

*Perhaps, there are certain things  
one can only see when  
others can no longer see them.*

## Note from the author

Writing has always been a part of my life. Ever since I was little, I would spend my time writing short stories, poems, or songs. As I grew older, my love for the art only grew stronger. I soon realized that I wanted to pursue writing in the future and the first step I wanted to take to achieve my goals and dreams was writing a novel. I could not be happier with the outcome of this novel, and I hope you love it as much as I do!

# The After Story

- S A N A H   S H R O F F

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The After Story

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# Chapter 1

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*I*t was the October of 1945. The people of London welcomed autumn with a sigh of relief, filled with gratitude, for the season had finally changed. The war was over. We won. And yet, nobody celebrated. Years of starvation, poverty, death – loss of every kind. It was difficult to let go of the suffering, even as a quiet feeling of solace overwhelmed everybody on the streets. I pondered upon these thoughts as I got ready to go out to Claridge's with a few friends. We were going to celebrate that night and greet the dawn of peacetime. I should have been as excited as the others, perhaps, but something felt odd.

My life hadn't been affected by the war at all. If anything, my family benefited the most. My father, Ruskin Jones, was the owner of the best upstream business in Britain. He supplied barrels and barrels of oil to the Allied army, facilitating all their strategic bombing plans during the war. The trade of oil production had brought us new money, and we elegantly climbed up the social ladder. We became one of the wealthiest families in all of London. What we didn't realise, however, is that money and power are all glitter and gold until they bring consequences, and oh, we had a few.

But, through all the highs and lows of the tabloids and the constant annoyances of my mother, there he stood – Georgie.

My Georgie. He was there for me, always, holding my hand and supporting me without a second thought. He drove me mad, really! Mad enough to go and write verses, endlessly, about his strength and love and, oh, what a gentleman he was, my Georgie! And I continued to write, every day, hoping that one day he might be able to read them. Hoping that one day, he might be mine. One shouldn't assume, but I'm sure you must be eager to hear a few of my written pieces. Well, here's a favourite:

*Like the rising sun, you make me smile,  
And I look beyond the gold coins, into your heart,  
Dreaming of the day I'll walk down the aisle,  
With a man so pure as he is kind, strong and smart.*

It didn't happen right away, though. Like every good love story, it was only with time that we came closer; our bond became tighter, and our love stronger. By the end of the dark days (as we called the days of the war), everybody we knew hoped or expected us to marry. I did too.

But, Georgie, oh Georgie! He was too unpredictable, even clueless at times. He still believed himself to be a boy – free of any concerns, worries or responsibilities – all of which, unfortunately, came with marriage. Times had changed, yes. Not everything was as it was before the war. Women had become more assertive, more independent – not equals, no – but we no longer had to wait

or bow down to the male sex. Take my dear friend, Mary Johnson, for example. A headstrong woman, strong as she could be, who became the talk of the city as she confidently announced her hatred for marriage and her vow to never let a man overshadow her.

I knew I could never be as strong as my dear Mary because I always wanted to marry. It's what I had dreamed of ever since I was a little girl. I was taught that it was one's duty to marry, in fact, it was one's great honour. I had heard it for so long that it became almost impossible not to believe it. It didn't mean, however, that I couldn't assert myself in other ways. So, I decided, if George wasn't going to ask for my hand, I would make the first move.

And so, there I was, carefully crafting my plan that would make him desperate enough to ask me to marry him. It was clear. I needed a spectacular dress.

My dress needed to be perfect. It had to make me the shining diamond of the ball, a peacock amongst common pigeons as they say. Something that would make George look, and look again, and never look away. It had to be perfect, that is all – perfect.

“How is the planning coming along, dear?”

Mama's voice interrupted my thoughts as she made her way into the room in that bright floral dress, a Sunday hat, and her favourite white heels. I didn't appreciate her unannounced presence, as

usual, so I whispered a reluctant and irritable, "Fine."

It was not fine. I had no idea what to wear because nothing I owned was right for the occasion.

"How could I have been so severely unprepared? I may as well cancel!" I thought, "Seriously, Emily, how could you be so stupid!"

But even these thoughts – my most intense, urgent thoughts – could only linger in my mind for but a moment. I was instantly distracted by deep, almost suspicious thoughts, about my mother's telepathic abilities (or sorcery) for a mere second later she dropped the dreaded question.

"May I help?"

The words I would still tolerate, but it was the tone that got me. A two-faced facade as she tried to get in my good books. I stared at her blankly. To be honest with you, I was debating it. I'm not sure if you have experienced this, but I heard a little devil's voice – not evil, but not friendly either – sitting on my left shoulder, demanding that I must decline my mother's offer. While a turn to my right shoulder brought me the angel's voice announcing from her heart that I must accept. I was torn, really, until I looked at my mother's dress again. She had good taste – feminine, elegant and noticeable. Enough years of experience, too. Regrettably, I shut the devil down.

"Yes, you may."

“Oh, my dear! We are going to have so much fun! How exciting! Okay!” She did find it difficult to contain herself. “Okay, I have a few ideas, a few colours and such, but first, let’s have a look at your wardrobe, shall we?”

A regrettable choice, indeed. You see, whenever my mother said, “Let’s have a look at your wardrobe, shall we?” it wasn’t as much of a question as it was an announcement – an open proclamation to do as she pleases. Usually, it ended with us fighting, her crying, and my dear father arriving and leaving as a very confused gentleman.

My mother could never just have a look at my clothes. She found it crucial to pass a sliding remark on each piece, its fabric, style, length or construction. She dissected the pieces, as she dissected me; comments on my weight, my skin, my hair, my nose, every inch of my body – it had become routine. And no, I was no machine without a soul, so inevitably, I would snap. As expected, that wouldn’t end well.

“I think George would love to see you in pink. It is more subtle than red, and yet, it has that pure quality of innocence. A symbol of love–”

“I do not like pink.”

“Well, no worries! How about this divine purple gown with these beautiful feathers?”

“I do not like feathers.”

It was true. They would always shed and get everywhere! There was no way I would have that in front of my dear Georgie. It was evident that my mother's sense of fashion stood in the polar opposite direction to my vision. As my mother's voice caused auditory chaos, I spotted some lace hidden behind the huge pile of dresses. It was a dress, white and laced, with incredible detailing on its neckline. It was not too short as to be inappropriate, but short enough to not be mistaken for a wedding dress! There was something so wonderful and magical about its simple and elegant style. It was- it truly was- oh! It was perfect!

"A white dress! My dear, you don't want to scare away the poor thing now, do you?"

There it was again. The demeaning sarcasm.

"I am going to wear it. It is perfect. A subtle hint that he is the one I wish to marry."

Suddenly, a deep excited voice said, "What are my two girls up to?"

It was Papa in his usual attire of a full black suit with shiny boots. The money looked good on him. I asked him, "Papa, what do you think of this dress? Do you think I can wear it tonight?"

"Let's see," he said as he carefully examined my white dress. "Yes, my dear, I think this shall be fine!"

Mother, oh mother, she was not having it. "Really, Rus?" she said, "Don't you think it's a bit over the top? Melodramatic? Or, in

other words frightful?"

"What I think, if I'm being honest my love, is that the boy, that George, he needs a wake-up call, and this dress is the perfect one to do the job!"

It was two against one. Mother could do nothing about it. I won.

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"Mr George Paltridge has arrived, Miss Emily. Shall I ask him to wait in the living room and offer him a refreshment?" Emma asked politely. She was a nice maid.

"No, thank you. I will meet him directly outside by his car."

There was no way I would invite him inside. Mother and father, both, would not let him leave without an answer. Father would bore him with his business talks, while my mother would flirtatiously ask him about his love life. That woman did not know how to be subtle, I tell you. I could not have them ruin that night. I had worked too hard to look perfect for Georgie.

I stopped by the living room to say goodbye to my parents. As I entered, my father's facial expression changed into something I had never seen before.

"You look beautiful. Truly," he said with a gleam in his eye and a proud smile.

I knew I did. The dress fit me like a glove. It showed off my best features and brought out the blue in my eyes, my dark hair was kept open in curls and my shoes gave me that extra height. It was all just right.

“Don’t be nervous, my dear.”

“I am not, Papa.”

Before leaving, I turned to my mother one last time, perhaps in hopes to hear something, anything, any last piece of evidence that she did embrace me with her heart beneath that tough, hard shell.

“You should have worn your hair up,” she said, “But, you do look... beautiful.”

She was my mother, after all.

“Thank you, mama,” I replied with a shy smile. “I won’t be out too late.”

“Don’t worry, dear. Enjoy yourself,” said my mother.

I kissed them both goodbye and went to the foyer. I wore my coat slowly, hoping it would hide the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Suddenly, I felt a rush of nerves, a rush all over my body. I guess I was nervous.

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“You know, it is rude to keep a guest waiting,” a handsome gentleman smiled as he opened the door to his fine expensive car.

“Do shut up, Georgie!” I whispered with a smile. His charm was truly intoxicating.



George was the type of man who believed in what I call the showing-off statement – if you have it, don't hide it – and he certainly never did. He would often come to parties in new excellent quality suits and shoes shipped from America and a new cologne from Paris – always fussing about the next thing to put on his body, almost as if it was the armour he needed to charm his enemies to surrender, and yet, he never thought of himself as perfect. That's what I had always admired about George.

We kissed cheek to cheek – nothing romantic as you would think – just a typical way of greeting amongst the upper class.

“You look so beautiful, my dear.”

“You don't look too shabby yourself.”

The cheeky lady buried under the mask of my proper ways always came out when I was with George, and he clearly seemed to enjoy it.

“Shall we?” he said, as he gracefully guided me into the passenger seat, making an extra effort to ensure that my dress wouldn't be creased during our ride. Always so thoughtful, my Georgie.

## Chapter 2

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*“Did you know that Edward is bringing along twins as his date tonight – or shall I say dates?”* teased George.

*“Is that right?”* I burst out laughing in utter disbelief. *“Well, that’s Edward for you.”*

Edward Taylor, the man I couldn’t hate more, and yet, I called my friend. The word frivolous was never going to be enough to describe his day-to-day and, might I add, night-to-night activities and behaviour. He was often drunk, sometimes even before the sun could cast its light upon the city, and had an endless record of improper short-sighted night-time minglings, which sometimes morphed into engagements before he decided to break apart yet again.

I remember hearing a rumour – not that there wasn’t a new rumour about him every other day, but this one, in particular, had been passed around the circle for months – that once upon a time, he left his bride at the alter to go to a pub with his groomsmen! To say the least, he wasn’t great. But, he was also very rich, which was qualification enough to be a part of our friend group. So, I needed to put on a courteous smile every time I saw him, even though all I wanted was to punch his annoying face. Also, George

liked him; he said he admired his free nature, but really, he envied it.

George's family held great power across London. They were respected and feared, had been commonly praised greatly in the newspapers, and had connections within the royal family itself! So, there was no doubt that when it came to Georgie and his life, there were a set of considerable expectations. He would often tell me that if he could wish for anything in the world, it would be to run away to the countryside and forget about everything that imprisoned him in London. All he wanted was an opportunity to just be himself. I think I often pitied him, for he came from a stone-cold and unloving home, whereas I came from the opposite – it reminded me that even though my parents (mostly mother) got on my nerves quite often, it was not intentional, and I certainly had it better than others like Georgie.

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The car journey was expected to be a long one – the traffic in central London that night was certainly more than usual. So, to keep ourselves from getting bored, we spoke continually, without a pause, of our friends, family, and ourselves. Maybe we were afraid of the silences, of reaching an end where both of us would have nothing more left to say.

“Mama told me that Katherine Allen lost both her brother and cousin during the war. Poor thing, how devastating!” I said in the middle of one of our conversations.

“How terrible!” replied George with great sympathy. “I cannot imagine how Kitty must feel!”

Oh, how much I wish we had embraced the possibility of the silences! At least then I wouldn’t have lived to hear him call her “Kitty” instead of “Katherine”! And not just say it as a passing remark, but with affection and longing! I know, some of you may think, “Emily, it’s only a sweet pet name. Why be so dramatic?” But, it was truly unlawful for a gentleman to have a pet name for a woman he is not courting, let alone mention it in front of a woman he is courting!

It drove me mad! I was furious. But, I had to keep it together, be proper, if I wanted everything to go according to my carefully crafted plan. Not that the facade stopped me from feeling everything that I was – doubt, confusion, anger, sadness – feelings I absolutely hated! No, I wasn’t overreacting! You need to understand one thing – George had only met “Kitty” twice in his entire life. He had no clue about her family, her interests or her personality, and honestly, neither did I. Then, how could he call her by a name so friendly, loving and– oh, it made me so mad!

Katherine Allen was not a socializer; she was the type of person who enjoyed the company of her tea and a boring book by herself. Not a talker, and certainly not a looker! But, like I said, I needed to keep it together!

## Chapter 3

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Claridge's was always booming with lights, music and the people of London. There was dancing, drinking, screaming and laughing, something or the other to spark joy in even the most dull moments. That night, it was even more than usual – we had won the war, after all.

For me, however, that night was nothing but a blur. Almost as if there was nothing there, just me and my broken heart.

“EMILY!”

I startled awake from my daze to the presence of the ever-confident, Mary Johnson, who seemed very confused by my utter lack of focus.

“Is something wrong, sweetheart?” she asked with a concerned look on her face.

“Nothing, I’m fine.” I was trying to cover up for what I was feeling inside, but Mary being Mary, saw right through me, and she knew exactly what to do. She decided to change the subject.

“Let me introduce you to Miles Anderson.” She exclaimed, “He is from America!”

This was very typical of Mary. She was a socialite – in a unique, almost flirtatious way. She had the amazing ability to convince any man, whether a stranger or a friend, to be her date to any event, party or even a small gathering as this was. Poor boy, I thought to myself! Miles Anderson looked so frail and thin with round spectacles that were certainly too big for his face. He had curly brown hair that was shabby, but not unkempt, and he wore a suit that, to my horror, was not tailored, looking too large for his tiny frame.

“So, what do you do, Mr Anderson?” I asked gently to make sure the poor boy did not feel completely lost.

“I am training to be a doctor,” he replied, followed by a silent chuckle at the table.

“I am sorry! It’s just too odd to hear an American accent among us,” said George, to which we all laughed. Yes, I did too, graciously hiding my extreme sadness. I do feel, sometimes, that I’d have been a great actress.

“Hello, ladies and gents!” the drunk Edward laughed, really stretching out his “hello” more than was needed. “How are we this fine evening?” The real question – how was he, now that he was being physically supported by his two dates?

“I am Lisa Ridley,” said one.

“And I am Alisa Ridley,” said the other.

Ah! Twins! How perfect. They had the most astonishing style of clothing; one wore a bright pink dress covered with rhinestones and flowers, while the other wore the same design but in bright yellow. Forgive me, but I can only refer to them as “one” and “the other” because, in all honesty, I just could not tell them apart. They both had severely pointed noses, which outshined their very small facial features, and they were tall, very tall, some would say too tall. But, they seemed nice in a high-pitched-annoying-voice kind of way.

Edward, on the other hand, was his usual drunk and repulsive self. I was not surprised. He usually showed up to our gatherings or parties or events like this. Shameful! It seemed to be that he did not have any other care in the world except for money, which he only spent on exotic alcohol and exotic women.

“Keep a smiling face! Keep a smiling face!” I instructed myself. God, I truly hated the man.

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“Darling, I think you should really convince your mother to not be friends with Elizabeth Peters,” said Mary out of the blue.

“Why?”

“Oh, didn’t you hear? She has been saying such nasty things about your mother. And besides, I also heard that she went to the



tabloids last month and leaked all that nasty information about your family!"

