



Vita Beckett

FAMILY

OLYMPIA

*F A M I L Y*

Vita Beckett

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This book is for

**My family; Mum, David and Alexey,**  
*for the encouragement, support and timely kicking.*

*F A M I L Y*

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*“Your family are those with whom you share the same shameful secrets”*

## **Before**

That Monday a friendship that had lasted almost four decades was at an end. The relationship between the two women had outwardly been formal and distant, the stereotypical relationship between servant and mistress. But secretly, without either of them ever having acknowledged it, the two women had been closer than mere friends; they had been like sisters.

When, two months shy of her seventeenth birthday,

Annie Jackson had started work at Liliwood Manor, she had been a young woman following in the footsteps of her grandmother, who had served as a cook for the Wellward family.

Liliwood Manor had been a bustling family home then. A staff of nine had looked after the family in what was their main home. But after the death of the family patriarch, John Wellward, the family had moved to London and their staff had been relocated with them. All but Annie had soon made their home in the English capital; she however, had been asked to return to Liliwood to serve Eileen Wellward, John's eldest daughter and heiress, who had decided to stay at the Manor permanently. Annie had been glad to return to the house she knew so well, but concerned about what it would be like with the two of them alone. There had been no need to worry however; a friendship had

soon blossomed between the two women, and soon neither of them could imagine a different way of life. But now it was all at an end. The doctor was with Miss Wellward in the master bedroom and Annie knew that there was no hope. Pneumonia had gripped Miss Wellward, and this time she could not possibly hope to recover. She had lived a long life, and lately, Annie had sensed within her the spirit of defeat. Something had happened the year before. Normally Miss Wellward would confide all things, great and small, to Annie, but the year before, she had made a discovery that crushed her spirit. Annie did not know what this discovery was, but it had caused Miss Wellward to shut herself in her room for a week, refusing food. When she finally emerged, something was different. She had stopped her monthly trips to London to visit her nieces and had, after many telephone

calls from concerned relatives, disconnected the telephone altogether. She now communicated with her family solely by letter. She had also called on her solicitor and changed her will; though Annie did not know what changes had been made. She was certainly not offended or angry with her nieces or their children, at Christmas she had accepted a visit from the family and it had been comfortable enough. The family had been seemed awkward at first, but Miss Wellward had been unperturbed, and the family had soon relaxed, presumably deciding that the change in Miss Wellward's behaviour was simply the eccentricity of old age.

Annie kept close to the door of the master bedroom, absentmindedly polishing the wax of a low table that was already gleaming, while she waited for the doctor's

verdict, though she suspected what it would be. The doctor opened the door and she looked at him, the expression in her eyes hopeful and fearful. He shook his head, sadly, and she felt a certain tightening in her belly; it was nearly over. She swallowed hard, trying to dissolve the lump in her throat, and fought back the tears that were suddenly brimming in her eyes.

“You can go in,” the doctor told her kindly, putting a hand on her shoulder as he spoke and looking at her very earnestly.

“When will...” she let the sentence trail out, not wanting to say the actual words.

“It’s only a matter of time, tonight probably,” he said sadly, adding: “I’ll stay if you want, though there is nothing more I can do for her.”

“Yes, please,” Annie answered, not wanting to be alone

with a dying woman, “shall I make up the guest room?”

“No,” he replied, “that won’t be necessary. I’ll kip on a sofa. Call for me if you need me.”

Annie went into the master bedroom and sat down in a chair beside Miss Wellward’s bed. She was asleep or unconscious, breathing heavily. Watching her made Annie feel unspeakably sad. It was not just because she would miss her friend, but also because she recognised that she herself must soon follow. Old age had crept up on her, almost unnoticed. Little by little her limbs had become less flexible, her organs had worked a little less efficiently and her eyesight had deteriorated. Looking down at Miss Wellward, she knew it was all soon at an end.

Miss Wellward opened her eyes, slowly with obvious effort.

“Annie...” her voice was no louder than a whisper, her

eyes focusing on Annie's.

"Hush," Annie whispered taking one of the dying woman's hands in hers, "you mustn't strain yourself, Miss Wellward."

Miss Wellward seemed not to have heard her, but whispered again:

"Annie...it will be coming." She sank back into the pillows and closed her eyes for a moment.

Against herself, Annie felt interested. What was Miss Wellward talking about? She lent forward and asked:

"What is coming?"

Miss Wellward's eyes opened again and she said, in a stronger voice:

"You should leave, Annie, when I'm gone... it will come."

Annie looked at her, concern had replaced her interest now; Miss Wellward wasn't making sense.

“They are all tainted,” she continued, “Except him. James must come. It will end then.” She closed her eyes, falling asleep again. Annie waited by her bed, hoping that she would wake again. She did not know who James was or if he even existed, Miss Wellward had been nearly unconscious, it seemed more than likely that she was confused. Annie sat by her bed, waiting, hoping. But Miss Wellward didn’t wake again, and as the waxing moon rose over Liliwood, she stopped breathing, her heart stopped beating and then she was gone.

The doctor left, promising that he would be back with means to transport Miss Wellward’s earthly remains to the mortuary early the next morning.

Annie closed the door to the master bedroom and wandered aimlessly around the house that had been her

home for nearly six decades, she would miss the house now that she had to leave it; it had been her only real home. Every corner, every crevice of the house was known to her. She had walked these halls for so many years she could have walked them with her eyes shut without running the risk of bumping into anything. She had memories connected with every room, and feelings connected to each memory. She knew the individual atmosphere within every room and the particular creak of each floorboard. And yet the house seemed different now with its owner was dead. The shadows were darker, longer. The sounds of the house settling seemed louder.

She walked down into the kitchen. The stairs seemed more rigid than they had earlier, they creaked in unfamiliar places. As she filled the kettle with water and put a teabag into a cup, she felt a draft on her neck and

turned.

The door down to the coal cellar was open. She stood silently for a moment, staring at it, perplexed. Miss Wellward had been bedridden for weeks and could not possibly have gone down into the kitchen. Annie was the only person who had been down to the kitchen for a month, and she had certainly not left the door open. How could the door have opened by itself? She walked over to it, slowly, cautiously and looked down into the coal cellar. It had not been used for years and looked the same as it always had; a grey room dirty with coal dust.

She closed the door and returned to her teacup, shaking her head slightly to remove her strange doubts about the coal cellar door and who could have opened it. Her thoughts turned to the future, which was far more topical. She would have to leave Liliwood, she had a sister who

was a widow and would take her in, but even thinking about making a new home somewhere else, even if it was with her blood kin, made her feel exhausted. She poured milk into her tea and returned the bottle to the refrigerator, wondering momentarily what she should do with the food it held, it would go bad if it was left.

A sudden shudder ran down her spine and the oddest feeling came over her. As if someone was watching her from the shadows. She turned and looked, but there was no one behind her. Her eyes fell on the door to the coal cellar. As she watched, the handle of the door moved, pressed down as if by an invisible hand. Annie took a step back and put her hand over mouth, her eyes wide in horror. The door opened. No one was there. A cold draft blew up from the coal cellar beneath. The sound of rushing water filled the kitchen. Annie turned and hurried up the

stairs to the ground floor, her teacup forgotten on the kitchen table.

The house suddenly felt like hostile territory, as if she was an unwanted stranger. Shadows seemed to leap out at her. She went into her bedroom and bolted the door. She kept the light on and spent the night sitting on the chair, watching the door with a quiet determination. Inside her head memories, long forgotten, were pushing at the edges trying to get in. She knew something about this. If she had concentrated, she might remember. But she had no wish to. What lay buried in her mind, should remain there. And so she sat silently, waiting for morning. When the sun rose, she packed her things and chose a dress for Miss Wellward to be buried in. When the cars came, she left the house without a backwards glance. The home she had known was gone and it was time to make a new home

somewhere else.

## Chapter 1.

### **The Phone Call**

The cold, grey October rain drummed unrelentingly against the windows, it had for days. It had been a record year for rainfall in Baltimore and strong winds had made the city cold and damp. James heard the rain even before he opened his eyes. His mind was still halfway in the dream he had been having, something about an old house and flickering candles. He raised his head a fraction and looked up at the window. It was still dark outside and

quiet apart from the rain.

He opened his eyes again to see exactly much time he did have. His smile faded when he saw the glowing red letters of the alarm clock turn from 05:58 to 05:59; his brain had decided to wake him exactly one minute before his alarm clock was set to ring. It was a cruel trick of the mind, depriving him of sixty precious seconds of sleep. His body turned over and, almost involuntarily, he pulled the blanket up to his chin. He lay still, enjoying the warmth of the bed and the softness of the sheets, knowing it was about to end. He couldn't help but count down the seconds and felt himself slip back into sleep, just as the alarm rang. It seemed unreasonably loud in the quiet room. He silenced it quickly and glanced over at the girl sleeping next to him; she didn't stir. Her long, curly, blond hair was spread out over the pillow and her heart-shaped, little face

was peaceful, the long dark eyelashes of her closed eyes, made her look like a sleeping doll. For a moment, his hand hovered over her head, the impulse to stroke her silky hair and feel the softness of her warm skin was so strong he could barely resist it. He held back, there was no point in waking her. Mattie was in her first trimester of pregnancy and needed her sleep. He gave her a fond look instead and got up. She rolled over on her side and curled up in a tight little ball, defending herself against the draft of cool air his movement had caused. Shuddering slightly, he put on his dressing gown and wandered into the kitchen.

He turned on the light and blinked, blinded for a second. The tiny, shabby kitchen came into focus. It had an extremely old cooker, some kitchen cabinets that had seen much better days, and a small, rickety table with space for two people. They used the kitchen only for eating; there

was no space for anything else. He filled the electrical kettle and went to the toilet while it boiled. He glanced at himself in the mirror, his skin was paler than usual and there were bags under his eyes. The eight year age difference between Mattie and himself stood clearly etched on his face. And tiredness made traces on her too. Otherwise, they would have made a fetching couple. He was tall, with dark hair and brown eyes; she was petite with flowing, golden hair and sparkling blue eyes. Reality dulled their colours, making them both look slightly grey and very ordinary. The early mornings and late nights were really taking their toil on him. But he knew he had no choice. With the economy in the shape it was in, he was lucky just to have a job, even if it was low-paying with long hours, even if it was a job that was far beneath him, one that did not require much brain power. But, he reminded

himself, as he felt himself get riled up over this injustice, he had no choice, especially not now when Mattie must necessarily give up her waitress job in a few months. He yawned and went back into the kitchen, poured hot water into a cup, and spooned instant coffee into it. One and a half teaspoon made strong coffee, just right for early mornings. He sighed and looked in the fridge for something to eat while the coffee cooled down enough to drink. On a plate at the front of the upper shelf stood a ready made sandwich that Mattie had prepared it before going to bed. He lifted the corner of the sandwich to see what the filling was. Imitation crab salad. He considered it for a second and then took the plate out of the fridge and had a bite, it was colder than he would have liked it, and the bread was a little dry on the outside and tough on the inside. *Better than nothing*, he thought as he chewed. He

drank his coffee and ate his sandwich staring out of the window, too tired to read the newspaper, a book or even to listen to the radio. He had always thought it was inhuman to demand that people get up and go to work before it got light outside. To make matters worse, it would be dark again by the time he got home. In all likelihood, he wouldn't see full daylight until the weekend, and that was only if it stopped raining. The dream he had had just before waking up came back to him. He had been walking through a house, going down to a cellar, down to a vault under the earth. But looking up at the ceiling it was strewn with twinkling stars. In front of him was a well and he knew that finally everything was coming together. An unspeakable joy had filled his chest. The stars had aligned and he was making everything right. There was something more he couldn't remember, something about... whatever

it was, it slipped away. He put his head in his hands for a moment, rubbing his eyes. He always found Tuesdays to be the most trying day of the week. Mondays were bad, but he was usually well enough rested, but on Tuesdays the weekend was both far away and he was tired.

Wednesday was when the week tipped, Thursday was nearly the end of the week and on Friday everyone was preparing for the weekend. It was however Tuesday, he already felt exhausted and the weekend seemed far, far away.

After he had finished his coffee and sandwich, he went back into the bathroom and started the shower, it took a little while to warm up and he stood silently watching the running water. When it was finally warm enough, he disrobed and stepped into the stream of hot water. It loosened up the muscles in his shoulders and for the first

time since he had gotten out of bed he felt comfortable. But he knew he didn't have much time. He washed, then shaved, and while towelling himself dry, went back to the bedroom. Mattie was still asleep and he was careful not to wake her. He took a close look at the shirt hanging over the back of a chair and decided it was passable for another day. He dressed quickly and quietly in the dark and started towards the door. In the kitchen, the phone rang. He stared at it. Who on earth would call at seven in the morning? It rang again. He went into the kitchen quickly to stop it. Like the alarm clock earlier, the phone sounded unreasonably loud.

