

Glade Hall

Chapter 8 – A Wife for James

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

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~Then~

When he built Glade Hall, James Maynard was a single man with a substantial fortune. Some of his wealth was old money, but he'd also added to his wealth by various means that he was unwilling to reveal to even his closest friends. Some hinted at plantations in the new world, plantations worked by slave labour. Slave labour was quite legal of course, but some people were a little squeamish about admitting to owning slaves. Others hinted at links with the orient and the opium trade. Again, quite legal, but no gentleman would want to admit to selling the filthy stuff.

His lifestyle gave cause for yet more whisperings among the local people of that part of Oxfordshire. He'd made some odd friends during his travels and acquired a few servants who didn't fit the accepted norm. A large Moroccan man served him as a sort of butler, opening his front door and scaring the locals. His cook had no aptitude for the job, but she was young and pretty, so the inhabitants of the village had put two and two together. A few of his odd friends shared his home and most carried weapons and some of those friends were wild looking women.

He was a highwayman, a brothel keeper, an assassin, a secret agent for the crown ! All those rumours and more began to circulate. James knew the way people's minds worked and his solution wasn't to offer a plausible origin for his wealth. James decided he needed to fit in with the community, he needed to quieten the curiosity by becoming just another boring landowner. In short, he was in want of a wife !

There was a middle aged woman of good breeding, who actually specialised in such match making and she'd proven to be remarkably worldly wise about such things.

“The elder Dawkins girl would be ideal, but she is a bit..... timid.”

Mrs Attercliffe was originally from the north of England and had travelled south with her husband. They ran a nearby livery yard which boasted at having some highly respected clients. Mrs Attercliffe had used her connection and branched out into matchmaking. She hadn't seemed put out by his Moroccan butler or his friend Izzy. Izzy had long red hair, dyed to a shade of red that Boadicea would have thought twice about. She was a friend of his, who doubled as maid, cook's assistant and quite a few other things. She was currently sitting on the arm of a sofa and watching his interview with Mrs Attercliffe.

“I'd say and I mean no offence by this,” said Mrs Attercliffe, “that you aren't too worried by a potential wife not coming from a wealthy family or..... having a perfect reputation.”

He didn't want too timid, but he didn't want a wife who'd draw more unwanted rumours about the goings on at Glade Hall.

“How far from perfect are we talking about ?” He asked.

The matchmaker had arrived with another lady, someone quite elderly who had never been properly introduced. It appeared that even the matchmaker required a chaperone to protect her reputation. The mystery guest was obviously a servant of some kind and was no longer required.

"You can go and sit in the carriage." Said the matchmaker.

Mrs Attercliffe glared at his red haired friend, but she wasn't about to give up her spot on the arm of a sofa. She ignored the dirty looks and curled herself up like a large ginger cat.

"Ignore Izzy." He said. "She speaks little English."

"There is Lydia Barnet, you might have heard of her?"

"No, but I don't mix much with the local community. That is why I sought out your advice, your expertise in such matters."

He was gently stroking her ego and she loved it, almost fluttering her eyelids at him.

"She was quite keen on a young man and there is no glossing it over. She moved in with him for a year or so."

She stopped to gauge his reaction. James didn't really want a timid village virgin. An experienced woman who'd actively enjoy full marital relations, was something he'd actually prefer.

"I'm still listening." He said.

"They would have married I'm sure, but he was involved in the Prussian wars and died there. In a way it was fortunate that no children resulted from their union."

Poor Lydia might not see it that way, but he could see why Mrs Attercliffe had made a point of mentioning it. An experienced woman was one thing, bringing up another man's bastard child was another thing altogether.

"She's bright James, and attractive. No dowry though, her family have a good name, but alas, no fortune."

Whereas he had a fortune and no good name. He liked the sound of Lydia and so obviously did Izzy. His friend and sometime maid, was nodding at him. Her command of English, was of course, perfect.

"Yes Mrs Attercliffe." He said. "I quite like the sound of Lydia Barnet. Please arrange an introduction."

