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WHEN I THINK OF HARTWOOD HALL, THERE ARE MOMENTS that come back to me again and again, moments that stain me, that cling like ink to my skin.

My first view of the house: a glimpse of stone, of turrets and gables, tall windows and long grass.

The sound of Louis's laugh. Bright and golden, eager and young.

Paul's hands in my hair, his body pressed against mine.

The silver locket, the dim portrait of the lost girl faded and worn within.

Lying cold in my bed at night, covers pulled tight around me, listening with my good ear to murmurs and taps in the darkness.

A figure in the distance, a shimmer beyond the lake. There, in the corner of my eye one moment. The next, vanished, leaving an empty impression behind.

The sound of a gunshot in the dark, running footsteps, burning flames and black, black sky.

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# VOLUME ONE

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## CHAPTER I

FOUR WEEKS AFTER WE BURIED MY HUSBAND, I FOUND myself in the back of a carriage, trundling slowly uphill. The road was rough, the carriage ill-built, my black dress heavy, my eyes heavier. I had that kind of tiredness running through me that comes not from lack of sleep but from lack of rest, lack of calm. My body ached for something new.

Beyond the windows, I could see sweeping hills, tall grass swaying in hedged fields, rows of trees in distant apple orchards. We rattled by farmhouses and far-off villages, passed great houses set back from the road. Then green-brown wilderness for miles, not another carriage or even a labourer in sight. The sun streamed down on rivers and pathways, on dairy fields and scattered trees. This was a quiet part of the world, all mud and sun and sky.

I had caught the Great Western Railway from London to Bath the day before, emerged into a busy station in a cloud of steam. I'd stayed overnight in a quiet inn, then taken the post-chaise to a town I had never heard of. From there, a carriage was sent to meet me. I had thought at first it must be from the house, but when I enquired after Mrs Eversham, the driver only scrunched up his nose and said, 'I don't know, ma'am. Never heard of Hartwood Hall before now.'

He had been instructed from afar, I supposed. He knew

no more about Hartwood Hall than I did, and that was precious little. That the mistress was called Mrs Eversham. That she, like me, was a widow. That she, unlike me, had a child. Louis Eversham. My new charge. A boy of ten years old.

And that was all.



I had met only with an agent in London – a stout woman of around fifty with iron-grey hair. The study in her house in Cheapside was grey, too, with dull-coloured furniture and cushionless chairs, a huge ledger adorning the pedestal desk.

‘And you have been at several places, I see?’ she’d asked, surveying my references.

‘Yes.’

‘You are nine-and-twenty?’

‘Yes.’

‘This last character is from three years ago.’

I swallowed. Another mark against me. ‘I have been married, ma’am.’

She glanced up, taking in my black dress, my widow’s cap, with a quick nod. ‘A recent loss?’

I hesitated. If I told her how recent, she would think ill of me at once. ‘A little while ago,’ I said slowly.

That seemed to satisfy her. ‘You play the pianoforte, of course?’

‘Yes.’

‘French? German? Latin?’

‘Proficient in all, ma’am.’

‘You can teach mathematics and the sciences as well as reading and writing?’

‘Certainly.’

She glanced back down at her desk. ‘I see you have some trouble hearing.’

‘None that has ever caused me difficulty, ma’am,’ I said at once. ‘I cannot hear in my left ear, but my right is very good. You will see, I think, that my former mistress mentions it only to note how little it affected my abilities.’

Once more she nodded, and I shifted uneasily in my chair. I needed work. I needed something. I had lost positions before because of my bad ear. Some mistresses caught word my hearing wasn’t perfect and decided another woman would be more suitable for their child.

‘That won’t be a problem,’ she said. ‘I believe I may have something for you, Mrs Lennox.’

I breathed out. Here was salvation. A life to build. A fresh start.



That was a week ago. Characters from my previous employers had been sent, letters had been exchanged, and finally I was engaged. And now I was sitting in this carriage, heading towards my new life. It felt as though I had never been anything but a governess, as though it had been only a few weeks since I left my last place. Three years of my life, vanished into thin air. Three years of my life, and nothing but widow’s weeds to show for it. I thought of Richard, his dark eyes, his freckled face, his gaunt figure those last few weeks.

