

**509:**

**Scarlet**

**Lenore:** I had envisioned a triumphant turning of the tables. I would reveal the painting of Radcliffe's murdered ex-wife, and everyone would rally around me. Radcliffe would be exposed and I would be safe. That was my first line of defense, to rely on the kindness and protection of strangers. It was my first mistake.

I had not taken into account money, or prestige. Things I only have because of my husband. It's his money. His prestige. He is generous to the surrounding community, the party itself was proof of that. And he was feared. Next to Radcliffe Thorne, what was I? Young. Foreign. A child. Worse, a girl.

Radcliffe's hand closed on my wrist before I could even register the movement, grinding the bones together. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I could almost feel the bruises forming.

"What the devil are you playing at?" he hissed, low at my ear. And then he did something chilling. He turned to the crowd flashing his warmest smile. "I do apologize," he said, full volume now, very much the gracious host. "We must retire for a moment. My wife isn't feeling well. Please make yourselves at home, and I shall return momentarily. Talbot, tend to our guests, please."

No one stepped in his way. No one spoke to me or met my eyes. Radcliffe pulled me by the wrist across the lawn and through the open doors into the parlor. My this point my shock had somewhat worn off, and I tried to call out to Mrs. Perrault, who was, I thought, just through the door to the kitchen. But Radcliffe stopped me. Now inside and out of sight of the guests, he dropped his performance and struck me savagely across the face.

“If you make another sound I will tear your heart out standing here in the parlor,” he said. “If you know who Bella is then you know what happened to her. I can bury you in the flower garden as easily as I did her.”

He swept me up in his arms, a gross parody of our wedding night, and carried me past the kitchen and all my hidden knives, When we reached the scarlet room, he all but threw me against the bed.

“I’ll come back for you tonight,” he said. There was nothing of the Radcliffe I had married in his eyes. “Make whatever peace you can. When the moon rises, god help you.”

I heard the key turn in the lock, and then his footsteps on the stairs. Faintly I could hear my party continuing in the garden.

The sun is already sinking towards the trees. I have perhaps two or three hours before moonrise.

That’s the length of my life.

**[Theme music; opening credits]**

**[Sounds of writing]**

I have to take up my pen again. All may still be lost, but after the strange events of the last hour, I am daring to hope.

After I wrote the words above, I stood at the tall window and watched the party as it wound towards its end. Everyone played the part of enjoying themselves, but you could see subtle signs. The guests seemed more subdued, and the band did not play again. Fewer people crowded around Radcliffe for his stories. My painting had been removed from the grounds, probably by Talbot. No one glanced up in my direction, except Radcliffe, who watched me from the food pavilion, making sure I did not cause a further scene.

So my little attempt at a coup at least had the effect of killing the mood. I suppose that will be some consolation if I end up haunting the halls of Maison d'Aubépine in a bloody choker.

But I only watched for a few fraught minutes. I was pulled from the window by the sound of a knock on the door behind me. I went to the door, and was greeted by Mrs. Perrault's voice from the other side.

"Oh my poor Lenore," she said, and I could hear the tears in her voice. "My poor dear. I was forbidden to tell you. I could only hint. I couldn't say their names."

I had already guessed this. I knew that she must have also worked for Héléne. For Bella. "Forbidden by whom?" I asked. I heard her sniffle, and I imagined her wiping her eyes on the edge of her apron.

"It's time," she said. "You should meet the doctor."

As she spoke, I felt the room change. The atmosphere became colder and closer, like the air of a tomb. I could hear Mrs. Perrault shuffle away from the door.

When I turned back to the window, the room behind me was no longer empty. Ravens lined the railing of the balcony, and in front of the window, framed by the gold of the darkening sky, were three figures. Héléne, in her stained white dress, and to her right my sweet Bella, in her Nile green silk. Both women wore their chokers, and the only blood was dried on their clothing. Bella smiled at me and gave a little wave. My heart swelled and broke at once.

Between my fellow wives, and slightly in front of them, stood a flickering figure that was hard to make out, though the light in the room was bright enough. It was a tall man in a black suit, his face shrouded in shadows. Except it was also Rev. Baring-Gould, short and humble, wearing the same shabby shirt and collar as always. I don't know how to explain this. It didn't change from one to the other and back. It was both at once—simultaneously the Reverend and

the Man in the Black Suit, the one smiling and nodding at me while the other stood wreathed in smoke and shadow.

It said, "I am here to make a deal." It was the Reverend's voice, but underneath was a manic buzzing, like radio static come to life. It stood unnaturally still, waiting for me to speak, I assumed. Bella and H el ene had cast their eyes down, also waiting.

"I'm listening," I said.

"I cannot kill your husband," the voice said.

