

503:

Bella

Lenore: The more I see of the house, the more I realize that I'm just one in a long line of inhabitants. I don't know old it is, but it must be much older than I first thought. It is beautiful, as I've said, but there are small imperfections that you only begin to notice when you have the time to look more closely.

The grand staircase that sweeps up the side of the foyer is the first thing you notice when you come through the big oak doors. But halfway up the stairs there is a small marring in the wall, a hole, that's been painted over but still shows through. It's almost like a bullet-hole, and it makes me wonder what sights this house has seen.

Likewise, there is a large stain on the foyer floor, underneath the big persian rug. It's old and faded, but definitely there—an irregular pale brownish, reddish patch more than two feet across, and beyond the rug you can sometimes see even fainter, smaller stains splashing like footprints toward the door to the parlor.

Similar instances can be found throughout the house. A small corner of wallpaper that has peeled up to reveal a robin's egg blue paint underneath. Small scarrings above the mantelpiece, like something has been rubbed away. By one of the doors on the upstairs landing there's a little brass plaque that once had writing on it—it's too scratched and faded now to read, except for the last few letters: "h-t-e-r," which is nonsense. Altogether it adds up to a story I can't quite read. At the very least it implies other stories, other histories, hidden beyond the naked eye.

In my art classes in Essex, Professor Straub once showed us an old oil painting. It was a simple landscape, pretty but nothing special or impressive. He pointed to the upper corner told us

to look closely. We crowded around to see. Faintly, another image was visible underneath the first. It was a face, a small figure in the background of a larger picture that had been painted over. The professor told us that when canvas is scarce, or expensive, painters often paint over existing paintings. They coat it in gesso and then make new art on top of the old. But it's often a clumsy job, and traces of the older painting show through, like a window into the past. Past images, past intentions, past lives, hovering just under the surface and sometimes, where the surface is thinnest, breaking through to announce themselves. The word for that kind of reemergence, where old layers intermix with the new, is "palimpsest." It's a beautiful word, and I've often thought about it since then. Because everything works like that, doesn't it? Maison d'Aubépine is no exception. It tries to hide. But it's all there, waiting to float up. The old can't be held down by the new. A painting, a house, a life. We are all palimpsests.

[Theme music; opening credits]

There is a door that I can't open. At first I thought that it was simply a supply closet—there are various nooks and pantries that Mrs. Perrault and Talbot use to keep brooms and polishes and whatever else they need. But those are never locked, and this door seems more important. The supply rooms are small, hidden doors meant to be unobtrusive. This is a large door with iron bindings. It's in a small room off the hallway between the parlor and the library, a room that is easy to miss, hidden as it is between the bookcases that line the hall. The room itself has a small couch and two matching chairs, all done in red velvet beneath a series of oil paintings. The pictures are old, and darkened with time until it's hard to make them out. They seem to be hunting scenes, with men on horses chasing what look like wolves or foxes darting amongst the

trees. And, against the far wall, this door. I found it locked when I discovered it. Mrs Perrault pled ignorance when I asked her about it, but in such a way that I doubted her. It seemed more like she didn't want to discuss the subject, which is decidedly strange. I must remember to ask Radcliffe about it at breakfast.

I am still unsettled by last night, both the woman on the lawn and Radcliffe's strange refusal to engage with it. But it is the only time he has ever acted that way with me, and surely we all have an off day here and there? I should perhaps be more concerned about an unknown woman wandering the grounds, but I was strangely unafraid of her. I keep thinking of the way she smiled at me, as if we shared a secret. I cannot believe she is dangerous. On the contrary, I'm surprised to find I want very much to meet her.

I slept later than usual this morning, and so cannot write as long. I must go down to breakfast. I hope to have more to report soon.

[Writing sounds]

I am at the little desk in my bedroom. I could not sleep, more on that later. But also the bed felt empty, and at any rate, I've had such an interesting afternoon—I must write it all down!

I suppose I should start with breakfast, which was less interesting than infuriating. Radcliffe mentioned nothing about our exchange last night, and I did not bring it up. Instead I asked about the locked door I had found. I was smart enough, I thought, not to broach the subject right away, and instead asked about the little room. Was it a sitting room? How old were the hunting prints on the walls?

