

## Glade Hall

### Chapter 4 – Hermione

**“Tom Bartley had been ninety one and his passing wasn’t exactly sudden or unexpected.”**

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~Then~

Hermione Wood had been to two previous long weekends at Glade Hall, but she’d been younger then, less sure of what she wanted. She was just two weeks away from her eighteenth birthday and now knew what she wanted. Hermione ached for the touch of William James Maynard, young heir to the Maynard family fortune and likely to be one of the richest men in England, one day. Soon all the young people would go to see the famous Grotto. Everyone knew what went on there during the five minutes of darkness after the candles went out. Nothing to ruin a young woman’s reputation, but kisses and touching, as long as it was consensual.

“He was looking at you right through dinner.” Said Cecilia.

Hermione felt herself blush and her heart began to race.

“You really think so ?” She asked.

“Oh yes. William only has eyes for you.”

Hermione was almost eighteen and she hadn’t even kissed a boy properly. Her father was rather over protective and she never seemed to meet anyone nice. There had been a sort of fumble with a boy in the Grotto when she was sixteen, but that had been truly awful. Last year she’d set herself to win over Teddy Sherrington, but he’d ignored her and kissed some awful shop girl.

One of the servants was hitting a gong.

“Please collect your outdoor clothing, it’s still wet out. The tour of the famous Maynard Grotto, will commence in ten minutes.”

She was wearing the latest trend in light casual clothing. It was now eighteen twenty, gone were the long heavy dresses and in were light diaphanous evening gowns. Hermione had hitched the side of her dress up slightly, to emphasise the shape of her legs. Yes, she was overdoing it a little, but she desperately wanted to feel a man’s touch on her skin, his lips on hers. Her best friend Cecilia was still hovering around with a smirk on her face.

“Keep still in the dark and let him come to you.”

“I just hope I don’t faint !”

It was alright for Cecilia, she was experienced in such matters and had actually let a boy pull her knickers down to her knees. Hermione had laughed when her friend had told her about her sexual exploits, but she was quite jealous and a little scared. She put on her light evening jacket and followed the other young people outside. William actually winked at her, as he walked through the French windows and out onto the lawn. Hermione tried desperately not to blush, as she smiled back at him. She was going to do it, be his, to do with as he pleased for that wonderful five minutes of darkness.

“The Grotto is about half a mile from the main house.” Said the servant. “Please keep close to those carrying lamps.”

It had been raining for most of the afternoon and the grass felt wet against her legs. They were all going to return with muddy shoes, but that was part of the adventure. She now ignored the smirking Cecilia and kept close to William, letting her hand touch his as they walked. She had to be careful, her father was Conservative MP George Wood, who represented a constituency in Surrey. Any

scandal involving his daughter could well blight his political career. She needed William though, the way a rose needs the rain to grow and flourish. She was too old to have never been kissed.

"Mind the puddles miss." Said a servant.

"Oh yes, thank you."

Daydreaming had caused her to soak her feet, but she still kept next to William, following him into the Grotto entrance. The lamps were exchanged for candles, to see the crystals to their best effect. That was the official reason, but candles are fragile light, that can conveniently go out. There were about a dozen of them, all sons and daughters of the great and the good. Most kept to the upper caves, but William headed for the lower caves, Hermione following him. It would be more private down there, little chance of a wandering hand being noticed by someone indiscrete. Hermione even began to wonder what a boy's erect penis might feel like.

William had stopped at the end of the yellow crystal cave. He was about four paces from her and they were alone. He leant towards the candle and pursed his lips to blow, then he stopped.

"May I blow out the candle Hermione?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

That would be nice ! What a stupid thing to say. She stopped beating herself up as William blew out the candle and moved towards her. He was holding her neck and kissing her, his right hand moving over her arm and towards her left breast. Hermione felt herself tense as his hand gently went down the top of her dress. He stopped moving, so she pushed herself towards him and kissed him with some passion. It wasn't going to happen again ! When she was sixteen, she'd become like a statue, a block of frigid ice. That had been awful, awful, awful ! Not again.

"Touch me !" She whispered in his ear.

