

# THE SKELETON BRIDE



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## **THE SKELETON BRIDE**

**Based on *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James**

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## THE SKELETON BRIDE



“REMIND ME AGAIN. WHY ARE WE HERE?” SIMON KILLED the engine of the black Buick Super convertible right in front of the main entrance to Bly Manor. My brother couldn’t believe our cousin had lent him his brand- new car, which also meant we had to ride with the top down to satisfy Simon’s demands. After all, he was doing this as a favor to me.

“We are here to find Grandma Flora’s wedding dress.”

I studied Bly’s entrance from the car; I wanted to get an impression of the place before stepping out. It did not look inviting. I didn’t want to show it in my voice, but it was evident that coming all the way from America to our long-forgotten family estate, nestled in a remote location of the English countryside, just to fetch a dress had turned out to be a little excessive. I had schemed this as a trip to “visit” the relatives living on the old island with this goal in mind... except no one knew it.

Everyone believed I wanted to rekindle our relationship with this side of the family before my wedding.

But I had been in love with that dress since the first time I laid eyes on the photograph my grandmother kept on her mantelpiece. I had a wonderful seamstress back home, ready to create whatever I wanted. However, a copy would never be the same. Besides, there was something about getting married in my grandmother's dress that made everything even more special. We were very close when I was growing up; Grandma Flora always made me feel protected and loved. She had passed away nearly a decade ago, but I still missed her every day, and knowing she would not be able to attend my wedding made my heart feel heavy, like a rock resting on my chest.

"Not me. That is the reason why *you* are here," Simon corrected me.

Simon leaned back in his seat, but I continued to study the manor. There was something mesmerizing about this place. It had two imposing towers flanking the main entrance. One of them had collapsed almost entirely to the ground, and its original shape could only be guessed by appreciating its twin sister. The second tower was holding up in better shape. At least it was safe enough for a man to be standing there, watching us.

"Agreed. That is my reason. Your reason is that you want me to convince Sophie to accept going out on a date with you."

I opened the car door and stepped out before my brother could continue questioning me. I had agreed to convince my good friend Sophie Mercer to reconsider

the negative answer she had given Simon. I knew he was madly in love with her, so I had used that to force Simon to come with me to Bly.

The reality was that this great mansion—which was indeed an old castle—was crumbling under the erosion of time and weather conditions—thus, its sinister appearance. No one in the family had shown any real interest in the property. My grandmother Flora and her older brother, Miles, had spent their childhood years in this estate. Bly Manor belonged to her uncle back then, and both my grandmother and her brother were sent to Bly when their parents died, and said uncle became their legal guardian. They didn't have a relationship with him, as he hardly ever visited the place. Both children were raised by several governesses and a housekeeper to whom they had grown attached to the point of considering her a second mother. Grandma Flora spoke fondly of Mrs. Grose and how she cared for and nurtured my grandmother, not only when Grandma Flora became an orphan but also when Mrs. Grose turned into the only family she had left.

I put a hand up to protect my eyes from the sun and looked at the tower once again. I squinted for a few seconds, scanning the sky, but I could not spot the man anymore. *He's probably coming down to greet us*, I concluded. I leaned on the hood of the car and tapped the windshield on my brother's side. "Get out, Simon. The groundskeeper is already here."

I straightened and stretched my dress, forcing some wrinkles to disappear. Although it was springtime, there were sudden gusts of wind embracing the place from

time to time. I removed my hat and tried to tame my hair then put the hat back on. It seemed inconsequential at the moment, but I could smell death still lingering there, even out in the open fields. There was a stillness floating around us, despite the windy day, that made me stay alert.

My grandmother's brother had died at Bly when he was only ten years old. She had left the place right before it happened. After Miles's death, she never returned. Grandma Flora always said Bly had stolen her brother away from her. This was a place of absences to my grandmother. Ironically, since her uncle had no other descendants, she reluctantly inherited his wealth—and this estate—upon his death.

"You better keep your promise," I heard Simon protesting right before slamming the car door. His footsteps let me know he was circling the car, approaching me. "Well, this place certainly looks like it's about to crumble to the ground." He folded his arms and studied the property with a careful eye. "Are we supposed to stay here?"

"Yes. Uncle Frank made some renovations to the place. He told me it has running water and the electrical insta—"

"That was over twenty years ago, Ida! Who knows what we are going to find in there! The renovations Uncle Frank did were in the late twenties. I don't even want to start considering if the roof might cave in over us in our sleep."

I realized by Simon's expression that his concerns were not just him playing around. He could really put a

stop to my plans if I let him carry on with this line of thought. “Well, if you’re worried about that, don’t stomp your feet when you walk inside,” I joked.

I placed a hand over my hat before the wind could snatch it away. We needed to get going. In a few hours it would be dark, and Bly Manor didn’t look like a place where you could run around in poor lighting. We would not find many luxuries here, so we had to settle ourselves before losing daylight. “Look, Simon, the place has been under the care of a... Mr. Goodwin, I believe. Uncle Frank phoned him so he would set up a few things for us. It’s not like we are walking into a work site. He’s already here; I saw him up on the tower. Besides, we don’t need to stay that long. As soon as we find the dress, we’ll leave, I promise... Simon?”

I looked at my brother, but he was done listening to me. He was staring at something on the front door of the manor. “What is that?”

“What is what?” I asked while Simon walked past me and headed for the door.

As he climbed the few steps leading to the double doors, he pointed to a sign that had been nailed to them. I don’t know how I didn’t notice it before, but just like the rest of the building, it was falling to pieces. If I was honest, I had to agree with him about the safety hazards staying in this house implied.

The sign itself was nothing too elaborate. It seemed it had been done in haste with whatever they found at hand. It was a piece of wood about twenty inches long and five inches wide, with a message carved on it.

“DO NOT ENTER,” Simon tilted his head and read. “HOUSE NOT EMPTY—DO NOT ENTER.”

The sign was crooked. You could tell it had been initially nailed horizontally to the doors, so it would stay fixed across both, preventing anyone from bypassing it and opening just one door. One of its sides now hung limp, so the warning sign held on to the door from the only rusty nail that had survived the pervasive weather conditions.

“It’s a sign to keep intruders away.” I peeked at it from behind my brother’s arm. What else could it be? “You know, like a Private Property sign.”

“Then why doesn’t it say that? This seems a bit excessive.”

“Oh, that’s been there since the war. Don’t pay attention to it.”

Simon and I abruptly turned on our heels and faced the person providing the explanation for the sign. It was a man in his late fifties, dressed in working clothes.

“Miss...” He removed his hat and exposed a balding head with only a few traces of gray hair left. “I assume you must be Mr. Lancaster,” he addressed Simon now. The man stretched out his hand, and Simon descended from the entrance steps to take it.

“Yes, I am Simon Lancaster. This is my sister, Ida. Mr. Goodwin, I presume?”