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Mrs Lydia Maynard had been married for nearly a year and she was about four months pregnant. Her husband had paid for a physician from Oxford to examine her and be there for the birth, if the state of the roads allowed. He'd been a nice man, who'd handled her gently and smiled quite a lot. He'd only given her the same information as the local midwife.

"As far as I can tell Mrs Maynard, you're four months into a normal pregnancy."

That was it really, apart from giving her instructions to eat plenty of green vegetables and rest as much as possible. James was attentive and affectionate, as he'd always been towards her.

Their marriage was hardly a love match, he wanted a wife and she needed a husband. Lydia was fast approaching an age where she'd be unlikely to find a good match and James was one of the most eligible bachelors in England. He'd had a reputation though and brutality had been hinted at. Either the rumours were false, or he'd decided to change. Whatever the reason, he'd been a loving husband, always looking for ways to please her. He was an experienced lover who'd taken time to get to know her likes and dislikes and she looked forward to their hours of copulation. As for the wild creature, the red haired Izzy? James had promised her that he'd be faithful after marriage and as far as she was aware, he'd kept that promise.

Lydia had also discovered that she really enjoyed being the wife of a wealthy man. After years of scrimping and saving, repairing, mending and making do, she could buy anything she desired. Clothes first, the best that could be found and then she'd begun to look at better furniture for her boudoir. James didn't seem to limit her at all and a new carriage with four horses had been purchased and staff hired to drive it. Within six months of being married, Lydia was becoming

something of a local figure in her own right. The wives of other leading men actually sought her company. They all asked of course, where did the Maynard money come from ? They asked by hints and circuitous questions, never asking directly, but they always asked.

"I never involve myself in my husband's business affairs." She always told them.

If she knew the person well, or was feeling in a mischievous mood, she'd add;

"I just enjoy spending the money."

It came as a surprise, when James volunteered the source of his wealth and offered to show her his workroom, after they'd finished their Sunday breakfast.

"Alchemy my dear." He'd told her. "Not the crazy ideas about symbolism and the tree of life. Old fashioned alchemy, the real thing. I make gold."

She'd laughed, anyone would have, he was talking like a crazy person. Only there did seem to be an inexhaustible supply of money. Lydia had educated herself by reading just about anything she could get her hands on. That had left gaps in her knowledge, but she did remember a little about alchemy.

"You mean turning base metals into gold ?" She asked.

"No, that's all nonsense. I'll show you how it's done." He told her. "Finish your breakfast and I'll show you my workroom in the cellar."

The locked deep cellar was another thing she never asked him about. Her mother had given her some advice on the eve of her wedding.

"Let him keep a few secrets Lydia. Men don't like to be pestered about their comings and goings. He'll tell you about the things he wants to share with you."

It had proven to be good advice. She had never asked about his business affairs, or why part of their home was locked and inaccessible to her. She finished her breakfast and followed him through the rooms of Glade Hall, towards the nearest stairs that led down to the basement. There were oil lamps hanging from hooks, but they gave off barely enough light to see anything in detail. James walked quickly through the basement where cook had hung several pheasant and then down into the cooler basement, where the best wines were stored. He stopped in front of a wooden door that had been strengthened with metal bands.

"There are strange odours and you may see things." He said. "Pay it all no attention. I give you my word that nothing beyond this door will harm you, or the child you carry. A boy by the way, they told me."

James unlocked the door and pushed it open, revealing nothing but total darkness.

"Who told you I carry a boy child ?" She asked.

"The spirits of The Glade of course. They showed me how to create gold, I owe everything to them."

James was lighting a lamp just inside the door, while she waited and became anxious. Her husband seemed to have no religion at all, which was rare. They'd been married in the local church and still attended the occasional service, but God was never mentioned in their daily lives. Lydia had come from a God fearing family who believed that blasphemy was a mortal sin. Whatever was in their cellar, might well be an abomination to her God. She hesitated when James stepped through the doorway, squeezing the crucifix that she wore all the time, even when she bathed.

"I feel that you're taking me to somewhere unholy my dear."

Lydia expected him to laugh at her or become angry. Instead he held her hand, the one that squeezed the cross her father had given her.

"If you're scared then we can go back to our breakfast and never talk about Alchemy and The Glade again." He said. "My only wish is to make you happy."

