

AMY CROSS

The GHOST of HARRY PRYM



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Kindle edition
First published in June 2024
by Blackwych Books, London

Jessica Prym hasn't seen her father for years. When she receives a brief note informing her of his death, she almost doesn't bother going to visit his 'new' family at a rundown English countryside mansion. But she does go, and when she arrives she quickly realizes that something is very wrong.

The mansion is haunted by Harry Prym, but it's not 'her' Harry. She soon learns that not only is there another man with that name, but he also had a long-lost daughter named Jessica. And although she wants nothing more than to turn around and leave, Jessica finds herself trying to help the ghost.

What she doesn't realize, however, is that this particular mansion hides many secrets. What do the Prym family really want, and was her arrival really an accident?

The Ghost of Harry Prym is a ghost story about two haunted souls, and about the power of the living and the dead to find the answers they both desperately need.

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The Ghost of Harry Pym

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Prologue

“Even Harry, with all his blinkers on, will eventually have to see what Prym Hall becomes! It's going to be a museum dedicated to his many failures... as a man, as a father and most importantly as a husband!”

I try again to argue with her, but I can no longer get any words out. A moment later the top of my head bumps against the hallway's ceiling, and when I look down I find that my vision is starting to become blurred. If I stay up here for much longer, I'm going to suffocate, but I'm certain that at any moment Beatrice is going to splat me against the tiled floor far below.

At least that should be quick.

For a moment, suspended up here, I find myself thinking back to my father. I see a kind of montage of my childhood, of all the ways that he damn near killed me, but somehow I finally understand that at least he was paying me some attention. Sure, I suggested earlier that he was actively attempting to end my life, but that was just my joking way of trying to deal with the situation. The truth is, I had a bunch of scrapes and mishaps when I was younger, and that was because Dad actually took me out and did stuff with me. We had so many adventures, and while our relationship soured in later years, I can't deny that for a time he was actually a good – if somewhat accident-prone – father. At least he didn't leave me to rot away, unloved and borderline unwanted, in some grand old mansion.

At least I was never ignored.

Damn it, I hate the fact that in my final moments, I've actually changed my mind about him.

Suddenly I start to fall, except 'falling' doesn't really describe it because actually I can feel an immense force slamming me down toward the floor. I see the tiles racing toward me and I brace myself for the explosion, for the vast bloodied splat that's going to finish my miserable existence. I've got to admit, this isn't how I saw my life ending. However, exploding on impact with the floor of an old English mansion might just be a pretty good metaphor for my time here in this world. It's just a shame that, in this final fraction of a second, I can't resist doing something that's completely and utterly lame.

I scream.

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Chapter One

One day earlier...

My father has been trying to kill me for years.

According to stories I've been told by other family members, my early childhood was basically a series of one near-fatal incident after another. By the time I was a week old, Dad had already dropped me three times, including onto a marble bathroom floor; over the next few years I was left in a car that rolled downhill toward a busy junction, 'lost' for three hours in a supermarket in a decidedly shady part of Morocco during a family holiday, and left outside a tent with salami on my face near a forest known for its wolf population. I'd barely learned to crawl before I was found trying to slide a fork into a plug socket, having been left in my father's care for a short while. The very last thing he did, right before running out on our family shortly before my eighth birthday, was 'accidentally' drop my favorite earrings into the waste disposal unit and tell me to fish them out with my fingers.

Which I attempted to do, while balanced on a chair on a recently-mopped floor. And this was just a few days after Dad had left me in the car as he filled it up with petrol while smoking a cigar, which to be fair could very easily have finished both of us off in one neat fireball.

"It's the next turning up here on the left, isn't it?" the taxi driver asks.

"I'm not sure," I tell him. "I've never actually been here before."

Once Dad was gone, my chances of survival increased dramatically. I was old enough by this point to overhear the occasional conversation between my mother and grandmother, in which they'd whisper about their relief that he was out of the picture. To be honest, I never really thought to question that judgment. The following year, Dad sent me a 'care package' for my birthday that included a bag of sweets containing several rusty nails; he apparently told my mother that he knew nothing about those nails, just like he'd known nothing about the literal live scorpion that had once somehow found its way into my crib on a balmy English summer's day. Sure, Mum was upset when he ran off with that other woman and started a whole new family, but any sorrow was tempered by the thought

that at least he was too far away to cause much more harm.

“Yeah, I think it's this one,” the taxi driver says, slowing and then taking the left turn. “Watch out, this looks like pot-hole heaven. It's gonna be a bumpy ride.”

“I'm used to bumpy rides,” I reply wistfully.

By my teens, Dad was properly out of my life, and I can't say that I really cared too much. Some of my friends still had two happily married parents, but I always thought *they* were the weird ones. Twice a year I'd pretend to be sad that Dad hadn't sent me any Christmas or birthday gifts, although I did that mainly for Mum's benefit; in truth, I'd priced the lack of attention from Dad into my expectations from an early age, so I was quite content with my lot in life. Occasionally someone might ask me about my father, and I'd just tell them that my parents had split up and that I didn't see him anymore. I never bothered to tell any stories about him, or to complain, or to admit that his inattention while using a chainsaw had left me with this small scar on my cheek when I was just five years old.

“It's a big old pile, this place, isn't it?” the taxi driver continues, clearly still trying to make small-talk. “I've never had to come out this way, though. I've only seen photos of it.”

I smile, but in truth I really don't appreciate his constant interruptions. I'm trying to have a sulk, and to calm my raging nerves. After all, I have no idea how much – if anything – these people are going to know about me when I arrive.

There was one final message from Dad, a few years ago when I finished school at eighteen. Out of the blue, he sent me a letter congratulating me on my exam results, which I suppose Mum had sent to him in some misguided attempt to prove that he wouldn't care. He enclosed a postal order – slightly old-fashioned, even at the time – for a hundred pounds, with a message telling me that I should spoil myself. So far, so good, except that on my way to cash the postal order that afternoon I was nearly hit by an out-of-control lorry that hurtled down the main street in town. Obviously I'm not sufficiently paranoid to blame *that* on Dad, although I happen to know that Mum went to the police station the following day and asked a few questions, just to put her mind at rest.

“There it is,” the driver says. “Prym Hall. I don't know how anyone could live in such a huge old place. The heating bill alone'd make my eyes water. Cost of living, eh?”

Leaning down, I see the mansion ahead and I immediately feel a sense of dread in my gut. I don't actually have to be here right now; I could ask the driver to turn around, I could get the next train home and I'd be the only person who'd ever know that I chickened out of this whole situation. Up until a few days ago, I honestly hadn't thought about him much for several years, and I was quite happy working on the ticket desk at the local cinema. Then the letter arrived, and I didn't even think much while I was opening it, only to find a rather curt handwritten note on headed notepaper, containing all of four words.

"Harry Prym is dead," I whisper now, remembering that message.

"Should I drop you outside the front?" the driver asks, as the taxi starting bumping across the gravel driveway.

"Yes, thank you," I reply, reaching into my pocket to find some cash. "I hope these stones don't damage your car too much."

"This old banger?" He laughs. "She hasn't done a proper M.O.T. in five years. Any damage'll probably do her some good."

"Yeah," I murmur, watching the windows of the mansion and searching in vain for a sign that somebody might be coming out to greet me. "I know the feeling."

This place is so quiet.

As the taxi disappears into the distance, I'm left standing in somewhat stunned silence on the driveway, looking up at the huge facade of Prym Hall. With my tattered backpack and even tattier leather jacket, I'm sure I already look truly out of my comfort zone. Until this moment, however, I hadn't truly appreciated the enormity of the place; the photos online made it look grand enough, but now the high tower above the main entrance is looming over me with almost menacing magnitude, and I'm finding it genuinely hard to understand how anyone could ever live in such a ginormous house. Then again, even my limited memories of Dad are enough for me to know that he always had a sense of ambition, and I'm sure he loved the stylistic flourishes and naked opulence of what appears to be a proper old-fashioned crumbling English mansion.

"You must have done alright for yourself," I whisper, before throwing the backpack over my shoulder and making my way across the crunching gravel.

My footsteps ring out so loudly that I immediately assume I'll be noticed soon. I'm even surprised not to see anyone as I reach the foot of the fancy stone steps that lead up to the front door, but when I turn to look around again I quickly realize why I might have been missed. I see huge lawns stretching off in every direction, and I come to understand that this estate is vast. The house is big enough, but it's set in the middle of so much land that you could probably build a small town here. There are forests in the distance, and those are part of the estate too, and my sneaky online research even suggested that the family owns a lake. It's not hard to believe, then, that they don't spend too much of their time sitting around indoors, waiting for someone to ring the bell.

Rolling my eyes, I walk up the steps and approach the large wooden door. Stopping, I look for some sign of a bell that I can ring, but there's nothing. I'm really not sure about the protocol that applies when arriving at these big houses unannounced, and my only experience of this kind of world comes from watching reruns of *Midsomer Murders*. Finally, supposing that there are no other options, I reach out and knock as hard as I can manage on the door, although I doubt that even this sound is enough to penetrate the house's farthest reaches.

I wait, but I already know that I've achieved nothing.

For a few minutes, I simply continue to watch the lawns, hoping to spot some hint of life. When that fails, I look up at the scores of windows running along the front of Prym Hall. I have no idea how many rooms this place has, but it's certainly not a stretch to think that the house must have more beds than your average hotel. And most of them, I imagine, have been left dusty and empty for years.

In fact, I'm starting to wonder whether there might have been some kind of mistake, and as I start wandering past the various downstairs windows I half expect to find that everyone has buggered off for the week.

Cupping my hands around my eyes, I peer through the first window. I see a large, gloomy room on the other side with a long and immaculately laid out table. There are huge paintings on the walls, and so far this place looks *exactly* how I'd imagined from the outside. More museum than home, Prym Hall appears to be almost a kind of time capsule. I walk along to the next window and look through, and I see another large room, one that contains a series of chairs and recliners that look perfect for fainting on.

And then, suddenly, a woman steps into view on the other side of the window. She looks at me, and for a fraction of a second she seems utterly confused, and then she screams.

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Chapter Two

“You really shouldn't go snooping around,” the woman snaps angrily as she just about manages to pull the wooden door open to let me through into the hallway. “You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“I'm sorry,” I reply, stepping into the house and immediately noticing a pungent aroma of old furniture. “I just -”

“Of course, if we still had Charles working here, all of this could have been avoided,” the woman continues, sounding utterly fragile now as she struggles to push the door shut behind me. “He wasn't the best butler in the world, but at least he could get the basics done. He knew how to open a good door.”

“This place is amazing,” I whisper, making my way past a small table and looking up at the huge spiral staircase that climbs up through the gloom and no doubt leads to a multitude of equally dark corridors and fabulously expansive bedrooms. The woody smell is getting stronger, and I can almost feel the dust entering my nostrils.

Actually, ignore the 'almost'.

I *can* feel dust entering my nostrils, with each and every breath I take, and the novelty value is already wearing off.

“Then again,” the woman complains, “I suppose we should be accustomed to this nonsense by now. The days of Charles attending to our day-to-day needs are long gone. You would have thought that he might stick around out of a sense of duty, but apparently he has -”

Before she can finish, I sneeze loudly.

She turns to me, clearly shocked.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

“Apparently Charles has better things to be doing in the village,” she continues, eyeing me with a hint of suspicion. “Honestly, these days loyalty is such a rare commodity.”

She's still having trouble forcing the door shut. I take a step back over toward her to help, and then I stop as I see that she's just about got the job done. She's fairly young, around my own age, but she's wearing a rather delicate-looking dress that somehow exaggerates her rather thin and weak frame. I'm fairly sure that opening and closing that door must have been the

most exercise she's had for a while, and she's lucky her arms didn't snap off.

"There," she says, and sure enough she's slightly out of breath as she turns to me. She pauses, looking me up and down, and I can already tell that she's highly unimpressed. "You could have worn something a bit... smarter."

"I'm sorry?"

"Forget it," she mutters, marching past me and heading toward the end of one of the many corridors leading off the hallway. "Mummy really isn't going to be happy, but that's not my -"

Suddenly I sneeze again.

She turns to me.

"Sorry."

"Mummy's anger is not my problem," she continues. "You should be prepared to get both barrels, though." She takes a moment to look me up and down once more. "I know you're only going to be in the kitchen during the wake, but we'd still like to feel that you've made an effort."

"The kitchen?" I say cautiously, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"And it's just you, is it?" she continues. "I don't mean to sound rude, but I hope you know what you're doing. We're expecting between two and three hundred guests for Daddy's wake, and I really find it hard to believe that you can cater for them all on your own. Then again, Mummy seems satisfied, and it's not like I'd ever presume to know better, but you need to be aware that our standards are very high. Daddy's wake is going to be one of the most prestigious events of the season in this part of the county. Anyone who's anyone will be attending."

"Daddy?" I pause for a moment, before stepping toward her. "Are you talking about Harry Prym?"

"Well, I don't think anyone else around here requires a wake, do they?"

"Was Harry Prym your father too?"

"Isn't that patently obvious?" she replies, clearly a little exasperated by my questions. "Are you always full of these ridiculous queries, or are you just being particularly stupid today? Did you inhale pastry fumes or something like that?"

"Wow," I whisper, and to be honest until this moment I'd never really considered the fact that I might find myself face-to-face with another sibling. "That means that you and I are -"

Before I can shatter her life forever by revealing the truth, I sneeze for a third time.

“Come along,” she says sharply, turning and marching away along the corridor, swinging her arms as she walks. “Mummy will want to get all of this over with as swiftly as possible. I hope you realize that she has a list of requirements as long as your arm, and her standards are monumentally high. If you're thinking that you can slack off in any way while you're here, I'm afraid you're very quickly going to realize that Mummy demands perfection.”

“Wait!” I call out, hurrying after her. “I'm sorry, but I think we're talking at cross purposes here. Do you think I'm here to do the catering?”

“I think there's been a misunderstanding,” I tell the girl as I finally catch up to her, just as she walks through into yet another grand high-ceilinged room in this labyrinthine mansion. “I'm not -”

Naturally I sneeze again, although this part of the house at least seems a little better ventilated.

Stopping suddenly, I see a woman dressed all in black, with a veil covering her face as she sits draped over some kind of recliner in the middle of the room. The sight is so shocking and odd that for a few seconds I can only stare open-mouthed as I try to work out exactly what I've just bumbled my way into. The girl, meanwhile, approaches one side of the recliner and looks down at the woman.

I take a moment to wave some more dust away.

“Mummy?” she says cautiously, her voice sounding so much softer now. “I'm terribly sorry to disturb your mourning, but the caterer is here.”

“Actually,” I pipe up, “I'm not -”

“The who?” an arch voice screeches, as the collection of black clothing sits up without yet revealing a face. The veil turns to me.

“The caterer,” the girl continues, and now she once again sounds just a little irritated. “I know she's early, but I found her looking through the windows. I thought it'd be better to bring her inside, rather than leaving her out there to sneak around.”

“I wasn't sneaking around,” I try to explain. “I was -”

“The caterer is here?” the woman in black says, before getting to

her feet. I think she can see me through the veil, but I certainly can't make out her features. If she has any; she might be 100% lace. "Is that her?"

"Yes, Mummy," the girl replies, lowering her voice a little while keeping her eyes fixed on me. "I know she doesn't quite look the part, but you *did* insist on selecting the cheapest option. I warned you that something like this might happen but you -"

"Leave us, Angelina," the woman says firmly, holding up a black-gloved hand and gesturing for her to depart. "I wish to speak to the caterer alone."

"I'm not the caterer," I tell them both.

"Fine," the girl – whose name, evidently, is Angelina – says as she makes her way back across the room. "Just be polite and agree to anything she suggests," she tells me, lowering her voice as she sweeps past. "Mummy's very demanding but she's also quite forgetful. You can do your thing and she won't even remember later what she asked for. If you're lucky."

I open my mouth to tell her yet again that I'm not the frigging caterer, but I'm too slow and she's already gone. I hear her footsteps hurrying away along the corridor, and then I watch as the woman in black slowly makes her way toward me. Although I know I should simply start talking and introduce myself, and that I should explain who I am and why there seems to have been a case of mistaken identity, something about the woman's imposing presence makes me hold my tongue.

At least I don't curtsy.

And then, as she stops in front of me, the woman reaches up and struggles for a moment with her veil, before lifting it to reveal an unmistakably sophisticated and refined but also very thin face, with dark eyes that peer out at me as if I'm quite the strangest thing she's ever seen in my life. If you asked me to draw a portrait of some imaginary slightly old-fashioned duchess, this is pretty much exactly what I'd have come up with.

"Hi," I say cautiously, "I -"

"You are the caterer," she replies, before I can get another word out. "Yes, I know that."

"Actually -"

"You're early," she continues, "but I suppose that's better than being late. Although I've always felt that prematurity is just as bad as tardiness, and that in an ideal world people would simply arrive when they

say they will. With perhaps a five minute margin either way, of course. One doesn't want to be excessively demanding."

"No, one doesn't," I reply, "but in this case I -"

"Of course, my own daughter was three weeks early for her appointment with the midwife," she explains, "so it seems that most people these days don't appreciate the value of precise punctuality, not even from the get-go. You shall simply have to make good use of the extra time. Has Angelina shown you the kitchen facilities yet?"

"No," I tell her, "but that's okay because -"

"I hope we have everything that you need," she adds, once again not letting me finish, before turning and heading to a large open doorway on the far side of the room. "I shall take you through there, but first I suppose I should show you the centerpiece of this weekend's events. That might help to set the tone somewhat."

"Well," I say, making my way after her, "I'm not sure what you mean, but there's one thing that I think I need to explain first."

I walk through into the next room, where the woman has come to a halt.

"I'm not the caterer," I tell her firmly. "I'm -"

And then I freeze as I look toward the far end of this latest room, and my heart skips a beat as I see an open coffin.

"I should like to say that he'd hate all this fuss," the woman continues with a hint of sadness in her voice, "but that wouldn't be true at all. Young lady, this is the gentleman whose wake you'll be catering." She pauses for a moment, as if she can barely bring herself to say the next words. "This is the body of my husband, the late Harold Pym."

Chapter Three

“Shit,” I whisper, looking at the coffin and realizing that although I can't see him from this angle, my dead long-lost father is in there.

“I beg your pardon?” the woman says, turning to me.

“I'm not the caterer,” I reply, staring at the coffin for a few more seconds before looking at her. “I'm *really* not the caterer. I don't know who is, but it's not me.”

“Then who -”

“My name is Jessica Prym,” I continue, making sure that this time I'm the one who does the interrupting, even if I feel a tad rude in the process. “I have no idea whether you even know I exist, but Harry... he was married before he moved here and started this family, and I'm the daughter he had from his first wife. We didn't have any contact in recent years, but I got a note to say that he'd died and I ummed and ahed a lot about whether or not to come but... well, here I am.”

I wait for a reply, but she's simply staring at me.

After a moment, I finally offer the brief curtsy that I've been holding in, although I quickly worry that this move might seem sarcastic when in fact I'm simply trying to figure out the etiquette.

“You're Harry's daughter Jessica?” the woman asks cautiously.

“Yep.”

“You?”

I nod.

She looks me up and down.

“You don't look a great deal like him,” she continues, “although I suppose there might be a slight resemblance in the shoulders.”

“The shoulders?”

“Specifically the minor hunching.”

“Thank you,” I reply, having not been aware that my shoulders were even remotely hunched. I immediately try to stand up a little straighter. “Listen, I get that this might be a big surprise, especially if you didn't know that I existed, but -”

“Of course we knew that you existed,” she counters, and now it's back to being her turn for the interruptions. I guess that they don't consider

that sort of thing to be rude around these parts after all, at least not when *they're* the ones doing the butting in. “Harry spoke of you sparingly, but he left us with no doubts that he had a life before his arrival here at the house. And I do specifically recall him mentioning that his first child was a girl named Jessica, although I confess that he gave us very few other details.”

“I bet,” I say, trying to hide a sense of disappointment that I know I shouldn't even feel. “Well, I got a note saying that he'd died, and I really wasn't sure that it was a good idea but... I came.”

“Evidently.”

I wait for her to say something more, and then slowly I turn and look once again at the coffin. I can feel a tightening knot of anticipation in my chest, and I'm not certain but I think my heart might be pounding at roughly double its usual speed.

“Well,” the woman says finally, “it would seem that despite your misgivings, you did indeed decide to come here today. And I'm sure that on this occasion we can overlook the fact that you didn't even think to send us any forewarning of your imminent arrival. Grief can make even the best of us occasionally commit the odd social faux pas.” She pauses for a moment. “Why don't I leave you alone with him for a few minutes? Then you can come and find the rest of us in the south drawing room when you're ready.”

I hear her voice, of course, and I hear the words too, but somehow they don't quite penetrate my mind. Instead I can only stare at the coffin as I feel the weight of more than a decade's worth of insecurities and anger and doubt threatening to weigh me down and crush me flat against the floor. I knew that coming here today would stir some old memories, but I stupidly never considered the possibility that these people might have Dad laid out in an open coffin like this. The one thing I never anticipated – the one thing I thought was actually finally impossible – was the idea that I might come face to face with him one last time.

“Take your time,” the woman says, turning and walking away. “My name is Beatrice, by the way. Your father and I were married for the past few decades. Unlike your own mother, I stayed with him to the bitter end. Which wasn't always easy.”

The absolute last thing I want in all the world is to be left standing alone here in front of my father's corpse, yet somehow that's exactly what has happened. As Beatrice's echoing footsteps disappear far off into the house, and as I realize that I should have asked her to unfurl a ball of string

so that I might be able to find her later, I keep my gaze laser-focused on the coffin and I come to the humbling conclusion that I have no choice.

I have to see him.

“Damn you,” I whisper as tears start to fill my eyes, although in truth I don't know exactly *who* I'm talking to. Dad, perhaps, or even myself?

I slowly pull my backpack off my shoulder and set it down onto the tiled floor. I really have no idea of how I'm supposed to act in this situation, and I can't help wishing that I'd been given a little more warning that something like this might happen. I've never actually seen a dead body before, not even at a funeral, and I start inadvertently twiddling with the cuffs of my leather jacket as I contemplate the enormous awkwardness that now awaits. Dad's coffin is about twenty feet ahead of me, which simultaneously feels like a teeny tiny short distance and an eternity.

Deep down, I feel I should be angry, but I'm not. I'm just sad that our lives left us alienated from one another for so long, and that only his death has brought us back together into the same room.

“Damn you,” I say again, and this time I'm very much talking to him.

I start edging my way across the black-and-white tiled floor like some kind of neurotic chess piece, unable to quite commit to any decent pace but also unable to stop. I glance around, perhaps hoping to spot something that might interrupt me, but this huge room is quite empty apart from the coffin and – of course – my dead father. I keep my eyes fixed on the coffin's edge, and with each step forward I'm able to see a little more of the plush white velvet interior, and then I stop suddenly as I finally spot a pair of hands interlinked and resting on a belly.

It's him.

I swallow hard.

Well, the belly alone suggests that he put on a little weight toward the end.

Any sense of amusement, any sense of black comedy or any idea that I can play this situation for laughs, has well and truly drained away to leave me feeling profoundly empty. I've *always* joked about things, especially about important things and particularly about emotional things, but now I know that I absolutely can't do that in this situation. Even during the taxi ride here, I was thinking of all the stupid and downright absurd aspects of my complicated non-relationship with Dad, yet now I'm looking

at his bare hands and I realize that I'm flat out of jokes. This is serious, this is actual death, and there's really no getting around the fact that it's a big deal.

I force myself to take a few more steps forward. I look at the window ahead as I reach the coffin, and I delay for a few more seconds as I realize that I have to do this thing. The lawns outside are so beautiful in the sunshine, and I could quite happily watch them for hours and hours, perhaps even for the rest of my life, but as a single tear trickles from my eye and runs down my cheek I know that I just have to take this emotional sucker punch to the heart. I tell myself that I'll wait until my next blink, and I watch the lawn even as my eyes start to feel dry and dusty. I fight and fight to avoid blinking, but finally I can't help myself.

I blink, and then I look down into the coffin.

The first thing I see is the almost peaceful expression on his face. His eyes are shut, which is a relief since I'd been slightly worried that they might be open, and his hair has been immaculately combed. He's wearing a nifty-looking dark suit that I could never have imagined him in before, and there's something strangely calm about the way that he seems to be simply resting. His belly is a little larger than I'd anticipated, and when I look down at his feet I see that he's wearing a pair of particularly ugly brown shoes, although I suppose I shouldn't be too critical. Some flowers have been left on either side of him, along with a copy of a leather-bound book that I suppose he must have cared about, but as I look back at his face I'm struck by a surprising realization that leaves me unable to tear my gaze away from his features.

It's not him.

Chapter Four

It's not him.

Let those words sink in for a moment, because as I hurry along the corridor in search of this elusive south drawing room, they're swirling around and around in my head and I feel like they might just be about to explode and take my skull with them. I wonder how Beatrice and Angelina would react if they later found my headless corpse on the floor with bits of my brain drying on the oh-so-refined walls, but I suppose they might understand once they inevitably figured out the huge mistake that seems to have been made, because as I turn and walk along yet another gloomy corridor I still can't get those words out of my throbbing head.

It's not him.

"Damn it!" I gasp, stopping and turning, then slamming a fist against the wall hard enough to hurt my knuckles.

Stepping back against the opposite wall, I stare at a painting of some old woman who no doubt was part of this family back in the day, and I try to work out exactly how something like this could have happened.

"It's not him," I whisper.

Believe me, I checked and double-checked. I'm not afraid to admit, dear reader, that I even reached into the coffin and pulled on the velvet, gently lifting the dead man's head so that I could get a better look. Hell, I actually pulled the collar of his shirt aside to check for that weird anchor tattoo that I remember from my younger days, but there was no tattoo at all. And as I continued to stare at the corpse, I became more and more incredulous as I realized that an obscene combination of mistakes and misunderstandings – some of them no doubt hilarious – must have occurred in order for the universe to engineer such a massive cock-up.

The man in the coffin might well have been named Harry Prym, but he's not *my* Harry Prym. He's not my father, so I guess there must have been two Harry Pryms floating around in the world, and thanks to an unlikely coincidence I guess this other Harry Prym also had an estranged daughter named Jessica.

And if you find that a little hard to believe then, well... join the club.

“Ahem.”

Stepping into the south drawing room, which I finally locate after a not insignificant period of searching, I see Beatrice and Angelina sitting on opposite sofas over by the window. They seem to be almost posed, as if they're waiting for someone to come and paint their portraits.

“Hey,” I continue, before taking a moment to clear my throat. “So I'm not sure whether you're going to think that this is funny, or just weird, but -”

“There you are!” Angelina gasps, getting to her feet and rushing over to me. She stops and looks into my eyes, and already tears are running down her face. “I'm so sorry! When we met earlier I thought you were the caterer. I had no idea of the truth until Mummy...”

Her voice trails off.

“About that,” I say cautiously. “I think -”

“I have a sister!” she continues, and after a moment the shock on her face gives way to a tentative and very disarming smile. “I, Angelina Prym, who for so long labored under the misfortune of being an only child, now have an actual sister.”

“Well...”

“Or a half-sister,” she adds, rolling her eyes. “Whatever. The point is, after all these years of doubt and solitude, in one of the darkest moments of existence that anyone in this cruel world could ever have imagined, a single bright spot has appeared and rescued me from what felt like the endless clawing grip of doom.” She pauses again, and I can hear her trembling breaths. “I'm not alone!”

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that this girl is nuts, and that she has some serious issues that she needs to address with a therapist, and most importantly you're thinking that her emotional well-being is really none of my concern. You're thinking that I don't have to lift a finger to make her feel better, and that right now I really ought to be focusing on my own not inconsiderable issues, which have been piling up for a while now and are just about ready to topple over. And you're be absolutely correct in every regard, but sometimes being correct isn't enough, and I guess I'm really just trying to lay the groundwork that might help explain the very stupid thing that I do next.

