

(THE AU PAIR--BOOK ONE)

ALMOST

GONE



OPHELIA

NIGHT

The Au Pairs

Ophelia Night

**Almost Gone**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Night O.**

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— (The Au Pairs)

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ALMOST GONE (THE AU PAIR—BOOK #1) is the debut novel in a new psychological thriller series by debut author Ophelia Night. When 23 year old Cassandra Vale accepts her first job as an au pair, she finds herself placed with a wealthy family in a rural estate outside of Paris, and all seems too good to be true. But she soon discovers that behind the gilded gates lies a dysfunctional family, a twisted marriage, troubled children, and secrets too dark to air. Cassandra is convinced she's finally found a fresh start when she takes a job as an au pair in the idyllic French countryside. Just beyond the Paris city limits, the Bouchard manor is a grand relic of the past, the family its picture-perfect occupants. It's the escape Cassandra needs—until she uncovers dark secrets that prove things aren't as glamorous as they seem. Beneath the opulence lies a dark web of malice, one Cassandra finds all too familiar, triggering dreams from her own violent and tortured past, one from which she desperately runs. And when a grisly murder tears the house apart, it threatens to take down her own fragile psyche with it. A riveting mystery replete with complex characters, layers of secrets, dramatic twists and turns and heart-pounding suspense, ALMOST GONE is book #1 in a psychological suspense series that will have you turning pages late into the night. Book #2--ALMOST LOST—is available for pre-order!

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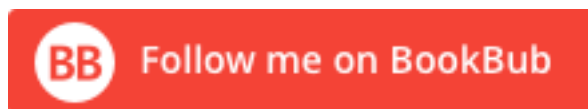
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# Ophelia Night

## Almost Gone (The Au Pair—Book One)

**Ophelia Night**

Debut author Ophelia Night is author of the psychological suspense series THE AU PAIR, which includes ALMOST GONE (Book #1), ALMOST LOST (Book #2) and ALMOST DEAD (Book #3). Ophelia would love to hear from you, so please visit [www.ophelianight.com](http://www.ophelianight.com) to receive free ebooks, hear the latest news, and stay in touch.



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### **BOOKS BY OPHELIA NIGHT**

#### **THE AU PAIR**

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)

ALMOST LOST (Book #2)

ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

## CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-three-year-old Cassie Vale sat perched on one of the two plastic chairs in the waiting room of the au pair agency, staring at the posters and maps on the opposite wall. Right above the tacky *Maureen's European Au Pairs* logo was a poster of the Eiffel Tower, and another of the Brandenburg Gate. A coffee shop in a cobbled courtyard, a picturesque village overlooking an azure sea. Scenes to dream about, places she longed to be.

The agency office was cramped and suffocating. The air conditioner rattled uselessly, not a breath of air coming from the vents. Cassie reached up and discretely wiped a drop of sweat, running down her cheek. She didn't know how much longer she could stand it.

The office door suddenly opened and she jumped, grabbing the file of documents on the other chair. But her heart fell to see that it was just another interviewee coming out, this one a tall, slender blonde, exuding all the confidence that Cassie wished she had. She was smiling in satisfaction, holding a sheaf of official-looking forms, and she barely glanced at Cassie as she passed.

Cassie's stomach clenched. She looked down at her documents, wondering if she would also be successful, or if she'd leave disappointed and shamed. She knew her experience was pitifully inadequate, and she had no proper qualifications in childcare. She'd been turned down by the cruise ship agency she'd approached the previous week. They'd said that without experience they couldn't even put her on their books. If it was the same here, she wouldn't stand a chance.

"Cassandra Vale? I'm Maureen. Please come in."

Cassie looked up. A dark-suited, gray-haired woman stood waiting in the doorway; clearly she was the owner.

Cassie scrambled to her feet, her carefully organized papers spilling out of the file. Scraping them together, her face ablaze, she hurried into the interview room.

As Maureen paged through them with a frown, Cassie started picking at her cuticles with her fingernails before lacing her hands together, the only way to stop herself from this nervous habit.

She tried deep breathing to calm herself. Told herself that this woman's decision wouldn't be her only ticket out of here. There were other ways to escape and make a fresh start. But right now, this felt like the only one left. The cruise ship company had given her a flat no. Teaching English, her other idea, was impossible without the correct qualifications, and obtaining them was too expensive. She'd need to save for another year to have a hope of getting started and right now, she didn't have the luxury of time. Last week, that choice had been ripped away from her.

"So, Cassandra, you grew up in Millville, New Jersey? Does your family still live there?" Maureen finally asked.

"Please call me Cassie," she replied, "and no, they moved away." Cassie clasped her hands tighter, worried at the direction the interview was taking. She hadn't expected to be questioned about her family in detail, but now she realized that of course they would need background on an applicant's home life, since the au pairs would be living and working in clients' homes. She would have to think fast, because while she didn't want to lie, she feared that the truth would jeopardize her application.

"And your older sister? You say she is working abroad?"

To Cassie's relief, Maureen had moved on to the next section. She'd thought what to say if asked, furthering her own cause in a way that wouldn't require any confirmable details.

"My sister's travels have definitely inspired me to take a job overseas. I've always wanted to live in another country and I love Europe. Particularly France, as I'm fairly fluent in the language."

"You've studied it?"

"Yes, for two years, but I was familiar with the language before that. My mother grew up in France and did freelance translation work from time to time when I was younger, so my sister and I grew up with a good understanding of spoken French."

Maureen asked a question in French: “What are you hoping to gain from working as an au pair?”

Cassie was pleased that she was able to reply, fluently, “To learn more about life in another country, and to improve my language skills.”

She hoped her answer would impress Maureen, but she remained stern as she finished perusing the paperwork.

“Do you still live at home, Cassie?”

Back to family life again... did Maureen suspect she was hiding something? She'd need to answer carefully. Moving out at sixteen, as she had done, would raise flags for an interviewer. Why so young? Were there problems at home? She needed to paint a prettier picture that hinted at a normal, happy family life.

“I've been living on my own since I was twenty,” she said, feeling her face flush with guilt.

“And working part time. I see you have a reference here from Primi? Is that a restaurant?”

“Yes, I've waitressed there for the past two years.” Which was, thankfully, true. Before that there had been various other jobs, and even a stint at a dive bar, as she struggled to afford her shared lodgings as well as her distance education. Primi, her most recent job, had been the most enjoyable. The restaurant team had felt like the family she'd never had, but there was no future there. Her salary was low and tips weren't much better; business in that part of town was tough. She'd been planning to make a move when the time was right, but when her circumstances had changed for the worse, it had become urgent.

“Childcare experience?” Maureen looked over her glasses at Cassie, who felt her stomach twist.

“I—I assisted at a daycare center for three months, before I started with Primi. The reference is in the folder. They gave me basic training on safety and first aid, and I was background checked,” she stammered, hoping that it was enough. It had only been a temporary position, filling in for someone on maternity leave. She'd never thought it would be a steppingstone to a future opportunity.

“I've managed children's parties at the restaurant, too. I'm a very friendly person. I mean, I get along with others, and I'm patient...”

Maureen's lips tightened. “What a pity your experience is not more recent. Also you don't have any formal certification in childcare. Most families require qualifications, or at the very least, more experience. It will be difficult to place you with so little.”

Cassie stared at her despairingly. She had to do this, no matter what it took. The choice was clear. Get away... or become trapped in a cycle of violence that she thought she'd escaped forever by leaving home.