His hand went down her dress, finding her nipple and she actually gasped with the release of pent up passion. It was such a small thing he was doing, yet it felt so wonderful. She pulled the straps off her shoulders and let her dress fall off her breasts. It was wanton and shameful and wonderful ! William leant down and began to use his tongue on her nipples. They were hard, her breasts were hard, it was all unexpected, but so pleasurable.

"Oh William !"

She liked the way he moved slowly, giving her time to move away or stop his hands from exploring her body. She was eager though and enjoyed the feel of his hand lifting her dress and caressing her thigh. He kissed her quite hard, as his hand went under the edge of her knickers and felt her most intimate area. She wasn't just moist, she was wet ! It was like a tap being turned on, she could feel it running down her thigh. That seemed to excite William and his fingers felt her, pushing in deep enough to make her moan. It felt so good ! If he'd wanted to, he could have taken her, there and then. She'd have given no resistance at all, to losing her virginity in the Maynard Grotto.

"Did I hurt you ?" He asked.

"No, not at all."

He probed deeper and she felt as though she was going to faint. William was the perfect gentleman though, nothing was hurried, nothing was going to go.... Too far. As he kissed her again, she decided to be brave. Hermione felt the front of his trousers, closing her fingers around the erect penis inside them. Instinct told her to gently rub her fingers up and down, the pure animal instinct we're all born with. It was Williams's turn to groan and whisper in her ear.

"Oh my darling."

Then there was the sound of voices and the glow of lights approaching. She pulled the front of her dress up over her breasts and made herself presentable. William was again prepared, he had matches to relight their candle.

“Are you going on the picnic tomorrow ?” He asked.

“Yes.”

He kissed her on the forehead and smoothed her hair away from her face.

“Good.” He said. “If it gets boring we can always go for a walk on our own.”

“That would be really nice.”

The voices were coming closer, the servants coughing a lot to make sure the couples were decent when they arrived. Hermione checked her dress and it looked fine. Messy hair was an acceptable souvenir of going to the Grotto with a young man, but not an unbuttoned dress or blouse.

“Oh, they’re going the wrong way.” Said William.

He handed her the metal dish which held their candle.

“Hold this. I’ll go and get us a proper lamp..... Won’t be a minute.”

She leant against the wall and felt wonderful, like a proper woman at last. She’d been kissed and touched and not by some pimply youth, but by William Maynard. Her head buzzed a little and her legs buckled, as Hermione fainted. Part of her knew it was going to happen, but could do nothing about it. Her head hit the yellow crystals on the wall and she was unconscious before she hit the ground.

Hermione Wood woke up and her head was throbbing. She felt cold and had the distinct impression that she’d been unconscious for several hours. Why hadn’t they found her ? All her friends and the servants, surely they’d notice they were one person short !? Then there was William, he wouldn’t just leave her in a heap on the floor.

“Ohhhh.”

She felt her arm and it hurt, far worse than the bump on her head. The blood was congealed now, she could feel the long scab in the dark. She must have been left there, all night, in the dark. She became angry, standing up and shouting.

“It’s Hermione ! I need help !”

No answer, not a sound apart from the steady drip of water somewhere. It wasn’t totally dark, there was a definite blueish glow coming from a passage in the caves. Her candle was still there, though it had come out of its holder as she’d fallen. There was no point in picking it up, she had no matches to light it.

“Hello !! Someone, anyone ! Hello !!”

She needed to pee too, though no power on earth was going to make her pee in a public place. She took a step towards the blue glow and heard giggling. Cecilia ? Her friend could play strange jokes, but leaving her injured !?

“Is that you Cecilia ? This isn’t funny !”

More anger now. Her father wasn’t just an MP, he was known to be a high flyer, destined for great things. He’d make sure someone paid for abandoning his beloved daughter. Hermione walked towards the glow and found a cave with a hole in the ceiling. Moonlight was giving her the light to see by and that was picking at her memory for some reason. Yes, she had it. A servant had told her they only did the tours on dark moonless nights. It was strange and frightening !

“I can’t have been here long.” She muttered. “I don’t feel thirsty or hungry.”

She tried to remember the layout of the Grotto, but she'd only been there three or four times, over a period of two or three years. The yellow crystal rooms were lowest, but the moonlight made everything look a dull grey. More giggling.

