



# One Last Whisper (The Governess #6)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Mary Wilcox, the seasoned governess with a knack for stepping into mystery, arrives at an imposing manor house only to find its walls shrouded in silence and suspicion.

The lords new young bride is a spectral figure adrift in her own home, her isolation mounting as unnerving cries cut through the night.

When a servant vanishes without a trace, the manors dark history resurfaces—tales of a relentless phantom now seemingly entwined with chilling reality.

Amidst this eerie backdrop, Marys own past haunts her—dreams merge with the present, and Anne’s voice seems to beckon from beyond.

Torn between phantoms and flesh, Mary must unravel a tapestry of deception before the truth becomes as unreachable as the whispers in the walls.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

In Japanese mythology, there is a creature called a jibakurei . The jibakurei , or Earth-bound spirit, is tied to a particular place or event and is unable to proceed to the afterlife. This is usually due to the death being the result of a curse or a violent or otherwise untimely death. Rather than proceed into the next life, they are doomed to repeat the events of their death over and over again, their soul forever tethered to the world.

I am not Japanese, and while I admire Japanese culture, I am not an avid student of their mythology or their literature. So, why I choose this particular haunted-house myth to dwell on as I wander through my parents' home in Boston is a mystery to me. Perhaps it's because if there is any place on Earth that might contain a jibakureii, it would be this house.

My name is Mary Wilcox. I am fifty-two years old, and a governess for the past two of those years after a long and fulfilling career as a schoolteacher before. I am also the last surviving member of my family. My father died in this house when I was thirty-three when an aneurysm burst in his brain. My mother died in this house seven years ago after a long and debilitating illness that robbed her of everything else before it took her life.

My sister, Anne Wilcox, didn't die in this house. She escaped, fleeing west just over thirty years ago and enjoying a brief respite on the California coast before moving on to parts unknown. She may still be alive, but she has chosen to live that life without interference from me. I wish her well.

Perhaps the lack of spirits here can be attributed to my choice to release myself from the obligation of finding Annie and learning once and for all what happened to her all

of those years ago. After all, the psychologist in me would suggest that a haunting is nothing more than a manifestation of one's own guilt and remorse. If one isn't guilty or remorseful, then one will not be haunted.

Still, I am shocked to find my childhood home so... empty.

"Not bad," my companion says.

I turn to him and raise an eyebrow. Before I reply, I take a moment to admire him. Sean O'Connell is the most unlikely and most welcome surprise to occur in my life since losing Annie. He is tall, strong and handsome in a rugged way, with a powerful jaw, hooded eyes and broad shoulders that call to mind the heroes of the romance novels I read when I was younger. It's far too soon to say that I'm in love with him, but I'm certainly heading in that direction.

He notices my slight smile and misunderstands its meaning. "What? It's not bad. A few solid days of cleaning, and we'll have it spruced right up. Might need an electrician to come out and retune a few things, but I'll make sure they do a good job."

"You will, will you?"

"Of course. Everyone has secrets, and I'm quite adept at finding them. Once I impress upon our electrician friend that nothing is sacred, they will be motivated to do a very thorough and very efficient job."

"Are all electricians brigands then?"

"Sure they are," he replied, "As are all professionals. They prey on those who don't know." He grins at me. "So I make sure to know."

I laugh and roll my eyes. “Well, I’m glad to have you protecting me, Sir Sean.”

I look around the empty and silent parlor, and my smile fades. I could almost wish for a haunting, if only to remind me that this place is more than just a building.

Once more, Sean misunderstands the reason for my pensive look. He’s a sweet man, but like most men, he’s rather thick. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”

I don’t feel like educating him today. “Yes, it has. Seven years since I was last here.”

“Only seven?”

“Only seven.”

“Oh, that’s right. You cared for your mother in her final days.”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t told me much about her.”

My lips thin a little. “I haven’t.”

An awkward silence hangs in the air for a moment. Sean breaks it by saying, “Right. Well, I’ll bring the bags in. Will you be staying here tonight, or will you be at the hotel?”

I smile slightly. “Is that your way of asking me on a date?”

“Sure. We can call it a date if you want.”

I chuckle and kiss him lightly on the cheek. “I’ll stay here.”

He gives me the dazzling grin that first captivated me nine months prior. Has it only been nine months that we've known each other.

"We'll start with the bedroom, then."

"We'll start with dinner," I counter. "I'm famished."

"A lady who knows her worth. Very well. I'll order from the nice takeout place."

I roll my eyes and head off to explore the house while Sean orders the food. My footsteps carry me up the twisting staircase that led to the second floor of our home and beyond that to the attic.

I will not visit the attic today. My return has thus far been free of hauntings, but I don't wish to tempt fate too much.

Instead, I head to Annie's room. I suppose it's no surprise I am drawn to her memory more than I am drawn to the memory of my own childhood.

Annie is a year and a half younger than me, but I always see her as a child and myself as the mature one who must take care of her. That attitude led to some tension between us as we grew older, but I couldn't help myself. Heaven knows our mother cared little for Annie, and our father was barely present later in our lives.

I push those memories away as I look through Annie's things. Dust and mold have rotted the covers and obscured the furniture, but the picture on her night table is the same as it was when she was eleven years old. I stare at that photograph for what seems like hours before Sean calls me down for dinner.

She is so beautiful and so brave, my Annie. I truly do hope she found happiness.

But her ghost, like all the rest, remains silent, and I am able to enjoy an evening with my beau before I fly to England in the morning for my next job.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

Northumberland County is the northernmost of England's ceremonial counties with weather to match. Although I am an English native, I have lived in the United States since I was eleven years old, with the exception of brief tenures as a governess for two English families and one American expatriate family in Switzerland.

So even though I dress warmly with a coat and scarf, I am not prepared for the blast of icy wind that pierces right through my shawl as though it wasn't even there. I shiver, and the cab driver smiles at me with crooked teeth and opines, "You'll get used to it. Cold enough to freeze the fires of hell and leave enough for the icebox, but it's a beautiful place in spite of that."

I look around at the pale grass to my left and the rocky cliffs to my right. The sky is a blue pale enough that it could properly be called gray, and I don't see a single tree in sight. I suppose it does have an austere beauty, and for politeness' sake, I choose to focus on that. "It is striking."

The cab driver nods, also for politeness' sake, and offers to carry my bags up the porch steps. I am grateful for this because there are two dozen steps, all of stone and all large enough to force me to place my feet carefully as I climb.

Blackwood Manor is as beautiful and as austere as the landscape. The manor was constructed over the bones of a Medieval castle that once belonged to a baron who I'm told was famous for being the last feudal Lord to surrender to the Normans. The walls are of grey stone, and turrets and battlements ring the building. The windows are paned with glass, and there are security cameras present every five yards or so, but otherwise, there's little to suggest that this building has aged at all in the thousand years since it was constructed. I wonder if the Blackwoods will be as imposing or as

timeless.

The cabbie sets my bags down with an appreciative sigh. He tips his hat to me and says, “Pardon me if I leave ma’am. The earl don’t like strangers waitin’ on his porch.”

He moves down the steps to his car, leaving me to wonder what sort of man this Earl was.

I have entered into the service of Lord Edmund Blackwood, the twenty-first Earl Blackwood. I will be caring for the Lord’s nephew, Oliver. This is not my first time working for a wealthy client. In fact, all of my clients have ranged from well-off to unfathomably rich. However, this is my first time working for an actual member of the peerage. I’m interested to see what sort of personality Lord Edmund has.

The door opens before I can knock, and a rotund, rosy-cheeked woman in her mid-forties grins and exclaims, “Well, you must be Mary Wilcox.”

I bow slightly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh pish posh with the ma’am,” she replies. “I’m not Miss Cordelia. My name is Theresa Pemberton, and I’m the housekeeper. It’s pleased to meet you.”

She sticks out her hand, and when I take it, she shakes vigorously. I note, rather uncomfortably, that her hands are very strong.

“Come on in,” she says. “I’ll show you around.”

She lifts my bags with considerably less effort than the cab driver did and carries them into the house. She sets them in the foyer and says, “We’ll carried those up later. You’ll be wanting the lay of the place, I imagine.”



“Yes, thank you.”

“Right then. Well, this is the foyer. It opens up right here into the parlor.”

I follow her into a large, high-ceilinged room with several couches and easy chairs arranged in three different circles. The furniture is of exquisite quality, of course, brown leather oiled and polished to a gleaming shine. The furniture and the rugs on which they sit are tastefully arranged to maximize the amount of free space while still giving a sense of intimacy among those who sit here. There is no television in this room, as is common in English households, especially wealthy estates. The parlor is a room for socializing.

It would be nearly perfect if it weren't for the bare stone walls. Not bare, I suppose. Artwork hangs where artwork should hang, and the coat of arms of House Blackwood is proudly displayed above the massive fireplace, as it should be.

But the dark, cold weight of that stone casts a pallor over everything. Or perhaps it's more correct to say that the cold darkness seeps through the brightness that the décor seeks to provide. It's as though someone attempted to paint over a crack in the sidewalk but did so poorly, leaving the crack still visible underneath.

“In here we have the kitchen.”

I realize I've allowed Theresa to leave me behind, so I hurry to catch up. The kitchen is a refreshing change, modern and furnished with marble tiles and stainless-steel countertops. Like the parlor, it is huge, but unlike the parlor, the stainless-steel covers the stone, effectively muting the cold of the house's ancient design.

There are two dining rooms, a grand one with sconces for torch lights and a great crystal chandelier over a table that could comfortably sit twenty, and a smaller one with seating for six. Both rooms are sparsely decorated but well lit, and the dark

mahogany of the furniture does little to warm the coldness of the stone walls but at least doesn't paint a false veneer over it.

The school room is a small study complete with a bookshelf, a globe and a charming little maple desk. "This is for the young master, I assume?" I ask Theresa.

She smiles sadly. "Ah, yes. Little Oliver. Poor lad."

I raise an eyebrow. "Why is that?"

She sighs. "He's a sickly child, he is. Has a cough that just won't go away. Doctors aren't sure if it's asthma or emphysema or if his poor lungs didn't form right."

"Oh, I wasn't aware. How awful."

"Truly, it is. His mother was sweet as honey but as delicate as a flower. She did her best, the poor dear, but I don't think she carried him well. When a child comes out sickly like that, you can bet it starts in the womb. Not that I blame her. She did her best, the poor dear."

I am a little disquieted by this somewhat circular speech. I am aware that I am caring for Oliver Blackwood, Lord Edmund's nephew. I am also aware that his sister, Oliver's mother, disappeared years ago. Still, hearing this suspicious assertion that somehow Oliver's condition is the fault of his mother sits ill with me.

I don't think Theresa means ill by it, though. Gossip is, unfortunately the favorite pastime of the English servant. It's something I've encountered before and something I am sure I'll endure at every one of my posts.

Not that I can claim I'm immune to gossip. Sean often teases me by saying that my penchant for sleuthing is nothing more than an "unusually sizable example of the

British woman's gossip gland."

Still, I do try not to speak ill of the dead. Heaven knows I've suffered enough from ghosts without provoking them.

Theresa leads me upstairs after that. "I'll show you the garden tomorrow when the sun's out and it's not so bitterly cold. I tell you, Mary, I do love Northumberland, but there are days I wouldn't mind if that climate change everyone talks about wanted to warm us up a few notches."

We reach the top of the stairs, and I am somewhat disheartened to see that the second floor carries even less to distract from the austerity of the castle. Suits of armor stand halfway in between six doors on the left side of the hallway and six on the right.

"These are the servants' quarters," Theresa informs me. "Mine is the last one on the right. Yours is directly across from me. Oliver is in the one next to yours so you can be close if he needs anything. The others are occupied by the other maids. You'll meet them soon enough. Lord Edmund's driver has a room in the garage, and he never hired a new gardener to replace Mr. Garland when he died. He hires a landscaping company now."

She says that last sentence with a peculiar streak of venom. So many household servants hold contractors in fierce contempt. Perhaps they feel their jobs are threatened, or perhaps it's the old English dislike of anything different.

"There's lots more to see," Theresa says, "but most of it isn't business for us servants. Well, mine, I suppose, since I'm the housekeeper, but even I can only enter certain rooms if I'm instructed. Lord Edmund is very particular about his privacy. Come, let's go fetch your luggage."

As I follow her downstairs, I ask, "How long have you been working for Lord

Edmund?”

“Oh, let’s see. It’s been... fifteen years now.”

My eyes widen in surprise. I don’t voice the thought, but I was expecting the number to be higher. I guessed Theresa’s age to be around forty-five. Most household servants enter service when they’re teenagers. Many are still born into it. In this modern age, some relics of our past still endure. I suppose, like this castle, we simply paint over it and hope the darkness doesn’t bleed through.

Theresa grabs my bags with the same effortless strength she shows earlier and tsks away my offer to help. “If I can’t lift a pair of suitcases up a flight of stairs, I’ve got no business being housekeeper to His Lordship.”

I’m not sure I follow the logic, but I’m quite sure I’d like to remain on Theresa’s good side. My first impression of her is that of a very strong-willed woman who takes great pride in her household and in herself. If she likes you, she will be a stalwart friend. If she doesn’t, she will be a lifelong enemy. I am finished making enemies.

With the luggage placed in my room, Theresa smiles in satisfaction and says, “There you are. You’ll be wanting to rest after your journey. Breakfast is at seven in the morning, and His Lordship has instructed you to me to invite you so you can meet him, the Lady Cordelia and Master Oliver. Will you need a wake-up call?”

“No, thank you. I am up by six-thirty every morning, and I don’t need long to shower and dress.”

“Very good then.” She sticks out her hand. “Miss Mary, it was a pleasure to meet you. I think you and I will get on famously.”

I smile and take her hand, once more marveling at its strength. “I feel that way too,

Theresa.”

She leaves, and I take a moment to look around my room. It is small, but not cramped. The bed is a full-size bed, smaller than I’m used to but plush and made with a soft down comforter and memory foam pillows. The pillows and the flatscreen TV on the dresser are the odd touches of modernity in a room that is otherwise as austere and ancient as the rest of the castle.

I do not consider myself a superstitious woman, but I have been plagued with nightmares in the past, and I don’t wish to be plagued tonight. So I leave the desk lamp that sits on the room’s small table on as a nightlight and change for bed.

I text Sean good night before I sleep. Though I suppose for him, it’s still rather early. He replies with an image of my own bedroom at the house in Boston. He’s dusted it and cleaned the furniture. The bedding is gone, presumably to be washed or discarded and replaced. It looks empty and lifeless.

I thank him anyway and then set my alarm and close my eyes firmly. I have fought quite hard to move past my old fears, and I am determined that no castle, no matter how old or forbidding, shall overcome that determination.

Still, the cold creeps in, just touching me as I pull the comforter over my shoulders. It’s not threatening me, not yet.

But it’s not letting me forget that it’s there, either.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

The nightlight is successful. I spend the night free of nightmares and awake well-rested five minutes before my alarm goes off.

The castle is far less intimidating in daylight. The sun rises early this time of year in Northumberland, and even through the deeply recessed castle windows, enough light comes through to make the gray of the walls and floor far less threatening than in twilight. A little drab, I suppose, but not so cold and dark.

I save all five of those minutes and arrive downstairs at five minutes to seven dressed in a flattering but sensible outfit consisting of a low-hemmed skirt over black Oxfords, a long-sleeved white button-down blouse and a gray cardigan with a single clasp below the neck. Theresa is dressed similarly, elegant but not so fine as to be accused of putting on airs, a deadly sin among the English.

“They’ll be late,” she informs me when I greet her. “They always are. You know how lords are.”

The closest person to a lord I’ve worked for in the past was Sebastian Carlton, a now-disgraced telecommunications billionaire. I had a large part to do with his disgrace, as it was I who exposed the murder his daughter committed and caught him plotting to cover it up. He wasn’t a good person by any means, but he was always punctual.

Then again, he wasn’t a lord.

The Blackwoods arrive ten minutes later, so they’re not exceedingly late. No butler announces their arrival, though, which I find somewhat surprising considering the status Lord Edmund holds. Instead, the Lord and Lady enter the room without

introduction, leading a small boy in between them.

Lord Edmund stops ten feet away and looks imperiously at us. He is of average height and somewhat portly in build, although not excessively overweight. His hair is gray, and his eyes are frost blue. He is not difficult to look at, but perhaps not the image most think of when they call to mind the image of an English nobleman.

Lady Cordelia smiles, and for a moment, I am unsure who she is. She is far younger than Lord Edmund, not even thirty. That can't possibly be the Lady Cordelia. Perhaps Lord Edmund has a daughter he hasn't mentioned.

I am not a judgmental person, despite all appearances to the contrary. I keep an open mind about love and relationships, and in general, I feel that people are better off not concerning themselves with the affairs of others. But like many people, I can't help but wonder when I see a wealthy man wedded to a woman young enough to be his child. Were Cordelia ten or even twenty years younger than Lord Edmund, I might excuse it, but she must be nearly thirty years his junior.

It's not your business, Mary, I remind myself. You're done solving mysteries.

"Good morning, your Lordship," Theresa says, bowing low. "This is Miss Mary Wilcox. She arrived late last night. I let her in and decided it was best not to wake you, sir."

Lord Edmund nods slowly. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Wilcox. I am Lord Edmund Blackwood. You may address me as your Lordship, Lord Blackwood, or sir."

His voice is resonant and powerful. I can see where he gets his reputation as an orator in the House of Lords. I bow and say, "Thank you for having me, your Lordship."

He nods again, still slowly. I must say, it's a bit ridiculous how intentionally regal he makes everything he says and does. Really, it is the twenty-first century.

He gestures to Lady Cordelia. "This is my wife, the Lady Cordelia."

Lady Cordelia smiles again and curtsseys. "It's wonderful to meet you, Mary. We're so glad to have you."

She truly is beautiful. She has flowing dark brown hair and fair skin. Her eyes are the color of honey, and her full lips and soft but noble features accentuate the radiance of her smile. Her figure is delicate and statuesque, like a work of art. I can see why Lord Edmund is attracted to her. I only hope his love is the sort that brightens the flame in the heart of such a beauty and not the sort that extinguishes it.

"And this is my nephew, Master Oliver."

Oliver opens his mouth to greet me, but before he can get a word out, a horrible coughing fit overtakes him. He covers his mouth and tries to control it, but his little body shakes with the force of each whooping exhalation. His face reddens, and for a terrifying moment, his lips seem to turn blue. But he recovers, and with an apologetic smile, he says, "It's nice to meet you, Miss Mary."

"Oliver is often unwell," Lord Blackwood offers by way of explanation or perhaps apology. "He should stay indoors to avoid exacerbating his condition."

It is my experience that staying indoors all day is the worst possible thing someone with trouble breathing can do for their health, but now is not the time to argue with His Lordship. So, I only incline my head and say, "I'm pleased to meet you, Oliver."

"Master Oliver, if you please," Lord Edmund interjects.



My impression of His Lordship grows sourer by the minute. "Master Oliver," I correct. "I have a feeling you and I will get along famously."

He smiles at me, and I see in that smile an image of the sort of child Lord Blackwood might have been. He is the boy's uncle, not his father, but the family resemblance is clear. The same frost-blue eyes, the same slightly upturned nose and slightly outturned ears. He's a beautiful child, but he's so small for his age and clearly as sickly as Theresa warned me. My heart goes out to him, and I hope fervently that he will grow to be more like his aunt and less like his uncle.

This is an unfair judgment, of course. I have known all of them for barely a minute. I can't possibly tell who they are based on this first impression, and I know well enough how wrong a first impression can be. Still, having met them, I can see that I will adore Oliver and find Cordelia charming. Lord Blackwood will be annoying at best and infuriating at worst.

Well, after all, he is a Lord. What do aristocrats exist for if not to remind us how much better they are than we?

Lord Edmund coughs and says, "We will take our breakfast now. Miss Wilcox, it is customary for the servants to eat in the kitchen, but this evening, you will join us for dinner."

"I am honored, Lord Blackwood."

His eyes narrow for a moment. I think he's trying to determine if I'm teasing him. When he's satisfied that I'm not trying to poke fun, he says, "Mrs. Pemberton, no cream if you will for the Lady Cordelia and please make her tea strong. I'm afraid the Lady hasn't been sleeping well."

Cordelia flushes and lowers her eyes. I feel offended on her behalf. Imagine airing

your wife's business in front of a stranger!

Theresa bows. "As you wish, my lord."

Lord Edmund nods again, then leads his family from the room without a farewell to us. When the door closes, Theresa says drily, "One might suggest that the Lady Cordelia drinks weaker tea and not stronger if she's having trouble sleeping."

"I take it from your silence that airing such a suggestion to his Lordship would be unwise."

She shrugs. "Not really unwise. Just useless. And don't worry about him. He's a windbag, but he's harmless. All bark no bite."

"That's good to know."

"I might as well introduce you to the others," Theresa says. "They'll be in the kitchen right now. Hopefully preparing His Lordship's breakfast and not making too much of a mess."

She leads me into the kitchen, where I find three young women whispering and giggling to each other as they make a full English breakfast for the diners. Lord Edmund, at least, doesn't seem to restrict his wife's diet.

The women fall silent when Mrs. Pemberton enters. They're all young and pretty, though none of them are as statuesque as the Lady Cordelia. The youngest is in her early twenties, surely no older than twenty-five. She fails to maintain the serious expression the three women affect when we walk into the kitchen. She is punished for her failure by being the first of the maids introduced.

"The one with the silly smile is Sarah. Barely more than a girl and it shows on her

face. And I'll bet you forgot to put cream in the eggs."

Sarah's face goes white. She hurries to correct her mistake while the other two maids try to hide their mirth.

"The others are Franny—that's the one with the lace in her bonnet—and Matilda. They're just a hair smarter than the pigs we slaughtered to make that bacon."

Franny and Matilda giggle, an odd reaction, but when I see the motherly smirk on Theresa's face, I understand. As is the case with many senior servants, Theresa has taken on the role of guardian to these young women. Her scolding may sound harsh, but it comes from a place of love.

"All right then, you've had your laugh," she says. "Now let's get back to work. His Lordship prefers to breakfast in the morning. Oh! I've almost forgotten. Ladies, this is Mary Wilcox, the governess. She is here to care for Master Oliver. She is not here to listen to you three prattle on, so please, if you talk to her, talk like adults. No, that's too much, Sarah. Here, let me do it. You help the other two with the sausages before they burn themselves, smirking at each other."

I smile and watch Theresa help the three young women get breakfast in order. The house doesn't seem quite so forbidding now.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

When breakfast is finished, Lady Cordelia finds me in the school room. She has Oliver with her, and the boy smiles when he sees me. I do well with children his age. I spent twenty-five years teaching third and fourth graders, and I've developed a skill at building rapport.

"We really are pleased to have you here, Miss Mary," Lady Cordelia says. "Oliver's done so well with his studies. It would be such a pity if he were to fall behind due to... well, if he were to fall behind."

She lowers her eyes, and her smile fades a little. My heart goes out to her. It is incredibly difficult to have a child with a chronic illness. I smile tenderly and say, "I am honored to be here, my lady." I look at Oliver and add, "As for you, young man, I'm sure we won't have any trouble keeping up with our studies, will we?"

Oliver shakes his head. "No, ma'am. I'm very smart. I'll have no trouble."

His cough seems to have gone away. The healing powers of a full English breakfast, I assume. Or perhaps it's separation from his overbearing uncle.

I push that unkind thought away, and say, "Excellent. Now, if it's all right with your Aunt Cordelia, I'd like to get to know you a little better. And, of course, if it's all right with you."

Oliver nods and turns to his aunt. Lady Cordelia's smile returns. "Of course."

She nods at me and says, "Thank you again, Miss Mary. I..." she hesitates, as though struggling to think of how to put her next thought into words. In the end, she only

says, “Thank you,” and leaves the room.

I smile at Oliver. “Well, Master Oliver, let’s begin with your favorite color.”

He furrows his brow. “My favorite color?”

“Of course! Why not?”

“That’s a question for babies.”

He grins as he says it, though. I shake my head. “I don’t think so. Color is important to people of all ages, including ancient adults like me.”

He giggles, “You’re not ancient, Miss Mary.”

“Well, thank you very much,” I say. “And you’re not ancient either. We have that in common.”

He giggles again. “Um, my favorite color is blue.”

“Blue like the ocean or blue like the sky?”

“Blue like the ocean. I used to visit a lot when I was younger. I can’t visit anymore because I’m ill.”

“Well,” I purse my lips. “I’m sure we can find a way to squeeze in a visit when the weather warms. Fresh air and sunshine never did anyone harm. What do you like about the ocean?”

He shrugs. “It’s a whole other world, I guess. Somewhere magical that doesn’t suffer from the same things that this world suffers from.”

Children have a remarkable ability to say the most revealing things in the most casual tones. They haven't yet learned that not all of what they consider normal is actually normal. "What does this world suffer from?" I ask.

He shrugs and looks away. I can tell he's growing uncomfortable, so I steer the conversation away. Pushing him will only succeed in pushing him into his shell. I need to coax him out, not pull him out. "My favorite color is green," I tell him.

"Green like grass or green like the forest?"

The forest that comes to my mind when he says that is dark and hostile and most definitely not green. I stop the vision before the old nightmare image of my sister's ghost arrives and say, "Green like grass. Like the grass outside in the fields."

"We have grass in our garden that grows green as an emerald," he tells me.

"Green as an emerald." Well, I'll have to see that."

He reaches forward and takes my hand. "Come with me. I'll show you."

I smile down at him as he leads me outside. The trust of a child is such a beautiful thing, so pure and wholesome and precious. And yet so many people manipulate that trust and turn it into something evil. May they all rot in the hell they deserve.

I push that thought away too. I'm determined to enjoy my time here and not to let the ghosts of my past interfere with my future.

We step through a back door into a paradise. I suppose objectively speaking, it's no more impressive than any other garden in any other wealthy home, and less impressive even than that of some other families I've worked for. But it's beautiful, and compared to the austerity of the castle, it might as well be a landscape from

Heaven.

There are carefully manicured trees, perfectly round and perhaps ten to fifteen feet tall. There is a flower garden with orderly rows of tulips, chrysanthemums, marigolds and poppies surrounded by rosebushes whose blooms shine blood red. There is a fountain in the center of the garden—thankfully a perfectly ordinary cherub and not some Gothic representation of a wrathful Moses striking a rock (that’s a whole other story).

But the crown jewel is, as Oliver said, a two-acre field on which grows the brightest green grass I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s as though the color was concentrated and intensified so that each individual blade shines with the verdure of an entire field. The contrast to the pale green outside of the estate is as sharp as the contrast between the blue of Monterey and the nearly-gray pale of the sky here.

“Do you like it?” Oliver asks.

“It’s beautiful,” I say. “Thank you so much for showing me.”

He hesitates, looking around as though he’s about to tell me a secret but must make sure there’s no one around to hear it. Then he asks, “Would you like me to show you my hide-and-seek spot? No one ever finds me there.”

I smile. “I would love to.”

“Oliver!”

We both jump at the sound of Lord Edmund’s voice. The light dies in Oliver’s eyes almost immediately, and it takes all of my strength not to snap at Lord Edmund for it.

“Oliver, come inside,” Lord Edmund commands. “It’s too cold for you to be

frolicking today. Show Miss Mary your video game collection if you must occupy her with nonsense.”

I turn to him, and though I say nothing, I allow my disapproval to show in my glance. He returns a frosty stare of his own and says, “As I said, Miss Mary, it is better for him to remain in doors. Perhaps when the weather warms, we’ll allow him some gentle outings into the garden.”

I want to argue with him, but what would be the point? This is his house, and I am only a servant. “As you wish, Lord Blackwood.”

We head inside, and Oliver launches into another coughing fit. I hold him until the coughing subsides, convinced now more than ever that his illness has far more to do with his nurture than his nature.

When the coughing ceases, he says, “I think I’ll rest for a while. I’ll show you my video games another day. Thank you for talking to me, Miss Mary.”

“You’re quite welcome, Master Oliver. Any time you need to talk about anything, I’ll be there.”

He smiles, a brief reminder of the joy of youth I saw in his eyes before. Then it vanishes, and he leaves.

I sigh and think of the trials I will endure in the months to come. Rather than allow my mind to turn to accusation, I determine to get to know Lord Edmund better. Perhaps I can convince him to trust me and allow me more freedom to manage Oliver’s care.

And I’d like to talk to his doctor too. I want to know what exactly it is that plagues Oliver. Surely we can find a better solution than imprisonment.



Until then, I must remember that I have only been here for one day. All is not necessarily as it seems.

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Dinner is, not surprisingly, a frosty affair. Lord Edmund is a black hole, sitting ramrod straight and demanding with his posture and his scowl that everyone present conduct themselves like proper English gentlemen and ladies.

Oliver looks pale and weak. I am grateful when he eats a hearty portion of the stew that Theresa made for dinner. He needs all of the strength he can get.

Lady Cordelia opens the conversation after the appetizer is finished. “So Mary, you were a teacher before you became a governess, right?”

“Oh yes, twenty-five years.”