To be honest with you, I was not surprised. Elizabeth Peters was a stout, short and fairly ugly woman, who married into a greedy, rich and powerful family. My mother and her would often go out with their friends for afternoon tea or luncheons, events, casual meetings and so on. But, my mother hated her because Elizabeth Peters had been a firm hater of my family and was the prime source of information for all of London's hot and steamy tabloids. My mother knew of this and yet, she remained 'friends' with her. She always told me, "Darling, sometimes we must bear the consequences of being friends with idiots" - whatever that means. But, after careful consideration, analysis and, well, imagination, I believe what she meant to say was that she had to maintain friendly relations with a senior member of a family whose rank exceeded ours.

"What nasty things did she say?" I asked with intrigue.

"Oh, terrible things! She told my mother last week that she thought of your mother as the most frivolous woman in the whole of Great Britain!" Mary said, quite serious.

"But, she is!" I replied with a cheeky smile, and my dear Mary burst out in laughter.

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I really did try my best to keep myself from expressing my sadness or anger, or saying anything that I would regret later. And not to boast, but I would say that I was doing quite well. I engaged in gossip, as per the usual expectation, and talks of politics followed by more gossip.

“How is work coming along, dear Mary?” I inquired.

“Good, but I’m struggling with manpower. It seems no one wishes to work after a war. How would you like a job, Edward? I promise that your wages will be paid on time, and you might even get a few bonuses,” Mary said with a sarcastic grin.

“Sweetheart, you know me! All fun and no games, or should I say, no work!” Edward did know how to get a laugh out of everybody.

“I loved your new designs, Mary, but I feel they were missing something,” said one of the twins.

“I thought so too. Maybe, a bit of colour!” said the other, with an oddly proud gleam in her eye.

“Ah, I understand where you’re coming from, but my clothes are meant for women in business. We don’t usually like to appear in ‘colour’. It’s business, darling, we need to look the part.”

If only I had the confidence that Mary exudes in every sentence!

Mary’s designs were truly magnificent. They would make the ugliest woman, like an Elizabeth Peters, the belle of the ball. They represented a new age, where women could be as smart, fierce,

and confident as men. They were allowed to make their own choices, their own decisions about their life – and it's what Mary's business represented. It was quite inspirational, indeed.

“Did you all hear about Katherine Allen? George, you have met her a few times, haven't you?”

I turned to face George who looked at me blankly, with no emotion, and replied with a sly smile, “What is ‘a few times’?”

Oh, I couldn't take it anymore! His response threw me off completely. The blurry visions began once again – the lights seemed to dim, while the voices of my friends began to disappear. I never felt so alone and so completely useless, unloved and humiliated.

“Emily, darling, you have to tell me what the matter is,” Mary whispered sympathetically, but I just couldn't reply. I was too preoccupied trying to hold back tears from streaming down my face. A few seconds of silence, and Mary, dear Mary, knew exactly what to do once again.

“Excuse us, please. Every woman needs her cigarette,” Mary laughed as she began to lead us out.

“Yes! May we join?” asked the excited twins.

Mary had a blatant response, “No,” and she pulled me along and ushered us out the main door.

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“Please, just tell me what is going on!”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But, you must! I see that it is eating you alive, my dear Em!”

So, I filled her in on exactly what happened. I told her everything – the conversation in the car, how it made me feel, his lack of empathy, or even sympathy, to how I felt.

“That dim-witted knucklehead! Emily, you must ignore him. You know how men are these days. They see one woman in a skirt, and they jump up and down like rabid dogs!”

“But, you did not hear how he spoke of her, with feeling and care, almost as though he loved her-”

“Nonsense! Sweetheart, he loves you. Emily Jones, you are the only woman who has captured his heart, and don’t you forget that! Do you hear me?”

I did. I heard her. And I tried really hard to believe it.

When we returned, the table was as we had left it. It remained an insensitive and frozen object, occupied by cold and heartless people. Oh, was I still upset.

I tried my best to shake off the dreadful thoughts attacking my mind and the painful emotions wounding my heart. I began to converse again with Mr Anderson and the twins, but found it more difficult by the minute. It was when Katherine Allen’s name was mentioned yet again that I reached my limit.

Edward was quietly speaking to George when he said, "But, she [Katherine Allen] is quite the looker, isn't she?"

I was too distraught to hear George's answer and to be honest with you, I did not want to.

I remained quiet for a few minutes until Mary said, "I'm afraid Emily is not feeling very well. Would you all please bid her good night?" She truly was my best friend. My saviour from that moment of complete darkness. As I stood up from my seat, so did George. I politely asked him to stay and said that I would find a taxi, on my own.

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As I stood outside, waiting for the doorman to find me a taxi, a million thoughts snuck their way into my mind and tortured me. I heard myself thinking, "You idiot! You absolute ugly, dumb, idiot! You let Katherine Allen wiggle her way in and destroy your future! Now you will always remain unloved, unhappy, and alone - forever!"

It seemed as though my own mind had turned against me.

"Ma'am, please be a little patient. It's a busy night, and most of the taxis are full," said the kind doorman.

"No worries. I can walk a bit ahead and try my luck there. Here is something for you." I handed him a generous tip with a superficial smile.

As I walked towards the signal at Bond Street, I could not contain my tears anymore. All was quiet and my mind was blank – so much so that I could hear my own heartbeat and the blood pulsing through my veins. Was this how it felt to have a broken heart?

You might say that I was being too dramatic, but I was not! It's exactly how it was that night. I began to lose the strength to walk or even hold my arm up to call a taxi. I felt physically and mentally broken. After a few minutes, I decided to stop, and just stand, and think – think about my future, my plan B and plan C because Georgie was never going to be mine. My carefully crafted plan had failed, and how!

I began to visualise my parents' reactions. My mother's disappointment and wrath, and the most definite comment on how it was the wrong dress I had chosen that had caused this catastrophe, and how I should have listened to her! To make myself feel better, I pictured and tried to feel my father's warm embrace.

"Maybe, I should go to Mrs Pat's bakery tomorrow morning," I thought. "I could wash down all my sadness with a sip of her coffee. Oh, and the cakes! I just love her cakes! Only if it wasn't too late, I'd have gone right away!"

But, all I could do at that moment was to wait for the sun to rise again.

## Chapter 4

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“Get out of the way, you little weasel!”

“Alright! Alright!”

“HONK!”

“Excuse me!”

“HONK!”

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

“HONK!”

It was daytime. The sun was shining so very brightly and yet, I did not feel its warmth. I seemed to have woken up to the noise of a busy street, hustling and bustling with an extremely impatient and angry crowd. I looked around the pavement near me, watching men in black-brown suits headed to work, well-dressed young girls chattering – on their way to work too, I suppose – and several policemen whistling away as they directed the heavy traffic in front of the confectionery right opposite me.

I blinked. For a moment, I forgot what I was doing at Regent Street. I blinked, again.

Why was I here?

Did I intend to run an errand? Was I on my way to meet someone, Mary perhaps? Oh! I must have come here to eat the wonderful cakes at the bakery – an undeniable craving, especially when I was upset, and oh dear, was I upset after the night before!

I blinked, again. My eyes struggled to focus amidst the chaotic blur and the blinding bright morning sunlight. Slowly, I made my way to the confectionery, trying to remember the previous night's events – what had happened after I went home, and more importantly, why didn't I remember? A gentleman made his way out of the store, holding the door open for his daughter and me. I smiled in gratitude, slipping in.

"Good morning, Mrs Pat!" I greeted the wonderful shop owner as I made my way through the aisles. I didn't even realise when I began biting my nails and scratching my head – how improper my behaviour was – but, it bothered me so much that I just couldn't remember what had happened!

Suddenly, I looked down and gasped! I was wearing the same dress as last night! Oh, and the same shoes, and my hair was exactly how I'd left it the night before! Had I been out all night? Had I fallen asleep on the road? Oh! My poor parents! They must have been worried sick!



I began to get a hold of myself as I walked ahead. Soon after, I came across an agreeable-looking gentleman wearing a fine brown suit coupled with a brown briefcase, with a groomed beard and well-kempt hair. He was walking towards his car – quite fancy and modern – so, I knew he was a man of high class. I approached him and asked politely, “Excuse me, sir. Would you be so kind as to drop me home? I live only a few minutes away.”

To my absolute astonishment, he did not care to answer me! Nor did he care to lift his head and look at me, nor acknowledge my very presence!

“What a rude man!” I thought to myself. But, it was imperative that I got back home, so I decided to try my luck with another passer-by.

“Could you please help me, sir?”

Yet again, I was greeted with no response.

At that point, I was bewildered more than I was startled. I mean, those men ought to have seen my clothing, right? Yes, my appearance may not have been the best, but I was still wearing a dress of fine quality – wasn’t that enough to suggest that I was a lady of high society? Which refined man would be rude enough to disobey the social rules and not come to the aid of a lady in distress? Might I add, Emily Post would be beyond disappointed.

Since, apparently, no man was willing to drive me home, I tried to ask a woman for help. I spotted a lady with a nice face and great

taste in clothing. She was holding her little daughter's hand, a girl perhaps only five years old, dressed in a pink frock with frills and a feminine collar covered by her beautiful golden locks.

"Excuse me, miss--"

She passed by without a moment's thought. People were unusually, but sincerely, rude to me today.

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Even though I tried, it seemed that I could not catch a cab, so I decided to walk home. I was currently on Regent Street and my family and I lived on Charles Street, in a quiet and wonderful neighbourhood, so my guess was that it would take me at least ten minutes to reach my destination, my home. As I slowly passed through the busy street, I noticed an odd number of photographers and policemen around the area. As an inquisitive person, I was about to ask - "Why bother?" I thought to myself - and decided to follow the crowd to see what all the fuss was about. I followed them to a nearby alleyway. As I got closer, I heard a lot of commotion - people gasping, screaming and crying. I pushed myself through the herd of people, only to spot twenty policemen shoving each other as they tried to have enough space to stand in that narrow alley, all looking at something - something above.

I drew a sharp breath. I could not believe it.

## Chapter 5

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*I*t all made sense now – why everybody had ignored me, hadn't spoken to me, hadn't heard me, hadn't noticed me, just hadn't – because I no longer existed.

It was me. There, hanging from that tree, was my very body.

I watched, in tears, as the policemen brought my body down from the tree and laid it on the ground. My skin was pale and my black hair never looked darker. There was no blood or warmth in my cheeks and my eyes looked dreadfully soulless. I observed further, more cautiously, and found several bruises and cuts on my wrist, feet and neck. How had this happened? How did I not remember? Was I really... dead?

"Make way, people! Make way!" shouted a rather masculine female voice. I turned to see who it was only to find two well-built detectives walking right past me. Actually, it was more... through me.

FLASH.

A rather young man with round glasses took a photograph with his camera.

“What have we got, Squirrel?”

“Nothing much, chief. Just a girl who, perhaps, wasn’t so lucky,” he said with a smirk.

I didn’t like Squirrel very much. How could a man who had been given the job of protecting people sit there beside a camera and laugh at a dead body? My dead body. That truly felt weird to say. It still does.

“Well, we do need to know something, idiot!” the female detective exclaimed while smacking that frivolous man’s godforsaken head. I mention female because it was rare for a woman to make such a high rank in those days. She truly must have been special. I developed a liking for her, almost instantly.

“Well, I can say that whoever did this was no professional. Definitely a first-time slayer, ma’am. But, I will need to take little Miss Sunshine to the hospital to get an autopsy done,” said Squirrel. The male detective nodded. A man of few words, it seemed.

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It felt quite odd, to be honest with you. I mean, I had never been dead before. I had known the dead before their death – people sent on Earth by the almighty Lord, destined to pass away one day. I had also thought of the dead after their death – souls who

once lived in bodies, now sent to their rightful place in heaven or hell. To my bewilderment, I was in neither.

I was still right here, on this very planet, in this very city. Except, I was the only one who knew that. As a young girl, stories and fairy-tales made me believe that being invisible was a superpower, but it was not too long before I realised that it only holds true when it is a choice.

Fortunately, there was one thing I could still do – write. Well, not physically, but in my mind (or whatever the ghost equivalent of that is). And I did. I crafted my poems, one after another, because it was the only way I knew to express what I was feeling.

*“Sad? Confused? Angry?”*

*No words enough to describe my plight  
as I wandered into the deadly light.*

*I had pictured death as a voluntary expedition  
that I would live a life of adventure, following my heart and  
intuition.*

*That I would welcome death with open arms when the time was  
right and that, perhaps, was a fool’s thought with no far sight.  
Oh, how naive we are, thinking we control the winds of time.”*

*“In life, one must move on,” they said.*

*“In death, too,” I thought to myself.*

I didn't know what I was or why I was still here. But, it didn't matter anymore. I had to bring myself together, piece by piece. I thought about what I truly wanted, at that moment. And I made a promise to myself.

I would find out who did this to me.

"But, what after that, my dear Em?" I thought to myself. Oh, I am still quite curious that way. And I made a second promise.

When my murderer will die, I will turn his life into a bloody nightmare.

## Chapter 6

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The next thing I knew, I was in a dingy hospital with bleak walls, bright white lights and complete silence. I could hear the slightest of sounds – the door creaking, the wind blowing and the detectives whispering. Then, Squirrel entered and led the detectives out to a much similar, but brighter, room. Don't be mistaken. It was brighter, yes, but not in a good way. And there I was, a ghost, floating through this haunted hospital.

The male detective let out a silent sigh as he looked down at my body – at my pale, naked, dead body – I still could not believe it. How could this have happened to me? Why did it happen to me? Such were the questions that lingered in the air as I desperately searched for their answers, only to now realise that I can never truly know them.

“Alright! The victim is Emily Jones. Female. Twenty-five years old. Ms Jones was at a small gathering at Claridge's the night she was killed. Now, would you like to hear my theory?”

The detectives looked at each other, while Squirrel continued anyway. “Well, my theory is that, first, she lost her consciousness by a blow to the head. There is a good chance that if the blow was hard

enough, it would have killed her directly. Although, look,” he said while pointing at my neck, “the bruising on her neck shows that she was later strangled, and therefore, she was probably unconscious when she, you know, ‘officially’ died.”

No wonder I could not remember a thing.

Squirrel continued with confidence, “Now, you may be wondering why I believe that the killer was a first-timer. Well, it’s because of the cuts,” he said as he pointed to my wrists and ankles. “He, or she, did not do a very neat job. A professional would have cut the artery in a single swipe, not after ten attempts.”

“Okay, but I still don’t understand,” said the female detective. “If the murderer had already killed her, why did he drain all of her blood, or was that done first?”

“In all honesty, we can never know. Although, in my experience, killers – especially the first timers – love the theatrics.”

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After examining my body, the detectives left for the police department. I followed. The department was buzzing with a great number of photographers waiting outside for the detectives to arrive. As the detectives and I reached the entrance, the chaos began.



FLASH.

“Can you tell us anything?”

“Move, I said! Let me through!”

CLICK.

“Who killed her? Detectives! You must answer! Who–”

CLICK.

\*\*\*

After surviving the stampede outside, the detectives made their way through the department into their office. People stopped and stared – police officers, secretaries, civilians – everybody seemed to know who they were. I still didn’t.

I followed the detectives to a medium-sized cabin. The walls were bare, except for one large bookcase and several certificates and news clippings. There were piles and piles of papers and around four telephones. The detectives hung their coats on the hangers and sat at their desks.

I began to explore. I found their name plaques – the stern female detective was Matilda Harris, and the male detective was James Turner Jr. Their cases were frequently covered by the press, and almost every one of them was solved successfully.

I thought to myself, “I should trust them. Everyone else seems to.”

