

Adeste Fideles

Gothic horror in Edwardian England



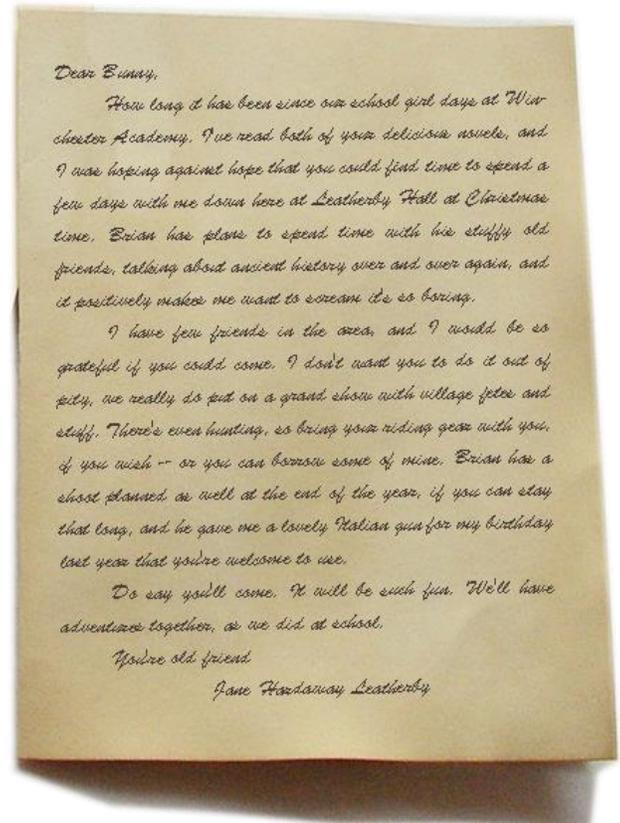
An Unexpected Invitation

December 1910
London, England

The weather has been remarkably mild though rainy this winter. Leaden skies and thick choking fogs in the city have exerted their own level of depression on the soul, however, and as the holiday season approaches everyone who can is looking for ways to escape the ancient capital and spend the festivities in the countryside where the air is clean and the company gregarious. For the struggling author who is fighting writer's block and hoping against hope for a new idea for a story, the unexpected invitation to spend the season at Leatherby Hall in Wiltshire with an old school friend is an irresistible temptation.

Dear Bunny,

How long it has been since our school girl days at Winchester Academy. I've read both of your delicious novels, and I was hoping against hope that you could find time to spend a few days with me down here at Leatherby Hall at Christmas time. Brian has plans to spend time with his stuffy old friends, talking about ancient history over and over again, and it positively makes me want to scream it's so boring.



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I have few friends in the area, and I would be so grateful if you could come. I don't want you to do it out of pity, we really do put on a grand show with village fetes and stuff. There's even hunting, so bring your riding gear with you, if you wish — or you can borrow some of mine. Brian has a shoot planned as well at the end of the year, if you can stay that long, and he gave me a lovely Italian gun for my birthday last year that you're welcome to use.

Do say you'll come. It will be such fun. We'll have adventures together, as we did at school.

You're old friend

Jane Hardaway Leatherby

On the Train

The shriek of the steam engine as it thundered across the English country side at fully fifty miles an hour quite set her nerves on edge. The First Class carriage rocked perceptibly from side to side and it felt as if the train were certain to leap off of the steel tracks at any minute.



The Train from Liverpool to Bath

She reassured herself that Isambard Brunel had been a very clever fellow and that she was quite safe. After all, trains all over England were making journeys like this one several times a day, knitting the countryside together into a much smaller place than it had ever been. Even in her lifetime, this journey, which would have taken several days by carriage when she was a girl, had been shortened to a few hours. Suddenly Bath and Bristol were effectively as close to London as Surrey and Sussex. It would be possible nowadays to live in the country and work in the city, she thought. And immediately began to work the idea into one of the gossamer plot threads that spun through her active imagination like dandelion seeds gusted on the breeze.

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Outside her window the wide sweep of the Thames Valley gave way to the rolling hills of Surrey and then Hampshire. The train stopped for several minutes at Basingstoke as carriages were disconnected to be shunted to another line, and an enterprising vendor strolled up and down the platform offering newspapers, chocolates and cigarettes for sale.

The rain in Liverpool had given way to watery sunlight as she headed south and west. Nevertheless, she was glad of her warm coat and fine Italian leather gloves. The heat in the carriage was iffy at best, enough to keep your fingers and toes from falling off, but not much more. From time to time, the conductor came by, offering tea service at two shillings for a pot of tea and a plate of rather soggy looking biscuits. Seeing her disappointed look at his wares, he informed her that the train had a dining car, two carriages forward, and that she might sit at a table and order from the menu, if she wished.

I knew accepting my dear friends offer to join her and her husband for the Holiday was a great decision. I was alone in my small country home outside of Liverpool. The life of a writer is actually rather boring. There are long hours alone at your typewriter trying to make your deadline. The first book was fun. No pressure. The second had demanding deadlines, but the success of the first secured myself enough money for a lifetime. The second allows me the pleasure to share some of the profits with friends and sample the finer things in life. This book has not taken shape as to its direction, plot or setting. I've bounced a few ideas around, but the major theme escapes me. Im hoping that this trip to visit my friend will prove inspiring and life changing.



I sit alone on this train trying to read the days news, but find it ever so boring. Im dressed in a fine silk gown, scarf which provides little warmth. My trench coat and leather gloves are a godsend. The other passengers smile at me and the gentlemen tip their hats, but no one dares start a conversation with me. Must I initiate everything? I see a gentleman sitting a bit ahead of me on the car. I walk past him getting out a cigarette. I pretend to look for a light in front of him, but he does not take the hint and looks away out the window. I dislike smoking, but often find it socially appropriate.

I stare out the large window next to me as the English countryside passes by. I forget how beautiful this country is once you get outside of Liverpool. Oh how I hate that city. It's dirty, loud and smelly. I couldnt wait to buy my first place out in the country.

I decide to purchase dinner for myself in the dinner. Im not quite hungry, but it will help pass the time. I check on my suitcase that is stowed above my seat and my leather satchel bag with contains my sketch pad, writing notebook, some cash, make up and my handgun. I decide to take the mauser out and put it into my small purse. I take the purse and my sketch pad with me. No one would suspect that I would be carrying gun. You never know when a girl will need it.

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I enjoy a wonderful dinner of baked duck, a green salad and a glass of wine before unfolding my sketch book and begin to pencil in an image of an older couple sitting across the car from me.

Arrival in Bath

It is late afternoon when the steam engine finally whistles to a stop at the station in Bath. The shadows are long and the air is chilling down. All up and down the platform, carriage doors swing open and passengers alight. The air is full of cries for porters, news vendors hawking their papers and the occasional wail of child separated briefly from its mother.

Gabriella descends regally from her First Class coach and has no trouble attracting the attention of a platform porter. Her clothing and ticket promise a better tip than the families and business men traveling third class. The uniformed flunky collects her luggage into a wheeled cart, somewhat like a large, flat bottomed wheel-barrow, and pushes it ahead of her towards the exit. She gives over her ticket stub at the gate at the end of the platform, and suddenly she is in the vast hall of the station proper with a sea of busily hurrying commuters. She looks around, a bit lost at the commotion. “Bunny! Bunny!” she hears her name called and sees a swish of elegant skirts. The crowd parts to let through her old school friend. Jane is an attractive woman, though not as lovely as Gabriella. She is fair where Gabby is dark, and not quite as tall. But both young ladies were raised to be poised and well-dressed for every occasion. In Jane’s case, the combination has won her a catch for a husband. Sir Brian Leatherby is tall, dark and handsome. He is a dozen years older than his wife, but still a man in the prime of his life. His estates are wealthy and he has brought Jane much happiness over the years they have been married, though the couple has not yet been blessed with children.

He takes charge of the situation, as men are wont to do, and guides their small party with the porter and his cart in tow, towards the large gate that opens on to the street beyond. “We’ve brought the motor car,” says Jane excitedly, clinging to Gabby’s arm as they press through the crowd together. “So much more fun than the carriage. And oodles of room for us all.”

She looks up at Gabby and her features crinkle for a moment in the smile she remembers so well from school days of pranks and secret pantry raids.

“I’m so glad you’ve come, Bunny. The house is full of men – Brian’s friends and colleagues. They’ve made a discovery of something and everyone’s so excited about it. But the place is so dull without my own friends to keep me company. I’ve been lonely and dreading spending Christmas on my own. Now you’re here, and Eloise arrived last night. She’s a new friend I met in London last summer. You’ll like here. And the three of us can have such fun over the holidays.

“Do say you’ll stay with us until the New Year. I shan’t accept a refusal. I simply shan’t.”

Sir Brian oversees the loading of her luggage into the motor car, a gigantic horseless carriage of polished wood and gleaming brass piloted by a chauffeur in tall boots and a peaked cap. He tips the porter, hands the ladies up into the cabin and clammers inside himself. With a shifting of levers, a grinding of gears and a sudden lurch, the vehicle shoots forward onto the street. Horses shy away from it and pedestrians shake their fists as they are forced to step aside from the lumbering four-wheeled monster.

I am so happy the train ride was over and I am finally here with Jane and Brian. The car ride is so much fun and only the second time I’ve ridden in one. While Brian loads my luggage, I whisper to Jane how handsome her husband is and that she is so lucky to have him.



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Once they are out of town, the driver shifts gears again and now the motor car moves forward as fast as a running horse, bouncing over the rutted roads and making Jane laugh as she clings on to her friend for support.

Sir Brian smiles indulgently at his wife and makes small talk about the weather and how well the harvest has been this year.

“Do you like to shoot, my dear?” he asks Gabriella as they come to the top a long hill and begin down on the other side into a picturesque green valley. “We have a partridge shoot planned for Boxing Day, and of course the hunt is on New Year’s Eve.”

We make small talk during the ride. I almost jump out of my skin when asked if I like to

shoot. “Of course I like to shoot. Growing up as a girl, my father would take us duck hunting. It was an expensive sport, so it didnt happen often.” Sitting on the edge of my seat with excitement. “Id love to stay until New Years Eve for the hunt, but Im not sure I can. I have to get in contact with my publisher to make sure I can be afforded the time off. However, you both have me for Christmas.” I say with a smile. I lean over and hug Jane thanking her again for the invitation and how excited I was to change scenary.