“Twenty-five years? That’s quite a long time. What prompted you to change careers?”

I take a bit of food and use it as an excuse to think. The truth is that I’m not entirely sure what exactly finally pushes me to make the move.

The reason I decide to give today is, “I felt as though it was time to try something different. I’ve always enjoyed working with children, and I thought that this would give me an opportunity to work even more closely with them.”

“Do you have children of your own?”

I’m about to answer when Lord Edmund interjects. “Come now, Cordelia. Surely, Miss Mary isn’t interested in discussing her personal life.

I make the mistake of saying, “Oh, it’s quite all right, Lord Edmund. I’m not offended.”

The room immediately chills. Lady Cordelia pales and looks nervously at her husband. Oliver looks down at his plate. He seems to have shrunk into himself.

Lord Edmund shows no visible sign of anger at my reply. He simply continues to eat his food as though he were unaware of the tension coming from the others around the table.

I try to turn the conversation to him to take the focus away from this moment. “So Lord Edmund. I understand you’re facing surprising support from the Labour Party on the new tax bill. To what do you attribute this success?”

Lady Cordelia is nearly audible with her relief. Oliver notices the change in his aunt and looks hopefully at his uncle. I don’t know what they see. To me, Lord Edmund’s demeanor doesn’t change.

Whatever they see, they are relieved to see it. Lord Edmund finishes his bite and says, “Well, even they understand that you can’t squeeze blood from a stone. If we’re to find solutions to the labor crisis, it can’t come by taking what the working class doesn’t have. Besides, there are enough roads that need paving and churches that need repairing to find work for any who need it. Why not kill several birds with one stone? Frankly, I’m still surprised there are some who oppose the bill.”

He finishes the last bite of his stew and stands. He gives me his signature nod and says, “Miss Mary, it was delightful to have you. Please excuse me for retiring early. I have a long trip back to Parliament in the morning. I hope to return with the victory you predict with that tax bill.”

I smile at him. “I’m quite sure you will, your Lordship.”

He nods again, then leaves the room. Lady Cordelia smiles gratefully at me. Oliver stares at me like I'm some sort of goddess.

I don't even try to contain my smile. It's only my second night here—my first after meeting the family—and I've already learned how I can improve the wellbeing of every member of House Blackwood, including its stern Lord.

It's a good start.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

All good things must come to an end, as they say. My first night, I am disturbed by the house and yet I sleep like a baby. This second night, I am not at all afraid, but this is when my nightmares return.

It begins with vague disquiet, more emotions than experiences. I sense a gray pallor and hear mournful voices. Sometimes I recognize the voices and sometimes they're unfamiliar to me.

Then, brief scenes flicker across my mind. My mother's flat expression when Annie burns herself on our stove. Elizabeth Carlton's cry of jealousy when she catches her lover trying to kiss her own mother. The fear in Sean's eyes when he pulls me from a raging tide. Tears running down Celeste Holloway's face when her father is discovered missing.

All memories of intense emotion that I've either experienced or witnessed. Yet I don't feel them really. It's as though I'm watching my life play before my eyes.

It's not until the final dream that things become seriously frightening.

I open my eyes, and I am alone in a green field. The grass is bright, emerald bright, far brighter than any natural color could be. I look around and see that the field extends to the horizon in all directions. It is broken only by a door standing alone some thirty yards ahead of me.

I know immediately that if I enter that door, something terrible will happen. I don't need a vision or an impression to know it. It's the only thing present in a false-color field. One doesn't need to understand dreams to know that anything that waits behind

a single door in such a scenario must be frightening.

However, I am unable to stop myself. My body moves of its own accord, dragging me inexorably toward the door.

Oddly, the most intense emotion I feel isn't fear but frustration. I know I shouldn't open this door. I know I'll find only pain and terror behind it, but I can't stop. I am compelled to open it while being fully aware that I will only hurt myself.

In the earlier days of our association, Sean would often ask why I had to solve every mystery I came across. I would answer that I enjoyed helping people and that I believed it was only right that victims should receive justice and that the guilty should not be allowed to hide behind their wealth. I still believe this, but the truth is that aside from the first mystery I solved—that of Johnathan Ashford's murder—I am reluctant to involve myself. I know that doing so only puts me at risk.

But I still involve myself. I am compelled to uncover the truth. It's not until I find an answer to my sister's disappearance that I finally accept that some mysteries are better left unsolved. This dream frustrates me because I fear it's a sign that I'm not truly ready to mind my own business. I worry what my curiosity will compel me to do when I wake.

I open the door. Inside, a woman kneels. She's tall and statuesque with long, flowing blonde hair that cascades over her shoulders and falls to the middle of her back. I don't need to see her face to know her features are excellent, and her eyes are a brilliant blue, blue like the sky, not the ocean.

I stare at the image of my long-lost sister as she was when I last saw her, and again, the emotion that fills me is frustration.

"What do you want?" I demand. "Do you want me to leave you alone, or do you want

me to find you? Can you just be clear for once, please?"

Annie turns around, and my blood chills. Her face is frozen in a mask of sheer terror. The frustration I feel vanishes as ice grips my heart.

She takes a deep breath and shrieks, "Help me! Oh God! Help me!"

I take a step backward, then another. My hand fumbles behind me for the door, and my heart beats rapidly. I try to reply, but all that comes out is a jumbled moan.

She stands and runs toward me, hands extended like claws, eyes rolling with fright, screaming, "Help me!"

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I sit up with a gasp and just barely stifle the curse that forms on my lips. Once more, I thought I'd beaten my nightmares, and once more, they've overcome me.

The room around me is dark and cold, but now that the danger is passed, frustration overcomes my fear once more, and I am only angry at the gray stone walls and not fearful of them. How did people live here before? How did so many cultures look at a lifeless slab of granite and say to themselves, "Oh yes, this is an excellent material to live inside of forever"?

I sigh heavily and throw the covers off. I know from experience that I'll be lucky to get any more sleep tonight, so I might as well shower to take the edge off of my nightmare.

It's just so frustrating! I spent years looking for answers about my sister, and finally came to terms with the fact that my sister left of her own accord and didn't wish to be found. I was even ready to move into my old house, or at least clean it out and make

it presentable enough to sell. I was moving on, damn it!

“What do you want?” I cry in frustration to the empty room. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“Help me!”

Ice grips my heart once more. I freeze and listen intently. I am awake now. I'm not dreaming. Surely, I didn't just hear my sister cry for help.

“Help!”

The cry comes again. It’s faint, barely audible, but it’s the only noise in the house, and it’s unmistakable. I’m not so superstitious as to think that my sister is crying for my help in this castle thirty years after she runs away, but there is no doubt that someone is calling for help.

I dress hurriedly, throwing on my slippers and a shawl, then rushing from the room. If I hesitate, I won’t have the courage, so I move quickly, not allowing myself a chance to lose my courage.

I rush down the stairs, and when I reach the first floor, I hear it again. It’s quieter this time and punctuated by a sob, but it’s just as clear as before.

I hesitate before descending to the basement. I may not be superstitious, but real dangers lurk in the hidden places of the world. Am I really sure that I want to discover what dangers might lurk below?

“Help! Please!”

It doesn't matter what I want. Someone is in danger down there. I take a breath and

continue. It occurs to me that I should call for help or at least call to ask where the owner of the voice is. I don't, though. I tell myself it's because I've had too many experiences where the criminals were residents of the same house in which I work, but the truth is that a part of me fears that this is some lingering effect of my dream and that I haven't really heard anything. It wouldn't be the first time I've imagined things that aren't there.

With that uncomfortable thought in my head, I open the door to the basement. It's pitch black, and the moment I open the door, a wave of cold malevolence swallows me. I shiver, and a soft moan escapes my lips.

Pull yourself together, Mary. There must be a light switch somewhere. Find it.

I reach for the wall, and my skin crawls. I am certain somehow that my fingers will land on something slimy and wet, like an open wound or the offal of some hideous monster.

I find only a stone wall, and after several seconds of tapping, I find the light switch. I take another deep breath and flip it on.

It's empty. The basement, I mean. It's a large room, perhaps twelve hundred square feet, and it's empty. I see nothing but bare stone walls and a bare stone floor. Clearly, Lord Edmund sees no need for the extra storage space.

I enter the room anyway, thinking that I might find some hidden door or some sign that someone was dragged away. The fear I feel a moment ago is gone, however, so I don't believe I actually expect to find anything. I'm just reassuring myself that it really was all in my head.

When a cursory inspection reveals nothing out of the ordinary and the time spent making that inspection brings no repeat of the cry that draws me downstairs in the



first place, I sigh. I'm going to be very unhappy if my dreams begin to linger into my waking hours.

I head back upstairs, flipping off the basement lights and hoping I won't encounter anyone come to investigate what the nutty governess is doing snooping through the house in the middle of the night. I reach my room, but just before I enter, I hear a small voice ask, "Mary? What's wrong?"

I turn to see Oliver rubbing sleep from his eyes. He wears his night clothes and in one hand, he holds a stuffed dinosaur. I smile at him and say, "Nothing. I thought I heard a noise is all."

"That wasn't you screaming?"

My smile fades. "N-no. That wasn't me. You heard screaming too?"

He nods. "It was quiet, like it was from far away. I thought maybe you were having a nightmare."

I try to sound reassuring, but I fear my voice betrays the lie when I reply, "No, honey. I wasn't having a nightmare."

"Then what was it?"

Jibakurei. "It was only the wind, or perhaps a dog howling at the moon."

"Do dogs really howl at the moon?"

"They really howl," I reply. "Whether at the moon or at annoying noises that wake sensible people up in the middle of the night, I'm not sure."

He laughs at that, and my fear subsides somewhat. It may be that there really was a noise, but I can't believe that it was a cry for help. That was only my mind interpreting an innocuous sound through the lens of my nightmare.

"Will you sit with me a little?" Oliver asks. "Until I fall asleep?"

"Of course, dear. I could use some company myself if I'm being honest."

I close the door to my own room and follow him back to his. His room is smaller than I would expect for the heir to the Earl, but his bed is comfortable, and he has a large closet filled with all sorts of toys imaginable. The tv on his dresser is even bigger than mind, and I see the video game system Lord Edmund speaks of earlier.

The room is exactly what a young boy's room should be, and I'm encouraged to see it. Children should be allowed to hold onto their childhood for as long as possible. The world grows so cold when you become an adult.

Oliver curls up in bed and lays a hand over mine for a moment. "Good night, Mary."

I brush a lock of hair out of his eye and reply, "Good night, Oliver."

Almost immediately, he is fast asleep. I will not be so lucky.

Someone cried out in the middle of the night. I don't believe the lie I told Oliver earlier, or the lie I told myself.

Someone cried out for help and was then silenced. I hope desperately that I'm wrong, but deep inside, I know that once more, I'm being compelled to solve another mystery.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

There are times when I truly wish I was wrong.

I understand how arrogant that sounds, but I am very rarely wrong when I suspect foul play or malice. Growing up with an abusive mother has given me a very strong intuition when it comes to other people's intentions. I must always be on guard around my mother to prepare for those times when her verbal and emotional abuse turns into violent physical abuse. When I'm in school, I hone that ability, studying psychology for my first four years of college before changing my focus to education after Annie's disappearance. Twenty-five years as a teacher and two years as a governess working with several troubled families has sharpened that intuition further.

Maybe it is only arrogance. I'm not always right about people. But it's rare.

In any case, I wish that I was wrong more often. I wish I was wrong about what I heard last night. I wish it wasn't actually a woman screaming that I heard. I wish my nightmare wasn't prophetic. I wish that Oliver and I had only been frightened by the wind and needn't have worried about the howls that ruined both of our sleep.

But when I arrive downstairs to see Theresa wringing her hands and pleading with a very frustrated Lord Edmund, I know immediately that I'm not wrong. Something terrible has happened here.

Lord Edmund finally brushes past Theresa and leaves the house. The door slams behind him, and Theresa hangs her head in defeat.

I rush to her side and ask, "Theresa! What's wrong? What happened?"

She lifts her eyes to mine. Hers are red and puffy, as though she's been crying. She sighs and says, "Sarah hasn't returned to work yet. I've called her mobile and asked the other two if they've seen her, but they haven't."

My brow furrows. "Sarah? Is she not in her room?"

Theresa shakes her head. "She went out last night. She had a date with a young man in town, and I gave her the night so long as she returned in the morning. She hasn't returned, and she hasn't called."

My fear dissolves. I think I know what happened here. I smile at Theresa. "Surely that's nothing to be frightened about," I tell her. "Sarah is a young woman, and... well, we know what young people do when they date."

Theresa shakes her head again and says firmly. "She wouldn't be late. She's never late. She's a good girl. A bit daft, but a good girl, anyway. She'd call me, at least, or she'd answer her phone when I called."

My heart goes out to her. She really does care for her staff. I lay a hand on the poor woman's shoulder and say, "Even good young people can get caught up in the heat of the moment. I guarantee you she's still with that young man and not thinking at all about work or her responsibilities. It's only six-thirty. She'll wake up, realize she's late, and rush over here red-faced and embarrassed, apologizing profusely and bracing herself for a scolding."

"She'll get one," Theresa promises. "Havin' me worried sick like this." She looks beseechingly at me. "Do you really think she's all right?"

Help me! Please!

But that can't be. I can't have heard that. It was only the wind. Wasn't it?

I'll take my own advice and wait before I panic. It's still early. In a few hours, Sarah will no doubt rush into the house, flushed with embarrassment and grinning like a fool. Theresa will give her a good tongue-lashing full of motherly scolding and motherly love, and Sarah will endure her punishment of hard work, no doubt dreamily remembering the reason for it the entire time.

I stifle a shiver and reply, "I really do."

She gives me a grateful smile and sighs. "Well, I hope he was worth it, then, because I'm going to work her so hard when she gets here she won't have energy to run off and dally with some young fool." She sniffs. "Well, I'll go get the others started on breakfast. Heaven knows if I'm letting my fancy take flight, Franny and Matilda have written a novel in their heads."

She heads for the kitchen. I remain in the foyer, and when the door closes behind her, I gasp and lean against the occasional table. A jade statue of a dragon snarls up at me, it's polished eyes gleaming under the light of the morning.

Sarah must be safe. It can't be that every single job I take exposes me to murder. The logical reason for Sarah's absence is that her date went well, and she's still in bed with her beau. She's young, after all. When you're that age, sex is the most important thing in the world. It doesn't matter how responsible you are, you'll forget to tie your own shoelaces when you have a chance for lovemaking.

When my heart rate calms, and I'm in charge of my own emotions, I head to the dining room for breakfast. Lady Cordelia is there. Her own eyes are red and puffy, and I suffer another bout of disquiet. I heard someone scream last night, and it seems that each time I try to convince myself it was nothing, some other reason reveals itself. I don't like to think about the reason that reveals itself here, but I still wonder if a breathtaking young woman like Lady Cordelia can be happy with a much older man like Lord Edmund.

I can't very well ask her if Lord Edmund hurt her, though. If I'm wrong, then such a question could spell the end of my employment, and it's clear that Oliver needs my help. Still, I want to be available for her if she needs it, so after we exchange good mornings, I say, "How are you feeling this morning?"

She gives me a tired smile. "Between you and me, Miss Mary, being married to a lord is far more tiring than I expected it to be."

"I imagine so." How can I approach this subject delicately? "Is his Lordship a light sleeper?"

She laughs. The reaction is unexpected and a little disturbing. She brings a hand to her mouth, but continues to shake with mirth. I shift in my seat and say, "I apologize if I've offended you, my Lady. It's really none of my—"

"No, no," she says, getting herself under control. "I'm sorry. No, you haven't offended me. It's just... the way you said that." She clears her throat. "No, his Lordship could sleep through the Second Battle of Britain and not so much as stir on his bed. And as far as..." she reddens slightly. "Well, my sleep is rarely interrupted. No, it's not sharing his bed that's tiring. It's..."

She seems to remember who she's speaking to. She reddens further and says, "Well, it's nothing important. His Lordship is simply stressed about his tax bill. I am very grateful to you for the way you spoke to him last night. It really does mean a lot to him when a... um..."

"A commoner?" I suggest.

She flushes again. "Yes. God, that's a horrible word, isn't it?"

"Only if you think it's horrible to be common."

“Excellent response, Miss Mary,” Lady Cordelia replies.

Her smile is dazzling. There are some people whose beauty is truly magical. You can’t help but love them. It’s not fair to them, really, to be treated like a work of art and not like a person, but it can’t be helped.

“Yes,” she says. “It means a lot when a commoner understands the importance of his work. He really is trying to make life easier for the less fortunate. He’s a hard man. I’m sure you can see that. He’s altogether too serious, and he clings too much to form and appearance that hasn’t mattered in two hundred years, but he really does want to make the world a better place. He was in an excellent mood last night after speaking with you. For a moment, he was...”

Her smile fades. For a minute, when she was talking about her husband's political passions, she was happy and proud of him. Now, she is worried. And, as she said, she is tired.

I feel horrible for my earlier assumption. She truly does love him. She wasn’t forced into this marriage. She is proud of him for his work. But like so many spouses of so many leaders, she finds it hard to accept that to people like that, family will always come second. Perhaps Lord Edmund loves her, but even if he does, he must always put his obligations first.

She sighs and says, “I’ve said too much. I’m sorry, Miss Mary. I shouldn’t put you in this position. I love my husband very much. I’m sorry if anything I’ve said suggests otherwise.”

I give her a tender smile. “Quite the opposite, dear. I can see how much you love him. He’s lucky to have you.”

She tries to smile again, but she lacks the energy.

The door opens, and Oliver walks in. “Good morning, Aunt. Good morning, Mary.”

Lady Cordelia finds the energy to smile again. “Good morning, love. How did you sleep?”

“Not so well,” he says.

“Not well? Why not?”

The door to the kitchen opens before he can answer that question. Theresa is still pale with worry, but she smiles brightly when she sees Oliver. “Good morning there, young master. I’ve made strawberry yogurt for you, just like you asked.”

“Did he ask for that?” Lady Cordelia interjected.

“He did, my Lady.” Theresa winks. “But don’t worry. I’ve made pancakes for the rest of us.”

“I don’t mind pancakes!” Oliver pipes up.

Theresa plants her hands on her hips and scolds, “And after you asked me especially for yogurt? I’ll tell you what. Eat the yogurt, and I’ll save two of the cakes for you.”

“All right!”

Lady Cordelia and I share a smirk as Oliver tucks into his yogurt. I’m happy to see him so hungry and so active. When I first met him, I feared his sickliness would leave him frail and lethargic.

He finishes the yogurt just in time for Theresa to arrive with the pancakes. “Mrs. Pemberton! I’m—”



That sentence devolves into a powerful coughing fit. Cordelia's smile fades. She pales and crosses to him. "Oliver? Oliver, are you all right?"

Oliver continues to cough, and when he starts to slide from his chair, Cordelia shrieks. "Oliver!"

"I'm all right," he pushes through. "I'm fine."

He lifts his eyes, and I'm afraid he sees very little to encourage him on our shocked faces. He slumps a little and says in a small voice, "Sorry to worry everyone."

Theresa is the first to recover. "Well, that's all right, young master. I was only worried that you wouldn't be able to finish the pancakes I made you. You know how I feel about wasting food."

Oliver smiles up at her. "I would never waste your food, Miss Theresa."

"I'm glad to hear it, because I happened to make you three pancakes, not only two."

She sets the pancakes in front of him, and he eats with all of the gusto with which a nine-year-old boy should eat pancakes.

But that cough sounded horrible and left him shaking. I share a look with Lady Cordelia and find that her lower lip is trembling. With all of the other mysteries in the house, I'd forgotten the very real suffering that Oliver and his aunt and uncle endure.

I decide to leave the mystery of the screaming woman alone. I have a young boy who needs my attention. I can't be chasing ghosts. The jibakurei can solve its own problems.

Still, I worry. Another hour has passed with no Sarah. I am still convinced that she's

overslept, but what if I'm wrong? What if those screams were the last cries she made alive? What if somewhere inside these cold stone walls, her spirit now wanders, forever cursed to repeat her final terrifying moments?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

We finish breakfast with no sign of Sarah. Theresa places another phone call, this time to the home of the young man Sarah dated last night, and again receives no answer. The thread of hope I cling to is thinner than ever now.

But I can't dwell on Sarah. Today, I begin tutoring Oliver. It is the middle of the school year, and while his records indicate that he is a bright child somewhat ahead of his grade in all subjects, I must be instructing him now to keep him there.

Besides, I do not wish to be involved in any mysteries here. I've done with that. I've helped many people, but I've risked my own life too many times. I've done my part. It's unfortunate if something happened to Sarah, but I'll let the police handle that. I am not a detective; I am a governess.

Today is a light day of instruction. I will test Oliver to get a sense of exactly where he's at in his studies, and I'll use that information to create goals and a study plan for him. When that's finished, I think I will take tea with him on the back porch. His Lordship prefers Oliver to remain indoors, but I believe I can get away with some fresh air on the porch. If he is upset by it, I'll just thank him for his work improving roadways in the county or something else to stroke his ego. Besides, I could use some fresh air myself.

As I review his lessons, he asks out of nowhere, "Mary, do you think we'll hear her again tonight?"

I sigh. There is just no way to escape this mystery. "What did you hear exactly?"

"A woman crying for help."

“And you’re absolutely sure that’s what you heard?”

He nods. “It was quiet, but it’s the same thing she always says.”

I flinch and drop my notebook. As I pick it up, I ask, “Always?”

“Yes. Whenever I hear her cry, she always asks for help.”

I place my notebook back on my desk and ask, “How... how often do you hear her?”

“Every now and then,” he says. “Sometimes it’s for days on end. Sometimes it’s only for a night and then she’s quiet for months before screaming again.”

I take a moment to gather myself. “When did you first hear her?”

“Oh, years ago,” he says. “As long as I can remember, we’ve had ghosts here.”

I take a seat so he won’t see the trembling in my legs. “You know ghosts aren’t real, right, Oliver?”

“But they are. Otherwise, what else could I be hearing? I know they can’t hurt me. They’re just poor lost souls who haven’t found their way to heaven yet. But they must be real. You heard her too, so I know I’m not batty.”

He speaks of this subject with the calm acceptance of youth. He speaks of his own safety with the same firm belief. To him this is a curiosity, but to me this is a sobering revelation.

If this isn’t the first time a woman’s cries have been heard in this house, then I truly have stumbled on a mystery. Could it be that Sarah really has gone missing? Could something or someone in this castle have caused her to make those cries for help?

And how many women before her have made the same plea?

But where, though? Where could Sarah have been?

“Oliver,” I ask. “Have... have you ever... seen anything?”

He shakes his head. “Just noises. Cries for help, moans, weeping. Just normal ghost noises. Most of the time, you don’t see ghosts anyway. It’s only when they’re really powerful spirits that you see them. I’ve never seen anything.”

“And has anyone else gone missing here?”

His face falls. He lowers his head and says softly. “My mother. She didn’t go missing here, but she went missing.”

I feel a stab of guilt. I’ve carried this too far. He’s a child. If there’s something nefarious going on in this house, it’s not poor Oliver’s business to worry about it.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” I tell him. “You must miss her terribly.”

He shrugs. “I never knew her. I mean, I’m sure I knew her for a little while, but Uncle Edmund has been taking care of me for as long as I can remember. I ask him about mother sometimes, but I don’t think he likes to talk about her. I think he misses her too, but it’s hard for him to miss her. He knew her.”

“Did she live here when you were born?”

Oliver shakes his head. “We lived in a cottage by the shore. When I was born, my mother realized she couldn’t afford to keep me, so she brought me here. She stayed with me for a while, I’m told, but then she disappeared suddenly. I wonder sometimes if she’s dead, or if she was hurt. Or maybe she just ran off and didn’t want to care for

me anymore.”

“Well, if that was her reason, then I hope you’ll forgive me, but your mother’s a fool.”

He stares at me in shock, and I explain, "You're a wonderful boy. If your mother chose not to stay long enough to see it, then that's her mistake. I, for one, am excited to get to know you."

He smiles and says, “I’m excited to get to know you too.” He shrugs. “It’s not all bad. Uncle Edmund buys me any video game I want, and Lady Cordelia is kind to me. I could do worse for a life.”

“That’s a wonderful attitude to have,” I tell him. “And I’m very proud of you.” I look out the window. “It’s a bright day outside. How would you feel about joining me on the balcony for lunch after we finish your tests?”

He grins. “I would love that, Miss Mary.”

"Well, thank you very much, my young lord," I reply with a bow.

He giggles, his melancholy displaced. My own melancholy is, unfortunately, returned in full force.

Perhaps his mother's disappearance is more easily explained by an untimely death. I find it difficult to believe she disappeared. Such a thing doesn't happen in noble families. More likely, she was also ill, perhaps with the same illness that afflicts Oliver. Or perhaps she had certain habits that ended up being her downfall. It is quite believable that Lord Edmund would keep such an affliction quiet and adopt Oliver in part to ensure that no rumors gained traction.

But if Oliver has heard other screams, then there have been other women. Perhaps Lord Edmund has habits of his own. I wonder once more if there's more to Lady Cordelia's melancholy than simple exhaustion.

I tell myself again that it's none of my business, but it's getting harder and harder to convince myself to stay out of it. Maybe it's fate that I'm here. Maybe some force beyond this mortal coil is calling upon me to right another wrong. I wish it would call on another, but we don't always get what we wish for.

Sometimes, we must make the best out of what we have.

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I take dinner with the servants that evening. Sarah still has not returned Theresa's calls, nor has she arrived for work, red-faced or otherwise.

And now I'm worried. I can no longer pretend that she simply lost track of time with a beau. To oversleep is one thing, but to go an entire day without so much as a text to one's employer is an entirely different thing.

The others are worried, too. Franny and Matilda are white as snow. While Theresa carries dinner to the family, I ask them. "Did you hear anything from Sarah last night?"

Franny shakes her head. "She's talked about this boy for a while now. She was really excited to see him. We told her to tell us if..." she reddens slightly. "You know, we told her to tell us all the details. But she never replied."

"We figured things were going well," Matilda said. "You know how it is when a date goes well, and you're just focused on... well, you know."

“I know,” I assure her. “But did you not worry when she didn’t answer?”

“No,” they reply. “Not until she didn’t show up this morning.”

“What about the young man? Did anything seem off about him? Anything at all concerning to you?”

They shake their heads again. “We never met him,” Franny says.

"But to hear Sarah talk, he was charming and kind. He was the son of a solicitor. She said he was really sweet to her. I can't... You don't think he hurt her, do you?"

Before I can answer, the door opens and Theresa joins us again. The two girls stare pleadingly at her.

Theresa notices their stares and tenses. “Eat your dinner,” she says. “No use worrying about what we can’t change.”

“But surely his Lordship will look for her,” Franny says.

Theresa’s lips thin. “Don’t you worry about his Lordship. Eat your dinner.”

I shift my feet uncomfortably. I am still new here, but I feel I must involve myself at least enough to say what I am about to say. "Perhaps we should call the police, Theresa. I know I advised you not to worry about it earlier, but at this point, we must let the authorities know. Surely the poor girl has a family somewhere who will worry."

Theresa stiffens, and I brace myself for the storm. It doesn’t come, thankfully. Theresa sniffs and scratches either side of her nose, then says, “His Lordship has said he will ask around. He has friends among the constables and others who keep their



noses to the ground. I trust that he'll do what is best. He always does. As for us, there's precious little we can do but continue to do our jobs."

"What about the young man she was with last night?" Matilda insists. "Has anyone talked to him?"

"If anyone talks to him, I'm sure we'll hear of it," Theresa says, finally irritable. "But there's no point in worrying ourselves sick over it. Don't you two agree to spend the night with the first handsome young man who winks at you. That's your lesson learned. As for you, Miss Mary, I know you're new here, so I don't blame you for worrying, but if his Lordship says he'll do something, he'll do it. He's got more reach than any of us do, and he'll see to it that the right people look for Sarah and ensure she's found. Besides, it's at least slightly possible that she's left of her own accord."

"Oh, not Sarah," Franny insists. "She wouldn't do that. She's a good girl."

"Bit daft," Matilda adds, "but a good girl nonetheless."

Their sentiment echoes Theresa's own from this morning, but the older maid's face hardens. "I surely thought so," she says brittlely. Then, louder, "but I'll hear no more of it. Finish your dinner, then start on the dishes. We'll have the same work to do as always, no matter what's happened to Sarah."

The other two share a frightened look, but they speak no further. For my part, I recall Oliver's testimony from earlier. His words and Theresa's behavior now increases my suspicion. This is not the first time a disappearance has happened in this house.

And, I fear, it won't be the last.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I spend the night awake, not because I fear my nightmares, although I am grateful to avoid them, even at the cost of my rest. I lay awake because I wonder how I might investigate my suspicions. It's clear that Theresa suspects foul play as well, and working for this family for fifteen years, she must surely have heard the same cries Oliver has.

I should have asked her about this yesterday, but I don't, and I don't plan to ask her today. I don't think she'll tell me. Her worry for Sarah was touching, but by the evening, it's clear that she won't look any further for the missing maid. Unlike me, she has the ability to avoid entangling herself in a mystery she isn't equipped to solve.