And if you're one of those people who always say "Oh, no-one in real life would ever do anything like that" then, well, I think I've got you covered. Because what do I say to Angelina in response to her outpouring of gratitude and shock?

Nothing.

Abso-bloody-lutely nothing.

In fact, and I know this might be hard to believe, I think it's at exactly this point that I enter some kind of temporary fugue state that renders me unable to responsibly react to anything that's going on around me. Don't worry, this isn't going to last for long, but it does explain why I just can't quite bring myself to shatter this girl's dream by telling her that we're no more related by blood than a cute little mouse and a cranky porcupine.

So please bear that in mind when you're judging me.

"Angelina," Beatrice says, having not moved from her position on the sofa, "don't overwhelm poor Jessica. I'm sure she's just as surprised about this development as you are."

"Oh, I think I'm a little more surprised," I murmur.

"Come and sit with us," Beatrice continues, patting the empty spot next to her. "The least we can do on this most traumatic of days is indulge you with a little kindness."

"Yeah, about that," I say, making my way across the room and sitting next to her. "I think we need to rewind slightly and -"

"You know, I can see it now," she says, leaning back a little as she stares very intently at my face.

"I'm sorry?"

"The resemblance," she purrs. "Forgive me for being direct, Jessica, but your father only mentioned you on a few occasions, so I'm perhaps a little surprised. I didn't see it so much when you first arrived, perhaps I was in denial about the whole thing, but now I see that you have your father's eyes."

"Oh, she does," Angelina adds with a huge smile as she sits opposite us. "Mummy, how could I not have noticed it before? She looks almost more like Daddy than I do."

"Right," I say cautiously, fully aware that what they're saying can't actually be possible. "About that... I think maybe we need to talk a little more about -"

“And the voice, too,” Beatrice says, interrupting me. “You are clearly your father's daughter, Jessica, and that's certain. It's so strange to have someone here in the house who looks so much like him, it's almost like having a ghost before us. Well, half a ghost, at least.”

“I'm so happy that I finally have a sister,” Angelina whimpers, as fresh tears roll down her cheeks. “You can't imagine how many times I prayed and prayed for one. I heard about you, of course, but to have you here in front of me now... I can't think of anything that could ever have made me happier.”

“Angelina,” I say after taking a deep breath, “I think -”

“I can't believe how heart-breakingly lonely my life was before today,” Angelina adds. “It's as if a true pain has been lifted from me, and now I can be myself. Oh, I know that might sound positively drippy, but a girl without a sister almost isn't a real person at all. Is she?”

I turn to her, puzzled by her rather exaggerated demeanor. I'm sure, dear reader, you're thinking that she's somewhat over the top, and to be frank I agree; at the same time, sitting here now and looking at her, I also feel profoundly sorry for someone who's clearly in such a terrible emotional state. And then, just as I'm about to open my mouth and finally set these two lunatics straight about everything, Angelina adds something that I can only describe as simultaneously totally shocking and entirely unprecedented in the history of human civilization.

“And, Jessica Prym,” she whispers, “you are so cool.”

I swallow hard.

“With your leather jacket,” she coos, “and your dark hair, and that slightly snarky sense of humor that you've got, and that light of intelligence in your eyes and that confident swagger and that knowing smile and that overall air of effortless self-assurance... you're just the coolest person I've ever met, or even conceived of, in my entire life.”

“I am?” I stammer.

Her smile widens until it genuinely seems to reach from ear to ear. And that's when I realize that no matter how much I want to get the hell out of this bizarre situation, I can't just rip myself free without considering the consequences. Angelina in particular seems to be almost nonsensically attached to me after such a short time, and I perhaps need some advice on how to deal with the situation, so I tell myself that the best bet is just to wait until Angelina is out of the room and then I can hurriedly explain

everything to Beatrice so that between us we're able to let the young girl down a little more gently. I mean, I'm sure Angelina will have something to do soon, right?

“You're so *amazingly* cool,” she continues, staring at me with an almost uncomfortable level of what appears to be genuine hero-worship. “I have so much to learn from you. I've finally got an amazing big sister!”

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Chapter Five

And that's how, six hours later, I find myself sitting in one of the other rooms at Prym Hall still trying to find the right moment to leave.

The problem is that while Angelina occasionally runs off to fetch something she wants me to see, like an excited terrier showing off its favorite toys, she's never gone for long enough. Beatrice is mostly staying silent, probably glad that someone else can bear the brunt of Angelina's enthusiasm for once, and as the light begins to fade outside I realize that I'm fast running out of time to make my excuses and leave. This whole situation started as a farce but it's now stretching out to become more of a tragedy.

With Angelina having rushed off to get something else, I sit on the edge of a recliner and tap at my phone. One thing I can certainly say about Prym Hall is that the phone signal here is truly excellent, perhaps the best I've ever encountered in my life. In fact, the coverage is shockingly good.

Hearing a bumping sound coming from upstairs, I look at the ceiling. I'm fairly sure that Angelina is in the west drawing room right now, so I'm a little surprised to hear another bump a moment later, this time from a different spot high above.

"Who else lives here?" I ask.

"Hmm?"

Turning to Beatrice, I see that she seems almost to be stirring from some kind of deep moment of contemplation.

"It can't be just you and your daughter, right?" I continue.

"Of course not," she replies demurely. "Until last week, your father was with us too."

"Right." I pause for a moment. "But... it's a very big house for just three people. And now two."

Another bump rings out from upstairs.

"So who else is there?" I add.

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"We do rather rattle around in the place," she concedes. "Then again, I suppose we're used to the space. I'd so hate to live in one of those small modern homes. I've seen them sometimes when we've been out

driving, and I just don't understand how people can stand to be on top of one another like that. The whole thing seems utterly frightful. Did you know that some people don't even have proper dressing rooms? And they have to take turns using the same bathroom!"

I open my mouth to reply, before looking up at the ceiling again. This time I hear no bump, and I'm starting to wonder whether the mansion might merely have been... settling. Still, the sound came three times and seemed rather distinct, so I tell myself after a moment that I must simply have been wrong about Angelina. She must have gone upstairs after all.

I look back down at my phone, on which I've been googling variations of this dilemma: how to let someone down gently and make a rapid escape from a country house. Plus the numbers of various local taxi firms.

"Beatrice," I say cautiously, realizing that this might be my best chance to escape. I look at the door and still see no sign of Angelina, so then I get to my feet. "Actually, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. It's a little delicate and sensitive and I'd like to get it out before Angelina comes back."

"Oh yes?" She turns to me, and I can tell that she has no inkling of what I'm about to say. "Is it about your father?"

"Sort of," I admit as I make my way over to her. "That's actually the crux of the matter. You see, I don't want to step on any toes, but when I looked into the coffin earlier I couldn't help but realize that -"

"Look what I've got!" Angelina shrieks excitedly as she rushes back into the room, running over to me with such glee that she almost slams into my side when she arrives. She then holds up two creepy-looking old dolls. "Did Daddy ever give you presents like this? Jessica, I want you to meet Lily and Lottie! Aren't they beautiful? They're so lucky, because they're sisters! I thought I'd never know how that truly feels!"

"What is it that you were about to say?" Beatrice asks me.

"Nothing important," I reply, figuring that I need to bide my time once again, even as the shadows lengthen across the lawn outside. "It can wait."

And it does wait, until I find myself sitting at one end of an absurdly long dining table while sipping canned soup from a bowl. Beatrice and Angelina

have been very welcoming and hospitable, and canned soup is certainly no worse than what I'm used to eating at home, although part of me is starting to realize that – for all the grandiosity of Prym Hall – these people might be a perfect example of rich people who've begun to fall on harder times.

The soup's good, though.

Really good.

I just wish Beatrice and Angelina weren't sitting silent at the other end of the table, watching my every move.

“Are you not hungry?” I ask again finally, although I've asked variations of that question several times already.

“Oh, we're fine,” Beatrice replies as calmly as ever. “You mustn't worry about us. I've always found it rather uncomfortable to eat in front of people I don't know. Dinner parties can be an utter nightmare.”

“I bet,” I murmur.

Looking over at the huge windows, I see that darkness has well and truly fallen outside now. I keep telling myself that I'm going to come clean at any moment, and that there's still time to call a taxi and zoom away into the night, but Beatrice and Angelina really aren't making that easy. In fact, while there have been a few openings that I began to explore, something always seems to pop up that wrecks my plans, which is how I've now ended up here at Prym Hall for...

I check my watch.

Nine hours and counting. Eight and a half of which have come after I realized the truth.

“Is the soup to your liking?” Beatrice asks. “I'm sorry we're out of bread. In truth, we were hoping that the caterer would bring some supplies, but I suppose she'll be coming tomorrow now. Fortunately my husband... well, your father... had a love of soup combined with a tendency to stockpile, so we have enough cans of the stuff to last us well into the new year and most likely for several months after as well.”

“I bet,” I tell her.

“We have so many cans of soup,” Angelina adds, her eyes almost ablaze with excitement, “that you could almost build a little town with them. You could use them to make walls, and then you could run around in them and...” She pauses, clearly lost in thought. “Oh, you could make a maze!” she adds, as if she's just come up with the best idea in the history of the world. “Jessica, we could take them all into the ballroom and make our

very own maze out of all the soup cans, and then we could have such fun in there!”

“Yeah,” I reply, trying to sound enthusiastic even though the idea is blatantly absurd. “But -”

“Mummy, can we do that tomorrow?” she asks, turning to Beatrice. “Can we? It would be so much fun!”

“Not tomorrow, my dear,” Beatrice says calmly. “The caterer is due and we can't have any kind of mess in the house. Really, you must think a little more sensibly about such things before you propose them. Besides, it's rather unseemly for two grown adult women to be making mazes in such a manner and playing childish games.” She takes a moment to clear her throat. “We've talked about these things before, Angelina. You really must learn to be a lot more grown-up, especially now that your father is no longer with us.”

“I know,” she replies with a sigh, slouching a little in her chair and clearly unable to hide her disappointment. “I just thought it'd be fun to make up for lost time now that I have a sister.”

“A half-sister,” Beatrice says, correcting her. “Besides, Jessica, I'm sure you don't want to play childish games, do you? I imagine that there's a lot more that you want to learn and see tomorrow. That's why it's so important for you to have a good night's sleep tonight. Fortunately there's a lovely bed already made up in the tower, and I'm absolutely sure that you'll be perfectly comfortable up there. In fact, I think we shall all retire quite shortly.”

“Retire?” I reply. “For the night?”

I wait, but they're both staring at me and I still feel as if I can't just blurt out the truth like this. At the same time, the clock's ticking and I have to say something soon, because there's just no way in the whole world that I can actually spend a night here at Prym Hall.

Chapter Six

“No, it's fine,” I whisper a short while later, as I wander along another elegant moonlit corridor, looking up at the huge paintings of various Prym family members from yesteryear. “It's just a very odd situation to be in, and to be honest I'm not sure that I've been making the best decisions.”

“No kidding,” Katie replies over the phone. “Tell me again, why exactly are you still there?”

“I just don't want to be rude.”

“Yeah, but there's not being rude, and then there's what you're doing. And in case you haven't figured it out yet, what you're doing is batshit insane. Are you sure you're not just enjoying a spot of freeloading?”

“Does any part of what I just told you sound fun?”

“You're talking to someone who literally spends more of her time in the pub than at home.”

“I just need to get Beatrice alone so that I can explain everything,” I mutter. “The problem is that she and Angelina seem to be joined at the hip.”

“You don't owe these freaks anything.”

“They're not freaks,” I point out, realizing that she's never going to understand. I guess I'd better just make a joke of it. “Hey, maybe you were right, at least I get a free night in a fancy country mansion with all the -”

Before I can finish, I hear a shuffling sound coming from over my shoulder. With the phone still against one ear, I turn and look back the way I just came and I half expect to see Beatrice or Angelina – or more likely both of them – heading toward me. I think I spot a hint of a shadow for a fraction of a second, but I blink and now the corridor appears to be entirely empty.

“Are you okay?” Katie asks.

“Yeah, this place is just a bit creepy,” I reply, shrugging off the sound as I step into yet another huge but mostly empty hall. Looking up, I see a massive and very fancy chandelier hanging high above. “They definitely keep most of the lights off,” I continue. “I guess they're saving money on the leccy bill.”

“Do you at least get breakfast at this place?”

“I imagine so.”

“You should totally steal something.”

“I'm not stealing anything.”

“Just a candlestick or some junk like that,” she continues. “For your trouble. It's not like they'll even notice. But how do you feel about the whole dead dad side of things? Are you relieved that there's been a mix-up and your real dad's still alive somewhere, or...”

As her voice trails off, I turn and see a set of very ornate double doors on the far side of the room. Heading over, with my footsteps rather echoing in this large space, I realize that I'm not sure how to answer Katie's question. I want to insist – as usual – that I don't give a damn about Dad, but there's some niggling little doubt at the back of my mind that's making it a little harder to lie this time.

Reaching the doors, I take hold of the handle and give it a turn.

“I think -”

“Don't touch that!” a voice calls out, and I turn to see Angelina hurrying into the room.

“Sorry,” I reply, startled that she's here so suddenly, “I only -”

“Mummy can be a little funny about such things,” she says, rushing toward me and then literally squeezing herself between me and the door, forcing me to take a step back. “It's best not to rustle her feathers.”

“Is that one of them?” Katie asks over the phone. “She sure sounds posh.”

“I'll call you back,” I tell her, before cutting the call.

“You could have kept talking to your friend,” Angelina tells me, still very conspicuously guarding the door. She reaches down and tries the handle, as if she's checking that it's locked. “I wouldn't have minded. In fact, I wouldn't have blamed you at all. This whole place must feel like it's so far away from your usual life.”

“Kinda,” I admit.

“Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like to live in London,” she continues. “I've only seen it on the television, and I must admit that it looks so busy and scary. I know that makes me seem like a silly little thing, but I suppose if you haven't grown up in that sort of place, it can be hard to adjust. Sometimes I watch webcam videos of places like London and New York, just to try to imagine what that kind of busyness is like.”

I can't help but smile as I try to imagine Angelina in somewhere like North London.

“I suppose one day you might be able to show me around, though,” she adds, and I can hear the nervousness in her voice. “I think I wouldn't mind London if I had a tour guide, someone who knows the ropes and -”

She stops herself just in time.

“But I wouldn't want to be a burden,” she adds, and then she sighs. “I'm sure you've got way cooler things to be doing than showing little old me around such an exciting city.”

“I wouldn't mind at all,” I tell her, once again feeling a burst of sympathy for the poor girl. She seems so fragile and lonely and... slightly needy. “Whatever happens,” I add, even though I know I might regret this later, “if you want to still hang out, I promise to show you around London for a day. How's that? I'll show you *my* London, though, warts and all.”

“What would we do?” she asks, and now her eyes are almost glowing with anticipation.

“We could go to the zoo,” I say, as the pair of us start walking back across the room, making our way directly under the massive chandelier, “and then... I think you might like Camden.”

“I've heard of it,” she says tentatively. “Is it busy?”

“Oh, it's busy,” I reply with a smile. “It might do your head in a bit at first, but we could look round the market and then there are all these cool food courts. And then I think we'll go to Leicester Square and Covent Garden, just to look around, and we'd probably end the day in one of the pubs I like round there.”

“I've never been to a pub,” she admits.

“No kidding.”

Stopping in the doorway, I turn to her.

“Is that by choice,” I continue, “or did your parents never let you?”

“A little of both, I think,” she replies, before biting her bottom lip for a moment. “All those things you just described – like Camden and the zoo and Leicester Square and a pub – sound absolutely terrifying, but I think that might be why I should do it. If you'd be willing to show me around one day, that is.”

“It's a promise,” I reply, holding a hand out toward her.

She reaches out, almost shaking my hand, before pulling back.

“I think *I'm* the one who might break that promise,” she says, and

now there are tears in her eyes. "I think I'd chicken out, and then you'd just end up hating me."

"I'd never hate you," I reply, and then I realize that she sure as hell might hate *me* once she finds out that I'm not really her half-sister at all.

"Believe me, that wouldn't be the problem."

I hesitate, and now an awkward silence falls between us. I so desperately want to blurt out the truth, but she looks like she's on the verge of a breakdown already and I really think that I need her mother's advice. I also think, after a moment, that I need to change the subject.

"So what's up with that door, huh?" I ask with a smile, looking over at the set of double doors. "Why would your mum not like me going into the next room?"

"Oh, it's... a bit of a mess," she admits.

"Is there a speck of dust on the carpet?"

She laughs, a little harder and more abruptly than I would have expected.

"No, it's nothing like that," she adds, and then she turns and looks over at the doors for a moment. I wait, and a hint of sadness seems to momentarily take possession of her features. "It's a long story, really," she adds. "It's just a room in the house that we very much don't like to go into. I suppose you could say that it brings back bad memories." She turns to me again, and now a solitary tear is trickling down her cheek. "You'd really not think too highly of us if you went in there."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I ask.

"Just that it's messy," she replies, and I can tell that she's lying her butt off. "Horribly messy. The messiest mess you ever did see. If you went in there, you'd think that Mummy and I are the queens of Messville." She laughs, before stopping suddenly and taking a deep breath. "I'm so sorry I was rude to you when you arrived. When I thought you were the caterer, I was positively mean, and that isn't really what I'm like. I hope you don't think less of me."

"I don't," I tell her, before surprising myself with a yawn. "I promise. I just -"

Hearing a shuffling sound again, I look past her, but the corridor once again appears to be empty.

"Come along," she says, stepping around me and starting to lead me in the other direction. "I've kept you up far too late already, and it's

certainly well past my bedtime. I'll show you to your room and then you can get your head down, and we can talk some more in the morning.”

“Sure,” I murmur, watching the empty corridor for a moment longer, unable to shake the sense that the shuffling sound must have been caused by something. After a few seconds, I turn and follow Angelina. “I don't mind admitting that this has been a long and very strange day.”

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Chapter Seven

Now this is getting ridiculous.

As I sit on the end of a bed in one of the many rooms upstairs, with my phone in my hands, I really struggle to work out all the bizarre twists and turns that have led me to this point. I should have just been honest with Angelina and Beatrice right from the start, right from the moment I first realized that their Harry Prym isn't the same as *my* Harry Prym, and that their Harry Prym's Jessica isn't the same as me. By delaying and trying to do things perfectly, I've only made the whole situation a hundred times worse and now here I am, sitting in a room in the tower with my hosts having retired for the night.

I could run away.

Suddenly the idea grips me, and it actually seems reasonable enough: I could leave a note and I could dart off into the night. I'd have to get the taxi to pick me up from beyond the driveway, to avoid causing suspicion, but I could leave and never look back. Sure, Angelina would be heartbroken, but I'm sure she'd get over it and – besides – I'd be long gone by then so I wouldn't have to see it. If that makes me sound callous and cruel then, fine, I might have to be a little callous and cruel for once, but ripping the band-aid straight off would surely be preferable to...

This.

Looking around the room, I realize that I'm exhausted, and that running away really doesn't seem like a good plan after all. For one thing, I'd probably get caught, and for another Angelina and Beatrice would surely be able to track me down. I've always had a tendency to run from difficult moments, which is how my life has ended up as such a mess, so I tell myself that for once I'm going to have to do the right thing. However, I'm also going to have to do it fast, so I figure that I'll just spend one night here and then first thing in the morning I'll insist on speaking to Beatrice in private. She seems like a reasonable woman and hopefully she'll understand.

Turning, I look at the bed and see that at least it looks very large and comfortable. And while this whole situation feels utterly bizarre, at least I'll have a fun story to tell my friends in the pub next weekend. I'm

tempted to call a few of them right now, but I guess it'd be better to be able to tell them the end of it as well. I can't wait until they hear about this particular escapade.

Several hours later, my eyes open in the darkness and I realize that I must have finally fallen asleep. I blink a couple of times, and I remember that although I felt exhausted earlier, I spent quite some time tossing and turning after getting into bed before – evidently – I must have drifted off.

I stare at the nightstand, where my phone is charging, but already I can feel the lure of sleep again. Besides, I want to nod off before my mind starts racing with all sorts of thoughts about this strange situation, so I close my eyes and tell myself that I just need to wait until morning so that I can straighten the whole mess out. I'm already feeling guilty for letting it drag on for this long, but everything kind of snowballed and I guess my biggest failure was trying to find a perfect moment.

There was no perfect moment.

Perfect moments don't usually exist.

And even if -

Suddenly I hear the door creaking slowly, and my eyes flick open. The room is still dark, but I'm absolutely sure that I heard the door and a moment later that sound is followed by the soft padding of footsteps. Someone's in the bedroom with me, and I'm already pretty sure that I know exactly who I'm going to see as I sit up and look past the end of the bed.

“Angelina?” I whisper.

I wait, but now the room is silent again and there's no sign of anyone. The door is open, however, so I know I wasn't mistaken when I heard the sound. I look at the huge curtains in front of the window, and I can't help but note that those would make a perfect hiding place for someone who – for example – had just crept into a room and made more noise than intended, and who was now hiding in a desperate attempt to cover up their mistake.

“Angelina, I know you're there,” I continue. “And I get it. You're excited, but... can we just leave it for tonight? Tomorrow's going to be another day and everything's going to seem different.”

I pause for a moment.

“Very different.”

I wait, and in that instant I realize that this is precisely my problem: I've been waiting and waiting for so long that I've maneuvered myself into the tightest and stupidest corner possible, all because I've been trying to spare someone's feelings. Sure, Angelina might be upset when she learns the truth, but she's an adult – just about – and I need to treat her like one.

Here goes nothing.

“The truth,” I say cautiously, still watching the curtains and wondering which one she's hiding behind, “is that there's been a terrible cock-up. My name *is* Jessica Prym, and my father's name was certainly Harry Prym, but... I'm a different Jessica and my father's a different Harry, so I shouldn't be here at all. I was going to tell you earlier but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it, so I'm telling you now and I just want to be clear that I never intended to hurt anyone.”

Silence.

I sit up a little more and scooch along to the foot of the bed, so that I'm a little closer to the window and the curtains.

“You seem really cool,” I add, “and I'm sure anyone would be so proud to have you as their half-sister. And if you think about it, all this means is that your real half-sister is out there somewhere, waiting for you to discover her. Hell, she might somehow be even more amazing than I am.”

I pause as I realize that I just made myself seem totally big-headed.

“More amazing than you *think* I am,” I continue, getting to my feet and stepping gingerly toward the window. “So don't think of this as a disappointment, Angelina. Think of it as just the start of a whole other opportunity.”

Edging closer and closer to the curtains, I realize that I need to bring this conversation to a head soon.

“I can even help you, if you like,” I tell her, even though I really don't want to commit to anything like that. Still, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to offer, and I guess I owe these people something for the hospitality they've extended so far. “Hell, we can even hang out a bit. If you don't hate me, that is. Which you probably do, because I've handled this situation so extremely poorly.”

Staring at the curtain on the left, I wait once again for a response.

“So what do you say?” I ask, before reaching out and pulling the

curtain aside.

Nothing.

“Do you want to try to be friends?” I continue, turning to the other curtain and pulling it out. “Would -”

In that moment I freeze, as I realize that there's no sign of her here either. I furrow my brow; I was so convinced that I'd figured out her hiding place that I didn't really stop to consider any other possibilities. Now, however, I turn and look around the room and I start to wonder where else she might be lurking.

A moment later I get down onto my hands and knees, but there's no sign of her under the bed. Standing up again, I hurry to the wardrobe and pull the big heavy doors open, but she's not there either. I look the other way, and I'm already rapidly running out of possibilities, and as I head back to the middle of the room I'm starting to wonder whether I was simply half awake when I heard the footsteps, although that doesn't explain the door opening unless there was a simple gust of air.

And then, slowly, I realize that I can hear a faint gasping sound coming from somewhere over my shoulder. I turn and look back across the room, and I realize that there's a figure hiding in the shadows of the far corner. It's at this moment that I realize I probably should have turned the lights on already, but I'm frozen in place now as I see that the figure is shivering slightly. As much as I tell myself that this is simply Angelina being a little weird, at the back of my mind I'm already worried that the figure looks nothing like her; Angelina's a small, slightly scrawny girl, whereas this intruder seems to be much bulkier.

“Hey,” I say cautiously, stepping closer before reaching out to put one hand on the side of the bedpost, while preparing to run out of the room at any moment. “Are you okay there? Are you... who are you anyway?”

I wait, and a few seconds later the figure leans forward slightly. He looks up at me with dark, dead eyes, and I swear I actually feel my heart skip a beat as I realize to my horror that this is the man from the coffin downstairs. It's Harry Prym – the other, very dead Harry Prym – and he's glaring back at me with an expression of pure unadulterated hatred.

Chapter Eight

“What the hell?” I gasp, taking a step back.

“Who are you?” he asks, leaning forward a little more and narrowing his eyes as he peers at me. “You’re not my daughter.”

“No kidding,” I reply, reaching out and steadying myself against the bed post. “You... you’re...”

Words fail me, but I’m in absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this is the dude who just a few hours earlier I saw flat on his back and very much dead in the coffin downstairs. I tell myself that there must have been some kind of mistake – yet another mistake to add to the pretty big pile – but I have to admit that this particular Harry Prym looks decidedly sick and weak and...

Well...

Dead.

Deceased.

Un-alive.

“What are you doing in my house?” he asks, emerging slowly from the corner. “Who let you in? Did the butler spot you? I’m going to have words with that man next time I see him. Wait... did he leave? It’s so ruddy hard to keep track.”

“Your wife and daughter let me in.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Well, because...”

I pause for a moment, still trying to work out whether I might actually be talking to a dead man.

“They thought I was your daughter Jessica,” I add finally, unable to ignore the sense of utter shock in my own voice. “Well, actually first they thought I was the caterer, but then they thought I was your daughter so they invited me to your...”

I stare at him for a few more seconds.

“Funeral.”

“They thought *you* were my Jessica?” he asks cautiously. “You look nothing like her.”

“Yeah, and you look nothing like my dad, either.”

“So what made you show up?”

“I thought you were him! I got a letter saying that my dad Harry Prym had died, and I showed up. Now it turns out that you're a different Harry and I'm a different Jessica, and the whole situation has gone totally ripe.”

“This is preposterous,” he mutters, sitting on the edge of the bed and putting his hands over his face. “*Utterly* preposterous. How can there be two Harry Pryms, both of whom have an estranged daughter named Jessica?”

“Beats me,” I mutter, “but I guess it's possible. Unlikely, but possible.”

“It's all my fault,” he adds, rocking back and forth for a moment.

With his hands still over his face, he sniffs briefly, and I start to realize that he might actually be crying.

“What a waste of space I am,” he continues. “What a terrible father.”

He pauses, before turning to me.

“Do you agree?” he asks pointedly, as if he's slightly annoyed at me for not having answered sooner. “Feel free to tell me if you think I'm wrong.”

“I'm sure you're not a terrible father,” I reply, before watching him for a moment longer. “I'm sorry, I know this is going to seem like the stupidest question ever, but I have to ask...”

I pause, worried that I'm about to make myself sound like a complete and total idiot.

“Are you really dead?” I manage finally.

I wait, and at first he doesn't reply. I desperately want him to laugh and call me an idiot, and for this whole situation to turn out to be even more of a misunderstanding than it seems to be already. After a few more seconds, however, he lowers his hands and slowly turns to me, and I swallow hard as I realize that he sure *looks* dead. I mean, he's got the pale features and the dark, sunken eyes and the generally disheveled appearance of someone who doesn't care much for mortal things.

“Am I really dead?” he asks softly, before getting to his feet. He seems a little bemused by the question. “Am I really dead?”

“It was just a thought,” I reply. “Don't worry about it.”

“Am I,” he continues, stepping around the bed, making his way

toward me, “really... dead?”

Holding my hands up, I take a step back.

“There's no need to get upset,” I tell him. “I wasn't trying to insult you. You're probably just having a bad day.”

“Well, I agree with you on that,” he says, edging closer as I start to notice the temperature dropping significantly all around me. It's almost as if Harry Prym's mere presence is causing the room to get much colder. “I'm having a very bad day, but as for the question of... am I really dead? Well, why don't I let you answer that for yourself?”