The bruises on her upper arm had taken a few days to bloom, darkly defined, so she could see each knuckle mark where he'd hit her. Her boyfriend, Zane, who'd promised on their second date that he loved her, and would protect her no matter what.

When the ugly marks had started to appear, she'd remembered, with gooseflesh prickling her spine, that she'd had almost identical bruises in the same place ten years ago. First it had been her arm. Then her neck, and finally her face. Also inflicted by a supposed protector—her father.

He'd started hitting her when she was twelve, after Jacqui, her older sister, had run away. Before that, Jacqui had borne the brunt of his anger. Her presence had protected Cassie from the worst.

The bruises from Zane were still there; it would take a while for them to fade. She was wearing long sleeves to hide them during the interview, and was overly warm in the stuffy office.

“Is there anywhere else you could recommend?” she asked Maureen. “I know this is the best local agency, but would you be able to suggest an online site where I could possibly apply?”

“I can't recommend a website,” Maureen said firmly. “Too many candidates have had bad experiences. Some have ended up in a situation where their working hours weren't adhered to, or they were expected to do menial cleaning jobs as well as mind the children. That's unfair on everyone concerned. I've also heard of au pairs being abused in other ways. So, no.”

“Please—is there anybody on your books who might consider me? I’m a hard worker and willing to learn, I can easily fit in. Please give me a chance.”

Maureen was silent for a moment, then tapped at her keyboard, frowning.

“Your family—how do they feel about you traveling for a year? Do you have a boyfriend, anyone you’re leaving behind?”

“I broke up with my boyfriend recently. And I’ve always been very independent, my family knows that.”

Zane had cried and apologized after he’d punched her arm, but she hadn’t relented, thinking instead of her sister’s warning, given long ago and proven true since then: “No man ever hits a woman once.”

She’d packed her bags and moved in with a friend. To avoid him, she’d blocked his calls and changed the timing of her work shifts. She had hoped he would accept her decision and leave her alone, while knowing deep down that he would not. Breaking up should have been his idea, not hers. His ego would not allow for rejection.

He’d already been to the restaurant looking for her. The manager had told him she had taken two weeks’ leave and gone to Florida. That had bought her some time... but she knew he’d be counting the days. A week to go, and he’d be hunting her again.

The US felt too small to escape him. She wanted an ocean—a big one—between them. Because worst of all was the fear that she would weaken, forgive him, and allow him another chance.

Maureen finished checking the paperwork and went on to ask a few standard questions that Cassie found easier. Her hobbies, any chronic medications, dietary requirements or allergies.

“I have no dietary requirements or allergies. And no health problems.”

Cassie hoped her anxiety meds didn’t count as chronic medication. It would be better not to mention them, she decided, as she was sure they would be a huge red flag.

Maureen scribbled a note on the file.

Then she asked, “What would you do if the children in your care are naughty or disobedient? How would you handle it?”

Cassie drew a deep breath.

“Well, I don’t think there’s a one-size-fits-all answer. If a child is disobedient because she’s running toward a dangerous road, it would require a different approach than if she doesn’t want to eat her vegetables. In the first instance it would be safety first and getting the child out of harm’s way as quickly as possible. In the second I would reason and negotiate—why don’t you like them? Is it the look or the taste? Will you be willing to try a bite? After all, we all go through food phases and usually grow out of them.”

Maureen seemed satisfied with that, but the next questions were more difficult.

“What will you do if the children lie to you? For instance, if they tell you they’re allowed to do something that the parents have forbidden?”

“I’d say that it’s not allowed, and tell them the reason why if I knew it. I’d suggest we speak to the parents together and discuss the rule as a family, to help them understand why it’s important.” Cassie felt as if she were walking a tightrope, hoping that her answers were acceptable.

“How would you react, Cassie, if you witnessed a domestic fight? Living in a family’s home, there will be times when people don’t get along.”

Cassie closed her eyes for a moment, pushing away the memories triggered by Maureen’s words. Screaming, smashing glass, the neighbors shouting angrily. A chair wedged under the rattling handle of her bedroom door, the only flimsy protection she could find.

But just as she was about to say she’d lock herself and the kids in a secure room and call the police immediately, Cassie realized Maureen couldn’t be referring to that kind of a fight. Why would she? She was obviously thinking of a spoken argument, a few words snapped in annoyance or shouted in anger; temporary friction rather than terminal destruction.

“I would try to keep the children out of earshot,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “And I would respect the parents’ privacy and stay well away. After all, fights are part of life and an au pair has no right to take sides or become involved.”

Now, finally, she earned a small smile.

“A good answer,” Maureen said. She checked her computer again and nodded, as if confirming a decision she’d just made.

“There is only one possibility here that I could offer you. A position with a French family,” she said, and Cassie’s heart leaped, only to crash-land when Maureen added, “Their last au pair left unexpectedly after a month, and they’ve had difficulty finding a replacement.”

Cassie bit her lip. Whether the au pair had resigned or been fired, she didn’t know—but she couldn’t afford to have the same happen to her. With the agency fee and the airfare, she’d be plowing all her savings into this venture. Whatever it took, she would have to make it work.

Maureen added, “They are a wealthy family with a beautiful home. Not in town. It’s a mansion in the countryside, on a large estate. There’s an orchard and a small vineyard—not commercial—and also horses, although equestrian knowledge is not a job requirement. However, you’ll have the opportunity to learn to ride when you’re there if you like.”

“I’d love that,” Cassie said. The appeal of the French countryside, and the promise of horses, made the risk seem more worthwhile. And a wealthy family surely meant better job security. Perhaps the last au pair hadn’t been willing to try.

Maureen adjusted her glasses before jotting a note on Cassie’s form.

“Now, I must emphasize that not all families are easy to work for. Some are very challenging and some are downright difficult. The success of the job will rest on your shoulders.”

“I’ll do my best to succeed.”

“Quitting an assignment before your year is over is not acceptable. It will incur a substantial cancellation fee and you will never work for us again. The details are stipulated in the contract.” Maureen tapped her pen on the page.

“I can’t see that happening,” Cassie replied determinedly.

“Good. Then the final point we need to discuss is the timeframe.”

“Yes. How soon will I leave?” Cassie asked, her anxiety flooding back as she wondered how much longer she’d need to duck and dive.

“It usually takes about six weeks, but this family’s application is very urgent so we are going to fast-track it. If things move along as expected, you will fly out within a week. Is that acceptable?”

“It—it’s perfect,” she stammered. “Please, I accept the position. I’ll do whatever it takes to make it work, and I won’t let you down.”

The woman stared back at her long and hard, as if summing her up one last time.

“Don’t,” she said.

## CHAPTER TWO

Airports were all about goodbyes, Cassie thought. Rushed farewells, the impersonal environment robbing you of the words you really wanted to say, and the time to say them properly.

She'd insisted that the girlfriend who'd given her a ride to the airport drop her off rather than come in with her. A hug before jumping out of the car was quick and easy. Better than expensive coffee and awkward conversation, drying up as departure time drew closer. After all, she was traveling alone, leaving everyone she knew behind. It made sense to start that journey sooner, rather than later.

As Cassie wheeled the luggage cart into the terminal, she felt a sense of relief at the goals she'd accomplished so far. She'd gotten the assignment—the most important goal of all. She'd paid the flight and the agency fee, her visa had been fast-tracked, and she was on time for check-in. Her belongings were packed according to the list supplied—she was glad for the bright blue backpack she'd been given with the “Maureen's Au Pairs” logo, because there wouldn't have been room in her suitcase for all her clothes.