“Hello” he said, as quietly as possible without whispering

“Is this James Kidd?” The question was posed by a man with a crisp, British accent.

“Yes?” James replied, feeling mystified. He had no idea who was ringing, or why. Seven am was much too early for most people to call and this man sounded businesslike and determined, much more so than most telesales operators. James and Mattie did not often get calls from anyone besides people who wanted to sell them subscriptions to magazines or ask if they were happy with their long distance phone bills. And then there was still the matter of it being ridiculously early in the morning.

“Ah, good afternoon, Mr Kidd,” the man said, “my name is William Clarke. I am calling from Campbell and Associates”

“Who?” James was even more surprised. Campbell and Associates sounded like a law firm, and for a moment he wondered if this was related with his work as a clerk at a Baltimore law firm. But the name was unfamiliar and he felt sure that if it was a company he had dealt with he

would have recognised the name. He was further surprised by the man's greeting of 'good afternoon', which seemed awfully misplaced.

"We are a firm of solicitors currently representing the family of Eileen Wellward"

"Oh" James felt confused, "who is Eileen Wellward?" It was a name he was almost certain he had never heard before. It was an old-fashioned name, one that smelled of moth balls and made him think of lace. But it was an unknown name, one he had never come across before.

"She was your great aunt, Mr Kidd. She passed away last night, I am sorry to say."

"Oh" James repeated, not knowing what to say about the death of a relative he had not known about until that moment.

He wasn't sure what to feel. Mostly he felt that there must have been some sort of mistake. He didn't have any relatives, and certainly not one named Eileen Wellward. And even if he had had such a relative, she was dead. He couldn't help but feel rather confused.

"The family – your family, sir – has requested that you attend the funeral."

"My family?" James repeated dully, wondering who the man could possibly mean. As far as he knew, he had no family. But strangely, this man seemed to know what he was talking about and at the words "your family" his heart had started hammering nearly painfully hard. A feeling of unreality swept over him. Could it be real?

"Yes, sir, not close family, of course, but family nevertheless."

“How close family?” he asked hoarsely, needing to hear the answer. Up until a moment before he had thought himself alone in the world. He was desperate to hear more about this family, hoping so much that it was not a mistake, that the man was not looking for some other James Kidd. As soon as he thought it, he felt his heart sink. It certainly seemed the most likely explanation, even if he desperately wanted it not to be so.

Clarke hesitated a moment and seemed to think: “Well, this would be first cousins once removed and second cousins. And Miss Wellward was your great aunt, as I said.”

James swallowed hard, his heart thumping hard and rhythmically against his ribcage. Was it possible? He had cousins? His minds scrambled to pick up the loose tread in the conversation:

“And they want me to attend the funeral?”

“Yes, that is correct, sir”

“Where is this funeral?” he asked, still thinking about the cousins and second cousins.

“In the UK, sir, your family, they live here.”

His heart sank. Family in England? It seemed to be the final nail in the coffin of the fantasy. He would have known if he had cousins in England. A wild moment he thought about going along with it, turn up at the funeral like the prodigal son, cry and be part of the family even just for an afternoon. Of course that would be extremely expensive fun, and he was sure to be discovered.

“I think you have the wrong James Kidd,” he said reluctantly and sighed.

“You are James Philip Kidd, son of Daniel Kidd and Catherine Peterson?” Clarke asked, his tone rhetorical.

“Well, yes, but...” he answered, but Clarke interrupted.

“Your mother, Catherine Peterson, was the daughter of Joseph Peterson and Rose Wellward. Eileen Wellward was the older sister of Rose. So I’m quite sure I have the right James Kidd.” Clarke said with finality in his voice.

James felt his heart starting to pump harder again. *It was* his family. It wasn’t a mistake. And suddenly he remembered that his grandfather had told him how his grandmother had been a war bride. He had not thought about it for years. His grandmother had died long before he had been born and the idea of her was very abstract. Rose Wellward Peterson was a young woman in a faded photograph. Beloved of his grandfather, but with no connection to him. Except that there was a bloodline from Rose to her daughter, Catherine, and from Catherine to her son. And with this bloodline she tied him to her family in

England. And this family wanted him to come to visit them, to help them lay his great aunt to rest. And he wanted to go to them. But how? England was far away and going there on a legal clerk's salary supplemented with the wage and tips of a waitress working in a diner, was just not an option.

“About the funeral... There's no chance...” James let the sentence trail away, not wanting to admit to this stranger that quick trips to England were not in his budget.

The lawyer may have realised what James was not saying anyway, because he quickly replied: “The family will be covering your travel and accommodation expenses, if you agree to attend, sir. But you will have to travel today. The funeral is tomorrow.”

James blinked. He didn't know what to say. He swallowed and opened his mouth. No sound came out. His

heart leapt in his chest. Surely this had to be a dream of some sort? Being offered a free trip to England to meet with his family was not something that happened to people like him. He bit the side of his mouth and felt it sting. It was real and he was being offered a chance to meet his family. Family... it was what he had always dreamed of. He suddenly became aware that he had not said anything for a while. Clarke continued after the brief pause that occurred:

“I will make all arrangement with booking and payment, if you will give me your passport number, sir. A flight out today and a return in seven days? Will that be satisfactory for you, sir?”

James opened his mouth to agree when heard a noise from the bedroom, and suddenly remembered Mattie.

“Oh, I have a fiancée. I can’t leave her, even for a few days.” He shook his head as he said it, feeling bitterly sad that he could not go. But he couldn’t leave Mattie, he simply couldn’t. She would be terribly hurt if he went off on an adventure without her, and then there was the baby. He had to make sure that she got enough rest and didn’t do anything that could harm the baby, only the day before he had had to stop her eating a tuna salad. Leaving her was simply not an option. James bit his lip, he closed his eyes. His eyelids felt as if they were burning. He swallowed hard, willing himself not to break down. He had been so close to getting a chance to meet his family, and then the opportunity had been snatched away from him at the last moment. He took a deep breath and rubbed his head and waited for the axe to fall. There was a long pause, and James thought he could hear the lawyer whispering to

someone. Then Clarke said, “Your fiancée would be most welcome, sir. I will need her passport number too, of course.”

Not for the first time during the conversation, James felt completely speechless. They would pay for Mattie’s ticket too? Or was she merely ‘welcome’? He shook his head to clear his mind. There had to be some sort of horrible catch. He had to know for sure. “Wait, they are going to pay for plane tickets and hotel for both me and my fiancée just so I can attend some funeral for a person I’ve never met? Why? It seems a bit... weird.”

There was a new pause, then the lawyer said, “Oh, but you have met, Mr. Kidd, you and your parents travelled to England some 25 years ago. You were just a child, but surely you remember something? They certainly remember you. And they would like to see you again.”

James clapped a hand to his forehead as memories, almost completely forgotten, started flooding back. It was as if a switch had been flicked somewhere in his mind, and images, as well as scenes ran through his head with a speed that made him feel dizzy. A garden party, his parents laughing, himself playing tag with a girl in a white dress, an elderly woman asking him how old he was, his mother saying ‘Go play with your cousins, James’, himself running down a corridor and jumping down some stairs two steps at the time, himself eating a pink ice cream with bunny ears, tracing a finger over a wood carving on the frame of a chair. He rubbed his forehead, he felt lightheaded. “Oh,” he said, “I *do* remember.” His voice sounded almost wonderingly, even to himself. He felt stunned by the sudden return of the memories.

“So, may I tell the family you will attend?”

“Yes, yes” James said distractedly and then suddenly focusing he added “but I still don’t get why they are so determined to get me there. It’s very nice of them and all, but it still seems a little weird to me.”

The lawyer cleared his throat and said, “I may be speaking out of turn, but, I do believe you are mentioned in the will.”

James’ mouth fell open, blood was now thundering in his ears. There was a will, and he was in it. The family obviously had money, and now he was mentioned in a will. Once again a feeling of unreality swept over him. It was like a not very realistic dream. It was what everyone with money problems hoped and prayed would happen. He tried to stay calm and not get his hopes up, but his mind conjured up ideas of what might be if he was indeed to be rich. Was it a way out of all their money problems? Could

he quit his job, could Mattie leave her horrible waitress job? Could they buy their own place to live instead of renting a tiny apartment in the rough part of town? Would their child be born into money? What did it mean for them? In the distance he heard the lawyer talking. “Mr Kidd? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I need to get my passport, right?”

“Yes, please, and the young lady’s passport too”

“Hang on”, he said, and put the receiver gently down, then raced into the room where they slept. Mattie was sitting up in the bed, she had turned the bedside lamp on, but was obviously still sleep befuddled. She looked at him, with quizzical eyes:

“James? What...? Why...? What’s going...?”

“Just a moment, honey” he told her, thanking his lucky stars they both had current passports, thanks to a cheap

holiday in Mexico the year before. He found them and raced back to the kitchen and read the information to the lawyer. He saw that Mattie, in her old cotton nightgown, had followed him. He grabbed his bathrobe off the chair he had left it on, and handed it to her. She put it on, grateful for the added warmth. She furrowed her brow in a comically quizzical way, wanting him to know that she was curious without interrupting him. He smiled and nodded at her, acknowledging her curiosity. She sat down and waited as James read the passport numbers to Clarke and he assured James he would call back as soon as the bookings had been made. They hung up, and for a second James stood still, not managing to do anything, not able to think clearly. He felt like laughing or possibly crying. He felt as if his legs were going to give way under him and

held on to the kitchen counter. He put his head down on it for a second.

“What’s going on, James?” Mattie asked softly, she sounded concerned. He held a hand up to stop her, glanced at his watch and picked up the phone again. He called his boss and told her there had been a death in the family – Mattie blinked rapidly and stared at him – and that he wouldn’t be in for a week. He struggled to make his voice slow and sad. It wasn’t easy, his mind was racing away and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop some highly inappropriate chuckles escaping. His boss was not happy, but accepted it. James couldn’t help a sour thought that if she hadn’t given him the time off, he would have quit. There and then, on the spot. He had no idea what he had inherited, so that might have been a very bad idea, but he had still been tempted to tell her that he

wasn't coming back. And rudely too. But he was glad he hadn't, knowing that he might have to go back. If he had burned his bridges, he would have had the worry hanging over his head the entire trip. And he reminded himself that if he had struck gold, he could just call his boss and tell her everything he had wanted to say to her the last few years.

He turned to Mattie with the phone in his hand and said, "You'll have to call your job too, tell them that you'll be gone for a week."

"Why? James, what's going on?" Mattie looked almost scared.

He grinned, and said, "Tell them that you've had a death in the family, it's almost true"

"Are you going to tell what this is about?" she asked, sounding as if she was about to cry. James smiled at her and said with jubilation in his voice,

“Our ship has come in, Mattie. Well, maybe. We’re going to England to claim my inheritance”

Mattie laughed and asked:

“You’re kidding, right?”

James shook his head, still smiling. Her laugh made him feel warm inside

“My great aunt Eileen passed away last night and it looks like she put me in her will.”

“I thought you said didn’t have any family...” Mattie’s smile had faded and she looked a little hurt, as if she suspected that he had lied to her.

“I thought so,” he answered, “I mean, you know my parents both died when I was six, I never knew my grandmother, she died before I was born, my grandfather died twenty years ago, and my other grandparents died before I was born, no uncles or aunts, that’s what I

thought... but, I didn't know that I had a whole family in England. My grandparent met during World War Two, he was an American GI and my grandmother was English, and he took her away to the US after the war." Recounting the death of his family usually made him feel sad and alone, but this time it felt different. Now that he had other family and they not only knew of him, but wanted him to come visit them. His heart lifted at the thought. He was wanted by someone. And, he told himself, it was not just because of the will they wanted him to come. Any inheritance could be sorted out with him still in the States. They wanted to meet him again.

"So, this woman who died, who was she?" Mattie looked confused

"My grandmother's sister." he explained.

“And she put you in her will? Why? She didn’t even know you.”

“Well, not really,” James smiled, “but I did meet them when I was five or six. We went to England, and met them all, I’d just forgotten about it. I kind of remember it now, though.” He blushed slightly as he said it. It sounded strange, not true, even if it was.

Mattie looked incredulous, “How could you forget?” James shook his head, not really sure how to explain:

“I don’t know, I was young, my parents died not long after, it was pretty traumatic...”

Mattie smiled sadly at him and said “You still cry in your sleep sometimes.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised.

She nodded. Then wanting to change the subject she said, “Still though, it seems a bit weird, doesn’t it? Her

leaving you something in her will. You only met once and it's not like you were her favourite nephew or anything. I mean, you're family and all, but it's not like you've had any contact with her over the years."