“Indeed.” They parted hands, and Mr. Goodwin put his hat back on. “I’ve been expecting you. Your uncle said you’d be staying here for a few days?” Mr. Goodwin gave us an intrigued look. Evidently, he didn’t believe it was a good idea to stay at Bly Manor.

While Simon explained to him that we were planning to spend as little time as possible, I stayed behind, mute. This wasn't the man I had seen in the tower. That man looked at least ten years younger than Mr. Goodwin, and although I had spotted him at a distance, I could tell he wasn't wearing the overalls Mr. Goodwin had on at that moment. The man from the tower was dressed in black, and my first impression was that he was wearing a suit. Most importantly, even though the man from the tower had a more distinguished appearance than Mr. Goodwin, he had no hat on. He was the absolute opposite of the man that was greeting us.

"You should come with me through the back. It's easier to enter the property through the kitchen area. This door has been stuck since—"

Mr. Goodwin started to skirt the residence, but Simon grabbed him by the arm and stopped him. "Since when?" Simon pressed him. "Does it have to do with the sign on the door? Because my uncle didn't mention anything about it."

I still felt confused as I stood next to this sign that gave me goose bumps. There was a palpable sense of fear emanating from that half-rotten piece of wood.

"All due respect, Mr. Lancaster, but Mr. Frank hasn't been here in decades, so he wouldn't know anything about that message."

*Message?* I thought. I guess all written signs could be thought of as messages, but somehow the heaviness of that word shook me.

"The army put that sign up."

“The British Army? You mean during the last war?” I stepped down from the porch, putting some distance between the carved message and myself.

“Yes, miss.” Mr. Goodwin nodded heavily. “Bly hadn’t been occupied since the late twenties, then the war broke. The British Army wanted to utilize this residence as a hospital, if I remember correctly. Especially since your uncle had made improvements to it, you know, giving Bly electricity and running water. It is the perfect place, if you come to think about it.” Mr. Goodwin turned and gave an appreciative look at the land around us. “It is peaceful and remote.”

“So? What happened? Did they believe the structure to be unstable?” Simon inquired.

“Oh no, no. Mark my words, Mr. Lancaster: Bly will outlive us all.”

Impatient, Simon requested more details.

“Truth is, sir, that I am not sure what happened. The war was in its early stages, and one day, a batch of soldiers arrived in jeeps and trucks loaded with provisions and all sorts of medical equipment. I was told they were setting up a hospital, but they only lasted here a week. They left without saying goodbye. When I came to check if everything was all right, I noticed the sign.” Mr. Goodwin explained that they left multiple signs. Most of them were written on paper or cardboard. The wooden sign was the only one that had survived the passage of time.

“Multiple signs. Multiple messages,” I mused. “Someone really wanted people to stay away.”

“And the signs were not the only things they left behind.”

“What else did they leave behind?” I was hooked now.

“Everything, miss.” I inquired what that broad explanation meant. “All the equipment they had brought, along with the provisions. They stacked them up against the front door from the inside, forming a barricade and blocking it. At first, my son and I thought it was best to remove it and free the entryway. Then we realized that maybe there were intruders trying to invade the property, since Bly is in such a state of isolation... I don't know, Miss Lancaster. I figured if the army thought that was what needed to be done, who was I to undo it?”

The groundskeeper resumed his march, and Simon followed him, but I was not quite ready to put all my doubts behind me. I hastened my step to catch up with them.

“What about the man in the tower? Is he also in charge of this place?” I couldn't let that go. The image of the man in the black suit staring at me was haunting.

“The man in the tower, miss?”

I explained to Mr. Goodwin what I had seen upon our arrival.

“Oh, that must be my son, Oliver. He helps me out sometimes. Bly is too big for my rusty and swollen joints. I'm getting too old for this job. I thought Oliver was in London for the week, but he probably returned early and wants to introduce himself. Here we are...”

We found ourselves in front of another set of steps

that led to a much smaller door. Mr. Goodwin pushed it open, and we were entered a large kitchen. The smell of mold and dust was strong, and it seemed impregnated in the walls. I stepped in further and approached a rectangular wooden table that dominated the room. On top of it, a paper bag full of groceries was right next to a box with some necessary items for our stay, such as plates and teacups.

“I’ve bought you some groceries. Something that could get you through today, at least.” Mr. Goodwin pointed to the bag and moved on to explain the box. “My wife thought it would be best to take some of the plates and silverware that were already here and wash them, so you can have clean dishes. There are also some pots and pans and some tablecloths, but Mrs. Goodwin can cook for you whatever you want, if you wish. We thought it was a safer bet to provide you with clean things. The beds upstairs also have fresh sheets.”

“How wonderful!” I approached the neat box and skimmed through its contents. I hadn’t even thought about any of this when I set my eye on dragging Simon along with me on this venture. “Tell Mrs. Goodwin that I thank her. This is a lifesaver.”

“Will do, miss.” Mr. Goodwin nodded and blushed upon my heartfelt response. “Now, if you come with me, Mr. Lancaster, I can show you the rooms we have prepared for you. I believe we chose the ones that are most suitable... or, uh, less run-down.”

I heard Simon and Mr. Goodwin as they moved out of the kitchen and traveled upstairs to the second floor while the groundskeeper cautioned my brother about

certain spots on the stairs that were unstable. I was mesmerized by the kindness shown by Mrs. Goodwin, as she had prepared with evident care an entire box of provisions for our stay. I wasn't much of a cook, but I could make do with what we had. The bag was filled with nonperishable food along with vegetables and fruit, mostly apples. I retrieved the apples from the bag, as they were on top of everything else, so I could reach the canned food I spotted at the bottom and placed them on the table.

I was busy with the chore I had assigned myself when a child's laughter resonated behind me. I turned, surprised. I'd thought I was alone.

And, indeed, I was. I didn't find anyone standing behind me, child or adult. Maybe a gust of wind running through the house created a strange noise that sounded like laughter.

I turned back to the table. As I did so, out of the corner of my eye I spotted an apple rolling away from me for no apparent reason, like an invisible force was attracting it. I tried refocusing on removing the rest of the fruit from the bag, but I heard the apple hit the floor as it fell off the table.

"Damn! Now it's gonna be bruised."

I looked to my right. The piece of fruit had rolled on the floor until reaching the arched entrance dividing the kitchen from the next area of the house. It was the entryway through which Mr. Goodwin had led us in minutes before. To my surprise, the piece of fruit had not stopped its journey due to lack of inertia. A foot had stopped it. A male foot, to be more precise.

It was wearing a shiny black laced boot. It looked like the shoes men had worn in the mid-1800s, antique but spotless. If I followed upward the line of the foot, the leg attached to it was also dressed in black. I could only see the leg of the pants, as the owner of the foot remained hiding behind the arched entrance.

I was more confused than startled. Weren't Mr. Goodwin and Simon upstairs? And in any case, neither of them was wearing that type of footwear.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Mr. Goodwin?" I asked hesitantly, believing his son had arrived at Bly.

