

THE  
WESTWOOD  
MAIDEN

AIYANA LAWRENCE





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I hope this one is good.

—

Aiyana L.

# PROLOGUE

“Well, will you?”

Alice’s slight hesitation to answer made Melinda scoff, “You’ll be in England! Don’t you dare pass this up!”

“...”

“You’re bringing Macy with you, right?” Melinda raised an eyebrow.

“Of course I am, I’m not that crazy,” Alice placed her phone back in her bag, “Isn’t it amazing though? With that money, I’ll be able to live without worrying for a couple years, and that’s after paying the debt.”

Melinda chuckled, “I sure wish I thought of starting house-sitting gigs.”

“I mean, you still can.. you just have to be reputable.”

Mel paused her cup inches away from her mouth, “Thank you for stating the obvious,” she sighed.

“I’m sure you’ll find clients outside of the city, Mel.”

“Like hell I will. I’m pretty sure nobody is going to have someone like me watch over their million-dollar mansion...”

Once he caught on to the conversation, Harley stormed down the aisle toward their table, “Remember that party we threw at the Munsons’ vacation home? Dude’s parents hate you!” he chimed in loudly.

“Shut up! I’ll tell mom and dad you’ve been going through their wallets again,” Mel scowled at her brother, looking at him as if he had two heads and an awful ugly haircut on each one.

“We’ll miss you, Alice!” He exclaimed, shoving his way into the seat next to Mel, “Now uh, what’s for lunch?” then he looked at his sister, who still had that same expression on her face.

“I’m taking all—of your things—and burning them on the front lawn.”

He smiled at her, paying no attention to her usual threats.

Mel sighed, "You're paying for yourself buddy. I have class in thirty, and Alice is headed back to pack for her trip today."

"Today?! I thought it was like, tomorrow you're leaving, not today!"

"The estate manager wants me there as soon as possible, so I'll be leaving at four," Alice said before finishing off the last of her latte, "Time zones, Harley."

"Man, I forgot about those," he slowly slid his hand over to Mel's coffee cup, "good luck getting your sleep schedule to act normal once you're over there..." and failed to take it once she smacked his hand away.

"I'll be fine, Harley," Alice smiled, "you should probably get yours in order before you graduate."

"True," he remarked, "eh, I'll do it later."

Mel let out another deep sigh. After a while, they all parted from the café, leaving hugs and goodbyes for Alice.

After her father's passing, her dead mother surely couldn't have helped in paying off the funeral debt, so Alice took to odd

jobs and random opportunities. Watching over someone's home proved to be the most financially pleasing, so she stuck with it. This one, however, was the luckiest job she had ever received. The offer came through e-mail, from an estate manager who took notice of Alice's promising résumé that showed her previous house-sitting jobs.

It was probably the jobs that included high-profile clientele that caught their eye, which were graciously provided by Mel and Harley's parents in her early days of starting out.

When Alice was juggling psychology courses and work, she still managed to put every waking hour into her academic career, since sitting alone in a quiet house wasn't exactly hard. Her academics were fully paid for as per her father's will; his final wish being that his life savings would go to her, to anything she desired, with a small, not legally binding condition:

"You spend yer money on somethin' worthwhile, don't you dare waste it on somethin' like those fancy schools," he drunkenly told her, about three years before his passing.

Six years done into university, Alice obviously took his words to heart, fully intending to spite him and grant herself

the greatest peace of mind she had ever known. Every word, every thought, from what was spoken during those mundane days, to those hectic outbursts. Even though she hadn't reached that peace of mind yet, it would continue to be a concern this Saturday when she would return to the States.

Alice finished packing her suitcase. It was small, and her other luggage was just a duffel bag. There was never much to pack, but usually, any menial tasks took her much longer. Miracles can be worked when you don't pay attention to what you're doing in front of you, at least for Alice, she thought it was a miracle. And for her final piece of luggage, Macy.

"Come here girl," Alice called her over to the cat carrier, stroking her back and giving her lots of scratches before zipping it up. The most important thing was packed, so she left for the airport, which was a half-hour drive by taxi.

The check-in went smoothly, there wasn't any trouble with security, and there was no layover like what Alice was used to—the perks of flying a good airline. No urgent need to suddenly rush over to the next gate, no delays...

Could this be it? Maybe Alice was dozing off and blanking

her mind too much. Were there really no issues? A real vacation that wasn't just traveling two hours to another city for a nephew's birthday party, but instead a laid-back and worry-free trip to an entirely different country; A country that she had set foot in about fifteen minutes ago. Maybe the adrenaline of excitement wasn't kicking in yet. Macy seemed interested in the new scenery though.

"Oh," Alice came to, realizing there was a cab driver who had been signaling her from down the street. She rushed over with her luggage and Macy, assisted him with the loading, and told him the address. The man looked at her, a bit baffled, but shrugged and simply responded with an "aye."