Mattie had a point, he had to concede. He bit his lip and nodded, a little of his enthusiasm drained out of him. She must have noticed because she quickly said "How much did she leave you? Not to sound greedy or anything..."

She blushed after she had said it, her cheeks going pink. It was very fetching on her and made her look very young. She added in a small voice, "I was just wondering if it would be worth us going all the way there, I don't know if we can afford..."

James gave her a quick hug and said, pleased to be the bearer of good news, "The lawyer didn't say how much, but he did say that I was in the will and that the family will

be paying for us to come to England, so it's not a matter of 'being worth it' or affording it."

Mattie clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a delighted scream, and stared at him with wide, mad eyes "Oh my God, we're really going? You weren't kidding? We're going to England?" she shouted, evidentially both shocked and delighted.

"Yes, today," he said proudly, "which is why you have to call your boss. Right now, please."

While a delighted Mattie made the call, sounding less solemn than someone who had just had a death in the family would normally sound, James wandered into the bedroom, looking around. He wondered if this meant he could leave this place behind for good. He loathed the tiny bedroom with peeling wallpaper, the damp bathroom, the

cold kitchen with the scratched linoleum floor. He wanted so much to have something better, to be able to give Mattie something better. And maybe now... He tried not to get his hopes up, after all, maybe he had only been left a few trinkets of little value, maybe he would have to come back to all of this. Even so, he consoled himself, he was getting a free holiday out of it. But in the deepest dept of his heart, he couldn't help hoping that it was the beginning of a new and better life. He was thinking of big apartments and new cars, even letting his mind drift to luxury travels and yachts. Everything he had always wanted while growing up in foster homes and never having any money. Could all his dreams be coming true? He strayed back into the kitchen and caught a sparkle coming from Mattie's engagement ring. He hoped he'd be able to replace the cheap, fake stone with a real diamond. Mattie had told him

she didn't care how little it had cost when he offered it to her, and he knew she was honest when she said it, but all the same, Mattie deserved a real diamond, and he would like to give it to her.

Mattie hung up the phone, turned around and gave James a big kiss. She laughed, and he loved seeing her like that. He hadn't for a long while. Some of the greyness in her skin was gone and her eyes were shining. She looked like she had when they had first met, when she had just come to Baltimore and everything was new and exciting for her. The sparkles in her blue eyes, the ones that had made him see past her quite ordinary features and made his knees weak when they had first met, were back.

The phone rang again and James grabbed the receiver: "Hello?" he said.

His heart beating fast again. It was Clarke already calling back. “Right, Mr. Kidd,” said the lawyer, “do you have pen and paper?”

“Yep” James replied and reached for the notepad and pen. His hand was shaking ever so slightly. He hoped it did not reflect in his voice.

“You and Miss Lyte will be staying at the Empire Hotel, in Kensington. If you’ll just write down the address...”

James wrote it down, feeling stunned at how quickly everything was moving along. Mattie was on tiptoe, trying to see what he was writing down. The address of the hotel, the flight number, the reference number for their tickets.

“...and you can pick up your tickets at the British Airways information desk at the airport”

“Wow, that’s... really amazingly quickly arranged.” James said vaguely as he circled the flight number the lawyer had just told him.

“Unfortunately you will have to make you own way into London. The family asked me to convey their apologies, but no one is available to meet you at the airport as they would have wished.”

James swallowed. He wondered if it said something about him that it had not really occurred to him that they would want to meet him at the airport.

“Well, I’m sure that it won’t be a problem,” he said in a thick voice, “we have the address so we can find it on our own.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kidd, if there are any questions, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with my office.”

“Right, thank you, I will...”

They ended the conversation with some pleasantries and hung up. Mattie raised her eyebrows at him in a questioning gesture.

“Tickets are booked,” he said.

She let out a little squeal and made a little jump and then bounced into the other room to start packing. He looked after her and smiled, then followed her.

She was pulling clothes out of the wardrobe, holding them up for a moment and throwing them on the bed. James pulled their big suitcase out from under the bed and opened it. It was full of books and old newspapers, things they have found no room for when they moved into this tiny apartment. James went into the kitchen and found some plastic bags, which he put the books, newspapers and old magazines into. He then pushed the bags untidily under the bed.

“How much should we pack?” Mattie asked.

“Just enough for a week I think. If we have to stay longer, it’s because we’ve come into serious money, and in that case we can buy some new stuff.” He felt a warmth spread inside as he said it, as if he had drunk a shot of whiskey. He felt his mouth stretch into a smile. Mattie giggled, her cheeks reddening. But he had promised himself he would not hope for too much. “Although,” he continued quickly, “we shouldn’t hope too much.”

“Maybe she only left you a grandfather clock or something.” Mattie said seriously.

“Exactly.” James agreed.

“We’re getting a free vacation anyway.” Mattie said consolingly.

“Just what I was thinking.” He kissed her on the nose.

After they had packed Mattie rushed off to have a shower, still making excited little noises. James smiled at her excitement and changed out of his work suit and into something more casual. He looked at the time, and decided they should set out for the airport as soon as possible. They would be there too early, but better that than too late. He started feeling excited, like butterflies in the belly. He heard Mattie sing in the shower and wished she would hurry up, he wanted to be on his way, he wanted to see his family, he wanted to know what the future had in store for him. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

Mattie came out of the shower, wrapped in a towel. "I've been thinking," she said, "do you think we will have time for sightseeing?"

"Yeah, probably." he said with a smile. He loved seeing her so excited.

“I can’t wait to see London,” she said as she dried her hair, “it’ll be even better than Mexico, I bet.”

“Yeah,” he answered distractedly, “different anyway.”

“Oh, there’s much I want to see while we’re there...” her voice sounded wistful. It was not surprising to him, Mattie was always hungry for new experiences, new sights to see and new things to try. She should have married rich, he had often thought, so she would get a chance to travel the world. And, as unlikely as it had looked, that might be exactly what she would do with his new inheritance.

She stood in the kitchen drying her hair and listing places she would like to see. He wasn’t really listening. He was instead fighting the urge to tell her to hurry up. Mattie might have noticed his restlessness anyway, she looked at him searchingly, then continued her task in silence. Even so, she still looked extremely cheerful, almost glowing,

smiling and throwing him sparkling looks of pure happiness. James started feeling more and more nervous and excited, and with that came even more restlessness.

Finally, Mattie was done. “Are we ready to go?” she asked.

“Yes” James said with a sigh of relief.

Mattie walked around, making sure all the lights were off and shut the water off, while James carried the suitcase outside. Moving made him feel better. At least they were on their way.

They went to Penn Station to catch the train to Washington Union Station. The traffic was bad on the way, which made James nearly sick with anxiety. But there was no need to rush, they made it to Penn Station in plenty of time, and the train rolled into to Washington Union Station less than an after that. And then a quick trip on the Washington subway and then a metrobus ride to Dulles

Airport. All the way, James was getting increasingly more nervous.

He had never been a good traveller, he secretly envied and was a little in awe of people who could relax before a flight, the kind of people who could sit around at the airport chatting and checking their email, people who strolled to the gate at last boarding call. He was usually a bundle of nerves until he had boarded the plane. But this time he was even more nervous than normal. It wasn't simply that he was flying further than he could ever remember doing, nor that there was money at stake. The thought he tried to shy away from was meeting his family for the first time in 25 years. His feelings had matured from the simple joy of having someone to call his family to hesitation and questioning. How would they act? Had they invited him simply because the old lady had mentioned

him in her will or did she really want him there? Would he be considered a usurper who was stealing part of the family fortune, or would they welcome him? Just the thought of having family was a lot to take in. He had lost his parents when he was six, and then been placed in foster care, with a weekly visit to his grandfather. Then when his grandfather had died three years later, James had been all alone in the world. And now these people had appeared, calling themselves his family? How was a person supposed to feel about something like that? A small bitter part of him could not help but wonder where they had been when he was shuffled from foster home to foster home. But he repressed that feeling as much as he could, it wasn't as if these people owed him anything. There was a knot in his belly that tightened when he thought about the people he was about to meet. There was

a little hope blossoming in his soul that he would have family for the first time in over two decades. And he wanted that so badly that he could practically taste it. He repressed that feeling too, this time because he dare not express his hope. If it was to be crushed, it would be horribly painful. He had already known of his desire for a family for a long time, he had often wondered if that was what had drawn him and Mattie to each other. He knew for certain it was why he had been so delighted by the news that she was pregnant. But this was different, this was not a family he had created himself, it could be a family he was already a part of. It had been his dream for as long as he could remember, being a member of a large, loving extended family. Now he would be. If they wanted him. His mind reeled away from the subject. He looked out the window as the city passed. He couldn't help but feel

slightly ill, in 24 hours he would be in London, at the funeral of his diseased great aunt. He sighed and tried to relax but it was impossible. He could hear the excited chatter of other passengers and checked his watch again. Mattie looked at him with sympathy in her eyes. He could tell that she was nervous too, but it seemed to be a lighter kind. When the bus stopped outside Dulles, they were the first two off. Not that there was any need to run, when Mattie and James rushed up to the British Airways information desk, they still had five hours before the flight left.

Having the tickets in hand and having made it to the airport, both of them relaxed a little. Mattie began to smile again as they wandered around the airport, stopping at different cafes and coffeehouses to buy overpriced cups of tea for James and fruit smoothies and bran muffins for Mattie. They wandered down to arrivals and watched people arrive from all over the world. Mattie looked around, her eyes wide and interested, and James suddenly got an impression of exactly how sheltered her life had been. She, like he, had grown up in a foster home. She had

been taken from her parents as a baby and placed in foster care in White Marsh, a tiny community in Baltimore county. Her parents had never bothered to make an effort to get her back. Her foster parents had been nice, but tired people, who had looked after nine children, most of whom stayed only for a few months and then moved on. Most of the other children had much more acute problems than Mattie, and she was a quiet, undemanding child, so she had mostly been overlooked. She had dropped out of high school, not because she was stupid, but because no one had encouraged her academic achievements. Her contact with the people who had raised her was limited to a Christmas card each year. And James had very much the impression that they had only the vaguest recollection of who she was. No one had protested when she left White Marsh. She had come to the Baltimore for the excitement, and ended up as a waitress in a diner. James liked to so warm; it had certainly been the year before, when she had spent Christmas at Liliwood. So why was it so cold now?

Down in the kitchen, she filled a jug of water as the kettle boiled and put that with a glass on a tray, she also grabbed a big mug and put a tea bag in it. As she was standing there a curious feeling came over her. A feeling of being watched, studied. The floor creaked behind her. She turned around, expecting to see Mattie or James. But no

one was there. She paused, looking around. She had been so sure that she had heard something. There seemed to be a strange atmosphere in the kitchen now, something she had not noticed when she was cooking or when Mattie and James were cleaning. The feeling of a presence in the kitchen was so strong, and yet she could see no one. She glanced around in the corners, not fully expecting to see anything, but yet wondering if she might. The water boiled and she poured it into the cup. A draft on her neck made her shudder. It was as if something was standing behind her, breathing coldly on her neck. She turned around. Nothing. She turned back to her tea, but the uncomfortable feeling of being watched was stronger now. She squeezed the tea bag against the rim of the mug, and threw it in the bin. She felt so aware of all her movements, sure that they were being studied, appraised. She went to the fridge and

got the milk. There was a bang from somewhere behind her. She jumped and the carton of milk fell to the floor as she slammed her back against the fridge, looking around in panic. Her heart was racing, thundering in her ears and her breath was quick and shallow. A door had burst open behind her and struck the wall hard, causing the sharp bang. She leant her head backwards against the fridge and exhaled slowly, letting her frantically beating heart slow down before she moved. Then, in sharp, annoyed movements she picked up the milk, which had luckily not spilled on the floor, and went to close the door. It was the door to the coal cellar that had blown open, no doubt due to the draft she had felt. She closed it and returned to her tea. But... there was that feeling again, the one that someone – something – was watching her from the shadows. Another shudder ran down her spine. She

poured milk into her tea, then returned the carton to the fridge and grabbed the tray with her tea and the water jug on and hurried up the stairs to the ground floor. The feeling of eyes burning into the back of her jumper was stronger now. So strong she could not help but to cast a glance over her shoulder, her mouth open; preparing to scream. But there was nothing there. And once she up on the ground floor she breathed a sigh of relief and closed her eyes in a silent thanksgiving she would not even acknowledge to herself. She put the tray down and switched the kitchen lights off. For a moment she thought she could hear something moving quickly and stealthily around in the dark and she slammed the door shut as fast as she could. She had never thought of herself as an easily scared person or one that was prone to hysteria. And yet she was scared, despite knowing that it was very unlikely,

or even completely impossible, that there had really been something watching her down in the kitchen getting ready to pounce. It must simply be her mind playing tricks on her she decided, but nevertheless walked upstairs to her own bedroom as quickly as she could. As she shut the door to her room she fancied she heard the low creaking of a door on the ground floor, the kitchen door being opened? She closed her own door and fought the urge to push a chair in front of it.

