

I See The World Through Darkness

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Day 1

The house —if such a simple word could adequately describe it— was an enormous piece of architecture and history. A long, twisting driveway led towards it from the road. Our driver made the approach deftly, but I was too entranced by the sheer mass of the building to notice. I knew that Henry's family had a distinct and wealthy heritage, especially when it came to distant aunts and uncles, but this was beyond my imagination. That sunset behind it, the beautiful tapestry of sky... It was almost too much.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" our driver remarked. I wanted to answer but found no words.

The mansion —since that's the only word I can comprehend to describe it— must have contained countless rooms. A rectangular parking area sat in front of it, beside a tidy, not-quite-huge garden on one side and a beautiful-but-simple fountain on the other. The house itself looked to be all brick, with two large chimneys that separated the house equally into three wings. The center was the most majestic, with an enchanting porch and doorway. The sides were less eye-catching but impressive nonetheless for their size and symmetry. It was the most typical and simple country estate I could think of, yet seeing it in person mesmerized me all the same.

"Garden's a bit smaller than I remember," Henry mused. He looked excellent as always, sharp and professional, but I could feel his nerves as plainly as my own. "Granted, that was years ago. Whatever I *do* remember."

I touched his hand and he smiled at me faintly, but still that look in his eyes. Worry. Anxiety. He hadn't seen his great aunt for years, not since he was a child. Of course, I'd never seen her, not even pictures. Of her or the house. All I knew was that she owned a lot of money, so I expected her disposition to be that arrogant, grouchy, pent-up widower in every story I'd ever heard.

"Ma'am is probably asleep, already," the servant remarked, glancing at the car's digital clock. "Mind your step on the porch. If you'll stop at the door, I'll be around in a moment to let you inside."

He pulled the car to a stop. Henry opened his door and met the tiny set of stairs that led to the front door, elevated by a few feet. I followed suit, grabbing my luggage.

"No, ma'am. I'll take care of that." The driver shot a kind smile in my direction and I relented.

Henry stood by the door as I approached, facing the solid oak barrier. He flinched, almost touching the handle, but drew back. I heard the driver parking the car as we waited for him and the bags.

"Are you surprised she's asleep before eight?" I asked Henry in a low voice.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said. "Still don't. Honestly, I'm kind of glad we can go a night alone."

I rubbed the small of his back and nodded. "Good point."

The driver let us in quietly and gave us the four total bags we'd packed. It only took him a few moments to show us up the staircase, pointing out the dining room, the sitting room, the

kitchen, and a few guest rooms as we progressed. The house was empty, he said, except for “Ma’am and myself.” As we approached the top of the stairs, he hushed us and cocked his head to the side.

“Her room’s down that way.” He led us in the opposite direction and to one of four doors. Unlocking the room and pushing the door open, he said, “Rooms on the right of you are for guests. Directly to your left is the bathroom. Make yourselves at home.”

The room was simple enough, much like the interior of the house itself, but contained a few lavish aspects. The bed was covered in a silver-colored drape and the edges of the frame were immaculate, likely faux gold but the color shone just as bright. We each had a dresser, a small table and lamp on either side of the bed, and a large vanity across from the bed’s foot. There was a desk set up by the window and what looked like a quill and ink on its surface.

“Is that real ink and everything?” I asked, fixated on it.

“Is indeed, ma’am.”

Henry strolled around the room, inspecting the furniture and the bed itself. He pushed on it, felt the mattress, and then ran his fingers over the drapes. A smile crept to his face and he thanked the driver. I followed suit.

“Of course. I’ll be downstairs and to the left, in the servant’s quarters, if you need anything. There won’t be any formal dinner tonight, but help yourself to anything in the pantry. All I ask is that you don’t wake her.” There was no question of who he referred to. He took a bow—which I saw as overkill—and left us alone.

Henry shrugged and gestured to the window. “Nice day out.”

“It’s a shame we can’t go outside.” I sighed and stepped towards him, resting my chin on his shoulder. I felt the unfamiliar weight on my left finger, twisted the band around my skin. “It’s weird. Pretending to be engaged.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” he smirked. “You know it’s just so my aunt... doesn’t freak out on us.”

“But still. It’s kinda nice.”

We stood there for a few moments, lost in thought. He kissed me on the forehead and broke contact.

“I’m gonna pop downstairs and check out the study, maybe the library. See what my uncle was up to before he went belly up.”

I nodded. “I’m gonna unpack a bit and then draw once it gets dark. That sitting room looked really nice. Maybe what’s-his-name will start the fire if I ask nicely.”

Henry scoffed. “You think I don’t know how to start a fire?”

I smirked and kissed his cheek. “Maybe I just wanna use our servant while we have one.”

Later that day, I set up my notebook, a pencil, and a pen at one of the small tables in the sitting room. Bob, as I’d come to know the servant, started a large fire across the room. He said they didn’t often use the firepit anymore, but seeing as it was a chilly night he had no objection to it. I think he was just being kind, but all the same it made for a great atmosphere. I sketched out the area around the firepit first but struggled with the intricacies of the bricks and gave up. It’d been a long time since I was able to draw freely and without distractions. I think I looked forward to it so much than when I actually had the chance it felt like a let-down.

Henry clambered around a bit, but the library didn't hold his attention for long. He took a book with him, which surprised me, but it was barely dark when he said goodnight and left me. His footsteps trailed away on the main staircase, softer and softer until they were gone. I was left alone in the dark expanse of the house with only the flames for company.

My eyes turned to the front door every so often. With my back to the wall in the sitting room, I had a perfect view of it. It was about ten feet away, through a large doorway. I started to draw that instead and it worked out slightly better. The edges were difficult, but the pattern of the wood was simple and I could trace it easily enough with just my eyes.

I heard footsteps on the staircase again and expected Henry to emerge, probably asking when I would come to bed. He'd been gone for about an hour now, which probably put it at eleven o'clock or something along those lines.

The footsteps reached the ground floor and were muffled by the carpet. They trailed along the hallway, passing by the first entrance to the sitting room. I felt a little uneasy at this. Probably not Henry, though. It could only be...

A haggard, old woman shifted into view. She stood at the front door, pressing her wrinkled face against its surface. I couldn't see her expression, blocked by the mess of curls that clung to his cheeks and drooped to her shoulders. Her fingernails were short and chewed as she pressed one hand to the glass. With the other, she fumbled with the door's locks. One on the handle, two deadbolts, and one of those door chains. Without noticing me, she then turned back the way she'd come and ascended to the second floor.

This disturbed me for a while, but I went back to drawing. Not even an hour later, however, she did the same thing. I noticed more about her this time. The stained, loose nightgown that she wore and the blotchy tone of her face. Once again, she took no notice of me. And then a third time later on, and finally a fourth at likely one in the morning.

