’s been missing for over a year now.”

“Oh.” Heat floods my cheeks. “Oh, how horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” she says, looking at me with a strange expression that is one part shrewdness, one part disgust, and one part amusement.

I blink and stammer for a few seconds, and she laughs and says, “I’m just teasing, Mary. Of course, it’s tragic. She was a beautiful and vibrant young woman. It’s a shame she was taken in the prime of her life. Mind you, no one knows that she’s dead. No body was ever found. She was just home one day and gone the next. But... well, after so long, I can’t see how she’d still be alive.” She meets my eyes. “I’m sorry. What a horrifically morbid thing to talk about. I should have warned you before you brought it up. Anyway, I don’t know why we still keep her picture in the attic. I’ll have Horace remove it when we return.”

We spend the next hour or so enjoying the garden. I allow the conversation to drift away from the mystery of Minerva Montclair, and we spend the rest of our excursion discussing Veronica’s charity work. She is quite careful to point out how much more the family gives than their neighbors and Sebastian’s business partners do.

“We recently made a pledge to Clean Water for Asia to donate one million pounds per annum to their fund. Sebastian was concerned that we would carve into our budget for maintenance of the estate, and I told him, ‘Sebastian, there are things on Earth more precious than your silly estate.’” She laughs. “He did not like that.”

I manage to keep up with the conversation, which is easy to do since Veronica clearly intends to dominate as much of it as possible. My thoughts, however, remain on the missing girl with bright blue eyes and hair the shade of molten gold.

I try once more to tell myself to let this go. It’s not my business. I’m done with prying into events that have nothing to do with me. Better to focus on the job I was hired to do and leave the secrets of the Carlton family to them.

But deep down, I know that once more, I’ve been pulled into the mystery, and try as I might, I won’t be able to leave it behind until I have an answer.

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Lucas doesn't join us for breakfast. The older children—I really must stop thinking of them like that—the older two siblings seem relieved by that fact. Veronica is tense. She asks about him several times, and each time, Oliver and Eliza brush her concerns aside with some lighthearted comment. I get the impression that were I not there, she would take matters into her own hands and go storming off to find him.

When he does finally come down as we're leaving the breakfast table, Veronica practically sprints toward him. "There you are, my love! Where have you been? Why didn't you come eat?"

"I wasn't hungry, Mother," he says in his soft, almost girlish voice.

"Nonsense!" she insists. "Eliza, get your brother some food."

"We're leaving to pick Father up, remember, Mother?"

"So make him a sandwich for the road. He looks so thin! Doesn't he look thin, Mary?"

She looks at me, and underneath the concern in her eyes is a thinly veiled threat: agree with me or else. I smile and say, "I'll pack him a lunch."

I am keenly aware of everyone's reactions when I say that. Oliver purses his lips and mutters something under his breath. Eliza lowers her head slightly and avoids eye contact with her mother. Veronica crows with triumph and looks at her two older children with naked delight. "Wonderful! Thank you so much. I just knew you'd be perfect for my Lucas!"

Lucas only regards me with his wide, expressionless eyes. I decide now is a good chance to get to know him. “Lucas? Would you like to pick out some food? I’d like to know your favorites.”

“He’ll have a cheese sandwich with a boiled egg, and a serving of fruit and almonds,” Veronica answers before the poor child can even take a breath. She gives Lucas the same threatening smile she gave me a moment ago. “It’s his favorite.”

He lifts the corners of his mouth slightly and nods.

I incline my head, resisting a suddenly powerful urge to tear him from his mother’s grasp and carry him away. I have my own experience with overbearing mothers, and while mine preferred vitriol to syrup, I get the sense that Veronica’s façade is as false as that of the manor. The rot underneath is beginning to seep through.

I head to the kitchen and prepare the food requested. Henri, I was told, only prepares the family’s dinners, so I am alone in the kitchen at first. I am just finishing Lucas’s lunch when the door opens and Eliza walks in.

She gives me a somewhat sad smile and says, “I apologize for my mother. She’s gotten worse the older Lucas has grown, I’m afraid.”

I don’t want to take sides right now, so I keep my response neutral. “Watching one’s children grow is hard. I’m sure it was just as hard for her when you and Oliver came of age.”

She scoffs. “Hardly. Lucas has always been special in her eyes.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I don’t. After a moment, she says, “She conceived him overseas, you know.”

I blink. What a strange thing to say. “I see,” is all I can think to reply.

“Yes. She lived in South Africa for a while when Oliver and I were young. Oliver doesn’t remember, but I do, a little bit. She and Father were fighting, and she ran off to live on her family’s estate in Johannesburg.”

“So she is from South Africa.”

“Not originally, but her family owns land there. When her father retired, they sold their house in Worcestershire and moved there permanently. Better winters, I’m told. Anyway, she was gone for a few months, but then Father went to get her. She came back, and I remember that they were both smiling. She told me we were going to have another baby brother or sister, and she and Father were so happy, and I should be too.” She smiles, but it seems a rueful smile. “I thought, ‘Why wouldn’t I be happy? Of course, I’m happy. Mum’s back, and we’ll have another baby.’”

“You seem to love each other very much,” I offer. Not technically a lie, I suppose, but not the truth.

She hesitates a moment, then says, “Yes. I suppose we do. I wonder, though, what happened while she was in Johannesburg. I was a young girl, so maybe I’m not remembering correctly, but she seemed different when she came back. She’s been like this with Lucas his whole life, always hovering close by, always descending like a vulture anytime anything even remotely dangerous happens to him. Almost as though she feels a devil is lurking, just waiting for the right moment to snatch him away.”

Or a girl hiding in the walls. I still don’t know what to say, but I believe Eliza is reaching out to me, so I try to offer some insight.

“It’s very hard to make a marriage work for a lifetime. It’s possible that your mother

sees him as a symbol of the salvation of her relationship with your father.”

Eliza looks sharply at me, and I realize what I’ve said. “I’m so sorry,” I quickly apologize. “It’s not at all my business to pry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She keeps the sharp look for a moment, then nods. “No, you shouldn’t have. But that doesn’t mean you’re wrong. Though I have to wonder if she’s put her faith in the wrong miracle.”

I want to ask what she means by that, but I think I’ve put my foot far enough in my mouth for one day. I hand Eliza the lunch and say, “Enjoy your day. I look forward to meeting your father.”

She gives another enigmatic smile. “I’m sure he will be the highlight of your stay.”

She leaves, and when the door closes behind her, I release a huge sigh and run a trembling hand over my forehead.

This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. One day with this family, and already I’m involved in their inner drama. Veronica seems desperate to make me her bosom buddy, Lucas looks at me like I’m a fascinating bug, and now Eliza is confiding in me about her parents’ marriage struggles and her mother’s favoritism.

I wish sometimes that I were as stern and forbidding as the governesses from storybooks. Life would be so much easier if people were afraid to talk to me.

I visit the attic again while the family is away. The portrait of the missing girl is gone. Veronica was evidently serious about having Horace remove it.

I feel a strange mixture of relief and sadness to see it gone. I didn't know the girl, but I know the tendency of wealthy aristocratic families to bury scandal. I don't know how many records persist of Minerva outside of sanitized demographics maintained by police and records departments. Part of me wonders if my meddling has resulted in the removal of the last snapshot of her life.

Another part of me reminds me that I'm here to teach Lucas and nothing else. It's none of my business, and if I don't want this stay to end up like the Ashford job, I need to pull my nose out of business that isn't mine and focus only on the task I'm hired to do.

Tomorrow, school will begin. I need only endure what I'm sure will be a very awkward and uncomfortable dinner with Sebastian and then I can gently pull away and establish myself as the governess who teaches Lucas and takes her meals in her room.

When the family returns, I am resolved to that action. I'll get through dinner, then mention to Veronica that I must use the afternoons and evenings to prepare lessons and the mornings to prepare for the day. If I keep myself busy enough, maybe I can become as noiseless and unseen as the rest of the staff.

My thoughts are interrupted when I hear rich, baritone laughter echo through the halls as the door opens. A moment later, a tall, stately man in his mid-fifties walks in. He wears a perfectly tailored suit, of course, and he stands with the bearing of an English lord. His hair has gone to gray, but is full and luxurious and perfectly coiffed, and his eyes are a piercing gray that sets my heart aflutter.

I am not a girl anymore, and as foolish as I may be at times, that foolishness doesn't extend to harboring fantasies about an employer. Still, it's impossible not to notice how attractive Sebastian Carlton is.

What's more incredible to me, however, is the change in the family. It's as though they become entirely different people around him. Veronica follows him, her hand on his shoulder, the first genuine smile I see her wear spread across her face. Eliza flanks his other side, beaming at him with the sort of affection that only a daughter can have and that she can only have for her father. Oliver seems to stand taller in his presence, and the layer of sarcasm that lies underneath his behavior thus far is vanished. Even Lucas smiles, and it might just be my imagination, but I think I see some color in his cheeks.

Sebastian extends his hand to me and smiles. "You must be Mary. Veronica has said wonderful things about you."

I take his hand and ignore the second flutter in my heart at the touch. I can see why Veronica values her marriage so much.

"Dinner is ready!" a cheerful voice cries.

I turn and see Hazel waiting at the entrance to the dining room, her hair done up and her dress ironed. She smiles and opens the door for us. Sebastian's return has even brought the servants out of their seclusion. The whole effect is one of a lord returning home to his keep.

That makes me feel a little awkward, considering that I truly am an outsider here. Still, since the family seems intent on including me in this moment, I allow Eliza and Oliver to lead me to the dining room.

I am allowed some distance during the meal. The family, of course, is far more interested in what their father has been up to these past six weeks.

"No doubt they'll have a statue of you inside of a week," Oliver says. "Are you the first internet provider there?"

Sebastian smiles wryly. “No, son, believe it or not, Thailand has had internet for a while.”

“Of course you’re the best one,” Veronica gushes.

“Oh, of course.”

Sebastian winks at me, and I feel another flutter. I really must get my emotions under control.

“Did you meet any interesting people out there?” Eliza asks.

“Oh, quite,” Sebastian says. “Their culture is so fascinating ! It truly is inspiring how they manage to meld modern sensibility with traditional values. I’ve not seen the like in any other East Asian nation.”

“Let’s just hope you don’t meet anyone too interesting,” Oliver says. “The last really interesting person you met was Mum, and we know how that worked out.”

The temperature in the room drops by ten degrees. Veronica stares at Oliver in horror. Oliver’s mischievous smile fades quickly when he realizes the change in mood, and his face pales several shades. Eliza looks nervously at the rest of the family. She casts a pleading look my way, but as I have no idea what faux pas Oliver has committed, I can think of nothing to say or do to salvage the situation.

Then Lucas laughs. The sound is light and airy and surprisingly musical. The rest of us stare at him a moment, amazed, I think, to hear such a sound come from him.

Then Veronica joins him. Eliza quickly follows suit, and Oliver adds his own grateful mirth to the celebration. Sebastian and I are the last to laugh, and Sebastian says, “Well, there is no one on Earth more interesting than your mother, so you won’t need

to worry about that.”

“No,” Oliver says, red-faced. “Of course not.”

He shoots an apologetic look to his mother, who offers a somewhat grudging smile in return.

The conversation turns back to Sebastian’s adventures overseas. It seems that Oliver’s mistake—whatever it was—is quickly forgotten.

But for a moment, another crack showed, and I could see quite clearly that the joy the family expressed at Sebastian’s return was only another façade.

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The next day is Monday, and for the first time since my arrival, there's a semblance of normalcy in the Carlton estate. Rather than the forced politeness of the weekend that thinly hides the undercurrent of tension between the family members, everyone is businesslike and focused on the work they have ahead of them.

Sebastian is no longer gregarious and effusive. He's not cold or abrupt, but he's distracted, and it's clear his mind is on his business. Veronica is equally occupied with a charity planning committee meeting she has this morning, and while she still greets me warmly, she leaves it simple and quickly moves upstairs to finish tidying up.

The two older Carlton siblings finish breakfast quickly. Oliver, in fact, takes his to go and mutters something about being late for his class. Eliza no longer dresses as though she's attending a ball, instead wearing a sensible skirt and blouse. Her hair is tied in a bun, and though my opinion doesn't matter, of course, I think she looks far more beautiful when she isn't trying to evoke an image of an ethereal goddess. Even Lucas is preoccupied, tinkering with a very large and—I assume—very expensive camera.

In summary, they are a bit frazzled, a bit distracted, and all in somewhat of a hurry. Just like normal people. Maybe it's a bit strange to say this relieves me, but after spending a weekend wondering when the lid was going to pop off and a series of scandals was going to boil over into the house, I'm quite grateful for some normalcy.

Sebastian is the second to leave, giving Eliza a quick kiss on her forehead. He is gone before Veronica returns downstairs. I wonder if she will be upset about this, but she mentions nothing, instead walking to me and saying, "Lucas can be shy at first, but if

you give him time, he'll open up. He has a wonderful personality."

She beams at him, and for a moment, I'm afraid of another display of overly possessive and syrupy love, but she only says, "Be good for Mary."

"He's seventeen years old, Mum," Eliza says somewhat crossly. "He'll be fine. If you want a ride to your meeting, we have to leave now. Rupert has a meeting himself today, and if I'm not at the clinic in time to organize his notes, he'll be hopelessly lost."

Veronica gives Eliza a strange look. "Dr. Chalmers."

Eliza returns an equally odd smile to Veronica. "Right. Dr. Chalmers."

Perhaps my relief arrived too soon. Once more, there's a layer of intrigue. God, is nothing done in the open anymore? Must everything involve deception?

It's not your business, I remind myself.

The two of them leave, and I heave a sigh of relief that is maybe just a touch too obvious and turn to Lucas. "Well, Lucas. I am excited to finally have a chance to get to know you."

He lifts his eyes to mine. Today, his gaze is inquisitive but without the staring quality of the previous two days. Perhaps when separated from his mother, he is able to relax more. "Why did you take this job?" he asks.

"It seemed a good opportunity," I reply. "My last position didn't work out well, and I've always meant to return to England for a visit. This just lined up at the right time."

He nods and turns his attention back to his camera. I sit across from him and say, “Tomorrow, Lucas, we must focus on your studies. Your performance this year will be critical when it comes to determining your future. It quite literally could mean the difference between a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge and a fight to get into a third-tier university. However, today, I’d like for us to simply get to know each other. I feel we haven’t really had a chance to do that yet. How does that sound?”

He shrugs. “All right. Have you seen the bird’s nest yet?”

I blink. “Bird’s nest?”

He grins, and the expression is so honest and pure that my heart warms instantly. “Come on,” he says, “I’ll show you.”

He jumps up, grabs his camera, and runs toward the stairs. I hurry to keep up, but when he bounds up the stairs two at a time, showing the usual exuberance of youth, I have to call and remind him that I’m not young anymore.

“Sorry, Mary,” he says sheepishly. “I get excited sometimes.”

“That’s all right,” I say, huffing as I catch up to him. “Excitement is good for any age. I just can’t quite make my legs move as fast as yours.”

He laughs and says, “Well, I’ll slow down so you can keep pace. It’s not far now, anyway.”

He heads up the next flight of stairs to the attic, and I somehow manage to keep up without dying of a heart attack. He leads me into the attic and then to the north end of the floor. When we arrive, he reaches up and pulls a drawstring hanging from the ceiling.

A stepladder falls down, and he heads up, disappearing into the ceiling. I stare dubiously at the rickety-looking structure, but when he lowers his hand and beckons for me, I screw up my courage and climb.

Miraculously, the ladder holds, and I soon find myself in a small, circular room surrounded on all sides by windows. The ceiling slopes steeply upward, and I realize we're inside one of the narrow gables that decorate the roof of the house.

He grins at me and asks, "How do you like it?"

"This is wonderful!" I say, not exaggerating in the slightest. I really do like hidden places. "You can see the whole estate from here!"

He nods eagerly. "And the village beyond. In clear weather, anyway. Eliza works in the village." A shadow crosses his face at the mention of his sister. He quickly brightens, though, and says, "This is one of my favorite places to take pictures. There's also an old hunting blind in the north woods where the old Carlton lords used to hunt foxes. The rest of the family doesn't know it exists."

He says that last part proudly. I get the sense that he values his privacy. Considering what I've seen of his mother, I'm not surprised. "You really enjoy taking pictures, don't you?"

He nods. "It's a snapshot of a moment that will never occur again. With this"—he holds his camera up—"I get to preserve a piece of that moment for all time."

"That's beautiful!" I exclaim.

He grins again. He is so charming right now that I feel bad for my earlier fear of him. I wonder if his mother ever sees this side of him. I wonder how she'd react if she did.

“I’ll show you some pictures in a minute,” he says, sitting down cross-legged on the floor.

“I’d like that,” I say. “I don’t believe I can join you on the floor, though.”

He laughs and says, “That’s all right. I only sit like this when no one’s looking anyway. Oliver says it makes me look like a cupcake when I sit like this.”

“Well, that’s not very kind of him, is it?”

His smile becomes bitter. “Well, he’s not very kind.”

I am treading dangerous ground here. I want him to feel comfortable with me, but I don’t want to be involved in the tension going on between the family. I offer a noncommittal, “Brothers can be a lot to deal with sometimes,” then try to change the subject. “When did you take an interest in photography?”

“Dad bought me a camera when I was seven. An old Polaroid. I remember watching the pictures develop and being fascinated as they showed up on the paper. And there everything was! And everyone! Like I had just captured a moment of real life. I knew then that’s what I wanted to do.”

“That’s wonderful. Are you hoping to take pictures for magazines?”

He shrugs. “Probably. I’m sure I’ll need some sort of income. It’s an even chance Dad won’t leave me anything since I’m such a disappointment to him.”

He says this nonchalantly, as though he were mentioning that the weather’s a little warm for the season. My heart breaks for him. I don’t know what to say, but I can’t remain silent, so I say, “Many people make an excellent living as photographers. I’m sure your father will be proud to see you succeed in any career.”

He smiles at me, but there's an edge to it. "You're new here, Mary. You're a good person, and I can tell that you want to believe the best in people, but there's things about this family that you don't know yet. You probably wondered why everyone was so shocked by Oliver's joke last night."

"I did, actually," I reply. "It seemed harmless, if a little cheeky and immature."

He chuckles, and the laughter has an edge just like his smile. "That's Oliver for you. Cheeky and immature. Anyway, Dad left his first wife for my mother."

I stammer for a moment, then say, "Well, that's none of my business, dear. Why don't we talk—"

"Then Mum left out of nowhere to South Africa for a while. I guess that's where I was born." He grins at me. "I'm a South African citizen."

"Dual citizenship has many benefits," I say. "You should be grateful."

He shrugs. "I've never been to South Africa. I've asked Mum to go, and she only says, 'Maybe someday.' But it won't happen. Not with her, anyway."

"Maybe you could go on a picture-taking adventure one day."

He grins. "Sure. One day." His smile vanishes, and he says, "Eliza and Oliver don't like me."

When I recover from the shock of the sudden change in subject, I say, "That's not true! I'm sure they love you very much."

"You wouldn't know," he says, not aggressively, just stating a fact. "They think I don't belong."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I'm grateful when he says, "Here, I'll show you some pictures."

He reaches behind and hands me a box. I open it and see hundreds of photographs, some of people, some of landscapes, some of animals both close up and from a distance. Some are of clouds and sunny skies, and one shows the taillights of a car heading from the estate in the dark of night.

I look through them, genuinely amazed at the talent the images show. "Lucas. These are wond..."

My voice trails off when I come across a photograph of the missing girl. She's standing in the corner of the photo, which appears to have been taken from the east garden. She's laughing at something someone has said off-camera.

It's not her image that stops me, though. The resemblance to Annie is still uncanny, but the disturbing part of the image is the man standing behind the hedges. The look on his face is one of either hate or lust. It might even be both.

His gaze is fixed on Minerva, and a chill runs down my spine.

"That's Niall," Lucas says. "He's the gardener. Scary-looking chap, isn't he?"

I am still too stunned to do more than nod.

"Come on," he says, "I'll show you the hunting blind. Don't worry. It's not far."

He scampers down the ladder. I replace the photograph and close the box, my hands trembling slightly.

Once more, I've found an image of the missing girl. A snapshot, as Lucas would say,

of her life.

I don't like what that snapshot suggests about the end of that life.

I follow Lucas down the ladder and push my concerns to the back of my mind. This time, I can't completely push them away.

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I believe I am a reasonably fit woman for my age, but with Veronica not present to sap his strength, Lucas has every ounce of the energy that a healthy boy of seventeen should have. I soldier on as bravely as I can, but after three hours of scampering from place to place across the grounds, exploring the hunter's blind, the "folly," as Lucas calls the three-story miniature castle on the other side of the north woods, and several other locations that he proudly claims are unused and ignored by the rest of the family, I have to finally admit I am overcome. I tell Lucas that his first assignment is to create a photographic collage that will fully capture the spirit of the Carlton estate and send him ahead to complete it while I limp back to the house gasping for breath.

My body is overwhelmed, but my mind is more alive than it's been in months, perhaps years. I laugh as I ascend the last of the hills between me and the manor. Look at me running around like a girl. I haven't done anything like this in as long as I can remember.

I decide I like Lucas. He really is a charming and eager young lad. Perhaps a touch immature for his age, but that's to be expected considering his upbringing. At least his immaturity expresses itself as innocence and curiosity and not as arrogance and vindictiveness.

I think back to our conversation about his family. I am disturbed by his insistence that his siblings don't love him. As I replay his words, a few things stand out to me.

Dad left his first wife for my mother. Not our mother, my mother. They think I don't belong.

When I think of the arrogant, handsome Oliver and the regal, confident Eliza, I have

to say I agree. I don't feel this in a negative light, of course, but it's easy to see the family resemblance between the other two Carlton children. Eliza is not as brash as Oliver and Oliver is not as poised as Eliza, but they both comport themselves with an air of superiority that I don't think they're even aware of. They remind me in a manner of their father. Sebastian has had time to temper his arrogance and so it doesn't show as much as theirs does, but the regal bearing and confident demeanor are entirely his.

Lucas, in contrast, is reserved and quiet at first and very awkward socially. I've thoroughly enjoyed today, but it certainly isn't the sort of activity I would expect a boy his age to engage in. He does talk—rather effusively, in fact—once he is comfortable with you, but his conversation can be quite abrupt and inappropriate. In this manner, he resembles neither Sebastian nor Veronica. Veronica is effusive, but her anxiety is born of nervous tension, not the flattened deflation Lucas showed the first two days I was here. Neither she nor Sebastian is awkward with others, while Lucas doesn't appear to have any concern at all with propriety or social grace.

My mind begins to wander to speculations it should not entertain. My mother, he said. Not our mother. The two older children definitely show more signs of their father's ancestry in their behavior. And they don't get along well with Veronica. For her part, she seems almost antagonized by them.

And she was overseas when Lucas was conceived and, according to Lucas, when he was born as well.

I wonder about that. Eliza told me that she came back pregnant, but Lucas told me he was born in South Africa. I suppose it's possible that Veronica returned to Johannesburg to deliver him, but why? Is it possible that Sebastian is not Lucas's father?

Damn it, I keep breaking my promise to myself that I wouldn't get involved. This is

none of my business.

I look up to see I've reached the house and release a sigh of relief. I'll make myself a cup of tea to settle my body, then perhaps I'll shower while the rest of the family is still out.

I head to the kitchen and begin to brew the tea. As I set the kettle to boil, I hear the front door open. I head out to see who it is, and my eyes widen when I see Eliza. I check the clock on the wall of the foyer. It's barely noon. Why is she home so early?

"So call Horace to pick you up! It was your choice to let your license expire."

I stare at her, dumbfounded for a moment. Then it occurs to me that she's on the phone and not speaking to me directly. I redden a bit and head back to the kitchen. Behind me, I hear her say, "So figure it out! Be an adult! You can do that, right?"

I decide she'll need some tea as well. I prepare a second cup, and when the kettle boils, I pour the water over the bags and add cream and sugar to Eliza's.

I carry the tea to the parlor and find Eliza sitting on the couch, a pensive expression on her face. She has her feet up but quickly sits up straight and smooths her skirt when I arrive. She smiles at me apologetically, and when she notices the tea, her eyes widen. Then she blushes. "I guess you heard me."

"No need to worry about that, dear," I say. "I know how to mind my own business." And if you believe that...

She chuckles bitterly. "I wish everyone did. I suppose the proper thing to do would be to scold you for eavesdropping, but I'm in a bit of a mood, and tea does sound wonderful, so I'll save the scolding and thank you for the consideration."

I smile—not too awkwardly, I hope—and say, “Well, thank you for sparing me the scolding. I’ve just had a rather exhausting day following Lucas all over the estate, and I don’t know if I could handle a scolding on top of all of that.”

She looks at me with amazement. “Really? Lucas left his room?”

“He did. He showed me a number of his favorite places and talked my ear off about his photography. He’s a very bright and inquisitive boy.”

She gives me an odd look and doesn’t say anything for a moment. Finally, she says, “Hmm. It’s amazing what a person can do when they’re not suffocating under Veronica’s attentions.”

There it is again. Not my mother. Veronica.

“Well, mothers are like that sometimes,” she continues. “I suppose, in my own way, I’m as stifled as Lucas. She simply chose to frame her suffocation as profound disappointment in my case.”

I don’t know how to respond—a distressingly common occurrence when talking with this family—so I sip my tea instead. If only it were wine.

“Has Lucas told you about the girl in the wall yet?”

I gasp when she says that. Unfortunately, I do so with my cup to my lips and inhale a healthy half-ounce of Assam tea into my nose. I cough and splutter, and only decades of experience and wisdom allow me to set the cup down without spilling more.

“I see he has,” Eliza says ruefully. “He imagines he sees Minnie in our walls at night. He’s convinced that she was killed and buried somewhere on the estate.”

“Goodness,” I say through more coughing. “How horrible!”

Her lower lip trembles briefly. “It was.” She shrugs. “But life is horrible, isn’t it? Nothing beautiful exists without decay. Not even for lovely young women like Minnie.”

“Were you two friends?” I ask.

She smiles, and again her lower lip briefly trembles. She regains her composure quickly, though. “We were. I was older than her, but... well, there aren’t many girls my age in this part of the Cotswolds. She and I grew close because we could talk to each other about things girls talk about. It was refreshing to have someone to chat with.” She looks wryly at me. “I think you can tell how important good conversation is to me.”

“Good conversation is important to everyone,” I reply, slowly gaining my composure. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She scoffs. “Don’t be sorry for me. Her parents were so devastated they moved to South Africa.”

An image crosses my mind of Annie laughing and pulling me along with her on one of our many childhood adventures. A lump forms in my throat, and I take another sip of tea to loosen it before saying, “It’s a terrible thing to lose a loved one.”