Even as Gabriella responds to his question, she is astounded to see the Sir Brian leap to his feet inside the carriage and thrust his head through one of the open windows.

“There they! Those beggars! See them, Machin? See those thieving bastards?”

He is pointing at a group of swarthy looking ruffians leaning on a fence watching the motor car sail past. They are dressed in colorful motley and Gabriella realizes instantly that they must be Gypsies.

Sir Brian calls to his driver to stop the car, and the vehicle rocks to a halt as the athletic master leaps out of the door while they are still moving. Gabriella sees him pull a large pistol from his coat pocket – a Webley revolver she knows from her research into weapons of murder – and fire it over the heads of the Gypsies. They scatter and run in all directions as Sir Brian hurries up to the fence, firing all six rounds in a series of loud concussions. It does not seem to the novelists eye that he is aiming at the men, but it must be a terrifying sight to have this wild devil suddenly leap out of the car and try to kill them.

“We’d heard that there were Gypsies in the woods,” says Jane quietly. Her eyes are wide as saucers as she watches her husband firing his gun. “Brian says they are all thieves who steal our sheep, or

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whores who spread diseases among the village men. I rather like their clothes and those funny colorful wagons they live in.

“Ah well.”

Sir Brian has emptied his gun and returns slowly to the car now. Standing on the road, he speaks to the chauffeur and then to his wife.

“Go on ahead without me. I’m going to follow them, see if I can’t find out where they’re camp is. If I can catch up with them, I’ll have Machin and Dobbs round up some of the villagers and we’ll see them off tonight. Burn them out if have to.”

He waves the car on, and they start up again, rolling down the hill towards the Hall. Behind them Gabriella sees Sir Brian loading another six rounds from his pocket into his revolver.

When we stop to confront the Gypsies, Im a little taken back. Im not sure how to react when I see Brian so angry and aggressive towards those people. When he gets out of the car and shoots into the air, I yell his name. Fearing someone might get hurt. I realize Im the only one who is worried. Then I watch him fire the remaining bullets into the air and the Gypsies run into the forest.

“Are you sure we should leave him?” Watching him through the back window as we begin to drive away. I turn to Jane. “I dont think we should leave him alone.”

Sir Brian looked embarrassed at Gabriella’s obvious concern about the shooting, but he set his jaw and walked off reloading the gun anyway. It seemed to her that she heard him muttering something along the lines of “Meddlesome women! . . .” But she couldn’t be sure.

“I’m so sorry, Bunny,” said Jane. “He gets so angry about these Gypsies. Sometimes I think he’s almost afraid of them, but I do not think he will actually shoot one of them. He might rough them up a bit if he can find them, but he’s been looking for days now with no luck.

“Let’s just forget about him and get home. Have a nice cup of tea and meet my friend Eloise. He’ll be home in time for dinner and very apologetic – you’ll see.”

The car rolled on down the hill and turned in to the long driveway that lead up to Leatherby Hall. Just through the gate, behind a screen of ancient yew trees, Gabriella spotted an old chapel off to the right that looked disused. Jane noticed her glance and commented on the place.

“It’s been out of service for fifty years or more,” she said. “It used to be the Leatherby’s personal chapel, St. Martin’s, and many of the villagers attended Sunday services there. But there’s a story that the place is haunted and now no one goes there anymore. Brian has let his confederates use the place to store the findings from their dig. That’s what they’re all so excited about, traipsing mud in and out of the house every time they go down there to gloat over their finds. Nothing but little boys really.”

Sweeping on up the curved driveway, the motor carriage came in sight of the ancient Hall. Built originally in the time of Queen Elizabeth, the old stone building had mellowed with age and become part of the landscape, elegant, homey and dignified all in one with the feeling that behind each leaded glass window would be a comfortable room with a warm place by a cheery fire to settle in. Gabrielle felt the charm of the place settle on her as they clattered up to the front door and the butler steeped forward smartly to greet them and open the door.

“Welcome home, Lady Jane, Miss Middleton.

Dobbs will take your bags, Miss. We’ve put you in the St. Ives Room, at Lady Jane’s suggestion. The upstairs maid is lighting the fires right now and there are fresh flowers as requested.”

Jane beamed at him and he smiled a little in return.



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“This is Meadows, Gabby. He really is a treasure. Keeps our house running like clockwork so that I don't have to do a thing.”

Meadows bows slightly in acknowledgement of the compliment and snaps his fingers. A handsome young man, dressed in the smart livery of a footman steps forward quickly and unloads Gabriella's bags from the trunk strapped on to the back of the car. He whisks them around the side of the house and Jane leads the way inside through the front door, pointing out details of the garden and the architecture.

“You must be tired, my dear,” she says inside the front hall, two stories high decorated with racked guns and hunting trophies. “I'll show you up to your room. The St. Ives room has its own bathroom attached. Brian had the plumbers in a year or two ago. You can wash up and have a rest if you like. We'll have tea and sherry in the drawing room in half an hour, if that suits you?”



“Thanks so much Jane.” Stepping out of the car. “Your home is simply beautiful. Maybe tomorrow you can take me through the garden for a closer look.” Walking past it to the front door. I dip in a poor effort to curtsy when I meet Meadows. Trying to be funny in an over polite way. I do notice the handsome man that takes my bags. As he carries them ahead of us, I give Jane a wide eyed smile and gesture towards the handsome man from behind. “You will definitely have to introduce me to him.” I whisper in her ear.

We walk up the flight of stair to the St Ives room. Following the young man and Jane into the room, I hold my hand over my mouth. “It's absolutely breath taking Jane. Maybe I'll stay forever.” I add with a laugh. I walking to the bathroom and notice the detail on the marble.

“If it's alright with you, I would like some time to get cleaned up and rest. Could we say an hour? It's been such a long trip. But then I'd love to catch up in the drawing room. Sherry sounds lovely.”

After you both leave, I open my suitcase and find another change of clothes. I run the bath water and slide my shoes off. While waiting for the water to fill the tube, I slowly walk around the room inspecting my new surroundings. I take in the view from the windows and the details in the woodwork inside the room. When the bath is ready, I remove my clothes and put my hair up. I slide into the tube and relax. I close my eyes and breathe the steam in deeply. Within a few minutes, I find myself almost asleep. I quickly finish bathing, wrap a towel around me and move to the bed to lay down. Oh if I had the time to take a nap. I lay here for the remainder of the time, careful to fall asleep. I do want to ask Jane about the old church. How fun would that be to get a closer look.

Tea and Sherry in the Drawing Room

As Gabby gathers her thoughts, resting on the bed, there is a quick knock at the door. Without waiting for a reply a young woman in a maid's uniform opens the door and steps inside, pulling to door to behind her. She bobs a quick curtsy at Gabriella.

"Beg pardon, Ma'am. Lady Jane sent me to see if you might need help getting dressed. I'm her Lady's Maid. My name's Sarah. I can help you with your dress, or your hair, whatever you like. It's just the others are downstairs, wondering if you would be coming down soon."

I move from the bed to the vanity. "I'd love some help Sarah. Please close the door. I must have dozed off for a few minutes too long." I sit at the vanity in front of the large mirror. "My hair is not too wet, but it appears I've made a mess of it." I say with a smile. "Could you please help me with it while I tend to this hideous face?" Gathering my makeup.

Sarah came in quietly and proved to be very efficient and capable, brushing out Gabriella's long dark hair and arranging it artfully in a fetching manner with many pins and careful tucking.

"You've got lovely hair, Miss," she said and Gabriella could hear her broad West Country accents that would forever mark her as being common stock. Her own voice was trained by years of elocution lessons to hide her Midlands origins.



Continuing to talk as she worked on Gabby's hair, Sarah asked how she knew Lady Jane, and one bit of conversation leads to another as she tells Gabby a little bit about all the visitors at the Hall this Christmas season:

Major Peter Greggs is Lady Jane's brother, recently retired from the Indian Army. Gabriella has met him before, many years ago when she and Jane were in school. He's handsome, very upright and manly as she recalls. "He was wounded, miss, and he walks with a limp, but he's very dashing and he still dances well enough."

Mlle. Eloise Shires is a young French woman who Lady Jane knows from London. Apparently she is a clairvoyant and a psychic medium. Lady Jane is planning to have a séance or two at some time during the holiday and everyone below stairs is fascinated by the idea of speaking to the dead. "Do you believe, in spirits, miss? Ghosts and such?"

Dr. Duncan McWhiter is a physician, an old friend of Sir Brian's, down from London. He works on Harley Street, famous for its specialists. "A brain doctor, they say, miss. He can tell you what's wrong inside your head just by talking to you."

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Professor Morris Thorn is an older man, an Oxford don who taught Sir Brian when he was at college. He has been invited to visit because of what the other guest has brought. “He’s very absent minded, miss, always late for meals and wanders about in a bit of a fog. But when he gets talking it’s like listening to a school book come to life.”

Mr. Angus McPherson is an explorer and archaeologist (Sarah pronounces it arky-loly-gist). He has just returned from Egypt with something he found there. “There was big boxes, miss, several of them delivered by wagons two days ago. Sir Brian said to put them in the old chapel, and all the gentlemen have been down there for two days, like little boys with a new hoop to play with. They’re ever so excited. Maybe its treasure in them boxes. The Gypsies showed up right after that and they’ve got a nose for gold, don’t they?”

As she brushes my hair, I listen intently to what she tells me about the people coming to the manor for the Holiday and especially about the mysterious boxes delivered two days ago. I cant wait to meet everyone. Ive seen pictures of Janes brother when were were in school together.

“You have a real talent Sarah.” Turning my head from side to side inspecting my hair. “Maybe you could teach me one night when we have some time together? Ive never really been very good at that sort of thing. Maybe that’s why I own too many hats.” I say with a laugh.

“To answer your question, I really dont believe in ghosts. I know that’s hard to believe since I write about spooky things in my books. That’s our little secret okay? If my fans found out, well, my publisher wouldnt be too happy.” I say winking at her through the mirror. “Imagine if Charles Dickens hated Christmas?” I laugh out loud. “Ive always been fascinated with the super natural, I think most people are. But Im kind of a Doubting Thomas. I need to see it with my own eyes to believe.”