At this point, the sole reason I stayed awake was to observe her. Something entranced me about this woman and her paranoia. What was she afraid of? Did she forget that she already checked the door? Was she expecting someone?

I mustered my courage on her fourth visit and as her hand touched the first lock, I said, "Hello, ma'am."

My voice erupted like a drum in the pitch-black silence of the house. She snapped in my direction, eyes wide, face of terror. Then she locked onto me and her features softened, breathing slowed. She placed a hand over her heart and shuffled towards.

"Goodness, you scared me." She smiled feebly. "I had no idea you were down here. And so late."

I nodded, unsure of what to say. I guess I had to say something. After all, I'd started this conversation. And I'd waited for her to return all those times.

"Are you okay?"

She cocked her head. "Why, yes. I'm fine. And you?"

"Good." I chewed on the end of my pen, avoiding her eyes. "I just thought because you've..."

The old woman chuckled. "How long have you been down here?"

"Probably four or five hours."

"Yes, I see." She shrugged. "I do like to check the door often. Makes me sleep better. Knowing everything is still out there."

"How... how many times do you check? If you don't mind me asking."

"Oh, you know. Seven or eight." Her eyes drifted to the sketches in front of me. "Those are wonderful. That's my door, right?"

I nodded.

"And you are, I'm guessing, here with my great nephew?"

Again, I could only nod.

"My name is Sylvia," she went on, reaching out to shake my hand.

I felt the empty, soft grip of her fingers and retracted my hand as soon as it was appropriate. "Bailey," I said in turn.

"Well, do enjoy your stay, Bailey. I'll be heading back to my bed for now." She grinned at me again, a twinkle in her eye, before leaving as quietly as she'd come.

Day 2

I hurried to bed shortly after and didn't see Sylvia until the next morning. Henry and I descended early in the morning for breakfast and found her already seated in the dining room, an empty plate in front of her alongside a cup of tea. She grinned and welcomed us.

As we took our seats, Bob brought us each pancakes, eggs, and bacon. I took my time in speaking, still groggy and only twenty-minutes awake. Henry, on the other hand, had been up since four with that old, dusty book from the library. He sat by the window, reading with a flashlight and then by the dawn streaming in the window. I would've quite enjoyed this sight of my suddenly-bookworm husband if not for the fact that it kept me awake to be alone in bed.

"Does Bob do everything around here?" Henry asked, peering at his great aunt. Despite the time between his last visit, they seemed to fully know each other already. They exchanged no pleasantries or small-talk. It was simply business as soon as we sat down.

"Oh, yes. Bob is marvelous." Sylvia grinned as Bob strolled in with cups of tea for the two of us. "Why don't you sit and have something yourself, Bob?"

"No thank you, ma'am. Already eaten." He grabbed her empty plate and hurried back into the kitchen with a lowered head.

"So I've been looking through some of Arthur's ledgers and writings," Henry went on, eyes only for Sylvia, "and I've been wondering ..."

The conversation droned on with talk of the business Arthur had once run. I gathered that they shipped some kind of wood from the nearby forest back in the day, but that this source of wealth had since dried up. Henry inquired about their property's value, the town nearby, and a few other manners that didn't seem to concern me. Sylvia herself appeared tired of the conversation and so I tried to but in at one point.

"This really is a fantastic mansion," I gushed, gesturing around vaguely.

"Manor house, dear," she corrected me. "We are most definitely not a mansion."

Bob took away all the dishes at last and we sunk into other talk, about the garden outside and what Henry remembered from his visit years ago. This part of the conversation I really enjoyed. I liked to imagine the "manor house, dear" in its former state of greatness. More

than anything, I liked the idea of being a young, married couple, with this lush property at our fingertips and the grandeur of such a house at such a young age. Sylvia and Arthur must have lived an extraordinary life early on. What a splendid marriage that would have been, rather than the dull, tedious, paycheck-dependent existence of my own.

"Henry," Sylvia said at one point, "would you mind running into town and checking the mail? It's only about a half-mile walk from here. Right through the forest. There's a lovely path that Arthur used to take every day."

"Of course." Henry stood from his chair, scraping against the floor. "I'll go right now, in fact." Then his eyes turned to me. "Come with?"

I shook my head. "I need to finish unpacking. Maybe tomorrow."

He shrugged and trotted off into the rest of the house.

Instead of unpacking, I found myself drawing once again, this time at the table facing the forest. These trees enveloped the house on all sides, with the front door leading to town along the path Henry was taking. This window in our room showed the reverse, where a back door led to a forest that appeared untamed and untouched. I could see, in the distance, a larger and older forest, slightly different from the one close to me. This was probably where the company had gotten their wood when they were still in business.

My drawing was interrupted by Sylvia, who knocked on the door and entered quietly. We exchanged a few words of greeting and she again commented on my drawings. I had been doing the outlines of the forest, planning to fill it in slowly. With a few attempts, I could possibly managed a decent sketch of the view.

"Henry seems like a good man," Sylvia commented, now leaning against the wall and staring out the same window as me.

I thought about offering my chair but didn't know how long she planned to stay and chat. I didn't really want this to be an extended conversation.

"Yeah, he is."

She smirked at something, eyes still in the distance. I couldn't tell if she was looking at the forest or conjuring an image in her head. There was nothing funny out there that I could see.

"I'm so glad you two came," she said. "It's wonderful out here. But so peaceful now. So calm."

This was an odd comment, especially considering the death of her husband instigated our arrival. Peaceful and calm weren't the normal words to describe such a situation.

"We're very glad to be here," I assured her. "We'll stay as long as you need."

"Oh, it shouldn't be long now." She patted the top of my head. "Things have a way of coming and going sooner than we expect."

"I... I guess so."

"Are you happy in your relationship?" she addressed, still not looking down at me.

"Very much."

"That's good." She sighed and rubbed the back of one hand. "Happiness is important, after all. I am happy now. Or at least I am relieved."

She made a few more odd comments before leaving without another word. This completely threw me from drawing. I spent the rest of the day unpacking, talking with Henry, and exploring the rest of the house. We ate a good lunch and dinner, enjoyed this new way of

life, and mostly kept to ourselves. The only other time I saw Sylvia was that night, checking the door three times before I eventually went to bed. Each time she said hello to me, and each time she slunk away with minimal sound like a ghost into the fog.

Day 3

That next morning after breakfast, I agreed to go with Henry into the town nearby. We dressed light but I made sure to wear something with a hood since it seemed like the rain could fall at any moment in this area. Since we'd come, it had rained at least two times, maybe more at night, and always unexpected.

We left the house right as the long hand struck nine o'clock. I had never been an early riser so it took awhile for me to feel alert, but the crisp air snapped at me. I felt myself more awake with every minute spent outside the warmth of the home.

"How far is it to the town?" I asked as we left the front porch, heading across the driveway and towards the forest. I could see a tiny path leading into the trees, barely visible from here.