"I just need a moment."

"Of course my beloved."

Curiosity was her biggest enemy. He'd lit a lamp and it showed the top of a few simple wooden steps, leading down into a part of Glade Hall that she'd never seen. Alchemy, spirits of The Glade ! To a woman who considered a trip to Oxford as an adventure, it was too much of a wonderful mystery to resist.

"There is no risk there ?" She asked. "Nothing..... Unholy ?"

"Nothing to harm you, I give you my oath."

He'd avoided part of the question, but she had to know what was in their cellar. Lydia picked up the lamp and handed it to the father of her unborn child.

"I'm putting my trust in you James. Show me.....everything !"

The stairs wobbled a little and Lydia was glad to reach the bottom of them. There was of course, the problem of getting back up the thirty feet or so of steps she'd just walked down. The floor was dusty and looked to be just plain earth. She followed James along a short corridor and into a room with a rough altar at one end. He seemed like an excited child who finally gets someone to talk to about their toys.

"This is all old, probably thousands of years old. They helped me to understand the carvings, though the altar plays no part in the alchemy. It's just a conduit to another place."

She felt the power there, it seemed to make her skin tingle.

"What other place James ?"

"To be honest I don't know, even Eloise isn't really sure. It works though, the transmutation works every time."

Eloise ?! Another of his wild women ? He must have seen the look on her face, even in just the dull glow of their oil lamp.

"No need to be jealous my dear." He said. "If you meet Eloise, you'll understand why."

"Who is she ?"

"A witch my love, very powerful and very dead."

So it was an unholy place. Lydia watched as her husband lit more lamps and retrieved several jars from a box near the altar. He opened one large earthenware jar and scooped out a red paste, using a wooden spoon. No bowl, the red paste was dropped onto the flat surface of the ancient stone altar. Blood, coagulated blood ! She was a country girl and everyone who'd grown up in the country knew the smell.

"Only the blood is used by the process." James told her. "Everything else is just there to ease the path to that other place."

Sulphur assaults her nostrils next, as he placed a single spoonful on top of the blood and worked them into each other. A shadow, moving in the corner of the room behind James.

"Pay him no mind my dear. He followed me here from one of my trips and just likes to watch."

Talk of witches and now a demon in the shadows. Lydia squeezed her crucifix and prayed that her husband wasn't going to cause the damnation of both their souls. Curiosity though, it still made her keep her eyes open and watch him. James picked up a bucket and removed its lid.

"Sour milk ?!" She exclaimed.

"It works my dear, every single time I've used the same ritual. Eloise is right, a ritual has to work every single time, or it's worthless."

Eloise again ! Lydia hoped to meet the witch who was dead, yet still managed to instruct her husband in her craft. James was working everything into a sloppy paste on top of the altar. Another

jar and the odour some kind of herb she couldn't place. More stirring of the paste, more words muttered in a language she didn't understand.

"It's important that you say nothing now, until I tell you it's alright to speak."

A yellow paste that smells of corruption is added and James kneels and begins to recite a spell of some kind. The words are often repeated, but none of it means anything to her. Eventually he stands and smiles at her.

"It is done my dear, you can talk now. Watch !"

At first nothing happened, but then the top of the altar began to shimmer. It was as if it was trying to exist in two places at once and being pulled apart.

"The noise !" She exclaimed.

High pitched, making her ears hurt.

"It will soon be over, cover your ears."

The world stood still for a moment, the altar ceased moving, everything stopped moving. As reality returned to normal, Lydia saw something glinting where James had been working the disgusting paste of blood and stench. James picked up the rough lump of what appeared to be, gold.

"A good four pounds." He said. "It needs melting down and the dross skimming off, but it's the purest gold you'll ever see."

She moved closer to get a better look at the precious metal he held in his hands. Soft yellow gold, there was no arguing with the evidence of her own eyes.

"Once I worked twelve hours a day down here." Said James. "But I realised that there are only so many things that even gold can buy."

He led her through another door and into a room with a cold furnace and a crucible, still with traces of gold around its edge. She was shocked when James dropped the raw gold he was carrying onto a large pile of similar looking lumps of the precious metal. He was so nonchalant, about a pile of pure gold that might well buy most of Oxfordshire.