I shut my eyes tight.

Beyond the carriage windows, the weather was turning. The sky had darkened from blue to mottled grey. I reached

into my skirt pocket for my watch – well, Richard’s watch, though it was mine now – and saw that it was not yet seven o’clock. I heard a rumble of thunder, and the coachman outside uttered a curse.

I had meant to think over future lessons in the carriage, to remind myself what a boy of ten might need to learn. But every time I tried to concentrate, I thought of Richard’s face and my mind baulked.

It was not my fault I was returning to work so soon. Everything else aside, I needed the money. I had spent the last four weeks in cramped lodgings, living off the sale of a necklace Richard had given me when we were first married. Even my mourning was reused; I had been forced to make the best of the black dresses I had worn when my mother died, darning here and there, turning out a seam, unplucking tighter threads at the waist.

A bad start, perhaps, for a widow – but it was not as though I had ever been a good wife.



Two hours later, the rain was furious and the darkness immense. The road seemed all turned to mud, and the horses were whinnying. I was about to call out and ask the driver how long it might be until we arrived when the horses began to slow.

Beyond the window, to one side, I could make out nothing but tangled hedges. When I looked to the other side, I could see the hazy glow of lamplight, just visible in the distance. Then the coachman’s face appeared at the window, making me start.

‘Sorry, ma’am,’ he said. He was wet through, tufts of grey

hair matted to his forehead below his hat. 'I don't know the way from here, 'specially in weather like this. See yonder – that's the village. Hartbridge, I believe. Bound to be a public house there. Someone'll know the way.' He hesitated. 'The track'll be rougher into the village. I could walk, or—'

'No,' I said, not out of compassion for him as much as because I did not relish the thought of sitting alone in a storm. 'You will only catch a chill on an evening like this.'

He nodded. 'Thank you, ma'am.'

The road that led to Hartbridge village was indeed in a bad state of disrepair, and the carriage jolted over every stone, caught on each bramble. Gazing out of the window, I saw shadowy shapes in the dimness – scattered farmhouses and cottages, I supposed, the occasional patch of what must be yet another orchard – and then the dark black of water, a river snaking its way through the landscape. We rattled over an old stone bridge, and back on to the rough road.

By the time we reached the public house, the rain was falling harder still. The building stood out, its lamps aglow in the darkness. It was an old, quaint sort of place, the walls made of sandy grey stone, the roof thatched.

As the coachman dropped from his perch and walked up to the inn, I pulled the window down. I could smell the cider from here, a tang of apples that filled the air. We were only a few yards away from the open door. A man stood on the threshold, looking out into the gloom, dressed in dark trousers and a worn shirt, with an apron over his clothes that told me he must be the landlord.

I turned myself around so that my good ear was nearer to the conversation. The rain was thunderous, but still I could make out the landlord's voice.

‘You’ll have to wipe your boots bloody hard before you come in here,’ he was saying.

‘I don’t want to come in,’ the coachman replied. ‘And you’d best not swear – there’s a lady in the carriage.’

The landlord gave an incredulous smile. ‘We don’t get many ladies here.’

‘I’m taking her up to Hartwood Hall. Can you direct me?’

The man hesitated, and his expression changed from one of amused surprise to one of distaste. ‘Hartwood Hall?’ he repeated. ‘Don’t get folks going there much.’

‘Do you know where it is?’

He hesitated. ‘You certain it’s Hartwood Hall?’

This was absurd. I opened the door and stepped down, feeling my boots sink into the mud. I was two yards from the carriage before I realized I had forgotten my bonnet. If the landlord had doubted I was a lady before, he would certainly do so now.

‘Is there any reason,’ I asked, ‘why I should not go to Hartwood Hall?’

The coachman started when he heard me speak close at hand. ‘Ma’am, you might have waited in the carriage.’

‘Nobody ever goes to Hartwood Hall,’ said the landlord slowly.

‘There is a family called the Evershams living there, I believe. I am engaged to be governess to the little boy.’

He raised his eyebrows. Then, addressing the coachman, not me, he said, ‘It’s north of here. Go back to the main road and on about a mile – there’s a path up through the woods to the house. Once you come out of the trees, you’ll find it. Big, grand place.’