“What do you think we should start with?” Harris asked.

“Well, the basics – questioning her friends and family, that sort of thing,” Turner replied.

After a moment’s pause, Harris said, “Yes, I think that is best. Let’s begin with the people at the gathering, who she was with that night.”

“What about her parents?”

“Let’s question them later. They deserve some time to, well, process the death of their child.”

Oh, my parents.

## Chapter 7

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“Alright, who is first?”

“Miles Anderson. Twenty-four years old and an American... how exciting!” smirked Turner.

Mr Anderson was sitting on what looked like quite an uncomfortable wooden chair. He was constantly moving, never sat still, and his sweaty palms were shining under the fluorescent lights. He removed his glasses every few seconds to rub his eyes, and above all, he evidently looked scared. I stepped closer so I could take a better look at his face – his eyes were red as if he hadn’t had a decent night of sleep in aeons, and his hair was all over the place as his curls seemed to have a life of their own.

“What do you know, Mr Anderson?” I whispered under my breath. Not like anyone could hear me, but – well, habit.

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“So, tell us how you knew Ms Jones?” asked Turner with a serious look on his face.

“I didn’t,” replied Miles Anderson. “I was with one of her close friends, Mary Johnson, who politely but quite adamantly asked me to accompany her that night. I didn’t know anyone really,

but from whatever short encounter we had, Ms Jones seemed like a pleasant young woman, not someone I would expect anyone to hate.”

“What do you do for a living lad?”

“I am a medical student at Harvard. I came to London because.... because I have taken leave for personal reasons,” Mr Anderson added. He looked almost ashamed or embarrassed by the statement he had just made, for he could not look Turner in the eye. Instead, his eyes remained fixed on his fidgeting hands.

“Oi! My eyes are here, bloody hell!” Turner was rather annoyed with Mr Anderson’s vague answers. “Tell us about these personal reasons, will you?”

“My mother died.”

I felt horrible, just looking at his solemn face, longing for a mother he wished were here. I wondered if she was around, if she had also stayed behind on this planet, in this city, following her son wherever he went. But, as my death luck had it, I was quite alone. Nonetheless, it was at this moment that I realized – Mr Anderson was harmless. No man who would let death affect him to this extent would be a party to these devilish acts. There was no way he knew anything about what had happened to me. I just knew it inside my heart, or whatever was left of it. I prayed to God that Turner would go easy on him.

“Turner, can I talk to you for a moment?” asked Harris.

Turner nodded as they stepped away from Mr Anderson.

“Let me talk to him,” whispered Harris.

“Well, of course, you can. This is our case, after all,” Turner responded. “Do whatever the hell you want.” He held an encouraging grin, or so I believed.

“Mr Anderson, we understand that you are new to the city and don’t know much about the case. But, we need you to dig deeper. Was there anything that felt odd that night? You are not expected to have a correct answer, but we need to know any piece of information that may lead us somewhere,” said Harris, quite empathetically.

“Well... well...” Mr Anderson added after a pause, “Here is what I know for certain – Ms Jones and Ms Johnson were very close friends. Ms Johnson seemed extremely protective of Ms Jones. I mean, the entire night, she made sure that Ms Jones was feeling okay. You see, Ms Jones wasn’t feeling very well that night and she did end up leaving earlier than everyone else, and with no escort. She came to the party with George Paltridge, but she didn’t seem too eager from the beginning. She was polite, but I knew she would rather be somewhere else.”

He was right. It is indeed intriguing that sometimes the people who do not know you – complete strangers – understand you

better than your close ones.

“Okay, so the people at this party were you, Mary Johnson, and George Paltridge-”

“Oh, and Edward Taylor, who brought twin dates. I can’t recall their names but they seemed quite in tune with each other, if you know what I mean – finished each other’s sentences, wore the same dress and all of that. They were a little weird if I’m being completely honest. But, yeah, that’s it.”

“Great. Alright! We will contact you if we need some assistance along the way, but, for now, you are free to go,” concluded Harris.

“Thank you, and good luck. I hope you find the bastard that killed her,” remarked Mr Anderson as he left the premises. Those were his parting words. Such a nice man he was! I only wish I knew him better while I was alive.

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I followed the detectives back to their messy office, where they discussed their observations. I listened closely to every word they said. I did not want to leave any stone unturned.

“I think we should interview Mary Johnson. She’s the best friend. She’ll know everything,” said Turner.

Harris replied, “We can’t, yet. She has gone into hiding – well, of sorts – she seems to be depressed. We can give her some time.

I say, meanwhile, we interview this Edward Taylor, then the twins, then Mary Johnson and then George Paltridge. I want to leave him for the very end."

"What about the parents?" asked Turner. "We can't leave them out. They might know something. I say we interview them after Mr Paltridge. That gives them plenty of time to process their loss and enough time for us to dig up the dirt that surrounds this case."

Harris nodded in agreement.

## Chapter 8

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“*P*oor old Emily! What an unfortunate incident! She was lovely, a breath of fresh air in my opinion. Never indulged in guilty pleasures, always prim and proper. Kind of like my father!” babbled the fool sitting opposite the detectives, Edward Taylor. He wore a rather vibrant suit for such an appointment. It was bright red – all ‘prim and proper’ – God, I hated him.

“How did you know Ms Jones?” Harris asked him.

“Family connections, love,” said Edward along with a creepy wink. “They take me everywhere and to everyone. Believe me, I have met everyone in this country. That is except you two – which is quite unusual – tell me, what godforsaken island did you come from, darling?”

“With all due respect Mr Taylor, do not refer to me as ‘love’ or ‘darling’ again, and might I remind you, we are asking the questions here.” Harris was offended, and with good reason!

“Now, I suggest you answer the question she just asked you,” added Turner, annoyed with Edward’s lousy behaviour.

“You’re Scottish! I love the Scots! Especially the female ones... if you know what I mean. The red hair, out of this world!” yelled Taylor.



“You complete, ignorant, foolish bastard! It’s time you stop talking!” I announced out loud, angrier than ever. Except, no one heard me. But, this time, I was happy about it. I had finally found an advantage to being invisible – one can say improper things without caring about their reputation or what others would think of them. That, certainly, wasn’t the case with Edward Taylor, so I knew, sooner or later, his easy-going attitude was going to push the detectives over the edge –

Turner slammed the desk.

“For God’s sake, lad! Do you know where you are?” Turner exclaimed with a scary, almost unfamiliar, look in his eye. “You will answer the questions being asked, show some respect and no longer make any inappropriate remarks, or I’ll slap you until your ears ring. Is that understood?”

“You cannot make any threats, detective! I have done nothing wrong!”

“I am a senior detective on a murder case, young man. I can do whatever the hell I please.” Turner’s eerie wrath engulfed the room. “So, how did you know the girl?”

Edward responded, with less attitude this time, “As I said, family connections. Our fathers fought in the war together along with Mary Johnson’s father and George Paltridge’s father. They became very close, like brothers, and they made sure that their

children would grow up together.”

“Elaborate, please,” Harris investigated further.

“I knew her since the day she was born. I am three years older than her, or was... I don’t think she liked me from day one, to be honest. Yet, we were always together, along with our other friends. We never missed birthdays, Christmas, or bloody parties – not one,” said Edward as his voice cracked.

I moved closer to him. Was he... Edward Taylor, my mortal enemy, was crying for me.

“I never showed too much emotion or love towards her. Or anybody, really. I don’t know why. That’s how I’m built I guess... I don’t know, but I think, deep down, I loved her... like a sister.”

It felt like a dream. A strange dream from which I could not wake.

“Describe the last time you saw her,” asserted Turner.

“It was the night she was killed. There was a small party at Claridge’s that night. It was me, her, Mary, George, Mary’s date – I forgot his name – and my dates, the Ridley twins. She seemed okay the entire night, although, she did step out with Mary Johnson for a considerable amount of time. A cigarette break, I think. At the time, I couldn’t care less, but now that I think about it, Emily hated smoking. She couldn’t stand it. So, I suppose, they

excused themselves from the table to talk or gossip. If I remember clearly, Emily came back slightly pale and blank. And then she left – alone – saying that she was not feeling very well. That was the Last time I saw her,” explained Edward.

Harris interjected , “Anything else? Anything that you remember from that night which might help us?”

“If I could, I would. In all honesty, I was very drunk that night. This is all I can remember, but I would love to help out in any other way if needed.”

The detectives glanced at each other before looking back at Edward.

“Well, there is something you can do for us,” said Harris.

“We need you to track down Mary Johnson. Nobody has heard from her for the past few days. We understand that she must be feeling awful, but we also know that she plays a vital role in this case. After all, she knew Emily better than anyone. Can you do that for us?” Turner asked.

“Yes! Yes, of course! I will find her and get her to come here,” said Edward enthusiastically.

“Very well then. You are free to go.”

As Edward left the room, I realised that even though I had known Edward my entire life, I never really *knew* him.

I had painted a picture of him in my head, based on how things appeared, but that was nothing but false. This truly was one of my greatest regrets. I couldn't see past that careless and frivolous exterior; I couldn't see Edward.

I wondered if there were others, like Edward, who I hadn't seen through either. Perhaps, there are certain things one can only see when others can no longer see them.

I know it is too late to make amends with Edward, but I do wish I could.

## Chapter 9

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“Yes. Thank you. This does help us a lot,” said Turner on the phone. He then turned to Harris, “That was Edward Taylor. He found Ms Johnson. She’s staying at a friend’s house in Suffolk. Edward is trying to get her to come here, but I think he’ll take some time.”

“That’s alright. We have enough time to carry on with the investigation as planned. The Ridley twins are next on our list,” Harris replied with a cheeky smile.

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“I am Lisa Ridley.”

“And I am Alisa Ridley.”

As expected, they showed up in identical outfits – the same colours, the same hairstyles and the same shoes. Once again, I was forced to refer to them as “one” and “the other one” because they left no clues to tell them apart.

“Did you know Emily Jones prior to your meeting with her at

at Claridge's?" Turner asked.

They answered, one after the other, sometimes finishing each other's sentences.

"Well, we went to the same school as her. We were a year younger--"

"But, we never spoke to her."

"Although, we did know of her. The tabloids had a very firm opinion of her and her family. Quite juicy but--"

"But, we actually met her that night along with Edward Taylor..."

They both blushed and giggled childishly.

"How did she seem that night?" asked Harris.

"Fine, I think. Although, she did cling onto that scoundrel Mary Johnson quite a bit. That woman was so ill-mannered she might as well have been born a man," said one of them.

"I'm sorry, but we did not notice anyone or anything besides Edward Taylor. Did you know that he owns an estate in Champagne? How romantic!" said the other.

Suddenly one looked surprised and exclaimed, "But wait! Mary and Emily did leave the table for a smoke, and casually denied us when we asked to join them! They were away for a considerable amount of time... right after Eddie mentioned Katherine Allen!"

The other one added, "Oh, yes! I remember this. Although, you can't make a cause-and-effect inference by that, Alisa."

“Who is Katherine Allen?” asked Harris, quite intrigued by the name of my mortal enemy.

“Oh, nobody darling, quite literally! She is a part of an aristocratic family but she has no self-worth, if you know what I mean. But, I have seen her a few times at some parties here and there, although, come to think of it, I have barely seen the woman! I don’t even remember what she looks like! Do you, Alisa?”

“I do not, Lisa! Strange!”

“Could you give us a clearer background, please?” Turner asked.

“Lisa, would you like to take the floor on this?”

“I would, thank you, Alisa.” She added after a moment, “Although, don’t you know more about her? You went to some class with her, didn’t you?”

“No, that was you, Lisa. We did the twin switch, remember?”

“Ah, yes, but-”

“Ladies!” screamed Harris, unable to contain her frustration any longer.

“Very well then,” one of them began. “She is the daughter of Michael and Edith Allen. Mr Allen is a part of the oil business, the same as Mr Jones but, obviously, Mr Jones is much more recognised in the industry. There was a time when she was a part of Edward’s group of friends-

Mary, Emily, and George – their parents were the best of friends, but they had a falling out. And since then, nobody knows too much about the Allens. It's like a big secret–”

“Until someone uncovers it,” finished the other one.

She was quite right. I did know Katherine Allen. In fact, I used to love Katherine Allen. But, after the big fallout between our families, I knew whose side I was on. I made a choice – a choice I never regretted.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” asked Harris.

“Well, we can tell you about the night we had with Edward Taylor.”

“You know he really is good at–”

“No, thank you, ladies. I don't think that is pertinent to the investigation,” said Turner, almost embarrassed. I couldn't help but let out a silent chuckle.

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In all honesty, I thought the detectives would get nothing out of the Ridley twins, but it seemed I was wrong. They were as surprised as I was, for I had no clue that they knew so much!

“Well, that went well,” Turner smiled lightly.



“As surprised as you,” replied Harris.

“If there is a connection between Ms Allen and Ms Jones, then we need to know the details. Get clarity. We need to speak with Mary Johnson as soon as possible. Let’s just hope that nitwit Edward Taylor knows what he is doing. Until then, we must pause this investigation for a few days.” Harris nodded in agreement.

Great! Just great! What was I supposed to do till then? I couldn’t just sit around. I needed to help – be a part of this somehow!

I needed to see what Edward was up to.

## Chapter 10

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“Suffolk. Who does Mary know in Suffolk?” I thought to myself. I knew it had to be someone close to her because I know Mary – she would never show herself as weak or vulnerable to just about anyone. “Think, Emily! Think!” I repeated as I paced back and forth in the detectives’ empty office.

Well, there were the Crawleys, the Thompsons... the Potters – that’s it! She would be at the Potters.

The next thing I knew, I was on a train – for the first time in my entire life! Yes, stereotypically I could have floated through the streets, but now that I had the ability to remain carefree of what high society would think of me, I thought I deserved an adventure or perhaps a little bit of entertainment.

It was exhilarating! So many people! Some rich, some poor; some snobby, some sweet; some greedy, some saintly – all confined to share the same space for the next two hours. How exciting!

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The two hours seemed to go by in two seconds. It's like they say, "Time runs faster during the good times and slower during the bad." And I was having a brilliant time. I decided to – should I say – eavesdrop on every conversation. I had an entire plan. I would rotate – go to each and every compartment – spend around five minutes per, longer if things were juicy and shorter if they were boring.

"Did you hear what happened to Emily Jones? Poor thing! I remember her so well. A very pretty young girl. She had such a bright future. What a shame!" remarked a woman dressed in a dark purple dress and a matching hat. She had a few wrinkles here and there, but her youth had not completely left her yet.

"Oh, yes, you did know her family quite well, didn't you Charlotte?" said her friend.

Charlotte – that name sounded oddly familiar.

"Yes. My niece, Katherine, and Emily Jones were the best of friends and so were their parents–"

"Charlotte Bell!" I screamed. She was Edith Allen's sister. I could not believe it.

From what I could remember, Charlotte was an uncommonly kind woman, with no lust or hatred in her heart – and in my world, that was rare. She had money, but she did not flaunt it. She didn't desire power, instead, she desired love. In a way, my eight-year-old self had admired her, and in another way, it had envied her.

“Tell me about these Jones... how were they?”

Charlotte replied, “Well, they were lovely. Great hosts and great parents. Although I didn’t always like their style of parenting – especially the mother’s – she was extremely hard on Emily and constantly wanted her to be perfect. She would always fuss about Emily’s looks, her thick black hair and her tanned skin – it amazed me how someone could complain endlessly about something that they created! But still, that little girl was a firecracker with a rulebook of her own.” Charlotte ended with a smile on her face.

She was not wrong. My mother would powder my face and frequently check to ensure that my hair was proper, or in her words, ‘contained’ in a braid or a bun. My childhood was restricted, and perhaps, my adulthood too – however long that lasted anyway.

