
# Lost Among the Living

*By Simone St. James*



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England, 1921. Three years after her husband, Alex, disappeared, shot down over Germany, Jo Manders still mourns his loss. Working as a paid companion to Alex's wealthy, condescending aunt, Dottie Forsyth, Jo travels to the family's estate in the Sussex countryside. But there is much she never knew about her husband's origins…and the revelation of a mysterious death in the Forsyths' past is just the beginning…

All is not well at Wych Elm House. Dottie's husband is distant, and her son was grievously injured in the war. Footsteps follow Jo down empty halls, and items in her bedroom are eerily rearranged. The locals say the family is cursed, and that a ghost in the woods has never rested. And when Jo discovers her husband's darkest secrets, she wonders if she ever really knew him.  Isolated in a place of deception and grief, she must find the truth or lose herself forever.

And then a familiar stranger arrives at Wych Elm House…

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## Editorial Review

Review
**Praise for** *Lost Among the Living*

“Though all of St. James’s books are splendid, this is her finest since *The Haunting of Maddy Clare.* The suspense level is top-notch, and the romance is one of the author’s very best.”*—Library Journal*

“Readers who enjoyed the classic *Rebecca* or even witnessed the Alfred Hitchcock film version, will absolutely love this story…A book that could very well one day become its own classic…This is the perfect blend of history and mystery, with a little paranormal activity and romance thrown in for the ride.”*—Suspense Magazine*

**Praise for the Award-Winning Novels of Simone St. James**

“Downright scary and atmospheric. I flew through the pages.”—Lisa Gardner, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Crash and Burn*

“Chilling romantic suspense that evokes the lost era between the world wars.”—Susanna Kearsley, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *A Desperate Fortune*

“Drips with atmosphere and emotion.”*—Publishers Weekly*

“Psychic Ellie Winter and her partner, war-damaged James Hawley, have terrific chemistry.”—Susan Elia MacNeal, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Maggie Hope Mysteries

“A 21st-century version of Mary Stewart...St. James layers the atmosphere with the requisite dread, and one can’t help but read on...Just the right mix of suspense, creepiness, and empathy.”*—National Post* (Toronto)

About the Author
**Simone St. James** is the award-winning author of *The Haunting of Maddy Clare*, which won two RITA Awards from Romance Writers of America and an Arthur Ellis Award from Crime Writers of Canada. Her second novel, *An Inquiry into Love and Death*, was shortlisted for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel from Crime Writers of Canada. She wrote her first ghost story, about a haunted library, when she was in high school, and spent twenty years behind the scenes in the television business before leaving to write full-time.


***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof***



Chapter Five

My bedroom at Wych Elm House was on the second floor, overlooking the front of the house. I could see the circular drive leading off into the trees, and the overgrown front lawn. It did not escape me that my window

was almost beneath the upper gable and that my view was of where Frances Forsyth's body would have landed the day she jumped.

Queer cousin Fran. She has died, poor thing.

That simple sentence of Alex's, one that hid so much. Perhaps he had hoped to shield me from disturbing family news; perhaps he hadn't wanted to put the distressing facts in a letter from the Front that would be read by censors, strangers. Perhaps he'd been ashamed of Frances's madness, the strain of insanity in his family, and he'd hidden it from me.

But Alex had known about Mother. He had met her. He knew about the madness in my family. And he'd come home on leave in early 1918, after Frances had died. Why hadn't he told me of it then?

They kept her locked up, out of sight.

I sat in my bedroom's window seat and pulled up my legs, hugging my knees, as darkness fell and the house settled into silence, gazing out at the tangled landscape, a book unopened in my hand. I could not complain about my room, which was nicer than any flat I had lived in—the furnishings were polished and expensive, including the high bed heaped with thick linens and the imposing walnut wardrobe that reached nearly to the ceiling. I almost did not want to touch the gleaming wainscoting or the expensive carpet, so perfect were they. My own modest trunk, lodged against the door of the wardrobe, looked shabby in comparison.

Alex and I had been as intimate, I'd thought, as two people could be. We'd married quickly—I supposed marrying a man two weeks after you'd met him even qualified as hasty—but we'd spent endless hours talking deep into the night, telling each other about our lives. He had been orphaned as a child. He had German relatives on his father's side—foreign blood was part of what made his father so unsuitable, according to his mother's family—and had spent some years with them. He had gone to Eton, then Oxford. He'd told me of his relatives in Sussex, but the family rift meant they were not close.

His was a slightly unusual life, due to his being orphaned, but it was not an overly strange one. A man from a good family, educated, brilliant, handsome, tall, and athletic—granted every privilege, on his way to becoming something breathtaking and splendid until the war had taken him. As it had taken so many others.

A mist had settled, sliding among the trees. I watched it dully, following its dirty gray smear as it moved across the darkness. I scraped a cold knuckle across the glass.