Beside me, the coachman was nodding, seemingly satisfied. He murmured his thanks and was about to turn back

to the carriage when I said, again, 'But is there any reason I should not go there?'

I spoke in the voice I used with young charges who would not confess to mischief.

'No reason, miss,' the landlord said. 'Folks say it's cursed, but I dare say a lady like yourself wouldn't believe such talk.'

'Of course not.'

The coachman took a step towards the carriage.

'What are the family like?' I asked. 'Mrs Eversham and her son?'

'Couldn't tell you. Never seen them since they came, and that was seven years ago now.'

'And the servants?'

He shrugged. 'They keep themselves to themselves. No one from hereabouts works up there, save Paul Carter.'

My coachman was with the horses now, and my dress was becoming heavy with rain. I thanked the landlord, perhaps not very graciously, and struggled back through the mud to the carriage, thinking over his words.

*Cursed.*

How ridiculous. How thoroughly foolish.

I heard the horses neigh and sat back, wet through, as we began to move.

After a mile or two, I could make out the woods, a dense black shape in the distance. It was nearing ten, and I was late. The little boy would already be in bed.

The trees were mere shadows, twisting forms of curling branches and scattered leaves. Rogue brambles and undergrowth tapped and scratched at the carriage, and I heard the coachman swear and whip the horses to go faster.

Out in the darkness, amidst the driving rain, I saw



something stir in the woods, a shuffling, a shifting, a figure moving through the trees.

No, not a figure. An animal, no doubt. A deer in the moonlight, a bird preparing for flight.

Of course I did not believe the house was cursed – but when people feared a place, there was usually a reason. I must expect to find these Evershams strange.

At last we were out of the trees. As the horses pulled on, I saw rain falling on water, and a shadowy little building standing apart on the other side of the lake. I leant out of the window to look up at the main house, and found my head soaked at once.

Hartwood Hall was very grand. I could tell it must be the shape of a horseshoe, with the middle part of the house set back from its two wings, a courtyard in the centre – but in the darkness I could see only two towering shapes of grey stone, a dark void between them. I saw a dim light in a sash window in the east wing, and that was all. The rest of the house was dead.

This, then, was my new home.

We pulled up to the house, the horses complaining all the way. When we finally stopped, there was a splash of boots in mud and the carriage door opened.

‘Here we are, ma’am,’ said the coachman.

While he took my trunk and carpet bag from the carriage, I crossed the cobbled courtyard. The grey walls of the house, surrounding us on three sides, blocked out any moonlight the clouds had not smothered, and I had to wait for my eyes to adjust before I could make out the faint outline of a fountain in the centre of the courtyard, a tree growing close to one side of the house, and an ornate brass knocker on the huge oak doors.

I pulled it forwards, let it drop and bang.

We waited for some minutes in the driving rain. The coachman looked half drowned by the time I heard the heavy sound of bolts moving, and one of the double doors finally creaked open.

A woman stood before me. She was small, wearing a neat grey dress, her hair tucked beneath a mobcap. The housekeeper, to be sure. She looked somewhere between fifty and sixty, with little wrinkles about the eyes and a grave, set mouth. She held a candle in one hand.

‘You are Mrs Lennox, I suppose?’ Her voice was clipped and low, the accent not local. She sounded as though she might, like me, have come from Hampshire or Surrey.

‘Yes. I am sorry I am late. The weather—’

She nodded, and held the door open a little wider. As I stepped inside, she handed me the candle without a word, then took my trunk and carpet bag from the coachman and hauled them into the house. If he expected to be asked inside to dry himself by the fire, he was disappointed. He glanced between me and the housekeeper, then trudged slowly back to his horses. The housekeeper closed the door with a crash, and we were left alone in the dark.

She turned back to lock the doors, and I saw to my surprise that there were nearly a dozen bolts on the inside. She turned the key, pushed each bolt across and then headed towards the stairs.

I eased off my muddy boots, lifted them in one hand and followed her. The hall was all shadows. I was dimly aware that we had come to a wide staircase, that I was walking up after her in silence. I opened my mouth once or twice to speak, only to find myself unsure of what to say.