I notice she is resting her hands on my shoulders as we talk, finished with her work. When I am done with my makeup, I reach up, take her hand in mind, look her in the eye through the mirror and thank her. “It’s lovely Sarah. Thank you so much.” I get up holding the towel around me with one hand and walk to the bathroom.

“Could you please lay something out for me to wear from my luggage?” I enter the bathroom and the door open a crack so not to appear rude.

“What do you think? Do you believe in ghosts?” I yell to her from inside the bathroom. I put my under clothes on and slide a silk slip over top. I peer back towards the door looking for an anser from her.

Sarah smiled warmly at Gabriella when she held her hand.

“Like I said, Miss, you’ve got lovely hair. It’d be my pleasure to brush it for you any time – as long as Lady Jane don’t need me, that is. And I can show you some of my tricks for keeping it under control as well.

The maid watched the young lady walk across the room in the mirror with a dreamy look and she blushed prettily when she realized that Gabby was looking back at her.

“I won’t tell no-one, Miss. About you not believing in ghosts, that is. It’ll be our secret. I’m not so sure, me-self. There’s so many creepy stories you grow up, you know. Like the old chapel. They say that’s haunted by a lady in white. Come up out of the crypt in the middle of a service she did fifty years

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ago, and vanished right in front of everyone. More than once they say. Now no one will go there at all.”

As Gabby dropped her towel and drew on her under things, Sarah looked away quickly and opened the wardrobe door to sort through the clothes the visitor had brought with her. She took out a burgundy colored dress with a delicate lace collar and cuffs.

“This dress is beautiful, Miss,” she said, laying it carefully on the bed. “Lady Jane is in blue tonight, and Miss Eloise is in green. So between the three of you, you’ll look like a vase full of fresh flowers if you wear this.”

She quickly helped Gabriella into the dress, careful not to smudge her makeup.

“I’ll come back tonight, Miss, after I’ve finished with Lady Jane to see if you need any help getting ready for bed.”

With that the girl whisked out of the door and was gone, leaving just a faint trace of vanilla in the air, probably from the kitchens rather than any deliberate attempt at perfume.

Dressed and coiffed to the best she could hope to achieve after a day of travel, Gabby descended the stairs and entered the drawing room. The whole house smelled of baking and fresh cut pine boughs, it brought back images of Christmas pasts from her own childhood – though Leatherby Hall was certainly grander than the way she had grown up.

Lady Jane and a strikingly beautiful young woman were sitting by the fire when she entered. They rose to greet her and Jane introduced her to Mlle. Eloise Shires.

“I met her in London,” gushed Jane, “at a séance for Lady Wilberforce. It was an electrifying session. Manifestations in multiple forms. Sounds. Lights. Even touch. Lady Wilberforce spoke directly to her late husband through Eloise, and discovered the whereabouts of a love letter he had written her some weeks before he died. Silly man had hidden it away in his safe, but Eloise found it. Made the old lady so happy, we all cried.”

She led Gabriella to sit with them on a silk-covered sofa by the roaring fire.

“I’ve just been persuading her that she should host a séance for us after dinner.”

The young French woman laughed prettily and reached out easily to touch Jane on the arm as she spoke.

“Madame Leatherby is too kind,” she said in a husky voice. “My small skills are not always up to the task. But for her, I will try tonight.”

“Tell me, Mlle. Gabby, how was your travel today?”



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The early evening drew in as the ladies chatted. The handsome footman was in attendance, mixing cocktails with a liberal hand and making sure that none of the ladies' glasses were ever empty. An hour passed quickly in very pleasant conversation, and then came a sonorous ringing on a gong somewhere in another part of the house.

I hit it off smashingly with the two other ladies. Jane is so gracious to introduce me to her friend who I'm fascinated with. Her beauty is captivating. Her french accent and her skills as a medium are intriguing to me. I wonder if she might be a fake covering it up with her charm and beauty.

"How fun!" I clap when told about the seance tonight. "You know, I'm working on a book about the super natural and this could make a delightful chapter. I am so looking forward to it."

When ever I can catch a glance at the handsome footman working the room I try. Smiling at him when he fills my drink. "You certainly are everywhere a young lady may need you. Arent you sir?" I whisper to him with a smile holding my glass out as he tops it off.

Meadows stepped into the room even as the last tones of the gong were still echoing in the upper halls.

"Dinner is served, my Lady. Lord Brian and his gentlemen guests will be with you in a moment to escort you through into the dining room."

Brian came in, full of energy, laughing at some comment from one of his companions. The men looked very handsome in their tail coats and formal attire, except for one who wore a tweed suit that looked rather rumpled and worse for wear. Sir Brian introduced Gabriella to each in turn, and it was easy to place them from the descriptions she had received from Sarah early in the day.

"Miss Gabriella, may I introduce my tutor from Oxford, Professor Thorn. This is Dr. McWhirter, a Harley Street specialist. I think you may already know Major Greggs, Lady Jane's brother. And this fellow is McPherson. His luggage has been lost, it seems, and he's too big to wear anybody else's clothes, so we'll have to take him as he is."

And big he was. Gabby judged him to be two or three inches over six feet tall with wide shoulders and long legs. The reddish tint to his hair and the rumpled clothes gave him a rakish air that seemed very much at odds with the old world formality of the Hall.

When the men join us from outside, I stand to meet everyone smiling and holding out my hand and giving a small curtsy and a smile to each of the men as I'm introduced.

"Greggs, would you escort Gabriella in? McWhirter, you give your arm to Mlle. Shires, and I'll steer mi'Lady. Thorn and McPherson'll bring up the rear. You don't get to escort a beauty, Angus until your wardrobe is complete.

"Shall we go in? Meadows is practically doing a jig and I'm sure the soup is cooling off already."

I take Major Greggs arm and allow him lead me into the dining room. We make small talk on the way. I do make sure I tell Sir Brian how lovely the Leaterby estate is and ask if someone might give me a tour when time permits.

I'm curious about the mysterious boxes in the old chapel and the suppose haunting, but wont ask anything about it at dinner. I hope it will come up in conversation.

Dinner is Served!

Dinner is a delight. Whoever the cook is, she is a marvel. And Sir Brian's wine cellar is well stocked with excellent vintages. What with the cocktails before dinner, a fresh glass of wine with every course, and port to follow, Gabriella's head is quite spinning by the time the gentlemen retire for cigars and brandy in the library. The handsome footman, Martin Dobbs, is very attentive to her, and seems a little clumsy around her, managing to touch her arm more than once while pouring wine. Jane actually reprimands him at one point for not doing his job with his usual grace, and Meadows gives him the evil eye because of it.

The meal is served in courses with a new bottle of wine opened at the beginning of each course. Meadows serves the food. Dobbs serves the wine. The meal takes almost two hours to eat.

- Starter: Melon Glace (Sauternes wine – sweet, white)
- Soup: Creme de Volaille (Riesling wine – semi-sweet, white)
- Fish: Poached Salmon with Hollandaise Sauce (Muscat de Sevre et Maine wine – crisp, dry, white)
- Main Course: Roasted Chicken, Cauliflower with Cream Sauce, Roasted Potatoes, Green Salad (Cote du Rhone wine – dry, full bodied, white)
- Dessert: Carrot Cake with Vanilla Ice Cream (Port wine – sweet, red, full bodied)



During the course of the meal, the gentlemen speak openly about what they are investigating in the disused chapel. McPherson has just returned from Egypt where he was acting as a field investigator for Howard Carter (who in years to come will find King Tutankhamen's tomb in the Valley of the Kings). In an obscure valley he came across a hidden tomb: The find of a lifetime. Instead of reporting his find to the authorities, or even his boss, he acted with absurd bravado: He packed up the contents of the tomb in wooden boxes, carted them ten miles to the Nile and simply sailed them out of Egypt without anyone being the wiser.

In Crete, he cabled Sir Brian, a man he had dealt with selling antiquities before (Gabriella will assume they were probably smuggled out illegally), and offered him the whole contents of the tomb, unopened for a thousand pounds. Sir Brian agreed, and McPherson has only just arrived with the crates a few days ago. Sir Brian has asked his old Oxford professor to be present as the crates and the tomb contents are opened. McWhirter is an old school friend of Sir Brian's in the way that Gabby is of Lady Jane's.

The men are very excited. They have stripped away the shipping cartons to expose the various sarcophagi and other tomb goods. Thorn has made an exhaustive list and reads it aloud at the table:

Three large crates, three medium crates, three small crates and three boxes.

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The large crates each contain a stone sarcophagus. One is clearly the main item with much decoration and hieroglyphs, two are lesser caskets.

The medium crates contain: one, a reed boat and a wooden chariot, much desiccated and decayed; two a mahogany and silver throne in fine condition; three a wooden and bone cabinet also in surprisingly good condition.

The smaller crates hold: one, a sacrificial altar of basalt inlaid with quartz and silver; two, three small wooden chests inlaid with gold and jewels; three, a statue of the goddess Bast or Sekhmet in gold and ebony.

The boxes hold: one, seven alabaster funerary jars; two, a pair of broken stellae removed from the entrance to the tomb, both densely carved with hieroglyphs, three, various ritual weapons including an axe, a bow and a dagger.

So far the men have done nothing more than catalog their list of treasures. Tomorrow they plan to photograph and open the sarcophagi.

“McWhirter has an excellent camera,” says Sir Brian, “but I wish we had someone who could sketch the items and perhaps paint the sketches with inks to give a sense of what their colors look like. Professor Thorn wants us to wait and bring some fellows down from Oxford for the job, but I’m in too much of a hurry. I want to see what my thousand pounds has bought me.”

Gabriela is initially shocked at the casual theft these treasures from Egypt, but quickly drawn into the lure of the investigation. She asks if anyone is afraid of the curse on the tomb, expecting everyone to know about curses on Egyptian tombs.

The academics were a bit set back by Gabby’s knowledge on Egyptian curses. It would seem that popular literature was not something they paid very much attention to at all.

“I’m sure it’s all bosh, my dear,” said Sir Brian, nodding Miller forward to refill the young writer’s raised glass. “I’m glad you like the wine. We have an excellent cellar. Meadows is very proud of it.”

The subject of ancient curses started a heated discussion between Professor Thorn and Dr. McWhirter. The archaeologist was convinced that the curses were no more meaningful than the lines engraved on modern tombstones, while the doctor had some murky ideas about long term subconscious urges becoming physically manifest. He was unable to explain himself clearly, however, and eventually resorted to pointing out that several men who had entered ancient tombs had died shortly thereafter.