A little confusion was bound to happen at some point; maybe it was the way she pronounced the words. She was sure the little research done on how to correctly say a British address paid off and didn't give it another thought.

"It's all about 50 minutes, miss. You in for something important?" the driver glanced up at the rear-view.

"I'm looking after the place," she glanced up back at him, "is the mansion really that special for an ordinary cab driver to

know about it?”

A cheeky smile could be seen from just behind the man’s ear, “Believe me, miss, you don’t need to be drivin’ a cab for fifteen years to have heard a word or two about that manor.”

Slight smiles prompted a gentle silence, but the smiles faded after some thought.

“Is.. is the little one as important for your job?” The man asked in reference to Macy, who was peacefully purring away in her carrier beside Alice.

“I’d say so, yes.” Then the silence returned.

As she tried to open her mouth to start a new conversation or perhaps ask about the rumors surrounding the manor, soon she grew tired.

Too many questions, too many thoughts, and the driver didn’t seem to mind if the ride was quiet. So, to reset her mind, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

• • •

“...”

“...Miss?”

Words were clearly leaving the driver’s mouth, but it wasn’t fully registering for Alice. A few blinks later, and the man’s voice finally came through,

“Miss? Sorry to wake you, but we’re here now,” the driver spoke softly, not only for Alice’s sake, but for the nature around them. The pitter-patter of rain dripping off and on the leaves and tall grass, the smell of fresh morning dew, and the birds agreeing so. A strong breadth of this chilly air and atmosphere nearly put Alice right back to sleep.

The driver, kind as he was, held her hand as she stepped out of the cab and her face readjusted to the light and scenery, “Beautiful, is it not?” he chuckled, “I’m sure you’ll be takin’ in the days here quite well,” and patted her on the back, a bit hard as to wake her up, but still gentle. Alice grew wide-eyed and realized her childlike carelessness in the moment.

“I am so sorry, sir,” she sighed and looked him in the eyes instead of at the greenery.

“Pay me no mind, miss! I am just a cab driver,” The man said with a bright smile as he went to the trunk and retrieved Alice’s luggage, bringing them both to her side. Alice was, in fact, paying him no mind after he said not to, as to take in the full view of the manor in front of her, and a bit more of the view behind it. Then the driver went around to the other side of the cab, carefully took the cat carrier out, and then handed it off to Alice.

“I wish you well, then,” he added, and got back into the driver’s seat of the cab.

But as the man started to drive off, she remembered at least one question she wanted to ask him, “Wait!”

The driver stopped and rolled down the window, “Yeah?”

“...Is there anything dangerous about this place?” She locked eyes with him, realizing she really should’ve asked this first,

The man let out a heavy sigh, “Not at all, miss. Deeply sorry if I’ve scared you in any way. I reckon the villagers ‘round ‘ere believe the silly rumors more than the rest of us do,” he chuckled, leaning a little closer to the passenger side window,

“They say... ghouls haunt the place...”

“ .. ”

“But! Of course, just a silly fantasy blown out o’ proportion, nothin’ else to it.” He then gave Alice a quick nod and a smile before driving off.

# CHAPTER ONE

After disregarding that blatant lie from the taxi driver, Alice remained captivated by the beautiful scenery. She stood a bit longer to look at the view that was behind the manor, as the deep fog coursing over the sea looked more intriguing. A short walk up the driveway was required to reach the doorstep.

The grand dark oak front door stood out against its white stone exterior. Its frame was surrounded by vines and creeping moss, so the two blended nicely in the end.

The door opened inwards, easily, as the estate manager assured Alice it would,

“Really is unlocked...” some short astoundment, since she could never imagine doing this back at home.

She rolled her suitcase inside with her duffel on top, and Macy began meowing more consistently, wanting to be let out.

Stepping into the foyer, Alice could tell the cherry wood flooring had been recently cleaned by the gleam and smell of a faint citric scent found in most cleaning products. She noticed a large shoe rack closest to her right and some wall hooks above it. She had brought a coat, but it was stuffed inside her suitcase. Her sweater had been doing just fine against the cold air.

There was a small antique sofa on the left that begged the most attention, being adorned with wooden edges that matched the front door, and pillows with intricate embroidery; the pale-pink fabric contrasted nicely with the surrounding beige walls. Though, besides all those menial things, the most obvious sight when walking through the front door was the floating walkway that the staircase was leading to. The walkway led to the left and right sides of the manor, where there were possibly a dozen or so rooms on each side.

“Huh. Neat.”

Alice set her duffel on the sofa and parked her suitcase next to it,

“Here you go, Macy...” she placed the carrier on the sofa and unzipped it, and out came Macy to stretch and sniff around the foyer,

“You can go, stay quiet.” Alice let her know that leaving her side was okay, so Macy eagerly ran off to somewhere else in the manor.