“There is nothing frightening here,” she whispered to herself, but the sound of her own whisper made her more frightened, rather than calming her down. She looked down at the lock on the door, a key glittered there, and before she could feel foolish, she turned it. It made her feel better instantly. For a second she stood and listened, then decided that locking the door had been indulgence enough

and that it was time to put these foolish thoughts aside. She got some legal briefs out of her bag and put them on the coffee table, and decided to try to light a fire despite not quite knowing how. If cavemen could do, she thought, she should be able to as well. And the warmth and light would do her good. She looked up in the chimney to make sure there were no blockages, stacked some firewood in the fireplace with some long twisted newspaper strips that were in a cup next to the fireplace. She struck a match to light the kindling and soon she had a roaring fire. She pulled her jumper off, curling up in an armchair in a t-shirt and jeans. Drinking tea in front of a roaring fire, while reading legal briefs, she felt safe, nothing could get her here.

Suddenly she felt tired; like her eyes would not stay open any longer. The legal papers she had been reading fell from her hand and hit the floor. She looked up, realising that she had been asleep for a while. The embers in the fire were dying. The skies had cleared up and she could see the waxing moon was rising outside. She glanced at her watch. It was half past ten, which was far earlier than she usually turned in. But for some reason she suddenly felt exhausted. It had been a long day and they had travelled far. Her sleep the night before had been marred by an uneasy feeling regarding Liliwood and her brothers. She had tossed and turned and tried to think of what they could be up to. And she had wondered if leaving James with them at the pub had been a terrible mistake. The worry had all been for nothing, Liliwood was exactly as she remembered. She took her night clothes out of the bag.

She went to the en-suite bathroom, brushed her teeth, washed her face and instantly felt more awake. She knew it was only a temporary alertness and continued her bedtime rituals. She undressed and put her night clothes on, a pair of flannel, tartan pyjama bottoms and an old white t-shirt. And then she crawled under the cold sheets, closed her eyes and promptly fell asleep.

Charlotte lifted her head off the pillow and looked outside. Soft snow was framing the windows, which were foggy around the edges. She got up off the bed in a gentle movement, her body cut light as if she was hardly tethered to the earth. She went over to the window and looked outside. A pale full moon was hanging over the lake, which was frozen and white, framed by dark trees. It must be cold outside, she thought; she could see the snow

sparkling in the moonlight, as if reflecting the stars in the black velvet skies. She leaned close to the glass, breathing on it, but no fog rose. She was a shadow, a ghost. She walked out of the room, her bare feet almost not touching the floor; but she felt that she was floating an inch above it. She was unsurprised when she heard voices from the ground floor and simply glided over to the stairs, but curious about who might be there. It was light downstairs, dark upstairs.

\*She sat down in the stairs and watched through the railing, just as she had when she was a child, watching her parents argue. Two men were standing in the hall, a young man in his early twenties and a man in his late forties. They looked very similar and Charlotte felt sure they were family to each other. The middle aged man had just arrived and was taking off his thick overcoat. The younger

man was holding a snowy hat. He seemed to be in deference to his... uncle? She didn't know how she knew the relationship between the two men, but she did with an absolute certainty. Just as she could tell that they belonged in a different era from her. She wondered if they could see her, and not sure, she stayed high up in the stairs, looking down on a hallway that was in much better repair than it was in her time. The walls were freshly whitewashed, the wood in the floor gleamed. But otherwise the house seemed oddly... empty. If this was the heyday of Liliwood, where were the servants, where was the bustling family life? Apart from the low voices of the two men the house seemed much too quiet. As if the house was waiting in bated breath for something that was about to happen. The men seem tense and agitated, judging by their movements. They came closer to the stairs, and the older one said:

“Where is Mary?” His voice was hard, somehow merciless. Charlotte pulled away a little, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. She did not want this man to notice her. She feared him.

“She is upstairs with the boy,” the younger man answered, “I hadn’t the heart...”

His voice trailed away, it sounded raw, hurt. The older man shook his head and said with scorn in his voice:

“As you wish it, Malcolm, but this is no time to give in to the womenfolk. Is everything ready?”

“Yes, uncle,” Malcolm said, seemingly chastised. And Charlotte felt a little bubble of triumph in her chest, she had been right; they were uncle and nephew.

“Good, we won’t get another chance after tonight. I’ll have a look at what you have prepared and then we should get started.”

Their voices trailed away as they walked down to the kitchen. Charlotte stood up. It seemed very strange to her that they would go down into the kitchen. She had never had servants herself, but she was fairly sure that the gentlemen – or the ladies for that matter - of the house did not go unbidden down to the servants' quarters. Was this why there were no servants in the house? Had they been sent away? Because something was to happen that very night? She started down the stairs wanting to follow them, wanting to see what they were doing in the kitchen, when she heard a humming coming from the first floor. She took a few steps up the stairs again and stopped. The humming was a female voice, sweet and soft. Charlotte recognised the melody; she had heard it before, but where? Her associations with the melody seemed to be terribly contradictory; snow, blood, Christmas, fear. She felt

mesmerized, moving towards the voice as if she had no will of her own. The humming, she realised, came from the nursery. She could hear words now:

*Lully, lullay Thou little tiny child,*

*By by, lully lullay*

*Sleep now, lully, lullay*

The hairs on the back of Charlotte's neck stood up, her heart was hammering painfully in her chest. Goose pimples had broken out on her arms and legs. There was something terribly wrong with the whole scene, the voice echoed; it was soft yet unnaturally strong. It was like an illusion inside her dream. She moved towards it, not wanting to, but being unable to stop her movement forwards. Tears filled her eyes. There was a heartbreaking

sadness in the voice. The sweet, female voice broke on the last line. Charlotte pushed open the door to the nursery.

*Oh sisters too, what may we do,  
For to preserve this day,  
This poor youngling for whom we do sing,  
By by, lully, lullay  
Sleep now, lully, lullay*

A very young woman, hardly more than a girl, sat in a rocking chair. She was wearing a long billowy white nightgown, her dark hair was loose and hanging down over her upper body, almost reaching her waist. In front of her was a baby's cot. It was empty. The girl was holding a child of a few months to her chest and rocking it gently. In the light of three candles placed in the window, Charlotte

could see that tears were flooding down her cheeks as she sang. The baby appeared to be fast asleep, and yet she sang, softly and sweetly. Did she sing for her own comfort more than the child's? She rocked the child back and forth, stopping every so often to wipe the tears of her face.

*Then woe is me, poor Child, for Thee,*

*And ever mourn and say;*

*For Thy parting, nor say nor sing,*

*By, by, lully, lullay*

*Goodbye, lully, lullay*

One the last word her voice broke completely and turned into a sob. She stood up and started walking around the room rocking the baby, who woke and fussed. Seeing her up close, Charlotte realised that she was even younger

than she had originally thought, surely no older than sixteen. But unquestionably, she was the mother of the child in her arms. The girl placed the baby's head on her chest, over her heart. The baby quietened. She began to sing again:

*Lully, lullay, Thou tiny child;*

*By, by, lully...*

Suddenly she broke off. Her body tensed, her eyes widened. Heavy footsteps were coming up the stairs. They sounded like thunder in the distance. Charlotte suddenly became aware that something terrible was about to happen. Her dream was about to turn into a nightmare. She struggled to wake up, absolutely sure that she did not want to see what was about to happen. If she stayed the

man would come, the merciless older one from downstairs. She did not want to see or know what he would do to this young woman and her child. Fear nearly paralysed her and she struggled harder to awake. She wanted to open her eyes and be in the warm, soft bed in the master suite. She felt as if she was being squeezed from all sides, she couldn't move, could breathe... and then the pressure let go. She was back, she was safe. She relaxed her shoulders and opened her eyes.

She was standing in the nursery, her bare feet cold on the floor. Her heart started hammering fast. Was the dream real? She looked around in confusion. How had she ended up there? Had she sleepwalked? She had never done so before, at least she didn't know she had. The nursery was empty; there was nothing there but darkness and dust. The furniture was stacked up around the walls,

wrapped in plastic sheets, just as they had when she had shown the room to Mattie and James earlier. She was shivering with cold and wondered exactly how long she had been out of her bed. She walked out, pulling the door shut behind her and went back to her own room. The door to the master suite stood agape. She closed it and locked it from the inside again. Any desire for sleep was long gone. The dream, or experience, had unnerved her; more so than she had thought was possible. Part of her mind was insisting that what she had just seen was no mere dream; it was real, it had happened. She turned on the light in her bedroom and sat down in an armchair, not quite knowing what to do. She debated calling Gennie and even got her mobile, only to see that the display said "No Service". It was half past three, she saw from the display. It was much too early to get up, but she had no desire to go back to bed.

Above all, she did not want to have another dream complete with sleepwalking and soundtrack. She could still hear the echo of the song the girl – Mary? - had been singing. It was haunting her, she knew it, and yet she could not remember where she knew it from. She sat down in the armchair again and pulled her legs up. She didn't want to start on the legal briefs again and the book she had bought at the railway station was a horror story, which she wasn't in the mood for. Her eyes fell on the bookshelf by the window, and she decided to have a closer look. There were a number of what had to be Aunt Eileen's old favourite books. There were also some books, which appeared to be diaries. Intrigued, she picked one up and opened it at random, and in cut old, spidery handwriting she cut read:

*"3<sup>rd</sup> October 1973*

*I spoke to Genevieve today about what I have long suspected to be the truth. She was not too pleased and accused me of blackening our father's name. Convincing her, would of course, never be the simplest task, I knew, but I had hoped that she would at least hear me out. She chose not to, and told me that if I did not let our dead parents be, I would no longer welcome in her home, nor would I be allowed to have any contact with Amanda or Ella. It was the final threat that did my resolve in. The girls have been as my own daughters and the thought of losing them was simply more than I could bear. I made a promise to Genevieve that the girls need never know. And indeed I see no reason for them to know. I had hoped that my own sister would listen, as she is the only other who could remember Fair Ellie, but she does not, or does not wish to remember. It seems the burden will be mine to bear alone."*

Charlotte looked up, puzzled, what was this? What was the burden Aunt Eileen had to carry on her own, the one that her mother and Aunt Ella did not need to know, and that her grandmother refused to acknowledge? And who was 'Fair Ellie'? She felt vaguely guilty. She had no business reading someone else's personal diary, even if that person had passed on. And yet... she wanted to know what the 'truth' the old lady had discovered was. Conflicted but curious, she continued to read:

*"4<sup>th</sup> of October 1973*

*Annie and I went to the market this morning, and as it happened, the two-faced wife of Reverend Hartwell was there. She asked Annie in a sugary voice if she had been ill of late since she had not attended services. I told her,*

*unbidden, that Annie came to Mass at St. Columba's with me instead. Mrs Hartwell was not impressed, I could tell, but she smiled her sour-sweet smile. Annie fretted fearfully afterwards and said she could never go back, but I assured her she would be welcomed as a prodigal daughter. As soon as we returned home the telephone rang. As I had suspected it was the deacon of Annie's church who was ringing to rescue her from the clutches of the Romans. I fear we shall both have to attend our respective churches this Sunday next, instead of listening to music on the wireless as we usually do."*

Charlotte grinned; she was not cut surprised that her great aunt had preferred listening to the radio to going to Mass. However it did not explain what she had referred to

the day before. She turned the pages back to the day before:

*“2 October 1973*

*I saw a fox in the early morning light today. It stood on the edge of the forest and looked towards the house. I rushed to bring it some chicken from last night’s dinner, but it ran off. I left the chicken anyway and by early afternoon it was gone...”*

It went on in that fashion. Charlotte turned pages back and forward in the book, but there did not seem to be anything that could shed any light on the mysterious entry on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October. She got up and looked over the bookshelves and found several similar volumes. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she was invading Aunt Eileen’s privacy and if the decent thing to do would

be to destroy the books. And then she thought better of it. She would stop reading if anything very personal was written in a book. She flicked to the beginning of the book she had already opened and started to read.