"We aren't actually going," Henry said. "The mailman told me that Sylvia almost never has mail so I should only come on the weekends. I'll probably act like I'm going everyday still, since that seems to put her at ease."

"So... where are we going?"

"There's this cool little thing in the forest," Henry explained. "You'll see."

It took us about five minutes to reach the 'cool little thing.' The structure came out of nowhere in the forest, standing alongside our path like they had been created for each other. It appeared similar to a tiny church building, with a triangular roof. At the crest of this was a cross, standing shorter than all the trees around it. The church had no windows, just a door at one end. It was incredibly plain, nothing ornate about it, and yet I felt a curiosity about it. To my surprise and pleasure, Henry led me towards the door and extracted an old, rusted key from his pocket.

"So apparently," he said, "this *technically* belongs to Sylvia. It hasn't been used for centuries, but I figured we'd take a peak around. Got this key in town from someone who knew all about it. Some young woman. She must have been a historian or something because she knew tons about the manor and this land." He pushed the door open and stepped inside, catching a spider web on his shoulder. "I noticed the church on my way into town and she offered to show me the inside. I declined, said I'd rather come back later."

This comforted me. I didn't particularly like the idea of Henry exploring an abandoned church with some woman from town. Especially without asking me first. He'd never given me a concrete reason to distrust him, but still...

"Creepy, huh?" he said.

I nodded. "It's something."

There were a dozen pews, organized into rows that led from the front of the church all the way to the back. In front of them sat a raised platform and another wooden cross hung on the wall. There were a few dusty Bibles scattered on the seats, cobwebs everywhere, and some random furniture strewn along the walls. A table here, wooden chairs there, half of a pulpit. A very typical, forgotten church.

"I was kinda hoping there'd be something freaky in here," I admitted, running my hand along the dusty top of one pew. "Weird there's no windows."

Henry didn't answer. He stood across the room, in the opposite corner, trying to fit the key into a new door. This one looked heavier than the entrance, hidden away in the corner like it wasn't supposed to be found. He ran his fingers over the surface and tried once more, unsuccessfully, to wedge his key inside.

"Isn't this weird?" he said. "Wonder what's inside."

"The building wasn't very long," I pointed out. "It could only be a closet or something."

"That's what I thought," he said, "but then why is the door so thick?"

When we couldn't budge the door and neither of us wanted to try kicking it down, the adventure came to an abrupt end. Henry figured that we'd been gone long enough from the house, so we returned. Sylvia was nowhere to be seen, nor Bob, so we went our separate ways in silence, me to the bedroom and Henry to the library. He said he needed to find a new book.

That night, our third in the house, I found myself once again drawing across the sitting room, my eyes transfixed on the fire. I'd come down here for the sole purpose of drawing that church building, at least what I could remember of it. But that became the problem. I couldn't remember enough. I knew, on one level, the basic structure and the oddities, such as no windows, but I couldn't comprehend the image of it. My mind was focused, and therefore my drawing centered, around the very plain, very bulky door that we hadn't gone through. That we couldn't. I remembered it too well, and so it dominated my notepad. Even when I drew something different, like the view in front of me, the door would emerge from my sketching and I was forced to move on.

The old woman returned, of course, only this time we chatted for a few minutes every time she came down. On her first visit, she apologized for not being at lunch or dinner, explaining that she felt rather sickly that day. I assured her it was okay and that she should take as much time as she needed. I even suggested that I would check the locks for her that night, but she refused this offer.

"No, dear. Focus on your drawings. I'll feel better if I check them myself."

On her second visit, she asked me about the town and how I liked it. I had to make up some fairly vague comments and I think she may have caught on. Her eyes did sparkle in a way I hadn't seen before. She didn't stay long, but I was beginning to tire of drawing. When she left for her room, I was finishing my last work of the night, a gorgeous rose that I'd seen outside the manor house earlier that day. This got me thinking about the garden outside, however, and how I wanted to visit it that next morning. I rose from my seat and stood at the front door for a while, trying to peer into the darkness and observe the garden. It was too far from the light, however, and with a moonless light I had no hope of seeing that far.

I turned back to leave and found myself face-to-face with Sylvia, this time a skeptical expression on her face. Her lips were curled, a fire in her eyes that hinted I'd done something wrong.

"Waiting for someone?" she growled, still blocking my path.

"What? No. I was... I was just trying to see the garden."

Her eyebrow rose. "So late?"

"I wanted to draw it."

"Mmm." She crossed her arms and scratched at her elbow absentmindedly. "So not waiting to open the door for anyone?"

"No, no of course not, ma'am. I would never. I don't even know anyone around here."

She nodded. "Good point. In that case, would you sit with me for a few moments by the fire?"

"I... Yes, of course." I trudged off in that direction, reluctant to sacrifice any more sleep but also to sit alone with her. At least that flash of anger had passed. Still, I didn't feel quite at ease in her presence.

Sylvia checked the locks again and then joined me by the fire. We each had an armchair to ourselves, though mine felt stiff and unused, like something new from the store. I could see a small burn next to where my hand lay and wondered what from. I also wondered how I could transform that image into a sketch.

"Do you like the house?" Sylvia asked me, her eyes not straying from my own. Her fingers tapped on her arm rest, distracting me.

I peeled my vision away from her and settled on the fire. "Yes, of course."

"Do you feel comfortable here?"

"Yes, I-"

"Be honest," she interjected.

"I mean, I don't feel *uncomfortable*," I blathered. "I'm just not quite used to it. You understand what I mean?"

She nodded. "I'm not sure one ever feels comfortable in this house. It's... it's corners are too sharp. Do *you* understand what *I* mean?"

I turned to look at her, not trying to hide my confusion. "Not... not exactly, ma'am."

Sylvia took a deep breath. "It's a little better in recent weeks. The lights are a bit more full. But in the past, there's always been such a cloud, both inside and out. The corners are sharp. The halls are shadowed. The books are dusty. The chairs all squeak. It's a horrible lonely place. Not so much recently, like I said. These past few weeks are... Well, they've been good, I dare say. The only question is how long that lasts. When does the fog return?"

I opened my mouth to say something. Her eyes were on the fire now, unfocused. I closed my mouth again. Whatever she meant, I had no idea. Her husband had died only a few weeks ago, after all. Did she mean that since his death things were better? Or had something else happened? None of it made sense. Then again, there was a reason Sylvia needed Henry to come care for her. She was losing her mind, he'd told me before we left home. Quickly, day-by-day, she was breaking down.

"Are you gonna be okay, ma'am?" I asked. I wanted nothing more than to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come unless I cleared my conscience with that question.

Sylvia turned to me and smiled, the flames lighting one side of her face while the other half lived in shadow. "Of course, my dear. What makes you think otherwise?"

