

# Terror at Fairmont Hall



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## Chapter 1

I stir in my hospital bed. The sound of an infant's cries lifting me up through layers of a deep, drugged sleep. The baby isn't visible. She's behind the curtain that separates me from her mother. I know it's a girl because the mother's parents visited the day before. Grandma walked in with a brand-new stuffed bear under her arm, and grandpa clutched the string of a large balloon. "It's A Girl!" was splashed across it in big pink letters.

The mother is very young, barely more than a teenager. I've glimpsed her and the baby a few times. I always look away, hoping to discourage her from starting to chat. I will speak to no one other than hospital staff and the psychotherapist who has come every afternoon for the past three days.

The room is quiet when she arrives a little after 1:00 pm.

"How are you today, Elizabeth?" she says in a soft, tentative voice.

"I'm fine," I assure her with a smile. "When can I go home?"

"You're free to go just as soon as your discharge papers are ready, but I need to make sure that you're strong enough emotionally. Losing a baby is tragic, and many women struggle to come to terms with it — some more than others."

“I’m sad, of course. I wanted this child very much. But I’m not going to crumble. Life must go on.”

“Good. That’s a healthy attitude,” she says, jotting down some notes in a pad. “Do you have a place to stay?”

“Yes. I’ll be returning home. My mother is going to be there with me for a little while.”

“That’s wonderful, Elizabeth. I’m so glad you have support. Are the two of you close?”

“Yes, very.”

“Do you work?”

“I was in a nursing program. I dropped out when I married my husband, James. Before I became pregnant, I was a caregiver at a local nursing home.”

“That’s admirable work.”

“Yes, it’s very rewarding.”

“While a job you enjoy can be therapeutic, don’t rush it. Give yourself sufficient time to heal, Elizabeth. If you should change your mind about grief counseling, get in touch with me,” she says, leaving her card on the tray table.

“Thank you. I definitely will.” Another smile to convince her how well I’m doing.

“All right then,” she says, slipping her note pad into the pocket of her lab coat. “I’ll check on those papers, and let you get some more rest. Sleep is the best healer.”

I smile one more time as she pats my hand and turns to go.

As soon as she's gone, the tears course down my cheeks, drip off my chin and splash onto my hospital gown. I don't bother to wipe them away; but I do choke back the sobs that try to escape, even though I am alone at the moment. A nurse might walk in. I have to convince the hospital staff that I am emotionally stable enough to be released. I'd managed to convince the therapist, but everything I told her was a lie. I haven't seen or spoken to my drug-addicted mother in 10 years. As soon as I turned 18, she moved in with her boyfriend, who clearly didn't want me around.

James Price and his mother, Margaret, were all I had in the world. I met him eight years ago when he had her admitted into the facility where I'd recently started working. She'd broken her hip and was diagnosed with early dementia shortly thereafter. The last two years of her life, she did not even recognize her only son. She'd had him quite late in life and, when she passed on March 9, 1967, he was very much alone in the world. I shared his grief, for I had become very attached to both of them.

James was ten years older than me – handsome, kind, and funny. Nothing felt more right than becoming his wife and sharing the large house where he'd lived with his mother. Despite her absence, we were very happy for a while.

James had always enjoyed a drink, but after his mother died his alcohol consumption increased. At the same time, he was

becoming sullen and moody. It was more than just his mother's death that troubled him. He had lost his father, Eugene, to a brain aneurism when he was only ten years old. The three of them were attending mass when Mr. Price stood up to receive communion and just collapsed to the floor. When his mother was still cognizant, she had told me that James had never really gotten over the shock. I believed my steadfast love and devotion would heal his emotional wounds.

About a year after Margaret's death, things began to improve. He stopped drinking and returned to the kind, loving, and attentive man I fell in love with. When we found out I was pregnant, we were overjoyed at the prospect of being parents.

I miscarried in my 11th week, after which I fell into my own pit of despondency. We tried for the next three years without success. The doctor said that James' sperm count was low and that it was time to consider adoption.

James took the news hard and began to drink again. This time was worse. He was withdrawn, cynical and argumentative. Everything I said or did was worthy of his ridicule or criticism.

Something else was different too. He began to push and shove me to get his point across. On one occasion, he slammed my head into a kitchen cupboard, giving me a black eye. It was as though he were trying to drive me away while at the same time fearing I would go.

I knew I couldn't bring a child into that environment. When I made the decision to leave him after another bad row, I kept it to myself. But before I could make any arrangements, I fell ill. The doctor confirmed my worst fear — I was pregnant again. Alongside the horror was joy and elation. I'd never wanted anything so much as I wanted that child.

When I told James, he was ecstatic. He confessed that his drinking and bad behavior toward me were due to his diagnosis. He said he'd felt like less of a man and couldn't cope with the idea that he might never give me what I wanted most — what we both wanted most — a baby of our own making. He promised to stop drinking immediately and start pampering me. Those ensuing months were blissful.

When I was six months pregnant, he started drinking again. I was furious and bitterly disappointed. I was also afraid for both me and my child. He knew how angry I was and, rather than being apologetic, he became defensive and verbally abusive. He hadn't laid a hand on me while I was pregnant, and I was sure that he wouldn't physically harm me in such a delicate condition.

In my seventh month, a heated argument erupted between us. He was so inebriated, I wasn't even sure what he was angry about. It seemed as though he'd wanted to pick a fight for its own sake. I'd had enough and told him I was going up to bed. I climbed the stairs, and he followed me up to the landing. He grabbed my

wrist tightly. I jerked my arm away with such force, it propelled me backward. My arms flailed, trying to grab the rail, which was only getting farther away. James lunged forward, wedging himself between me and the gaping maw into which I was about to plummet. Then I turned and watched in horror as my husband summersaulted down the stairs. The pressure of striking the hard wooden steps at such an angle caused his neck to snap. He died instantly.



## Chapter 2

I get out of bed and put on the clothes I was wearing when I was brought in — a maternity top, slacks, socks and slip-on shoes. I'm in a lot of pain, but I must endure it. I've taken nothing, for every pill I was given was squirreled away. Between what I've got now and what I'll be given when I leave, I might have enough to end my meaningless existence. I have to be sure, for if I fail, I'll end up back here again. Only I'll be in the psyche ward instead of the maternity ward, and no one will believe me when I say I'm fine.

I ask one of the nurses at the reception desk outside my room to call a cab for me. I can't wait to leave this place. It's too painful seeing the young mothers pacing up and down the halls in the early stages of labor, or the ones who've already delivered and are being shown the proper way to nurse, change and bathe their babies once they are home. Worse, is the row upon row of tiny bassinets with young husbands waving through the window as the nurses hold up the tightly-swaddled pink and blue bundles and tilt them toward the glass.

I go to the loo and look in the mirror, noticing how chalky my skin appears against my dark hair. My normally smooth curls are jutting out in all directions, and there are dark circles beneath my eyes.

As I'm coming out, two nurses arrive. One has the release papers, the other has a wheelchair. I scribble, Elizabeth Price, with her pen and hand it back. She gives me a copy, a bottle of pain pills and a prescription for refill. I sit down in the chair and am whisked to the elevator where we wait for the door to open. When it does, four people exit before we enter.

She pushes the button to the first street level, and my stomach flips as we start to go down. A moment later the doors open again, and I'm wheeled through the lobby and toward the hospital entrance but off to the side so I won't be in the way of where people are walking.

"The cab will be here at 2:00," she says, looking at her watch. "It's 1:50 now."

I look up at her. "You don't need to stay. I can stand for 10 minutes."

"It's protocol," she says.

We wait in silence until the cab pulls up to the curb. A passerby holds the door open as she wheels me through and thanks him. The cab idles as the driver gets out and comes around to open the rear passenger door. I slide into the back seat, and he slams it shut. I look out my window and see the nurse pushing the chair through the door with no assistance this time. Then she's gone. The cab driver gets behind the wheel, and I give him the address.

Twenty minutes later, he pulls up in front of the house. I put my purse strap over my shoulder and get out. Reaching for my wallet, I take out the fare and hand it to him. He thanks me and drives off.

I climb the steps and take the key from my purse. Unlocking the door, I enter the vestibule. I close the door and stand there as the ominous silence envelops me. The house is mine now, but I can't bear living here by myself.

I sigh and go to the living room where I lie down on the sofa. I'm exhausted and fall asleep instantly. When I wake, it's dark. I sit up and reach for the lamp. I get my purse and pull out all the pills I have. There are 31. It should be enough. Just to be sure, I go to the liquor cabinet for something to wash them down with. I find the unopened bottle of Scotch I hid between the back of the cabinet and the wall so James couldn't drink it. I'm glad I did this, for all the other bottles are mostly empty.

Ignoring the blood stains, I climb up the stairs. James' body must still be at the morgue, I reason. There will be no one to claim it, no one to make funeral arrangements, and no one to pay their respects. I refuse to ponder what will happen to my body – when or by whom I might be found – and where I'll be laid to rest. James and I were too young to make those sorts of arrangements. All I can do is leave a note behind asking for James and I to be buried next to James's mother and father in the little cemetery across the road. It's

only right for us all to be together in death as we can no longer be in life.

I walk down the hall and stand for a moment outside the nursery. I want one more look at the adorable room I worked so hard to make ready. As soon as I open the door, I dissolve into a puddle of pent-up tears. Too overcome with emotion to remain standing, I sit down in the rocking chair and cry for the child whose life ended before it began. I cry for myself and all that I've lost, I cry for James and I cry for Margaret.

When my emotions are spent, I run myself a hot bath and soak for a half hour. When I'm clean and dry, I don a white cotton gown and sit on top of the big bed I'd shared with James. Propped against the pillows, I pour all the pills into a pile on my lap. I realize I forgot a glass and decide not to bother. Nothing matters now. I open the Scotch and take a few slugs from the bottle. Not until I'm sufficiently relaxed am I ready to take the pills.

I hesitate for just a moment. It isn't regret or remorse or indecision, it's fear of the unknown. I sip a little more Scotch before lifting the first pill to my mouth and swallowing. One by one, I take the remaining 30 pills. By the time I'm through, I haven't the strength to hold up my head. It lolls to one side with my chin nearly touching my shoulder. My eyes can't focus and my breathing slows to a crawl. My fingers lose their grip on the bottle as the darkness

closes in all around me. I feel myself briefly held aloft before I'm carried away on the wings of oblivion.

## Chapter 3

“Elizabeth!” a stern voice jars me into semi-consciousness, but I don’t want to leave the comforting void. “Elizabeth! Wake up, please!” Someone is tugging on my wrists, then shaking my shoulders until my teeth rattle. I pry open my lids to see a woman I don’t recognize. She looks to be in her mid-sixties with glasses and silver hair.

“Who are you?” My voice is a dry croak.

“I’m Mrs. Brennan,” she says as she straightens my blankets.

My eyes snap shut against the glare of sunlight streaming through the window. “I don’t know anyone by that name.” I wince when I swallow, for my throat is sore. I throw my arm over my eyes and wish I had the strength to order her out.

“That’s because we’ve never met.”

“Can I have some water, please?” My head is pounding.  
“And an aspirin.”

“Water, yes. Aspirin no.” I hear her walk off to the loo down the hall, run the tap, and return a moment later. “Here, have a sip, but you’ll have to raise yourself against the pillows.”

“I’m too weak.”

She puts the glass down on the end table and shoves both her hands under my arms. With an unladylike grunt, she hoists me up higher. “I can’t do this alone!” she says. She lifts again and I try to

use my hands to push against the mattress. I'm well-propped against the pillows when she hands me the glass. The minute it touches my lips, I start to guzzle it, but she pulls it away. "That's too much, too fast. You're going to throw up again."

Again? "Then why did you fill it in the first place?"

She sets the glass down. "To keep by the bed."

I take a deep breath and really look at her this time. "It would be very nice if you could please explain to me who you are and why you're here."

She sits down on a chair beside the bed. "You tried to kill yourself with pills and booze." The words sound harsh and accusing to my ears. "My husband is Margaret Price's solicitor. When he learned of James's death, he called to speak with you about whether you wanted to keep him on and what you wanted to do with regard to James's funeral and the house. When he couldn't get through, he assumed you'd gone off somewhere. Having never met you, he didn't know what to expect. All he knew was that James had a wife named Elizabeth. I came over with him to investigate, in case he needed my help. It's a darn good thing I did too, or you'd be dead now. We found you in the nick of time."

"You didn't call an ambulance?"

"No, but we contacted a doctor friend of ours. He said to put you in the tub and fill it with ice cold water. You came round right quick. You just don't remember. I've been nursing you back to the

living for almost a week now. The doctor came two day's back and said you'd be fine."

"Then why were you shaking me awake just now?"

"Because you're impossible to rouse. All you do is sleep. How am I supposed to feed you? I'm not here all the time, you know. I've got lots of other things that require my attention. Why did you do it anyway — a beautiful young woman like you?"

I fold my arms across my chest and look away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, you have some decisions to make about your husband's remains and whether you want this house."

"I'm the only one left to inherit."

"It doesn't work like that. You see, unless you sign legal documents to assume responsibility, the bank will sell it and all its contents. Can you afford to live here?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a chance to think about such things."

"It's a big house, just the utilities alone will cost a fortune and it's mortgaged to the hilt!"

"Mortgaged! Why? Mrs. Price lived here for 50 years!"

"I know, but she kept selling her valuables, taking out loans and refinancing in order to fund James's lifestyle. He never worked a day in his life."



“I didn’t think he needed to,” I say through clenched teeth. I rub my temples. “My headache is getting worse.”

She ignores me. “His mother had him believing that her money grew on all the trees in the backyard.”

“Please, Mrs... Mrs...”

“Brennan.”

“Mrs. Brennan. I won’t have you sully the character of a man who just lost his life. He was my husband, and I am still grieving his loss — not to mention the loss of my baby. Have you no heart?”

“Your baby?” she says.

“Yes.” I sigh, not wanting to explain, yet knowing I have to. “I was seven months pregnant when James died. The shock was too much.”

“You poor child,” she says, stroking my hair. “I’m sorry. I’ll go down and fix you some food and maybe you can have a think about your prospects.”

“All right,” I say, feeling sorry I lashed out when she’s only trying to look out for me. “Thank you.”

I fight back tears as soon as she’s gone. I’d thought that things couldn’t get any worse after losing my family. Now I’ve lost my home! What in the world am I going to do?

I eat as much of Mrs. Brennan's meal as I can. It's very tasty, and I tell her so as she collects the tray.

"How about a cup of tea before I leave?"

"Thank you. I'd like that."

A beaker of hot tea with sugar and cream sits on my bed table as she readies to leave. "Have you given your situation a think yet?"

I want to say no, but deciding something doesn't take very long when one has no options. "I can't afford the house."

"That's too bad, but it's very sensible of you to accept that fact right from the get go. Have you any job prospects? Family, friends?"

"No family or friends, unfortunately." I don't want her pity so I focus on my strengths. "I do, however, have some nursing experience. I was a caregiver at the facility where Mrs. Price was living. That's how I met James."

"A caregiver? Why, that's wonderful!" she says putting on her gloves. "There is never a shortage of people who need good care. Many of them have circumstances as sad as your own. If we found you the right situation, it might be mutually beneficial." She smiles, obviously very pleased with herself. "You let me have a think about this tonight."

"It's all right, Mrs. Brennan. You're not responsible for me and you've already done so much."

“Nonsense, dear. I really want to help, so I’ll see you tomorrow around 10:00.”