From here on until she landed in Paris, she was sure everything would go smoothly.

And then she stopped in her tracks, her heart hammering, as she saw him.

He was standing near the terminal entrance, with his back to the wall, thumbs hooked into the pockets of the leather jacket she'd given him. His height, his dark, spiky hair, and his aggressive jaw made him easy to spot as he scanned the crowds.

Zane.

He must have found out she was leaving at this time. She'd heard from various friends he'd been phoning around, asking where she was and checking up on the Florida story. Zane could be manipulative, and not everyone knew about her situation. Someone must have innocently told him the truth.

Before he could look in her direction, she swiveled the cart round, yanking her tracksuit hood over her head to hide her wavy auburn hair. She rushed the other way, steering the cart behind a pillar and out of his sight.

The Air France check-in desk was at the far end of the terminal. There was no way she could get past without him seeing her.

Think, Cassie, she told herself. In the past, Zane had praised her for her ability to make a fast plan in a tricky situation. “You think on your feet,” he'd said. That had been at the beginning of their relationship. By the end, he'd been accusing her bitterly of being sneaky, underhanded, too damn clever for her own good.

Time to be too damn clever, then. She took a deep breath, hoping for ideas. Zane was standing near the terminal entrance. Why? It would have been easier to wait by the check-in desk where he'd be sure of spotting her. So that meant he didn't know which airline she was flying. Whoever he'd gotten the information from either hadn't known, or hadn't said. If she could find another way to the desk, she might be able to check in before he came looking.

Cassie unloaded her luggage, shouldering the heavy backpack and dragging her suitcase behind her. There was an escalator at the building's entrance—she'd passed it on her way in. If she rode it up to the top level she hoped she would find one going down, or an elevator, at the other end.

Abandoning the luggage cart, she hurried back the way she had come and rode the escalator up. The one at the other end was broken, so she climbed down the steep steps, dragging her heavy bag behind her. The Air France check-in desk was a short distance away, but to her dismay, there was already a long and slow-moving line.

Pulling the gray hood further forward, she joined the line, took a paperback from her purse, and began reading. She wasn't taking in the words, and the hood was sweltering. She wanted to rip it

away, cool the perspiration on her neck. She couldn't risk it, though, not when her bright hair would be instantly visible. Better to stay in hiding.

But then a firm hand tapped her on her shoulder.

She whirled round, gasping, and found herself staring into the surprised eyes of a tall blonde who was about her own age.

"Sorry to startle you," she said. "I'm Jess. I noticed your backpack and thought I should say hello."

"Oh. Yes. Maureen's Au Pairs."

"Are you flying out on an assignment?" Jess asked.

"I am."

"Me too. Do you want to see if the airline will seat us together? We could request it at check-in."

While Jess chatted about the weather in France, Cassie glanced nervously around the terminal. She knew Zane wouldn't give up easily—not after driving all the way out here. He would want something from her—an apology, a commitment. He would force her to come with him for "a goodbye drink" and pick a fight. He wouldn't care if she arrived in France with fresh bruises... or missed her flight completely.

And then she saw him. He was heading in her direction, a few counters away, scanning each line carefully as he searched.

She turned away quickly, in case he sensed her gaze. With a flicker of hope, she saw they had reached the front of their line.

"Ma'am, you'll need to remove that," the check-in clerk said, pointing to Cassie's hood.

Complying reluctantly, she pushed it back.

"Hey, Cass!" She heard Zane shouting the words.

Cassie froze, knowing a response would mean disaster.

Clumsy with nerves, she dropped her passport and scrambled for it, her top-heavy backpack tipping over her head.

Another shout, and this time she glanced back.

He had seen her and was pushing his way through the line, elbowing people aside. The passengers were angry; she could hear raised voices. Zane was causing a commotion.

"We'd like to sit together if possible," Jess told the clerk, and Cassie bit her lip at the additional delay.

Zane shouted again, and she realized with a sick feeling that he would reach her in a few moments. He'd turn on the charm and beg her for a chance to talk, reassure Cassie that it would only take a minute for him to say what he needed in private. His aim, she knew from experience, would be to get her away and alone. And then the charm would vanish.

"Who's that guy?" Jess asked curiously. "Is he looking for you?"

"He's my ex-boyfriend," Cassie muttered. "I've been trying to avoid him. I don't want him causing trouble before I leave."

"But he's already causing trouble!" Jess whirled round, irate.

"Security!" she screamed. "Help us! Somebody stop that man!"

Galvanized by Jess's cries, one of the passengers grabbed Zane's jacket as he pushed past. He slipped on the tiles, arms flailing, dragging one of the posts down with him as he fell.

"Hold him," Jess appealed. "Security, quick!"

With a surge of relief, Cassie saw that security had indeed been alerted. Two airport police were rushing over to the line. They were going to reach it in time, before Zane could get to her, or even run away.

"I came to say goodbye to my girlfriend, officers," Zane gabbled, but his attempts at charm were lost on the duo.

"Cassie," he called, as the taller officer grasped his arm. "Au revoir."

Reluctantly she turned to face him.

“Au revoir! It’s not goodbye,” he shouted, as the officers marched him away. “I’m gonna see you again. Sooner than you think. You better take care.”

She recognized the warning in Zane’s last words—but for now, they were empty threats.

“Thank you so much,” she said to Jess, overwhelmed with gratitude for her gutsy action.

“I also had a toxic boyfriend,” Jess sympathized. “I know how possessive they can be, they stick like freaking Velcro. It was a pleasure to be able to stop him.”

“Let’s go through passport control before he can find a way back in. I owe you a drink. What would you like—coffee, beer, or wine?”

“Wine, for sure,” Jess said, as they headed through the gates.

“So, where in France are you headed to?” Cassie asked, after they had ordered the wine.

“This time, I’m going to a family in Versailles. Close to where the palace is, I believe. I hope I’ll have a chance to go and see it when I have a day off.”

“You said this time? Have you been on an assignment before?”

“I have, but it didn’t work out well.” Jess dropped an ice cube in her glass. “The family was dreadful. In fact, they put me off using Maureen’s Au Pairs ever again. I went with a different agency this time. But don’t worry,” she added hurriedly, “I’m sure you will be fine. Maureen must have some good clients on her books.”

Cassie’s mouth felt suddenly dry. She took a big gulp of wine.

“I thought she was reputable. I mean, her slogan is The Premier European Agency.”

Jess laughed. “Well, that’s just marketing. Other people told me differently.”

“What happened to you?” Cassie asked. “Please tell me.”

“Well, the assignment sounded OK, although some of Maureen’s interview questions worried me. They were so weird that I started wondering if there were problems with the family, because none of my au pair friends were asked similar questions during their interview. And when I arrived—well, the situation wasn’t as advertised.”

“Why not?” Cassie felt cold inside. She’d found Maureen’s questioning strange, too. She’d assumed at the time that every applicant was asked the same questions; that it was a test of your abilities. And maybe it was... but not for the reasons she’d imagined.

“The family was super-toxic,” Jess said. “They were disrespectful and demeaning. The work I had to do was way outside of the scope of my job; they didn’t care and refused to change. And when I said I was leaving—that was when it really became a war zone.”