*“21<sup>st</sup> January 1975*

*It is dreadfully cold, when I leave the house I feel as if the cold wind chills me to my core. And I have a hard time warming up. Annie and I stay in doors as much as we possibly can. I have made great progress on my quilt... ”*

Charlotte flicked ahead:

*“22<sup>nd</sup> March 1975*

*I had the most wonderful idea; I will spend what remains of the winter, which had been long and harsh this year, in a warmer climate. Annie, having never travelled abroad is very excited and has already started packing...”*

Charlotte put the book down and picked up another, and there it was, another clue to Aunt Eileen's secret:

*"18<sup>th</sup> July 1983*

*I now know the full truth. I have raged against the knowledge, but it can no longer be denied. One makes assumptions about the characters of one's ancestors, and even I did so despite everything I knew, but these assumptions must now be put aside. I wish I could share this knowledge, but the promise I made to Genevieve prohibits me. Indeed I cannot bear to pass the knowledge on to Amanda or Ella. One thing is certain, their children can never come back here, if anything were to happen to the little ones while they were here, I could not bear it. I worry especially about the girls, Gennie and Charlotte are such active children and I fear what would happen if they should*

*stumble upon something or go somewhere they should not be. Only last week I caught John daring Charlotte to jump onto the large rock in the tarn, despite both of them having been warned repeatedly that the water is off limits. I would dearly like to share my knowledge with someone, but it is better if the secret dies with me."*

Skim reading further ahead gave no clue to what this "secret" might be, and Charlotte could not see any earlier entries that shed much light on it either. But she had confirmed one suspicion; they had been told that the water in the lake was dangerous and off limits. She could not help wonder why. What was it in the lake that had scared Aunt Eileen so much? She looked out of the window towards the lake, but with the light on inside, she could see nothing of the view. The only thing she saw was the

room and her own puzzled face. And suddenly a memory surfaced.

As a small child one summer at Liliwood, she had woken up in the middle of the night and had gone to get a glass of water. She had looked out towards the lake with was bathed in moonlight, much like it had been earlier that night, and suddenly seen waves on the lake. Curious, she had gone up to the window, these waves were unlike what occurred when a strong wind blew, because they had radiated out from one spot almost in the middle of the lake. And then she had seen something big rise up from the water. Surging up from under the water.

She shook her head. Was that a real memory? Or the memory of a dream? Or was it something her mind had conjured up now that she had been told that for some reason the lake was dangerous. Surely if that had been a

real memory she would have told someone? Kept it in her mind? And she didn't seem to find any continuation of the memory, so it was likely not real. Or perhaps it had turned out that there was some perfectly innocent explanation, and she had therefore forgotten all about it. She got up and walked over to the window, she saw her own reflection, pale and serious. She cupped her hands around her face, touching the glass, and looked out. The wind was rustling the treetops, but the surface of the lake was smooth, unbroken. Did something live there in the deep of the lake? She turned away from the window. It was much more likely that Aunt Eileen had had a screw loose, living here, nearly alone, for all those years. And the fact that her sister, Charlotte's grandmother, had simply refused to listen to whatever it was Aunt Eileen was trying to tell her, was further proof that it was all nonsense, because

Charlotte knew her grandmother had been one of the most down to earth, level-headed people in the world.

Charlotte returned to her armchair and picked up one of the diaries and opened it to a random page. Though, she looked at the page, and it occurred to her that it had been pressed down on hard, as if the page had been read again and again.

*“17<sup>th</sup> May 1970*

*I have the curious sensation that Liliwood has become haunted...”*

Charlotte sat up straight, the hair on the back of her neck rose. It felt as if she had found what she had been looking for, that it was just this she had been subconsciously looking for in the diaries.

*“It has been five days since Father passed away, and for each night here my discomfort has increased. Every night I have dream of water, the moon and flickering candles. The dreams disturb me a great deal, but even more so the other things that have been happening since Father’s passing. I had hoped that the funeral would be the end, but when I returned from London, it was stronger. And now that I am here alone, I am almost certain that there is a presence in the house. I can feel it, eyes watching me from darkened corners. The sound of water rushing, was it always this loud? When I am down in the kitchen I fancy I hear water gurgling, but I cannot find a source. It worries me a great deal. Last night I could have sworn I heard footsteps, and this morning, wet patches had appeared on the carpet on the stairs. In my mind’s eye I picture something horrible and*

*wet, rising from the lake, slowly making its way towards the house, closer and closer each night until, finally... Oh, but these are the frivolous, silly thoughts of a woman who should know better. Still, I wonder if I should invite Annie back to stay here with me. She was always such a comfort."*

Charlotte poured herself a new glass of water, she would actually have preferred a cup of tea, but she had no urge to leave the room, to go outside the safe circle cast by the light. She suppressed a shudder, got up and made sure the door was locked. She did not want to examine her reasons for doing so, but instead she lit the fire in grate again. She picked up the diary and continued reading.

*“18<sup>th</sup> May 1970*

*It occurred to me today that I have not heard birdsong since Father’s passing. It is most strange, as Liliwood has always been full of birds. The house too seems strangely silent today, almost as if it is waiting for something. It sounds silly to express such a sentiment, but it really does feel that way. As if the house itself is holding its breath.*

*I dreamt of Father last night. It was a curious dream. We were sitting by the lake and it was a hot summer evening. The sun still hung high in the sky, but was about to turn a deep orange colour and it reflected in the lake.*

*“Eileen,” he said, “I must share something with you, because you are now the guardian of Liliwood.”*

*He walked down to the edge of the lake, I looked up after him and suddenly he was gone. I ran down to the lake, but could not see him. The sun went down very quickly and the*

*moon came up, I waded out into the lake and stood in water up to my ankles. There was a whispering from the forest all around me. A sudden splash told me that something large was moving in the lake, and I looked down, catching a glint of my own reflection. I was no longer myself, I was Father, then the reflection changed and I was grandfather, it changed again and I was yet another man...I backed away, but heard my father whisper in my ear:*

*“Only you can control it.”*

*I woke up, shaking with fright. Outside the wind was blowing up a storm and I saw the lake. And suddenly for the first time in my life I was drawn to it, I, who had always feared it. I thought of going down there and letting the velvety black water close over me. With a start I came to myself. The lake looked cold and uninviting again. The familiar chill that I usually felt when thinking about the*

*lake was back, which made me wonder why. I do not know, and have never known, why the lake always frightened me so."*

Charlotte put the book down, perspiring as if she had just finished some great task, poured herself yet another glass of water and regretted that there was no possibility to make tea. There should have been an electric kettle, she thought, that way people would not have to go all the way down to the (creepy) kitchen at night. Her eyes fell on a low wooden cupboard with exquisite carvings; she had a suspicion of what it might hold. A small smile grazed her lips as she opened it and saw that it did indeed hold a bottle of Scotch whisky, a decanter and a couple of glasses.

Charlotte picked up the decanter, removed the cork and smelled the liquid within. It was definitely whisky and a good quality one at that. She poured a little of it into her cup and swallowed it in one gulp. It was good. She poured herself more whisky and sat down again, curling up in the chair.

e had relaxed a little since she had come to believe that James was not planning to use his knife for anything more spectacular than a simple bloodletting, but that was perhaps a mistake. Charlotte had quietly been working on the ropes, but with that thought she redoubled her efforts. She had no desire to wait patiently for James to let her go. And she should get Mattie out of the cellar too, even if she was in no immediate danger. The ropes around her wrists were much looser than they had been. She could turn her

right hand almost a half turn and her left hand a full quarter turn. There was no doubt that she would be able to get herself loose given enough time. But how long was James planning to take? She couldn't see him; he was hunched over or on his hands and knees. He was muttering soft words again though, so she supposed that he was painting more symbols on the floor.

Charlotte's arms were aching and she paused the work on her ropes. She leant back and surveyed the scene. This would have been the perfect time to escape if her arms had been untied and she wondered if there would ever be another time that he would not notice that she slipped out of the cellar and ran to the car. Her eyes fell on Mattie, and again she wondered how she would be able to get the unconscious girl out of the cellar without James noticing. It seemed almost hopeless if Mattie could not be woken.

Relaxing her arms, she moved forwards, studying Mattie's face in the candle light. She thought she could see movement under her eyelids. Was Mattie dreaming? Charlotte wondered what she was dreaming of and if the awakening in the cellar would be unacceptably brutal. It was as if a spring inside her tightened again and her longing to get out of the cellar grew to enormous proportions once more. She started back up on her ropes, twisting her aching arms in an attempt to slowly, slowly loosen the restrictions. She thought of the sweet air outside, she thought of sitting safely in front a roaring fire, she thought of stopping in Aberdeen at an all night cafe and drinking cup after cup of sweet, milky tea. The thought of these things spurred her on, motivated and comforted her.

James stepped down the stairs again. His face was pale

and he held his arm funnily. Charlotte could see he had wrapped something around the elbow to stem the tide of blood. He still held onto the soup bowl, but it slipped from his hand and shattered on the stone floor. They both looked at the shards of glass as they flew and spun and then lay still, but neither commented. James walked over to her, casually stepping over Mattie and sat down with his legs crossed. He sat closer to her than he had before, and she worried that he would notice the tiny movements she made as she tried to loosen the restraints. But James noticed nothing. He sat in front of her for a long time, with his head in his hands. Charlotte said nothing, but she watched him intently. There was something despairing in his posture and she wondered if he was having second thoughts about the ritual.

"Do you feel it too?" He asked without preamble.

Charlotte jumped at the sudden question. She didn't answer, wondering what he was talking about, wondering what she should say. James continued without looking at her "It's all suddenly so real," he said, paused for a moment and then continued, "it has all been like a sort of dream, but now..."

Was this regret? Or had the insanity that had gripped him earlier suddenly let go? He lifted his head. Charlotte recoiled; deep inside James' eyes something seemed to be glowing. Her heart started pounding, steadily but hard against her ribcage. She wanted to scream, fear seemed to fill every part of her insides.

"Charlotte?" James asked, his face looked concerned, but he was still looking at her with those horrible, unnatural eyes. She looked down, trying to quell her fear. But her heart would not still; it beat harder and faster than before.

It thumped painfully in her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe. On the inside she screamed.

James put a hand under her chin and forced her head up. With his face only inches from hers he stared into her eyes. She stared back into his, into the core where flames seemed to dance. She felt as if she was staring into eternity. And on the inside her soul was screaming.

She did not know what he saw in her eyes, but he moved away. It made it easier for her to breathe, even if her heart was still pounding painfully.

"It's was so strange how everything fell into place." he said uncertainly, "Mattie finding the sacred place that had been lost for decades, you giving me the book with the secret ritual, the one that no one alive knew..."

"But you don't have a sacrifice." Charlotte said. The words had just fallen out of her, she had thought it, but

had not had the slightest intention of saying it.

"Actually..." James said with a pleased smile. He got up and started pacing the floor. "I'm worried about next year, and the year after, and the year after that. Because I have to keep it up you know. Every year I have to feed the creature that I summon tonight. And even if I can feed it anyone, I know children are traditional - but it doesn't have to be, that's just because they're smaller and easier to handle."

The meaning behind James' words hit her like a fist to the belly. Every year. Feed the creature. Children are easier to handle. In her mind's eye she saw the pictures of missing children from the newspaper cuttings. Smiling boys clutching toy cars, little girls with bows in their hair, a tiny boy in a sailor suit, a boy with a broad grin and a missing front tooth. A tooth that would never grow back.

Every year. Feed the creature. Children are easier to handle. She stared at James in silent horror.

"I plan to drug them, so they'll never know." James was saying, nodding to himself as if that made it all right to steal someone's life.

"I know how Chloral Hydrate works, I've used it lots when Mattie's been difficult. It's just like going to sleep."

Charlotte looked at Mattie and the hairs at the back of her neck stood straight out. He would drug the next victims as he had drugged Mattie that night, as he had drugged her when she had been 'difficult'. And what about the sacrifice that night? She didn't dare ask.

"The difficulty will be to find who to... do that too. But like I said, it can be anyone, so I can maybe use criminals, or rapists and killers, you know."

Was he expecting her to agree? To praise him for not

wanting to kill 'innocents'? Charlotte said nothing; she just stared at the pacing figure in silence.

"And I can spend a long time to select them, and maybe find someone who is suicidal..."

Finally she couldn't help herself any longer:

"And tonight?" she asked bracing herself for the answer.

James stopped pacing. He looked at her. His eyes were mad and the glow in his eyes seemed stronger than before.

"Tonight?" he said with a smile, "Tonight is the most important time. Tonight it can't be just anyone, because this first time I have to make an actual sacrifice. I have to give up something that matters to me. This time I have to sacrifice a beloved child."

Charlotte's insides turned to ice. The children of the family. Sacrificed by their fathers and grandfathers. Men who claimed to love them.

"And you may think I come unprepared" James said with an air of a magician about to pull a rabbit from his hat, "I have no children; I have no nieces or nephews. Where would I get a child I love from? But remember how I said that everything fell into place?"

He paused and Charlotte waited.

"I have Mattie." he said and squatted down beside her limp body, but with his eyes on Charlotte, "And the child I love is inside her."