All the answer I received was the stillness of the foot holding the apple captive against the ground, impeding any movement and forcing the silence to become present in a house filled with old noises and empty shadows.

"Hello? Who's there?" I stepped away from the table. Why was he being so mysterious? "Who's there?" I repeated, approaching the entryway with determination. What a silly game to play; I had no time to waste.

"Hello, may I help you?" I asked as I crossed the archway into the hallway and faced him.

It was a man in his early forties. And like his footwear, his three-piece suit was outdated. His clothes were clearly of refined tailoring. However, they did not fit him properly. He was wearing someone else's clothes. It seemed to me he wanted to give the appearance of a man of good fortune, but I had the distinct feeling this

was someone living beyond his means. I don't know—perhaps it was the fact that he was wearing no hat that gave me that impression.

*A proper gentleman always wears a hat.* Grandma Flora's words floated up to the surface of my memory as soon as I focused my eyes on his ginger hair.

"Yes, sir?"

I waited for a word as I stared into his watery eyes with the palest of blues tainting the irises. He had freckles, as most redheads do, and a tight smile of thin lips carved on a long face of sharp features. He was not showing his teeth, but if he had done so, he would've seemed less menacing. He looked like a human-sized version of a ventriloquist doll. In a way, he felt like one as well, as I had the eerie feeling that a carcass was staring back at me, and there was no life behind those slits he had for eyes. He was tall, I reckon taller than my brother. Yet a figure that should have been imposing was rather feeble, as if the body lacked substance. Then it hit me. This was the man from the tower I had spotted when we arrived.

"Oh, you must be Mr. Goodwin's son!" I smiled nervously. "Your father is upstairs with my brother." I turned on my heel and shouted in the direction of the staircase. "Mr. Goodwin! Simon! ... Simon, Mr. Goodwin's son is here! Come down... please!" I didn't wish to plead, but somehow the expression came out of me.

"Coming!" I heard Simon's voice bouncing off the empty corridors of the house and reaching us downstairs.

I should've said reaching *me* downstairs because when I turned to face my visitor, I encounter nothing. "Mr. Goodwin?" I asked.

I'd considered him a peculiar individual before, but now I had to categorize him as plain rude. I marched to the kitchen and peeked inside. He was not there. I stepped out to the driveway and looked around me. There was no one there, either, only the gardens and the windy skies with puffy white clouds moving swiftly along.

"Mr. Goodwin?" I asked once again of the quietness of the countryside around me before going back into the house, retreating in fear as a shiver ran down my spine. Something about the vastness of this land made me uneasy.

"Yes, Miss Lancaster. Here I am. How may I help you?" a crackly, old voice answered behind me.

"Good heavens, what is that smell?" Simon asked when I turned to face him and Mr. Goodwin as they were coming down to meet me.

I could not answer Mr. Goodwin's or Simon's questions. I was speechless. Where did the man from the tower go?

"Do you smell that?" Simon persisted.

I muttered an unintelligible response as my eyes fixed upon the only thing my peculiar visitor had left behind. I approached the apple on the floor while having the distinct feeling that I should consider him more like an intruder than a visitor. Hypnotized, I picked the fruit up. The discoloration had been apparent from a distance, but now that I held it in my

hands, I realized the place where the foot had stepped on it was not only bruised but also rotten.

“God, that’s it!” Simon approached me with an expression of disgust on his face and took the rotten piece of fruit from my hands then proceeded to toss it outside the house. “How can something smell so foul? I’ll have to wash my hands now.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Lancaster. I’m sure my wife didn’t notice it,” Mr. Goodwin apologized.

My brother put the good old man at ease, assuring him there was nothing to worry about. But I knew that was not how it had happened, and it took me all that time to be barely able to translate my thoughts to my lips.

“No...”

Both men stared at me. Having four eyes on me was not the best way to speed up the process.

“Ida?”

“No, that’s not how it happened...” I turned on my heel and pointed to the open door as if that gesture alone could explain it all.

“You said my son had arrived, miss?” Mr. Goodwin tried to steer my scrambled mind into some sense.

“Yes, I saw a man. I believe I saw someone. No, I know I saw him...” I continued to point idiotically at the open door. “But he must’ve stepped outside. I don’t know...”

Mr. Goodwin thought it strange that his son Oliver had left without a proper introduction, but he stipulated perhaps he was eager to see his mother, as he had been away for a week. He explained how Mrs. Goodwin

missed him dearly every time he left for London and how, although Oliver was a grown man of twenty-five years of age, he would always be a little boy to his mother.

“Twenty-five?” I unintentionally asked, adding more confusion to the situation.

“Right. Let’s get the luggage so we can settle in before it gets dark.” Simon headed outside, bypassing me at the entrance, followed by Mr. Goodwin.

I made an effort to step out of my confusion. In the end, Mr. Goodwin had a fair explanation for the visitor. I couldn’t let this peculiar incident derail me from the purpose of my visit to Bly. I started outside once again, with the intention to follow my brother and the groundskeeper. But as I walked down the driveway, I came across the exact thing I was trying to leave behind. The apple Simon had tossed was on the ground, only a few steps away to my left, with the rotten part facing up. It was close enough for me to notice the skin of the apple seemed to be moving in tiny waves. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. Rotten fruit does not move. Neither does fresh fruit. I stepped closer to give it a good look and put my mind at ease. But I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d kept all my doubts locked up inside me.

“What on earth...?” I leaned forward, placing my hands on my knees.

It wasn’t the skin of the fruit what was moving. Something underneath it was twisting and turning, trying to break free. Suddenly, it did. It poked from the inside of the fruit, piercing its rotten skin.

“Oh!” I gasped.

I straightened up abruptly. Some rotten fruit landed on my face as if the apple had spat at me. Then a viscous worm twisted its way furiously out of the fruit. I had never seen anything like that before.



“THIS IS YOU.” Simon dropped my luggage on the floor of the bedroom I was to occupy during the night, creating a cloud of dust as the suitcase hit the ancient rug covering the floor. It was a large and cold room, with high ceilings, a state bed as a focal point, and one single window that could scarcely let any light in. Not only was it too small, but also the layer of grime plastered to the glass panels was as thick as the curtains themselves.

“Cozy. No question about it,” Simon added with a phony grin on his face that showed me how much he’d like to rip my head off for dragging him there.

“At least I have you to keep me warm with your brotherly love,” I replied, approaching the window. From there, I could not only appreciate the green fields surrounding Bly, but a lake that was also right in sight. “Did you know we have a lake?”

Simon approached me and contemplated the view over my shoulder.

“We don’t have anything. Uncle Frank does. What we do have are fresh sheets, and for that I’m eternally grateful to Mrs. Goodwin.” He stepped back and

headed toward the door. "I better get settled in my own room."

"Candles," I instructed him, turning away from the lake and offering him one of the handfuls of candles I had brought with me. "Mr. Goodwin said we each have candleholders in our bedrooms."