Cassie bit her lip. She’d had that experience growing up. She remembered raised voices behind closed doors, muttered arguments in the car, a tightrope sense of tension. She had always wondered what her mother—so quiet, subdued, beaten down—could possibly have found to argue about with her bombastic, aggressive father. It had only been after her mother’s death in a car crash that she’d realized the arguments were all about keeping the peace, managing the situation, protecting Cassie and her sister from the aggression that flared unpredictably, and for no good reason. Without her mother’s presence, the simmering conflict had boiled over into full-blown war.

She’d imagined one of the benefits of being an au pair would be that she could become part of the happy family she’d never had. Now she feared the opposite would be true. She’d never been able to keep the peace at home. Could she ever manage a volatile situation the same way her mother had done?

“I’m worried about my family,” Cassie confessed. “I also had odd questions during the interview, and their previous au pair left early. What will happen if I have to do the same? I don’t want to stay around if things are going to turn nasty.”

“Don’t leave unless it’s an emergency,” Jess warned. “It causes massive conflict, and you hemorrhage money; you’ll be liable for a lot of additional expenses. That nearly put me off trying

again. I was very cautious about accepting this assignment. I wouldn't have been able to afford it if my dad hadn't paid for everything this time around."

She put her wine glass down.

"Shall we go to the gate? We're near the back of the plane, so we'll be in the first group to board."

The excitement of boarding the plane distracted Cassie from what Jess had said, and once they were seated, they chatted about other topics. When the plane took off, she felt her spirits lift with it, because she'd done it. She had left the country, she'd escaped Zane, and she was airborne, heading for a new start in a foreign land.

It was only after dinner, when she started thinking harder about the details of her assignment, and the warnings Jess had given her, that her misgivings crept back again.

Every family couldn't be bad, right?

But what if one particular agency had a reputation for accepting difficult families? Well, then, the chances would be greater.

Cassie tried to read for a while, but found she wasn't focusing on the words, and her thoughts were racing as she worried about what lay ahead.

She glanced at Jess. After making sure she was engrossed in watching her movie, Cassie discreetly took the bottle of pills from her purse and swallowed one down with the last of her Diet Coke. If she couldn't read, she might as well try to sleep. She switched off her light and reclined her seat.

\*

Cassie found herself in her drafty upstairs bedroom, huddling under her bed with her back against the rough, cold wall.

Drunken laughter, thumps, and shouts came from downstairs; revelry that would, at any moment, turn violent. Her ears strained, waiting for the smashing of glass. She recognized her father's voice and that of his latest girlfriend, Deena. There were at least four others down there, maybe more.

And then, over the shouts, she heard the creak of the floorboards as heavy footsteps climbed the stairs.

"Hey, little honey," a deep voice whispered, and her twelve-year-old self cringed in terror. "Are you there, girlie?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, telling herself this was just a nightmare, that she was safe in bed and the strangers downstairs were getting ready to leave.

The door creaked slowly open and in the spill of moonlight, she saw a heavy boot appear.

The feet trod across the room.

"Hey, girlie." A husky whisper. "I've come to say hello."

She closed her eyes, praying he wouldn't hear her rapid breathing.

The whisper of fabric as he pulled the covers back... and then the grunt of surprise as he saw the pillow and coat that she'd bundled underneath.

"Out and about," he'd muttered. She guessed he was looking at the grimy curtains billowing in the breeze, the drainpipe hinting at a precarious escape route. Next time, she would find the courage to climb down; it couldn't be worse than hiding here.

The boots retreated out of her vision. A burst of music came from below, followed by a shouted argument.

The room was quiet.

She was shivering; if she was going to spend the night hiding, she needed a blanket. She'd better get it now. She eased herself away from the wall.

But as she slid her hand out, a rough hand grabbed it.

“So there you are!”

He yanked her out—she clutched at the bed frame, cold steel scraping her hands, and began to scream. Her terrified cries filled the room, filled the house . . .

And she woke, sweating, screaming, hearing Jess’s worried voice. “Hey, Cassie, are you OK?”

The tendrils of the nightmare still lurked, waiting to draw her back in. She could feel the raw grazes on her arm where the rusty bed frame had cut her. She pressed her fingers there and was relieved to find unbroken skin. Opening her eyes wide, she switched on the overhead light to chase the darkness away.

“I’m fine. Bad dream, that’s all.”

“Do you want some water? Some tea? I can call the flight attendant.”

Cassie was going to refuse politely, but then she remembered she should take her meds again. If one tablet didn’t work, two would usually stop the nightmares from recurring.

“I’d love some water. Thank you,” she said.

She waited until Jess wasn’t looking and quickly swallowed another pill.

She didn’t try to sleep again.

During the plane’s descent, she swapped phone numbers with Jess—and just in case, she took down the name of the family Jess would be working for, and their address. Cassie told herself it was like an insurance policy, that hopefully if she had it, she wouldn’t need it. They promised each other that the first chance they got, they would tour Versailles Palace together.

As they taxied into Charles de Gaulle Airport, Jess gave an excited laugh. Quickly, she showed Cassie the selfie her family had taken for her while waiting. The attractive couple and two children were smiling, holding a board with Jess’s name on it.

Cassie had received no message—Maureen had just said she would be met at the airport. The walk to passport control seemed endless. She was surrounded by the babble of conversations in a host of different languages. Tuning in to the couple walking alongside her, she realized how little spoken French she was able to understand. Reality was so different from the school classes and language tapes. She felt scared, alone, and sleep deprived, and she was suddenly aware of how crumpled and sweaty her clothes were, compared to the elegantly clad French travelers around her.

As soon as she had her bags, she hurried to the restroom, put on a fresh top, and fixed her hair. She still didn’t feel ready to meet her family and had no idea who would be waiting. Maureen had told her the house was over an hour’s drive from the airport, so perhaps the children hadn’t come along. She shouldn’t look out for a big family. Any friendly face would do.

But in the sea of people watching her, she saw no recognition, even though she’d placed her “Maureen’s Au Pairs” backpack prominently on the luggage cart. She walked slowly from the gate to the arrivals lounge, looking anxiously for someone to spot her, wave, or call out.

But everyone there seemed to be waiting for someone else.

Grasping the cart’s handle with cold hands, Cassie zigzagged around the arrivals hall, searching in vain as the crowds gradually dispersed. Maureen hadn’t said what to do if this happened. Should she call someone? Would her phone even work in France?

And then, as she made one final, frantic pass round the floor, she noticed it.

“CASSANDRA VALE.”

A small notice board, held by a lean, dark-haired man in a black jacket and jeans.

Standing near the wall, absorbed by his phone, he wasn’t even looking for her.

She approached uncertainly.

“Hi—I’m Cassie. Are you...?” she asked, the words trailing off as she realized she had no idea who he could be.

“Yes,” he said in strongly accented English. “Come this way.”

She was about to introduce herself properly, to speak the words she'd rehearsed about how excited she was to be joining the family, when she saw the laminated card on his jacket. He was just a taxi driver; the card was his official airport pass.

The family hadn't bothered to come and meet her at all.

## CHAPTER THREE

The cityscape of Paris unfolded as Cassie watched. Tall apartments and somber industrial blocks gradually gave way to treed suburbia. The afternoon was cold and gray, with patchy, blowing rain.

She craned to see the signboards they passed. They were heading toward Saint Maur, and for a while she thought that might be their destination, but the driver passed the turnoff and continued on the road out of town.

“How much further?” she asked, attempting conversation, but he grunted noncommittally and turned the radio up.