I could not countenance what I had seen today. That girl in the small parlor, the set of her thin shoulders, the way she had turned and looked at me. I wondered with a chill if somewhere in this house there was a photograph of Frances Forsyth. Whether that same face would look out at me if I found it.

No. That is Mother. That is not me. That was never me.

I had been the sane one, the one who saw that the rent was paid, the one who had gotten a job and married a good man. Mother was the one who saw things, not me.

A man was torn to pieces. They kept her locked up, out of sight.

The mist had stopped moving, I realized. It hovered in the woods, blurred among the trunks of the trees, still and cold. It almost seemed to be watching me. I stared out the window and watched back.

When I had packed up Alex's things, getting ready to leave for the Continent with Dottie, I had gone through his personal papers. I had found the usual dry things—bank records, school records, our marriage certificate,

all the milestones of his life. But I had not found one memento. No letters, photographs, or journals. No postcards or souvenirs from vacations, no notebooks or letters from schoolmates. Not one.

The man I had married was gone.

I slid into the overweening bed late, and I slept badly. I dreamed of something falling past my window, the ruffle of a skirt and a sleeve, the fabric flashing as I startled awake. And somewhere in the dim place between waking and sleeping, I thought I heard soft footsteps in the corridor, tapping past my door.

I reported to Dottie at eight o'clock the next morning, as instructed. She was in the morning room, located at the back of the house, a warm room with glass French doors that opened out to the back terrace. The windows let in swaths of sunlight, bright and slightly chill. The sideboard was set with a variety of breakfast foods, steaming in large dishes and smelling thickly of sausage. Dottie sat alone at the table, straight as a needle, surrounded by an expensive tea set. Robert was nowhere to be seen.

I filled a plate with eggs and toast. Dottie checked her watch ostentatiously as I pulled out a chair and sat. She did not greet me, but gave me a prying glare. "I trust you have settled properly in your room," she said.

"Yes," I said, picking at my breakfast. "Thank you."

Her gaze raked me up and down. "Now that we are at Wych Elm House, I see that we will have to find you some new clothes. I will be meeting important people, and you will be with me. I cannot have you dressed like a fat schoolgirl."

I looked up at her. I was wearing a skirt and blouse again, with a cardigan. Part of me was offended—I was not in the least fat—and another part admired the deftness of the insult. Besides, she was right. I had looked well enough on European trains, but in the luxury of this house, I was as out of place as chipped china or an unpolished lamp. "My dresses are too old," I said.

"Then go into town and buy new ones. The dressmaker there will be able to send to London for anything she cannot supply. You'll need new stockings, too, and shoes. Tell the shopkeepers to put the items on my account."

"Thank you," I said, though I knew well that the items were not a gift. Dottie would extract repayment from my wages to the penny.

She gave me a nod, then stared at my hair. We had seen each other every day for three months, yet this morning she inspected me anew. "At least you don't wear cosmetics," she commented. "I don't approve of them. You must do your hair more tidily; have a maid assist you if you need it. Also, I warn you that I do not approve of the current fashion for bobbed hair. I think it's fast and horribly unattractive."

I touched the chignon at the back of my neck. Alex had always loved my long hair. "I have no desire to cut my hair."

"That is excellent news," came a voice from the doorway. Robert Forsyth came into the room, freshly bathed and clean-shaven, dressed in another well-cut suit. He gave me a wink. "Good morning, Mrs. Manders. Dottie." He moved to the sideboard and put food on a plate. "I've had a letter from the Dennistons," he said to Dottie before either of us could return his greeting. "They've heard of our return. I believe I'll drop over and pay a visit. Denniston has a first-rate stable, and my riding in Scotland was interrupted. I'll take my own motorcar."

“Robert,” Dottie said, her voice low. “Martin comes today.”

Robert poured himself a cup of coffee and shrugged at her. “I’ll see him later.”

“He comes this morning.”

“I don’t see why it matters.” His tone had a note of sullenness now. He pulled back his chair with a bang and sat.

“You don’t see why it matters?” Dottie’s cheeks were growing red. “Don’t you want to be here when your son comes home for the first time in three years?”

“For God’s sake, the boy isn’t going to be expecting me.” Robert jammed his fork into a piece of sausage. “Must you ruin everything? Do you expect me to sit here all day while we wait? What did you drag him home for, anyway?”

“You know perfectly well,” Dottie said. “He is coming home to be married.”

“To whom?” Robert said. “I suppose you’re going to choose some milksop girl for him so you can get grandchildren? The boy’s just been to war, and already you’re trying to suffocate him.”

Dottie’s jaw flexed, and she blinked her small eyes. For a horrified second, I thought she might cry. “Martin and I have written about this,” she said, her voice tight. “He has agreed to take a wife. It is our chance for children in this family. Someone to leave our legacy to.”