Alice quickly collapsed the carrier and stuffed it into her duffel bag; the manager didn’t need to see Alice breaking the rules specified in the email. One small rule break to achieve that promised paycheck wouldn’t mean much. Thankfully, the owner isn’t allergic, and Alice swore she’d clean up any loose hairs.

There was a door just before the staircase, though it was locked. The estate manager would come over in roughly half an hour to unlock each of the rooms themselves, as a way of showing Alice where she could and could not go, and as a warning that they would know if she tried to go where she couldn’t.

She closed the front door, deciding not to lock it, and began to walk around the manor. The foyer was quite open, and at the opposite end were French glass doors that appeared to lead

outside to a garden, its frame and color matching the front door. Again, locked. The hallway that passed through the foyer had a painting or two on either side, a few of which reached as high as the ceiling, and a little way down the left, Alice discovered the kitchen.

Beige and pastel-orange tiles lined three of the sage-painted walls as a backsplash, since the right wall wasn't solid; instead, it was 4 large glass panels that gave the kitchen a modern feel. There were hedges about 7 feet tall that were blocking the view of the garden outside.

In the center of the room, a large crystal chandelier hung over the island counter, its bulbs mimicking candle flames. The cupboards and cabinets looked refurbished, nearly everything did. There was an open doorway next to the fridge, leading to what looked like a small dining room. And at the front window was a small breakfast nook, so the driveway was visible from there.

Alice noticed the clock at the center of the kitchen's back wall. A good nap wouldn't hurt, so she decided to sit in the nook, looking out at the misty pavement, "Ten more minutes..."

• • •

Alice crept her eyes open, since the bright sunlight was stinging them.

Oh no.

“Hello?!” She burst up from her napping position and yelled as loudly as she could.

Even though her eyes still stung, she kept them as wide as she could and saw a rather short woman in gray slacks pouring a steaming cup of tea at the kitchen island,

“Good afternoon to you as well, Ms. Elisedd!” the woman said, rather chipper, considering the face Alice could see on her. Perhaps it was sarcastic.

“You...” Alice rubbed her eyes, “You must be the estate manager?”

“Yes,” the woman said with a bright smile, “my name is Claire.”

“Oh, no surname?”

“Not at all, Ms. Elisedd.”

“..”

Claire brought over the extra cup of tea while holding her own and placed it on the table in front of Alice. The two exchanged a quick smile and drank from their cups,

“Awake now?”

“Mm.. yes, it’s very hot.”

“Great,” Claire placed her cup on the table, “Please follow me, Ms. Elisedd,” and lightly jangled a keychain holding around six keys.

The pair traveled to various rooms around the manor:

The study, which had a large bookshelf on the left wall, a cozy fireplace at the end of the room, and a wide desk with a chair that faced the bookshelf on the right. This was the door just before the staircase...

Just one of the upstairs bedrooms, with Claire stating that there are four total. The queen-sized bed was adorned with pure white bedding and silk red pillowcases. A modest oak dresser

was against the wall at the end of the room, with a grand family painting hanging above it, though Alice didn't have time to ask about it. There was a balcony allowing a view of the sea behind the manor. To the left of the floating crosswalk, this was the first door on the left...

A closet, not much to be said about it, besides that it was filled with many cleaning supplies, and was quite roomy for a closet. Going back out on the crosswalk and past the staircase, this was the first door on the left.

The unlocking ended with a very anticlimactic opening of the bathroom, which was right across from the closet. It had a beautiful bathtub with lavender curtains, and a standard sink and toilet. "This is never locked," Claire smiled.

Alice noticed several of the other doors were never even looked at twice, "And there are no other rooms I'll need access to?" quietly pointing towards the remaining keys in Claire's hand that weren't used.

"No, these are all that are required for you," and she tucked the keys back into her coat pocket.

Alice gave an understanding nod.

They both went back downstairs to the kitchen, but then the garden doors caught her attention,

“Am I...” she paused in front of them, “Am I allowed into the garden?” and pointed.

Claire stopped and glanced at the doors, then back at Alice, “Mrs. Brown doesn’t like strangers in her private garden,” she said sternly, then turned back to walk towards the kitchen.

Alice was satisfied with the answer; she now knew the owner’s surname. It was never mentioned in the email she received from Claire, which only ever stated this “Mrs. Brown” as “The Owner”. In hindsight, it was mildly suspicious, but the paycheck was enough to keep most common sense at bay.

“For some quick reference, Ms. Elisedd,” Claire spoke loudly to grab her attention, “as you see,” and she opened the fridge, which was completely empty, “there will be a delivery boy on his way here with a week’s worth of food and drink,” then she closed it.

“A week?”