I still don't have that ability.

But who do I ask? I don't dare bother his Lordship. Cordelia might talk to me, but I don't want to add to her stress.

I am at my wit's end. Fortunately, I have a friend who makes a career out of solving mysteries. That career is on hold while he establishes himself in Boston, but Sean O'Connell is first brought to my attention as a private investigator, and he has proven to be a very effective one.

I go to the bathroom and dial his number, hoping that if I speak softly behind closed doors, the sound won't carry out of my room. He answers quickly.

"Mary? My God, how late is it over there?"

“So late that it’s early,” I reply. “Listen, I need your help.”

He is silent for a moment. Then he sighs. “Again, Mary?”

“Sean, I’m in no mood for your judgment,” I snap. “You haven’t had to hear a child complain of ghosts or watch an entire staff of servants quaking with fear for their missing maid.”

“So it’s a maid missing this time,” Sean replies. “Have you checked his Lordship’s bedroom?”

“This is no time for crass jokes. Sean, please. I’m serious.”

“So am I. You forget I lived in Britain for forty-two years. Trust me, there’s not a Lord or Lady in that House who hasn’t bedded every pretty maidservant they’ve ever had. Or ugly maidservant. Or manservant. It’s become a running joke in that country.”

“Well, it’s not a joke, and I fear that something worse than sex has happened to her.”

“And once again, it has to be you who finds out what.”

I rub my temples. “Are we really going to have this argument again?”

He sighs heavily. “No, we won’t. God knows I love wasting my time with you, but I’m a bit sore from the last time we wasted time.”

“Oh, go soak your head. Listen, I need you to look into Lord Blackwood’s history. Look into the history of the manor as well. Find out how many women have disappeared here.”

“A thousand-year-old castle in Northumberland? It might be easier to find out how many women have lived there who haven’t disappeared.”

“Sean—”

“All right, all right. You know I’m going to do it. Don’t get bloody pissy with me.” He sighs. “Tell me about this latest poor soul.”

“Her name was Sarah. I don’t know her last name. She went missing last night after taking the evening off to go on a date.”

There’s a pregnant pause before Sean says. “Really, Mary? Must I explain the birds and the bees to you?”

“I’ve already thought of that,” I reply, “but she hasn’t returned Mrs. Pemberton’s phone calls, and everyone says she would. I could see her being enamored and deciding not to come to work, but I can’t believe she would ignore multiple calls from people who care about her.”

“She would if she was having enough fun.”

“Will you please take this seriously?” I snap. “When have I been wrong before, Sean?”

There's another pause. That last remark must have finally convinced Sean of the seriousness of this situation because he uses a professional tone when he speaks again. "I'll look into this. It will take some time, but I can find information on Lord Edmund from Parliament records and go from there. Be patient, please. He's an Earl, and it's a delicate thing to investigate an Earl for wrongdoing. Even if he's innocent, it's a delicate thing to investigate wrongdoing in the vicinity of a high-ranking member of the peerage. In the meantime, please, please, please don't put yourself in

danger. You're very far from home in the house of the most powerful man within two hundred miles in any direction. The Blackwood family has a history that goes back to the time of the Romans, and that still means something in that part of the world."

"I'll be careful. It may be hard for you to believe, but I care for my charge, and I intend to be focused on his care more than on this mystery."

"Is that why you're calling me?" he challenges.

"Yes. I trust you. I know you'll do good work. I can step away now knowing that you're helping me."

"That's very sweet of you, Mary. I wish I could believe it."

I roll my eyes. "I was going to tell you how much I missed you now that my business is out of the way, but if you're going to be an arse—"

"I miss you too, Mary. I've gotten used to having someone else in my bed. It's rather cold out here all by myself."

I flush beet red. "That's not what I meant."

"Sure it is. I'm just brave enough to say it. But since you insist on being proper, I also miss our conversations over tea and the outings we take to the city."

"Well, thank you," I say drily. "It's nice to know I'm more than a warm blanket for you."

"Don't underestimate the value of a warm blanket. The winters are long there."

"Are you saying I should find someone else to keep me warm?"

“Honestly, Mary, if it keeps you from putting your life in danger over another bloody mystery, I’ll consider it the lesser of two evils.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “You’re far too young to be this grumpy, Mr. O’Connell.”

“You age me.”

“Like fine milk,” I retort. “Good night, Sean. If you’d like, you can throw the comforter in the dryer for twenty minutes so you can sleep with a warm blanket tonight.”

He hangs up without replying, and I laugh. It’s a truly fine thing, romance. I rather hope that Sarah has thrown caution to the wind and given herself wholly to some lucky lad.

But as the American saying goes, hope and five dollars will buy you a hamburger. It now falls to Sean to see if we can learn what truly happened to poor Sarah.

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I have broken a promise to stay out of mysteries so many times that I wouldn’t blame Sean for never trusting me again. I have no more success keeping this promise than I do any previous one, but I can’t be entirely blamed for that. The opportunity falls into my lap unasked for after breakfast that morning. It’s the weekend, and Oliver has no school. The day is unseasonably warm, and Lady Cordelia has decided to take him to the ocean for a walk along the shore. It seems she doesn’t fear Lord Edmund as much as my first impression suggests.

I plan to help Theresa with the chores since she is short one maid, but she asks for different assistance. “Miss Mary, I don’t mean to intrude, but could I ask you a

favor?”

“Of course! I am at your disposal today.”

“Could you run into town and pick up some cleaning supplies for me? I normally have one of the others do it as I don’t drive, but since Sarah is... absent... I need Franny and Matilda to help me with chores.”

An idea comes to my head. I don’t let it fully realize quite yet. Perhaps I am afraid it will show on my face. “Of course. What do you need?”

“I’ll make you a list. It’s not too much, and I’ll send you with money. His Lordship has a budget for this. There’s a car too.”

“He has a car for the servants?”

Theresa nods. “We have to purchase supplies from time to time, and his Lordship’s driver has to be at his Lordship’s beck and call. So he’s purchased a wagon for us to use when we need it. If you go to the garage, Willem will give you a key. Go to the market in Tarly. It’s the first village you come to driving south along this road. It’s a little farther than Clifton, but the shopkeeper there is more honest.”

She hands me the list, and I head to the garage for the car.

Willem hands me the key, frowning darkly. Not at me. I can see in his eyes that he is concerned for the missing maid.

“Willem,” I ask, “do you know anything about the young man Sarah was dating?”

Willem shakes his head. “I’m afraid not, Miss Mary. We try to keep our private lives to ourselves. Makes for less awkwardness at work.”

I purse my lips. I have worked in many different environments in my life. In not one of those environments have people refrained from sharing nearly every detail of their personal lives. “So you’ve heard nothing?”

Willem sighs. His dark frown fades to a look of dejection and remorse. "People here are taught to stay out of everyone's business. We're taught that it's better to focus on your own life and not worry about others. I've always thought life is better when people are concerned with themselves and not mixed up in things that don't concern them. Now..." His shoulders slump. "We all heard her say he was a kind and sweet young man. We just took her at her word. I suppose we should have looked deeper into it."

He straightens and takes a deep breath. “Anyway, the police have interrogated him. I overheard the inspector say that he has an alibi. It turns out she never met him at the theater.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“Just so. He waited for her for twenty minutes after the show started. The theater’s cameras have him standing in the lobby. Finally, he went home. He called her and texted her, and when she didn’t answer, he assumed she wasn’t interested in him anymore. So it looks like he’s not the killer. But someone is. Maybe if we weren’t so private, we might know who.”

His shoulders slump again. “Anyway, here’s the key. It’s in stall ten.” He tries for a smile but fails badly. “Have a good day, Miss Mary.”

He walks away, and I make my way to the car, my thoughts even more disturbed than previously. There must be someone I can speak to who will have a better idea of what happened to that poor girl.



The car is a late model of what an American would call a minivan. Hardly luxurious but more than adequate for the needs of a household servant.

It's only when I'm on the road to Tarly that my idea formulates in my head. I don't mention it to Theresa, but I actually know where Tarly is. I drove through it on my way to the manor. It's nine miles south of Blackwood Castle. The people there will surely be familiar with the goings-on at the manor. If anyone can confirm the potential history of disappearances here, it will be the townsfolk.

I reach the market fifteen minutes later. It's a charming little shop that is most accurately compared to an American general store. In the smaller towns of England and most of Europe, in fact, shopping is rarely completed at a single massive supermarket. Shoppers visit the dairy, the butcher, the grocer and the market. Perhaps this is because shopping is considered a social activity here as much as it is considered a chore or a task.

I find evidence of this in the little shop here in Tarly. The proprietor is a kindly, bespectacled man with a burly frame, wire rimmed sunglasses and a long white beard that reaches his chest. It would not be inaccurate to say he resembles Santa Claus in all of the best ways.

He talks with another English stereotype, a rough-looking, middle-aged fisherman with powerful arms underneath sleeves rolled to the elbows. He clenches a pipe between his teeth, and I'm quite sure it remains there whether he has tobacco to smoke or not.

It's not so much the men who interest me as the conversation I overhear. It seems I won't have much digging to do to hear what the town's understanding of Sarah's disappearance is.

"D'ye think they'll ever find the girl?" the fisherman asks in a thick Northumberland

accent.

“Doubt it,” the proprietor replies in an accent not quite as thick. “They never find the missing ones.”

“What d’ye think ‘e does with ‘em?”

The proprietor chuckles. “What d’ ye think ‘e’ does with ‘em?”

The fisherman scoffs and flexes his hands. The muscles in his forearm ripple. “I’d like to have a go at ‘im, I would. Teach ‘im to treat people like they’re cattle.”

“Have a go,” the proprietor encouraged. “‘E’s a high lord, he is. What d’ye think’ll happen to ye? Won’t make it five steps through the front door before you’re taken. Then you’ll be one of the disappeared.”

The two men notice me and fall silent. The fisherman pushes off of the counter and tips his cap to the proprietor. “See you later, Gavin.”

“Aye.”

The fisherman tips his cap to me, then walks out. The proprietor smiles and rings up my cart. “Ye’re new here.”

“Yes. I’m the new governess for Master Oliver Blackwood.”

Gavin stops still. He meets my eyes, and the fear in his expression disturbs me. He plays it off and says, “Well, don’t be puttin’ too much stock in what ye hear around Tarly, love. It’s all ghost stories, anyway.”

I hesitate. The prudent thing to do would be to leave and not pry any further.

But as poor Sean will attest, I am rarely prudent in these circumstances. “Forgive me,” I say, “but I’m worried for Sarah. That’s the maid who’s gone missing. If you know something, please—”

“I don’t know but one thing,” Gavin interrupts. “And that’s this: Sarah ain’t the first girl to go missing in that house. She won’t be the last. But there’s nothing we can’t do about that. Best not to meddle with the affairs of a high lord.”

He hands me my bag and says, “Have a good day.” His tone makes it clear he’s not interested in further conversation.

His advice is sound, but as I say before, I am not good at being prudent when justice is at stake.

And now I know for sure that I’m not alone in my suspicions. Something terrible is happening at that castle.

And it’s up to me to find out what and put a stop to it if I can.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I muse over what I've heard on the drive back to the manor. I can now be certain that Sarah's disappearance is not unique. I can also be reasonably sure that it was her screams I heard two nights ago. Oliver and I both heard those cries, and Theresa also suspects foul play. Lord Edmund's dismissiveness of Theresa's concerns combined with the townspeople's suspicions of him identifies him as a suspect in her disappearance, and, I fear, her murder.

And this wasn't the first time. Others have disappeared.

I realize my mistake and smack the steering wheel in frustration. I should have asked Gavin who else has gone missing. That would have given me somewhere else to look.

Then again, it's not likely he would have talked to me. He seemed decidedly unhappy with the fact that I overheard his conversation with the fisherman, and once he learned who I was, he shut down completely. Lord Edmund must indeed be as formidable as Sean suggested. The people here are terrified of him.

I feel awful for not looking harder when I hear Sarah's screams. I so easily dismiss them as a figment of my own imagination. If I'd kept searching after finding the basement empty, could I have found her, perhaps even saved her? Maybe not, but I might have at least learned what happened to her and taken steps to punish the guilty.

I have good reason to question my sanity, though. I've had trouble in the past with imagining things that aren't true. My old nightmare of Annie consists of a vision of me waking in a forest lit by moonlight filtered through clouds. The trees are all bare of leaves. Annie wears a nightgown. Her skin is pale and almost translucent, and she is always facing away from me. When she turns to me, her eyes are gone, their empty

sockets black holes that draw me inward until I wake screaming.

I haven't had that nightmare in months, thank God. But when it occurred frequently, I would often imagine I saw that image in paintings or that I saw that ghostly vision of my sister watching me out of the corner of my eye. It got to a point at my last job where I would have blackouts of several hours and awake not remembering what happened and unaware of the passage of time.

I don't admit this to anyone, but that's part of the reason I let go of my sister's mystery. The closer I get to an answer, the more damaging the toll on my psyche. When I lost her the first time, I spent eleven weeks involuntarily committed to a mental hospital. I remember almost nothing of my time there, but what I remember convinces me that it's not an experience I care to repeat.

So it's not too surprising that I believe the voice I hear calling for help the other night is a lingering remnant of the dream I have where my sister calls for help. I can't be blamed for not looking into the call further.

Tell that to Sarah.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair. Then a rush of emotion takes me, and I smack the steering wheel again. Damn it, I wanted so much to return to normal work. I didn't want to be involved in another mystery. I've gotten all the closure I need about Annie, and I'm too old to fight demons everywhere I go. I'm too old to chase ghosts.

But here I am again, the only person willing to chase that ghost, the only person willing to fight the demon. If there was someone else willing to fight for justice for Sarah and whoever else this house has claimed, maybe I could content myself with being a governess.

But until then, I must fight. Someone has to.

I reach the estate and park the car. I'm unsure where to go from here, but if I am committed to this mystery, I will be committed fully. Perhaps it's time to talk to Theresa alone and insist that she tell me what's going on in this house.

As I walk up the porch steps, I see something out of the corner of my eye. I glance up at a second-floor window, and my heart stops. Annie is staring at me from the window, the ghostly Annie of my nightmares. Her eyes are black holes, and they draw me inward where no light escapes.

I blink, and Annie is gone. In her place is the Lady Cordelia. A wave of relief washes over me, but that relief is short-lived when I take a closer look at her Ladyship.

Cordelia is fidgeting, tapping her thigh and turning her head from side to side in short, rapid tics. Her lips move, too, but I can't tell if she speaks aloud. I realize the longer I look that she is standing uncomfortably close to the window. The glass is closed, and the window itself is so recessed in the battlement that I feel it would be difficult if not impossible for her to accidentally fall through.

Still, the way she stands there twitching...

"Miss Wilcox?"

Lord Edmund's voice startles me. I jump and cry out a little. When I meet his eyes, they are narrow and shooting icy glares my direction.

I stammer, "M... My apologies, L... Lord Edmund."

"What the devil are you staring at?"

“I...”

I glance up at the window. Lady Cordelia isn't there anymore. I look back at Lord Edmund. “Nothing, my Lord. I simply lost my head in the clouds for a moment.”

“Hmm.”

He holds my gaze for a moment, and I feel the ice from his gaze fill me, freezing me to the spot. He could kill me right now, and I would stand motionless until the deed was done.

“My wife's health is poor,” he said. “She has a nervous affliction. It's common in sensitive, high-born ladies.”

I swallow and suggest, “Perhaps some rest would do her well, my lord.” I'm not sure what else to say.

“She gets rest enough,” he replied. “And I am quite capable of caring for her.”

“Yes, my lord,” I say quickly. “Of course.”

“I'll thank you to mind your business when it comes to her.”

“I... I had no intention of involving myself in your affairs, Lord Edmund.”

“Hmm.”

There is silence once more between us. My palms are sweaty, and my knees are beginning to shake. I wish desperately that Sean were in England right now. I would feel much safer knowing he could get to me within a few minutes if I needed him.

But he's not hear, and it doesn't matter what I wish. I am alone in this house, and as frightened as I am, I have every intention of involving myself in Lord Edmund's affairs, no matter what the consequences to me. I am compelled to involve myself.

"I'm sure the maidservants have shared their superstitions with you regarding this house," he continues. "Such legends occur in every old castle in Britain."

"I'm sure they do, my lord."

"You are, of course, too sensible to place any stock in them."

"Of course, lord Edmund."

"Hmm." He bows stiffly. "Good day, Miss Wilcox."

When he turns his eyes away from me, it's like a hand releases my heart. I feel a wave of relief, but unfortunately for me, that relief brings courage with it. He passes me on his way to the garage, and I turn and call after him, "Lord Edmund?"

He stops, hesitating a moment before turning around. "Yes?"

"I'm concerned about Sarah. She hasn't called yet. I worry that something may have happened to her. I'm sure her family is worried sick."

I pay careful attention to his reaction as I say this. His reaction tells me nothing, mostly because he doesn't react. His expression, bearing and tone of voice remain exactly as before when he replies, "I am looking into her whereabouts as we speak. You needn't burden yourself with that."

I bow. "Of course, my lord. Thank you."



He doesn't reply. He only turns and continues to the garage. I watch him walk and remain there watching until I see his car—a sedan that is far more luxurious and expensive than the minivan I drive earlier—pull onto the street and accelerate south.

I walk inside, feeling as though the shadow of the angel of death has just passed over me. He is heading south to Tarly. I wonder what he intends there? Will he visit the market? Will he ask Gavin if I was there and what I asked about?

I know this is paranoid, but Lord Edmund's behavior has done little to convince me that the accusations against him are groundless. And then there's poor Lady Cordelia. I understand a little better now the redness in her eyes and the exhaustion in her shoulders.

“Are you all right, Mary? You look like you've seen a ghost?”

I look up to see Theresa frowning at me with concern. I realize that I've been standing in the foyer for several minutes, lost in my own thoughts. I smile at her and say, “I'm all right. I just allowed my mind to run away with itself for a moment.” I hand her the bag of cleaning supplies.

Then I realize something important. “Where's Oliver? Did he not go out with the Lady Cordelia earlier?”

“He did. They returned early because the poor lad was coughing too much to enjoy himself. I made him a warm broth and some chamomile tea. He's in his room resting now.”

I sigh with relief, but also with heartache. I remember that his own mother died shortly after he was born. I don't like to think that Lord Edmund would harm his own sister, but if he did, would he stop there?

Would he harm his nephew as well?

I am grateful when Theresa has chores for me to complete. I need to give my mind a break. As always happens when I stumble onto a mystery, I have found more questions than answers.

I fear that those answers will be even more frightening than the questions.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

The next morning brings with it another surprise. I awake after a night blessed with easy sleep free of nightmares and head downstairs determined to learn more of the history of this house. I'll enjoy my breakfast and see if I can get Theresa to myself for a while to ask her about previous disappearances that she might know of. I know she'll resist talking to me, but I feel we are close enough now that I can convince her that it's safe to share her secrets with me.

I don't get the chance, though. When I arrive in the kitchen, I find Theresa talking to a tall, bearded man of around forty. He wears the uniform of a constable, and I realize when I see him that Lord Edmund has indeed enlisted help in learning what happened to Sarah.

Or help covering it up.

The constable frowns at me. "Who are you?"

Theresa answers for him. "That's Miss Wilcox," she says, "our new governess."

"When did she arrive?"

"A few days ago. Thursday."

"I see." The constable lifts his eyes to me. "I'll be with you in a moment, Miss Wilcox."

I blink. "All right. Um... His lordship expects breakfast at seven. Perhaps you two could use another room while I—"

“His Lordship can wait,” the constable replies.

His tone is brittle. My earlier belief that the constable is here on Edmund’s behalf changes. Perhaps the constable is here because he shares my own suspicions regarding Lord Edmund.

I bow slightly. “Of course, constable.”

I leave the kitchen and nearly collide with Franny and Matilda. The young maids have eyes as big as dinner plates. They grab my hands and practically drag me from the kitchen into the empty parlor.

“Did you see him?” Franny asks.

“The constable? Yes, I saw him.”

“Big as a horse, he is,” Matilda opines.

“We’re not here to talk about how fine he is,” Franny scolds. “He’s asking about Sarah.”

“Do you think he’ll find her?” Matilda asks. “Oh, I hope so.”

“Have you talked to him yet?” I ask Franny.

“Not yet. I only overheard the start of his conversation with Mrs. Pemberton.”

“Do you think she’s been taken by her beau?”

Franny doesn’t answer. They both stare at me, and a moment later, I realize they’re waiting for my response.

“No,” I reply honestly. “It seems the police have investigated, and Sarah never even reached the theater. They have the young man on camera waiting for her before giving up and returning home.”

Matilda’s eyes pop open. “Really? So she was taken before she even got to her date?”

“It seems that way.”

“It’s just terrible,” Franny says, shaking her head. “And with her being so young.”

“Is his Lordship aware that the inspector is here?” I ask.

"I should doubt it. Hargreaves has no love for his Lordship. Thinks he's an arrogant, stuffy aristocrat."

“He is, though, isn’t he?”

Matilda gasps at her friend. “Franny! You mustn’t say such things!”

They fall silent when the kitchen door opens. A grim Theresa walks out, her face a tight mask. The constable pokes his head out a moment later and fixes stern brown eyes on me. “Miss Wilcox? I’ll see you now.”

The two maids whisper as I make my way toward the kitchen. Theresa shoots me a knowing glance, but I have no idea what it is I’m supposed to know.

I enter the kitchen, and the constable offers his hand as soon as the door closes behind me. “Inspector Jacob Hargreaves, Scotland Yard.”

My eyes widen. So he’s not a constable. “Scotland Yard? Is the case that serious then?”

“The potential abduction and murder of an innocent subject of the Crown is always a serious affair.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Well, yes, but unless I’m mistaken, Scotland Yard rarely involves themselves until a crime is alleged.”

“A crime is most definitely alleged, Miss Wilcox. That’s why I’m here.”

“I see. Well, in that case, I am excited to have your help.”

“Why?”

I blink. “Is that not obvious?”

He doesn’t address that further. Instead, he asks, “What brings you to the Blackwood residence, Miss Wilcox?”

“As Theresa said, I am the new governess. I am charged with the care and education of Lord Blackwood’s nephew, Master Oliver.”

An indecipherable look crosses Hargreaves’ face when I say that. When it passes, he says, “And what is your impression of Lord Blackwood?”

I must be careful here. I want to help Inspector Hargreaves in any way I can, but I don’t want to put myself at risk. It will surely get around to Lord Blackwood that Inspector Hargreaves is talking with us if he doesn’t know already.

“I have only worked here for four days, Inspector, and during that time, I have had limited interaction with his Lordship.”

“And what is your impression of those interactions?”

I think for a moment. “I think his Lordship is very concerned with maintaining his image and the image of House Blackwood. I believe he takes his role in government seriously.”

“And his family?”

“Pardon?”

“Does he take his family seriously, or is it only his image and role in government that matter to him?”

I wonder what the source of this animosity might be. I wonder how many times Inspector Hargreaves has responded to rumors of a disappearance at Blackwood manor.

“I am not privy to His Lordship’s private life,” I reply. “So it’s difficult to answer that.”

Hargreaves sighs. He folds his arms and regards me for a moment. “You’re afraid of him.” It’s not a question.

I hesitate once more, but only briefly. I can’t let my fear get in the way of Sarah’s justice. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Hargreaves could use a gentler approach. He’s not doing well at easing me into this.

It’s not about you, I remind myself. “He is a very hard man, and very cold. At least it seems that way to me. He seemed... dismissive... of Mrs. Pemberton’s concerns when Sarah went missing. I have to confess, though, that I dismissed them as well.”

“We’ll get to you. So he was aware of Sarah’s disappearance shortly after she didn’t report to work.”

“Yes. Mrs. Pemberton knew something was wrong when Sarah didn’t show up for her shift. I understand that is unlike her.”

“Yes, she told me the same thing. Tell me, when did Lord Edmund report Sarah as missing?”

“I... I’m not sure, sir. Wouldn’t you know that answer better than me?”

He frowns and says sourly. “I would expect to know better, but unfortunately, Scotland Yard didn’t see fit to inform me until after the initial inspector determined that this case was more in line with my expertise than her own. Good on her for her honesty, I suppose. How has the Lady Cordelia reacted to this news?”

I think back to her in the window the day before and to Lord Edmund’s insistence that he can manage her health without interference from me. “I don’t know for sure, Inspector, but if I had to hazard a guess, I would say she’s handling it quite badly. She’s been depressed since Sarah’s disappearance.”

“Is she a happy woman otherwise, would you say?”

“No,” I admit. “I wouldn’t say.”

“What would you say?”

I think of my answer for a minute. I want to help Inspector Hargreaves, and I don’t mind if that puts Lord Edmund in an uncomfortable spot, but I don’t want to make trouble for Lady Cordelia. “I would say that she finds the life of a Lady trying. Lord Edmund is very active in the House of Lords from what I understand. That would put



a great strain on any marriage.”

Though it occurs to me as I say this that I haven’t seen any news media around. Typically famous politicians are unable to escape that sort of attention, but Lord Edmund hasn’t been harassed once since I’ve arrived. He doesn’t even have any personal security.

I find this very strange.

“And what of Master Oliver?” Hargreaves says. “How’s he getting on?”

There’s a hint of affection in the Inspector’s voice as he asks that. It seems young Oliver has stolen the hearts of all who know him.

“He’s a wonderful boy,” I gush. He’s stolen my heart too. “He’s very bright and sensitive and kind. It’s a pity about his health.”

Hargreaves darkens instantly. “Aye. It is. I’m sure his Lordship is quite broken up by it.”

I can no longer ignore the evidence right in front of me. “Forgive me, Inspector, but it appears that you bear some ill will toward his Lordship.”

He doesn’t reply right away. He narrows his eyes and looks at me. I can’t tell if his expression is cold or only searching. When a minute passes with no response, I say, “I apologize if I’ve offended you. As I said, I’m new here. This is all quite overwhelming for me.”

“Hmm.”

Hargreaves would probably not appreciate it if I told him that he reminds me of Lord

Edmund at the moment.

“He and I are not friends,” Hargreaves finally admits. “This is not the first time I’ve responded to a report of a woman missing from his house.”

I struggle to contain my excitement. If Hargreaves can tell me who else has gone missing, it will give me an angle to look into as I investigate this case. “Who else has gone missing?” I ask.

He hesitates before answering. I assume he’s trying to decide if it would be appropriate to answer that question. Finally, he nods. An odd look crosses his face before he smiles slightly and says, “Among others, there is the case of Alivia Blackwood, Lord Edmund’s sister and Master Oliver’s mother.”

I gasp, unable to hide my shock. So his mother did vanish from this house. My stomach turns. Did Oliver hear her cries for help when he was an infant? Is that the memory called up by Sarah’s own cries?

The door to the kitchen bursts open, and Lord Edmund strides in. A shadow crosses Inspector Hargreaves’ face. He nods stiffly. “Lord Edmund.”

“Jacob, what the devil is the meaning of this?” Lord Edmund thunders. “Could you not have called ahead?”

“Why? Would you have preferred more time to prepare?”

Lord Edmund’s eyes narrow. “I would have preferred a modicum of respect. I’m leaving for London in an hour, and I don’t appreciate that you’ve chosen now to poke your nose around my home.”

“Perhaps you’d prefer I didn’t interrogate your staff?”

“Don’t be bloody ridiculous, Jacob. Do your damned job. Stop trying to find ghosts where there are none. Talk to them if you wish. But you’re wasting your time. I’ve told you already. No one here murdered Sarah Collingswood.”

He storms from the room, and Inspector Hargreaves smiles slightly. I can tell that he believes he’s achieved some sort of victory, though what that victory might be, I’m not sure.

“Thank you, Miss Wilcox,” he says. “That will be all.”

I incline my head, then walk from the room. As I proceed upstairs, I hear him call Franny into the kitchen.

I reflect on what Lord Edmund says to the Inspector. Stop trying to find ghosts where there are none .

But there are ghosts here, Lord Edmund. And they cry out for justice.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

“Help me! Help me, Mary!”

“Where are you, Annie?”

“Help me!”

I sob and run to my sister's room. She's not there. The room is thrashed. Annie's model horses are shattered on the ground, and her fifth-grade school picture is on the floor, the frame broken, the print torn. My stomach turns when I see the holes burned into the eye sockets.

“Mary!”

“Annie! Tell me where you are!”

I wish I could scream for help from my parents, but they won't help me. Father helps before, but he's lost his heart now. He's given up on us, on Mother, and on Annie and me. As for Mother? She's almost certainly the reason for Annie's screams.

I recall the flat look in Mother's eyes when she coaxes Annie to burn her hands on the stove. I remember the sneer she wears when she holds Annie's head underwater. I remember the way her lips pull back from her teeth when she attacks us with the letter opener.

That was the last time Father saved us. I don't know why, but I am sure now that he would let her kill us if it happened again.

“Mary! Please help me!”

“Where are you?”