“Bad air,” said Angus McPherson. “It sits undisturbed for two thousand years and all sorts of things breed in the darkness – those microbes that French fellow Pasteur described. That’s what killed them. Not hidden forces. No such thing!”

“Au contraire, mon Cherie,” said Mlle. Shires. “I know for a fact that there are hidden forces all around us, part of our world, though we cannot see them. Tonight we will speak with some of them at the séance that Lady Jane has asked for. Then you will not be so sure.”

She laughed prettily to take the sting out of her words, and McPherson beamed at her.

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“I for one don’t believe in any of it.” said Gabriella. “Actually, I’d love to be there when you all open the things,” she added. “I’d love to document what you find and possible journal some of it for my next book. You never know what might inspire me. Maybe you’ll all be famous!” She laughed and the meal continued merrily as the conversation turned to other questions, such as the plot of her latest novel and the newest fashions from America.

“I see no reason not to have you observe the openings of our treasures,” said Sir Brian in reply to Gabby’s earlier question. “You have a keen mind, my dear, and a journalist’s talent for observation. If you would try to sketch some of the items as well, I would be indebted to you. But by all means, feel free to join us tomorrow after breakfast.

As the gentlemen get up to leave the ladies for their cigar and brandy, Lady Jane announces that there will be a séance tonight in the drawing room.

“Mlle. Shires has agreed to sit for us, my dear,” she says to Sir Brian. “It’s nine o’clock now. Shall we say ten? I’m sure you can smoke yourselves to death in an hour.”

“I’m quite dizzy from all that wine. I’m going to put my feet up,” she says to the ladies after the men leave. “I know Eloise will need quiet time to prepare, so I’m afraid you’re on your own, Gabby. Do forgive me.”

The other two young women disappear to their own destinations and Gabby is alone in the dining room.

“Is there anything you’d like, Miss?” says a quiet voice from one corner. It is the handsome footman, and he’s a got a rakish grin that makes him look like a naughty schoolboy.

Startled by the footman remaining in the room, I gasp when I hear him speak. “You are a cheeky young man!” I say shaking my finger at him with a bit of a smile. I stand up slowly and attempt to walk towards him and narrowly miss the end table. Giggling at my tipsiness I move towards him. “Mr. Miller is it?” Asking a question that I’m sure I know the answer to. Moving closer to him. “For an employee of my dear friend Lady Jane, you sure are a flirt when it comes to her guests. And when I say her guests... I mean me. Where do you get off? Do you think every young woman who comes here deserves to be flirted with?” Moving within a foot of his face. “I see guys like you everyday. Handsome, charismatic and, and handsome.” My tipsiness is not helping me. “I should have the mind to tell Jane to fire you this instant.” Stopping for moment. Looking into his eyes. Then kissing him. Throwing myself on him. He and I almost stumble to the floor. He catches himself on the door jam. I kiss him long and hard, then push myself off of him. I stumble away, walking back to the couch, dropping on it. “Oh god my head. Why did you serve me sooooo much mind. You really should be fired.” Waving my finger back at his direction. “But my god you are handsome.” I lay on the couch, the room spinning... thinking to myself... I have an hour.

The footman stood his ground as Gabriela approached him. There was an amused sparkle in his eye, and he looked at her boldly. As she lurched into him and pressed her lips against his, he kissed her back, passion for passion. His tongue found its way inside her mouth in a delightful invasion. His grip as he held her was strong and she could feel the clean, lean muscles of his body through his uniform. In fact, . . . Oh, my God! . . . she could feel his manhood stir against her own taut body, a caged beast seeking release.

Tearing herself away from him, she found her way to the couch and looked up at him.

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He glanced over his shoulder and she could hear the heavy tread of Meadows the butler returning from the kitchen.

Miller glided forward, stooping briefly beside the couch where she reclined to pick up her purse from where she had dropped it in her confusion. Placing it in her hand she smiled at her and whispered intimately in her ear.

“Leave your door unlocked tonight if you would like some more . . . wine, Miss.”

And with that he was gone, striding swiftly from the room before Meadows could enter.

The butler noticed her half swooned on the sofa and seemed concerned.

“Are you alright, Miss?” he asked, stepping forward. “I noticed you did drink a fair bit tonight.”

“Shall I have one of the maids help you upstairs?”

“No Meadows, thank you. I’ll be alright. I have to know when to say enough when it comes to Sir Brian’s wine cellar.” I whisper to him as I place my forearm over my eyes. “Everyone has been so kind to me and I have not been very polite in return. Let me just stay here for a moment and rest my head. The room is spinning. If I were to go upstairs, I’m sure it would be the last you would see me tonight. I would miss the seance, and that would break my heart.” I say with a sarcastic smile not truly believing in those things. “Before I trouble so much that you throw me out, could you bring me some coffee to help me sober up Meadows? I will forever be in your favor.”

“Of course, Miss. Coffee it is.”

The imposing butler swept out of the room and returned in a few minutes with a silver tray bearing a silver coffee pot, a bone white porcelain cup and saucer as well silver cream and sugar serving bowls. He set these on a low table next to Gabriela and poured out the coffee.

“I will leave you to rest, Miss,” he said. At the door he turned briefly and added, “The other servants have gone to bed, Miss. You will not be disturbed again tonight.” There is a sternness in his voice that makes Gabriela wonder how much he saw of her and Miller before he came into the room.

The coffee is strong but very good. Her swimming head soon calms down and she feels brighter, more capable of staying awake for the coming seance. The slow tick of the grandfather clock in the main hall soothes her and she sips her hot drink, wondering what could have come over her to make her so forward. With one of the servants, no less!

The Seance

Bong! Bong! Bong! The sonorous tones of the grandfather clock in the front hall rang out ten times announcing that the moment had arrived for Mlle. Shires' séance to commence. In the hour since dinner, she had transformed the drawing room. Colorful scarves draped the electric lamps, candles burned in every corner giving a warm, roseate glow to the room. Snow had started to fall softly outside and the deep silence of the night penetrated to room, giving the space a hollow feeling as if it were larger than it really was. A strong scent of sandalwood emanated from the fire where the young medium had sprinkled nuggets of incense.

"Entrez, mes amis," she drew her hosts and the other house guests into the room, guiding them to sit at a small Chippendale table that has been moved in front of the fireplace, placing each person at an assigned seat.

"Chevalier, sit here, if you will, next to me," she steered Sir Brian to his place. "And Doctor McWhirter on the other side of me. Madame Leatherby, beside him, and Major Gregg across from me. Just so. Next to him, Monsieur McPherson; then Mlle. Gabby alongside Sir Brian. Now our circle is complete."

She sat down and placed her hands on the table in front of her. She wore a long shawl of cream colored raw silk that draped her like a mystic's robe.

"Lady Jane has asked me to contact her father, who died last year," she explained to the others. "She has given me some of his personal effects to establish a connection." The mystic laid out a hair brush, a pocket knife and a cigar case on the table in front of her.

"For those of you who have not attended a séance before, I work by contacting a spirit guide who acts as my intermediary on the other side. My guide is a Roman Legionnaire who died more than eighteen hundred years ago. His name is Gaius. He speaks Latin and very bad French, I'm afraid, but once he has contacted Monsieur Greggs, we will be able to speak with him in English."

Having given this brief explanation of what she planned to do, Eloise closed her eyes and hummed quietly, a tuneless sound that droned on for many minutes, seeming to expand into the room and get louder. Over the course of many moments the lights visibly dimmed and the air was suddenly chill.

The humming sound continued, though now it seemed to come from the very air itself. Eloise's lips moved and a raspy very male voice spoke in the middle of the table, it seemed. "Bonum vespere, domina,"

"Bon nuit, mon ami, Gaius," said Eloise in her own voice. "Nous sommes ici pour parler avec un homme, le pere de Dame Jane."

"Invenies," said the man's voice and there was a growing tightness in the air, as if they were in a very confined space and it was hard to breath. The lights dimmed down even more, and as Gabriela looked around she could see the candle flames actually shrink to tiny points. The electric light had only a very small glow to it, and the fire looked like nothing more than dead coals

"Janey? Janey? Is that you?" said a new voice through Mlle. Shires' lips. "It's so dark. I can't see you, but I sense you're there, girl. Speak up, please, I seem to have lost my way."

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“Papa!” burst Jane. “It is Papa. I would recognize his voice anywhere.”

Indeed, Gabriela also recognized the voice of her childhood friend’s aged father, and Major Greggs, at the far end of the table stiffened in fear. His eyes flew wide at the sound of his dead father’s words.

“Speak to him quickly,” hissed Mlle. Shires. “There is another force. Some one trying . . .”

The beautiful French woman spasmed and shook as if a terrier had seized her.

“Oh! Hello,” said yet another voice, very calmly and politely through the woman’s mouth. “Sorry to intrude and all that, but I rather need a bit of help . . .”

“Avaunt!” commanded Eloise in her own voice. “Allez, allez, immediatement!”

“Not yet,” came the calm, new voice. “There’s something very nasty quite close by that you should be most cautious about. And I do need a bit of help myself to open my . . .”

“Papa? Papa where are you?” cried Jane, mystified at this new intruder in their communing.

“Ah. You’ll do just fine,” said the calm voice.

The lights flared back to full power and Lady Jane cried aloud, falling back in her chair seemingly in a dead faint. The fire blazed up, roaring in the chimney like a lost soul.

“Jane!” cried Sir Brain, jumping up to reach his wife.

Major Greggs blanched white and swallowed heavily.

“That was the old man,” he whispered. “How could that be?”

Gabriela looked quickly at Mlle. Shires and was shocked to see the young woman’s face writhing in the grip of a strong emotion, or perhaps pain.

“Are you alright?” she asked the clairvoyant.

“He’s here. At the threshold. He comes and may not be denied,” she whispered, looking the writer full in the eyes, terrified. And with that she too lay back in her chair, her eyes fluttered up in her face to show the whites and she swooned, panting rapidly for breath.

“Who are you?” cried Gabriella to Mlle. Shires as the young woman’s eyes fluttered up and she started to swoon.

Jane had fainted in her chair. Sir Brian was first at her side, patting her hand and holding her head. Dr. McWhirter took a small vial from his waistcoat pocket and twisted off the top. The strong smell of ammonia established the contents as smelling salts and he wafted the vial under Jane’s nose.