“Oh yes. Your stay here will end on Friday as proposed, but Mrs. Brown will be here with family as you are leaving. The rest is for them.”

“Oh.”

“Also,” Claire reached into her breast pocket, “in the case of an emergency, please call me first and foremost,” then placed her business card on the kitchen island.

“Why not call the local authorities?” Alice asked, walking over to pick it up.

“Mrs. Brown never liked them,” she said, “the last time they arrived here for a silly break-in, she caught three snooping up and down the halls and in every berry bush in the garden. These lot believe some superstition over basic diligence...”

“Oh, I see...” Alice twiddled the business card in her hand, “And, what if I come across a situation that will definitely need authorities? Like, an armed robber?”

“Ah, darling, the most we’d get are ‘silly’ break-ins,” she rolled her eyes, “local youth thinking themselves brave, so they hop the garden wall with no more than a couple of sticks as their

weapons,” she walked over to the nook to pick up her teacup,

“Believe me, these children aren’t the brightest,” she smirked, “and neither are most of the adults.”

Alice chuckled her initial fears away, “So, that’s it?” She asked, putting the business card into her pants pocket.

“Yes,” Claire sipped the last of her tea and placed it into the kitchen sink, “Now, obviously, I won’t have to remind you of the basics regarding your housekeeping duties?” And she politely gestured to the sink.

“Of course not!” Alice assured her.

“Very well then,” Claire proceeded to the foyer and called on Alice to follow,

“Here you are, Ms. Eliesedd,” and she handed her the key to the front door,

“I don’t believe you thought to coop yourself inside for this stay,” she smiled, “I trust things will be in good hands for the next few days,” and her face quickly returned to the same expression as when she arrived. Then she left.

• • •

What a scary woman. Alice hadn't shaken that thought even though it had just been an hour since her short visit. Very stocky, very sarcastic.

While unpacking her duffel bag, she placed her immediate belongings in the nightstand and pulled out Macy's carrier, setting it down on the floor. Then she pushed her suitcase to a corner of the room and threw the duffel on top of it. Alice yawned as she sat on the bed, a bit too hard, not realizing it was an old-fashioned spring mattress that, she assumed, had nearly broken purely based on the horrible sound it made. She politely got up and carefully sat down on it again in a different position.

The bed faced the balcony, so the sunset could be seen just from lying there. Even though it was cloudy, the sunlight still pierced through, creating a serene view as it glittered on the sea. She took it all in; one more look around the room, a deep breath appreciating the view and ambiance, leaning against the headboard of the bed, closing her eyes to the peaceful silence,

"One more..." she muttered, "not yet."

“ ”

She sighed, realizing she'd only waste away her precious time here by napping—again, and forced herself to get out of bed. She took a look around the room.

*The painting..*

Alice walked closer to it as she had never clearly seen the faces when touring with Claire.

It featured a very wealthy-looking family. Predominantly filled with women, as there was the mother in the foreground, looking toward the painter with a calm face. The eldest daughter, who sat on a stool in front of the mother, had a face unnaturally bent with disdain. And what appeared to be two younger sisters, maybe around the same age. One stood beside the father, who was decorated with military valor and dressed in a blue uniform, while the sister wore a modest lily-white dress with frills at its ends, and she smiled greatly.

The other sister sat on the floor beside the eldest, dressed the same, but with a different expression; not too happy, not too sad, almost the same as the mother's, but as if she had more

on her mind. There was a cot on the left of the family, but it appeared empty to the viewer. Perhaps the baby was sleeping, or there was some significance as to why they couldn't have been painted in.

Alice scanned the painting's background and realized it was done in a room that she had access to: the study.

"Hm, why not?" She said to herself.

She went down the stairs and opened the study door, which hit Macy square in the face, making her meow loudly,

"Macy?" Alice flinched the door back toward herself and peeked her head inside, seeing Macy had been sleeping on the inside, right in front of the door. She stretched and meowed at Alice for the rude awakening,

"Well, I'm sorry... how'd you get in...?" Alice opened the door all the way once Macy moved from her sleeping spot, and she immediately noticed the lit fireplace. When Claire first opened the study door, the cold and damp fireplace was obviously not lit.

"...I'm glad you never showed up during Claire's visit, just like

we planned...” Alice bent down to pet Macy, but her gaze was still focused on the fireplace.

The crackle of firewood was anything but comforting. She couldn't grasp it, but maybe it was always lit... One deep sigh of acceptance, and Alice returned to her original intentions.

She looked around the room and noticed the exact spot where the family stood for the painting. The painter must have stood closer to the doorway as the family got into position near the end of the room, right in front of the fireplace. A sturdy-looking armchair sat in the far corner, which Macy graciously accepted all to herself.

“Don't rip it up, I don't want to get in trouble,” Alice glanced at her before looking back up at the bookshelves, and Macy continued to roll on the seat.