I fall asleep shortly after she leaves and wake the next morning when I hear her whistling downstairs in the kitchen. I look over and see the full mug of cold tea sitting there. She was right about my lethargy. I don’t want her to see it gone to waste so I pick it up and drink it as fast as I can. I’m setting it down when I hear her in the hall. She enters with a breakfast tray and sets it in front of me. It’s scrambled eggs and buttered toast.

“Thank you, Mrs. Brennan.” I start to eat hoping she’ll go away, but she doesn’t.

“Listen dear,” she says, coming over to sit in the chair next to the bed. “Mr. Brennan and I were talking last night, and we came up with an idea you might be interested in. There’s a woman in Yorkshire who’s completely bed ridden. She lost her son very tragically, and she’s never recovered. She’s very wealthy and owns a large manor home in the wilds called Fairmont Hall. It’s very remote so she’s having trouble finding someone. She needs both a companion and a caregiver because she’s all alone but refuses to even consider entering a facility. She can afford live-in care and she’s determined to stay in her home until the end.”

“It sounds perfect.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Her eyes shine with excitement.

“How do you know of her, and who’s been caring for her up until now?”

“She’s got a live-in at the present time, but the young woman is leaving at the end of the month. They’re both feeling up against the wire and desperate to find someone.”

“And how do you know her?”

“I don’t. Mr. Brennan saw an advertisement her solicitor posted regarding the position. He made some calls this morning and found all this out. I couldn’t wait to get here and tell you about it.”

“So what now? Will I need to interview? What if she doesn’t want to hire me?”

“Mr. Brennan spoke with the young woman who’s there now. She wants you to come as soon as you can so she can explain Mrs. Fairmont’s care and routine. She wants it to be a smooth transition. She’s very eager to have you meet Mrs. Fairmont.”

“So that’s it? Just like that? I have a job?”

She shrugs. “Well, I don’t see anything standing in your way.”

“The only thing is, it seems a little frightening to be so isolated with only two people living inside a large estate. I wonder if the woman who’s there now ever felt that way.”

“Perhaps she does, but I’m sure you’ll feel better after you speak with her about it. Mr. Brennan will drive you there whenever you’re ready. Do you feel strong enough?”

“Not today, but with the care you’re giving me, I’m sure I’ll be fully recovered soon. I just need to get up and walk more, maybe go outside for some fresh air.”

“That’s the spirit,” she says getting up to remove the tray. “The good Lord saved you for a reason,” she said. “Maybe it was to be Mrs. Fairmont’s guardian angel.”

“Would you run a bath for me before you go, Mrs. Brennan?”

“I think it would be good for you to do it, but I won’t leave until you’re finished in case you take a spill.”

I throw off the covers and swing my legs over the side of the bed. “I’ve gotten spoiled I guess.”

“Well, you’ve had quite a time of it. But things are about to turn round. You’ve been given a new purpose and you must embrace it like a lifeline, because that’s exactly what it is.”

I smile after she’s gone — something I haven’t done in so long I can’t even remember — but my heart truly does feel lighter as I pad down the hall to prepare my bath.

## Chapter 4

On Friday morning, I ready myself for transport to Fairmont Hall. I'm wearing a corduroy smock dress, tights and comfortable shoes. Over my arm is a light cardigan. I was able to fit all of my things into a suitcase, the handle of which is clasped in my hand as I take a last look at the bedroom I shared with James.

I don't want to live here anyway, I think as I head down the steps that killed him. His crumpled body, broken neck, and sightless eyes flash through my mind, and I shudder.

I go into the kitchen where Mrs. Brennan is making me some coffee and toast. I'm a little nervous, so I don't have much appetite, but I know it's best if I try to eat something before the long drive.

Putting the case on the floor and draping my sweater over it, I sit down at the kitchen table. Mrs. Brennan puts a beaker of hot coffee in front of me as though I'm a patron at a breakfast cafe.

"I'll just take it black this morning, Mrs. Brennan. And no more than one piece of toast, if you please. I'm not very hungry."

Before she can answer, the door opens and a man walks in wearing a hat. He's tall and broad shouldered with gray hair and spectacles.

"Mr. Brennan," she says, addressing her husband the way the character of Mrs. Bennet addressed her husband in my favorite

novel — Pride and Prejudice. “Why don’t you sit down and have a coffee with Miss Elizabeth.”

“Thank you, my dear. I don’t mind if I do.” He removes his hat and sits down across the table from me, smiling. “It’s nice to see you up and about.”

I feel a little embarrassed as I imagine him finding my unconscious body upstairs in the bedroom. “It’s good to be so. Thank you for saving my life, Mr. Brennan. You and your wife have been unbelievably kind to me, and I will be forever grateful to both of you.”

Now *he* seems a little embarrassed, but Mrs. Brennan puts his coffee with cream down, giving him something to focus on. A moment later my toast appears, already buttered and jammed. I pick it up and bite off a corner. “How long is the drive?”

“About 4 1/2 hours,” he says, after a sip of his coffee. “So, eat up while you can. We don’t want to have to stop on the way.”

I take another bite of my toast, but it doesn’t want to go down. I realize I can’t have too much coffee either, if Mr. Brennan doesn’t want to stop. It’s just as well, for I don’t want to be in the car any longer than necessary. I’m sure he doesn’t either, and I can’t forget it’s a nine hour drive for him. I glance at my watch. It’s 8:05am. As soon as he’s drained his coffee cup, I tell him I’m ready.

With my suitcase stowed away in the boot, I give Mrs. Brennan a brief hug, thank her again, and slide into the back seat.

Mr. Brennan doesn't speak so I don't either. About an hour out of London, I can't keep my eyes open any longer and nod off in a sitting position. The city girl in me was looking forward to seeing the landscape of rolling green hills and fragrant heather, but I still haven't regained my strength. When my eyes finally open, instead of perking up and gazing out the window at the magnificent sights we are passing, I fall onto my side, using my sweater as a makeshift pillow.

I don't wake again until we arrive at Fairmont Hall, and my sweater is damp with drool. I sit up as Mr. Brennan gets out and retrieves my suitcase. I check my appearance in the rearview mirror, running my fingers through my unruly curls.

The sunshine we enjoyed when we left is far behind us. A heavy mist blankets everything. The manor is charming, but the grounds haven't been kept up. What was likely once a beautiful garden with a fountain and a couple of stone benches, has been woefully neglected. Between the weather and grounds, I feel my optimism and sense of adventure waning.

I realize that Mr. Brennan is waiting for me to exit the car. I slip my sweater on and get out on his side. "Thank you," I say, picking up my suitcase.

"Will you be all right?" He barely knows me, and he is sounding like a concerned father. I savor the feeling, wishing I still had a father to care about me.



“I will,” I say.

“You let us know if you need anything.”

“Thank you for bringing me out here, Mr. Brennan. I am in your debt.”

He puts his hand on my arm for the briefest moment and then gets back inside the car. I swallow the lump in my throat as I watch him drive away. Then I turn back to the house and take a deep breath before I make my way up the cobblestone path. A black cat skitters out from the dry foliage. A gust of wind comes up and a sudden shadow falls over me. I look up and notice dark clouds amassing overhead. When I feel large drops of rain falling out of the sky, I hurry the rest of the way along the path and up the porch steps. Under a small portico, I ring the bell and wait for the door to open. Pushing down my apprehension, I focus on the fact that this is a new beginning – a second chance at life – and that I mustn’t take it for granted.

## Chapter 5

An attractive young woman stands before me. She is petite, blond, blue-eyed, and her smile is infectious — instantly buoying my spirits.

“Are you Elizabeth Price?”

“Yes, I am.”

She peeks out at the weather and waves me inside. “Oh, you’ll want to get out of that, won’t you?”

“It came up so suddenly,” I say, stepping into a grand entrance hall.

She closes the door and puts out her hand. “I’m Molly Harper,” she says.

I shake it. “It’s very nice to meet you, Molly.”

“You too. After that long drive, I’m sure you’ll want to rest and settle in before anything else.”

“That would be nice,” I say, following her up a steep staircase with a black wrought-iron banister that curves slightly to the left as it meets the second floor landing.

We head down the long corridor. The walls are papered in a dusty rose hue. The floor is dark wood, as is the wainscoting and the trim. It creaks beneath our feet while we make polite chit chat.

Molly's engaged and will be moving with her fiancé to New York where he will be working in an ad agency.

"Will you find another nursing position?"

"No, I'm expecting a baby. That's why we're in a rush, so we can keep that a secret."

This causes me an unexpected jolt of pain, but I keep it well hidden as we pass a side table with a small lamp that glows softly. We stop at the last room on the right and she opens the door. I walk in and set down my suitcase.

"This is one of the nicest rooms," she says. "Mrs. Fairmont is at the other end."

"Wouldn't it be more convenient to be closer to her?"

"It would, but I found that every little sound either woke or startled her."

I take in the room. On the right wall is a large four-poster bed with a nightstand on either side and two antique hurricane lamps. A bench chest sits in front, which I assume holds blankets and extra bedding. An armoire and dressing table are against the left wall. And on the wall opposite the door is a large bay window with slate blue drapes that match the bedspread. "It's lovely," I say, truthfully, omitting the fact that the somber hues aren't very cheerful. "Where is your room?"

"I'm across the hall."

It occurs to me once again that, except for Mrs. Fairmont, I'll be living here alone, so far away from everything. Thunder rumbles outside and rain pelts the glass. "I understand that you'll remain here until the end of the month."

"That was the plan, but it shouldn't take more than a few days for you to get comfortable with the routine. Why don't you unpack, rest or relax — whatever you need — and then come downstairs for a cup of tea."

"That sounds perfect. Thank you, Molly."

She closes the door behind her, and I go to the window and look out. There is nothing for miles around but a thick mist, gnarled trees and untamed wilderness. It's chilly in the room, and I'm glad I'm wearing my sweater.

Sighing, I lay my suitcase on the bench and open it.

I place my comb and brush on the vanity. I smooth the wrinkles down before hanging my clothes in the armoire. There's enough room to store the empty suitcase in the bottom of it, which I guess is my reward for having so few possessions.

The bed looks inviting, but after the four-hour nap, I'll never be able to sleep. I sit at the vanity and gaze at my reflection. My hair is curlier now because of the humidity. I run my brush through it, but the smooth, shiny look I've always envied will never happen. I give up and decide that the sensible thing is to go downstairs for tea with Molly and to enjoy her company while it lasts.

As soon as I step into the hall, I hear crying but I can't tell where it's coming from. The door of the room across from mine is ajar. Molly said that this was her room. "Molly?" I call. No answer, but the weeping continues. Could her sunny demeanor be as feigned as mine? Was she hiding some sorrow she didn't share with me? But why would she tell me her sorrows anyway? I didn't tell her mine. We've only just met.

I'm torn between infringing on her privacy in an attempt to lend her some comfort and pretending I never heard anything. Perhaps because my own pain is so raw and deep, sympathy wins. I push open the door slowly, wincing as the hinges creak. "Molly?" I say again as I tiptoe farther inside. I realize I'm in a sewing room, not a bedroom. Molly wouldn't be in here, yet the sound of weeping is still distinct.

I leave feeling perplexed and disquieted. Did Molly mean her room was literally across from mine, or practically? I stop in front of the next room down. "Molly?" I knock a few times, but the door remains closed. I still hear the crying. This must be Molly's room. "Molly!" I shout this time, but there is no answer. The crying continues as I open the door a crack and peek inside. This room – which is nearly identical to my own – is empty too. I go all the way in and pull open the armoire. There are no clothes hanging up. I glance over at the vanity but its surface is clean and there are no items on it. It's clear that the room is unoccupied.

I run back out and check the next room and the next. My concern over the unidentified weeping sound has been replaced by something much more perplexing and worrisome: Molly's room doesn't seem to exist.

## Chapter 6

I run down the stairs as lightning flashes through the windows and thunder booms overhead adding to the ominous feeling that has me tightly in its grip. I keep telling myself that there has to be a rational explanation for what's going on. "Molly!" I shout as I near the bottom of the stairs and try to decide in which direction to turn. To my right is a large living quarters. To my left is a long hallway leading toward the back of the house. I follow it, shouting Molly's name every few minutes.

I poke my head inside a room about half way down on the right. It's a large, but cozy library with a fireplace. It's also empty. Farther down the hall on the left-hand side is an elaborate dining room. A quick scan confirms that no one is inside. At the end of the corridor is a large kitchen. There's no kettle on the hob, no tea steeping in a pot — nothing. I'm all alone.

I don't remember seeing a vehicle outside when we arrived, so I can't check to see if it's gone. How could she just disappear? And why would she do that? I feel utterly abandoned and betrayed, almost like she played a cruel joke on me. The only explanation that I can come up with is that she planned to escape the very moment that I showed up to perform her duties. Why didn't she just say she was going to leave right away? She'd said that she wanted the

transition to go smoothly. Could she have written everything down and left it for me? I search every counter, cupboard, corner, and cranny. Nothing!

I decide to make myself a cup of tea and fill the kettle with water from the sink. While I'm waiting for it to boil, I open every cupboard until I find a beaker. The tea cannister is on the counter. There's sugar on the table, and I find cream in the refrigerator. A perfunctory whiff tells me it's still fresh. I take the kettle off the hob after it starts to steam but before it whistles and pour it over the bag I dropped in the beaker.

As I sit at the long wooden table sipping my tea, I wonder again why Molly would desert me like this. If Molly's gone, then who was crying? And why could I hear it so distinctly but not locate the source? I glance over at the curtained window above the sink where rain beats against the pane in a loud staccato rhythm.

When my tea is gone, I put the cup in the sink. I see a switch and turn the lights on and off again. They work, but it's probably a good idea to hunt down a flashlight or candles and matches in case the storm knocks the power out.

I know that I have to go to Mrs. Fairmont's room to make sure she's all right, but I don't know what to expect when I get there. It's going to be so much harder this way. It's not fair to Mrs. Fairmont and it's not fair to me. For the first time, resentment begins to bubble up. How selfish and unprofessional can Molly be?



Caregivers are not supposed to put themselves before those who depend on them.

With my mind now focused on poor Mrs. Fairmont, I decide to just introduce myself and find out what she needs and what I can do for her. Molly said her room was at the other end of the hall. Then again, Molly said a lot of things. So, I'll believe it when I see it.

I leave the kitchen and return to the staircase, my eyes sweeping curiously over everything from cushions to draperies. The dark woods and fabrics strike me as overly somber. My grief intensifies in this gloomy atmosphere, and I remember that poor Mrs. Fairmont is grieving too. Maybe Mrs. Brennan is right and we need each other.

The wood creaks as I go up the long staircase. When I reach the second floor, lightning flashes in the windows at each end of the hall. I turn right and go to the last room — the opposite of mine. I knock and hear a faint voice coming from inside.

“Come in.”

I open the door slowly. A soft glow is coming from a small lamp burning on the nightstand. An elderly woman sits propped up in a large bed beneath a fluffy duvet. I approach her and speak softly. “Hello, Mrs. Fairmont.”

She blinks and stares at me. “Who are you?”

“I'm Elizabeth. I've come to care for you. Molly was supposed to stay and show me your routine, but she's left rather

abruptly, I'm afraid. I'm going to have to rely on you to let me know what it is that you need, and I will do my very best to accommodate you."

"What are you talking about, dear? There's no one living in this house but me."

"No, Molly was your nurse. She was taking care of you every day until this afternoon when I arrived. I've come all the way from London."

"I've been alone here since my son died," she said. "Did he tell you to come here? Does he want you to take me to him?"