Tears stream down my face as I rush to the bathroom. The bathroom is empty, but my stomach turns when I see a bloody handprint on the mirror.

Oh God. “Annie!”

A shriek fills my ears, and I return one of my own as I sprint downstairs. The living room is also thrashed. Father’s grandfather clock is fallen and exploded, springs and gears everywhere scattered among the glass.

The kitchen is empty, too, and when I touch the stove in an absurd urge to satisfy my morbid curiosity, I find it cold. Damn it, where is she?

“Mary! Help me! Help me!”

I run outside and rush around my house, but I see no sign of her anywhere. I hear her voice on the wind calling for help, but I can’t tell which direction it’s coming from. It flows around me, swirling with the rain that pours down, soaking my face and drenching my clothing.

“Mary! Help me, Mary! She’s going to kill me! Help me! MARY, HELP ME!”

“Where are you!” I shout, the effort tearing my throat.

I sink to my knees and sob, chest heaving as I gasp and retch with fright.

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I sit bolt upright, and once more, I feel a curse bubbling up. This time, I don't stifle it.

"Fuck! God damn it! Bloody shit!"

I bury my head in my hands and weep softly. The vulgarity of that outburst only shows me how terrified I am. I am not a vulgar person, and I only rarely curse. It's only when my emotions are on the edge of collapse that I'll use such epithets.

I wish Sean were here. If he were, he could hold me and tell me that everything's okay. He could remind me that Annie survived our household and for at least some time managed to escape the terror of living in our family. She was loved for a while and found happiness for a while. If nothing else, she found freedom.

"It's only a dream," I whisper. "It's only a dream. It's only a dream, it's only a dream, it's only a—"

"Help!"

Once more, the cry is faint, barely audible. Once more, it's unmistakable. I sob, this time with frustration, and roll out of bed. What's happening now? Who else is Lord Edmund butchering?

It's a testament to my frayed mental state that, once again, I feel no fear when I leave the room. Lord Edmund could appear in front of me with a bloody knife and a psychopath's grin, and I am sure the first words out of my mouth would be chastisement for interrupting my sleep.

I hear the cry again, and this time, I don't assume I know where it's coming from. I stand quietly and try to follow the sound.

When I hear it a third time, there's no mistaking that it comes from below me. I head

downstairs, and then, because I don't hear a fourth cry yet, I check the basement, just in case. Still empty.

The cry comes again, and it's above me this time. So it's on the first floor.

I return to the first floor and quickly move through the foyer, the parlor, the kitchen and the dining rooms. There's no one there. Where is she?

Where are you, Annie?

I shiver, and the cry sounds again. "Help me!"

It's coming from above me. I stand still for a moment, confused. Could it be coming from one of the maids' rooms? Is someone else having a nightmare?

I climb the stairs, and the cry comes from above me still when I reach my own floor.

I look up and it occurs to me for the first time that there are more floors in this castle. Theresa only shows me the first two, but there is a third floor above me and then the battlement on top with an extra floor in each turret.

It occurs to me for the first time just how large this castle is. Not only have I only seen the first two floors, I've also only seen the south wing of the castle. There are three more wings and countless rooms to explore. How is it that I've never looked through them before? In all of my previous jobs, I've made it a point to explore every nook and cranny in the house in which I'm employed. Why do I neglect to do that for this one home only?

I climb the third floor and enter to find it twice as tall as the previous two. Chandeliers hang from the vaulted ceiling, and they flicker when I flip the light switch. The floor is clean, but the furnishings and tapestries appear old, almost

ancient. I wonder if they are the original décor of the castle.

There are more suits of armor like the ones below, but while the armor on the second floor is polished and smooth, the armor here is rough and pitted with rust. The statues seem to glare at me as I walk past, listening for the cry.

I hear it again, ahead of me. I walk past portraits of former lords Blackwood. The resemblance is eerie. They could almost be portraits of Lord Edmund in different outfits.

It's the eyes that frighten me the most. They are all that piercing ice blue, and they all sit above the dark frown Lord Edmund wears at all times. Sometimes, the portraits are in profile and sometimes they stare directly at the viewer. Like the suits of armor, they seem to glare at me as I hurry past.

There are no doors on this side of the castle. I find that odd. Was this floor simply meant as a shrine for the former lords? I suppose that's not so odd after all. Most feudal castles had something similar, but usually that is a crypt in the basement, not the top floor of the castle.

I round the corner and see a door at the very end of the long hallway that spans the east wing. I am reminded uncomfortably of my dream a few nights ago when I encounter the single door in the false-green field of grass.

I know what I found behind that door. I know what I will find behind this door.

“Help me!”

The cry is louder now. I summon my courage and rush forward. There is no specter behind that door but a living, breathing, terrified woman who needs help. I will do what I can.



I reach the door and throw it open without further hesitation. I don't give myself time to be frightened. Let what danger may come have its chance with me. I will fight to save whoever it is that needs rescue.

There's no one in the room. The room itself is a vast library. The furniture here is modern and matches the furniture downstairs. The shelves span two walls and reach to the top of the vaulted ceiling, and they are filled with hundreds of volumes of books, perhaps thousands, ranging in age from Medieval illuminated manuscripts to modern paperbacks. There's even a cabinet filled with scrolls protected behind glass.

There is no sign that anything has been disturbed, no sign of a struggle at all. The only sign that something is amiss is a window that is thrown open to the night. A storm rages outside, and it's the first time I realize that there is a storm. Either the castle walls are too thick to permit the noise, or I am too focused on the cries of this latest victim to notice.

I hear the cry again and walk to the window. The night is black. Rain whips my face and drenches my clothing. Could it be that my dreams truly are prophetic?

Lighting strikes, shattering the sky with a crack of thunder that sounds disturbingly like the shriek of a woman. The brief moment of illumination is enough to show me that there is no one below, no one in sight for hundreds of yards past this window. No blood, no trampled Earth, no body.

I sigh and pull the window shut. When I latch it, the sound is almost completely muted. It seems the castle is well insulated.

I sit on one of the chairs near the window. It is already soaked from the open window, so I don't mind that I'm staining the leather.

I look around and take more thorough stock of my surroundings. This room is clearly

in regular use. It is clean, but not only clean. Other than the two chairs soaked by the rain, the furniture is oiled, and the carpet pristine. The shelves are impeccably organized, at least at a glance, and unless the first lord Blackwood had access to the 2010 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, it's a safe bet that the current Lord Blackwood uses this room regularly.

I hear no more cries. It seems the sound truly was only the wind this time.

Finally, I sigh and trudge back to my room. Rather than glare at me, the armor and portraits on the walls seem to mock me. Look at the paranoid governess. Chased the wind all the way to an open window.

Well, at least I closed the window so the rain didn't threaten his Lordship's library. That would have been a terrible loss. Some of those books are hundreds of years old.

I hear the cry a final time as I return to my bed.

Help me!

Even knowing it's not real, tears come to my eyes. "I can't. I'm sorry, Annie."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I sleep again after my ordeal, but I am far from rested when I trudge downstairs in the morning. Theresa, as usual, is in the kitchen. She looks just as haggard as I am.

“Morning, Mary,” she says. “Did the storm keep you up as well?”

I chuckle bitterly. “You could say that.”

"Aye. The North Sea is a cruel mistress. Whatever gods rule, it must delight in tormenting those who choose to live here." She sighs. "But we still live here."

“I don’t mind spiting the gods,” I say, helping myself to some of the tea she’s made.

She laughs. “I’ll drink to that. Spite the gods.”

We sip our tea, and I look pensively down at the cup. I need to talk to someone about my experiences last night. I’ve had poor luck finding friends in the past, but I suppose Theresa will have to do for now.

“I thought I heard Sarah screaming for help last night,” I tell her.

“Aye. So did I.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Did you?”

"Aye. Trick of the wind, of course, but it chilled me, nonetheless. Sometimes it's Sarah I hear, sometimes it's another. Sometimes, it's my own mother, screaming as she did before the illness took her."

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. "Better the illness takes her than that it tortures her for the rest of her life. Anyway, that was nineteen years ago. The point is that these storms find the deepest fears you have and rip them to the front of your mind whether you want them or not."

I scoff. "That’s true."

She lifts an eyebrow. "Was Sarah’s loss your biggest fear then?"

“No. Just the most recent.”

She waits, eyebrow still lifted. I sip more of my tea and try to think about the consequences of telling her more than I already have. Something tells me it would be better not to share anything about my personal life, but I'm so tired and so frustrated and so alone. All of the old memories that plagued me, the nightmares I thought I'd overcome, have all come back in force.

And there’s that need again, that compelling to solve mysteries, to uncover hidden truths, to seek justice for those to whom justice is denied. It won’t release me no matter how hard I try.

And I can’t bear this burden alone.

“I lost my sister,” I tell her. “Thirty years ago.”

She nods. “Those tragedies never truly let us go, do they?”

"No. They don't." I sip more of my tea. "She didn't die. I thought she did for a long time. But recently, I learned that she faked her own death. Or rather, she disappeared and did nothing to stop us from thinking she had died. She moved from Boston to

Monterey, California and lived there for several months, nearly a year, before leaving again."

"What happened to her after that?"

"I don't know. I stopped looking for her." I finish my tea and set the cup down with a sigh. "It just hurt. To know that she was alive all this time, but she didn't want me to know."

"Were you two close?"

"I thought we were. I suppose that feeling was one-sided."

A lump forms in my throat. Before now, I was certain that I had forgiven Annie for her decision, certain, in fact, that there was nothing to forgive.

But thinking of the way her departure has affected me, the nightmares I've suffered, the brushes with insanity I've endured, the inescapable compulsion to fight for those who have disappeared or whose deaths have been brushed under the rug even when doing so places me in mortal danger... No, I haven't forgiven her. She suffered, yes, but I was not the cause of her suffering, and while I was never a perfect sister, I was far better than to deserve the wound she tore from me when she left.

She escaped, but there is no escape for me.

Theresa says nothing. She simply pulls me into an embrace and holds me. We are not yet close enough that I would ordinarily accept such a gesture, but I am alone here, far from the only person I am close with, and I have learned that I am not yet recovered from my sister's departure the way I thought I was.

And once more, I am embroiled in mystery.

She releases me a moment later, and I offer her a smile. “Thank you. I guess I haven’t moved on as well as I thought I had.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. You’re a good woman, Mary. It’s your sister who should be sorry. I’m sure she had her reasons for leaving her life behind, but that’s no excuse for the pain she caused you. I hope she suffered. I hope she lived to regret hurting you like that.”

I appreciate the sympathy, but the venom in her voice is a little disquieting, and while I am angry with Annie at the moment, I don’t particularly enjoy hearing a stranger disparage her. I pour some more tea and change the subject.

“Last night, when I heard the cries, I followed them. I think... I guess a part of me wondered if Sarah had somehow come to harm here in the castle.”

“Aye. Inspector Hargreaves thinks that as well.”

“You don’t agree?”

Theresa frowns. “I think it’s best not to meddle in the affairs of high lords.”

“You’ve said that twice now.”

“Twice to you, but many a time before.”

“But what about Sarah? What about the others who have gone missing?”

Her frown deepens. “Who told you about the others?”

“Inspector Hargreaves told me that Alivia disappeared from this same castle.”

Theresa sighs. "There have been rumors. There always are. Whether they're true or not is another thing entirely. Perhaps they are, and perhaps they aren't. When I say it's not good to meddle in the affairs of high lords, I think of what can practically be done to change things. Unfortunately, when the person in question is an Earl of the House of Lords, the answer is not much. Not from the ordinary folk, anyway. Now Hargreaves, if he has years, more likely decades, and consistent support from the Yard, he might be able to do something. If there's something needs to be done, mind you. I'm not at all convinced that Lord Edmund is the monster people make him out to be. But if he is, there's naught you or I can do but get ourselves hurt. Won't affect his Lordship at all."

I purse my lips and process what she's just said. There's nothing really wrong with it. She has simply adopted the attitude I wish I could have. And she did try. She talked to His Lordship and reached out to Sarah. Someone must have alerted the authorities, and it's a fair bet that Theresa is the one who did. She's just willing to accept when there's no more she can do.

I am not.

"Anyway, I thought I heard my cries last night, so I went to investigate them. I followed them to the third floor of the castle."

"The third floor? There's nothing up there but old paintings and his Lordship's library."

"Exactly. I went into the library and found the window flung wide open."

Theresa's eyes widen. Then she sighs. "Oh, bother. Was the furniture ruined?"

I blink. "I... possibly the two chairs by the windows."

She sighs again and rubs her face with her hands. "I'll need to order new ones then. And possibly a new rug for the floor." She shakes her head. "His Lordship is a very fastidious man in all areas save that he can't remember to close his damned library window when he leaves. I've had to chase birds, bats and moths from that room I don't know how many times. Now he's left it open during a storm."

"I see."

I frown and sip my tea. I don't know why I react this way. Theresa has provided a perfectly reasonable explanation for what happens. It would even explain why the cries of the wind were audible from my room despite the insulation of the castle's thick stone walls.

Theresa herself says as much. "Well, we know why the wind was howling so much last night. I suppose we have you to thank for the few hours of peace we had later in the night."

I smile briefly. "Yes, I closed the window."

"Good for you. Not that it'll save us much damage."

She pours herself some more tea and adopts a pensive look. It's my turn to lift an eyebrow and wait for her to speak.

She finally sips her tea and says, "Mary, I'm not suggesting we meddle, but... Hell, I don't even know if it means anything."

I try to control my excitement. "What? What is it?"

She sips more of her tea and looks at the door as though checking to make sure no one else is entering the kitchen. "Well... You're aware that Lady Cordelia is not Lord



Edmund's first wife, yes?"

I can't quite control my reaction to that news. "No. I wasn't."

"Well, she is. Lord Edmund had another wife, Evelyn. Married for twenty-three years, they were. In fact, they were married for longer than Lady Cordelia was alive when she married his Lordship. Then, less than a year later, he's married to Lady Cordelia."

"What happened to her?"

She chuckles. "Guess."

A chill runs down my spine. At the same time, my heart leaps. I may be close to the answer to this mystery. "She disappeared?"

"She did. She just woke up and vanished one day. I came to bring her breakfast in bed—she liked her breakfast in bed—and she was gone. We looked all over for her, but we couldn't find her."

There was a big fuss over it. Made the papers and everything. Locals eventually found her on the wrong side of White Cliff near the ocean. Dead, of course."

A shriek splits the air, and Theresa flinches, dropping the teapot. It shatters on the floor, and we stand stock still in the mess, eyes wide and spines stiffened. Theresa looks at me. "Did you hear—"

"Help me!"

There is no mistaking the reality of that cry or the owner of the voice making the cry. The Lady Cordelia is screaming for help.

We sprint upstairs and rush to her room, moving faster than I would have thought possible for our ages. I reach the room first and catch a glimpse of Lady Cordelia in her bathroom, kicking and clawing at the air, shrieking for help. The sight is so shocking that I am frozen for a moment.

Theresa pushes past me and wraps Lady Cordelia in a bear hug. “All right, love,” she says soothingly. “It’s all right. We’re here.”

“The ghost!” Lady Cordelia cries, pointing at her mirror. “There was a ghost in the mirror! There was... there was... a... ghost.”

“Shh... It’s all right, love.”

“Aunt Cordelia?”

I snap out of my shock and rush to Oliver, who stands in the doorway, pale with fright. I scoop him up in my arms and carry him from the room. “Your aunt is all right,” I tell him. “She’s just had a shock. Mrs. Pemberton’s going to help her calm down.”

“Is she okay?” he asks, his voice wavering.

“She’s okay. It was only a nightmare.”

He wraps his arms around me, clinging tightly. I hold him just as tightly, keenly aware of how fast my heart is beating.

Lady Cordelia claims to have seen a ghost. Twice now, I am certain I heard one. Thrice, a woman, has gone missing from this house under mysterious circumstances. I do not believe in ghosts, not truly, but I do believe that Lady Cordelia’s outburst was prompted by more than just superstition.

Something is haunting this house.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I make breakfast for Oliver while Theresa tends to Lady Cordelia. Oliver asks several times how his aunt is doing and if he can go see her. It's touching to see how worried he is, but I am worried myself, and that fear dominates my thoughts.

Just yesterday, she was standing in front of her window, staring outside and muttering to herself like an insane woman. I could understand how the stress of this environment would get to her, but considering what I've learned so far, I can't believe that there's no basis to her fears. She couldn't have seen a ghost, but if she knows about what's happening here...

That thought hits me like a freight train. What if Lady Cordelia does know what's going on? It's tiring to be married to a lord, surely, far more tiring to be married to a murderer. Could she be aware of her husband's habits?

I must be careful not to assume. Lord Edmund is the most likely suspect, but I don't know that for sure. I've been wrong in the past when I assume the most likely candidate to be the murderer.

I must learn more. I need to understand the history of this house. Only when I am fully aware of everything that's happened here can I form any solid conclusions.

Theresa returns downstairs just as Oliver finishes his breakfast. Oliver immediately turns to her. "Is aunt Cordelia all right? Can I go see her?"

"She's resting right now, dear," Theresa says. "She's all right. She's only had a fright. A nightmare that lingered upon waking."

Oliver frowned. I can tell he won't be satisfied until he can see his aunt and verify with his own two eyes that she's alive and well.

I meet Theresa's eyes, and her expression makes me fear that she isn't well.

"I just..." Oliver begins. "I..."

His lips tremble. I believe he's about to cry, but an instant later, he begins to cough. This fit is not like the others. They are loud, horrible, whooping sounds that shake the poor child's body as though tearing him apart from the inside. I rush to his side. "Oliver? Are you all right?"

It's truly incredible how our first instinct upon any sign of distress is to ask a question which has an obvious answer. I wonder if that question has ever been asked when it wasn't clear that the person questioned was not all right.

He gasps, trying to catch his breath. "I'm..."

That's all he gets out before he coughs again. The coughs are so powerful he nearly slides from his chair. I steady him and tell Theresa, "Bring some tea, please. Chamomile and peppermint."

"Right away, Mary," Theresa says.

The poor woman's face is white as snow. In the span of an hour, she has seen her mistress nearly prostrate with terror and the heir to the family unable to breathe due to illness. On top of that, her master is the primary suspect in a string of disappearances. I wouldn't blame her for fearing the end of House Blackwood is approaching rapidly.

Oliver gasps, grimaces, and this time is able to catch his breath.

But the fit has weakened him. He takes a puff from his inhaler, but that only helps a little. He trembles in my arms, and when I ask if he needs a blanket, he nods weakly.

I go to his room for a blanket, and when I return, Theresa is helping him drink tea. A touch of color returns to him when he sips, but his eyes are heavy-lidded and sit above dark circles. Theresa gives me a pleading look, and I make an executive decision.

“There will be no school today,” I tell him. “You need rest. I will find some documentaries so you’ll receive some education. Perhaps the latest nature documentary the BBC released. Do you like animals?”

Oliver nods. “There’s an ocean one I’ve wanted to watch.”

“We’ll start with that one, then.”

He gives me a weak smile. “Will you sit with me?”

“Of course I will. Finish your tea. I’m going to speak to Miss Theresa for a moment.”

He nods and lifts the cup to his lips. I take Theresa’s arm and lead her to the kitchen. When we’re alone, I ask, “How is Lady Cordelia? Really?”

She shakes her head. “She’s resting now. The poor woman wouldn’t stop insisting that she saw a ghost in her mirror. She claims she’s seen one ever since Sarah went missing. Said the cries weren’t the storm but Sarah begging for help.” She wrings her hands. “I fear for her, Mary, I do. She’s... well, she’s so delicate. Living here in this old castle with a stern old Lord and now there’s a girl missing. I’m just worried that it’s too much for her constitution to take.”

I take a moment to digest this. I am also concerned for Lady Cordelia, but I must

think of Oliver first. “For today, we’ll let both of them rest. Let’s hope by tomorrow that Lady Cordelia is well enough to see Oliver, but...”

I leave the rest unsaid, but Theresa understands. She nods slowly. “Of course, Mary. I’m sure they’ll be fine. Summer’s comin’ round. Warmer days and brighter skies. It always helps.”

She doesn’t sound convinced. Quite frankly, I’m not convinced either.

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Oliver falls asleep shortly after I set him up in bed. I leave the movie playing, partly to soothe him and partly to conceal my voice.

I call Sean, and when he answers, he says, “I’m glad you called. I was actually about to call you.”

“What have you learned?”

“Well, this maid who’s disappeared wasn’t the first woman to go missing from Blackwood Manor. I don’t suppose she’s been found?”

“No. No one’s heard from her.”

I leave out the part about the cries for help. I’m still not convinced those cries are genuine and not my imagination. If there’s somewhere in this castle where women are being kept, I still haven’t found it.

“I’m not surprised. It turns out that there’s a long-standing legend in Northumbria about Blackwood Castle.”

My eyes widen. “A legend?”

“Yes indeed. It dates back all the way to the time of the fifth Earl, Lord Thomas Blackwood. It seems Lord Thomas was urged to marry his cousin, the Lady Rowena, Countess of Lancashire. Unfortunately, the marriage wasn’t a happy one. The countess made her disdain for Lord Thomas known far and wide and was renowned for taking lovers in a bedroom in one of the castle turrets so that all could see her profaning her vows.”

“Goodness.”

“Not the word I would use. Well, Lord Thomas eventually had enough. He carried the Lady Rowena to the top of the castle and threw her from the wall.”

I gasp. “Good God.”

"Again, not the word choice I would have made. Lord Thomas was acquitted, primarily because he was a good friend of the Duke of Lancaster and officially because it was known far and wide that he was a cuckold, and in those days, it was considered just that a philandering woman should be killed for her transgressions. Not by being thrown from a battlement, but still.

“Here’s where the story becomes interesting. Lord Thomas married again after the Lady Rowena’s death. Five times, in fact.”

“And did all five of those women meet their fate at the base of the castle wall?” I ask.

“No one knows.”

A shiver runs through me. I can see what Sean is getting at. “So that is when the disappearances began.”



“Yes. All five marriages lasted less than a year. All five women disappeared and were never seen again.”

“And Lord Thomas was allowed to continue murdering?”

“That’s the next interesting part. Lord Thomas swore up and down that he had no idea what was happening to his wives. He insisted that he had nothing to do with these disappearances. In fact, he became increasingly paranoid and convinced that Lady Rowena’s spirit was taking vengeance on him for murdering her. After his last wife died, he went mad. He raved that Rowena was a vindictive spirit hellbent on tormenting him. He ran himself through with his sword, and when that didn’t kill him quickly enough, he stabbed himself in the eye with his own dagger.”

I can’t think of an epithet to match that crime. I glance at Oliver to make sure he’s still sleeping, then say, “And the disappearances? Did they continue?”

“Off and on. There are a total of nineteen others over the next four hundred years.”

“That’s more than one disappearance per earl.”

"On average, yes, but there were a few earls who never suffered a tragedy and some who suffered several. Our current lord Edmund has in fact seen three women disappear in his home. Before this maid, there was his first wife, Lady Evelyn, and before her, his sister, Lady Alivia."

“Yes, I’d heard of those.” I frowned. “I don’t believe in curses, Sean.”

“Really? That surprises me. I thought you would jump all over such a superstition.”

“When have I ever suggested that the supernatural was responsible for anything?” I scold. “No, I think we have a very human culprit. I want you to look deeper into Lord

Edmund. If he's covered up past sins, then there will be some evidence of it that can prove his guilt."

"If he's covered it up, then by definition, there will be no evidence."

"No one can completely cover up such an action. Dig deep. Talk to people. Find people who have the courage to be honest."

"I can find conspiracy theories everywhere. I can't guarantee evidence."

I sigh in irritation. "Find what you can, Sean."

He returns a frustrated sigh of his own. "I don't suppose I can convince you to just leave this alone and let the authorities handle it?"

"Did the authorities find Lady Evelyn's murderer? Or Lady Alivia's? Or were they both brushed under the rug because of Lord Edmund's influence?"

As I say that, I think of Inspector Hargreaves. He clearly has no intention of brushing anything under the rug. I don't say that to Sean, though. Best not to give him more ammunition.

He sighs again. "I'll do what I can. Please be careful. I'm not there to save your life like I was the past two times." He pauses, then asks, "Should I fly out to you?"

"No. The last time you did that, the killer deduced that the two of you and I were together. I would rather keep you as an ace up my sleeve in case of emergencies."

"Very well. But be careful," he insists. "I don't know if Lord Edmund is behind what's happening in that house, but whatever it is, it's still happening. I don't want to find out that you're the next one missing."

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Good.” He pauses for a moment. “I miss you.”

A touch of warmth cascades over the ice in my chest. “I miss you too.”

We hang up, and I take a deep breath and release it slowly. It seems this family has a history.

Now, we must determine how far the apple fell from the tree.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

Oliver remains in bed for the rest of the day. Theresa makes him chicken soup for lunch and a hearty beef stew for dinner with liberal amounts of tea made with lemon and honey. The warm liquid keeps his cough at bay, but he is still tired.

During one of his periods of wakefulness, I ask him how he likes living with his aunt and uncle.

He shrugs and says, "It's all right. They take good care of me, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

He shrugs again. "It's lonely sometimes being here all the time. I miss my friends at school. They send me emails, but it's not the same as being able to see them."

"They don't visit?"

"They aren't allowed to. Uncle Edmund doesn't want his house overrun with children."

I stifle a frown. "Perhaps your uncle will allow you to visit some of them over the summer."

He brightens a little at the thought. "I hope so. It'll be warmer then, and Aunt Cordelia says that warm fresh air is good for my lungs. Uncle Edmund doesn't agree, but I do feel better when I'm outside." His brow furrows in concern. "Is Aunt Cordelia really all right?"

“Of course she is,” I tell him, hoping the lie sounds more genuine to him than to me.  
“Just like you, she’s tired. She needs rest.”

He looks down and plays with his fingers.

“What is it, Oliver? What’s wrong?”

He shrugs again. “It’s just... He told me mum went crazy before she left.”

“Who?”

“Uncle Edmund. He told me that my mother wasn’t fit to take care of me, and it was a good thing for me that I ended up with him.”

I can’t restrain myself this time. “That’s a cruel thing to say about someone’s mother.”

He looks away. “If it’s true, is it cruel? I know that some mothers do go insane, and they harm their children. Perhaps if she hadn’t disappeared, she would have harmed me.”

He’s not wrong, but I have serious doubts about lord Edmund’s side of the story in this case. “You needn’t worry about that. You’re in a safe place now with people who care about you.”

He lowers his eyes and plays with his fingers again. “I don’t know if uncle really cares about me. I think he’s only caring for me because it’s his duty.”

The proper response, I suppose, would be to insist that Oliver is wrong, that his uncle loves him very much. I don’t believe I could convince Oliver of this lie, though, so I tell him something I can convince him of, something that is true.

“I care for you, Oliver. Miss Theresa cares for you. Lady Cordelia cares for you. You are surrounded by people who love you, and I don’t care if your uncle is the King of England. We will see to it that you are properly taken care of.”

He smiles softly, but it doesn’t last long. “I hope Aunt Cordelia is all right. I couldn’t bear to lose her. She’s the only real mother I’ve ever known.”

I squeeze his hand and say nothing else. Repeating myself here won’t help, so I only hold his hand and show him that I will be here for him, no matter what.

Meanwhile, I pray that I can find the ghost that plagues this house and bring it to rest. I am no longer fighting only for justice but for the health and happiness of a little boy who risks losing the small safety net he has.

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There’s another storm that night. This time, the cries are louder. I hear no words, but the wailing I hear sounds unlike any howl of wind or crack of thunder I’ve ever heard. What could possibly cause the storm to sound so much like the fearful and pained wailing of a young woman?

My own worries are far too intense to afford me sleep. I am not young anymore. I will soon need rest. If I endure another night without sleep, I will drive to the pharmacy in town and purchase some sleeping aids.

But tonight, I am awake, and the tea I drink gives me enough energy to overcome the physical exhaustion. I climb the stairs once more, heading directly to the library.

As I suspect, the window is open again. I close them, and then survey the damage. The leather chairs have already cracked from the previous bout with a storm, and a soft musty smell tells me they’ve already begun to mildew. They will need

replacement.

I can't do anything about that tonight, but I can bring a towel and some air freshener. I will mop up the water blown in from the storm and spray some scent on the chairs so the mildew doesn't overwhelm the room.

I retrieve the necessary supplies and return to the library. The storm outside continues to howl, but with the window closed, those howls sound like actual wind, rain and thunder rather than the shrieks of a girl in mortal peril.

As I clean, I try to take a practical approach to this problem. There is precious little I can do myself. This is an Earl's castle, and even in times like this, propriety must be followed. If I am caught snooping, the servants will not defend me. Even Theresa will do no more than shake her head and lament that I meddled in the affairs of high lords against her advice.

I will have to rely heavily on Sean. He can move more freely than I without fear that he'll suffer the wrath of Lord Edmund. Perhaps he has to be careful, but he's out of the earl's reach.