“Your legacy, you mean,” Robert said. “He’s always been your child, not mine. Besides, I’ve nothing to do with weddings. If I want to go riding, I’m going to go riding. You know how I hate this house.”

“Yes, you’ve made it very clear,” she sniped, “with all the assistance you give me in the running of it.”

“It isn’t even mine,” Robert said. His brow smoothed and he turned to me. “Did you know that, Mrs. Manders? Wych Elm House came to me as part of the settlement upon marrying my lovely wife. From her side of the family.” He smiled sourly, his eyes traveling me as I sat, uncomfortable and horrified, in my chair. “We should start a minstrel show, you and me. The Poor Married-for-Moneys.”

I made to push back my chair, but Dottie held a hand up and I froze. “I won’t sell this house,” she said to Robert, her chin up, her eyes furious. “I won’t.”

Robert put down his fork. I felt the hideous presence of Frances in the room, the heavy memory of her in all of our minds, as if her name were even now echoing off the walls, and all I wanted was to escape.

“It shouldn’t be sold,” Robert said. “It should be burned.” His gaze flickered to me again, and I saw how grief and dissipation had worn away his long-ago handsomeness into something tired and almost haggard. “You’ve made me heel so far as to come here for Martin,” he said to Dottie, “and I’ll do my duty. But you can’t make me sit in this fright of a house all day.” He stood and left the room without another look at either of us.

A long, painful silence followed. I stared at my hands. Finally I raised my eyes and looked surreptitiously at Dottie. Her expression was blank, impassive. The flush of anger had gone from her face.

“Manders,” she said.

“Yes, Dottie.”

“I wish you to go into town and run errands for me. Purchase your new clothes at the same time. Use the car and driver.”

“Yes, Dottie.”

She sat quietly. She made no comment on my use of her first name; she never had. It was one of my small victories. I may be her paid companion, but I was family. I had refused to call her Mrs. Forsyth, and she had never complained.

She turned her head and looked at me, taking me in with her intelligent gaze. “I suppose you think I’m a fool,” she said.

“No,” I said truthfully. “I do not.”

“You were a married woman, so perhaps you have some understanding.”

I nodded. Alex and I had never had a row like that—he had never shown me one-tenth the contempt that Robert seemed to think was Dottie’s due—and yet I did understand. A marriage is unfathomable to those looking on, running as deep as the strata of rocks in the earth. That, I understood.

I pushed back my chair and stood. “What are the errands you wish done?” I asked.

Dottie followed the change of subject without a flicker of expression. “I have letters to post—they are on the holder by the front door. I do not trust the servants to do it. And you must make a trip to the chemist’s for me. You know the stomach remedy I usually use.”

“Yes, Dottie.”

“Manders, there is one more thing.”

I stood by the door and waited.

She raised her impassive gaze to me. “I assume Alex told you about Frances,” she said.

I was so surprised that the truth sprang from my lips without thought. “He told me about her existence. But all I had was a letter from the Front saying she had died.”

She blinked, and before she shuttered her gaze I saw honest surprise in her eyes. “Is that so? How interesting. However, when you go into town, you will likely hear certain rumors.”

I nodded, not wishing to mention that I’d ferreted out those same rumors from the servants’ quarters already.

Dottie lit a cigarette, the fumes mixing with the leftover smells of sausage and tea, making my stomach turn. “Frances is buried in the churchyard in town, if you want to see her,” she said. “That should tell you everything you need to know. I do not wish to speak of her, for obvious reasons, and I expect you to maintain the family’s privacy if you encounter any prurient interest in town. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Dottie.”

“I hope so. There is also a letter in the holder to go directly to my solicitor and not into any other hands.”

I left the room, collected the letters, and went to the kitchen to ask Mrs. Bennett how to go about ordering the motorcar and driver.

Once in the car, I sat in the back, watching the trees go by on the way to town. She is buried in the churchyard, if you want to see her. As with everything with Dottie, it was not a casual suggestion; it was an order, deep with meaning I could not yet discern. And as we came closer to town, I began to wonder what it was she wanted me to see.

## Chapter Six

The village was called Anningley, and it was a brisk little place, pretty and polite, cradled in the palm of a cup of land. I had the driver drop me near the edge of town and instructed him to wait; he gave me a succinct nod and sat back in the driver's seat, likely hoping for me to leave so he could light a cigarette. I walked into town on foot, taking in the fresh smell of the air and the scent of the sea, somewhere over the rises to the south.

High Street held a few ladies shopping, servants gossiping at the butcher's as they waited for the day's cuts of meat, nannies from the nearby homes walking with small children. Shopkeepers nodded at me as I passed. I immediately felt like a stranger, dark-haired and wild-eyed after my sleepless night and unpleasant morning at Wych Elm House, lacking a husband or a child or even a pleasant routine of shopping and talk. I already felt painfully visible, so I took Dottie's letters to the post office first and let the postmistress have at me.