At the top of the stairs, we turned left, heading down a

carpeted hallway until the housekeeper stopped in the dark before one particular door. Setting my trunk on the floor, she pushed into the room.

I breathed out. It was cheerful enough, a glowing fire in the grate, a candelabra set on a chest of drawers. It was a good-sized room, with a curtained four-poster bed, a tall press to one side and a bookcase to the other. Across from that stood a dressing table that might double as a desk. The furniture was deep, rich mahogany, old but sturdy.

The housekeeper heaved my trunk in, and I tentatively placed my boots near the fire, embarrassed by my stockinged feet.

‘This is your room, Mrs Lennox.’

I smiled at her.

She did not smile back.

‘Thank you, Mrs—?’

‘Pulley,’ she replied. ‘I am the housekeeper here. You won’t have had supper?’

I was too tired for food. ‘I am not hungry.’

She nodded. ‘Mistress and Master are in bed. You shall meet them in the morning.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

She nodded briskly, glanced once around the room to check that everything was in order, then took the candle from my hand and stepped out into the corridor.

The door closed behind her with a firm click.

I peeled off my wet gown and rooted through my trunk for my nightdress. Then I sat down alone on the bed in my new room. With my right ear towards the door, I could hear Mrs Pulley on the stairs, the distant clatter of the kitchens. Then another noise, much closer at hand, and for a moment I expected her to reappear. But nothing followed.

I wondered how close my room was to my charge's, if he was awake a door or two down, playing on his own in the dark.

I climbed into bed, my eyelids heavy. I turned my head, put my good ear to the bedsheets, and lay there, wet and weary, in the silence of myself.

## CHAPTER II

I SLEPT LATE THE NEXT MORNING. THE THICK BED CURTAINS kept out the sun, and the mattress was comfortable – better than the one I'd had in lodgings these last few weeks, better than the bed in the spare room where I'd slept while Richard was ill.

A loud knock on the door finally roused me. I stirred slowly, rubbing my eyes. I'd half forgotten where I was, and when I opened the bed curtains, I stared blankly at the unfamiliar surroundings.

The flickering embers of my dream caught in my mind as I stumbled out of bed. I could still see Richard's face, hear the sound of hymns. He had been standing at my side by the altar where we were married, and when I turned towards him, his eyes were white and he was dead.

Another tap came and I hurriedly opened the door. Before me stood a maid – a young woman, not much beyond twenty, with a thin face and proud eyes and messy brown curls beneath her cap.

She was speaking as I opened the door, but in my weary state I only caught the word 'dead' and in the seconds before I said, 'Pardon?' I felt my heart constrict, and my first selfish thought was how hard it would be to have to find another position if the little boy had died suddenly in the night.

‘I said you must be dead tired. I tried to wake you an hour ago.’

‘Oh.’ I swallowed. ‘It was a long journey. I am a little deaf, so please knock as loudly as you like.’

She nodded, unfazed. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Margaret,’ I said, and then, with a sudden recollection of my position and hers, added, ‘Mrs Lennox. And you are?’

‘Susan. Housemaid. Well, maid-of-all-work, more like. There’s no nurserymaid so I do for Louis, too.’

‘Have you been here long?’

‘Eight months, nearly. Mary in the kitchen says the last girl got spooked.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

She glanced down at my nightgown and smirked. ‘You’d best get dressed and come to breakfast. Missus is always up late and Louis breakfasts with her, so they’re still at table. I’ll show you down.’



Ten minutes later, wearing the neatest of my old black dresses, my hair scraped into a tight bun, I followed Susan down to the breakfast room. The house seemed friendlier in the daylight. The sun streamed over dust motes, making the marble staircase golden. It must have been a very grand house when it was first built, but the tiles were chipped now, the steps uneven, the red walls faded and solemn, with some patches of brighter paint, as though vast portraits had once hung there.

We emerged into the entrance hall, and I kept myself to Susan’s left so that I could better hear anything she might say. All of yesterday’s shadows became clear – the

chandelier, the console tables, the grandfather clock. Carved faces leered above the doors. They, too, were in some state of disrepair – the first was missing its nose, the second its ear, the third half its face.