She shrugs. “I wouldn’t know.”

The bitterness in her voice tells me she does know and very well. I should be respectful of her grief and mindful of my commitment to stay out of the drama this family suffers. I should do a great many things, but as always, my curiosity gets the best of me, and I ask the question I should leave unasked.

“Why does Lucas feel that she went missing on the grounds?”

She meets my eyes, and there’s a coldness in her gaze that chills me. I’m about to apologize for going too far when she says, “I forget sometimes that you’re not from around here, so you can’t be aware of the news.”

“The news?”

“Yes. She was last seen alive here, in the Carlton estate.”

The temperature in the house drops precipitously, and the sip of tea I take does little to dispel the chill. The drama surrounding this family instantly takes on a far darker and more sinister turn.

“Not here in the house,” Eliza clarifies, “but here, on the estate. Depending on who you ask, I was the last person to see her alive. Or it was Oliver. Or my parents. More likely than not, it was Lucas creeping around with his camera and trying to see if he could get an angle down her shirt.”

I really should scold her for saying that about her brother, but my curiosity still has me in a tight grip. “What happened?”

Eliza sighs. “She left for home and never arrived. The police never found her. They tried to get a warrant for the estate so they could have dogs sniff for her, but my father fought that and eventually they backed off. Said there was no reason for them to hunt for a body when everyone agrees they saw her leave the estate.”

“Did you all see her leave?”

Eliza looks down at her tea and doesn’t answer. After a moment, she stands.

“I feel like baking,” she says. “Mother says it’s unbecoming for a lady of class to work in a kitchen, but I feel like ignoring my mother’s wishes today. Thank you for the tea.”

She heads for the kitchen but pauses at the entry to the parlor and turns to me. “You seem like a good woman, Mary, but not everyone is worth saving.”

She leaves without another word. I remain where I am for several minutes, trying to process everything I’ve heard.

So Minnie was last seen on the Carlton estate. She was friends with Eliza, and her portrait at one point was hung in this house before being buried in the attic and then disposed of. There’s a picture of her in Lucas’s collection, and a mysterious gardener whom Lucas caught gazing at her with what appears to be a mixture of lust and hate.

I try to convince myself—again—that it’s not my business, and I should just let it go, but Annie’s face flashes across my mind, and I know I can’t walk away from this mystery. Perhaps not everyone is worth saving, but everyone deserves justice.

And I will find justice for Minerva.

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Eliza joins Lucas and me for a lunch of cheese pudding. Eliza informs me that the muffins will have to wait until dinner but promises me they will be worth it.

“I’m sure they will be. What do you say, Lucas? Muffins for dessert?”

Lucas shrugs and tinkers with his camera. With his elder sister present, he has shut down once again.

If she is his older sister. I hate holding that suspicion, but both he and Eliza have referred to Veronica as though she is Lucas’s mother, but not Eliza’s or Oliver’s. Then again, Eliza has also referred to Veronica as her own mother. And neither of them seem to care much for her.

Layers upon layers upon layers. Deceit upon deceit upon deceit.

“Make sure Mother doesn’t see you eat them,” Eliza says. “She’ll give you trouble about your digestion.”

She smiles tauntingly at Lucas, and I see the relationship between her and Oliver in that sneering glance. Lucas surprises me by meeting Eliza’s eyes and saying, “I’ll have one if she wants me to or not.”

Eliza seems equally surprised. She even nods approvingly and says, “Well, if you’re that insistent, I suppose I must make some. I wouldn’t want to disappoint a big, strong man like you.”

Her words taunt, but her tone, again, is approving. Lucas offers the ghost of a smile

and turns to me. “I’m still working on that photo collage. If it’s all right with you, I’ll do that for the afternoon so I can concentrate. You’re welcome anywhere on the grounds if you’d care to do some more exploring.”

“Why thank you, Lord Carlton,” Eliza teases.

He rolls his eyes and turns back to his camera. She laughs and says, “But he’s right. Feel free to go anywhere. The estate is yours.”

I wonder for a moment why the other servants don’t have this same freedom. Or perhaps they do, and they simply use it to stay away from the family as much as possible.

In any case, that is the least of my questions. My hips and knees ache, and my ankles are sore from the morning’s excursions, but I think I will take the afternoon to explore. My mind is restless, and if I don’t work that restlessness out now, I’ll spend the evening wandering the house again. I’d just as soon not run into any more paintings of my sister.

Superstition aside, I would like to rest tonight, so after lunch, I bid farewell to the two Carlton children and set off to explore the grounds. I’ve seen much of the east garden, the arboretum, and the north woods, so I head west, across the rolling hills toward the meadows beyond. The ground here isn’t as manicured as the other gardens, but the grass is still uniform, and the flowers are contained to planters or orderly rows along either side of the several footpaths that wind through the hills and meadows.

Niall could not have done all of this himself. The estate is six hundred thirty-two acres, nearly a full square mile of landscaping. It would take a whole team of people to handle this. I don’t know why that stands out to me, but it does.

“You’re the governess.”

The thick, coarse voice startles me so badly that I leap into the air and shriek. I spin around and find myself facing a man of perhaps forty with tanned, leathery skin and narrow, deep-set eyes. His form is thin, almost scrawny, but his hands are large and strong.

He looks at me with an expression that reminds me far too much of the one he cast on Minerva Montclair. “Name’s Niall Weaver,” he says. “I’m the gardener.”

I stare at him in shock for a moment longer, then find my voice. “Y—yes. I’m the governess. Mary Wilcox. Are you in the habit of sneaking up on women unawares?”

He laughs—a harsh, cackling sound—and a chill runs down my spine. I am all at once very aware of the fact that I’m alone.

“I don’t sneak up,” he says. “It’s just that most people don’t pay attention.”

He fixes me with a grin that is not quite a sneer and not quite a leer. I decide it’s better for me not to remain alone with him. I want to find out who killed Minerva, but I don’t want to end up another victim in the process.

“Well, I’ll spare you my lack of attention,” I say. “Good day, Mr. Weaver.”

“Ain’t no need to be afraid of me,” he said. “I’m not as harmful as I look.”

I offer a smile I don’t feel. “I’m happy to hear that.”

I head away from him, but a moment later, I hear his footsteps behind me. I turn quickly and see him walking with me, just far enough apart that I don’t feel the need to shriek and sprint away.

“That’s a dark home,” he says unprompted. “With a dark family. It’s funny how the

prettiest creatures are so often the deadliest.”

“Do you have a fascination with pretty creatures, Mr. Weaver?”

“Call me Niall. And everyone likes pretty things, Miss Mary. Not that anyone cares what I like. People only talk to me when they don’t want to hear something back. That’s the nature of being a servant. You’re not quite considered a person, but you look like one. If you’re quiet enough, you can hear things you wouldn’t believe. Secrets people wouldn’t tell their own mothers.”

I think back to Eliza’s and Lucas’s and even Veronica’s confidences. At the time, I was shocked that they would talk about these things with me, but I just assumed they’re desperate for anyone to talk to. I don’t consider that part of it might be the fact that I am, when it comes to it, unimportant in the grand scheme of their lives.

But what Niall says makes sense.

I am well aware that I could be talking to a murderer, but the chance to discover information that might lend insight to this family is too much to pass up. And perhaps I can get him to admit something that will either prove his involvement or clear his name.

“What secrets have you heard?”

He laughs and grins at me again. “So you’re interested in secrets? Ha-ha. It’s always the proper ones that want the gossip.”

My cheeks start to burn, and I say, “If you’re only following me to taunt me, then I bid you good day.”

“Not at all,” he says. “But I ain’t gonna tell you everything I know. It’s for your own

safety, you understand. People like the Carltons wield power that common folk like you and I can't begin to grasp. Best to stay in the good graces of people like that."

"And are you in their good graces?"

He grins at me. "Ain't you seen how pretty their gardens are?"

"And you expect me to believe that you're responsible for all of that?"

"Not meself, no. I have a team of people that work for me."

"That work for you ?"

He laughs. "Surprised? My speech might be coarse, and my look rough, but I have a master's degree from Oxford, and I own a landscaping company that makes twelve million a year. That might pale in comparison to the wealth of a tech mogul like Sebastian Carlton, but it's nothing to sneer at."

"I... I see." My cheeks burn again. "I apologize."

"No need to be sorry," he says easily. "No one would look at me and think that in any other part of England, I'd be the one putting on airs and getting a French chef to cook me suppers. But in the Cotswolds, I am what you see before you. Just a lowly gardener. And that's how I like it."

I should let the conversation end there, but I'm close enough to the house that if I were to scream, Eliza and Lucas would hear it. It's foolish to ask what I ask next, but I suppose it's time to stop pretending that understanding the foolishness of my actions will stop me.

"What do you know of the missing girl? Minerva Montclair?"

His smile fades. A thrill of fear runs down my spine. I glance toward the house and prepare to run, but he makes no move toward me. After a moment, he says, “I’m going to say this once more, Miss Wilcox. It’s best to stay in the Carltons’ good graces. They’re the type of family that can make people disappear when they want, and it don’t matter if they were your friends before. This is the Cotswolds. People live different lives here. The politicians would like you to believe that the aristocracy is dead, but it ain’t. Best to think of the Carltons as royalty and yourself as a common serf. It ain’t good for your pride, but it’s good for your health.”

“Are you saying that the Carltons had something to do with Minerva’s disappearance?”

“I ain’t saying anything but what I’ve said,” he replies.

I’ve spent the past ten minutes prepared to run at a moment’s notice, but in the end, he’s the one who flees. He turns around and walks off without looking back.

I watch him until he disappears into the south woods, then head back to the house. The bright white paint and pristine lines of the manor glitter like glass in the sun.

Dinner is a more reserved affair tonight than it was the night before. The family still shows signs of the distraction they showed in the morning. Most of the conversation is about their various tasks tomorrow, and I am not included in that.

The only exception is when Veronica asks Lucas, “So how was your first day of instruction with Mary?”

He nods and says, “It was good. She’s very intelligent. I think I’ll learn a lot.”

I notice he mentions nothing about the photography or the project I've given him. I heard him mention it in front of Eliza earlier, but she doesn't say anything either. In fact, she shows no sign of interest at all.

"That's wonderful! I'm so happy to hear that." She turns to me. "And isn't Lucas such a bright child?"

I smile at her. "He's very bright. I think I'll learn as much from him as he does from me."

Veronica laughs and turns to Sebastian. "See? I told you she was the right choice."

Sebastian gives me a dazzling smile. This time, my heart doesn't flutter. "I'm pleased to welcome you to the family, Mary."

"I'm pleased to be here."

Veronica beams at Lucas and hugs him tight. Her knuckles are white around his shoulder, and her teeth are bared like a lioness's. Lucas seems to shrink in her grasp, not really a movement so much as a sense of diminishing. I am reminded uncomfortably of my own mother. She made no pretense of affection, but she diminished Annie in much the same way Veronica appears to diminish Lucas.

Veronica looks around at all of us and dares any of us to challenge her behavior. Eliza looks down at her plate. Oliver looks at his father. Sebastian takes a bite of his roasted lamb and calmly says, "Henri's outdone himself this time. We'll have to talk about a bonus for him."

I am the only one to meet Veronica's gaze, but what am I to do? I am, after all, only a servant.

So, after a moment, I lower my head to my own plate and say, “It really is quite delicious.”

The forlorn look on Lucas’s face breaks my heart.

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“You know she’s a vampire, right?”

Annie looks at me, and her expression is so serious that I almost think she believes what she said. It’s a moment before the absurdity of that thought hits me. When it does, I laugh and play along with the joke.

“That would explain why she’s so pale and thin. Aren’t vampires supposed to be tall, though?”

Annie’s expression doesn’t change. “I’m serious. I’ve thought about it a long time, and I really believe she has to leach energy from other people to survive.”

Once more, I hesitate a moment. Annie’s just turned ten years old, and at only twelve years old myself, we both engage in our fair share of play-pretend still. But we’re too old to actually believe anything we make up, aren’t we?

Of course we are. Annie’s just being ridiculous. I decide this is an excellent opportunity for me to demonstrate my maturity as the oldest sister and tell Annie something that will help her understand the difference between children and adults.

“Oh, Annie,” I say, sitting next to her on the park bench and putting a comforting hand on her arm. “I know that Mother is hard to deal with at times.” I’ve recently started calling Mum Mother and Dad Father. I feel very grown up calling them that. “But you must remember that she is only like this because she loves us very much, and she wants us to have happy, successful lives.”

“Is she happy?”

I start to say, of course she is, but the words don't leave my mouth. It hits me that I've never once seen Mother smile.

No, that's not true. I recall one time when Annie was three years old, she was curious about the food Mother was making on the stove. I was only five at the time, and I can't remember exactly what she was making, only that she had a pot of water boiling. Mother noticed Annie looking at that water and set her on the counter near the stove.

I recall wondering why on Earth she would put a toddler on the counter. What if Annie burned herself? I looked at her and prepared to ask her that exact question, but the expression on her face chilled me. It was not an angry face. It was not vindictive or vicious. It was... absent somewhat. Her eyes were still in her head, and she was aware of her surroundings. She set Annie on the counter, with no thought to ensure that she couldn't accidentally touch the boiling water.

There was nothing there, no emotion at all. Not the anger I am used to, or the occasional cruelty. Not the typical long-suffering exhaustion that is her usual expression. Just... nothing.

She set Annie on the counter and walked away. I wanted to warn my sister not to touch the stove. I wanted to lift her off of the counter and lead her from the room to play in our bedroom. I wanted to save her, but I noticed my mother watching us, and I knew in my heart of hearts that if I made any move to rescue her, my mother would punish me tenfold for interfering.

Annie looked at the water for a second, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Then she placed her hand on the edge of the pot.

She pulled it back quickly and looked at it, her brow furrowed in confusion. What on

Earth was that strange sensation she was feeling on her palm?

Then the pain hit. Her eyes widened in shock, and then they looked at me. Even at three years old, the understanding was there, the knowledge of my betrayal.

Then they turned to my mother, and just before the shrieking started, I saw heartbreaking grief.

And my mother watched her screaming child, a look of approval in her eyes, the corners of her mouth tilted upward, and said these words.

“Now you’ll know better.”

I gasp and then release a sob of anguish. My eyes are shut tightly, and I hear my voice moan, “No, Annie!”

The voice is not that of a child but that of a fifty-year-old woman. It snaps me the rest of the way out of my dream, and I open my eyes to see the sun shining through the window. I sit up and look at my cell phone. I rarely use the implement as anything more than a flashlight or clock, and as a timepiece, it proves quite useful and unfailingly accurate.

It’s seven-fifty-six. I’ve slept in nearly two hours.

I sigh and roll out of bed, dressing quickly and heading upstairs. I don’t have time to dwell on the nightmare or on the fact that for the first time in twenty-six years I’ve slept through an alarm. Today is the first day of Lucas’s instruction, and I have made myself late.

The family is nearly finished with breakfast. No one pays me any mind as I head to the kitchen and prepare myself a scrambled egg and some toast with jam. The novelty of my existence is wearing off, and I'm slowly becoming just another servant. I think I prefer that.

When I return to the table, only Lucas remains. He looks at me, and for the first time, I see the resemblance between his wide, not-quite-innocent stare and my sister's direct, piercing gaze.

I force a smile and say, "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you. And you?"

"Well enough," I lie. "I'm sorry I was late to breakfast."

He shrugs. "You didn't miss anything. Oliver and Eliza reminded Mother that they hate her, she reminded them that she doesn't care, and Father pretended not to notice anything, as he usually does."

I want to comfort him, but I want more to finally wrest myself free of the poison rotting this family from the inside. So I say, "Yes, well, let's be grateful it's over then. Today, we shall review your English, maths, and sciences and determine how much you must learn to pass the sixth form with the appropriate marks. Over the following three days, we will review all your other subjects as well as your elective and create a plan that will allow you to achieve top marks in the form. Do you have access to your current academic record?"

"I do, but... don't you want to see the collage?"

I stare at him blankly for a moment, then remember. I assigned him to create a collage that will capture the spirit of the Carlton estate. I'd completely forgotten.

“Of course!” I say. “Yes! That will be the first thing we do. Why don’t you bring it downstairs, and I’ll finish my breakfast in a hurry. Then we can review it.”

He brightens, and the relief I feel when I see that smile nearly reduces me to tears. My emotional instability concerns me greatly. I shouldn’t be so fragile.

But I won’t focus on it. The more I focus on it, the worse it will get. An image flashes across my mind of a bespectacled woman with a severe expression and even more severe features telling me the same exact thing, but I don’t focus on that either.

I finish my breakfast, willfully taking each bite into my mouth and swallowing, not caring if I taste it or not. Damn it, this will not be a repeat of the Ashford job!

Lucas runs downstairs, and when he opens the folder and shows me the photos, I feel a touch of relief. Something positive I can use to calm the turmoil in my head.

I smile and look down at the photographs. My smile fades.

Each photograph bears an image of death. A bird, stiff and cold in the middle of a perfectly ordered flower bed. A cockroach, desiccated and curled, on the first step of the gleaming marble porch. A rat, decomposed to the point that only teeth, fur, and bone remain, rotting in front of a poplar carefully trimmed and pruned to immaculate symmetry.

“Do you like it?” he asks hopefully.

I lift my eyes to his and force another smile. “It’s wonderful,” I lie.

He practically glows at the praise. “I wanted to show the juxtaposition of beauty and death,” he says. “The family is focused on appearances, like most families, but underneath, there is decay and rot just like anywhere. I worried I wouldn’t find

enough dead creatures—Niall is usually very good at removing them—but I’d forgotten he was taking his day off yesterday, so I was able to get what I needed.”

My head reels again. He talks of decay and rot with the same airy tone one might use to describe a trip to the market. Niall was off yesterday and chose to use his time to prowl the grounds and frighten me. And Lucas’s conclusions about the family are no different from my own, but seeing them represented here in visual form is almost nauseating.

No, it’s literally nauseating. I feel bile rise in my throat and have to lift my gaze to his once more to stifle the vomit. “This is truly exceptional. You have a wonderful talent. I definitely wish to explore this gift further. However, I think we will save that for next week. We must ensure that you are well-set to complete your education.”

He nods. “Very well. I’m so glad you like it. Perhaps I’ll laminate it for you!”

God, please, no. “I’d like that. But study must come first.”

“Of course. My records are on my laptop in my bedroom. Shall I take it to the study?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

Lucas has excellent marks in school. I’m not surprised by this. He truly is a gifted child, and his inquisitive nature lends itself well to academic work. Unlike many artistically gifted people, he is not afflicted with the usual boredom that prevents excellence in maths and sciences. I believe I will have a quite easy time instructing him. With very little in the way of catch-up to do, we are able to review all of his subjects as well. His elective, of course, is photography, and it goes without saying he excels in it.

By the end of the day, it is clear he will need only the usual instruction of a gifted sixth-former. It is equally clear that he will be able to self-manage.

Veronica, of course, is quite pleased to hear this. She crows with delight over dinner, and the other two children shoot me sour looks, unhappy that I've given their mother another reason to sing Lucas's praises.

The breaking point comes when, after a lengthy soliloquy on Lucas's acute intelligence, Veronica fixes another sharklike grin on him and says, "He takes after his mother."

Eliza, who ordinarily remains passive during these exchanges, meets her mother's eye and says, "Well, he certainly doesn't take after Father, does he?"

As with Oliver's joke about Sebastian's first wife from before, everyone's smile vanishes aside from those of Oliver and Eliza, who look at Veronica with triumphant grins on their faces.

"He reminds me more of Minnie than us, doesn't he, Eliza?" Oliver asks casually.

"That's enough!" Sebastian thunders.

We all jump at the sound of that voice. Sebastian's eyes fix on his older son, and Oliver shrinks under his gaze. "I will not hear that name mentioned again! Is that clear?"

"Clear, Father," Oliver whispers.

Sebastian turns to Eliza, who swallows and then says, "Clear," in a hoarse voice.

Sebastian stares at her a moment longer. Then he returns to his meal, his expression

calm once more. “We really should pay Henri more. This beef Wellington would earn a Michelin Star at any restaurant in London.”

The rest of us don’t respond, fearful of provoking another episode of wrath. Veronica is the first to recover, slamming her fork down and pushing her chair back so forcefully it falls to the floor. She leaves the table and stalks upstairs, her footfalls echoing hollowly through the house.

My head reels from what I’ve just witnessed. The insinuation that Lucas is Veronica’s son by affair is shocking enough, but the insinuation that Minerva might be his sister is beyond the pale.

And Sebastian’s reaction chills me. I will not hear that name mentioned again.

Why not? What is he hiding?

Prudence tells me that I should follow Niall’s advice and keep my nose out of their business.

But Minerva’s voice cries to me as surely as Abel’s cried to God when Cain slew him.

For better or for worse, I must know the truth of what happened to her.

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That night, I am afflicted with nightmares once more, but none of them are clear, or at least none remain clear upon waking. My alarm does its job this time, and I am awake by six as usual.

Veronica is up. She is sitting at the table, staring out the window of the breakfast room, a blank expression on her face. Outside, the gray light of pre-dawn mutes the colors of the flowers, causing everything to appear ethereal.

I consider ignoring her and going to the kitchen for my coffee, but aside from being uncalled for—Veronica has been nothing but gracious to me—it is unwise. Niall warned me that it's best to stay in the Carltons' good graces, and I am wholeheartedly inclined to believe him.

Veronica preempts my greeting, however. Still staring out the window, she says, "I love him, you know."

I blink, confused. "Ma'am?"

"Veronica," she reminds me. "Not ma'am. And Sebastian. I really do love him."

The fragility in her voice breaks through my fear and engenders genuine sympathy. I cross the room and sit next to her, taking her hand in mine. It's cold and paper-thin.

"Of course you do," I tell her. "I could see that the moment he walked into the house."

She smiles slightly and says with a trace of irony, "Could you now?" She takes a

deep breath and turns to me. “Well, it’s true. I love him. I’ve always loved him. But... it’s hard to be in love with him. He’s always away, and when he’s here, it’s always about the business. Not that he doesn’t love his children, and I believe he loves me too, but... I feel sometimes as though we’re property. He has decided that this is the life he shall have: a successful business, an exquisite estate, a doting wife and children that are the envy of the world. So that’s what he has.”

She shakes her head. “So few have that gift to have whatever it is they want in life. He doesn’t demand it. It just occurs.”

I recall his thunderous rebuke of Oliver and Eliza the night before, but I keep my mouth shut.

“And I’m happy for him, I really am. He’s a good man. He deserves it. But...” She sighs. “It’s hard. It’s hard to know that the rest of your life will proceed in an orderly fashion according to what propriety dictates. I will keep the estate, I will support charity, I will ensure that our family name stands taller and shines brighter than the others, and I will ensure that my daughter comports herself like a lady and my sons receive the education they need to become men. It sounds so simple. So... normal.”

She meets my eyes. The emptiness in her expression sends a chill down my spine. It reminds me of Annie’s own in the months leading to her disappearance.

“But eventually it becomes too much. A gilded cage is still a cage. Eventually, I must flee the cage and fly somewhere, anywhere, just to remind myself that I can. That’s all it is. Just reminding myself that I exist outside of him.”

She looks down. “That’s all it was. But I love him. I would never leave him. And haven’t I proven that I’ve learned my lesson? Haven’t I stayed where I’m meant to be?”

Her voice trails off. She blinks and her eyes come into focus. She pulls her hand from mine and stands, frowning down at me. My heart begins to pound, and I remain silent. Her lips thin, and I fight the urge to apologize. Saying something can only make this worse.

“Hazel is off today,” she says, and her tone is that of the mistress of the house speaking to a servant. “If you have time after your instruction of Lucas, I’d appreciate it if you cleaned some of the rooms. The children’s bedrooms and the kitchen and breakfast room. There’s no need to concern yourself with mine and Sebastian’s bedroom and you may leave dinner’s dishes for Hazel when she returns tomorrow.”

I swallow. “Yes, ma’am.”

She inclines her head, then leaves. I wait until I hear the door to the breakfast room close behind her, then release a ragged breath and slump forward in my chair. I take a deep breath to steady myself, then head to the kitchen and prepare coffee.

As I work, the fear fades, and I digest what I’ve heard. The meaning of the outburst last night and Veronica’s confession this morning is clear. She’s cheated on Sebastian. Perhaps recently, certainly when she was younger.

Lucas is quite probably the child of that affair. He shows some sign of resemblance to his mother in his wide eyes and full lips. He shows no resemblance at all to Sebastian and only a passing connection to his elder siblings. And the slender build, long fingers, and softer bone structure are shown by neither Sebastian nor Veronica.

It’s easy to put the timeline together. Veronica realizes that by marrying a landed gentleman, she has bartered much of her freedom away. She rebels against this and goes to South Africa. While there, she meets a man and has an affair, probably as an extension of that rebellion. She learns she is pregnant and is no doubt terrified of the consequences. Sebastian Carlton is powerful, and she and her family could suffer if

both her reputation and his are soiled.

So Sebastian comes for her, and either she throws herself at him and convinces him that Lucas is his, or she confesses and begs mercy, and he agrees to forgive her. Or perhaps he tells her that he already knows, and if she agrees to come home and stop acting a fool, he will bury the scandal so that she and their family don't suffer.

I find the second option—forgiveness—unlikely. Sebastian has a warm exterior, but it's clear after last night that he will not tolerate a stain on his reputation. Any "forgiveness" he extended would come at a cost.

The first is possible. Sebastian clearly knows of the affair now, but perhaps he didn't realize until it was too late to simply put her away without causing himself embarrassment. The third is equally possible. In either case, the narrative of a loving couple and a perfect family must be maintained, and in any case, Sebastian is now in control of that narrative.

The piece that truly intrigues me is the connection to Minerva. She was nineteen when she died, which would make her twenty now. That would put her within a few months of Oliver's age, but Oliver turns twenty-one next month, so perhaps not so close that it's impossible she could have been conceived almost immediately after his birth.

So perhaps she didn't flee to South Africa and meet a man there. Perhaps she met a man and fled to South Africa with him.

But then what of the Montclair family? Minerva's parents. A quick search of the family provides nothing to indicate that she's adopted.

Could they have helped hush the scandal up? It's difficult to fake a pregnancy, but not impossible. And if they did cover it up, why? Or is it all just idle speculation that

no one can prove is untrue because Sebastian won't let anyone risk proving that it is true?

There's a reason he doesn't want her name spoken. I must find out what that reason is.

Lucas, as expected, is quite able to manage his own schoolwork with minimal guidance from me. I decide to get the cleaning done while he works so that I can use the evening to peruse official records and see if I can find the answers to some of the questions I have.

Eliza's room barely needs cleaning. She is as fastidious with her living space as she is with her appearance, and other than making the bed and placing a few books back on her scrupulously organized shelves, there is little for me to do.