“We better get going,” said Charlotte as the train came to a stop.

“So should I,” I thought. I had to find Mary.

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The Potters’ house was nothing short of lovely. It was a little cottage in a secluded area with a beautiful garden – I could see all kinds of flowers, berries and vegetables! They weren’t a rich

family. In fact, they were quite ordinary in financial terms, but they made up for it by being the warmest and kindest couple I have ever met.

Meredith Potter was Mary's nanny. They were the best of friends. Meredith truly played the role of a mother in Mary's life. She was incredibly protective of her and guided her through everything. Her husband, Anthony, was Mary's gardener - that's how the Potters met, because of Mary.

I was incredibly close to them as well, so much so that I would spend the long days of summer with them, and I always had a great time.

As I floated through the closed doors of the cottage, I could hear whimpering and crying. I rushed into the living room to find Mary huddled up in a blanket with Edward by her side and Anthony and Meredith in the corner.

"Darling, come home. We need you. You are the primary witness in this case. You will be able to help the detectives - maybe even help find her killer," said Edward gently.

"I am the killer, Edward. I told her to go home early that night. I sent her to her death. And now I wake up every morning feeling

so guilty that I can scarcely breathe,” said Mary with tears in her bloodshot eyes

“Mary, you did not kill her. You couldn’t have possibly known what would happen that night,” Edward tried to comfort her. “Fate works in ways we cannot understand, and we may find it unfair and unjust, but we cannot control it either. What we can control, my dear Mary, is what we do with the time we have got.” Mary looked up at Edward.

Edward continued, “Mary, if you loved her, then please help her. Do not let her die in vain. Do not let the lunatic who did this get away with it. Only you know exactly what happened before she died, Mary. Please, come with me.”

“Be strong, Mary,” I thought to myself as I looked down at my best friend – the woman who I knew to be the strongest in this world, now broken, with her heart completely shattered.

“Please, Mary... for me,” I said out loud.

Mary got up. “Fine,” she said, almost inaudible.

Maybe, she had heard me.

## Chapter 11

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RING.

“Hello? Yes, please send her inside,” Harris said with a relieved – and perhaps hopeful – look in her eyes. “Edward Taylor found her. She’s waiting in the room.”

Turner immediately put down his newspaper and followed Harris out the door.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Turner opened the door to find Edward standing very still, with a worried and grim look on his face. Edward firmly announced, “Before you question her, I need to talk to both of you.”

Edward took off his coat and hat and sat down on the hard wooden chair as he took a deep breath.

“You can ask her anything you want. But, please, go easy on her. She might not answer everything all at once, but you can speak to her throughout the week and maybe the next one as well. It is very overwhelming for her.” Edward added, “Mary was Emily’s best friend. If you push the wrong button, you will lose the best chance you’ve got at finding the killer.”

“We understand,” Turner said, although he seemed to be restraining himself from blurting, “We know how this works, lad. We are humans for Lord’s sake!”

Thankfully, Harris offered an empathetic solution.

“I think it will help if you were to be there during the questioning. It would make her feel much more at ease – that is if you are okay with it?” asked Harris.

Edward replied with a warm smile, “Sure. I would be delighted.”

How had I missed his warmth?

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“So, Ms Johnson, it is our understanding that you were Ms Jones’s closest companion. Is that true?” Turner began politely.

“Yes,” said Mary, rubbing her swollen eyes. Her face was so pale as if life had been sucked out of her.

“How did you meet her?” asked Harris.

“I knew her since she was born. I was just a one-year-old baby.”

“Tell us about Ms Jones. What was she like? Her hobbies and passions?”

“She loved to read. Romantic novels were her favourite; Jane Austin, Brontë – she loved them all. I know it’s a cliché, but she would tell me that reading was her escape from reality, something that would lead her into a world which was, in her opinion, perfect. She also loved to write poetry.



She began with poems about ladybugs and butterflies and then moved on to more mature topics. She had a knack for it, as if it came to her naturally.” Mary’s voice broke before she could continue further.

A short silence lingered, as everybody found themselves still and sombre.

Turner broke the silence, “And what about the not-so-good things in her life? Were there any?”

“Emily was the most insecure person I knew. Yet, she had nothing to be insecure about. She was beautiful! With long, dark and thick hair, gorgeous eyes, and a contagious smile – she had everything. Perhaps, in hindsight, I can say that her insecurities weren’t her doing. Her mother’s criticisms embedded these insecurities in her mind a long time before she was killed. Nothing would ever be good enough for Mrs Jones. She would powder Em’s face so much that Em would end up looking as white as snow! She never allowed Emily’s hair to be let down – it always had to be pinned up tight. So, I think she was the happiest with us. Me, Edward, and George. She could be herself,” said Mary.

“Tell us about her relationship with George Paltridge,” Harris continued to inquire.

We found ourselves amidst another short silence.

“I’m sorry, but can we please continue tomorrow? I’m afraid I am

too tired,” said Mary, barely able to keep herself together.

“Alright,” concluded Turner. “You can come by tomorrow after lunch.”

## Chapter 12

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The next day, the detectives decided to make effective use of time. Since they were meeting Mary in the second half of the day, they decided to call my parents in the first half.

My parents.

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I hadn't seen my parents since... well, since before the party at Claridge's. I remember leaving home so caught up in everything – fussing about George and my perfect dress – and never really taking the moment to absorb the present... my last moment with my parents.

I had been wanting to see them, but with so much going on in the investigation, I didn't have time to ponder upon it too much. Or, perhaps, the real reason was that I was avoiding it because I was afraid – afraid of looking at them again and not knowing how to respond, and of confronting the harsh truth that I can never go back to them again. But, that day, I couldn't run from it any longer, regardless of how anxious it made me.

Suddenly, the door opened and I saw my parents walk into the room. I didn't have words as my eyes began to water and my throat became dry. Yes, curiously enough, one still feels the same emotions even after life ends, except the feelings are more hollow – instead of seventy percent water, consider seventy percent air.

My father was dressed quite unusually. He wore a wrinkled shirt which was not tucked in, his hair was all messy and his eyes were red. My mother looked even worse. She wore a black dress along with a white shawl, carried a handkerchief, and had let her hair down – something I had never seen before. She wore no jewellery. She was barren of anything luxurious and filled only with remorse and loss. It was heartbreaking to see her this way.

“Mr and Mrs Jones, we are so sorry for your loss,” said Turner.

“Thank you. We appreciate the time you gave us to process this, but now, we just want to help – in any way possible,” Papa replied.

“What was on Emily's mind the night of the party?” questioned Harris.

“Well, Emily had always dreamt of marriage, and she was sure that George was her knight in shining armour – her ‘happily ever after.’ All of us expected them to get married and so did Emily. But, George was not mature enough. He wasn't ready for that kind of commitment.”

My mother added, "His family dictated his moves, and as the years progressed, their grip just grew tighter. So, I think he wanted to hold on to whatever freedom he had left – freedom that marriage would consume."

"Yes, but we all believed he would come to his senses sooner or later," said Papa. "Emily tried her very best. She would make sure she looked agreeable, would laugh at all his jokes, would support him, and be there for him."

"How does this connect to that night?" asked Turner.

Papa responded patiently, "The night of the party she was having trouble deciding what she would wear. She wanted to deliver a clear and bold message to George that it was time he proposed for marriage. I think she was inspired by Mary – partially, at least – to take matters into her own hands. Eventually, she picked out a white dress – not a wedding dress – but a white dress–"

"I thought it was the most stupendous idea in the world, but Ruskin thought it was fine, so she went on with it," my mother interrupted.

"What was George Paltridge like as a person?" questioned Harris.

"He was Emily's ideal match – handsome, from a good family and had money, which would provide security for a lifetime, and he was kind. There has always been something magical about him. He can make anyone fall in love with him. Have you spoken to him yet?" Papa said.

“No, not yet.” Turner continued after a pause, “Can you talk about Katherine Allen, please? Mr Taylor said that Emily was quite jealous after she heard Ms Allen’s name that night.”

“Katherine Allen? No, I’m afraid we don’t know much about that. Our families used to be quite close until we had a fallout. We are both in the oil business, but our business was larger and more popular than theirs. So, there was a lot of rivalry and animosity. Towards the end, we just thought it would be best to cut each other off before things would get nastier,” said my mother.

“Can you tell us anything? Anything you have found?” asked Papa desperately.

“I am afraid we can’t tell you much yet as it is all confidential, but we will tell you everything as soon as possible. Till then, we would request you to please be available. We might have to call you in for further questioning if required,” Turner explained gently.

Papa nodded and led my mother out the door.

After my parents left, Harris whispered to Turner, “There has to be something more to this. There has to be.”

## Chapter 13

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“*M*s Johnson, let us continue where we left off. What can you tell us about Emily’s relationship with George Paltridge?” asked Turner.

Mary, who was sitting with her arms crossed, simply replied, “She was in love with him.”

“Yes, we knew that. Is there anything else?”

“Well, I always thought, or always knew, that they would never end up together. Unlike everybody else, I saw George’s frivolous nature – the nature everybody chose to ignore. Emily was about stability and security. While George had security, he wanted nothing to do with stability. In that regard, I could see that he envied Edward because unlike him, Edward didn’t need to worry about his reputation as he wasn’t the first in line to receive his father’s fortune. George craved freedom, actually, begged for it. Emily, on the other hand, was like the model wife – she did expect a lot from him,” answered Mary.

“But, weren’t there other suitors or was it only George?”

"There were many. But, I think she chose him because she had known him all her life. He was there for her during the war – then again, we all were – yet, she made up this fantasy that he was in love with her. I just didn't have the heart to tell her that he didn't, so I played along. As I said, she chose him, but he didn't choose her," confessed Mary with a heavy heart.

"Mr Taylor said that she was not feeling well that night, so she left the party early?"

"What happened was that in the car, on the way to Claridge's, the name of Katherine Allen came up in George and Em's conversation, and then George – the idiot – called her Kitty! It's not right for a gentleman to call a woman who he isn't courting by an affectionate nickname – it's society's rules – don't worry, I find it ridiculous as well. So, Emily was quite shaken up by that. Then, at the party, Edward called Katherine Allen good-looking and George did not say anything, but he didn't disagree either. And then, the worst of all, Edward brought up that George had met with Katherine Allen a 'few times' – this broke Emily completely. After speaking with her in private, I realised how affected she was, so I just... I... I told her to go home, and so she did, and I... I regret that suggestion... those words... every single day of my life," Mary sobbed.

I wanted to tell her that it wasn't her fault, that she couldn't have known, and that I still loved her as dearly and deeply as before.



“Ms Johnson, it is not your fault. You couldn’t have known what was going to happen – no one could have – don’t be so hard on yourself,” said Harris as if she had heard my cry.

Mary replied, “Yeah, well, there’s nothing that I can do about it now. In all honesty, that is all I know about that night. I really think you should speak to George. He knows something that none of us do.”

## Chapter 14

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*“Do you know why you are here, Mr Paltridge?”*

*“Yes.”*

George looked heartbroken, almost lifeless. I felt as though he was in disbelief or could not accept what had happened to me. He still looked the same though, the sadness didn't seem to affect him much physically. He looked good – his shirt was tucked in, had no wrinkles, his face was clean-shaven, and his hair was well-maintained. Maybe this was his way of grieving? I don't know.

*“We know about your relationship with Emily Jones. We know that she was deeply in love with you. Question is, were you in love with her?”*

Harris had asked the hard question. It was the moment of truth.

*“I did love her. I still do.”*

I let out a sigh of relief.

George continued, “But, I think I wanted to keep away from marriage for as long as possible. Everything around me is planned out for me. My entire life has been governed by a dictator – my family. I had to always meet or exceed their expectations, and had to be worthy of the Paltridge name. The one thing that I surprisingly had control over, was deciding who my wife would be. So, it was a decision I didn’t want to rush into.”

“So did you, I don’t know, let’s say, explore other options? Potential candidates?” asked Turner.

George nodded in agreement.

I was wrong earlier. This was the moment of truth.

I had no idea that George was mingling with other women! I thought I was the only one. God, how could I have been so stupid and blind! I wasted my time loving a man who loved nobody but himself. How could he have toyed with me like that?

I wanted to scream, but I knew it would make no difference – I was dead – nobody could hear me, or comfort me, or hold me. It was at this moment that my worst nightmare and fear came true; I was alone.

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After some time, Turner asked the most dreaded question of all. "Mr Paltridge, what can you tell us about Katherine Allen? Mary Johnson said that the reason for Emily's early departure from the party was that she was upset after finding out that you had been meeting with Ms Allen. What can you tell us about that?"

"Well, Ms Allen was – as you said – one of the candidates. A lovely young woman, pretty and well-mannered. She had this confidence in her, which was surprising because she comes across as a very soft-spoken girl. But, I think what I loved most about her was that she gave me a sense of freedom. You know, with Emily, I was always reminded of my duty, my station and my family, but with Kitty, I was able to be myself completely. I could be silly and play games, dance like nobody was watching and just laugh – non-stop! Obviously, I couldn't tell Emily because she would get crazy jealous and also, well, because of the situation–"

"What situation? The rivalry between the Allens and the Jones?" interrupted Harris.

"No. What rivalry are you talking about?" George seemed more surprised, and rather confused, than I had ever seen him. As a moment's realisation dawned on him, he continued, "Wait, you don't know–"

## Chapter 15

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*“Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice, Mr and Mrs Jones,”* said Harris.

*“Is there a problem? It sounded quite urgent on the phone,”* my mother asked, tensed.

*“We spoke to George Paltridge today and he had quite a lot to say.”* Turner added, *“Is there anything you would like to tell us? Or should we just fill you in?”*

*“I’m sorry, detective, but we have no clue what you are talking about,”* replied Papa.

*“Okay. Well then, let me give you a clue. What was your relationship with Edith Allen, sir? Ring any bells?”* stated Turner with a rather accusatory tone.

*“I assure you, sir, I do not know anything about-”*

*“We should tell them, Rus. We should tell them everything,”* my mother said with a grim look.

Tell them what?

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My mother began in a rather sombre tone, “It was a few years after the Great War. I was out with a few of my girlfriends, and we stumbled across this pub which looked suitable for our purpose – to get drunk. It was there that I met a man; he was big and muscular – the perfect specimen – he had golden skin, with the perfect tan, white and straight teeth, a beautiful smile, black hair which was neatly groomed and blue eyes which stood out from his darker features. He was merely a soldier but acted like a gentleman. He and his friends sat and drank with us, laughed with us, and got drunk with us, and in the end, they all made sure we got home okay.”

My mother paused and sighed, as if it took all her energy to just tell this story, to say the words.

She continued, “The next day, I was extremely hungover. Coffee wasn’t cutting it, so I decided to go to the local bakery to get something sweet. And there he was, standing outside the main gate with flowers and a box of chocolates – for me. We courted for a few months; he told me about his entire family. His name was Ronald. Just Ronald. He was half-Indian. His father was a general who was sent to India, where he fell in love with an Indian maid

and together they had a baby. Unfortunately, Ronald's mother died during childbirth... and being the soft man that he was, the general decided to take Ronald back to England with him. Born and raised in the shadows, no one knew that the general had a bastard son, and it was kept that way for the general had a family and a reputation to uphold. So, at the age of eighteen, Ronald joined the army, so that he could be a part of something, somewhere he could belong. It was not long before the army became his family. After a few months..."

Papa held my mother's hands gently, with warmth.