"Then you're wasting my time," I said, and both of the dead women looked up at me. Apparently, that was a breach of decorum. But with an hour left before moonrise, what did I care if this ghoul thought me rude?

"I cannot kill your husband," the voice repeated, "but I can use the house to help you."

"Okay," I said. "Time is a factor, so if you could say exactly what you mean, I'd appreciate it."

"If we help you, you must stay here. You will be one of us."

"Like Mrs. Perrault?"

"And Talbot. And a dozen others you have yet to meet." And as he spoke I felt them. A host of people, mostly women and children, standing somewhere just out of my vision. Watching me. Waiting for my answer.

"What is Maison d'Aub epine?" I asked. "Is what Mrs. Perrault told me true?"

"My house is everywhere and nowhere," the voice said. "It has held wonders and served as shelter. It has burned and fallen and risen again. It is ever now and ever here. Center of the glittering web."

That seemed to both complicate things and explain them. I don't know what he meant,

but I thought I understood. I said, “What would be expected of me?”

The only word that could be applied is “smile,” but that doesn’t convey the unsettling chill of what he did with his face. “You can host parties. You can wander the grounds. You can be, always and forever, the belle of the ball. An eternity as Mistress of the House.”

My eyes were on Bella. She had cast her eyes down again and would not meet my gaze. Glancing aside, I met the eyes of a raven on the railing, it seemed to be waiting also. A memory hit me with the force of reality: the press of Bella’s lips, the taste of cigarettes and wine. I nearly staggered from the weight of it.

“Those things aren’t important to me anymore,” I said. “I mean, I’m happy to play hostess. I’m happy to stay in Maison d’Aubépine, forever if I must. I feel more at home here than anywhere else. More myself. But I want to know if Bella will be here with me.”

She looked up, startled. A line of red escaped underneath the velvet choker. Her mouth twisted in the smile I loved.

The Man in the Black Suit came fully into the room, erasing the Reverend and blacking out light of the setting sun. The static screamed in my head, and I somehow knew what I was being told. He wished me to quit asking questions. To make a decision. Would I, the static wanted to know? Would I join the dead in Maison d’Aubépine? I knew moonrise was imminent.

“What if I say no,” I asked. And instantly I saw both of the women in their full form— blood and torn flesh, broken necks, flies crawling on their open wounds. It was the only answer. If I said no, I would wait here and Radcliffe would destroy me.

“I will stay in the house and join the others,” I said. “Only please help me.”

And then I was alone. The Man was gone, and so were Hélène and Bella. I did not see the ravens take flight, but the balcony railing was likewise empty. I stepped to the window. Most of

the guests were gone, only a few stragglers stood below, including one or two of the lupine young fellows who had been so enamored of Radcliffe. The village men Talbot had hired were beginning to take down the pavilions. The band had already gone. The sun had dropped below the line of the trees and the dusk was heavy on the lawn.

Radcliffe was talking to one of the young men. He looked calm and happy, radiating the same confidence and easy grace he always had. He looked nothing like a man planning to murder his wife later the same evening.

Or perhaps he looked exactly like that.

As I stood and watched my husband, I heard a sharp click behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw the door to the scarlet room swing open. I walked through the door and into the house.

**[Sounds of writing]**

In the forty-five minutes since, I have hidden myself in the pantry. I am writing on the little shelf that Mrs. Perrault uses to make her shopping lists. The sounds of the party being broken down faded as the workmen finished their tasks and went away. I have not seen or heard Mrs. Perrault, and I assume she knows to be away when Radcliffe does what he does to his wives. I can hear the house, little creaks and movements like the small breaths of a sleeping beast.

There is a small bottle of absinthe in here, which I have made use of to garner my courage. I grabbed a silver butcher's knife as I went through the kitchen, and it is lying next to my writing hand. I hope I have the strength to use it.

Five minutes ago, give or take, I heard Radcliffe come in from the garden. His heavy tread was unmistakable, and at any rate, no one else was in the house. He moved through the

parlor, every step and gesture audible as if amplified. He mounted the stairs, and stopped outside the scarlet room. I heard him turn the key (I had carefully locked it behind me), and then silence for a full minute. He did not shout or scream my name, only said it slightly more loudly than normal, teasingly, like we were playing hide and seek. “Lenore? Where are you, my love?”

He paced the floor above me. And then, just now, just as I’m writing these words, I can hear him struggling, as if he has fallen on the floor and is rolling around. He shouts and grunts as if he is in pain. But he also growls and makes sounds that are less and less human. I know what these sounds mean.

I will now put my pen down and pick up my knife. The moon has risen. I go forth to meet the Wolf.

**[Theme music; end credits]**