To one side ran a long corridor, down which Susan pointed. ‘That way’s the west wing – breakfast room and parlour and morning room and everything else. Missus’ll tell you what you can and can’t use. Stairs down to the kitchens and servants’ quarters are behind the main staircase. The schoolroom’s upstairs, next to your bedchamber.’ Then, turning towards a door to the east of the main entrance, she said, ‘That’s the library, there. Only room on this side of the house you’ll ever need. Beyond that’s the east wing.’ She nodded down a short stretch of corridor that ended in a closed door. ‘Did Mrs Pulley tell you about the east wing last night?’

I shook my head.

‘We’re not allowed there,’ said Susan. ‘It’s all closed up. Dangerous, like – rotten floorboards and such. Makes you wonder what the point of such a large house is if you can’t use it all. Still, there’s no understanding rich folk.’

She looked me up and down as she spoke, taking in my patched mourning dress, as though to confirm that her assessment of me was right. It had been a long time since a servant had spoken to me so freely, and I was not sure I liked it.

‘Anyway, stick west,’ she said. ‘Understand?’

We headed down the corridor, passing various closed doors before Susan stopped. I had barely a moment to feel nervous, to remember that the next few years of my life would depend on the people I was about to meet – and then the door was open and I was following Susan into a sunlit breakfast room, where two people sat at a vast rose-wood table.

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The first was a woman of perhaps five-and-thirty. She had dark hair – so very dark I might have thought the colour false had her son's not been the exact same shade. Her eyes were a greenish blue, her skin pale, her frame tall. She gave the impression of someone who had once been very beautiful but had lost a little of her shine, not through age so much as care and trouble. She was in half mourning, wearing a mauve dress with white lace trimmings.

Across from her sat the little boy. He had his mother's dark hair, but beyond that the resemblance stopped. His eyes were bright blue, his features delicate. Had I not been told he was ten years old, I should have thought him younger, for he was very small. Yet he seemed to have a healthy appetite: his plate was piled with bread and bacon and eggs. He had a smear of grease on his cheek and a napkin tucked into his collar. His shorts were the same blue-grey as his waistcoat and his shirtsleeves were rolled up.

'You must be Mrs Lennox,' he said, and a shy smile spread across his face. After a glance at his mother, he crossed the room and held out his hand. It trembled before I took it, but it was somehow a strong handshake for a boy so small. 'Mother says you're going to teach me everything.'

'I will certainly teach you as much as I can,' I replied. 'I hope you are eager to learn.'

'I hope so, too,' said Louis. 'And you are really my governess? I have never had one before.'

Ten years old and never yet had a governess! I was about to ask if he had been away to school when my new mistress spoke for the first time.

'Come, Louis, let Mrs Lennox sit down.'

The boy, somewhat abashed, reclaimed his chair and tucked into a mouthful of bacon.



I hesitated. I ought, of course, to sit down next to my charge, but the place set beside him was to his right – it would be harder to hear clearly. The seat beside Mrs Eversham was to her left, but I was not used to eating with the mistress of the house; it had never been the custom in my previous positions.

Perhaps seeing my difficulty, Mrs Eversham inclined her head to signal the seat beside her, and I moved to take it. As I sat down, I saw Susan quit the room.

Mrs Eversham, without standing, held out her hand to me. ‘I am glad to see you, Mrs Lennox. Thank you very much for coming.’ I had never had a mistress thank me before, and I must have shown my surprise, for she gave a slight, cool laugh. ‘We are very out of the way here, I know. It will not be a grand position, but Louis’s a good boy and keen to learn.’

‘He has never had a governess before?’ I asked.

‘Mama has been teaching me,’ he said, and his mother gave him a warning look for talking with his mouth full.

‘It is time Louis had proper instruction,’ Mrs Eversham said. ‘I am a poor teacher, I fear, and I am often away on business matters. I am going to London tomorrow, as it happens, so you will have a quiet first week here. You have met Mrs Pulley and Susan, I think? I will introduce you to the others after breakfast. Do help yourself.’