"Who is it ! You'll pay. My father has powerful friends."

Again just the dripping of water to break the silence. She followed the glow again, along a passage and into a room with two large bones on the wall. There was a gap in the ceiling, barely three inches across, but it showed her a full moon.

"It can't be..... I can't have been here for two weeks ! I'd have died."

She moved on, along passage after passage, always following the blue glow, praying that she'd find the way out. The Grotto wasn't that large, barely twenty rooms, spread over a quarter of an acre at most. It had to be easy to find the way out, she just had to keep moving.

"Oh poor Hermione."

She spun around, certain the voice was right behind her, but no one was there.

"Who is this ? This is not funny ! Help me."

More giggling, which she ignores. She'd find a way out and then she'd show them. Cecilia would go to jail, her father would make sure of that. Follow the glow, the game continued and her bladder was now constantly hurting.

"That's impossible !"

She was back at the large room with two bones, she recognised it. It wasn't two different bones, she distinctly remembered the cut marks in one of them. There was even a puddle, with her shoe print at the bottom. Hermione gave up being civilised and squatted on the ground, adding her urine to the contents of the puddle. If she was going insane, she'd do it without the pain of a full bladder.

"I know the directions I walked in..... this is impossible."

More giggling, she ignores it and pulls up her knickers and stands before turning round. Hermione had expected to see an empty passage again, she was wrong. They were there, the shadows.

"I er....."

Five of them, maybe six. They touched her and the pain took not only her voice away, it took her ability to think. Terrible pain that came from every part of her body and only stopped when her heart could take no more.....

Her father was tipped for the top, might have made Prime Minister if he hadn't become too fond of drowning his problems in alcohol. No trace was ever found of Hermione Wood.

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**~Now~**

Emma was working at Sheila's Flowers for the afternoon; trimming bunches of blooms and building wreaths for a funeral in Enstone. There was an actual Sheila who owned the shop, Sheila Hewer.

"You can't beat a good funeral for bringing in business." Said Sheila.

The local community might all be mourning the passing of the deceased, but Sheila wasn't hiding her joy at the extra sales. Tom Bartley had been ninety one and his passing wasn't exactly sudden or unexpected. He'd been the local school crossing person, a lollipop man, for over thirty years, before the cancer put him in a wheelchair. Tom had been popular and many of the locals had been in to buy flowers.

"I'm not sure if I'm trimming too many leaves off these." Said Emma.

"That's fine girl." Said Sheila. "People aren't too fussy about flowers for funerals."

Emma hadn't been shocked that Sheila viewed funerals as golden opportunities to sell overpriced wreaths and bunches of flowers. Local shops and stores weren't doing that well and every opportunity needed to be milked for all it was worth.

"Did you know him?" Asked Emma. "The deceased I mean."

"Old Tom, yes we all knew him." Answered Sheila. "Lovely man. There was that one bit of trouble after he hit one of the Cooper's kids, but it was all hushed up."

Emma smiled and carried on trying to make old blooms look fresh. It wasn't the idyllic village life she'd imagined when they'd moved out from London. Ripping off mourners with poor quality blooms and a casual attitude to child abuse. It probably went on everywhere, it just seemed worse in the tranquillity of the countryside.

Emma liked Sheila Hewer, had done the instant she'd answered the door to her. On the doorstep had been a plump woman of about thirty, wearing a bright yellow dress and thrusting a business card at her.

"I used to supply the hotel, for wedding and functions. Can I leave you a card, just in case your father decides to carry on with the weddings?"

Emma had turned it all around and asked Sheila for a part time job. In truth she was sure that Sheila just wanted to keep in with the new owner of Glade Hall. At least once a week, the florist told her what a shame it was that her father wasn't using the hall for weekend weddings.

"What does your father do exactly?" Sheila had asked her, more than once.

"He's something in the City."

"Hmmm."

Emma had just finished a wreath which she was quite proud of. It didn't look that much like a lollipop man's stick, but it was colourful and Tom's name was picked out in bright yellow blooms. Her phone began to make the noise associated with her mother calling. But her mother was in New York!

"Mum?"