Rain pattered on the windows and the glass felt cold against her cheek. She wished she’d taken her thick jacket from the trunk. And she was starving—she hadn’t eaten breakfast and there’d been no opportunity to buy food since.

After more than a half hour, they reached open countryside and drove alongside the Marne River, where brightly painted barges provided a splash of color in the grayness, and a few people, swathed in raincoats, walked under the trees. Some of the trees’ branches were already bare, others still clothed in russet-gold leaves.

“It’s very cold today, isn’t it?” she observed, giving conversation with the driver another try.

His only response was a muttered “Oui”—but at least he turned the heater on, and she could stop shivering. Cocooned in the warmth, she slipped into an uneasy doze as the miles flew past.

Sharp braking and the blare of a horn startled her awake. The driver was forcing his way past a stationary truck, turning off the highway onto a narrow, tree-lined road. The rain had cleared and in the low evening light, the autumn vista was beautiful. Cassie stared out the window, taking in the rolling landscape and the patchwork tapestry of fields interspersed with huge, dark forests. They passed by a vineyard, the neat rows of grapevines curving round the hillside.

Slowing his speed, the driver passed through a village. Pale stone houses with arched windows and steeply sloped, tiled roofs lined the road. Beyond, she saw open fields, and glimpsed a canal lined by weeping willows as they cruised by a stone bridge. The tall church spire drew her gaze and she wondered how old the building was.

This must be close to the chateau, she guessed, perhaps even in its local neighborhood. Then she changed her mind as they left the village behind and wound further into the hills, until she was totally disoriented and had lost sight of that tall spire. She hadn’t expected the chateau to be so remote. She heard the GPS give a “Lost Signal” notification and the driver exclaimed with annoyance, picking up his phone and glancing closely at the map while he drove.

And then, a right turn through high gateposts and Cassie sat straighter, staring down the long, gravel driveway. Ahead, tall and elegant, with the setting sun highlighting its stone-clad walls, was the chateau.

Tires crunched on stone as the car stopped outside a high, imposing entrance and she felt a stab of nerves. This home was far bigger than she’d imagined. It was like a palace, topped with tall chimneys and ornate turrets. She counted eighteen windows, with elaborate stonework and detailing, on the two stories of its commanding frontage. The house itself overlooked a formal garden, with immaculately trimmed hedges and paved pathways.

How would she relate to the family inside, who lived in such grandeur, when she had come from nothing?

She realized the driver was tapping his fingers impatiently on the wheel—he clearly wasn’t going to help her with her bags. Quickly, she climbed out.

The unforgiving wind chilled her immediately, and she hurried around to the trunk, manhandling her suitcase out, across the gravel, and into the shelter of the porch, where she zipped her jacket up.

There was no doorbell on the heavy wooden door, only a large, iron knocker that felt cold in her hand. The sound was surprisingly loud, and a few moments later Cassie heard light footsteps.

The door opened and she found herself facing a dark-uniformed maid, hair drawn back into a tight ponytail. Beyond her, Cassie glimpsed a large entrance hall with opulent wall coverings and a magnificent wooden staircase at the far end.

The maid glanced around as a door slammed.

Immediately, Cassie sensed the presence of a fight. She could feel it, electric in the air, like an approaching storm. It was in the maid's nervous bearing, in the bang of the door and the chaos of faraway shouts fading to silence. Her insides contracted and she felt an overpowering desire to get away. To run after the departing driver and call him back.

Instead, she stood her ground and forced a smile.

"I'm Cassie, the new au pair. The family is expecting me."

"Today?" The maid looked worried. "Wait a moment." As she hurried into the house, Cassie heard her calling, "Monsieur Dubois, please come quickly."

A minute later, a sturdy man with dark, graying hair strode into the foyer, his face like thunder. When he saw Cassie at the door, he stopped in his tracks.

"You are here already?" he said. "My fiancée said you were arriving tomorrow morning."

He turned to glare at the young, bleached-blond woman following him. She was wearing an evening gown and her attractive features were taut with tension.

"Yes, Pierre, I printed the email when I was in town. The agency said the flight lands at four in the morning." Turning to the ornate wooden hall table, she shoved a Venetian glass paperweight aside and brandished a page defensively. "Here. See?"

Pierre glanced at the page and sighed.

"It says four p.m. Not four a.m. The driver you booked obviously knew the difference, so here she is." He turned to Cassie and held out his hand. "I am Pierre Dubois. This is my fiancée, Margot."

He didn't introduce the maid. Instead, Margot snapped at her to go and make up the room opposite the children's bedrooms, and the maid hurried away.

"Where are the children? Are they in bed already? They should meet Cassie," Pierre said.

Margot shook her head. "They were having supper."

"So late? Did I not tell you that supper must be early on school nights? Even though they are on holiday, they should be in bed already to stay on schedule."

Margot stared at him and shrugged angrily before walking over to the doorway on the right, stiletto heels clicking.

"Antoinette?" she called. "Ella? Marc?"

She was rewarded by a thunder of feet and loud cries.

A dark-haired boy sprinted into the foyer, clutching a doll by her hair. He was closely pursued by a younger, chubby girl in a flood of tears.

"Give my Barbie back!" she screamed.

Skidding to a stop as he saw the adults, the boy made a dash for the staircase. As he hurtled toward it, his shoulder caught the curved side of a large blue and gold vase.

Cassie clapped her hands over her mouth in horror as the vase teetered on its plinth, then crashed to the floor where it shattered. Shards of colorful glass spilled across the dark wooden boards.

The shocked silence was broken by Pierre's enraged bellow.

"Marc! Give Ella her doll."

Feet dragging, lower lip jutting, Marc shuffled back past the wreckage. Reluctantly he handed the doll to Pierre, who passed it to Ella. Her sobbing subsided as she smoothed the doll's hair.

“That was a Durand art glass vase,” Margot hissed at the young boy. “Antique. Irreplaceable. Do you have no respect for your father’s possessions?”

A sullen silence was the only response.

“Where is Antoinette?” Pierre asked, sounding frustrated.

Margot glanced up and, following her gaze, Cassie saw a slim, dark-haired girl at the top of the stairs—she looked to be the eldest of the three by a few years. Elegantly dressed in a perfectly ironed frock, she waited with a hand on the balustrade until she had the family’s full attention. Then, chin high, she descended.

Anxious to make a good impression, Cassie cleared her throat and attempted a friendly greeting.

“Hello, children. My name’s Cassie. I’m so pleased to be here, and happy to be looking after you.”

Ella smiled shyly in return. Marc glared unrelentingly at the floor. And Antoinette met her gaze for a long, challenging moment. Then, without a word, she turned her back on her.

“If you will excuse me, Papa,” she said to Pierre. “I have homework to finish before bedtime.”

“Of course,” Pierre said, and Antoinette flounced upstairs again.

Cassie felt her face flame with embarrassment at the deliberate snub. She wondered if she should say something, make light of the situation or try to excuse Antoinette’s rude behavior, but she was unable to think of suitable words.

Margot muttered furiously, “I told you, Pierre. The teenage moods are starting already,” and Cassie realized that she hadn’t been the only one Antoinette had ignored.

“At least she was doing her homework, despite nobody helping her with it,” Pierre countered. “Ella, Marc, why don’t you both introduce yourselves properly to Cassie?”

There was a short silence. Clearly, introductions weren’t going to happen without a fight. But perhaps she could ease the tension with a few questions.

“Well, Marc, I know your name but I’d like to find out how old you are,” she said.