I had eaten nothing since a light luncheon the day before. I took bread and kippers and cold meats, and when my plate was full – though not quite as full as Louis’s – I began to eat, thinking over all I had heard. I wondered what sort of business would take Mrs Eversham regularly from home, and why she chose to live so far from London if she had cause to make frequent visits there.

As Mrs Eversham poured my tea, she asked after my journey.

‘A little wet,’ I replied, with a smile.

‘I ran out in the storm,’ said Louis, ‘and Mother was dreadful cross.’

‘Of course I was cross!’ The sudden urgency of Mrs Eversham’s tone surprised me. ‘Running out by yourself in the dark, on such a night as that! You know it is not safe, dear. You must never, ever wander off by yourself. You *know* this.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ he said, and looked solemnly down at his plate.

As I ate, Mrs Eversham told me about the house. There was only a small staff here, she explained: a housekeeper and one housemaid, a butler, a cook, a kitchen girl and one gardener. It was a surprisingly short list – at the Russels’, where I had worked before my marriage, there had been twenty-five servants for a house not much larger. She told me that the building itself was three hundred years old, that the grounds ran down to the woods in the south, and up to the hills in the north. We were two miles from the village of Hartbridge.

‘I came through it on my way here,’ I said. I half wanted to see what she would say about the village; it had been clear from the landlord’s words that the Evershams were not favourites there.

‘Oh, did you?’ She paused. ‘I own I am not fond of the place. They are . . . small-minded, the people of Hartbridge, and don’t take easily to outsiders. We never go into the village.’

After breakfast, Susan took Louis upstairs to wash his face before lessons began, and Mrs Eversham introduced me to the other servants. On the stairs, we encountered Mrs Pulley, and I found her as impassive as last night. She inclined her head to Mrs Eversham and merely blinked at me.

‘You’ve met our new governess, haven’t you?’

She nodded.

‘Mrs Lennox, if you need anything, ask Mrs Pulley. She is the best housekeeper anybody ever had.’

Mrs Pulley’s face remained expressionless. She said quietly, ‘Thank you, ma’am,’ and walked on.

Mrs Eversham had no qualms about going into the kitchen itself. It was a large room, with bare wooden floors, a big range and a mismatched array of plates lining the dresser shelves. It smelled of bread and apples, and I saw a pitcher of cider standing on one of the tables.

Here, Mrs Eversham introduced me to the cook, Miss Lacey – ‘Just Lacey’s fine by me, ma’am’ – a tall, loud woman in her early forties, and to Mary, the kitchen girl, not more than eighteen, with dark blonde hair and a pinched face.

‘We’re right glad to have you here, Mrs Lennox,’ Lacey was saying. ‘If you can keep Master Louis out of the kitchen, everyone’ll be happy. What an appetite that boy has! The food that goes out the larder while I’m asleep, I swear – enough to feed a man – and yet he’s such a little boy, for all that he’s trying to make himself big and strong.’

Behind her, Mary muttered something under her breath.

‘Oh, do be quiet, Mary. You’ll be saying next that all that food vanishes into thin air!’

After we had left the kitchen, Mrs Eversham showed me to the offices and introduced ‘John Stevens, our butler’, who rose from filling out the household accounts. He was a man

of about fifty, with dark hair, greying at the temples, and a gentlemanly face. He had a kind voice, with a faint northern lilt, and he greeted me with a cheerful, 'How do you do, Mrs Lennox?'

'Very well, thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you.'

'We are all glad to have you at Hartwood. I hope you will be happy here.'

There was something so terribly earnest about those last words that I could not help smiling. 'But of course,' I said.

And that was all – five indoor servants, and no more. I wondered if anyone would dare to ask me to help on laundry day. It seemed very singular, but Mrs Eversham made no comment on it, as though it were quite normal to run a grand country house with such a small staff.

'The east wing is entirely shut up,' Mrs Eversham went on. 'Please don't venture there – we never use it. That is the only part of the house that is out of bounds; otherwise, you must treat Hartwood quite as your home.'

This, at least, seemed a warmer welcome than I ever had at the Russels'. There I had been confined to my own bed-chamber and the schoolroom, banned from much of the rest of the house. Whatever the irregularities of Hartwood Hall were, I might find they worked in my favour.