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Sylvia and I began to talk almost every night, between her lock-checks. For the next week, we didn't miss a single chance to sit together and chat. She shared some stories from her

past, especially of her and Arthur in those early days. From what I could gather, being a young couple in this home was as majestic as I'd imagined. I wanted nothing more than to capture that same feeling, one way or another. I wanted to feel what she had, do what she did. Sylvia became, in some ways, an idol of mine.

In that same, peculiar transformation, I began to understand her. I knew why she checked the door so often now. I understood that paranoia in this crumbling, darkening home. Even during the day, I felt it. That sensation she put into words so well. "The corners are too sharp," she repeated to me one night, only this time I got what she meant. They *were* too sharp, and perhaps there was no way to correct that. Like a weakening of the house's structure. It was too far gone and we had to suffer the consequences.

Even as Sylvia and I grew closer, Henry and I began to drift apart. This was, partially, my own fault. I spent many nights with Sylvia downstairs instead of Henry in our bed. He'd never been particularly good about going for a week without sex, but in this huge house I think he began to feel more of a master. He wanted me and he even thought he deserved to have me anytime he pleased. This, in turn, pushed me away from him. I didn't want to relent. And more than anything, I didn't want to deal with that way of thinking.

He never said it to me outright, but I could tell from the side-glances he threw my way and from the manner in which he left the house every morning, "going to town for mail." We didn't talk often. He spent more and more time away from the house. I thought about his comment a week ago, about that young woman in town that had been so eager to show him the church building. I felt rising jealousy, but more than anything anger. I began not to trust him. More than anything, I began to hate him. Sylvia's stories, of beautiful marriage and perfect evenings in this home, were even brighter compared to my dreadful relationship. We slept with our backs to each other every night. We rose at different hours and slept at different moments. I was here, alone in this house, while he spent his time elsewhere. Probably with that woman. Probably in that building. Probably thinking of me and laughing at me all the while.

Maybe that's why the church building continued to haunt me. I saw it in my dreams. I felt it in my hands when I drew. Day to day, I was able to capture it better and better. The church began to live on my notepads, breathing and growing and changing into the structure I remembered. It became so much more than that. It was something I hated, and so it consumed my art. It infected me.

That wasn't the only thing I dwelled on continually. The church, and by extension the forest all around us, began to swirl in my dreams. I saw creatures moving in the trees. I could remember them vividly and I described all of them to Sylvia. The way they prowled. Stalking back and forth, always eyeing me, always creeping to the edge but never into the clear.

The night I described all of this to her, Sylvia's eyes narrowed with concern. She asked me to describe when I'd seen them, and that's when I realized. I could remember the image, but not when or where. I had no idea whether I saw them in a dream or in real life. I didn't know if they were real or simply figments of my buzzing brain after hours. And that fact disturbed me all the more.

It was one night, during these conversations we often had, that I breached the subject I'd been wandering closer to. She had already checked the lock twice and I usually went to bed after her third or fourth time. With my opportunity shrinking, I mustered my courage. As soon as she sat down in her armchair facing my own, I asked it.

"What did Arthur do that was so successful?"

She raised an eyebrow and I feared that I'd pushed too far. "Come again?"

"I mean... how did you both afford all this. Or inherit it. Whatever the case. I'm just curious. Was the wood-selling business just super profitable?"

Sylvia smiled, but it was distant and lacked any warmth. "The wood company, of course, made a nice profit," she began, "but Arthur was never exactly a man of honest business practices."

"You mean... he stole from people?" I asked, my eyes wide.

"He called it 'besting them in business.' I suppose it's true that he cheated them." She refused to meet my eyes during this explanation. I figured it was a tough memory to relive. "I always worried that he might get caught, you know, and that all of this would be taken from us. He gave it up sometime in his 50's, saying he had enough money and it was just an afterthought at that point. I think the pressure got to him, though." I expected to smirk or something at this point, at least show emotion, but her face remained stone as if she were reciting a poem she didn't particularly enjoy. Sylvia's story died off in the same manner and we were left in silence.

"It's odd," she said, "to miss someone as much as I do Arthur and yet... and yet I know that I'm in a better place now. That things are better off. He was a great man... but he was just a man. Perhaps not even a great one." She sighed and turned to face me, a flicker of a smile. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to bore you with the musings of an old woman."

"No, no." I tried to reassure her with my expression. "It's okay. I like hearing about you and him. Cooped up in this house." I tried not to sound like a little girl in fantasy land when I added, "It must have been wonderful."

"Oh, it was more than wonderful," her own face brightened. "For a time. Do you remember how I told you about that tree we planted the day of our wedding, how it grew and grew in the back yard until it was nearly as tall as the house?"

I nodded eagerly, remembering the story from a previous night.

"Well, one of his men cut down the tree, thinking it was just an extension of the forest. Arthur and I didn't realize until we felt it shake the ground. Never before had the house moved like that, so we rushed out back and found two men dragging it away." She shuddered at the image in her mind. I wanted to reach for her hand but remained in my seat, captivated and upright. "Arthur grabbed a shotgun from the porch and ordered them to stop. They were confused but obliged. Then he asked which one had cut the tree." Now she closed her eyes, a sour expression on her face. "He shot the man right there, once in the thigh and then in the forehead. The other man, who helped drag the tree, got a bullet in the shoulder."

"That's..." My mouth gaped.

"It's awful," she finished for me. "Don't be afraid to say it. I think that story is a perfect example of who Arthur was. He loved me, passionately, but he also could do awful things. He was a mess. I only hoped, back then, that I could sort it out. Clearly, I never managed."

"It's alright." This time I did reach over and gently touched her arm. I felt the goosebumps on her skin, the hair standing up. "It's all better, like you said."

At that moment, the back door crashed open. Sylvia jumped from her chair and rushed to the hallway, which led to that end of the house. I hurried after her. When I stood beside her, though, I was astonished to find Henry standing there. He closed the back door behind him, a set of keys dangling in his hand. His hair was ruffled, forehead sweaty, and his eyes had a wild appearance to them.

"Sorry..." he mumbled, gesturing behind him at the darkness. "Thought I was something in the forest. Had to check."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. "With no flashlight?"

"Left it outside," he said. "I didn't expect you all to be up so late. Sorry I've disturbed your nightly meeting." He waved half-heartedly and trudged to the stairs without another word. We watched his back disappear at the landing. Sylvia moved to the back door and fumbled with the locks, peering out into the darkness.

"Getting foggy out there," she said, shaking her head. "Don't see anything else though. I'd forgotten he had keys for this door. Only way inside once everything's locked up. Nobody's got keys for the front. Nobody." Sylvia turned to me, folding her arms. "Henry feeling okay lately?"

"I suppose so." I fidgeted in my spot and stared at the ground. "We... haven't been talking much."

Sylvia sighed and gestured up the stairs. "Well then, on with you. Tonight's a fine one to tie broken strings. I'll see you tomorrow bright and early."