“What? Who? Whaaa...?” The lady’s eyes flickered open and she looked around in momentary befuddlement at the many worried faces looking down at her.

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“Brian, darling, did I faint? It was Papa wasn't it, Peter?” she said to her brother who hovered behind her husband's shoulder. “It was his voice we heard.”

Sitting up in her chair, seemingly non the worse for her swoon, she glanced across the table at Eloise.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “I seem not to be the only weak female at the table. Dr. McWhirter, please help Eloise. I'm fine. I was just startled, I suppose. I knew Eloise was the genuine article, but to speak so clearly to my dear father. It quite overcame me.”

The doctor took his container of salts to treat the medium and Jane collected herself sheepishly.

“How silly of me,” she said, taking Gabriela's hand and looking directly into her old friend's eyes. “Just an hysterical girl. Please don't concern yourself, my dear. I'm fine now.”

Indeed, her friend's eyes seemed clear and free of any hint of taint. Gabriela allowed herself to breath easy again, but the uncertainty was still in her mind. What had happened here? What spirits had reached into the corporeal world through the spirit gate that Eloise had opened?

A sudden spluttering cough from the other side of the table drew everyone's attention to Mlle. Shires, who had also aroused quickly after the doctor applied the spirits of hartshorn. The strong pungent salts penetrated even the most dense mental fogs.

The clairvoyant looked in panic at the others.

“Que'st que ce?” she asked. “What has happened? I remember Gaius, his searching for Monsieur Greggs. A moment of the old man, and then? Rien! Nothing.

“This is not normal. I am usually aware of all the spirits who speak through my lips. But tonight? I recall only darkness.”

She sees the worried group gather around Lady Jane and gasps aloud.

“Madame Jane! You are well? Did something frighten you? Attack you?”

Jane laughed, though it sounded a bit hollow to Gabriela, and spoke lightly in reply.

“Nothing but a silly faint, ma cheri. You brought me my Papa, as I asked, and then I got scared. How foolish of me. Perhaps we should try again?”

“Certainly not,” said Sir Brian in no uncertain terms. “We've all had a scare tonight and while I am still not one hundred percent convinced that Miss Shires can speak to the dead, I am bloody well certain that she will not do so again in my house.”

He stood up from beside his wife and offered her his arm

“Let us go to bed, my dear, and put this frightful event behind us. I advice you all to do the same.”

Watching my friend Jane get up from the table with her husband, I am not sure if she is telling the truth. I believe something is amiss here. Knowing Sir Brian is helping her to their room, I stand up

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and shift my attention to Eloise. I quickly come to her aid and help her out of her chair. "My dear Eloise, are you sure you are okay? You really scared everyone tonight. Can I do anything for you? Maybe help you to your room? I believe we've all had a long day." Composing my self, I bid the men a good night and gather myself to retire for the night.

I'll offer to stay with Eloise as long as she needs me.

Eloise was clearly embarrassed at what had happened and turned away Gabriela's attentions, politely but firmly.

"No, no, Mlle. Gabby. You are too kind, but I will be well. We shall all sleep soundly tonight and tomorrow will be bright and merry. You shall see. Voila! The snow is falling, and it will be Christmas time all of a sudden."

Outside the snow fall had indeed settled in to a steady accumulation, already an inch or two thick on the lawn and the holly trees they could see out of the windows, faintly illuminated by the lights from within the house.

The Lady in White

After the seance came to an awkward end, the party was over. Everyone made their way upstairs to their rooms. Sarah, Lady Jane's maid, did not make an appearance to help her undress, and Gabby assumed she was busy helping Lady Jane get to bed. The author had been looking after herself for many years, however, and had little trouble getting out of her dress, hanging her clothes in the large wardrobe and dressing in her nightgown. A fire had been lit in the small fireplace, and plenty of coals had been set in the scuttle, with a poker and a pair of big tongs to place them on the blaze. She banked up the fire for the night. The room was chilly and the wind outside had picked up as the storm settled in on the countryside, rattling the windows and stirring up tiny drafts of cold air. The ensuite bathroom made it easy for her to wash up and brush her teeth without the risk of encountering any amorous footmen on the stairs, and she locked the door firmly before slipping under the covers of the very elegant four-poster bed in her room.

Someone had put a hot water bottle in the bed perhaps an hour before, and though the real warmth had seeped away by now, the huge bed was at least not freezing cold. Under the thick blankets and eiderdown cover, she soon warmed up a little cocoon of space and drifted off to sleep, wondering what she had witnessed this evening and whether her friend Jane was in any danger from malignant spirits.

She dreamed at first of the handsome footman, an embarrassing, fumbling dream in which he was watching her from various doorways and she kept realizing that she wasn't wearing any underwear and that her skirts were in constant danger of being lifted up by strong winds or closing doors. One of the doors did slam loudly behind her, and she started awake in the darkness of the night convinced that the young man was in the room with her.

The faint glow of coals from her fire provided enough light, however, to see that she was alone in her room. Nothing but a silly dream.

She rolled over to go back to sleep. And then she heard steps outside her door. Not the heavy tread of a man, but the lighter patter of a woman's footsteps hurrying past in the corridor that lead to the back stairs.

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When I hear the creak of someone walking past my door, I sit up in bed and listen. I look to the door and see no hallway light under the door. I hesitate, then my curiosity gets the best out of me. I slide out of my warm bed and quickly yet quietly move to my bedroom door pressing my ear to it. Not hearing anything, I look around my room for a light source. Not wanting to turn on the lights in my room or in the hallway, possibly waking up everyone, I find an old metal lantern by the fireplace. I pick it up and light the wick inside. Im cold in my silk night gown and bare feet, but it I take the time to find my robe and slippers, the opportunity might be gone.

I slowly open my door and peek outside into the hallway, holding the lantern out to see better.

Gabriela's feet were freezing cold as she quietly unlocked the door to her room and ventured out into the shadowy corridor. The earlier snowfall had stopped and a setting moon cast bars of bright light across the hallway. Her wristwatch on the bed side table had told her the time was shortly before three o'clock in the morning. She was fairly sure the footsteps she had heard had been heading towards the back stairs. These were not the servant's stairs, but a lesser staircase used by guests to reach their bedrooms without passing through the main upstairs suites. Tip-toeing along the hallway, she came to the top of the staircase and caught a brief glimpse of a white nightgown swirling away towards the back of the house.

In a trice, she had run down the stairs and was in hot pursuit. On the ground floor, however, she became temporarily disoriented by the maze of storage rooms, pantries and sculleries that surround the kitchen. But she found herself in a few minutes at the back door, which stood partly open to the night.

Bitter cold air wafted inside, setting the half-naked girl to shivering. Moving forward to push the door closed, she glanced outside. In the moonlight she could see a clear set of very recent footprints in the snow, leading away from the house.

I'll quickly look around for a coat or even a blanket to wrap myself with. Even if I have to use the rug from the floor. Then hopefully someone has an old pair of boots by the door I can slip on. Assuming a servant or gardener uses this back entrance into these rooms.

I'll peer outside from the door and try and determine where the person might be heading. Why would someone be going out into the cold night at 3:00am. Let alone wearing a white night gown. Could it be Jane or Eloise? Is there another building close by? Or God forbid they're heading to the old church.

There are heavy coats hanging on pegs by the back door and a range of mud boots as well. It does not take more than a few moments for Gabriela to wrap herself up and find a smaller pair of Wellington boots to fit her feet. There is a good amount of moonlight outside to see by, and there are lanterns also hanging nearby with boxes of matches on a shelf beside them. She does not have her pistol with her.

The foot prints lead out into the gardens at the side of the house, not in a direction that Gabriela is familiar with — but she's not very familiar with the grounds at all.

I quickly don the heavy coat that hangs on the pegs by the back door and slip on a pair of boots. I'll take the lantern with me, but leave it unlit. The fresh white snow creates enough light reflecting the moonlight allowing for a bright night. Actually, Im a bit concerned about being seen by another if I go out into the snow. My dark figure will stand out against the white snow. I'll keep the lantern incase I go into another building and need light.

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I slip out into the cold crisp night. The snow crunches under my feet. It's cold, but not windy so the night air is actually quite beautiful. I walk slowly, looking about for another dark figure against the snow. I'll look at the footprints to determine if she wore boots at this point too. I'll follow the tracks into the garden, stopping every so often to look about. Remembering the blue light I saw during the seance, hoping that this is not related.

Thinking to myself, the woman I saw would have to be Jane or Eloise. Wondering who and why is consuming me.

Gabriela stepped out into the bitter freeze of the winter night. The heavy coat she had found kept the worst of the weather at bay, but her breath plumed in clouds of steam in front of her. She looked around in the cold beauty of the night, brilliantly lit by moonlight with stars as bright as diamonds on the black emptiness of the sky, but she saw no signs of another figure moving against the white sea of snow.

Looking carefully at the footprints, she realized that the woman she was following had actually walked out into the snow barefooted. It made her shiver just to think about it, and she hurried forward hoping to catch the foolish person, whoever it was.

The tracks lead clearly down a path in the back garden between mounded heaps of snow that were probably low bushes in more clement weather. Perhaps a hundred paces from the Hall they turned left, definitely now headed towards the road, and perhaps the chapel where she had entered the estate yesterday afternoon.

Gabriela hurried on, and then she saw a curious thing. The foot prints stopped. In the middle of the snow, in the middle of the path, in bright moonlight. They just stopped. And as she watched, in a thrill of utter terror she realized that the foot prints she could see were disappearing, one by one, starting with the farthest away from her they erased themselves from the snow. One second they were fully visible, the next it was as if nothing had been there at all. No disturbance in the snow. No movement, just slowly vanishing footprints.

In horror she watched the trail she had followed from the house erase itself. The trace of non-evidence retreated to her position on the path and then past her. Looking back along the garden path she could still see her own boot prints, but the dual track was quickly becoming one.

Standing in the cold, alone and in the middle of the garden, I attempt to put together what just happened. Did I imagine the woman... the footprints in the snow... everything? Or did I just see a ghost? A shiver runs down my spine when I think of the latter. I look around, recognize that I am alone and quickly run back to the back door, embarrassed that I was outside alone. What if someone saw me... they'd think I was crazy. Am I?

Had she been dreaming? Had it been a ghost? Was she mad?