The postmistress was a woman of about forty, immensely large, her flesh so soft and ruddy that I briefly wondered if she'd just had a late baby. She looked at the letters, but when she raised her gaze to me, there was no smile. "Wych Elm House," she said. "I'd heard the family was in residence again."

I shifted, remembering Dottie's instructions. "Yes, they are."

She took the letters and tucked them away. "They've been away for a long time."

"They had their reasons," I allowed.

"Perhaps." The postmistress turned back to me. "I'm Mrs. Baines. And who might you be? Are you a member of the family?"

I stared at her. This woman, standing in her tidy rural post office with the sun shining outside, was giving me a sour expression that made me feel like an unwelcome intruder. It was a chilly interrogation, not cheerful gossip. "I was married to Mrs. Forsyth's nephew, Alex Manders."

"I've heard of him," Mrs. Baines said. My husband's existence, it seemed, was now verified by the village authority. "A decent man, as far as the Forsyths go, though I hear he kept to himself. I also hear that Mr. Martin is coming home."

Of course she had. "This morning," I said. "We expect him shortly."

"That's as well, then." Mrs. Baines turned away from me and ran her gaze over the shelves of letters on her left. "I don't know Mr. Martin myself. No one saw him much before he went to war. I hear he's been in a hospital since."

I tapped my fingers on the counter. No wonder Dottie had no desire to come into town herself, but had sent her lackey instead. “You seem to hear quite a few rumors about the Forsyths.”

“I do, but rumors are all there is to hear about the Forsyths, you must understand.” Mrs. Baines turned to look at me again. “They never come to town, and when it’s time to hire servants, they always hire from away. The only local girl who’s worked for them is Petra Jennings, and she was dismissed when the girl died. They must have threatened her with something, because she doesn’t speak of them.”

I understood some of her hostility then. A wealthy family like the Forsyths would be expected to provide work for the locals, not for people from away. Trust Dottie to be obtuse about something so simple. “I can speak to Mrs. Forsyth about it,” I said, “though I can’t promise anything.”

Mrs. Baines only shook her head. “I don’t think you’ll find anyone from here willing to work at Wych Elm House. Not now.”

“What do you mean?”

“The woods,” Mrs. Baines said. She gestured behind her with a beefy arm, in the vague direction of the trees two miles away. Her expression was almost angry. “That mad girl haunts them. None of the children will go in—mine certainly won’t. They’re too afraid to play in there.”

I tapped my fingers on the counter again. “You can’t hold the Forsyth family responsible for the fact that your children are afraid to play in the woods.”

“I can, and I will. It’s easy for them—they closed up the house and left. It’s us who have had to live with the ghost these three years. That girl was kept in chains, I hear. She was a beast.”

“She wasn’t a beast,” came a voice from the doorway behind her. “She had a beast, my dear. That’s a different thing.”

The man who had spoken leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed. He was a year or two older than she, in shirtsleeves and a waistcoat, a cloth cap on his head. He gave me a brief nod of greeting. “Good afternoon, madam. I’m Mr. Baines.”

“Good afternoon,” I replied. “What do you mean, she had a beast?”

“Please excuse my wife,” Mr. Baines replied, eyeing me levelly. “The topic of the Forsyths upsets her. I only mean that young Miss Frances Forsyth had a dog, that’s all.”

“They’re not good people,” Mrs. Baines protested, hurt. “My sister has been in service for ten years, and they wouldn’t even talk to her. And that thing was not a dog, not from what I hear.”

“Did you ever see it?” Mr. Baines asked his wife. When she was quiet, he turned back to me. “You see how upset she gets. As a stranger you may not know this, Mrs. Manders, but the Forsyths are not popular in this part of the world.”

“I see.” Dottie had warned me, if obliquely, of the attitude in the village, and she’d been correct. “What do you mean about a dog?”

“Only that Miss Frances had one,” Mr. Baines replied. “A big, angry beast. Kept outdoors, in the woods. It’s gone wild since she died and the family left the house, I’m afraid. The children say it roams the woods, vicious. That’s why they won’t go in, especially after the sun has gone down.”

I frowned. “Could that be the animal that killed the stranger on the day Frances died?”

“That’s the opinion of some,” Mr. Baines said. His wife had subsided to a chair, sullen, leaving him to take over the conversation. “No one knows who the dead man was. A vagrant meets a wild dog in the woods—who knows what happened? A simple conclusion, really. However, Mrs. Forsyth herself testified at the inquest that her daughter owned no dog at all.”

“She testified at the inquest?”

“Certainly she did. There had to be an inquest, to determine how the man had died—whether it was murder. The man was torn to pieces. Many had the theory that Miss Frances’s dog was responsible, but Mrs. Forsyth swore on a Bible that no such animal existed. And it came out that no one had seen the dog with their own eyes; nor could they produce it.” He shrugged. His gaze on me was flat, and I realized he did not feel quite as friendly as he was pretending.