On the way up to the schoolroom, Mrs Eversham outlined my duties. I was to teach Louis from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon each day, and be his companion in the early evening until Susan came at eight o'clock to get him ready for bed. I was to teach him mathematics and the sciences, as well as reading and writing, and modern and classical languages, and to walk with him in the grounds, to ensure he got enough exercise. In the evenings, my time was my own.

'There is one other thing I must mention,' Mrs Eversham

paused, and a flush of colour passed over her cheeks. 'Whenever you and Louis are outside in the grounds together, you must never let him out of your sight. Of course it is different within the house, but please do shut and lock the doors whenever you come in.' She tried to smile, though I saw she was very much in earnest. 'You will think me an anxious mother, I know, but this is very, very important. You are always to know where Louis is. You are to watch over him constantly. Do you understand?'

I looked at her in surprise. Her face was pale, her brow furrowed in concern. I said, 'Of course.'



Louis and I commenced our lessons that morning. It seemed even stranger that he had never had a governess before when I saw the schoolroom, for it had been furnished perfectly: a fine wide desk for Louis and a larger one for me, a huge globe resting on mine, and a low bookshelf running along one wall, packed full of fairy tales and storybooks. I spotted *Jane Eyre*, and Miss Edgeworth's *Moral Tales for Young People*, Pinnock's abridged histories, a leather-bound Bible and several volumes in Latin and French. One shelf was piled up with paper and ink and pens. The inkpots were half full, and the blackboard had evidently been used before.

Louis sat behind his desk, his legs folded beneath him. I pulled my chair forwards before I sat down.

'Today, Louis, we shall start by becoming better acquainted.' I smiled. 'Can you tell me what your mother has taught you?'

He frowned in concentration, his forehead puckering. 'We learnt lots of things.'

‘And what is your favourite thing to learn?’

‘I like learning about history,’ he said. ‘And I like reading – Mother is good at telling stories, and she always says that books are very, very important. I like French, too – but Latin is hard. I don’t like arithmetic much, and nor does Mama, but I do like learning about the globes, and – and scientific things, when it’s outside, insects and birds and everything. I like that. Not that we go outside much, but—’ He broke off, seemingly confused, and finished by drawing circles on the paper with his pen.

‘I’m glad to find you can read. Would you like to show me?’

He nodded eagerly.

‘Pick your favourite book off the shelves and read me the first chapter. Then I’ll read the next and ask you to write it down.’

He chose Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and began to read aloud. He read well, not just with accuracy but with feeling – and though he struggled over some of the longer words, we had got smoothly through several pages before I had time to think that it was a strange favourite for a ten-year-old.

He stopped at the end of the first section, and offered the book to me.

I read slowly to give him time to write, watching the movement of his hand as it travelled across the page. His handwriting was neat, though his press was too heavy, making the ink bleed into the page.

‘Why do you like *Frankenstein*?’ I asked, when I had finished.

He shrugged, suddenly shy. Then he said softly, ‘I like monsters.’

## CHAPTER III

WE HAD LUNCHEON IN THE BREAKFAST ROOM, JUST LOUIS and me. The table was spread with bread and hard local cheeses, and we both ate heartily. Afterwards, I suggested we take a walk in the grounds. Louis was a thin, weak-looking child, and I was sure he ought to take more exercise than he did. He looked hesitant at the idea of a walk, but then his face brightened and he asked, 'Can we see Paul?'

'Paul?'

'The gardener. He's my friend.'

I smiled. 'Do you have many friends your own age, Louis?'

Louis was busy putting on his boots and did not answer. When he finally looked up, he shook his head. 'I don't know any other children,' he said simply.

I studied his face for any traces of sorrow but found none; he seemed to take the isolation of his life for granted. I thought of my own childhood, playing in the river with the village girls, drawing hopscotch on cobblestones, racing marbles. My father had been a struggling surgeon; our home was small, our means always stretched – but I felt sorry for Louis, with his large, grand house and no friends to run and play with.