"Come my dear, behold our fortune."

Past clay moulds she walked and rows of tools used in the working of metals. Her husband had once been very busy in their cellar. Of course, the years when the local villagers had never seen him, the cause of so many strange rumours. He put his hand out and the far wall was no wall, it was a large heap of something covered in canvas sheets. James pulled aside just a portion of the sheeting, to reveal gold ingots, stacked up in rows of ten wide.

"More gold than even our new King and his parliament could spend." Said James. "On all their wars and it's our, to do with as we please."

To Lydia it seemed so much wealth to simply leave as a huge pile in their cellar.

"Is it safe ?" She asked. "Supposing someone came in here and stole it ?"

"I trust my people to guard our home and there are other guardians in these cellars."

He kissed her gently on the lips and smiled at her.

"A few thieves have tried to steal from Glade Hall my dear." He whispered. "Where do you think the blood in the paste comes from ?"

~ ~

~Now~

Emma was still under some kind of house arrest. It was a nice and cosy sort of arrangement, with lots of love and well meaning people, but she still felt like a prisoner. Or more accurately like someone under witness protection. Dean locked their bedroom door and then hid the key while she undressed. It was undignified and an infringement of her civil liberties.

"If this goes on for too long, I'm calling the United Nations." She joked, sort of.

She was back in her father's study and doing another day of research on the house and looking after Jerry Jr. He hadn't been harmed by his escape into the gardens and the workmen had spoiled him rotten. Her mother knew he was a famed escape artist, who'd once made it out of her apartment and onto the streets of New York. That had been quite a scare and the police had been involved in his recapture.

"Rugby fullback or escape artist when he grows up." Her dad said.

Her baby brother watched people and how they opened doors, she'd watched him doing it. That boded well for his adult IQ, unless he was squashed by traffic before then.

"I'll watch him like a hawk mum, I promise."

"Ok, I'll be back from London by about eight."

Dean had gone with her father to see the farm, so she was all on her own. Well, apart from people arriving with regular supplies of coffee and nibbles from Mrs Hargreaves. She bit the edge off a large cookie and gave the rest to Jerry Jr.

"Love Emma !" He yelled.

"Yeah right. Stay here, be a good boy and more cookies later. Do we have a deal."

He was furiously nodding at her and giving her a huge smile. It might just work, but if it didn't, there wasn't anywhere really dangerous for him to go. It wasn't as if Glade Hall was on a main road or anything. Sean was cleaning the panelling near the stairs and Henry was supervising some construction work next to the kitchens. They all knew Jerry by sight and would stop any bid for freedom. Emma relaxed and went through the hundred or so reactions and comments on the pictures she'd put on social media.

"Spooky, wouldn't catch me living there !"

Emma sighed, there were about fifty similar comments. A few direct messages from her close friends and the usual five or six friend requests from people she'd never heard of. One was from a middle aged guy called Alex Godfrey, his name rang a bell. A fraction of a second away from deleting his request, she remembered that an Alex Godfrey was a producer on Dig Quest.

"I bet he's a nutter Jerry."

"Cookie !"

"Later, be a good boy."

His profile picture matched the one on his IMDB listing and the link to his Twitter account was the same as the one on his 'Dig Quest,' biography page. It seemed that Alex was the genuine article.

Emma accepted his friend request and instantly sent him a private message.

'Hi, I hate it when people send me a DM right after becoming new friends.

We need to talk though. About the cellars at Glade Hall.'

She posted the pics of her little brother to her Facebook page and became absorbed with reading everything that her mum had brought over from New York. She'd been through everything, but Emma wanted it all to be fresh in her mind. Nathaniel James Maynard had obviously become quite insane in his old age, yet something had started his bouts of anxiety.

"The craziest person has to be set off by something Jerry."

He was almost at the door, pretending to be playing with a toy car.

"No more cookies if you run away."

"Looking for pretty lady."

"Hmmm, well look for her in here, ok ?"

"Ok."

He'd replied, there was a direct message from Alex Godfrey.