Although the background wasn't heavily detailed, Alice realized not much had moved since that painting was created. The books were a mix of some original editions and more modern ones. Alongside the bulky books at the top were a few trinkets and odd decorations. Closer to the bottom were some smaller novels and a few children's books.

Alice stepped back and looked at the door, where she could picture the approximate spot where the painter from all those years ago must have stood. She began to walk towards it, but then a chill rushed over her, making her feel inexplicably heavy.

Then the same tension of being watched, even though she was completely alone. Alice tripped as she tried to force herself out of her frozen position and slammed her hands onto the floor. She closed her eyes tightly, seething at the pain,

“Macy... I’m okay.” The heaviness slowly faded, but the feeling of being watched didn’t leave. Alice sat on the floor and turned around, expecting Macy to be concerned for her, but she was gone.

“Macy?” She looked around the room,

“I’m alone, alone...” and pulled out the pill container from her pants pocket, popping two of the pills in her mouth and gathering enough saliva to swallow.

She sat a little longer to wait for the dizziness to subside, then got up, clenching her hands, trying to let go of the stinging pain from hitting the floor so hard. Even worse than the pain, she saw

that the floorboard was loose,

“Oh no,” realizing she’d have to find a way to fix the floor,

“Tool bag...” and quickly remembered there was something like that in the closet upstairs, so she hastily stepped forward to leave the room, unfortunately stepping on the loose board, and falling. The board flung out of position, and Alice scratched her knees again,

“Shit,” She turned and got up to reach for the floorboard, but she saw something in the foundation—a small book wrapped in a dulled, white ribbon.

She carefully pulled it up from the trench and dusted it off. Then grabbed the floorboard and placed it back in its original place,

“I’ll fix you in a minute...”

Her medication kicked in, and her previous tension dissipated. Alice looked up to scan the room, thinking Macy would be somewhere, but finished with the idea that she had always been hallucinating. Because Macy was still gone, and the fireplace was damp and cold.

She stared at the soot-covered logs, then exhaled another sigh. Instead of focusing on another mental dilemma, she thought, it was more appealing to read what was inside the little book. So, she went over to the corner, pulled the armchair into a more comfortable position, and sat down. Alice untied the ribbon and opened to the first page, which read the following, in slightly messy ink just outside of the lines:

“My name is Lucy Hollins. I am 9 years old.

This is my diary.”

# INTERLUDE



“Pesky thing. Out of my chair,” She shooed away the little cat that was lounging in Her chair, watching it drop and run off toward the door when He was entering.

“...” He stared at the cat as it ran past His feet and out the door, then waved to get Her attention, even though She was already looking in His direction, “Where did that come from?”

“No clue, just another pest.” She sat down and continued reading a newly acquired book, “How are things going, old friend?”

An obvious question regarding the children He has yet to attain. She lowered the book a little, “Those things are dangerous when left unattended.”

“Still trying. But there is something new, a woman—”

“And?” She flipped the page.

“...She has some great awareness—”

“Of what?” She glanced up.

“Of their presence and mine,” He stressed to Her.

“Mm, unimportant,” And She flipped to the next page.

He stared at Her blankly, sat down in His usual chair, and kept staring at Her from across the table until She gave in.

She sighed, “Is she dangerous?” and tossed the book aside to look directly at him.

“She does not seem to have control, but—”

“And you still bother me with this? Describe her then,” She stood up and began sifting through the bookshelf, searching for a book of high importance, one that wouldn’t be written until another eighty years or so.

“Dark brown hair, hazel eyes, as tall in height as me...”

“No-no, her soul, I mean,” She found the book and pulled it off the shelf, “Describe her soul,” and then looked to him, waiting for an answer.

“How am I supposed to know the way your books work?” He complained, then gave an answer: “...Forced into a corner.”

“Hmm,” She opened the thick book and skimmed through it, “I was right. Unimportant,” then closed it, placing it back on the shelf where it got shuffled among all the others.

She beckoned the previous book back to Her, and sat in the chair across from him to resume her reading, “Mortals are fickle. She might be special, but she isn’t important.”

That answer was acceptable, for now.

She looked back up at him, “Why are you still here? Go do your job,” and then went back to reading.

Some angry-looking words from Him could be seen just out of the corner of Her eye, but She shoved Her face deeper into the book until He threw His hands up in frustration and finally left the room.

She moved the book back to a comfortable distance and continued reading.

# CHAPTER TWO

The diary had everything a nine-year-old girl would have written in it: the day was drab, the wind blew away the pretty flowers, the big, mean girl at school, and, of course, anything embarrassing that was thought or happened. But thankfully, it was something Melinda told her about understanding personal things, so Alice skipped most of those entries.