I hoped we wouldn't need them, as but the groundskeeper had explained how, despite Bly Manor having electricity, the electrical installation had been done twenty years ago and no one had checked if the job was done properly, so it could be unreliable. Simon took my offering and headed out as I approached the bed and sat on it to confirm my suspicions.

"As hard as an ironing board." I anticipated a restless night of sleep and a morning filled with Simon's complaints if his bed was as horrendous as mine. "God, please don't let his be worse than mine," I begged under my breath.

I got to my feet, looking for the candleholders, and when I left the bed, I noticed I had wrinkled the covers. The crests were arranged in a peculiar shape, as they had not pooled around the place where I sat, but closer to the middle of the bed. They formed concentric circles that grew outward, like ripples on a pond. I stretched the covers, as the freshly made bed was the only thing making the room barely presentable. When I moved from one side of the bed to the other, I spotted the candlesticks on top of a battered dresser stashed away in a corner. There was a mirror hanging above it, its frame matching the brass hardware of the dresser.

I reached out to take the candlesticks, when I caught

a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. It was deformed. The Ida staring back at me from the mirror was wavy; she didn't have one single straight line on her face.

I had seen distorted mirrors before, at carnivals and funhouses, but this one felt different. I caressed the surface of the mirror with my index finger. The waves were on my reflection because they were present on the mirror itself. My finger traced the crests and the inevitable depressions that came after. They, too, just like on the bed, were concentric and spread outward. There was a specific spot in the lower part of the mirror, halfway between the middle and the bottom edge, where I could see some of my reflection not being distorted. This was where it all began.

"I guess time can truly play games with the image we have of ourselves," I mused.

When I had arranged the candles, I turned to leave one on the nightstand and discovered the bed was once again, but this time for no apparent reason, matching the mirror. It was as if the lake out in the gardens were right in there with me as well. I stretched the covers one more time, right after placing the candle next to the bed. After that, I grabbed one of the two remaining candles on the dresser and headed out, as I had planned one to leave in the bathroom.

Like my bedroom, the bathroom was a cold and murky room. It was equally large, which did not help with the chilly sensation filling the place. Here was where I could spot some of the improvements Uncle Frank had done before the war, as the bleak state of the

manor was such that Simon and I could not—until that moment—identify precisely where the changes had taken place. The tiled walls and the toilet were signs of a more modern time. There was also a large sink with a mirror hanging above it, and a little to its left there was a small plate where I found a piece of soap.

“Thank you, Mrs. Goodwin,” I expressed my gratitude.

I retrieved the soap and left it on the edge of the sink while I repurposed the soap holder as a surface where I could place the candlestick. It was a relief to look at myself in this mirror and see a smooth reflection. The ride to the manor with the top down had not been kind to my hair, despite my efforts to conceal it under a hat. I removed it and tried to rearrange my hair as much as I could, but I quickly gave up hope.

I turned and faced the other side of the bathroom, where the tub was. Clearly, another modern artifact. It was a flat rim, claw-foot tub, lined with porcelain. And the faucet was leaking. One slow but relentless drop at a time, like a metronome. I approached it to close the tap, only to find that the bathtub was almost filled to the brim with water. This faucet had been leaking for a long time. I would have to let Mr. Goodwin know about this before it was too late. Water damage could be a death sentence to a property like Bly.

I turned the faucet, using all my strength, but the drops of water kept coming down. At best I had slowed it down, but I did not manage to stop it. I looked at the bathtub as it kept getting closer and closer to

overflowing, the metronome-drop setting the rhythm of the room.

“Well, at least it’s clean water.” Truth was, I had anticipated the pipes being filled with dark water.

One more drop finally joined the mass of water after jumping off the cliff the faucet represented. The ripple effect spread fast and more forcefully than I had anticipated. It had been one mighty drop. One drop that turned out to be enough to change my reflection.

As the waves increased, expanding outward from the point of impact, I saw that the outline of my silhouette on the water was changing. I shrank, turning into a smaller woman. When the water slowly became smoother again, I realized my hair had shifted into a darker shade. And my face was covered by two hands. Two hands that were not mine. Somehow, the drop of water had turned the watery version of me into someone else. I was looking at a woman similar in age to me, but she was not me.

I felt the air getting stuck in my throat. I could not breathe in. I could not breathe out. I could only stand there and watch as the ripples dissipated completely and the female figure floating in front of me kept trembling and erasing its own edges at the same time. She was crying. As soon as I recognized this, she removed her hands to expose her face. I could feel my shoulders shaking and transmitting the movement to the rest of my body. Her eyes... her eyes were so red.

“You’ve been crying for so long...” I told her, letting her know I understood.

I felt my knees about to give under my weight. I even

believed for a second she had filled that tub with her tears. Her sadness was so undeniable, palpable, and above all, overwhelming. I wanted to join with her in crying so she wouldn't feel so alone. Where was all this sorrow coming from?

Just like they had gone, the waves returned, like a movie that is being played in reverse, from the edges of the tub to the point of impact. Her mouth, already fixated in a painful crying gesture, opened wider and wider. I thought she was trying to dislocate her jaw to swallow all the water at once and recuperate the shed tears. Her eyes and mouth turned darker until her face was nothing but the sum of three black holes. That's when sadness and fear traded places in my body.

I screamed. I screamed so hard I lost my footing and stumbled backward. I was still screaming when Simon rushed in, trying to save me from whatever he thought I needed to be saved from.

"Ida! Ida, what's going on? What happened? Stop screaming, please! Tell me what happened!"

In one single movement, Simon hugged me and got me to my feet. I was not sure I could stand on my own, so I latched on to his arm.

"The tub-tub... Water... The water..."

My brother approached the bathtub and looked in. I followed because I had no choice as I didn't want to go back to the floor, but I did not wish to be near that water again.

To my surprise, that was something I needn't have worried about. The water was no longer there. When Simon and I reached the bathtub, it was only half-full

with green rotten water. It reeked. You could even spot some larvae swimming in it.

“OK, yes, that is disgusting.” Simon covered his nose and mouth with his free hand as I was still holding on to his other arm. “Don’t be scared, silly. I don’t think there’s anything in there that can hurt you.” Simon turned and grabbed me by the arms. “You look as pale as a sheet, Ida. And you scared me to death. I know that water is disgusting, but c’mon! Our beds are much more terrifying than this!” he joked with a half smile on his face, not quite certain why something so trivial had scared the living daylights out of me.

I inhaled and exhaled deeply, trying to make my feet work again so they could carry me. “Yeah... No, the light—the light in here is weird and I-I thought I saw something.”

“Let’s go downstairs. I’ll make you some coffee or tea, or whatever we can find in Mrs. Goodwin’s blessed box. Then I’ll tell Mr. Goodwin to clean the tub.” Holding me by the waist so I could walk, my brother steered me in the direction of the door.

“Simon?”

“Yes?”

“The man I saw today, in the tower, uh... I don’t think he was—”

“Was what?”