'Emma, stay out of the cellar and the tunnels.

Call me on 07794 *****, or give me a number to call.'

Tunnels, what tunnels ? Emma looked at the pictures of the cellars again, especially the one with the shadow creature in it. If she looked at the picture quickly, she saw a demon with red glowing eyes. If she looked at it for a few minutes, she began to see a smudge and the red glare of Dean's flashlight. Nothing was as it first seemed and Emma was beginning to think that her imagination was just being a little overactive. There was something behind the demon or smudge though, a wall that just might be hiding some stairs.

'I'm calling you now Alex.'

The phone rang a few times, before a male voice answered.

"Emma, glad you called me. I can't tell you much, just stay out of the cellar. It was all supposed to have been sealed up years ago."

"We found your broken camera."

"Oh crap, they promised us the door would be bricked up ! I had to sign a gagging order Emma, there's not much I can say, especially over the phone."

"What tunnels Alex, at least tell me about them ?"

"No, Christ No ! That's the most dangerous place. Look I want to work in the industry again, I'm not quite old enough to retire, not yet."

He chuckled and Emma liked his chuckle.

"I live in Truro now. Bring a boyfriend or something and come down for a weekend. I'll tell you more then, but not everything. Will you do that ?"

"Yes Alex. We found blood, did someone actually die ?"

"Oh, Christ ! No, but it was close. I'm not saying anything else. Call me when you have a weekend in mind."

"I will Alex, I'll bring Dean with me."

"Fine ! And Stop posting the pics Emma, you'll bring back bad memories for some people who just want to forget Glade Hall."

He'd gone and as Emma looked at her computer screen, she saw the smudge really was a demon. It wasn't enough to make her parents sell up and move, but she was convinced. Jerry Jr was right by the door again.

"Ok Jerry, Cookie time."

"Cookie ! Love Emma."

She had him on her lap, straightening his mop of hair as he ate the large sweet biscuit. He was pointing and smiling, but Emma could see nothing.

"Is it the pretty lady ?"

"No. funny people."

Her camera was by the PC, but nothing was showing up on the LCD screen. Emma cranked up the flash to max and took about a dozen pictures, panning across the back of her dad's study. Jerry Jr was chuckling.

"Silly people run away."

She was learning, they didn't like bright lights. She transferred the pictures to her PC and looked at them all closely. Just a few smudges on most, easily put down to her hurried camerawork. One picture though was different. It was maddening ! If she studied the picture she just saw a pear drop shaped smudge. Out of the corner of her eye though, or if she looked quickly, there was something

quite different. The imaging chips in her camera had found something to enhance and it looked like a young woman in old fashioned clothes.

"Hermione." She muttered.

The dream came back into her mind and the instructions to find the poor girl, the MP's daughter who had vanished in eighteen twenty.

"Mione, Cookie !" Said Jerry, stabbing a grubby finger at her PC screen.

"Yes Jerry, Hermione. When Dean gets back, I'm going to go into the tunnels to find her."

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Lysette Anders had been given the full tour of the farm accompanied by Jerome Hooper and Emma's young man. It was all part of her induction into the working of the estate and gave her the opportunity of meeting the staff who worked at the farm. If it had just been her and Tommy, they were unlikely to have covered more than the basics, but having the owner following along had meant a thorough tour. She'd been given the VIP introduction to the Glade Hall Farm. Now she was naked and lying on an old mattress in a corner of the fertiliser store.

"Well what did you think ?" Asked Tommy.

"What am I marking you on ?" She asked. "Technique or stamina ?"

"Very funny ! The tour, did you learn anything ?"

It was odd to be laying naked next to a man she'd just had sex with and be talking about the workings of a farm. As post coital chatter went, it was unusual.

"I didn't realise how much science went into modern farming. It was quite interesting."

There was no lockable door on the barn used as a store, she felt awkward.

"You're sure we won't be discovered ?" She asked.

"No, they'll all be down at the Copper Kettle by now, including my wife."

For a man his age, he seemed insatiable, perhaps his wife had him on short rations ? His hands explored her and ended up on her breasts. She was learning his repertoire, full penetration would quickly follow. As technique went, Tommy was a get on and bang away until he came, kind of guy.