"No, Mrs. Fairmont." I want to press the issue, but it's obvious that the woman's lost control of her faculties. It could be dementia – Mrs. Price had been much the same toward the end. Or perhaps it's from the loss of her son. In some cases, madness can result from prolonged and intense grief. It's essentially the mind's refusal to accept reality. It would have been nice if Molly had mentioned that. Fortunately, it's an area in which I have some experience. "When did you last eat?"

"I don't know."

"All right. I'm going to bring you a tray in about an hour." I don't ask her if she's hungry or what she likes to eat because she won't remember anyway. "Do you need to use the loo or have a drink of water?"

She shakes her head no, but I'm not convinced about the former. That is another thing Molly didn't tell me — whether Mrs. Fairmont is incontinent. I hope not, but either way it's going to be a problem because I have no idea how to get her to the loo. My eyes scan the room, looking for supplies or evidence of what her needs are. Is she on any medication? There's so much I don't know, and I'm not going to be able to rely on my patient to tell me.

I pull the covers up a bit higher, hoping I don't get a whiff of urine and ask her if she's warm enough. She nods, still not sure who I am or what I'm doing here.

I go, but leave the door open. I'm trying not to collapse under the weight of this enormous responsibility. Will I find what I need to care for her properly? Will I be able to change her or get her to the loo by myself? Will there be enough food in the kitchen to make her a meal? From where will I get more? I sigh in frustration as I go back down the stairs again, cursing Molly Harper all the way.

## Chapter 7

I miss the sounds of the London streets. Any noise would be better than the deafening stillness that swallows me up. I flip on every light switch and bang around inside the kitchen looking for ingredients to make dinner.

Thunder cracks, making me jump and when the rumbles subside, I think I hear something. I listen and there it is — a cross between a wine and a howl. I go to the back door and open it. The black cat bolts inside, ears down and drenched from whiskers to tail.

“Poor thing! I don’t know your name,” I say to him — assuming it’s a him. He looks up at me warily, as though one wrong move on my part and he’ll run for cover. “I’m Elizabeth.” I’ve never been one to apologize for talking to animals. They might not understand the words, but the message of kindness is conveyed. One can’t blame a small animal for caution. People can be so cruel, especially to black cats. I’ve always loved them. “What is *your* name? No wait, don’t tell me. Let me guess. Is it, Mr. Fuzzy Bottom? No? All right then...is it, Clarence Horatio Bigglesworth? No? How about if I give you a new name? I think I’ll call you, Silhouette. Do you like that? I think it’s quite charming and it suits you rather well.”

I go to the pantry in search of cat food but find neither canned nor dry. “How about a dish of cream?” I say, going to the fridge. I

take out the cream and search for a small bowl, taking the first one I see. I pour the cream and set the bowl on the floor. I watch to see what he'll do. He goes to the bowl and starts to lick, but keeps close tabs on me, clearly letting me know that I'm still on probation.

Smiling over Silhouette's adorable cream mustache, I get back to the business of pulling together a meal for Mrs. Fairmont. I've already found some cans of soup and crackers. There's a bowl of fresh fruit and I select an apple, which I cut into slices. There's even some cheese to go with the crackers. It's not much of a dinner, but it'll do until I can get some groceries. I have no idea how I'll do that, but right now I'm focused on carrying the tray up to Mrs. Fairmont's room without incident. I've always been a bit accident prone.

I climb the stairs carefully, trying to see around the tray. When I reach the top, I turn right and go to her room. I've left the door open, so I walk in and set the tray on her lap. "Sorry for the wait," I say, unfolding a napkin and laying it across her chest. "I was tending to your cat. He was not very happy about being caught in the downpour."

"I don't have a cat, dear," she says, picking up her spoon. At least she's able to feed herself. And I'm not at all surprised that she doesn't remember the cat. I shiver when I imagine all the animals whose owners die or become physically or mentally incapacitated. What happens to the poor things? Molly hadn't mentioned the cat

either. I suppose it's possible that it's not Mrs. Fairmont's cat, but I didn't see any other houses close by, so I have to assume he belongs here. It'll be good to have his company.

"Mrs. Fairmont," I say, as she spoons the soup into her mouth. "Where is the nearest shop for buying food and supplies?"

"When I was a little girl, I used to go with my mother to the shops. Sometimes she'd let me buy candy, but only if I was well-behaved."

"Yes, but where would you go today if you had to buy something?"

Her spoon is paused in midair as she considers this. "I would go to... to..." She begins to look fretful.

"Never mind, Mrs. Fairmont," I say, holding back a sigh and pushing her hand back into motion. "Just eat your soup."

I go to the window while she's eating, although I can't see a thing except when lightning flashes. There is nearly a constant rumble of thunder and, every once in a while, a boom so loud I jump and my heart thumps like a wounded bird. Turning from the window, I see that she's now working on her apple, having already eaten all the soup and most of the crackers and cheese. I listen to her crunching the fruit while I take a quick look inside her dresser. She's got several pairs of giant panties, a few nightgowns much like the one she's wearing now, and some warm socks. In her walk-in closet, I reach up and pull the chain that turns on the bare bulb. The smell

of moth balls makes me gag as I flip through dresses and sweaters, slacks and blouses — all things she probably hasn't worn in years. There are some shoes on the floor as well. Mostly flats, but some with a low, thick heel. I turn around and notice that the closet is larger than I first realized. There's another little alcove that was in shadow. I peek around the corner and discover a wheelchair. It's folded and leaning up against one wall. I take it by the handles and open it up.

I can't fit it through the door and realize that I should have taken it out first. Sighing because my back muscles are sore and I haven't eaten, I fold it up again, pinching my finger so hard I nearly scream.

I carry the chair out and unfold it again. She takes no notice of it even though her food is gone and no longer a distraction. I take the tray and set it on top of the dresser. Then I push the chair over to the side of the bed then lean across her. "Put your arms around my neck," I say. She does so without questioning the procedure. I pull her forward and she's surprisingly light. I lower her into the chair, feeling a huge sense of relief and accomplishment. I get behind the chair and grasp the handles, pushing her out of the room and down the hall toward the loo I discovered while searching for Molly.

I pull her forward again and lower her onto the toilet. She's able to stay on the seat, but I now have to pull her nightgown up and her undergarments down while she's sitting on them.

There's barely more than a trickle before she tells me she's done. I worry that she hasn't properly voided her bladder, for I don't want her wetting the bed. I have no choice but to pull her panties back up, push her nightgown back down and shift her weight from the seat to the chair. My back muscles beg for mercy as I get her washed up at the sink and back down to her room.

Just as I'm about to transfer her from the chair to the bed, I notice the large yellow stain on the fitted sheet over the mattress.



## Chapter 8

Other than the thunder, the only other sound inside the house is the loud ticking of the grandfather clock in the entrance hall. Every time it chimes the hour, it startles me more than the thunder. I just hope I can get used to it. At least it helps assure me that time is indeed passing. It feels as though it's standing still, and I will stay in this moment forever. It makes me wonder about death and what happens when the soul leaves the body. Are James and his mother at peace? Are they together? Are they somehow able to watch over me? I'd looked forward to starting my life over as Mrs. Fairmont's caregiver, but if Mr. and Mrs. Brennan hadn't saved my life, would I be with James and his mother now instead of isolated out here on the moors? Mrs. Fairmont is a very sweet woman, almost childlike. But she's a stranger to me. Then I remind myself that she is alone in the world and she needs me – Silhouette needs me – and I strengthen my commitment to them both. *Caregivers are not supposed to put themselves before those who depend on them.*

I fix myself the same meal I served to Mrs. Fairmont. As I sit at the long wooden table, Silhouette begins to rub himself against my legs. He has to have more than just cream, but I'm not sure what to give him. I get up and go to the pantry once more hoping I'd overlooked something. Sure enough, there is a can of tuna. I open

the can and drain some of the liquid out before putting a small portion into a bowl. As soon as I place it on the floor, he runs over and starts to eat. He makes a big production out of chewing but he seems to be enjoying it.

I return to my soup and crackers, finishing everything and hoping that a full stomach will not only make things look brighter but also ensure a good night's sleep.

I put my dishes in the sink and look for a dishpan, soap, and a rag. Filling the pan about halfway, I wash the dishes and set them in the rack to dry. I wipe my hands, toss the towel on the counter and flip off the light, hoping that Silhouette follows me up to my room.

I put on my nightgown and arrange the clothes I was wearing in my dresser drawers. I turn off the bedside lamp but leave the hall light on so Silhouette will be able to find his way. Just as I'm dozing off, the door creaks. I stiffen for a moment, then I hear a soft mew and realize that he must have brushed against the open door when he came in. He jumps up on my bed and lies down at the foot, where I've placed a very soft blanket especially for him. After a long and very thorough bath, he curls up into a tight ball and falls asleep. Knowing he is there, gives me a cozy feeling and soon I am drifting off myself. A short while later, I'm jarred awake by the obnoxious chime of the grandfather clock. An hour later – and every hour on the hour – the same thing.

I wake up feeling as though I'm being smothered, realizing that I've jammed the pillow over my head to block out the sound. I toss it aside and breathe deeply before I sit up and stretch. As soon as I do so, my head starts to pound. A dull, throbbing ache one minute, a vice-like pressure the next. Messaging my temples doesn't help, so I throw off the covers and get up.

Silhouette is gone already — probably waiting downstairs to be fed and let out to relieve himself. I have to go to the loo as well, but I want to get to Mrs. Fairmont before she wets her bed again. Last night, I managed to locate a linen cupboard off the loo and put on a new set before I put her back in bed. Today, I have to wash the soiled ones, provided I can find a washer and dryer somewhere in the house — most likely the cellar. It gives me a creepy feeling already, for basements are not places I enjoy. A hold over from childhood, no doubt. As soon as I got to the bottom of the staircase, I'd become paralyzed with fear and race back up the steps, two at a time, as though unseen hands were about to grab my ankles and pull me down into the fiery pits of hell where I would be trapped forever. I outgrew most of that, of course. But not all. I still believe in heaven and hell, God and Lucifer and the eternal struggle between good and evil. When I attempted suicide, I feared that my soul might become trapped between this world and the next because I'd been too good a person to go to hell and too sinful to get into heaven. The important thing, I tell myself, is that I didn't die. I was saved by the Brennan's

— a couple of guardian angels — giving me a brand-new chance at life, love, and a happy ending.

I look out the window and see that the sun is shining brightly. The gray mist still blankets the ground, but the day is otherwise lovely. I am determined to shake off my grief and general melancholy and embrace the brand-new day. Maybe something good is about to happen.

## Chapter 9

I can put it off no longer. I will run out of food and supplies if I don't figure out where the shops are and how to get to them. There is also the problem of money. I had little of my own and Mrs. Fairmont hadn't given me any. I doubt she is even able to understand the concept, so how will I be paid for my services?

After she eats a simple breakfast of boiled egg and toast, I put her in the wheelchair and check the sheets, relieved to see she hasn't wet the bed again. Then I take her to the loo as I did the night before.

When we return to her room, I place her back into her bed and make sure she's comfortable. I bring the tray downstairs and wash the few dishes I'd used for both our meals. I give Silhouette more tuna and cream hoping the rich diet he's probably not used to won't upset his stomach.

I make a quick inventory of the pantry items, jotting down on a note pad the things that are running low. I do the same with the refrigerator shelves and take a peek inside the freezer. I realize I should have done so sooner, for Molly had made some meals and stored them here for her convenience. Now it was my convenience. I smolder with resentment whenever I think about Molly Harper.

With my list ready, I accept the fact that I will have to use my own money to purchase the items. This one time only, I tell

myself. Grabbing my purse and my sweater, I go out the back door and Silhouette follows me. I look around the grounds, hoping to find a bicycle or some vehicle by which I can scout around for stores. There's nothing.

I start out walking with Silhouette close at my heels. The sun is out and bright enough to cause me to squint as I follow the drive that leads out to the road. I don't want to walk too far, for fear of getting lost. I decide that when I can no longer see the house, I will turn around. A likelihood of there being any kind of store in this close proximity is laughable, but I have to try something or we'll run out of food and all three of us will perish.

I walk as far as I can in both directions and return to Fairmont Hall in defeat. My sense of unease is growing by the minute, but I tell myself that Molly had found a store close enough to keep the pantry stocked. Then I realize that she must have had a car at her disposal — the same car in which she drove away and left me stranded. I don't remember seeing a car outside when Mr. Brennan dropped me here in the middle of nowhere, but I'd come in the front door. Her "getaway" car was likely parked in the back. Thinking of Mr. Brennan reminds me that, if I need anything, I should let them know. So, as soon as I enter the kitchen, I look for the piece of paper he gave me with their phone number on it.

I search my room when I don't find it in the kitchen and panic begins to mount as I curse myself for my carelessness. That

piece of paper could be the only thing that separates me from disaster. I go through everything, but to no avail. Now, I'm looking in ridiculous places like drawers I've never even opened, but I'm desperate. After an hour of this, I sit down on my bed and cry.

Silhouette jumps up and starts to rub himself against me. He purrs loudly and I suspect this is his attempt at consoling me. Animals can often pick up on things like that. I pet him and speak to him in a soothing tone, hoping it will calm and cheer us both. Then I wonder if he's really consoling me or just letting me know he's hungry. This makes me feel my plight even more sharply because this poor cat is depending on me for food. Sitting here crying isn't doing any good. I have to pull myself together and meet this challenge head on. But how? I need a tissue and reach into my sweater pocket. When I pull it out, the piece of paper I was looking for comes with it and falls to the floor. "Yes!" I say out loud, bending over to grab it. I hug Silhouette in my joy and plant a kiss on his little black nose.

## Chapter 10

The long telephone cord stretches as I walk back and forth in the kitchen, trying to pull together another measly lunch. When it begins to ring, I hold my breath hoping at least one of them is home.

“Hello?” It’s Mrs. Brennan’s voice I hear on the other end. Relief washes over me.

“Hello, Mrs. Brennan? It’s Elizabeth — Elizabeth Price.” The receiver nearly slips from between my shoulder and chin as I lay two slices of stale bread down on a plate, checking for signs of mold.

“Elizabeth! How are you, dear? And how’s the new job?”

“Well, that’s why I’m calling actually. There have been a few problems since I arrived. The first was that the caregiver whom I was replacing was supposed to train me in. Instead, she seems to have sneaked out the back door and left me stranded.”

“What? Oh my goodness! Why would she do a thing like that?” The question was likely rhetorical. If not, I couldn’t supply her with an explanation without having one myself.

“I don’t know, Mrs. Brennan. She just did. I’m as curious as you are as to her reasons, but much more pressing is the plight I find myself in right now.” I butter the bread and lay down two slices of cheese. “You see, Mrs. Fairmont hasn’t got full use of her faculties, and she can’t help me figure anything out. I’m running out of food



and there are no shops anywhere near me. There's no car, leaving me without any means of transportation, and I don't dare take off on foot in case I can't find my way back again. I need quite a few things so I'd have a lot to carry, which would never work. Plus there's the issue of money. Mrs. Fairmont hasn't given me any. I don't have much of my own and, even if I did, I would eventually run out. There's also the matter of my wage. Did the solicitor who posted the advertisement happen to mention how I would be paid?" I spread a thin layer of tuna over the cheese before cutting the sandwich in half to form triangles.

"I don't know. I'll have to ask Mr. Brennan. If it's not working out, you can come back here and look for something else. You just say the word, dear."

"I couldn't possibly leave Mrs. Fairmont alone. I'll just have to solve one problem at a time, the most immediate is getting to the store."

