

506:

Paris

[Sounds of writing]

Lenore: Last night I dreamt of Bella. I was standing on the lawn at sunset, somehow in the front and back yard simultaneously. Once again there was a rope swing in the great oak tree, and once again I knew someone sat in it, though I couldn't see her. Likewise, someone was standing at the window watching me, and though I thought it was Reverend Baring-Gould, I also knew it was someone else, someone I didn't want to see. Radcliffe was somewhere nearby, hidden in the trees beyond the lawn. In the dream it was important that he not know where I was or what I was doing, and the people watching me were there to make sure I kept it secret.

But all of this was secondary, like a memory playing at the back of my mind, flickering like a film in a darkened theater. I knew it all, but I couldn't see it. All my attention was taken by Bella.

Bella was dancing on the lawn, leaping and spinning with abandon. She was naked except for the velvet choker, and her skin was golden in the deepening dusk. I couldn't look away from her, and only in these pages could I admit the longing I felt. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But then the sun dipped below the trees, and Bella stumbled in her dance. I took a step toward her, and when I did, she stood and faced me, smiling. She reached to her throat and hooked her fingers underneath the choker. She pulled her hand down, tearing the velvet. As she

did, all the ravens took flight at once, and I awoke gasping her name.

[Theme music; opening credits]

I slept past my time this morning, but Mrs. Perrault had my breakfast warm and waiting when I arrived in the dining room a little after nine. A gold-rimmed plate with poached eggs, sausages, and bread with honey sat steaming next to the silver coffee pot. And beside that, the Gévaudan paper, brought by Talbot as usual from town.

Mrs. Perrault poured the coffee, and I took the chance to ask her the question I had been slowly building in my head over the past several days.

“Mrs. Perrault,” I said, “is Maison d’Aubépine haunted?”

Almost imperceptibly, her pouring hand trembled. She set the coffee pot down on its stand. “Whatever nonsense is this?” she asked. This was one of her stock phrases when she needed time to think.

“There is a woman in this house,” I said. “She wears a white dress, and her throat has been torn out.”

Mrs. Perrault gasped. Small, and quickly covered, but unmistakable.

“You know what I’m talking about,” I said. And she turned away and busied herself with the toast rack. Caught.

“Mrs. Perrault,” I said, using my fiercest mistress-of-the-house voice. “Tell me what you know.”

She surprised me by pulling out a chair and sitting next to me. I had never seen her sit—anywhere, really, but certainly not at the formal dining table. She folded her hands, seemingly

composing herself for what she was about to say. Biscuit was pawing for attention at my side, and I placed a calming hand on his head.

Mrs. Perrault took a deep breath and said, “Once upon a time, there was a house...”

“I don’t mean a folk tale,” I tried to say, but she put her hand on my arm and looked sternly at me before beginning again.

“Once upon a time, there was a house, and a tall dark man. The man was a doctor, and he bought the house from the old man who had built it. He threw a grand party to welcome the world to his home, and everyone who was anyone came. And because of the kind of doctor he was, faeries of all kinds came as well. But he tricked them, and when the party was over the faeries found themselves trapped. The man held them and exploited them, selling tickets and making a spectacle of them, forcing them to perform. Some think he did this to feed on their magic, or their life, that he was some kind of vampire. Some think he was just sadistic and enjoyed the pain he inflicted. For years he did this, welcoming anyone with ready money in his black suit and tall hat. One day, a mortal girl came and released all the faeries, cutting through the magic bonds that held them with an enchanted knife. But the knife was stronger magic than the girl realized, and in cutting the bonds she also cut the house loose, unmooring it in time and place.

And now, the house is everywhere and nowhere, and the man, still in his black suit, still traps and kills and feeds.”

She fell silent, looking at her hands.

“Mrs. Perrault,” I said, “I am not a child. I was not asking for more fairy tales.”

She furrowed her brow and put her hand on my wrist again. “This is the truest tale I’ve ever told you,” she said.

I picked up the newspaper and opened it. “Thank you, Mrs. Perrault. I’ll let you know when you can clear the table.”

From the doorway, she said, “You asked me if the house was haunted. I’m telling you. This house is a river of ghosts, spilling over its banks with the power of its flood. There’s no counting the spirits that walk its halls, and the stories they trail behind them.”

I did not answer her, and she left the room. I was angry that she thought me so simple I could be put off with fairy stories, but I was distracted at the moment by the front page of the Gévaudan paper. I couldn’t read much of the French, but I saw the picture of the frantic and crying farmer’s wife, and the inset photo of a smiling little girl and I understood. Another child had gone missing.

My first thought was of Bella—that I had let her walk home alone last night, when a beast was marauding the countryside. But the picture in the paper was definitely a young girl, no more than six or seven, and there didn’t appear to be any other story of someone missing. I hope I will see her later today.

My second thought was that Radcliffe would be home today. I was excited to see him, of course, and to begin planning the party. But I had discovered so much during his three days away and seen so much else that I had still to understand. I knew from experience I could not talk to him about the woman who I had seen in the house—should I just come out and say ghost? He would only scoff and make me feel like I was a silly girl. And what am I to make of the woman leading me to the locked room, which he also refuses to discuss?

I should confess, here in these private pages, that I didn’t really sleep late this morning. When I awoke from my dream, I found my feet stained with the blood I had stood in last night. It had dried to a thick, rusty brown, and I had to scrub and scrub to wash it clean. I was worried I

had tracked it throughout the house, bloody footprints running across the foyer and up the stairs, but when I came down on my fresh, clean feet I found no trace of blood on the stairs, or in the locked door parlor.