I thanked her graciously but, once I'd made my way up the stairs, turned into the bathroom. I sat there for twenty minutes at least, long enough for Henry to fall asleep. Then I climbed beside him, with my back against his, and lay awake for at least an hour. It could've been more. I thought I may have heard the birds at one point.

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Despite Henry's peculiar behavior and his continual disappearances for long stretches of time, life inside the house transpired much the same as before. We still ate breakfast every morning together, although with very little chit-chat. Bob would show his presence every once in a while. I started to notice a growing tension between him and Henry, usually over small things like the state of the garden or what they predicted the weather would do. One time, however, Bob offered to go to town for the mail so Henry could stay in for the day. Henry vehemently objected and it nearly came to blows before Henry stormed out of the house, putting at end to the discussion.

Sylvia continued to reveal more about herself to me. I learned that she'd grown up in the mountains north of this house and that she met Arthur when they were only fifteen. This added to the mythical idea of their love that I had already conjured in my mind. They were married at nineteen but had no kids for a variety of reasons. Arthur had never been pushy about having them and Sylvia herself didn't know if she could conceive. The few times they'd tried it failed, and when things failed Arthur would usually give up. At least that's how she described it.

I began to look around the house for a painting or image of Arthur, something I could copy into my notebook. I never found any. It seemed that all traces of him had been removed from the house. This made sense, especially for a grieving Sylvia, but it disheartened me. I wanted so badly to put a face to the name and the character. I thought about asking Henry to check the library, but we were talking less and less. I didn't want to appear weak and I didn't want him to deal with his anger, if it appeared out of nowhere like usual. Perhaps I would check the library myself one day. There was bound to be a photograph or something. Anything.

Day 17

Sylvia didn't show up to the sitting room one night and I found myself lonelier than usual. I decided to walk around the lower floor of the house for a while, maybe find something interesting to draw. I took a candle with me, but I also turned on a few of the lights. I didn't want to wander in the dark, not with some of the stories Sylvia had told me. There were more than a few people who'd met unfortunate or evil ends here. I figured that's how ghosts were created, after all. If any house contained a few nasty spirits, it would definitely be this one.

My wandering led me around the hallway of guest rooms, not that I opened any doors. I simply passed by, leaving them be. I didn't want to disturb anything. I continued on past the library door. That wing of the house contained mainly just the library. So many books at this hour of night would creep me out. I'd never been an especially brave explorer. I came to the back set of windows which observed the lawn behind the house. The one Henry had come in from a few night's earlier. I still thought about that sometimes. It was peculiar. And the way Sylvia didn't seem to believe his explanation. All very, very odd.

I stood at those windows for a few moments, uncomfortably aware of how bright the house became. Anybody standing out there could easily make out my form in the window. That was the downside of having lights on. I could see around me, but so could they... whoever *they* were. I ignored the feeling in my throat and kept my eyes on the lawn. I noticed the wisps of fog that floated above the ground. It struck me how these reminded me of ghosts, fragile and smooth. Translucent. I shook away the thought.

Then I saw it. A light at the edge of the trees. Waving, slowly, from side to side. Signaling somebody? Me? I stood in awe, wrapped up in the image. It maintained a steady pace. Then it stood still. I felt like something had changed. Like it had seen me.

I rushed up the stairs, shutting off the lights on my way. Two at a time, unnecessarily loud, I emerged onto the second floor landing and made a straight line for my room. When I entered, I found Henry awake, to my surprise. He was seated on the bed, a book in his hands.

"Henry!" I exclaimed. "Thank god! Look outside, quick."

He raised an eyebrow, perhaps confused by the simple fact that I'd said his name. "What are you..." He set down the book and stood to face me. "Bailey-"

"Henry, just look, please." I snatched his arm and dragged him to the window. Both of us stood, peering through into the back lawn. I could barely see the fog still, catching the glint of the moon. But there was no light by the forest. Nothing at all to break the darkness.

With no further proof, Henry of course thought I was crazy. He laughed the matter off and said we all imagined things sometimes, even pointed out that he'd done the same a few

nights ago, only he thought he saw a wolf out there. I shook my head and tried not to show that his mocking tone hurt me. Whether or not he noticed, he didn't care. Henry drifted to sleep and I was left staring at the forest, waiting for a light that never returned.

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That uneasy feeling didn't end, though. I never again saw that light, but I felt it in some ways. I knew it had reached farther than the back windows. Over that next week, the fog continued to spread with every night. I made a point to check now, along with Sylvia usually. It was always closer, more dense. She would sigh and shake her head, a weary expression in her eyes. On the contrary, I felt alive, vibrant, terrified. I wanted the light to show itself by the forest, if only so I knew it had stayed out there. With each passing day, I feared it had come inside the house.

I began to see shadows where there shouldn't be. I saw them drifting along the walls, around those horribly sharp corners. One minute, a nondescript form, and then vanished into another hallway. I could never catch them and I didn't know if I even wanted to. They seemed to taunt me, begging me to follow. I didn't want to play this game.

I never told Sylvia about the light or even about the shadows. I didn't tell her how I could feel them pressing in on me every time I closed my eyes. It was never a sound. No whispers or footsteps. Just the sensation that we were no longer alone. The idea that someone stood in the dark corner, watching me, taunting me. Begging me to play their game.

That light had moved inside of our home. That fog which Sylvia described had thickened. And I saw them, those people, moving around the corners. I only wished they would stop for one moment more... I only wished to know the face of my own death.

Whatever his reasons were, Henry stopped leaving the house after that night. Just as drastic as his absence has been, so his presence was ten times worse. He refused to leave, even for a moment. Like the outside air would rot his skin and bones. He stayed in the library or Arthur's old study most of the time, except for meals and a few occasions, such as yelling at Bob.

Henry's temper rose each day, hotter and hotter until I feared it would melt the walls of whatever room he entered. Perhaps luckily, then, he never stepped foot in our shared room after that night when I barged in on his reading. He slept in the old study, rotating between three pairs of clothes, and I rarely saw him. Even though sleeping alone was uncomfortable and took a few nights to adapt to, I began to enjoy the peace and solitude of my own room with a backyard view.

I began to draw up there some nights, although I felt bad for abandoning Sylvia in this way. Anytime I sat by the fire with her, though, I began to fear that Henry was eavesdropping. I didn't feel confident in anything I said, knowing he could be just around the corner, waiting for a moment to pounce. For whatever reason, I started to think of my fiancé as the villain and I the victim. I tried to talk this over with Sylvia but, like I said, the words were limited.

All of this anxiety, uncertainty, and building tension came to a head one morning at breakfast.

Bob knocked over one of the empty chairs at the table and dropped the glass he had been carrying. Sylvia and I watched, holding our collective breath. Something about him had been off this morning well before he bumped into the chair. Now he knelt on the ground with a sopping wet pile of paper towels. He laid these on the table and grabbed the broom for the broken glass.