I hesitated. If I told my brother I believed there was an intruder in the house, he would have grabbed our luggage and forced me to abandon Bly Manor at once. If I told him what I really believed, that this place was

giving me hallucinations, he would get us out of there even faster.

“Ida?”

“Can we sleep in the same room tonight?”



THE SOOTHING BEVERAGE of choice ended up being water. Although Mr. Goodwin had provided us with everything that was needed, Simon had a hard time lighting a fire in the stove. By the time he had succeeded in giving life to a few timid flames, the sun had already gone down, and I had decided that even if it took me all night, I was going to find that wedding dress. We would be gone by the next morning.

As Simon came to terms with how difficult it was dealing with wood in such a damp environment, he set himself to work on the fireplace in the bedroom we were going to share. If I indeed managed to get some sleep. Ironically, after what I had witnessed in the few hours spent at Bly, the last thing I wanted to do was to close my eyes. Simon didn't want to ask for Mr. Goodwin's help, the same way I didn't want to share my fears with Simon. That was the one thing my brother and I had in common—our stubbornness.

Mr. Goodwin had instructed me on where I could find Grandma Flora's wedding dress. There was a room on the same floor as our bedrooms that was used as a storage place. So when Simon climbed upstairs with a pile of logs, struggling as he huffed and puffed as he stepped on the squeaky stair steps, I followed along.

The room pointed out to me by Mr. Goodwin was two doors down from Simon's bedroom, which was itself in front of the dreadful bathroom. On the way there, we walked past the bedroom that had been assigned to me. As my brother got to work on the fireplace, I entered my former bedroom to retrieve my luggage and the candles I had prepared. I found the state bed's covers wrinkled in circles. This time, it did not surprise me.

I stepped into the storage room armed with candles, matches, and an ironclad determination to achieve my goal. The lights came to life in a nauseating shade of yellow when I flipped the switch, as had happened in the majority of the rooms at Bly we had used until that moment. The countryside mansion was a place where the darkness ruled, so it was not enough. Therefore, I lit every candle I had and arranged them around the room, giving the impression I'd created a shrine to Bly's past.

When the groundskeeper had referred to that room as a storage place, he had not mis-categorized it. I thought I was going to encounter ten or fifteen boxes to go through. What greeted me instead were piles and piles of them. I estimated between fifty to sixty boxes of different sizes and in different conditions that had been stored there over the years. I could be stuck in this room for days, sifting through all that stuff. Some boxes were only banged up in a corner. Others, especially those at the bottom of the piles surrounding me, had caved in, bursting at the seams and exposing their contents. The one thing they had in common was the veil of dust covering them. Except for the wall where a window was, the rest were layered in boxes, giving the impression that

I had stepped into a fortress not unlike the shape of the tower that was still up. Mr. Goodwin had told Simon that part of the mansion had been shut down and there was no available access to the crumbling tower. Therefore, our appreciation of Bly was only partial. *And that is enough for me*, I thought. My initial love for the place was evaporating under the heat of its hidden horrors.

Having candles lit in a room so filled with flammable material made me uneasy, but there was no other way of doing this, so I rolled up my sleeves and got to work. The first ten boxes were a bust. They were filled with books and papers, mostly bills from the time Uncle Frank had renovated Bly. Plates and kitchen items, various house ornaments, such as vases and porcelain statuettes, occupied several boxes.

The next batch of boxes I set my eyes on got me excited. I thought I had hit the jackpot when I lifted one of the flaps and spotted what appeared to be fabric. However, those boxes ended up being even more time-consuming than the first ten, as I had to remove each piece of fabric to inspect it and make sure I didn't miss anything. They were filled with linens, bedsheets, curtains, and tablecloths but nothing that resembled clothing. Having to put everything back in the boxes after not finding the dress was disheartening and infuriating. *Who had the brilliant idea to mail my grandmother's wedding dress to Bly after the wedding?*

After Grandma Flora got married, she had left London for her honeymoon in Vienna. She and my grandfather Alfred had already acquired a townhouse in London, where they would eventually settle for good

and form a family. Mrs. Grose had packed my grandmother's belongings when my grandparents were on their honeymoon, ordering the help to arrange a coach and move her things to the new house.

However, when my grandparents returned, my grandmother noticed her wedding dress was nowhere to be found. What Mrs. Grose discovered was that one of the maids had mailed the box with the wedding garments to Bly Manor. Mrs. Grose and my grandmother emphatically denied having ordered that, while the maid stated that the box was labeled with Bly's address and had a note reading "Urgent. Send by mail."

Neither my grandmother nor Mrs. Grose ever found out what had occurred for this mistake to happen. None of the help knew about Bly Manor, except for Mrs. Grose, and by the time my grandmother got married, it had been twelve years since they both had abandoned the place. Also, Mrs. Grose was illiterate, so she never could've written that note or Bly's address.

It didn't make any sense for anyone to think my grandparents would settle down at Bly. My grandmother had a known aversion to this place, and to even mention its name would upset her. My grandfather Alfred started managing the property as soon as they got married, arranging for it to have a groundskeeper and whatever was necessary to prevent the place from falling apart. Eventually, when they had children, it was my uncle Frank who took on Bly as his personal project, without much success.

The wedding gown remained, until that moment, missing. I knew my grandmother loved that dress dearly,

but coming to Bly to get it was simply out of the question. The only time I had tried to talk about it with her, she didn't answer my questions and simply left the room.

My constant sneezing as I moved boxes, papers, and linens did not lessen my frustration. I had started with the boxes closest to the door, but after many failed attempts, I understood my strategy had been wrong. I needed to focus on the boxes at the back of the room, closer to the window, as that place was the farthest from the door. It wasn't illogical to think that the oldest boxes had been stored first by placing them at the end of the room, and as the space got more and more populated, the boxes were set closer to the entrance.

I quickly realized this new section I had approached was related to Bly's most distant past. The first box I focused on was filled with papers so thin and yellow. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that those papers were not just papers. It was mail. One of the first envelopes I took out had an address from Harley Street written on it.

"Grandma Flora's uncle," I concluded. I didn't remember his name, yet I knew he was a doctor. Why was his correspondence here at Bly?

The envelope was open, so I decided to take a peek. It wasn't much of a letter; it was more of an announcement, as its shortness demonstrated. I was surprised to find the letter concerned my grandmother's brother, Miles. The piece of paper I was reading communicated to their uncle that Miles's boarding school would not be able to take him in for the next

school year. They were kicking him out; that much was clear, though the message did not give any reason as to why they didn't want him back.

Going by the date on the letter, I calculated my grandmother's age at eight years old, which would have made her brother ten years old. What could a ten-year-old child possibly do that was so unacceptable? Then it hit me. *This must've happened close to his death.*

I knew he had passed away at Bly, but Grandma Flora didn't talk about the reasons behind his death or anything related to that period of her life. The little I knew about her childhood was mostly to do with the fact that she confided in my grandfather, and I had squeezed the information out of him. This part of her life had stayed hidden behind black clouds, heavy with tears she refused to shed in public.