“It’s her that was the beast,” Mrs. Baines said. “It’s her that haunts the woods. That’s what the children say.”

“It’s an outlandish story,” I said, trying not to think of the girl I’d seen in the small parlor at Wych Elm House.

“It is that,” Mr. Baines agreed. “We also have stories of boggarts and wood sprites here, if you care to hear them. Myself, I am a logical man.”

I regarded him curiously. He spoke with such confidence, as if well versed in the topic of the Forsyths, his tone not hostile like his wife’s but more disdaining. “And what do you think?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Mr. Baines straightened from the doorjamb and took a step forward, uncrossing his arms. “Me? Oh, I think that Miss Frances Forsyth was mad,” he said. “There’s no doubt of that. The children who encountered her in the woods said that she wandered alone, talking to herself, pale and thin. Nothing sets people off like madness, does it? You can imagine any kind of tale.” He took another step forward, his eyes still on me. “And yes, despite her mother’s lies, I think Miss Frances had a dog. I think the dog killed that man—perhaps the man threatened his mistress somehow, or the dog was bad-tempered, as some dogs are. To avoid responsibility, Mrs. Forsyth did away with the dog, then lied about it. And it worked—because the man in the woods was nobody, and to such as the Forsyths, his death meant nothing. That’s what I think.”

I stood staring at him, unable to think of what to say.

Mr. Baines nodded toward my hand. “I also think you have another letter there that you did not give to my wife to post.”

“This?” I said. I blinked down at the letter in my hand. “I’m to take this to Mrs. Forsyth’s man of business. His name is Mr. David Wilde.”

The Baineses exchanged a look I could not read.

“Very well, then,” said Mr. Baines. “You’ll find his offices two streets over, in the white house with the green shutters. If your business is with him, then you’ve no more business here today.”

“What?” I said. “What is it?”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Manders,” Mr. Baines said, and though the words were kind, his tone was not. “You’ll see for yourself. I wish you good day.”

I wasn't very keen to knock at the door of the white house with the green shutters, but I didn't have much choice. Perhaps Mr. David Wilde was a crotchety old man, or perhaps he liked to abuse unsuspecting ladies' companions. In either case, I was to deliver Dottie's note to his hands only, so there was nothing for it. I knocked.

The door was answered by a man of about forty-five, with large gray eyes and premature silver in his hair. He wore a shirt and waistcoat, immaculate and expensive. It would be a challenge to tailor a shirt so well for such a man, I noticed, because his left arm was irregular, withered, the folded hand encased in a gray glove and hooked like a question mark. I blinked at it in surprise.

The man regarded me politely. "Yes?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I'm looking for Mr. David Wilde. I'm—I'm Mrs. Forsyth's paid companion, Jo Manders."

Recognition warmed his eyes, and I knew then that he was not a servant. "Ah," he said. "I'm Mr. Wilde."

I pulled the note from my pocket and held it out. "Then this is for you, Mr. Wilde."

He reached for the envelope with his good hand, while I most determinedly did not look at the other one. "How thoughtful," he said, but when he spoke, his eyes were on my face. "I was just about to have a cup of tea. Would you like to come in?"

"Oh, no," I said. "There's no need."

"But there is," Mr. David Wilde said with gentle persuasiveness. "I may need to send a reply."

Of course. How could I forget I was Dottie's paid letter-delivery girl? "Very well, then," I conceded. "Thank you."

I followed him into the house, which was decorated in dark colors—dark wood floors, dark wainscoting, pale gray wallpaper. Even the electric lamps were of dark metal, their shades dim and obscure. Still, the house smelled of wood polish and the flowered rugs on the floors were clean and tidy. He led me to an office off of the main hall and tossed Dottie's letter to the desk. "Have a seat," he offered, motioning to a chair.

A tea set was laid out on a sideboard. I opened my mouth and came half out of my chair as he walked over to it, but his back was to me, and I could see he planned on pouring the tea himself. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Manders," he said, picking up the teapot with his good hand as his other dangled, useless, in its glove. "Mrs. Forsyth was in need of a companion."

"She told you about me?" I asked.

"Of course." Mr. Wilde glanced over his shoulder at me and raised a brow. "I handle the money."

I sorted through my memory. If Dottie had ever mentioned a man of business, I didn't recall it. She gave the impression of being an entire civilization contained in one woman.

Mr. Wilde's hand was deft, and in moments he was handing me a cup of tea on a saucer. "Mrs. Forsyth speaks quite highly of you," he said.

I took the cup. It isn't hard, Manders, I heard Dottie say. Just try not to spill it. If a one-handed man could pour tea, then I supposed I could as well. Was this what the Baineses had been so suspicious of? A man with

a withered hand? “I doubt that very much,” I told him.