"After a few months," she said, "I got carried away. I was pregnant. I was so angry and I blamed Ron, and I forgot that it was my fault too, that it took two people to make a baby, especially when Ron never forced me to do anything. But, I was young and stubborn. So, I sent him away. I knew I couldn't tell my family because they would disown me, strip me of all my inheritance and throw me to the dogs... so I went to my best friend."

My mother looked at Papa with tears in her eyes.

"When she came to me, I was very angry and disappointed in her, if I'm being honest, but I knew I had to help her. So, I proposed. Even though I was not in love with her, I did love her. Luckily, she

she hadn't reached the stage where her belly was popping out, so we did have time. We eloped that weekend, came back to our surprised but happy parents and started our life together. We raised Emily together. Even though, she is- was- not my biological daughter, she was still my baby, and I loved her and still love her."

Papa paused for a moment, then added, "But, I am human. I did crave real love that I didn't find in my wife. So, we decided to have an open marriage. I was quite discreet about mine. I didn't have multiple women in my life, just one. Edith. I was completely in love with her. I was courting her when my wife came to me with her situation. It broke my heart when I had to leave Edith, but she had to understand, and she did understand, in a way. She went on to marry her husband and we carried on with our illicit affair. And then, she got pregnant with her first child - Katherine - it was only a few years after Katherine's birth when Edith told me that she was my child. I wasn't angry or confused, but happy. We raised our kids together; Emily and Katherine were the best of playmates, and all was well. That was until the spring of 1930 when Michael came home early from work and caught Edith and I... well, together. I haven't seen Katherine or Edith since."

"Do you think Mr Allen knows that he is not Katherine's father?" asked Turner.



“No. I don’t think Katherine knows either,” said Papa. “And it’s probably for the best that my dear Emily also didn’t know.”

I needed air.

## Chapter 16

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*F*or a long time, I didn't have anything to say, which is rare – to say the least.

I felt trapped in emotions I did not understand. Hatred, betrayal, anger, sorrow, stranded, out of place; the only way to describe it was that my heart had been ripped out of my chest. As if my lungs had stopped breathing and my brain had morphed into my worst enemy. And this is coming from a dead person.

Was it all a lie? My childhood, my life?

It had all seemed to fade since the moment Papa mentioned that I wasn't his daughter. I couldn't believe it. It was like those stories that you read in novels late at night, the epic thrillers you read for amusement and excitement, but always pray to God that it never happens to you. Except it was, it was happening to me. I realized that everything in my life was a fantasy – it wasn't my reality – it was a story they made up; I couldn't care less if it was made up to protect me or to give me a better life. I deserved to know the truth – the truth behind my mother's constant obsession with covering up my face with a powder too light for my skin, of tying my dark

hair up tight and of always looking at me like I was her greatest disappointment. Because I was.

The only moments of joy and happiness I ever felt were with my father. And now, even that was gone. Flashes of memories flooded my mind – how I sat in his study as he read to me, how he taught me to ride a bicycle, how I would long to give him a big hug when he would return home from work – all of that, all of it was fake. I couldn't comprehend how something so good, so pure and so real was nothing but a facade, a disguise from the truth.

I was not a Jones. I was a thief, who unconsciously stole a name and got too familiar with it. I was a hypocrite and a liar to myself and others. I was not his daughter... but someone else was. Once again, I was second to Katherine Allen.

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I was still at the precinct, in a grey and practically empty room. Never in my life had I felt so connected to a room before. The silence screamed how lonely I was feeling, the bare walls illustrated my colourless life, and the wooden and empty desk characterised the place where all the lies and stories were born. I couldn't help but feel uneasy, like I was going to be sick, and God knew I did.

But, one of the perks of being dead is that you can never feel that way again. Even if you really wanted to. And one of the advantages of finding yourself in an abandoned room is that you have the chance to think, or to face the problem head-on because there's no escape.

"Okay, Em!" I thought, "It is a burden, but it is a burden that can't be undone. So, let it go."

Except, I didn't feel like letting it go, or rather, I didn't feel like letting my mother get away with it. How could my mother, the incarnation of perfection, fall on her knees to something as human as ever - a mistake - something which she used to commonly call a sinful act? She held a weapon to my neck if I made the slightest slip-up, but allowed herself to live a truly improper life without... without any... I felt so frustrated that I didn't have the words to continue.

In a way, I pitied her. Imagine having a daily reminder of your life's demolition, all summarized by looking at your own daughter, your own blood. Perhaps that was the reason for her mood swings, and the reason why my childhood was nothing but my desperate attempts to fit in, to feel included and accepted, and to feel loved by my own mother who would only push me away.

Maybe she was like me? Maybe once upon a time, she was a romantic who could fall head over heels for someone in a matter of seconds. And maybe that's why I had to let her go - to forgive her for being just as I am, and failing, and then not wanting her daughter to grow up the same way.

I still hadn't accepted it, but I had repeated it enough times to focus on this new information I had, and use it to make connections, any connections, which could lead me to how I ended up this way - dead.

I was ready to return to the ongoing interview. Perhaps, there was still another mystery about my rather short life awaiting to be unravelled.

## Chapter 17

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*“Did you ever think of telling Emily about it?”* asked Harris empathetically.

*“No- no! That was completely out of the question for us,”* Mama gave a rather firm response. *“Ruskin has and always will be her father. He taught Emily how to ride a bicycle. He took care of her when she had Chickenpox. He supported her in every choice she made. He was more of a parent to her than I ever was. You know, detective, in the end, blood does not matter – not to us at least.”*

Those were powerful words, especially for my mother. But the words that were to follow– I could not believe it.

Mama continued, *“I shouldn’t have restricted her so much. There was a time, before we started to argue and fight, when she would hold me so tight with eyes full of love and joy. She used to laugh with me, tease me, and I used to tell her all the gossip; we would laugh hysterically and joke about how weird and materialistic people were. What I didn’t realise was that, soon enough, I became them– those people. It was a mixture of things really, but I think the trigger was that big Christmas party around 18 years*

ago. A woman and her husband – two guests – began gossiping about us at our own house. They pointed out that Emily did not look like Rus and that the colour of her skin was darker than it ought to be. I was agitated and threw a fit. I ended the party early. Made up some excuse– dizziness, maybe. But, the fit didn't end that day– I made new rules. I was suddenly more frivolous, just to give people something else to talk about instead of my daughter. I made sure Emily's hair was always neatly tied up, and that her face was powdered every morning, touched up regularly, and oh– she had to stay away from the sun! The colour of her skin would not give people the invitation to comment on our family. That's why she was banned from going to the Potters' house with Mary every summer. It crushed her! I know it did. But, I was so blinded by my own misfortunes that I couldn't see the misery in my little girl's eyes– the little girl who would grow up to be a woman who hated her mother.”

My mother sobbed silently. A sombre feeling lingered in the air. It made them all uneasy as if no one knew the right thing to say. Funnily enough, I experienced the opposite– I felt at ease. My mother loved me, and everything she had done– all of it– was to protect me. In the process, she became something she didn't want to, and as her guilt took over, it became harder for her to come out of it. But, it was all to protect me– my mother loved me.

Turner, the gentleman, slowly handed my mother a handkerchief. Harris took the cue and asked, “Mr Jones, did you ever contact Katherine Allen in any way? You told us that she probably does not know that you are her father, but did you ever reach out? Not as a parent, but an unlikely friend, perhaps?”

“No. As my wife said, Emily was my daughter. She was my dear Emily and always will be. I may be Katherine’s biological father, but I had no part in her upbringing. Did I ever feel sad about it? Yes. But that sadness ended a long time ago. I swear on my daughter Emily’s soul that I have never, to this day, reached out to either Katherine or Edith in any way or form. It is all in the past.”

Well, he swore on my soul and my soul is still around, so I assumed he was telling the truth.

He was telling the truth. And I realised that I was not so much a burden or a mistake– I mean, indeed, I was a mistake, but I was a mistake well received by my father, Ruskin Jones. It is true that I may not share his blood and my ancestors may not be from the same family lineage, but I was brought up as a Jones by a Jones. It was my identity and nothing could replace the pride I felt when I spoke of it. They would always be my real family – Mr and Mrs Jones.

That didn’t mean, however, that I wasn’t curious about Ronald–



the man who was my biological father. Self-satisfaction does nothing to restrain our eagerness to search for the unknown. What was my father like? Where was he? Was he dead or alive? And why did he never come back?

## Chapter 18

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“No, father. I have not found a suitable man, yet. No- I do wish to work, father. No- father! I-” Harris rambled on, evidently annoyed. Turner laughed quietly in his corner of the office. Harris noticed and was definitely not pleased.

Harris was talking to her father – a field marshal and a decorated war hero. John Harris was his name, a military man who made it to the highest of ranks with his hard work. He sounded familiar to me for I had heard such great stories about him, although, I could have never imagined that he and the detective were related. Related doesn’t always mean good, obviously. From what I heard, it seemed that their relationship was – how should one call it? – complicated. The reason Harris had rung up her good old father was that the detectives, like me, wished to dig out more information about my biological family to help solve the case.

Well, even if it didn’t help take the case forward, it would give me some kind of closure at the very least.

“Now, can we please stick to the matter at hand? When you were first stationed in India, father, was there a general who had an

affair with an Indian maid? I know it's not much information, but it's all we've got," said Harris.

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After about twenty minutes, Harris concluded the call, "Thank you so much, father. Really. Yes- Yes, I promise to call more often."

"So?" asked Turner, jumping right off his comfortable chair as soon as the line was disconnected.

"He gave me a list of five names. Men in the army, both of high rank and low, but my guess is that since Emily's grandfather was a general, her father will also fall into the high-rank category. Still, I think we should interview them all. All are living, and are known to have had a fling - whether serious or not - with Indian maids or mistresses," said Harris.

"Maggie!" yelled Turner.

"Yes, detective!" a frightened Maggie responded.

"Reach out to... what were the names again?" Turner asked.

Harris handed Turner a piece of paper with all the names. I managed to take a peek.

*Major General Lance McAvoy*

*Lieutenant General Peter Sturridge*

*Brigadier Mark Russel*

*General Benedict Lennon*

*Field Marshal James Ludlow*

“Okay, here, take this,” rushed Turner. “These are the names of former military officers. Reach out and ask them to come for an interview – tell them it is regarding the case of Emily Jones – I am sure they won’t refuse.”

“Yes– yes, sir. Right away,” said Maggie as she ran out the door.

“You’re sure this isn’t a waste of time, right? Because sadly, we don’t have much of it,” Turner said hesitantly.

“I will not lie to you, Turner. I do not know for certain if this will help us. But, there is strong reason to believe that there might be a connection, and even if it turns out to be a dead end, it’s better to rule it out than to ignore it,” responded Harris.

Turner nodded in agreement.

## Chapter 19

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“*R*ussel... Lennon... Sturridge... Nothing. We have to move on.”

Harris didn't look convinced. Turner sighed.

“Up next are-”

“McAvoy and Ludlow,” finished Harris. “They are friends and served their time in India together. Also, Maggie said that they want to be interviewed together. Strange, but we might as well allow it. What do you think?”

“We can. Send them in,” replied Turner.

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“So, you have known each other for quite a while now?”

inquired Turner.

“Too long,” replied McAvoy.

A man of few words, McAvoy was in good shape for a man his age. Although white, his hair seemed to have a healthy shine and, well, all of it was still there! He was wearing a manly cardigan along with a tweed cap, his fingers had multiple rings on them and he smelled of cigars. He was the perfect specimen of an aged war hero.

“Around 40 years,” added Ludlow.

A tiny man with a stern yet caring face, Ludlow looked his age. Old. He wore a shirt, tucked in tightly, and beige trousers, and he smelled of books– the kind that elegantly collects dust over the decades, so when a stranger finally decides to lift them off the shelf, they leave their mark. He had an aura that emanated wisdom and he spoke as one with a high class of education, grace and poise.

“You were both stationed in the city of Bombay, am I right?” asked Turner.

“Yes. Beautiful city. Lovely colours and culture. We stayed – or I stayed there for around two and a half years until I was re-stationed to the south of Bengal. I think you stayed on for, what was it? Seven more months?” Ludlow turned to McAvoy.

“Eight months. I was then re-stationed to Madras,” added McAvoy.

“Yeah. We kept in touch though– letter and postcards and all that,” said Ludlow.

“I don’t know how to ask this politely, so I might as well be direct with you, gentlemen. While you were stationed in Bombay,

Madras or Bengal, did you have any indiscretions with an- or more- Indian women?" asked Turner.

"Excuse me?"

McAvoy's eyes stayed fixed on Turner. He looked firm and, well, quite scary. Within a moment, Turner turned visibly pale.

"Easy, Lance. I'm sure they have a reason for asking such a question," said Ludlow in a calm and reserved voice.

"Sorry, gentlemen, but we are forced to ask such questions. A poor lady has been murdered and we do need this information to find her killer. It may sound absurd, but we do," said Harris politely.

"Alright. Well, the short answer is- yes. Being away from home and our families for so long, it takes a toll on you. You need to distract yourself. You need some- how do you say it- amusement and, well, pleasure," said Ludlow uncomfortably but quite convinced of his choices.

"But we never took them seriously. It was merely a moment for us, nothing more," added McAvoy.

"So, in all your time there, you didn't fall in love with anybody? What about the others? Was there anybody who fell in love with

an Indian woman?" persisted Harris, almost desperate for a lead.

"No, no- not that I remem- wait! Ludlow, what was that man's name? Remember that general who never smoked any cigars nor drank more than a glass of wine- such a stuck-up!"

"The general who never left his office, never thought of anything but work," responded Ludlow, equally enthusiastic in the contempt he had for the man.

"Yes! But, what was his name? He was quite friendly with me, but God, it's been too many years," muttered a frustrated McAvoy, who probably said more words during these two minutes than he had in his entire life.

"PERCIVAL!" yelled Ludlow.

"Yes! Yes, that's it! General Arthur Percival!" exclaimed McAvoy.

General Percival, as was said during the interview, was the son of Lord Percival, an aristocrat who had "too many children, not enough money." Apparently, he had ten children and five more with his mistresses! The man joined the army at the age of eighteen and worked his way up the ranks to finally call himself a General. He soon found himself in Bombay with multiple other



officers of ranks both below and above him; he was fascinated by the country and desperately wanted to explore it. But he was there for a reason – a job – that had to be fulfilled. The house in which he stayed had multiple members of staff, both male and female. There were cooks, maids and butlers, so in a way, to him, it felt like home. Down the street lived a good friend of the General, Andrew Brookes, who was a colonel and lived in a similar house, although with lesser staff members compared to the General.

There was a maid who worked in Brookes' house, who the General described to be "the most elegant creature in this world." Despite her low social status and the obvious – her ethnicity and colour – they fell madly in love. The General began learning Hindi to communicate with her, and such is the power of love, for he became fluent in just a couple of months.

It was towards the end of this story when Ludlow said, "A few months into their relationship, Percival began to lose his patience more often, became angry, threw things around – chairs and all that. No one knew why. And this was extremely strange because he was a calm man, almost soft, but in a way that made him weak. So, to see him in such a state, it was unbelievable for us. We knew something must have happened, but no one would dare ask him. Then a few weeks later, the maid died. No one knew how – she just died. The next day, Percival was nowhere to be found, and a few

days later, we got to know that he was needed back home and would be taking an indefinite leave.”

“Did you ever hear from him again?” asked Turner.

“I did. The last I saw him was at a party in 1919,” said McAvoy confidently.

“Do you have any idea if he is alive today?” asked Harris.

“Yes, he is – I think – or at least his wife is. But last I heard, he was quite sick,” McAvoy replied.

“I think he lives somewhere in Kensington,” added Ludlow. “I’m sorry, but this is all we know. I have to head home now, I’m afraid it’s late.”