"Mr. Brennan could go there and help you, I suppose." She does not sound as if she likes the idea. Silhouette jumps up on the counter top, and I place him firmly on the floor again so that he doesn't think that this is something that's allowed.

"I wouldn't ask, Mrs. Brennan, but I'm truly desperate." I think about the nine-hour trip he would have to make all over again and realize why she sounds rather dubious. After all, the poor man

can't take an entire day out of his life every time I need a carton of milk.

"Let me talk it over with him. He might be able to come up with a better solution. I'll call you back. What's the number there in case he doesn't have it?"

Luckily, the number is written in pencil in the center of the dial. I rattle it off as I pour juice into a glass. "That certainly sounds fair enough, Mrs. Brennan. I'm sorry to be a bother, but I really appreciate you being there."

"All right, dear. Don't fret. We'll see what can be done. I'll call you back this afternoon." After thanking her again, I hang up the phone and bring Mrs. Fairmont her lunch tray.

She seems a bit more lucid right now, and I want to use the opportunity to reach her. I pull over a chair and sit down near the bed while she eats. "So, Mrs. Fairmont," I begin, "tell me about your son."

"Paul?"

"Yes, Paul."

A blob of tuna falls onto the napkin I placed over her chest. She doesn't seem to notice. "He was such a good boy," she says. "I loved him more than life. Why did God have to take him from me?" Her chin quivers.

I ignore her question. "Can you describe him to me?"

“He had hair the color of wheat, deep blue eyes, a strong jaw with a cleft chin.” She smiles as if she can see him standing before her. “He was very handsome.”

“How old was he when he died?” I don’t wish to sadden her, but I can’t suppress my curiosity.

“He was 38.” I’m not sure of Mrs. Fairmont’s age, but she must have had him very late in life like Mrs. Price when she had James. “If it wouldn’t be too painful for you to tell me, Mrs. Fairmont, how did your son die?”

Her chin remains steady this time, but tears flood her eyes and spill down her cheeks. “He hanged himself from a beam in the cellar.”

## Chapter 11

The ring of the phone is sudden and jarring. I haven't recovered from the shock of learning that Paul Fairmont took his own life in this house. The place is frightening enough already.

"Hello?"

"Elizabeth," Mrs. Brennan's familiar voice is reassuring. "We've come up with a way to handle this for you. Mr. Brennan was able to find the shops in your vicinity." She asks me to get a pen and paper handy so she can give me the number. I go to the door where I'd last seen stationary items and pull out what I need.

"Go ahead, Mrs. Brennan," I say, pen poised in midair. I scribble down the number and name of the shopkeeper to whom Mr. Brennan had spoken.

"Prepare your list and then call. They'll deliver whatever you need."

"What a relief! I can't thank you enough, Mrs. Brennan — both of you! Please give Mr. Brennan my best regards."

"I will, Elizabeth. You take good care now and, if you need anything more — anything at all — you get in touch immediately."

An unexpected lump forms in my throat, and when I say good-bye, my voice cracks slightly. I hope she didn't notice.

After hanging up I wonder for a split second if I should call her back and tell her about Paul Fairmont's suicide. I decide not to

and try to put the disturbing subject from my mind as I get started on my grocery list.

Two hours later, a delivery boy knocks on the back door. I open it up and he comes in carrying two bags.

“Right there is fine,” I say when it appears he’s waiting for instructions. He sets them down without a word and goes out again. A moment later, he returns with two more and sets them on the counter next to the first two. When he’s done, he stands near the door. I realize with a rush of embarrassment and anxiety that he’s expecting me to pay him.

“How much is it?” I ask.

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, hands jammed inside his pockets. His bowl haircut is the only distraction from his acne. “Mr. Mills says he put it all on Mrs. Fairmont’s account.”

“Oh,” I say relieved, yet wondering how Mr. Mills is going to collect. I’m not sure why he’s still standing here until it dawns on me that he’s waiting for a tip. “Wait here,” I say, hurrying from the room. I race up the stairs and find my purse inside my bedroom. I take out two shillings and run back down to the kitchen. I’m both relieved and disappointed to find him still standing there. “I don’t know how much you typically get,” I say holding it out, “but this is really all I have. Do you think it would be possible for Mr. Mills to

tack your delivery charge onto the bill next time? At least until I get things worked out. I'm new here."

"No problem, miss," he says pocketing the coins before turning and heading out the back door.

Grateful that's behind me, I begin the business of unpacking the items. I check the list once everything is out of the bags and make sure there's nothing missing. I start putting it all away while my mind returns to the unsettling business of Paul Fairmont. I want to forget him, while at the same time I'm developing a morbid curiosity to know more.

The sky begins to cloud over around mid-afternoon. I had been thinking about allowing Mrs. Fairmont to sit in the wheelchair by the window whenever the weather was clement, but for today at least, I've lost the chance. It think it would be better still if I could find a way to get her downstairs so I could wheel her outside to sit in the overgrown garden.

Once the kitchen is orderly and the pantry and fridge are stocked with food, I notice how black the sky looks out the kitchen window. It looks as if another storm threatens, and I know that it will be harder to chase away the creepy feeling of Paul Fairmont's suicide with thunder and lightning as a backdrop.

I cook a decent meal for the first time since I arrived, and give Silhouette something more suited to his digestive system. I take Mrs. Fairmont her tray but she doesn't eat as much as before, even

while I'm encouraging her with each bite. "You have to keep your strength up, Mrs. Fairmont."

She pushes the tray away. "I don't like thunderstorms," she says petulantly.

She'd said nothing about her fears the night before, suggesting that her earlier lucidity still lingered. If so, perhaps she can tell me more about Paul.

She brings the subject up herself. "It was storming like this on the night Paul took his life."

I remove the tray from her lap and set it aside, hoping she will eat more later. "Have you any idea why your son would do a thing like that?" I don't wish to cause the woman any pain, but I really want to know what drove him to such a desperate act. Perhaps it was because I was driven to it myself so recently. It's like a shared pain that binds like no other.

"It was his wife, Karen," she tells me. "She drank and they fought constantly. He fell in love with someone else – a sweet young woman who took care of me. She'd suffered a recent tragedy in her own life, which is what brought her to Fairmont Hall. She and Paul were kindred spirits but he didn't want to hurt Karen, for he'd loved her too in the beginning. One night, during an argument, Karen fell down the stairs. Paul tried to prevent it but even so, he blamed himself for her death. The grief and the guilt were too much."

I nearly forget to breathe. What happened to Paul and Karen is nearly identical to what happened to me and James – only reversed! Except for the fact that I lost a baby. Mrs. Fairmont said nothing about Karen being pregnant.

Before I can respond, she adds, “I was the one who found him, you know.”

“Oh, Mrs. Fairmont! I’m so sorry. What a shock it must have been.”

“I tried to focus on the fact that Paul was no longer suffering, but I couldn’t get the image out of my mind. Then one day, my legs became useless. The doctors called it, hysterical paralysis. I’ve been in this bed ever since with nothing to do but grieve. Sometimes I can think clearly. Like now for instance. But that’s when the pain of his loss is the most unbearable. I prefer those other times when I don’t seem to know much at all. It’s easier that way.”

I pat her hand, wishing there were some way that I could help her. When her eyes glaze over again, I realize that her mind is protecting her in the most merciful way – by facilitating her escape from reality.



## Chapter 12

I return to the kitchen to wash the dinner dishes, the whole time pondering what I now know about Mrs. Fairmont. Her mind is not slipping because of old age – although, that might also be a factor. What she saw would be gruesome enough under any circumstances, but when it's your own child, it would just be too much. Her mind escaped and her body shut down in response to her inability to cope with what happened to her son. I cannot allow my curiosity to drag her back into a world in which she can't bear to exist.

I try to convince Silhouette to go outside and do his business, but, when I open the back door, he takes one look at the driving rain and heads the other way. I decide that the next time I have groceries delivered I will have to put a litter box on the list for situations like these. I can't imagine how he survived before I showed up. I want to believe that Molly was keeping an eye on him because I can't bear to think otherwise.

I take a candle up with me in case the power goes out. The cat follows me to bed as usual. I lay an old newspaper down in the corner of the room to give Silhouette an option if he can't make it until morning. I regret not getting a book for myself from the library downstairs and hope I can fall asleep quickly. The storm has me on

edge so I leave the candle burning. It has also occurred to me that Paul Fairmont's ghost could be roaming the halls. *Perhaps his soul is trapped between this world and the next because he'd been too good a person to go to hell and too sinful to get into heaven.*

I turn onto my side and watch Silhouette go through the systematic process of bathing himself. When he's satisfied that each strand of fur is going in the right direction, he curls up beside me and begins to purr. The sound is both comforting and relaxing. I close my eyes and drift off.

A loud crash bursts through my unconsciousness. Sitting bolt upright, Silhouette springs off the mattress and scuttles to the corner with his ears pressed low. I know this means that there's someone in the house who shouldn't be. My heart hammers so loudly I can't hear myself think. I'm torn between rushing toward the sound to see what it is and getting as far away from it as possible – preferably the bottom of a closet. None of these are good options and I quickly realize that I can't think only of myself. I must go to Mrs. Fairmont first to make sure she's all right.

I hastily don my robe and grab the candle off the bedside table. Just as I'm leaving the room, I hear another crash, though this one isn't so loud. As I get near the landing, I hear a woman's voice and then a man's. My legs almost give out beneath me as terror sweeps over and envelops me. For a moment I can't move, think, or breathe. Maybe Mrs. Fairmont will be safer if I run downstairs and

confront whoever this is, but I have no weapon – no way to defend myself. They must be criminals, I reason. They're probably vagabonds who assume that this great hall is empty and that they can just take possession of it. But how did they get in? I double and triple locked all the doors and checked all the windows, at least the ones low enough for a person to crawl inside.

I dash across the landing and run for Mrs. Fairmont's room. I don't knock, but barge right in to see her fast asleep! How can she be sleeping through all this commotion? At least she's all right, I tell myself. Waking her will do no good at all, I'm sure. It will only frighten her and then I'll have an hysterical woman to deal with on top of the intruders.

I creep back out into the hall, leaving her door slightly ajar. Taking a deep breath, I place my left hand on the banister to steady myself as I grasp the candle with my right and slowly, quietly descend the stairs. I hear the female voice giggle, then the male voice is raised sharply. My breath comes in rapid, shallow bursts as I force my feet down each step.

When I reach the bottom, I stand there listening. The next sound I hear seems to come from the kitchen. That assumption is confirmed when I hear the sound of dishes clanking together. Then a loud ping as if a piece of silverware has dropped and is bouncing on the tiles. The man's voice again. "Will you please keep the noise down!"

As I creep down the hall towards the kitchen I wonder why he's worried about the noise if he thinks the house is empty. Does he know someone lives here? Does he know Mrs. Fairmont? Suddenly I wonder if these could be friends of Molly's. Or even Molly herself with her fiancé. Maybe she forgot something or maybe her conscious finally got the better of her. I fervently hope there is a simple explanation for this terrifying intrusion. I feel angry now, which makes me a little more daring.

I blow out my candle so I can remain in shadow as I stand just outside the brightly-lit kitchen. I can see the strangers clearly, but they won't notice me very easily as long as I'm quiet and still. There is one man and one woman. He is tall and broad shouldered with blond hair, very neat in appearance and well-dressed. She is less conventional – long skirt, sandals, no makeup, round-wire spectacles and kinky red hair. They are both sitting at the table. He is pouring cereal into a bowl and she has a glass in front of her with ice, and some amber-colored liquid. No food. I can't help but notice how pale and skinny she is. She also has a mass of freckles on her face that I can see from where I'm standing.

I take a deep breath and swallow before I force myself to step into the light. Still, neither of them notices me at first. Then it's their turn to be startled. "Who are you?" I demand, trying to look fierce and commanding.

They both look up at the same time. He answers. “Who are *you*?”

“I’m Elizabeth Price, care-giver to the owner and proprietress of this establishment.”

“Well, well, well!” says the woman in a mocking tone as she looks me up and down. “This one’s got a royal bee in her bonnet!”

I place a hand on my hip to suggest I won’t be intimidated. “As such, I demand to know who you are and how you got in here.”

The man gets up, coming around the table, extending his hand to me. “I’m Paul Fairmont, and this is my wife, Karen.”

## Chapter 13

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” I say. “Mrs. Fairmont’s son and daughter-in-law are both dead. I know that for a fact.”

Karen cackles loudly. “You hear that, Paul?” she says. “We’re dead.”

He barks over his shoulder. “That’s enough, Karen. I’ll handle this.” Turning back to me, he smiles. “I have no doubt that’s what she’s told you, but my mother has been quite delusional for some time.” He fishes around inside his back pocket. Flipping open his wallet, he slides his driver’s license out and holds it up for me to read.

I lean forward and peer at it closely. Sure enough, it says that the man standing in front of me is indeed Paul Fairmont. Then again... “You could have had this card made so you could impersonate him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“For her house and her money,” I say, as though nothing could be more obvious.

“I understand your reservations,” he says. “And it’s very sensible of you to be cautious. But I can prove my identity.” He walks past me, down the dim hall and makes a left into the library. A moment later, he returns with a large book in his hands. It’s a

photo album. I set my candle on the counter while he's opening it up to show me.

He flips to the back of the book. "This is Christmas of '68."

It was four years ago, but the man in the picture hadn't changed. It's Paul Fairmont all right. Next to him is Karen and Mrs. Fairmont. All are smiling happily in front of a beautifully decorated tree. "I'm sorry," I say, feeling both foolish and shocked that the man I thought was dead is alive and well. "Your mother had me so convinced..." I shake my head, embarrassed.

"It's understandable," he says. "Think nothing of it. I'm just glad you're here taking care of her and doing a wonderful job, I'm sure."

"I've only just arrived," I say. "The young woman before me – Molly Harper – she left rather abruptly, I'm afraid. I'm still trying to figure things out." I feel something against my bare leg and look down to see Silhouette rubbing back and forth. I pick him up. "Would this be your mother's cat, by any chance?"

"Sorry," he says. "I don't recognize him."

I feel relieved, for Silhouette is no one's cat but mine now. I can't bear the thought of leaving him behind when I'm no longer needed. Which, I realize, might be now. "So, I guess you will be taking over your mother's care now that you're back from... wherever it was you were."

“That’s not possible. Unfortunately, my presence terrifies her. She thinks I’m a ghost.”

“I don’t understand. You mean...you’ll be here, but she won’t know?”

“Believe me, I’ve tried to convince her otherwise. She becomes hysterical at the sight of either me or Karen. I’d rather deprive myself of her company than put her in such an emotional state. She might have a stroke or a heart attack. Then I’d feel responsible.”

I put down the cat, who wanders farther into the kitchen and jumps up on the table. “Get that thing away from me!” says Karen, leaning away from the tail that almost brushes her face.

I look at Paul. “She doesn’t like cats?”

“She’s allergic,” he says, ruefully.

Silhouette looks at her, his ears once again pressed down. “Scat!” she says, making shooing motions with both hands. He jumps down and then bolts from the room, tearing past us.

“That’s the difference between dogs and cats,” he says. “A dog will protect you; a cat will protect itself.”

I open my mouth to defend Silhouette, but think better of it. Instead I say, “I guess I’ll go back to bed then.”

“Sorry for disturbing you, Miss Price or may I call you Elizabeth?”

“You may.”



“And I insist you call me Paul. Mr. Fairmont would be much too stuffy for my taste.”