Mr. Wilde gave a small laugh as he poured his own cup. “She says you’re not entirely stupid,” he amended. “From her, that’s high praise. I know you were the wife of Alex Manders. I must say how sorry I was to hear he died in the war.”

“Thank you,” I managed. He must know of Alex through Dottie, I thought, since he was her man of business. There was no way he could have known Alex in person.

“I could not fight, myself,” Mr. Wilde said. He set his teacup gracefully on the desk and sat in his large desk chair. He raised his withered arm slightly, letting the gloved hand dangle. The upper arm, I saw, was as thick and strong as its mate, but below the elbow the arm seemed to nearly vanish, pinned into the tailored sleeve. He did not take his eyes from me. “A defect from birth. I tried to enlist, of course, but they told me I could not fire a gun. I asked how they could be sure, since I’d never tried, but they would not be convinced.”

I held my cup and saucer in my lap and looked back at him. His eyes were kind, his expression intelligent, but there was something about him I did not like, something that resided behind his gaze. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“My wife is not,” he replied, lowering the arm. He let the silence stretch out, comfortable in it, seeming in no hurry to open Dottie’s note and reply to it. I took a reluctant sip of tea.

He leaned back in his chair, the withered arm resting at his side. “Tell me, Mrs. Manders,” he said, “does Mrs. Forsyth have you doing errands for her all day?”

“It’s my job, Mr. Wilde,” I said, putting my cup down again.

“It seems somewhat beneath your station as Alex’s wife.”

“I’m his widow. And there are girls with worse jobs than this.”

“Quite true,” he agreed. He watched my face, and I felt certain he guessed at how desperate I was for money, the exact reason I’d taken the job. He reached out and touched the edge of Dottie’s letter on the desk, tracing it slowly with his fingertip, his gaze turning thoughtful. “May I ask you something?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He gave me a smile at that. “I apologize. I’m a lawyer, and we like to ask questions. My days are usually very quiet. You are quite the most exciting thing to cross my threshold all week.”

The words hung in the air, suspended. My tea seemed to have congealed to paste in my stomach. I wondered if Dottie would dismiss me if I stood and left.

“You mustn’t worry,” Mr. Wilde said into the silence. “My questions are not so very personal. I simply wondered if you plan to be a ladies’ companion forever.”

“Forever?” I could not keep the dismay from my voice.

“Yes.” Mr. Wilde picked up the envelope with his good hand, stood it idly on end. “You’ve never thought of it? You’re an intelligent girl. Mrs. Forsyth is in the prime of health, but she will not live forever.”

I leaned over and set my teacup on a side table. “Are you asking,” I said slowly, “whether I expect Dottie to

leave me something in her will?"

He did not answer that. "My job," he said with a lawyer's evasiveness, "is to look after the family. To protect it from harm."

"Is it?" I said. I was being impertinent, I knew, but I was stung and I could not help myself. "It seems to me the harm to the family has already been done."

"Ah," Mr. Wilde said. "I believe you're referring to Frances."

"There are rumors in town."

That made him smile. "Oh, yes. Mad girls in chains, killer hounds, ghosts. It's quite 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' is it not? Such is the imagination of the English countryman. I admire the locals their creativity, but don't believe everything you hear. I'm part of the rumor, myself—I believe I play the role of Mrs. Forsyth's evil accomplice, helping to keep Frances in chains and cover up her murders at the inquest. I don't suppose you heard that part?"

It was the easy superiority, the cold condescension in his tone, that gave me a chill when he spoke to me. "No," I said.

He nodded. "A man with a withered arm is born to play the villain, you see. But since you're attached to the family now, would you like to know the truth?"

"I don't—"

"Frances was a sweet girl," Mr. Wilde said. He looked at my expression and smiled. "Does that surprise you, after what you've heard? She was certainly intelligent, and I believe she never meant harm to anyone."

"Yet she was mad," I said.

He finally took up Dottie's letter and slid his finger under the flap, opening it. "She was . . . afflicted. There is no other way to describe it." His gaze stayed on me and not on the letter in his hand. "The spells started in childhood. That was before my time with the family, but by the time Mrs. Forsyth engaged me as her man of business, Frances's spells had progressed."

"What type of spells?" I asked.

"Hallucinations," he replied. "She saw things that weren't there, spoke to people who weren't present. I witnessed it myself any number of times, and I questioned Frances—when she was capable of it—as well as the doctors Dottie had called in to treat her. Some of the things Frances thought she saw were benign, and some of them were terrible. But by the time she was thirteen, the hallucinations were pervasive and incredibly real to her. She claimed there was a door that the visions came through. She could describe it to the finest detail if you asked." He gave me a small smile that was entirely sad. "It took some questioning before she trusted me enough to explain, but I finally understood that the things she saw coming through that imaginary door were dead."

I gaped at him. My tea had grown cold on the table next to me. I could not think of a thing to say.