There was not much I could do with that letter, so I returned it to its envelope. Yet there was another thing inside that box calling my attention. It was a thick manila envelope, and it was different from anything else in there. I removed it from the box to inspect it. It was heavy and had remained unopened through time. Unlike the letter, this had been mailed to Bly with no specific name to go along with the address.

Although this wasn't what I was looking for, I felt this package was of importance. I couldn't put it back in the box without opening it first. What harm could it do? I ripped open one side of the manila envelope without much of a struggle, due to its fragility, and looked inside. The package was so thick and heavy because there was a stack of paper inside. I carefully

removed its contents. The stack of papers, about two inches tall and tied with twine to keep it together, came out with a small envelope. I picked it up and turned it around.

“Flora,” I read, surprised.

There was no way now I would leave that envelope unopened. Inside, I found a small note written in a beautiful feminine handwriting.

*“My dearest Flora,*

*I have written this in case you ever want to find out what truly happened to Miles. There is only one other copy, and it is in my possession. It will remain that way until the end of my days.*

*I hope you forgive me for this intrusion, but this address is the only way I have to contact you, as any letter I sent to your uncle was returned to me unopened.*

*I wish things could’ve been different. Please know that you and your brother are forever ingrained in my heart. I pray you can, despite all, lead a life of happiness and purpose.”*

The missive’s words floated around me, eating up the oxygen in the room. There was no signature at the bottom. I now had the confirmation I was dealing with that specific dark time of my grandmother’s childhood, the time she had locked behind a door of silence and sorrow. I felt cold for the first time since I’d stepped inside that room.

When I was able to unglue my eyes from the letter, I focused on the stack of papers. It wasn’t a simple pile of sheets. It was a story, a story written in the same beautiful calligraphy I had appreciated in the note. I moved aside the twine tying it together and read the first page of the manuscript. It was evident it had been

written by one of their governesses, possibly the last governess Flora and Miles had at Bly.

“Certainly the last governess Miles had,” I concluded, caressing the curly words populating the page in front of me while missing someone I had never met.

“Ida, come check this out!” I heard Simon calling me, and the satisfaction on his voice was undeniable.

I headed toward the bedroom, carrying the manuscript with me to put it away with my purse, only to find that he had finally lit a fire in the fireplace. His teeth seemed whiter than ever as he smiled, pointing at his accomplishment, because his face was covered in ash dust.

“See? Now we won’t freeze to death!” He was glowing. “But I think we should stay in this bedroom because I am not going to do this again—”

I stopped hearing what Simon was saying. My ears were suddenly inundated by a child’s laughter coming from the hallway. I had heard it before, downstairs, in the kitchen, before the runaway apple incident. “Do you hear that?” I cut Simon’s celebration abruptly.

I tossed the manuscript on the bed and ran out to the corridor. There was no one there. In turn, I realized the laughter was coming from the storage room. I burst into the place ready to catch the child that had been playing tricks on me. A neighbor’s kid? Did we even have neighbors at Bly? Did Mr. Goodwin have grandsons? But what child would be playing out in the dark night?

Despite all my conjectures, just like before, I found

nothing. It was a disembodied child's laughter, which made it impossible to be caught. And what initially had been cute was now turning out to be a shade closer to chilling. However, the room did not look exactly as I had left it. Yes, the opened mail box was still there, but now there was another box opened close by. The box's lid was lifted, and a piece of white cloth was sticking out.

"Oh my God..." I sputtered. That was not my doing. I had not opened that container.

I leaped toward the box and stuck my hand inside of it. I grabbed a handful of fabric and pulled it out. This was it. White, long, and more beautiful than I could possibly imagine it to be. I had found it! I couldn't contain the squeal of happiness that emerged from me and bounced off the walls. I pressed the gown against my body and danced in circles around the room.

"What is it now?" Simon shouted, entering the room. "Is it bats? I am sure this house is infested with them—" He became quiet as he contemplated my demented dance. "What are you doing?"

"I found it! This is it! This is Grandma Flora's wedding dress!"

"Well, thank God, because this place, Ida—" Simon's train of thought was completely derailed as he focused his eyes away from me. "I'm trying to keep the place warm, and you have a window open?"

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

I stopped dancing and looked at the window behind me. He was right. But I hadn't opened that window. Had it been like that all along? The place had felt

suffocating at first, so I doubted it. Was it closed when I first stepped in?

Out of nowhere, a wicked gust of wind came in through the window and engulfed us. I held onto the dress even tighter. At that moment I realized that when I pulled the dress out of the box in a rush, I hadn't noticed that the veil had come out as well, falling to the floor. Now the wind picked it up and was making it turn and twirl, floating like a ghost, bending itself with ease like a spineless being born out of the things that dreams are made of. Soon enough, amidst this shapeless dance with the wind, the veil got sucked out by its invisible partner and before I could react, it flew out the window.

"Oh no! The veil!" I hurried to it, but it was too late. I could see the veil floating down, getting dangerously close to the lake I had also appreciated from my bedroom. "No, no! Please don't drop in the water!" I pleaded with the suddenly animated object.

I had to act fast. I stuck the wedding dress inside the empty box and picked it up.

"Ida, what are you doing?"

"Getting my veil back, Simon."

I exited the room and placed the box with the dress in the hallway. I wasn't planning on leaving of the house with the gown, but I couldn't quite leave it inside the room as it was. Clearly, the wind was a stronger adversary than I had anticipated.

"It's too dark outside!" Simon shouted in my direction as I ran downstairs, pushing my legs as fast as they would go. I knew that if the veil touched that lake, I would never see it again.

Once outside, I found myself embraced by darkness thicker than I had anticipated, and the cold wind did not help. I stopped for a second, trying to figure out the landscape. I wasn't quite sure where the lake was located. But then *it* came to help me. Again. The child's laughter.

I heard it to my left, so I skirted the house in that direction, avoiding tripping on the debris of the crumbled tower on my way to the back of the manor. The laughter became sharper as I approached it, but I had no definite idea where it was coming from. It simply floated in the wind, feeding itself off of my own determination.

It was a moonless night, and that made the solitude of the place feel heavier. At last, I distinguished some wild grass and weeds that stuck out from the rest of the foliage because they were taller, unrulier. This vegetation formed a belt around what looked like a smooth surface, but I quickly understood it wasn't. I occasionally caught a glimpse of a shimmer here and there, sometimes coming, sometimes going, and presumed they were waves on the lake. I was still about fifty feet away from it, so I had to pick up my pace.

The laughter pierced through the moonless sky. I looked up and saw the veil floating above my head, but it was too high for me to snatch it away from the wind's claws. It kept doing the same dance as before, slow and delicate, as if the veil were trying to choreograph laziness. My eyes remained fixed on the spectacle unfolding so I could spot the place where it would touch the ground.