"Up a bit higher Tommy, yes perfect !"

It might take her a while, but she'd eventually turn him into a good lover. Over his shoulder Lysette thought she saw something move. She tensed.

"Sorry, did I hurt you ?"

"No, harder if you like."

Oh, he was definitely good at the bread and butter, good hard fucking ! There was nothing over his shoulder, it must have just been a trick of the light.

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Dean was back, smelling of booze from the pub. She liked him being friends with her father, but not too friendly. His main loyalty had to be for her, otherwise she'd dump him and look for another boyfriend. As it was, she was about to put his loyalty to the test.

"It's another dirt mark Emma, another smudge."

"Are your eyes playing up Dean ? It's quite obviously the ghost of a girl."

Another smudge indeed ! He could at least humour her a little. She'd already mentioned searching for the tunnels, she just hadn't told him she meant to do it that night. Emma slung a tool bag over her shoulder to join her camera case and handed him a large Maglite flashlight.

"I have a pretty good idea where we'll find Hermione Wood's remains."

"Where do you want to go Emma ?"

"Back into the cellar."

She was losing him, she could see it in his eyes. He'd either go with her or go and tell her parents. If he did betray her, she'd pack his bags and have him out of her room that night. It would be sad, she was almost beginning to love Dean Jenkins.

"Your parents will go crazy Emma. They're bound to find out!"

"How? Will you tell them?"

"No, of course not, but someone will see us go through the kitchen."

Good, he looked almost certain to pass her test of loyalty.

"There are lots of stairs down to the basement area. One is right below us, near where Henry found the cat altar. They're all down the pub now, giving Wendy a drunken send off or something."

"They're an odd lot."

"This is an odd place Dean. Haven't you noticed?"

Her parents were in the lounge, watching TV and moaning about the state of the world, a normal night. Dean took the Maglite from her and tested it, shining the bright beam round the room.

"I've mine and two spares in my bag." She said.

"Crap! We'll be in so much trouble if they catch us."

"Then we won't get caught."

Down to the ground floor and then they had to creep past the lounge. It excited Emma to know they were going to use the original stairs down to the basement, the same stairs that James Maynard would have used.

'Confidante of George III, yet never given a title of any kind.' It said on Wikipedia.

He'd been on first name terms with two kings and yet neither of them had wanted to make him so much as a Duke or an Earl.

"What were you up to James?" She mumbled.

"Sorry missed that, don't mumble."

"It was nothing and I do not mumble."

Very quickly they're at the door to the cellar and it's still as they'd left it, open and slightly ajar.

"When is a door not a door Dean? When it's ajar."

"Very funny."

"I'm in a weird mood."

She'd been terrified of those stairs before, but now she turned on her flashlight and took them two at a time, having to wait at the bottom for Dean.

"There are strange odours and you may see things." She said. "Pay it all no attention my beloved."

He was looking at her, shining his light in her face.

"Are you alright Emma? Maybe this was a mistake."

"I'll be fine, I just feel things in this place. It was a temple once Dean, an unholy temple to God's that mankind has long forgotten."

She knew where the stairs were, like stepping back into a home she'd once known very well. In the far corner of the room and covered by plastic sheets bearing the Dig Quest logo. They hadn't sealed off the cellar or done a particularly good job of hiding the tunnels.

"Here, we go down and then it's a walk of a good mile or so."

Dean was no longer giving her strange looks, he was just following her. The tunnels were damp, with tree roots penetrating the ceiling in places. It looked to be on the point of collapse, but might have looked like that for hundreds of years.

"Leave this place!"

She stopped and looked at Dean.

"You must have heard that ?"

"Just the wind Emma."

"Wind ! Underground ?!"

They came to a fork, the sodden tunnel heading towards The Glade, while a drier path headed towards the Grotto. Dry stones underfoot now and fragments of yellow quartz.

"Not far now." She said.

Dear Poor Hermione was spread over the floor of a cave full of yellow crystal. Rats had been at her and perhaps other things too dreadful to think about. Her skull was jammed against a corner, her foot bones right at the other side of the cave.

"Is it her ?" Asked Dean. "We should call the police."