"Hi sweetheart. I'm at Heathrow and just about to hire a car."

"But..... we weren't expecting you for another ten days. Does dad know?"

Emma can hear her mother talking to someone about a four wheel drive.

"Oh.... I've just sent Jerry a text. I should be at Glade Hall in time for dinner."

"I'll let the cook know..... Mum.....your rooms won't be ready."

"I'm sure I'll survive in one of those awful hotel rooms for a while."

She heard her mother apologising for something Jerry Jr had just done.

"Must go, he's such a monster..... see you for dinner."

Emma just looked at her phone for a while. Arriving ten days early and happy to sleep in one of the hotel rooms. Oh it was bad! Fuck! Maybe her parents were divorcing or something. It was still half an hour until her shift ended though.

"Sheila, I know we're busy. It's just that my Mum just flew in and we weren't expecting her."

"Yes, go early, of course..... Hang on though..... just a moment."

Sheila grabbed several handfuls of blooms from the fresh stock and a few fern fronds. After less than a minute she was handing Emma a bunch of flowers that looked superb.

"For your Mum."

"Thank you."

Emma was in tears by the time she unlocked her father's car and carefully placed the flowers on the passenger seat. Maybe, just maybe, living in a rural community wasn't so bad.

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Nick Goodwood had calmed down quite a bit over the weeks since being threatened by Jerry Hooper. The suite of rooms did actually look likely to be ready ahead of time and he'd been given a substantial stage payment for work already done. He could pay suppliers and hopefully look forward to not being insolvent. He was currently looking at the nastiest infected wound he had ever seen and being a builder, that was saying something.

"Ok, fine Oliver.... Cover it up again.....Christ, that looks bad !"

Oliver pushed the bandage back across his face, covering the area of weeping sores and web of black lines.

"The anti-biotics aren't working." He said. "The hospital made me an appointment with a specialist in London. Best guy in the country they reckon."

He'd need to be, Nick was just surprised that Oliver was turning up to work every day. Times were hard though and he was being paid quite well.

"Take as much time off as you need Oliver. Get it fixed, your health has to come first. You're a good worker and there's a job here for you as long as you want it."

Oliver wasn't looking well and young Emma had mentioned him prodding a cut on his face with filthy hands. The builder looked to have aged ten years and there was a permanent film of sweat on his forehead.

"I'll keep coming to work Nick..... for as long as I can."

Oliver had never been that popular, he could be quite unpleasant, but Nick found himself squeezing his shoulder.

"We'll cross that bridge if and when we get to it Oliver. There's employee injury insurance, so you won't starve if you need a spell in hospital."

"Thanks Nick."

He watched Oliver go back to work and wondered if he was doing the right thing. He'd shown him the letter from the London teaching hospital. Oliver had an appointment with a consultant who specialised in communicable diseases. Did he really want Oliver around his other staff ?

"They might keep him in hospital anyway." He muttered.

Nick had seen a farmer with an untreated wound once, in his leg. That had areas of weeping puss and black web like lines. They'd cut his leg off to save his life, but you couldn't cut a face off. Nick shuddered and went back to ordering building supplies.

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Emma heard a heavy vehicle churning up the gravel drive and knew her mother had arrived. Her father was just as baffled as to why Alice Hooper had suddenly arrived at Heathrow.

"You know your mother..... I'm sure she'll tell us."

Mrs Hargreaves had muttered about the short notice, but had promised to create a memorable meal to welcome the lady of the house back to the UK. Dean was waiting with her and Emma hoped her mother wasn't too moody with him. No one was ever going to be good enough for her daughter, she'd referred to him as the 'Jenkin's eldest brat,' for months.

Emma walked out to meet her mother, holding hands with Dean.

"Couldn't she find a bigger car ?" He joked.

It was some kind of Mitsubishi monster of an SUV, pulling up near the house. It looked big enough to take an entire school class on a field trip.

"I didn't think you could hire those." Added Emma.

Alice Hooper stepped down from her brute of a car and smiled at her daughter.

"I think you're grown a little."

"I think I'm as tall as I'm ever going to get Mum."

They hugged, while Dean made himself useful and began to pull cases from the back of the SUV.