Stopping in front of me, with the room feeling positively icy now, he looks into my eyes and I swear I can almost see two skulls in his pupils.

“Tell me,” he snarls, “what do you think? Am I, or am I not, really dead?”

And then, before my brain has a chance to screw this up by saying something stupid, my body takes over and decides to blurt out its own answer. I have perhaps a tenth of a second's warning, and I just about understand what's about to happen, although I have no chance to stop it or to perhaps position myself better so that I won't get hurt. I feel as if all the blood in my body is rushing down into my legs, and the world seems to swim all around me, and then I do something that I've never done before in my entire life. In fact, I do something that I always used to think only scared women do in tatty horror movies.

I faint.

When I wake up, I feel like absolute crap.

Letting out a faint groan, I prop myself on my elbows for a moment and look across the darkened bedroom. I feel decidedly groggy and out of sorts, but I suppose that might well be natural for someone who just fainted. Having never done that before, I really don't know what's normal, but as I sit up properly and rub my eyes I start to wonder whether the whole ghost thing might have been some kind of nightmare.

Either way, the fainting part of the story definitely isn't getting mentioned in the pub.

As I look all around the room and see no sign of the ghost, the whole thing is starting to feel more and more silly. I can't help wondering how I could ever have believed that there was an actual ghost here, and I

feel slightly embarrassed by my own reaction. At least nobody else was here to listen as I wittered on like a complete idiot, so the best solution is for me to pretend that none of that stuff happened at all, and to never ever mention it to anyone. Already I'm starting to think that I'll just keep my mouth shut when I get home.

Even when I'm drunk, I must *never* even utter the word 'ghost'.

"Okay, that was weird," I mutter, hauling myself up and then taking a moment to try to pull myself together. "That was just about the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me."

I wait, listening to the silence – no, *enjoying* the silence – and savoring the sensation that I'm returning to the normal world. I'm pretty sure that a therapist would have plenty to say about the idea that I hallucinated the ghost of a man with the same name as my father, but I'm not too interested in the idea of delving deep into my psyche; I think I'd rather just let all that stuff fester somewhere in my soul, and if any horrendous psychological problems emerge later I'll plaster over them with food and drown them in alcohol.

"You're not mad," I say out loud, remembering a friend's advice that it's wise to externalize certain thoughts if you want to make them seem more real. "You should be, after the day you've been having, but you've managed to hold yourself together."

I ponder that achievement for a few seconds, and then I realize that tomorrow I have to really bite the bullet and pull Beatrice aside for a serious talk. I just hope they don't think I've been taking advantage of them, although I won't blame them if that thought crosses their minds.

"Everything is calm," I continue. "Everything is peaceful. Everything is fine. No matter how bad things might seem right now, there's always another sunset just around the corner. And that means that everything's going to be alright."

For a fraction of a second I feel as if those words are true, but a moment later I hear the unmistakable sound of somebody clearing their throat right behind me. At the same time, I feel another creeping front of cold air making its way over my shoulders.

"That's easy for you to say," the ghost of Harry Prym says as I slowly turn and – to my horror – see him sitting on a chair over by the window. "You're not the one who's dead."

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Chapter Nine

Very slowly, I peer around the corner of another moonlit corridor downstairs and I see that Harry Prym – or rather, his ghost – has stopped at another set of doors.

“Are you coming?” he asks, before turning to me. “Ah, there you are. I was starting to worry that you might have fainted again.”

“I'm not a fainter,” I whisper.

“You could have fooled me.”

“I'm not a fainter,” I say again, before stepping around the corner and starting to follow him. “Can you cut me some slack? I've never seen a ghost before. I'd like to see you react completely calmly if you saw one. Before you *became* one, obviously.”

“Did I knock you off your feet?” he asks, raising an amused eyebrow. “I used to have that effect on the ladies back in the day. I never actually had one faint in front of me, but I think I came close once. Gloria Potter, Belgravia, 1985. That woman couldn't get enough of me. I could have married her if I'd wanted to, but she wasn't quite my type. Too buttoned-up and prim and proper.” He chuckles. “Which is ironic, when you think of the two women I eventually married instead.”

“Are you for real?” I murmur.

“I was a good-looking fellow.”

“I mean the ghost part,” I tell him, reaching out with a hand for a moment but not quite daring to try to touch him. “Could I put my hand straight through you?”

“You could try,” he replies, “but I'd consider that to be a serious violation of my personal space.”

“You would?”

“If you put your hand into my stomach, certainly,” he continues, before turning and heading into the next room. “I'm sure you could come up with one of those hashtags about it. If you think living people are discriminated against and ignored, wait until you find out what it's like to be dead. Where are *our* rights?” He heads over to the middle of the room and stops beneath the huge chandelier, and then he turns to me again. “Hey, at least in this particular moment I feel seen.”

“I -”

“There's heavy irony in that statement, by the way.”

“I've been in this room before,” I reply, stepping after him and then stopping as I spot the door that Angelina told me not to open. “Earlier this evening.”

“And what happened?” he asks archly.

“Not a lot,” I admit. “Angelina – your daughter – turned up and warned me against going through there.”

“She did, did she?” He looks over at the door. “Well, I can't say that I'm too surprised. She and her mother are what you might refer to as two of life's oddballs. Don't get me wrong, I loved them dearly while they were alive, but I wasn't blind to certain aspects of their characters.” He pauses for a moment. “Jessica – *my* Jessica – was always the most like me. Fat lot of good that did her.”

“What happened?” I ask. “Why don't you talk to her anymore?”

“She strayed off the path of wisdom,” he mutters. “She got into bad things. Drink, drugs, crime, prostitution, that sort of thing. I mean, there's nothing particularly wrong with drink and drugs, but one has to be so careful when one enters the seedier areas of life. And she wasn't careful at all. She jumped in headfirst.”

He hesitates again, as if the thought of his long-lost daughter is perhaps a little too painful.

“The last time I saw her was about ten years ago, when I tracked her down in some bedsit near King's Cross. I tried to help her, I gave her money, and do you know what she did? She spent that money on heroin, and then she stole my wallet and ran away. After that, I figured there was no helping the girl.”

“So you didn't try to see her again?”

“I suppose I assumed that she'd show up here one day,” he admits. “She always know where to find me, but I didn't exactly anticipate my death. Have you got one of those things?”

“What things?”

“The phones,” he continues, sounding a little irritated now. “I never got on with the damn things, or with the internet in general. Can you find people on it?”

“I could try,” I say, slipping my phone out and unlocking the screen. “Do you have any other information about her?”

“Oh, there's no point,” he sighs, turning and heading across the room, making his way toward the forbidden door. “I don't think I'd want to know, anyway. What would be the point?”

I tap Jessica's name into a search engine and add a few terms to avoid coming up with my own details. I don't really expect to find anything, but I quickly discover several online news articles about a girl named Jessica Prym who fulfills all the criteria. I open one of the pages and see a photo of her, and I immediately notice that she looks a lot like the Harry Prym whose ghost I'm with tonight. And then, as I scroll down, I feel a thudding sense of dread in my chest.

This Jessica Prym died recently. She was apparently wanted by the police for something, and the gist of the story seems to be that she killed herself by jumping off a bridge over the train lines in South London. Horrified by such an awful story, I check out some other news stories about her, and there's really no doubt now that this is the right woman.

“Well?” Harry asks, keeping his back to me as he looks at the doors. “Find anything?”

“Uh... no,” I lie, slipping my phone away, too shocked to know how I'd even begin to break that awful story to him. “Nothing. The internet's pretty big, though. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“It's probably best that I don't know,” he sighs. “I'm sure that whatever she's doing, she doesn't want me getting involved. I just hope she's happy, although I doubt she is. The wrong drugs can do terrible things to a person. Maybe she'll get help eventually. She knows how to find me if...”

His voice trails off.

“Well, I suppose she doesn't anymore,” he adds. “I'll be here, though, haunting the place if she ever shows up, but I doubt she will. She hates me, and I don't blame her. I was a lousy dad when I was alive and it's not like I'll be any better now I'm dead.”

“You shouldn't blame yourself,” I reply, as a tear runs down my cheek. I quickly wipe it away. “People make their own choices.”

“But they become those people because of how they grow up,” he suggests, and I'm starting to think that he's keeping his back to me because he's crying as well. “Her mother died when she was young, and I was in no place to raise a child alone. I decided to blunder ahead and try it anyway, and the results were disastrous. There's a good, wonderful heart in that girl, and I just hope that one day she gets to let it out again. Who knows?”

Perhaps with me dead now, she'll be able to blossom."

He turns to me, and sure enough I see tears in his eyes.

"Do you think that's possible?" he asks.

"Sure," I reply, even though I hate lying. I just can't bring myself to tell him what I read online. "You never know, right?"

"And what about your father?" he continues. "What about *your* Harry Prym?"

"I really don't want to talk about that."

"Must be something bad."

"So what's behind that door?" I ask, trying to change the subject. "Angelina was pretty set against me going anywhere near it. She blamed Beatrice, she made it out like the next room is a complete mess, but I'm thinking there must be something else going on."

"There most certainly is," he tells me. "This room... beyond the door... is where I died."

"No shit," I whisper.

"It was a terrible accident, really," he continues. "I was in a foul mood and I decided to dust all the chandeliers in the house. I was carting my stepladder around from room to room, and it was going pretty well until I made a bit of a mistake." He turns to the closed door. "I propped it on a table in there and climbed up, and then... well, everything after that is a bit of a blur, to be honest. The stepladder fell and I plummeted, and I suppose I must have broken my neck or something like that. The next thing I knew, I was in that coffin you saw earlier."

"Did it hurt?"

"Probably, but I don't remember the exact moment," he tells me. "I suppose the human mind just doesn't want to contemplate certain things, even in death. I sometimes wonder whether that's why I'm still here. I certainly can't pretend to know what comes next for a human soul, and I'm certain I wouldn't be invited to the big house upstairs, but is there a reason why I'm just lingering around this place like a bad smell? Is there something I'm supposed to do before I get to leave? That's why I was curious when I thought my daughter Jessica was here. Do you think I'm stuck here in some kind of purgatory until she shows up and we can resolve things?"

"I hope not," I whisper, once again feeling tears filling my eyes.

"But hey, if -"

Suddenly I hear a loud banging sound coming from the corridor. I

turn and look over at the open door, and then I feel a rush of air hit me. Turning again, I watch as Harry's ghost rushes behind one of the large curtains over by the window.

“Hide!” he hisses.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because it's coming!” he continues, as I hear loud, thudding footsteps heading toward this room. “The other ghost! You have to hide before it sees you!”

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Chapter Ten

Standing in silence, I can't help but think about the way this situation keeps barreling from one level of absurdity to the next.

I'm hiding behind a huge, heavy curtain, while the ghost of Harry Prym is hiding behind an identical curtain just a few feet to my right. We're both trying to avoid being noticed by what Harry calls 'the other ghost', but so far he seems to be far too scared to actually explain what he means by this. I have no trouble believing that an old house like Prym Hall might have multiple ghosts, but I'm a little confused by the idea that Harry – a ghost himself – is in a state of such abject terror.

Glancing over at the space behind the other curtain, I can see even from here that he's almost trembling with fear.

“Hey!” I whisper.

“Sshh!”

“Nothing's happening,” I continue.

“Be quiet!” he hisses.

Sighing, I look straight ahead at the dusty old fabric of the curtain, which smells particularly old and stale. I have no idea whether Harry's right about there being another ghost here – in the room with us – or whether he's wise to be scared of the damn thing, but I keep coming back to the fact that we've been hiding for at least ten minutes now and there still has been no further sign that we've got company. Finally, figuring that somebody needs to take charge, I lean around the curtain's edge and look across the moonlit room.

There's nobody and nothing else here.

“Are you crazy?” he whispers. “You could get us both killed!”

“You're already dead,” I point out.

“You're not!”

I hesitate, and then – deciding to take matters into my own hands – I step out from behind the curtain. I hear Harry letting out a series of exasperated gasps and splutters, but otherwise there's no sound at all as I walk slowly back toward the middle of the room. I certainly heard a loud banging sound coming from the corridor earlier, but when I head over and peer out into the passage I still see no sign that we've got company. And

then, as I turn to look at Harry again, I see to my relief that he has at least deigned to emerge from his hiding place.

“What exactly do you think just happened?” I ask him.

“There's another ghost here,” he says with a sigh. “I don't know what it is, I've never actually seen it. I've always been too scared.”

“Of another ghost?”

“Are you always so judgmental?” he snaps. “It makes horrible noises! Do you hear me making horrible noises?”

“Not so far.”

“I think it's different somehow,” he continues, rubbing his hands on his face for a moment. “It's scarier. Older, perhaps. More... ghosty.”

“Ghosty?”

“More like something from a scary movie,” he adds. “I must admit, as a ghost, I don't seem to be particularly horrifying.”

“Fair point.”

I want to remind him that he really has nothing to worry about, that even in the worst case scenario it's not as if another ghost can do anything to hurt him, but somehow I get the feeling that logic and reason don't work too well with this Harry Prym. Instead I turn and look once more at the double doors, and as I make my way over I can't shake the sense that Angelina was *very* keen for me to stay away from this part of the house. I'm way too wired to sleep, so instead I stop and reach out to touch the handles.

“Don't,” Harry says suddenly.

I turn to him.

“I really don't like that room anymore,” he continues. “It gives me the most awful vibes. Whenever I think I might go in there, I rather chicken out at the last second.”

“I'm not surprised,” I reply, trying the handles but finding that the door is locked. “I don't think *I'd* want to spend much time in the room where I died, either.”

Kneeling down, I try to peer through the keyhole. I struggle at first, but after a few seconds I squint and just about manage to make out what appears to be a crumpled table in the middle of the next room. The legs of the table appear to have completely collapsed, and sure enough there's a stepladder on its side nearby. Moonlight is streaming through the windows and for a moment I can only stare with a sense of shocked awe as I watch the exact spot where Harry apparently died. All jokes aside, I'm

already picking up on a strange atmosphere.

Suddenly I hear a buzzing sound and something briefly blocks the keyhole. I pull back slightly; the blockage flitters away just as I realize that it must have been a big fat fly.

“This house will never be the same,” Harry says mournfully as I turn to him. “I must admit that I’ve not quite felt like myself since I died. It’s as if I’ve lost my sense of joy, and I really don’t see much point in existing anymore. It’s hard to have plans and ambitions when you’re no longer part of the land of the living, isn’t it? What exactly am I supposed to look forward to? It’s not like -”

Before he can finish, Angelina hurries through the open door and makes her way toward me. In the process, she steps straight through Harry as if she hadn’t even noticed that he was there.

“I hate it when they do that!” he hisses angrily. “Why can’t they be more considerate?”

“You shouldn’t be in here,” Angelina says to me, and I swear I can see fear in her eyes. “Mother wants to see you in the conservatory, Jessica, and I should warn you... she’s not in a very good mood!”

“I’m not entirely sure what I did wrong,” I say as I follow Angelina along one of the endless corridors. I swear, ninety per cent of Prym Hall seems to be one corridor after another. “I couldn’t sleep so I went for a look around. Is that bad?”

“Mother doesn’t like people snooping,” she says stiffly, clearly annoyed.

“Beatrice never likes people doing anything,” Harry mutters, keeping up with us. “When I married her, I thought I could soften her iron countenance a little. Boy, was I wrong!”

“I really don’t think that I was snooping,” I tell Angelina. “I was just... admiring the house and its history.”

“Beatrice doesn’t give a jot about the history of the place,” Harry sighs. “She’s the one who insisted that I had to rename it Prym Hall in the first place. It used to be called Bagshaw House, which I thought was rather nice. It reflected the legacy of the family who built it many centuries ago, but Beatrice insisted on giving it our own stamp. Of course, it’s not really named after me at all. She named it after *us*, by which I suppose I mean

her.”

“Mother can be tricky,” Angelina says, leading us around the next corner in a hurry. “You won’t be able to reason with her.”

“The girl’s right about that,” Harry adds. “Once she’s on the warpath, there’s no stopping her. I used to do odd little jobs around the house, just to keep out of the way. That’s why I was dusting the chandeliers in the first place, I just wanted to mind my own business. If you think about it that way, Beatrice bears some of the responsibility for my death. Not that she’ll have troubled herself with such thoughts, of course. She’s not exactly burdened with a great deal of self-awareness.”

“I’m sorry,” I say after a moment, stepping past Angelina and then stopping with my hands held up, “but can I ask you something? Can you not hear him?”

“Hear who?” she asks, stopping in front of me.

“Him?” I continue, nodding toward Harry. “He’s been jabbering on ever since we left the room.”

She turns and looks in Harry’s general direction, but when she turns to me again I can already tell that she has no idea what I’m talking about.

“You don’t see anyone else in this corridor with us, do you?” I add.

“Who else *could* I see?” she replies, although now there’s a hint of uncertainty in her voice. “Mother’s in the conservatory, so that only leaves you and me.”

“They completely ignore me,” Harry sighs. “I suppose that’s my lot in life now. I could rattle some chains and slam a few doors, but what’s the point? The only possible positive to come out of it would be if they hired an exorcist to come and get rid of me. Where would I go then? I’m not sure I fancy finding out, to be honest.”

“Are you sure you haven’t noticed anyone?” I ask Angelina as Harry continues to lament his fate, and now I’m starting to wonder whether she might be picking up on something. “Anyone at all?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, with a hint of tears in her eyes. “Jessica, I know that you’re trying to delay things, but you’re really going to have to come and talk to Mother sooner rather than later, and in my experience it’s best to get these things over with so that she doesn’t keep... simmering.” She gestures toward the doors at the corridor’s far end. “I’ll wait outside. It always makes me so unsettled when

she yells.”

“I'm not going in there either,” Harry adds. “That woman still frightens the life out of me. Or the death, I suppose.”

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Chapter Eleven

As soon as I step into the conservatory, I'm struck by the extremely frosty atmosphere. A few candles are burning around the large open space, but Beatrice is sitting in a wicker chair at the far end, looking out at the moonlit lawn and – as far as I can tell – posing moodily in an attempt to intimidate me.

I can just about make out a reflection of her face in the window.

“You wanted to see me?” I say cautiously.

“You're supposed to be asleep.”

“I know, but I just couldn't...”

My voice trails off as I try to work out exactly how I'm supposed to explain that the ghost of her late husband has been nattering on at me. After a few seconds I realize that there's really no point trying, plus I also know that I need to talk to her about something that might be even more important. I glance over my shoulder, just to make sure that there's no sign of Angelina, and then I step forward.

“I need to tell you something,” I continue. “I -”

“I am a gracious host but I have my limits,” Beatrice says archly, still not turning to me. “Perhaps where you come from, it's not considered impolite to creep around in another person's home in the dead of night, but here we have rather higher standards. You have already been introduced to the parts of the house that you are permitted to see. The rest, I am afraid, remains off-limits.”

“I need a ticket for the full tour, huh?” I suggest.

“Prym Hall does not offer *tours*,” she says witheringly, as if she finds that last word utterly disgusting. “Do you think we're completely impoverished?”

“I just figured you might want to show the place off.”

She doesn't laugh. She doesn't even respond.

“There's been a big mix-up,” I continue, deciding to get this over with before I have another chance to bottle it. “You're going to find this so funny. Well, actually, you probably aren't, but here goes. The thing is, I'm not Harry Prym's daughter. At least, not *this* Harry Prym. It turns out that there are two Harry Pryms, both with estranged daughters named Jessica,

and some wires have ended up crossed and we've been mixed up.”

I wait for an answer.

“So I shouldn't really be here at all,” I add.

“Well, I know all that,” she sighs dismissively, finally turning and glaring at me. “Do you take me for a complete moron?”

“You already know?” I hesitate for a moment, before furrowing my brow. “Then... why am I here?”

“Do you really think that I'm so stupid,” she continues, slowly getting to her feet and stepping toward me, “that I would allow such a foolish error to stand uncorrected? Even if I hadn't been appraised of the situation from the start, one look at you tells me that you can't possibly have any connection to this family. The Pryms are a proud, strong people, whereas you are clearly neither of those things. You look nothing like Harry at all. Indeed, your gormless face alone would have been enough to tip me off.”

“You're a real charmer,” I mutter.

“Let me elucidate the real reason for your arrival here,” she says, making her way over to a table at the far end of the conservatory. “I must admit, I intended to explain all of this to you earlier, but Angelina rather got in the way. I hadn't anticipated that she would be so overjoyed to think that she'd finally met her long-lost half-sister.”

“If you know that I'm not Harry's daughter,” I reply, watching as she stops and looks down at some documents on the table, “then why am I here?”

“Why else would you be here?” she purrs. “I have a use for you.”

“That doesn't sound ominous at all.”

“My dear Harry was such a sentimental old fool,” she continues, as she starts gently moving the documents into a row. “His Jessica was a pathetic scrap of a human being. She wasn't worth worrying about at all. But following his untimely death, I made a rather unfortunate discovery. I'd been led to believe that Harry left the entire estate to me, but it just so happens that in what I can only assume was a moment of madness, he gave fully one third to this Jessica girl. I'm sure you can imagine how inconvenient that is.”

“I bet.”

“I have access to some of the finest solicitors in the land,” she explains, “and they can muddy the waters a little in order to get the

paperwork over the line. They inform me, however, that in order for the plan to be watertight, it would be useful to get the real Jessica Prym to sign the paperwork handing over her share of the estate to me. And since the real Jessica is unavailable, someone with her name will do. That's the one part of the whole process that can't be faked. Don't ask me about the intricacies of this little loophole, it gives me a headache just thinking about it, but the upshot of it all is... I need you to sign here..."

She taps at one of the pages.

"And here."

She taps at another.

"And finally here."

She taps at the third page.

"And then you get the whole estate?" I ask.

"I think that's only fair," she murmurs. "I had to put up with Harry for so many years, so I have more than earned my reward."

"But I'm not the real Jessica," I point out. "I'm not the one named in any will, at least. This plan won't stand up to scrutiny."

"It doesn't need to," she sighs. "If someone looks into things, they'll see that a real person named Jessica signed the documents and they won't delve any further. Believe me, I had plenty of questions too, but apparently it'll all work out very well. And it's not as if anyone's going to come along and cause a fuss, anyway." She glares at me for a moment. "I was going to get you to do this in the morning, but I suppose now is as good a time as any."

She holds up a pen.

"Sign your name three times," she adds, "and then you can be on your merry way."

I hesitate for a moment, still not entirely convinced by the legality of her proposal, but then I hurry over and grab the pen. All I can think right now is that I want to get the hell out of this madhouse, so I scribble my name on the first page, and then on the second. I'm still trying to work out how my signature can possibly be important in the grand scheme of things, and I can only assume that either I'm too dumb to understand (totally possible) or Beatrice's plan is unnecessarily convoluted (also totally possible), or the law (and this is extremely possible) is an ass.

Actually, at this point I should probably point out that a scheme like this would never work, not in a million years. So if you have some

contracts sitting around that you need someone to sign, and they're reluctant for some reason, getting a random person with the same name to scribble their signature in a few places will NOT work. I just thought I should add that disclaimer, so that nobody mistakes this crazy story for actual legal advice.

You might also, if you're so inclined and you've read stories like this before, take the above two paragraphs as a clue that something else is afoot here.

“In the unlikely event that anybody ever contacts you about this,” Beatrice purrs, “you will of course have to stick to the agree line.”

I move the pen to the third page, but at the last second I hold back.

“I can't imagine what led Harry to include that little runt in his will,” she continues. “His Jessica is the most dreadful person you could ever meet. I only met her once or twice, but that was enough for me to understand that she wasn't worthy of the Prym name at all. If she got her hands on any part of the estate, she'd have it liquidated so that she could spend the money on drugs. Everything that I've worked for over the years would be ruined and the entire grandeur of Prym Hall would fall into ruins. And why? Just so that some dirty little whore could extend her life of misery for a few more years.”

“You really didn't like her, huh?” I whisper, as I prepare to sign my name for a third time.

“There was nothing to like,” she sneers. “Even Harry saw that eventually. He tried so many times to turn her life around, he gave her chance after chance, but she threw everything back in his face. She would have stolen the clothes off his back if she'd thought she could sell them for another quick score.” She pauses for a moment. “But you don't need to know about the Prym family's darkest secrets. All you need to do is sign one more time.”

I stare at the blank spot on the document, but somehow I feel as if I need to think about this for a moment longer. Sure, I know her scheme can't work, but she doesn't strike me as a fool; I'm worried that there's something else going on here, some other aspect that I've overlooked. And so, finally, I set the pen down.

“What are you doing?” Beatrice asks.

“I need to talk to someone about this first,” I tell her.

“Who?”

“That's between me and him,” I continue, turning to her. I can see the monumental bubbling frustration in her eyes, but I've always hated people who are full of themselves so I have no trouble pissing her off. In fact, I think I'm even enjoying it. She's put me in this situation and now it's my turn to be the annoying one. “You've waited this long and you've orchestrated this little situation, so you can wait a short while longer.”

“If you tell Angelina the truth -”

“I wouldn't do that,” I say firmly. “I'll sign your piece of paper once I'm sure that it's the right thing to do, but first I need to give it some thought.”

“Name your price,” she replies. “As you might notice, we're not exactly rolling in liquid assets, but I might be able to come up with a small reward for your troubles.”

“It's really not about money,” I tell her. “But if you'll excuse me, I just need a few minutes to get my head straight. You can spare a few minutes, can't you? After all, you've waited this long.”

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Chapter Twelve

“Harry!” I hiss, hurrying into one of the other rooms and approaching the coffin, where I see his body still in place. “Hey, Harry, this is important! I need to talk to you!”

I wait, but he doesn't respond. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what I was expecting, but as I look around the room I see that there's no sign of his ghostly presence at all. He has to be nearby, though, so I'm stuck trying to think of a way to get a ghost's attention.

“Harry!” I continue, unable to raise my voice too much in case I attract attention from beyond the room. “Listen, this is no time to sulk, okay? I need to ask you about something, and I don't have much time. Harry, this is serious, so can you please just materialize?”

Reaching into the coffin, I flinch for a moment before shaking him gently.

“Harry?”

Again I wait, but I really don't know what I'm supposed to do next. After looking around I turn and look at the body in the coffin again, and I guess I assumed that he was going to be somewhere nearby, perhaps unable to get too far away from his own corpse. I know I don't have much time and that soon Beatrice is going to run out of patience, and I also know that none of this is really any of my business and that I should just sign the damn papers and get as far away from this place as possible, yet somehow I feel as if I need to get Harry's approval first.

I'm worried that something bigger is going on here, something that might yet have consequences. Beatrice's scheme is clearly nonsensical.

“It's about your daughter,” I say finally, hoping against hope that I might be able to stir him into appearing. “It's about *your* Jessica. Beatrice has some madcap scheme lined up, she found out that you left part of the estate to Jessica and she thinks she can steal it away from her by getting me to sign some papers. I'm not even sure that things work that way, but she's convinced it'll work. The thing is, though, that none of it makes any sense because I'm pretty sure Beatrice must know that your Jessica is...”

My voice trails off as I try to make sense of everything in my head. If Beatrice managed to track me down, that means she must have

done her research, which in turn makes it highly unlikely that she didn't discover the news about Jessica's death. In that case, wouldn't her share of the estate just get given to Beatrice and Angelina anyway? Pretty much no part of this entire mess makes any sense, and I'm certain that Beatrice isn't being honest with me about what she knows, but at the same time I'm not quite sure that I'm ready to tell Harry the truth about Jessica's death.

Even though he's dead, I really don't want to break his heart.

"Can you please just talk to me?" I continue, resorting to begging now. "Seriously? You have to be able to hear me. Where else can you be right now? Something really weird's going on here and it's about your family, and I really don't think that I'm the right person to make the decision. It's your will and I think you should be in charge, so I need to know what you want me to do about it. Harry, do you have any idea what Beatrice is really up to?"

I pause, still hoping that he'll appear, but I'm starting to think that I might have to shock him to his senses. I really don't want to do this, but he's not leaving me with much choice.