She noticed some of the words were written in bold, as if to let anyone reading know exactly what was important, even though the owner would be the only one going through the pages. Since some of the words were barely legible, Alice thought the bolded words were a good way to fix mistakes.

It was odd to read that the little things in life had not changed

much compared to today. It made Alice wonder if everyone, everywhere, probably went through the same things as their previous generation,

“ ... ”

She quickly disregarded the thought, since it obviously didn't apply to her.

According to the dates written on the pages, Lucy would have seen the Second World War. Alice also learned that this manor had once been her family's summer vacation home. Several other entries included her overly-mentioned friend 'Evan', whose family lived with hers, though Alice didn't question what the dynamics were.

She kept reading to find that it was Lucy's grandmother who owned the estate the manor sits on, and that she baked the most marvelous cookies in the whole wide world whenever Lucy came to visit. But instead of more memories, Alice came across four blank pages.

A note on the fourth one stated that they were left this way because Lucy was ill. She had been too sick to write about what

happened on those past days... and it wasn't just four. Alice contrasted the dates of Lucy's last entry and the date of the sick-note, seeing that nearly three months had gone by. For a little girl who seemed very adamant about writing every day in her diary, the illness must have been severe.

Alice kept reading, coming across more entries filled with cleaner, more proper handwriting, but had more serious thoughts. As she approached the end of the diary, she got to a page that was entirely scratched out, with ink blotches scattered everywhere, and the sentences weren't close to legible. The date on this page wasn't visible either, and the paper was slightly torn in some places.

Alice felt it again, that engulfing tension of being watched. She shuddered and accidentally dropped the diary. Bending over from the chair to pick it up, she jolted back after hearing a thud from above her,

“...Macy?”

She left the diary on the floor and went to look around the foyer and up the stairs, then out came Macy from around the staircase,

“Oh, there you are...” she knelt down to pick her up, but the short feeling of relief wasn’t enough since the original sound came from upstairs.

Taking a deep breath, Alice held onto Macy and turned back around to head into the study—

“...”

The sound she heard next was much too close, much too real to ignore, but she couldn’t tell what really happened by just staring into the room.

The armchair had made an awful, grating noise, as if it was being pushed further back into the corner of the room, and the little diary was now placed on the desk instead of the floor. In the span of two seconds, that thin line between reality and psychosis was indecipherable, and all Alice could do was stare and think. Something she did not enjoy doing for too long.

“Okay... Okay,” Alice placed Macy down, “don’t go anywhere,” she pointed at her, then pulled out her phone from her back pocket,

“...”

No signal. She called Melinda's number one more time, just in case... Still no signal. Macy curled around Alice's feet, meowing loudly, then decided to run off into the study to lurk under the desk.

"There could be better reception in the village," she mumbled, "...or use the home phone..." thinking of a white phone cord she saw somewhere in the kitchen. She stared down at the floor and paced, looking anywhere else other than the study.

"...Macy!" She moved aside to let Macy dash past her and toward the kitchen. Before deciding to follow her, Alice took one more look into the study. An awful idea, since she saw that one floorboard was out of place now, and it appeared the diary was open on the desk.

"Okay." She turned and went to the kitchen to find Macy. After entering, she realized the teacups from earlier were still sitting in the sink,

"Get off there..." Alice gently shooed her off the kitchen island while walking past, and watched her lounge out in the breakfast nook instead.

When she stood in front of the sink, there was a noticeable section of the glass panels that wasn't blocked by hedges. It was in the corner of the kitchen, which was another tall floor window. Peering through it wouldn't offer much view of the garden, since it only had a small pathway leading up to the kitchen with more hedges blocking the opposite side. Perhaps this was previously a door.

Alice turned back around to rinse out the teacups, but a loud thump caught her attention. She snapped her neck to face the direction of the sound behind her, and saw a white rabbit looking right back at her,

“Hello... Oh!”

And the rabbit, presumably, did what it did before: run headfirst into the window, very quickly and very hard. Notes of blood started to appear on the glass, but the rabbit kept going. Alice hurried to dry off her hands and ran toward the garden doors,

“Oh... no...” She had no keys, so the doors wouldn't open, and it wasn't in her best interest if Mrs. Brown found the lock broken for one measly rabbit...

The thumping grew louder and faster, echoing through the hallway, until it finally stopped. Alice closed her eyes and took a deep breath, assuring herself that it was just a figment of her overwhelmed mind, but still, she went to check on it.

Approaching the corner, she looked down and saw the white rabbit, mutilated and dripping blood, with its head split open, pressed against the glass, and its hide slowly peeled off its skin. There was blood pooling in the grass beneath it, creeping under the glass, coming inside. All Alice did was stare—

“Hello?!”

Alice yelped at the sound of a voice other than hers, which was accompanied by a few knocks at the door. She took a glance back down where the rabbit laid, and it was gone, blood and all.