"You can imagine," Mr. Wilde continued, "what a torment everyday life must be for someone so afflicted. Frances believed she saw the dead, waking and sleeping. She often had screaming fits that were terrible to behold—her madness sometimes produced particularly gruesome visions. No doctor could help her, and

eventually Dottie would not hear of her being examined yet again. So Frances lived at home instead, in privacy, plagued by her waking dreams." He looked at me closely with his chilled gaze. "You have a look of pity in your eyes, Mrs. Manders, but not a look of great shock. According to my information, you are well acquainted with madness, are you not?"

I thought of the long, red scratches on Mother's neck, and the words sprang to my lips, defensive. "It is not the same, Mr. Wilde. Not at all."

"If you say so. In any case, the rumors you hear are nothing but poison. Frances was never locked up or chained. There was no dog. The vagrant dying in the woods on the same day as Frances was a cruel and gruesome coincidence, that is all. Though something did strike me the day she died."

"What was that?" I managed.

"I had known Frances for years by then. For all her torment, she had never been suicidal. She had never attempted to take her own life until that day. In fact, because of her hallucinations, she was terrified of dying. The last place she ever wanted to go was through that terrible door, to be with the things on the other side." He shrugged. "Don't you find that strange?"

"Yes," I said, keeping my voice steady. "I suppose it is."

Mr. Wilde flipped open Dottie's letter at last and read the lines inside. He showed no reaction to whatever they said except for the faint tightening of his jaw. "If you will be so kind as to wait a moment, Mrs. Manders, I will write Mrs. Forsyth a reply."

I sat in silence as he pulled out a creamy piece of paper and scratched on it with his pen, one brief line, two, three. There seemed to be no air in the room. I wondered if David Wilde had ever seen a strange girl in Wych Elm House sitting in a chair and staring at him. But no, he couldn't have. The house had been empty since the Forsyths had left.

When he had finished, he sealed the letter and rose. I followed him to the door. "Mr. Wilde," I said, "I have one question."

"And what may that be?"

"Why do I feel like you have been assessing me for the past hour?"

He gave me his small smile again and placed the letter in my hand. "Don't worry about it, Mrs. Manders," he said. "My duty to the family comes first. Good day to you."

## Chapter Seven

I finished the rest of Dottie's errands in numb silence. I visited the dressmaker's and came away with two ready-made frocks in packages under my arm, as well as an order for two more to come in a week's time. I had barely looked at them, letting the dressmaker select what was best. I also bought new stockings, one pair of new shoes, and a new hat. I had paid for all of it on Dottie's credit; likely I'd have to work for her for years before we were even again.

Next to the dressmaker's was a photographer's studio. It was closed—the sign said the proprietor was in only on Mondays and Thursdays—but I paused and looked at the photographs in the window. One showed

Anningley's own High Street, on a misty early morning, looking toward the gentle rise of a hill, which was crowned with a pretty church of old stone, its spire coming out of the mist above the roofs of the village houses. I thought of that same church, rising out of the same mist, two hundred or even three hundred years ago, patiently waiting for Sunday attendance by villagers now long dead, weathering storms long forgotten, just as it would do when I was dead and so was everyone around me. And I thought for the first time in months of Alex's camera in its case in my bedroom at Wych Elm House.

I turned and looked down High Street at the spire from the photograph. A church meant a graveyard. She is buried in the churchyard, if you want to see her.

Still, I dawdled on my way to Frances's grave. I stopped at the pharmacist's and the lending library, David Wilde's words turning over in my head. Finally I had no more errands, no more excuses, and I opened the churchyard gate with my gloved hands, listening to it creak in the peaceful stillness of the sunny afternoon.

The church was a snug building of buttery stone. I saw no sign of a vicar or a groundskeeper, though the grounds were immaculate; there were only the starlings crying at one another in the trees over the hill.

From the very first, I knew which monument I was meant to see.

It was a long block of shiny marble, raised and gleaming, overshadowing all of the graves around it—humble stones from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, planted by the good people of Anningley. Frances Forsyth's grave was slick and shiny, almost obscene. As I approached I could see the lettering—FRANCES FORSYTH, B. 1902–D. 1917—and an angel etched, weeping, into the marble above it. Beneath the dates was a single sentiment: ANGEL ON EARTH.

I stared at the grave. It made my throat thick, made my heart beat slowly and sickly in my chest. This was Dottie's work, there was no doubt of it—Robert had had nothing to do with this monstrosity. She must have faced some objection to having Frances buried in the churchyard at all, as a suicide and a suspected murderer. She had not only prevailed, but she had raised her daughter's monument above the rest. It was a mother's act of love, of defiant and loyal belief.