Lucas's room shows the ordinary mess of a young man, but it's not excessive. I gather his soiled clothes—no underwear among them, thankfully—into the hamper, make his bed, and vacuum the rug. I leave his lenses and cameras in their somewhat haphazard state. I don't want to touch an artist's tools.

Oliver's room is downright slovenly. I suppose this is how he chooses to rebel against his parents. Clothes lay scattered everywhere—including boxers, I'm afraid. Food wrappers, empty drink containers—a disturbing number of them alcoholic—and scraps of paper from notebooks, magazines, and other sources I don't recognize are strewn over every surface.

I sigh. I will have my work cut out here.

It takes me nearly an hour to gather the soiled clothes into the hamper and collect the

trash into the wastebasket. It fills two bags, and I realize I don't know where the trash is to be taken and what to do with the soiled clothes. I would like to wash them so that poor Hazel doesn't return to a mountain of work. Perhaps Lucas knows.

I gather the papers that don't appear to be trash—though I can't be entirely sure—into piles which I set on the desk for Oliver to (hopefully) review and dispose of if appropriate.

It's while I'm gathering these that my eyes catch sight of the name Minnie.

I stop and pick up the paper. It's a letter. Her name is at the bottom, a signature, underneath the line, Yours forever in love.

I scan the letter, and my eyes widen. It is quite clearly a love letter to Oliver. In it, she refers to him in glowing terms. There's not much in it to make me blush, but there's enough to make it clear that at the time this letter was written, they'd engaged in a long and very intimate affair. She references a plan to run away together and be free of our persecutors. Typical teenage angst, but considering the events that occurred shortly after, quite sobering.

I set the letter down and dig through the rest of the papers. When I find nothing there, I open his desk drawers one at a time. When that also reveals nothing, I search his closet. There I find a shoebox, and in that shoebox, I find a pile of letters from Minnie.

I read them quickly, not sure exactly what I'm looking for until I find it near the bottom of the shoebox. This one is from Oliver to Minnie. It's the only one addressed to her, which suggests to me that it was never sent.

Several inkblots and small tears along with generally poor handwriting give away his frayed mental state at the time of writing this. When I read the letter, that frayed state

becomes even more obvious. It's short, but its content is nothing short of frightening.

I know. I know everything. I know what you did with him, you miserable whore. I'll punish you for this. You were mine, not anyone else's! I'll make sure no one else can ever have you!

"Mary?"

I shriek and throw my hands in the air. The letter flies over my head, and Lucas flinches back in the doorway. He looks at me quizzically. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I snap, getting quickly to my feet and retrieving the letter from where it's landed on Oliver's mattress. "You shouldn't sneak up on a person like that. You frightened me."

"I'm sorry," he says, his brow still furrowed in confusion. "I only wanted to tell you I've finished my calculus assignment, and it's ready for your review."

"Right." I take a deep breath and set the letter in the shoebox, then close it and replace it in the closet. "I'll come at once. Thank you."

I follow him downstairs. He casts another quizzical look over his shoulder as we descend, and I offer a smile to dispel any suspicion he might have. I have no idea if his suspicions are lessened, but he doesn't ask what I was doing again.

My own suspicions are far from lessened. A far more sinister reason for Sebastian's shunning Minerva's memory coalesces in my mind.

Could Oliver have followed through on his promise to make sure no one else could have Minnie?

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Lucas finishes his schoolwork early, and I allow him to spend the rest of the day outside with his camera.

I spend the rest of the afternoon in turmoil. I know that I need to do something about the evidence I've discovered, but I don't know what. I could go to the police, but what do I have other than a letter that was never sent? What could I hope to accomplish?

Perhaps the police would choose to investigate and not simply dismiss this out of hand in a desire to avoid reopening a year-old mystery involving one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the region. What happens next?

They question Oliver, of course. Oliver expresses remorse over the letter and explains that he never sent it because as he wrote it, he realized how foolish it sounded and knew that he could never bring himself to hurt Minnie. Nor could he bring himself even to frighten her. He kept her letters because he misses his first true love, and they remind him of her. As for his letter, he never sent it, clearly, and never destroyed it because he still can't bear to think of her.

It's a questionable response, but what else is there to link him to Minnie? There's Sebastian's refusal to let the police search the grounds, but with nothing more concrete than an unsent letter to connect Oliver to the crime, the police could hardly force that issue. The Montclairs live abroad now, and if the police did contact them, would they give a different answer than what they've previously given? Do they even suspect the Carltons of wrongdoing?

It's too soon to come forward. I need more. Perhaps I should start by trying to learn

what I can of Oliver's relationship with Minnie. The problem is that I don't know where to begin. Sebastian has made it clear he doesn't want her name spoken in this house, and if it gets back to him that I'm prying, then I could be in serious danger. At the very least, I will lose my employment. At worst...

They're the type of family that can make people disappear if they want.

I shiver at the thought, but it also gives me an idea. What information did Minnie have that could threaten the Carltons? Surely a relationship with Oliver wouldn't have caused a scandal. They're both of age, and she came from a wealthy family herself. I can't see that a romance between Minnie and Oliver—even one that ended badly—could cause them to want her killed.

But she did disappear, and evidence is starting to suggest that the Carltons know more than they're letting on. I need to find out somehow what Minnie knew that could threaten them. But how do I go about doing that?

A knock on the door interrupts my musings. That's odd. Who could be visiting during the afternoon on a Tuesday?

I don't answer the first knock, but when a second indicates that our visitor won't be dissuaded, I decide I should at least inform whoever it is that the Carltons aren't here. I look through the peephole and see a handsome young man who bears some resemblance to Oliver and Eliza, though he is not nearly so well-dressed. A cousin, perhaps?

I open the door, and before I can say anything, the young man barges past me into the house.

"Thank God!" he says. "I thought Lucas was playing a trick and keeping me out until the family came home. Lucas!" he calls. "Where are you, old chum? Come say hi to

Cousin Finch!”

“Excuse me!” I say, rushing in front of him and holding out a hand to stop him. “And who are you?”

“Oh. How rude of me.”

He grins rakishly and takes a deep bow. “I am Alistair Finchley, of the Devonshire Finchleys, not that that means anything. I am second cousin once removed of Sebastian Carlton, and that does mean something, or so I’m told. And who, if I may be so bold, are you?”

Upon closer inspection, I see his poor dress is due not to the quality of the materials, which are every bit as excellent as the clothing the Carltons wear, but due to the woefully mismatched sizes, colors, and styles. The long tuxedo coat clashes horrifically with the turtleneck and brown khakis. I don’t believe that first appearances always reveal much useful information about people, but if his is to be believed, these choices are intentional.

“I’m Mary Wilcox,” I reply. “I am tutor to Lucas.”

“Tutor? Has he not graduated already?”

“It’s his final year.”

“Right. Well, I’m sure he’ll do fine. He was always the smart one. Lucas!”

“He’s outside,” I say. “Seriously, sir, this is highly irregular. I suggest you leave a message for the Carltons, and—”

“Cousin!” I turn to the door to see Oliver striding forward, a grin on his face and arms

outstretched. “How are you? God, it’s been ages !”

“Only a coon’s age, as they say in Kentucky,” Alistair replies, returning the embrace. “Not that I would know as I’ve spent most of the past three years in Japan. Fascinating country, let me tell you. And the women... well...” He winks at me. “We’ll save that conversation for later.”

I’m so flummoxed that I don’t realize the other Carltons have returned until I hear Eliza shriek, “Alistair!” and run into his arms.

Alistair’s smile changes to one of longing and desperate lust. He sweeps Eliza off of her feet and kisses her full on the mouth, an action that for reasons I can’t fathom doesn’t seem to alarm the elder Carltons, who follow their daughter with equally delighted smiles.

When Eliza pulls away, Alistair’s smile is back to what I suppose is his normal rakish look. “Eliza. Still prim and proper, I see.”

“And you still dress like a clown. And that hair.” She runs her hand through his long brown locks. “You look like a rocker.”

Alistair laughs. “Ellie, you must listen to more modern music. No one’s worn their hair like this since your parents were stealing kisses behind Jeannie’s back.”

“Alistair!” Veronica cries, paling and looking at me. “Enough of your wild tales.”

He turns to her and says, “Without tales, life would be devoid of meaning. How are you, Aunt V?”

“I’m better now that you’re here,” she says, embracing him. “Provided you can keep that tongue of yours inside your mouth.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says. He looks sideways at Eliza. “A tongue can be quite useful when it’s outside of one’s mouth.”

They all laugh. Even Sebastian and Veronica. What in God’s name is wrong with this family?

“Alistair, you should have called,” Sebastian chides. “I would have had Henri prepare sushi for dinner.”

Alistair grimaces. “Would you believe it, three years in Japan was finally enough to kill my taste for the meal. Besides, I’m sure I’ll love whatever Mary would like for dinner.”

He turns to me, and I stammer, “Um... I... well, the lamb the other night was lovely—”

“Lamb it is!” he cries. “Henri! Where is that French bastard?”

“He’s at the market,” Sebastian says. “You’ve caught us just in time. I’ll call and have him pick up ingredients for lamb.”

“You’re a gem, Uncle! Now where is my cousin—Lucas! There you are!”

I turn to see Lucas standing in the doorway. He alone doesn’t appear overjoyed beyond belief to see this flamboyant young man. Alistair doesn’t appear perturbed at all by his youngest cousin’s wariness, picking him up off the ground and swinging him around in nearly the same manner as he greeted Eliza, though without the kiss, thank heavens.

“Look how tall you are!” he exclaims. “God, you’re taller than me! I’ll bet you have girls scrambling for your attention all over Eton. Have any of them written you to

lament your absence?”

Lucas blushes, and a small smile crosses his face. Alistair laughs and claps him on the shoulder. “Well, that is a story I have to hear! You see?” He turns to Veronica. “I told you he liked girls.”

“Alistair!” Veronica exclaims. “Enough!”

She still smiles as he says it, and it’s hard to tell if she’s upset or simply playing a game. Perhaps both. Everything is games with these people.

Dinner is as animated an affair as Alistair’s entrance. He regales them with tales of his tenure in Japan. All of his stories are exaggerated, most are risqué, and while I have no firsthand knowledge of the country or its people myself, I would venture a guess that much of what he says is simply untrue.

But the family listens to him with rapt attention. If anything, the adoration they show him is even greater than the affection they showed Sebastian on his return. For his part, Sebastian seems not to mind the intrusion at all. Perhaps they all live vicariously through Alistair. He is the carefree spirit that obligation prevents them from being. Even Lucas seems to lose his initial wariness, grinning and laughing with the rest and even admitting that yes, Tilly Fairfax did kiss him goodbye when he informed her he would be leaving the boarding school and completing his sixth form at home.

“Ha!” Alistair cries jovially. He elbows Lucas, not very gently, and says, “More than kiss, right? Right?”

Eliza rolls her eyes. “Alistair...”

“Maybe a little more,” Lucas says softly.

Alistair pumps his fist triumphantly. “I knew it! This calls for a celebration! Sebastian, Veronica! I’m taking your children to Madrid!”

I stiffen in shock. He can’t be serious!

To their credit, Veronica and Sebastian offer up some resistance to this.

“Oh, Alistair, come now,” Sebastian says. “You can’t simply spirit them away in the middle of the work week.”

“Besides, Lucas has only just started his education,” Veronica adds. “Perhaps a night on the town would be more appropriate.”

“And cost-effective,” Eliza says. “Your wealth isn’t unlimited, Alistair.”

“Nonsense!” Alistair says. “Oliver’s paying for it. He owes me for talking him out of drastic measures when Minnie broke his heart.”

The blood flees my face, but thankfully no one notices. Oliver, rather than reacting with the horror I expect him to, or the anger I suspect might follow, laughs and says, “It’s true. You rescued me from making decisions I would certainly have regretted.” He gestures to Sebastian, who wears a dark frown. “Although it might be best if we save that conversation for later.”

“Quite right, quite right,” Alistair says, lifting his hands placatingly. “Just imagine if you had sent that letter, though. You’d be the laughingstock of all of Eton.”

“Alistair,” Sebastian says warningly.

“Of course, of course. Anyway, I’ll have them only for a night or two. Perhaps three. I promise I’ll return Lucas safe, sound, and at least free of disease if not entirely pure.” Lucas blushes beet-red at that. “It won’t affect his education.”

“Well...” Veronica says. Good God, can she be bending? What power does Alistair have over this family that he can convince her to allow Lucas to leave to a foreign country for three nights? And I am certain Alistair fully intends for him to drink and to spend his nights with a girl. Perhaps more than one.

“If Mary thinks it will be all right.”

All eyes turn to me. Alistair clasps his hands in mock begging. I stare from face to face and wonder what power I have that twice now, I’ve managed to become a voice of authority in two families whose combined wealth eclipses that of some nations.

“I... well, I suppose—”

“Wonderful!” Alistair interrupts. “Children! Pack your bags and prepare for debauchery! Eliza, you may wish to call your husband and tell him that you’ll be out of work for a few. God knows he’ll get grouchy if he doesn’t know where you are.”

And that last comment is the only one to provoke tension. Veronica’s smile fades, and Eliza flinches. “Dr. Chalmers will survive without me for a few days, Alistair,” she says brittlely.

“Of course, of course,” Alistair says. “What are you waiting for? Adventure awaits!”

The four of them leave the table, leaving two slightly exasperated parents and a very stunned governess.

As the shock wears off, suspicion grows. Alistair acts like a carefree soul, but

between the intentionally slovenly dress, the aggressive cheer, and the almost taunting knowledge of family secrets, I can't help but wonder if there's a reason they tolerate him that goes beyond affection.

It seems I've stumbled on yet another layer to the web of deception in which the Carltons reside.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

I wake the next morning still reeling from the events of the previous day. If breakfast hadn't arrived with no sign of the children, I might have believed I'd hallucinated Alistair's appearance. But he did arrive, and against all odds, he took the three younger Carltons away like a genie sweeping into the household to grant the wishes of every young spirit oppressed by the obligations of wealth and breeding.

One of those young spirits, of course, being the author of a letter that suggested a desire to murder a missing girl. Their brief conversation indicated that Alistair talked him out of drastic action, but was that drastic action the sending of the letter or acting out its intent? And if the family permitted all of those excesses Alistair roped their children into, then why would Sebastian still react so furiously to the mention of a simple letter?

I'm missing something. Perhaps, with the children gone and Sebastian at work, I might learn from Veronica what that missing piece is.

I begin by asking about Alistair as soon as Sebastian leaves. "Ma'am, I don't mean to pry, but who exactly is Alistair? He introduced himself as Sebastian's second cousin, but he looks... well..."

She smiles slightly. "Young?"

"Well... yes. Among other things."

She laughs. "Yes, Alistair is both Sebastian's second cousin and other things. I'm afraid that Harriet Carlton ignored the well-meaning advice of Sir Robert Carlton back in the day and chose to marry an air force pilot by the name of Garth Finchley.

The Finchleys and the Carltons have retained close ties, but the Finchleys, needless to say, did not inherit the Carltons' love of dignity and tradition. Still, it's refreshing to have someone in the family who doesn't feel a need to be bound by rules."

"Yes. I suppose so."

She arches her eyebrow at me. "You're wondering why I allowed Lucas to join him."

"Oh, that's not my place, ma'am. I'm sure you'd never allow him to be unsafe."

"No," she says, a touch of steel hardening her voice. "I wouldn't." Her voice softens again. "In any case, Alistair, as I'm sure you inferred, has a flair for the dramatic. He won't actually push Lucas into bed with strange girls, and if Lucas drinks any alcohol, it will be one mild cocktail and monitored closely by Alistair himself. Oliver and Eliza are of age, and there's little I can do to stop them from doing what they will, but they're smart enough to know their limits. It will be a few days of harmless fun, and then they'll be back home. Alistair will be on his way, and things will return to normal."

I decide to probe a little further. "Does Alistair drop in like this often?"

She chuckled. "Well, he used to, but it's been several years since the last time. He actually found some success with an investment venture and moved to Japan with his own money. I'll admit I'm surprised he stayed away as long as he did, but I suppose his luck finally did run out."

"Oh, so he's here for money."

I realize what I've said and quickly apologize, but Veronica laughs it off. "Oh, dear, there's no need to pretend. Money is always why he arrives. He's a charming young man, and I enjoy his company, so I tolerate his presence, as does Sebastian. Sebastian

will write him a check, he'll leave with fanfare, and we'll see him again when that money runs out."

That she can so casually dismiss such a waste of money is astonishing to me. Perhaps they've decided that Alistair is less of a threat to their reputation if he's allowed to gallivant off to parts unknown for months or years at a time.

Or perhaps he knows things that make keeping him sated more prudent than cutting him off.

"Ma'am... I know it's not my business, but... I was cleaning Oliver's room, and I came across some letters."

"From Minerva?"

"Yes... and one from Oliver."

She nods and sighs. "Yes. I warned him against that dalliance, but there's no stopping young people who think they're in love. It's my fault. I allowed her to spend her days here. They were the same age, and until Oxford opened the campus here last half there were no other people their age. Of course, they fell in love. It ended badly, as all such youthful affairs do. Don't tell Oliver you found the letters. He'll be dreadfully embarrassed. You saw yesterday how he reacted when Alistair brought it up."

I saw how you all reacted.

I hesitate before asking the next question, but I feel that I'm close to unraveling this mystery, or at least learning some crucial bit of information that will propel me to the next step in this investigation. So, I summon my courage and ask, "Why does Sebastian refuse to talk about her?"

She meets my eyes, and I'm afraid I've gone too far, but she only smiles wryly and says, "Sebastian is very careful with his reputation. When the news reported that Minerva was last seen alive here, the scandal was, as you can imagine, quite devastating for him. His solicitors fought madly to hush the affair up. They succeeded, of course. There's nothing to be gained by hunting phantoms. The police realized that none of us were involved and chose not to waste their time."

She pauses before continuing, "But the scandal lingers. You aren't aware, of course, but in certain circles, we're very well-known." Her smile fades. "Now our reputation is tainted, and that is something Sebastian cannot forgive, especially since we've done nothing to earn that taint. He exaggerates his reaction, of course, but," she waves her hand dismissively, "that is simply how he is."

The doorbell rings, interrupting our conversation. "Another long-lost cousin?" I ask dryly.

Veronica laughs. "I sure hope not! We'll let Hazel answer the door. She'll tell us if it's something that should concern us or if we can risk leaving our burrow."

Hazel does answer the door. I'm too far away to hear what is said, but I can tell that the voice that responds is a man.

And that man is known to Veronica. When she hears him, her smile vanishes. She meets my eyes and says tightly. "Rupert Chalmers. Don't be fooled by the mellow exterior, Mary. This man is nothing more than a cad."

She plasters a fake smile and stands just as the door to the breakfast room opens. "Dr. Chalmers to see you, ma'am," Hazel says before vanishing into the ether once more.

Dr. Rupert Chalmers is in his early forties, perhaps ten years younger than Veronica, and while not so tall or striking in appearance as Sebastian, he is quite handsome in

his own right. If Sebastian has the devastating looks of a movie star or politician, Dr. Chalmers has the wise and earnest features of an academic.

And he's in love with Veronica. The desperation in his eyes is better hidden than Alistair's when he saw Eliza, but not hidden enough to escape my gaze. When Veronica embraces him, he holds tighter than he should and for longer. When she releases him, he smiles and asks, "How are you, Veronica?" without even looking in my direction. I don't think he's even noticed me.

He notices me a moment later when Veronica says, "I'm wonderful, dear. Unfortunately, I'm also late. Feel free to stay and enjoy some tea with Mary, but I must get to the office now or we shall never finish preparations for our gala."

"Oh." He looks at me, and the disappointment in his eyes is almost endearing. Poor man. He recovers quickly and smiles. "Well, I'm sure I'll find Mary wonderful company."

"Of course you will! I'll see you later, dear." She leaves the room, mouthing I'm sorry to me on her way out.

Well, Dr. Chalmers isn't in love with me, so I'm sure I won't find him as annoying as Veronica does. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor," I say. "I'm Lucas's tutor."

"Ah, yes." He looks around. "Is he here today?"

"No, I'm afraid that all three of the Carlton children are with their cousin Alistair in Madrid."

I realize my mistake instantly. Dr. Chalmers's smile vanishes, and he says coldly, "I see." Eliza must not have told him after all.

“So how do you know the family?” I ask, hoping to move past the faux pas.

“I have been a friend of Veronica’s for many years,” he says, “long before Sebastian was in the picture.” There’s no mistaking the bitterness in that reply. “I now employ Eliza as my personal assistant. I may have to reconsider that, however. She told me she was taking time off for a family emergency. I came by to make sure Veronica wasn’t alone to worry over her brother, but it seems that Eliza’s uncle isn’t taken suddenly ill.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, face burning. “I’ve intruded. It really is none of my business.”

“No need to apologize,” Dr. Chalmers says. “You couldn’t have known.” Then, perhaps to reassure me, “I won’t fire Eliza. I’ll give her a stern talking-to, but she knows she’s too valuable to replace. After Minerva went missing, she was a lifesaver to me.”

My ears perk up. “Was Miss Montclair your assistant before Eliza?”

“She was.” He looks at me sideways. “A shame what happened to her.”

“Do you know anything?” I ask.

“Well... I really shouldn’t say, but in her last few weeks with me, I noticed Minerva leaving with a very suspicious figure. A man, younger, but too old for her. She refused to introduce us, would always beg off, saying he was no one of consequence, but I never liked the look of him.”

“What did he look like?”

He looks sideways at me again, and a small smile plays across his lips. “Playing at detective, are we?”

My face flames. “I’m only curious. I shouldn’t intrude.”

He laughs. “Nothing to apologize for. Unfortunately, all I can say for sure is that he was tall and had long brown hair. He dressed rather poorly, too. Nice clothing but ill-fitting and mismatched. I suspect he’s the black sheep of some high-class family or another. Just the sort of lure to draw away an impressionable girl like Minnie.”

My heart skips a beat. He’s just described Alistair to a tee.

“I hold hope that she’s still alive, that she and her black sheep are somewhere in Costa Rica enjoying a free-spirited life away from the rules that their breeding forced on them. But if I’m being honest, I don’t think so. The one time I saw her young man, I saw danger in his eyes. If only I could have done something to protect her.”

He turns to me and smiles. “Well, I hate to be rude, but I should take my leave. It appears my reason for visiting never existed to begin with. It was lovely to meet you, Mary. I hope to see more of you before the school year ends.”

“You too, Doctor.”

I walk him to the door and keep my composure until it closes behind him. Then my smile vanishes.

I realize now that Alistair couldn’t have been gone for three years. Minnie went missing a year ago. Oliver wrote his letter shortly before. If Alistair was here to advise Oliver against sending that letter, then he could only have been absent for a year or so.

Veronica lied to me. They all did. They know something. They all do.

I’ve spent the past few days wondering which of these people is guilty. Now I wonder

if any of them are innocent.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

After Dr. Chalmers leaves, I intend to talk to Hazel and get her perspective on the events surrounding Minnie's disappearance, but the woman's skill for disappearing is unmatched. She's not in her room when I knock, and I know this because I stand with my ear pressed to the door for several minutes and finally open it to find it empty. She's nowhere in the house that I can see. She could be on the grounds, I suppose, but if she is, I'll have to run into her accidentally. Henri won't arrive for several hours, and Horace is out with Veronica, and with Niall out prowling around and no one else in the house, I am loath to wander.

So I look up what I can online. I am woefully illiterate when it comes to technology, having grown up fond of nature and books rather than computers and cell phones, and with no skill at digging into the dark web or searching for expunged or well-hidden data, I'm limited to what information is easily available.

It's not much. The Carltons may be well-known in some circles, but not all, and the Montclairs are utterly unknown. The story runs for four issues in the newspaper, starting as a fourth-page article and ending with a brief, five-paragraph summary that announces that the Carltons have been exonerated of wrongdoing and there are no leads in the case.

I look up Minnie herself and get very little. The search links to five different Minerva Montclairs, and when I find the one that matches my Minerva, I see only images from her social media accounts. This reveals nothing to me other than that she does indeed resemble both Annie and Lucas to a disturbing degree. This is hardly a revelation, since her resemblance to Annie is largely what motivates me to seek justice in the first place, and her resemblance to Lucas fits with the suspicion that she is somehow Veronica's long-lost child.

I wonder about that, though. Veronica is fiercely protective of Lucas and dismissive of Minnie. Perhaps Minnie is Lucas's half-sister but with a different mother and the same father. Perhaps the resemblance is entirely coincidental.

And does it even matter anymore with this new information from Dr. Chalmers? If Alistair truly is responsible for Minnie's death, then it would explain all of the family's behavior so far: their refusal to talk about Minnie openly, Sebastian's insistence that she not be discussed at all, and their indulgence of Alistair.

I search for Alistair next. I get even less on him than I do on Minnie. His Bohemian lifestyle so far has left no mark on society, which I suppose shouldn't surprise me.

The younger Carltons yield little besides their academic records, which is understandable given they've only just started their adult lives. The older ones have a more extensive record, but it's only ordinary information. Veronica's name is connected to several charities. Evidently her philanthropy is well-known enough that she's even earned a magazine interview or two.

Sebastian, not surprisingly, figures most prominently in the public's eye, but it's all business-related. He appears to command some respect in the world of technology. He's not a giant in the industry in the vein of Gates, Zuckerberg, or Page, but he's well-respected.

There's nothing here that tells me anything, nothing that indicates what might have happened to Minnie. Or rather, there's much that indicates what happened to her, but nothing concrete that can tell me which of the rumors are true, if any.

I finally admit defeat and close my laptop. I chastise myself for wasting my own time. Why would I think I could discover the cause of Minnie's death on the internet? If such information was available, then the police would have used it already.

I sigh and press my palms to my temples. I should let this go. I'm not trained to be a detective. I can't be of help to Minnie. I'm only torturing myself. But each time I think that, Annie's face floats across my mind, as though to remind me of the consequences of giving up.

The detective looks at me and says, kindly but firmly, "It's time to let go, Mary."

I think of Annie's face, her smile, her laugh. I can't bear to think that's been taken forever and I'll never know why.

But I'm so tired. I've fought so hard, and if I keep fighting, I'll lose myself. And for what? If there's nothing to gain, then what am I fighting for?

I lift my eyes to her and nod softly. "All right."

That conversation was twenty-eight years ago. The next day, Detective Huxley closed the investigation into my sister's disappearance. I've never forgiven myself for not fighting to learn the truth.

Someone kidnapped Minerva Montclair. Someone killed her. I don't believe for a moment the fantasy that she eloped somewhere. Someone murdered her, and whether it's right or wrong, I can't just ignore that. Not anymore.