“I’m eight,” he muttered.

Glancing between him and Pierre, she could see a definite family resemblance. The unruly hair, the strong chin, the bright blue eyes. Even the way they frowned was similar. The other children were also dark, but Ella and Antoinette had more delicate features.

“And Ella, what’s your age?”

“I am nearly six,” the small girl announced proudly. “My birthday is the day after Christmas.”

“That’s a good day to have a birthday. I hope it means you get lots of extra presents.”

Ella gave a surprised smile, as if this was an advantage she hadn’t yet considered.

“Antoinette is the oldest of all of us. She’s twelve,” she said.

Pierre clapped his hands. “Right, it’s bedtime now. Margot, will you show Cassie the house after you’ve put the children to bed. She will need to know her way around. Make it quick. We must leave by seven.”

“I still have to finish getting ready,” Margot replied in acid tones. “You can put the children to bed, and call a butler to clear up this mess. I will show Cassie the house.”

Pierre drew an angry breath before glancing at Cassie and pressing his lips together. She guessed her presence had made him swallow his words.

“Upstairs and into bed,” he said, and the two children followed him reluctantly up the staircase. She was heartened to see that Ella turned and gave her a small wave.

“Come with me, Cassie,” Margot ordered.

Cassie followed Margot through the doorway on the left and found herself in a formal lounge with exquisite, showpiece furniture, and tapestries lining the walls. The room was huge and chilly; there was no fire lit in the massive fireplace.

“This lounge is seldom used, and the children are not allowed in here. The main dining room is beyond—the same rules apply.”

Cassie wondered how often the massive mahogany dining table was used—it looked pristine and she counted sixteen high-backed chairs. Three more vases, similar to the one Marc had broken earlier, stood on the darkly polished sideboard. She couldn't imagine happy dinner table conversation flowing in this austere and silent space.

What would it feel like growing up in such a house, where whole areas were off limits because of furnishings that could be damaged? She guessed that it might make a child feel as if they were less important than the furniture.

“This we call the Blue Room.” It was a smaller lounge, wallpapered in navy, with large French doors. Cassie guessed they opened out onto a patio or courtyard, but it was fully dark, and all she could see were the room's dim lights reflected in the glass. She wished the house had higher-wattage globes—all the rooms were gloomy, with shadows lurking in the corners.

A sculpture caught her eye... the marble statue's stand had been broken, so it lay face up on a table. Its features looked blank and immobile, as if the stone were coating a dead person's face. Its limbs were chunky and rudely carved. Cassie shivered, looking away from the creepy sight.

“That is one of our most valuable pieces,” Margot informed her. “Marc knocked it over last week. We will have it repaired soon.”

Cassie thought about the young boy's destructive energy and the way he had knocked his shoulder into the vase earlier. Had the action been totally accidental? Or had there been a subliminal desire to shatter the glass, to get himself noticed in a world where possessions seemed to take priority?

Margot led her back the way they had come. “The rooms down that passage are kept locked. The kitchen is this way, to the right, and beyond it are the servants' quarters. There is a small parlor to the left, and a room where we dine as a family.”

On the way back they passed a gray-uniformed butler carrying a broom, dustpan, and brush. He stood aside for them but Margot did not acknowledge him at all.

The west wing was a mirror image of the east. Huge, darkened rooms with exquisite furnishings and works of art. Quiet and empty. Cassie shivered, longing for a homey bright light or the familiar sound of a television, if such a thing even existed in this house. She followed Margot up the magnificent staircase to the second floor.

“The guest wing.” Three pristine bedrooms, with four-poster beds, were separated by two spacious drawing rooms. The bedrooms were as neat and formal as hotel rooms, and the bedcovers looked as if they had been ironed flat.

“And the family wing.”

Cassie brightened, glad to finally reach the part of the house where people lived.

“The nursery.”

To her confusion, this was another empty room, occupied only by a tall crib with high, barred sides.

“And here, the children's bedrooms. Our suite is at the end of the passage, around the corner.”

Three closed doors in a row. Margot's voice dropped and Cassie guessed she didn't want to look in on the children—not even to say good night.

“This is Antoinette's bedroom, this is Marc's, and the closest to ours is Ella's. Your room is opposite Antoinette's.”

The door was open and two maids were busily making up the bed. The room was enormous and icy cold. It was furnished with two wingback chairs, a table, and a large wooden wardrobe. Heavy red curtains shrouded the window. Her suitcase had been placed at the foot of the bed.

“You will hear the children if they cry or call—please attend to them. Tomorrow morning they need to be dressed and ready by eight. They will be going outdoors, so choose warm clothing.”

“I will, but...” Cassie gathered her courage. “Could I please have some supper? I've had nothing to eat since dinner on the plane last night.”

Margot stared at her, perplexed, then shook her head.

“The children ate early because we are going out. The kitchen is closed now. Breakfast will be served from seven tomorrow. You can wait till then?”

“I—I suppose so.” She felt sick with hunger—the forbidden candy in her bag, intended for the children, suddenly an irresistible temptation.

“And I must email the agency and let them know I’m here. Would it be possible to have the Wi-Fi password? My phone has no signal.”

Now Margot’s stare grew blank. “We have no Wi-Fi, and there is no cell phone signal here. Only a landline telephone in Pierre’s study. To send an email, you must go into town.”

Without waiting for Cassie’s response, she turned away and headed toward the main bedroom.

The maids had gone, leaving Cassie’s bed in a state of chilly perfection.

She closed the door.

She’d never dreamed she would feel homesick, but at that moment she longed for a friendly voice, the babble of the television, the clutter of a full refrigerator. Dishes in the sink, toys on the floor, YouTube videos playing on phones. The happy chaos of a normal family—the life she’d expected to become a part of.

Instead, she felt she was already embroiled in a bitter and complicated conflict. She could never have hoped to be instant friends with these children—not with the family dynamics that had played out so far. This place was a battleground—and while she might find an ally in young Ella, she feared she had already made an enemy in Antoinette.

The ceiling light, which had been flickering, suddenly failed. Cassie fumbled in her backpack for her phone and unpacked as best she could in the flashlight’s beam, before plugging it into the only visible plug point on the opposite side of the room and shuffling through the darkness to her bed.

Cold, apprehensive, and hungry, she climbed between the chilly sheets and pulled them up to her chin. She’d expected to feel more hopeful and positive after meeting the family, but instead she found herself doubting her ability to cope with them, and dreading what the following day would bring.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The statue stood in Cassie's doorway, framed by darkness.

Its lifeless eyes opened and its mouth parted as it moved toward her. The hairline cracks around its lips widened, and then its entire face began to disintegrate. Fragments of marble showered down and rattled on the floor.

"No," Cassie whispered, but found she could not move. She was trapped in bed, her limbs frozen even though her panicked mind implored her to flee.

The statue made its way toward her, arms outstretched, stone chips cascading from its limbs. It began to scream, a high, thin sound, and as it did, she saw what was being exposed under the marble shell.

Her sister's face. Cold, gray, dead.

"No, no, no!" Cassie shouted, and her own cries woke her.

The room was pitch dark; she was curled in a shivering ball. She sat up, panicked, groping for a light switch that wasn't there.

Her worst fear... the one she tried hard to suppress by day, but which found its way into nightmares. It was the fear that Jacqui had died. Because why else would her sister have suddenly stopped communicating? Why had there been no letters, no phone calls, no word from her for years?