I open my mouth to tell him the truth, yet I hold back for a few more seconds until I realize that there are no other options.

"Jessica's dead," I say finally, as I feel fresh tears filling my eyes. I look at the corpse in the coffin, and then I glance around the room again. "Your Jessica died a while ago in London. She killed herself. She jumped off a bridge because the police were after her for... I don't know why they were after her, but she's dead and I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier but I didn't know how to put it into words. Please don't be mad at me. I'm just really rubbish at making decisions, and I think you have to admit that this is a really weird bind for anyone to be in and..."

And...

And I have no idea how to finish that sentence, because suddenly I'm struck by the full absurdity of this situation. I'm standing in a room in a mansion, talking to a corpse in the hope that a ghost might be lurking nearby, while a mad old bitch waits in another part of the house for me to take part in some dodgy scheme to reclaim an inheritance from a woman I've never met who just so happens to be dead anyway. None of this makes a lick of sense, and I finally come to the realization that I'm not the person to fix it all. More importantly, I don't *have* to fix it all. I simply have to not get involved.

In which case, there's really only one sane option left to me.

An owl hoots in the distance as I race across the lawn with my backpack over my shoulder, trying to get to the cover of the trees as fast as I can manage.

I finally skid into place, dropping onto my knees and turning to look back at Prym Hall. I'm hopelessly out of breath, but sheer adrenaline is keeping me going as I watch the house's doors and windows for any sign that I might have been spotted. I can see a faint glow coming from the conservatory and I have no doubt whatsoever that Beatrice Prym is still waiting in there for me to sign on the dotted line, but I have absolutely no intention of setting foot in that place ever again.

"Goodbye, you bunch of weirdos," I whisper. "Enjoy rattling around in that house together."

Getting to my feet, I start picking my way through the dark forest while trying to come up with a mental map that might help me eventually find my way to safety.

And I know what you're thinking, you're thinking that the Pryms will still be able to track me down once I get home, but I'm one step ahead of you. My first stop in the morning is going to be a police station, and I'm going to tell them everything that happened to me tonight, although I think I'll leave out the part about the ghost so that I'm not immediately written off as a nutter. As I pick my way through some particularly nasty brambles, I realize that I might need to keep my head down for a while, but I can always go and crash on a friend's sofa for a week or two. I'm not quite sure what the Pryms have done that's illegal, but I imagine the whole scheme about my signature might raise a few eyebrows and -

Suddenly I slam into something that hits me in the waist. Letting out a gasp, I reach down and feel some damp stones. Squinting, I'm finally able to make out what appears to be an old well. I lean over the edge and see nothing but darkness, and in that moment I realize that I really don't have time to stop and fuss over things.

"Well well," I mutter under my breath as I set off again, and fortunately no-one's around to hear that particular comedic nugget.

Another owl hoots, causing me to stop once more and look around. The forest is thick and dark, with precious little moonlight breaking

through the canopy above, and I can't help thinking that this place is decidedly creepy. I'm still not certain that I believe I met an actual ghost, but even the possibility leaves me worried that other spectral figures might be lurking somewhere nearby.

Then again, I think I'd rather meet another ghost right now than have to spend more time in that insane house.

After hurrying through the forest for a few more minutes, I stop to gather my bearings. I've tried to go in a straight line, so I set off again, veering to the right this time in an attempt to rejoin the road. Some of these brambles are so thick that I feel my clothes starting to tear, but I'm determined to get the hell away from this place and finally – to my immense relief and not a small amount of shock – I realize that I can see the road ahead. Somehow my terrible sense of direction has come through for me, so I clamber over some more brambles before stepping out onto the side of the road and stopping to look both ways.

I know I'm not out of the woods yet – literally – but at least now I have a solid route to follow. Sticking close to the side of the road but remaining ready to leap into the shadows, I start following the route that leads toward the estate's main gate. I came this way in a taxi earlier, and I know that the walk to the nearest town is going to take hours, but I figure even this late at night there might be some traffic on the roads. I keep trudging on, while regularly glancing over my shoulder, until finally I stop as I see a car parked in darkness up ahead.

For a few seconds I'm really not sure how I should react. There's no reason why a car should be out here, and I can't help worrying that the Pryms might have some kind of security service. Ducking down, I start picking my way through the undergrowth, until finally I get close enough to the vehicle to spot some decals on the side. And it's in this moment that I realize I've seen this car before.

It's the same taxi I arrived in earlier.

Puzzled as to why the taxi never made it far away from the house, I glance around once more before stepping back onto the road. The taxi driver seemed nice enough, but roughly fourteen hours have passed since he dropped me off and somehow he's only managed to drive about half a mile. Already I can see a figure sitting in one of the front seats, and as I get closer to the vehicle I honestly can't work out whether this might be an amazing miraculous opportunity or – on the other hand – some kind of trap.

Reaching the front of the car, I lean down and look inside, and I see that the driver is staring straight ahead.

“Hey,” I say cautiously. “How are you doing? Remember me?”

He doesn't reply, and to be honest I'm getting a little unnerved by the fact that he hasn't even blinked. I hesitate for a moment longer, before reaching out and opening the door, and then I let out a brief and rather childlike gasp as the man's corpse topples over and falls down headfirst against the tarmac.

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Chapter Thirteen

“What the -” I hiss after a moment, taking a step back as the dead taxi driver slithers a little further out of the vehicle. “What the... what...”

I take another step back, only to trip and fall down hard on my ass. For a moment I can only stare in utter shock at the corpse; I see his glassy eyes staring out across the tarmac and a few seconds later I spot thick, congealed blood caked around his throat. I somehow manage to crawl a little closer, and as I move around the man I realize that his throat has been cut open from ear to ear.

“Are you dead?” I ask, just to make sure.

“I'm dead,” he doesn't reply, for obvious reasons, “and it really sucks.”

Looking up at the taxi, I see blood sprayed against the windshield. Until this moment, I had the Pryms written off as harmless eccentrics who might possibly be involved in a dodgy property deal, but now I'm starting to think that they're much more dangerous.

“Hell no,” I stammer, getting to my feet. I'm shaking all over, but as I glance back along the road I start to understand that I'm caught up in something that's much bigger than I ever realized.

For a few seconds I try to work out what I should do next, and then I come to a moment of understanding. I don't want to toot my own horn, dear reader, but I think this might be the first moment in this whole sorry tale where you're actually proud of me. And the reason for that is that at long last I do something so normal and expected, so completely relatable, that I don't think a single person in the whole world could ever argue with my choice.

I run.

And I keep running until I reach the gate that marks the end of the Prym estate, at which point I immediately race along the main road in the desperate hope that I can get to the village.

I might be out of shape, I might not be used to this much physical activity and my backpack might be a little heavy, but I guess some kind of

basic survival instinct is taking over.

After a few minutes I clamber over a wall and run through a cemetery, determined to take any shortcut that might help me reach safety faster.

“Hey, guys,” I stammer. “Please don't haunt me right now. I've had more than enough of that sort of thing tonight.”

And despite everything that has happened to me so far tonight, I don't spot a single ghost in the cemetery. Nor, at this point, do I remember that I have my phone with me.

A short while later I race across another road, heading down a hill that I think should lead into the village.

Okay, the village is a little further away than I thought, and I think the adrenaline might be wearing off because finally I come to a halt next to a low stone wall. Leaning forward, I take a few seconds to catch my breath while also glancing around to try to figure out exactly where I am.

Spotting a road sign, I squint slightly to read the information in the darkness, and I see that something seems to be wrong. Apparently the next town is nine miles ahead of me, and even my basic geography tells me this means I've been running in the wrong direction.

“Damn it,” I mutter, realizing that the village must be a couple of miles back the other way.

Once I've managed to get a little more air into my lungs, I turn and start retracing my steps.

I run across a familiar road, struggling up a hill that this time I'm *certain* will eventually lead to the village.

Eventually I get to the cemetery again, and there's really no other option. I climb over the wall and make my way back through the slightly spooky

space, hurrying between the gravestones.

“Hello again,” I stammer breathlessly. “Sorry to keep disturbing you.”

Once again, however, I see no sign of any ghosts.

Twenty minutes later I'm somehow in what appears to be an orchard. I don't know how this has happened, and I don't know what's growing on these trees, but at least I can see lights in the distance and I know I'm nowhere near Prym Hall.

My legs are burning, but I tell myself that I have to keep going for just a little while longer.

“Come on,” I mutter, trying again to pull myself free from the barbed wire that's curling its way along this wall. “You bastard, just -”

In that moment my jacket rips and I fall back, landing with a pained gasp on the grass.

“Mother-”

My jacket's ruined, but I guess in the grand scheme of things I shouldn't be too annoyed. Getting up again, I brush myself down and examine the damage, and I quickly realize that someone who knows what they're doing might actually be able to fix this thing. I'm so sick of living in a society where we throw stuff away as soon as it's broken, and I'm absolutely determined to see whether the fabric can be stitched up in some kind of cool pattern, although I have to concede after a few seconds that this isn't the right moment to be fussing over something so shallow.

Turning, I see a small cottage nearby, and miraculously there are actually some lights on in one of the windows.

“Hallelujah,” I whisper breathlessly, before starting to make my way toward the front door. “This had better be -”

“I need your help,” I blurt out as soon as the cottage's front door opens to reveal a tall, somewhat older man who looks rather bemused by my sudden arrival. “Do you have a phone I could -”

In that moment I realize that I'm an idiot. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my own phone and see that once again I have perfect signal. I could have called someone already, but in truth I wouldn't have known how to describe my whereabouts anyway. Sighing, I figure that I still haven't done too badly, although I quickly realize that the man is still staring at me as if he doesn't understand what's going on.

To be fair, I don't blame him.

"I know it's late," I say, checking my phone again and seeing that the time is almost two in the morning, "and I'm so sorry for disturbing you, but something really crazy has happened and I didn't know where else to go."

"You'd better come in, then," he murmurs, stepping aside and gesturing for me to enter the cottage.

"Are you sure?"

For a fraction of a second I wonder whether this is wise. After all, I have no idea whether this guy might be a secret serial killer, but I quickly realize that I've probably had more than my fair share of bad luck for one night. Besides, the man's clearly quite old and as I step into the hallway I tell myself that I shouldn't be in too much danger. Ageist, much? Anyway, so far the place looks completely normal and I don't see anything that hints at a dungeon or a set of mysterious graves in the garden.

"What exactly did you say has happened to you?" he asks as he shuts the door. "Did you have some kind of accident? Did your car break down?"

"If only," I reply, still a little out of breath as I turn to him. "Have you heard of Prym Hall?"

He pauses for a moment, and then he nods gently.

"Yeah, well, I hadn't until recently," I continue, struggling to work out exactly how I'm going to explain all of this without sounding like a lunatic. "I've had something of a crash course in the place and its inhabitants, and let me tell you... do not go there. Like, ever. They're all barking mad."

"Right," he says, furrowing his brow.

"And that's just the ones who are still alive."

He tilts his head slightly.

"There's a taxi driver," I continue, "and he's been murdered. I don't know how that fits into it all, but I need to call the police and get them out

here. Can you tell me your address so they know how to find me?"

"Let's just take a moment so you can breathe," he replies, before heading to the window and peering out into the night. "Is someone following you?"

"Following me? No. I mean, I don't think so. Why, what do you see?"

I wait, and after a few seconds he turns to me.

"Nothing," he says. "I think you're good."

"I need to call the police," I stammer, pulling my phone out but immediately letting it slip from my trembling hands. I pick it up again, and sure enough I drop it for a second time. "Damn it!"

"Hold your horses," the man says, stepping over to me. "I've got a landline phone in the back room, how about *I* call them for you? Meanwhile, I think you need to sit down before you collapse."

I reach for my phone again, but in that instant I realize that he might have a point. I'd only ramble madly if I got through to the police, whereas this guy seems calm and sane. I look at the phone as it rests – finally – in my shaking hand, and I feel a growing sense of relief as I realize that this whole nightmare might actually be over. Besides, I'm on the verge of bursting into tears and I think any attempt to speak to the police over the phone right now would end in a garbled mess.

"Go through into the living room," he continues, as he turns and walks past the bottom of the staircase, "and I'll call the police and get them out here, and then you can tell them everything. I'll also make you a nice cup of tea to calm your nerves. Tea always helps in any situation. Go into the living room and wait for me there."

"I will," I reply, and now fresh tears are filling my eyes as I realize that I'm on the verge of a full-on breakdown. "Thank you so much."

"Just one thing," he adds, stopping in the doorway and turning to me. "What's your name? Did you tell me?"

"I don't think so," I reply. "My name's Jessica. Jessica Prym."

"Prym, huh?" He pauses. "Well, Jessica Prym, help's on the way. My name, by the way, is Charles. Now, please, sit down and I'll bring you that tea."

"Thank you," I sob, as I realize that my bottom lip is trembling. Full-on waterworks are surely not far behind. "You're so kind. Thank you so much!"

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Chapter Fourteen

A few minutes later, sitting on a somewhat sunken sofa in the living room, I at least feel a little better. I'm trying to go over everything in my head so that I'm ready for when the police arrive, because I really think that I'm going to struggle to put the whole ordeal into words. I guess I'll start with the murdered taxi driver, which should get their attention, and then work back from that point.

Looking over at the doorway, I realize that the cottage is strangely quiet. I haven't heard Charles talking to anyone on the phone, and I don't even hear a kettle brewing.

I wait, but all I hear is silence.

"Hello?" I call out finally. "Is everything okay?"

More silence.

"Do you... need help?" I continue.

Again, only silence.

The last thing I need to do is let my paranoid brain start coming up with all sorts of crazy ideas, but I can't help noticing that since he went through to the rear of the cottage, Charles has been conspicuous by his silence. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that anything's wrong, yet there's this niggling concern in the back of my mind that perhaps the insanity of the night might not be over just yet. I start rocking back and forth, wondering whether I might have made another huge mistake, and then finally I can't help myself.

Getting to my feet, I hesitate for a moment longer before slowly making my way to the door and looking out into the hall.

"Uh, Charles?" I say cautiously. "I'm sorry to be a pest, but I kind of think this is urgent. That poor taxi driver's out there all alone in the cold, on the ground, and I just think someone ought to go and... pick him up."

Hearing nothing but silence again, I walk past the foot of the staircase and make my way toward the door at the hall's far end. My heart's racing now and I keep telling myself that everything's fine, that I can't have stumbled upon the home of a mass murderer, but I'm still worried.

And then, as I step into the kitchen, I realize that I can hear a soft, slightly muffled voice coming from one of the other rooms.

“Yes, she's here now,” Charles is saying. “No, I don't really know the full story, but she seems to need help. She's in quite a bad way.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I realize that all my fears were for nothing.

“I think so,” he continues after a moment. “Officer, how long do you think it'll take before one of you guys can get out here to talk to her?”

I lean back against the side of the kitchen counter and shake my head, shocked by just how quickly I managed to become a paranoid overthinking mess.

“I'm sure that'll help,” he adds. “No, she's fine here, I'm going to make her a cup of tea and try to calm her down a bit. She's in a real state.”

Another pause.

“An ambulance? I hadn't thought about it, but maybe. Someone should probably check her over. You've got my address down, right?”

I turn to go back to the front room, but at the last second I glance over at the sink. There's no sign that Charles is making that cup of tea yet. I really don't want to be a pain, although I'm parched and I quickly spot a few tumblers on the drainer. Without wanting to be rude, I figure that there's no harm in fetching myself a glass of water, so I head over and take one of the tumblers, before reaching for the tap as I look into the sink and -

In that moment I freeze, as I spot a large, serrated knife that's absolutely caked in blood. For a few seconds my brain seems to stumble, unable to quite process what I'm looking at, although I quickly realize that this knife could most certainly be used to cut a taxi driver's throat. In fact, I can't imagine anything in the whole world that it's better suited to, and a moment later I manage to drop the tumbler into the sink as I take a step back.

“There you are,” Charles says, grabbing me from behind and sliding a needle into the side of my neck, then injecting me with something that I'm sure isn't too good for my health. “I had a feeling you were going to go sneaking about.”

I open my mouth to scream, but I swear this injection works at lightning speed. I'm already feeling woozy, and after just a couple more seconds everything goes black and the last thing I feel is my body crashing down against the tiled floor.

Have you ever been tied up and gagged, then dragged backward across gravel?

No?

Good for you.

I hadn't, not until tonight, but let me tell you that it's not a particularly fun experience. In fact, as my eyes flicker open and I find myself staring up at the starry night sky, I feel the back of my head bumping against the ground. Someone's holding a rope that's attached to my ankles, although it takes a few more seconds before my brain is fully functioning again and finally I look around and see that Charles is hauling me away from a truck and over toward...

I think you've probably guessed where.

Prym Hall looks even creepier when you're looking at it upside down.

A sense of absolute dread and panic fills my chest as I see the house's front door. I try to work out what could possibly be happening and why this random man is bringing me back here, but at that moment he starts making his way up the stone steps, dragging me behind. Despite the gag over my mouth, I start to let out a series of impressively loud gasps as my body bumps and batters its way up those steps, and I have to lean forward a little to avoid getting completely knocked out. I don't really know what Charles is doing with me right now, but he sure as hell doesn't seem to have made any attempt to keep me comfortable.

Suddenly I pull my feet away and try to turn. I don't really know how I expect to get away, not with my legs bound together, but I manage a muffled cry before I feel him grabbing me again from behind.

"You woke up, huh?" he sneers, leaning so close to my left ear that I can feel the hot spittle bursting from his mouth. "That's a little ahead of schedule, but I don't suppose it matters too much."

"Why are you doing this?" I try to cry out, but all I really manage is a kind of "Mmm mmm mmm mmmmmmm mmm?"

"You're a feisty one, that's for sure," he continues. "Then again, I don't suppose I should be surprised, should I? I mean, you managed to make it all the way from the house to my little place, so you've obviously got some pep in you."

"Mmm mmmmmmm!" I try to scream, which roughly translates as "Help me!"

As I look out across the dark lawn, I see nothing but the treeline in the distance and I realize that there's no-one else around for miles and miles. Even if I could get this gag off and scream my lungs out, I seriously doubt that anyone would be able to hear me anyway. A moment later I'm pulled back again, and Charles shoves me down hard against the ground at the top of the steps.

"I'm so tired," he complains, and to be fair he definitely sounds pretty exhausted. "I'm far too old for this shit."

"Then don't do it!" I try to sob, but you can probably guess how much of that can be heard.

He starts dragging me toward the front door, and for a moment I can only try frantically to think of some way out of here. I pull on the restraints that are keeping my hands behind my back, but they're tied far too tight, and then I do the same with the ropes around my legs, only to find the same thing. In fact, I'm starting to think that Charles might have done this whole 'kidnapping and tying up' thing before, especially since he just so happened to have a syringe full of sedatives sitting around at home. That's not something that normal people have within easy reach.

And that's when I realize that I heard the name Charles earlier.

"Of course, if we still had Charles working here, all of this could have been avoided," Angelina muttered yesterday, almost as soon as I set foot in the house. "He wasn't the best butler in the world, but at least he could get the basics done."

Butler?

"The days of Charles attending to our day-to-day needs are long gone," she explained earlier. "You would have thought that he might stick around out of a sense of duty, but apparently he has better things to be doing in the village. Honestly, these days loyalty is such a rare commodity."

Butler!

This guy is the family's butler, or at least he used to be. And as he opens the front door and hauls me into the hallway, I start to realize that he most definitely seems to still be on their payroll!

Chapter Fifteen

“Oof!” I gasp as I'm finally shoved down hard against the floor in the hallway, and to be fair “Oof!” sounds more or less the same regardless of whether or not you've got a gag over your mouth.

But I know that some people are sticklers for accuracy, so the sound I actually make is more like:

“Mmm!”

I immediately roll onto my side and let out a faint groan, and it's at this moment that I realize the sedative might not have fully worn off just yet. The whole world seems to be slightly swimming all around me, to the extent that as I sit up and look around I start to feel more than a little dizzy.

Was the ceiling in this place always so high up?

And did it always move?

“She's here!” Charles calls out, his voice echoing slightly in the hallway's huge space. “I did what you asked! I told you before that I was out of this mess, but I mean it this time! This is the last thing I'm ever doing for you people!”

I hear his deep, heavy breaths. He must be sixty if he's a day, and as I look up at him I realize that although he's a fairly big man, he must still be exhausted after manhandling me all the way back into Prym Hall. I turn and look around, but so far the house seems strangely empty and gloomy, and there's no sign so far of either Angelina or Beatrice coming to gloat over my return.

Yet.

“Hello?” Charles yells. “Come on, I know you're here! Let's just get this over with!”

He hesitates for a moment.

“Damn people,” he mutters, grabbing my collar and starting to pull me toward one of the corridors. “I wish I'd never set foot in this damn house in the first place.”

I know exactly how he feels, but as he hauls me along the corridor I'm powerless to resist. And to be honest, some of his language is a lot fruitier than I've reported, but I know a lot of people don't like that sort of thing so I'm substituting some more acceptable words here and there.

Actually I've been doing that all along, especially with my own thoughts. You can thank me later.

"Be a butler, they said," he continues. "It's slightly old-fashioned but you'll like it, they said. All you have to do is take sodding sods some tea and look after a bunch of rich old sods who wouldn't know the real world if it slapped them in the sodding face. That's what I was told. And now look at me."

I try again to cry out, although in truth I've more or less come to terms with the fact that crying out really isn't going to get me anywhere. I don't actually have a plan right now, but I keep telling myself that there has to be some way out of this mess if only I can be smart.

Unfortunately, being smart has never really been my thing.

"I wanted to be an artist," Charles continues, and I'm pretty sure that he's simply grumbling to himself now rather than expecting any kind of response from me. "I should've just stuck to my guns and tried to make a living out of that. Sure, I'd probably be dirt poor, but at least I'd be able to spend my days painting instead of running around like a dogsbody for these jumped-up morons. My life could have been so different if I'd just stood up to my father all those years ago and refused to go to sodding business school."

Looking back as I'm dragged further along the corridor, I spot a figure in the shadows, and a moment later I realize that Harry – or rather Harry's ghost – has come to see what all the fuss is about.

"I lasted one term," Charles complains angrily. "What was the point of that, huh? And then butler school was one big joke from start to finish, but at least I managed to stick it out. Mainly to piss off the old man, but it was worth it to see the disappointment in his eyes."

"Harry!" I try to cry out, desperate to get him to help me, although obviously I still can't manage any actual words. "I need you!"

He's just staring at me, however, and after a few seconds he steps back into the darkness.

"Harry, no!" I try to shout. "Harry! You have to help me!"

Translation: "Mmm! Mm! Mmm! Mmm mmmm mm mmmm mm!"

In that moment, Charles drags me around a corner so fast that my legs hit a small table and knock it over. A vase topples down and smashes on the floor, but Charles barely even seems to notice.

“I've always been a sodding pushover,” he sighs as he drags me along the next corridor. “I think that's always been my most fundamental flaw. At the end of the day, I'm just too much of a nice sodding sod!”

Finally he shoves me down hard against the rug in yet another of the large emptyish ballrooms of Prym Hall. I swear a faint cloud of dust puffs up from the rug, filling my nostrils as I once again try to sit up.

“Well?” Charles shouts, and I can tell that he's getting to the end of his tether now. “Still nothing? Ladies, I know it's the middle of the night and you both need your beauty sleep, but somehow I really don't think you're napping through all of this. I want one last payout for bringing this girl back here, and then we're done, do you hear me?”

He steps past me and sits in a nearby chair, and then he makes a show of rather dramatically brushing his hands clean.

“Done,” he adds again before looking down at me. “Completely and utterly done. Forever. Finito. No more of this sodding stuff. I want to go back to being a good person.”

Staring up at him with eyes that are undoubtedly filled with fear, I'm genuinely not quite sure how to react. Charles seemed friendly enough when I first met him, and despite everything that has happened since I still can't quite shake the sense that he has a kind face. Sure, that kindness isn't exactly manifesting itself in his actions, but I'm starting to think that my best bet here is to try to appeal to his better nature.

“I'm sorry,” he says after a few more seconds, giving me a little more hope that my plan might work if I can just get rid of this gag. “You seem like a nice kid and I'm sure you don't deserve any of this bull. For what it's worth, I hate it all too. That's why I got out, or at least I thought I did. When I heard about old Harry's death, I decided I was completely finished with the rest of the family. Harry was the only one I could ever stand, anyway. Honestly, don't even get me started on Beatrice and that shrew-like daughter.”

Sighing again, he takes a moment to look around.

“Yeah, I won't miss this place,” he continues. “You can't even begin to imagine how degrading it was to have to hurry around, attending to their every needs. Again, Harry was always okay, he knew how to make himself a cup of tea or cut the crusts off his own sandwiches, but those

other two..." He shakes his head. "There's something about the upper classes in this country, isn't there? Why are they always so goddamn helpless?"

"Mmm mmmmm mm mmmm," I reply, which is my attempt to get him to remove the gag.

"Yeah, you've got a point there," he mutters. "But then Beatrice started making me these little offers. She wanted me to do things that didn't quite seem to be in the job description. She literally told me to fetch the money from the safe myself, if only I'd do a few tiny jobs for them."

He hesitates again, and I can tell that he's really troubled by something.

"But I never meant to hurt the girl," he adds. "You have to believe me, I'm not a monster, at least... I wasn't, not at the start."

He pauses, and now he seems to be on the verge of tears.

"They told me they just wanted to get her into trouble," he continues. "They were worried that old Harry still had a soft spot for his oldest daughter, but they figured that if she ended up in jail, that'd be the last straw. All I had to do was go down to London and frame her for a few things. She was in a recovery center by that point, she seemed to have finally started to kick all her addictions and her life of crime. I felt bad for tempting her, but it's not like I forced her to start shooting up again. Sure, I gave her the opportunity, I damn near shoved it in her face but... she's the one who broke and took it. Personal responsibility and all that stuff, right?"

Staring at him, I realize that this seems to be some kind of confession, or perhaps a way to get some guilt off his chest.

"I didn't know she'd off herself," he adds, and I can tell that he feels genuine regret. "And I sure as hell didn't know about the -"

Before he can finish, he suddenly looks past me as if he heard something.

"Hello?" he calls out, getting to his feet. "Mrs. Prym? Sorry, I mean... Lady Prym? Angelina? Is one of you there? I just want my money and then I'm getting the hell out of Dodge for good."

I turn and look across the room, but so far there's absolutely no sign of anyone. My mind is still racing and I have absolutely no idea what's going on, although I'm starting to realize that there's a lot more to this whole situation than I ever realized before. And as I watch the empty doorway, I start to wonder whether I can hear the faintest sound coming

from somewhere out in the corridor, almost as if someone *is* coming toward the room, and I notice after a few more seconds that I've actually started to hold my breath.

And then, very slowly, a figure steps into view. I feel my heart sink, however, as I see that this figure is in fact wearing what appears to be a white bed-sheet with two eye-holes cut into the front.

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Chapter Sixteen

“Woooo!” the figure under the sheet says after a moment, although he sounds a little uncertain. “I am the ghost of Harry Prym and you must leave this house at once!”

Staring at him, I can't quite work out whether this is madness or genius. Or, more likely, some kind of ridiculous mix of the two.

“What the hell are you up to?” Charles asks, stepping past me. “Are you serious? I might not be the smartest guy in the world, but do you actually think I'm going to fall for something so stupid?”

“I'm telling the truth,” Harry continues from under the sheet. “I swear.”

I try to call out to him, but the gag is still making it impossible for me to speak.

“This house is insane,” Charles says with a heavy, labored sigh. “Whenever I think I've got it figured out, some joker comes along and tries to pull another fast one. As if -”

“It's me!” Harry yells, suddenly pulling the sheet away and letting it fall to the floor, before stepping forward. “Come on, Charles, look at me!”

“What the -”

Clearly shocked now, Charles freezes for a moment. Looking up at him, I swear I can see the confusion in his eyes; his mouth is hanging open and he genuinely seems to be lost for words.