Jerry Jr was chuckling and trying to pull himself free of the baby chair.

"Now, he has grown." Said Emma.

She gripped his chubby little fist and kissed the top of his head. It was nice to have him back at home, and her mother, as long as she left Dean alone.

"He's learnt a few new words." Said Alice. "Someone taught him to say bum and he seems to know it's.... inappropriate. He shouts it out in public places."

"Nice to see you again Mrs Hooper." Said Dean.

Her mother gave Dean a long hard look and then smiled.

"It's nice to see you too Dean. I hope your family are well?"

"Yes, thank you."

The pleasantries were over and Emma could only assume that her mother was now reconciled to Dean being part of her life. She unhooked Jerry Jr from his seat harness and lifted him to the ground.

"He is so heavy Mum, too many chocolate cookies." She said.

"Cookies!" Shouted Jerry Jr, as he hurtled across the gravel and into his father's arms.

Dean went back to lugging cases about and seemed not the least bit worried, that all the lifting had been left to him. Emma put her arms through her mother's and held her hand.

"It really is nice to see you Mum, but why?" She asked. "Why arrive early and end up in a set of rooms you'll hate?"

"It was a conversation with Ginie really, Angela Maynard." She answered. "You know we've been keeping in touch and barely a day goes by without us exchanging emails."

"Yes, I know. You've been copying me in on some of it."

"Well... her father dictated some more notes for her to send to me. Oh, I brought those, you haven't seen them yet."

Her mother seemed lost in thought.

"Oh where was I? Oh yes, Ginie vanished after that. No contact for three days."

Emma had to smile, her mother really was a net addict. Three days without contact must have been absolute hell for her. Her father often speculated on what she might do if he ignored her for just a day.

"Men up ladders, outside the windows." Her father had said.

"Posters on trees with your picture on." Emma had countered.

It was fun to speculate, but neither of them had been brave enough to actually do it.

"So Mum, what had become of Ginie?"

"Her father died you see, or at least they think he died. The death or whereabouts of Nathaniel James Maynard is a bit of a mystery."

Her father used to simply say that his wife was 'a bit artistic,' to explain her eccentric nature. Emma often thought that 'just plain nuts,' often described it better.

"Mum, you're drifting again.... What happened."

"Ginie was quite upset about it. James had been doing quite well for a man of his age, when suddenly he began to experience intense and unexplainable pain. She said he was in agony for hours and even morphine didn't help."

"Oh, poor man."

“Well yes, I just can’t imagine coping with anything like that. After several hours of this intense pain, he begged her to call an ambulance, rather than his own doctor. While she arranging that, he vanished.”

“So he’s not really dead then Mum ?”

“Ginie said he was given enough morphine to kill an elephant. She wanted to stop his suffering..... I’m sure you understand ?”

“HmMMM.”

“Anyway, the ambulance people called the police, who searched the entire house and called on all the neighbours. Not a trace, no sign of Mr Maynard, alive or dead. Just some rather ominous traces of what looked like ash in the bed.”

“Ash ?”

“Yes, I did say it was all rather strange dear. In view of his last words, I simply had to get on the first plane to London.”

There were times when Emma felt really tired after a long conversation with her mother. Alice did well with her design business, she was very artistic. It was just the mundane business of everyday life that seemed to tie her mind in knots.

“Mum, what last words ? You never mentioned those.”

“Oh sorry dear, baby brain. That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it. I can only tell you what Ginie said, but why would she lie about such a thing ? Nathaniel Maynard kept shouting that you must keep away from The Glade. ‘Keep Emma away from there; the spirits mustn’t have her.’ He shouted it out over a dozen times, or so she says.”

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While Emma was enjoying her family reunion, Tommy Milner was directing a lorry driver towards the old stables. They were late; his twenty sheep should have arrived by midday. There were strict rules and regulations about transporting livestock and he suspected the driver hadn’t followed them. “Back another two feet.” Lysette told the driver.