But I won't learn anything else today. I head upstairs for some tea. I'll sit in the sun for a while, then work on my lesson plan for Lucas. I don't know if he'll be back tomorrow, but it's better than stewing in my own uncertainty.

I arrive in the tearoom to see Sebastian sitting with a cup in his hand facing the window. He turns to me and smiles. "Good afternoon, Mary. I thought you had gone for the afternoon. You can, you know. You're not a prisoner here."

I redden slightly. “I’m sorry to intrude, sir. I’ll leave you to your tea.”

“You mistake my meaning,” he says. “You’re welcome to stay if you’d like. In fact, if you’d like, I’d love the company. You’re under no obligation to stay, though.”

I hesitate a moment. On one hand, if there’s anyone who knows the whole story of Minnie’s disappearance, it’s Sebastian. On the other hand, he might be the most dangerous of the Carltons, and I don’t think it would be wise to poke this particular bear.

But again, wisdom has never been my strong suit.

“Thank you, sir. I will join you if that’s all right.”

“I invited you,” he reminds me, “so it’s all right. Sit. I’ll get you a cup.”

“Oh, sir, that’s all right. I can manage.”

“Sit.”

I sit. What else is there to do when the lord of the manor commands me?

He returns a moment later and asks, “Do you take cream?”

“No, thank you. I’ve always said a good Earl Grey should stand on its own.”

“I agree.”

He pours me a cup and resumes staring out the window. Just when I’m about to make small talk to break the uncomfortable silence, he asks, “Have you ever married, Miss Mary?”

“No, sir. I’ve never met the right person, I suppose.”

He nods. “You’re lucky.”

When he doesn’t offer an explanation and the silence grows uncomfortable again, I say, “Veronica seems like a lovely woman.”

“Oh, she is,” he agrees, “the loveliest woman I’ve ever met. But also the most demanding.”

“Oh?”

He smiles slightly. “She’s enamored with the status that comes with wealth. The money itself is secondary to her. She must be worshipped always. You don’t see that side of her at home, but she cannot stand being less than the most important person at all times.”

I sip my tea. I really should speak to someone about my strange ability to get everyone to trust in me for no reason.

Sebastian notices my embarrassment. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Oh, no, sir. Of course not.” As though I could give any other answer.

He nods. “I love her more than anything. And I will never leave her. I suppose that’s my curse.”

“It can’t be all bad,” I say. “She’s given you three wonderful children.”

“Yes,” he says. “She has. For the most part.”

I consider my reply carefully. “It’s natural for a father to worry about his children. They will have to navigate many struggles in their lives, but they appear to be doing well enough. Eliza is establishing her place in the world, and while her job isn’t prestigious, it’s a good place to start. Oliver seems dedicated to his studies, and Lucas is quite brilliant. And so creative! I really think he could have a wonderful career.”

Sebastian grimaces. “Lucas will fall over at the first strong wind thanks to Veronica’s coddling. Oliver is one drunken escapade away from jail, and Eliza declined a graduate scholarship to Cambridge to work as a secretary for a country doctor.”

And yet you allowed all three of them to travel to a foreign country with your rake of a cousin .

I’m smart enough not to say this aloud, thankfully. After a moment, he sighs and says, “It’s cruel of me to say, and I hope you’ll keep this in confidence, but there are days I wish I had never met Veronica.”

“All married people feel that way at times, I imagine.”

Sebastian nodded. “Yes. But I’ve acted on it.”

I blink. “Is... I mean, it’s not my place, but—”

“Oh, not with Veronica.” He chuckles. “No, I’m far wiser with her. But Jeannie... Well, you heard Alistair’s crass little joke the other night. I’m ashamed to say it’s rooted in truth. I was married before Veronica, and when Jeannie and I began to have problems, I ran to the first pretty woman who caught my eye. It worked out well, I suppose, but I wonder sometimes what would have occurred if I had thought more prudently. Jeannie was a sweet, kind, and pure woman. That made her boring, but it made her trustworthy. I wish sometimes that she had been enough for me.”

“You wouldn’t have your children if you had stayed,” I offer, not sure what else to say.

“Yes,” he says. “I suppose I wouldn’t.”

There’s a touch of bitterness in his voice. I fall silent and sip the rest of my tea. I’m about to excuse myself when he stands instead.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t ask about the missing girl.”

My blood freezes and my mouth dries instantly. I swallow and stammer. “I... of course not.”

“It’s a source of great embarrassment to my family that rumors abounded regarding her disappearance. Reputation is very important to us, and the stain of her loss still corrodes that reputation. It’s a source of personal pain for me, and while it’s a tragedy that she was lost, I would rather not be reminded that so many people still think of us as kidnappers and possibly murderers.”

“Of course, sir,” I say, I hope not too quickly. “It’s none of my business after all.”

He nods. Then he lays a hand on my shoulder and squeezes softly. I resist the urge to cry out and hope that the trembling in my body isn’t noticeable.

“Thank you, Miss Mary.”

He leaves the room, and when I hear the door close behind me, I gasp. I set the teacup on the table so the trembling in my hand doesn’t lead me to spill the remaining liquid. Then I stand and pace the room until my heart calms.

My reaction might be excessive, but Niall’s warning echoes in my mind. How much

danger am I putting myself in by turning over these stones? What can I hope to gain that is worth the sacrifice, perhaps of my life?

At the Ashford house, I was nearly killed by a crazed woman with a handgun. I escaped that situation by the skin of my teeth, but Sebastian Carlton is not unhinged. He is shrewd and cold and very, very dangerous.

And I have no doubt that he would erase me from the Earth in an instant if doing so would protect his family's reputation.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

Alistair and the three younger Carltons return the next evening. They all wear flushed faces and grins that proclaim the enjoyment of their brief excursion. Lucas is more animated and alive than I've seen him, more so even than when he showed me his photograph collection. Despite my suspicion of Alistair, a part of me can't help but be grateful for Lucas's sake. The boy needs experiences that aren't viewed from under his mother's wing.

Unfortunately, that wing circles him protectively the instant he returns. His smile fades, but only slightly. I hope that's a sign that he's learned he isn't stuck with her his whole life.

Oliver and Alistair laugh and joke like twins. The swagger and cheeky smiles of each young man show a similar spirit. They immediately launch into tales of their exploits in Madrid, some of which I hope are exaggerated.

Eliza seems flushed with a similar joy, and occasionally intervenes to inform us all that many of these tales are indeed exaggerated.

"Oh, cousin, why must you crush my spirit with each word that leaves your lovely lips?"

"Oh, Alistair, why must you lie compulsively?" she counters. "The girl was decidedly uninterested in our poor cousin."

"That one, yes," he admits, "but who can blame me? With such a creature as yourself before me, how could I have eyes for anyone else?"

He smiles rakishly, but his eyes show a longing as he says that. I see no violence or possessiveness in that longing, but I can't help but wonder if his attraction to Eliza might be strong enough to become something sinister.

Could he have felt such an attraction for Minnie? I've assumed that if he killed her, it was to avenge Oliver's broken heart or protect him from ruining his own life, but now I wonder if he fancied her and was angry that she preferred Oliver.

Eliza smiles at Alistair, and it's clear that she knows of her cousin's interest in her. It's equally clear that she tolerates it to a point, but not nearly so far a point as Alistair would hope.

"At least one of us found love overseas," Oliver interjects. "Lucas, tell them about the lovely young lady you met on the dance floor."

Lucas blushes red as a cherry and shakes his head.

"Just show them the mark on your neck," Eliza says, reaching over and pulling down his collar. "I'm sure some of her lipstick is still there."

Lucas flinches away, and Alistair comes to his rescue. "Oh, come now, you two. Allow our young man his privacy. A gentleman should never kiss and tell. Unless, of course, he's telling other gentlemen to show them how much luckier he has it. But since we're in mixed company, we'll allow Lucas a fond memory without forcing him to reveal it."

Veronica manages a smile, but it's clear that she's unhappy to hear that Alistair has indeed allowed Lucas a dalliance with a strange foreign girl. Alistair notices that look and quickly adds, "In any case, it was only a kiss. Lucas returns as pure of heart as always and remains faithful to Tilly. Though perhaps we shouldn't tell Miss Fairfax about that particular dance."

“I think that would be wise,” Veronica says, relaxing.

“Well, I hope you’ve all gotten it out of your system,” Sebastian says, “because tomorrow, it’s back to normal life.”

“Speaking of,” Veronica says, “Dr. Chalmers came to visit yesterday.”

Eliza blanches. “Oh?”

“Yes. I got the impression that he wasn’t entirely aware of the circumstances of your leaving.”

Now it’s my turn to be surprised. Veronica was gone when I let that particular cat out of the bag. Did Dr. Chalmers call her? Or does she just know Eliza well enough to know she wouldn’t be honest with her employer?

“Well, if Rupert has a problem with how I spend my free time, he can talk to me about it,” Eliza says curtly.

Color has returned to her cheeks, enough that Alistair points it out. “Lovers’ quarrel, cousin?”

“Shut up,” she hisses with shocking venom.

“She does prefer to call him by his first name,” Oliver says.

“Yes, that’s how adults speak to each other,” Eliza snaps.

“Though it’s hardly appropriate coming from a secretary to her employer,” Veronica mentions.

“He’s what, twenty years older than you?” Alistair says.

Eliza’s lower lip trembles. She turns and abruptly stalks from the room.

The mood sours immediately, not surprisingly. Sebastian has withdrawn into disinterest once more. Lucas’s grin is gone, and his shoulders are slumped. Oliver chuckles bitterly and shakes his head. Veronica wears an oddly triumphant smirk. Even Alistair seems subdued.

Finally, he says, “Well, I suppose I’ll have to apologize to her. I’ll wait until tomorrow, though. I don’t think I’d survive what she did to me if I talked to her again tonight.”

Conversation resumes, but it’s clear the life has been stolen from the room. I excuse myself next, pleading fatigue.

“Nonsense!” Alistair calls after me. “I don’t believe it! Behind that proper exterior lies a wildcat, I know it.”

I smile at him. “Perhaps one day you’ll meet her.”

His eyes widen. “Ooh, is that a threat, Miss Mary?”

“It’s a promise.”

On the surface, it appears I’m only flirting playfully, and the family reacts accordingly, laughing and teasing. Veronica lifts an eyebrow at me and says, “Why, Mary! I would never have guessed you’d have such a saucy side!”

Something flashes across Alistair’s eyes. He sees beneath the surface and knows that I referred to a very different sort of wildcat than the one to which he alluded. I hold

his gaze a moment, then say, “Good night, Alistair.”

“Good night, Mary.” He recovers from his momentary fear and flashes another of his rakish smiles. As I walk out of the room, he says, “Hey, does anyone have any pictures of her from when she was younger?”

“Alistair!” Veronica cries.

The door closes behind me, and I don’t hear the rest. I really am tired, and while I wonder why Eliza reacted so strongly to the teasing about the handsome village doctor, I would rather wait until the morning to dig into that mystery any further. Besides, it’s probably best I save my prying for when Sebastian isn’t home.

I start upstairs, but when I hear crying, I pause. I follow the sound back down the stairs to the drawing room behind the parlor.

Eliza sits in one of the upholstered chairs with her face buried in her hands. She looks up when I enter and straightens, wiping her hand across her eyes. “I must have embarrassed myself horribly out there,” she says.

“Hardly,” I reply. “Between you and me, your cousin is a cad.”

She laughs. “He is, isn’t he.” She sighs. “Sometimes I think I should just give him what he wants, at least for a year or two. Maybe I’d enjoy just throwing caution to the wind and living a life of adventure for a while. It’s not like he’d maintain any sort of interest longer than that.”

“You’re not attracted to him, are you?”

She bursts into laughter. “Oh God! Oh, if he could see the horror on your face!” She shakes her head. “No. No, I’m not attracted to him. But it’s quite easy for a woman to

fake attraction if she must. Men don't know the difference."

"You can do better than him," I assure her.

"I can. I have. I will. But I don't think it matters. All men are like Alistair. They might dress better and talk smoother, but when you strip everything away, all men are just wolves hunting for prey. They catch you and devour you, then they shit you out and move on to the next doe."

The viciousness of that sentiment silences me for a moment. When I recover, I say, "Your love life is none of my business, Eliza. But a man who would use you and then discard you as though you were worthless is not worth your time. No matter who he is to you."

She looks away. "Oliver's the same, you know."

The change in subject is jarring, but it's nothing I'm not used to from this family by now. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's like all men. He slept with three different girls in two days in Madrid."

"Oh, goodness!" I exclaim, unable to help myself.

"Yes. Three different girls." She shakes her head. "They seemed to enjoy themselves, so I suppose there's that."

"Did Lucas..." I can't bear to finish the question.

She chuckles. "No. No, don't worry. Lucas would probably have scored one had Alistair not swooped in to save him. Oddly enough, Alistair is quite responsible when it comes to Lucas. Though I suppose it's not so odd that he would be careful with

Mother's favorite. He wouldn't want to bite the hand that feeds him. But don't fret. As Alistair said, Lucas is as pure of heart and mind as he was when he left. But his day will come. Later due to Mother's stifling, but eventually, all men succumb. I tried to warn Minnie."

"About Lucas?"

"No, about Oliver. Oliver was no different with her than he is now. He claimed to love her, claimed she was the only one, acted all devastated when she cheated, meanwhile he and his mates were out prowling the bars all over the Cotswolds. Not that I'm excusing Minnie for cheating. She was as much an utter fool as he was." She shook her head. "I warned Oliver too. But no one listens to me."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

"You've said that already."

"I'm still sorry."

She looks me up and down a moment before turning away again. "Don't be. I'm through punishing myself for the fact that people don't bloody listen to me. I told her to leave Oliver alone. I told her to leave—"

She catches herself, but her trembling lips betray the grief threatening to overcome her again. "I left her. The night she died, I left her."

My heartbeat quickens. I fight to keep my tone calm when I ask, "What do you mean?"

"I left her," she snaps. "It's not hard to figure out the meaning. She and I fought. I told her to leave my brother alone because they would only break each other's hearts

again. She called me a meddling whore and accused me of... well, I won't repeat it, but it was enough that I said, 'Fine. Go get yourself hurt for all I care.' I was supposed to walk her home, but I didn't. She left by herself, and she was never seen again."

She stands abruptly. "Maybe you'll take my advice. Don't get close to us. Don't get involved in our lives. We're very badly broken, all of us. Even Lucas, poor boy. Just teach him his maths and his reading and his science, and at the end of the year, collect your paycheck. Be polite if you must. Join us for dinner, and at the end, embrace us all tearfully and promise to write and visit."

She meets my eyes. "But don't. Don't write, don't visit. Escape and leave us to our own warped devices. If Minnie had done that, she might still be alive."

She leaves the room without waiting for a response. I remain, wondering if what I've just heard is an emotional warning or a direct threat. What it is, unquestionably, is good advice.

Unfortunately, I haven't been good at following advice for nearly thirty years.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

“Do you ever think of leaving?”

My brow furrows. “Leaving? Annie, what on Earth are you talking about?”

She shrugs. “You know. Leaving.”

I stare at her for a moment. In the twenty-one years I’ve known her, I’ve never gotten used to these off-the-wall questions. “Leaving what? Our parents? I’m pleased to say that we’ve already left them. Well, Father left us, but we both left Mother.”

“I know, but we’re still here.”

“What do you mean? We don’t live in Boston anymore.”

She laughs. “It’s what, a two-hour drive back home? That’s not what I’m asking anyway. I mean...” She gestures around. “This. All of this.”

A spark of concern goes off in my mind. In school, I learned that suicidal people will often leave hints of their ideation to loved ones. “Annie? Are you feeling all right? If there’s something you want to talk about, you can tell me.”

She laughs, a full-throated, mirthful sound that both frightens and irritates me. I choose to voice the former emotion. “Annie, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, getting her laughter under control. “I mean it, I am. I’m not asking if you ever think about taking a long leap off of a short bridge. I mean... don’t you ever wish there was more to life?”

“That’s a very different question than asking me if I ever think of leaving.”

“Not really. We grew up with well-to-do parents, a quality education, and a life in a large American city. Now, we’re both enjoying a quality education in a large American city. Afterward, you plan to continue your education in a large American city until you can open a practice in a large American city. You’ll take the subway to and from work instead of to and from school. You’ll go to the theater Saturday night and the park Sunday afternoon. You’ll meet a polite, sensible boy with a polite, sensible career with whom you’ll have polite, sensible sex—”

“Annie!” I exclaim with a blush.

“It’s true, though. That’s your future. Don’t you ever wish it wasn’t so… planned?”

“It could be far worse,” I say.

“It could be far better,” she counters.

“How?”

“I don’t know.” Her smile fades. “I really don’t know. I think that’s the problem.” She looks over my shoulder and says, “Look who’s here.”

I turn and see Alistair approaching. I frown. “What are you doing here? I don’t meet you for twenty-eight years.”

Wait, how do I know that? What is this? Why…?

“Relax, Mary,” Alistair says breezily. “You’re just having a nightmare is all.”

“A what? Annie…”

I turn to the left, but Annie's gone, and so is the bar where we were enjoying a drink after our school day (a polite, sensible beer).

It's daytime now rather than night. Yet somehow, the forest of elm and poplar I find myself in seems to close around me, as though swallowing the light from its edges and reflecting it back to me.

There's a girl ahead of me. She's standing alone, looking into the trees. It's Annie, but it's not Annie. She's too short, and her shoulders aren't quite broad enough.

Minnie. That's her name. Minerva Montclair. Twenty-seven years from now, she'll go missing, just like Annie.

"Silly Mary," Minnie says, still facing away. "I went missing a year ago."

I look down at my hands and rather than the smooth, soft skin of youth, I see the rough, leathery fingers of a fifty-year-old woman. "That's right," I say. "I'm looking for you. I'm going to find out what happened to you."

"What do you mean what happened to me?" she asks. "I'm dead. I was killed. Annie was killed, too. You know that, right? You know that someone took her and used her and killed her and left her broken body somewhere to rot, and no one ever found her."

"Be quiet," I snap. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course I do. It happened to me too. Someone took me and killed me and left me to rot. No one ever found me. I'm dead and gone. Oliver fucks different girls now, and he doesn't think of me anymore except to compare his new lovers to me. Eliza fucks different men and thinks how lucky she is that her body still works while mine is food for maggots."

“Stop this,” I hiss, my voice thready. “Stop this at once!”

“Why? Is it not proper of me to swear?”

She laughs, a harsh, brittle sound like the shattering of a crystal glass. I take a step back, but my feet don’t move, and when I try to turn, my head doesn’t move either.

“That’s what happens,” Annie says, and it is Annie now. The shoulders are broader and the figure taller. “People use other people, and when they’re done using them, they discard them. It’s brutal, but that’s how it always is. You’re no different, you know.”

I open my mouth to protest, except now my lips won’t move either. I’m not sure if I’m actually trembling or if, once more, my body is frozen.

She turns to me, and in place of her eyes are empty black holes. “Of course it is. You used me to feel good about yourself. As long as you made a token effort to care for me and protect me, you could feel better about letting Mother burn me when I was a toddler.”

That’s not true , I plead silently.

“It is,” she says, replying to my unvoiced protest. “And when I went missing, you gave eloquent speeches about how you’d never rest until I was found, but the moment Detective Huxley offered you a way out, you took it. That’s you, Mary. Always looking for the way out.”

No, I reply voicelessly. No, it’s not.

“You used Mom to feel better about the shitty life she gave us. When Dad died, you imprisoned her in a life she hated and told yourself you were caring for her, but you

weren't. You were forcing a woman who felt caged her whole life to live in a smaller cage so you could watch as little by little her spirit broke down, whittled away until it was as small as yours."

No! I shout inside my head. That's not true! I did it for you! I hated her for what she did to you, and I was getting her back!

"No, you weren't."

I look closely and realize it is Minnie once more. She smiles at me with her pert mouth and says, "And now you're using me. You hate that you abandoned Annie, so you're trying to avenge me so you can look at yourself in the mirror and convince yourself that you're good and strong and brave, but you aren't, Mary. You're only another vampire."

She turns away from me and tilts her head. Two crimson dots appear on her neck, and as I watch in horror, blood begins to pour out of them. Iron hands seize my arms, and I am dragged toward the bleeding specter. I look in horror to either side and see Alistair on my left and Lucas on my right. Their faces wear the same flat stare my mother wore when she watched Annie stick her hand in the boiling pot.

I struggle against my captors, but their strength is beyond human and slowly, inevitably, they bring me to the porcelain-white form of Minnie.

"Drink, Mary," she commands.

Alistair's hand presses on the back of my head and forces it down toward the two crimson pools on Minnie's neck. I struggle and fight, but to no avail.

"Help!" I cry out. "Help me! Please!"

“There’s no help for you,” Annie says.

I gasp and moan, “No, no, please, God, no...”

I feel something warm and coppery on my tongue and cry out, sitting bolt upright in the bed. My heart pounds in my chest, and my head turns wildly, looking for any sign of my tormentors.

They’re not there. The bedroom is empty.

Bedroom. I’m in my bedroom. I’m not in the forest. I’m in the Carltons’ house. It was only another nightmare.

I collapse back on the bed and pull my pillow over my face to cover it while I weep. Most of my nightmares do me the courtesy of leaving my memory when I wake, but this one remains vivid. I can still taste the coppery sweetness of Minnie’s blood.

I feel something wet on my chin and lift my hand to it. When I pull it away, a smudge of scarlet remains.

I sit upright again and look at the bloodstain on my pillow. I move my fingers slowly over my lips and wince when I reach a cut on the lower one. I bit my lip while I slept. That’s the blood I’m tasting.

It’s a macabre thought to feel relief that the blood I taste is my own, but the image of Minnie’s bleeding throat is still vivid in my mind, and having something concrete to hold onto that proves that the dream is over is a godsend. I take a deep breath and stand, and when I am on my feet and moving toward the bathroom, I am finally able to shake the terror that follows me upon waking.

I clean myself as best as I can, and when the alcohol sends a sharp sting of pain through my face, I cling to the sensation and allow it to drive the horror of the dream even deeper into my subconscious.

That was the worst one in a while. I had nightmares for years after Annie's disappearance, but when I finished school and took up teaching, they receded and eventually disappeared. It wasn't until I took the job at the Ashford estate earlier in the year that they returned.

A thoroughly unpleasant recollection comes to mind of visiting the local doctor in the small town outside of Buffalo where the Ashford estate was located. I went to be treated for a burn on my hand, but while I waited, the doctor there began questioning my mental state. She brought up an alleged hospitalization that I have no recollection of, a three-month stay in a sanitarium that supposedly took place shortly after my sister's disappearance.

I didn't believe her at the time, but then the Ashford family psychologist, an equally unpleasant man named Harrow, told me that I had complained to him of my nightmares, a conversation I am quite sure I didn't have.

And now I've bitten my own lip to support a nightmare of vampirism brought on by my own guilt at losing Annie.

I think of Minnie's accusation that is really my accusation. I'm only doing this to feel better about myself.

Is that true? It's hideous to think so, but why am I concerning myself with her? I didn't know her. She's far from the first girl to go missing under mysterious circumstances, and if the Carltons are involved, then they're far from the first wealthy family to hush up wrongdoing.

So why is it so important to me? Why do I have to solve this case? Because of Annie, of course.

But why? I've spent more than half my life without her, more than half my life leaving her in the past and building a sensible future for myself. Why have I suddenly decided to become a governess and insert myself into mysteries surrounding the dead and disappeared? Is this my version of a mid-life crisis?

Is it, after all, just selfish of me?

I sit with a start, and for a moment, I'm disoriented and unaware of my surroundings. Where am I? Wasn't I in the bathroom?

The alarm on my phone beeps again, and I shut it off. Why am I sitting in bed again?

I check my pillow. The case is clean, free of stains. I lift a hand to my lip and feel the bandage. I didn't imagine that part. I really did bite my lip and tend to it.

Then I obtained a new pillowcase somehow, and by the looks of it, new sheets as well. I confirm this a moment later when I see the soiled case and sheets in the hamper.

Why do I have no memory of that? If I can no longer rely on my own senses, then how can I trust anything? How can I trust myself?

I sit where I am, too frightened to move, for over an hour. It's only when I hear voices outside that I risk leaving the room.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

“Mary, are you all right?” Eliza asks. “I heard you crying out in your sleep last night.”

I lift my head from my breakfast and see concern on the faces of all present. Heat creeps up my cheeks. “Oh. I apologize. I was having a nightmare. You... you all heard it?”

Their bedrooms are a full two floors above mine. If they heard me, I must have been screaming quite loud.

Alistair confirms that a moment later when he says, “I think the whole estate heard it. Oliver and I were nearly ready to rush to your aid.”

“Oh. Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude on your sleep.”

“It’s not the sleep we’re worried about,” Veronica assures me. “Are you sure you’re all right, dear? Have you been having trouble sleeping?”

“Oh... it’s nothing. It’s an old...” I continue to stammer, wanting to reassure them but not wanting to reveal anything.

I do, however, want to speak further with Dr. Chalmers. He seems to know a lot about Minnie’s disappearance, more than he revealed earlier. I can understand his reticence inside the Carlton house, but perhaps he’ll feel more comfortable speaking in his office.

I don’t want to blatantly ask to see him, though. I don’t want to run even a slight risk

of creating suspicion. I try to leave a hint and hope that one of them will suggest visiting him. “I’ll just run to town for some sleeping pills perhaps. I intended for Lucas to use today to catch up on the schoolwork he missed in Madrid, but maybe we can do that tomorrow instead.”

“I can catch up,” Lucas says. “You should take care of yourself.”

“Well... I suppose I should. I don’t want to risk waking anyone else up with my nightmares.”

The ruse finally works when Eliza says, “I’ll take you with me to work this morning. Horace can drive you back.”

“That would be lovely, actually,” Veronica says. “Then he can drive me to the charity.”

“Oh, really, it’s all right. You don’t need to put yourselves out.”

“Nonsense,” Eliza says. “Besides, you can say hello to Rupert.”

“Rupert...” I say, feigning ignorance.” Oh, right. Dr. Chalmers.”

“Yes. My boss.”

“The lovely Rupert,” Alistair mutters under his breath.

Eliza gives him a glare before turning back to me. “Please. It’s no trouble, Mary.”

I hide the burst of triumph I feel and say reluctantly, “Well... if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not!” Eliza says. “I just said it’s no trouble at all.”

“Besides,” Alistair interjects, “if you have another night like that, we might all need sleeping pills.”

The others look at him with disapproval, and he lifts his hands apologetically. “Just having a laugh.”

I finish my breakfast and then join Eliza. She spends the journey gossiping as though I’m just another girlfriend. I recall her telling me that there are few people her age in the village. I can see that she’s desperate for companionship after Minnie’s disappearance. I do my best to keep up until we arrive at the doctor’s office.