“Not got so much to say now, have you?” Harry continues, and I turn to see that he's glaring at the former butler with an expression of pure anger. “What happened to you, Charlie? You used to be a decent guy. And a fairly good butler, as well. I should have known that once I was dead, my wife would whisper in your ear and get you to start doing even more of her dirty work.” He pauses, making a point of looking Charles up and down, before shaking his head in disgust. “Shame on you, Charlie, for stooping to this level. Look at poor Jessica down there on the floor. Is this really what you want to spend your time doing?”

“It's impossible,” Charles whispers, before making the sign of the cross against his chest. “You're...”

“Dead, yes, I know,” Harry says darkly. “I'm glad that news of my

demise has spread. Here's what's going to happen, Charlie. You're going to untie Jessica and apologize to her, and then you're going to help her get away from here and this time you're not going to bring her back. You're going to make sure that she gets to safety, and then you're going to go home and have a long, hard think about where your life is going."

"But -"

"This isn't up for debate!" Harry shouts angrily. "You're in my house, Charlie, and -"

"What's all this nonsense?" Beatrice snaps, storming into the room and marching straight through Harry as if she hasn't even noticed him. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I hate when they do that!" Harry snaps, before stamping his foot angrily. "It completely undercuts any gravitas of what I'm trying to achieve!"

"Charles," Beatrice continues, ignoring Harry's ghost completely, "thank you for bringing the young lady back. Your payment can be found in the safe in my husband's old office, and you know the combination. Take what you're owed and not a penny more, and then be on your way."

"Can't you see him?" Charles stammers.

"What are you talking about?"

She looks around, but she clearly has no idea that Harry is here with us. A moment later Angelina steps into the room, but she loiters in the doorway as if she's scared to come any closer.

"I'm done," Harry sighs, turning and storming out, walking straight through Angelina in the process. "This family can rot as far as I'm concerned. No-one has any respect these days."

"Okay, but I'm done here," Charles says, holding up his hands as he steps away from me and heads toward the door. His voice is trembling and he seems genuinely terrified. "I've done some awful things for you, Mrs. Prym, and -"

"*Lady Prym!*" she barks, correcting him.

"I've done some awful things for you, but I'm finished now," he continues, before glancing briefly at me. "I don't want any further part of it. If you try to call me again, I won't answer. Do you get that? You can do your own dirty work from now on!"

With that, he turns and hurries out of the room, and I hear his terrified footsteps hurrying away along the corridor.

“Remove the gag,” Beatrice says archly, glaring at me. After a moment, when nothing happens, she turns to her daughter. “Well?” she continues. “You heard me, didn't you? Remove her gag!”

“Yes, Mother,” Angelina murmurs, scurrying across the room and stepping behind me, then taking a moment to untie the gag and pull it away. “Sorry, Mother.”

“Running away was not very smart,” Beatrice continues, watching me as I slowly – and with great difficulty, since they're tied together – get to my feet, “and more importantly it was very impolite. We have extended nothing but the finest hospitality to you, young lady, and how do you repay us? By trying to abscond under cover of darkness.”

“The taxi driver,” I stammer.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The taxi driver,” I say again, barely able to get the words out. “You... you killed the taxi driver.”

“I can assure you that I did no such thing,” she replies dismissively, as if the idea is utterly ludicrous. “Charles, on the other hand, had orders to tie up any loose ends so I suppose it's possible that he might have gone overboard. To be honest, I tend not to ask him for too many details of what he gets up to, but he can be a brutish man and violence is certainly one of his qualities. At least it was only a taxi driver. The world isn't exactly short of those, is it?”

“You had him killed!”

“I can get you another number.”

“You're insane,” I stammer, as I try to work out whether – despite the restraints – I can make a run or at least a hop for it yet, or whether I should wait until I'm sure that Charles has left the building.

“No, I'm focused,” she says calmly. “Do you have any idea how difficult it is today for England's great families to maintain their status? Do you know how much it costs to keep a house like Prym Hall running? I'm trying to set this family up so that the next generations still *has* an estate to manage, and if that means engaging in a little creative paperwork then so be it. Is what I asked you to do tonight so utterly awful?”

“Murder,” I whisper. “You can't murder people.”

“What happens outside this house is of no concern to me,” she explains, “but if Charles has done something wrong then I fully support any kind of police investigation. There's certainly no way to tie any of it back to

me, and I'm sure I wouldn't be the first lady whose butler has gone rogue. It's a regrettable situation, to be sure, but I can't be expected to solve all the world's problems. Plus I've been paying him in cash, which is rather smart of me."

She pauses again, watching me carefully as if – and bear with me here, because I know this is kind of a wild idea – but she's watching me carefully as if she expects me to actually agree with her.

"Fair point," she seems to think I'll say. "Might as well murder a few lowly people if they get in your way. What was it you wanted me to help you with, again?"

"I can only control what happens within these four walls," she laments finally, "and that means getting your signature on those documents. And then, if anyone ever comes to ask you about it, all you have to do is confirm that you signed the house over to me. It's really not that difficult, and you'd be doing us all a wonderful favor. I'm afraid I can't offer you any remuneration for your work, but you would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that you've done a wonderful thing for both the heritage and future of this fine family."

I want to scream, but I'm honestly not sure whether that would do any good. The truth is, I simply can't believe that Beatrice thinks this plan could work. Does she expect me to do her a favor and then walk away, and then I'm supposed to not stress about the fact that she had a taxi driver killed, or about the muddled confession that spewed out of Charles earlier? I'm fairly certain that Beatrice at least had a hand in the death of the other Jessica Prym, and she can't possibly be crazy enough to think that I'll just let it all drop, so that leaves me with only one other conclusion.

She's going to kill me.

She needs me to sign those documents, for reasons that I still don't quite understand, and then she's going to knife me in the back or bash me over the head or poison me. Whatever she does, her scheme is really only watertight if I'm permanently out of the way, so if I sign that last of those papers that means that I'll effectively be signing my own death warrant. That explains why the taxi driver had to die, too: he might have told the police that he brought me here, and I'm sure Beatrice would hate having the police knocking on her door. They're probably far too common.

I need to play for time and come up with some way out of this mess, but for the life of me I can't work out what to do next. I certainly can't

run at any great speed, since I'm still tightly bound.

“This is so exhausting,” Beatrice says finally, letting out a dramatic sigh and turning to hurry out of the room. “Angelina, watch over your half-sister for a few minutes, will you? I'm afraid I need to rest for a moment. This really has been such a long and trying night.”

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Chapter Seventeen

“Don't go getting any ideas,” Angelina says firmly, glaring at me as she tries – not too successfully – to sound tough and mean. “And don't make me angry, either. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry.”

If my arms weren't tied behind my back and my legs weren't bound tight, I'd be able to get away from her in about five seconds flat, and that's certainly not because I'm any good at running. The truth is, Angelina looks about as tough as a chocolate teapot and I'm fairly sure that a small child could overpower her. In my current predicament, however, I'm not so confident and I think I might have to use something that – once again – isn't my strength.

I might have to use my brain.

“You're not really onboard with all of this, are you?” I ask after a moment.

“If you keep talking, I'll... I'll put the gag back on.”

“I don't know what made your mother turn out like this,” I continue, “but I can see in your eyes, Angelina, that you know it's wrong. So why don't we come to an arrangement? If you untie me and help me get out of here properly, I won't cause any trouble.”

“You're trying to trick me,” she splutters, but already she seems more nervous. “It won't work. I'm not as stupid as I look.”

No-one could be as stupid as *she* looks.

“We're sisters, right?” I point out, figuring that in all this convoluted mess she probably still doesn't know the truth about that particular lie. “Half-sisters, at least. And let's be honest, half-sisters don't tie other half-sisters up and threaten to hurt them. Sisters – whether they're half or not – stick together. So how about we show a little sisterly love for each other, huh?”

She looks over her shoulder, as if she's worried that Beatrice might be about to return. When she turns to me again, I see tears in her eyes. I feel kind of bad for her, but right now I need to manipulate any signs of weakness she might be showing. There'll be time for sympathy later.

“Sometimes sisters have to take a stand,” I add, shuffling forward as I begin to hope that she might come around to my way of thinking.

“Sometimes sisters have to recognize that their parents have gone a little... off the reservation, so to speak. If you think about it, we have an opportunity right now to step up and be the adults in this situation. Your mother's making a terrible mistake, one that could mean your family loses Prym Hall forever. Why don't you and I take over, make her stand down, and come up with a proper plan that might actually work?”

“What... what kind of plan?” she asks.

“I don't have it all figured out just yet,” I continue, shuffling toward her again as I try to work out whether even in this state I might be able to overpower her. I'll worry about stage two of the plan once stage one is complete. “This is a mess, Angelina. I can't even keep it all straight in my head, but it's a mess and messes can't really last for long. Your mother has done some bad things, she's complicit in at least one murder and maybe...”

She shakes her head as if she can't accept that something so awful is true, but now tears are streaming down her face.

“...but as far as I can see, you've done nothing wrong, Angelina. Not really. So if we stick together, we can come out of this pretty well. We'll do what we can to help your mother, but -”

“Mummy can't go to jail!” she blurts out. “She wouldn't do very well in jail!”

“She sure wouldn't,” I agree. “So let's try to keep her out of there, yeah? It was your old butler Charles who actually got his hands dirty. All your mother has done so far is arrange some dodgy paperwork, but we can gloss over that, and I guess Charles can go down for the really bad stuff.”

I don't mean a word of this, of course. I want to see Beatrice in the English equivalent of an orange jumpsuit, but I know I have to get Angelina on my side first. And I think I might know how to seal the deal.

“Do you know who'd be really proud of you?” I ask.

“You?” she whimpers.

“Absolutely, but I'm thinking of someone else,” I tell her. “Tell me, have you noticed any... weird noises around the house?”

“Like what?”

“Like moans or groans,” I continue, “or doors or other things that go bump in the night.”

“I don't know,” she says, her voice trembling with fear. “I don't think so.”

“Because I have,” I add. “I've seen things, too. Angelina, I don't

mean to scare you, but are you aware that the ghost of your dead father Harry is haunting this house?"

"No!" she sobs, shaking her head more frantically now. "Why are you telling me this? It's not true!"

"I've seen him and I've talked to him," I continue, figuring that I'm finally getting through to her. "He kind of... floats in and out of situations. Not literally, but you get the idea. He was in this room when you arrived. Did you see him?"

"Daddy was here?" she cries. "Please don't lie to me."

"He was right here in this room," I tell her, and to be honest I feel a little bad for toying with her emotions like this. Not bad enough to stop, however. "I can tell that he really loves you, but do you think he'd be happy to see you doing this? Would he like the way your mother is ripping the family apart?"

"No," she whimpers, and now she's in absolute fits of tears. "He always told me that family's so important. He always said that no matter what happens, we all have to stick together so we can help each other when times get tough."

"Right, so -"

"Is his ghost really here?" she adds, turning and looking around the room. "Daddy?" she calls out. "Daddy, let me see you! Daddy, I'm so sorry you died, I really didn't mean to do anything bad! Daddy, can you please just come and tell me you forgive me?"

"Angelina -"

"Daddy!" she screams, stumbling back and falling down hard onto her backside, then scrambling to her feet again. She seems almost hysterical now, as if she simply can't hold back. "Come to me, Daddy!" she cries out, reaching up with her hands as if she expects him to descend from the heavens and land in her arms. "Why aren't you here? Why won't you appear to me?"

"I think you need to -"

"Daddy!" she screeches, and now her voice is so loud and so guttural that I instinctively wince. "It's me! It's your dear darling beloved Angelina! Please, you have to come and show me that you've forgiven me!"

"Okay, this reaction is weird," I tell her, although I'm not sure she even remembers now that I'm in the room. "Let's just simmer down with the father issues and -"

“I'll prove it to you!” she gasps suddenly. “I know you probably hate me for what we did, and I don't blame you, but all that stuff with the table was Mother's fault.”

I can't help furrowing my brow. I'm so lost in this semi-confession now that I genuinely don't know what she's talking about.

“I've always been weak-minded,” she continues, as thick gloops of snot run unattractively from her nostrils and onto her lips. “I've always let Mother guide me and tell me exactly what to do, and I know that makes me horrid but I've finally seen the light.”

She hesitates, and I swear every atom in her body seems to be shaking now with fevered anticipation of Harry's triumphant return. Except, as I look around the room, I see absolutely no sign of him at all. I guess he might be invisible right now, but in truth I wouldn't blame him for running a mile from this melodramatic meltdown.

“But you need me to prove it to you,” Angelina adds, wiping snot onto the back of her hand and then smearing it down the side of her dress. “Alright, then that's what I'll do, Daddy. I've been so naughty and I've let Mummy talk me into doing dreadful things, but that stops tonight. Because tonight I'm going to put my foot down and tell her that enough's enough, and I'm going to stand on my own two feet and I'm going to do what's right!”

“Yes,” I stammer, figuring that I have to intervene at some point. “I'm glad you've come to this conclusion, Angelina. Big up to you.” I turn so that she can see my hands, which are still tied behind my back. “Now, how about -”

“I'm going to do it right now!” she sneers, before turning and stomping toward the large open doorway. “I'm coming to make everything better again!”

“Wait!” I call out. “Angelina, I think you should start a little closer to home. Can you untie me?”

“Mummy?” she shouts angrily as she disappears out of the room and storms away along the corridor. “I have something to say to you, and this time I'm not going to back down until I've got it said! For once you're going to listen to me!”

“But can you untie me first?” I ask, somewhat plaintively this time as I begin to realize that she has truly forgotten me. “Angelina? A little help here? Please?”

I wait, but a moment later I hear a door slam loudly in the distance and I let out a heavy sigh. I'm really starting to suspect that Angelina has some significant and probably un-diagnosed psychological problems, and I doubt that this is either the time or the place to start fixing those. I briefly consider hopping after her and trying to get to the house's front door, but I'm worried that I might get caught so instead I start looking around for some other way out of here.

Making my way to the window, I see that the latch has been left open, which means that in theory I should be able to turn around and lift it up and then open the window, at which point I can try again to hop away from the house. I might not be able to hop very fast, but I'll more than make up for that with smarts, and this time I won't make the mistake of barreling into the first cottage I come across. I'm going to be way cleverer than that, I'll hop like some demented rabbit and I'll somehow get to safety. Sure, in cartoons people rarely try the same plan twice, but this is no cartoon.

This – and try not to roll your eyes right now – is real life.

Turning, I try to reach my restrained hands up to the latch. At first I really don't think that I'm going to have any luck, but after a few seconds I manage to stand on tip-toes and for the first time I dare to hope that this plan might actually work.

And then, hearing footsteps, I turn just in time to see Charles stepping back into the room.

Chapter Eighteen

“Don't move!” I gasp, although I really don't know that I'm in much of a position to threaten him. “I mean -”

“Relax,” he says, hurrying over to me and grabbing my arms from behind, then starting to untie them, “I'm not going to turn you over to them. Not again.”

“Then what *are* you going to do with me?” I stammer. “Are you going to kill me? Are you going to silence me so I can't talk to the police? Are you going to take me out into the forest and shoot me in the back of the head and bury me in a shallow grave? Because I promise you, if ghosts are really real, I'll find a way to haunt your miserable ass!”

“I'm going to do what I should have done from the beginning,” he continues, forcing me to turn to him. “When I opened the safe just now and saw the money waiting in there for me, something in my heart just snapped. I used to be a good person, Jessica, and now look at me. I've murdered one man, I drove a woman to her death and now I let Beatrice Prym order me around like I'm some kind of nodding dog. Well... no more.”

Reaching down, he rips the restraints away from my legs, finally freeing me.

I take a step back, and somehow I manage to resist the urge to run. I know I still need to be smart.

“Going out the window wouldn't have worked,” he tells me. “Beatrice and her freaky kid are in the conservatory on that side of the house, so they'd see you and they'd find a way to get you back.”

“But -”

“They'd find a way!” he says firmly.

“So what's the alternative?”

“You need to go out through the north wing,” he add, “because that way, you can get across the narrowest part of the garden without being spotted, and from the treeline it's only about a hundred meters to a bend in the road. Then you follow that to the west for about half a mile, and you'll get to a gas station, and I'm pretty sure you can figure out what to do from there.”

“Why are you helping me?” I ask.

"I told you, I don't want to be a bad person, not anymore." He looks around for a moment. "I'll come to the police with you and confess everything. I know I'll end up spending the rest of my life in jail for what I've done, but at least I'm taking that bitch Beatrice Prym down with me. I only wish I'd come to this conclusion earlier but..." He turns to me again. "I don't expect you to forgive me," he adds, "but I hope you can at least understand."

"I don't think I understand *anything* right now," I tell him. "I just want to get out of here."

"We'll cut through the other wing," he says, hurrying to the doors on the other side of the room and trying them, only to find that they're locked. "Damn it, that woman's getting more and more paranoid."

"I was told not to go through here," I stammer as I catch up to him and see that he's already opening some kind of flick knife. "They were very specific with me, they said -"

"This is the room where Harry died," he says darkly as he slides the knife's tip into the lock and starts to jiggle it around. "It's also the quickest and safest way for us to get to the north wing. They sealed the whole place up last week, but trust me, this is your best bet." He glances at me. "You *do* trust me, don't you?"

"I don't think I have a choice," I reply. "Just promise me that when this is all over, you'll sit down and explain it all to me, right?"

"I'll try," he tells me, before pausing as if he's worried about what he wants to say next. "Actually, there's one other important part of the story that I haven't told you yet. If I'm honest, it's the part that really caused me to reconsider my actions and try to do the right thing." He continues to jiggle the knife in the lock. "In London, when I was framing the other Jessica up and before she died, I found out that -"

Before he can finish, the lock clicks loudly. He pulls the knife out and tries the handle, and this time the door starts to open.

"There'll be time for that later," he adds, as we both step through into the next room. "Right now, we just have to -"

And then we both freeze, and while I can't speak for Charles, I have to admit that I'm struck by just about the foulest stink I've ever encountered in my life. I picked up a few whiffs on the other side of the door, but now in this gloomy but large room I realize that it smells truly dreadful, almost as if... as if something died in here. Sure enough, as if to

underline that impression, a moment later a couple of fat juicy black flies buzz past me, and then a third tries to land on my face, only for me to swat it away.

Over in the middle of the room, I see the partially-collapsed table that I spotted earlier when I peered through the keyhole. Even back then, I remember briefly seeing a fly in the keyhole; sure enough, a swarm is circling constantly beneath the chandelier.

“That's the table he was standing on,” Charles says somberly, as if he's momentarily struck by the horror of this moonlit tableau. “See the stepladder over on the side? He set that up on the table so he could dust the chandelier, and then... I mean, I wasn't here at the time, I was already moving my possessions out of the house, but from what I heard the stepladder toppled and he fell. He must have landed hard. After all, the table broke, and that looks like it would have been a sturdy old chunk of wood.”

“What's with the stench?” I ask, waving a hand in front of my nose in a desperate attempt to keep from being sick. “What's going on in this room?”

“I don't know,” he replies, stepping past me and leading me toward a door on the other end of the room, “and I really don't want to hang around and find out. Based on the smell, it's almost as if they left old Harry's body in here to rot.”

“But they didn't do that,” I point out, following him for a few paces but stopping as I get closer to the crumpled, tilted remains of the table, which is propped up at one end by a couple of legs that are still intact. “I've seen Harry's body, it's in a coffin on the other side of the house.”

I watch as another fly crawls along the sloping tabletop, and I swear something about this whole situation really isn't making any sense. I mean, it hasn't been making sense for a while, but this is a whole new level of madness, and a moment later I spot a single white shoe on the floor.

A woman's shoe.

“The coast is clear!” Charles hisses, having opened the door at the far end of the room and leaned out to check the next corridor. “Come on!”

“Something's really wrong here,” I continue, picking up the shoe and turning it around in my hands. “Do you ever feel like you're not seeing the full picture?”

“There's no time for this!” he snaps. “Hurry!”

I know he's right, and I know this isn't the time to start doing a

Jessica Fletcher impression, but I can't help myself. Still holding the shoe, I take another step around the table and look down at the shadows beneath the broken wood. More and more flies are buzzing in the air all around me, and I have to swat them away, but I ignore Charles and his repeated calls for me to join him, and instead I walk all the way around the table until I reach the other side. And then, with a growing sense of dread in the pit of my belly, I very slowly crouch down and peer into the darkness beneath the table's remains.

“Oh,” I whisper as my eyes adjust slightly and I start to make out a strange, ragged shape.

I tilt my head slightly.

“No,” I add.

I tilt my head the other way.

“Wait, this can't...”

“What the hell are you doing?” Charles snaps. “I'm risking my life by coming back here to save you and now you're -”

“Give me my phone,” I say, looking up at him. “You took it, right? Do you still have it?”

“It's back at my place,” he replies cautiously. “What -”

“Then give me something I can use to see!”

He hesitates, and then he unhooks a small flashlight from his belt and hands it to me.

My hands are trembling slightly, but I manage to get the flashlight to switch on. Then, as Charles crouches next to me, I shine the beam under the broken table so that we can both see the crumpled mess beneath. And I don't know about Charles, I really can't be sure what's going through his head right now, but certainly *I'm* very surprised and confused to see the smashed, partially crushed and very much semi-rotten corpses of not only Beatrice Prym but also her daughter Angelina.

“Okay,” I say cautiously, “but if they're down here, and if they've clearly been here for a little while, then...”

Hearing a creaking sound, I sit up and look back past the table, and I'm shocked to see both Beatrice and Angelina standing silhouetted in the first doorway.

“Then who exactly have I been talking to all night?”

Chapter Nineteen

“Well well well,” Beatrice says, her voice calling out at me from the other side of the room, “aren't you your father's daughter? Sorry, poor choice of expression. Still, you're always sticking your nose into things that really don't concern you, so there are certain similarities. You know, you should be careful. One day you might find that the end gets chopped off.”

I stare at her for a moment, before looking at the two twisted corpses beneath the collapsed table. More flies are buzzing around now, and a dozen or so are crawling over the face of the dead women. Peering a little closer, I see Beatrice's rotten features with parts of her face already hollowed out by the hungry insects that are making their homes – and no doubt laying eggs – in her flesh and bones. I reach out to brush a fly away from Beatrice's graying lips, only to let out a gasp as I inadvertently knock her entire jawbone off. Some kind of clear sludgy liquid immediately starts dribbling from somewhere around the opening of her throat.

She and Angelina are clearly just about as dead as dead can be, yet a moment later I look at the doorway again and...

There they are.

“Saints preserve us,” Charles whispers, and now his voice sounds tight with fear. “I could tell that something wasn't quite right, but this...”

“Harry was always so very uncooperative,” Beatrice explains. “He got up to so much D.I.Y. work around the house, and I felt sure that eventually he was going to fall off something or stick his hand into something or blow himself up. I was very patient, I waited and waited for years, but nothing ever happened. Can you really blame me for deciding, eventually, that I needed to take matters into my own hands?”

“You killed him,” I whisper as I start to understand.

“A minor act of sabotage,” she continues, “albeit with unintended consequences. All we were going to do was reach up and knock the stepladder over so that he'd break his neck. How were we to know that the table, like so much else in this rundown old house, wasn't strong enough to hold his weight? When it came crashing down, Angelina and I really had no chance to get out of the way in time. Our necks cracked like...”

She pauses, before tilting her head slightly, causing a horrific

snapping sound to ring out from somewhere beneath her jaw.

“Well, like that,” she says, raising an amused eyebrow.

“It was really horrible,” Angelina chimes in. “It makes me feel sick just to think about it.”

“At least it was relatively quick and painless,” Beatrice adds. “One moment we were under the table, the next I was standing next to my jewelry box upstairs and I really wasn't sure at first what had happened. Dear Angelina found herself kneeling in front of her favorite dolls' house in her bedroom. It would seem that following our unfortunate demises, we each popped back as ghosts next to the thing that mattered most to us in this whole world. I do so love all my jewelry.”

“That dolls' house is so fine,” Angelina says meekly. “I can show you later, Jessica, if you're interested.”

“I'm getting out of here,” Charles stammers, turning and hurrying toward the far door. “This whole family is way too -”

Suddenly he stops and lets out a gasp, and when he reaches up and clutches his own throat I realize that Beatrice is somehow doing something to him. I wait for him to break free, but after a moment he drops to his knees and I can tell that he's no longer able to breathe.

Trying not to panic, I get to my feet and rush over to him. He's already starting to become a little redder in the face, and when I pull his hands away I see that some kind of invisible force is twisting and crushing his throat.

“Stop it!” I yell at Beatrice. “Leave him alone!”

“He has outlasted his usefulness,” she says calmly. “In truth, he outlasted it a while ago but we kept him alive out of some misguided sense of pity. Now I realize that I should have bitten the bullet much sooner, although I suppose he turned out to be handy tonight. Still, all living things should die once they're no longer useful. That's just the way of the world.”

Slowly Charles starts to get up, while clutching his throat again. At first I assume that he's pushing through and somehow fighting back against Beatrice's power, but a few seconds later I realize that he's starting to rise above me. Looking down, I see to my horror that his feet are starting to leave the ground as he's slowly lifted higher and higher into the air.

“What are you doing to him?” I shout angrily.

“What I should have done a long time ago,” Beatrice continues. “All butlers outstay their welcome eventually. They get ideas about their

station and they start thinking that they might find some greater meaning to their lives. It's so very rare to find a butler who simply accepts his situation and sees his work through until the end. To be honest, I always knew that Charles was going to cause trouble eventually, although I must admit that he was very useful for a while."

Spluttering and gasping, Charles rises higher and higher above me. At the last second I reach out and try to grab his foot to hold him down, and I manage to take hold of his left foot briefly, only for the shoe to come away. I fall back, landing hard on the floor, and now I can only watch powerlessly as Charles continues to ascend toward the ceiling.

"Mummy, this is so cool," Angelina froths. "Can you teach me how to do things like this? I'd so love to have special powers!"

"Child, you must be patient," Beatrice tells her. "You really don't need to trouble yourself with such matters."

Looking down at me, with his eyes almost bulging from their sockets, Charles tries to say something but succeeds only in letting out a faint groan.

"Please don't hurt him," I stammer as tears run down my cheeks. "Please, it doesn't have to be like this." I turn to Beatrice. "I'll sign your stupid document if you just let him go!"

"Let him go?"

She pauses, and then a faint smile creeps across her face.

"Well," she adds finally, "if you say so."

I open my mouth to reply, but at the last second I realize that something's wrong. I look up just as Charles manages a loud sigh.

"Rose," he gasps, looking down at me. "Find Rose! Find -"

Before he can get another word out, his body slams down at lightning speed, as if swatted by yet another unseen force. I flinch and pull back, and in that moment he hits the floor just a few feet away and his body bursts like a water-bomb. I squeeze my eyes tight shut just in time, and I feel hot blood spraying across me, followed a moment later by a heavy lump of what I can only assume must be one of his internal organs.

I wait, dripping in silent horror, before slowly opening my eyes and seeing that the explosion of the poor man's body has left a huge blast of blood and guts and broken bone everywhere. Holding my hands up, I find that I too am covered in what's left of Charles. Letting out a faint whimper as blood seeps into my eyes, I try to tell myself that this can't be happening,

that the whole situation has simply become far too insane now and that at any moment I'm going to wake up nice and safe in bed.

Holding my hands up higher, however, I watch as more and more blood runs down to my wrists and then drips down onto the floor. I look past my hands and see some larger pieces of bone resting on the floor nearby.

A moment later, one of his kidneys slithers down from the top of my head and lands in my lap.

"I hope that this has been a suitable lesson," Beatrice sneers, as Angelina giggles next to her. "Jessica, the time for playing games is over. I am fastidious about detail and I insist on doing things properly. The documents remain on the table in the grand hall, and that is where you will sign them. I hope you realize that I could drag you there and force you to do the deed, but I believe it would be better all round if you come to your senses and join us willingly. I shall be in the east conservatory waiting for you, and I very much hope that after a moment's contemplation you will do the right thing."