Wiping off the last bits of water on her pants, she ran up to the front door and looked through the peephole, seeing a young man standing there with a bag of food. She opened the door,

“...Hello there.”

“Hello miss,” the man nodded.

“You’re the delivery boy Claire mentioned, right?” Alice opened the door a little wider.

“Yup!” and he held out the large brown bag filled with food, “That’s me.”

He had intended to hand over the bag and leave, but Alice decided to invite him in, and he obliged.

• • •

“It’s quite nice here, isn’t it?” He asked, placing the canned items on the counter.

“It is,” Alice answered plainly.

The man stayed quiet, glancing over at Alice’s face, which showed her to be in deep thought. He placed the perishables in the fridge, quickly filling the space. Alice helped by choosing a cabinet to store the canned items and organizing them neatly.

“So...” he continued, “Are they true?” he then closed the freezer door and looked her right in the eyes.

“Uhh...” Alice glanced up at him then off to the side, “Is what

true?"

The man quickly broke eye contact and looked down, "I-I-I'm so sorry," he stuttered, "perhaps I should've announced my name at the door; I'm Thomas," he looked back up, "Thomas Walsh," and held out his hand for a handshake.

"I'm Alice," she said, completing the handshake, "Alice Eliesedd."

"Ah! Welsh?" Thomas exclaimed, following up with some words that sounded absolutely foreign.

"I... M-my grandmother tried to get me to learn, but, I was stubborn," she chuckled, "and once my family moved to Texas, there wasn't really... a need to learn it."

"Oh, I see... My apologies..."

"..."

"Have you ever been around London when you were young?" Thomas began folding the bag back into a neat rectangle.

"Never," Alice answered, silently hoping the conversation would end there, but it didn't.

The silence endured for just a moment as Thomas finished his folding and Alice opened the fridge to see what type of food there was, and as soon as she knew the door couldn't remain open any longer, Thomas popped the same question,

"...You must be close with the madam," he paced around the counter, "so, are the rumors true?" and stopped near the end, looking at her with a genuine curiosity. Maybe his expression lured Alice into a false sense of calm, because he quickly followed his previous question with another:

"Is the garden actually a cemetery?"

"What?" Alice jolted, "No, I've... I don't know Mrs. Brown, I don't know her at all," she assured him.

"Oh... So you.. you really are just a random American..." he stepped back from her, and Alice looked at him with a blank expression.

"Ah, I-I-I mean," he took a seat at the island, "as soon as the cab pulled into the village, we—" and glanced up at her again, "they all noticed—and realized that Mrs. Brown must've sent for another to house-sit."

“Oh...”

“It’s really only herself and family that go in and out of the manor... Oh,”

Thomas lost any further thought he had, since his attention was now focused on Macy, who had silently snuck over to him and started meowing,

“Ah, I didn’t know the madam allowed pets!” he carefully picked her up and started petting her.

“She’s actually not a pet. Well,” Alice walked over and sat in the chair next to him, “she... helps me stay focused,”

“...Like a service animal?”

“Yeah,” she kept her gaze down, looking at Macy.

“...I like cats. She do her job well?” he asked as Macy ran off his lap then out of the kitchen.

“Of course, but... she really is just a pet most of the time.”

The two continued a pleasant conversation for about ten minutes, then Thomas looked at the clock above Alice and real-

ized he had overstayed. Before he got up to leave, Alice asked a question she should've asked before,

“Since I’m just a random American... Could I know about the rumors?” she looked up at him.

Thomas was standing, pushing his chair back in, “Ah... Well, the madam’s family history isn’t very peachy,” then leaned his arm on the counter, “and the people around here don’t remember them bein’ nice.”

“Oh...” Alice began thinking about the questionable sections she read in the diary.

“The cops came a few times before, when there were...” he looked at her then glanced away, “other, random Americans that were brought to watch the place...”

“There were others?”

“Only two,” he stepped away from the counter to stretch, “absolutely lost their rags, screamin’ about all sorts to the cops.”

“ ... ”

“Somethin’ about seeing the dead or the like, then the madam

never brought in another American since. Well..." he gestured toward Alice, "til now," he chuckled, "Her family must be busy this year..."

Alice got up from her seat, "Um, the estate manager..."

"The old hag?"

"...Claire."

"Ah."

"She said there was a break-in before..."

"Ah yeah, some of the kids thought they'd go ghost huntin', found nothing but a beatin' from Mrs. Brown's husband and a quick time in jail," he laughed.

"Ah..." Alice pushed her chair back in and got back on track to her original question, "So, is that it? It's all really just... a ghost story?" She stared at him.

"...Have you—" he bit his lip before asking, "Have you been in the cellar?"

"Cellar?"

“No? Good,” he scratched his head, “You see, the madam’s family had quite the business in slaves.”