How could one tell, she thought as she hurried back to the Hall in the bright light of the moon on the freshly fallen snow. Her footprints could not be eradicated. Whoever rose first to make the fires, start the kettles, get the household going would know that someone had been out in the snow. But so what? A quick romp in the early morning snow by moonlight? How romantic. Even if she was discovered, her artistic temperament would explain the excursion. Wouldn't it?

I get back inside and remove the coat and boots. I hang the lantern back on the hook and immediately realize how poorly dressed I am in a simple silk nightgown and barefoot. I move quickly

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and quietly back up the back stairs to my bedroom and close the door quietly behind me. Hoping not to wake anyone else on the same hallway. I re lock my door and move to the small fireplace throwing in a few more pieces of coal. I sit on the hearth warming myself for a few minutes rethinking what just happened. Questioning everything. Should I say something tomorrow to Jane? Should I ask Meadows or Sarah about the estate's history? What about Eloise? Would she listen to me or think I'm being cheeky.

I close the screen on the fireplace a bit and return to my bed. Sliding into my clean sheets I curl up like a child and attempt to go to sleep.

She made her way back upstairs to her room unobserved, she hoped, and snuggled by the fire until some warmth had returned to her frozen feet and fingers, then she climbed into bed, warming a cocoon of air underneath the thick blankets and comforter. Her mind ran over and over the mystery of disappearing footprints. There was no possible logical explanation. Either she had dreamed the whole thing, or she had seen a ghost.

Without noticing it, she drifted into a dreamless sleep, waking suddenly at the ringing of the breakfast bell. Sarah, the young ladies maid from the night before knocked on the door, tried the handle but was unable to enter.

"Breakfast in half an hour, miss," she called through the door. "I can help you dress or bring you a tray of you'd like."

The Crypt

I rise slowly and walk to the door. "Good morning Sarah." I say to her after I open the door. A tray for breakfast would be wonderful this morning. I hope it won't appear rude to everyone. Do you think it will?" I open the door and walk back into the room. Allowing her to enter. "I'll just need a few minutes to clean up and get dressed. Would you mind bringing me something?"

When Sarah leaves and closes the door, I'll quickly bath and get dressed. I'll put on a nice dress, but not one that is too formal. I'm not sure what the day holds. When Sarah comes back with breakfast, I'll make small talk with her and see if she may be open to discuss some of the history about the house. If it seems appropriate, I'll tell her what happened last night. I feel a nice connection with the young girl.

Gabriela dressed warmly in a tweed skirt and a sweater over her blouse with knee-high woolly socks. The house was chilly after the snow fall, though the countryside looked fresh and clean under the new blanket of soft white. By the time she was dressed, Sarah had returned with her tray. Only Angus McPherson was downstairs, she reported, so there was no slight in not going down.

"Lady Jane is staying in bed" said Sara. "Says she's caught a chill and she do look pale. Miss. I heard there was something awful happened last night at the see-ance. Miss Eloise is still fast asleep."

I listen to Sarah as she combs my hair again. "You know a lady could get used to this." I say as I smile at her in the mirror. "I can never style my hair the way you do." The situation turns more serious when she begins to mention the hunting's in the chapel. I reach up for her hand when she mentions the weeping spirit that roams the upper hallway. I turn in my seat to face her. I take her hands and pull her close to me. She kneels in front of me while I sit. Looking her in the eye, I tell her

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everything about the night. I see the terror in her face. "I dont know why she appeared to me on my first night here, and not to you. You and your family have worked here for years. Please dont tell Lady Jane of this. I dont want to worry her. It seems she has caught a chill and wont be up and about today. Lets allow her to feel better first shall we?"

The young woman's face, so close to hers is full of trust and sympathy. Gabriela can smell the faint scent of lavender soap on the girl's skin and see the pupils in her eyes expand as she looks up at her. It is a very intimate moment. Sarah's lips quiver slightly and she draws in her breath in a sigh.

In response to Gabriela's questions about the history of the house, the young servant is pleased to show off her knowledge.

"The Hall's been here since the time of Queen Elizabeth, Miss, though it's been added on to a bit since then. There's all sorts of stories about ghosts and such. I think all old house have them, don't they. They say there's a priest hole in the dining room, behind the fireplace, but I never seen it. And there's supposed to be a weeping lady in white what walks the upper halls — that's the hall outside your door, Miss. But I ain't never seen her neither.

"And, of course, the chapel is haunted. That's a more recent story, from my Grand Dad's time. The chapels is as old as the Hall, but it was sacred ground, see, so no ghosts could haunt it. But they do say that one Sunday morning about fifty years back, when the family and half the village was in there saying their prayers that a woman in white come up out of the crypt, crying and calling out to people what was in the pews. Scared them half to death she did. Especially when she just sort of faded from view, right in front of the vicar, like.

"Same thing next week and the week after. She just kept on coming out of the crypt and crying like. Then fading away. Eventually, they just stopped using the chapel and the family now goes for Sunday service to the church in the village"

Sarah's eyes were wide open and she had worked herself into a state of terror telling this tales. Even Gabriela could feel a shiver of the unholy in her spine at the image of the woman in white.

When Gabriela told the young woman what she had seen in the night and the footsteps in the garden, the girl put her fist in her mouth and went very pale.

"Then you seen her too, Miss. The ghost of the Hall. She's real!"

A sudden knock at the door made both women start and then giggle at themselves for being so nervous.

"Pardon me, Miss," said Meadows in his deep tones through the closed door, "but Sir Brian would like me to tell you that the gentlemen will be leaving in half an hour to catalog the items in the chapel. He hopes you will be able to attend the proceedings. Shall I tell him you will be there?"

We both jump at the knock at the door and laugh as we're brought back to reality. We laugh and hug each other in fun. Then I feel a connection. Maybe since I am not her employer, she feels more at ease with me. "Please Sarah, lets keep this conversation a secret between us okay? I feel like I can really trust you." There is a moment of silence as we hold hands and looking at each other. If this were a date, I would expect the man to kiss me here. She then pulls away and takes my breakfast tray. "Wait Sarah." I call to her. She turns and I can tell she is flushed. "You mentioned a Priest Hole behind the fireplace. I dont know what that is?"

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“It’s a hiding place, built for priests back when being a Catholic could get you burned,” says the girl. “I’ve heard of it, but I never seen it.”

Meadows knocks again calling for Sarah. I walk sternly to the door opening it. “She is here Meadows! She is helping me. I heard what you said and plan on being with the men this morning. Tell them I will see them in 30 minutes.” I hold the door open for Sarah as she leaves.

Meadows draws himself up to his full height. His eyes smolder with indignation, but he is too polite to snap at a guest. He stands aside and glances fiercely at the young maid who scurries out of the room under his watchful eye. Gabriela is reminded that while she may be immune from the butler’s wrath, the other servants are not. And punishment may be delayed until well after she has left the Hall

“Meadows!” I call to him gathering myself. “Im sorry to had spoken to you that way, I didnt sleep well last night. Please forgive me.” I calmly whisper. “Could you tell me how Lady Jane and Eloise are doing? Im a bit concerned with them. Please let me know when I could check on them today. Id also like to explore the manor this afternoon. I find the house simply stunning. Is there someone on staff that can give me a tour in Jane’s absence?”

“I would be happy to escort you, Miss,” he says, unbending a bit at her apology. “Lady Jane is not well. She has a cold, and Miss Eloise has locked her door, asking only for coffee and to be left alone. I will pass along your concerns when I speak to them later.”

After my exchange with Meadows and Sarah, I check myself one last time in the mirror. After all, I will be spending the day with several very handsome men. I adjust my skirt and sweater, and decide to change my shoes, replacing them with my leather riding boots. The snow will be unforgiving if I simply wear shoes. I pull the leather boot straps tight under my knees and calves, and buckle them. I always feel so strong when Im in them. Plus, they look fantastic with my skirt and sweater. I grab my sketch pad and writing supplies, and slide them into my leather satchel. Buckling the front of the bag, I head downstairs to meet the men. The smell of coffee fills the stairwell and readies me for the day.

The gentlemen are gathering in the front hall, putting on their winter coats and hats. It is not very far to the chapel, perhaps a quarter of a mile down the main driveway, but the air is cold. Gabriela can feel it bite at her skin when the front door is opened. She puts on her own coat and gloves. The riding boots seem to be a good idea and they do indeed make her look smart and vaguely dangerous.

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He waves her ahead of him as they leave the house and then walks alongside her as they make their way down the snow drifted driveway. Perhaps six inches of snow have fallen during the night, coating the trees and countryside in a glorious blanket of sparkling white. Somewhere in the distance she can see the smoke from chimneys on cottages and hear the faint sounds of children laughing. “The village is over there,” says Sir Brian. “I expect the school is closed today. Tomorrow is the last day of school for the year. There is an awards ceremony. I will be presiding. Might I ask you to attend? My wife was to be giving away the prizes for the best pupils, but I’m sure they will be much honored to have a published author give out their awards. Jane is not well, you see.”

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“It’s a gloomy place, isn’t it?” says Dr. McWhirter. “And they’ve set up shop down in the crypt, which is even darker and more depressing. But I suppose it is an appropriate place to store the coffins of these ancient Egyptians. Sacred ground and what have you.”

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Gabriela watches with fascination as the archeologists begin their scholarly process of cataloging the finds. Professor Thorn has already produced a list that he summarized at the dinner table last night. He now begins to add details as they look – more closely at each object.

Their immediate attention is on the sarcophagi: Two fairly plain, one much decorated and painted with hieroglyphs that have faded to faint stains with time. Thorn and McPherson spend a great deal of time trying to decipher the sense of the glyphs.

“Would you mind sketching things for us?” ask Sir Brian. “There’s an interesting cabinet over here that I find much more fascinating than those old bone boxes.”

He directs her attention to a tall cabinet made of black wood much inlaid with ivory and silver.

“I’m waiting for our learned friends to open it,” he says. “I think it may contain the real treasures of this trove. Something about it calls to me.”