“Yes, of course! This is in fact everything we needed. Thank you so much!” said Harris.

“You are welcome. And give your father our regards,” ended McAvoy.

## Chapter 20

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*K*ensington was as peaceful as ever. The green trees stood tall in perfect contrast to the blue sky – the ideal habitat for the beautiful birds whose songs echoed through the street. I followed the detectives who wore similar dark trench coats, which gave them a sort of mysterious quality, quite suitable for the occasion, really. They walked in only one direction – straight, towards an old and almost run-down mansion.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Yes?” said a man dressed in a tailcoat who, I’m guessing, was a member of the staff.

“Hello, we are detectives from the London precinct. We are looking for General Arthur Percival,” announced Harris.

Without another word, the man closed the door and the detectives were left in silence. Annoyed and absolutely shocked by the man’s disrespect, Turner began to knock constantly – with each knock getting more and more aggressive – that was until the door opened once again, but this time it was a woman dressed in all black.

Turner blushed as he saw the woman, evidently in awe of her beauty. He tried to compose himself as he responded in a forced heavily-masculine voice, “We are here to speak to General Arthur Percival.”

The woman was tall, but not too tall. She had gorgeous, dirty blonde hair with a few white and silver strands that came just above her shoulders, and her eyes were a beautiful hazel brown and had something magical or almost dreamy about them.

“I’m sorry, but my father is no longer with us. He passed away a few days ago. Is there something I can do for you?” asked the woman, who carried herself with utmost grace.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, ma’am. We came here regarding the case of Emily Jones. We were hoping to speak to your late father as we feared there might be a connection,” said Turner gently.

“Are you accusing my father of a wrong-doing?” said the woman, suddenly stern and aggressive.

“No, not at all, ma’am. We think there was a relation – a blood relation – between the late General and Ms Jones.” Harris paused and continued, “Would you be so kind as to allow us in?”

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The house could have been beautiful if it was not covered in darkness. All the curtains hid the windows, blocking every ray of the sun. The furniture, though antique, was extraordinarily exquisite – there were clocks, paintings, and sofas – all of it had some sense of wonder. And I just stood there thinking, was this the home that I could have possibly grown up in, with the family that I could have possibly loved? Amid these crazy and sentimental thoughts and emotions, I seemed to have completely forgotten that the detectives had already begun talking to the woman.

“We have enough evidence to believe that during your father’s time in Bombay, he fell in love with an Indian maid who gave birth to his child and died shortly afterwards. We also have reason to believe that after her death, without a word, he ‘retired’ from his duty in the army,” said Harris.

“Did he bring the child back here– to London?” asked Turner.

“Enough,” announced the woman, who stood up from her seat. “How dare you come to my house and accuse my father – a man who has barely spent two days buried in the ground – of adultery with a filthy Indian maid?”

“You must leave,” she said with a strong force. “Now.”

“I apologise if we offended you, ma’am, but an innocent girl has been murdered and there’s a bloody killer on the loose. We are just trying to do our job. We thought we found a connection between your father and this girl – we thought that she was his biological granddaughter, her father being the son of that Indian maid. Your father, with a heart too kind and tender, brought the boy to England when the Indian maid didn’t survive. But, we understand that we were mistaken, and we are sorry to have wasted your time,” said Harris, who politely excused herself.

Turner, absolutely confused, followed behind her – practically running to catch up. In all fairness, I was too very confused. What was Harris playing at? This was her chance to find out everything, so why was she wasting it? They were detectives and the woman was a civilian– the woman had no choice but to cooperate!

“What just happened in there?” asked Turner as soon as they stepped out of the large, black metal gates.

“She will call soon. Trust me,” responded Harris with ease.

“How can you be so sure?” asked Turner, who was extremely frustrated, agitated and angry. “You should have spoken to me before making such a decision, Harris! The smallest slip-up could cost us the case!”

“She is the daughter of a war hero, Turner. You forget that so am I.”

Harris sported a cheeky grin on her face.

“And what has that got to do with anything?” Turner asked, still not convinced.

“The daughters of army officers are surrounded by war, order and patriotism all their life. They see men laying down their lives and the lives of others in hopes to save many more. We, as daughters, wish to contribute, but it is never seen as appropriate. So, Turner, when the opportunity comes to help someone – anyone and in any way – we take it upon ourselves to do our bit.” Harris paused and smiled, “She will call tomorrow.”

## Chapter 21

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“Yes. Yes, we will be free to come. Thank you very much,” Harris smiled.

General Percival’s daughter, who I later found out was named Elizabeth Percival, invited the detectives for tea at her house. Harris was right about her.

Turner sat there, shocked. He then took out some money from his pocket and reluctantly handed it over to Harris. The detectives had engaged in a bit of a gamble.

“I don’t know how you knew this would happen, but God, I’m glad you did!”

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The house seemed exactly as we had left it the day before – gloomy, mysterious, and full of objects that fascinated me, like collectors’ items that were brought home by the General and his sons from all over the world when they served in the army. This time, compared to our last visit, I had more time to



place in greater detail. While the detectives and I waited for Elizabeth, I came across painting after painting – even the detectives were amazed by all the artistry.

During my exploration, I came across a portrait – a family portrait – that illustrated the Percival family. General Percival at the centre – majestic and royal, with his well-groomed beard and hair slicked back; he seemed to be the ideal specimen of the aristocracy. He wore his uniform embedded with multiple medals that depicted his greatest feats, and oh, he had the Victoria Cross – the greatest and most respected medal of all, awarded only to a few who showed great valour in the face of the enemy!

I knew this because, well, my other- non-biological but real-father also had one.

To the right of the General was a woman who stood with her hand on his shoulder. She had beautiful features – rosy, red cheeks, pink lips and blonde hair that were in natural curls. I guessed that this was the General's wife because, despite the fact that her beauty had not yet faded away due to age, there were streaks of white which were visible in her hair and more importantly, her eyes – lovely green eyes – seemed to have wisdom that only one with years of experience would.

Next to her was Elizabeth, her younger self. Her hair seemed to be wild and free as it fell down to her hips and was not contained by any clips or torturous hairstyles. She had what we all eventually lose- youth- and somehow, despite the many years, she still hadn't lost it.

There were also four other men who were the sons, all standing behind their father. Some of them were in uniform while the others were in suits, but they all had medals - although, I couldn't make out which.

"My family has always had a soft spot for the arts," said Elizabeth as she entered the parlour only to find the detectives consumed by the various paintings and sculptures surrounding them. She continued, "Ah, that one is from Greece. It was sculpted using only marble and depicts Artemis, Goddess of the hunt."

Elizabeth was referring to a breathtaking sculpture that Turner was carefully examining.

"It is beautiful," he replied.

"Yes," Elizabeth paused for a moment. "I think I must apologise for how I acted yesterday; I am deeply sorry for it. My father has passed away merely a few days ago and well, I was- maybe, still am- on edge. But, I am glad to be of any help now... Would you

like some tea?"

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"My father did fall in love with an Indian woman," said Elizabeth. "My mother was furious because as far as she knew, their marriage had been a happy one. Perhaps when you are overseas for so long, away from family and friends, away from your home, you get distracted or try to find a home wherever you are. We found out through my father's secretary, Joan. She gave a detailed account to my mother - about everything - except for one thing. But, I doubt she even knew about it."

Elizabeth took a moment to stir her tea. I could see the discomfort in her eyes, her hands, her body. It wasn't the most pleasant conversation to have with two strangers.

She continued with strength, "One night, when I was about 4 years old, it was raining, and it was late... a loud knock woke us up. It was my father, in uniform and with a baby in his arms. My brothers and I were told to go upstairs right away. My parents thought that we wouldn't be able to hear anything, but my mother's horrified screams and foul words were perhaps loud enough to be heard by the neighbours as well. The baby was my half-brother, Ronald; or Ron as we later liked to call him."

“How was your, and your family’s, relationship with him?” asked Harris gently.

“Mother hated the sight of him. She thought he was an abomination. So did my brothers; they kept treating him with such hatred and, I don’t know, they segregated him from the rest of us, from the rest of our society. And it didn’t play well with them that he was clearly my father’s favourite. I mean, he had a strong build and natural athletic skills, just like my father – so, there was certainly a little jealousy there in the brothers... As for me, I loved him. I loved him more than any of my other brothers. He was incredibly kind and empathetic and he always put others’ needs before his own– a rare sight in any man. And he was always there for me, for everyone,” replied Elizabeth.

“Did you know he had a child?” asked Turner.

“Yes, but he never told me who the mother was... Emily Jones was his child, wasn’t she? Otherwise, there is no reason for you to be so oddly curious about my half-brother.”

“We believe so, yes. Tell me, what happened to him?”

“Well, he... he died in battle. I don’t know how, but I think it was an explosion of some kind because they never found a body...”

What saddens me more than anything else was the fact that the last words I said to him were... were to... to go back to his country. We were arguing about something - I can't remember what - and the last thing I remember was... those words."

"So, they didn't find a body? No trace of him?" inquired Harris.

"No. But they did find this," said Elizabeth as she removed a plain and rather simple gold ring. "He was wearing it. Apparently, Emily's mother - the woman my brother had loved - had given it to him a long time ago. I recognized it as soon as I saw it because he told me that they had exchanged rings long before the woman got pregnant. The rings signified a sort of promise or a way in which they find their way back to one another. I suppose... I suppose it doesn't serve a purpose anymore."

There was a strange silence in the room. I was also a part of that silence, almost one with it.

I would never be able to see my biological father just like he was never able to see his biological mother- both passed away before they could ever love their children.

Harris responded empathetically, "Would you like to meet Emily's family? I am sure we can arrange something."

“No. Believe me, I would love to help in any way I can, but I want to keep it as private as possible. My father – my family – spent many years hiding this secret, so I would betray them if I said anything to anyone apart from you two,” replied Elizabeth.

“Where is the rest of your family?” asked Turner.

“All dead,” replied Elizabeth with little display of emotion. “I am the last standing Percival, with no sons or daughters of my own, and none from my other brothers either. I am afraid the name will die with me.”

## Chapter 22

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*I*t is hard to find out that your life had been a lie, but harder to discover what it could have been– the possibility of a different life. As it turns out, I am a Percival. Or at least, was. I could have been the last standing member of this family, I could have been the one to take the family name forward, I could have been– Alas, none of it mattered anymore. I was dead, just like the rest of my biological family. Except one.

Now, all that truly mattered was finding out who killed me. And I was afraid that the detectives were not doing a thorough enough search, as though we were going around in circles leading to no end. Always coming back to the same thing.

In my mind and in my heart, however, I believed that the answer was right in front of us. That the killer was in plain sight. If only we had the eyes to see it.

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“We have covered every possible lead, Harris. Everything!” yelled Turner, who was getting more and more frustrated every day.

“Getting angry will not help us. We need to think- harder and deeper,” said Harris, who kept going through the same stack of papers, the same notes, over and over again.

“What do you mean? Aren’t you angry? Irritated? We have spent months going over the same things and yet, nothing has come of it! What do you think we will say to the press? That we still don’t know anything? We can’t even tell them of Emily’s true heritage because our dear Elizabeth Percival will not allow it! Don’t you see, Harris? We have absolutely nothing!”

KNOCK! KNOCK!

“What?” screamed Turner.

A frightened Maggie opened the door. Yes, she was always frightened, but this time it was more than ever- she was drowning in anxiety. Perhaps it was because of Turner’s vile words and hot temper. Nonetheless, she could not find the words.

“Oh, just speak woman!” yelled Turner.

“Shut up,” responded Harris. She turned to Maggie, gently, “What is it, Maggie?”

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“Mr George Paltridge is here. He asks to speak with you urgently,” replied Maggie.

As soon as those words came out of her mouth, the detectives ran out the door. I followed.

When I saw George, in that second, I knew that there was something terribly wrong. His hair was completely out of sorts and his face unshaven, his eyes were blood red and swollen, and his clothes were all wrinkled. He smelled of alcohol and seemed a bit drunk as he sat there with a solemn face. The detectives were as shaken by his appearance as I was. He seemed like an entirely different person compared to the last time they saw him.

As the detectives sat down, George’s face lit up with a big smile.

“Hello, friends!” announced George.

“Hello, Mr Paltridge. How can we help you this evening?” replied Turner.

“Oh, no! No, it is I who can help you, detectives–”

“Mr Paltridge, have you been drinking today?” Harris interrupted.

“Mhmmm... just a little bit.” George burst out into laughter.

Oh, it was a laugh I had never seen before.

Turner got up from his chair and said, “Maybe we can talk to you tomorrow morning, once you feel better-”

“No! No! No! No! I might forget it in the morning. Oh, no! It is far too important to forget.”

“Then, tell us! Put us out of our misery, will you?” said Turner, annoyed.

There was a long pause. George’s eyes remained fixed on the detectives– didn’t shift their gaze even though he was so drunk. It evidently made Harris extremely uncomfortable.

“I think I know who the killer is.”

## Chapter 23

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“No. No, I don't believe it. Not one bit,” said Harris as soon as the detectives came back into their office.

“Why not? In a way, when you look at it, she had enough motive and reason to kill Emily,” replied Turner.

“You're just believing him because you want to close this case, Turner! The man was drunk... for all we know, he hallucinated and made up the entire thing!”

Harris was starting to get very irritated at her fellow detective's lack of sight- or may I add, brains for that matter.

Yes, what George said could have been made up. After all, he was awfully drunk. But, I wanted to explore every possibility. Did I believe she was my murderer? No. I don't think she would have been capable of killing me. But, then again, I was in her way.

“You said so yourself, Harris, to leave no stone unturned. Well, this is probably one of the most important stones in the investigation! I'm not saying he is right. I am just saying that there is a possibility,

a chance that she is the murderer. Why should we not investigate this possibility? We are detectives! It is our job!"

Harris sighed in frustration and said, "Fine. Whatever. But, don't blame me for saying I told you so."

"You won't regret it! Even if it does not go our way, it is for the better." Turner paused and yelled excitedly, "Maggie!"

Maggie, surprised at Turner's sudden mood change, responded, "Yes, Detective Turner."

"Call her in, please."

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"Thank you so much for meeting with us on such short notice," said Turner.

"Not a problem. How can I be of help?" said Katherine Allen- my arch nemesis, and possibly, also my murderer.

She wore a grey winter dress with stockings and a scarf, along with a beige winter coat. She looked quite beautiful, in all honesty- I took back my words of her not being a good 'looker' in that instant.

“Ms Allen, I am sure you are aware of why we called you in. Your childhood friend, Emily Jones, was murdered a few months ago,” said Harris.

“Yes, I am aware,” replied Katherine.

“Are you also aware that, as detectives, it is our job to find out the murderer- to prevent anything like this from happening again?”

“Yes... Yes, I know. But, I’m sorry, detectives, I am not sure how I fit into the picture here.”

“We are aware of your relationship with George Paltridge as well as his relationship with the victim. According to George, he loved you both and found it very hard to choose between the two. Did you know about this?” asked Turner firmly.

“I was aware that he was courting Emily as well. It wasn’t unheard of. A gentleman always courts more than one woman when he is thinking of marriage.”

“Were you jealous of that?”

“Naturally. She was the definition of perfection in my mind – the perfect, model wife – the type of woman who could only bring out

the best in George. But, George didn't want to be perfect. He always found beauty in the flawed- in fact, he searched for it."

"You said that he was looking for a partner or- to be clear- a wife," said Harris. "Were you confident that he would choose you?"

"If I'm being honest, I was quite sure that he would pick Emily. At the end of the day, he was the heir to his father's fortune and his family's reputation depended solely on him. I have the stature and a well-respected place in society, but Emily had more. Besides, too many people were rooting for them. Not us."