So, did I dream it? If I did, how did my feet become bloody? If I didn't, where is the blood I stood in last night? I feel lost. I had hoped Mrs. Perrault would help me, but I can't believe her fairy stories of a magic house. Though wasn't I asking about ghosts? How crazy does a story have to be before it's beyond the pale?

I so hope to see Bella today, so I can confide in her. I want to know what she makes of all this.

So many questions. And no time to answer them. Radcliffe comes home today, but I don't know when. So I've made a decision, as I've been writing these words. I'm going to open the locked door. I know I said I wouldn't, because, as I wrote in this diary, Radcliffe is entitled to a few secrets. But so am I, and this will be one. Talbot is outside, I believe, and Mrs. Perrault has gone shopping. If I go now, I'll have time. More later.

[Time passes; Sounds of writing]

I am writing from Paris. I know it has been nearly a week since I last opened this journal, but it has all been such a whirlwind.

I did not open the door. I had firmed my resolve, and I strode purposefully to the parlor after putting down my pen. The room was as I had last seen it, minus the pool of blood. I stood in front of the door, and pulled the little brass key from my pocket.

I don't have any explanation for why I was so afraid, but I was. Short breath, beating

heart, clammy palms. Not so much because I had been told to stay out, but more because of what I might find inside. I can't for the life of me imagine what Radcliffe could have locked away, but a niggling voice in my head shrieked that I was better off in ignorance.

I dropped the key when I first tried to fit it in the lock, the brass thumping against the carpet and skittering behind me. Bending over, I turned to fetch it and nearly screamed. Talbot was standing in the door to the hallway, watching me.

"Talbot," I said, catching my breath, "you shouldn't sneak up on me."

He chuckled, eyeing the key as I slipped it back in my pocket. "We all do things we shouldn't, I suppose," he said. "I came to tell you that your husband has returned. Perhaps you'd like to receive him elsewhere?"

"Yes, thank you, Talbot," I said, with as much semblance of control as I could muster at the moment. Why does everyone in this house make me feel like a naughty little girl?

I rushed out to the foyer, just in time to greet Radcliffe as he charged through the big oak doors in a swirl of cigar smoke and wind-blown hair.

"My darling!" he said. He was trying to embrace me while simultaneously removing his leather driving gloves, and eventually gave up on both.

"I missed you," I said, as one does.

"I am beside myself from being away from you," he said. He bent and kissed me, hard, and I felt warm with his solid, overwhelming, realness. Low in my ear, he growled, "Let's go upstairs."

"Talbot, my bags," he said, louder, and Talbot sprang to obey. Radcliffe swept me up in his arms and carried me up the staircase to the red room.

Afterwards, I stood at the tall window looking over the lawn. The day had been overcast,

and while Radcliffe and I were in bed dark clouds had rolled in. While Radcliffe pulled on his clothes behind me, I watched as the rain began to fall, and I guessed, correctly it turned out, that Bella would not be coming.

Radcliffe would not say where he had been, only that business sometimes called him away for days at the time. “This is something any wife of mine has to take in stride,” he said, and I thought of Bella’s question about his past.

I reminded him that he had promised me a party, and said I hoped it could be soon. He said we would begin planning immediately. The date for the party was set for a little over three weeks from now. We decided that in two days time we would spend the weekend in Paris and buy what was needed.

What followed were two days of lists and preparations. Mrs. Perrault affected to be put out with plans of having people in the house, but secretly I think she welcomed the idea. She made lists of things she’d need from the market, and got permission to hire two girls from the town to help with the baking. For his part, Talbot brought in a town boy to help prepare the grounds. Pavilions were hired and banners purchased.

It should have been magical. I mean, it *was* magical. It was exciting and romantic, and Radcliffe stayed at home the whole time. He was in high spirits. We filled the parlor with lists and diagrams—Radcliffe had an address book full of rich and important families, and he pointed out which ones had wives or daughters near my age. In the afternoons we made love and ate chocolates in bed, much to Mrs. Perrault’s displeasure.

But I was never alone. Radcliffe did not notice the missing key, but I had no opportunity to use it. I tried, once, to discuss the reports of wolves in Gévaudan, but Radcliffe dismissed it. Actually, he worded it very strangely: “The villagers are superstitious,” he said, “and fear what

they don't understand." When I suggested that perhaps losing a child to a beast was not difficult to understand, he quieted me with a kiss.

I did not see the woman in the white dress, nor the tall man in black. The rain held sway, and no visitors came. I hoped for a note at least from Bella, but was disappointed. Biscuit lay listless on the big rug by the parlor fire, and I felt his languor in my bones. At night I dreamed of Bella dancing on the lawn, ravens crying overhead, and woke sweating and guilty.

And then we packed a weekend's clothes and other necessary items in the car and drove away. I had not left Maison d'Aubépine since my first arrival, much less sat in the passenger seat of the Bugatti.

And now we are in Paris. It is the second day, and I've already drunk champagne in fine restaurants, seen the great Josephine Baker dance, and bought four new beaded silk dresses. We are staying at Le Meurice, where everyone speaks English and you are likely to share an elevator with royalty. Last night we danced in the hotel's rooftop garden, where we could see all of Paris laid out below us like a net of stars.

I am as far from my life in Essex as I could imagine. I am rich, and have a handsome husband who dotes on me and who is, as Bella mused, generous in all things.

Why do I keep thinking of the woman in white, and her bloody throat? Why do I finger the small brass key I carry in my pocket always? In the midst of this wild freedom, why do I feel more and more like a prisoner?

* * *