Time had no meaning for Charlotte any more. She stared at James for what seemed like an eternity. He could speak of 'going to sleep' and killing only criminals all he wanted, but at the core he was as all other men in the family, prepared to kill his own child for profit. How would he do it? She lifted her head and said in an ice cold voice:

"And will you cut the child you love out of your fiancée's womb?"

James recoiled. Was it the question or the tone of her voice? She could not say. She did not care.

"Of course not" he said in an almost meek tone, "I would never do that to her. She's asleep now. This time she'll never wake up. While she sleeps, it will come and it will devour them both."

She felt sick to her stomach as well outraged. Not just at James, at generations of her ancestors who had sacrificed their own, as well as other's children, for generations, for centuries. Her ancestors, whose blood ran through her veins. It had to end. She saw herself, in her blinding white fury, turning on the gas in the house while the family was gathered, lighting a match and getting them all in one go, including herself. The evil in the family had to be dealt

with even if that meant getting rid of the whole bloodline. That would be a sacrifice worth making.

She looked up at James who was considering her carefully. The look on his face was both confused and worried. A warning light came on in her head. What she did now might determine the outcome for both her and Mattie. James' insanity was not of the harmless kind, he was prepared to kill even his unborn child. The revelation had shaken her. She breathed deeply and leant back, shaking her head at him, but saying nothing. There was nothing she could say. From the edge of her vision, she could still see James watching her.

"I know it's not a great thing to do," he said carefully, "and I would have liked it if there was another way, but I have to take care of the family, Charlotte. It has to be now. When the moon sets it will already be too late. And

another chance won't come until the first full moon after I die."

She nodded without looking at him, feeling like a traitor, but reminding herself that she had to conceal her true feelings if she were to save Mattie. Even if all James planned to do was to leave her on the cold stone floor. Even if nothing came to claim her and the child within her, she would still be left alone in the dark underground chamber for hours, maybe days, before Charlotte could get back to her. She remembered the few moments she had been alone in there without any light and shuddered. Something had changed within her. Now she had no choice, she had to get Mattie out of there as soon as possible.

"Will you be here with her when it happens?" She asked James, her voice rusty.

He looked at her, seemingly a little alarmed by the thought. She was pleased to see it. It was good to know that James was not so jaded that he could watch something eat the mother of the child he claimed to love, without battering an eye.

"I..." he said, "I don't know. I don't know what happens exactly. I summon it and then it comes. I don't know what happens after that. I know that the symbols I painted in my blood make it so I can control it, and the symbols in Mattie's blood means she is the sacrifice."

He looked worried for a moment and then said:

"I know it should have been the child's blood, really, but I couldn't get that, so do you think it's ok that I used her blood?"

He had asked her this question before. She hadn't answered then, but she thought about it now.

"I'm sure it doesn't matter" she said, "normally, I'd caution against changing anything in a ritual, but in this case...? No, I'm sure it does not matter. Her blood flows through the child's veins."

Charlotte felt disgusted by herself, but what she had told him was the truth. James looked relieved. He trusted her, she noted with relief, and that would make tricking him much easier.

James went up on a dais again, to check on how his blood was drying on the floor. Charlotte worked harder on her ropes, and they felt looser and looser. She looked at Mattie while she worked, focusing on her belly this time. She could not see any sign of pregnancy. Mattie's belly seemed perfectly flat as she lay on her back. Charlotte thought of all the upsets Mattie had been through since they had come to Liliwood. The thing in the lake, the fall on the

bridge, the escape from the coal cellar. But none of that had harmed the baby it seemed. She was determined that this last thing wouldn't either. She would get Mattie out and she would have a nice, healthy baby. James would go to prison, and Liliwood should be burnt to the ground. And at any sign of trouble from the rest of the family, she'd light that final match. She smiled grimly to herself. And behind her back, the ropes finally fell from her wrists.

## Chapter 14.

### **Those Born of Darkness**

Charlotte grabbed her left wrist with her right hand behind her back, so that James, who had just turned, would not know that she was finally free. The action had been so quick that he could not have noticed, and yet he was looking at her with an intensity that suggested that he at least suspected that something had happened. Nervous that he would discover that the ropes he had used to tie her was now lying on the ground behind her, anxious that she should not be tied up again, she said, in an effort to distract him, “James, can I ask you something? As a representative of the men in the family?” He looked almost

absurdly proud and pleased to be called a representative of the family, and for a second she felt sorry for him. She shook it off and continued "Why is it so important to you to be rich?"

He looked at her in surprise, as if she had asked him something completely elementary. And maybe to him she had. She added "I mean, I like nice things as much as the next person you know that, but I don't aspire to immeasurable wealth and... I mean, the picture you painted for me earlier - about working normal hours and still being rich - it was nice, but I don't necessarily want to lie on the beach and do nothing. I want to work for my money. I think most people do."

James looked thoughtful. After a while he answered "I can't really speak for the whole family, because everyone's different, you know. Your brothers, they like luxury stuff,

so money is important to them. I mean, I'm guessing, of course, but that's the vibe I get from them. For me... you wouldn't understand. You have a fancy education and great paying job. I... started college, I got a scholarship. I decided I wanted to study law, and be a lawyer, just like you, actually. The problem was that my scholarship didn't cover living expenses, so I had to get a job on the side. The job took up too much time and... my grade point average slipped, so I lost my scholarship and couldn't afford to stay. So now I work in law firm, as a clerk. I have snooty lawyers shouting at me daily and I earn... not a great deal. I don't know... I'm just tired of being looked down at. Especially by people I consider to be less intelligent than me. I watch them every day, Charlotte, making elementary mistakes, and I cringe. And now, finally, I have a chance to look down at them. In a year, I can buy up the law firm I

worked in and fire all the idiots who work there.”

“And that would be worth more to you than to sell Liliwood, take the money and go back to university, get your law degree and then demolish your former bosses in court? Wouldn’t that prove that you’re better? In your scenario, you’re not better, just... richer.” Charlotte asked, trying to keep her voice reasonable. Truthfully, she was a little hurt by what he had said. She herself was not above shouting at the odd clerk, when they had made a mistake. And occasionally she was guilty of overlooking the simple and obvious answer in a case.

James lifted an eyebrow at her and with a smile said jokingly “That’s not the American way, Charlotte.”

She found herself almost laughing. The prone body of his fiancée stopped the laugh in her throat. She looked at his smiling face, so familiar to her and found herself pleading

with him. "Don't do this, James. Go back up on the dais, burn some sage to cleanse it, and let's get out of here. You, me and Mattie. I'll pay your way through university, and we can defeat your enemies in court together."

James' face tightened. His smile had vanished.. "It's not just that, Charlotte. It's not just about me getting back at the stupid lawyers I worked with. The family needs this, and it will benefit all of us. The magic of Liliwood belongs to us, and we should use it. It's wrong if we don't, it's... wasteful. For hundreds of years we were powerful, we were rich, because of this ritual. We... we deserve it."

"Why?" Charlotte asked, sensing that James was faltering in his belief, "Why do we deserve it? Why us, particularly?"

"It's just the way it is," James insisted, "I don't know who gave us this gift, or why. But we are chosen to guard this well. The power that it contains belongs to us and we

should use it. We can do great things, Charlotte, wonderful things. It's not just about being rich, or even about having power. It's about what we can do with that money and power. We can right wrongs. We can change the law, make it the way it should be."

That struck a cord with her. How often had she not seen the spirit of the law crushed underfoot by the letter of the law?

"I... I shouldn't be the one to decide how it should be," her voice sounded uncertain, even to her. Part of her relished the thought. Part of her saw herself cleaning up the law, changing things to create a better, truer society. But the other part of her, protested. She simply did not trust herself with power of that kind. And she didn't trust any other member of her family with it either. And, her eyes flicked to Mattie, no power that came from sacrificing

any living thing could ever be used for good. The power that came from the well, would be corrupted and corrupting. It was not safe in the world. And that was why not one of her ancestors had truly used their power for good. They had all had the potential to do good with the power, but not one of them had ever used for anything but their own benefit. To get more power and accumulate more money.

James smiled at her as if her weak tone, the hesitation in her voice, her one moment of greed, had proved something. "No, James," she said, "this is not a good."

His eyes flashed angrily at her, and in the core of his pupil the flames danced brighter than before. Looking into his face, she knew absolutely that James was lost

"Why is it 'not a good'?" on the last words his tone was mocking.

“Power corrupts, James,” she told him.

“Yeah, yeah,’ he answered dismissively, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So what?”

She sighed and shook her head; it was pointless to try to convince him that what he was doing was wrong.

"This is our fate, Charlotte. This is our station in the world. See how everything fell into place for me? How everyone helped? So maybe it not 'good', why does everyone have to be? Maybe we provide the balance, have you ever thought of that? That some people are born of darkness, not of light. The Wellwards are. This is our destiny."

Charlotte lowered her head. She had no arguments against James' ruthlessness. Maybe once James had been good, and Liliwood's core of evil had corrupted him; but it was more likely that James had a point of a kind. The

Wellward family were 'born of darkness' as he so dramatically had stated. They had the evil-gene, which while undiscovered by scientists, surely must exist. She herself was tainted by it as well, she knew that in her heart of hearts. What was the point of fighting against their destiny? Maybe James was right? She had no belief in the idea that they provided a balance though. And again she saw in her minds eye a burning match falling to the floor, lighting the gas that had unnoticeably filled the room. She had not replied to James and now she could hear the chill in his voice.

"People everywhere use the advantages that God and nature has provided them with; intellect; strength; birthright. This is our birthright and it is a downright shame not to use it. For decades the family has suffered while trying to 'do the right thing' by some insane social

standard. It is over now. I will set it right. The family will rise to prominence again. I will make sure we do."

Charlotte looked at Mattie, her helpless body on the floor, the blood soaked handkerchief around her arm.

"This is the way it is supposed to be. We are supposed to be kings among men."

She looked at the shards of the broken soup bowl on the stone floor.

"Our birthright sits right here in this chamber. Our power lies in our control of the power within."

Her eyes flitted to the walls where the ancient symbols spun and twirled.

"We have been here since time immemorial, and we shall always remain."

In the ceiling of the chamber, the stars seemed to almost twinkle at her.

"For too long things have been wrong with the family, with society, even with the world."

The shadows of the candles flickered and the well gurgled.

"I can set it right"

Charlotte looked up into his eyes as his the last words echoed in the chamber. She suddenly knew exactly what to do, what her only chance to get herself and Mattie safely out of the cellar was. She smiled at him, a cold, superior smile and said in a voice so strong and steady it surprised even her:

"Good James, now use you determination when you summon Him. It is imperative that you do not feel fear or regret."

James stared at her wildly for a moment, then his face broke into a wide grin "I knew it!" he said, punching the air

with a clenched fist, "I knew you were on our side. You brothers said not to trust you..."

Charlotte laughed as derisively as she could.

"My brothers are idiots. They know nothing about this." She said with a smirk.

James laughed, it was a high and happy laugh, and it did not belong in a sacred chamber.

Charlotte continued, not sure where her sudden flash of inspiration had come from, "You are the Guardian of the Well, but I am the Keeper of the Secrets. Why do you think I gave you that book?"

As she spoke aloud her self invented title, an image rose in her mind; the beast behind the book shelves, the *real* Keeper of the Secrets. She tried to suppress a shudder. James looked at her in an almost adoring manner. She smiled her superior smile at him, feeling sick as she did so.

"Should I release you?" he asked in a slightly subservient tone.

"No!" she said panicked, her hands, free behind her back, would give the game away.

"No," she again, this time more calmly, "I hadn't planned to reveal myself to you. It's imperative that you continue the ritual on your own."

He furrowed his brow at her, and she was sure he would see through her lies.

"Everything will be alright, of course, but I am the Keeper of the Secrets," she invented madly, "there is no other. If things should - God forbid - go wrong, I have to be here to advice the next Guardian of the Well."

James looked sceptical. Her heart hammered. To distract him from his doubts she prattled on, making things up wildly. "Who do you designate, by the way?" she asked.

"Designate?" he asked.

"If you had a son, he would be the natural successor when he came of age, but since you don't you have to designate an heir."

"Oh" said James looking slightly confused, "can I designate you?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, "I'm the Keeper of the Secrets, I can't be both."

James looked hesitant.

"How about Robert? My younger brother?" she suggested.

James looked relieved "Yes," he said, "Robert it is. Since I don't have a son yet. But when I do, he'll be..."

"Your child will always be your natural successor, Charlotte said reassuringly, wondering why what she said felt so right.

Behind James the well gurgled. He turned and looked at it for a moment, then turned back to her. "I should continue now, right?" He asked, his tone insecure.

"Yes, but James, you *know* what to do. It is important that you be decisive."