"For a murder that happened two hundred years ago ? We'll collect her remains."

She had one of the strong plastic bags with her, the sort used by Henry to collect rubble. It had Nick Goodwood Renovations on the side, in large green lettering.

"Not nice I know." She said. "But it's strong and none of the tiny bits will fall out."

"We'll never find all of her Emma."

"Yes we will Dean, I'll know if there's any piece of her left in this awful place."

Even with her new sixth sense for spotting tiny fragments of bone, it took them over an hour to put all of Hermione Wood into the sack, or at least what was left of her skeleton. A few pieces of her jewellery went into the bag, but her fine clothes had decayed away to nothing at all.

"Who do you think killed her ?" Asked Dean.

"The spirits of this place, though I think the late William James Maynard had a hand in it. He led her down here and left her for the phantoms to use for their own designs."

"Buy why Emma, what was in it for him ?"

"Power, wealth or just because he enjoyed doing it."

Dean carried the bag as they followed the tunnels further, away from house and out through the famous Glade Hall Grotto itself. Poor Hermione had died so very close to where her rescuers were looking for her.

"The spirits hid her away from prying eyes though."

"You're muttering again."

"Sorry."

They would have looked odd, carrying a bag of bones at the entrance to the Maynard Grotto. A stagnant pond added its own unpleasant odour to the scene, another part of the estate that needed cleaning and refurbishing.

"What do we do with these ?" Asked Dean, holding up the sack.

"We bury her, in the graveyard. Not at night, that would be awful. By day, when my parents are out and that bitch Lysette is fucking Tommy. We'll give Hermione a proper burial, with the right words said over her."

Dean was giving her an odd look and probably about to tell her to stop being weird. Luckily the sound of a shotgun being fired grabbed his attention.

"What was that ?" He asked.

"Probably just poachers. Let's go home, we both need a shower after grubbing about in that cave."

"Do they still have poachers these days ?"

"We're going home Dean."

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Jerome Hooper heard a shotgun fired twice and then a short time later he heard it fired again. It was a hot night and they'd left their bedroom window open. Strangely enough their conversation was very similar to that of their daughter and her boyfriend.

"Probably just poachers." Said Alice. "Come back to bed."

"We've nothing to poach." He replied. "There are no game birds on our estate."

Jerry wasn't a brave man, but Glade Hall was his home and he wasn't simply going to hide from whatever was going on. He began to pull on the underwear he'd taken off to go to bed.

"You can't go out there Jerry; you don't even have a gun."

"It's probably just kids. They'll run off if they see an adult approaching."

Uppermost in his mind was Tommy's new flock of sheep. Times were tough and he'd heard stories about people killing and butchering flocks to sell as cheap meat. He wasn't about to alarm Alice with such tales though.

"Call the police, let them deal with it Jerry."

"Yes, of course. I'll call the police about hearing a shotgun fired, in the English countryside. Every farmer carries a shotgun; they'll think I'm crazy."

He carried on dressing, trying to avoid any further conversation with his wife. She was too damn clever; she'd see the gaping hole in his logic.

"See !" She yelled. "You said it, every farmer carries a shotgun. It's nothing to worry about, come back to bed."

But it wasn't a farmer with a shotgun, something inside him knew that. Tommy used a professional company to keep rats under control and they used traps and poisons. He looked at the clock and it was after two am, no respectable farmer was taking pot shots at vermin.

"I'll come with you."

"No ! Stay here, I won't be long."

He rarely raised his voice, her lower lip was actually quivering. He hugged his wife and kissed her cheek.

"Sorry. I really won't be long."

"Just be careful Jerry."

Finding a flashlight in his study, stopped him seeing his daughter return from her trip to the Grotto. As it was, only a few overgrown pots of shrubs, prevented him from seeing her and Dean enter the house near the kitchens. Once he'd taken the bold step of investigating the shots, he really had no idea where to begin looking. Glade Hall estate covered over five hundred acres and he was just one man with a flashlight.