Shaking with cold and fear, Cassie realized the clattering stones in her dream had become the sound of rain, gusting in the wind, drumming against the window glass. And above the rain, she heard another sound. One of the children was screaming.

*"You will hear the children if they cry or call—please attend to them."*

Cassie felt confused and disoriented. She wished she could turn on a bedside light and take a few minutes to calm herself. The dream had been so vivid she still felt locked inside it. But the screaming must have started while she was asleep—it might, in fact, have caused her nightmare. She was needed urgently, and she had to hurry.

She pushed the duvet back, discovering the window hadn't been properly closed. Rain had blown in through the gap, and the lower section of the covers was dripping wet. She stepped out of bed into the blackness and headed across the room in the direction she hoped her phone would be.

A slick of water on the floor had turned the tiles to ice. She skidded, losing her footing and landing with a painful thud on her back. Her head banged against the bedframe and her vision exploded into stars.

"Goddammit," she whispered, easing herself onto her hands and knees and waiting for the pain in her head, and the dizziness, to subside.

She crawled across the tiles and felt around for her phone, hoping it had escaped the floodwater. To her relief, this side of the room was dry. She turned on the flashlight, clambering painfully to her feet. Her head was throbbing and her shirt was drenched. She ripped it off and quickly pulled on the first clothes she could find—a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a gray top. Barefoot, she hurried out of the room.

She shone her flashlight onto the walls but there were no light switches nearby. Carefully, she followed its beam in the direction of the sound, heading toward the Dubois's suites. The room closest to theirs would be Ella's bedroom.

Cassie knocked quickly and went in.

Thankfully, light at last. In the glow of the ceiling lamp she could see the single bed near the window where Ella had kicked off her duvet. Shouting and screaming in her sleep, she was fighting the demons of her dream.

"Ella, wake up!"

Closing the door, Cassie hurried over and sat on the edge of the bed, gently grasping the sleeping girl's shoulders and feeling them hunched and shuddering. Her dark hair was matted, her pajama top bunched up. She'd kicked her blue duvet to the bottom of the bed—she must be cold.

"Wake up, it's OK. You're just having a bad dream."

"They're coming to get me!" Ella sobbed, struggling to get out of her grasp. "They're coming, they're waiting at the door!"

Cassie held her firmly and eased her into a sitting position, dragging a pillow behind her as she smoothed her rumpled top. Ella was shaking with fear. The way she'd referred to "they" made Cassie wonder if it was a recurring nightmare. What was happening in Ella's life to trigger such vivid terror in her dreams? The young girl was completely traumatized, and Cassie had no idea of the best way to soothe her. She had vague memories of Jacqui, her sister, waving a broom at a cupboard to chase off an imaginary monster. But that terror had its roots in reality. The nightmares had started after Cassie had hidden in the cupboard during one of her father's drunken rages.

She wondered whether Ella's fear was also grounded in something that had happened. She'd have to try and find out later, but for now, she needed to convince her that the demons had gone.

"Nobody's coming for you. It's all OK. Take a look. I'm here and the light's on."

Ella's eyes opened wide. Tear-filled, they stared at Cassie for a moment and then her head turned, focusing on something behind her.

Still spooked by her own nightmare and Ella's insistence on seeing "them," Cassie looked quickly round, her heart accelerating as the door banged open.

Margot stood in the doorway, hands on hips. She wore a turquoise silk dressing gown and her blonde hair was tied in a loose braid. Her perfect features were marred only by a residual smudge of mascara.

Fury emanated from her and Cassie felt her insides shrink.

"What took you so long?" Margot snapped. "Ella's crying woke us up, it went on for hours! We had a late night—we are not paying you to have our sleep disturbed!"

Cassie stared at her, confused by the fact that Ella's well-being was seemingly the last thing on Margot's mind.

"I'm sorry," she said. Ella was clinging to her and making it impossible for her to stand and face her employer. "I came as soon as I heard her, but the light in the bedroom had blown, it was completely dark, so it took me a while to get—"

"Yes, it took you too long, and this is now your first warning! Pierre works long hours and he becomes angry when the children wake him."

"But..." With a surge of defiance, the question sprang to Cassie's lips. "Couldn't you have come to Ella if you heard her crying? It's my first night, and I didn't know where anything was in the dark. I'll do better next time, I promise, but I mean, she's your child and she was having a terrible dream."

Margot stepped toward Cassie, her face taut. For a moment Cassie thought she was going to offer a snapped apology and that they would reach a strained truce together.

But that didn't happen.

Instead, Margot's hand whipped out and she struck Cassie hard across the face.

Cassie bit back a scream, blinking tears away as Ella's cries escalated. Her cheek burned from the blow, the bump on her head was throbbing harder, and her mind was reeling in horror from the realization that her new employer was violent.

"Before you were hired, a kitchen maid did your duties. And can do so again, we have many servants. This is your second warning. I do not tolerate laziness, nor staff talking back. Your third offense will mean instant dismissal. Now, stop the child's crying, so we can get some sleep at last."

She marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Frantically, Cassie bundled Ella in her arms, feeling overwhelming relief as her loud sobs subsided.

“It’s OK,” she whispered. “It’s all right, don’t worry. Next time I’ll come to you sooner, I will be able to find my way better. Would you like me to sleep here the rest of the night? And we could leave your bedside lamp on to be extra safe?”

“Yes, please stay. You can help stop them coming back,” Ella whispered. “And leave the light on. I don’t think they like it.”

The room was furnished in shades of neutral blue, but the bedside lamp, with its pink lampshade, was a bright and comforting item.

Even as she consoled Ella, Cassie felt ready to throw up, and realized her hands were trembling violently. She wriggled under the covers, glad of their warmth because she was freezing cold.

How could she possibly keep working for an employer who verbally and physically abused her in front of the children? It was unthinkable, inexcusable, and it brought back too many of her own memories that she’d managed to forget. First thing in the morning, she should pack up and get out.

But... she’d received no payment yet; she’d have to wait till month’s end to have any money at all. There was no way she could afford the taxi ride back to the airport, never mind the expense of changing her flight ticket.

There was also the question of the children.

How could she leave them in the hands of this violent, unpredictable woman? They needed someone to care for them—especially young Ella. She could not sit here, consoling her and promising everything would be all right, only to disappear the very next day.

With a sick feeling, Cassie realized there was no choice. She could not leave at this point. She was financially and morally compelled to stay.

She’d just have to try and balance on the tightrope of Margot’s temper, to avoid committing her third and final offense.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Cassie opened her eyes, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling in confusion. It took her a few moments to orient herself and to realize where she was—in Ella’s bed, with the morning light streaming through a gap in the curtains. Ella was still sleeping soundly, half buried under the duvet. The back of Cassie’s head throbbed when she moved, the pain reminding her of everything that had happened last night.

She sat up hurriedly, remembering Margot’s words, the stinging slap, and the warnings she’d received. Yes, she had been at fault for not attending to Ella immediately, but nothing that happened after that had been fair. When she’d tried to stand up for herself, she had only been punished further. So perhaps she needed to calmly discuss some house rules with the Dubois family this morning, to make sure this wouldn’t happen again.

Why hadn’t her alarm gone off yet? She’d set it for six-thirty, hoping this would mean a punctual arrival for breakfast at seven.

Cassie checked her phone and found with a shock that the battery was dead. The constant searching for signal must have drained it faster than usual. Climbing quietly out of bed, she went back to her room, plugged it into the charger, and waited anxiously for it to power up.