"Where were you on the seventeenth of October?" asked Harris, quite abruptly. She was starting to get impatient.

"At my aunt's house in Suffolk. I was spending the month there."

"Can your aunt confirm that?"

Katherine was taken aback, but she replied calmly, "Yes. Yes, you can ask her."

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"Thank you for meeting with us, Ms Bell," stated Harris.

“No problem, detectives. How can I help?” said Charlotte, who was looking beautiful as always.

“This is regarding your niece, Katherine Allen-”

“Is she alright? Oh, no! Has she done something?” panicked Charlotte.

“She is alright, ma’am. We just want to confirm with you- was Katherine at your house on the seventeenth of October?”

“Yes, she was. She spent the entire month at my house in Suffolk- told me she needed a break from the city life,” explained Charlotte.

“Do you have any evidence to support your claim?”

“I mean, there is the train ticket- both for when she arrived and when she returned. I’m sorry, has she done anything wrong, detective?”

The detectives looked at each other.

“No, she hasn’t,” said Harris. “We just needed some answers with regard to the case of Emily Jones. It seems that you have provided them. That will be all, Ms Bell, thank you for your time.”

“Oh! Yes. Emily Jones. I knew Emily when she was a girl. Did you find anything, detectives?” asked Charlotte.

“I am sorry, ma’am, I’m afraid we cannot say much right now, except that we are working on it,” replied Turner.

“Unfortunate! She was always such a bright and happy girl. Beautiful as well. But, her family had too many expectations, especially her mother. Always fussing about the child’s hair and skin- made her wear layers and layers of powder and yelled at her if her dark hair was out of place,” Charlotte rambled on.

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“Well, you were right,” Turner said.

“Yes. But, at least we ruled her out,” responded Harris.

“But, what now?” asked Turner, who seemed as confused as me.

“Now... we keep looking,” said Harris as she stared down at her notes yet again.



## Chapter 24

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*H*arris and Turner sat on their desks, staring at- what I liked to call- the detective's mind board. It had every clue, every name, every place, listed with arrows to make any possible connections between them.

"There has to be something we are missing," Turner began.

"Let's go over it again," proposed Harris. She got up and took out a piece of paper from the board that had the name of every person they had interviewed.

1. Miles Anderson
2. The Ridley Twins
3. Edward Taylor
4. Mary Johnson
5. The Jones
6. Katherine Allen
7. Charlotte Bell

"Alright, Mr Anderson and Ms Johnson were together inside, so they have an alibi. So do Edward, George and the twins. Also, the

manager saw them leave hours after Emily had,” said Turner.  
“Wait, the parents... what about the parents? Shit! We forgot-”

“Don’t worry. They were at home. All the maids verified it. They were fast asleep,” said Harris.

“Thank God! I thought we forgot... lastly, Katherine Allen was in Suffolk with Charlotte... so, we have-”

“Nothing,” said Harris with a sigh of defeat. “No lead. Nothing.”

My dear Harris. Little did she know... the tide in this investigation was about to turn.

## Chapter 25

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*T*he next day was cloudy and rainy. The rain would come and go, but the clouds would just remain; they covered any ounce of sunlight that tried to penetrate through, leaving us all in complete and utter dismay. The trees swayed violently as the wind soared- with the wind flew winter jackets and cloaks, and the people on the streets ran- like cats chasing a rat- in an attempt to catch them. It was just an ordinary British morning.

The detectives, as usual, sat with their feet up on the table. Harris read the newspaper while Turner passed his time just looking up at the ceiling, or as he called it, thinking.

“You know, I really think we should be doing something right now,” said Turner.

“I agree,” replied Harris. “Tell me, Turner, what do you think we should do?”

What followed was nothing but silence. It was quite an unfortunate situation for me; the two people who I had trusted to find my killer had reached a dead end- a brick wall.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

“Detectives,” said Maggie, “I just thought you should know that Edith Allen has just come to the office to file a case of domestic abuse against her husband. Carter is with her right now, but I thought maybe you would like to talk to her? Considering the case and-”

Turner interrupted her as he got up from his seat and walked straight towards Maggie. The poor thing was so frightened. Turner walked until he stood right opposite her. Maggie was sweating by this point. But, Turner, oh, Turner! He gave her the warmest hug in the world- after asking for her consent of course- Turner was a gentleman like that.

“Maggie, you are truly amazing! Thank you! Thank you so much!” yelled Turner.

Maggie, for the first time since I saw her, was smiling! And may I add, blushing!

“Well done, Maggie,” Harris added. “Still, let’s not celebrate just yet- she’s here to report something serious after all. Maggie, please tell Carter that we will take it from here.”

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When I entered the room where Edith was sitting, I realised that she was not the woman I remember from my childhood. She looked tired, defeated, malnourished, and weak. She had so many bruises on her face that even the visible layers of powder couldn't cover them up. Her face looked extremely slim, showing her cheekbones and jawline but not in a good way. Her hair, which was always neatly tied up in a bun, was now messily hanging over her head, while her eyes, which were still the colour of the ocean, were now sunken and swollen.

"Ms Allen, my name is James Turner and this is Matilda Harris. We understand that you have filed a domestic abuse case against your husband, Michael Allen?"

"Yes," replied Edith, who couldn't even make eye contact with the detectives.

"Please, tell us what happened, ma'am," said Harris comfortingly.

"He found out... he found out that... that he wasn't my daughter's biological father," Edith replied as her eyes turned red. Her voice began breaking, "He found out more than three months ago and lashed out. I thought it would stop... my husband wasn't a monster after all. But..."

“It didn’t,” finished Harris.

Edith nodded.

Even though the detectives had spent all this while diving deep into Katherine’s bloodline, they continued to pretend that they were unaware. I have to say, they were pretty good actors.

“Why didn’t you report him immediately?” asked Turner.

“I was scared. He threatened to hurt Katherine too, considering that she wasn’t actually his daughter. I never thought he would be capable of raising a fist to a man, let alone to a woman! But something changed... his eyes only saw red and he started to act like a monster. He began throwing things around the room and then he began pushing me... punching me... kicking-”

Edith didn’t have the heart to continue any further. If I was being honest, I didn’t have the heart to continue listening either. I could not believe that a man could do such a thing... it was horrifying.

Edith had no more words, so she burst into tears. Turner handed her a handkerchief.

“What made you file a report now?”

“He has gone to America for the week,” said Edith. “This was my chance, I thought. But I- I couldn’t muster up the courage... until an old friend convinced me.”

“And who was this old friend, Ms Allen?” asked Harris.

“My daughter’s father. The real one. Her biological father. He said that there was no point living in such a dangerous situation.”

Edith took a long pause, then added, “He was Emily Jones’s father. I am sure that you of all people have heard about her- her case- it must be the centre of attention here.”

“Yes,” said Harris. “Ms Allen, how did your husband find out about the truth?”

“I don’t know. Only Ruskin, his wife and I know the truth, and I am sure none of us would have told him. I certainly did not. I have no idea how he found out,” said Edith.

“And when is he back?” asked Turner.

“He should be back tonight... around nine, maybe,” said Edith.  
“Please... please, tell me you will help me... please...”

“Of course, we will help you, Ms Allen. Tell me, is there a safe place that you can go to, with your daughter? Perhaps somewhere out of the city?” Turner asked.

“My sister’s house in Suffolk... it’s the only place I can think of,” replied Edith.

“That’s perfect. You must go there. Leave the rest to us, please,” said Turner.

“Wait... Ms Allen, does he know who the father is?” asked Harris.

“Yes,” said Edith, absolutely terrified.

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Back in the office, Turner paced up and down the room. I had never seen the detective so anxious before.

“You know there could be a possibility that he is linked to all of this, right? I mean, the way Edith described him; his anger... anything is possible,” said Turner.

“Yes. But, we can’t just knock on his door and accuse him. We need... we need to think this through.”



## Chapter 26

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*T*he detectives decided to give Michael a bit of a ‘welcome home’ surprise. They were comfortably waiting for his arrival in his own living room- a room which I knew all too well. It was here that many moments in my childhood were spent. It was always Katherine, George, Edward, Mary and I running around the furniture or sitting around the fireplace telling ghost stories.

As I stood in that room after so many years, as a ghost myself, I felt nothing- not one part of me felt nostalgic or emotional- I suppose I wanted to move on more than anything.

Suddenly, we heard a whisper from one of the maids. I couldn’t quite make out the exact words, but I think it was along the lines of, “Sir, there are two detectives waiting for you at the parlour.”

Soon, Michael came in with a big smile on his face and said, “My, isn’t this a surprise? Tell me, how can I help you, detectives?”

“Mr Allen, we have come here to arrest you on charges of domestic abuse,” announced Turner.

And soon after that, Harris cuffed an extremely shocked and bewildered Michael, and showed him the way out of his own house.

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“This is absolutely outrageous!” shouted Michael.

“I am sure, Mr Allen, but we have a warrant,” said Turner, quite calm compared to his personality.

“Maybe- maybe, we can come to some sort of arrangement- or something! How much? Tell me, how much?” asked Michael as he reached out for his wallet, panicked and flustered.

“Unfortunately for you sir, we don’t engage in corrupt activities. You know we could arrest you for that alone, right?” Harris took a moment, then added, “Now, we have arrested you because your wife, Edith Allen, has filed a domestic abuse complaint against you.”

“That woman is mad! Delusional! She has been on medication for months now! I’m sure she must have hallucinated the entire thing!”

“Well, we believe her. Especially after she told us the real story behind your actions. You found out that your daughter wasn’t your biological daughter, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Fine. I hit her a few times.” Michael turned to Turner, “What would you have done if your wife had not only been unfaithful to you but had also given birth to another man’s child while she was still married to you?”

Turner, who ignored the question, asked, “When and how did you find out?”

“About three months ago. I was in the pub. I had just lost an important business deal, so I went to have a drink. George Paltridge was there with a couple of friends; I was in no mood to greet him, so I didn’t. They were all drunk, out of their minds, and began talking about women. Then Katherine’s name came up, so I couldn’t help but listen. ‘She has fine legs,’ said one and then George made a rather disgusting joke about that, so, I got up to tell him off. I was so angry, it was my daughter they were talking about! But, then, he said words that changed my life – ‘What do you care? She isn’t even your daughter.’ Even though he was drunk- probably had no idea what he was talking about or who he was talking to- it still got to me,” said Michael.

He paused and continued, “I went home and told Edith about what happened. She didn’t say anything- didn’t laugh or comment on how ridiculous or outrageous George was. She just sat there. If I’m being honest, I don’t remember much after that-

I don't think I care to remember."

"Do you remember hitting her?" yelled Harris.

"Of course, I do!" snapped Michael. "The next day is when it happened. After she told me who the father was. Ruskin Jones. I went ballistic. I kept punching and kicking her and then Katherine rushed in because of the screams and I told her what her mother had been hiding. She told me she knew about it. She knew about it, but didn't tell me! She didn't even give me the slightest hint! My family, my wife and daughter, were betraying me every single day and they didn't even regret it! I was so mad. But I couldn't hit her- so, I started to throw everything."

"Have you ever hit her before?" investigated Harris.

Michael responded without a moment's thought, "Yeah. A long time ago. A little while after Katherine was born. I caught her and Jones... kissing. Of course, I got angry and I immediately forced her to cut ties--"

"What about the following days? Did you beat her then?" asked Turner.

“Yes. But, not as much. I went to the Jones’s house, met with Ruskin, and gave him a black eye. That was quite funny. I would have done far more than that if it wasn’t for his stupid wife coming in and threatening to call the police. But, I wanted to hurt him,” Michael said casually.

“Did you do anything else? To hurt the Jones?”

“What are you implying, detective?”

“Well, I am sure that you have heard about the murder of Emily Jones, daughter of your beloved Ruskin Jones? Now, would you know anything about that?”

Michael gave the detectives a long dead stare, smiled, and said, “I wish to see my lawyer.”

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Michael and the detectives didn’t move an inch until Michael’s lawyer, Benedict Lewis, walked in. He was the perfect specimen of a lawyer- round glasses, a creaseless shirt and blazer, hair slicked back, and a few frown lines to illustrate what a serious person he was.

“You should have asked for me as soon as you got here,” said Lewis. He then turned his attention to the detectives, “You had no right to ask any questions to my client without his lawyer present.”

“We had every right, Mr Lewis. He didn’t ask for you right away, so we asked our questions, and he happily answered them,” said Turner. “He had a lot to say about his wife, but as soon as we asked about Emily Jones, he asked for you. Now, I find that quite interesting, don’t you, Mr Lewis?”

Lewis sat there for a while without saying a word.

Soon enough, he broke his silence, “Well, then, get on with it. Ask away, but don’t expect my client to answer every question.”

“Naturally,” smiled Harris.

## Chapter 27

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*“How long have you known the Jones?”* asked Harris.

“Ruskin Jones and I served in the army together during the Great War. We remained close even after that and made sure our children knew each other,” said Michael.

“Did you know Emily well?”

“As I said, our children grew up together until they were about ten or eleven. So, in a way, I did know her- when she was a child. She used to spend a lot of time at my house and Katherine at hers.”

“We are aware that you and Mr Jones had a falling out of sorts... why was that?”

“I caught him and my wife together. After that, I vowed not to address that man or his family ever again,” stated Michael. “I made my wife as well as my daughter cut all ties with him and that family.”

“So, you had no contact with him until you found out that Katherine was not your daughter?” questioned Turner.

“Yes. I avoided any parties to which he was invited– any gatherings, public affairs, or even business offers. So, it was no surprise that, to London’s upper-class society, my family and I became ghosts– isolated and invisible from social life.”

“Here is something your wife told us– that once you found out the truth, you became a different person. Something changed about you, and you became angry and aggressive... or, a monster.” Harris interrogated further, “Did you take out your anger on anyone else, Mr Allen? Besides Mr Jones and your wife?”

Michael– who had kept a straight face throughout the interview, who had answered every question directly without hesitation, who hadn’t faltered– suddenly remained silent.

“My client will not answer such ridiculous questions,” interjected Lewis.

“If you have nothing to hide, then you should answer, Mr Allen,” said Turner.

Yet, Michael remained silent.

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Back at the office, the detectives were agitated. Thinking. Talking. They were on the very edge of giving up- I knew it. And as a matter of fact, so was I.

"He is hiding something. I am sure of it," stated Harris.

"I am, too. But, he isn't saying a bloody word," replied Turner. "You know, I am actually getting pretty sick and tired of this case. Every time we come close to something- anything- we hit another brick wall. It's bloody infuriating."

"Calm down. I am sure something will turn up. It always does. For all you know, the answer is right in front of us. We just can't see it yet," said Harris. I have to say, she was an optimistic woman.

Turner responded, "Well, we can't just sit here and wait... we need to do something. We should speak to Mr and Mrs Jones. We can tell them what we've found till now- they have a right to know- besides, they might be able to help us."

"Maybe," said Harris.

"Maybe," replied Turner.

## Chapter 28

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*“This is what we have found so far, but we believe that there is something Mr Allen is hiding. Something... we just aren’t sure what...”*

Turner muttered, “Only because he won’t open his bloody mouth!”

“You didn’t tell me anything about Edith coming to see you,” Mama turned to Papa.

“I thought it would be best not to. I don’t know why,” replied Papa. He continued, “But, I am happy that she came to see you, detectives. Where is she now?”

“Suffolk,” said Turner. “Mr Jones, do you know anything else? Anything at all?”

“Who is his lawyer again? Lewis?”

Turner nodded.

“Oh, then Michael won’t speak. Lewis will act as his mouthpiece—he won’t allow him to say a word. If you want answers, you have to speak to Michael alone.”