Lysette had volunteered to help with the arrival of the sheep and he had two of the farm hands. They’ve created a fenced in area to funnel the sheep into the interior of the stables. There were no horses now hadn’t been for years. All transport had been horse powered when Glade Hall had been built. Riding horses, horses pulling carts and carriages, horses dragging ploughs. Now everything was powered by internal combustion engines and the horses had gone. The building was old and neglected, but add a three inch layer of hay and it made a good barn to house the sheep for the night. The lorry stopped in the right spot and Tommy made sure the fence was tight up against the rear wheels. The lorry driver turned off his engine and came round to help lower the tailgate.

“Most places I deliver to, put them straight outside.” He said.

Tommy wasn’t in the mood to be taught his trade by a delivery driver.

“You’re very late. Were they rested and watered ?” He asked.

“They haven’t come far. The bloody engine played up.”

The sheep were now able to come down into the stables, but they weren’t exactly hurtling out. Left too long cooped up together in summer weather, they’d begun to dehydrate. The lighting wasn’t good, just a few old fashioned hundred watt bulbs, strung across the ceiling. The sheep spotted the feed and water though, mainly the water. Tommy turned to the driver.

“What happened ? Decided to have an afternoon in the pub and left them in the sun.”

“Be reasonable, I had problems. It’s not as if they’re pets or something.”

Tommy had come across that attitude all his life, usually as an excuse for laziness. He knew livestock had to be slaughtered and turned into meat, it was what financed the farm. Tommy just saw no need for living creatures to suffer while they were alive. He clenched his fists and walked towards the driver, causing him to back away.

“Clear off ! And I’ll be on the phone to your boss in the morning.”

He went, grumbling as he reversed his lorry and headed towards the main Oxford road. Tommy closed the stable doors and surveyed his small flock of twenty sheep. They looked much better already.

“Amazing what a good drink will do. They look like different animals.” Said Lysette.

“Yes, a little food and water and having room to move. They’ll be running about by morning.”

He liked Lysette, though he seemed to be the only one. She did seem to have a knack for rubbing people up the wrong way, even the normally cheerful Emma. He was keeping out of all that, not a good career move to upset the boss’s daughter.

“Ok lads thank you.” He told the farm hands. “Back in the morning, nice and early.”

In truth the little bundles of wool did feel like pets. He’d always wanted sheep, ever since he’d been a young child. They were low maintenance creatures that could be largely left to their own devices until lambing time. Perfect livestock for Glade Hall, with its acres of lush green grass.

“Where will you put them ?” Asked Lysette.

“Here, there’s half an acre of decent grass on the old horse gallop. The horses were always healthy enough from what I’m told.”

He turned off all the lights, just leaving the glow of a low wattage bulb near the door. Her car wasn’t far away, so he thanked Lysette again for helping.

“Anytime Tommy.”

She leant towards him and gave him that look, the one all men recognise. He didn’t think of her that way though and his wife would kill him if she found out.

“We work together.” He said. “Better to keep it as just friends.”

“Fine.”

Stomped, she definitely stomped away from him. Hell, life was difficult with modern, sexually liberated women. He didn’t envy the youngsters, oh no, not one little bit.

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Emma had read the last words that Nathaniel Maynard had dictated to his daughter, they all had. Cook had made a superb meal that catered for all tastes. No one had told her who preferred what, so there had been venison and a vegan main course. There was even homemade jelly, supposedly for Jerry Jr, but they’d all enjoyed it. Dean had been politely asked to leave them after dinner, so that the three of them could have a family discussion.

“He was obviously completely barking mad.” Said Jerome Hooper.

“I don’t know.” Said Emma. “A lot of strange things have happened at Glade Hall. The Glade too, they found lots of bones from babies and young children.”

“Rural communities have always been a bit insular.” Said her mother. “Babies born out of wedlock could ruin a girl’s life. Often the local witch was nothing more than a seller of herbs who doubled as a back street abortionist. They also considered even the slightest physical deformity, as the mark of the devil.”

“So it’s all nothing more than a crazy old guy not knowing the difference between criminality and the occult ?” Asked Jerry.

Emma was looking at the last known words of Nathaniel Maynard and he was raving about a centuries old witches coven and evil forces that pre-dated the druids. It was a mishmash of different ideas and none of it was backed up by evidence.

"It all might be just coincidence." Admitted Emma. "But it's still a fascinating piece of history, which needs to be investigated."