"Please take that off the table," Henry grumbled.

Bob raised his eyes and glared. "What?"

"That mess."

Bob grabbed the pile of paper towels and threw them into the trash can across the room. He continued with the broom. I reached to take an awkward drink from my glass before remembering it was mine he'd dropped.

"Why don't you just take all these extra chairs out of here?" Henry suggested, crossing his arms as he watched Bob.

Their eyes met and Bob growled something under his breath. Henry raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"I can't have a servant who talks poorly about me."

Bob stood with the broom in hand. He swept the glass into a dustpan and dumped that in the trash. Henry tapped his fingers on the table, his eyes never leaving Bob's back. Then he spoke up.

"You gonna repeat what you said?"

Bob stood and faced him. "I'm not your servant. I'm here as a courtesy to Sylvia, in remembrance of Arthur. It has nothing to do with you."

Without a word, Henry stood from the table. "Well, if this is a volunteer opportunity, why am I paying you?"

Bob's face turned bright red and his knuckles were white as he gripped the broom. "I'm getting really tired of you, know that? The things I could-"

"What?" Henry advanced toward him. Now they were standing inches apart from each other, noses almost touching. "What are you gonna say? I could fire you, on the spot." He plucked the edge of Bob's collar. "I could take everything from you."

"Henry!" I exclaimed.

"Shut up," he spat without turning to look at me.

"Do it then." Bob crossed his arms and stared straight.

Henry pushed him with one hand. "Maybe I will."

"Take your hands off me. You're nothing but a kid." Bob's fingers tightened around the broom. It looked like he wanted to punch Henry himself.

"At least I'm not an old man wishing he could replace his dead master." Henry snarled. I felt the tensions rising to an unbearable point. The moment that would change everything for this home. "I bet you'd love to stay in her bed, wouldn't you? You'd love to take Arthur's spot. But now *I'm* here and you're nothing but a slaveboy again."

With one movement, Bob smacked him across the face with the broom handle. The plastic cracked. The end of it flew across the room. I ducked and it smacked into the wall over my head. Henry let out a roar of pain and anger, bringing his fist down on Bob's shoulder. The older man crumpled to the ground, falling on his knees. Bob gasped for air as Henry kicked his stomach and then his side.

I jumped from my seat, waving my arms. Henry kicked Bob's body two more times, shouting profanities. I screamed for him to stop. Bob grabbed onto his ankle and twisted. The two men were on the ground now, throwing punches.

"Stop this at once!" Sylvia screamed, her voice cutting through everything.

The men halted. Henry glared at her, venom in his eyes, while Bob slowly managed to his feet. As quickly as it started, it ended. They were both standing in the kitchen now, breathing heavily, on the verge of another fight.

"Get out," Henry snarled. "You're done here, slave." Kicking a chair out of his way and bumping into my shoulder roughly, he left the room. I heard him stomping down the hallway and then slam the study door behind him.

Bob gathered his items quickly and left the house without saying a word to me. He and Sylvia shared a hushed conversation for a few minutes before he exited through the front door, his features cold and anxious. It wasn't the expression I expected. As soon as the door shut, I hurried to the front windows and saw him throwing a few suitcases into his car. The only car.

Then it sped off down the driveway, just as it had brought us here, and we were truly left alone. Bob disappeared into the distant trees and with him our only transportation. I pressed both hands against the glass, uncomfortably aware of the fact that nobody would clean these windows again unless I did it myself. Henry wouldn't hire another servant. I knew that for sure. Nor did Sylvia have the energy to fulfill all of the tasks left behind.

"Come, now." I felt her soft hand on my shoulder, pulling me away from the glass. "It's no use to dwell on what's happened. There is nothing for us in the past."

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Life changed after that. Henry continued to stay in his study or the library but now I never drew downstairs. Sylvia would join me in my room, each of us with a chair pulled up to the desk in my room. She began to draw along with me, albeit with shaky hands and an unsteady style. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the company and we had some long conversations in that setting. It was interesting to see how her drawings evolved over the few weeks we spent, as well as what she focused on during that time. We would compare sometimes. She would marvel at mine and I would be astonished by how much she'd improved.

I explained to her one night how I was growing fearful of Henry. Any time I wandered downstairs at night for water or food, I worried that I would find him waiting. The last thing I wanted was to face Henry alone. In fact, ever since he fired Bob, I only talked with him at meal times or other occasions when Sylvia was around. It wasn't even a "rough patch" in our relationship. It was like the entire thing had ended. I felt more like a captive here than ever before. Sylvia understood this and she pitied me.

My drawings became darker at this time. I often included trees and forest creatures. Sometimes I would remember that church building, but I never drew it anymore. It seemed unimportant to me, something far in the distance. The same held true for the light that I'd once obsessed over. Now it was gone, never to return. Those shadows that haunted these halls weren't heard from anymore. They were replaced by a very real, tangible horror. That of Henry. The stalker who held real power and posed a real danger. But I never included him in my drawings. I was never brave enough.

Part of me actually missed the mysterious spirits that I'd been so close to touching. I wanted them back. I wanted to play their games. Anything but this constant terror. They weren't so scary, not really. They were just mysterious, confusing. Henry was neither. He had become something evil. I knew exactly what he was capable of, and I wanted no part of that.

Day 43

One day, for the first time in weeks, Henry left the house. I have no idea where he went, only that he had gone. The heavy pressure had been lifted, at least for a time. I saw him through one of the windows, trudging into the forest, in the direction of town. Maybe he'd gone to check for mail or something else. We still had plenty of food in the cabinets so it couldn't be a grocery run.

Whatever his reasons, I seized the opportunity. I explored the library that day, as soon as his figure wandered into the trees. My own feet led me into the labyrinth of books. Not that I sought reading material. I'd come here for one purpose. To find a picture of Arthur. It was the only part of Sylvia's story that I couldn't fully comprehend. What did he look like? What face went with the name?

So I searched and searched for at least an hour. All the walls were barren, so I tried finding some historical records. The family books had pictures of some, especially drawings of the older generations, but nothing of Arthur. Most of these books actually stopped a generation or two before him. It was peculiar. Perhaps I grabbed the wrong books or perhaps something had happened. I don't think Sylvia would have gotten rid of these records. Not when it involved her own name, too.

I found old newspapers, but these too weren't recent enough. Arthur had disappeared from this library. I could think of two possibilities. Sylvia could have eradicated his record after his death because she felt guilty about his business practices. That felt a bit extreme. The other explanation had to do with Henry. He could have found everything about Arthur and taken it into his study. This was every bit as hopeless for me. I could never get inside there. I wasn't sure I'd want to, anyways.