Radcliffe seemed uninterested in talking about it. "Oh, you were in there?" he asked, almost offhandedly. "I think it's an old sitting room." He continued reading the morning paper,

retrieved from Gévaudin and delivered before dawn each day by Talbot.

I ventured further. “There is a large door at the far end of the room, and I can’t seem to find the key for it.”

Radcliffe lowered the paper and looked at me over its edge. His face was thoughtful, as if I had posed a riddle and he was trying to work out the answer.

“Whyever would you need the key?” he finally said. He held my gaze, and I felt his mood balanced on a knife’s edge, able to fall in any direction depending on my answer.

“I merely want to see all of the rooms,” I said, as coquettishly as I could. “I am, after all, the mistress of the house.”

This answer seemed to please him. He smiled, his eyes sparkling, and chuckled low in his throat. “Of course you are my little mistress,” he said. “But there’s no need for you to go everywhere, is there? The house is old, and some parts of it are moldy and full of dust. Not places for you, mistress of the house notwithstanding.”

“Still,” I said, “I’d like to see what’s inside.” I squeezed his hand and smiled my sweetest smile. “You wouldn’t deny me something so small, would you?”

His face hardened and he pulled his hand away. “There is nothing for you in that room,” he said. “Do not ask me again.”

He went back to his paper, and I felt firmly chastised. I fed Biscuit a piece of bacon and left the table.

Later, as he was leaving, he softened somewhat. I can’t say he apologized, but he did do something even better. He told me he had to be away for next three nights, for business he said, and that when he returned we would plan a real party, and we would go to Paris to shop for it! I am sad to have him gone—and for three whole nights!—but I am beside myself with excitement

for the party. He said I could have full reign in the arrangements. I am already planning how to decorate the veranda and the grounds (it is to be an outdoor soiree), and I cannot wait to find a Parisian dress!

But I am getting ahead of myself. I want to write about the afternoon.

I spent the rest of the morning looking fruitlessly for keys in the drawers and alcoves of the foyer, the morning room, and the parlor. I found nothing, and Mrs. Perrault finally told me to stop upsetting things while she straightened.

After lunch I had Talbot carry my painting things into the back garden. Radcliffe bought me new canvasses in Monte Carlo, and I was eager to capture the lush blooms of the garden before they faded into autumn. Today was nearly perfect—cloudless blue skies and just the hint of a breeze. The ravens were gathered in a cluster at the far edge of the lawn, watching me from the branches of an ash tree in a companionable unkindness. Biscuit romped through the grass for a bit, chasing insects and barking happily, and then came to lie down and sleep at my feet. It was an idyllic day, and all troubling thoughts of last night or Radcliffe's moods melted away.

Around four, and I know this is when it was because Mrs. Perrault had just laid tea on the back patio and I was just putting down my brush, Biscuit leapt awake and began barking. I turned to see what had startled him, and was surprised to see a young woman, about my age, standing by the corner of the house. She knelt, holding out her hand, and Biscuit ran to her, wagging his tail.

“He’s a friendly fellow, isn’t he?” she said, smiling up at me as I approached. “I hope you don’t mind my intruding without an invitation,” she continued. She stood and offered me her hand. “I’m Bella. I live in town.”

“Lenore,” I said. I took her hand. She was pretty, her dark hair tied with a green ribbon so

it fell down her back. She wore a simple silk dress that ended just below her knees, and a wide velvet choker encircled her throat, set off by a single ruby. Her eyes were an unusual green, playful and smiling. I couldn't help but smile back.

“Mrs. Perrault has just brought out tea,” I said. “I hope you'll join me?”

We sat at the little filigree table on the stone patio and I poured out. We ate Mrs. Perrault's savory pies and then moved to the battenberg cakes.

“I hope it's all right that I came unannounced,” she said again. “I've heard so many stories about the house, and I was passing by and thought I would see for myself.”

I asked her what she meant. “What stories have you heard?”

“Silly stories,” she said, and laughed like she was being foolish. “In town the children say a witch lives here. Or that a prince has been changed into a beast and is imprisoned here. Or that the devil holds sabbaths on the lawn.”