“You can call me, *Mrs.* Fairmont!” says Karen with a slur as she reaches for the whiskey bottle on the counter and unscrews the cap before topping up her glass.

“That’ll be confusing,” I say, under my breath for only Paul to hear.

“That’s why you’ll call her Karen,” he says with a wink. “Good-night, Elizabeth. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Just to be clear, you definitely want me to continue caring for your mother now that you’re back.”

“I would be very grateful if you would.”

I smile, meeting his deep blue eyes directly for the first time. “Of course. Good-night, Paul.” I turn and walk down the hall. When I glance over my shoulder, he is still standing there watching me.

## Chapter 14

A curious array of emotions swirl through me in the weeks that follow the arrival of Paul Fairmont and his wife, Karen. On the one hand, I feel an immense relief that I am no longer the only person in this isolated manor besides Mrs. Fairmont. I am also quite relieved to know that Mrs. Fairmont's son did not commit suicide after all, and that the story was simply an old woman's delusion. Although I must attribute the disintegration of her mind to dementia once more, rather than madness. I long to tell her that her son is right here in this house with her, but Paul has been firm. It's precisely this, which has caused a prickling fear about him: What if he's not as he seems? What if he cares nothing for his mother and eager to collect her fortune when she dies? It would be so simple for him just to sneak into her room and hold a pillow over her face. Such a death would look like natural causes, wouldn't it? Who could prove she didn't just stop breathing in the night? There's something else that's been creeping into the corners of my thoughts as well. I almost dare not even consider it, but I fear falling prey to Paul's charm which might be concealing a more sinister agenda: What if he and Karen staged the whole incident – the argument, Karen's fall, and his suicide? Maybe it was a failed attempt at giving her a heart attack or a stroke. Or maybe just to drive her mad. That would certainly explain the discrepancy in the accounts of what took place here. It

seemed an unlikely explanation and yet a logical one. If it's true, then I'm back to Mrs. Fairmont's fragmented mind being shock induced rather than age related. Even if I knew for certain that Paul is decent and honorable, I am still distrustful of Karen. She's a dreadful woman – loud-mouthed and crass. I can't for the life of me understand why he married her. Especially with the money he is due to inherit when his mother dies. A man in such a position should be very selective and not take the first floosy that flounces down the pike.

I find Paul at the kitchen table at dawn when I come down to prepare Mrs. Fairmont's breakfast.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," he says brightly, one hand wrapped around his coffee beaker.

"Good morning, Paul." Silhouette has followed me down for something to eat before he goes outside. I can feel Paul's eyes on me as I open a can of cat food, scoop a small portion into a bowl and set it on the floor. That done, I get out a frying pan, place it on the hob and go to the refrigerator for some eggs and orange juice. That's when I become aware that Paul has nothing in front of him.

"Would you like some eggs?"

"Love some," he says, smiling. "I'm a lousy cook."

"What about your wife?" I hope that this will subtly imply that she should be up by now and tending to her husband. If she's going to share his fortune, that seems the least she can do.

“Worse,” he says.

I notice his smile has been replaced by a scowl. Is that because his wife can’t cook or because I asked? I’m not sure. “Well,” I say, cracking an egg and dropping it into a bowl. “I’m no Julia Child, but I probably won’t burn down the kitchen.” He laughs but I’m uncomfortable in the silence that follows, so I fill it with the first thing that pops into my head. “My husband liked to cook and he taught me.”

“Where is he now?”

I pick a fork out of the drawer and begin to whisk the eggs a little harder than necessary. “He died.”

“Oh, Elizabeth. I’m so sorry. When? And how?”

“Not long ago. He fell down the stairs.”

“That’s terrible! And now you’re way out here taking care of my mother to make ends meet?”

“I’m a licensed caregiver,” I tell him. “It’s what I want to do with my life.” I wonder if this sounded defensive as I stare down at the eggs I’ve whisked into a foam.

“That’s an honorable profession.”

“Thank you. I think so too.” I pour the eggs over the butter that is melting in the pan.

Silhouette has finished his food, so I go and open the back door for him. I’m surprised to see a newspaper on the sidewalk and

stoop to pick it up. “Where did this come from?” I say, stepping back inside and closing the door.

“I called to resume service,” he said. “No point in having a paper delivered if I’m not here.”

“But there’s no one about for miles!”

“That’s why the paperboy has to be old enough to drive.”

“I really need to get out and look around this place. Now that you and Karen are here, perhaps I can take a walk once in a while.”

“I’d feel better if you didn’t go alone.”

“Surely it’s safe.”

“You never know. It’s always best to err on the side of caution. You could also get lost very easily. At least let me come with you the first time, so you’re more familiar when you go alone.”

Is he going to kill me in the woods so I can’t bear witness when he murders his mother? I put the paper on the table and go back to the eggs, which are a little too brown on the bottom. I stir them quickly, hoping I don’t embarrass myself by serving him inedible food.

“How do I know that *you’re* safe?”

He coughs and I imagine that my question made his coffee go down the wrong pipe. “Well, I guess I can’t ask my mother to vouch for me, can I?”

“No, you can’t.” I pull out two slices of bread and pop them in the toaster.

His eyes widen. “I didn’t realize you doubted my character.”

I walk to the fridge for butter and jam, fearing I’ve insulted him. He chuckles when I throw his words back at him. “It’s always best to err on the side of caution.” I open the fridge and reach inside, hearing the toast pop up. I return to the hob, taking the pan from the burner and turning off the gas. “Were you and your mother close?”

“Very much so, but that all changed when I met Karen. She didn’t want me to marry her.”

I take two plates from the cupboard. “Why not?” The answer to this seems obvious. No mother would approve of a woman like Karen.

“She thought she would make me miserable.”

I want to say I agree. Instead I scoop eggs onto a plate, add a slice of toast, and set it in front of him. That’s when I notice the look of gloom and desolation that spreads across his face.

“It turns out she was right.”

## Chapter 15

I don't want to be wary of Paul. I want to trust him, to believe in his devotion to his mother, and to be sure that he has only the best intentions toward her. Yet I find it odd, to say the least, that he is keeping himself in the shadows. I still don't know what room – or rooms – they are occupying. The only time I see either of them, they are in the kitchen.

I get a bug in me to snoop, checking every room on every floor. None of them appear to be in use. Paul is neat, but Karen is a real mess. There seems no way that she could spend even one night in a room and not leave it trashed by morning. Or, more accurately, by noon when she finally rolls out of bed... with a hangover. Then, she sits at the kitchen table drinking coffee, smoking, and reading trashy romance novels. I pretend not to see when she tips her flask over her mug for a little hair of the dog. It's hair of the *cat* she has a problem with – claiming it makes her eyes itch and, why can't I just keep the wretched beast outside? I ignore her repeated remarks about Silhouette and her objection to him. Just as she ignores my repeated remarks about her cigarette smoke and *my* objection to *it*.

In an effort to avoid her, I split my time between Mrs. Fairmont's room and my own in the afternoons. It's in the mornings that I wish Paul were willing to carry his mother downstairs so she

could spend a little time in the overgrown garden. I don't want to press him. Nor do I want to accept a less than ideal arrangement for my patient.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," he says in response to my most recent plea. "I really can't do it. I know what will happen."

Whenever he refuses to see his mother, or – more accurately – refuses to *be seen* by his mother, I can't help but question the wisdom of that judgement. "Won't you regret your estrangement once your mother is gone?"

"It's not an estrangement exactly," he says, looking up from the newspaper he is reading. "I wish I could spend time with her, but her mental illness has convinced her that I died – killed myself to be more precise. The last time I entered her bedroom, she became hysterical with fright. She had to be sedated and slept fitfully for several nights after. I would regret causing her a heart attack or stroke far more than I regret having to keep my distance. It's for her benefit. Surely you understand that."

"I do. It just seems a shame. She may not have many years left, and you're her only family. Her beloved son."

"I agree. It's a shame. But the fault lies with the delusion, not with me. I don't want to frighten or confuse her. Nor do I want to be away from Fairmont Hall for very long in case something happens. It helps my mother not to see a son she thinks is dead. And



it helps me to be near her. I love my mother, and I'm just trying to make the best of a bad situation."

"I'm sorry," I tell him, placing my hand on his forearm. "I'll never mention it again."

He lays his hand over mine. "Don't be sorry, Elizabeth. You have a big heart and it shows. I know that anything you say about my mother and me comes from kindness. She's very lucky to have you taking care of her. How in the world did that come about anyway?"

"I think it was handled through her solicitor. I was staying with my mother-in-law's solicitor and his wife after my husband died. They somehow found out about this position and contacted Molly Harper. Speaking of Molly, she just up and disappeared the day I arrived. She was supposed to stay and train me. Have you any idea why she would do something like that?"

"No. I really didn't know her at all. She kept to herself most of the time, and she wasn't here long."

"Who was here before Molly?"

"Mrs. Pratchett. She was an elderly widow who went to live with her daughter. Said she couldn't manage the stairs anymore – arthritis or sciatica or some such. Nice woman though. I hope you're not planning to leave any time soon." His hand is still on mine.

"No. I have no other place to be."

“Good,” he says, squeezing my fingers and looking deeply into my eyes. “Because I’m very fond of you, Elizabeth.”

I swallow but don’t look away. “I’m fond of you too.” I can hardly believe I’ve said the words, but there they are. I can no longer deny what I’d hoped wouldn’t happen: I am falling in love with Paul Fairmont.

## Chapter 16

I spend the rest of the day going about my duties with Silhouette following so closely I wonder if I should have named him Shadow.

I try reading the book I took from the library, but I can't focus on the words. I keep going over the same line with little to no comprehension. Or worse, when the heroine of my story is enjoying a passionate kiss with the hero, suddenly I am her and Paul is him. I snap the book shut and sigh in frustration.

At lunchtime, I enter the kitchen warily. I don't want to have an encounter with Karen, although total avoidance isn't possible either while we are both living in the same house. Fortunately, the large room is empty. As quickly as possible, I make a sandwich for me and one for Mrs. Fairmont. I don't want to bother with soup, so I put lettuce and tomato on some tuna instead. Silhouette will be heartbroken if I don't share. So, I put some in his bowl and go back upstairs.

At dinner time, I'm less fortunate. Karen is sitting at the table with a glass of Scotch in front of her and the bottle beside it. She glares at me and I pretend not to notice. I swallow the lump of discomfort while I look around inside the pantry for something to make for dinner. This time, I choose the soup and turn the back

burner to high while I get out milk and fruit to go alongside my paltry offering of chicken and stars. To jazz things up a bit, I grab some saltines. I'm rooting around inside of the fridge for some cheese when I hear a loud hiss and crackle. I whip my head around in time to see the soup boiling over the pot. I run to grab it and scream as my hand closes around the scalding handle. I pull my hand back so fast, I nearly send the pot careening to the floor. It hangs precariously on the edge of the hob while I get an oven mitt so I can push it back to a safer position.

"It takes real skill in the kitchen to screw up canned soup."

I turn around in time to see her pop a cigarette between her smug lips before lighting it. "At least I try. I don't see *you* bothering to cook."

"Why should I? Because I'm the *wife*? That is so 1950's," she says rolling her eyes while she blows smoke in my direction.

"Well, I happen to be more traditional," I say, reaching into the cupboard for a couple of bowls. "If I had a husband like Paul, I would take better care of him. Come to think of it," I say, pouring the soup into them, "I'd take better care of myself too."

"You'll never get a man. You're too prim and proper."

I'm about to tell her that I had a husband up until very recently, but I decide not to engage any further in this petty and pointless exchange. Once everything is piled on the tray, I pick it up by its handles and leave the room as haughtily as I can manage.

In contrast, I find a sunny and beaming Paul occupying the same seat the following morning. “You’re always up bright and early,” he says, looking up from his newspaper.

I notice he has no coffee yet and set to work brewing some. “Sleeping late gives me a headache,” I tell him. “Besides, I have a job to do.”

“I’ve always enjoyed the morning hours best.”

I shake my head as I measure out the coffee. “You and Karen couldn’t be more opposite.” Daring a glance, I see him shrug.

“She wasn’t like this when we met.”

“What was she like? And why has she changed so drastically?”

“She’s had rough time of it.” He seems to want to say more, but hesitates. “I know she’s dead to the world right now, but I still don’t feel comfortable talking about it with her in the house. Perhaps we could take a morning walk and I could explain.”

My heart soars. “That would be lovely,” I say, perhaps too eagerly. “I’ll be free as soon as your mother finishes her breakfast.”

## Chapter 17

The weather is bright, sunny and warm with a gentle breeze that plays with the wispy tendrils of hair around my face. Silhouette follows behind us as we venture down the path.

“I’m sorry that Karen is so rude to you,” he starts off by saying. “She’s very jealous of other women.”

“She’s jealous of me? Why?”

“Well, you’re very attractive, for one thing.”

I feel my cheeks grow warm and don’t dare to look at him.

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment so much as an explanation.”

My cheeks grow even warmer now as I regret my two little words of gratitude. It sure sounded like a compliment.

“Jealousy is basically a form of insecurity,” he continues. “If she felt secure in our relationship, she might not perceive you as a threat.”

I dare a quick sideways glance at his expression, which I notice is somber. “Why doesn’t she...feel secure, I mean?”

“Because I’ve told her that I want a divorce. I can’t live with the woman she’s become.”

I try to hide my shock over this revelation. Even while I realize that, for a man like Paul to stay with a woman like Karen,

would be far more surprising. “You said you can explain her downfall.”

“Yes. Her mother died when she was a teenager. She went to live with an aunt and uncle. The uncle was a mean drunk, and when she was 16, he raped her. She ran away, but discovered she was pregnant. She couldn’t afford proper medical care and her abortion was badly botched. She’ll never have children.”

“That’s *terrible!*” I say, feeling genuine sympathy. “Has she ever sought counseling?”

“I don’t think so. She never had the money, and she certainly hasn’t done so since we’ve been together, although I’ve encouraged it.”

“Surely you can adopt. Unless, of course, that’s not something you are willing to do.”

“Absolutely, I am. But what adoption agency would grant a child to a mother like Karen?”

“Wouldn’t she clean up her act if it meant she could have a child?”

“I certainly thought so,” he says. “Perhaps I was naïve in giving her the benefit of the doubt. I told her, if she got sober and could prove her determination to stay that way, we would adopt as soon as there was a child available. What could be a better incentive? If that isn’t enough, she’ll never do it to save our relationship. I’m afraid I can’t live this way any longer.”

“How long has she known you want a divorce?”

“I told her six months ago. Since then, her drinking has only escalated.”

“Why are the two of you still together now then?”

“If I don’t watch over her – if I just sent her packing – she’ll die on the street somewhere. I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“But she can’t stay with you forever. You have to move on with your life.”

“Having her here wasn’t a problem for me until now.”

“Why now?” I say, holding my breath.

He stops walking and turns to me, taking my hands in his.

“Because of you.”

I am only comfortable feigning ignorance. “Me?”

“I told you yesterday that I was fond of you, but what I really meant was that I’m falling in love with you, Elizabeth. You’re so kind-hearted, selfless and generous. You have the sweetest soul, and you’re beautiful. How is it that you’re not taken?”

I remind him that it’s only been a couple of months since James died. “I lost a baby too.”

“Oh, Elizabeth,” he says, pulling me to him. “I’m so sorry.”

The embrace ends when he says, “What was James like?”

“He was a good man,” I say. “I loved him very much. But, like Karen, he was an alcoholic. He was also becoming abusive. The



accident happened because of an argument. The sad thing is, when he fell, he was trying to save me.”