But the sudden sound of footsteps behind me startled me. The brushing of feet against the grass was so distinctive out there in the loneliness of the night that I could tell it was a heavy body coming at me. I turned swiftly, ready to face whatever or whoever was there. To my surprise, it was an opponent I could not fight. A man's hat was rolling on the grass, propelled by the wind. It was like the wheel of a monocycle, spinning in solitude. I felt it had a clear idea of where it was going.

The owner of the hat was not in sight, and I was grateful for that. I witnessed the hat's path, feeling my joints getting stiffer by the second. I also felt the night's dew permeate my shoes.

As the headless hat bypassed me, I turned on my heel and discovered that my veil had finally descended. It was wrapped around something I presumed was the trunk of a tree that had been cut, as it had no top or branches at all. I ran to it, leaving the hat to meet its fate. I thought I'd been lucky that the veil had gotten stuck on this trunk, which was—I realized as I approached it—right next to the lake.

Out of breath, I reached the veil, noticing the wind was still very much present, forcing it to stay pressed against the trunk of the tree. The stronger it pressed, the more the trunk's odd silhouette became defined. Near the top of the shape, there appeared to be a hole, and as the wind kept pushing the veil, its outline emerged perfectly. Perhaps it wasn't the trunk of a tree after all.

I yanked the veil away. By that point I didn't care to preserve its integrity. All I wanted to do was run for the safety to the house. Horrified, I stepped back. I was

holding on to the veil so tightly my knuckles were turning white, as if I could transform it into armor that would protect me from what I was witnessing.

The figure hiding behind the veil was a human one, and what I thought to be a hole was a mouth. An unnaturally open mouth. It was the crying woman I had encountered in the bathtub, with her dislocated mandible. It was she who had tried to swallow this delicate piece of fabric with her perennially open mouth. She was wearing a Victorian-era dress, although it seemed like it had been in a battlefield, as the dress was torn and tattered with muddy blotches everywhere. Her hair was nothing but soggy strings. Her entire body was drenched, water constantly dripping from her, creating a puddle around her that wasn't absorbed by the ground.

Like I had seen her in the bathroom, she was covering her eyes with her hands, and by the way her body shuddered, it was evident she was still crying. Once again, I couldn't deny her sadness was contagious. There was a lump growing in my throat, pushing up tears so they could be set free to run down my face. Fear was also present, along with the nagging belief that I had played with fire and gotten burned to the bone.

I couldn't stay there; even though I felt the urge to help her, I remembered what had happened in the bathroom. I didn't want to be around when she removed her hands. I ran even harder this time, pushing my legs to the point where I felt my kneecaps would split in half.

I reached the manor, still holding on to the crumpled white ball the veil now was. I closed the door behind me

and leaned against it to catch my breath. The dress, which I had left out in the hallway, came back to my memory, and I feared it might not be there anymore.

“Ida, did you catch it?” I heard Simon in the kitchen.

I managed to answer a dry “yes,” as my throat was sore, and the side of my face felt tender.

“I’m heating some of that canned soup Mrs. Goodwin send us!” my brother said as I ran upstairs. I didn’t want him to see me so disheveled.

I laid eyes on the box out in the corridor as I climbed the last steps and sighed in relief. Yet as I approached it, I understood it was a victory I had declared too soon. The box was empty. And the wedding gown was nowhere to be seen.

Desperate, I stepped into the storage room, believing I would find the dress hanging from the windowsill if I was lucky. The wind had blown out the candles, and the room was now barely illuminated by the feeble threads glowing inside the lightbulbs. But the gown was not at the window, which was now closed.

My grandmother’s wedding dress was neatly lying on the floor, surrounded by the boxes containing Bly’s past. And it had a lump at its waistline. The wedding dress appeared to be...

“Pregnant!” I gasped.

It truly looked like a pregnant bride was lying before me. I approached the gown with wobbly feet and picked it up, only to discover that it was not an illusion. The wedding dress was indeed pregnant with something. It was the hat I had seen rolling around out in the yard.

“No, no... This isn’t possible. This isn’t happening...” I muttered as I lumped everything together, veil and dress, into one ball and walked backward without taking my eyes away from the baby-hat. Once I found myself out in the corridor, I closed the door loudly. I didn’t even bother to turn off the lights. What was the point? Light or darkness, nothing prevented them from invading Bly through every crack they could find. Because that much I knew: I was dealing with *them*.



WE ATE our dinner in Simon’s bedroom. He ate most of it, anyway, and was now snoring in the bed behind me, as the pain on the side of my face had gotten worse. While the night progressed into a timid dawn that began to peek at me through the window, the throbbing became more precise, and I felt it now at my jaw joint.

I had barely eaten anything, mostly drank tea, heating the water in the fire I had fed throughout the night. Not only could I not eat nor sleep, but I had also developed an insatiable hunger for words. The words of the manuscript written by my grandmother’s governess, to be more precise.

Now I knew. I knew what had happened to Miles, my grandmother’s brother, and why she hardly ever talked about him or her years spent at Bly. Grandma Flora had a much more painful childhood than I ever imagined. However, the hours I spent at Bly until that moment had given me a fair idea of what she had

endured. Despite the ambiguity ingrained in the governess's tale, there was one thing I knew to be true and that led me to believe this wasn't a silly ghost story crafted during a rainy night.

"They are still here," I concluded as I turned the last page of the manuscript, which unfortunately did not mean their story was over.

I now understood why my grandmother mistrusted men who wore no hats, and why she was adamant about never sending her children far away, or living in the countryside herself. She wanted to be surrounded by people. Honorable people. People who were alive.

I also had a better grasp of who my visitor at the kitchen had been and why I had immediately distrusted him. He was one of Bly's horrors. Yet that woman, the governess that mysteriously died, Miss Jessel, did not infuse in my body the same sensation of dread he did, that awful impression that my blood was returning to my heart and refusing to travel through my body. Peter Quint and his hatless head made me feel like that.

I was confident there was something else hidden in the gap between the different sensations the apparitions gave me. Everyone knew how Peter Quint had died, but Miss Jessel's tale remained shrouded in obscurity. Her story was one tainted by the presence of him. He was always there, even if it was a part of him he did not use.

"That damned hat," I remembered.

I pondered the wedding dress arranged on the floor, covering his hat, an item that clearly refused to stay on his head.

"No, not covering. Pregnant. She was pregnant with

his child.” I tied those loose ends. I appreciated that the wedding dress wasn’t important only to me. In a way, it was also important to Miss Jessel. “She didn’t want to have an out-of-wedlock child.”

I gazed into the fire. The flames were blazing, but they didn’t carry enough energy to keep me warm. I moved my jaw from side to side, massaging the side of my face, trying to relieve the stiffness I felt.

“She wanted to get married to him, but that wasn’t an option for her. Is that why she still lingers here? Did Miss Jessel commit suicide, as was implied by Mrs. Grose’s reaction?”

I wasn’t expecting any sort of answer from a house that was more dead than alive, but I did receive one. A persistent dripping sounded, carving its place out of the silence of the mansion. And I knew exactly where it was coming from.