The downside to that is that Sean is on the outside looking in. The absence of media presence here indicates just how effectively Lord Edmund is at concealing his private life from the outside world. Even Inspector Hargreaves hints at the difficulty he faces investigating these disappearances. Sean is shrewd and very skilled, and I have no doubt that he will find information I can use, but it will take him a long time, and it might not be complete enough for me to act on. If I am to determine the truth of these disappearances, then I must act, even if it puts me at risk.

"No!"

The wailing cry startles me so badly that I shriek and drop the mop handle. It falls to

the floor, making a noise like the crack of a rifle.

My heart pounds as I listen for a repeat of the call. There is no one in the room, and I hear no footsteps outside. Could the wind be playing tricks on me again?

“No!”

That one is a little louder. It seems to come from behind the walls, but where?

I look outside, checking the hallway in both directions. There’s no one. The cries appear to have silenced as well.

I close the door softly. It must have been the storm again. Pull yourself together, Mary.

I listen for a few minutes more. Nothing.

I am somewhat disquieted by this experience, but I’m not ready to leave just yet. I approach one of the bookcases that line the walls. This one appears exclusively devoted to religious texts.

Perhaps religious is not the right word. Spiritual. Borderline occult in some cases. Not so borderline in a few others. There are copies of kabbalistic texts and grimoires, including the Key of Solomon and the Ars Goetia . There are Hindu texts that deal with eastern mysticism and esotericism and on one shelf, modern texts of occult secrets designed to enhance one’s life in the areas of wealth, influence and sexual pleasure.

The library has hundreds of texts, and I shouldn’t draw too many conclusions about this one. After all, he also has a case dedicated to scientific tomes, so it’s not as though this case is evidence that lord Edmund is a spiritualist himself.



Still, I can't pull my eyes away. One shelf—the one at eye level to me—contains such titles as *Capturing the Soul*, *The Essence of Control*, and *Mystical Techniques for Dominating the Female Will*.

I pull that one from the shelf and glance through it. It is as horrible a book as it sounds and essentially consists of advice by which men may guarantee that their women are willing to do whatever their men want them to do in bed.

Still, horrible as it is, there's nothing in that first glance that I find helpful. In fact, I'm not really sure why I'm looking at these books to begin with. I won't find anything here that will help me in my investigation. I already suspect lord Edmund of being abusive. I won't learn what happened to Sarah, or to the other two women, and I won't learn anything that will help me prove lord Edmund's guilt or perhaps point toward another possible killer.

Still, I browse through the titles. The collection is extensive, as are all of lord Edmund's collections. The books range in age from Renaissance-era manuscripts to modern-day marvels still shiny with the print on their dust jackets.

I fixate on one book, an old, leather-bound tome with no title. The book is thin, perhaps seventy pages. Little more than a magazine. I pull it from the case and open it. It is written in a brownish-red ink and the characters are of no language I recognize. The paper is yellow and faded, and in some places, the ink is washed away.

But the pictures. Those are clear enough, and they are enough to chill me to my soul. Images of women bound to shackles, tortured by demons, torn asunder by chains, boiled in oil, tied and beaten. Some of the images are too horrible for me to describe. I don't know if this is a grimoire, a spell book, or just a collection of images of torture for people to amuse themselves with. Whatever it is, it convinces me more of lord Edmund's guilt.

I push the title back into the shelf. It slides further back than it should. I hear a soft click, and the bookshelf shifts, causing a low rumble that echoes throughout the room.

The cry comes again, this one a long, drawn-out moan rather than a shriek. I am familiar with this noise by now, but I still shiver. The cry comes from directly behind this bookcase.

Heart pounding, I push further.

“Hey! What the devil are you doing?”

I scream and spin around, pressing myself to the bookcase in my fright. Lord Edmund stands in front of me, frowning darkly, lightning shooting from his eyes. I am so shocked that I can’t speak. In that moment, I am certain that he will kill me.

“This is my private library!” he thunders again. “Why are you here?”

My senses kick in, and I point to the mop. “The window was open, my lord. I was cleaning the mess.”

“I have maidservants to do that job. You are Oliver’s governess. What were you doing snooping through my books, anyway?” He looks over my shoulder, sees the particular books I was reading, and makes a face. “There is a perfectly good library in Clifton. You can browse... whatever... to your heart’s content on the weekends.”

“Forgive me, my lord,” I say, my voice shaky. “I was only curious.” And that curiosity overcomes my fear. “Um... sir... when I replaced this book, the case moved.”

“Because you shoved it back there like an ox,” he scolds.

He brushes me aside and pulls out several titles to reveal the book pressed against the very normal back of a very normal bookshelf. His frown deepens when he sees this. He gives me a look a parent might give a child snooping on inappropriate websites. “Don’t read this. This is garbage. I keep it for posterity’s sake, but there’s nothing in here except...”

He sighs and rubs his forehead, then replaces the book, careful not to push them too far back. When he’s finished, he pushes hard on the shelves, satisfying himself that I haven’t tipped the case off balance. It remains stock still, and he sighs again, this time with satisfaction.

When he speaks again, he’s no longer angry, simply tired and annoyed. “Go to bed, Miss Mary. And please don’t come into my library again.”

“Of course not, my lord. I’m so sorry.”

I rush from the room. I don’t stop running until I’m in my own room with the door locked. Lord Edmund doesn’t act like he suspects me at all. In fact, he doesn’t act like a murderer at all so much as a prissy and self-centered noble.

But I heard those cries. They came from within this castle. I can’t blame them on the storm anymore because I closed the window myself.

And that shelf moved. I am certain of it. There is something back there.

But how can I find it?

I don’t have an answer to that question yet, but I know one thing for certain. I will visit that library again.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

It doesn't occur to me until the next morning to wonder why Lord Edmund is here. He only left for London two days ago. Has he returned already?

Well, clearly he has. But why? Surely, he has business with parliament.

I ask Theresa the next morning. She shrugs and informs me, "His Lordship is often back and forth. He has a private aircraft he takes when he must visit London. He keeps his professional and private lives separate. I've never seen him conduct business here, and if he must entertain, he entertains at his house in London."

"He has a house in London?"

"Aye. Most of the lords do. There are times when their work requires extended stays in our nation's capital. Staying in a hotel room is not something men of that stature do for any length of time, so they purchase homes to use when in London."

"I see."

I wonder if his house in London could have any bearing on this mystery, but if it could, how doesn't come to mind right away. The point is that it's not out of the ordinary for him to be gone for short periods of time.

I change the subject. "Did you hear the storm last night?"

Theresa frowns. "Storm? What storm?"

My brow furrows. "The storm. Did you not hear it?"

She shakes her head slowly. “Mary, there was no storm last night.”

“There was,” I insist. I had to close Lord Edmund’s library window again and clean up the water the storm blew inside.”

Mary walks to the kitchen window and opens it. I follow her, and my stomach flips when I see the garden outside. It’s lush and vibrant. It’s also dry. There’s not a drop of water anywhere to be seen besides the fountains. Even more telling, the sky is a uniform clear blue without a single cloud.

My knees begin to tremble. I couldn’t have imagined that storm. If it were only the cries I heard, I would say I had mistaken them, but I saw the rain. I felt it. Hell, I spent twenty minutes cleaning it.

Had I imagined all of that? But... the conversation with Lord Edmund... surely that was real. “His Lordship is here, yes?” I ask Theresa.

“He’s here. He’s in the dining room eating breakfast with Lady Cordelia and Master Oliver. Are you all right, Mary?”

I am far from all right. Last night was far too vivid to have been a dream, yet I am staring at evidence that what I experienced wasn’t real. Is this castle affecting me the way it’s affecting Lady Cordelia?

I don’t say that, of course. I just shake my head and say, “I’m fine. I... suppose something else must have made that mess.”

Theresa nods warily. “Perhaps.”

A cry comes to our ears from the dining room. Theresa and I both rush to see what’s wrong and find Lady Cordelia standing with her hand to her mouth. Lord Edmund is

also on his feet, frowning darkly at the figure of Inspector Hargreaves. He is the first person I hear speak. “Would you bloody mind not speaking of this in front of my nephew?”

“I don’t need to speak to him,” Hargreaves agrees, “but I do need to speak to you and Lady Cordelia.”

Theresa interjects. “If you please, sir. Lady Cordelia’s not well. She—”

“Who in hell gave you permission to speak about my wife?” Lord Edmund thunders. “Damn it all, has everyone gone mad? First the governess snoop around my library without permission, now everyone’s trying to claim my wife is insane—”

“Edmund, enough!” Cordelia cries.

We are all shocked to hear her take control. She looks at me and says firmly, “Mary, take Oliver to the school room to begin his studies. Theresa, please bring Inspector Hargreaves some refreshments. Inspector, Lord Edmund, and I will be happy to speak with you, but you must allow us a moment to compose ourselves. This is unwelcome and tragic news.”

“What news?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Inspector Hargreaves looks at Oliver and clears his throat. My face flames, and I rush forward and usher him out of the room.

When we reach the school room, I heave a sigh and turn to Oliver. “I’m so sorry you had your breakfast interrupted.”

Oliver is pale and shaking. I can’t tell if it’s his condition or if it’s simple fright.

I learn the answer an instant later. It appears that Lord Edmund had good reason to scold Hargreaves for speaking in front of Oliver. He's already revealed too much to the boy.

"They found Sarah," Oliver tells me. "Her body washed up on shore near the cliffs this morning." He shivers. "Inspector Hargreaves says she looked like she fell."

My blood freezes. It can't be a coincidence that she was found in the same place as Lady Evelyn.

There can be no doubt now. A murderer is hunting women in this house.

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I stay with Oliver until he is calm. Then, I give him some assignments that should occupy him for the next hour or two and return to the parlor. I feel a touch of guilt at this, but I must know. This could be the best opportunity I'll have to find an answer to this mystery.

The parlor is in chaos when I arrive. Theresa stands in the corner, wringing her hands and casting anxious glances at Lady Cordelia. The lady herself is still as a statue, skin porcelain-white, eyes frozen as she listens to the two men argue.

"I will not be accused of murder in my own house!"

"Then perhaps you should step outside, my lord," Hargreaves suggests thinly.

Lord Edmund turns the color of a ripe tomato. His hands clench into fists, and for a moment, I fear he may actually strike the inspector. Hargreaves notices this too. He glances at lord Edmund's hands and smiles softly.

Lord Edmund takes a deep breath and unfolds his hands. In a barely controlled voice, he says, “Am I under arrest, Inspector Hargreaves?”

Hargreaves frowns. Reluctantly, he replies. “No, my lord.”

“Then I will kindly ask that any further conversation with me or my household take place by appointment and at my office in Clifton rather than the home I share with my wife and nephew.” Without waiting for a response, he walks to the door and holds it open. “If you please, Inspector.”

“I was dropped off,” Hargreaves informs him. “May I wait for the car to return?”

“You may wait on the porch.”

Hargreaves stares at him for a long moment. The earl meets his eyes without wavering. Finally, Hargreaves chuckles. “Very well, lord Edmund. Once more, you have won. I will wait outside.”

He tips his hat to Lady Cordelia and Theresa. When he meets my eyes, he says, “Perhaps Miss Mary would like to keep me company. I would like to follow up on Oliver’s condition, and since I’m not to be allowed to see him, she can bring me up to speed.”

I look at Lord Edmund. His lip is curled in disgust, but at the inspector, not at me. “Whatever makes you feel good about yourself, Jacob,” he sneers.

Without another word, he storms from the house. Theresa looks at me curiously. I shake my head slightly to let her know I have no idea what’s going on.

“Theresa?” Lady Cordelia says in a thready voice. “I am feeling unwell. Will you prepare me some tea and biscuits please?”



“At once, my lady,” Theresa says, hurrying to the kitchen.

Lady Cordelia follows, seeming to glide through the air like a...

Like a ghost.

I shiver and meet the inspector’s eyes. He gestures with his head for me to follow him outside.

I join him on the porch and shiver in the frosty late morning air. It is sunny outside, but it is not warm.

“Here,” he wraps his jacket around me. “I’m naturally warm-blooded. You mind if I smoke?”

I shake my head. His coat smells like cigarettes. It’s a comforting smell. I don’t smoke myself, and I refuse the cigarette he offers, but Sean smokes, or did until I implored him to quit recently. This reminds me of him.

“So how is he?” Hargreaves asks.

For a moment, I don’t know what he means. Then I remember. “Oh. Oliver’s...” I hesitate, unsure how much I should share, but that hesitation makes a lie impossible, so I say, “He’s not well, I’m afraid. He was laid up in bed with a cough all day yesterday. He’s better this morning, but it’s hard to tell if he’ll stay that way or not.”

Hargreaves curses. “They need to send him south to Lady Cordelia’s family. Somewhere, it’s warmer and not windy all the time. If they won’t do that, they should at least have a doctor look at him.”

“Does he not have a doctor?”

“Not one he sees often enough. He needs full-time care. He can recover from this, but not if he’s not given proper care.”

“What is his affliction?” I ask.

“Weak lungs. Truly, that’s what it is. He’s not ill, and he’s not got asthma. He was born hard. His mother...”

Now it’s his turn to hesitate and my turn to catch him in a lie. “His mother was ill during her pregnancy, and it left Oliver underdeveloped.” He takes a deep drag on the cigarette. “He’d be fine, though, if they just let him receive proper care.”

He takes another drag, then turns to me. “How are you? Feeling ready to move on yet?”

I purse my lips. “I’m concerned, Inspector. I heard that you found Sarah’s body.”

“What’s left of it, yes.”

My stomach turns, and I pull his coat closer over my shoulders. “I don’t believe her death was an accident.”

“It wasn’t. I’m certain of it.” He meets my eyes. “But you take care, Mary. Lord Edmund is powerful. He is not the sort of man you take on lightly. I’ve been doing my job for twenty years and more, and I don’t mind sticking my neck out. But Oliver needs you. Keep your eyes and ears open, but keep your wits about you. He can’t lose anyone else. Do you understand?”

I shiver again, not from the cold this time. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good.” He looks out at the road. “There’s my car.”

He finishes his cigarette, tosses it on the floor and stamps it out. I hand him his coat and he tips his hat to me. "Have a good day, ma'am."

I can't conceive of any way I can have a good day after the morning's events, so I only repeat his sentiment and watch him descend the porch steps to the waiting sedan.

He is right. I must think of Oliver first. But in thinking of Oliver, I must root out the murderer in his house. Oliver is a bright boy, intuitive and shrewd. One day, he will learn the truth. When he does, his life will be in danger. I must ensure that the danger is past before its black fingers wrap around Oliver.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

Another coughing fit afflicts Oliver when I return to the school room. This one is as bad as the one from the day before. I cancel the rest of school and once more declare that he shall spend the day resting and drinking tea and broth. I can't keep pushing his schoolwork back, but his health is more important right now, and it seems his medicine isn't enough to address his illness.

Lady Cordelia joins us in his room, and Theresa brings lunch and tea for all four of us. We talk with Oliver for a while, assuring him by our presence that he is loved and cared for. He drinks and eats heartily, and when he is able to rest, he looks far better than he does an hour ago.

Theresa leaves to manage the chores. I stand to allow Lady Cordelia some time alone with her nephew, but before I can leave, she says, "May I talk to you alone, Mary?"

"Of course, Lady Cordelia," I say.

She stands and once more seems to float across the room. She looks so thin, so wasted. There's nothing to her. My father used to remark when Annie was younger that a stiff breeze could have blown her away. That is the thought that occurs to me now.

She leads me into her bedroom, and I get my first good look at it. The last time I was here, I was only in the room long enough to see Lady Cordelia in hysterics and pull Oliver out so he didn't have to witness the same thing.

The room is large, but smaller than I expected for a lord's bedroom. It is smaller than the bedrooms of all of my previous employers save my most recent, an artist named

Victor Holloway who lived in a spacious but hardly palatial oceanfront home on the California coast.

The décor here is at least somewhat more sensible than elsewhere in that it covers up the cold gray stone. The walls are hung with silk tapestries, and a thick Persian rug dominates the floor. The bed has a plush mattress and thick quilted comforters with down pillows. The furniture is all of dark mahogany and polished to an incredible shine, and a large, ornately carved mirror stands atop the dresser. The bathroom beyond is only barely visible through a crack in the door, but a large office is visible through another door on the right side. The room is thoroughly modern, with late-model computers, a television, a stainless-steel refrigerator and chairs that would look right at home in any office building.

“That’s Edmund’s study,” Lady Cordelia informs me. “Though between you and me, it’s more of a man cave than a study. He uses it to watch the Manchester City matches.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t figure his Lordship for a football fan.”

“Can you be English without being a football fan?” she asks, smiling slightly. That smile vanishes an instant later. “I fear you have received a very poor impression of us, Mary.”

It hurts to know that I am lying to her when I say, “Oh, no, my lady. That’s not true at all.”

She smiles again, a knowing smirk that tells me she’s caught the lie. She sighs and crosses her arms. “Edmund hasn’t always been like this. It’s only recently that he’s...” She bites her lip. “Well, he’s been under so much pressure. The Conservatives in the House of Lords are relying on him to stir up support from the Labour Party moderates in the House of Commons. I’m not sure how familiar you are

with British politics, but getting those two parties to work together is like asking a starving lion to pull a cart with an ox.”

“It's much the same in America, my lady.”

She hugs her chest more tightly. “And Oliver... He loves Oliver, I swear he does. But... I think seeing him reminds him of Alivia.”

“Did the two of them not get along?”

“Edmund and Alivia? Hardly. Alivia was a drug addict. Edmund has no patience for addicts.”

“I see.”

My feelings must be evident in my face, because she quickly says, “Don’t take that to mean that he didn’t love her. He loved her very much. He gave her a place to stay when she got pregnant and needed help.”

“And Oliver’s father? He was never in the picture?”

Lady Cordelia sighs. “Alivia didn’t even know who he was. He was conceived during a drug-fueled orgy.”

“How awful.”

She shrugs. “It gave us Oliver. And Oliver is wonderful.” Her lip trembles, but she controls herself before she weeps. “I’ve called for a doctor. He’ll arrive within an hour.”

“That’s wonderful! Thank you, my lady.”

She shivers. “Edmund will be unhappy.”

I stifle the response I would like to make. Instead, I say, “Are you sure he will? If he loves Oliver, he would be happy to know he’s being cared for, wouldn’t he?”

She begins to pace back and forth around the room. “Edmund is a very mistrustful person. He has reason to be considering his mother and sister were both given to drugs. His father was very cold and distant. You’ve seen Edmund behave the same way, but it’s not his fault. He’s known no other way. And he wasn’t so angry until the trouble in Parliament. And now poor Sarah.”

She shivers and looks over her shoulder toward the bathroom. No doubt, she is remembering the fright she took earlier.

She stalks to the bathroom and shuts the door firmly. I watch her shoulders rise and fall as she takes several deep breaths before returning to me. She takes another deep breath before meeting my eyes. “Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Wilcox?”

I hesitate. The simple answer is no, but things are never simple, are they?

“I believe that memory is powerful,” I reply. “When a person is taken from us, especially cruelly, unfairly or violently, their memory lingers. That memory can affect people for years, decades even. Sometimes, it can affect someone for the rest of their life. To those who suffer the most from that memory, it can even manifest as an apparition or a voice.”

Help me, Mary!

I shiver and finish, “So, do I believe in an actual spirit that haunts places and targets people maliciously? No. But I believe that a memory can fester until it becomes as malignant as any disease.”

Lady Cordelia purses her lips. Clearly, this wasn't what she hoped to hear. She looks away from me and says, "I believe in ghosts. I know you must think me insane, but they are as real as you and I. I've seen them."

I must be careful. Lady Cordelia may unknowingly have information that I can use to find the answer to this mystery. However, she is fragile right now. If I push too hard, she may spiral into hysteria again. I will have to let her lead and guide her gently in the direction that will be of most use to me.

"What have you seen?" I ask.

"I saw that woman, Sarah, in the bathroom mirror the other day. She was... she was..." Lady Cordelia shudders and starts pacing again. "She looked as Inspector Hargreaves described. Exactly as he described: swollen with water and her head shattered and deformed from where it landed on the rocks. One eye was hanging down over her cheek, but the other one was staring right at me."

I have made a terrible mistake. Lady Cordelia is suffering. She has no information that can help me, only a vivid nightmare that has invaded her conscious mind and poisoned her reality.

I take her hands firmly in mine. "My lady, this is the power of memory I spoke of. It has created an apparition in your mind. You feel guilty for Sarah's death, and perhaps afraid that you might suffer the same fate. So your mind has conjured an image of the worst thing that you can possibly imagine and left it there to torment you. But it is not real."

"That's easy for you to say," she snaps. She takes her hands from mine and paces again. "You haven't seen them. You haven't heard them."

"I have," I insist. "When the storm came, I heard them. But it was only the wind. My



mind told me it was something else.”

“Do you really think it was the wind?” she scoffs. “Come, Mary. We are reasonable women, you and I. Can you honestly tell me that the wind screamed for help and begged for mercy?”

I consider my response again. I am concerned for her mental health, but perhaps it is her physical health I should be more concerned with. “No,” I admit. “I think... My lady, it might be best for you to spend some time away. Perhaps you and Oliver could visit your family for a while. At least until there’s a satisfactory explanation for Sarah’s murder.”

“Not just Sarah,” she said. “Lady Evelyn too. And Alivia. All three of them follow me everywhere and accuse me. They accuse me of being at fault somehow, but I’m not. What could I have done?”

“My lady...”

“Edmund will protect me.” She hugs her arms tightly across her chest again. “Edmund will care for me. He always has. He will make sure that we are all right.”

I press my lips together and look away. I am nearly certain that Edmund is the danger.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. I look back at her and see her sitting on the edge of her bed. “I think I’d like to be alone for a while,” she says. “Thank you for talking to me.”

I fear she is not long for this world. Even if she is, her mind will not much longer be able to see the world. I wonder was I the same way when I lost Annie? I can’t remember, or rather, I remember myself being as sensible and logical as ever.

Clearly, I wasn't, though, because I was committed shortly after her disappearance. The worst thing about insanity is that it so easily disguises itself as sanity.

I'm not sure if it's wise to leave her alone, but I've been of far less help than I hoped to be, and someone must stay with Oliver.

So, I bow, then leave Lady Cordelia to her ghosts.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

“Take a deep breath for me.”

Oliver complies with Dr. Thornton’s request, breathing in deeply and releasing it slowly. It ends in a coughing fit, as all four of his previous breaths have.

I hold Oliver’s hand on one side. Theresa holds his hand on the other side. Lady Cordelia stands behind the doctor, biting her nails in anxiety. Oliver is expressionless, but he grips my hand tightly, and I can sense his fear.

Dr. Thornton puts his stethoscope away and smiles at Oliver. “Thank you for your cooperation, Master Oliver. I’ll leave you to your own devices for a moment. Lady Cordelia and Miss Wilcox, if I could have a word.”

I squeeze his hand, and then pass it to Theresa. She takes it in her other hand and smiles at him. “So brave, Master Oliver.”

He manages a wan smile in return.

Dr. Thornton leads the two of us from the room. His smile is gone when we are out of Oliver’s view. Lady Cordelia is shaking almost uncontrollably. She is too afraid to ask the question that must be asked.

So it falls to me. “How serious is his condition, Dr. Thornton?”

The doctor sighs. “Quite serious, I’m afraid.”

Lady Cordelia releases a soft cry and presses her eyes shut. Her lips shake, and tears

leak from her eyes.

“There’s hope, my lady,” the doctor continues. “In fact, there’s a very strong chance he will grow up normally and recover from this ailment with perfectly adequate lung function. But I will spare you no details. He will have a long road ahead.”

Lady Cordelia cries out again. I put an arm around her, and she leans against my shoulder. She is so frail.

“What can we do?”

Thornton sighs again. “Oliver’s problem is that his left lung is severely underdeveloped. There are holes in the brachial tubes of his right lung that cause him to aspirate fluid when he eats.”

My eyes widen. “We’ve been feeding him tea and broth.”

“You’ll want to stop that right away,” he says.

“Oh God,” I whisper. “Have we hurt him?”

“Not seriously. Not yet. It’s not a high level of aspiration either, but it’s enough to cause the coughing. The coughing, really, isn’t too much of a concern. The concern is infection. His breathing function is forty percent of normal at best, but if he contracts pneumonia or a sufficiently bad flu, what would be an irritation to us could be deadly to him.”

“Oh God!” Cordelia wails.

She drops to her knees for a moment, and I glance nervously at the room door. Lady Cordelia’s cry was no doubt heard. “What should we do?” I ask.

“I am going to recommend that he be hospitalized immediately. We have tools at the hospital that can scan his lungs thoroughly and determine if his pre-existing condition has worsened. We can also start him on a diet that will minimize the risk of aspirating fluid as well as prescribe an antibiotic that will fight infection and an expectorant that will make it easier for him to clear what he aspirates.”

“That’s so much,” Lady Cordelia whispers. “That’s so much, and he’s so small.”

She runs her hand over her face and plants it on her chin. She’s still squatting on her heels. Dr. Thornton looks decidedly uncomfortable at seeing the Countess like this, but he does his job professionally. “We can transport him in my vehicle with your permission, Lady Cordelia.”

“We’ll need my husband’s permission,” she says. “He’s Oliver’s guardian. I’m not.”

The doctor frowned. “I see. “Is there a number where he can be reached?”

Lady Cordelia takes a deep breath. “I’ll call him. It will be easier to convince him if I’m the one who delivers it.”

She gets to her feet and heads to her room. Dr. Thornton waits until she is gone, then turns to me. “Miss Wilcox, if Lord Edmund doesn’t give his approval, can I count on your testimony when I complain formally that Lord Edmund is negligent?”

I blink. “I... well... you’ve put me on the spot, doctor.”

“I know, and I’m very sorry to do that, Miss Wilcox, but...” He glances over my shoulder to make sure Lady Cordelia isn’t on her way back. Then he lowers his voice and says, “There is significant indication that an infection has already started. If we don’t treat it soon, it could turn a corner, and if it does, there may be no turning that corner again. Frankly, any choice other than allowing Master Oliver to receive

treatment at the hospital is going to put his life in danger, and I can't allow that to stand. Even if the culprit is Lord Blackwood."

"You won't have to worry about that, Dr. Thornton," Lord Edmund says.

We both jump. Lord Edmund looks coldly down at the doctor and says, "I agree to your recommendation. We will transport Oliver to the Clifton Hospital at once. I shall expect a private suite and the care of your finest medical team. I will want you, and whoever else you nominate for that team on call twenty-four-seven, and I and the Lady Cordelia are to be kept apprised of any changes. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, my lord," Dr. Thornton says. His head is lowered in shame, and his voice is soft.

"Miss Wilcox," Lord Edmund says, "I will allow you to remain here, and when I am informed by Oliver's medical team that he is well enough to take school, I will send a driver for you to complete school at the hospital. Is that satisfactory, Doctor?"

"Perfectly, my lord."

"Good."

The bedroom door opens. Lady Cordelia strides toward us but stops when she sees her husband. A look passes across Lord Edmund's face. I can't tell if it should encourage me or terrify me.

His words encourage me, though. "Pack a suitcase, Cordelia. We are going to take Oliver to the hospital."

Lady Cordelia stares at him in shock for a long moment. Then tears fall from her eyes. She rushes into her husband's arms and embraces him fiercely. "Thank you,

Edmund. Thank you.”

He smiles softly, and I hope very much that the love in his eyes is genuine.

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Theresa, Franny and Matilda go with the family to assist with each person’s luggage. I am left alone in the house. I don’t doubt that Lord Edmund’s decision not to include me is intended as a slight, but I will use that slight to my advantage. As soon as their car disappears up the road, I rush to Lady Cordelia’s bedroom and into the study she points out to me earlier.

In all of my past mysteries, private studies and bedrooms have revealed information that later proves crucial to the unraveling of the mystery. People are creatures of habit, and nearly all people have a habit of hoarding items that call to mind powerfully emotional memories. Many killers have been caught because they kept mementos from their victims, and I have brought several people to justice by uncovering records that prove their involvement in murder.

Lord Edmund’s study is no different. His filing cabinet is locked, but I use two bobby pins to pick the lock and open the drawers. I flip through the files and find a document stamped with a large red OVERDUE.

I frown and pull it out. Behind it is another. And another. And another.

I skim through the files. One is a property tax bill. Another is a telephone bill. One is a payroll account. My eyes widen at that. I am financially secure regardless of my income, but I can’t imagine that Theresa and the other maids can say the same.

The thrust of these documents is clear. Lord Blackwood is deeply in debt. I do some quick math and come up with a figure north of seven figures. The family is teetering

on the edge of bankruptcy.

This is shocking information, and it can truly explain Lord Edmund's irritability and rudeness, but it's not enough yet to suggest a motive for murder. I need to keep looking.

I take pictures of the documents and send them to Sean with a question mark caption. Then I replace them and look through the rest of the cabinet. I find more records that indicate the dire financial straits in which this family finds itself, but I don't find anything that can connect this precipice with the one over which Sarah was thrown.

I look through the unlocked drawers and find nothing of importance. Nothing either that would indicate the struggles Lord Blackwood is facing. Evidently, he's chosen to keep his finances locked away and hidden from Lady Cordelia. I can't say that surprises me.