“And your child?”

“Premature and stillborn. It was the shock and the grief that caused it.”

“But you are able to have another someday?”

“Yes. Fortunately.”

“Well, that is one thing to be grateful for.”

I nod and we begin walking again. Neither of us speaks for a while, and my head is spinning with everything I’ve learned about Karen and everything I’ve shared about myself. I am still full of heartache and sadness, but it’s mixed now with love for Paul and hope that we can one day have a life together.

## Chapter 18

The following morning, we bring bread to feed the ducks at a nearby pond. Once the bread is gone, we sit on a bench and talk for hours. On the way back, we take a little detour so that he can show me the family cemetery that's located in a small clearing in the woods and across the dirt road from the property.

His father's grave is there, and – quite surprisingly – his mother's too. Although her stone is blank, of course. The grave of Charles Edward Fairmont says that he was born in 1888 and died in 1956. He was 68 years old. I notice another very small stone. "What's this?" I ask.

"Oh, that's Shadow's grave," says Paul. "He was the cat I had growing up. He lived more than 20 years, so we were all terribly fond of him. Especially Mother and I. We thought he deserved a place of honor."

I am struck by the tenderness of the gesture and his attachment to his cat. It seems as if Paul and I are kindred spirits. I am also struck by the strange coincidence of having thought that I should perhaps have given Silhouette the name Shadow. "What kind of cat was he?"

"He looked a great deal like this one," he says, indicating Silhouette, who was rubbing up against his Mr. Fairmont's headstone.

“Really? What are the odds?”

“Well, they’re pretty favorable. Cats only come in so many colors.”

I laugh at this, for it’s true and it’s a good reminder not to give random coincidences more significance than they deserve.

We linger longer than we intended and Karen is already in the kitchen when we come in the back door. She glares hatefully at both of us. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Just out for a walk,” Paul answers. We make the mistake of glancing at each other with a little too much conspiratorial sympathy.

*“Together!?”*

I wonder if Paul will be truthful with her. I’m afraid he will. At the same time, I fear he will not. If he is, she will surely wreak vengeance on me. If he isn’t, he will be deliberately lying to the woman who is still his wife.

“Yes,” he says with a bright smile. “We’re getting our daily constitutional. I suggest you do the same.”

Wow, I think. He told the truth *and* made it sound like a noble endeavor. Impressive. But we still have Karen’s wrath to contend with.

“You think you can just start up with her,” she says waving her hand in my general direction, “right under my nose?”

“I’m very fond of Elizabeth,” he says, reverting back to “fond”, but out of necessity. “She’s taking wonderful care of my mother and I’m most grateful. We also have a lot in common and I enjoy talking with her.”

“Oh yeah?” she sneers, making her look less attractive than she really is. “And just what is it that the two of you have in common?”

“For one thing we don’t waste our morning hours and we enjoy getting a little exercise.”

“Well, isn’t that cozy?” she says, taking a sip from her beaker and then slamming it down on the tabletop with such force that coffee splashes everywhere. “You’re an ass!” she says through gritted teeth, grinding her cigarette into the side of an ashtray and standing up so suddenly that her chair would have toppled to the floor if Paul hadn’t stopped it. She storms from the room, throwing out one last barb. “Stay away from me, Paul. If you know what’s good for you!”

I am on pins and needles as I go about the rest of my day. What will Karen do to retaliate against me? I feel certain that she won’t take her obvious humiliation lying down. No matter how good a job Paul did answering her questions with a combination of brutal honesty and innocence, she can see what’s happening between the two of us, even with her senses dulled. Perhaps because of it. She

seems to always be in a highly emotional state with her temper ready to flare at the least provocation, and this is not a trivial thing. She sees her husband taking obvious pleasure in the company of another woman.

To make matters worse, Mrs. Fairmont only picks at the lunch I prepared for her and refuses her tea. She looks a bit flushed too. I take her temperature and it's normal, but I keep the thermometer close by in case I need to use it again. My own appetite isn't much better for I am feeling a rollercoaster of emotions ranging from joyfulness to foreboding. As long as Paul is here, I tell myself, Karen wouldn't dare strike out against me.

When I find Paul in the kitchen later, I tell him about my slight consternation regarding his mother. "She's not eating, and her face seems a bit flushed, but she's not running a fever."

"That's good. I know you'll keep close tabs on the situation. Be sure and give me an update on her condition when I return."

"Return?"

"I have to go to London tomorrow. I'm leaving first thing in the morning, and I'll be away for a few days."

I don't bother to ask why. My only concern is his absence and not the reason for it. "What about Karen?"

"What about her?"

"I don't trust her. After what happened this morning, I'm afraid she'll try to get back at me in some way."

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. When Karen is upset, she just takes a deeper dive into the bottle. She’ll be barely conscious most of the time. You probably won’t even see her.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t go if I thought you’d be in any danger, Elizabeth. I care about you too much for that.” I nod and smile up at him gratefully as he gazes tenderly into my eyes before he leans in and places his lips on mine. It’s not a lingering kiss, but it makes the blood coursing through my veins feel like melted butter. My knees grow weak, and I will them not to buckle. Then I hear a noise in the hall and snap my head around. I see nothing, but I know Karen was watching us.

## Chapter 19

When I enter the kitchen, Paul is not there. I assume he's already gone. A quick peek out the window confirms that his car isn't in the drive.

I am eager to get breakfast started to see if Mrs. Fairmont will eat. I'm relaxed though, for I know that Karen would never be up at this hour.

After I toast bread and boil an egg, I take the tray up to her room. "Good-morning, Mrs. Fairmont!" I say, cheerily, hoping my mood will rub off on her. She's been unusually quiet lately too – another symptom I should have mentioned to Paul. I feel an obligation to keep him well apprised, yet I don't want to worry him unnecessarily.

I set down the tray on a table before helping her into an upright position against her pillow. Then I place it on her lap and slip a napkin into the collar of her nightgown.

I'm encouraged when she picks up one of her toast triangle and nibbles at it. A moment later, she lays it back down. "Can you not eat a bit more, Mrs. Fairmont? How about a bite of that egg?"

She shakes her head and pushes the tray farther away from herself. I grab it before it slides to the floor, set it aside and position her wheelchair next to the bed so I can help her into it. But this morning, she refuses to cooperate. She hasn't soiled her sheets, but

it's still time they were washed. I've been doing all the laundry in the bathtub in an effort to avoid the cellar. It helps knowing that Paul never committed suicide down there, but it's still not where I want to be.

I realize I'll have to do the sheets later and go get a large, shallow basin from the loo. I fill it less than half way so it won't be too heavy to carry. Then I take both a sponge and a washcloth from the cupboard and return to her room.

Midway through the procedure, her lids begin to droop. "How about a nice cup of tea when we're done?"

"Nap," she says. Just one word like she hasn't the strength for more. Is Mrs. Fairmont's health on the decline? Is there something I'm not doing, or something that I am doing that's causing it? Worry needles me, for I take the job of caregiving very seriously.

As soon as I get her into a clean nightgown, she's ready to fall asleep. I take the tray downstairs wondering if Paul should have the doctor pay a visit when he returns. When I enter the kitchen, it dawns on me that Silhouette has not been following me as usual. I forget about the doctor and start wondering where he could be as I do up the breakfast dishes. An uncomfortable thought occurs to me and by the time I'm finished drying, I'm quite worried that Karen might have done something to him. What better way to get back at me?



Worry gnaws at me as I begin calling his name. I'm sure he was in my room last night, but I always leave the door open a crack in case he wants to wander. And I didn't see him when I woke up this morning. Perhaps Paul let him out before that since he left so early. I go to the back door and open it. He is not there, nor does he appear when I call his name.

I close the door and stand with my hands on my hips wondering where to look next when I hear a faint meow coming from somewhere. But where? I listen intently but don't hear anything more. I call out his name again and this time there's an answering muffled meow that I realize is coming from the cellar. Did he get locked down there? Is it possible that Paul had to go down there this morning for some reason and didn't realize that Silhouette had followed him? That would certainly explain it.

I open the cellar door and call his name again. This time, the meow is much clearer. I'm expecting him to bound up the stairs any minute, but I don't even see him from where I'm standing. I don't want to go downstairs. "Silhouette, come!" I say, hoping to convince him. Even though the meow is clearer than before, it's still a little bit muffled. No matter how much I dread going down the stairs, I cannot possibly leave him there. What if he's gotten inside of something and can't get out?

I begin the slow descent down the dark, rickety staircase. Each step creaks and groans as I put the pressure of my weight on

it. “Silhouette!” I call out again as soon as I reach the bottom. I can hear him, but I still don’t see him. There’s another door, and as I cross the room, I can tell that he’s behind it. When I pull it open, his meow is loud and clear and registers his objection to this inconvenience. Cats do not like to veer from their usual schedules, and Silhouette has never been interested in visiting the cellar.

I bend to pick him up and give him some comfort. “Did you follow Paul down here earlier and get locked in? Poor baby! Poor, poor baby,” I coo as I sway back and forth and hold him snugly against me. I kiss his head and carry him across the room toward the stairs.

When I get to the top, I find the door is closed. I know I didn’t close it, but perhaps it closed itself? “Doors do that sometimes, don’t they?” I say aloud in my kitty voice – my lips just above his left ear, making it twitch.

Ignoring the pounding in my heart as I reach for the knob, I give it a twist; but it won’t open. I try again, but I can’t even jiggle it. It simply won’t turn, and I realize with a sinking heart that Karen must be behind this. She’s locked me in. I’m trapped in the cellar with no way to escape.

## Chapter 20

Panic grips me as I bang on the door with one fist. “Karen! Let me out! Karen!”

Silhouette struggles to get down, as he dislikes both the noise I’m making and my heightened emotion. But it is for him, as well as myself, that I am fighting. How *dare* she do something like this! Nothing can rouse her out of bed before noon except playing an evil trick?

Silhouette bounds down the stairs as I begin pounding with two fists. “Karen! Let me out right now! I mean it! You can’t get away with this!”

After the pounding and the yelling comes the crying and the begging. “Karen, *please!*” I sob. “Please don’t do this.”

I give up after what seems like an hour, but it’s probably only 10 or 15 minutes. I sink to the floor and cry. How could I have been so stupid as to fall for this? And now what? Am I just supposed to remain in the cellar until Paul returns? He said he’d be gone a few days. A few *days!*? I can’t be locked down here for days! What about Mrs. Fairmont? What about food? What about water? Fresh waves of panic and tears wash over me as I hug my knees and rock back and forth at the top of the stairs.

Despite the summer’s heat, it is quite chilly in the cellar and I eventually make my way down to look for a blanket. I find some

old clothes in a heap in the corner of the room and reach for a raggedy sweater when a large black spider falls out and runs across my foot. I shriek and look around me for something to kill it. I find a book and return to the spot, raising it up and ready to slam it down as soon as I see the offending creature. My eyes dart nervously in all directions, but I see nothing. It obviously scuttled into the shadows when it had the chance. I wonder how many more of them there might be as I toss the sweater back into the pile. I'm not cold anymore anyway.

I pass the time checking myself for spiders, afraid to even close my eyes, for fear I'll wake up with one crawling on me. What about rats? I say aloud to myself, eliciting Silhouette's attention. His ears twitch again and he looks at me with huge eyes. I'm sure he's hungry but he doesn't meow anymore now that I've found him.

After a while, the cat is no longer content with being found. He's hungry and climbs the stairs to sit by the door. He must think I'm really stupid for not opening it up and letting him back into the kitchen for a bite. I have to agree with him. If I had any common sense, we would not now be trapped together in this damp, forsaken cellar, which I'm convinced must be long for cell, because that's what this is – a prison cell.

Silhouette finally begins to whine around supper time. I don't see a clock anywhere, but I have my watch and there's one window. It's too high to reach, even though I keep thinking that if I

could find something to climb on, it might be worth risking a fall. I get up and move carefully along the wall to see what's beyond the archway. There are no windows here, so I feel the wall for a switch on the right and the left of me as I enter. There isn't one. I go back to the other room and search with more determination. There must be a candle or something! There's an old desk in the corner with random stuff piled on its surface. I walk over and pull open all of the drawers but find nothing that will be of any use.

To the left of that is another dark area, but I can make out an old washer. There's a cupboard above it and I reach up and pull it open. At first, I see nothing. Just as I am about to close it, I spot what could be a flashlight behind an old coffee can filled with loose change. I can't reach it without hopping up and down. Even then, I'm just grazing it with my fingertips. I let out a groan of frustration and look about me for a step stool or a chair. I think I remember seeing a folded chair in the other room and go looking for it. I don't find the chair but I grab some books and return. Stacking them in front of the washer, I step on them just long enough to get a firm grip on the flashlight. As I step down, the books topple and I nearly fall, but it doesn't dampen my sense of accomplishment. I slide the switch with my thumb and nothing happens. "No!" I scream. "Don't do this to me!" Then I remember seeing a battery in one of the desk drawers. Hoping it's the right size, I go over and check. It's not in the first drawer I open but in the one below it. The size AA battery

rolls around inside the mostly empty drawer after I pull it open so fiercely the whole drawer nearly comes out. I twist the top part of the flashlight and it easily unscrews from the bottom. I turn the bottom part upside down against my palm to release the D cell battery inside. “Why does everything have to be so damn difficult!” I say aloud. I don’t remember seeing any other batteries, but I search nonetheless. As the last of the light fades from the one tiny window, I give up. That’s when I remember seeing a book of matches. They were in the coffee can with the loose change!

I stack the books again and step up on them to reach the cupboard door I’d left open and grab the coffee can. I take out the matches and leave the can on top of the washer. I don’t have a candle, but by the light of a single match, I can at least see what’s in front of me and whether the dark room leads anywhere.

I strike the first match and the flame is so large, it startles me. In less than a second, it reduces back down to almost nothing. I blow it out and toss it on the floor. I try again but this time, I expect the initial surge of flame and hold out my hand to check my surroundings before I lose it. It happens too fast. I don’t see anything. I return to the other room telling myself that there has to be a candle somewhere. I search with fresh determination until, finally, in a box at the bottom of a stack of other boxes, I find what I’m looking for. I might not be the bravest or the most industrious of women, but I do pride myself on my tenacity.

Lighting the candle, I walk into the darkened area again. I still can't see a great deal, but as I move about the room and extend my arm in front of me, I can just make out the thick, wooden ceiling beams. I give a little gasp when I realize that this has to be the room that Mrs. Fairmont described when she said that Paul committed suicide. It gives me a chill for some reason. I mean, at least it didn't really happen, but why would her recollection of the incident be so specific as to the exact spot I'm now looking at? Could Mrs. Fairmont be right about what happened? Did her son really hang himself in this room? What if the Paul I know only resembles her son, which would explain the Christmas photo. Anyone can get a fake ID. What if the reason he can't let her see him is because he's not the real Paul Fairmont?

## Chapter 21

I awaken in a vertical fetal position with my aching head leaning against the wall. There is light beginning to seep through the little window. Wiping the drool from the corner of my mouth, I slowly unwrap my stiff, sore muscles. I flex my fingers and stretch out my legs before I am ready to stand up. I go to the bottom step and look up at Silhouette lying in front of the door. He looks at me with what I'm sure is a mixture of disappointment and contempt.

"So much for the nice lady that promised to take care of you, huh?" I climb the steps and scratch him behind the ears when I reach the top. "Well, we've survived the first 24 hours at least." I know he's expecting me to open the door and he begins to whine. "I'm sorry," I tell him, scooping him into my arms to give comfort. "I would if I could." He squirms away and begins pawing at the door. It's too heartbreaking to watch, and I go back down.