She turns to walk away, before hesitating for a moment.

"Don't even try to escape again," she adds darkly. "And don't take too long, either. If you haven't signed the documents by sunrise, I shall be forced to become... more inventive."

With that she makes her way off into the next room, and Angelina follows her after a few seconds.

Left kneeling all alone on the floor, covered in blood and guts, I feel for a moment as if my mind might be about to shatter. I'm still clinging to the hope that somehow this is going to turn out to be some huge prank, or the most realistic dream I've ever had in my life, but a few seconds later I realize that I can actually taste some of the blood dribbling down onto my lips; I spit it out across the floor, and then slowly I get to my feet as I start to understand that I really only have one option. I have to sign that damn document, and then I have to hope that I can find a way to stop Beatrice killing me.

And then I have to get the hell out of Prym Hall and try to pretend that none of this ever happened. I turn to hurry to the door, but in that moment my feet slip in the blood and I let out a brief cry as I slam back down against the floor.

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Chapter Twenty

Stepping through into one of the other rooms, on tottering legs that feel as if they're going to suddenly drop from under me, I spot Harry's coffin over by the window. I hadn't even realized that I was in this part of the house, and I tell myself that I just need to find the room with the documents, but after a moment I wander over to the coffin.

Harry's corpse is still in there, and I can't help but resent the calm look on his face. He can come and go as he pleases now, and evidently he'd rather not be around too much when the shit really hits the fan.

"I don't blame you," I murmur, before turning and starting to walk toward the doors. "You're better off out of it."

"There's really nothing I can do."

Stopping, I let out a sigh. I'm clutching my right elbow, which I banged really hard when I slipped on the blood in the other room.

"They're your family," I point out, not turning to him. "Dead or alive, you still have some responsibility for this... complete mess you've left behind."

"I heard them, you know," he continues. "When I was up on that stepladder, I realized I could hear a faint whispering sound. I kept looking down, trying to work out where it was coming from. Finally I understood that Beatrice and Angelina were hiding under the table I was on, and I spotted Beatrice's hand reaching up to knock the stepladder. And then, miracle of miracles, the wretched old table collapsed. I fell, and the table crushed them both, and the next thing I knew I woke up on the table and I realized that we were all dead."

"That's quite a way to go," I point out, although I can't summon too much enthusiasm or anger. I just want to get this over with. "Apparently they didn't feel any pain. That's a shame."

"I didn't feel much either," he admits. "Just some soreness after. That's not much to sum up an entire lifetime, is it? Soreness."

"I still don't get what this is really about," I continue, turning and seeing to my surprise that he's sitting up in the coffin like some kind of English countryside Dracula. "Beatrice wants me to sign some papers so that she gets the house instead of any of it going to Jessica. To your Jessica,

I mean.”

“That's what she's always cared about,” he tells me wearily. “The house. The grounds. The jewelry. Well, that and humiliating me, I suppose.”

He furrows his brow.

“You're absolutely covered in blood,” he adds. “Did something happen?”

“But she knows that the real Jessica's dead,” I remind him. “How can a dead person own a house?”

“It merely means that nobody will come snooping,” he suggests. “That's what she really wants. To be left alone.”

“But she could forge my signature,” I reply. “There are a million little tricks she could try. She didn't have to come up with this elaborate plan to get me here.”

“Oh, but she did.”

“Why?”

“Because she's as mad as a March hare,” he adds, before starting to climb somewhat awkwardly out of the coffin. “Seriously, she's a fruitcake, and she's an absolute stickler for rules and regulations and... signatures and all that crap. It doesn't matter how things really work out there in the rest of the world, Jessica. All that matters is how Beatrice *thinks* it works. When you go and sign those documents, I wouldn't be surprised if she's got a wax seal ready for the occasion. I knew she was odd when I married her, but it was only much later that I realized that she's completely bat-shit crazy.”

“She's not the only one round here who's a few bricks short of an outhouse,” I say under my breath.

“Give her what she wants,” he continues. “There's no point fighting it. What's it to you, anyway? For what it's worth, I think there's a good chance that she'll let you walk away once it's done to her satisfaction. She'll make you promise to never breathe a word of this to anyone, and she'll truly believe that your word is your bond. She can be so cruel in some ways, yet so trusting and naive in others.” He pauses again. “If my Jessica was alive,” he adds, “I'd fight tooth and nail to stop all of this. But I know now that Jessica is dead, I overheard everything, so what's the point? Let Beatrice have the place. Let her win. Who cares?”

“The people she's murdered? The people she got Charles to kill?”

“I don't see their ghosts hanging around to set things straight,” he points out, before holding his hands out. “Do you? Do you see more ghosts

here? Obviously they're content with things. Hell, they're probably just relieved to have escaped from the relentless grind of being alive. It's really not that bad being dead, you know. It's quite like being alive, just without the relentless pressure to do things."

"She had your daughter killed," I remind him. "Your Jessica was driven to suicide by Charles, and he'd been sent by Beatrice."

"I know, but... what can I do about it?"

"You can be angry!" I hiss, stepping toward him. "You can not give up!"

"It's a bit late for that," he says, rolling his eyes. "I'm dead."

"Does that mean you stop caring?" I continue. "It's one thing for me to be willing to sign those papers, I don't really have any skin in this game other than survival, but you... Jessica was your daughter and you don't even seem to care that your insane wife caused her death!"

"I can only fight for so long," he tells me.

"When have you *ever* fought?" I ask.

"Stop it!" he snaps angrily, waving me away. "You don't understand! It's all just too hard!"

"Wow," I reply, as a shudder runs through my bones. "I thought my father was the worst father in the world, but now here I am looking at you, and it turns out that there's another Harry Prym who's so much worse."

He starts shaking his head.

"You know I'm right," I continue. "I've found the one person who makes my own dad seem like a saint. Sure, my Harry was a waste of space, but at least he could summon up a bit of care once in a while. And I'm fairly sure that if I'd been murdered, he at least would have lifted a finger to try to make sure that my killer paid."

"I can't do anything!" he sighs, clearly determined to make himself seem like the victim here. "I'm dead! All I can do is haunt this place!"

"Being dead isn't stopping Beatrice."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he replies, taking a step back from me. "It's alright for you to lecture me when you have no idea what it's like to die. Believe it or not, I'm actually quite bummed out about the whole thing and I'm still trying to process it. So don't go telling me how I should or shouldn't behave, because you have no idea! You're so young, you don't have a clue how the world really works."

He hesitates, and then he lets out another sigh.

"I wasn't even sorry that I died," he admits. "Not really. I suppose I was more relieved, in a way. I almost finished myself off a few times before that. I tied a noose one morning, but I couldn't bring myself to put my head through it. I found one of the old hunting rifles and sat with it in my mouth for a while, but I couldn't pull the trigger. One time I even smashed a vase over my head, hoping that would finish me off, but I suppose I didn't hit myself hard enough. I woke up with the broken vase next to me, but I suppose it only shattered when I dropped it."

"You tried to kill yourself by hitting your own head with a vase?"

"I was desperate and cowardly."

"That couldn't even work," I tell him. "No-one could actually kill themselves that way. A survival instinct would always kick in."

"Another lecture!" he moans. "I give up, okay? I know that doesn't make me a good person, I know it makes me a lousy father and a woeful ghost, but haunting just seems like such hard work. Let Beatrice have the house. After all the effort she's put in, she probably deserves it. I know she's dead, and Angelina too, but they're two peas from the same pod and I'm sure we'll mostly be able to avoid one another. I'll just find the dingiest, darkest corners of the house and loiter there, and I'll keep out of the way for the rest of eternity."

Staring at him, I can barely believe what I'm hearing. I get that being dead is quite a major life event, and that it probably robs a person of certain ambitions, but at the same time I truly can't understand why he's not angrier about everything that happened. I thought ghosts were usually vengeful, that they set out to right the wrongs from their lives, but he truly seems not to care that Beatrice had Jessica killed, or that she gets the house now, or even that his own wife and daughter died while trying to engineer his death. They murdered him as well, and his only reaction now seems to be to fade away to nothing.

"Perhaps after my funeral I'll cease to exist," he suggests with a shrug. "That wouldn't be so bad. I could live with that. Or not, as the case might be. But you get the idea."

"I think you faded away a long time ago," I tell him, unable to hide a sense of genuine disgust. "Definitely before you died."

Turning, I head out into the corridor.

"Where are you going?" he calls after me.

"Where do you think? I'm going to sign those stupid papers so that

Beatrice gets exactly what she wants, and then I'm going to try to get out of here so that I never have anything to do with your stinking family ever again. Are you satisfied now?"

"Good!" he yells indignantly. "Go! Finally you've come around to my way of thinking! There's no point fighting any of this! If Beatrice wants the house so much, she can have it! Who else is left for me to give it to, anyway?"

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Chapter Twenty-One

Reaching the desk, I look down at the paperwork. Beatrice wanted me to sign it in triplicate earlier; I managed two of the signatures and now there's only one left. Once that's done, the house will belong to her and my only focus will be on trying to get the hell out of here.

“Are you going to do it?”

Glancing up, I see Angelina standing in the doorway.

“Are you?” she continues eagerly, and I can hear the anticipation positively foaming in her mouth.

“Do you think I should?” I ask.

“Mummy will be so happy,” she tells me. “All she's ever wanted was to secure the future of the house. Even when we died, she quickly found a way to still make her plans work. I really respect her, you know. She never lets anything stand in her way.” She pauses. “I don't really understand how it all works, but Mummy says that's just because I'm young and a little bit stupid. I just have to trust her.”

“Will she let me go?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If I sign the last of the papers,” I continue, “will she actually let me walk out of here?”

“Oh, of course she will.”

“I'm not so confident.”

“Mummy is a stickler for honor,” she tells me. “Hasn't this whole rigmarole taught you anything about our family? I know you're not my real half-sister. Mummy told me everything. I wish you were, though. But the point is, Mummy's word is priceless and she'll absolutely let you go, just so long as she can be sure that you'll keep your little mouth shut. You'll do that, won't you? Can't you see that it'll be best for everyone?”

“After I leave this place,” I reply, “I don't even want to remember that it exists.”

“Then sign, and everything will be alright.”

I look down at the empty spot on the last page. If I'd just signed this a few hours ago, so much trouble could have been avoided. Still, there's no point delaying any longer, so I pick up the pen and then – after one final

moment of contemplation – I do the deed.

I sign.

“There,” I mutter, before setting the pen down and looking at Angelina again. “It's done. Your mother has got everything she wanted. She's won and -”

Before I can get another word out, I hear someone singing in the distance. Puzzled, I look past Angelina and see the corridor, and I realize that someone is singing their heart out as they get closer. And then, just as I start to recognize the voice, I see Beatrice dancing into view with jewels and necklaces and pearls and all sorts of other treasures clasped in her hands. It's almost as if she somehow knew the moment that I set the pen down; in fact, I'm fairly sure that the ink isn't even dry.

“She's done it, Mummy,” Angelina says, keeping her eyes fixed on me. “She's signed the papers. Does that mean -”

“Prym Hall is safe at last,” Beatrice sings, her voice sounding so shrill and high-pitched as she dances to the desk and sets some of the jewels down, “and so are all the things in it. Jessica, look at all of this for a moment, isn't it utterly beautiful? Some of these gems are more than a century old.. They should perhaps be in a museum somewhere, but then all the poor oiks would look at them. I suppose it's much better for them to be here, where they can be properly appreciated by people who actually appreciate their value.”

“Here's the paperwork,” I say bitterly, sliding the documents over to her. “I'm not sure how much good it'll all be to you, though. Dead people can't own property.”

“No, but their relatives can,” she coos happily. “Darling, I didn't want to burden you with the details earlier, but it's all quite simple. Once Harry died, the estate was supposed to be divided between me, Angelina and that wretched other daughter of his.”

“The other Jessica,” I murmur.

“Now she's dead, so it would automatically revert to me,” she continues. “Harry's will was quite specific about the process, even about what should happen in the event that any of his heirs were already dead. So following my unfortunate demise, and the demise of my dear Angelina, there's really nobody left to inherit except my darling brother Teddy.” She looks up at the clock. “And he's going to be arriving by helicopter, straight from the airport once his flight from Nice lands, a little after sunrise.”

“So that's why you needed this all done before the sun comes up,” I say with a sigh. “Your brother's going to take these documents and use them to establish himself as the legitimate heir to Prym Hall.”

“And then it will be in my family forever,” she tells me, unable to stifle a grin, “and I can get on with what I really want to do with the place. At first I was disconsolate when I realized that I'd died, but now I see that things couldn't have worked out better. This way I'll get to stay here forever, watching generation after generation of my family as they turn Prym Hall into a magnificent success. What could be better than that? Plus, I'll be able to put my own stamp on the place. After all, I have a point to prove.”

“Was it really worth murdering people?” I ask, truly disgusted by her glee.

“A taxi driver, a butler and a drug addict?” she replies, raising an arched eyebrow. “They were hardly pillars of society, were they? I'm sure if I'd explained things properly, they'd have understood why their lives had to end for the greater good. Teddy's going to be so happy when he gets here.”

She holds up some more of the jewelry.

“Isn't it wonderful?” she continues. “It's so... shiny!”

“I've done what you wanted,” I tell her, and now my heart is racing as I realize that I have to hope she's as good as her word. “I really don't care about this house, it's none of my business anyway. Am I free to leave?”

“I've always been clear that you can depart,” she replies, “just so long as I know that I can trust you to not meddle in the future.”

“You can trust me,” I say, rolling my eyes as I step around the desk and head toward the door. “You don't need to worry about that.”

“Oh, but can I?”

“Don't even -”

Before I can finish, the door slams shut ahead of me. I stop, and in that moment I feel a flicker of fear running up my back. I can still hear the jewelry rattling, but I'm starting to think that my earlier fears were more than justified.

“I'm not so sure,” Beatrice continues. “Don't get me wrong, I'd love to let you go if I thought that I possibly could, but there's just this nagging doubt in the back of my mind and it won't leave me alone.”

I turn to Angelina, and she winces as if she always knew that this was going to happen.

“We had a deal,” I tell Beatrice, still trying to not panic.

“But it's a deal that's contingent upon my trusting you,” she purrs, “and there's still this gnawing part of me that worries you'll rush off and start telling people all about what happened here. I can just tell that you're one of those do-gooders who insist that every dead taxi driver or scraggly drug addict deserves respect.” She holds up some more of the jewelry, admiring it in the low light. “And that presents a wrinkle in my plan.”

I open my mouth to reply to her, to tell her that I swear I won't even mention this place to another living soul, but at that moment I spot a dark figure lurking in the shadows nearby. Convinced that Harry must finally have come to his senses, I watch as the figure steps forward, and then a shiver runs through my bones as I see the ghostly face of Charles glaring back at me.

“Find Rose,” he whispers, and now he sounds even more urgent than before. “You have to do it before it's too late. You have to find Rose and... tell her that I'm so sorry.”

“Who's Rose?” I ask.

I wait for an answer, but instead he simply fades away to nothing.

“What did you just say?” Beatrice snaps.

I hesitate for a few seconds, trying to work out what Charles could possibly have meant. Various possibilities are running through my mind, yet I'm finding it hard to pin any of them down. And then, slowly, I remember everything that Charles told me about his involvement in Jessica's death. He said that he tempted her to start taking drugs again, but he never actually said that this was why the police were looking for her. Sure, I'm having to draw some pretty massive conclusions and I admit that I might be completely wrong, but there really seems to be no reason why Charles would be fussing about some random girl unless...

Unless she isn't random, and she's somehow connected to this mess. So many people seem to have various claims to Prym Hall, but... what if there's one more?

“Rose,” I whisper, as I start to realize that my best bet for getting out of here might be to put the cat among the pigeons and cause real chaos. I don't even know if my theory is correct, but I figure it should at least stir things up a little.

“You know,” Beatrice says softly, setting the jewelry down as she turns to me, “I've thought it over and I really believe that letting you go would be foolish. In which case, there's only one thing to do with you.”

“A granddaughter,” I reply.

“What are you blathering on about now?” she asks dismissively.

“Harry has a granddaughter,” I say again, under my breath, before turning and cupping my hands around my mouth, then screaming at the top of my lungs. “Harry!” I yell. “You've got a granddaughter!”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

“What in the name of God are you talking about?” Beatrice asks. “How could Harry possibly have a granddaughter?”

“Jessica had a daughter!” I yell, turning and looking around with my hands still around my mouth. “Harry, you have to listen to me! You have a granddaughter and her name is Rose, and I’m no expert but I think that means she might have a better claim on the inheritance than -”

“Shut up!” Beatrice snaps, and suddenly an invisible force sends me crashing across the room and slamming against the far wall.

Letting out a pained groan, I slump down and then lean forward. I don’t exactly know how this psycho bitch can do all these things, but I’m getting really sick of her little demonstrations.

“There’s no granddaughter,” she snarls. “If there was, Charles would have told me.”

“Not if he was too ashamed,” I reply breathlessly, looking up at her as she marches toward me. I’ve got a cut lip, but right now I don’t care about that. “You sent him to London to kill Jessica,” I continue, “but you didn’t realize that she had a baby of her own. And while Charles might have pushed Jessica into killing herself, he wasn’t enough of a monster to kill a newborn child, so she’s out there somewhere. Her name is Rose and she’s Harry’s granddaughter and since you and Angelina are both dead... by my reckoning, that makes Rose the rightful inheritor of this entire estate.”

“Enough with your lies!” she hisses angrily.

“She’s not right, is she?” Angelina asks, and she sounds absolutely terrified now. “Mummy, please, tell me that she’s not right. I can’t have a -”

She pauses for a moment, clearly struggling to make sense of everything.

“Wait, does that make me somebody’s aunt?”

“Of course she’s not right!” Beatrice spits. “The whole idea’s ludicrous! Charles would never have kept something like this from me! The stupid girl’s just trying to confuse us... and annoy us!”

“No, I’m not,” I reply, watching her carefully for a moment as the cogs continue to turn in my head. “Well, that’s an added bonus, but I just so happen to be onto something. And you know it, too.”

“Child,” she begins, “you are meddling in something that's far above your station in life. You have no right to involve yourself in the affairs of the upper classes. We are far more important than -”

“I finally get it,” I add, and I immediately see the irritation in her eyes. I bet no-one has ever dared to interrupt her before. “Let's have a reset moment here. Your whole scheme never really made much sense to me, but I was too wrapped up in the madness to look at it properly. Sure, you might have an army of top lawyers waiting in the wings to somehow make it look like the other Jessica signed those papers, but... you knew she was dead, didn't you? So why do the papers need to be forged at all, unless...”

My voice trails off, but I can see from the expression on her ghostly face that I'm getting to the truth.

“Unless you know somehow that Jessica had a child,” I continue, “and you need to make sure that nobody else finds out, because then that child would inherit a big old share in the house. And with you and Angelina dead, that share would probably become the whole thing. You want -”

“I want what's rightfully mine!” Beatrice snaps angrily.

“Except it's *not* rightfully yours,” I point out.

“Isn't it?” she asks. “Harry made his money thanks to a pure fluke. He bought this place and renamed it. My own family has money, but it's new money. Old money is what really carries weight in this country. Old money is what elevates a family to a higher status than new money can ever achieve. I've always wanted to become part of the aristocracy.” Tears are filling her eyes now, which isn't something I thought could happen to ghosts, but I guess I'm no expert. “All I ever wanted was to be accepted,” she whimpers. “To put on a tiara and be seen as one of them, rather than as an interloper.”

She pauses, and then she steps back and sits in a chair near the window. Putting her hands over her face, she seems finally to be breaking down.

“It's over,” she says softly. “I just don't have the strength for it, not now. Being dead has put something of a crimp in my style.”

“Mummy, is this really true?” Angelina sobs, rushing over and dropping to her knees next to her mother. “What... what are we going to do now? Am I really an aunt?”

“Your father used to taunt me,” Beatrice replies, pulling her closer for a hug. “He used to tell me that I could never be properly rich, and now I

realize that he was right. I suppose, deep down, I wanted to prove him wrong. That was my sole driving force, and now I can't even do that. I might as well accept what I am... a truly mediocre ghost with no purpose. And the museum was such a silly idea."

"Museum?" I whisper.

"I just can't keep going," she whimpers.

I open my mouth to point out that she's directly or indirectly involved in three murders, but at the last second I realize that this is perhaps not the right moment. At least I've managed to talk her out of this ludicrous scheme, and I let out a sigh as I finally understand that my job here is done. In fact – and this is a very strange admission to make – I actually feel slightly sorry for Beatrice Prym. She looks so pathetic and sad now that her plans are in tatters.

Suddenly the door slams open behind me and I hear footsteps marching into the room.

"Did someone say something about a granddaughter?" Harry snaps.

Turning, I watch as he storms over to me.

"Jessica had a child of her own?" he continues, raising an arch eyebrow. "Well, that changes everything, doesn't it? Beatrice, did you hear all of that? I have a grandchild, which means that the whole bloody estate will go to her now. Believe me, I know the paperwork inside and out, and since everyone else is dead the little baby will inherit everything."

He turns to me.

"What's the child's name?"

"Rose," I reply, "but -"

"Rose!" he roars excitedly. "Such a fine name!"

He turns to Beatrice again, and I can see the contempt in his eyes.

"Did you hear that, you silly old goose? Your whole plan has failed, and do you know *why* it failed? It failed because at the end of the day, nothing you do can ever change the fact that you were born into a lowly family. You can put on all the dresses and tiaras you want, you can festoon yourself with jewelry until it's coming out of your ears, but none of it changes the fact that you don't really belong."

Beatrice looks up at him, with tears still running down her eyes.

"Okay," I say cautiously, "Harry, I don't think this is the time to get her angry again or -"

"I told you this all along!" he booms, clearly enjoying himself as he hurries to the cabinet in the corner and takes out a glass, before pouring himself some brandy. "I told you over and over, Beatrice, that you just don't have it in you. I know your brother told you as well. You should have been content with your lot in life. Honestly, you did pretty well, you climbed the social ladder as high as you could." He downs the brandy in one go and immediately starts to pour himself another. "I'm surprised you don't have a nose bleed."

"Shut up, Harry," she sneers.

"Harry," I add, "this isn't helping. She's given up, so let's not piss her off in case -"

"You don't know Beatrice like I know Beatrice," he adds theatrically, before downing his second brandy and starting to pour a third. "Oh, she's always been a little ball of calculating rage. You have no idea how many crackpot schemes she's had over the years, and they all turn to dust. Take this one, for example. In the cold light of day, no lawyer or solicitor would ever fall for it. I suppose they might be hoodwinked into getting one Jessica Prym confused for another, especially with a sufficiently stuffed brown envelope in their pocket, but how could a ghost run a country house? It's just another example of Beatrice's foolishness."

"Shut up," she snarls again, and I can see her old anger returning.

"Harry, this isn't the time to gloat," I say cautiously, as Beatrice slowly gets to her feet. "Beatrice has only just calmed down, and I think she's seen the error of her ways and it's probably very important that she *stays* calm."

"You don't need to lecture me about my wife," he says, rolling his eyes with excess drama. He's already pouring some more brandy. "God, this tastes good. It's nice to be proved right about something yet again."

"Now I remember," Beatrice says firmly, "why I was doing all of this in the first place. I remember why I hate you!"

"Let's not talk people back into making more mistakes," I tell Harry, before watching for a moment as he drinks more of the brandy.

"Wait, I'm confused... how does a ghost drink?"

"You should have seen Beatrice when I first met her," he adds with a smile. "This was just before her brother made his millions. She was working in a bar, of all places. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine frumpy Beatrice Prym working in a place where people are supposed to

enjoy themselves? Or Beatrice Hilda Duckworth as she was back then. Let me tell you, she wasn't very good at it.”

He turns and sneers at her.

“Not that she's any good at *anything*, really.”

Hurrying over to him, I grab his arm. He's well on his way to pouring yet another drink, and I'm starting to think that he seems a little tipsy now.

“Do you want one after all?” he asks.

“Harry,” I say cautiously, as I spot Beatrice slowly stepping up behind him, “I think something's really wrong here. I mean... something new, something to add to the pile.”

“It's all fine now,” he tells me. “Beatrice'll calm down when -”

“Harry!” I say firmly, before putting two fingers on the side of his neck and feeling a strong and very distinct heartbeat, then twisting his ear so that he lets out a pained cry. “You're not dead!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

He opens his mouth to reply, but at the last second I see a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

“I beg your pardon?” he says finally.

“You're not dead,” I tell him again.

“Of course I'm dead,” he replies dismissively. “I've been dead for about a week now.”

“You have a pulse.”

“That's probably just gas.”

“You're drinking.”

“So?”

“Have you been eating over the past week?”

“Well, of course,” he continues. “I just assumed that was a perk of being a ghost. You can eat and eat and eat, and you never get fat. You should see all the cans in the larder, there's enough to last a good while yet.”

“And have you been sleeping in that coffin?”

“I woke up in there,” he explains. “Not *right* after the accident, granted. I think it was the next morning. Beatrice and Angelina were standing in front of the coffin saying all these things about how I'd broken my neck when I fell, blah blah blah, and I didn't really see any reason to doubt them.”

Reaching up, he feels the side of his own neck for a moment.

“Blimey, you're right about the pulse, though,” he adds. “That *is* a bit odd, isn't it?”

“You're not dead,” I tell him again.

He sighs.

“You're not!”

“Then how did Beatrice and Angelina manage to walk through me?” he asks.

“Because *they're* dead!”

“Well... then why didn't they respond whenever I was in the room? Why did they ignore me as if I wasn't even there?”

“I suspect that's probably because they were annoyed at you,” I suggest. “Harry, I'm serious here. You're not dead.”

“No, he's not,” Beatrice snarls, “but we can soon fix that.”

“Is it me,” Harry continues, “or is it getting rather chilly in here? I always thought that was due to the complete lack of insulation, which I could never afford to pay for since -”

“Move!” I hiss, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him across the room so quickly that he drops his brandy glass, which smashes on the floor behind us. “Harry, how can you spend an entire week thinking you're dead when you're not?”

As soon as we're out in the corridor, I push the door shut and turn to him. He's checking his pulse again, while muttering under his breath, and I think perhaps I'm starting to get through to him.

After all, he's actually got breath to mutter *under*.

“Whenever I think I've got this house figured out,” I say after a moment, “one of you manages to throw another spanner in the works. Are you all completely out of your minds?”

“Does this explain why I've still been needing the bathroom?” he asks airily. “I did wonder about that, but I supposed it was just force of habit.”

“It's because you're alive.”

“And I had a tickly cough for a few days. I thought that was peculiar.”

“It's because you're alive, Harry.”

“And I've not been feeling quite like myself,” he adds. “I ran up the stairs the other day, and I got out of breath. I thought at the time, wouldn't a ghost -”

“You're alive, Harry!” I shout, rushing toward him and grabbing him by the lapels, then giving him a good – and very angry – shake. “Can you get that through your thick head? You've spent the past week thinking you're a ghost but you're actually alive!”

“Don't twist my ear again!”

“Have you walked through any walls?”

“I was working up to that.”

“Have you seriously not even wondered once whether there might have been a mistake?”

“She told me I was dead!” he stammers, pointing toward the door.

“I just assumed that she knew what she was talking about for once!” He pauses for a few seconds. “I mean, I must admit, I was starting to think that the whole death thing wasn't how I expected it to be. Not that I'd given it much thought beforehand, but -”

Suddenly the door's handle starts to turn. I rush over and hold it tight, and a moment later I realize that I can hear Beatrice laughing on the door's other side.

“She's insane,” I whisper.

“So where's this granddaughter, then?” Harry asks. “Is she here?”

“Of course she's not here,” I reply, keeping hold of the handle as I feel it starting to shudder. “She's probably somewhere in London. She probably been taken into care or something like that after your daughter died.”

“To think, she's now the heir to my entire estate,” he mutters. “I wish I'd got to meet her while I was still alive.”

“You're not dead!” I yell. “Can't you try to remember that for five seconds?”

“Oh, right.” He nods gently. “Force of habit.”