I got up from the armchair where I had been reading all night. I didn’t even bother to put on my slippers or pull my coat over my nightgown. Holding on to the governess’s manuscript, I made my way to the dripping while the floorboards squeaked under my weight. The house was complaining. It had endured too much.

I slipped into the bathroom. It wasn’t the faucet by the sink that couldn’t control itself. It was the one in the bathtub. As I approached it with careful steps, my feet became wet. This time the water had overflowed the bathtub. I knew *they* were going to be in there. Unfortunately, I felt in my bones this would be the only way to get my answers.

I leaned in, expecting to see Miss Jessel crying once again for the mess her life had turned out to be. But the water only gave me my reflection back, altered by the waves the constant dripping generated. It was such a perfect mirror. Then a shadow materialized behind my reflection, taking the shape of Peter Quint.

Before I could step away, with unthinkable force, he shoved my head into the water. I flapped my arms around, trying to break free of him. I had my eyes open and saw the little air bubbles looking so innocent as they ran away from me. It wouldn't be long before I started inhaling water. I was going to die.

Without any explanation, the force pushing me down disappeared just as fast as it had materialized, and I was able to pull away. Still clenching the manuscript—now wet—in my hand, I crawled backward to get away from the tub. I recognized what Peter Quint had done. He had spared my life, so I would remember who was the boss, who was in charge of Bly. However, in his fury to mark his territory like a rabid dog, he had also given me the information I needed.

“He murdered her,” I spat out, my throat hoarse. “He drowned her when he found out she was expecting his child.”

Miss Jessel had not committed suicide. Or perhaps she did, the moment she became entangled with Peter Quint.

Drops kept falling from the faucet into the now half-empty tub. There was water dripping from the walls after Peter Quint's visit.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*But why was she here at Bly?*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*He murdered her here.*

I scrambled to my feet and got out of the bathroom, holding on to the manuscript for dear life. The water had now spilled out to the corridor and was cascading down the staircase. This was completely unnatural. There was not enough water in that bathtub to cause this effect.

“She’s here. She’s here...” I kept repeating, out of breath, as I traveled down the corridor and headed toward the staircase, leaning against the walls so I wouldn’t slip and fall.

“Ida, what is going on? What time is it?” Simon’s questions, mixed with a yawn, reached me from the bedroom. I didn’t have time to waste answering his questions. I had one last question of my own.

As I had done hours before, I ran downstairs and into the gardens, barefoot and with my wet nightgown stuck to my body. My left hand was gripping the manuscript as if it were the only thing giving me the energy to move forward. If I let it go, I would lose the grasp I had on Bly’s wicked story.

This time I knew exactly where I was going. My muscles were so tense as I frantically ran toward the lake that I thought they might actually rip away from my bones. I only stopped when I found myself standing at the edge of the lake. I vaguely heard my brother calling to me—he clearly had realized I had exited the

house—but I was too absorbed by what was unfolding in front of me to give him any attention.

The ripple effect. Now that the dawn was upon us, I could see with clarity that the wavy pattern I had witnessed on the bed, in the mirror, and in the bathtub was a reproduction of the waves spreading out from a specific point on the lake and flooding the entire manor. At the same time, it was a pattern that pointed to the exact place I needed to go. I didn't stop to think twice about what had to be done. I walked into the lake. Its freezing water could not stop me.

“Are you crazy?” I heard Simon behind me as I headed straight to the point of origin of the waves.

The water had risen a few inches above my waistline by the time I reached the spot. I held my left hand up in the air, trying to protect the manuscript as I explored and dug the lake's muddy floor with my feet. The water was moving, and bigger waves were coming at me from a different direction, erasing the pattern that had led me to this place.

“Ida!”

As Simon entered the lake, risking everything I had found until that moment, my foot tapped on a hard and smooth surface. It was a thin object shaped like a boomerang. I held my breath and squatted down, submerging myself in the freezing water. However, it wasn't as clear as the water in the tub, so even though I tried to open my eyes, it didn't garner any result. The fact that I kept holding my arm out of the water hindered my capacity to reach the lake's ground, as I

was stretching in two different directions at once. I had to choose my battles.

I pulled my hand into the lake as I unclenched my fist and let my grandmother's story float away from me. A story I now understood was also that of all the women who had lived at Bly Manor in its final years.

Just as I felt a pair of hands grabbing me, I was able to get ahold of the hard object my feet had discovered. I gasped for air when Simon pulled me up, trembling and as stiff as a table at the same time. The look on his face was that of one who had seen a mad person in action.

"Have you lost your mind? What the hell are you doing? Do you want to freeze to death?" He grabbed me by the arms, trying to shake an answer out of me.

"She's here," I told him, although he did not understand.

Exhausted and satisfied at the same time, I lifted one hand out of the lake, exposing the jawbone with only a few teeth left that I had found buried under the water.

The pages of the governess's manuscript floated around us, creating a halo of protection. The lake was now still, as it hadn't been in decades, while the water washed away the ink from the pages and their story became unwritten.



"IS THIS ABOUT RIGHT, MISS?" Mr. Goodwin asked when he finished digging the rectangular hole I had asked him to dig that morning before Simon and I could get in the car and drive away. "Do you need it to be deeper?" He

removed his hat and scratched his head, not fully understanding why we were doing it.

“No, that’s quite all right. Thank you.”

I stepped down into the hole and arranged the wedding dress on the ground, extending it as I had found it in the storage room. Then I asked Simon to place the jawbone where her mouth should’ve been. My brother refused to let me keep digging in the lake and see if I could find any more bones, so this would have to be enough. I stepped out of the grave and looked at the skeleton bride. This was as much of a funeral as I could give her.

“Okay, Mr. Goodwin. You can start covering her up,” I instructed him.

I had chosen a spot beneath an old tree, away from the lake but with a nice view of what was left of Bly Manor. I thought it had been quite a Solomonic decision. Miss Jessel would keep the wedding gown, and I would take the veil back home with me to wear at my wedding.

“Ida”—Simon shook his head as the dirt began to cover the white gown—“I don’t understand you. You were crazy about that dress.”

The tree leaves danced above our heads as a gentle breeze played with them. A child’s laughter was heard in the distance.

“She needs it more than I do, Simon.”

The End



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TRINIDAD GIACHINO is an indie writer from Buenos Aires, Argentina. After many failed attempts, Trinidad has managed to combine her stage training background and her studies in literature and linguistics from Buenos Aires University (UBA) into one single purpose: to craft deeply human characters with a dark side that we can all relate to.

A yoga enthusiast, a cat lover, and a wannabe Flamenco dancer, Trinidad shares her days with felines, canines, and the occasional human while creating—or embodying—stories. She is also constantly trying to trick her palate by exchanging high coffee dosages for the always less amicable cup of tea (which we all know is a fruitless enterprise, but oh well, one can dream...)

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## CONNECT WITH THE AUTHOR

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