I try to sleep again but it's useless. My mouth is dry, my stomach is growling, and I'm still worried that Paul might not be who he says he is. Although, the feeling of foreboding I had last night as I stood looking up at those ceiling beams is less intense in the light of day. Isn't that what they mean when they say that things always look better in the morning? What is it about the darkness that turns us into weaklings?



The only way out of the cellar is through my thoughts. I think about the baby I lost and where I might be today if it hadn't happened. I think about James and how much I loved him, despite the things that alcohol made him do. Underneath it all, he had a good heart. As did his mother, whom I also miss terribly. Mrs. Fairmont reminds me of Mrs. Price in many ways.

I return to the cellar door and bang on it as hard as I can. Then I add my voice to the ruckus. "Karen! Karen! Mrs. Fairmont needs me! Open up this door right now! You have no heart, Karen!" I want to add: "No wonder Paul doesn't love you anymore," but I'm afraid she'll open the door and stab me in the eye with a steak knife.

I am pacing the floor a few hours later when I glance up at the window and see Paul's car pulling up. I run up the stairs too quickly, slipping twice. The second time banging my shin so hard I yelp in pain. Nothing matters as I lunge at the door, beating my fists against it for all I'm worth. "Paul! Paul! I'm here! Open the door, please!" I still myself long enough to listen but hear nothing on the other side. I repeat the process and, when the door still doesn't open, I sag against it. Then I hear the back door open and do it all over again. "Paul! Please! Open up!"

I hear his voice now. "Elizabeth? What in the hell...?"

The door flies open and he catches me in his arms as I fall into the room. I burst into sobs, speaking incoherently and not bothering to wipe the tears that course down my cheeks as he stares

at me in horror, slowly taking it all in. “Karen...Karen did it...locked me down there!” My ragged breaths prevent me from getting all the words out. But words are becoming unnecessary now as the whole picture slowly begins to dawn on him.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” he says, holding me against his chest. “I’m so sorry. Thank heaven I came back early!”

I sniff and look up at him. “Why did you?”

“I was worried. Your fears about Karen started getting to me. I did the most important stuff and just headed back.”

When we finally break apart, he goes to the sink and fills a glass of water. He hands it to me and I guzzle it down in one shot. “We have to check on your mother.” I put the glass down and turn to go.

He follows, both of us racing up the stairs to see if she’s all right.

I go in alone, gasping when I see her lying on the floor unconscious. “Paul!”

He rushes in and crouches down next to her. “Mother? Mother! Call an ambulance!” he says to me over his shoulder.

## Chapter 22

Paul and I drive to the hospital the next morning. Silhouette waits in the car, for I refuse to leave him home alone with Karen. Paul buys flowers in the gift shop which I bring into her room while he waits just outside the door.

“How are you, Mrs. Fairmont?” I say, scanning the room for the best spot to put the bouquet.

“Elizabeth?” She squints as she looks up at me.

I put it down on the table next to the bed and take her cold hands in mine. “Yes, Mrs. Fairmont. It’s Elizabeth.”

She seems to remember nothing. “Why am I here?”

“You had a nasty fall, but you’re going to be just fine. That’s the important thing. Is there anything I can get you? Some coffee or tea perhaps?”

She shakes her head to decline. Already her lids are growing heavy. A moment later, she’s asleep, and I return to Paul.

“Well? How is she?”

“Confused,” I say. “And I’m guessing heavily sedated.”

“I’m sure the drugs don’t help the confusion. Does she really need to be taking them?”

“Let’s talk to the doctor and see what he can tell us.”

We walk to the closest nurses station. “I’d like to see my mother’s doctor,” Paul says. “I want to know exactly what her condition is.”

“Certainly, sir,” says a woman in uniform. “What’s your mother’s name?”

“Fairmont.”

She flips through the charts in front of her, but doesn’t find what she’s looking for. She goes over to another counter and looks there. “Stacy, have you seen Mrs. Fairmont’s chart?”

Stacy nods over her shoulder. “It’s right there,” she says.

Our nurse goes over and picks up the indicated chart before flipping through it. “Yes, that would be Dr. Heralds,” she says. She looks at her watch adding: “I’m afraid he’s in surgery now.”

“When might he be available?”

“Um....sometime after 2:30, I should think.”

“All right,” says Paul a little impatiently while glancing at his own watch.

We step away from the desk and discuss our options. “I don’t want to go home and come all the way back,” he says. “Besides, I’m starving.”

“Do you want to go down to the cafeteria? That would certainly kill some time.”

“No. I don’t like hospital food. There’s a little café about a block down the road. How about that instead?”

“Sounds perfect.”

After lunch, we take a little walk through town and browse in the shop windows. Paul sees a necklace in one and stops to admire it. Then he takes me by the hand and leads me inside. “I’d like to see the necklace that’s in the window,” he says, when the clerk turns his attention to us.

“The sapphire pendant?” he asks. Paul nods. “And would this be for the lady, sir?”

I blush as I hear Paul say, “It would indeed.”

The clerk goes to the window and brings back the necklace. He steps behind me to place it around my neck and I move my hair away as he does so. When the clasp is secure, he steps back and allows Paul to take a long look.

“It’s beautiful,” says Paul admiringly. The clerk brings over a mirror so I can see it too. “Do you like it?”

I nod, still staring at my reflection. “But it’s too much, Paul.” I say this having no clue about the item’s cost, but assuming it’s exorbitant.

“Nonsense,” he says without hesitation. “We’ll take it.”

“Very good, sir,” says the clerk with a new spring in his step as he goes behind me once again to remove it.

“Let her wear it, please,” Paul insists as he steps nearer the counter to pay.

I'm both thrilled and uncomfortable throughout the transaction, but the former envelops me in its entirety once that's over and we walk out the door. "Oh, Paul! You shouldn't have, really! But thank you! It's the most beautiful thing I've ever received."

We find Silhouette sleeping in a ball on the backseat. The car is parked in the shade of a large tree, and the temperature inside is still cool enough with the windows part-way open. He wakes up when we get back in and I pull out the few morsels of chicken and shrimp that I'd put in my purse after asking for a doggy bag, or – in this case – a kitty bag. He eats it delicately as we drive back to the hospital.

My thoughts turn to the troubling subject of Paul's wife. "Why is Karen still in the house after what she did? She's the reason your mother is in hospital. If you hadn't come back early, she would likely have died!"

"I know," he says slowing to a stop at a red light and putting his blinkers on. "Believe me, I am not taking any of this lightly. But there's nothing I can do until she sobers up. I've taken every last drop of booze from the house. Unless she's got more stashed away somewhere, she should be coherent again in a few hours. I'll deal with her then, don't worry."

"How? How do you plan to 'deal with her'?"

"I'm going to make her believe that I'll be pressing charges."

“Make her believe? Why wouldn’t you really do so?”

“I would, but I’m afraid they wouldn’t stick. There’s no evidence that she did anything at all.”

“But I was locked in the cellar! Your mother had no one in attendance! What do you mean there’s no evidence?” Silhouette could sense my heightened emotions and came to plop himself on my lap.

“I believe that’s what happened, but I can’t prove it. The law is pretty particular when it comes to proof.”

“But the door was locked! Isn’t that proof?”

“No, it’s not actually. It’s hearsay – your word against hers.”

“But, but...”

“She’s going to say that the door was just stuck or got locked by accident. She’s going to blame it all on you. And, if the charges are dropped, I won’t have as much leverage. If I can scare her into believing that she’ll likely be prosecuted for this, she’ll be much likelier to heed my warning and get the hell out. If she still won’t go, I’ll have her arrested on another charge – trespassing or something. But, unless and until she tries to harm you with witnesses, there’s really nothing more I can do.”

Those words lie in the pit of my stomach as we park the car and go inside to talk to the doctor.

## Chapter 23

Dr. Heralds is a man in his mid to late 50's. Graying hair and wire-rimmed spectacles compliment a starched white lab coat, complete with stethoscope. "Mr. and Mrs. Fairmont," he says, offering his hand.

Paul shakes it but does not correct him. "Yes, doctor. My mother was brought in yesterday after a fall. What is her condition now and what medication is she on?"

"She has a fractured hip, I'm afraid. I have her on a morphine drip for now to ease the pain," he says. "Later, I'll take her off that and we'll see how she does, but she'll likely need some type of pain relief for a while. Is that something you object to?"

"No, no," says Paul quickly. "I don't want her in pain. Please do whatever is necessary to keep her comfortable."

"There is something else that has me more concerned, however. She's running a fever and there is a lot of congestion in her lungs. We'll be monitoring her closely until that situation improves. It can be very dangerous for a person her age."

"May we see her?" says Paul and I'm shocked. Paul hasn't seen his mother for...well...*years*.

"Of course you can," says the doctor. I don't mention that I was in her room earlier, for I hadn't gotten any special permission



to do so. "I encourage it." He smiled and shook Paul's hand again, nodding at me.

As we walk away from the doctor, I look over at Paul. "Are you really willing to let your mother see you?"

"She'll be sedated, which should keep her from getting upset. And, if anything happens, I'd never forgive myself if I didn't take this rare opportunity."

I say nothing, but take his hand and squeeze it as we walk into his mother's room and she turns her head to see her son for the first time in a very long while. Tears fill my eyes immediately when I see her light up like a child at Christmas.

"Paul? Is that you? Is it really you?" Tears roll down her cheeks now too and, one glance at Paul tells me he's not faring any better. "I've missed you so much," she says to him, holding out her hands for him to take.

He leans over and kisses her gently on the cheek even though it's wet with tears. "I've missed you too, Mum."

I immediately wonder why she's no longer convinced that he died. I soon have the answer.

"I knew you'd come when I was ready."

"What do you mean?"

"That you'd come and take me to heaven with you when my time came. That's why I'm not afraid."

“You’re not dying, Mum,” he says, patting her hand.  
“You’re going to be just fine.”

Mrs. Fairmont died sometime during the night. After he receives the call from the hospital, Paul is devastated. He sits at the kitchen table with his head in his hands.

“At least you were able to see each other one last time,” I say. I’m standing behind him and lean down to put my arms around him, hoping to lend some small measure of comfort.

I see Karen standing in the doorway and my blood runs cold. She’s wearing a wrinkled shirt, loose pants, and her hair – which is usually teased – looks like a bird’s nest. I’d have compassion for her if I didn’t fear her so much.

“I’m sorry about your mother, Paul,” she says, slurring her words almost unintelligibly. I can see now that it did little good for Paul to rid the house of booze. Clearly, she’s got a stash somewhere or she wouldn’t be drunk now. “I was hoping to offer you some sympathy, but I see you already have the position filled.” She shoots daggers at me, her eyes narrowing into slits.

Paul stands up. “Don’t!” he yells. “*You’re* the reason my mother is dead! I want you out of this house immediately!”

My heart soars. *Finally!*

She laughs. “I’m not going anywhere Paul.”

“If you don’t, I’ll call the police and they’ll take you into custody.”

“For what?!”

“For locking Elizabeth in the cellar without water for what could have been days! For leaving my mother with no one to attend her! That’s why she’s dead now! She must have tried to get up and that’s how she broke her hip.”

“I’ve *told* you I didn’t lock the cellar door! The latch catches all the time. *That’s* what happened.”

I’m unable to stay silent. “Even if that were true, you were here in the house. You had to have heard me banging and screaming my lungs out. You’re not deaf! You would have heard Mrs. Fairmont calling too. You could have at least gone to make sure she was all right!”

“I heard nothing,” she says. “I was asleep.”

“More like passed out,” says Paul.

She slaps him hard across the face. Without another word, she turns and storms away.

## Chapter 24

Paul spends the next hour on the telephone speaking to the solicitor, Mr. Browning, who agrees to go over Mrs. Fairmont's financials with him as well as to start divorce proceedings.

"Mm hm," he says in response to whatever is being said at the other end of the line. "But what measures can I take right now to make her leave the property? ... Yes, she is a danger to herself and others ... She'll never go ... Why can't I just change the locks? ... What's the doctor's name? ... All right ... I'd appreciate it. Thank you, Mr. Browning."

He drops the receiver into its cradle and puts his head in his hands. Feeling utterly helpless in the face of Paul's misery, I make a pot of coffee and hand him a beaker. He smiles his gratitude before dialing another number. This time it's the mortuary. He explains that there will be no formal service and makes arrangements for the casket to be transported to Fairmont Hall. Next, he calls the parish priest, Father Doyle, and asks him to come and say a few words at his mother's grave.

Just before dawn the next morning, I see Paul cross the road with a canteen, a wheelbarrow, a pickaxe and a spade. I know he's going to dig his mother's grave and my heart aches with sympathy. There is no doubt in my mind that he loved her as much as she loved him. James had loved his mother in the same fashion. I wonder what

kind of father James would have been. Would he have loved his child enough to conquer his demons or would they have continued to hold the ultimate power over him – eventually destroying everything he held dear? Loving Paul affords me the freedom not to think of James every waking minute. But I think of him now with a fresh pang of grief, guilt, and regret for all that might have been.

I am determined to shake off the melancholy mood that envelops me. Mrs. Fairmont's death casts a pall of gloom over everything. Even the sun is playing hard to get, and the constant cloud cover only adds to the oppressiveness. There's also the issue of Karen and how much of a threat she might still be. I keep telling myself I'll feel better once she's gone.

On Friday morning, a hearse pulls up in the drive. Paul runs outside and speaks to the driver. I sip coffee and watch out the window as Paul points to the cemetery across the road. A moment later, I see four men sliding the casket out and carrying it in that direction.

Father Doyle and Mr. Browning both arrive at 11:00. There is no sign of Karen as the four of us walk across the road to Mrs. Fairmont's freshly dug grave that took Paul nearly six hours to make ready. A light rain is falling as we bow our heads under black umbrellas and listen to the priest's somber voice reading from the bible resting open in his palm. *"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Our Lord Jesus Christ, we*

*commend to Almighty God the soul of Matilda Fairmont, and we commit her body to the ground. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless her and keep her, the Lord make His Face to shine upon her and be gracious to her, the Lord lift up His countenance upon her and give her peace. Amen."*

Looking up now and around at one another no one seems to know what to do next. I glance over at Paul standing close beside me. He has water running down his cheek but I'm uncertain as to whether it is tears or rain. Father Doyle leaves his post and comes over. With his bible now tucked beneath his arm, he offers a hand to Paul, the tips of their umbrellas touching.

"You have my deepest condolences," he says.

"Thank you, Father. Will you come back to the house for coffee?"

"Most certainly," he says.

Mr. Browning approaches. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Fairmont."

"Please call me Paul."

"Your mother was a good woman, Paul," he says. "Always wanted the best for you. I hate to bring this up, but there are some things to look over," he says. "Nothing out of the ordinary, some papers to sign. We just need to make it all official. Unless you'd like to do it some other time."

“No, it’s all right,” says Paul. “There’s no reason to put it off. Come on back to the house for coffee. And let’s get out of this rain.”

## Chapter 25

The rain is coming down harder now and pelting the windows. There are low rumbles of thunder in the distance. The men sit in the library making small talk by the fire. Father Doyle stays less than an hour and Paul sees him to the door, thanking him again for presiding.