The office is in a quaint little building constructed with the famous golden stone of the Cotswolds. A sign hangs from the front, announcing the offices of Dr. Rupert Chalmers: Family Practice, Internal Medicine, and OB/GYN. An interesting specialty given that there are so few young women here.

We are the first in the office since Eliza is employed as his secretary and receptionist. When we walk in, Rupert fixes a look on Eliza that looks much like the longing I see in Alistair’s eyes. He opens his arms for an embrace, but Eliza greets him with a professional handshake instead and whispers something.

It must be a warning to him to be professional in my presence because he glances at me and reddens slightly. Curiously, I notice a similar blush on Eliza’s cheek. That couldn’t mean what it appears to, could it?

No, she probably tolerates his overtures to a point, but I can’t see the two of them being involved with each other. Dr. Chalmers is a handsome man, but Eliza is young and beautiful like a goddess. She could have her pick of young men if she wanted.

“Good morning!” Dr. Chalmers says, stepping closer and offering me a handshake as well. “I hear you’ve had trouble sleeping.”

“Oh, only a little,” I demur. “It seems I kept the family up last night with a nightmare, unfortunately.”

“Well, that’s no good,” he says. “We’ll get you something to take that can help you sleep like the dead.”

I really wish he had chosen another simile.

“Eliza, would you mind organizing my calendar?” he calls over his shoulder. “I shouldn’t be too long with Miss Mary, and then we can go over the schedule.”

“Of course, Dr. Chalmers.”

Dr. Chalmers smiles at me and says, “Come with me, Mary.”

He leads me into a small office decorated with flowery wallpaper that is horribly tacky but not unappealing. I sit on a vinyl chair, and Dr. Chalmers takes my ID and looks up my medical record.

I think of the hospitalization too late, and my face flames again. All at once, asking about Minnie becomes less important than avoiding a discussion of my own medical history. “It really was nothing,” I assure him. “Only a nightmare.”

“Of course,” he says, “but dreams have a way of invading our reality, don’t they? Let’s see if we can’t do something to make sure that yours stay where they belong.”

He sits across from me and asks, “When did these nightmares start?”

I stammer a bit before saying, “Just a few days ago.” I don’t want to tell him that I’ve had them for months and when I was younger, years.

“Are they similar to the dreams you complained of when you were committed?”

Fear rushes through me like a blast of icy wind. I stiffen, and he quickly says, “It’s nothing to worry about. You are very clearly far from insanity. There are a thousand steps between this episode and anything I could call a crisis. However, if this is a recurrence of your old nightmare, it will affect my prescription. Certain medicines affect one’s mood differently, and I need to ensure that what I prescribe you is appropriate for your particular situation.”

I am about to insist again that this is nothing related to my past, but then I remember my purpose for being here. If I expect him to be honest about Minnie, I must risk a little honesty myself.

“Yes. It is an old nightmare. As far as my commitment, I have no recollection of that, so I can’t tell you if that has anything to do with it.”

He nods. “A great many patients block their memories of hospitalization. I can’t blame them. Sanitariums are horrible places. It’s an inhumane method of treatment, and I’ll be grateful when it’s done away with entirely. Now, do you have any other gaps in your memory?”

I fight to keep my face steady when I reply, “No.”

“That’s excellent,” he says. “No dissociation. Any history of sleepwalking?”

My left eye twitches slightly, and I can only pray he doesn’t take that as a sign of deception. “No, none.”

“What about in your family? A parent or sibling?”

Annie walks down the hallway, her slippers sliding softly on the hardwood floor. I look at her curiously. “What are you doing?”

She turns to me, and for a moment, I think her eyes are replaced by black holes. I gasp and prepare to scream for Mother and Father, but when I look again, I see it’s only a trick of the light. Her eyes are merely closed.

“No,” I reply. “Not that I’m aware of.”

He nods. Then he leans back in his chair and looks at me pensively with the expression that all doctors seem to wear when they want to talk about something uncomfortable but aren’t sure how to approach it.

“Eliza tells me you were screaming for help during the night. She says you were shouting, ‘Let me go!’ and weeping. Do you recall any of that?”

I tilt my head. “When did she tell you that?”

“Over the phone on your way over here.”

My brow furrows. I recall her speaking on the phone, but I don’t remember the conversation.

“Do you feel you’re in danger, Mary?”

I take a breath and say, “Really, Dr. Chalmers, I’m fine. I only need something for insomnia. I am dreadfully sorry to have alarmed everyone, but it was only a nightmare. No, I don’t feel I’m in danger.”

He nods and folds his hands in front of him. He seems once more to debate what he wants to say, but after a moment, he only says, “I’ll prescribe you a low dose of melatonin. We’ll see if that doesn’t do the trick. But Mary, if you have other symptoms—memory gaps, sleepwalking, bedwetting—”

“This is getting a bit ridiculous, Doctor,” I say curtly. “I’ll take the melatonin, and if I have any other worries, I’ll be happy to notify you. At the moment, none of those extreme symptoms are occurring, so there’s no need for undue concern.”

“Of course,” he says. “I didn’t mean to offend.” He stands. “I’ll be back with your prescription in a moment.”

He leaves the room, and I breathe an exasperated sigh. Bedwetting? Honestly.

But you do have memory gaps, Annie’s voice taunts in my mind. And you did bite yourself hard enough to draw blood.

“I bit my lip, Annie,” I mutter. “That’s hardly a cause for alarm.”

I realize I’ve said this aloud and look around to make sure no one heard. The office door is closed, and of course no one is in here but me, so how could they?

I take a deep breath and let it out. Just a few more minutes. Then I can be on my—

Minnie! I’ve completely forgotten about Minnie!

I purse my lips. I don’t want to ask Dr. Chalmers about Minnie. He’s on the cusp of deciding I’m having a mental break. If I indicate to him that I’m obsessed over a missing girl, he might change his mind about the benefits of commitment. Or worse, he might suggest the Carltons terminate my employment so I can take a long, restorative holiday.

But I need to learn something.

In desperation, I walk behind Dr. Chalmers's desk and start digging through the files. I am breaking every privacy law known to man doing this, but if I can find some angle, anything that will lead me to concrete evidence of wrongdoing that I can bring to the police, then the effort will be worth it.

Perhaps my luck is starting to turn, because just at the back of the files is one marked M., Minerva. I pull it out and open it.

My leap of joy fades quickly. Most of the file is redacted. It contains only her name and basic information such as height, weight, eye color, and hair color. It has an address for a home in the village, but that won't help me since her family no longer lives here.

The data I can gather only confirms that she was seen by Dr. Chalmers approximately four weeks before her death. She was seen for ninety minutes and sent home with a prescription for vitamins and told to avoid caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol.

My brow furrows. Those instructions are fairly typical for a wellness checkup, but it's odd that they would be included in a medical report.

Unless she was pregnant

My eyes widen. I think I've just found a motive for Minnie's murder. If she was pregnant, and the father didn't want it to be known that he was the father, then perhaps he would have conspired to get rid of her.

But if Dr. Chalmers knew about the pregnancy, then why hadn't he said anything after Minnie went missing? It's better than being "disappeared" too, I suppose, but he showed no fear of Eliza or Veronica, and if he was coerced by a member of the

family into hiding Minerva's pregnancy and eventual murder, I would expect some sign of fear.

I hear the door handle begin to turn and quickly shove the file back into the drawer and close it. I don't have time to return to my seat, but I am at least standing in front of the desk when Dr. Chalmers walks in. He smiles at me and says, "Sorry to keep you waiting. I have that prescription for you. If you're willing, I can send the pills home with Eliza by the end of the day so you don't have to wait for the pharmacist to fill them."

"That would be lovely, thank you."

"No trouble at all."

I shake his hand goodbye. I manage to keep my cheerful demeanor when I say goodbye to Eliza, but my mind is once more in turmoil.

The man Dr. Chalmers described as the possible kidnapper reminded me disturbingly of Alistair. I can't help but wonder if Dr. Chalmers knows that for sure and is just afraid to say. Could Alistair have threatened him to remain quiet? Could he simply be afraid of the Carlton family and be unwilling to say anything to explicitly incriminate one of their own?

Whatever the case, it is yet another piece of evidence against Alistair, but still not enough for me to draw any definite conclusions. Before I can do that, I need to learn what exactly Alistair's relationship with Minnie was.

I head home in silence. Part of me is intrigued to come closer to the answer to this mystery. Another part fears that I am simply spiraling deeper into a conflict that can only end in more tragedy.

But it's too late for me to walk away. My earlier resolution to stay out of the family's business has crumbled utterly. For better or for worse, I am committed to finding answers about Minerva Montclair's death.

I'll simply have to hope I don't end up falling to the same fate she did.

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I am quiet for the first few minutes of the drive. Horace remains as quiet as ever, his hands stoically on either side of the wheel, his eyes fixed firmly ahead at the road.

I finally break the silence by asking, “How long has Eliza worked with Dr. Chalmers?” I’m not sure if I hope to learn anything by asking this or if I simply can’t bear the quiet.

“This past year and a few weeks or so,” Horace replies. “She was hired to replace Miss Minerva.”

Perhaps I can learn something. “Were she and Minnie close?”

“More or less,” Horace says. “Can’t ever tell with these rich types. They smile at their enemies and stab their friends in the back. Different world, innit? Me? I’m just happy to keep my mouth shut and collect my paycheck.”

“She seems to get on well enough with him.”

“Aye, she likes him.”

“It’s a dreadful thing what happened to Minnie,” I say. “She was so young. Ready to begin life—fall in love, start a family.”

“Aye, I reckon it was awful.”

“I can only imagine how hard it must be for Eliza working in the same building her friend worked, being reminded of her every day.”

“Aye. But life goes on.”

I watch his face carefully, but he shows no sign of an emotional reaction of any kind. I’m not sure exactly what I hope to learn from this conversation, but I noticed the way Eliza and Dr. Chalmers looked at each other, and I noticed the way he looked at Veronica. There was no fear there, but there was a great deal of longing for both women.

And there’s that redacted medical record which could indicate that Minnie was pregnant when she disappeared. Dr. Chalmers hinted that Alistair was the culprit, but perhaps Eliza and Veronica are involved somehow as well. If I can get an understanding of their relationship with the doctor, maybe...

Maybe what? What then? Where do I go from there, and most importantly, how do I find concrete evidence that I can take to the police?

This whole mystery is frustrating. The more I learn, the closer I get to the truth, the further away I seem to be from acting on it.

And I must be sure. I must know who the killer is, and I must be able to prove it. A misstep with a family like the Carltons could be fatal.

I may try talking to Oliver. I can simply mention that I found letters in his room and that I wanted to know how he was feeling or if there was anything he wanted to talk about. Or I can take a softer approach and claim that I once stumbled on a shoebox of letters my mother once wrote my father. Anything to get him talking about her. Anything that could inspire him to trust me enough to reveal something... well, revealing.

And Alistair. I must talk to him, too. There are discrepancies in his story that, if uncovered, could reveal the pieces missing from this puzzle. He’ll be harder, though.

I get a sense of danger from him that I don't get from Oliver.

We reach home, and Horace says, "Here we are. Before you go, Miss Mary, if you don't mind me being presumptuous, I think you should try not to get too close to the Carltons. They're not a bad sort as far as wealthy people go, but they live in a different world than you and I. You might consider taking your meals downstairs or else earlier or later than they do. Best not to confuse yourself for a friend. That'll only end badly."

Yet another person advised me to stay far away from the family. Oh, Horace, if only I had your wisdom.

I head inside. I think I'll spend my afternoon seeing if I can find a more intact medical record for Minnie. I really wish I had gotten more information from Dr. Chalmers's office. Any idea who the father might be would have helped.

I head downstairs to my room, but before I can enter, I'm accosted by Hazel. I gasp and say, "Oh, Hazel! You gave me a fright!"

"Sorry about that, Mary. I didn't mean to."

I feel a touch of guilt at my reaction. The poor woman is so fragile that if I were to glare at her long enough, I really do think she'd wilt.

"Well, that's all right. No harm done."

I start to move past her, but then it occurs to me that if anyone is likely to both have information I can use and be willing to share it with me, then it would be Hazel.

"Would you like to join me for some tea?"

She looks at me for a moment, an inscrutable expression on her face. Then she nods.

“All right.”

I smile and lead her to the kitchen. “How do you take your tea?” I ask.

“A little sugar, no cream,” she says. “Thank you.”

“Do you prefer Earl Grey, Darjeeling, Breakfast?”

“Breakfast, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. There’s nothing like a stout English Breakfast tea to invigorate the senses. Have a seat. I’ll be back in just a moment.”

I set the kettle to boil, feeling a sense of excitement. Finally, my chance to talk to Hazel. As the housekeeper, she is a veritable gold mine. And with her penchant for being unseen? Who knows what she’s heard!

When I return with the tea, Hazel is sitting primly in one of the upholstered seats of the tearoom. She is around my age, I believe, but with her thin face and sallow skin, she appears ten years older. That isn’t a kind thought, I know, but I am looking for secrets today, and she looks like a woman who might have some.

I set the service on the small table in between the two upholstered chairs, then take the other. I take a sip of my tea—Darjeeling, in my case—and close my eyes, allowing its warmth to suffuse me. “There really is nothing like a good spot of tea,” I say, “although I still do like my coffee.”

Hazel doesn’t respond. She doesn’t exactly look uncomfortable. Just uninterested. Well, if I can’t establish a rapport, I might as well get right to it and stop wasting time.

“You’ve worked for this family for many years, yes?”

“Thirty-five in April,” she replies.

“How have you found it?”

She shrugs. “Agreeable enough. They pay me well and on time. They ask no more of me than I’m willing to do.”

“I must say, I’m truly impressed by your work. You seem to have quite a talent for always being where you’re needed when you’re needed, but yet remaining unobtrusive at the same time. I’m afraid I’m quite clumsy in my interactions. I always end up stumbling into situations or sticking my foot in my mouth.”

She shrugs again. “After a lifetime of service, you develop the skill of being present but unseen.”

I control my excitement. We’re getting somewhere now. “You must have heard quite a bit of juicy gossip that way.”

She looks at me cautiously. “I’ve heard my share.”

“I can imagine. The lives these wealthy people lead.” I shake my head. “Well, I don’t want to sound envious, but to be able to run off to Madrid at the drop of a hat! If I had that sort of wealth, I’d surround myself with handsome men and have them wait on me hand and foot!”

“Really? You don’t strike me as that sort.”

“Well, I suppose not,” I admit, “but then, I’ve never had that chance. Perhaps if I had, I would be more adventurous.”

“Perhaps.”

I circle a little closer. “Although I suppose you lose the option of privacy in the case of wealth. It must have been horrible for the family when that girl disappeared and they were suspected of being involved.”

Hazel’s shoulders tense slightly. I’m getting closer, but I must be careful not to put her on her guard. “That was a trying time for all, yes.”

“It’s just awful what happened.” I shake my head. “That poor girl. To think she was walking home from a friend’s estate only to disappear. And don’t you think it’s odd that no sign of her was ever found?”

She chuckles, a touch of bitterness evident in her laugh. “I don’t find that odd at all.”

“But surely someone must know something.”

She scoffs again. “I’m sure that quite a few people know everything. But no one says anything.”

Time to make my move. “If only someone would. If I knew something, anything that could shed light on what happened to her, I would go to the police myself.”

She looks me directly in the eye, and I can see in her expression that I’ve triumphed. I brace myself for the revelation.

“You’re new to this life, Miss Mary. You haven’t yet learned your place. If you had, you would have politely declined these dinners and teas and walks and conversations and kept yourself separate from the vicissitudes of your employers. You’d have arrived to teach Lucas his schooling and disappeared the moment that schooling ended.”

I flinch slightly, taken aback by the vehemence of her speech. “I hope I haven’t offended you. I assure you, I don’t see myself as superior in any way.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s not about being superior or inferior. It’s about having power or not having it. The Carltons have power. You don’t.”

I can’t quite stifle the reaction I have to that. “Well, that power shouldn’t give them the right to cover up a murder!”

“It shouldn’t,” she says, “but it does. I don’t know if Minnie was murdered. Probably she was, but if you were hoping that I stood in the shadows and heard one of the Carltons confess to the crime, then I’m afraid I must dash that hope.”

Heat climbs my cheeks. That was, in fact, exactly what I hoped.

“You are nothing to them, Mary. That’s not an insult, it’s a warning. If they so decide, you can disappear as surely as Minnie. You can be shipped overseas. You can be committed to a sanitarium on nothing more than the strength of their word.”

I shiver at that, and Hazel decides that she’s made her point. “It’s best to let them keep their secrets. I’ve learned to be where I’m needed without being seen. I’ve also learned not to listen for those secrets. If it makes you feel better at all, they’re far from the most evil of aristocrats. You know how the saying goes: ‘If these walls could talk...’ The walls of this manor would say far less than the walls of any number of other homes. But the world goes on in spite of it. You must let this go, Mary. Minerva Montclair’s death is tragic and offensive. It’s also not your problem.”

My disappointment with that statement must show in my face because she says, “I can see you’re not satisfied with that answer, and I don’t blame you. But don’t let your emotions fool you. You can’t help her. You can only hurt yourself.”

She stands and sets her empty cup on the service. “Thank you for the tea.”

She leaves me to ponder her warning, not the first I’ve received even this day. She’s right. Horace is right. Niall is right. They’re all right, but I can’t just let this go. Powerful or not, someone has to be brought to justice.

But I am a lone minnow in a sea of sharks. What can I possibly hope to do?

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The house, it appears, is empty save for me and Hazel. I didn't see Veronica leave with Horace, but I assume she's gone to the charity. Oliver, Alistair, and Lucas aren't home. I suppose Alistair has spirited them off to do something fun and irresponsible again. I really do need to get control of Lucas's schooling. I've allowed myself to become distracted. That's reasonable, of course, but if Lucas's work starts to slip, it will make people wonder just what I've been up to.

I decide to take a walk outside on the grounds. I don't admit to myself that I'm hoping to run into a certain someone, but deep down, I know exactly why I'm walking among the tall trees of the south woods.

In any case, Niall isn't really a suspect anymore. The description Dr. Chalmers gave matches Alistair, and even if he's lying, the Carltons have more motive than Niall does to want Minnie dead. I have a photograph showing Niall staring lustfully at her, but all men stare at beautiful women the same way. I can't assume he's a murderer simply because he likes to look at attractive young women.

And I need someone who will talk to me. The people who might have answers for me are either suspects or they're refusing to share what they know. Granted, Niall himself refused to share what he knew beyond a cryptic hint, but I'm growing desperate. I feel like I'm circling around the answer to this problem, but I can't quite reach it.

And I suppose I do take this personally. Aside from the guilt I still feel over losing Annie, it offends me that simply because the Carltons are wealthy they should be immune from prosecution. I should look into the police records of the case. I would love to know how they justified caving to Sebastian's refusal to allow the property to

be searched.

It hits me for the first time that Minnie could be anywhere. I could have walked over her grave and not even known it.

I shiver and then curse. It only heightens my resolve to learn what happened. No one should die and then just be left to fade into memory!

Righteous Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?

“Shut up, Annie.”

“Shouldn’t talk to yourself where others can hear you,” a familiar voice interjects. “Might give ’em the wrong impression.”

I spin around and see Niall a few yards behind me, hands in his pockets, insolent grin on his face. “And you shouldn’t sneak up on women unawares,” I fire back. “It might make them think you’re a murderer.”

“You don’t think I’m a murderer,” he says. “Else you wouldn’t be here by yourself. You thought I was the last time, though, didn’t you? Looked ready to bolt the moment I said boo.”

I hesitate for a second, then admit the truth. “Yes. I considered the possibility.”

Niall seems to think that hilarious. He throws his head back and laughs, a rough sound like the cackling of an old crow. When he recovers, he says, “Can’t say I blame you. A proper girl like you probably took one look at me and knew I was no good. ‘Probably don’t even wash himself proper,’ you thought.”

“You’ve made your point,” I interrupt. “How foolish everyone is to judge you simply

because you're an uncouth, rude, boorish, and unkempt man."

He thinks that is even more hilarious. This time, when he finishes laughing, he says, "And yet here you are coming to talk to me again. Pretty as you are, I can't think it's that you desire my company."

My eyes narrow. "Certainly not in that way."

"Course not," he says. "Woman like you could have your pick of any number of gentlemen. So if it's not a cuddle you're looking for, I surmise you're hoping to learn something more from me about the missing girl."

"Yes. I know that last time you told me to keep my nose out of it—"

"And here you are with your nose buried deep inside the arse of the Cotswolds anyway."

I turn around and start walking away. He calls after me, "If you think I'm going to chase you and beg your apology, you're wrong."

I want nothing more than to leave him behind, but rude as he is, he could be my last chance to learn what I need. So although it galls me to my core, I turn back.

He grins at me, naked triumph in his face. I understand him now, I think. He is intelligent and successful, yet he will be nothing more than a cockroach to these people, and, since his manners are rough, he won't even receive credit for the intelligence and success he does possess.

And women all look at him with disgust. A perfectly understandable reaction, but one that no doubt hurts him as well. Perhaps I am wrong to dismiss him as a suspect.

I set that aside for now. It's still a very thin reason to suspect him, and I have much stronger reasons to suspect the Carltons.

"I am trying to bring justice to a young girl," I say. "One who whatever her faults hardly deserved to be wiped off the face of the Earth as though she didn't exist."

"Why?"

I blink in surprise. "What do you mean why?"

"It's a simple enough question."

My hackles rise again. "Why? Because it's not fair! She was kidnapped, probably murdered, and probably buried in an unmarked grave. She was a person with a life—loves, interests, dreams, desires—and all of that was tossed aside for... for what? Damn it, I don't even know why!"

"So what?"

"So... Niall, if you're going to be difficult just to be difficult, then I'll leave you right now."

"I think you're threatening yourself with that, not me. I'm perfectly content to live my life knowing that Minerva Montclair was probably kidnapped, murdered, and buried in an unmarked grave. So why aren't you?"

"Because I'm not a horrible person!"

"You're not a saint either. No more than anyone is. So why?"

I start to walk away again, and he says, "You came out here to ask me questions, but

you won't answer mine? Tit for tat, Mary. That's how the world works for people that are equals, and that's what you and I are whether you care to admit it or not."

I whirl on him. "Because it offends me that people like the Carltons can kill someone and get away with it for no other reason than that they're wealthy."

"I'm sure it does, but I don't think that's why you've chosen Minnie as your pet crusade. There's plenty of people get offed by the wealthy and are never seen again. I daresay the Carltons have done no more than any other rich family and probably less than most. Do you go to every family you work for and try to dig up their skeletons?"

"I'm two for two so far," I say brittlely.

"Well, then I'd expect a short lifespan if I were you."

"Everyone dies. That's the short version of what you said, isn't it?"

"Lots of people get murdered by rich people who never suffer for it is what I said. But I want to know why you think that you should find out who—"

"Because my sister disappeared twenty-eight years ago, and I gave up on her."

My lower lip starts to tremble, and I lower my head. I don't want him to see me cry, though, so I lift it again and meet his eyes, forcing the tears to dry before they can fall. "Well, you've gotten your gossip," I say bitterly. "Now tell me what I want to know."

If it's any credit to him, Niall does look uncomfortable. I'm not sure what he expected me to say, but the confession about Annie was apparently different from his idea of my motives.

God, I hate that he forced that out of me! That's my business! Mine and no one else's! I'm sick of having people pry into my personal life!

The hypocrisy of that statement isn't lost on me and only serves to sour my mood. "If you've got nothing to say, at least do me the favor of letting me know so I can take my leave of you as fast as I possibly can."

"No, I'll say something," he replies, in a far more subdued voice than before. His hands are in his pockets, and he shuffles from side to side. "Thought you was just jealous."

"You thought I would investigate a murder because I'm jealous?"

"Well, I'm jealous. If my great-great-grandda' had had a smarter head for business, it might be me up in that pretty little house and not Sebastian Carlton."

I stare at him, not bothering to hide my disdain. "And you thought I was just as petty as you."

He lifts a wounded gaze to me and says, "I said I'd help. As much as I can, leastways. I'm sorry about your sister. If I'da known, I wouldn't have teased you."

I sigh and press my fingers to my temples. "Just tell me what you know."

"I know they were fighting. All of them. Before Minnie died, they were all fighting. She was fighting with Eliza and Oliver. Eliza was fighting with Oliver and Veronica. Oliver was fighting with Veronica too. They were all fighting with Rupert."

I lift my gaze to his. "Rupert? Rupert Chalmers? The doctor?"

"Aye, that's right. He came over a few times, and they were fighting with him too."

Sebastian was fighting with everyone. I think he was more upset that they had brought scandal than he was about whatever that scandal was.”

I think I have an idea . “And you have no idea why they were fighting?”

He shakes his head. “I never paid it mind until after Minnie went missing. To tell the truth, I thought it was another spat about something foolish, like whose dress was prettier or who got a better spot in the dining room at the Chateau Cotswold. I didn’t consider it might be more serious until Alistair showed up.”

My ears perk up. “Alistair? Why’s that?”

“He’s a shady one, that’s why. He smiles and laughs and flops around like a jester, but he’s a cunning one. He’s managed to live off of their money for his whole adult life now, but I don’t think he’s living for free.”

“You think the Carltons hired him to kill Minnie?”

“I don’t think it was nothing so crude as that. I think they mentioned they had a problem and that they’d be grateful for the problem to go away. I think he saw his chance, flew over here, and took it. Mind you, that’s all speculation. All I know for sure is that they were all fighting bad just before she died.”

“This is very helpful,” I say. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Mary. I would warn you again to leave it alone, but I guess that you’ll just ignore me.”

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

He nods. Then his face hardens. “Well, then, leave me alone. I gave you what you

wanted, and you gave me something I realize now I don't want. I despise the Carltons, but I love me life more, and being around you is unhealthy. So I'll take my leave and bid you good luck. God knows you'll need it."

He walks past me, leaving me to process the new information he's given me. It's not entirely new. I knew about Oliver and Eliza fighting with Minnie already.

But it supports the idea that the whole family had something to do with her disappearance. And while it's clearer now than before that Dr. Chalmers isn't innocent, it seems that he might have been right about Alistair after all.

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I walk into the house and nearly collide with Alistair. I flinch back in alarm, and he grins. “Sorry about that, Mary. We were wondering where you were. Out for a stroll?”

“Y-yes,” I stammer. “Yes. And where were you? Where are Oliver and Lucas?”

“Oliver’s still out. He ran into some friends from school while we were out and decided to go on with them. They invited us to join, but seeing as how I stole Lucas away from his schooling, I brought him back to catch up.” He smiles again, and there’s a hint of reproach in his expression. “I’m not a complete flake. Well, I am , but I want better for my little cousin.”

“That’s good to hear,” I say. “So he’s in the study?”