“We have to get out of here,” I continue, still holding the door shut even though I'm fairly sure that Beatrice is only toying with me now. She could step right through at any moment. “This whole mess really isn't anything to do with me and I don't feel like it's my job to play the role of therapist for your bat-shit crazy family. Now we know you're alive, Harry, I really think you're the one who has to fix it all.”

“I suppose I'm a widower now,” he muses, as if he doesn't have a care in the world. “I might take a holiday. Somewhere like the Italian coast, perhaps Amalfi or -”

“Don't you have more important things to think about right now?” I snap.

“My old friend Johnny Balagoni owns a lovely restaurant in Naples. I used to spend wonderful summers there, and it's been such a long time since I was able to relax. I really think I deserve a nice long holiday.”

“Harry!” I shout.

“Hmm?”

He turns to me.

“You know,” I add, “I think I'm actually starting to understand why Beatrice is the way she is. You're just a total -”

Before I can finish, the handle suddenly falls still. I hesitate for a moment, but the laughter has stopped on the other side of the door and I can't help glancing around in an attempt to spot any ghostly figures. At least when the door was shaking, I knew where Beatrice was lurking, but now she could be anywhere.

"I don't think you're being very nice to me right now," Harry says after a few seconds. "I've had a rather trying day and frankly I think I could use a little more support."

"If you're not careful," I reply, turning to him, "I'll turn you into a ghost myself."

"You don't mean that."

I narrow my eyes.

"Shall we get out of here?" he continues, forcing a smile. "I'm sure we'll be able to make sense of everything once we're away from the house, and there are probably some nice fellows I can pay to come in and sort of... Hoover up any ghosts that need getting rid of."

"I think your priority needs to be getting to London," I point out.

"Why would I do that?"

I wait for the penny to drop.

"Is there something in London that I need to do?" he asks innocently.

"You have a granddaughter!"

"Oh, right," he replies, before managing a faint chuckle. "Sorry, that's still rather new and I suppose I'm having trouble getting my head around it. Can't you look her up on your thing?" He nods toward my pocket. "You've still got your thing with you, haven't you?"

"If I had my 'thing' with me, don't you think I'd have called for help by now?" I ask, before hearing a heavy thudding sound coming from somewhere far off in the house. "Harry, you're right, we need to get out of here."

"Before Beatrice has a chance to attack us?"

"No," I reply through gritted teeth. "Before I kill you myself."

Storming past him, I start hurrying along the corridor, and I hear him huffing and puffing as he tries to keep up with me.

"You don't have to walk so fast, you know," he mutters. "You know, I'm still a little bemused by this whole situation. Obviously Beatrice has always been something of a crackpot, but she's really stepped over the

line this time. Then again, I suppose some of it might be my fault.”

“You think?”

“I should have recognized that she was poor marriage material right from the start,” he continues. “A few people tried to warn me, but I thought I knew best and I pushed on, and I admit that now I'm starting to regret it. I just felt sorry for her when I met her in that bar, that's all, and one of my greatest failings has always been a desire to help the unfortunate. I think I was becoming rather lonely, and I fancied the idea of getting married and... well, Beatrice just showed up at the right moment in the right place with the right plunging neckline. Or the wrong moment, as it turns out.”

“Fascinating,” I reply as we reach the entrance hallway and I head toward the front door. “If -”

“Daddy?” Angelina says, suddenly materializing right in front of me, stopping us in our tracks. With tears in her eyes, she stares at Harry for a moment before taking a step forward. “Daddy, please... don't leave me here alone with Mummy.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Angelina,” I say cautiously, “we don't have time for this. We -”

“Daddy, I know I've always been a terrible disappointment,” she continues, ignoring me as she looks at her father, “but it's not too late for me to change. Well, I suppose in one sense it's too late, but please don't abandon me. I want to do better.”

I know I should just storm straight past – or even through – her, but I can't help feeling desperately sorry for this poor girl. A solitary candle is burning on a table nearby, casting a flickering glow that only serves to make Angelina's ghostly presence look more ethereal than ever. A moment later, hearing a clicking sound, I turn and see to my surprise that Harry is lighting a cigarette.

“You smoke?” I say, furrowing my brow.

“Don't you start,” he mutters, before taking a long drag. “I'll quit eventually.”

“Have you been smoking while you thought you were dead?”

“It takes the edge off,” he says archly.

“And *that* didn't give you a clue that you were still alive?” I ask despairingly, unable to quite believe how this idiot manages to function. “You didn't think that it was odd?”

“You know, I don't like your tone,” he tells me between puffs. “I think -”

“Give me that!” I snap, grabbing the cigarette and then dropping it to the floor, before crushing it with my heel. I then take the packet of cigarettes from his pocket. “You can have these back when you deserve them!”

“I -”

“Daddy, please,” Angelina whimpers, “I don't want to be left alone here with Mummy. She scares me.”

“Join the club,” I tell her.

A moment later we all hear footsteps somewhere nearby, although when I turn and look across the hallway I see no sign of Beatrice.

“She's still just playing with us,” I whisper under my breath. “She must know that we can't get away from her. I think she's actually enjoying

all of this.”

“Angelina, this isn't the right time for another of your little meltdowns,” Harry tells the girl. “Frankly, I think you're being very self-centered, and it's not a good look. I blame your mother, of course, she clearly instilled this very narrow-minded attitude in you and I'm really not sure what can be done to straighten you out again. It might be too late, but you certainly can't expect me to fix all these things for you.” He waves at her dismissively. “Now, do you mind getting out of the way? The grown-ups have some far more pressing concerns.”

“I hate you!” she sobs, before rushing past us and hurrying up the grand central staircase. “I hate you all!”

As she runs, she fades from view, but a moment later I hear a loud bumping sound coming from somewhere else in the house. I look along the corridor we just left, and in the gloom I realize that I can just about make out a figure coming this way, and already the air is starting to feel much colder.

Upstairs, a door slams shut.

“I suppose Beatrice was the other ghost all along, wasn't she?” Harry suggests. “Or Angelina. Or both of them, at times. I knew there was something rather scary here, but I suppose I didn't want to see their ghosts so I hid whenever they showed up.” He turns and heads to the front door, trying to open it but quickly finding that it's sealed shut. “Still, that's none of my business now,” he adds, still struggling with the door. “I have a date with a flight to Italy. I might even stop by Monaco first. Why is this thing wedged so hard? Jessica, do me a favor and come and help. I should be able to do it myself, but for some reason I can't.”

Before I can reply to him, I see Beatrice emerging from the corridor and stepping into the hallway, and I immediately realize that she has the power to keep us trapped here, perhaps forever.

“Jessica, are you going to help me or not?” Harry sighs, evidently having not even noticed the arrival of his dead wife. “It's very disagreeable of you to not even lend a hand. I miss the days when Charles was here to do things like this. When the whole mess is over, I really need to find myself another butler, but until then I need you to do the honors.”

He tries the handle again.

“I thought this was how doors worked.”

“I think we've got bigger problems right now,” I tell him, as I see

the darkness and anger that has returned to Beatrice's eyes. She might have given up earlier, but Harry's little rant clearly got her right back in the zone. "*Much* bigger problems and -"

Suddenly hearing a clicking sound, I turn and see to my surprise that Harry has managed to get the door open. He glances at me, and I see a hint of fear in his eyes as he spots Beatrice coming closer, and then he turns and runs out of the house. I take a step after him, but in that moment the door slams shut, and when I rush over and try the handle I find that it's shut again.

"Harry!" I yell, banging on the door as I hear his footsteps racing away, followed by a bump and then silence. "Come back! Help me! You can't just leave me here! Harry!"

After a moment's hesitation, I hear a faint creaking sound coming from somewhere over my shoulder. An icy shiver runs through my bones, but I know there's no point delaying things so I slowly turn and see that Beatrice is watching me from a few feet away.

"Come on," she says after a few seconds, "you can't actually pretend that you're surprised. You've only known my husband for a few hours, but you must have realized by now that he's utterly unreliable in pretty much any kind of situation. He has run away again, like the coward that he is."

Hearing a sobbing sound, I look toward the staircase.

"School plays," Beatrice continues. "Outings. Awards. Dances. Sporting events. Concerts. You name it, Angelina tried everything in an attempt to get her father to pay her some attention, but he always had an excuse ready. I gave up long ago, of course, because I realized what sort of man he was shortly after I married him. I could accept my own sadness, but I couldn't do the same on Angelina's behalf. I kept trying to make him look after her more, but he was never interested. So do you really blame me for starting to hate him so very much?"

"That part I can just about get my head around," I tell her, "but... why did you bring *me* here?"

"The documents -"

"No, the real reason," I continue. "Don't give me all that crap about signing the documents, that was clearly just a smokescreen. Anyone

with even half a brain-cell could see through all of it in about five seconds flat.”

“I really *did* want to take the house for myself,” she replies. “That was the original plan. It's why I sent Charles to make sure that the real Jessica went back to jail. Then he accidentally ended up driving her to suicide, and we learned about the child. I'm sorry I lied about that earlier, but I thought it was for the best while Harry was listening. I suspect that's when I realized that despite all my convoluted schemes, I was never truly going to succeed, so I simply decided that I was going to do something old-fashioned.”

“You murdered your husband.”

“I arranged for him to have an accident. That's not quite the same thing. Unfortunately it went terribly wrong, and although he fell from the ladder, the table broke under him when he landed. Angelina and I must have softened his landing a little and we were killed instead. Harry was knocked out, and by the time he came around I'd understood that I was dead. I later placed him in the coffin, during one of his naps, so that he'd think he was dead when he woke up.”

“You just happened to have a coffin around the place?”

“It's an old house,” she points out. “We have a lot of strange things stashed away.”

“And then you lured me here,” I continue. “I still don't understand why.”

“It shouldn't be that difficult to figure out,” she says with a faint smile, holding her arms out as if to emphasize the simplicity of it all. “I wanted to torture Harry. I wanted to make him suffer. Bringing his daughter's namesake here and killing her is only the first of many, many little schemes that I've got lined up. I wish you hadn't told him that he's still alive, but I'll just alter my plans a little. I'm endlessly inventive. I actually borrowed the whole document fiasco idea from a crime novel I read a while ago, although I have to admit that in real life it didn't make as much sense as it seemed to make on the page. I shall have to take that into consideration in future.”

“Is this all you want to do with the rest of eternity?” I ask. “Are you just going to endlessly torment your husband?”

“When you put it like that,” she purrs, “it sounds even better.”

She slowly reached toward me with one hand.

“I'm going to grind him down,” she continues, “the way he ground me down. Do you know the worst part of it all? You saw the jewelry... Can you believe that he never let me have any of it? He always insisted that it was too grand for me, that I wasn't good enough. Do you have any idea how much that hurt?”

I open my mouth to reply, but in that moment I feel a faint tightness around my throat. I reach up, but a few seconds later I start to rise up off the floor and I realize that Beatrice is doing the same thing to me that she did earlier to Charles. I try to struggle and break free, but I can't breathe now as I'm raised higher and higher above the hallway.

“And if the living won't respect me as the mistress of this house,” Beatrice snarls, “then I suppose instead I shall just have to command the loyalty of the dead!”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Twisting first one way and then the other, I try desperately to break free, but I can already tell that Beatrice's invisible hold on me is too strong. I'm high above the floor now, almost level with the chandelier, and when I look down I realize that I'm about to get splattered the same way that Charles was splattered.

“Being dead is really so much fun!” Beatrice calls up to me, her voice tinged with a hint of madness. “You'll learn to embrace it, the way I'm embracing it. And soon you'll become the first of many ghosts in this house, ghosts that will serve to remind my husband of his endless failures in life!”

“Is that what you really want?” I gasp, still trying to get some air into my lungs as my legs flail helplessly beneath me. “Can't you find anything to do except haunt Harry?”

“He'll be back!” she shouts. “He always comes back! Your ghost will serve as a reminder of how he failed with the real Jessica, and then one by one I shall gather more and more ghosts to fill this place. Even Harry, with all his blinkers on, will eventually have to see what Prym Hall becomes! It's going to be a museum dedicated to his many failures... as a man, as a father and most importantly as a husband!”

I try again to argue with her, but I can no longer get any words out. A moment later the top of my head bumps against the hallway's ceiling, and when I look down I find that my vision is starting to become blurred. If I stay up here for much longer, I'm going to suffocate, but I'm certain that at any moment Beatrice is going to splat me against the tiled floor far below.

At least that should be quick.

For a moment, suspended up here, I find myself thinking back to my own father. I see a kind of montage of my childhood, of all the ways that he damn near killed me, but somehow I finally understand that at least he was paying me some attention. Sure, I suggested earlier that he was actively attempting to end my life, but that was just my joking way of trying to deal with the situation. The truth is, I had a bunch of scrapes and mishaps when I was younger, and that was because Dad actually took me out and did stuff with me. We had so many adventures, and while our relationship soured in later years, I can't deny that for a time he was actually a good – if

somewhat accident-prone – father. At least he didn't leave me to rot away, unloved and borderline unwanted, in some grand old mansion.

At least I was never ignored.

Damn it, I hate the fact that in my final moments, I've actually changed my mind about him.

Suddenly I start to fall, except 'falling' doesn't really describe it because actually I can feel an immense force slamming me down toward the floor. I see the tiles racing toward me and I brace myself for the explosion, for the vast bloodied splat that's going to finish my miserable existence. I've got to admit, this isn't how I saw my life ending. However, exploding on impact with the floor of an old English mansion might just be a pretty good metaphor for my time here in this world. It's just a shame that, in this final fraction of a second, I can't resist doing something that's completely and utterly lame.

I scream.

And then I come to a hard, jerking stop just a few inches above the floor.

Letting out a startled cry, I still brace for a few seconds, waiting for the inevitable explosion that'll send my blood and guts flying everywhere. Finally, however, I realize that none of this seems to be happening, and that instead I'm suspended here in mid-air as if all sorts of invisible forces are pulling on me from different directions. I can still feel Beatrice trying to slam me against the tiles, but I can also feel something – or someone – else trying to raise me up.

“Um... uh...”

Looking around, I try to make sense of this mess. I spot Beatrice, and the furious look on her face suggests that she's still trying very hard to kill me. I have no idea what's stopping her, but a moment later I turn and look the other way, just in time to see Harry Prym stepping through the front door and making his way back into the house.

And when I say *through* the front door, I mean literally through the wood.

“Let her go, Beatrice!” he says firmly. “Your quarrel isn't with this young lady. It's with me.”

“What are you doing?” she snarls back at him. “And *how* are you doing it?”

“I've spent my whole life running away from responsibilities,” he

tells her, puffing his chest out a little as if he's actually proud of himself for once. "That ends today. I know that I'm not perfect, but it's never too late for a man to change his ways and I see now that I have a duty to act responsibly. And I'm going to start by making sure that you no longer cause any harm to young Jessica. After all, she's entirely innocent in this situation and she deserves to be allowed to go on her way."

"Damn you, Harry Prym!" Beatrice hisses. "Damn you to Hell!"

In that moment the force pushing me down fades to nothing, and I'm sent bursting back up toward the top of the hallway. I cry out again, but at the last second I slow just enough that I only bang my head against the ceiling, and then I'm slowly and rather carefully allowed to drift back down.

"Sorry," Harry says a little sheepishly as I finally manage to set my feet back down on the floor. "I'm still getting used to all this ghost business."

"What happened?" I gasp, turning to him. I hesitate, before reaching out and finding that I can put a hand straight through his chest.

"Don't do that!" he says, stepping back. "It's rude!"

"Are you dead now?"

"I bet you thought I was going to run away, didn't you?" he continues with a faint smile. "The old Harry most certainly would have done, but I finally realized that I needed to show some responsibility for once. I also realized that I couldn't stop Beatrice while I was still alive, so I supposed that only another ghost would be able to stand up to her. And let's be honest, Jessica, I was rather living on borrowed time already."

"You killed yourself so that you could come back and save me?"

"Let's not get into the nitty-gritty," he replies. "The important thing is that I'm here now and -"

Before he can finish, an anguished scream rings out. We both turn and look across the hallway just as all the candles are snuffed out, and now only moonlight bathes the scene as I realize that there's no sign of Beatrice.

"She's angry," I say after a moment. "I think -"

In that instant, a large painting flies off one of the walls and crashes down against a dresser, breaking apart and leaving parts of the wooden frame to skate across the floor.

"I think dying might have driven her insane," I add.

"No, she had a temper when she was alive, too," Harry tells me.

"Dying doesn't really seem to have changed her too much at all."

“Harry Prym!” Beatrice screams, her voice filling the entire space. “Welcome to my greatest creation. Prym Hall is going to become a museum of your inadequacies! I'm going to fill it with ghosts, and all those ghosts are going to be eternal reminders of your utter failings as a human being! No-one will ever look back at your life and claim that you were a good or a decent man. They'll all know that you were a dismal disappointment to everyone who ever met you. And the best part is that you'll be trapped here forever as I keep adding more and more specimens to this place. Are you ready to finally see yourself the way that the rest of us have always seen you?”

“Well, that's not very nice,” Harry murmurs.

“At least it makes more sense than all the stuff with the documents,” I point out.

Before Harry can answer, another painting flies off the wall. This one almost hits me; I have to duck out of the way at the last second, and I turn in time to see the frame breaking against the opposite wall. As the portrait of some long-dead earl or duke crashes down against the floor, part of the broken frame flies up into the air and twists around. I just have time to spot a large nail poking out from the wood, before the chunk flies down toward me and I have to once again hop out of the way. The wood hits the door behind me with such force that the nail slams into the surface, and I'm fairly sure that wouldn't have been good for my health if it had connected with my face.

“She wants me to be the first exhibit in the museum,” I tell Harry, trying to hide my sense of panic. “I don't think she's going to stop until I'm _.”

“Watch out!” he gasps, holding up a hand.

I turn just as yet another piece of wood flies toward me, with yet another nail aiming at my head. This time I don't move out of the way in time, but Harry stops the wood at the last second and sends it crashing back across the room. And then, before I have a chance to thank him, I hear a creaking sound and look up just in time to see that the chandelier high above us is coming loose.

I pull back just in time, but I lose my footing and fall just as the huge chandelier crashes down just a few feet from me. All the glass baubles shatter, and I'm left horrified for a moment as the vast mess starts to settle.

“This is intolerable,” Harry splutters. “She's going to rip the place

apart. Soon there'll be nothing left except the things *she* cares about. She's going to sacrifice the history, just to accentuate the tat.”

“Like the jewelry,” I whisper, getting to my feet and brushing myself down. I try to figure out a better plan, but I quickly realize that there might be only one thing here that might actually work. “Harry,” I continue, turning to him, “can you distract her for long enough to let me get outside?”

“Running away, eh?” he replies with a hint of sadness in his voice. “Well, I suppose I shouldn't blame you.”

“I'm not running away,” I say firmly. “I just think I know how to get rid of Beatrice. But the plan's only going to work if you can give me some cover.”

“Cover?” He thinks for a moment, and then he manages a faint smile. “Well,” he adds finally, “I can certainly jolly well try.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Racing out through the back door, with all of Beatrice's jewelry in my arms, I immediately start hurrying across the moonlit lawn. I can hear crashes and bangs coming from inside the house, as if Beatrice's rage is echoing out through the night air, but I know I don't have time to look over my shoulder.

I can't see the well yet, but I know it's out there somewhere.

By the time I get halfway across the lawn, I'm already slightly out of breath and frankly I'm starting to lament my generally poor level of fitness. I tell myself for the millionth time that it's time to start using that gym membership I've been paying for over the past few months, and I swear that this time I'll actually show up to an induction, but a moment later all my thoughts are interrupted as my right foot catches on a small mound and I fall forward, spilling all the trinkets and gems out across the grass.

"Damn it!" I hiss, immediately starting to gather them together.

"Jessica!" Harry's voice bellows from inside the house. "I think she's noticed!"

Looking back, I'm horrified to spot Beatrice silhouetted in the back door, and I can somehow feel her glare almost burning into my soul.

"No time," I stammer, collecting as much of the jewelry as possible before stumbling to my feet and setting off again. "Stall her, Harry. You have to try to stall her."

I almost fall again, but somehow I manage to reach the far end of the lawn. I start hurrying through the forest, and after just a few paces I spot my destination up ahead. I don't think anyone has ever been this happy to see a well before, and as I reach the edge I stop to look down into the dark void below. I don't even know how deep this thing is, but now isn't the right moment to start taking complex measurements. I just have to hope that this cack-handed plan actually has a chance of succeeding and -

"Are you a complete moron?"

I freeze as I realize that Beatrice's voice just came from somewhere extremely close.

"Actually, don't answer that," she continues as – right on cue – I also hear a fox screaming in the distance. "I do so hate rhetorical questions."

“I -”

“Do you really think that this is about money?” she asks. “Or gold? Or jewels? Do you really think that I'm so pathetically, lamentably shallow?”

“That's kind of what I'm hoping,” I stammer, and I'm shocked to hear the fear in my own voice.

In truth, I know that this is my last hope, and that I probably don't have time to come up with any other plans if this one fails.

“Then I'm truly disappointed,” Beatrice says with a sigh.

“Evidently you've learned nothing whatsoever. I admit that the trappings of wealth here at Prym Hall were rather lovely, and that I have enjoyed them all, but everything I have done has been driven by much deeper concerns. Love, or the lack thereof, being the primary issue.”

“I get it,” I reply, still a little breathless after my run across the lawn, and still holding the jewels over the top of the well, ready to let them go. “Harry's not exactly the greatest husband who ever lived.”

“You have no idea,” she sneers. “He probably seems like some lovable buffoon to you, but can you imagine living with such a wreck of a man for year after year? I might spend the next millennium torturing him in the house, and I still won't come close to inflicting the pain and misery he caused me during our life together. My entire existence was ruined by him, and I truly regret the day I allowed him to whisk me away from my old world. At least when I worked in that miserable bar, I had no real hopes or dreams. Harry gave me my hopes, he allowed me to dare to have dreams, and then over the next few decades he systematically turned all my ambitions to dust.”

“Don't you think this is a bit of an overreaction, though?” I ask, stepping around the well while keeping the jewelry held out, until I see Beatrice watching me from just a few feet away. “Are you actually going to kill people so that you can add them to your macabre museum of all Harry's failings?”

“Why not?” she sneers. “He deserves it.”

“Yes, but we don't,” I point out. “I don't think I do, at least.”

“I don't really care, my dear,” she says archly. “You're still going to be the first exhibit in the museum.”

“Third,” I counter.

“Third?”

“After you and Angelina,” I continue. “Or fourth, after Charles. Fifth if you include Harry himself. It seems to me that you and your daughter will always be the first exhibits in the place, trapped in an endless cycle of rage and resentment. Always blaming someone else for the fact that your life turned out so poorly, rather than taking responsibility.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” she says darkly. “You might be right about one thing, though. Angelina will be the primary exhibit. The centerpiece.”

“Is that all you see your daughter as?” I ask. “A symbol of hatred?”

“Well, that's his fault again.”

“You could have left him,” I point out, “but you didn't. Why not?” I look down at the jewelry in my arms. “I think you liked all the wealth and fanciness more than you're willing to admit to yourself.”

“Absolutely not,” she snaps back at me. “The whole idea is so utterly ridiculous.”

“I think you liked it so much, you were willing to stay with Harry despite all the misery you felt. Hell, you were even willing to let your daughter stay there too. It's one thing to make yourself twisted and bitter, but you were willing to let the same thing happen to Angelina, and for what? Money? Comfort?” I look over at her again, and in the moonlight I can just about still make out the anger in her eyes, and that's how I realize that I'm bang on the target. “I don't doubt for one second that everything you told me about Harry is true,” I add, “but sticking around and *letting* the misery infect every part of your own life, and the life of Angelina... that's on you.”

“I would advise you to shut up,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Fair enough,” I reply, as I realize that the moment has finally arrived. “I'm not really big on speeches, anyway. And you know what they say, right? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

“I don't care about worldly goods,” she snarls. “I'm not that shallow.”

“Oh no?” I pause for a moment. “Prove it.”

She opens her mouth to reply, but in that instant I do exactly what I came out here to do in the first place. I hold the jewelry as far out over the well as I can manage and then I let go, and I watch as moonlight catches the vast collection of gems and precious stones and gold chains and all sorts of

other precious items tumbling down into the darkness. I swear, the whole moment seems to almost happen in slow motion as the last of the jewels fall out of sight, and then – before I have a chance to react again – I hear a scream of fury coming from nearby. I turn, just as Beatrice lunges straight through me and tries desperately to catch the falling jewelry.

And then I turn again, and I just about catch sight of her tumbling down into the well. I hear the various items splashing down into the water at the bottom, and then Beatrice's cry fades away into the night air and I'm left standing all alone. The worst part is that, in this rather shocking and emotionally charged moment, I find that all I can think about is a particularly awful pun that nobody in their right mind would ever let leave their lips.

“Well,” I say out loud. “Well well well.”

At least there's no-one else here to hear that. Apart from Beatrice, perhaps, although as I lean over the side of the well and look down into the darkness, I realize that nothing about her fate is permanent. The truth is, she could rise out of the well right now and probably splatter me against the trees, and she could go back to the house and continue her bonkers plan to create a museum dedicated to all of Harry's many inadequacies. But she won't do that, I'm pretty sure, because at the end of the day she *is* too attached to all the glittery jewels and riches that now rest at the bottom of the well. And I'm fairly certain that she's going to spend the rest of eternity down there, with the things that – at the end of the day – truly mattered most to her in this whole wide world.

“Well,” I mutter, stepping back before sighing and shaking my head. “No, let's not do that again.”

Feeling utterly drained, I start picking my way back through the forest. A moment later I freeze as I hear a shriek of fury coming from the well, but I quickly relax as I realize that a few shrieks here and there are never going to amount to very much. I set off again, exhausted as I make my way between the trees, and then as I reach the edge of the lawn I realize that the sun is finally starting to rise, turning the sky behind the house a warm shade of red and silhouetting the whole vast building against the dawn.

I don't think I've ever felt so peaceful in my entire -

Suddenly a bright light swoops over me, and I look up just as a helicopter flies down low and races toward the house. And then, to my

horror, I see that this helicopter is starting to land on the lawn.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Too dazed to really know how to react, I stumble toward the helicopter as the blades slow down, and as a man in a dark suit slides open the door on the side. To be honest, by this point I'm starting to think that the weirdness might never end.

As I stop a few feet away, another man steps out from the helicopter, and I immediately see that he's the type of man who simply oozes importance. He's wearing a suit that's quite clearly far more expensive than anything worn by his staff, and he's got his hair slicked back in what appears to be some kind of tribute to 90s Canary Wharf fashion. He stops for a moment, looking around, and then he removes his shades and peers at me as if I'm quite the weirdest sight he's ever seen in his life.

And, to be fair, I probably am.

"So this is Prym Hall, huh?" he says finally, taking another moment to look around. "It's... smaller than I expected."

"Who... what..."

He looks at me again, and I realize that I'm not quite sure that I can form a full sentence right now.

"Edward Bolton," the man says, stepping toward me and grabbing my hand, which he then shakes very firmly. "I don't know how closely you follow the world of steel and steel derivatives, but I own one of the largest steel-making firms in the western hemisphere. I started from scratch, and I'm generally considered to be one of the greatest self-made men in the whole world. My friends call me Teddy."

He waits for me to reply, but I'm too busy trying not to faint.

"That's alright," he continues, pulling his hand back and forcing a smile that reveals his perfect white teeth. "Not everyone's into steel, I know that. Are you..."

He looks me up and down for a moment.

"Do you work here?" he asks.

"No," I reply, still far too dazed to really know what's happening as I shake my head. "Not really."

"I thought you might be the gardener or something like that," he mutters. "The truth is, I'm really only here for a very quick visit. Hell, I

almost didn't even bother landing, I could probably have seen enough from the air if the light was a little better. My sister asked me to drop by, she told me that she needed my help with something." He looks past the helicopter and peers at the house for a moment. "I never got a chance to visit over the years, but I guess... this must be the Prym Hall place she was always banging on about."