But as David Wilde had intimated, I knew something of what it was like, caring for the mad. I knew how it drained you, how it ate at you, how your love for the mad person both fed you and consumed you. How you felt it was all your fault, or all theirs. I knew of the unspoken moments as you worried in the dark—as your own life sat frozen and forgotten—when you hated the mad person with all your heart, when the black part of you wished they would simply go away, that they would simply die. And I knew of the hideous wash of relief that overcame you when the burden of caring for that person was finally lifted.

Frances Forsyth's monument was an act of love. But I could see what it also was—an act of guilt, the kind that bows a person and alters them forever. This was what Dottie lived with, what no one could understand. No one but me, who had lived with Mother.

The last place she ever wanted to go was through that terrible door, to be with the things on the other side. Some mad people wished for death, but others clung to life, even when that life was filled with pain. Yet Frances had, finally, decided to go through that door she so dreaded. Or had she? Was it possible her mother had helped her? That the final result was this monument to Dottie's own guilt?

I turned away and walked back to the motorcar in silence.

When I arrived in the front hall at Wych Elm House, all was quiet. I removed my hat and stood for a moment. I heard the ticking of the grandfather clock in the next room. I smelled furniture polish and dust. I

looked at the sunlight coming interrupted through the glass door from the sitting room, sliced by the lines of a tree branch. At the quiet corridor, its floor gleaming.

This house shouldn't be sold; it should be burned.

A murmur of voices came from one of the rooms down the hall, and reluctantly I walked toward the sound. I found Dottie and Robert in the small parlor where I had seen the girl yesterday, sitting in the chairs in an awkward arrangement. A tray of tea sat on a spindle-legged table, the steam no longer rising from the pot. Dottie's color was high, her posture straight, a teacup all but forgotten in her lap. Robert sat uncomfortably, looking pained. So Dottie had won some part of their argument after all, then.

A third person rose from his chair to greet me.

He was, unmistakably, the boy from the photograph Dottie carried in her book. I could see Dottie in the narrow, clean shape of his jaw, the shoulders that were not wide yet firm of line. I could see Robert in the set of his dark eyes, his long lashes, and the charming ease of his smile, which he flashed me on sight. But there the resemblance to either of his parents, and the photograph of years ago, ended. The man who stood before me had the painful thinness of the long-term patient: his cheeks hollowed, his tidy shirt and jacket hanging as if from a clothes hanger in a shop. He was in his early twenties, but the creases on his forehead and the lines bracketing his mouth aged him past thirty, and the soft shadows under his eyes hinted that the travel he'd just undergone had taken more out of him than he cared to let on.

"Manders." Dottie's voice was tight with excitement, her gaze trained on the man as he turned to me. "This is my son, Martin."

"Cousin!" Martin said, smiling at me. Despite the gauntness of his features, there was something compelling about the forced brightness in his eyes. "Cousin Jo! What a delight to finally meet you. Alex told me everything about you."

I blinked at him, surprised. I glanced briefly at Dottie, remembering her injunction not to talk of Alex with her frail son. "Oh," I said stupidly.

"Martin," Dottie said, changing the subject on cue. "You must eat something. I imagine you are famished."

"Don't harass the boy, Dottie," Robert said.

Martin ignored them both and took one of my gloved hands in his. I still held my packages in the other. Dottie's comment hung in the air; Martin looked like he hadn't eaten in weeks. His gaze was fixed on me, and I returned the look, trying to read his expression. I had interrupted a family conversation on some serious topic—I inferred it from the color in Dottie's cheeks and the way Robert's gaze roved around the room, as if he was waiting for the first chance to escape.

"You are lovely," Martin said to me. His voice was not seductive, or even particularly inviting; the words were spoken more as a message, as if he were telling me something in code. He squeezed my hand once, briefly, reinforcing the feeling. "Just as I heard. I am so glad I came home."

I stared back at him. I should know what he meant; I should know. And yet I racked my brain and came up with nothing. "Thank you," I managed.

Dottie spoke again, something about Martin seeing the artworks she'd bought on the Continent. Robert countered that no young man would want to see such a dull thing, and instead they should go riding at the

first opportunity. Martin agreed with both his parents without committing to anything. He seemed adept at navigating the treacherous territory between them, skipping past the many land mines with the agility of an adored son.

But I was only barely paying attention. I had figured out the subtle tension in the room with the sudden understanding of a thunderclap. My son is coming home to get married. Her dismissive wave of the hand when I had asked about his fiancée. I'll take care of it.

Mr. Wilde's assessment of me, the exchange of notes between them.

Our chance for children, someone to leave our legacy to.

You are lovely. I am so glad I came home.

Martin must have seen understanding on my face. I stood transfixed as he stepped closer, dropped my hand, and pulled me to him in an embrace. My packages bumped between us awkwardly, but still Martin patted my back, his thin hands touching me coldly through my coat at my shoulder blades.

"Cousin Jo," Martin said, his breath in my ear, his voice dark with understanding. "We are going to have so much fun."

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