Mr. Browning stays a little longer and Paul offers him a brandy before they begin going over legal matters. Paul doesn't have a copy of his birth certificate, but I hear Mr. Browning say that he's already seen the copy that's on file at the courthouse. He doesn't seem to have any qualms about Paul's identity, and I wonder why I tend to be distrustful. It's not distrust, I tell myself. It's pessimism. I've endured so many disappointments and so much heartbreak, I am conditioned to believe that I'll never find love or happiness again. But now I have and I'm going to hang on to it for dear life.

Once Mr. Browning is gone, Paul asks if I'd like to go out to dinner. "Not in this weather," I say, looking out the kitchen window. "I'll make something nice here instead."

By the time the meal is ready, the storm has knocked the power out.

Paul grabs a flashlight and a book of matches out of the drawer. "What a shame," he says, feigning disappointment. "Now we're forced to dine by candlelight."



“Oh no!” I say, playing along. “That’s going to ruin everything!”

I chuckle as I watch him follow the beam down the hall. A few minutes later, he returns with a copper candelabrum. It has three tall red candles on either side. He hands me the flashlight to hold while he strikes a match and lights them. I turn off the flashlight and return it to the drawer. When I turn back again, I see him taking a bottle of wine from the rack so I get two wine glasses and set them beside our plates. I sit down at the table and watch him insert the opener and pull out the cork. He pours some into each of our glasses and sits across from me.

“This looks delicious, Elizabeth,” he says, digging into his chicken marsala.

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Don’t be modest. My mother always said, ‘Never hide your light under a bushel.’” He looks sad then and his eyes glisten with tears for just a moment before he blinks them away.

“What was your mother like when you were growing up?”

He clears his throat. “She was overly protective, I suppose, but I could hardly fault her for that. She was loving and affectionate and kind. She was also generous, but she could afford to be. Birthdays and Christmases were always abundant. I think she tried to make up for the fact that I had no siblings.”

“It must have been lonely.”

“It was,” he says, cutting into his chicken.

I take a sip of wine and watch him for a moment. I realize for the first time that he reminds me a little bit of James – at least the James I knew before he began to drink, before his mother died, before the violence, before the fall that broke his neck.

I wash the dishes by the light of the candles and Paul goes upstairs to get more. I can hear the wind outside, whipping the rain against the windows. The claps of thunder are louder and the flashes of lightning are so bright, they light up the outside as if it were day before the inky blackness returns.

I wipe my hands on a towel after washing the last dish and placing it atop the others in the rack. I untie my apron and set it over the back of the chair as Silhouette rubs against my ankles and purrs. “You want your dinner now, I suppose.” I bend over and scoop him up but he’s not interested in cuddles right now. “Okay, okay,” I say as I set him down again and go to the pantry for a can of sardines. I open the can, break them up into his dish and set it on the floor by his water bowl. When I look up, I see Karen standing in the doorway.

## Chapter 26

My eyes narrow suspiciously and I offer her no greeting, hoping that Paul will return momentarily.

“Why are you still here?” she says.

“I might ask you the same question.”

“I live here. You work here. No, you *worked* here. Mrs. Fairmont is dead, which means that you have no reason to stay.”

“Paul will decide who goes and who stays,” I tell her. I sound confident but I can feel myself starting to tremble. I wonder where she keeps herself when she’s not around. She’s like a cockroach that scurries off into the darkness when the lights go on.

“I’m his *wife*!” she hisses.

“Well, I’m his...” I’m not sure what word to use and she takes full advantage of my indecision.

“His what?”

“Paul and I have feelings for each other,” I say lamely. She already knows this anyway. She only wants to weaken my resolve and make me feel silly, as if I have no claim to him.

She mimics me: “*Paul and I have feelings for each other.*” She comes farther into the room and I get a better look at her in the glow from the candles. Red lipstick is smeared across her lips. Her face is ghostly white as though she’s wearing some type of powder. I grab the back of the kitchen chair for emotional support as she

continues to come toward me. She lurches forward and I get a whiff of booze, stale cigarettes, and sickeningly sweet perfume. I feel a wave of disgust followed by nausea. And fear. I tell myself to relax, to breathe – that she can't hurt me. But I tremble even more. I won't let her do this to me. I can't let her see weakness.

“Paul is divorcing you so he can marry me! You are the one who has lost their position. You are the one who has no reason to be under this roof. You are the one that needs to get out!”

Her eyes widen with shock. She's never seen me act so boldly. Have I gone too far, or is this how I should have handled her all along? Either way, she's clearly enraged now. Something catches her eye on the counter behind me. I turn to see what she's looking at. In the same moment that I realize it's the knife block, she lunges for it, pulling out the largest one and waving it in the air.

“Put that down!” I slowly back away from her. “What are you doing? *Paul!*” I scream.

“I'm going to eliminate the competition,” she says raising the knife in the air. Before her arm can come back down again, I spin around and run screaming from the room.

“Paul!” I don't dare look back but I can hear that she's hot on my heels. I expect the knife to plunge into my back any minute. “Help!” I run as fast as I can through the dark passage that leads to the stairs.

“Paul!” My screams peel through the air. As I round the bottom newel post, I feel a hot searing pain in my right shoulder. The blade has grazed my skin, but I don’t stop. I race up the stairs in terror, sobbing now. “Paul!” A light comes on overhead. I look up and see Paul standing at the top of the stairs. I run to him and he steps in front of me like a shield.

“Put that down, Karen!” he says, holding one hand out in front of him.

“Like *hell* I will!” she says, raising the knife.

Paul grabs her wrist and twists it hard. She screams in pain as the knife falls from her fingers. He uses his foot to push it out of the way. It spins and sails across the wood floor and into a darkened corner.

Furious now, Karen pounds Paul’s chest. “I hate her!” she screams. “I hate both of you!”

Paul grabs both her wrists and holds them tightly. Bursting into sobs, Karen struggles to free herself. She pulls her arm back so violently that she loses her balance on the top step. I watch in horror as Paul reaches out and tries to grab hold of her again. She tries to grab him at the same moment but their fingers only graze one another’s as she continues to fall backward. A desperate scream rips from her throat and her eyes are wide with terror as the momentum takes her and she tumbles down the stairs in a blur of motion, arms and legs flailing until at last she comes to rest at the bottom.

“Karen!” Paul runs down the stairs and kneels next to her, feeling for a pulse. Blood seeps out from behind her head and forms an ever widening pool on the floor.

## Chapter 27

Karen is pronounced dead at the scene, and her body is taken to the morgue. Paul and I speak with two uniformed police officers who take our statements. I worry that her death will not be ruled an accident but they don't seem suspicious.

Paul is grief stricken in a way that he wasn't when his mother died. He tells me that he loved Karen very much once, and that deep down inside she had a good heart. "The drinking turned her into something I no longer recognized," he tells me.

I do my best to console him. "It was the same with James. He was a good man and alcohol destroyed that."

"I should have gotten her the help she needed. Instead, I just left her to suffer. I owed her more than that."

"You didn't make her drink," I remind him.

"No, but I knew how much pain she was in, and instead of helping her, all I did was hurt her more. What kind of a man am I?"

I put my arms around him as he holds his head in his hands. "You're a good man, Paul – a wonderful man. This didn't happen because of anything you did. It's not your fault." I kiss his cheek which is wet with tears.

My foreboding returns. I'm haunted by Karen's death and unsettled by Paul's grief. Rather than getting over what happened, he slips deeper and deeper into despondency – sometimes even refusing to eat. He says he just wants to be alone, which leaves me alone too. I rattle around inside the manor feeling restless and uneasy. I can do little but think, and my thoughts are not particularly comforting.

I spend a lot of time thinking about Mrs. Fairmont and what she'd told me regarding Paul's suicide. I can't get her words to stop playing in my head. *It was his wife, Karen. She drank and they fought constantly. He fell in love with someone else – a sweet young woman who took care of me. She'd suffered a recent tragedy in her own life, which is what brought her to Fairmont Hall. She and Paul were kindred spirits but he didn't want to hurt Karen, for he'd loved her too in the beginning. One night, during an argument, Karen fell down the stairs. Paul tried to prevent it but even so, he blamed himself for her death. The grief and the guilt were too much.*"

How can it be that she described in such precise detail everything that had transpired right up until this moment? It couldn't have been a memory because it hadn't happened yet. Was Mrs. Fairmont seeing the future and believing it to be the past? If so, then *I* was the young woman who took care of her. I had recently suffered a tragedy. That was the thing that brought me here where Paul and I fell in love. I believed we were kindred spirits. And then Karen fell



down the stairs and died, plunging Paul into a state of grief and guilt. Waves of fresh foreboding wash over me as I realize what this means: Paul is going to hang himself.

I walk out to the shed and look for the pickaxe that Paul used to dig his mother's grave. I see it on a long wooden bench, resting against the wall. I take it back with me and go down to the cellar.

Standing on the stack of books that are still there from last time, I hack at the beams until they're completely destroyed.

"Paul!" I wake up gasping. A loud crack of thunder startles me as I try to calm myself and slow my breathing. A storm is going to have the opposite effect. A glance at the bedside clock tells me it's 2:00 a.m. Didn't Mrs. Fairmont say that Paul hanged himself during a thunderstorm?

I reach over and turn on the lamp. The switch clicks once, twice, three times but no light. I scramble out of bed while grabbing my dressing gown and wrapping it hastily about me. I go to the wall switch and flip it on but the darkness remains. We've lost power again. *Damn!* The storm must have started hours ago and I'd slept through it.

I light a tall, thick candle and go out into the corridor. My heart is pounding with fear over Paul. I have to know he's all right.

Holding my candle in front of me, I go down the stairs and check the library. He's not there. "Paul!" I make my voice loud to

compete with the thunder. I feel no need to check the cellar after destroying the beams. But when I enter the kitchen, I see the cellar door ajar. I was the last one in this room, as far as I know, and it was securely closed when I left.

My heart hammering with fear, I tiptoe down the rickety wooden stairs. I can't bring myself to shout his name now. Instead I hold my breath until I reach the bottom and make a left into the room. I already feel a scream rising in my throat as I hold the candle out with a trembling hand and force myself to look. Paul's body hangs from the beam that's not supposed to be there. Screams of horror rip from my throat. "Paul! Oh my God, no! No! No! No!" I collapse where I'm standing, still shrieking my objections and shaking my head back and forth in a fruitless effort to banish the gruesome sight.

## Chapter 28

When I regain consciousness, I look around the dark room confused and disoriented. I look up expecting to see Paul's body, but there's nothing there! I reach for the candle and stand, holding it up high. The beams are still destroyed. There's no rope. There's no body. There's no Paul. I weep with relief, assuming I must have dreamt the whole thing. But where is he? I need to find him and make sure he's all right.

I still don't know which of the rooms is his! How is that possible? I begin randomly opening doors and calling his name softly at first. Then louder and louder as my urgency grows. I can feel in my bones that something is very wrong. Am I still dreaming? It reminds me of the way I searched for Molly after she deserted me.

After re-checking every room on the second floor, I go up to the third floor and do the same thing all over again. None of the rooms have been slept in, but that still doesn't mean that none of them are his. Perhaps he was lying on top of the bed and got up after the storm woke him. Where could he have gone?

Fighting tears of frustration, I go back down to the kitchen. This time, I find the back door ajar. Relief washes over me. Paul must have gone outside. But why? Why would anyone go outside in this weather? The storm still rages and, as I stand there, contemplating what to do, I hear Silhouette's meow coming from

somewhere outside. He must have followed Paul, but he hates rain. Did he go outside before realizing how wet it was and now he's hiding under a bush waiting to be rescued?

My curiosity and concern over both Paul and the cat are greater than my aversion to the storm. I leave the candle on the counter and get the flashlight from the drawer. I grab an umbrella from the rack in the alcove. Slipping on the pair of shoes I always leave by the door for emergencies like this one, I open the umbrella and walk out into the rain.

In the beam of light, I spot Silhouette at the end of the path. Instead of coming to me, he takes off in the opposite direction.

"What are you doing?" I call after him. "Come into the house where it's dry." He's never acted this way before, and I suddenly wonder if he might be trying to tell me something. What if Paul's in some sort of trouble, what if he's hurt and needs help? A sick feeling washes over me, and I try to lessen my own trepidation with humor. "You're not Lassie, you know." Every time I get near him, he leads me farther and farther away from the house.

I cross the road and enter the clearing. In the beam of the flashlight, I see Silhouette darting between the gravestones. "This is ridiculous!" I shout at him, but it doesn't alleviate the dread that gets harder and harder to push down with every step I take toward him.

When I get near enough to the two gravestones ahead of me, I see Silhouette weave between them. Then he disappears like a puff of smoke.

I walk toward the graves, occasionally shining the beam along the perimeter in case he darted out so fast I missed it. There's nothing but a layer of thick mist that blankets the ground and clings to the long grass.

The rain lets up a little and I see a faint light in the sky. I realize that it'll be dawn soon. The thought comforts me and I decide just to walk back to the house and allow Silhouette to return when he's ready.

As my eyes scan back over the gravestones, I notice something I didn't before. Mrs. Fairmont's grave is missing the fresh mound of dirt. Did the rain get so heavy that it pounded it down flat? I walk over to the stone to get a better look.

Icy fingers of terror travel up my spine as I read the name: *Margaret Price*. I blink and look again but nothing changes. That's *James's* mother, not Paul's mother! What is happening? My breath comes in short gasps as I glance at the gravestone next to it. I expect to see Mr. Fairmont, but it says, Eugene Price! I scramble backward, screaming as the world spins and tilts and blackness begins to close in. My weak legs tremble and give out beneath me, sending me spilling onto the wet grass. Refusing to allow unconsciousness to gain the upper hand, I pull myself up again.

Sobbing hysterically, I run all the way back to the house without stopping. My brain feels as though it's splintering. I am incapable of grappling with what I've just seen. Surely, it was a hallucination of some kind. If I'm not dreaming then perhaps I'm running a high fever.

By the time I reach the back door, my lungs burn and my sides ache. There's more light in the sky now, but the inside of the house is still cloaked in dark shadows. I dropped the flashlight somewhere outside in my panic, so I take up the candle once more. I know what I have to do – know what I must force myself to confront.

I climb the stairs, still heaving for breath, tears coursing down my cheeks. My legs feel like lead as I put one foot in front of the other, practically dragging myself all the way up to the landing and then down the dim hallway. My candle's flame flickers eerily as I approach my room. I take a deep breath and push the door open slowly, dreading – and yet, somehow knowing – what I will find. I stare in disbelief as I take in the room I shared with James. My body lies on the bed dressed in the large cotton gown. My skin is bluish, my lips a dark purple. There's an empty pill bottle not far from my lifeless hand, and a half-empty bottle of Scotch.

It took a long time for me to fully comprehend it all. I gradually came to realize that there had never been a Mr. or Mrs.

Brennan. They were a figment or perhaps a hallucination of a brain deprived of oxygen. So were Paul and Mrs. Fairmont and even Silhouette. Paul must have represented the man I wanted James to be. And Karen, the demon that destroyed him. They were so real to me and yet they never existed at all. Not even Molly Harper. She didn't desert me. Nor did I hear her crying. It was my own sobs I heard in the hallway that day.

I roam through the empty corridors of the house I lived in – the house I died in. My mourning for those I love and lost has not abated. I ended my life so I could spend eternity with James and his mother. Instead, I exist in the very purgatory I feared so much – a soul trapped between this world and the next because I was too good to go to hell and too sinful to get into heaven. At least that's what I tell myself, but maybe this is all there is – all that there ever will be. The loneliness is unbearable.

The only thing that comforts me is knowing that the house won't stay empty forever. A new family will move in and fill the rooms with love and laughter. I hope they won't mind living with a ghost.