"Yes" he nodded, "I'm going to go get the extra candles, then."

He turned and went back up on the dais, where he grabbed the magic ritual book and the knife and nodded to Charlotte proudly. She watched as he walked across the chamber, up on the first dais and scrambled out through the narrow passage. As he vanished from sight Charlotte let her arms go. They ached almost intolerably. She tried rubbing her upper arms a little, encouraging the blood to flow, but it did not help much. Her hands were not able to rub as hard as her upper arms needed. She gave up and

tried to get up instead, it was beyond her, her arms failed when she tried pushing herself up from the floor; her legs wouldn't carry her weight. Slowly, painfully, supporting herself on the wall behind herself, she made it to her feet. Her head throbbed like a rotten tooth at her effort. For a moment she closed her eyes, swallowing her pain.

She walked up to Mattie on shaking legs. Bending over her and shaking her awake seemed completely impossible. Charlotte knew that if she got down on the floor again so soon, there was no way she would ever manage to get back up. She poked Mattie gently in the side with her foot. Mattie didn't move. Charlotte bent down as far as she dared and hissed "Mattie"

There was no reaction. She tried kicking her again. This time Mattie moved her head, and made an annoyed grimace, like someone very tired who wanted to continue

sleeping. Charlotte's heart leapt, Mattie would probably not be completely impossible to wake. She didn't know anything about the effects of Choral Hydrate other than what James had said; that Mattie had woken without incident before after being drugged before. For a second she let that piece of information wash over her. James had drugged Mattie before for no other reason than that she was 'inconvenient'. She felt indignant, but realised how silly that was. Since James was now planning to feed Mattie, with her child inside her, to a creature he was summoning from inside the well, drugging her to avoid an argument seemed like a pretty trifling offence.

Charlotte moved off to the exit on legs that were still hesitant to carry her. She walked up the rough cut stairs with effort, not sure what she would do. It was perhaps her only chance to escape, she could crawl through the

passage and hide inside the coal bin until James had crawled back inside and then lock him inside with the wood panel and the plank. But what of Mattie if she did that? She would be locked inside with a madman in rage. Someone who was already preparing to kill her. It was simply not an option. How long would James be? Could she hide Mattie in the coal cellar before he came back? But as she squatted down next to the passage, she could already hear running footsteps.

She hastened back to where she had sat, her legs protesting for every step, her head throbbing with every move she made. She sat down in the same position she had sat before and twiddled the rope loosely around her wrists in case he should look.

A bundle fell to the ground by the passage; James was pushing something ahead of himself as he crawled through

from the coal cellar. A moment later he appeared. He caught her eye immediately and smiled reassuringly at her.

"Ok," he said with a pleased smile, "we're ready for the last phase."

Charlotte tried to smile back, her belly was surging, time was running out for her and Mattie. James stopped and looked at her with concern.

"Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Head hurts," she said succinctly. He looked a little guilty.

"I'm sorry about that," he said sheepishly, "I just panicked when I saw that..."

"It's ok," she cut him off, "you didn't know."

"Should I cut you loose?" he asked again.

"No," she said, "still, no."

"I could make you more comfortable..." James offered.

"No," she said again, "James, really, Complete the ritual, then release me. I'll survive the head ache."

"If you're sure," he said, shrugging as he walked up on the dais, with the bundle and put it on the stone railing. He took out a number of big, thick candles and put them around the railing in what looked to Charlotte like a specific pattern. He lit them, one by one. He picked up a folded piece of paper and looked at it, shook his head and lit the torch. Seemingly satisfied with the visibility, he put both the paper and the torch down. He turned his back to her, so she could no longer see what he was doing.

Charlotte lent forward while holding her breath. Her heart was beating hard and fast. This was the endgame. She would have to act soon or it would be too late. Would he notice? She moved carefully closer to Mattie, little by little. She needed a plan, but what? The only thing she

could think of was to trap James in the underground chamber. That was a given. This would give her time to carry and drag Mattie out to the woods along the path to where the car was parked and then they would drive off to safety. The problem was only getting Mattie out of the chamber. She could perhaps be woken, but if she spoke Mattie's name aloud, James would hear it. And there was no way she could drag Mattie across the floor, push her out through the passage and climb out herself before James caught up with her. It was all about timing and luck. Perhaps she would still get her chance.

James picked up his piece of paper and lit the torch. He started reading, stumbling over words she could not understand.

As he chanted, the sound of rushing water grew louder; the candles fluttered in a breeze seemed to blow from the

well. James stopped and looked around, wide-eyed. The rushing sound stopped and the breeze abated. Charlotte, who had been moving slowly towards Mattie, stopped and met James' eyes. He looked excited and a little shocked. A candle blew out on the railing of the dais. James looked around, took an audible big breath and continued reading. Charlotte felt a shudder come over her. The breeze started up again and slowly but surely the sound of rushing water increased, and seemed to amplify by the minute. James stuttered as he looked around, trying to focus on the words he was chanting and not on the changes that were occurring in the room around them. She could tell he was making an effort. The candles in the candlestick behind Charlotte went out suddenly, completely without preamble. One minute they were burning brightly and flickering slightly in the breeze, the next she was sitting in

darkness. Charlotte couldn't help herself, and let a small scream out. Her heart was hammering. James jumped and looked at her; his eyes were wide and seemed very dark. And she could tell he was scared too. But there was no turning back now. If he were to stop now... Charlotte didn't know what would happen, but she had a strong feeling that it was dangerous, very dangerous. And she could tell James knew that too. Earlier he had been playing almost, but now it was very real.

James continued reading out the chant and the water rushed louder and louder. The breeze blew out of the well, stronger now than ever. More candles blew out, some from the breeze, some simply extinguished, seemingly for no reason. Charlotte sat in darkness, she felt cold in the growing breeze. It was time, she suddenly realised, James was busy, he would not notice. She edged along towards

Mattie, frequently looking up, checking that James wasn't looking at her. But he never looked up. He had raised his voice over the wind and was trying very hard to keep the paper still. She leant over Mattie, grabbed her by the upper arms and lifted her torso off the floor. Mattie opened her eyes a crack and looked at her. Then she closed them again and Charlotte could feel her getting heavier, as if her muscles were relaxing. Charlotte shook her. Mattie's eyes opened again, this time a little more than before, and there was recognition in her eyes. Charlotte glanced up at James, he was squinting at his piece of paper and thankfully not paying attention to what was going on.

"Mattie," Charlotte hissed straight into her face, "don't fall asleep again. We have to get out."

Mattie opened her mouth as if to speak, the expression

on her face was confused. Charlotte put her right index finger against her lips and shushed. Mattie looked as if she was about to fall asleep again. Then she jerked her head towards the dais and looked as if she was trying to focus.

“Come on, we have to get out,” Charlotte whispered, and let Mattie’s arm go.

Mattie turned over and tried to get up on her hands and knees. Her knees buckled and she folded her arms. She put her head down on her and seemed to fall asleep. Charlotte grabbed Mattie’s right wrist and Mattie looked up.

Charlotte motioned to her to follow. Mattie tried again, this time with more success. But after a few steps she was clearly out of energy. Charlotte circled around and crawled up on Mattie’s side. She looked up on James, who was now shouting over the wind that had turned into a storm. She could feel it tearing at her clothes and she felt cold all over.

She could only imagine how Mattie must feel, in her cotton night gown. They moved slowly, but steadily towards the exit, Charlotte checking over her shoulder if James had noticed. But he was still chanting, shouting over the noise of the rushing water and howling wind. Halfway across the floor, Charlotte stood up and helped Mattie to do so too. They were in the darkness now, and Charlotte was almost sure they could not be seen by James. Anyway, time was of the essence. They walked as quickly as they could across the floor. They were hunched over so James wouldn't see. Mattie was stumbling in her own legs, and Charlotte made sure she didn't trip. They made it to the exit and Mattie was down on her knees, on her way into the passage.

"Hey," James shouted.

Charlotte turned and looked. James was standing on the floor where Mattie had lain, looking at them. Charlotte

looked down at Mattie, who was looking questioningly up at her.

“Get outside and run,” she said.

Mattie crawled into the passage as quickly as she could.

Charlotte straightened up and turned to face James.

## Chapter 15.

### **Eachy**

Charlotte heard Mattie scramble through the passage and just hoped that she would run as quickly as she could away from Liliwood. Meanwhile she would hold off James as best she could. Her heart was beating hard and fast, but she stood her ground as James ran up to her. She curled her hand into fists and conjured up all the fury she could muster. She would need it all if she were to fight James. His word rang through her head:

“The child I love is inside her.”

It had horrified her beyond belief. He had modified the ritual and thought of it as a mercy to drug his fiancée and

feed her to some beast he was conjuring up, instead of cutting her open and extracting the child. She gritted her teeth, feeling a rage building, not just against James, but against her father and her uncle, against John, Robert, Alexander, against legions of nameless ancestors that had so willingly given others' lives in order to prosper themselves. And she swore to herself it would end, right there next to the well where it had started.

James rushed up on the dais where she was standing; he pushed her aside and crouched down to follow Mattie through the passage. Charlotte regained her balance and kicked James hard in the side. He stopped and she kicked him again, a little softer this time. Her innate desire not to cause harm, momentarily overshadowing her rage. She bit it back as she bent over and grabbed the back of his jeans and pulled him out of the passage. He turned around and

grabbed her t-shirt, she toppled over, half over him. He grabbed her neck and squeezed while rolling over, pinning her against the floor. Her face felt tight and warm, she was breathing in tiny gasps as James squeezed tighter and tighter. He stared into her eyes as he squeezed. Her heart was pounding in her ears, and little black and red spots started dancing before her eyes.

There was a strong wind in the chamber and the sound of water was now not rushing, but oddly bubbling. The last candles went out leaving them in nearly total darkness. The only light was coming through the passage, but it was mild, only just enough for Charlotte to see the fury in James' eyes. And deep inside his eyes, fire still danced. He was going to kill her, there was no doubt. She pulled at his hands, trying to get them away from her throat. But he was stronger than her, and he was clearly determined to

kill her. With her left hand she kept tugging at his hands, but with her right hand she scratched his face, aiming for the eyes. She felt her fingers hitting something soft, wet and with a grunt he let go of her. He got up on his knees and clutched at his face. She raised her knee and jabbed it at him, hoping to catch him somewhere painful. He keeled over and she kicked him off herself. She turned over and crawled over to the passage, this was her moment to get out and leave him there, in the dark, waiting for the monster he had tried to conjure up. She would not feel sorry for him, he could sit there forever and she would not be bothered. If her fury did not last, her throat, sore and tight, would remind her why he should let him die.

James grabbed her right leg. She could feel his fingers clamping down on her ankle. She screamed and turned around, James' face was twisted in pain and anger. He

pulled her back from the passage and she kicked him, with her left leg. This time she got him right in the face. For a second he let her go and then he pounced. He got up, blood was streaming down his face. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her off the dais. She fell, hitting the floor some ten feet away. She scrambled to get up, but her left leg gave way and she crashed to the floor again. Up on the dais she could see that James was moving quickly. He crawled out through the passage and he could hear him bolting it up. Keeping her in place until he came back.

Mattie had crawled through the passage as quickly as she could. She had no idea how she had ended up down there. It was as if she had just woken up from a dream. Except the reality she had woken up in was more reminiscent of a nightmare, a nightmare of chanting and fear and flickering

lights. She wasn't sure what was going on, but she knew she had to get away. Charlotte had told her to run and she had actually seemed afraid. She had to get out and as quickly as possible. It had been on the way up the old wooden ladder that she had noticed it. Her arm was hurting and she had looked down at it. There was a v-shaped cut over her elbow and it had bled quite extensively, her lower arm was covered in blood. Looking at it made her sway, feeling as if she was going to faint. She gritted her teeth and continued as fast as she could up the ladder, into the kitchen. She slipped on the kitchen floor and felt panic bubble up inside of her. Mattie was suddenly sure she knew what had happened. She had been right the night before, when she had thought that there was a black mass going on in the cellar. Tonight whoever it was had come for all of them, with plans to do ungodly things to all

of them. They had already started. They had cut her and hurt her. Charlotte had saved her, but where was James? Was he...? She couldn't even finish the thought. She got up and ran to the stairs to the ground floor. She thought she heard a noise from behind her and sped up. She ran up the stairs and paused. Should she go upstairs and get her things? Or wait for Charlotte, surely she was right behind? But Charlotte had told her to run. And where was James? She stood indecisive for a moment, then she heard another noise from behind her and this time she was sure. Someone was on the way up from the cellar. She had no more time left to think. She could wait and hope it was Charlotte or James, but there was an equally good chance it was a crazed devil worshipper. She decided not to take any chances. She ran to the door, ripped it open and ran outside in the rain.