“He is. Hard at work on science problems. Don’t really see the point to be honest. He’s probably smarter than most of his teachers. But he needs these marks to get into Oxford, so study he must! Care to walk with me? I know you’ve just returned, but I could use the company. Never was much good at being alone.”

Half of me wants to refuse and run to safety. I have an excellent excuse, of course. I really should be supervising Lucas. But Lucas has done an excellent job of self-managing so far, and in any case, this is only the first week. It will be no trouble at all to catch up.

I wonder how long I’ll keep telling myself that.

The other half of me is still aflame with the fires of justice. I have Minnie’s possible

murderer right in front of me, and if not her murderer, then someone who could shed more light on the circumstances surrounding her death. It's an opportunity I can't pass up.

And let's face it. If Alistair wants me dead, there's precious little I can do to stop him no matter where I am.

"Very well," I reply. "Lead the way."

"Oh, nonsense," he says, putting his arm in mine and propelling me back down the stairs. "We journey together, Mary! I suggest the east garden. Prettier flowers and fewer trees to spoil the sun. I never understood Sebastian for growing so many trees on the property. Sun is such a rare occurrence in central England—well, any part of England. Why hide from it?"

I extend my first feeler. "Perhaps it's to hide what happens underneath the canopy."

He laughs, and I'm struck by how alike his laugh is to Niall in every aspect but its hoarseness. "Yes, indeed; the secret lives of the rich and famous. Who knows what mysteries lurk in these walls?"

"I imagine you have a few tales to tell," I say, probing a little further.

"Fewer than you might think. I only act like I own the place. In reality, I visit only rarely."

"Yes. This is your first in three years, right?"

He laughs. "You've caught me. That was a lie when I said it over dinner. To tell the truth, I just wasn't sure if I should speak of what happened when I was here last year."

“Why not?”

“Well, you know Sebastian’s touchy over the whole Minerva Montclair scandal. I happened to be here when it occurred—only for a few days, mind you—and I’m afraid I got embroiled in the whole affair. You figured out the truth when I mentioned the letter, right?”

There’s no real point in lying, I suppose. “Yes. I thought the timing was odd.”

He gives me a sly look. “So that means that you’ve seen the letter.”

Again, there’s no point in lying. I’ve already told Veronica about them anyway. “Yes. I was cleaning his room while Hazel had the day off, and I discovered a box of letters between him and Minnie.”

“Ah, but did you see the one he wrote Minnie when he discovered she was cheating?”

“I did. He was quite angry.”

Alistair laughs. “He was quite broken-hearted. And quite young and quite foolish.”

We are in the east garden now. I am keenly aware of how close Alistair is to me and how strong his arm is over mine. I begin to regret my decision to come out with him alone. Still, I am out here. I might as well see this through.

“You mentioned you advised him not to send the letter. Is that why you flew all this way?”

“Ah... no. No, I...” He sighs. “Well, I might as well say it. I’m afraid I’m a failure, Mary.”

He gives me a jaunty grin as he says it, but I see the pain of that failure in his eyes. I also see crow's feet at the corners of those eyes. I've thought him around the same age as Oliver and Eliza, but now that I pay closer attention, I would guess him to be ten years older at least.

"I don't mean to be," he continues. "I had high hopes for myself, nearly as high as those my parents held for me. I planned to be a successful investor and use my wealth to explore the world and learn all there is to know about its wonders. I've accomplished one of those things."

"You're not alone," I say. "Quite a few people fail to live to their own expectations."

"Quite true," he agrees. "If only I had a better head on my shoulders. In any case, I was here for a reason I'm sure you can deduce but I'm equally sure you're too polite to say. I was asking for money."

"I see."

He laughs. "Ever the polite one. There's no need to mince words between us. I think we understand each other very well."

An alarm goes off in my head. God, I wish he would release my arm. "Oh?"

"Yes. We're both dissatisfied. Opposite ends of the spectrum, of course. You have money. Not as much as my cousin, of course, but you don't behave as if you struggle financially."

"And how does one behave if they struggle financially?"

"Desperately." He gives me another slightly forlorn grin. "Like me. No, I think what you lack is purpose."

I'm taken aback, and I flinch instinctively. "I lack purpose?"

"Yes. I don't mean in some esoteric philosophical way. I don't really put any faith in philosophy to begin with. But I think you lack a driving force to your actions, a reason that keeps you coming back day after day after day."

Oh, how wrong you are . "And what gives you that impression?"

"You're here in the Cotswolds just a few months after you were in a small town in New York, USA, just a few months after you were a teacher at an elementary school in New York City for twenty-five years. No one picks up and changes their routine after twenty-five years for no reason. You're missing something, and if you'll forgive me for the most horrible rudeness, I think you turned fifty and realized that your time to find that something is running out."

"That is a little rude," I say, not too angrily.

That alarm still rings in my head, and I don't want to antagonize him. I do , however, want to hear what he has to say about Minerva's disappearance.

My reproof has the effect I hope. "Quite right, quite right. I mean no offense, but my tongue does waggle. Well, it was wagging about Minnie and Oliver, yes? So I was here asking for money, and it was profoundly the worst time. Oliver was whining about a girl who turned out to be nothing more than a vapid society wench who latched onto our family because she saw a chance to advance her status. If only she had been a little more prudent, she might have latched onto Oliver. But she went ahead and got pregnant by another man. Then her vapid little brain thought it would be a good idea to confide in Eliza."

"So she was pregnant." He gives me a searching look, and I realize my mistake. "I mean... that's usually what these scandals are, right?"

He chuckles. “Hardly. Illegitimate children are the norm in families like ours. It’s almost fashionable. Don’t tell me you haven’t wondered why Lucas looks so different from the other two.”

I have wondered, but I keep my mouth shut this time. He stops and examines a row of brilliant purple foxgloves. “So since I was here,” he says, “I advised Oliver not to give Minnie the letter. I told him to cut off contact with Minnie, and I told the family the same. I never understood why they tolerated her anyway. Not that I’m one to speak, but...” He lifts his hands and lets them drop.

In the process, he releases mine, and I step away so he can’t grab it again.

“Well, Minnie wouldn’t let it go. She kept coming by, pleading with Eliza to help her do something about the baby, pleading with Oliver to forgive her, pleading with the Carltons to protect her from her parents.”

“Her parents?”

“Well, they weren’t happy, were they? Honestly, if it had been Oliver who ‘did the deed,’ they probably would have been over the moon. A whole family of leeches, the Montclairs. But since it was... well, I don’t know who it was. Not Oliver. Anyway, it got to the point where I felt I had to intervene.”

My heart begins to pound. I take another step away from him. “How so?”

He notices the step and smiles at me. There’s some mirth in that smile, but mostly anguish laced liberally with affront. “I didn’t kill her, Mary,” he says softly. “I was gone home the day before she disappeared. You can check my plane ticket if you like. I still have it somewhere in my luggage. I went to her and told her that she needed to stop coming around and inciting the family. She made her mistake, and she needed to accept it.”

“How did she respond?”

“She asked me if I knew what my cousin was doing.”

“Which one?”

“She didn’t say. I assume Veronica, though, because she called her an unrepentant whore.”

I stiffen a little. “That’s a rather unkind thing to say about Veronica.”

“Unkind, yes. Unfortunately, also accurate. You know that she fled to South Africa with some man, and that’s how we have Lucas. Who I love, by the way, and who I hope is better than any of us. He has a real chance if the aforementioned unrepentant whore ever releases him from her clutches. But that’s not all Veronica’s done. Sebastian, for all his cunning in business, is a fool in love. She has cheated with numerous men, including, it seems, the father of Minnie’s child.”

“Goodness!” I exclaim.

I want to tell him that’s not possible, but the pieces of the puzzle are beginning to fit. The fighting that occurred right before Minnie’s disappearance, Sebastian’s refusal to acknowledge the event, everyone’s dismissal of Minnie’s very existence, Dr. Chalmers’s decision to cover up the pregnancy and likely decision not to report his suspicions.

Suspicious of Alistair. But he has an alibi. I suppose I could insist on confirming it, but why would Alistair mention an alibi if he wasn’t certain it could be proven?

I still don’t have all the answers, but once more, I’m closer. I just need the answer to one more question. That answer should give me the final answer to the final question:

Who killed Minerva Montclair?

“Who was the father?”

Alistair meets my eyes. He’s still smiling, but his gaze is hard. “It’s in my best interests not to say exactly who I think it was. But I can tell you that Veronica keeps her correspondence in her dresser drawer upstairs. If you can stomach digging through the disorganized pile of lace panties she keeps in that particular drawer, you might find some interesting information. You may even find an answer to your question.”

He offers his arm, and this time, I take it willingly. As we walk back to the house, he says, “I would appreciate it if you kept what I’ve said to yourself. Say that you were cleaning and came across the letters if you should feel a need to go to the police. I am a worthless waste of a man for saying this, but it would be nice to obtain at least a small sum before the Carltons are ruined. Just enough for me to have one last go at being worth something before I sink to despair and die in a third-rate bar somewhere far from home.”

We reach the house, and before I can think of a response, he pulls his arm away and bows. “Thank you for a lovely walk, Miss Mary. If it means anything at all coming from me, I hope you find your purpose.”

He walks away, leaving me alone on the porch. I wait until he disappears around the corner, this time heading toward the west garden. Then I whisper, “I believe I have, Mr. Finchley.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

I head immediately to Veronica and Sebastian's room. I have no idea if Lucas is still working on his homework or prowling the grounds, or if he's run off to parts unknown. I have to admit I've been a poor governess to him. He's older, yes, but prior to Alistair's arrival, I got the distinct impression that I was the only good influence in his life.

And I've thrown it away for a dead girl. The poor lad. He deserves better than me, and if I find what I need to put Minnie's killer behind bars, I will at least do what I can to ensure he finds it.

But I'm so close now! If I can find the evidence Alistair refers to, then I could have what I need to bring Minnie's killer to justice tonight!

So as soon as I arrive at the bedroom, I enter and head straight for the dresser to the left of the bed. I venture a guess that it's Veronica's, but that guess proves to be wrong, so I cross to the other side. As I do, I'm struck by the relative plainness of the furniture. It's not cheap by any means, but it's certainly not the grand arrangement I expected, considering the rest of the house. The furniture is plain gray wood, and the mattress, while comfortable, is adorned only with plain blue sheets and white pillows. The vanity mirror on top of the chest of drawers is a run-of-the-mill rectangular unit, and there's limited scrollwork on the dressers, bedposts, and armoire. I suppose since no one will be here to see the room but the married couple, there's no need to display their wealth.

I open the other dresser and check the drawers. The top one is full of blouses and shirts. The second contains various pants and leggings. The middle contains an astonishing amount of socks, pantyhose, and bras.

It's the fourth drawer that finally reveals the panties Alistair is referring to. I blush a little when I realize he wasn't kidding about the lace. Whether it's for Sebastian or the mystery men Veronica cheats on him with, they're lucky.

I dig underneath the panties but find nothing but the hard bottom of the drawer. Perhaps Alistair was wrong. I certainly hope not, because if anyone walks in on me doing this, I'll certainly be fired.

I laugh at that. I'm stalking a murderer, and I'm worried about my job. Hell, if I find proof of the murder, I'll probably lose it anyway. The silly reasons my mind comes up with to avoid danger.

On the third go-around, my finger comes across something cool to the touch. I pull it out to see a key. It seems Veronica has done a better job of hiding this secret correspondence. But what does the key open?

I look around the room and see nothing with a lock on it. There's a wall safe, but it requires a code, not a key. I check the walk-in closet, but while I find what one would expect—dresses, suits, an obscene amount of shoes—I don't find anything that this key might fit.

She couldn't be keeping it hidden under the bed, could she? I check there and am surprised to see that it does, in fact, appear as though she's hidden her letters under the bed. Presumably Sebastian never checks there. Or perhaps he doesn't check at all, and she simply ran out of space to keep them in her underwear drawer.

I pull the small wooden chest out and insert the key. I chuckle a bit at the odd fixation this family has with hiding things in boxes: Lucas's photographs, Oliver's letters, and now Veronica's letters.

I spread them out on the bed, heart pounding. God, I don't know where to begin.

There are dozens, no, hundreds of letters and cards. How can I tell which one is the father of Minnie's unborn child?

I scan the letters to look for familiar names first. Many of the letters are many years old, and in a few cases, I can't quite read the names. But the letters I'm looking for wouldn't be that old, would they?

I get through all of the letters and don't find anyone I know. That's irritating. It makes it that much harder to find out which of Veronica's many boyfriends also had an affair with Minerva Montclair.

But Alistair seemed so sure. I'm not ready to give up yet.

I look at the old letters again and read through the first one. The tone is somewhat sappy and syrupy—typical of a love letter—but it gives me the information I want when I reach the end and find that Veronica has recorded the recipient's name again at the bottom.

I have to read that name several times before I'm sure I've read it correctly. When I'm sure, I still don't believe it, so I read the other old letters.

All of them are addressed to the same person. The last one is dated twenty-six years ago.

The person addressed is Rupert. No last name is mentioned, but it doesn't take a nuclear physicist to infer that the Rupert mentioned is none other than the illustrious Dr. Chalmers.

The final letter appears to be a break-up letter. In it, she apologizes for choosing Sebastian over him, but protests that with Sebastian, she can have a real future.

She ends the letter with the line, This doesn't need to mean the end of our love, only the end of our courtship. You will always remain the first and brightest star in my sky.

I set the letter down and think about what I've just read. There are no more letters between them. That could suggest that their romance did indeed end despite Veronica's promise.

But I saw the look in Rupert's eyes when he came to visit. Clearly he still loves her. Yet, at the same time, Veronica was almost annoyed by him and eager to leave. It could simply be that she didn't want me to realize how close they were. But then, if their dalliance ended decades ago, before she even married Sebastian, then why would Rupert still be chasing her? And why would he agree to help cover up Minnie's pregnancy?

The more I think about the doctor, the more suspicious it all becomes. He is clearly in love with Veronica, but just as clearly he lusts after Eliza. And it seemed very much that Eliza was attracted to him. Probably she doesn't know about her mother's relationship with the doctor, but it certainly doesn't paint the doctor in a flattering light that he is such a womanizer.

And Eliza is near in age to Minnie. That is evidence of Rupert's attraction to younger women. But he still wants Veronica, so it's not an exclusive perversion, as is the case with most violent sex offenders.

And he claimed Alistair was the killer. Not in so many words, but it was clear what he was insinuating. Then again, it's clear Alistair holds no love for him. It's equally clear Alistair suspects him.

One of them is lying. One of them is trying to frame the other to remove suspicion from himself. Or possibly both of them are lying, and they're trying to obfuscate

things so that no answer is ever found. Unlikely as it seems, I must also admit that it's possible that neither of them are lying. Both genuinely feel the other is responsible but also feel that they're not in a position to do anything about it. If that's true, then it means that once more, I'm chasing a red herring.

One thing is true: Dr. Chalmers knows more than he admits. It looks like I'll need to make another appointment with him after all.

I hear noise coming from downstairs, and a moment later, Veronica's voice calls, "Lucas, darling? Are you here?"

I quickly throw the letters back into the box, lock it, and place it under the bed. I start to rush from the room, then remember the key. I curse and run back to the dresser, tossing the key back into the drawer. I hear footsteps climbing the stairs and curse again.

I rush from the room and reach the other side of the twin staircase, descending just before Veronica says, "I'm just going to change, then I'll call Henri and see about an early dinner!"

Lucas calls back, "All right. Hey, have you seen Mary?"

"I'm here," I call, reaching the first floor. "Have you finished your schoolwork?"

He pokes his head out of the study. "There you are. Yes, I've just finished. I'm caught up now."

"Wonderful! Just in time for the weekend."

I keep that smile and go through the motions of checking his work. All the while, my heart is pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement.

I can almost taste victory. Just a little more work, and Minnie shall have justice.

I will have accomplished my purpose.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

“You’re leaving us so soon?” Oliver exclaims. “You’ve just got here!”

Alistair gives him a smile that contains more than a hint of sadness. “Yes. I’m afraid duty calls.”

Sebastian and Veronica both appear shocked at this. “Duty?” Sebastian exclaims. “I thought... well...”

“No need to be coy, cousin,” Alistair says. “You thought I drifted to your door because my latest venture left me as penniless as the last. Well, you’re right. I’m afraid I have naught but the clothes on my back and the money I used to buy my plane ticket back to Japan. But I have some goodwill remaining with my former investors, and I’m armed with a plan—a real one this time. I feel confident about it. And anyway, it’s high time I spread my own wings and flew.”

Sebastian looks utterly flummoxed for the first time in my memory. “You... Is everything all right?”

Alistair laughs. “Everything is wonderful, cousin. I just... want to grow up is all.”

“How do you plan to do that with no money to live on?” Veronica challenges.

“I will be happy to share all the details with you later,” he says. “I don’t wish to spoil your dinner by discussing my financial woes, nor do I wish to bore you all with my very mundane plan to rescue myself from them. I wish to enjoy a merry meal with my lovely cousins and then hear them wish me success as I venture into the future!”

“We shall miss you, cousin,” Eliza says. There’s a touch of relief in her expression, though, and I’m not sure if she means it.

“And I will miss all of you,” he says. “But think of it this way. I won’t be around to annoy you with my affection, and your husband won’t have to be jealous of my rakish good looks and superior wit.”

Eliza rolls her eyes and says, “I’m sure he’ll be quite thrilled.” At the same time, she tenses and casts a nervous look at her mother.

Veronica purses her lips, but I can’t tell if it’s jealousy that prompts her reaction, or concern for Eliza. My experience with her suggests that she cares little for her older children, but after all I’ve only been here a week. Perhaps I’m wrong.

In any case, it’s clear Alistair refers to Rupert. It’s been clear since the first I saw them together that Rupert is attracted to Eliza. I assumed at that time that Eliza couldn’t possibly feel the same way about him. Now, I suspect she might.

Could she have been involved in Minnie’s death too?

Lucas looks genuinely upset about his cousin’s departure, and my heart goes out to him. I think that Alistair’s arrival is the closest he’s come to feeling truly free.

Alistair notices his expression and says, “No tears from you, little cousin. It’s only for a little while. When I have established myself, I’ll fly all of you out to Japan and show you how we party in Asia. In the meantime, you made a promise to me to devote yourself to your studies. I will expect that when we see each other again, you will tell me all about the scholarship you’ve earned.”

Lucas smiles at him, his eyes moist. “I will.”

“Good. Mary?”

I turn to him. “Yes?”

“Be good to my cousin, please. Teach him well and protect him as much as possible.”

“I... of course, yes.”

Veronica and Sebastian look between us, their brows furrowed. I feel heat climb my cheeks at the same time as a chill runs down my spine. I would have much preferred it had Alistair shared this missive in private.

“What does that mean?” Veronica asks. “Protect him from what?”

“From stodgy instruction and rote memorization, of course,” he says. “You know how I feel about education in Britain.” He grins and winks at me. “Mary is wise enough to allow his mind to develop rather than cram it in a box.”

“Quite so,” I say. “He’ll be in good hands.”

Veronica gives me a suspicious look, and I shrug a little, as though to indicate that I don’t understand him either.

She sighs and gives Alistair a slightly exasperated smile. “Well, I wish you well. And don’t hesitate to call us if you need help. I admire your choice to try to stand on your own two feet, but don’t feel you need to stand or fall. We love you.”

“I promise you,” he replies, “should I stand at the edge of a precipice, I will grasp whatever rope is extended to me.”

His phone rings, and he says, “Ah. That’s my ride, I believe.”

“You’re leaving this minute?” Oliver exclaims. “In the middle of dinner?”

“Time and opportunity wait for no man,” Alistair says, “least of all me.” He stands and walks to each of us in turn, planting a kiss on each of our cheeks. “I love you all! When next I see you, I shall be shogun!”

He heads to the door, and just as suddenly as he arrives, he is gone.

The rest of us sit in silence for a moment, discombobulated at his abrupt departure.

“Well, that’s odd,” Veronica finally says. “What on Earth could have inspired him to leave us so abruptly?”

Sebastian shrugs. “Perhaps he means what he says. I’ve always told you he won’t live like this forever. Sooner or later, he’ll want to be a man and stop living on my coattails.”

“Father!” Eliza exclaims.

“What? It’s a compliment! I approve of his choices, and I always knew he’d shape up. What’s wrong with that?”

The others continue to debate the legitimacy of Alistair’s choice to reform. At the moment, I suspect that Rupert Chalmers might be more closely involved with Minnie’s death than Alistair, but I can’t help but wonder if Alistair is fleeing because he is, after all, her killer. He knows I’m close, and perhaps he only distracted me long enough to make his escape.

I hope he isn’t the killer. I rather liked him for all his immaturity. I would like to believe he is simply what he seems to be, a no-longer-young man who realizes he’s wasted his life and wants to seize one last opportunity to make something of himself.

And if he is the killer, then he may already have made his escape, and the opportunity for justice may have vanished as completely as Minnie has.

I don't take the melatonin Dr. Chalmers prescribes me. Part of the reason is that I don't entirely trust him, and part of it is that I wish to have an excuse to see him again in the morning. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I will have the weekend off. According to the hours posted on the front of his clinic, Dr. Chalmers takes Sundays and Mondays off, so he should be in the office tomorrow. Eliza will be there too, unfortunately, but I hope I can figure out a way to get a chance to talk to him alone.

Without the sleep aid, restlessness takes me again. I don't wish to snoop around the house after my uncomfortable experience in the attic. I doubt I'll find anything helpful in one of the few unused rooms in the manor, so there's no reason for me to wander and possibly alert the house.

I decide to make myself some chamomile tea, so I head quietly to the kitchen and prepare a kettle. I stop it just before it boils and steep the tea, then carry the cup and saucer to the tearoom. I will miss this house when I leave. It's not the vast cavern the Ashford estate is, but it's large enough to be stately and laid out in an orderly and sensible fashion. Were I wealthy enough to afford a home like this, I could see myself retiring here. Oh well. I'll find a nice cottage somewhere that will do instead.

I reach the tearoom to find Oliver awake. It seems I'm not the only restless one.

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect anyone else to be awake."

He smiles at me. "It's fine. I should be asleep, but tonight is hard for me."

"Why tonight?"

His smile becomes wistful, and he looks out the window. “This would be my second anniversary with Minnie.”

I take the seat across from him. I’m fairly confident I’m on the right track with Dr. Chalmers, but if this is a chance to glean some new information, then I should take it. “You cared deeply for her, didn’t you?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think she’s only the first girl I ever sh—” He looks at me and blushes. “Ever loved. Other times...” He shrugs again. “Mum and Dad say that I was only a boy and that I’ll grow up and find someone better. I’m sure they’re right, but...” He taps his finger on his knee and falls silent.

“The first love is always the loveliest to feel and the hardest to lose.”

He nods. “Has anyone told you what happened before she disappeared?”

“I’ve heard some rumors,” I say carefully. “I’m not sure I believe any of them.”

He nods again. “Well, you shouldn’t. Minnie wasn’t kidnapped. She’s perfectly fine.”

I am too stunned to answer for a moment. He notices my shock and smiles sadly. “I haven’t told anyone. I trust you won’t either.”

“No,” I say, “of course not. But... you’re sure?”

“Certain. I saw her leave myself.”

Once more, I am too shocked to respond. He looks out the window and says, “The last night she was here, she and I talked. We had fought so much since I learned she was... well, I suppose you might as well know. She was pregnant.”

I feign shock at the news. “Goodness!”

“Yes, well, that wasn’t my initial reaction. The baby wasn’t mine, of course. I’ll spare you the gory details, but I knew it wasn’t mine.”

“Yes, I... I think I understand.”

“So, anyway, we had fought, but I was too tired to fight anymore. I didn’t love her anymore, but... I think maybe a part of me still did. I don’t know. Anyway, we talked on the porch, and she told me she was going to run away. Her parents were furious with her, my family hated her, including me and my sister, and the baby’s father evidently wanted her to get rid of the baby. She said she couldn’t handle being hated by everyone who had once loved her, so she was going to take the money she’d saved and make a new life for herself somewhere else. She was going to cut her hair, wear glasses instead of contacts, and work on changing her accent. She told me she wanted to tell me because she really did love me, and she was really sorry that things ended between us the way they did.”

“My word,” I say, head reeling. Could Minnie’s murder not have been a murder after all?

“So, we went to the pub and had a drink. Well, I had a drink. Several drinks, actually. Minnie didn’t, of course, due to her condition.”

He sighed. “It was good. I felt like I did before everything, back when we were just friends and life wasn’t so complicated. Then I left her waiting for a cab. And...” He lifts his hands and lets them drop. “That’s how it ended. She was gone. I wish her well.”

I sip some of my chamomile. It’s still too hot, and the liquid burns my throat. I focus on that pain in an attempt to center my thoughts.

Eliza lied to me. She said that she and Minnie fought and that she let Minnie storm off alone instead of walking home with her. Why would she lie to me? Unless she thought Oliver was the killer?

I turn back to Oliver to see him smiling sadly at me. His grief certainly seems real, but plenty of killers are genuinely remorseful.

This is all too much. Too many people could have killed Minnie. Niall, Rupert, Eliza, Alistair, and now Oliver. Or she could simply have done what Oliver says. Honestly, his story makes sense. Many young women in her situation have done the same.

But it's too much. My head aches trying to think which of the many stories I've heard and pieced together myself might be true. If only I could let this go.

"It's a lot to take in, I know," he says. "I'm sorry I told you. You're here to teach Lucas, not to listen to the heartsickness of a young and still foolish man. I just... had to tell someone. Don't tell my parents, will you? If they know that I allowed this family to suffer scandal to protect a promiscuous girl, they'll be furious with me."

"I won't tell them," I say.

I have no idea what I'll tell anyone, or if I'll even have anything to tell anymore. But it's simpler to just agree.

He nods and stands. "Thank you, Mary. And thank you for listening." He looks out the window, a wistful expression in his eyes again. "Wherever she is, I do hope she's happy."

He leaves me alone to wonder what I should do.

I sigh. I'm too tired for this. Perhaps it was a mistake to get involved at all. The

situation is so complicated that I can't be sure if anything I'm doing is going to help avenge an innocent girl or merely embroil an innocent family in yet another scandal.

I should focus on Lucas. I've neglected the poor young man. Perhaps it's time to stop being a detective and start being a governess like I intended. Tragedy strikes daily, and Niall is right. I can't pick and choose which tragedy inspires me to crusade. Leave that to others with more fortitude and intellect than I.

I head upstairs. I don't need the tea to exhaust me anymore. Tomorrow, I will once more be Mary Wilcox, governess. And may Minnie Montclair rest in peace, whether she does so alive or passed on.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

I hope to spend the next day bonding with Lucas again—finally convincing myself that’s a better use of my time than trying to talk to Dr. Chalmers again—but after Veronica leaves for a brunch, Lucas tells me that he’s going out to take photographs. I offer to join him, but he explains that it would be better if he were alone.