Indeed, Gabriela can feel a fascination about the object as well. In the soft illumination from the lanterns the silver runes inscribed upon it almost seem to glow with a faint bluish light. I walk down the stairs behind the men: Sir Brian, Agnus and Dr. Throm. I crouch down to avoid the low ceiling as I step off the final stair and enter the Leatherby family crypt. I stand quietly alone to the side of the stairs and watch the men enter the room and light the other lanterns. Seeing the room for the first time, it takes me a moment to get familiar with things. A sense of awe comes over me as I see the Egyptian items. A cold draft finds a way beneath my coat and under my sweater. I feel a shiver go across my chest and around my back, triggering goose bumps everywhere. A cold draft must have crept down the staircase to find me. It causes me to step into the room as if obeying a summon to enter. I flip the collar on my wool coat up over the back of my neck and hold the front of my coat tighter to me. I think to myself how I wish for longer hair as I step towards the items.

I walk to the main sarcophagus in the middle of the room and stand next to it. I see the detail on the surface. I run my left hand across the top feeling the carvings. My black leather glove masking my touch. I slide my gloves off, crouch down eye level to the surface and feel the carvings with my fingers. “It’s simply beautiful.” I whisper to myself. After my close inspection, I walk along its side running my bare hand down the case while looking at the smaller items around me. At Sir Brian’s direction, I see the black cabinet. It stands alone against the far wall. I’m not sure what to make of it. But something familiar about it strikes me. I move closer and feel its surface. Maybe dark wood? I’m not quite sure. Then I notice it. Small inscriptions set on the surface. They almost glow with a soft blue hue. Could this be what I remember! The other night. From the window. But how? This was under the chapel and well out of my view. It does cause me to stir.

Sir Brian calls for my attention again asking me to sketch. I unbutton my coat and set it aside since it is warmer down here away from the outside elements. I sit against a wooden crate and open my leather satchel removing my sketch book and pencils. I hop up onto the crate, cross my legs as a

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proper lady should, flip to a blank page, and quickly find a subject. Everything! I begin to sketch the items in the room as they sit. Leaving no detail out. I sketch quickly as if under some unknown haste. Once complete, I quickly turn the page and start anew. This time I sketch each of the men as they work. A few times I witness Angus and even Dr. Throm distracted at my knee caps. Typical men, a woman's bare knees gets their attention even during the most exciting of times. However the old Professor seemed to stare the longest. Maybe he's not so absent minded. The old pervert. But I didn't mind. Let him look, it was quite charming knowing a man of his age still has eyes for a young lady.

Before long, I had 6 to 10 sketches and decide to set my book down and walk to Sir Brian. He sits on a stool looking over hieroglyphs on a tablet. I move up behind him resting my hand on the back of his shoulder. "I've documented everything as you've asked." Not hearing a reply, I continue. "What do you make of all this? Can you read the writings? And that dark cabinet. What do you think is inside?"

Sir Brian and Professor Thorn both look over Gabriela's sketches. The professor smiles shyly at her. He's clearly nervous around beautiful women.

"These are excellent, my dear," he says in his dry upper crust accent. "Perhaps this evening we can try adding a drop of water color to these ones you have done of the two lesser sarcophagi? That will make them very attractive, I think.

"I've finished by catalog. It is much as I described last night. Now we must try to open the sarcophagi. I think we shall start with the lesser two. They look quite ordinary compared to this black and silver sarcophagus, which I must confess is quite unusual."

When she asks about the cabinet, he nods and actually comes close enough to rest his hand on her arm.

"You have a keen eye, Miss Middleton. This is quite strange to find in an Egyptian tomb. The design is Chinese. Quite as old as the Pharos, but from somewhere else altogether. If this is indeed an original artifact, we shall have to rethink much of our accepted history, I shouldn't be surprised."

He turns back to Sir Brian.

"His methods may be unorthodox, but your young adventurer has brought you a major archeological find, my young friend. I can guarantee that scholars the world over will be analyzing these objects for years to come."

Sir Brian puffs up and grins as Thorn refers to his notes again.

"Let me see. As I indicated last night we have three large crates, three medium crates, three small crates and three boxes." He points to each in turn, the wooden crates have all been disassembled to reveal their contents

From each of the large crates a stone sarcophagus has been removed. One is clearly the main item, black and silver with much decoration and hieroglyphs, two are more ordinary caskets.

The first of the medium crates contained a reed boat and a wooden chariot, much desiccated and decayed. The second crate held a mahogany and silver throne in fine condition. And the third crate has disgorged a black wooden and bone cabinet also in surprisingly good condition. It is this object which has captured Gabriela's fascination

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From the smaller crates a sacrificial altar of basalt inlaid with quartz and silver has been removed along with three small wooden chests inlaid with gold and jewels and a statue of the goddess Bast or Sekhmet in gold and ebony. This alone must be worth thousands of pounds as an object of art itself. According to Thorn its scholarly value may be much higher.

And finally the smaller boxes have been opened and their contents displayed upon a makeshift table. Arrayed before them in the soft glow of the lanterns are seven alabaster funerary jars, a pair of broken stellae removed from the entrance to the tomb, both densely carved with hieroglyphs, and various ritual weapons including an axe, a bow and a dagger.

“A staggering haul,” says Thorn.

McPherson, in his shirt sleeves in the close atmosphere of the crypt, smiles broadly and winks at Gabriela.

“I’m going to be a rich man,” he laughs. “Perhaps you would consent to have dinner with me at Simpsons on the Strand, Miss Middleton – when we go back to town that is.”

Professor Thorn bristles at this clear advance on the young lady and sniffs loudly.

“It’s not treasure, young man. It’s history. It is priceless, but you cannot simply sell it.”

“Not going to,” says McPherson with a grin. “Sir Brian will reward me as he sees fit. That’s our gentlemen’s agreement. And from what you’re saying, Professor, it’s a legendary find. It will make him famous. And he will do right by me. I trust him.”

Sir Brian nods uncomfortably at the brash young Scotsman.

“Quite right, young man. But let’s get on with it shall we. Open the sarcophagi? These two first.”

Tools are fetched from a kit supplied by Thorn. Sharp chisels are driven carefully into the crevices between the lid and the main box of the ancient stone coffins. These are levered up enough to get crowbars under the lip of the lid and then with a concerted heave, the lid is lifted up and aside before being lowered down carefully so as not to crack the painted surfaces.

Gabriela wrinkles her nose, anticipating a smell of rot from within the coffin, but there is only the faint odor of sandal wood and cinnamon. The dry, brittle carcass within its shroud is long past decomposition, and if the job was done right when these two fellows were laid to rest, the pitch and bitumen used to preserve their bodies would have staved off the effects of the dry air altogether.

Both mummies are very similar. Gabriela sketches them quickly in morbid fascination as Thorn looks at inscriptions on the inside of the stone boxes. These are much clearer than those on the exterior.

“This is odd,” he says. “Favored servants were often buried with their masters, but these two are set as guards. ‘Lest he stir again’, it says. Most unusual.”

As the professor examines the bindings on the mummies, Sir Brian and Gabriela turn their attention to cabinet. There is clearly a lock and hinges, but on close examination with the lanterns, the doors seem to be fused completely with the main body of the cabinet. There is not even a sign of a seam between them, as if the whole thing had been carved from a single block of wood and merely made to resemble a cabinet.

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Sir Brian takes one of Professor Thorn's chisels and positions it where there must logically be a gap between the door and the body. Striking the chisel with the hammer lightly has no effect. He hits the tool harder, but this also does not even mark the wood.

"Give me a go," says Angus, stepping forward and flexing his muscles. He is a powerful young man and as he comes close to her, Gabriela is very aware of his virile scent: sweat and an exciting raw muskiness that makes her glad it is dark down here as she flushes bright red at her physical reaction to him. She is no longer cold at all.

The powerful Scotsman settles the chisel blade in place and whacks it as hard as he can with the hammer.

"Damn!" he swears when there is no effect.

"Give me that small sledge hammer," he points to another tool, much heavier than the hammer he has been using.

"Be careful," warns Thorn looking up from his studies as he hears the brash young man curse out loud.

McPherson swings the sledge hammer with all his might. The chisel snaps in half and the blade flies off into the darkness. The stub remaining in his hand, with a sharp fragment of broken steel impales the young man's left hand, gashing him badly.

"Christ's blood that hurts!" he screams, unmindful of a woman's ears.

Blood gushes from the wound soaking the front of the cabinet and dripping onto the crypt floor.

"Let me see," says Dr. McWhirter, pressing forward. He performs a quick field dressing on the wound with his handkerchief, staunching the flow of blood, but McPherson is pale and sweating profusely now.

"He's lost a fair bit of blood," says the doctor. "Let's get him back to the Hall immediately while he can still climb the stairs on his own. I don't fancy carrying this big lump up those narrow steps."

I scream as I witness the accident happen to Duncan's hand. I stand with my hand over my mouth shocked. I watch the Dr. rush to his side and wrap his hand in a cloth. I turn and see the blood splattered on the black cabinet and feel faint at the sight of it. I swoon and catch myself on the edge of the large wooden crate. Professor Thorn sees me catch myself and rushes to help stabilize me. "Are you okay, Miss Middleton?" he asks. Holding my arm with one hand and my lower back with his other.

"I get faint at the sight of blood Professor. I'll be alright. Thanks you. You're a very kind gentleman." I say tapping his hand.

We move to rush Mr McWhirter upstairs to tend to his wounds. I watch Sir Brian blow out the lanterns taking only one with him. He turns and hands the lantern to me and asks that I fetch my sketch book. The men hurry up the stairs as I turn to reenter the room. I hear their voices grow silent as they head up the spiral staircase.

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Quickly, leaving all their gear where it is, the men help McPherson up the steps to the main part of the deserted chapel. Gabriela turns round at the last minute to fetch her sketch book.

Lifting her lantern high to find the leather binder, she sees the front of the wooden cabinet glowing blue. As she watches in fascination and a creeping sense of horror, the blood that had soaked the wood in a curtain of red is slowly absorbed and as it is sucked in to the body of the cabinet, the silvery sigils visibly pulse and glow with an unearthly energy.

Despite the rough bandage that McWhiter had applied in the crypt, the young archaeologist's hand had bleed profusely, quickly soaking the linen handkerchief. As she exited the chapel to catch up with the others, Gabriela noticed a trail of blood spatters on the dusty stone floor and then on the bright white snow outside. With a lump of terror in her throat (2 SAN) she hurried up to catch the gentlemen who were moving rather slowly with McPherson supported between them.

I am alone. Fear grips me almost immediately. I turn to leave, then catch myself. I force myself to go back into the crypt to find my sketch book and leather satchel. I walk to the back of the main crypt and find my things on the floor next to the wooden crate I sat on that morning. The crate is now open and its lid almost hid my satchel from me.