The only good discovery was a set of what looked like academic papers. They were on boring history and science subjects, but stuck inside the volumes were sketches not unlike my own. These were so peculiar, especially the two of the forest I noticed, that I decided to take all the books back to my room. All in all, I carried around eight volumes upstairs, over the course of two trips. After my second one, I closed the door behind me. There was still no sign of Henry, but I didn't want to risk anything.

After dinner that evening, which Henry had returned for looking grim and unhappy, I rushed to my room and sat at the desk, pouring over the nearly forty sketches I'd found. A handful were of the forest, viewed from a room on the second floor but not exactly my own. This intrigued me, but I carried on. Some were of flowers, frogs, a tree stump. Normal items that one would draw. But then I found two which really interested me.

The first was an image so distinct that I gasped when I saw it. It was so much like my own drawing that I had to compare the two. The same sloping roof, the same windowless side. Only the image I'd found didn't have weeds and bushes growing up around it. In fact, there were fewer trees at all than I remembered. But the tiny church from the forest path was unmistakable and unexplainable. Whoever drew these... they had been there too. And it had struck them as powerfully as it had me.

The second sketch disturbed me even more. It was the same forest view I'd seen in the other images, only different. The shading around the forest told me it was at night. The empty lawn was haunting, only it wasn't entirely empty. A small tree grew in the backyard, right in the middle. But behind it, at the beginning of the large forest, was a little orb. Something like a lantern. A light in the darkness. My light.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I panicked, throwing the loose papers back into books and shouting, "Come in."

Sylvia entered, her smile feeble. "Good evening." Closing the door behind her, she crossed the room. She didn't hold any drawing materials in her hand, so I figured this wasn't our typical meeting. And she wore a coat over her nightgown, which I found odd.

"How are you?" I asked, gesturing for her to come sit.

She strolled over to me, stroking the back of my head. "Oh, fine." Her eyes roamed over the desk and noticed the one paper I'd forgotten to stuff back in. It was a sketch of a frog, done incredibly well. "Did you know I drew that?"

I tried not to gape at her. "This?" I held it up. "I... I found this on the floor of the library earlier."

"Mmm." She squinted at me and then grinned. "Yes. I used to draw quite a bit. I stuffed them into my books to hide them from Arthur. As the wife of such a land owner, I was supposed to be educated and proper. I always preferred drawing, though. Always." She reached down for my hand, still standing by my shoulder, and I grasped it.

"You're quite good."

"I was, once. But time has a way of fading even the arts." She sighed deeply, closing her eyes for a moment. "I came here to tell you goodnight."

"So early?" I asked, unaware of what time it actually was. "And without any drawing?"

"Yes, yes. It *is* a shame, but I feel so horrid." She chuckled, on the verge of tears. "Maybe tomorrow, yes? I've quite enjoyed our time together. Drawing."

"So have I." I squeezed her hand and tried to imbue life in her with my smile. "I hope you feel better tomorrow."

"Oh, I hope as well." She let go of my hand and fumbled in her pocket. Her eyes flicked to the side, as if checking the door remained shut. "I thought you might find this a good... a good test of your drawing skills." She extracted a bronze key, ancient in its appearance but heavy.

I opened my hand and she dropped it on my palm. Closing my fingers over it, she curled her hand over mine.

"Are you sure you can't stay for a bit?" I asked.

"I really must go." She backed away from me. This time I saw a tear run down her cheek. She opened the bedroom door, her eyes flicking to the window beside me and then to my face. "Sweet dreams, child."

"Goodnight, Sylvia," I called, as she swung the door shut.

I heard her breathe, "Goodbye."

Turning back to the window, my heart skipped a beat. I fumbled through the papers and found the drawing I'd intended. Holding it up to the window, I shook my head, thoughts buzzing. I didn't even feel the mystery now. I simply felt confused. Lost.

A small light peered at me from the forest, side-to-side, a peaceful dance.

Day 44

Perhaps I should've seen it coming. I noticed all the signs afterwards, but at the moment I didn't realize...

Sylvia never came out of her room that next day. Not for breakfast, which I ate in silence and Henry didn't even show up to. Not for lunch, which I also attended alone. And not that entire evening. Dinner was nonexistent. I just stayed in my room, listening intently for any footsteps in the hallway outside. I heard none.

I only saw Henry once that day, just in passing. He stared at me, eyes narrowed, and then shuffled away towards his study. I froze in spot as soon as we made eye contact. Honestly, for one moment, I thought he was going to hit me or something. But then the moment passed and I carried on my way to grab some food.

That night, almost midnight, I had to make a decision. I'd been thinking about it since breakfast that morning. The one way I'd know what happened to Sylvia. As much as I wanted to stay in my room, I gave into temptation and crept out my door. I listened hard for any footsteps below now. I didn't want to run into Henry. Least of all at this time.

A quick descent and I stood at the bottom, facing the front door. I couldn't see it clearly yet. I crossed the room, glancing from side to side. My footsteps picked up speed. I tried not to think about how much noise I made. At last, I reached the door. All of the locks were open. I took a deep breath, fixed this problem, and headed back for the stairs. If Sylvia wasn't here to lock the door, I had to for her. But that was the point. Sylvia wasn't here.

She'd never come out of her room because she'd never been in it.

I ascended the steps with my head low, not sure what to feel. I kept my eyes on the steps and then on the floor when I reached the top. Sylvia gone. Henry mysterious, lurking. Bob far away by now. I was truly alone, but I had nowhere else to go. It's not like I could escape this treacherous position. If I went to town, Henry would find me. I had no doubt of it. I felt more and more confident that he only ever left his study to make sure I was still here. He wanted me to stay. But I didn't know-

Feet.

My head jerked upwards and she stood in front of me. A young woman, ghastly pale. Her lip was busted, her chin bloody. Fresh wounds. Her eyes were wide, her features tortured. I heard a gurgling sound, like she was struggling to speak. But in mind I could only see those bare feet which had arrested my attention. With bruises around the ankles. The shadow of chains.

"Get out," she whispered in a harsh tone, the voice as rough as her features. "Get out while you can."

"What?"

She fled at that moment, dashing past me. The ghostly woman cut around a corner and left me alone once again. That sharp corner.

I felt my heart starting to race, my pulse increasing. I clutched my forehead and ran immediately to my bedroom. As soon as the door closed, I locked it and barred it with a chair.

Not long ago, I had wished for those shadows to slow down. I had wanted to face my death in all its horror. But now I wanted anything else but that. I understood the shadows. I had growing concerns about the forest and the light. I thought, and I feared, that I knew the truth.

I had seen my death.

Day 45

It wasn't hard to sneak out of the house. Not at six in the morning. Even if Henry was awake, he couldn't have heard me. I took every precaution. Dressing warm, with my lightest shoes and taking excruciating care to avoid the creakiest spots on the floor, I snuck out of the house. I eased the door shut behind me and faced the front lawn. The hardest part had passed. I gripped the bronze key in my pocket. It's all I needed for this phase. Stolen by Sylvia and preserved for me.