"You're Beatrice's brother?" I whisper.

"I'm sure she talks about me," he continues. "Listen, I don't have much time, but Beatrice told me that I really should come here and take a look at the place." He hesitates, and then he wrinkles his nose slightly. "I don't really like it, though," he adds. "It's definitely not my kind of country estate. Not enough steel. I know she said she could swing it so that I could sign a few papers and own the place, but between my castle in Scotland and my house in London and my pads in Monaco and New York, I'm not really on the lookout for more homes. I've reached the stage in my life where acquiring new property is more of a headache and a hassle than anything else."

A moment later Beatrice's cry rings out again from the well in the forest.

"Shit, is that her?" Matthew says, turning and looking the other way across the lawn. "Even by her standards, she does *not* sound like she's in a good mood."

"She..."

He turns to me, but my voice trails off as I realize that I really can't put any of the night's events into words. Not properly, at least.

"Listen," he continues cautiously, "I know this is a little unfair of me, but I have to get going and I don't much fancy sticking around to talk to my sister while she sounds so pissed off. When she phoned me up the other day and begged me to get down here, she sounded pretty weird. Would you mind telling her that I *did* drop by? And tell her that although I'd love to take on the house, I have too many irons in too many fires right now, so the idea of picking up a stinking old English mansion..."

He turns and looks one more time at Prym Hall, and I can't help but notice the witheringly disapproving expression on his face.

"I'm afraid it's a hard pass," he adds. "Way too many bricks. I'm sure she'll be fine, she'll find a way to keep the old place going."

He makes his way back into the helicopter.

“Tell her I hope her museum goes well,” he calls back to me as he climbs into one of the seats. “She was going on about it over the phone, but I didn't really understand what she meant. The music in the club was very loud, so I couldn't hear her properly. Anyway, I'm very busy at the moment but let her know that I'll try to swing by next time I'm in the country.” He fastens his seat-belt and turns to me as his security guy slides the door shut. “But tell her not to hold her breath.”

“I -”

“Hey, do you wanna come with me?” he adds. “Fancy a night on the town? We could shoot down to Dubai for a night or two. Interested?”

“No,” I reply, still too dazed to really compute anything. “No, I'm not.”

“Pity,” he mutters, looking me up and down. “Maybe next time, right?”

As the security man climbs back into the helicopter, I realize that I possibly should have found a way to say more during that whole interaction. It's too late now, however; the helicopter rises up off the lawn, and I have to shield my eyes a little as the vehicle swings around and passes above me before shooting off back across the forest.

“Bye,” I stammer, as I'm once again left standing all alone on the lawn. “Have a nice... flight.”

I walk slowly back toward the house, and somehow I end up on the path that leads around to the front. Reaching the bottom of the steps that lead up to the main door, I'm about to head up when I spot a crumpled figure nearby.

“Harry?”

I make my way over and peer down at him, and I immediately see his dead, glassy eyes staring out across the lawn. He's almost at the bottom of the steps, but his head has smashed against the corner of one of the columns and a large quantity of blood has leaked out from the wound, ending up dribbling all the way down to the gravel. I peer more closely at the huge gash on one side of his forehead, and then I take a step back as I realize what must have happened. This blood is no longer flowing, which means the wound is at least a few minutes old, which in turn suggests...

Hurrying up the stairs, I push the main door open and step into the

hallway, only to find Harry waiting for me.

“Well?” he asks.

“Did you *actually* sacrifice your life in a noble effort to come back and save me from your wife,” I ask, “or did you just fall over and die while you were running away, and then you figured you might as well slink back inside?”

“I don't see why you're being such a Negative Nelly,” he mutters, waving a hand at me as if he expects my concerns to simply dissipate. “I saved you, didn't I?”

“Yes, but -”

“Please, let's not get into the details now,” he adds with a heavy and extremely theatrical sigh. “We should focus on more important matters. Have you still got my cigarettes?”

Increasingly convinced that his supposed heroism was actually the result of a stupid accident, I pull the cigarettes from my pocket and – although I absolutely don't think that he deserves them – I hand the packet over to him.

“Beatrice is down the well, by the way,” I tell him as I watch him trying to light one of the cigarettes.

“Well well,” he says, before chuckling as he turns to me.

I offer a scowl in response.

“And her brother showed up in his helicopter,” I continue, “but he doesn't want to take the house on. I'm still not sure exactly how that fitted into Beatrice's plans for a museum about your stupidity, but I guess it must have somehow.”

“Inadequacies,” he says, correcting me as he takes a drag on the cigarette. “Not stupidity. Inadequacies.”

“Can't Beatrice bring the jewelry up out of the well?” I ask.

“What's stopping her from doing that?”

“Sheer bloody-mindedness, I expect,” he sighs. “She always did rather have tunnel vision when it came to anything shiny.”

As he smokes, I realize that I can hear a sobbing sound coming from somewhere upstairs. I look over at the top of the staircase, and I have to admit that a shudder runs through my bones. After all, the sound of a ghostly cry seems strangely fitting in a place like this, but it's still rather disconcerting and unsettling. For the first time, Prym Hall feels like a more traditional, old-fashioned haunted house.

“This isn't working,” Harry mutters, holding the cigarette up. “Is it because I'm dead? Nobody told me that being dead would stop me enjoying a nice cigarette.”

“Harry, don't you think you should go to your daughter?”

“Do you think it's the same with cigars?” he asks, turning to me. “I bloody well hope not, otherwise tripping and falling on that shiny step out there might have been the biggest disaster in the history of mankind. What about drinks? Can I even get a nice buzz from a glass of brandy anymore?”

“Harry, your daughter's upset,” I point out, as the sobbing sound continues. “Do you not think that, after everything that's happened tonight, you should go up and comfort her?”

“You mean Angelina?” He looks over at the staircase. “Oh, I wouldn't worry about that too much. She was always crying when she was alive, too.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

The door creaks open, and although I don't see Angelina, I spot a large dolls' house on the far side of the bedroom and I'm immediately certain that the sobbing is coming from somewhere over there.

"See?" Harry says dryly. "She's not even here. Come on, let's go and see if the brandy -"

"Get into this room," I say through gritted teeth, "or I'll get all Egon Spengler on your ass."

"I understand that reference," he replies, "and I don't like it very much."

He hesitates, before sighing as he – clearly deliberately – walks straight through me on the way into his daughter's bedroom. To be fair, he's right: that's an extremely unpleasant sensation.

"Not funny," I say firmly.

"She's still not here," he continues, holding his arms out as he turns to me. "See? If she wanted to talk to anyone, I rather think that she'd at least make an appearance. You have to understand that Angelina has always been prone to the waterworks, it's just what she's like. You can't change a person, you know."

"Harry..."

For a few seconds I truly don't know what to say to him, but I'm starting to think that nothing's ever going to get through to him. If he wasn't capable of some self-reflection while he was alive, how likely is he to try to improve himself now that he's dead?

"Harry," I continue, "I'm talking from experience now. Do you know the one thing that's worse than having a lousy, no-good father who gets everything wrong?"

I pause for a moment as I think back to my own childhood.

"A father who doesn't even bother to try," I add, and I'm extremely annoyed to feel tears welling in my own eyes. "That's what's worse. Yes, you'll probably screw things up. You more than the average person."

He furrows his brow.

"But trust Angelina to see past that," I tell him, stepping forward and trying to put a hand on the side of his arm, only to find that my hand

goes straight through him. "It's never too late to start making an effort, even after some mild attempted murder and a few horrific deaths. She's a really smart girl, Harry, and she'll understand that you're trying and that you might not get it right the first time."

As those words leave my lips, I see Angelina fading into view. She's sitting cross-legged in front of the dolls' house, with her hands over her face as she continues to sob.

"We don't have anything in common," Harry half whispers and half mouths to me.

"Get over there," I mouth in return.

He looks utterly lost, as if he genuinely doesn't think that he'll have much luck, but finally he lets out a heavy sigh.

"It'll take forever," he mutters.

"You've *got* forever," I point out, before turning and making my way out of the room. "Use it."

"But I can't be a good father!" he calls after me. "I'm dead!"

"Yeah, well," I reply as I disappear around the corner, "nobody's perfect."

Sitting on the steps at the front of Prym Hall, close to Harry's still crumpled and still very much dead corpse, I look out across the lawn as the sun continues to rise. So much has happened since I arrived here last night, and I'm really not sure what I'm going to say to the police, but part of me is wondering whether I could just sort of... leave.

After all, even if they do a full search of the place eventually and find my fingerprints, it's not like they can link them to me. I'm not in the system. And it's not like I actually did anything wrong, either.

Hearing footsteps, I look up and see that Harry has emerged from the house. He doesn't say anything, not at first, as he comes over and takes a seat next to me on the steps. For a few seconds we simply sit and look out at the morning light, and I for one can't help but feel a strange sense of peace rising up through my chest.

"Have you got your thing?" he asks finally.

I turn to him.

"You know, your... device," he continues, nodding toward the pocket of my jacket. "That thing you use to look things up."

"Do you mean my phone?" I ask. "No, I don't have it. Right now, I believe it's back at your former butler's cottage. He took it from me while he was drugging and kidnapping me so that he could bring me back here."

"That's a bugger," he sighs. "I can't find any of ours in the house, and I wanted you to look something up for me."

"How's Angelina?"

"She's stopped sobbing, at least," he tells me. "She's very excited now, she thinks I want to learn all about her dolls. I told her that, in return, I must insist on telling her my life's story. I thought that threat would stop her, but do you know what she said? She said that she loves the idea!"

"Of spending time with her father?" I reply. "Shocking."

"I wanted you to look up a few loopholes," he admits. "I can't really be stuck here forever, can I? How is that fair?"

"What does 'fair' have to do with anything, Harry?"

"Well, it's just not right," he adds. "I had so much that I still wanted to do, plus there's the whole issue of Beatrice. What if she comes back?"

"She won't come back."

"But -"

"She'll spend the rest of eternity down in that well," I tell him, "with what really mattered to her. You were no saint, Harry Prym, but neither was she. And at least she didn't get to do what she really set out to do, which was turn this house into a museum of all your failures and inadequacies."

"I rather fear that I did that all by myself."

I turn to him.

"See?" he adds. "I *can* be self-aware occasionally. I also have a lot of time on my hands, so I was thinking that Angelina and I might bond over a little light housework. We're going to clean and scrub, and generally make the place look nice for when the police eventually show up."

"I don't think they'll care too much about that."

"Do you think they'll be annoyed if we scrub away any fingerprints or evidence that you were here?" He pauses again, and then he allows himself a faint smile. "Too bad for them, hmm?"

"I need to get going," I say as I stand up. "I'm so tired."

"Will you come back to visit?" he asks. "Actually, perhaps it's best if you don't. I'm sure you've got your own life to lead. Do you know what? I

just realized that I know very little about you. What do you even do out there in the real world? Where do you live? Are you married? Do you have children?"

"I'm not sure I'll be a regular face here," I tell him, "but... I'll try to swing by once in a while, just to see how you and Angelina are getting on."

"You'll always be welcome," he replies, and to be honest he seems genuine about this. A moment later he gets to his feet, before glancing down at his own corpse. "That thing will have to be moved," he adds disdainfully. "I can't believe I landed in such an awful pose. There's really not that much dignity in death, is there?"

"There can be," I point out. "You just have to put the work in. I'd give you a hug, but... I don't think that would work."

"I should get back inside to Angelina," he continues. "She's a good girl, deep down. She reminds me of her mother, but also a little bit of myself, so at least there's something to work with." He starts making his way back up the steps. "Have a nice journey home, Jessica."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I ask.

Reaching the doorway, he stops and turns to me, and I can't help but sigh as I see that blank, uncomprehending expression on his face once more.

"There's still one more loose end to tie up," I remind him.

I wait.

He blinks.

"There's still something that needs doing," I add, emphasizing those words a little more in the hope that I might jog his memory.

"Seriously, Harry, haven't you learned anything? Beatrice is gone, you and Angelina have a vague shot at getting along and I'm alive. That's all great, but isn't there one other little detail that you think we should attend to?"

"Is there?" he says cautiously, as if he knows deep down that I'm right, even if he can't come up with an answer. "What would that be, then?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

A couple of police cars race past with their sirens blaring as I make my way up the steps at the front of the building. I stop and look over my shoulder, and I watch as cars roar along this busy London street. A couple of seconds later an ambulance follows, and I have to admit that the noise is almost too much for me.

I've never been much of a Londoner, but I suppose I can grin and bear it for a few hours at a time when I've got something important to do. And as I turn and look at the hospital's sign, I feel a sense of foreboding as I realize that this whole mission is a big of a long shot.

But I have to try.

"I can't give out any information about cases that might or might not be ongoing in this office," Sandra says as she stares up at me with a deeply unhelpful expression, "unless you're a family member."

She narrows her eyes for a moment.

"Are you a family member?"

"No, actually, I'm not," I reply, before setting my backpack on the desk and unzipping the side, then pulling out the clear plastic folder that I took the liberty of preparing at home, "but I suppose you could say that I'm an interested party."

"Interested parties are not-"

"I know, I read up all about it online before I came here," I continue, setting the folder down. "But here's the thing. I don't care about your rules and regulations. I only care about the baby girl who was brought into the care of this trust at some point in – I'm guessing – the past month."

Still looking extremely dubious, she turns the folder around and slides it closer.

"Her name's Rose," I explain. "I'm guessing that her mother named her before she abandoned her, and I'm also guessing that she would have left a note and that, somewhere in that note, she probably mentioned the child's name. So you must have an abandoned baby named Rose that was brought in here at some point in the past month or so."

“I -”

“I don't need you to talk, Sandra,” I add, cutting her off. “I need you to listen. You might or you might not be aware that little Rose was the daughter of a woman named Jessica Prym. Now, Jessica – that Jessica – had a pretty bad record when it came to drugs and crime and all that stuff, and eventually she committed suicide shortly after giving birth. Again, I don't need you to confirm any of this. But the thing is, Jessica was the daughter of a very rich man, and although they were estranged, she was still mentioned in his will.”

She opens the folder and looks at some of the documents that I carefully located before leaving Prym Hall.

“Anyone else who might have had a claim on that estate is now dead,” I continue, “in circumstances that really don't need going into right now. The point is, that little abandoned baby Rose is actually the sole beneficiary of an estate that's conservatively estimated to be worth about a hundred million pounds. That's including the various companies that the late Harry Prym owned.”

“Where did you get all of this?” she stammers.

“That doesn't matter, Sandra.”

I watch as she turns to another page, and then I lean forward and snap my fingers in her face.

Startled, she pulls back.

“Pay attention and focus on what I'm telling you,” I continue.

“You can read the stuff in the folder later, but right now what I'm going to say to you is vitally important.”

“Who are you?” she asks.

“I'm little Rose's fairy godmother,” I say firmly, surprising myself a little with the coolness of that comeback. “I'm sure you'll run check after check to confirm what I'm telling you, but let me assure you that it's all going to turn out to be absolutely true. And the thing is...”

I hesitate for a moment as I spot a nurse wheeling a pram past. The nurse stops to press a button on the elevator, and after a few seconds I can't help but step out into the corridor and look down into the pram, where I see a beautiful little baby – perhaps only four or five weeks old – wriggling in various white cotton blankets. She's a little red-faced and chubby, but I swear I can just about make out a slight resemblance to Harry. A moment later she lets out a faint grumbling cry, and the resemblance is confirmed.

“Can I help you?” the nurse asks.

“Me?” I look at her for a moment as the elevator doors slide open.

“No. Not me. Help *her*, though. Keep her safe.”

The nurse hesitates, before hurriedly pulling the pram into the elevator. She scans her badge and presses a button, and she looks somewhat relieved as the doors slide shut. I watch the pram, and Rose's face, until the doors have closed fully, and then I listen as the chamber starts rising up higher into the building. I must admit, I never expected to actually come face-to-face with little Rose, but I'm pretty sure that was her.

And as I head back into the office, I see that Sandra is busily going through the various documents I set in front of her. I'm sure she's pretty overwhelmed by all the information I've compiled, and I'm also sure that she and her colleagues will spend a great deal of time checking and double-checking and triple-checking every last detail that I've included. I've run through that little dossier so many times and I'm certain that it's bulletproof, but I'm still slightly paranoid that a bunch of bureaucrats and pen-pushers might find a way to screw up Rose's inheritance. I've done all I can for now, though, so I just need to focus on keeping track of things down the line.

“Hang on,” Sandra says cautiously. “If I'm reading this right, it means... that little girl who just went upstairs is absolutely filthy rich.”

“I'm glad you're keeping up, Sandra,” I reply. “I was worried you might struggle.”

Realizing that I'm being a little too sarcastic, and that I need to get her on my side, I decide that for once I need to try to be more polite. Besides, deep down I know that I'm just hanging around here so that I can distract myself from certain other matters, and if there's one thing I learned during my night at Prym Hall it's that sometimes you really have to just get on with difficult tasks.

“Just make sure that she gets her inheritance,” I add, taking a step back as I feel tears welling. “Make sure she uses it for something really good.”

With that, I turn and make my way out of the office.

“Wait!” Sandra calls after me.

I stop and look back at her.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“Just call me the Angel of...”

I stop myself just in time.

“Just call me a concerned stranger,” I continue. “Oh, and I know the estate's probably going to have to be held in trust for Rose for a while, but add a note to the paperwork for me, will you? Make sure she knows that as soon as she can, she really needs to sell the place. And whatever else she might do... she should never, ever go there. Not even once.”

I turn to walk away again, and this time I don't let anything stop me. By the time I'm back outside I feel pretty pleased with myself for getting all of this done, and I can't help wondering what Rose will think one day when she's all grown up and she hears about the mysterious woman who dropped off her inheritance. I'd like to think that I'll seem all cool and enigmatic, although I guess that doesn't really matter a great deal. What matters is that hopefully Rose will flog the estate and put the money to good use. I don't know who'll end up taking over Prym Hall, but whoever they are, they might just find that the place has a few ghosts.

And now, as I stand on the steps with traffic roaring past on the main road, I realize that I need to get around to the second half of my little mission. I told myself that once I'd sorted Rose out, I was going to turn my attention to matters that are a little closer to home. Sure, I could just go and get drunk instead, but I know that I can't keep burying my head in the sand like that.

I take my phone out and bring up a certain number, and then – before I have a chance to stop myself – I tap to call. I immediately feel a tightening sense of anticipation in my chest, but I know that I have to at least try this. Sure, it might all go wrong, but I have to give him one last chance.

“Hello?” a familiar but much older sounding voice says, picking up on the other end of the line. “This is Harry Prym. Who's calling?”

“Hey,” I say finally, wondering just how much my father might have changed over the years. “It's me.”

Chapter Thirty

Ten years later...

Stepping into the hallway, I set my black purse down and then pause for a moment. I don't really know how I expected today to go, and I sure as hell don't know how I'm supposed to feel, but for a few seconds I can't shake the feeling that it could all have been a lot worse.

Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I see a hint of fear in my eyes. I also see once and for all that I *really* don't suit the color black, although I quickly remind myself that it's not like I'd wear anything like this during the rest of the year. Right now, I'm wearing my funeral get-up, which is just about as uncomfortable as any clothing could ever be. And then, looking down at the booklet in my right hand, I see Dad's smiling face staring up at me from the photo on the front.

"You old bastard," I whisper, as I realize that I'm on the verge of tears again. "I hope you were looking down today and could see all those people who turned out to give you a good send-off."

I think he'd have liked the funeral service. All his surviving ex-wives were there, along with his various children and I even got to meet a few half-brothers and half-sisters I didn't know I had. Then there were the women he'd 'encountered' over the years, along with a surprisingly large assortment of friends from around the world. It was only a decade ago, when I got back in touch with Dad, that I realized just what a crazy and rich life he led, and I have to admit that some of his stories used to have me in stitches. And to be honest, I'm really glad that we got those final years together, even if at times he drove me out of my mind.

Still staring at the booklet, I realize that I'm never going to be able to talk to him again. Not unless he turns out to be haunting me, although Dad was never really the type to stick around in any one place for very long. Haunting would be way too big of a commitment for him.

"I'm sorry about all the accidents you had when you were younger," he told me a while ago, in the hospital room once he knew for certain that he was dying. "I tried to look after you, it's just that we were always racing about and occasionally I lost track of you for a second or two."

I can't help smiling.

“And to be fair,” he insisted, “you certainly had a knack for getting yourself into trouble. I always thought that we had some good adventures together. I hope you feel that way too.”

I remember kissing him on the forehead after he said that, and I kissed him on the forehead again a few weeks later once I realized that he'd died. He was far from perfect, but then *nobody's* perfect, are they? I know I'm certainly pretty screwed-up, but I keep telling myself that so long as I'm always trying to improve myself in some way, there's no need to be too negative about things. And I'll always be glad that after Prym Hall I grew up a little, and that I decided to look past the worst of Dad's faults and – in turn – gave him a chance to look past mine.

In the end, I think we did pretty well.

Checking my watch, I see that it's almost time. I hung around at the wake for a while, but to be honest I felt like a fish out of water and – besides – there's something on the TV tonight that I really can't miss. Sure, I could watch it on catch-up without any adverts, but that would require patience and right now I'm desperate to see this particular episode. And as I head through to the front room, I realize that I can already feel a tingling sense of concern in the pit of my belly. After all, what if things haven't gone quite the way I'd hoped?

“Now this,” Christian D'Goode says as he steps into the main dining room at Prym Hall, “is one of the most active parts of the house. There are so many accounts from people who claim to have sensed a presence in here, and in a few cases they've even insisted that they saw a ghostly figure walking straight past.”

The camera slowly moves to offer a better view of the room. As I shovel some more crisps into my mouth, I can't help but think back to the time I spent at Prym Hall. The host – former reality TV star and all-round vacuous non-entity Christian D'Goode – keeps getting some of the most basic facts about the house wrong, and I want to yell at him through the screen that this 'dining room' was actually a study, but I guess none of that matters.

What matters is that D'Goode's haunted house series is finally visiting Prym Hall for one episode, and I'm curious to see what – if

anything – he and his team might discover.

“So let's go through into this next room,” he continues excitedly, “because this is where several people have reported sensing the presence of a young woman.”

I can't help but smile. There have been several times over the past decade when I seriously considered taking a trip back to Prym Hall, but ultimately I decided that I wanted to leave Harry and Angelina alone. I don't even know how time works for ghosts, and I'm fairly sure that they've got eternity to haunt the place, and the last thing I want to do is get in their way. Still, occasionally I wonder whether I should show my face again, and I think I might do just that in a year or two.

“So last night our crew stayed over from dusk until dawn,” Christian continues, looking into the camera, “and I'm truly excited to share some footage that we recorded in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Prepare to be amazed and downright spooked, because what you're about to see is raw, unfiltered footage that hasn't been doctored in any way at all. This is genuine proof of supernatural activity right here at Prym Hall.”

The shot changes, and I immediately recognize Angelina's bedroom. The dolls' house is even still there, which I guess makes sense since Rose's guardians apparently sold the place and its contents a while ago so that the money could be reinvested for her in a trust.

“I just heard laughter coming from in this room,” Cally Northrup, one of the other presenters, says as she steps into the shot. She seems absolutely terrified. “I swear, about two minutes ago -”

Before she can finish, a door swings open on the front of the dolls' house before almost immediately slamming shut again. The camera pulls back and Cally lets out a shocked gasp.

“I believe,” she continues, “that we're in the presence of a category A-plus paranormal entity, one that seemingly likes to taunt us with hints about its presence. And -”

She stops again, and I can't help leaning forward as I realize that I can hear a hint of childish, giggling laughter on the episode's soundtrack.

“Did you hear that?” Cally asks, turning to the camera. “I swear, that's a sound that actually just occurred right here in this room. We're talking about a female ghost that -”

Yet again she's interrupted, this time by another burst of laughter, and this time both Cally and the cameraman race out of the room.

“You heard it yourselves,” Christian says as the shot cuts back to him downstairs. “Where else could that sound possibly have come from? Now, I know what you're thinking, you're thinking that we might have in some way manipulated the audio, but we've had it examined by an independent professional sound engineer who has confirmed under oath that nothing was altered or tampered with in any way. You can see his full report, in great detail, on our website.”

I can't help but roll my eyes. Everything in this episode is no doubt absolutely genuine, but since the whole scandal a few years ago when Christian's previous haunting show was caught fabricating evidence, no-one's going to take his show too seriously. He's conducted investigations at scores of English country houses over the years and I bet most of them have been faked, but he was bound to stumble upon something a little more real eventually, and that seems to be exactly what has happened here. It's just such a shame for this charlatan that when he finally gets genuine evidence of a real ghost, no-one's going to believe him.

He plays the sound recording again, and this time I feel a flicker of recognition in my chest. Not just because I recognize Angelina's laugh, but because I think there might just be a second voice in there too. The presenters don't seem to have noticed, but I swear that in the background I can also hear a male voice laughing, and my smile grows as I realize that this can only mean one thing.

After all these years, Harry and Angelina are bonding over their shared hobby of haunting Prym Hall and scaring visitors.

“Join us after the break,” Christian says, leaning closer to the camera, “when we'll be investigating claims of a moaning voice that can sometimes be heard coming from a well in the grounds of the property. We'll also look into reports of a ghostly former butler who's said to haunt the kitchen.”

I quickly reach for the remote control. There's really no need to delve too deeply into every aspect of whatever's going on at Prym Hall, and I have absolutely no doubt that Beatrice's ghost will remain down at the bottom of that well for the rest of time. And so, figuring that it's late anyway and that I need to get to sleep so that I'm up bright and early for work in the morning, I tell myself that I don't need to watch the rest of the show. Instead I get to my feet, chuckle one last time and turn the TV off.

“Have fun haunting the house, guys,” I whisper, thinking once

more of Harry and Angelina. “I'm just glad that you've finally got something in common.”

With that, I head to bed. After all, I've got a big day tomorrow. My new catering company – which specializes in wakes and funerals – has really taken off since I started it a few months ago. Something about my experience at Prym Hall gave me some kind of weird inspiration, as well as the feeling that I might sometimes be able to help if any... unusual problems arise. I have to admit, most of the time I love my new career path, although there are times when some of the mourners can be a little difficult.

Especially the ones who are still alive.

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THE GHOST IN ROOM 119

Something dangerous is lurking in room 119 of a Barcelona hotel.
Something vicious. Something evil. Something that wants revenge.

Arriving in the city for a short break, Penny and Steve are looking forward to a week of sun, sea and sand. Those plans are ruined, however, when Steve thinks he recognizes a woman at the hotel bar. Ten years ago, he dated a girl named Annabelle, but the relationship ended badly. The woman at the bar looks a little like Annabelle, not enough for him to be certain that it's her, but enough for him to worry.

Soon, Steve finds himself drawn into a nightmare. He's starting to see the strange woman everywhere, and now he's worried that he's being followed. Has Annabelle returned to his life? If so, has she turned up in Barcelona by accident or by design? And how is her apparent appearance connected to the strange noises and flickering lights that can be heard every night, coming from room 119?

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Marsh House stands abandoned in the heart of an English seaside town. A local ghost tour guide regularly stops in front of the house to tell its grim tale, but no-one has actually set foot in the building for more than forty years. Until now.

Desperate to get away from his troubles in London, Andrew heads to Marsh House and sets about trying to fix it up. Between rotten floorboards and bug infestations, he's got his work cut out for him. And that's before he even notices the strange noises in the night, and the fact that a strange presence is watching his every move.

When he invites a new friend to move in with him, everything changes. Andrew might not have paid attention to the darker side of Marsh House, but his new guest quickly realizes that something's very wrong. Does the ghost of a long-dead woman still haunt the house, cursing anyone who dares to fall in love? And is this malevolent entity somehow also responsible for the death of a local woman whose body was found on the beach?

And by the time he uncovers the shocking truth, will it be too late for Andrew to ever return to his old life?

The Ghosts of Marsh House is a horror story about a man who's trying to run from his own mistakes, and about a woman who'll stop at nothing to make others pay for her misery.

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