I nearly leave the study when, out of the corner of my eye, I see a shoebox. It sits on top of the refrigerator in the office. I have to stand on tiptoes to reach it and nearly fall, but when I pull it down, I am rewarded for my efforts.

Inside the shoebox is a stack of letters. I sift through them and find mostly innocuous items. There are a few love letters from girls in college and university and a few pictures that I quickly look away from as they are very private. Perhaps this is only a shrine so Lord Edmund can remember the conquests of his youth.

But when I work my way through the first few letters, I find that most of them are from Lady Evelyn. These are of more interest to me, but as I read through them, I find that they are no different from the letters Lord Edmund receives from other admirers. It's touching that he saves the memory of his former wife's love, but that doesn't help me understand if Edmund could be responsible for her murder. It doesn't really indicate innocence either, since, as I've said before, many serial killers keep



mementos of their victims.

I finally strike gold at the bottom of the box. The letter here is frayed at the edges and written in a harried scrawl that speaks of great distress at the time of writing.

The contents of the letter are chilling.

I don't think I have much longer. I don't have anyone on my side. Edmund's going to take Oliver, and no one will care that his own mother wants to raise him to be better than she was. No one believes I can.

So this letter was written by Lady Alivia Blackwood, Oliver's mother. I read on.

They might be right. I really can't take it anymore. The screaming. It's always the screaming and the moaning and the wailing of the ghosts. They're coming for me. I don't have long to live. I hope I am wrong, but I can feel it in my soul.

The final line is bold-faced, written so harshly that it tears the paper in some places.

Death is coming for me.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I stare at the letter for a long moment before carefully placing it back in the box. I stare out the office window at the road beyond and think about what it might mean.

Lady Alivia complained about ghosts coming for her. She heard the cries just as I do. Just as Lady Cordelia does. Just like Lady Cordelia, she believed the ghosts were persecuting her, threatening her life. It is quite possible that Lady Alivia took her own life, pushed to it by her fear and the belief that there was no escape.

In Alivia's case, this attitude is easily explained by the fact that she was a drug addict. Lady Cordelia doesn't mention what sort of drugs Lady Alivia used, but it's a fair bet that it was some sort of powerful narcotic. Paranoid fantasies often accompany withdrawals from narcotics, and that paranoia can sometimes be strong enough to bring delusions and psychotic breaks.

But Lady Cordelia is suffering nearly the same symptoms, and she doesn't use drugs. I suppose I don't know that for sure, but I don't see any of the physical symptoms of heavy drug use. She's still beautiful, and her skin is still firm and supple, at least as far as I can tell. Drugs have a tendency to ravage a person, and for Lady Cordelia to suffer mentally the way she is, she would have had to be a heavy user for some time.

So what is it, then? The cries of the ghosts? If that's the case, then why am I not also driven to insanity? I have actually suffered a psychotic break in the past, and insofar as ghosts are echoes of traumatic memories, I am haunted by my sister and to a lesser extent, my parents. So why am I able to rationalize the cries I hear, but Lady Cordelia isn't?

I suppose I could be reading too much into this. I might be struggling to make things

make sense that don't necessarily need to make sense. What does this letter tell me for certain? It tells me that in her last days, Alivia heard voices and was in fear of death.

Just like Lady Cordelia.

I catch sight of movement through the window and look through to see the van returning. That's odd. I would have expected them to spend the night at the hospital. Perhaps Theresa is returning with the servants.

But in Doctor Thornton's van?

Either way, my snooping is done. I quickly replace the letters and place the shoebox back in its spot atop the refrigerator. I ensure the filing cabinet is locked, then leave the study, closing the door on my way out.

I arrive downstairs just before the front door opens. I am surprised to see that everyone has returned, including Dr. Thornton. It seems Oliver was the only person left at the hospital.

I frown quizzically at Theresa, but it is Doctor Thornton who explains. "Master Oliver has been sedated. He will sleep for the evening. In the morning, I will return to the hospital, and Lord and Lady Blackwood will arrive whenever they wish and stay for as long as they like."

"Thank you for sharing our plans, Doctor Thornton," Lord Blackwood says drily. "Yes, unfortunately, in our haste, the Lady Cordelia neglected to pack certain necessities. We will enjoy dinner here and return in the morning, as Doctor Thornton said."

"I'll get dinner started," Theresa says, rushing toward the kitchen with Franny and

Matilda in tow.

All three women are pale and appear exhausted. I'm not sure if it's because of fear for Oliver or the tension of spending the past two hours with Lord Edmund and a rapidly deteriorating Lady Cordelia.

And she is deteriorating. She is pale and shaking, and she mutters under her breath. Lord Edmund leads her up the stairs, and she seems barely aware it's happening. I greet her, and she doesn't even turn to me.

Lord Edmund does, though. He fixes a look on me so cold and so hateful that I nearly wither in my boots.

But rather than discourage me, that look galvanizes me. I will discover the truth whether Lord Edmund likes it or not. And if what I discover proves that his Lordship is a murderer, then I will turn him over to Inspector Hargreaves.

At least Oliver is safe. I can take some comfort in that. He is finally receiving the treatment he needs, and he is away from this cursed castle. I am upset that I couldn't see him when he was hospitalized, but I will make time to visit him soon.

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When Lady Cordelia returns downstairs for dinner, she looks somewhat better. She still appears utterly exhausted, but she is aware of her surroundings now and responds when people talk to her.

Lord Edmund looks tired for the first time since I've seen them. The impenetrable wall he puts up is weakening, and the tired old man grappling with debt, Parliament, legal trouble and family health issues shows his face. It's comforting to know that he's human too.

Doctor Thornton is the only one among us who is close to good spirits. He is somber and respectful of Lord Edmund's and Lady Blackwood's concerns, but he is far more relaxed than he is when he first arrives. Perhaps, like me, he is relieved that Oliver is finally getting the treatment he needs.

For all of this, the tension at the table is thick enough to be cut with a knife. Lady Cordelia's shoulders are stiff, and her movements jerky and uncoordinated. Lord Edmund is tired, but behind that exhaustion is an undercurrent of disdain for seemingly everyone.

Theresa and I share a sober look as we serve dinner. I will be dining with the servants tonight.

We are just about to serve the last of the appetizers when a howl whines through the castle. Like all of the other noises the storms and winds bring, this howl sounds like the plaintive cry of a woman.

I look through the window in the dining room and see rain starting to fall. At least I'm not imagining the storm this time.

That memory causes me to frown. It occurs to me that I haven't been keeping my wits about me any better than Lady Cordelia has. What is it about this house that is driving all of us mad?

Another howl sounds, and Theresa and I share a grim look. Those howls, whatever they are, always come as evil omens. What new horror could they be announcing now?

That question is answered a moment later when an ear-splitting shriek comes from Lady Cordelia. We rush from the kitchen, appetizers forgotten, and watch in horror as she leaps to her feet and shrieks, "Go away! Go away, damn it!"

“Cordelia!” Lord Edmund shouts. “There’s no one there!”

He tries to restrain her, and she shrieks and pulls free from his grasp. “It’s your fucking wife!” she shouts. “That bitch, Evelyn! She’s the one trying to kill me!”

Lord Edmund flinches. Doctor Thornton carefully moves his seat away from his Lordship.

“Cordelia,” Lord Edmund says, his voice low and deadly. “That is enough. Evelyn is dead.”

“And she’s come back for me!” Cordelia insists.

Tears stream down her cheeks, and there’s a wild look in her eyes.

“Cordelia, sit the hell down!” Lord Edmund thunders. “I’ve had enough! Ghosts and legends and cries and storms: it’s driven all of you daft! My governess is snooping in my library, my servants whisper about Sarah’s ghost, and now my wife is bringing up Lady Evelyn. Enough! No one is haunting you!”

“Yes, they are!” Cordelia shrieks. “Yes. They. Are!”

She punctuates that last word by hurling a water glass at his Lordship. The rest of us cry out and move away. Lady Cordelia stands there, weeping, just as shocked as we are at her outburst but unwilling or maybe even unable to take it back.

His Lordship calmly pats at the water and commands, “Go to bed, Cordelia.”

Cordelia takes a deep breath, then says in a small tone. “Will you come to bed with me?”

“I’m bloody well fixed at the moment, aren’t I?” Lord Edmund thunders, unable to maintain his calm. “Go to bed, and I’ll be there when I’ve finished here.”

“I’ll take her to bed,” Theresa volunteers, rushing forward to help Lady Cordelia from the room. “I’ll get some warm blankets and a nice spot of tea, and everything will be all—”

“Just do it, Theresa,” Lord Edmund says, rubbing his eyes. “For the love of God, just do it.”

“Right away, my lord.”

She leads Lady Cordelia away, leaving me, his Lordship and Doctor Thornton.

Doctor Thornton breaks the silence. “Begging your pardon, Lord Edmund, but if the Lady Cordelia’s condition is this advanced, perhaps she should be placed somewhere she can be cared for properly.”

Lord Edmund stares at him in amazement. He stares at me, then laughs and stares at the doctor again. Thornton turns to me and flames beet red but doesn’t apologize for his statement.

Lord Edmund breaks the brief silence. “You just want to hospitalize my entire family, don’t you? Hell, why not me too?” My back’s been sore lately. Maybe I should go to your office and bend over so you can line it up right for me, eh, Doctor?”

In his anger, Lord Edmund is losing his bearing. Dr. Thornton swallows and says, “I apologize, my lord. It wasn’t appropriate for me to discuss Lady Cordelia’s health in front of the servants.”

"It wasn't appropriate for you to discuss it at all. You're Master Oliver's doctor, not

Lady Cordelia's. For God's sake, what's been going on here? Has everyone gone daft? Mary, for the love of God, why are you still in my dining room."

I flinch. "I'm sorry, Lord Edmund. I came to check on the Lady Cordelia. I'll leave you to your dinner."

"Oh, to hell with it," Lord Edmund grouses. "Dinner's ruined anyway. I live in a house full of madwomen."

He stalks out of the room and upstairs, presumably to tend to Lady Cordelia. Outside, lightning flashes, and a moment later, thunder rumbles and the long, mournful howl of the wind echoes through the house.

I clear the plates while Dr. Thornton stares down at his own plate. After several minutes, he gives me a brief dejected smile, then leaves the table, and I am alone.

I bring the dishes to Franny and Matilda. Their faces are ashen, and no words are exchanged between us as they begin to wash. I return to my own room, trying to make sense of the collapse I've just witnessed.

It's Lord Edmund's behavior that I find most interesting. His reaction when Lady Cordelia brought up Evelyn was quite shocking. Almost as though he was frightened. But of what? What could the memory of his dead wife conjure up that would frighten his lordship? What does Lady Cordelia know that Lord Edmund fears she may let slip?

I dress for bed, but I already know I won't sleep that night. I will only lay awake waiting for the opportunity to learn what I must.

As the storm rages outside, it beckons me. I know exactly where I must go to learn more.



Tonight, I will find answers.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I open my eyes and find myself once more in the false-color green field from before. The sky is a blue as brilliant as my sister's eyes, intense and piercing.

The door is ahead of me, but this time I walk to it of my own accord. No force compels me.

I open the door, expecting to find my sister, but instead, I find a stone passageway dimly lit by torches in wall sconces. Within the passageway is a staircase that descends downward into the Earth.

My bravery wavers. I hesitate a moment, and as soon as I feel myself resist, that force returns to compel me. I move down the stairs, descending for what feels like hours. The passageway is cool, musty and damp. The lights flicker, and from time to time, I hear soft moans echo off of the stone.

I don't feel terror, and that surprises me. I would expect to be nearly prostrate with fear, but it's not fright I feel. Instead, I feel a low, pensive dread. I know I'm about to witness something terrible, but I don't know what it is yet.

The passageway twists as it winds down. I am descending a long, shallow spiral toward the center of the Earth. And what will I find when I arrive? Will my sister be waiting for me? Will she be the pale, hollow-eyed ghost? Will she be the statuesque Fairy who captures the fantasies of my previous employer, the artist Victor Holloway? Will she be the woman begging for help who invades my first nightmare here at Blackwood Castle?

I am so preoccupied with this thought that I don't realize I've stopped until a door

opens in front of me.

And now I'm frightened. Now I'm petrified. Now I would cry out, "No, no, no!" if I could.

But I can't. I can only stare mutely ahead and watch the scene unfold.

I am in the hospital. The psychiatric hospital in New York, where I am housed for eleven weeks following the closure of my sister's case. I see several orderlies and nurses moving down a hallway. I don't remember their names, but I recognize them. These are faces I saw often during my stay here.

The force compels me forward again. I try to resist, but it is the struggle of an ant against a cruel and vindictive god. I walk through the hallway and come eventually to room five-forty-three.

My room.

The door opens. I am sitting on the bed wrapped in a straitjacket, my eyes staring wildly ahead. Tears fall from them, but I don't blink. In front of me, Doctor Bradbury sits on his stool, writing notes on his pad, asking me questions.

This is not so terrifying yet. I am in poor condition, but other than slight humiliation, I am almost relieved.

Then I shriek. The sound pierces through to my soul, and the me that stands behind Dr. Bradbury shrieks with the me that sits on the bed.

"Shut up!" I cry—the me in front of the doctor. "Can't you hear her screaming? She's calling for me, but she's not here! I can't help you, Annie! God damn it!"

“That’s right, Mary,” Doctor Bradbury says soothingly. “She’s not here.”

“But she is! She’s here! She’s in the room with us right now. She’s here, and she’s going to punish me for driving her away. She’s going to punish me for letting Mother hurt her. I let Mother hurt her, and now she’s going to hurt me!”

Doctor Bradbury shares a grim look with a burly orderly. “Tell me what you hear, Mary.”

“It’s a scream,” I whisper. “She’s screaming.”

“What is she screaming.”

I hear a rustling and realize that the me on the bed is shaking uncontrollably. “She’s screaming, ‘This is your fault, Mary.’ And she’s grinning. She’s smiling at me, and her eyes are empty, and she’s telling me that I’m next, and it’s all my fault.”

I gasp as the memory floods me. The scene in front of me vanishes, and I return to the first nightmare, the one that plagues me for these thirty years and longer.

I am in the forest again. Annie stands in front of me, pale and ghostly. I walk toward her, calling her name.

She turns, and her eyes are empty black holes. I freeze in terror as the apparition approaches. Her lips split into a wide grin, too wide to be human. She walks to me, leans close until our lips are almost touching. She whispers, “You’re next, Mary.”

Then her grin vanishes. She opens her mouth wide, and an unearthly howl emanates from her throat. “Help me! Oh God! Help me!”

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My head hits the floor hard enough to see stars. I gasp and press my hands to my forehead, gasping and shivering. I am soaked in sweat, and while the details of my nightmare are already fading, I remember my sister's ghost with her empty eyes and her distended grin.

No, not my sister. I don't know what the creature was, but that was not Annie. Some horrible monster my psyche created assaults me in my dreams as it assaulted me thirty years ago, warning me of some terrible price I must pay for my wrongdoing.

Perhaps this is why I don't look for Annie for twenty-eight years. Perhaps I am so frightened that I choose to hide rather than fight.

Help me!

It's the cry on the wind once more, only clear and loud this time. I press my lips together grimly. My nightmare is far too terrifying for me to be frightened by what I hear now.

I rise to my feet. My head throbs, but the shivering has subsided. I am not the frightened young woman I was when my sister left. I am not the shell I was in that hospital. I have thirty years of experience dealing with guilt and fear, and I have faced living enemies more deadly than any ghost my mind can conjure up.

This ghost pleads for my help. Whether it is a trick of the wind or the embodiment of the women who have disappeared within these walls, it begs for succor. And I shall provide it.

I dress in warm clothing, not a nightgown and slippers. I don't know what I'll face when I reach my destination, but I will be prepared for it.

I leave my room and walk upstairs. I hear wailing coming from all around me, and

when I reach the third floor, lightning flashes through the windows. The portraits of lords past stare down at me, commanding me to turn back. I ignore them.

When I reach the library, I find the door locked. I'm not surprised by this. I'm also not deterred.

I get to my knees and slip one bobby pin through the keyhole with the flat side up. I insert the second flat side down and use the ridges on the bobby pin to gently find and lift the tumblers. The lock clicks, and I open the door.

A blast of cold air seems to come from the room, and a loud moan follows it. I am drawing closer to the abode of the spirits.

Lightning flashes outside as I approach the bookcase, where I nearly find the secret room. It reveals fantastic shapes, monsters and demons, and murderers and ghosts.

Let them all come.

My phone buzzes.

The sound is so... ordinary. It shocks me out of the fugue I'm in. Lightning flashes again, and I realize I haven't switched on the lights.

I do that, and the room looks far more ordinary. Once more, it's just a library. Lightning strikes once more, and there are no demons or ghosts outside. Just rain.

I pull my phone from my pocket, a trifle embarrassed at my fanciful thoughts. Still, I did intend to explore this library, so maybe the nightmare and the fugue it left me in weren't bad things. I hadn't intended to sleep, but sleep took me anyway. My nightmare released me.

My phone rings again. Sean. This time, I answer.

“Hello?”

“Mary, I got the financial records you sent me. I think you might be right about Lord Edmund.”

My eyes widen. “What have you discovered?”

“Well, you discovered that House Blackwood is nearly bankrupt. I pulled that thread and learned that House Raynor is not. In fact, they are quite wealthy.”

“Who is House Raynor?”

“That would be Lady Cordelia’s maiden name. Cordelia Raynor.”

My eyes widen, but then my brow furrows. “Does their money not solve Lord Blackwood’s problem?”

“It does if Lady Cordelia is no longer with us. You see, Lord Raynor is a staunch opponent of Lord Blackwood in the House of Lords. When he learned his daughter was marrying his enemy, he cut her off from her estate. However, he neglected to cancel her life insurance policy. And wouldn’t you know it, Lord Blackwood is the beneficiary of that policy.”

I gasp softly. “So if he kills her, he gets her money.”

“Provided no one catches him, of course. The plot thickens, though. Lady Alivia had an eight-million-pound trust. When she died, that trust passed to her son, Oliver. Should Oliver survive to majority, the trust will be fully vested, and should he then die, the trust will become the property of his nearest relative.”

“Uncle Edmund.”

“Uncle Edmund indeed. And lastly, we have Lady Evelyn Downing, whose death yielded to our Lord Blackwood ownership of properties in Scotland, and Northumbria totaling twelve million in value.”

I see the motive now. They were killed for money.

But... “What about Sarah? The maid? She didn’t have money.”

"Yes, that's the odd one out. If I were a betting man, I would say that she discovered something she shouldn't have. Before you lodge your second objection, I'll answer it. The reason why Lord Edmund doesn't still have money is that he is utterly incompetent at managing his money. He's lost millions attempting speculative investments. He is stubborn and refuses advice, but somehow, he always comes upon money when he needs it. Usually, that money arrives conveniently around the same time as a catastrophe reaches someone close to him."

Lighting crashes outside, and then a loud scream follows it. I remember why I come here and say, “Keep looking into this, Sean. I believe I may have some more evidence for you in a moment.”

“More evidence? Wait. Mary, where are you—”

I hang up and put my phone in my pocket. Then I look for the book I remove the other night. I find it and push.

Nothing happens. I stare in disbelief. I could have sworn that worked the last time.

But then, I pulled the book off of the shelf and started reading it, so it couldn’t have been the book that was the key to moving the door. Perhaps the shelf?



Yes! I push it, and it recedes. A moment later, I hear a click, and the entire case slides backwards, then to the right.

I'm about to step through when I hear Theresa cry out behind me.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

We stare at each other for a moment. Theresa is shocked by the secret entrance that opens behind me. I am shocked by Theresa.

“What are you doing here?” I finally ask.

She blinks and seems to just now remember I’m there. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m...”

My voice trails off. What do I tell her? What can I tell her? I’m caught. What possible good reason could I have for snooping through Lord Edmund’s library?

Then again, what possible reason could she have?

She tells me. “You heard the screaming again.”

I nod slowly. “You did too?”

“Aye. I’ve ignored it too many times. Told myself it was just the wind, but...” she shook her head. “With poor Sarah found the way she was and with Lady Cordelia talking the way Lady Alivia did before she died.”

“Yes,” I reply. “Exactly like that. I wonder if maybe the killer drugged them somehow or influenced their thoughts to feel that they were being chased by ghosts.”

Theresa stares at me for a moment, and I remember that I’m not supposed to know about Lady Alivia’s ravings. Heat climbs my cheeks, and I stammer, “I... well, Lady

Cordelia said that she was being haunted by ghosts, and she mentioned that Lady Alivia was unwell before she died and perhaps... I thought maybe her condition may have been worsened..."

I let my voice trail off. It's a horrible excuse, and I can see that Theresa doesn't buy it. After a moment, she chuckles drily. "You're a sly one, Mary. You've been looking into this for a while now, haven't you?"

I don't respond. Theresa nods and says, "Well, thank God someone was brave enough to fight for those who can't fight for themselves anymore. Yes, Lady Alivia complained of being persecuted by ghosts before she died. I fear Lady Cordelia might be doing the same. I would say it's just the curse of this house if not for Sarah." Her face tightens, reminding me once more of the affection she held for the young maid. "Sarah was a good girl. And she wasn't screaming about no ghosts hunting her. But then, she was only a maid." Her lip curls. "Wouldn't have to be too careful about her, would you?"

"Do you think... I mean... who would you believe could do something like this?"

Theresa laughs. "There's only one person I know might stand to gain something from this, and only one person I know who would know where this chamber is. Well, three people now, but I think you see where I'm going with this."

I nod. Then I look behind me. A dark hole looms in front of me. I remember the hollow sockets of Annie's eyes in my dream, and a shiver runs through me.

Theresa grabs my hand. "We'll go together." She reaches into her coat with her other hand and retrieves a flashlight. "See? I brought a light. Never can be sure what you'll find in these old castles. Figured it would come in handy."

I return her smile, and nod again. "All right. Let's go then."

She releases my hand and steps in front of me. She switches her light on and reveals a stone staircase leading down and curving as it descends. I shiver again. The wall sconces are dark, but in every other way, this passageway reminds me of the one I see in my nightmare.

“Into the maelstrom go we,” Theresa mutters.

She enters the passageway, and I follow. The air is cooler inside, and I draw my coat tightly around my shoulders. I’m grateful that I think to dress warmly.

The staircase descends at least forty feet, and I still see no sign of an end. We must be underground now. I mention this to Theresa, and she says, “Aye. Old keeps like this often had secret passages so the master of the house could escape with his family and his personal guard in case the city was under siege. Usually they lead to a tunnel that opens past the castle walls.”

We descend another forty feet perhaps before the passageway levels out. “This’ll be the tunnel, then,” she says.

She starts forward, but I hesitate and look back up the stairs. “What is it, Mary?”

“Do you think we should worry about someone following us? This goes on for a while. We don’t know how long we’ll be down here.”

“We’ve already gone too far,” she replies. “There’s no turning back now. Lord Edmund knows you’ve snooped here before. Sooner or later, he’ll know you’re snooping again, and me with you. If you want to go back, you can, but I’ve chosen to see this through. Sarah deserves more than to be cast into the sea to have her head bashed in on some rocks just for... hell, for what?” Tears well in her eyes. “I’m moving on.”

Her courage and the passion she shows inspire me. “I’ll follow you.”

She nods, then gives me a grim smile. “Then once more into the maelstrom we go.”

We follow the passage forward. The corridor is somewhat wider and taller than the stairs but just as devoid of decoration. The elder lords Blackwood didn’t feel a need to embellish the path of their defeat.

“I wonder if this passage has ever been used,” I say aloud.

“Well, House Blackwood’s never seen the front lines of a battlefield,” Theresa says. “So I doubt it. Although perhaps some other lords have found less than savory uses for a secret passage that leads into the plains beyond.”

I frown at the thought. I have encountered several wealthy murderers who go to great lengths to conceal their behavior. In the end, they never conceal it well enough. They’re always confident that they can get away with whatever they want because their wealth will allow it. Unfortunately, they are often true.

But I’ve never encountered something like this, a built-in lair for a killer who could make women disappear and never leave any evidence behind. No evidence that anyone could find, anyway. It’s rather macabre to wonder how many women might have been led through here to their doom.

We reach the end of the passage about two hundred yards after we reach the bottom of the staircase. It ends at a large stone door with a single small window covered with a steel grate. I test the handle, and it opens easily.

The silence and ease with which the massive stone slab moves on its hinges is disquieting. It’s proof that this place has been used recently. That door has been well-maintained so that whatever room exists behind it can continue to be used for the

purpose for which it was created.

We enter the room, and Theresa's light reveals its purpose. I gasp when I see it, and Theresa lets out a soft cry.

The room is twelve feet by thirteen feet, smaller than my bedroom. It is an almost completely bare stone chamber. Only two things identify its purpose and illustrate to us just how terrible a murderer this killer is.

The first is a pair of massive iron manacles seven feet above the wall. A person shackled by these chains would be forced to stand, or, if they were shorter like Sarah and Lady Cordelia, to hang by their wrists.

The second thing that shows how terrible this room is reveals itself when Theresa sweeps her flashlight to the floor. The stones there are stained with the dried brown of old blood, and when she lifts the flashlight, similar stains run the length of the wall up to the manacles.

The room carries a rancid, coppery smell, and as we stare at the manacles, a moan echoes through the room. The stone walls focus the sound from the storm outside and channel it here. That means the opposite is true. The stone channels the sound from the room and carries it up that staircase into the house.

Theresa and I share a look. The source of the cries we hear is revealed now. Some of the howls can be explained by the wind, but the screaming and the cries for help? Those came from this chamber, from right up here where women were chained and... and where God knows what happened to them until Lord Edmund was finished with them.

"Mother Mary," Theresa says softly, crossing herself. "Oh, Sarah. What did he do to you?"

I turn around and catch sight of a small hallway perpendicular to the passageway that leads us here. I touch Theresa's shoulder and point it out to her. "There's something else there," I tell her.

She shines her light, and we see that the small hallway runs for about ten yards before ending in another door.

"More madness," she mutters. "God help us."

She takes the lead again. This door opens into a smaller chamber, maybe four feet wide by seven feet long.

There is no wall behind it. The floor ends in an abrupt drop. I can hear the crashing of the waves and know where we are even before a flash of lightning illuminates the ocean.

It's clear now what happened to Sarah. At some point, she was set upon and dragged down here to Lord Edmund's torture chamber. There she was used, undoubtedly in the most cruel and vile ways imaginable, tortured until Lord Edmund had his fill.

Then she was taken here and thrown to her death.

Theresa is shaking. I can't tell if it's fear or anger that provokes her reaction.

"We need to tell someone," she says. "We need to show this to Inspector Hargreaves."

I remember my cell phone. "I can take pictures," I tell her. "We'll collect evidence and give it to the inspector. Maybe he can get a warrant to search the property, especially if we tell him we've seen this for our own eyes."

Theresa's eyes widen. "You have a cell phone? That's wonderful!"

"Yes. I have a friend I can send these pictures too, as well. That way, if something happens to us, he can share them with Scotland Yard on our behalf."

"Nothing will happen to us," she says firmly. "We're going to take these pictures, go back upstairs, send them to Inspector Hargreaves and bring that miserable dog to justice."

"I wish I had your confidence," I tell her.

"You've got to," she insists. "We're in the trenches now, Mary. If we're going to survive, we have to believe that we'll win, even if all of the odds are stacked against us."

I meet her eyes and see strength in her gaze. There's fear there too, powerful fear, and anger as well. But her strength overcomes it all. I have had poor experiences with friendship in the past, but I hope very much that this one will last.

I take the pictures and try to send them to Sean and to Inspector Hargreaves, but the lack of cell coverage means my messages don't go through. I tell that to Theresa, and she sighs. "That's all right. We'll go upstairs and get it done."

"And just what the devil are you two doing down here?"

Theresa and I both shriek. We spin around, and our flashlight lands on the stern, ice-cold eyes of Lord Edmund.

"Everywhere I find you, I catch you meddling in something, Mary," he says. "And now you've dragged poor Theresa down this path with you. When will you learn to leave well enough alone?"



I don't answer. Fear has stopped my tongue.

I am trapped underground with a serial killer.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

“Didn’t I tell you not to intrude into my library?” Edmund demands. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

I glance at Theresa and once more see strength. I find my own courage and say, “We heard her scream, Lord Edmund.”

“What? Heard who scream?”

“Sarah. We heard her. We heard her screaming from her bonds.”

"Sarah... what?" He throws his hands up in the air and looks out at the ocean as though praying to the sea for guidance. "The women in this house have all gone mad," he says. "How in God's name did you hear her? What, did she call your name? Did she shout, 'Hello, it's the maid, Sarah. I'm trapped underground, please come rescue me?'"

“She cried for help,” Theresa says. “When you have all of us hearing it, including Master Oliver, it’s not madness, my lord.”

Lord Edmund takes a step toward us, causing us both to backpedal. “Don’t you dare bring my nephew into your madness! It’s bad enough that he’s trapped in that bloody hospital bed for God knows how long. I won’t have his mind poisoned as well.”