“It’s...” He blushes. “Well, I need to be quiet, or the subjects will be scared off.”

“Ah. And you fear that I will alarm them, and they’ll fly off or scamper away.”

He nods, reddening even further. “I’ll show you the pictures after, though. I can make another collage even.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I say. “Though... perhaps we’ll keep the focus on living subjects this time.”

He laughs. “Well, the dead ones can’t really scamper away, can they?”

The lightness in his voice reminds me of the chill I felt upon first meeting him. I remember the girl in the wall again. I hadn’t thought about her since discovering the painting, but now I can recall the fear I experienced when he looked at me with his wide, flat eyes and warned me about her.

He turns to leave, and I grab his arm. He winces and looks at me curiously, and I realize I’ve grabbed him too hard. I release him and ask, “Um...” I look around to make sure no one is left in the house to hear me, then ask, “Have you had any more visits from the girl in the wall?”

He shakes his head. “No. Not since Mum got rid of the painting.” His eyes widen. “You haven’t started seeing her, have you?”

“No,” I reply quickly. “No, I just... I was just concerned for you, is all.”

“Oh. Well, no. I think she’s gone.”

“Yes,” I say, relaxing a little. “I think she is.”

“Well... I’ll see you later.”

He gives me another wary look before heading outside with his camera. I sigh and remind myself that I’ve decided not to be a detective anymore.

Of course you have, Annie’s voice taunts me. Easier that way, right? You don’t need to risk shaking up your comfortable life over some dead girl who won’t even be around to appreciate it.

“Well, what am I solving?” I say aloud. “How am I helping anyone? It’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Another pithy saying. You’re full of them, aren’t you?

“How can I help anyone?” I say. “Who will benefit from anything I do? I’m not a detective. I’m not a police officer. I’m in over my head here. I’ll only make things worse.”

Is that what you told yourself when you let me go?

“Well, damn it, it’s true!” I shout.

My voice echoes, and I stiffen. The family is gone, but Lucas might still be close enough to the house to hear my outburst.

I clam up and head outside to clear my head.

I am not a detective, I remind myself as I walk through the grounds with no particular aim. I am a governess and a teacher. I will help no one by meddling.

Still...

I helped the Ashford children. I found their father's murderer. I gave them peace.

But Minnie is gone. Oliver's story makes the most sense. She is somewhere safe, living a life of freedom for the first time.

Still...

Eliza lied to me. Why would she lie? To protect her brother, possibly, but Oliver was adamant he told no one else. Alistair might have lied, but would Eliza protect him just because he was a distant cousin? Rupert might have lied, but why would he not simply say he knew nothing? Why sic me on Alistair?

And why would anyone worry about what I think at all? None of this makes sense! I want to believe Oliver is telling the truth, but the lies... they're everywhere! I don't know what or whom to trust anymore. Even Lucas could be hiding something.

Lucas...

A horrible thought occurs to me. Lucas prowls the grounds frequently. Lucas knows hidden places. Lucas has an interest in dead things. Lucas was having nightmares about Minnie. Lucas, Veronica's favorite, tolerated by the elder two but not liked.

Lucas with his wide-eyed stare and his cameras and his introverted, repressed personality, the kind that in so many cases leads to outbursts of violence. Had he killed Minnie? It seems ridiculous, but of all of them, he's the one who could get away with it. He would know where to take her and where to bury her. He takes pictures of dead animals, and while it's not quite the same as torturing them, it's possible he would escalate to taking pictures of dead people.

And who better to start with than the disgraced former friend of his sister who cheated on his brother, possibly with the town doctor who is also his mother's former lover and his sister's boss? Someone who not only no one would miss but whose loss they may even appreciate?

It's a loose thread of reasoning but for the fact that if anyone here would know where to hide a body, Lucas would be the one. Other than Niall, he's the one who knows the grounds best. That makes Niall a suspect again too, but Niall's had two chances to kill me, and both times, he knew I suspected him.

I look up and realize I've made my way to the south woods again. I try to remember where Lucas showed me that hunting blind. Would he have buried Minnie somewhere out there or somewhere he's never mentioned?

I walk through the woods, not quite daring to call his name. If he knows I'm out here alone, would he decide to eliminate me as a threat just to be safe? Would he think that I suspect him?

I look for signs of a body. I have no idea what exactly I'm looking for, but...

I stop and sigh. I'm letting my mind run away with itself. Lucas is almost certainly not the killer, but if he is, I won't stumble onto a body by traipsing across six hundred acres of land. I'll need more information.

Bloody hell, have I decided to be a detective again?

I head back toward the house, taking a long route that will lead me through the east garden and then the central courtyard. Nothing in the orderly rows of flowers and shrubs suggests to me that a body could be buried underneath.

Gradually, my momentary zeal subsides. I remembered the girl in the wall and allowed that to start a cascade of assumptions that led to Lucas somehow being not only Minnie's killer, but my killer too. It's a little absurd, really.

I sigh and look up at the sky as though God himself might open the heavens and reveal the answer. But there's no answer to be found there.

I just need to calm myself. Focus on my job. These episodes will leave me in time.

I am nearly at the house when I see Lucas coming out of the garage. As he closes the garage door, I frown and head in his direction instead.

"Lucas?"

He cries out and flinches backward.

I meet his eyes. "What are you doing? Did you leave the grounds?"

His cheeks turn bright red. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell you I left."

I stare at him. "Where did you go?"

"I..." He looks around, then lowers his voice. "I had a suspicion about Eliza and Dr. Chalmers. I wanted to confirm it."

My eyes widen, and the color leaves my cheeks. “What? What suspicion?”

He narrows his eyes. “You promise you won’t tell?”

“I...” I hesitate. It would be easy enough to lie to him, but I’ve had enough of lies. “I can’t promise that.”

He frowns again. “Will you at least promise not to tell anyone you got the photographs from me?”

“Yes. Yes, that I can promise.”

“Good.”

He takes his camera bag off of his shoulder and opens one of the pockets. He pulls out several Polaroid photos. “I took these about a half hour ago.”

He shows them to me, and I gasp and flush beet-red. “Oh, goodness!”

“I know,” he says. “I shouldn’t be taking these pictures of my sister. Obviously I won’t keep them, but...” He shifts his feet and says, “It’s wrong, right? I mean... it’s bad for her.”

“It is,” I agree. “Very bad.”

The pictures prove that at least one of my suspicions is correct. There’s no mistaking now that Eliza Carlton and Dr. Rupert Chalmers are engaged in a romantic relationship.

And if Dr. Chalmers got Minnie pregnant, that would infuriate Eliza, wouldn’t it? Not to mention, Dr. Chalmers would be terrified of the repercussions of such news. Both

of them would have a motive to kill her. Both of them would want the pregnancy covered up.

And neither of them would want Oliver to suspect that it was Rupert who seduced his girlfriend. Neither of them would want Veronica and Sebastian to know the truth.

But they suspect. They must. Or else why would Veronica have had the painting removed? Why would Sebastian order that her name not be spoken? I had thought it was simply the sensitivity of the wealthy to scandal, but now I can see the very real chance of a scandal should the truth become known. Now I can understand why Sebastian would insist that there be no search when the chance existed that instead of clearing their name, it would prove that they were murderers.

“I’m not sure what to do with these,” he says. “I want her to stop before she gets hurt, but I don’t know if I should tell my parents or Eliza or what. What should I do?”

I have no idea what I’ll do, but I know exactly what Lucas should do. “Give the photographs to me,” I say. “Tell no one what you saw. Don’t take any more pictures of them. Let me think of a way to handle this so that you’re protected. In the worst case, I’ll simply be fired and sent away. I’m only a servant, after all.”

“But I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“You stand to be in far worse trouble,” I remind him. “Please. Let me handle this.”

He thinks a moment, then nods and hands me the photographs. I place them in my coat pocket, then put my hands on his shoulders. “Remember. Tell no one.”

“I’ll remember.” He smiles. “Thank you, Mary. Please be careful.”

I suppose I’m not done with lies just yet because I return his smile and say, “I will.”

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The rest of the day passes in a blur. With his burden removed, Lucas returns to his photography, this time walking the grounds and taking pictures for the collage he promised me. I drink enough tea to leave my hands shaking by dinner time and sift through everything I've learned about Minnie's disappearance.

Eliza and Dr. Chalmers are romantically involved. Eliza works as his secretary now. Before then, Minnie worked for him, and she and Dr. Chalmers were also romantically involved. Minnie became pregnant with his child, and he urged her to abort. She didn't, and he redacted the proof anyway. Either she walked safely into the future, as Oliver claims, or she was kidnapped and murdered.

It's possible she did leave, and Oliver spoke the truth. But if so, then why the lies? Why act as though she was taken with foul play by some unknown party? Why try to convince me that Alistair is the killer?

Rupert simply wanted the baby gone. He didn't want the responsibility. That could be motive enough to murder her, or it could be motive to let her leave and simply say nothing. With no record of the pregnancy, there would be no proof that he was the father. I am not familiar with the court system in Britain, so perhaps she could challenge him later and prove he was the parent. Perhaps that would be motive to murder her too.

But Eliza... I don't know. I know she lied, but she could be lying to protect Oliver. Or perhaps she simply didn't see Oliver leave with her the night she disappeared. She could be the culprit, an accomplice, or simply another foolish young woman taken in by a charismatic older man.

The key will be to determine if her relationship with Dr. Chalmers started before or after Minnie's disappearance. He could simply enjoy boffing his secretaries prior to every workday, or he could have taken to Eliza before Minnie, seeing her as a consolation prize in place of Veronica. Eliza does take after her somewhat in appearance, and it's not exactly rare knowledge that men prefer youth.

In any case, I still need more. I can't show these pictures to the police and tell them my hypothesis about Eliza and Dr. Chalmers.

So I decide to confront her. God knows it's the most dangerous thing I've ever done, but I can no longer dance around this. I won't ask about Minnie's disappearance. I'll present myself as an older woman trying to give her matronly advice without alerting her mother to her mistakes. Then I can mention Minnie and say that I suspect Dr. Chalmers was using her the same way.

It's not a foolproof plan, but maybe she'll reveal something. At the least, I can determine how long things have been going on between her and Dr. Chalmers.

That dinner is the longest of my life. I smile and laugh and joke with the others as though I'm part of the family. The suspense is nearly enough to kill me. I look at Eliza, and every sly smile, every flush in her cheeks reminds me of what she was doing earlier that day.

How could she be with him knowing what he did to Minnie? How, if she wasn't also complicit?

I'm jumping to conclusions. First things first.

After dinner, the family slowly disperses. I manage to learn that Eliza plans to take a walk in the west garden after dinner. It's a clear night and a full moon, and she wants to enjoy the fresh air.

“That sounds lovely!” I interject. “Could I join you?”

It’s horrifically impertinent of a servant to invite herself to such an outing, but Eliza smiles graciously. “Of course. A fellow stargazer?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I demur, “but I like the pretty lights.”

Oliver laughs at that. “You’ll have to tell us a story about pretty lights one of these days. I’m sure you’ve seen your fair share.”

“I don’t know exactly what you’re trying to say, Oliver,” Eliza replies, “but I’m sure it’s some sort of nasty joke, so shame on you.”

He grins at her. “Perhaps I’ll join you, and we can all tell stories about what goes on in the dark.”

I struggle to contain my fear. I need to talk to Eliza alone.

Lucas glances at me, and a knowing look flashes across his face. He turns to Oliver and says, “Actually, I was wondering if I could ask you some advice later.” He blushes and says, “You see... I spoke with Tilly over the phone earlier today. She’s visiting over the summer holiday, and she and I were thinking about... well...”

He glances at Veronica and reddens a little. Oliver gets the hint and winks at him. “Say no more, little brother. I shall turn you into the world’s most successful Lothario.”

“What’s that?” Veronica asks.

“Nothing, Mother,” Oliver replies. “Lucas here has just saved our sister from a thoroughly annoying evening.”

Eliza rolls her eyes. “And I am grateful to him, though disgusted by his reasons. Honestly, is that all boys ever think about?”

You’re one to talk , I don’t say aloud.

We finally head to the gardens. Eliza talks brightly about her day, gossiping about the patients they saw and confiding her relief that Alistair’s visit was brief. “I like him well enough, but he does linger sometimes.”

I wait until we’re out of view of the house, then turn to her. “Eliza, I’ve come across some disturbing news.”

Her smile fades. “Oh?” she says warily.

I meet her eyes. “I’ll just come out and say it. I know about you and Dr. Chalmers.”

She blanches but catches herself and laughs airily. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The two of you are involved romantically. I suspect you have been for quite some time.”

Her smile fades. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but my love life is none of your business.”

“No, it isn’t. But I’m taking it upon myself to warn you anyway. What you’re doing is very dangerous.”

She laughs, another sound like crystal shattering. “I don’t know what you’re on about, but you’ve clearly gone mad. I’ll see if Rupert can schedule you for an

evaluation.”

I pull a photograph from my coat pocket and show it to her. She blanches further and becomes very still. “Where did you get that?”

“I won’t tell you,” I reply.

“Was it Lucas? It was, wasn’t it? That little brat.”

“Eliza!” I say sternly, pulling her focus back to me. “What you’re doing is very dangerous.”

“Oh, come off it,” she snaps at me. “I’m a grown woman, and I can shag whoever the hell I want.” Her face changes, becoming something vicious. “You’re jealous, aren’t you? I could see it in your face when you met him. You want him, and you’re jealous that he prefers me.”

“Believe me, I have long since grown past caring whether any man wants me, and a man who would impregnate his nineteen-year-old secretary, then urge her to abort, is far from my type.”

She slaps me, hard enough that I gasp and take a trembling step backward. She takes a menacing step forward, and I say, “I’ll scream. If I have to, I’ll fight. Be careful what you’re about, Eliza.”

She stops and stares at me, also trembling, though for a different reason. She lowers her head and takes a deep breath, then lifts her gaze to me again and says in a controlled voice. “How did you know about that?”

I decide not to mention the medical report. “It’s not hard to figure out. Minnie was your friend, then you two had a falling out. She was Oliver’s girlfriend, and he broke

up with her. I assume the advice Alistair gave him was not to do anything foolish about it.”

“Alistair wouldn’t know his ass from his left hand if you labeled the pictures,” she says. “If he’s the one that told you—”

“He’s not,” I interrupt. “I’m an old woman, but not so old that I can’t tell when two people are attracted to each other. You say you saw attraction in my eyes? I saw lust in yours.”

She laughs and nods. “Wow. Well done. You...” She laughs again. “Yes, bloody well done, Mary. Well, here’s what you don’t know. It’s not lust, it’s love. I loved Rupert long before that cunt ever met him. She was a bloody girl when Rupert and I fell in love, and then she grows tits and all of a sudden the two of them are meant to be together? Ha.” She shakes her head almost violently. “No. No, no, no. He was mine, and she was in the way. ”

“Did you get her out of the way?”

She moves as though she’s going to slap me again, but glances toward the house and controls herself. “I didn’t kill her, you old fool. I told her to get rid of the baby. She had no right to carry his baby.”

“You didn’t think that was a decision for her and Rupert?”

“You... Oh my God!”

She presses her palms to her temples and paces back and forth. I watch her warily, prepared to fight, flee, or scream if necessary. After a moment, she pulls her hands from her temples, shaking them in front of her like claws.

“You don’t understand! Rupert didn’t want the baby either! He wanted me !”

“But he slept with her.”

“Yes! Because he’s a man, and if a man’s in the mood, a bloody cow could wave her arse in front of him, and he’d drop his pants. But she wasn’t the future for him. She wasn’t anything . She was... It was a bloody afternoon ! We both told her to get rid of the baby, and she wouldn’t listen!”

“So what did you do?”

“Nothing! I don’t know who fucking killed her! Do you think I’m a murderer? Is that it? Do you think he and I conspired to have her killed?”

Almost certainly. Out loud, I say, “No, dear. I just think that Rupert is using you. He’s telling you what you want to hear so he can keep using you, and as an older woman speaking to a younger one—”

“Oh, bugger off with your advice. I love him, and he loves me, and Minnie meant nothing but a bloody hole to fill while I happened to be out of town for graduation. She was never supposed to be pregnant. She was never supposed to be anything.”

“She was your friend. He used her too.”

“She was a selfish whore, and she used him. She knew I loved him. She was jealous of me. She always was. She just wanted to take what was mine, and she caught him in a moment of weakness.”

She stops pacing and looks at me. “Why am I talking to you like this? You’re just the servant. Who’s going to believe you?”

“I’m not trying to tell anyone anything. I’m only giving you—”

“Right. Advice.” She reaches forward and strips the photograph from my hand. She holds it in front of me tauntingly and says, “Here’s my advice.” She begins tearing the photograph and as she does, she says, “Fuck off out of my business. I knew it was a mistake inviting you to dinner, letting you put on airs, acting like you’re our sweet aunt or some shite. You’re a servant . You’re nothing. You’re here to make sure Lucas passes sixth form so he can fuck off to Oxford, and I don’t have to stare at his stupid face anymore. Do your job, like good little help, then bugger out of our lives.”

She storms away, stopping after a few paces to call back, “And tell Lucas if he takes any more pictures of me, I’ll break all of his cameras.”

She continues toward the house, and my heart pounds. I shouldn’t have shown her the photograph. Of course she would deduce that the only person here interested in photography would take that picture. Thank God she didn’t think to search me and find the others.

I need to warn Lucas. I don’t know what she’ll do to him. Perhaps nothing. After all, killing her mother’s favorite child is a far cry from killing a girl no one likes. And if I came forward and exposed them, she would immediately become a suspect. More likely, they’ll try to kill me.

I need to stop that before it happens, but how?

An idea comes to mind. It’s not a great one, but it’s the only way I can think of to possibly bring Minnie’s killers to justice.

I let that idea work its way through my brain that night. By the morning, I have the intricacies worked out. I’ll only have one chance to make it work, and it will mean sacrificing my employment and, unfortunately, exposing Lucas.

But if it does work, then Minnie's killers will be behind bars, and Lucas and I will be safe.

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When Lucas and Eliza come downstairs together for breakfast, I look at them, tension stiffening my shoulders. He smiles and says, “Good morning, everyone,” and I nearly collapse with relief. Eliza hasn’t confronted him.

Eliza looks at me, venom shooting from her eyes. But when she looks at Lucas, she only gives him an exasperated smile. She must have somehow decided that he wasn’t responsible for the photographs after all.

Veronica beams at Lucas. “Well, look who’s so cheery this morning!”

“I had a wonderful day yesterday,” he says. “I let Mary borrow one of my cameras, and we challenged ourselves to a picture-taking contest.”

He meets my eyes, and I realize what’s happened. Eliza must have asked if he was taking pictures by the office yesterday, and he crafted a story about loaning me a camera.

That’s all right. I can work with that.

“Oh?” Veronica says, smiling gratefully at me. “How wonderful! I must see the pictures!”

Lucas’s smile fades, but before Eliza can notice the change in his face, I say, “Oh. I’m afraid I completely forgot to remove the lens cap. It’s been so long since I’ve used a camera.”

“That’s all right,” Lucas says. “You can use it again today.”

Eliza looks shrewdly at me, and I say, “That sounds wonderful, Lucas! I’ve been meaning to take a picture of each different tree in the arboretum.”

Sebastian perks up at that. “Mary! You never mentioned you were an amateur botanist.”

“Well, I don’t know if I would say that,” I reply, “but I am truly impressed at your collection.”

“Well, perhaps the three of us can label the photographs when Mary is done,” Sebastian says. “I know a fair amount about those trees.”

Veronica rolls her eyes. “Oh no. You’ve gotten him started on trees again.”

“That sounds lovely!” I say. “I’m particularly interested in the baobab.”

Sebastian’s eyes fly open with joy. “I love that tree! It’s truly incredible how nature adapts to challenging conditions. Did you know their trunks can hold up to—”

“Not now, Father,” Eliza interrupts. “Let’s allow Mary something to occupy herself while she’s here.” She casts her venomous eyes at me. “Something to keep her out of trouble.”

I return a beatific smile. “Yes, I do have a tendency to get into trouble when I’m alone. Besides, I don’t want to rush my botany lesson. Aside from that, I have to take excellent photographs to have a hope of competing with Lucas here.”

“Quite right, quite right,” Sebastian says. “You’re in for a treat. I remember when I first visited Madagascar—”

“Dear, perhaps we should save it for later,” Veronica says. “The brunch will start in

less than an hour.”

Sebastian frowns. “Already? Then why are we eating breakfast?”

“Probably so Mother can have something to soak up the alcohol,” Oliver quips.

Veronica gives him a hard look, then says to Sebastian. “The meal won’t be served until at least noon, but if we show up too late, Georgia York will have taken the best table.”

“Can’t have that,” Oliver says dryly.

“Do you intend to be cheeky all day?” Veronica scolds him.

“We really should go, Mother,” Eliza says. “Let’s give Mary all the time she needs to take her pictures.” She turns to me. “I demand to see hundreds, no, thousands of images of all the wonderful plants Father has showered our estate with.”

I meet her eyes. “I assure you, you won’t be disappointed.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” she says with a bright, diamond-hard smile.

“Well, let’s go then,” Sebastian says. “We’ll leave our botanist to her work and bring your mother to her drink.”

Veronica slaps Sebastian’s shoulder playfully and says, “Enough out of you. Besides, I’ll only have one. Maybe two.”

“Or three,” Oliver says as the family files to the door. “Or four.”

Veronica slaps his shoulder too, a little less playfully, as evidenced by his “Ow!”

The door closes, and I wait until it's been five minutes since the sound of their car quiets. Then I take a deep breath and begin.

It's two miles to the village. The road there is mostly uphill, so I figure an hour for the walk and perhaps the same amount of time back due to fatigue. Dr. Chalmers is off today, so he won't be in the office, and Eliza is out with her family for at least the next three or four hours.

Still, I don't want to dally. Who knows if Eliza will find a chance to slip out and return to the estate to be rid of me?

Well, it's a risk I'll have to take. In any case, I'm still not convinced that Eliza was the one who actually killed Minnie.

Still, I'm sure she knew of the murder, and I'm reasonably sure she conspired with him. Today, I hope to gain the evidence I need to prove it.

As I walk to the village, my trepidation grows. I could be wasting my time. Eliza could already have warned Rupert of my suspicion, and he could have removed the medical report or destroyed it. He could be waiting along the road to waylay me and make me disappear as well. Despite appearances, I could once more be mistaken and simply exacerbating drama left behind by a very-much-alive girl who succeeded in her plan to leave and find a new life for herself free of her enemies.

I continue anyway. I've learned that I will always think of ways things can go wrong, or reasons why I should stop or let things go. I've also learned that for better or for worse, the part of me that's capable of listening to those warnings is gone. Annie's memory spurs me forward, and while it may be too late to do something for my sister, I can help this unfortunate girl as I helped Johnathan Ashford and his children.

I reach the village and find it bustling. There are dozens of people in the streets, and

in typical English country fashion, all of them smile and greet me.

I return their greetings and smiles, cursing their presence silently all the way. I need to get into the doctor's office unnoticed, and I can't be seen climbing through a window or entering through the front door. They almost certainly know everyone who works for him, assuming he even has employees other than Eliza.

I need to get inside somehow, though. I'll do my best to avoid being seen, but otherwise, I'll just have to hope that I can enact the rest of my plan before word gets back to Dr. Chalmers that I've been snooping.

I reach the office and start by memorizing the phone number listed on the sign. That won't help me for at least two days, but if I can't find a better number for him, I'll have no choice but to wait.

I reach the door and look around as casually as I can. No one's paying close attention to me, but if I fiddle for too long with the door, I'll be noticed for sure.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the bobby pin and letter opener I've taken with me, shielding them from view with my body. I have no idea how to do this, but it's the best shot I have.

I stick the pin in the lock and slide the letter opener in between the door and the wall. My heart pounds as the bobby pin sticks inside. I look around and see someone smile at me. I return the smile and the greeting and pray they don't pay attention long enough to wonder what on Earth I'm doing.

Breathe, Mary.

I do as I command myself and slow down, trying to feel the interior mechanism of the lock. I try to recall the instructions I read online for how to defeat locks with a bobby

pin, but I have no idea if what I read is of any use. After all, it's not like professional criminals would want to advertise their craft to the police, would they?

I hear a click and feel the bobby pin slide in deeper. Have I defeated part of the lock?

I jiggle it some more. There's another click, and the pin goes in even deeper. After a third click, it slides in all the way, and I'm able to move it easily.

That should be it, right? Why is the door not opening? I move the letter opener and find it stuck solid. Damn it, I'm so close! What am I missing?

In frustration, I try to turn the knob. It opens easily, and I squeak in surprise when the letter opener falls to the ground. I quickly pick it up, then look around to make sure no one's noticed. I don't see anyone staring at me. I'll have to hope that's a good sign.

I enter, red-faced. In my head, I was much more capable at this. I really am not cut out to be a detective.

Well, I'm inside the building anyway. Now, I can begin to accomplish my plan.

I take a deep breath, close the door, and walk to Dr. Chalmers's office.

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My heart pounds as I dig through the files in Dr. Chalmers's desk. If that file isn't there, then my task becomes far more difficult.

When I find it exactly where I left it the last time, I release an audible sigh of relief. Luck is finally on my side.

But I'm not done here. I need Dr. Chalmers's personal cell phone number, and I can't get it from a member of the family. The success of my plan depends on everyone being unaware of every aspect of it.

I look through the office, but of course, Dr. Chalmers doesn't need to be reminded of his own cell phone number. The medical reports list his business number under his information and no cell number is given.

I try to think who might have it written down. Eliza wouldn't because it would be in her own cell phone.

I walk into the lobby and look for any sign of it. It has to be somewhere. It's a small office, but even a small office would have a nurse, wouldn't it?

A nurse who would almost certainly have the number in her phone as well.

My earlier sense of triumph fades. I fear I didn't think this through.

Perhaps I can find it listed somewhere at the estate. It's not as though Dr. Chalmers is persona non grata at the estate. His number's bound to be listed somewhere in case of emergencies that don't require a nine-nine-nine call.

I'll finish checking the office first, and if I don't find it, I'll check the estate.

I look everywhere, but Chalmers's phone number isn't listed anywhere I can see. I calm my irritation and tell myself I can find the number at the estate.

I'm about to leave when something under his desk catches my eye. I walk closer, and when I see the glimmer again peeking out from underneath his desk, I bend low and retrieve the object. When I see what it is, I gasp.

This is it. This is the proof I need. Now, all that remains is to create a circumstance that will allow me to use this proof.