I crouch down to gather my things when I hear it! Faint whispering. I freeze! I cant tell where it is coming from but it sends a shiver down my spine. I gather my things hastily and stand up face to face with the cabinet made of wood and bone. I stand there frozen. Almost trapped by its power over me. I feel drawn to it. Almost as if it calls for me. I walk closer to it and hold out my hand. I gently place my hand on it. I can feel and hear my own heart beat. Then I happens. The cabinet begins to glow with a faint blueish hue. I hear whispering again and pull my hand away. It feels wet. I turn and run to the stairs.

I call out to the men as I climb the stairs making sure they did not leave me. When I reach the main floor of the Chapel, it is bright from the afternoon sun. The light shines through the stain glass. I look at my hand and see Duncan's blood. I whip it on my skirt and run out of the Chapel. The men have walked quite a ways from me by now. I must have stayed longer than I thought. My heart is racing as I run to catch them. They smile as they see my fear.

"Dont laugh at me!" I scold them. "I heard something when I was alone."

"What did you hear?" Sir Brian asked in a patronizing tone. Everyone stopped and look at me for my response. "Nothing.... It was just the wind rushing across the vaulted ceiling." I say. Everyone chuckles except Professor Thorn. He believes me I sense.

"Well, I for one found the place very ghoulish," said Major Greggs, coming to her defense. "I'm not surprised that a sensitive soul like Miss Middleton was scared down there. And as for odd noises, I expect the crypt is a veritable hostel for small wildlife in this weather – squirrels, badgers, and what have you."

Gabriela was glad that he did not mention mice or rats, though of course her imagination immediately supplied the image of the nasty rodents scurrying around in the dark corners down there. She shuddered at the thought. Nevertheless, it was very gallant of him to offer a plausible explanation for whatever noises she may have heard.

We all continue to walk quickly to the Leatherby Manor. "Dont go dying on me Mr. McWhirter." I say with a smile attempting to lighten the mood. "You owe me dinner."

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Back at the Hall, Meadows and Miller hurried out to help support Angus McPherson through the front door. Another young man, dressed very roughly as a groom came from the back of the house to help everyone pull off snowy boots and take away coats to be dried and brushed clean of cobwebs and dirt. McPherson was half carried up the main stairs, but called down to her at the turn of the staircase that he would hold her to the promise of dinner in London.

“I’ll fetch my bag,” said Dr. McWhirter mounting the stairs two at a time after them. “That wound will need stitching. And a shot of morphine will help him sleep though the pain. Have the cook boil a large pot of water and bring several clean towels.”

As an afterthought he too paused at the first curve in great staircase and called down.

“Have the kitchen staff prepare a bowl of hot beef broth as well and bring up a jug of beer. He has lost a lot of blood and will need to replenish his fluids.”

Sir Brian relayed the instructions to his servants and then he too went upstairs to see how Lady Jane was doing. Professor Thorn, Major Greggs and Gabriela were drawn to the heat of a roaring fire in the drawing room. Eloise Shires, the young French medium, was reclined on the sofa in front of the fire looking as beautiful as a freshly painted picture by Titian. She was drinking a cup of tea and nibbling at a cookie, the last of several judging by the crumbs on her plate. The remains of the Sunday newspaper were scattered about her feet.

“Bonjours, mes amis!” she called brightly to them as they entered the cheerful room, cold and damp from their trek in the snow and their long day in the chilly subterranean crypt.

“You have enjoyed your beastly dead mummies, no?” she laughed and batted her long lashes at Major Greggs who positively glowed at her attention.

“Me? I have spent my day in idleness, reading the newspaper and sitting by the fire. C’est tres bien, n’est ce pas?”

“Madame Jane, she has the sneezes and does not come downstairs, so I am all alone and bored. But now you are returned and we shall talk and tell stories and laugh, shall we not, as friends do at holiday times?”

Meadows entered silently with a tray bearing a fresh tea pot and a coffee service as well. In a trice more cups appeared on the sideboard along with a mounded platter of baked goods: small cakes colorfully iced to look like wrapped Christmas presents and a selection of freshly baked cookies. Alongside these he set a silver tray with a decanter of fine sherry and a set of crystal glasses.

The grandfather clock in the front hall chimed the half hour. Gabriela checked her watch. It was three thirty and already the bright sunshine outside was slipping away as long shadows crept across the sparkling snow. The day had passed quickly while they worked in the crypt. She vaguely remembered a lunch of sandwiches and warm drinks being served, but she was ravenously hungry again and the cookies smelled divine.

“So, Mlle. Gabriela, tell me what you have seen in this treasure trove from ancient Egypt,” said Eloise, patting the sofa, inviting her to sit next to her. “And has the curse of the tomb struck down our brave explorer?”

The Chapel

The gentlemen are gathering in the front hall, putting on their winter coats and hats. It is not very far to the chapel, perhaps a quarter of a mile down the main driveway, but the air is cold. Gabriela can feel it bite at her skin when the front door is opened. She puts on her own coat and gloves. The riding boots seem to be a good idea and they do indeed make her look smart and vaguely dangerous.

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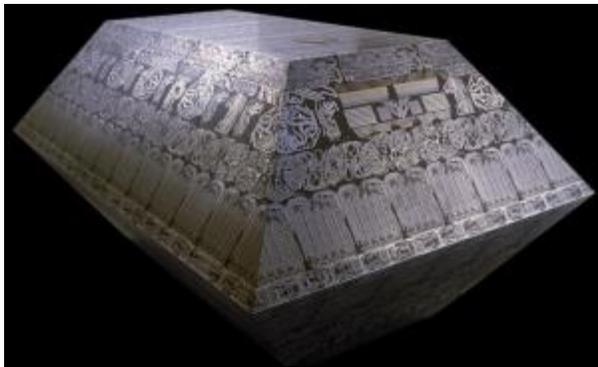
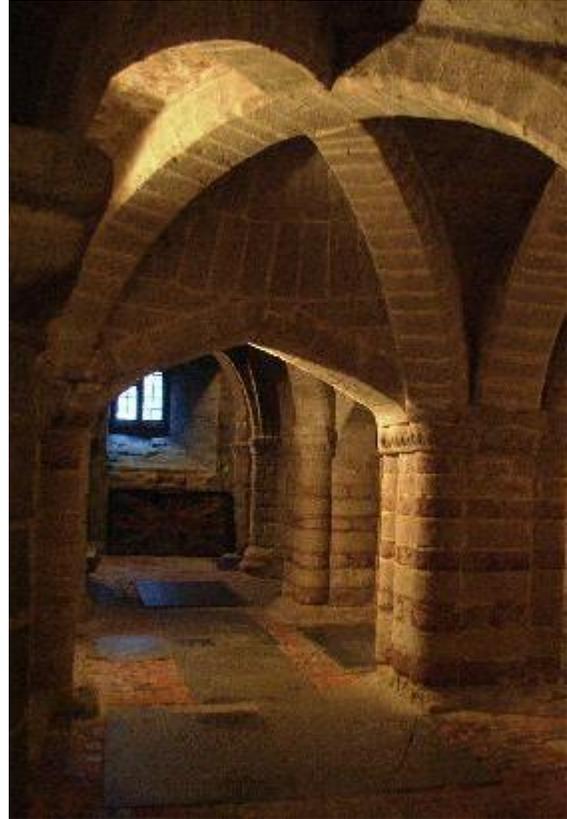
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Cast

Above Stairs

Miss Gabriella Middleton is a novelist. She is the protagonist of our story. She has written two popular murder mystery novels: *Murder at Midnight* and *The Butler Did It*. She is unmarried. She is staying at Leatherby Hall for the Christmas season as a guest of Lady Jane Leatherby, her childhood friend.

Lady Jane Leatherby is a school girl friend of Gabriela's. She was Jane Gregg when they were at boarding school together in Winchester in Hampshire. Jane and Gabriela have corresponded regularly since those days, but they have not seen one another more than a half dozen times. Not at all since Jane married Sir Brian.

Sir Brian Leatherby is a wealthy country squire. His family seat at Leatherby Hall has extensive estates attached to it. He is an intelligent man, but more interested in hunting than reading. He is a bit vain and dearly wants to leave his mark on the world of learning. The opportunity to endow his Alma Mater with an historic archaeological find is too good a chance to turn down.

Major Peter Greggs is Lady Jane's brother, recently retired from the Indian Army. Gabriella has met him before, many years ago when she and Jane were in school. He's handsome, very upright and manly as she recalls. "He was wounded, miss, and he walks with a limp, but he's very dashing and he still dances well enough."

Mlle. Eloise Shires is a young French woman who Lady Jane knows from London. Apparently she is a clairvoyant and a psychic medium. Lady Jane is planning to have a séance or two at some time during the holiday and everyone below stairs is fascinated by the idea of speaking to the dead. "Do you believe, in spirits, miss? Ghosts and such?"

Dr. Duncan McWhiter is a physician, an old friend of Sir Brian's, down from London. He works on Harley Street, famous for its specialists. "A brain doctor, they say, miss. He can tell you what's wrong inside your head just by talking to you."

Professor Morris Thorn is an older man, an Oxford don who taught Sir Brian when he was at college. He has been invited to visit because of what the other guest has brought. "He's very absent minded, miss, always late for meals and wanders about in a bit of a fog. But when he gets talking it's like listening to a school book come to life."

Mr. Angus McPherson is an explorer and archaeologist (Sarah pronounces it arky-loly-gist). He has just returned from Egypt with something he found there. "There was big boxes, miss, several of them delivered by wagons two days ago. Sir Brian said to put them in the old chapel, and all the gentlemen have been down there for two days, like little boys with a new hoop to play with. They're ever so excited. Maybe its treasure in them boxes. The Gypsies showed up right after that and they've got a nose for gold, don't they?"

Below Stairs

Stanislaus Meadows is the Butler

Joth Miller is the Footman

Sarah Winslow is Lady Jane's maid

Bess Meadows is the Cook

Becky Potts is the Downstairs Maid

Grounds Keepers

Andy Machin is the Farm Manager

Sally Machin is the farmer's wife

James, Elizabeth and Martin are their children

Stable Hands

Ian Dobbs is the Game Keeper

David Rhys-Evans is the Stable Boy