Jerry decided to cross the lake via the bridge, turn towards the farm and come home round the back of the Maynard Cemetery. It was a long walk, which would see him coming home just before dawn. It might be pointless, but his natural urge to protect his family and home would be satisfied. Then he heard two more shots, coming from where Tommy had put his sheep. Jerry took his nice new smartphone out his pocket and saw the strong connection to the house Wi-Fi. There was something about the undulating nature of the ground, he'd have no signal by the time he reached the line of trees near the cemetery. He pressed two nines, but hesitated over the third. Supposing Tommy was out shooting rats ? Jerry would look stupid and Tommy might be in trouble, especially if he was drunk.

"No, they'll think I'm nuts and take hours to arrive."

By the time he was halfway to where Tommy had laid out the electric fence; Jerry could see the beam of a flashlight and then hear the repeated thuds of a shotgun being fired. It might be

professional sheep rustlers, but his phone was showing no connection. He turned off his flashlight and crept forward in the dark, falling over the dead sheep.

“Crap !”

He put on his light and found his hands and most of his trousers were covered in blood. Someone or something had ripped the throat out of the dead sheep and the carcass was still warm. Why hadn't he listened to Alice ? He could be in bed and having early morning sex, or at least cuddled up with his wife and fast asleep. He swung his light around and saw two more dead sheep. He quickly examined them both and they'd died from a massive and ragged wound to their throats.

“They don't even seem to have struggled.” He muttered.

The worst thing was that they were still warm, their blood was still steaming. Whatever had killed Tommy's precious flock, was likely to still be there. He heard two more shots, probably from someone using a double barrelled twelve gauge.

“Fuckers !! No need to kill all of them !”

Tommy's voice, shouting at someone. Jerry is so tense that his chest hurts, so he gives himself a few seconds. He wants to go home, it is just Tommy and probably drunk as a skunk. Who is Tommy shouting at ? Something inside Jerome Hooper makes him carry on. By pure bad luck he points his flashlight in Tommy's face and get a double barrelled shot gun aimed at his head.

“No ! Tommy it's me Jerry Hooper. What killed your sheep Tommy ?”

They were all dead, Tommy Milner was surrounded by dead sheep. It almost looked as though someone had made him watch his precious creatures die. Tommy didn't seem too keen on lowering his weapon.

“How do I know you're not one of them ? You might be a shadow.”

“I'm Emma's dad Tommy, you know me. I came to see if your sheep were ok.”

Tommy turned and fired at something in the darkness, but there was nothing there. Both barrels he fired and then threw the weapon down.

“No point, it doesn't even hurt them.”

His farm manager knelt beside one his dead sheep and began to stroke its head.

“I couldn't let them take your daughter, but they shouldn't have killed them all.”

Jerry picked up the shotgun, splitting it and dropping out the spent shells. He was no expert with such weapons, but he had been to a few clay pigeon shooting events. Tommy was going to be a problem. The police needed to be called and if Tommy was still raving, they might well take him into custody. Jerry knelt next to Tommy and put his arm round him.

“Come on Tommy.” He said. “Calm down and we'll go to your house and call the police.”

No smell of alcohol, whatever was wrong with Tommy, it didn't seem to be too much drink. There was also the problem about what had killed the sheep. It might still be there, waiting in the dark. For all sorts of reasons, Jerry wanted to get inside some solid brick walls.

“Police are no good Jerry, they can't arrest shadows.”

He hauled Tommy to his feet, but found it hard to carry the shotgun and his farm manager.

“Tommy, snap out of it. If you start raving about shadows when the police arrive, they'll call for an ambulance. You don't want to be sectioned do you ?”

Tommy's eyes seemed to see him for the first time.

“No, my wife would kill me.”

“Come on then, let's go to your house and clean you up a bit.”

Fear can be infectious and Jerry knew there were at least three private collections of exotic animals in the area. What the hell had escaped and killed the sheep ?

“Do we need to wake my wife ?”

“I think the police arriving will wake her up Tommy.”

Tommy became almost docile, letting Jerry lead him towards the farmhouse. Jerry wanted to swing his light round to examine every noise in the dark, but that might set Tommy off again.

“Will you replace the sheep ?”

“Yes Tommy. Let the police and the insurance company sort this mess out and we’ll get some more.”

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