Out in the courtyard, the house towered above us. The roof was gabled, huge chimney turrets rising above greying

sandstone. Gargoyles and statuettes were tucked in corners and above windows. I glanced around us, at the cobbles, the dried-up fountain, a worn statue of a woman's frame rising out of the stone. I took in the tall apple tree to one side of the courtyard, its bright leaves and ripening fruit – and beyond it the east wing, where every curtain was drawn.

I followed Louis into the grounds. It was a warm, bright day, and the smell of fresh grass filled the air. To the south was the dark strip of woodland that enclosed half the grounds, a tight muddle of oak, ash and beech trees. To the east of the house was the lake, its dark water shimmering in the sunlight. On the other side was a little summer house, and beyond that the countryside spread up into open hills. These were large grounds for only one gardener to manage, but everything seemed well ordered. The rose garden was elegant, the vegetable garden neat, the topiary impressive – even the unruly parts of the garden were carefully, purposefully wild.

'These are beautiful grounds, Louis,' I said. 'Do you often play outside?'

He hesitated. 'Sometimes,' he replied, 'when Mother or Paul or Susan can watch me. I have to be careful, though. Mother says never to go into the woods or I might get lost.'

'Are there deer here?'

He blinked at me, surprised by the question, until I explained that 'hart' was an old word for deer.

'Oh. I didn't know that.' He smiled, as though the idea pleased him. 'No, I've never seen a deer. I should like to, though.'

'The village is down through the trees, I suppose?'

'Yes,' said Louis slowly. 'We don't go there much. Mother is the only one who can take me and she is often away. On



business,' he added, in a very grown-up way, as though he knew all about it.

'Well, I can take you into the village, now that I am here.'

Louis's eyes lit up. 'Oh, would you? I should like that.'

I looked across at him, this odd, lonely child. What a strange life his seemed to be.

For all today's warmth and sunshine, the grass was thick with last night's mud, and we tramped through it together. As we neared the east wing, I thought I saw something move in the summer house across the lake, a twitch of the curtains, and I stopped.

'Is there someone in the summer house?'

Louis shook his head. 'Only Mama and I use it.'

'Would you like to show it to me?'

Louis turned around. 'But – but I want to show you my garden.'

I smiled. 'Your garden?'

'Yes, my garden. You'll like it. Paul let me choose everything in it. There's a big oak that has been there for ever and ever and then Paul and I planted a little horse chestnut tree and lavender and Lent lilies and primroses and magnolias and dahlias.'

I glanced back at the summer house, but all was still. 'Very well, then. Lead the way.'

This he did, heading round the east wing, past curtained windows, across muddy grass and up gravel pathways. The house's age, its shabby grandness, made it an impressive sight. Ivy and other creepers climbed between the windows, stretching up towards the roof. The east wing was nearly as much green as it was stone.

Beyond the house there was a small outhouse that I

assumed to be the stables; it was newer, with red brick and a tiled roof, with one ordinary door and one wide enough for horses.

As we came around the back of the house, I saw at once what must be Louis's garden: a swing strung up from an ancient oak, surrounded by an odd assortment of plants – a mess of flowers, thistles and shrubs, with lavender and wild-flowers carpeting the ground. It was beautiful, in its way, Louis's little arcadia.

And then I saw a figure move out from behind the tree – the gardener Louis had mentioned, no doubt. I stopped, coloured and stepped back.

The young man was leaning over, cutting the grass with a pair of shears. His hair was a light auburn brown, unruly about his ears. He wore dark trousers rolled up to the knee, thick worn boots – and nothing else. His shirt and waistcoat lay discarded on Louis's swing a little way behind him, and his back shone with sweat in the sunshine. Without meaning to, I watched him for a moment, his strong arms, his broad shoulders – and I thought of the last man I had seen in such a state of undress, of Richard's thin frame, months ago, in the days when he still summoned me to his room.

And then the gardener looked round.

He stood up, startled, and turned quickly to gather up his shirt and pull it over his head. I looked away, embarrassed, but at my side Louis was laughing.

'It is only us, Paul. You must meet Mrs Lennox, my new governess. Mrs Lennox, this is Paul. He made my garden for me.'

The young man, now fully dressed, was scarlet. He approached us quickly, with a slight bow of his head.

'You'll forgive me, Mrs Lennox, ma'am. I'm not much