Her father had appointed himself as chair of the meeting and often seemed to confuse family gatherings with board meetings.

"There is a lot of money invested in this house." He said. "Are we talking about leaving and going back to London ? Do we need a family vote on it ?"

"Vote Jerry ! This isn't a committee meeting." Said Alice. " We can surely reach a consensus ? Emma, do you feel safe living here ?"

There it was the elephant in the room had finally been spoken of. Was their new multi-million pound home safe ? There was now Jerry Jr to consider.

"Personally I think everything will have a logical explanation." She said. "I want to stay here. No one has been hurt apart from Oliver and that was probably his own lack of personal hygiene. He only seems to shower once a month."

Her mother appeared to be thinking it over. In a way Emma had lied, she did think something occult or super natural was happening at Glade Hall, but simply felt insecure about admitting it.

"I have to admit to believing that as the saying goes. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'" Said her mother. "My own view is that unless we hurt the living, we have nothing to fear from the dead. I honestly believe that, believe it enough to stay here and let my family stay here."

"Very well." Said her father. "We stay and continue with restoring Glade Hall to being a family home once again."

"I volunteer to get the pool cleaned and working again." Said Emma.

Her parents were staring in disbelief, she rarely volunteered for anything.

"Well..... it's hot and a pool would be nice."

"Watch out, the builders will come and ogle at you." Teased her Mum.

"Mum !"

Her father actually filled her wine glass up, maybe a sign that he accepted his little girl was growing up.

"First thing." Said Alice. "Is to stop this nonsense about the locked chapel and the cellar. In the morning we'll open up the chapel and examine every inch of it. Then we'll open up the basement."

Her father was going slightly pale.

"But..... but English Heritage ?!"

"You do have keys don't you Jerry ? I mean, this is our house."

"Yes, I have the keys in my study."

"Good. First thing after breakfast will be the grand re-opening of the Maynard Chapel."

"I'll make sure my camera is full charged." Said Emma.

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Wendy James was in the kitchen of her small flat, cleaning the soot off something she'd found at Glade Hall. The flat was tiny, but it was hers, or would be once the mortgage was paid off. No one else had a key though, she had privacy for the first time in her life. She'd grown up in a crowded house, with four generations of the same family, crammed under one roof. It was how rural England

was becoming, no one could afford to move. Her sister was a nosey bitch and her gran seemed to spend her life, spying on her and her boyfriends. Now she could entertain who she pleased.

“These are beautiful.” She muttered.

Oliver had mentioned finding roughly carved dolls, but these were well made. Even the faces looked to have been carved with love. Henry had made a huge fuss about throwing away the nation’s history, but the client wanted the job done fast. There was no chance of finding the dolls Oliver had thrown away though, they’d be in a landfill somewhere by now.

“So much soot.”

It seemed to fill the cavity wall where she’d discovered the dolls. It was harmless, it had been tested by various labs after Oliver contracted the plague. It wasn’t really the plague of course, but Nick’s insurance company had arranged for everything to be tested. It was basically dirt with a high percentage of wood ash. Far too much ash for a house with no history of any major fire. An interesting anomaly the lab had called it. Nick had given them all a copy of the various reports. No plague germs, no asbestos, no heavy metals, no anthrax. It was all just harmless soot.

“Tell that to Oliver.....” She muttered.

Oliver was an arsehole, but no one deserved to suffer like that. At first he’d shown everyone the rot that had set up home in his face. Anti-biotics would clear it up and it wasn’t painful. Once it was obvious that it wasn’t clearing up, he didn’t show it to anyone. Then the pain had started. Oliver didn’t look very well these days.

“He looks like he’s going to die.”

Wendy was happy that the dolls were as clean as they were ever likely to be. All the soot was gone, but there was still that grey patina, put there by centuries of ageing. The cavity wall was from the eighties though, it didn’t make sense. The dolls attracted her though, she was going to keep them. One a boy and one a girl, their carved private parts were grotesque caricatures of any real anatomy. They had a certain charm though and Wendy carried them into her bedroom and put them onto her bedside cabinet. Instinct told her they weren’t harmless, but she wasn’t an oaf like Oliver. He’d treated them like trash, whereas she would love them like her own.

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