I am keenly aware of the drop five feet behind me. We may need to fight to escape him, but even two against one, I'm not sure that we can overcome Lord Edmund.

I try to talk him down first. “Think of Oliver, my lord. He needs you. He needs Lady

Cordelia. He needs both of us. Think before you do something you'll regret."

Lord Edmund laughs bitterly and sneers at me. "Oh yes, he needs you, all right. I looked you up, Mary Wilcox. I learned all about your history. You were in a madhouse for three months. Drove your sister off so you could keep her inheritance and then took advantage of your sick mother to keep her house and all of her money as well. Then you've made a career out of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong and driving families to ruin. If I'd had the sense, I would have insisted on vetting you before Lady Cordelia hired you. Well, I'm going to rectify that mistake right now."

I steel myself for the fight, but Theresa moves first. She shrieks and rushes Lord Edmund, barreling into him with all of her strength, scratching and clawing. Lord Edmund cries out and stumbles backward, shielding his face from the attack. I am so stunned by her ferocity that I don't react at first. It's only when he grabs hold of her shoulders that I join her.

Lord Edmund cries out again when I kick at his legs. I swipe for his face, nails extended, but he catches my wrists and twists viciously. I cry out and fall to my knees, crying out again when they slam onto the hard stone floor. Theresa puts her head down and pushes him back, her bullish strength driving him to the wall.

But my earlier fear proves true. Lord Edmund is older than us, but he is stronger than us as well. With a growl, he shoves Theresa to the ground. She lands beside me, and we both stare in horror as Lord Edmund snarls at us, his eyes wild with insanity.

"What the devil has got into both of you?" he shouts. "You've both gone bloomin' mad. Bloody march, bloody hares, the both of you!"

"If you kill us," Theresa warns, "There will be people asking questions. You're already suspected of three murders, and you won't get away with two more."

He stares at us in amazement. “Kill you? What the bloody hell are you on about? You’ve just tried to attack me. ”

I feel a kernel of doubt, but how can we be wrong? The evidence is all around us. “You threatened us,” I remind him. “You said you would never have let me work here, but now you’re going to fix your mistake.”

“Yes! You stupid old bat! I’m going to fire you. I’m not going to kill you.” He blinks. “Did you really think I meant to push both of you into the ocean?”

Theresa and I share an uncertain look, and Lord Edmund sighs and once more lifts his hands and looks out at the ocean. “Good God. Good. God.”

“Then what’s that chamber in there?” Theresa asks. “With the shackles and the blood? What’s this little execution spot that opens out to a cliff?”

“I have no idea,” Lord Edmund replies. “I came to the library because I heard Mary snooping around in there again. I was going to warn her that if I caught her in the room again, it’d be the end of her job. Instead of finding her, I find the bloody shelf moved out of the way and a dungeon underneath. I could hear you two talking, so I came down to investigate. Nearly got myself killed for my trouble.”

He stares at us for a moment. In a softer voice, he says, “You really thought I lured Sarah down here, tortured her and then threw her off of the cliff?”

We share another uncertain look. Then Theresa asks, “Well, if not you, then who?”

Heat climbs my cheeks as I realize that the entirety of my case against Lord Edmund is based on that reasoning. If not him, then who?

But the evidence is so strong! These chambers open up to his library, a private room

in an otherwise unused portion of the castle. The blood in the room with the manacles is not brand-new, but it's not ancient either. Blood has been shed there recently, and who else could have found it but Lord Edmund? How could he not know that this place was down here?

No, I don't believe it. Even if he didn't know at first, he couldn't have used this library for years without accidentally moving the shelf the way I almost did. He would have discovered this place eventually, and when he did, he would have known he could do whatever he liked here without ever being found out.

Clearly, that's not true either, as Theresa and I have found him out, but murders have been taking place here for years. And there's the financial evidence Sean has.

I meet his eyes and say, "There's more evidence, Edmund." He notices that I don't address him by his title and frowns at me. I don't care. "I hired a private investigator to look into your finances. I know that you received a life insurance policy when your wife died. I know that you received your sister's inheritance when she died. Lady Cordelia has money too. Do you plan to kill her and take that money as well?"

Theresa gasps when I reveal what I've learned about Lady Evelyn and Lady Alivia. Lord Edmund is white as a sheet. He stares blankly at me, breathing slowly and deeply as he tries to keep his emotions under control.

When he finally speaks, some of his lordly bearing is returned. "Miss Wilcox, you have no idea what you're talking about. You've glanced at a few pages and believe you understand the entire story. I remind you that you've been here for barely more than a week. You can't possibly know enough about me to claim that I'm a murderer. You can't possibly know enough about my family to claim they were innocent. As for the financial difficulties to which you've alluded, they are none of your business, and as you've implied, the money I received from my wife's insurance policy and the meager portion of my sister's inheritance that remained was not so much as a drop in

the bucket.

“I am well within my rights to have you both arrested and dragged from my house. It is out of respect for Mrs. Pemberton, who up until your arrival was an excellent servant and one of the few bright spots of life in this castle, that I tell you the truth.”

He takes a breath and looks out over the ocean. I am not yet convinced that he isn't the killer the evidence suggests him to be, but there is real pain in his eyes, real grief.

“My wife, Lady Evelyn, was a fragile woman. She was beautiful, breathtaking even. She was also kind and pure and gentle as a sea breeze. I loved her. But she wasn't well, and...” His lower lip trembles. “And I am not an easy man to love. I was raised by a very strict father and a cruel mother. It's made me very hard and very strict myself. I did my best, but... it wasn't enough. Lady Evelyn was worn down and eventually, she chose to leave. She walked to the edge of White Cliff and jumped.

"Lady Cordelia, I'm afraid, is much the same. Utterly beautiful, kind, pure and far more loving than I deserve. But she is fragile, and Sarah's death has sent her spiraling into insanity. I fear Dr. Thornton is right and that I will have to commit her to save her life."

He takes a shaky breath, and I'm surprised to see tears welling in his eyes. “Well, I suppose I have a type,” he says thickly.

“As for my sister, she was a drug addict.” His face changes, losing its grief and adopting an ugly sneer. “She preferred heroin and fentanyl to caring for her son. She used when she was pregnant, constantly. I warned her she would kill her baby, and she told me, and I quote, ‘Bugger the baby.’ Well, bugger her. I hope Hell exists, and I hope she's there burning an eternity for all the suffering she's caused Oliver.

“When she had Oliver—and by the way, no one knows who the father is. I don't

know if you heard that or not. When she had him, she said she was going to get sober. She came to me begging for help. I wanted to have her thrown in jail and keep Oliver for myself, but Lady Cordelia was a bleeding heart, and I'd just married her, so I would have done anything she said if she only kept smiling at me the way she did.

"She was sober. For eight days. Then she began using it again. I began legal proceedings to adopt Oliver and take custody from her. When I won, she threw herself off of the same cliff where Lady Evelyn jumped. I'll be honest, I don't miss her. Were it not for Oliver, I might have killed her. But I didn't."

He meets our eyes and smiles thinly. "And now you know the truth. Bugger both of you if you don't believe it. But I'll tell you what. Let's all go upstairs, and we can tell the Inspector whatever we'd like. Then we'll let him decide. And Mary, you're still fired. I want you out of my house before sunrise."

Before I can respond, a wailing noise carries through the stone passages. "Please." Then another, much louder and rising in pitch to a shriek. "PleeAAASE!!"

For the third time, the color drains from Lord Edmund's face. He mouths one word, "Cordelia."

Then he turns and runs back the way he came.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

Theresa and I share a stunned look. Then we follow him.

Lord Edmund is already ten yards ahead of us, and he rapidly increases that distance. He cries out Cordelia's name as he runs, and it's the first time I've heard him show fear. Whatever else he might be, he truly loves her.

And what might he be? Up until a few minutes ago, I thought I knew, but now...

The evidence is there. Logically speaking, he must be the murderer. No one else has access to this place and no one else had a motive for the deaths of Lady Evelyn and Lady Alivia. Lord Edmund might dismiss the financial relief from their deaths as a pittance, but to a dying man in the desert, even a drop of water is worth killing for. As for Sarah? Well, she didn't have money, but she had youth, and she was pretty enough. Not statuesque like Lady Cordelia, but the wealthy often feel they can have their cake and eat it too. It's clear that no one is looking too hard for justice for poor Sarah, so if it wasn't for us, Lord Edmund would have gotten away with her murder.

But his emotion was genuine, and Lady Cordelia shared a similar story about Lady Alivia's drug addiction. Oliver's birth defects are severe, and drug use during pregnancy could explain that. As for Lady Evelyn, it's not illogical to believe that she was as fragile as Lady Cordelia. Lord Edmund's story makes sense too.

But do I believe him? Can I believe him when so much hard evidence suggests that he is our killer?

I put those thoughts aside when I hear another cry. "They won't leave me alone! They won't leave me alone, Edmund, they won't leave me alone!"



Theresa and I reach the top of the staircase. We are gasping for breath, but physical exhaustion is the least of our worries right now.

The library window is thrown open again. Standing outside of it on the stone ledge beyond is Lady Cordelia. She is barefoot and wears nothing but a cotton nightgown that is soaked through. Lord Edmund stands inside the window, his hand outstretched to her.

Two others are in the room. Dr. Thornton wears his own nightclothes and stands on the other side of the window, though a few feet back, out of the way of the rain.

The second person is Inspector Hargreaves. He has his gun drawn, aimed at Lord Edmund. He gives me a sober look and nods. I remember the pictures and realize that my phone must have sent them. Perhaps signal was briefly established when we stood on the platform exposed to open air.

Lady Cordelia presses her hands to her temples and shakes her head. She paces back and forth on the stone ledge, nearly falling off. Theresa cries out and drops to her knees, hands clasped in front of her. I might react the same way if fear hadn't rendered me immobile.

I've never seen someone die. This fact hits me like one of the bolts of lightning that strike outside. I've seen dead people before. Some time ago in Switzerland, I saw the aftermath of my employer's gunshot murder. The scene was gruesome, but I didn't see him actively die. I don't know how I'll react if I see Lady Cordelia fall to her death in front of me.

"They won't let me go," she sobs. "I hear them all the time shouting at me, crying for me, begging me to join them, compelling me."

"Lady Cordelia, please," Dr. Thornton says. "Think about what you're doing. Oliver

needs you. He's ill right now. He's alone in a hospital, and when he awakes, he will be frightened. If he sees you there with him, he'll know he's safe. He'll know he's okay. But he needs to see you. You're his mother now."

"His mother just told me to jump." Lady Cordelia laughs. The sound is mad, like the cackling of a hyena. "Did you hear that? She just told me to jump. Headfirst." She giggles again, and that giggle devolves into a wail of pain.

"Lady Cordelia," Inspector Hargreaves calls. "You can't jump. Lord Edmund is wanted for murder. He'll be taken to jail now. Oliver will have no one but you, and like Dr. Thornton says, he will need you. You have to come back inside."

Lord Edmund frowns darkly at him. I confess I'm not pleased with Inspector Hargreaves's choice of argument either. Could he not have refrained from mentioning Lord Edmund's arrest until after we've assured ourselves of Lady Cordelia's safety?

Lord Edmund snatches for Lady Cordelia, but she shrieks and claws at his arm. Rivulets of blood well where her nails dig into his skin. "Don't touch me !" she cries out. " Don't fucking touch me !"

She moans and looks out at the storm. She is shivering badly, and I don't know if it's the cold or her fear that causes it. "I can hear them all the time. They're telling me to join them. They say they'll hurt Oliver if I don't. They say they'll hurt Edmund. They'll hurt me. I need to go. I can't listen to them forever; it'll drive me mad."

This ends in an anguished moan that echoes throughout the room. She sounds already like a ghost.

"We can get you help, Lady Cordelia," Dr. Thornton tries again. "We can help you stop hearing the voices. We have doctors who specialize in treating such nervous afflictions. They can—"

“This is not a nervous affliction, doctor,” she sneers, glaring at him with disgust. “I see them! I hear them! They’re out there!”

“They are not,” Dr. Thornton replies. “What you are hearing is not real.”

“Yes, it is,” she insists.

“It isn’t.”

“It is!”

“Please, my lady,” Theresa cries. “Come back inside. I’ll make us some tea and some warm broth. I’ll bring you warm clothes and a blanket and put something nice on the telly for you. We’ll relax and get some good rest, and in the morning, it’ll all be better.”

Theresa’s argument is the simplest so far and arguably the most practical. Perhaps this is why Lady Cordelia seems to actually consider it. She stops for a moment and tilts her head. Her lips move, but she doesn’t speak aloud.

Lord Edmund makes a grab for her again. Lady Cordelia shrieks, her face screwed up in rage. She grabs his wrist and kicks hard, planting the balls of her foot into his nose. Even over the storm, I hear the snap as the bone breaks. Lord Edmund cries out and stumbles backwards.

“You never loved her!” Cordelia cries. “You only loved the way she did whatever you wanted! All you had to do was ask, and she’d give you anything you desired. She’s smile and moan and tell you she liked it even when her soul was rotting away!”

Lord Edmund takes a step back, staring at her with shock.

“And you never loved Alivia either. Even before she found the drugs. She was never smart enough, never prudent enough, never enough of a lady. She shamed the family, and when she needed you, all she got from you was disgust and hate!”

Her lips trembled. “And you never loved me. Just like Evelyn, I’m nothing more to you but a beauty who’s willing to let you use that beauty.”

“That’s not true, Cordelia,” Lord Edmund insists. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone. Even Evelyn. You are all I’ve ever wanted, and I will spend the rest of my life proving it to you. Please, come inside.”

Cordelia laughs. She looks down at him and shakes her head. “You never listen to me. You never believe me. I’ve told you for days now that I can hear them, and all you’ve given me is judgment. ‘Stop being silly, Cordelia.’ ‘Stop being daft, Cordelia.’ ‘Cordelia, stop whining about ghosts and be a good little wife for me.’”

“I’m sorry,” Lord Edmund says, “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. You’re right. I should have listened to you. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. Come inside, and we’ll talk. Tell me what you need, and I’ll make sure you have it.”

Cordelia slumps. Her chest heaves, her breathing growing more rapid as another panic takes hold of her. “I need them to shut up! I need them to go away!” She runs to the end of the ledge, and we all cry out, but she stops, inches from the precipice, and screams into the storm, “Go away! Go away! Go...”

She drops to her knees, the movement shockingly graceful. “Go away.”

She buries her face in her hands and weeps, moaning and sobbing in an anguish that pours from the depths of her soul.

I can understand that anguish. It mirrors the anguish I saw in my dream, the memory

of me as I was thirty years ago, weeping in front of Dr. Bradbury in the psychiatric hospital.

I approach the window, stopping short of Lord Edmund so he'll have room to reach for her again if he gets the chance. "My lady, I see them too. I see the ghosts."

All eyes in the room turn to me. Lady Cordelia lifts her head slowly and regards me as well.

"My sister's ghost has haunted me for thirty years," I tell her. "It's as I said before. Her memory haunts me, as the memories of Lady Evelyn and Lady Alivia haunt you. But please listen to me. They are only memories. They aren't real. They're caused by our own guilt. That guilt is powerful, and it conjures images and words that convince us that we deserve to suffer, even that we deserve to die.

"You do not deserve to die, Lady Cordelia. You do not deserve to die for what happened to Lady Evelyn. Or for what happened to Lady Alivia, or to Sarah. That was not your fault. You are innocent, and those ghosts that demand your blood don't deserve it.

"It's hard. I know it is. My sister's ghost still haunts me. To this day, I endure the self-accusation that tells me I am deserving of nothing more than suffering. But I ignore it because I know in my heart that I am a good person, and I deserve to be happy. You may hear the ghosts. They may demand that you join them. Tell them the same thing I tell my own ghosts. Tell them no."

I extend my hand toward her. "Come inside, Lady Cordelia. Your family—your living family—needs you."

She looks at me for a long moment. The others and I wait with bated breath. Finally, she stands and walks toward me. She places her hand in mine, and I lead her forward.

Cheers call from behind me, but she stops just before entering. I try to pull her, but she remains where she is. Her strength is shocking, and I can't move her at all.

She smiles down at me, the tenderness in her eyes an odd and disturbing contrast to the strength of her grip. "I saw your sister too," she tells me. "I saw Annie."

A chill shoots through me. I've never mentioned my sister to her. How does she know her name?

You're next, Mary.

"That's not what she said."

I stiffen. "What?"

"That's not what she said. And that's not what you said."

I see myself sitting in front of Dr. Bradbury again, telling him of my nightmare. He asks me about the dream, and I reply, but the memory is fuzzy now. My vision is equally fuzzy. Reflexively, I try to pull my hand away from her, but she holds it like a vise.

"She wanted me to tell you that," Lady Cordelia says. "Before I go."

She releases my hand. Lord Edmund cries out, "No! Cordelia!"

He lunges for her, but it's already too late. I see a look of peace cross her face. Her dress billows around her as she falls backward.

Then she is gone.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

I sip my tea, but I don't taste it. It's still too hot, and I know it sears my tongue, but I don't feel it. I set it down, and a little of it splashes onto my fingers. They are scalded, but I don't feel that either.

Theresa and I sit in the parlor on one of the three large sofas. There's a tea service on the coffee table in front of us, made by Franny and Matilda before they went home. They somehow managed to sleep through everything that happened, so Inspector Hargreaves has no use for them, and with Lord Edmund already on his way to jail for the murder of those women, there's no need for them to stay.

I keep replaying Lady Cordelia's words to me before she jumped. She said my sister's name. How could she have known that? I know that I never told her my sister's name. I never even told her that I had a sister. How could she know who Annie was? And how could she know about the dream I had of being in the hospital? How could she know about the dream of her ghost telling me that I was next?

But she knew. Somehow, she knew.

And somehow, that isn't what disturbs me the most. What disturbs me the most is what she told me Annie said to her.

That's not what she said. That's not what you said either.

I was so certain that I had unlocked a memory, so certain that I had found a little more closure to the mystery that has plagued me for decades, the ghost that—like the ghosts who plagued Lady Cordelia—just won't leave me alone.

Now, I am left wondering again. What did I say? What did Annie's ghost say to me?

I sip my tea, and once more, I don't feel or taste anything. I feel guilty that I'm having these thoughts now. I should be focused on my concern for Lady Cordelia. By some miracle, she's survived, but Dr. Thornton told us that based on his initial examination while waiting for the paramedics, it's unlikely that she'll survive the day. If she does, it's unlikely that much of her will survive. In his own words, "She might be able to make some noises and drink her meals through a straw, but there won't be anything of Lady Cordelia left. Just a corpse that hasn't realized it yet."

Not the kindest way to describe it, but I can forgive him for his rudeness. He doesn't mean it to be unkind, and he has enough presence of mind not to deliver it that way to Lord Edmund. He's simply shaken by what he's witnessed. We all are.

"Bugger this," Theresa says. She sniffs and says, "Pardon me language, but this is all such shit. She was a lovely woman who didn't deserve what happened to her. None of them did."

Strange voices carry to us from the stairs. A moment later, two crime scene investigators in white lab coats pass us. They're discussing the upcoming Manchester City match, interspersed with comments about girls they've dated and girls they hope to date. When they see us, they clam up and offer us nervous nods.

"Seems disrespectful," Theresa observes. "I know it's just their job and they can't be emotional about it, but they could save their talks about football and fillies for after they've finished looking through the scene of a murder."

I don't reply. I think to myself that if one is to survive in a job like that, one must be able to separate themselves from the tragedy of the situation, but I don't say it out loud. I am too numb to speak right now.



“Thank you for trying,” Theresa says.

My brow furrows. Confusion manages to break through my shock. “For trying what?”

“To save her. To pull her back inside. I saw you try to yank her in, but she had a demon in her. My mum used to say that when a person really wants to die, Lucifer plants a demon in them that gives them strength to find their death no matter what anyone does.” She sniffs. “Cordelia had that demon, and there was no saving her.”

Her lips tremble, and she hangs her head forward, tears streaming from her eyes. “And me, I didn’t know what to do. I offered her tea and soup and the telly because that’s all I knew. That’s how my mum took care of us when we were sick. I just...” she chuckles through her tears. “I just grabbed at the only rope I could see. What a fool I was. Offering blankets to a woman gone mad.”

“You did your best,” I assure her. “As you said, she had a demon in her. There was nothing we could do.”

She sighed. “Least we got Lord Edmund, right? He won’t be able to hurt anyone anymore.”

I pause a moment. I still have doubts that we were right after all. The evidence is there, but his reaction was not at all what I expected it to be. And he could have easily killed both of us if he wanted to. I don’t believe we frightened him with our warning that people would suspect him.

I don’t have the energy to dwell on this right now, though. “No. He won’t hurt anyone.”

We hear more footsteps, and a moment later, Inspector Hargreaves walks into the

parlor. He smiles wanly. "Mind if I join you?"

We shake our head, and Theresa heads to the kitchen for another cup.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself," he says. "I can get it."

"Sit down," Theresa commands. "I can still serve tea even if that's all I'm useful for now."

Hargreaves lowers his head. "Thank you."

"Don't you be mopey," Theresa warns as she enters the kitchen. "Can't handle everyone being down right now."

The door closes behind her, and Hargreaves sighs and looks at me. "Well, we caught our killer."

I frown. "Do you believe so? I'm no longer sure."

He raises an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"He could have killed us," I tell him. "But he didn't. And he seemed genuinely surprised when we accused him."

"He did it," Hargreaves says firmly. "The evidence all adds up. No one else could have accessed that room or even known about it. He's got a motive for the other women. He needed Lady Evelyn's and Lady Alivia's money. Franny and Matilda told me that he'd had his eye on Sarah ever since she arrived."

That fits with my earlier speculation, but...

“Why didn’t he kill us, though?”

The door to the kitchen opens, and Theresa returns with the extra cup. She serves Hargreaves tea and takes her seat again. She frowns at me. “What’s wrong, Mary? You look upset. I mean... more upset.”

“I just don’t know why Lord Edmund didn’t kill the two of us. He could have. You saw how easily he overpowered both of us. He could have thrown us both down into the ocean.”

“And how would he get away with that?” she challenges.

“The same way he got away with it before,” Hargreaves replies. “The evidence has been stacked against him for a while.”

“Exactly my point,” I insist. “It’s the one thing that doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, you said you had a friend. A private investigator, remember? He might have been afraid that he couldn’t get to your friend the way he could get to other people.”

Hargreaves frowns at me. “What’s this about a private investigator?”

Heat climbs my cheeks. “I... I’ve been doing my own investigation into Sarah’s death. I have a friend in Boston who’s a private investigator. I hired him to look into possible motives for her death. I sent him pictures of the chamber.”

That reminds me. I need to call Sean. He needs to know everything that’s happened.

Hargreaves sighs. “I really wish you had told me about that first, Mary. Scotland Yard takes a dim view of private investigators. It’s not my opinion, you understand, just Yard policy. We’ll have to be careful that it doesn’t come out that you were

spying on Lord Edmund. Even if he's convicted, you could still be charged." He sips his tea. "That being said, if your friend uncovered any evidence, we would like to have it."

"I'll make sure you get it."

"All the same," Theresa interjects, "I think that's why he didn't kill us."

"Yes," Hargreaves agrees. "If your friend is based in Boston, then he's out of Lord Edmund's reach. He would discover that something happened to you and come forward with his evidence."

I nod. "Right. I can see why Lord Edmund would want to avoid that. Still... if he leaves us alive, then we come forward with the evidence."

"I'm sure he had a plan to silence both of you and make himself look innocent," Hargreaves says, "but Lady Cordelia's outburst caught his attention first."

We fall silent a moment, thinking of poor Lady Cordelia. Hargreaves sighs, and I'm surprised to find tears in his eyes. He pulls out a cigarette, glances at Theresa and puts it back.

"Might as well smoke it," Theresa says. "No lord or lady here to tell you otherwise, and I don't care much either way right now."

He nods thanks and pulls the cigarette out. After he lights it, he says, "This was supposed to be a celebration. Justice for my sister."

I raise an eyebrow. "Your sister?"

"My sister," he confirms. "Evelyn Hargreaves. The late Countess Blackwood." He

says that last with venom. "I told her not to marry him. I knew he was no good."

"So Lady Evelyn was your sister," Theresa says softly. "I didn't know that."

"She was. I never mentioned it because..." His lower lip trembles. "Well... I disowned her after she married Edmund. I hated the prick. I still hate him. I didn't know that he was a murderer, but he always fancied himself better than everyone just because his ancestors had favor with old kings who did something of value hundreds of years ago." He shook his head. "I never imagined he'd hurt her, though. God, I feel like such a fool. I could have helped her. I could have saved her life."

I think of Theresa's words about the demon in Lady Cordelia and our futile attempts at rescuing her. I'm not sure there was anything Hargreaves could have done for Lady Evelyn.

He sniffs and stands. "Well, I have to get back. Got paperwork to file, you know. Mary, if you can send your evidence as soon as you think of it, that would be appreciated. Miss Theresa... I'm sorry. You've been caught in the middle of all of this. Both of you have."

She shrugs. "Would've been in the middle anyway. Like the saying goes: The elephants fight; the grass gets trampled."

"Quite so." He smiles slightly. "But not anymore. Not by this elephant."

He leaves the room leaving both of us to ponder the future of Blackwood Manor now that its lady is comatose, and its lord is jailed. I suppose that future lies with Oliver now. What a cruel fate for a young, sickly child.

But then, fate's wheel turns with no regard for the people ground under it. I suppose, in that way, Oliver is no worse off than many of us.

Besides, he won't be alone. There are still people alive and well who care for him.  
The sky is dark now, but the sun will rise on House Blackwood again.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

“So once more, you’ve put your life in danger rather than let the police handle a situation better suited for men with guns than middle-aged governesses.”

“I did what I had to, Sean. They would never have found that room if Theresa and I hadn’t found it first.”

I'm in the parlor talking to Sean while Theresa makes dinner. We've spent the day doing chores mostly because there's nothing else to do. Oliver is in surgery right now to repair some of the damage to his lungs. Dr. Thornton assures us over the phone that the surgery is nothing to worry about, but he'll be kept under for at least another day, so we can't visit him yet.

“Yes,” Sean replies, “and you wouldn’t have come face to face with a crazed murderer. Seriously, Mary, you could have died.”

“We’ve discussed this. If you stay with me, you’re likely to find me in that sort of situation quite often.”

Sean sighs. “Yes, but... I wasn’t there with you this time. I wasn’t here to save you.”

I smile slightly. “You did, though. I warned Lord Edmund about you, and that if anything happened to me, you would be able to prove it.”

“That would have been small comfort to me if he’d thrown you to the rocks.”

“Yes, but he didn’t.”

He sighs again. “What unimpeachable logic you show, Mary. It reminds me of the drunk driver who said he would keep driving drunk because he hadn’t yet crashed and killed anyone.”

Such a comment would ordinarily make me laugh, but I don’t have the energy to laugh right now, so I only smile. A moment later, he asks, “So when are you coming home?”

I take a deep breath. “It’ll be a while, Sean. Oliver’s infirm, and he’s alone now. It’s going to be a while before he’s strong enough to return home, and when he does, he’ll be... Well, to be honest, things here are so messed up that I don’t know if he’ll even come back here.”

“He won’t. The castle will have to be sold to pay for the family’s debts, along with probably everything in it. Some of those portraits might be enough to leave him with a little to put in a trust, but it will be a modest one. He’ll probably be sent to Lady Cordelia’s family in Cornwall.”

“Yes, that will be best,” I agree. “But that will take some time. I will stay at least until he is placed with them.”

“At least?”

“He’s so ill, Sean. And he’s just lost the rest of his family. Lady Cordelia might never wake up, and if she does, she’ll leave most of herself behind. He needs someone who cares for him to help lead him through this and find his way to shore.”

“I love you, Mary.”

The phrase comes out of nowhere and stuns me so much that I don’t respond. It’s the first time he’s said that to me.



“Shite,” he says. “Well, I’ve stepped in it, haven’t I?” He chuckles. “Well, I’ve said it, and I won’t take it back. You don’t need to say it to me right now. I just... well, I think it’s wonderful that you’re such a caring person. I know this is a lot to ask right after declaring my love, but would you mind if I joined you? It’s lonely here, and if you’re going to insist on being noble, I’m going to insist on a cuddle every now and then.”

I grin widely. I don’t return his sentiment right now, but I’m sure my appreciation shows in my voice when I say, “I’d like that very much.”

“Wonderful. I’ll book a ticket, then.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Right. Soon, Mary.”

He hangs up, and I sit and allow the glow to build in my heart. It truly is a wonderful thing to be in love. I never thought I’d experience it this late in life. Even with Sean, I never let myself believe that things between us would go this far. I just enjoyed what we had without hoping for anything more.

But now it’s here. For the first time in my life, my luck is good.

I should have told him. I was too shocked to say it at first, but now I wish I had.

Well, I’ll tell him when he gets here. I think I can find a way to say it that he’ll appreciate very much.

“What’s the smile for, Mary?”