James pushed the wood panel into the hole in the wall, in his fury he used all his strength to push the coal bin in front of it to assure that Charlotte would right to stay where she was until he came back. The feelings he had had for her as she helped him achieve his destiny were very dead. As dead as she would be when he had time to deal with her. Even if he hadn't been furious over how she had tricked him and injured him, Charlotte would have to die. She had proved that she could not be trusted and she knew much too much. And he could have just left her alone to die in the dark, but he wanted to see her die. She had tricked him and hurt him and jeopardised the ritual, and he wanted to see the look in her eyes when she knew he would kill her.

He tried to run after Mattie, but Charlotte's kicks had

seriously slowed him down. He suspected that he might even have broken ribs; it hurt to breathe. With an effort he made it up the ladder and rushed to the stairs. His gaze fell on the knife he had used to cut Mattie and himself, it would serve Charlotte too, he thought grimly. He heard the front door slam on the ground floor and smiled. Mattie was just ahead of him, and she would not get far barefoot in the rain. But he hurried up the stairs anyway, the sooner he could get her back, the better. He was not sure how long he dared to be away, the ritual was complete, but could he be sure the creature would not appear before his return to the cellar? He sped up.

Mattie stopped just outside the door; the gravel hurt her feet and it was as if the skies had opened. Rain was pouring down, soaking her to the skin in seconds. Lights from the

house cast ghostly shadows over the gravel and illuminated the path to the right, the one that would either take her to the road or to the lake. She wondered if she could go back inside and get some shoes and a coat, but changed her mind. Charlotte had told her to run, she reminded herself. She ran towards the forest, trying not to notice that the gravel was digging into her feet, making each step feel as if she was running over hot coals. As she made it to the forest line she heard the door slam and turned. She saw a figure running down the stairs, blurry in the distance and the rain. She paused; the figure looked familiar to her through the haze. Was it James?

Charlotte was panicking. James would be coming back to kill her, she was sure. All she could hope was that she had bought Mattie enough time to get away. She felt her way,

crawling in total darkness. The wind had abated a little, and the sound of rushing water wasn't as strong. She crawled towards where she thought the dais might be, she had to find the passage back to the coal cellar. That was the only chance she had of staying alive. But how could she get out? The scraping sound from the cellar probably meant that James had locked her in completely using the coal bin; she had no chance to getting out she could not push it away, nor kick it away now that her leg was crippled. Still, she had to try. She felt dizzy and put her head down on her hands. It hurt to swallow and her head was pounding. It felt as if all strength had left her. She cried, tears rolling down her face, huge sobs finally escaping her. Her whole body ached and she wanted to sleep. And she knew that she would probably not survive the night.

She raised her head, dried her tears and froze. The wind had stopped and on the railing of the dais across the room a candle was flickering.

Mattie turned and ran, if it was James she could apologise later. If it wasn't... She didn't even finish that thought. On the forest path, there was less gravel; she could feel squelchy mud under her feet, which felt like having her sore feet wrapped in silk. But she didn't dare move off the path. It was so dark in the woods and the further she got from the house the darker it got. If she moved off the path she might never be able to find it again. It was difficult enough to keep on the path as it was, she was almost grateful for the bits of gravel digging into her feet, at least she knew she was running in the right direction. Although, she could hear the sound of the rushing water from the

river growing louder and ran towards it. She came to the bridge and stopped for a second. One of the planks was broken, she reminded herself. She grabbed on to the left railing and walked as quickly as she dared across the bridge. The wood planks were rough and slippery. She reinforced her grip on the railing, knowing that slipping and falling would send her to a watery grave. She felt one of the middle planks give way under her foot and moved quickly off it. When she was finally on the other side of the river she broke into a run again.

James stopped on the stairs outside the front door. He saw Mattie's white nightgown disappear into the forest and followed. For a second she had looked as if she was going to wait by the edge of the forest and his heart leapt. But then she ran, vanishing into the forest like a spirit. He ran

after her, not wanting to lose track of her and having to spend all night searching the woods. He wished he had brought a source of light, but it was too late for that now. And Mattie's nightgown seemed like a beacon, shining, drawing him to her, even through the darkness and the rain. He heard the gravel crunch under his feet, rain whipped his face. He entered the woods and had to stop. He looked around for any sign of Mattie's nightgown. He saw it something white in the edge of his vision and ran towards it. He could hear the river rushing and ran towards it. He saw a figure dressed in white that seemed to float slowly in front of him. He stopped with a feeling of foreboding in his belly. Something was wrong. Maybe it wasn't Mattie? For a minute he wondered if he was following a spectre. Then the figure sped up, running quickly. That broke the spell and James ran after her. He

ran and heard wooden planks creak under his weight. It was a bridge, old with slippery boards. Halfway over one of the planks gave way, his hands searched for something, anything to hold on to. He fell hard and grabbed on to a wooden board, which immediately rose and tipped him into the river. The water was deep and his head went under, he felt his body helplessly being pulled down. He tried to scream but his mouth filled with water. His hand searched desperately for something to hold onto and finally he managed to grab hold of the root of a tree sticking into the water. He pulled himself up as much as he could; managing at last to get his head above the water. He took a deep breath of cold damp air; it hurt his lungs but still felt like life. Something moved under his legs and he froze. Whatever it was it was big and moving against the current of the water. He clung on tightly on the root,

feeling the creature, cold as the water, moving under him. It felt like a long muscle contracting under rough skin. The creature passed and he breathed out, then he felt it return. Something pushed against his face. He felt his head enveloped in something cold, his head was inside something more solid than water, something darker than the darkness surrounding him; he felt a burning tearing pain in his shoulders and back. And then he felt nothing more.

Charlotte was staring at the candle. A moment ago she had been laying in total darkness, but now one of the candles had reignited, a pinprick of light in the dark chamber. She noticed an eerie silence, the wind had stopped and the sound of rushing water had died, all she could hear was her own panicked breathing and the sounds of her

heartbeats. She sat up, ignoring the pain in her leg. A sudden movement caught her eye and she turned. A candle in the candlestick near the wall had spontaneously lit. Involuntarily she pulled her upper body away, wanting to get as far from the candle as possible. Her heart was hammering painfully in her chest. Over on the dais with the well another candle lit, and another and then another. Charlotte crawled backwards without taking her eyes of the scene that was playing out in front of her eyes. It scared her, but she couldn't help feeling fascinated. One by one the all candles in the room lit. A bubbling sound from the well drew her attention. The strangest impulse came over her. She had to see what was going on. She got up, with difficulty, and limped towards the well.

Mattie ran, as fast as she could. She ran without knowing

exactly where she was going. She had lost the path shortly after crossing the bridge. She ran deeper into the woods, to where the trees were so thick the rain had not hit the ground. She ran over dead pine needles. She ran through branches slapping her face painfully. She ran until she couldn't run anymore. A stitch in her side made her stop. She doubled over. Every breath stung like a knife. She took large gulps of air, trying not to feel the stabbing pain in her lungs and the aching in her legs. Her nightgown was soaked and clung to her body. Her hair was plastered on her head. Her face had been whipped raw by tree branches and she had pine needles in her hair. The trees were thinner where she had stopped, and rain was pouring down over her. She didn't care or even notice, she was so wet a little more water made no difference. A flash of light shone through the dark trees in front of her. *Friend*

*or foe*, she wondered. The sound of an engine made her decision for her. It sounded like warmth and safety. She ran towards the light and suddenly she was out of the trees. She felt gravel under her feet and realised she was standing on a road. A car was moving towards her, and she waved her arms, willing the car to stop. The car came to an abrupt stop. She ran over to it and the young woman driving it rushed out of the car with a concerned look on her face. She was safe.

Charlotte stood in front of the dais with the well staring in fascination at it. The candles flickered over the scene she stood watching. For the first time in her life she felt properly connected to her Wellward roots. It was the blood of the Wellwards that coursed through her veins and this was her sacred well. From deep underground

water sprang up, sweet and pure, it surged to the surface of the earth and joined the river carrying water down to the lake and beyond. It had done so since before the dawn of man and it would do so long after man was gone. This close to the well she knew the truth. This wellspring had magical properties of healing. In ancient times people had come here with broken bodies, with broken minds and with broken spirits, and her ancestors had guided them to a place of healing, a place of peace. That had been the job of her foremothers and -fathers, the priests and priestesses of the sacred well. This had been a place of healing magic, and then... She closed her eyes and let the knowledge flow into her. The well had been corrupted, it had been used to make riches for some members of the family, and they had held it secret and kept it from the rest. They had built a fortress over the source of their

magic, their riches. But it need not be like that. The intention of the Guardian of the Well designated the well as a place of healing or a place of harm. She moved in closer to the well. A strange surging bubbling sound was coming from it. Something was coming, she knew it. She knelt before the well and lowered her head in deference to the power it held. Water spilled over the edge of the well. James had summoned it and now it was coming. He had chosen to once again make the well a place of greed. And now the manifestation of that greed had been summoned. She knew its nature and knew what must happen. It fed on the power from the well and granted the wishes of those who fed it flesh. It belonged to the well as much as the healing magic, and should it be destroyed, the well would run dry. She had no sacrifice of flesh for it and no means or wish to destroy it. She knew what must happen and

accepted her fate. More water spilled over the edge of the well and something huge rose up. The same something that lived in the lake. Charlotte lifted her head and looked at the creature. She had to crane her neck to see its head, which nearly swept the ceiling 15 feet above her. It had the figure of a man, but larger and heavier. Its skin was built up of tiny glistening, dark scales, beneath which she could see the movement of muscle. It had no neck, the enormous serpentine head sat directly on the broad shoulders. Its black eyes glittered as it approached her, in their depth she could see flames dancing. A trice forked tongue darted out of its mouth, tasting the air. Its giant mouth opened. Charlotte lowered her head in supplication and closed her eyes. She knew what must come. She felt as if generations of her ancestors, the healers of the family, were standing in silence waiting for her to cross the great

divide. She thought she could hear the beating of wings  
and knew it was the bird of death. She accepted it calmly.

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## **After**

Mattie and Robert shared at Kit-Kat at the doctor's office.

Mattie was grateful and surprised at how well they had

taken care of her since the terrible night at Liliwood. She

lived with Amanda and Charles, and Robert came by daily.

He had taken her to every appointment she had with

doctors and even attended antenatal classes with her.

Gennie had taken her shopping for little blue baby clothes

and baby furniture. John had arranged for her to legally

stay in England. Ella, who had a law degree, had gone to

the courts and had Mattie appointed as guardian of James'

estate until their son came of age. Even thinking about

how kind they had all been to her brought tears to Mattie's

eyes. She knew they were grieving for Charlotte, daughter, sister, cousin, niece. And she was grieving too. She had only known Charlotte for a few days, but in those few short days she had come to know her, come to love her as a friend. And of course, Charlotte had saved her life. There were times she hoped against hope that Charlotte would still turn up, alive and well, but she knew it was silly. The police had made it very clear that the amount of blood in the secret chamber under Liliwood Manor meant that Charlotte could not have survived. Human remains had been found in the lake and a quick DNA test had shown it was James'. No one had managed to find any secret passage into the chamber from the outside, but Mattie was sure they would have in time. Alexander had overseen the closing off of passage from Liliwood Manor.

Both the McBride family and the Halliwell family had

welcomed her with open arms, and when she revealed that she was expecting James' baby, they had all been thrilled.

"Any thoughts on name?" Robert asked out of the blue.

Mattie smiled a little sadly, knowing that she might open a wound with her words "I was thinking Charlie, after Charlotte."

Robert looked away a moment and said in a slightly thick voice "That's nice."

"She saved my life," she patted her burgeoning belly, "and his."

"So you won't name him after his dad then?"

"I thought about it," Mattie said thoughtfully, "but I decided against it."

"I wish they would catch who did it," Robert said.

Mattie didn't reply, but she knew what he meant. She too

wanted that. For the killers to be caught and punished. Then they could put it behind them and focus on the future.

“I dream about Liliwood,” the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Robert squeezed her hand:

“That’s hardly surprising,” he said.

“But it’s not nightmares, I dream that the baby and I live there. And there is sweet water rushing and stars above us in the velvety black sky.”

He looked at her with interest:

“Do you want to live there?”

She smiled a little embarrassed:

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “but I feel drawn to it.”

“It’s the baby,” Robert said and grinned, “he’s got Wellward blood in him.”

Mattie laughed. It was a bright laugh, as clear as the summer day outside. She laughed not because the joke was funny, but because it reminded her that her son would never have the sort of lonely childhood that she had struggled with. Her son would be born into a family that stretched back through the ages and he would never be alone. He would never know the desperate longing for a family that James had had. James' dearest wish had come true for the baby.

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