The walk back takes only forty minutes due to my nervous energy. My emotions swing on a pendulum between excitement and anxiety. It's not the end of the world if I have to wait to call him on Tuesday, but... well, it might be. The more time Eliza has to warn him, the more time he has to prepare an alibi or a defense, and the less likely my plan is to succeed.

And the more time they have to simply remove me as a threat as well. No, it has to be tonight. This is the best chance I have of catching the two of them before they manage to elude justice once more.

I reach the estate and head straight to Sebastian and Veronica's room. I'm sure Veronica has his number saved, but maybe Sebastian will have it written somewhere, or perhaps I'll find some sort of correspondence with the number included.

I realize I'm grasping at straws, but I'm so close ! I can practically see the finish line. Justice for Minnie is within my reach. I can't stop now.

The more I search and don't find what I need, the more my heart pounds. Despair begins to creep into the edges of my psyche, and I have to fight to keep from

exclaiming in frustration.

Damn it, it has to be here somewhere! Do people not write down numbers anymore? Am I the only old-fashioned person remaining who finds it useful to jot important information down?

“What are you doing?”

I stand up straight and come face to face with Hazel. She stares at me in shock, a duster in her hand. She wears a slightly soiled apron, and I realize that she’s taking advantage of the family’s absence to get some cleaning done. Damn it, the woman is a ghost!

No, it’s my fault for forgetting about her. I was so focused on what I was doing that I didn’t think about her.

“Mary?” she asks.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “you startled me.”

Her eyes narrow. “What are you doing?”

I feel heat climb my cheeks. God, what can I say? How can I defend myself?

Then I remember that I have a prescription from Dr. Chalmers. That’s my excuse!

“I was looking for Dr. Chalmers’s cell phone number,” I say. “I... this is embarrassing, but the pills he prescribed me for sleep aren’t working, and... well, I’m exhausted.” I chuckle nervously and say, “I was just hoping he could maybe send a different prescription over today. I know it’s presumptuous of me, but I’m going positively daffy without sleep.”

She keeps a wary expression on me and says, “The pharmacy’s closed on Sundays, and I doubt it will reopen just for you. But if you want his cell phone, it should be in the notebook next to the phone under emergency numbers. The phone’s in the drawing room.”

“Right.” I give another nervous laugh. God, I am a horrible liar. “I should have thought to check there.”

She nods, but I can see the tension in her shoulders relax. She’s buying it, thank God. “Well, you do need sleep. I heard you up again last night. It’s not healthy to go without for too long. If you don’t get a hold of him, let me know. I’ll make you some chamomile with valerian root. I think I still have some left over for my own insomnia.”

“Oh, that’s dear of you, Hazel. Thank you.”

She nods again. “Right. Well, off you go. It won’t do to have the missus find out you were in her room. And—not to suggest you would do something like this—but she is aware of exactly where everything is in here, so if anything turns up missing, that wouldn’t bode well for you.”

“Of course,” I say, cheeks burning. “She won’t have to worry about that.”

“Right. Well...”

“Right. Off I go.”

I rush downstairs, heart pounding. My face flames brighter than the late morning sun. Of course, his phone number would be next to the bloody phone! Leave it to me to complicate something absurdly simple.

I reach the phone and, as Hazel promised, the number is on the third page of the notebook under the heading “Emergency Numbers.” I shake my head and have a good laugh at myself. Looking for a phone number everywhere but by the bloody phone.

Well, I have it now. It’s time to put my plan in motion.

I take a deep breath, then pick up the phone.

I reach the house just before the family does. I’m dirty and sore and irritable, and I have no idea if any of the pictures I’ve taken have come out at all, but I’ve managed somehow to complete all of my tasks for the day.

Sebastian greets me with a warm smile. “Mary! You look like you’ve had quite a refreshing safari!”

“Dear, please,” Veronica chides, blushing.

“What? Why must that mean something negative? All good naturalists look as though they’ve been in the sun.”

“Sebastian!” Veronica turns to me. “I’m so sorry, Mary. Despite the family’s insistence that I’m the drunk, it seems my husband is more soused than I am.”

“Oh, I am not,” he insists. “I had one of those horrible drinks, and then I couldn’t bear to drink another. What on Earth were they called anyway?”

“Mimosas,” Eliza says. She eyes me curiously. “So you’ve taken your pictures of trees?”

I smile at her. “Oh yes. Trees, flowers, grasses, and a few species that I believe were bamboo but could have been ferns. I’ll trust in your judgment to tell me, Sebastian.”

“Bamboos for sure,” he says. “Anyway, let’s look at them.”

“Of course! Lucas, would you mind if we borrowed your computer? I’m afraid I’m not sure how to download images off of the memory card.”

“Sure,” he says, eyeing me suspiciously.

I return an innocent smile and say, “Lead the way, then.”

“Yes!” Sebastian exclaims. “And I want to see yours as well, son. What did you photograph anyway?”

“Oh, um... a few different animals and insects around the estate.”

“Oh, jolly good!” Sebastian cries out. “Did you see the family of foxes by the stream?”

“Not recently, but I have a photo from last year.”

“Oh, pity. I was hoping to see how the kits have grown.”

“I found a nest of starlings, though.”

“Hmm. Never been particularly fond of birds.” He smiles and claps Lucas on the shoulder. “Perhaps today I shall be made a believer!”

I turn to the rest of the family. “Would you all care to join us?”

Oliver cocks his head and thinks a moment, then shrugs. “Very well. It’s better than lounging around all day.”

“I’ll join you too,” Veronica says. “I can’t wait to see Lucas’s work!”

“I think I’ll take a nap,” Eliza says. “I promised a friend I would meet them tonight, so I need to rest up.”

“Oh?” I ask. “You’re going out tonight?”

Her eyes narrow. “Why is that any of your business?”

“Oh, it’s not,” I say quickly. “I apologize. It’s just... I... I hoped to make my cheesecake for dessert as a thank you to all of you for welcoming me to your home.”

“Ooh, cheesecake!” Veronica cries out. “Eliza’s favorite!”

“She can save some for me,” Eliza says irritably. “I’ll be back before midnight. I’m only going out for dinner.”

“Well, it’s clear that you do need a nap,” Veronica chides. “There’s no need to be rude.”

Eliza rolls her eyes. “Very well. I’m off then. Sorry to offend the help.”

“Eliza!”

Eliza sticks her middle finger out at her mother as she ascends the stairs. Veronica turns to me, face burning. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

“It’s no trouble, ma’am. I understand how trying it is to go without sleep.”

“Still... there’s no cause for that.” She takes a breath and smiles at me. “Well, anyway, let’s go see Lucas’s pictures.”

“And Mary’s too!” Sebastian exclaims.

He’s too excited to talk about trees to care much about Eliza’s attitude or my sudden revelation of baking skills. I hope that my burning cheeks communicate embarrassment at the spat with Eliza and not at my woeful skill at lying.

We go up to the room, and Lucas helps me download the pictures. I glance at the clock. Five minutes until two o’clock. I take a deep breath and release it slowly. I’ll know soon if my ruse has worked.

The first picture in the queue is of the baobab tree. Sebastian crows with delight and immediately launches into a soliloquy about the wonderful water-retention qualities of the tree, the habitats it provides for lemurs and birds, the critical shade it delivers to other wildlife, and other facts numerous enough to make any naturalist approve.

Oliver listens to his father’s excitement with amusement. Veronica looks bored. Lucas listens raptly, and I feel a pang of guilt for what’s about to happen. This could be the most quality time he’s spent with Sebastian in years. Mr. Carlton might not be his father biologically, but he’s the only father Lucas has ever known, and I hate to create a circumstance where the two can become close only to use it as a distraction to confront Minnie’s murderers.

As the minutes slowly count down, I feel another rush of anxiety. I begin to feel as though my plan is too clumsy and foolish to work. Too many things need to go right, and very few can go wrong. Otherwise, I’ll only be presenting myself as a madwoman and creating drama without accomplishing anything to make the drama worth it.

But I had to try. I had to do something.

The doorbell rings, and I steel myself. Too late to turn back now.

Sebastian frowns. “Who’s that?”

“Eliza’s friends, perhaps?” Veronica says.

“Oh, yes. Anyway... where was I?”

The doorbell rings again, and Sebastian scowls. “Could you answer that, Veronica?”

She rolls her eyes but smiles affectionately and pats his shoulder. “Of course, dear.”

“I’ll go with you,” I say. “I need to stretch my legs. Lucas, why don’t you show your father some of your pictures until we return?”

“Oh yes!” Sebastian says. “Show me the starlings. Those are the white birds with the black wings, right?”

“No, they’re the black birds that shimmer blue and green in the sunlight.”

“Ah yes! They look like small peacocks, right?”

“Well... the color, I suppose.”

I leave the two of them grinning and follow Veronica downstairs. The doorbell rings a third time, and she rolls her eyes and calls out, “Yes, yes! I’m coming.” She looks at me and says in a quieter voice, “Young people have no patience.”

I smile at her, but my heart pounds too much for me to manage a reply.

She reaches the door and opens it. Rupert Chalmers rushes in, wraps his arms around her, and kisses her deeply.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:39 pm

Veronica stiffens and pushes him away, then slaps him full on the face. “Rupert! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He blinks and lifts a hand to his face. “What? I... but you told me that you loved me. You said that you wanted me to come here so you and I could plan to run away together.”

“What?” she shrieks. “Rupert, what on Earth are you talking about? Have you gone utterly mad? How dare you come to my house?”

He takes a step back. His lips begin to tremble, though I believe it’s more from shock than because he’s actually about to weep. “But... you texted me. You said...”

His voice trails off, and he lifts his eyes to me, seeming to see me for the first time. “You...?” he asks, his brow furrowed in confusion. “But...”

Footsteps interrupt us, and Sebastian calls, “Veronica? Is everything all right?”

He descends the stairs, followed closely by his sons. When he sees Dr. Chalmers, his brow furrows. “Rupert! What a pleasant surprise. What are you doing here?”

“I... I...” He looks around at us, his face white as a sheet.

“He was just leaving,” Veronica says. “He’s... he was here to see Eliza, but he’ll handle whatever the issue is at the office, won’t you, Rupert?”

“Nonsense,” Sebastian says. “The man came all this way, and we won’t turn him out.

At the least, he must stay for tea. Eliza! Eliza, Dr. Chalmers is here to talk to you!”

“No!” he says quickly, putting his hands in front of him in a comical display of fear.

“No, I...” He turns to Veronica. “You said you’d be alone.”

“Rupert!” Veronica hisses. “Stop this! You’re mad!”

“But...” He looks at me, and I smile at him. His eyes widen, and color begins to fill his cheeks. “I see,” he says, regaining his composure. “It appears that I’ve been had.”

“Had?” Sebastian says. His friendly smile is gone, replaced with a dark scowl.

“Rupert, what the devil are you on about? What do you mean you’re here to meet my wife alone?”

“I apologize,” he says, looking up at the stairs. “I... I was mistaken. I will handle the, uh, the work thing with Eliza later.”

He turns to the door, but Sebastian strides forward. “Wait a damned minute. You told Veronica that she said she’d be alone. What is the meaning of that?”

Veronica steps in between them, trying to hold Sebastian back. “Darling, please!”

“Don’t darling me!” Sebastian snaps. “What’s going on here?”

“Father!” Eliza shrieks. She rushes down the stairs. “Don’t hurt him! Please!”

Dr. Chalmers blanches again and cries, “Don’t come down, Eliza! It’s a trick!”

She stops at the foot of the stairs and turns even paler than he does. “What? A... what?” She looks at me, and I smile and say, “I believe I can explain.”

“Well, someone had better explain,” Sebastian thunders. “I come downstairs to hear a man I consider a friend tell me he’s here to meet my wife alone, and my wife lies to me and says it’s over something to do with you, Eliza. Now he’s telling you that it’s a trick? What sort of trick? Why are you here, Doctor? Lie to me at your own peril.”

“You’re here to meet my mother?” Eliza says in a thready voice, her eyes locked on Dr. Chalmers.

Oliver and Lucas remain at the top of the stairs, watching the whole situation. Oliver is stunned. Lucas is less surprised but has a wary look on his face, as though he’s ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Considering the look on Eliza’s face, he’s right to be wary.

“I apologize for the misunderstanding,” Dr. Chalmers says quickly. “Eliza, I’ll see you at work. Veronica, I’m sorry. Sebastian, there’s nothing to worry about, Mary—”

“What’s she got to do with this?” Sebastian thunders, taking a menacing step closer. “Why are you here to meet my wife alone?”

Eliza gasps. “You said you were done with her. You said I was the only one—”

Veronica releases a cry, and her hand comes to her mouth.

“No,” Rupert says. “Eliza, it’s not what it looks like. It—”

“What?” Sebastian yells. “Are you sleeping with my daughter?”

Rupert begins to tremble. “N—no. This isn’t what it—”

“You bastard !” Eliza shouts.

I decide it's time I step in. "I can explain."

All eyes turn to me. Rupert's are filled with fear, Eliza's with venom, Veronica's and Sebastian's with confusion.

I take a breath and say, "I believe that Rupert Chalmers is the murderer of Minerva Montclair. And... I'm sorry to say, but I believe Eliza helped to cover it up."

Veronica releases a soft gasp. Sebastian stares blankly at me. Eliza begins to shake visibly, the color drained completely from her face.

Rupert completely falls apart. "What? That... how did you... that's..." He screws his face up in a comical approximation of anger. "That's completely preposterous!"

"It isn't," I reply. "I have proof that Eliza and Dr. Chalmers are in a romantic relationship, and I have proof that they covered up Minnie's pregnancy and then murdered her because they learned that Dr. Chalmers is the father."

Veronica shrieks and turns to Dr. Chalmers in horror. Rupert begins to splutter again. Oliver stiffens in horror and looks at Eliza. Eliza looks at me, and if she could, I know she would strike me dead on the spot.

Sebastian continues to stare blankly. "What's this now?" he asks in a slightly distracted voice.

I reach into my coat pocket and pull out the photographs. Eliza shrieks and starts toward me, but I give her a warning glance and say, "I've sent copies of all of this to the police, so don't think you can tear these from my hands and escape justice." That's a complete lie, of course, but it stops her in her tracks.

"The police?" Veronica says.

I show her the photographs. She gasps and turns to Rupert, who appears about to faint. “You... Oh, you miserable bastard ! You come here to declare your love to me, meanwhile you’re shagging my daughter every morning before work.”

Eliza cries out and turns to Rupert, lips trembling. “What?”

“That’s right, Eliza,” Veronica says, anger replacing her shock. “Your lover just walked in and kissed me and said I texted him to run away together.”

Tears begin to fall from Eliza’s face. “Rupert?”

“That... I...” He looks at me and releases a strained laugh. “What? You texted me, right? That wasn’t Veronica at all.”

“No,” I admit. “I texted you from my phone pretending to be Veronica.”

“You what ?” Veronica exclaims, looking at me in shock.

“I told him that you texted from my phone so no one would suspect. I told him you still loved him, and if he came here at two o’clock, the two of you would be alone and you could plan your escape.”

“Why on Earth would you do that?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I truly am. I just needed him over here. Sebastian, for what it’s worth, I don’t believe your wife had an affair with him, at least not since before you married.” I don’t know that for sure, but I do know that their dalliances ended a long time ago, and Veronica is regrettably caught in the crossfire with this.

But not too regrettably. She turned a blind eye to Minnie’s disappearance like the rest. I don’t feel too much sympathy for her.

“This is outrageous,” Rupert says. “I won’t stay for—”

“You will stay right where you are, or I’ll tie you to the goddamned stairs,” Sebastian thunders.

Rupert pales and lowers a trembling hand from the door. Sebastian turns to me and says, “Mary, you had better be able to prove what you’re saying. The evidence of my daughter’s foolishness is clear, but you had better be able to show that they’re responsible for Minnie’s death, or I will absolutely ruin your life.”

I know that’s not an idle threat, and I can’t suppress the shiver that runs through me. I hand him the medical report and say, “This is the office visit report where Dr. Chalmers discovered Minnie was pregnant with his child.”

Rupert stiffens, and Veronica lifts her hand to her mouth. “Oh God. Oh God !”

“Is that true, Eliza?” Oliver asks. “Did you know about this?”

Eliza doesn’t answer him. She continues to stare at Rupert, tears streaming down her face. “You came here for my mother ?”

“This report is completely whited out,” Sebastian says. “It only has her name on it and a prescription for vitamins. Some advice to avoid alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco.”

“Yes,” Rupert says quickly. “What you have there is a checkup report. I make it a practice to white out personal information.”

“So all of your files will look like that when the police raid your clinic?” I challenge.

He blanches. “You have no right to do that.”

“The call’s already been made,” I say.

Veronica snatches the paper from Sebastian’s hand and reads it. Her hands begin to tremble, and tears stream down her face. She looks at Rupert and says softly, “Oh, you bastard. How could you? She was only a child.”

“It’s a blasted checkup !” he says, trying to sound angry and succeeding in sounding frightened.

“But the date, Rupert. It was the same day she told us she was pregnant.”

“Why did you tell her to pick up vitamins?” Eliza says. “You said you told her to get rid of the baby.”

The whole family gasps at that statement. Rupert’s jaw goes slack. “Eliza... God...”

“You asshole!” Oliver cries.

He rushes down the stairs toward Rupert, murder in his eyes. Lucas cries out and runs after his brother, tackling him at the foot of the stairs. “Oliver!” he cries out. “Stop!”

“I didn’t kill her!” Rupert says, backing to the door. “I saw her leave with your cousin Alistair!”

“Liar!” Oliver shouts.

Eliza blinks and seems to realize where she is. “It’s true,” she says. “I haven’t wanted to believe it, but I lied when I said she left the house alone. She actually left with Alistair. He offered to walk her home. I didn’t think anything of it, but I saw her go with him.”

Oliver stops struggling with Lucas and looks at Eliza. I take a deep breath and release it slowly. The plan has worked. The killers have sabotaged themselves. “Eliza?” Oliver whispers. “You?”

“I’m sorry, Oliver,” Eliza says. “I know how much you loved Alistair.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “No, not him. You. You killed her.”

She pales again. “Don’t be ridiculous. I saw her leave with him. You were up in your room because you two had just fought, and—”

“No. I wasn’t. I met her the day after you two fought, and I went with her to the bar. I left her waiting for a cab.”

Eliza and Rupert both turn corpse-gray. “I...” Eliza stammers. “I... guess I saw her after.”

“Alistair was gone,” Oliver said. “He left the day before. She was alive when I left her, and I watched Alistair get on a fucking plane. But I remember you were mad at her because of the baby. I thought you were mad for me, but it wasn’t about me at all. You were mad because it was his baby, and you were jealous.”

“That’s not true,” she says. “She...” She looks at Rupert. “Damn it, she didn’t deserve to have his baby.”

“Oh, Eliza,” Veronica says, her voice thready. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Eliza shrieks. “I didn’t kill her?”

“Then why lie?” Oliver asks. “Why tell everyone you saw Alistair with her? And why wait to say that until now?”

“Because I didn’t think I...” She catches herself and then looks at me. Her face screws up in hate. “She’s lying. That’s what she does. She just stuck her fat meddling bitch nose into my life, and...” She looks at Rupert and anguish fills her eyes. “My mother ? After everything ? I did everything for you. So we could have our life.”

“Why?” Oliver says. “Why, Eliza? I loved her.”

“Oh, she was a stupid, slutty, selfish cunt, Oliver. She thought she was going to have Rupert’s baby and parade around like a proper lady , and everyone would look at how pretty she was. She didn’t deserve it. Damn it, she didn’t fucking deserve it! I just wanted her out of the way ! I just wanted her to give back what was mine !”

“Eliza,” Rupert warns. “Enough.”

“Oh, shut up!” she shouts. “You cad! My mother ? Really? After you promised to protect me!”

“Stop it!” Rupert yells.

“Enough!” Sebastian shouts.

Everyone falls silent. Sebastian takes a deep breath and asks, “Rupert, is there any more evidence that could link Eliza to Minerva’s murder?”

“Sir. I swear to you—”

“I have evidence,” I interrupt.

I pull the necklace I found in Rupert’s office from my other pocket. “The inscription on the pendant reads M.M & R.C. A gift from you, I presume, Dr. Chalmers?”

Rupert doesn't answer, but he is shaking visibly now.

Sebastian stares coldly at me for a moment, then turns again to Rupert. "Could the police find her if they looked?"

Rupert hesitates a moment, then deflates. "No. We made sure to dispose of the body."

"Oh God," Veronica cries, burying her face in her hands and bursting into tears.

"You selfish bitch," Oliver spits at Eliza.

"Enough!" Sebastian shouts again. He takes the report and shreds it. "Rupert, you are going to retire to America. You will never be heard from again. Eliza, I will find you work with your mother's family in South Africa."

"Minnie's family lives there too," Veronica reminds him.

"And Eliza will never so much as look in their damned direction," Sebastian says. "She's had a falling out with Minnie, and her guilt is too great for her to overcome. Ever. Oliver, Eliza is your sister, and you will put this family first. You will ruin my life, your mother's, your brother's, and your own if you say a single word. The same goes for you, Lucas. Mary, we will pay you a bonus of one million pounds. You will hand me that necklace, and you will never breathe a word of this outside of this room. Lucas, you're going back to boarding school, and Mary, you'll be out of the country by this evening. I'll arrange a flight. If this ever gets to the authorities, I will make sure that you suffer for it. I will not have this family's name ruined by scandal."

"I'm sorry, Sebastian," I say. "I'm afraid word already has gotten to the authorities." I raise my voice and call, "Inspector! I believe we're ready for you."

The door to the parlor opens, and four uniformed police officers walk into the room.

Sebastian takes a look at their grim faces and deflates. For the first time since I've seen him, he looks truly old.

The chief inspector announces in a coldly professional tone, "Eliza Carlton, Rupert Chalmers, you two are under arrest for the murder of Minerva Montclair."

Veronica bursts into tears. Oliver stares hatefully at his sister as she's led away. Lucas walks to his mother's side and puts his arm around her. I feel a touch of sadness for the pain I've caused them.

But mostly I feel joy. Against all odds, I've found justice for a young, naive but innocent girl whose future was stolen from her by people who valued their own desires above her right to life.

I've accomplished my purpose here.

“Come to wish me a fond farewell?”

I turn toward the voice to see Niall’s lopsided grin. I return the smile and say, “To be honest, I was only taking one last stroll along the grounds. I am glad to see you, though. I owe you an apology.”

“No apology necessary,” he says. “I realize I’m a suspicious-looking sort. I could change myself to look and act more proper, but I’m too old and curmudgeonly to bother.”

“It grows ever harder to change oneself as we grow older, doesn’t it?” I agree.

“That it does. I’m glad I caught you before you left, though. I have something for you.”

He steps closer and hands me a business card. I turn it over and read, Sean O’Connell, Private Investigator.

“He’s a good man,” Niall says. “I hired him a few years back when an employee of mine disappeared with a million quid from the company. He found the bloke in three weeks. He and I became friends. I don’t know if you’ll stay in England, but he travels all over the world, so if you need him, he’ll come. Don’t worry about the expense either. I told him to bill me for whatever it costs to help you.”

“You told him about me?”

“I did. I don’t know if you’ll ever have need of him, but if you find yourself drawn to

another mystery and can't ignore it, it might be safer to use a professional than to stick your own neck out."

I have no intention of getting involved in any of my future employers' business, but then, I never intended to get involved with the Carltons either. I can't say that I'll never find myself entangled in a mystery again.

And then I think of Annie. Surely, after twenty-eight years, there's nothing a private investigator could do to find answers to her disappearance, but perhaps...

"Thank you, Niall. That's very kind of you."

He shrugs. "Least I can do. You're the only person who wouldn't give up on that poor girl. Even I stopped my ears and covered my eyes. But you didn't. Thank you for that."

I smile at him. Then I surprise him by stepping forward and embracing him. He wraps his arms awkwardly around me, and when I release him, I see him blushing furiously. It's silly of me, I know, but I'm flattered to know that at my age, I can still have that effect on a man. "I wish you all the best, Niall."

He shuffles his feet. "You too, Mary."

I take his hands in mine and squeeze them gently, then head back toward the house.

I walk to the porch, my luggage in my hand. Oliver and Lucas stand there waiting for me. Oliver has his hand on his younger brother's shoulder, and Lucas has his arm around Oliver's waist. They smile at me, and I feel tears well in my eyes as I embrace them.

“You will come visit, won’t you?” Lucas asks.

I smile at him. “I may need to visit you at school rather than home, but I promise I’ll see you again.”

Veronica is in the house. She managed to avoid arrest since she didn’t say anything that can be proven to be conspiracy to conceal evidence of a crime, but she’s furious with me for destroying her family. She hasn’t spoken to me since everything happened yesterday. I know she realizes I’ve done nothing wrong, but I made it impossible for her to ignore what she already knew. For some people, that’s worse.

“Alistair says he’ll have a place for us,” Oliver offers. “He wants to move me out to help him when I finish university. I think I will.”

“Do you think he’ll succeed?” I ask him.

“Honestly? No. Not without me. But he’s a good person in spite of his faults, and in this family, that’s rare. So I’ll help him. And you and Lucas can come visit us in Japan.”

I smile at him. “I would love that. Thank you.” I turn to Lucas. “Lucas, I’m truly sorry I couldn’t stay to tutor you. You’re a bright and exceptionally gifted young man. I hope you won’t forget that.”

“I won’t.” He rushes into my arms and embraces me. “You’re a good person. I’m glad I got to know you.”

I hold him tightly. “Thank you. I’m glad I got to know you.”

I hear the noise of a car engine and release Lucas. “That’s my taxi approaching, I believe.”

The next moment, it starts up the drive, confirming that statement. I smile at the two boys and offer one piece of parting wisdom.

“None of what happened here is your fault. None of it. It’s not your mother’s fault either, but she may be harder to convince. There will be hard days ahead, but you’ll all survive them. Stay strong and keep your heads held high. But never believe that any of you caused this in any way. That might seem obvious to you now. There will be times when it won’t seem so obvious. Don’t let your grief convince you of guilt.”

They both nod seriously. “We won’t,” Oliver says. “Will we, Lucas?”

Lucas shakes his head, but in truth, it’s Oliver I’m more worried about. He left Minnie alone to wait for her cab, and it would be all too easy for him to convince himself that that makes him culpable in her death. I understand that feeling all too well.

The taxi pulls to a stop, and I give the boys a final embrace, then take a seat. I watch them as the taxi pulls away from the Carlton estate. As the perfectly manicured grounds recede behind me, I take a deep breath and steel myself for the future.

I’ve found justice for Minnie, but my task is not yet complete. There’s another young girl who vanished nearly thirty years ago whose blood cries to me from the ground.

I reach into my pocket and run my fingers lightly over the business card Niall gave me. I’ll find you, Annie, I promise. I’ll bring justice to your memory too. I swear it.