I jump when I hear Theresa’s voice. “Oh. Oh, um...” My cheeks flame. “I was

talking with my friend. He said some very nice things about us for helping to bring Lord Edmund to justice.”

I consider Theresa my friend too, but we are not close enough yet that I want to share the real reason for my happiness. She gives me a knowing smile, though, so I think she can see behind my lie. She doesn’t press me, thankfully. “Well, supper’s ready. I hope you don’t judge me too harshly, but I’ve opened a bottle of his Lordship’s wine to drink with it. I’m not given to alcohol, but I could use something to take the edge off.”

"I am in full favor of that," I assure her. "Thank you. And thank you for helping me. You risked your life, too. I appreciate your courage. I'll be honest, I... well, I couldn't have done it without you.”

She flips her hand dismissively, but I can tell she’s pleased. “Oh, you’d have been fine. You’re a far braver woman than you think you are.”

We head to the dining room, the larger one. I’m a little pensive about eating in Lord Edmund’s grand dining hall. Obviously he no longer has need of it, but it still seems a little presumptuous of it.

The thought doesn't linger, though. I start on the food, and as always, Theresa is an excellent cook. The lamb roast flakes off of the bone, and the mashed potatoes are creamy and smooth and delectable. Humans really are simple creatures when it comes down to it. There's nothing like a good meal to soothe the soul.

The wine is just as delicious. Like Theresa, I am not given to alcohol, but I can recognize the quality of this claret. I shudder to think how valuable this bottle is.

For several minutes, we just focus on eating. We finish our first glasses and Theresa goes to the kitchen to pour us another. “Air’s not good in here for decanting wine,”

she explains.

“I know nothing of wine, so I trust your expertise, Lady Theresa,” I reply.

The wine, it seems, is already getting to me. I try to remember the somberness of the circumstances. “So what will you do?” I ask.

She frowns. “Do? What do you mean?”

“Well, you won’t have a job soon,” I reply. Now it’s my turn to frown. “Oh, I’m sorry. That was terribly rude of me to say so bluntly.”

“No need to apologize,” she says. “You’re not wrong. To be honest, I don’t know what I’ll do. I suppose I’ll stay here for as long as I can. I have a little saved up, so I can be here long enough at least to ensure no vandals get into the place before the assessors come to take everything. After that, I can stay with my sister in Lancashire until I find a new position. There’s always some lord or another looking for help. What about you? What are your plans now that you’ve dragged all of these bones into the light?”

I grimace a little at the way she says that. “Well, I’ll stay for Oliver as long as I can. I have enough money to live off of, so I can focus on taking care of him until he goes to his grandparents in Cornwall.”

Theresa chuckles. “Always the hero, ain’t you? Have to save everyone.”

My brow furrows at that. There's something in her tone, something odd. Her eyes, too. They're hard now. I haven't seen that expression before.

I blink, and when I open my eyes again, the hardness is gone. She’s only smiling pleasantly.

I sigh and push my glass away. "I think I've had enough of this. That's strong stuff."

She tilts her head a little, the nods. "Aye. I think it's enough to work."

I giggle at that. "Yes, I think so. I'm positively soused."

"Doesn't take much with you, does it?"

I shake my head. "No, I rarely drink. I never smoke either."

"That's good. Sensible. Drugs and alcohol are the worst things to happen to humanity." She sips her own wine, something I find deliciously funny, although I control my laughter. "People who fall into that trap are no good. Weak. Just like Lady Evelyn."

The disquiet comes back. There's really no need to speak ill of the dead. My curiosity gets the better of me, though. "You mean Lady Alivia, right?"

She scoffs. "Both of them. Evelyn was a drug addict, too. Horrible. Not to mention she cheated on Lord Edmund. Used to do it with the local dealer for a dime bag of dope or a rock of fentanyl. Don't know if they call 'em rocks like they do with coke, but the point is if you happened to walk by the manor every other Wednesday while his Lordship was at his office in London, you'd find Lady Evelyn on her knees earning her fix." She shook her head. "I wasn't surprised at all when I found her dead with that needle in her arm, all covered in vomit."

I set my fork down, my heart pounding. The disquiet I feel has turned into alarm. I swallow and notice how thick and furry my tongue feels. "You... you said that you... couldn't find her. When you searched the house. You said she had just disappeared."

She smiles at me. Her teeth are white and even. They gleam like marble under the

brittle diamonds of her eyes. “Did I say that? It's so hard to keep all these stories straight.”

I get to my feet, consumed with fright. I lift a trembling hand to her and stumble backwards. “You... you...”

“Are you all right there, Mary?” she says with a lilt in her voice. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The world spins around me, and the last thing I see before darkness takes me is the gleam of Theresa’s stony smile.

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The first sensation I'm aware of is a coppery scent. It's tangy and unpleasantly sweet, and it sticks to the roof of my mouth, leaving a metallic residue that curdles my stomach.

I turn my head, and my next sensation is a cold and hard object pressed against the back of my head. Or rather, my head is pressed against something hard and cold. More touch comes to me, and I feel something equally cold and hard gripping my wrist. My shoulders ache, and there's an unpleasant stretch in my side, almost as though I'm hanging from a—

My eyes fly open, and alertness returns to me in the worst possible way. I look around wildly, willing myself to see anything other than what I'm seeing. I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, hoping to drive this nightmare away.

But I don't drive it away. The nightmare is still here. And it's no dream.

I'm shackled to the wall in Lord Edmund's torture room. There's a dim light from the platform across the way, just enough to confirm to me that my worst fears have come true. Only it wasn't Lord Edmund's room after all, was it?

Fear slithers up my spine and overwhelms my will. I take a deep breath and shriek, "Help! Help me! Someone help me! Oh God. Help!"

I hear a low rumble and fall silent. A moment after that, I hear footsteps and realize that the low rumble I've heard is the sound of the bookcase in Lord Edmund's library opening.

The footsteps approach and panic takes hold of me again. “Help! Help me! Please!”

I struggle to pull myself free. It’s a useless thing, I know, but fear has overridden my sanity. “Help!”

A shadow falls over the door, and I shriek when my murderer walks in a moment later.

“Won’t do you no good to scream, Mary,” Theresa says. “There’s no one left to hear you but me.”

“You... you... you’re...”

She grins. “Me.”

She chuckles and pulls a cigarette from her pocket. I stare at her in shock, and she says, “A bit hypocritical, I suppose, given me speech about drugs and alcohol, but I’ve never gotten on my knees for a pack of cigarettes, and I’ve never driven drunk and killed an innocent person. So”—she takes a drag—“can’t really say it’s the same thing, can you? Oh.” She offers me one. “Want one? Don’t worry, I’ll help you smoke it. No need for me to be especially rude, is there?”

She laughs, and that laugh sends a wave of anger through me. I try to kick her, only to find that my feet are chained to massive steel balls.

"Cannonballs," she informs me. "Sixty-four-pounders. Not common to find, but with the troubles with the French, some English lords opted to defend their keeps with the biggest guns they could have. Lord Michael Blackwood was one of them." Her brow furrows. "Or was it Lord Henry?" She shrugs. "Point is, I figured you'd try to fight me. You've got spirit in you."

“So you killed them,” I say. “All of them.”

“All of them,” she confirms. “Someone had to. Don’t mean to be rude, but they were all deserving of it. Weak, pathetic little creatures.”

I can’t believe the creature I’m staring at. How could I have missed this? How could I have so easily been taken in by her wholesomeness? I fancy myself a good judge of people, but I don’t see anything in Theresa to warn me that she is so evil.

Yet here I am, utterly at her mercy. Utterly under the control of a serial killer.

My stomach turns. In the past, I’ve dealt with crimes of passion, single murders by people who have allowed their selfishness to overcome them in one brief moment of rage. This is the first time I’ve dealt with someone who kills as a pastime.

That’s why she so easily fools me. She’s shrewd. She’s learned how to protect herself. She realized I was a threat, and she kept her distance from me while at the same time keeping me close. I’ve been made a fool of.

I still don’t understand, though. “Why?” I ask her. “Why did you kill all of them? What do you gain from it?”

She takes a drag from her cigarette and shrugs. “Well, the world gains from it, doesn’t it? That sod from Tarly won’t be dealing more drugs to hook kids on and ruin them, will he?” She notices my shock and laughs. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t know about that one. Yeah, that was my first. My first here, anyway. Didn’t do it here, though. I followed him back to his place in Tarly and beat him to death with a truncheon.”

I am sick to my stomach. She speaks of killing a man as flippantly as I would speak of changing my coat.



“As for the others. Let’s see. Evelyn was a whore. We talked about that. Couldn’t understand how the wife of a lord would sell herself out like that.”

“She could have gotten help,” I tell her. “She could have found a doctor to help her get clean.”

She frowns. “What? Oh!” She throws her head back and laughs. “Oh, that bit about the drugs wasn’t true. That was just Lady Alivia. No, Evelyn wasn’t an addict. Just a whore.” She chuckles. “Why’d I come up with that, anyway? Must have been in me cups a little more than I thought. Now, Alivia, though. She was absolutely an addict.” She shakes her head. “Poor Oliver. Never stood a chance with a mother like that. And to take advantage of Lord Edmund’s generosity the way she did.” She shook her head. “Despicable.”

“But Sarah? Why her?”

"Ah, yes. Sarah. That stupid little cow-faced thief. You wouldn't notice because you haven't been here long, but Lady Cordelia’s missing a fair bit of her jewelry. I caught Sarah wearing it in her room. She begged me not to tell and said she’d put it right back. I told her that she shouldn’t give it right back or Lady Cordelia would notice. I’d show her where to hide it, then put it back when I was able. And I wouldn’t tell a soul that she took it. I kept that promise.”

She meets my eyes. “And now we come to you. Little Miss Hero. Mary Wilcox, the superhero governess who just has to be the detective. How does a woman get to be your age without knowing to mind their own business?”

As frightened as I am, I still feel angry. I can’t stand thinking that Theresa will get away with all of this.

It’s that emotion that informs my response. “How does a woman get to be your age

without knowing that murdering people is wrong?”

She wags a finger at me. “You see. That’s where you’ve got it wrong, Mary. I didn’t get to be this age. I’ve just always been like this. I’m really not all that special. Started with animals when I was a lass, just like so many do. Never really knew why I liked hurting them. Just found it fascinating, I guess, how hard they fight for life even when there’s no chance. They can’t understand that it’s over the moment I have them in the trap.”

She finishes her cigarette and lights another one. “Sure you don’t want one, Mary? I really will help you smoke it. You’ve got a hard few days coming, and this might be your last chance to take the edge off.”

I shiver at the implication she makes, but I refuse the cigarette. She shrugs and continues with her horrible life story.

“I’m not a monster. I’m really not. I grew up, realized what I was doing was wrong, and decided I wouldn’t do it anymore. And I didn’t. I got a job in service with Baron Harcourt in Devonshire, and I stayed clean. When I had urges, I just found another way to take the edge off.” She grins and lifts her cigarette. “That’s how I got into these.”

She sighs. “But it wasn’t enough. Of course it isn’t. Once you’ve felt a life struggle for itself in your hands, felt it fight with everything it has, you know that you’ll never feel anything like it again. There’s nothing beats that rush, Mary: not drugs, not sex, not alcohol, not money, nothing. And when the inevitable happens, and you take that life regardless of its wish not to die... well, that makes you a god, doesn’t it? At least to those few.”

She stares at the wall with a faraway look in her eyes. I look at her face and marvel at how human it looks. How normal. I spent so much time with this woman and could

never tell what she was.

After a minute or two, she starts and grins at me. "Where was I? Oh yes. So I knew I couldn't just go around killing everything I saw. I mean, aside from the fact that I'd make it, what, a week or two before I got shot, there's the fact that people aren't animals. They're people with hopes, dreams, and thoughts like you and me. I can't just kill them because I like killing them. So I picked my targets. I picked people who deserved it. Druggies, drunks, violent men, sometimes violent women: people who used their lives to abuse themselves or others.

"Took me a while to figure it out. Had a couple of close calls in Devonshire. One of them came too close. So I took a step back. I figured out that I needed something more than just an opportunity. I needed a plan. I needed a place where no one could see me, a way to dispose of the bodies, and a good cover story so no one would think to suspect me. And wouldn't you know it, I found all of that here."

She shakes her head in wonder. "If you could have seen my face when I found this place. It's as though it were designed for someone like me. Probably it was. Those old lords... they knew they were gods, and they acted like it.

"But I only killed those who deserve it. That's why I've only killed four people since coming here. People here are good folk for the most part. There's not much to do to clean up. Guess that's the silver lining to the cloud of losing this place."

She stands and finishes her cigarette. Then she looks at me curiously. With the care of an artist, she presses the cigarette to the upper portion of my breast where the shirt doesn't cover.

There's no chance of holding back the scream. The pain is something utterly sharp and unbelievable. She smiles and nods, satisfied. "Oh yes. I'll have some fun with you."

She leaves then, shutting the door behind her. I hang from the wall, trembling and shaking with pain and fear and rage.

“Help!” I shriek. “Please help me!”

The only response is Theresa's laughter as she ascends the stairs. I keep screaming until I hear the low rumble of the bookcase returning to its place. Then I burst into tears and wept.

For the first time, I have met my match. There's no way out. All that's left for me is to wait for Theresa to grow bored. Then she'll toss me onto the cliffs, and all that will be left of me is my ghost.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

Annie comes to visit me that night. The room is pitch-black during the night, but I can see her, so I know I'm dreaming. She is, as I remember her, tall and beautiful and full of life. She smiles at me and says, "Hey, sis. Got yourself in a bit of a pickle, huh?"

I laugh, but those laughs turn to sobs. "I'm done for, Annie. She's beaten me. Sean warned me that one day, I would go too far and get myself into this kind of trouble, and he was right. I'm going to die."

"No," she insists. "You won't. If you keep your wits about you, you'll survive."

"How? She can keep me here as long as she wants. She's only waiting for a storm so she can get rid of me when no one's looking."

"But people are looking, Mary. Sean will be here soon. He'll know something's wrong when you don't answer your phone."

"Yes, but it could be too late, then. And Theresa... she's different, Annie. She's not like the others. She's cunning. She's a true killer. She'll find a way to outsmart him."

"Such little faith in the love of your life," she chides. "Sean is a true detective. He'll find you. And he'll find a way to bring you to justice. You really don't know him as well as you think you do."

"But..."

"Enough," she barks. "I'm not going to listen to you whine. You will survive if you

stay sharp. You will die if you don't. It's that simple. So stay sharp and do what you have to do."

"What do I have to do?"

"I won't listen to you play stupid, either. Grow up, Mary. We're not girls anymore. It's time we admitted some things to ourselves."

I think for a moment, and it quickly becomes clear what Annie means. "But how can I kill her? Even if I were capable of such—"

"You're capable."

There's a hint of bitterness in what she says. I shudder at that and continue with my question. "I'm shackled to the wall. By the time she unshackles me, I'll likely already be dead."

"You won't be. She likes to feel her victims struggle. She likes to feel them fight. You can't fight if you're already dead."

"But she's not stupid. She won't risk it."

Annie sighs. "I forgot who I'm talking to. You know everything, don't you, Mary?"

I sob. "I just don't want to die."

"Then you have to fight. There's no miracle here, Mary. There's no magic button. There's no, 'If I do this, then everything will work out right in the end.' You just have to do it even though you might fail."

I sob again, this time with as much frustration as fear. Annie notices this and says,

“That’s always been so hard for you. You’ve always needed to believe that if you make the right choices, you’ll receive rewards. But that’s not how it works. Sometimes, you make the right choices and still lose. It’s crappy, but it’s the truth. But what you never do is stop fighting. You never stop trying. No matter what.”

She turns to leave, but there’s one more question I need to ask her. “Wait!”

She stops and turns back to me.

“What did I say? In the hospital. And what did you say to me in my nightmare?”

She watches me for a long moment. A look crosses her face. I can’t tell whether it’s a look of compassion or a sneer of disgust. Perhaps it’s both.

She finally responds. “Not now.”

Then she is gone.

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A loud crack of thunder wakes me from sleep. I’ve been hanging in this room for at least half a day with no hope for escape. And now the storm has come. Any chance I might have had has been taken from me.

I sob again, then shout in frustration. Damn it! Already? I don’t even have time to prepare myself for the conflict to come.

Life’s not fair, Mary.

“I know it’s not bloody fair, Annie!” I hiss. “If it were fair, I wouldn’t be here! I’d be home in Boston, and I’d have a practice, and you’d be home, and you’d never have

left me to what? To find yourself? To be free? Ha. I wonder, did you ever learn the lesson you taught me? That sometimes you lose no matter what?"

Annie, of course, doesn't respond.

I take a deep breath and steady myself. It's not likely that Theresa will kill me now. She hasn't had a chance to torture me. There will be at least a few more storms before summer arrives. That gives me some time.

But how to make use of that time? My body aches all over from the tension between the shackles around my wrists and my ankles. Not to mention the fact that I have no food and water. As it stands, I probably have only three days left of life and only a few hours left with enough strength to fight.

So I have to outsmart her. The problem is that I see precious little chance to do that shackled as I am. I have no illusions about my ability to break through my bonds. My only chance will be if I can somehow free myself.

I can't see anything. I can't tell if there are any weaknesses in the shackles to exploit. With my hands chained as they are, I can't reach into my pocket for my bobby pin. Perhaps the manacles are loose enough that with the right movements, I might be able to slip free.

I try pulling on them, but that gets me nowhere. Frustration and panic bubble up in me again, and I take deep breaths to calm myself. I don't succeed.

"It's too much. It's too much, Annie. There's too much against me and not enough for me. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

Tears fall again. I allow myself to weep until the panic subsides. That leaves me with an odd sense of wonder and a sense of something for Theresa that might be respect.



She has beaten me. She has well and truly beaten me. I don't realize before now how highly I rate my detective skills or how sure I am of success and survival. There's no good reason for it. Perhaps I have some skill as a detective, but it doesn't help me here. I don't realize Theresa is the killer until she's already drugged me.

As for survival? Well, as Sean is fond of telling me, I am only alive because thus far I have been extraordinarily lucky. No more.

Sean.

Fresh tears come to my eyes. "I love you, Sean," I whisper. "I love you. I'm so sorry. I love you."

He'll never hear me say that. The one man in my fifty-two years of life who I've felt anything for, and he'll never hear me say it because I've finally gotten myself into trouble he can't rescue me from. I'm such a fool.

Then I hear voices. Not one voice. Voices. Theresa is talking to someone. A man.

My heart leaps to my throat. "Help!" I scream. "Help me, please!"

I keep screaming, shouting until my throat is raw, begging God that my cries will carry as Sarah's did, and that whoever is upstairs talking with Theresa will hear me screaming.

I scream for well over a minute before I hear footsteps rushing downwards. "Yes!" I cry out. "I'm over here! Help me!"

I see the beam of a flashlight rapidly approaching. "In here!" I cry. "Theresa's captured me! She's going to kill me!"

The flashlight beam crosses into the room. Then it lifts up. It falls on a face for a brief moment, and I see the snarling visage of Theresa Pemberton.

Then the flashlight comes down on my head. A star bursts in my vision, and everything goes haywire for a moment. My eyes flutter, my legs shake, my lips buzz, and my head swims, reeling from the force of the impact. The experience reminds me of a seizure. I've never had one, but my body acts the way seizures appear to act.

“Shut up!” Theresa hisses. “You fucking bitch!” If he’d heard you, I would have to kill him too, you fool!” She sighs. “Pipe down!”

I take a deep breath and regain control of myself. My vision still swims, and my head pounds, but I’m not shaking uncontrollably anymore. “You don’t have to kill anyone,” I tell her. “I’ll leave. I’ll go back to America, and I won’t tell anyone.”

She chuckles. “Just out of curiosity, did you actually expect me to believe that?” She sighs and looks out at the water. “You’re too risky. Damn it. I would have loved to play with you, but I can’t take that chance. I’ll have to get rid of you now.”

I prepare myself for the most important struggle of my life. “Are you going to throw me over the edge?”

“Aye. But I’m going to beat you to death first while you’re still chained up here.” She grins, and the look in her eyes is wild and sickening. “Can’t risk that you’ll somehow get the better of me.”

She lifts the flashlight, and a familiar, lovely, beautiful voice calls, “If that flashlight moves, I blow your sodding head off!”

“Sean!”

I burst into tears, but this time the tears are happy. The miracle has occurred. Sean has found me.

I hear more footsteps. Then Inspector Hargreaves calls, “Damn it! On your knees!”

Theresa’s eyes widen. “Help, Inspector! He’s threatening to kill me! Shoot him!”

“Don’t!” I cry out. “He’s my friend! Theresa’s trapped me here, and she’s trying to kill me! She killed Sarah. And Lady Evelyn and Lady Alivia.”

“Please listen to her, mate,” Sean pleads. “I’ve got me gun on Theresa because she’s about to bash Mary’s head in. I won’t let that happen, but please believe that Mary’s telling you the truth.”

A moment later, a light illuminates me. Inspector Hargreaves calls out, “My God. Mary? Theresa, what is the meaning of this?”

Theresa’s eyes flit between me and the two men. A look of rage crosses her face. Then she chuckles. “Well, shite. Looks like it’s come to an end. I knew this would happen eventually. I tried to be careful, but you know how it is. The Devil comes to collect one day.” She looks at me. “God, I really hate that it’s you, though. You’re just some prissy busybody governess. I hoped it would be someone less annoying. Oh well.”

She turns around and sprints for the platform over the ocean. Inspector Hargreaves cries out and rushes after her. “Theresa! Don’t do it!”

Theresa doesn’t hesitate. She doesn’t even slow down. Lightning illuminates the edge of the platform, and the last image I see of Theresa Pemberton is her choosing to go out on her own terms rather than face justice for her actions.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:33 am*

“Do you think I’ll be able to ride a bicycle one day?”

Dr. Thornton smiles at Oliver. “You could ride a motorcycle if you wanted to.”

“Let’s start with a bicycle,” Lord Edmund interjects, “and see where things go.”

Oliver’s surgery is a success. They were able to repair the damage to his right lung. His left was too underdeveloped to ever be of use, so they cut it out and left him with the good lung. Oliver will have to work harder than most children to strengthen his body, but he will be able to lead a normal life with the proper care and exercise.

Lord Edmund is, of course, released immediately upon Inspector Hargreaves report that the true murderer has been found. After Theresa’s suicide, he inspects her room and finds more evidence. When I ask what he found, he won’t tell me. He only says that Theresa was the sort who kept trophies. Perhaps it’s better that I don’t know.

So now, Lord Edmund, Sean and I are in Oliver’s hospital room with Dr. Thornton. Already, he looks so much stronger. The color is back in his cheeks, and he doesn't have that horrible cough anymore.

“When your dad comes around about the motorcycle, let me know,” Sean says. “I’ve got an old Triumph Bonneville I’ve been meaning to restore. I’ll let you have a ride on it.”

I look him squarely in the eye. “You never told me you had a motorcycle.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” He winks at Oliver, and the boy giggles.

Lord Edmund clears his throat and says, “In point of fact, Mr. O’Connell, Oliver is my nephew, not my son.”

“That’s all right,” Oliver says. “You’re pretty much my dad. I never knew my real dad, and you’ve taken good care of me. Besides, I love you.”

Lord Edmund’s lip trembles, and his eyes are moist. His voice is shockingly tender when he says, “I love you too, Oliver.”

He embraces his nephew—his son, rather—and I have to turn away so they don’t see me crying. Sean puts his arms around me, holding carefully to keep from irritating my bruises. I close my eyes and breathe deeply of his strong, manly scent. God, I really do love him.

When Oliver and Lord Edmund separate, Oliver asks. “Is Aunt Cordelia here? I want to ask her if she’ll be my mum as well.”

The room dims slightly when he says that. Lady Cordelia is still comatose. She’s showing signs of brain activity, but it’ll be some time before they know how much recovery she can expect. Dr. Thornton warned us not to be optimistic.

“She’s resting right now,” Lord Edmund replies. “She had a bad fall. The doctors are taking care of her, but... she’s resting.”

“Oh.” Oliver’s brow furrows in concern. “She’ll be all right, though, won’t she?”

Lord Edmund’s lip trembles, but he quickly controls himself and smiles at Oliver. “Yes. I believe she will.”

I hope fervently that his Lordship is right. This family has suffered altogether too much. They’re done for some good luck. Annie might be right, and that might not be how life ordinarily works, but we must hope for the best anyway, mustn’t we?

Otherwise, we have no choice but to give in to despair. And we can't do that. Not ever. Not even when the odds are stacked impossibly against us.

“Will you be staying, Miss Mary?” Oliver asks.

I look at Sean. He nods, and I reply, “We’ll be staying for a while. I’ll continue to teach you until the castle is sold.”

“Where will you go after that?”

I cross to his bedside and take his hand. “Then I have to go home,” I tell him gently. “I have some things I need to take care of that I’ve been neglecting to take care of.”

“Will you visit me?” he asks hopefully.

“Of course. If your uncle—sorry, your father—allows it.”

“We’ll keep in touch with Miss Mary,” Lord Edmund promises. “She cares deeply for you. I think it’s important that you have people in your life who care deeply for you.”

Oliver nods. "Yes. I think so, too. I'm very lucky, aren't I?"

“You are,” I agree. “Very lucky. And you must always be grateful for that.”

“I will,” he says seriously. “I promise.”

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I stand in the library and stare through the open doorway into the staircase beyond. The light from the library illuminates the first few steps. Beyond that is darkness.

Lord Edmund remains at the hospital with Oliver and Lady Cordelia. He gives Sean and I permission to stay in the castle until they move. It's hard to tell whether that will be in a month or in a year. Castles like this are in high demand among the younger wealthy, and the bank will be very motivated to sell it to cover Lord Edmund's debts.

But the deaths here cast a pallor. So many lives have been lost within these walls. Their ghosts no longer cry out for justice, but who's to say they don't linger here, trapped as jibakurei and doomed to wander the place of their death for all of eternity?

The door opens behind me, and I turn to see Sean entering. He gives me a gentle smile. "Thought I'd find you here. Lord Edmund told me if it wasn't for your fascination with his library, we might never have learned the truth."

I smile at that, but the smile fades quickly. I look back at the no-longer-hidden staircase and say, "She beat me, Sean. I was wrong this time. I had no idea it was her. Not until it was too late."

Sean hesitates a second. When he replies, I'm grateful that he tells the truth. "Yes. She did. I told you, Mary. You do this long enough, and eventually, you'll meet your match. That's just the way it goes. You win some, but that means you lose some."

His scolding is painful, mostly because I hear the pain he tries to hide. I can't imagine how terrified he is for me all the time, knowing of my tendency to get myself into this kind of trouble.

"It's just..." I take a deep breath. "So frustrating. To fight so hard for justice and to lose to someone who's little more than an animal killing for pleasure. I know it sounds like I'm making this about me, but I'm not. She killed innocent people. Someone had to stop her. And I couldn't. It was only by chance that you showed up when you did. If you hadn't..."

My voice trails off. After a moment, he says, "I know. But I did show up. And you're alive. And the murderer can't hurt anyone anymore. That's what matters."

I cross my arms. Sean is right, but knowing that only frustrates me more. "I had a dream while I was down there. Annie visited me. She told me if I kept my wits about me and fought hard, I would survive."

"Sounds like she was right."

"She wasn't, though. I could have panicked uncontrollably, and nothing would have been different. You still would have shown up, and I still would have survived due to a miracle. I could have fought and struggled and raged all I wanted. I could have thought for hours and not thought of a way out of there. I was trapped. Completely. It's just... What if I'm wrong, Sean? What if I come across one of these mysteries again, and I don't find the killer? What if the guilty escape and the innocent suffer because I come to the wrong conclusion? And..." I take a deep breath. "And I really do hate that I was trapped. It's the first time where I realized that I'm not invincible." I hug my arms over my chest. "But I won't stop. That's the part that really frightens me. I will do this until it kills me because I can't not fight for justice. I'm compelled to."

He turns me around and looks me squarely in the eye. "Mary. You are not alone. You need to get that thought into your head. It's not just you fighting for justice. It's you and me and a lot of police officers wherever we happen to be. And sometimes others will fight with you. There's a whole world of people who want justice. We're the majority. People like Theresa are outnumbered.

"Yes. She beat you, Mary. But she lost to us. And people like that will always lose. As long as there are people like you to inspire people like me."

I nod slowly. His words don't drive away all of the pain, but they show me the light at the end of the tunnel. That's enough for now.



I turn to him and say, “I love you, Sean.”

This time, his words do drive the pain away. He smiles and caresses my cheek. “I know.”

He pulls me into his arms, and everything is right with the world again.

Almost everything. There is that business I still need to take care of, the one I tell Oliver about.

When we separate, I take a deep breath. “Sean?”

“Yes?”

“I want to look for Annie again.”

He sighs heavily, but he smiles at the end of it. “All right. I’ll help you. Always.”

And now everything is right. I pull him close and kiss him again, pouring every ounce of love I have into it. We have a long road ahead of us, and my experience here has taught me that road may end in tragedy.

But tonight, we have victory. And we have each other.

Tonight, that’s enough.