I laughed at this last one.

“Like I said, silly stories to frighten children,” she said. “Fairy tales.”

“Am I meant to be the witch?” I asked.

She lowered her eyes. “I'm not being completely honest,” she said. “I saw you in town when you drove here last week, and I wanted to meet you in person. Gévaudin is a wonderful town, but everyone there is either ancient or else a child. Someone my own age is a great novelty.”

“I am so happy you came,” I said, sincerely. “And I hope you'll come again. You are welcome at any time. It is a lovely place, but it does get lonely.”

“Your husband would not mind?” Biscuit was trying to climb into her lap, and I had to pull him away.

“My husband is often away, it seems. But in any case, he would not deny me a friend.”

We talked for an hour or more, until the sun began westering. She was bright and funny, and knew the current fashion trends and modes. She remarked on my hair—cut short to frame my face—and exclaimed over my dress, which was one of the new ones Radcliffe had brought from Paris. I told her about the party, and she agreed to help me plan it. I felt I had found a real friend, the kind of connection I had longed for in Essex.

When she stood to leave, she noticed my easel and paints, and went over to see what I had been painting.

“You are an artist!” she said, and covered her mouth with her hand in joy. “Oh, Lenore, this is beautiful!”

We looked together at the landscape I had been working on. “It isn’t quite right,” I said. “I can’t get the ravens to look like ravens.”

“They look like ravens to me,” she said, glancing between my canvas and the original birds, still rustling amongst the trees.

“I’m much more comfortable doing people,” I said. “Portraits or full figure. We worked from models in my art classes.” And then I had an epiphany. I almost cried aloud. “Oh! I must paint you!”

To her credit, she blushed prettily. “I’m no subject for a painting,” she said.

“Oh nonsense,” I said. Now that I had the idea, I wouldn’t be stopped. “I have so many dresses hanging in the closet, and the light is perfect this time of year. You must come tomorrow and we can have a painting party! We’ll dress you up and drink wine and I shall capture your beauty on the canvas!”

She laughingly agreed, and we made our date for the next day.

I went to bed happy. I hadn't realized how isolated I had felt, how much just having a meal and a bottle of wine with another woman my age could shift how everything felt. I sank happily into the silken sheets, embraced by their cool smoothness against my skin. It was strange not having Radcliffe lying beside me—isn't it odd how quickly we grow used to things, to people?—but I was able eventually to sleep. And then, like most nights lately, I dreamed.

I dream always of the same woman, the one in the white dress with her throat torn out. In this dream she was standing at the door of my bedroom, and I was lying in the bed, just as when I fell asleep. Her dress, as always, was stained with the blood from her throat. The light of the full moon lit her like a spotlight, making her shimmer as she moved. Little shreds of skin hung at the edges of her wound, and I could see her pulse, a rhythmic bleed oozing onto her collarbone.

She came into the room, and everything went cold, like when a cloud crosses the sun. I thought she was coming to me, but instead she went to Radcliffe's bureau, a little cabinet that sits on his dressing table where he puts rings and cufflinks and spare coins. She stood next to this and turned to me, her blue eyes piercing above her scarlet throat. She pointed at the bureau and then, in her scratched record voice, she said, "Dark deeds hidden as dark words breed. All brides weep and all brides bleed. Behind the behind and beneath the beneath. What great eyes and what great teeth."

As she finished speaking, I thought I saw, behind her near the window, a tall shadow—a man—nearly obscured by the curtain flapping in the air from the garden. But then a great howl arose outside, a shudder passed through the woman, and a huge gout of blood erupted from her throat. I woke sweating and breathless.

All was silent and still in the room. The window was empty, and I could hear nothing in the garden. Once I caught my breath, I went immediately to the bureau. I opened the long central

drawer and found nothing but a scattering of francs and a pair of gold cufflinks. There were two smaller drawers on either side, and in the one on the right I likewise found nothing. The one on the left looked empty as well, but for a broken fountain pen, but when I reached in I felt the bottom give under my fingers. It took no time to work my fingernail under the edge and lift the false bottom out. Beneath, in a little velvet-lined alcove, was a single brass key.

[Theme music; credits]

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