“But, how? If we contact him, he will immediately tell his lawyer,” said Harris.

After a long pause, Papa said, “Let me talk to him.”

Instantly, a civil argument broke out between my father and the detectives, who were completely backed by my mother.

“Are you crazy, Rus? I mean, after he physically assaulted you? No! I won’t allow it.”

Harris added firmly, “Yes, we agree. Please, sir, we cannot allow that-”

“What’s not to allow? I’ll meet him for a drink or two and talk with him,” said Papa calmly.

“How do you know if he would even say yes?” asked Mama.

“I’ll give him a bait- tell him that I want to explain the entire story. The missing pieces of the puzzle. Curiosity will surely get the best of him. And even if he refuses, what’s the harm in trying?” defended Papa.

The next half an hour was spent devising multiple alternative plans, but in the end, Papa’s plan was the only one with potential.

So, reluctantly for my mother and the detectives, it was decided that Papa will write Michael a letter, inviting him to have a drink and discuss all that needed to be addressed. If Michael agreed, then Papa would meet with him alone, and come back and tell the detectives everything.

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RING.

RING.

RING –

“London Police,” stated Turner firmly until he heard from the other end. “Oh, good morning, sir... yes, sir... oh, great... okay... alright, thank you, sir!”

“Who was that?” asked Harris.

“Mr Jones. It seems that Michael Allen has responded. He’s asked Mr Jones to meet him at his house for a drink,” replied Turner.

“His house? That might be a little dangerous. Won’t a public place be more suitable?” said Harris.

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“Yes, but Mr Jones doesn’t want to push his luck... so, he has agreed. They meet tonight.”

I agreed with Harris. It was much too dangerous for my father to be alone with Michael in his own house. Even though I knew that I wouldn’t be able to help my father in case something did go wrong, I still wanted to be present with him. Let him feel my energy, if he could. Besides, I couldn’t bare the suspense to hear the story as an aftermath, so I decided to go along with my father to Michael Allen’s house.

## Chapter 29

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*M*y father and I waited, in the blistering cold, for the door to open. Although I didn't feel anything, I could tell that my father was under the weather- no, he wasn't ill, but I could see the cold slowly seep into his skin. He was nervous- rarely blinked, constantly re-adjusted his glasses, fidgeted with his hair and found his shoulders to be excessively stiff and tight. It was almost as if he was dead- dead as I was.

Suddenly, the door opened and revealed not a maid or a butler, but Michael himself. Without a word, he led my father to the parlour where two drinks were already served on the table.

The room was comfortably lit with a warm fireplace along with a few lamps. Surprisingly, it was not dark or dingey as I had expected it to be- it looked normal, as if it had been tidied up for a nice friendly gathering of guests.

However, the tension between my father and Michael did not match this energy. They started off by just staring at one another and then shifted their gaze to either the floor or the fireplace, or they would just gulp down their drinks; that was until-

“What do you want, Jones?” asked Michael.

“Michael, I know you and I have had our differences, but please, if you know anything about my daughter’s case... please, tell me,” said my father politely.

Michael sighed and said, “I am disappointed, Rus. I thought you would be smart enough to know that after what you did, I will never help you. Ever.”

“Michael, this isn’t about me, and it isn’t about Edith or Katherine. My daughter, my Emily- she was murdered in cold blood and for no reason-”

“Who said there wasn’t a reason?”

My father stared at him, trying to find the words to answer that question. But, he couldn’t. Instead, tears began trickling down his pale cheeks.

After a moment’s pause, Papa said, “You know what- you knew about Edith and me, long before you caught us that night. You knew long before you married her. We were best friends. We served in the army together, where I wrote her letter after letter. You even delivered some of them on my behalf, Michael!

So, don't play the victim here because you knew what you had gotten yourself into! The only victim in this narrative is my daughter who... who is no more!"

"Yes, Jones. I knew. But, I thought... I thought that as a man, and more importantly, as my best friend, you would respect our marriage and stay out of it. I was a faithful husband- I had been a faithful husband since the day I married her. Not once did I look at or even think about any other woman. What did I get in return, Jones?"

"I am sorry, Michael, for all the harm I caused to you and your family. It was never intentional. I didn't mean to- I- I was just young and stubborn... too stubborn to let go of the love of my life. I never wanted any of this to happen. And after you found out about us, I stayed away. You know I did. I didn't contact either of you, even after I found out about Katherine... I kept my distance. Never once, in all these years, have I ever tried to have a relationship with Katherine because I knew that you are her father. I knew it then, and I know it now. Some things are thicker, Michael, that run deeper than blood- you taught her everything she knows, you made her who she is- I had nothing to do with that. That's what makes her your daughter. She is a reflection of your teachings. Of you... Same as was my Emily to me. She wasn't of my blood; but you already knew that, didn't you?"



“I had my suspicions.”

“So, you knew. But, what you didn’t know, Michael, is that despite that... I saw her as my daughter. My own. I only cared and loved for her... and I always will. She is my daughter. My only daughter. So, I ask you, Michael Allen, one last time... who killed my daughter?”

## Chapter 30

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“We have reason to believe that you were associated with the murder of Emily Jones. Any comments?” Turner said without missing a beat.

*A few hours earlier.*

“Are you certain?” asked Harris, surprised yet concerned.

Believe me, I was as shocked as she was.

“Yes. He seemed quite certain,” said Papa, who was looking a little pale but sounded confident in his judgement.

“But, how?” asked Mama. “There couldn’t be a reason–”

“Actually, there could be many,” interjected Turner, the only one who seemed rather calm or unaffected by the news. “Now, it is only about finding them.”

“I just can’t believe that... it’s just... I never expected this,” murmured Papa.

“I know, Mr Jones. Unfortunately, it is what it is. Might I add, we don’t know if it is true just yet. That is why we have to go forward with it, bring in the accused, ask questions and then... well, we’ll see. Let’s go,” said Harris.

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It was extremely early in the morning. The air was crisp and cold, and the snow had just stopped falling minutes before the detectives’ car pulled up in front of the big house with great iron gates. The security guard at the entrance asked the detectives what their business was, and upon their response, he was left rather stumped. The guard opened the gates to let them in- and the detectives made their majestic entry to bring in... my killer.

The detectives knocked at the door- multiple times, harder and stronger each time. As we waited for the door to open, I found myself... terrified, excited, and impatient. I couldn’t believe this was it- the moment of truth.

And suddenly, the door opened- with an eerie creak- and Harris charged in.

“Ms Edith Allen, you are to come with us right away. We’re detectives- London Police- we need to ask you a few questions-”

I couldn't believe that my death was avenged. Or at least, it was possibly avenged; for we didn't have any evidence... yet.

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*Back at the precinct.*

"We have reason to believe that you were associated with the murder of Emily Jones. Any comments?" Turner said without missing a beat.

"There has been a mistake, detective," said Edith, quite calmly.

"Then why would your husband tell us that you were involved?" interrogated Turner.

"You detectives..." Edith scoffed, "You tell me- why would he constantly physically assault me? Because the man's mad and wants everyone to see me as the problem, as the mad one. I am surprised you believed him, for isn't he also a criminal? Have you arrested him yet?"

"Alright, Ms Allen. You will have to stay here until we release you. If you want water or anything else, call out to Maggie, my secretary," replied Turner.

With that, the detectives left the room. You might wonder why.

Michael Allen gave my father another piece of crucial information- the piece that made his version of the story rather believable. The piece of the puzzle that made the detectives, and me, believe in Michael's lead.

According to Michael, a man named Charlie Andrews was hired to murder me. In other words, Edith had hired him to do her dirty work. You may or may not remember him; he was the same lobby man at Claridge's who had offered to help me find a taxi that night...

Shame, I thought he was a nice man.

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Charlie's apartment was a mess, and so was he. He looked like he hadn't showered in days... smelled like it too. The detectives shoved him in their car and drove him back to their office. The man was so big and tall, you couldn't predict how much he cried.

"I- I didn't- I didn't mean to do it... I needed the- the money," stammered a teary-eyed Charlie. "She- she spotted me while I was working at Claridge's... dragged me to the side and- and-

asked me to do it... Obviously, I- I said no at first, but then she told me what she would be willing to pay... 800 pounds!"

"So, you did it. You killed her," said Harris.

"I had to! My mum was in the hospital and she- she needed money for treatment. I regret doing it... I do. Not only because I killed an innocent girl, but- but also because that woman- that woman- she didn't even give me half of what she promised! And now- now- now my mum is dead."

There was silence. A long, painful silence.

"I don't care if I go to prison, detectives... I know it is where I belong... But, please, don't let that woman walk away free." This time, Charlie didn't stammer.

And with that closing statement, the police officers accompanying the detectives cuffed Charlie - but gently - and took him away.

"Well, if that is not concrete evidence, what is?"

"Yes. It's time we pay Ms Allen a visit."

## Chapter 31

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When the detectives returned, they found Edith sitting in the same place, in the same position, as they had left her. Except, this time, she had a smile on her face. Perhaps what one would call an evil, conniving smile.

“Well, Ms Allen, it seems you are in a bit of a pickle,” said Turner.

“Oh, dear Lord! Am I?” replied Edith, with her sarcasm shining through her smile.

“We spoke with Charlie Andrews and he had a lot to say. You hired him to murder Ms Jones, didn’t you?”

Edith stayed silent.

“We have enough evidence, Ms Allen, enough to put you behind bars,” said Harris.

“You two can’t do anything. You know why? Because I haven’t confessed. So, ask away– ask how many ever questions you want, detectives, threaten me all you want. I am not saying a word.”

“Well, aren’t you just a delight?”

Harris turned to Turner, and they both returned back to their office, where Mama and Papa waited patiently.

As soon as the detectives entered the room, Papa stood up from his seat.

“We heard you arrested a man who confessed to murdering Emily... who is he?”

“His name is Charlie Andrews; he was working as a lobby man at Claridge’s. He confessed. But, he also said that he was bribed by Edith Allen... I don’t doubt his word. I know she did it, but she isn’t telling us anything. And we can’t charge her with the murder of your daughter without a confession.”

Turner added, “That is why we’ve come to you.”

“We think that you can... talk to her... convince her to confess,” said Harris.

Papa immediately replied with a firm and stern, “No. I won’t be able to stand the sight of her.”

Mama put her hand on his shoulder, comforting him, and said



confidently, “Let me talk to her.”

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“Hello, Edith.”

“Are you even allowed to be in here? Talking to me?”

“Yes,” replied Mama.

“I’m surprised you even can,” scoffed Edith.

“I’ve come to terms with my daughter’s death, Edith. I am not angry nor am I vengeful. But, I do want to see justice.”

“Well, good luck with that.”

“You know what you did and so do I, so I’m not going to waste time asking you to confess. What I am going to ask you is... why?”

“I don’t have to answer any of your questions, frankly because they’re not worth answering.”

Mama got up and stepped closer to Edith. She then put her hand on Edith’s face, gently, to see the bruises.

“You know, I actually feel sorry for you, Edith. Nothing in your life has ever gone your way,” said Mama calmly. “Your parents always favoured your sister. You were never their first choice–”

“Stop it,” interrupted Edith.

“You never performed well in school, academically or socially. No one really thought of you as their friend–”

“Stop!”

“You fell in love. Multiple times. But, no one ever loved you back, did they? Well, that was until you met Rus–”

“I said... Shut up!”

“But, then, he was taken away from you again... I have to say I’m sorry about that. So, you let your parents arrange a match for you. The match was a good one... Michael was a nice man, but your love for my husband kept pulling you back. Unfortunately for you, again, soon you were banned from seeing him.”

Edith’s rage had reached a level I hadn’t seen before. I could see the blood pumping through her veins. I could see her eyes – though teary, looked as though they were about to rain hellfire.

And yet, my mother refused to stop talking.

“But, that love was so intoxicating that you bore his child. And when Michael found out, he turned into the monster you never expected. Now, here is the part where I can’t pretend to be the know-it-all that I am– I don’t know why, but you decided to turn your anger and frustration with your miserable existence towards my daughter... Ruskin’s daughter- the man you so claimed to have loved–”

“She wasn’t even his daughter, damn it! I didn’t hurt him by killing her!”

“So, you admit it.” Mama was as calm as I had ever seen her.

“Do I admit to killing your daughter? Yes. Do I admit that it was because I had a grudge against you? No,” Edith finally said. “I wanted my husband to stop beating me. I thought if he knew that Ruskin had his dear Emily taken away from him, he would be satisfied. And maybe, if he knew I did it, his trust in me would be restored. But, no. He became more angry and more violent. So, yes! Least to say, your daughter died for no reason.”

The way she spoke, her voice almost breaking, it felt as if she almost felt sorry.

Until, Edith Allen began laughing hysterically. It was sickening. It made Mama so furious that she slapped her with all the force she could summon.

Mama immediately pulled Edith close by the neck of her blouse and said, "You are going to go to prison for a long time, Edith Allen. I will make sure of it."

## Chapter 32

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And that brings me to the end of this story- the story of how I died.

Ironically, I lived to see how everyone's lives unfolded after Edith Allen was arrested.

Mama and Papa spent their remaining years living between London and Edinburgh. With no one to keep them company at home, my mother found herself a job- as a fashion consultant! She was quite popular you know- the talk of London. She was known for her daring sense of style and her confidence, which she would, in turn, pass down to her clients. Papa returned back to his work, but he connected with Katherine Allen- even walked her down the aisle on her wedding day! I was happy for them- both Mama and Papa. Yes, to this day, I call him my Papa because, at the end of it all, I was (or rather, am) his daughter.

Mary became so successful in the fashion industry- her designs were worn by everyone, including the Queen, who used to request Mary to make custom pieces for her when she went on her business trips to foreign countries. Edward became Mary's

‘business manager’ but really, he was her secretary. Yet, he was quite good at his job, and he was able to still have fun, but I noticed that his ‘fun’ aspect had dialled down a notch- I was proud of him; of them both. And I was so happy when I found out that they fell in love! I got to watch their wedding- I was in the front row as I deserved to be- and saw their kids grow up. It was beautiful. I couldn’t have been happier for them- my best friends.

George’s father passed away shortly after the trial, so George took over the family business. But, to my surprise, he didn’t take it as a burden, but rather in a good spirit. He did marvellous things for the company- introduced it to new technology and customers. But, George never married. He had companions, but never married, and to this day, I don’t why. Nonetheless, he seemed happy with his life, so, I was happy for him as well

Katherine Allen fell in love with a businessman called Marcus Holmes. He was well-off and very gentle. Together, they had two beautiful children and lived a great life. But, Katherine always carried the baggage of her mother’s sins. She felt a sense of responsibility for my murder- the fact that she didn’t see it through her mother. My father always told her not to feel guilty- about any of it- yet, the guilt stayed. Yet, I thank God that it didn’t overcome her.

Michael Allen ran away to the States because he was going to face jail time on the account of domestic abuse. Neither Katherine nor my parents ever saw his face again.

Edith Allen was sentenced to life in prison. The trial was an easy one. There was no chance of her sentence being reduced- it was a clear win for us. I never saw her face again. I could if I wanted to, but I didn't. Papa did his best to forget about her, but he still suffered from the shock of his former lover killing his daughter. Mama helped him a lot in overcoming it- they took trips and went to restaurants as a way to forget, but in the end, it would always come back to haunt them. Edith died a lonely and painful death- which, maybe, she deserved.

As for me, well, I have all the time in the world- without any worries, but also with nothing much to look forward to. *My existence is continuous- like you watch television, I watch your world. I laugh at the comedy of it, cry at the sorrow of it, get scared at the ugliness of it, but in the end, smile at the mortality of it.*