I had to know the truth about Arthur. About Henry. About this house and about the past.

The morning was eerily quiet as I crossed the long stretch of grass. It had been weeks since I left the house. This realization shocked me but all thoughts were only distractions. I had to focus.

The birds were noisy this morning. A slight wind touched my face as I pressed on. The trees ate me. Their shade covered me and I felt the chill. I turned back to look at the house. Nothing. Just as I'd left it. That was my greatest fear. Being caught by Henry. Having to explain.

It took me a short time to reach the church. I broke into a slight run for a while. It emerged, just as I'd remembered, in all its haunting glory. The windowless frame welcomed me and that high-perched cross. I reached the door and found it locked, but I'd prepared for this. I'd thought long and hard. It only took me an extremely heavy log, a few tries, and one good pop. The handle fell onto the ground, leaving a gaping hole in the door. I easily managed my way inside after that. Again, very hard to explain if I got caught.

Without a second thought, I crossed the pew-clad area at a brisk pace and reached the door. I waited in that corner for just a moment, fumbling for the key. Once I'd extracted it, I found it fit the hole perfectly. This confirmed my idea. Sylvia had wanted me to do this. It had to work, because she wanted it.

The door swung open easily. It'd been used recently. I found myself facing a staircase, descending almost straight down. I took a deep breath, shook my head violently, and I forced myself down them. Step by step, into the foul stench. It was its own kind of fog, only this time I faced it willingly. I took action.

I fumbled in the darkness at the bottom for a moment. There was a string hanging from the ceiling and I pulled it. A dim light bulb flicked on, casting the whole place in a distant light, casting shadows. I whimpered.

It was a basement. Very bare, with something like a concrete floor. There were chains all over the place, coming from anchors on the ground but also on the walls. Enough for twenty people at a rough guess. There were disgusting stains in places, a brown-red mixture. I didn't want to know.

Worst of all, on the opposite wall, I saw three woman. Two of them were younger, bleeding, pale. Frightened for their lives. Distraught and hopeless. The other was someone I recognized all too well and it filled my eyes with tears. Sylvia.

They were all gagged and blinded by the light but as their eyes adjusted each one began to fidget and mumble. I heard the chains on their ankles and wrists, holding them in their spots, clinking against each other. I rushed over, pulling out their gags. Sylvia spoke first, her eyes wide, more afraid than I'd ever seen her, more emotion than any time before.

"You have to get out!" she hissed. "He's become the man he was meant to replace."

The door at the top of the stairs swung shut and my heart froze. The other girls began to cry, their hollers echoing around the basement. They clutched at my arms, at my legs, pleading for something I couldn't offer. Then footsteps on those stairs I'd come down, closer and closer, no face to accompany them yet. Sylvia shook her head and began to shake.

"He's just like the others. We're too late," she muttered, followed by unintelligible words.

Henry emerged, his arms swinging, skin an odd shade. In the dim light, all his worst features were enhanced. He snarled at me, eyes locking onto my neck.

"Hello, darling." He snickered. "You've come to join us?"

"What is this?" I screamed. "Henry, what have you done?"

"Done? I did nothing." He shrugged and cackled. "I merely followed the path set before me."

"Henry, please-"

"I don't have time for this!" he snapped. Henry pointed to a spot on the floor. "You think I followed you here for conversation? No! Kneel. I'll fasten you."

"Henry, I'm not-"

"Shut up!" he erupted, smacking me across the face. I felt the sting for a moment, let it build up the rage inside of me. "Get down, now, or I'll force you." He held up a knife in one hand, pointing it at me.

Without a word, I knelt on the ground, not sure what other choice I had. Henry fidgeted with the shackles for a moment, opening them. He placed one around my ankle, trailing his fingers up my leg.

"Oh, they're going to enjoy you, little precious."

Gripping the bronze key in my hand, I swung it around and caught him in the neck. It pierced skin, drove deep into his flesh. He gasped and clutched at the wound, dropping the

knife. I quickly grabbed it and plunged that into his stomach. Henry fell back against the wall, blood gurgling from his mouth, pouring over his chin and soaking the nice, buttoned shirt he wore.

His eyes locked onto mine for one last time. I saw the look of surprise in his features, astonishment. Just as I thought, he'd never seen it coming. When his eyes were white and his body limp for a few minutes, I grabbed his keys and unlocked the others. The two girls crawled to Henry's body as I unlocked Sylvia. They grabbed the knife and took turns carving into his corpse. I turned away, closing my eyes. The tears weren't coming yet. I felt too much adrenaline, too much of the moment. But I still couldn't watch. Not Henry. Not like this. Not even in my worst imagination was this the end.

Sylvia and I helped the two girls out of the building. They could barely walk and the steps were a challenge. It was another while before we reached the town. All of us went in silence, nobody sure what to say. I wanted to know exactly what had happened there, what Henry had become, but at the same time I didn't. I understood some. And the rest... the rest could wait.

After a quick call by Sylvia with a restaurant's phone, Bob showed up in his car. Apparently, he hadn't left town. He'd rented out a hotel. Said he couldn't bring himself to truly leave, "not without ma'am."

The two girls turned out to be missing persons from a few towns over. They were college friends, both presumed dead. I imagined their families would be happy to see them. Bob said he'd drive them over ASAP, as soon as he dropped off me and Sylvia at a hotel. I liked that idea. I wanted nothing to do with that. I wasn't a hero by any means and I didn't want anyone to know. I didn't have any wants, in fact. I wanted to die. I wanted to forget. And more than anything, I wanted to never step foot inside that manor house.

"Far away," Bob said. "I can take you two far away. Just as soon as we drop them off and get a night's rest."

We drove past the manor house by coincidence. I turned my face away at first, but Sylvia started straight at it. She turned my head and forced me to watch as it passed by. I thought about that woman I'd seen, so lost. There was a slight chance she was still alive. Maybe. Just maybe.

"Can we call the cops and have them check the house?" I asked. "There might be more."

"There is." Sylvia lowered her head. "I'm certain."

Her tears fell heavy as the house sank into the afternoon sun. Bob looked back in his mirror but never said a word. I held her hand and kept my tongue still. The young women were crying next to me, all four of us piled in Bob's backseat, giving him space and not worried about our own sakes. Nobody wanted to sit alone, not right now.

"You did what I never could," Sylvia said through her tears, clutching my hand tight. "Thank you so much."

I am not a hero. I am nothing close to one. I got lucky. I got help. I killed the man I loved. If anything, I am the villain. For not seeing it sooner. I understood what Sylvia felt, all of her guilt, all of the sharp corners and dense fog. The guilt that pressed in me for weeks had tortured her for years.

But it was finally over. We'd saved a few and survived ourselves. If only we'd stopped them a long, long time ago.