“...”

“And...” he sighed, “weren’t very kind to the ones they bought. There are some... worse stories around the village about this place, y’know, other than ghosts.”

“So, the cellar...”

“Said it was mainly for torture,” he stated bluntly, “I’ve only heard through talk, but apparently not even the madam goes down there now.”

“Wasn’t this place renovated? Like, recently?”

“After the war, of course. But, apparently, the cellar was mostly untouched...”

“Ah...”

“After those last two sitters threw a tantrum, that’s what really kept the whole ‘haunted manor’ rumor going. That, and...”

“You asked about a cemetery? In the garden,” Alice glanced

over to the glass wall.

“Yeah,” he looked with her, even though they couldn’t see past the hedges, “they said that was where the dead slaves got buried...”

“...”

He clapped his hands, startling Alice and resetting the mood, “Of course! It’s all just rumor, and you haven’t seen anything strange now, have you?”

“Nope,” Alice kept looking toward the hedges, then back at Thomas, “nothing.”

“That’s good! This place is far better than the old horror stories make it out to be, and even the madam doesn’t agree with her family’s past, so—” he held out his hand for a handshake, “enjoy your time here,” he smiled, and Alice completed it.

Thomas left the manor with a wave from the driveway before getting back on his bike and pedaling off. After closing the door, Alice stood there a little longer, just staring at it, trying to decide whether to head to bed or go back to the study. The latter was the easiest to do, since it was right there next to her.

Instead, she took a peep inside without actually walking in.

The diary was still open on the desk, but the floorboard was back in its original place. Alice scanned the room a little longer before Macy interrupted to headbutt her legs,

“Hey girl... You hungry?” Alice looked down at her, and Macy meowed in response.

She took one more glance inside the study, then went upstairs to the bedroom to feed Macy. Some fancy canned cat food was all she brought, and she didn’t like the idea of needing to clean up a possible mess in the kitchen, so Macy ate in a designated spot near the corner of the room.

Alice pulled her phone out from her back pocket,

“4:40...” she mumbled, then looked outside, noticing the sunset. Maybe the conversation with Thomas was a little longer than ten minutes.

• • •

She did her usual nightly routine and got dressed in her sim-

ple pair of sweats. It was only six something, but Alice intended to stay cooped inside until the end of her stay, so there wasn't much else for her to do. The rooms were already quite tidy; maybe the study needed some light dusting, but everything else was essentially prepped for her.

She approached the balcony and leaned on the railing, looking out to the sea and up at the moon.

“...”

It was obvious; since she had such a great view from the balcony, she could also look down and see the garden, so she did.

And... Still, she couldn't tell much from above, especially since it was nighttime now. Alice let out a deep sigh,

“Just... bias... Mass hysteria, that's it...” She walked over to the nightstand, swallowed two more pills with her glass of water, and went back to appreciate the beautiful view of the sea. She closed her eyes, feeling the cold air brush against her face, then she opened them...

“...Hm,” Alice blinked a few more times while taking in a couple of deep breaths, but nothing changed the view in front of

her, of the sun high in the sky behind a few clouds and the now humid air hitting her face. She closed her eyes for a period, then opened them, then again, and again. Nothing changed, and that made the view horrific to look at.

She spun around and called out, "Macy?"

The room looked slightly different. The bedding had flowery patterns instead of being plain white, and there were pale-green drapes on both sides of her that could cover the balcony. Her luggage, her clothes, even Macy, were all gone.

Alice didn't understand this type of hallucination, nor did she want to, so she ran over to the bed and slipped beneath the covers, forcing herself to sleep.

# INTERLUDE



“Oh, dear me, very harrowing,” She said before turning to the next page.

He looked at Her, puzzled, “You’ve never made a comment before on any of these people...”

“Oh yes—I’m reading *her* story,” then She looked back down.

“...You told me she was ‘unimportant’?”

“Oh yes, I just want to read it.”

Her ludicrous nature was included in every eon, but understanding it was never required for Him. Especially when He would propose a question that never concerned Him in the first place, only for Her to make the usual jabs of:

“Hmm, not doing your job I see...”

He stormed up from His chair and was deciding whether to leave, but not before She laughed, “Calamity approaches!”

She placed the unfinished book on the table and reached for another from the shelf, one finished some time ago. “That boy must learn his lesson; better late than never,” and began flipping through the pages.

He thought for a bit, then looked at Her, “...The boy’s loop begins sometime now, no?”

“Yes, exactly! Perfect time for their story, don’t you agree?”

“...” He composed Himself and sat back down.

“Don’t worry, old friend, you always play an important role, so it’s far more interesting, no?”

“I know, I’ve been through it a thousand times...”

“And what’s a thousand more?” She smiled.

And He gave Her another blank stare.

“Ah, here we are... Chapter... something.”