She swore under her breath when she saw it was nearly seven-thirty. She’d overslept, and would now have to get everyone up and ready as fast as possible.

Hurrying back to Ella’s room, Cassie pulled back the curtain.

“Good morning,” she said. “It’s a beautiful sunny day, and it’s breakfast time.”

But Ella didn’t want to get up. She must have battled to fall asleep after her bad dream and she’d woken in a mood. Grumpy and tired, she clung tearfully to the duvet when Cassie tried to pull it back. Eventually, remembering the candy she’d brought with her, Cassie resorted to bribery to get her out of bed.

“If you’re ready in five minutes, you can have a chocolate.”

Even then, further struggles lay ahead. Ella refused to put on the outfit Cassie selected for her.

“I want to wear a dress today,” she insisted.

“But Ella, you might be cold if we go outside.”

“Don’t care. I want to wear a dress.”

Cassie finally managed to compromise by choosing the warmest dress she could find—a long-sleeved corduroy frock, with long socks and fleece-lined boots. Ella sat on the bed, legs swinging, lower lip quivering. One child was finally ready, but there were another two still to go.

When she opened Marc’s bedroom door, she was relieved to see he was awake and out of bed already. Clad in red pajamas, he was playing with an army of soldiers scattered over the floor. The large steel toy box below his bed was open, surrounded by model cars and an entire herd of farm animals. Cassie had to step carefully to avoid standing on any of them.

“Hello, Marc. Shall we go to breakfast? What do you want to wear?”

“I don’t want to wear anything. I want to play,” Marc retorted.

“You can carry on playing afterwards, but not now. We’re late, and we must hurry.”

Marc’s response was to burst into noisy tears.

“Please don’t cry,” Cassie begged him, aware of the precious minutes ticking away. But his tears escalated, as if he were feeding off her panic. He flatly refused to change out of his pajamas and not even the promise of chocolate could change his mind. Eventually, at her wits’ end, Cassie wedged a pair of slippers on his feet. Taking his hand in hers and placing a soldier in his pajama pocket, she persuaded him to follow her out.

When she knocked on Antoinette’s door, there was no response. The room was empty and the bed neatly made with a pink nightdress folded on the pillow. Hopefully, Antoinette had made her own way to breakfast.

Pierre and Margot were already seated in the informal dining room. Pierre was wearing a business suit, and Margot was also smartly dressed, with her makeup perfectly done and her hair curled over her shoulders. She looked up when they walked in, and Cassie felt her face start to blaze. Quickly, she helped Ella into a chair.

“Sorry we’re a little late,” she apologized, feeling flustered and as if she was already on the back foot. “Antoinette wasn’t in her room. I’m not sure where she is.”

“She has finished breakfast, and is practicing her piano piece.” Pierre gestured his head in the direction of the music room before pouring more coffee. “Listen. Perhaps you recognize the music—‘The Blue Danube.’”

Faintly, Cassie heard an accurate rendition of a tune that did indeed sound familiar.

“She is very talented,” Margot offered, but the sour tone of her comment didn’t match the words. Cassie glanced at her nervously. Was she going to say anything about what had happened last night?

But, as Margot stared back in cool silence, Cassie suddenly wondered if she’d misremembered some of it. The back of her head was tender and swollen from where she’d slipped, but when she touched the left side of her face, there was no bruise from the stinging slap. Or maybe it had been the right side? It was frightening that she couldn’t remember now. She pressed her fingers into her right cheek, but there was no soreness there, either.

Cassie told herself firmly to stop worrying about the details. She could not possibly have been thinking clearly after a hard bang on the head and possible concussion. Margot had definitely threatened her, but Cassie’s own imagination could have conjured up the actual blow. After all, she’d been exhausted, disoriented, and had emerged straight from the throes of a nightmare.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Marc demanding breakfast, and she poured orange juice for the children, serving them food from the breakfast trays. Ella insisted on taking every last piece of ham and cheese, so Cassie made do with a jam croissant and some sliced fruit.

Margot drained her coffee in silence, staring out the window. Pierre paged through a newspaper while he finished his toast. Were breakfasts always so silent? Cassie wondered. Neither parent showed any desire to engage with her, the children, or each other. Was this because she was in trouble?

Perhaps she should start the conversation and straighten things out. She needed to apologize formally for her lateness in reaching Ella, but she didn’t think her punishment had been fair.

Cassie composed her words carefully in her head.

*“I know I was slow to attend to Ella last night. I didn’t hear her crying but next time I’ll leave my bedroom door open. However, I don’t feel that I was fairly treated. I was threatened and abused, and received two consecutive warnings in as many minutes, so could we please discuss some house rules here?”*

No, that wouldn’t do. It was too forward. She didn’t want to appear antagonistic. She needed a softer approach, and one that would not make more of an enemy out of Margot.

*“Isn’t it a lovely morning?”*

Yes, that would definitely be a good start and bring a positive angle to the conversation. And from there, she could lead into what she really wanted to say.

*“I know I was slow to attend to Ella last night. I didn’t hear her crying but next time I’ll leave my bedroom door open. However, I’d like us to discuss some house rules now, in terms of how we treat each other and when warnings should be given, so that I can make sure I do the best job.”*

Cassie cleared her throat, feeling nervous, and put down her fork.

But as she was about to speak, Pierre folded his newspaper and he and Margot got up.

“Have a pleasant day, children,” Pierre said, as they left the room.

Cassie stared after them, confused. She had no idea what to do now. She’d been told the children were to be ready by eight—but ready for what?

She'd better run after Pierre and check. She headed for the door, but as she reached it, she almost collided with a pleasant-faced woman wearing a staff uniform and carrying a tray of food.

"Ah—oops. There. Saved." She righted the tray and slid the slices of ham back into place. "You are the new au pair, yes? I am Marnie, the head housekeeper."

"Nice to meet you," Cassie said, realizing this was the first smiling face she'd seen all day. After introducing herself she said, "I was on my way to ask Pierre what the children need to do today."

"Too late. He will have gone already; they were heading straight for the car. Did he leave no instructions?"

"No. Nothing."

Marnie set the tray down and Cassie gave Marc more cheese and helped herself hungrily to toast, ham, and a hardboiled egg. Ella was refusing to eat the pile of food on her plate, pushing it around fretfully with her fork.

"Perhaps you can ask the children themselves," Marnie suggested. "Antoinette will know if there is anything arranged. I would advise waiting till she has finished playing the piano, though. She does not like her concentration disturbed."

Was it her imagination or did Marnie roll her eyes at those words? Encouraged, Cassie wondered if they might become friends. She needed an ally in this house.

But there was no time to forge a friendship now. Marnie was clearly in a hurry, collecting empty plates and dirty dishes while she asked Cassie if there were any problems with her room. Cassie quickly explained the issues, and after promising to change the bedcovers and replace the light bulb before lunch, the housekeeper left.

The sound of the piano had stopped, so Cassie headed to the music room near the hallway.

Antoinette was putting the music away. She turned and faced Cassie warily when she walked in. She was immaculately dressed in a royal blue frock. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and her shoes were perfectly shined.

"You look beautiful, Antoinette, that dress is such a pretty color," Cassie said, hoping compliments would endear her to the hostile girl. "Is there anything you have planned for today? Any activities or other things arranged?"

Antoinette paused thoughtfully before shaking her head.

"Nothing today," she said decisively.

"And Marc and Ella, do they need to go anywhere?"

"No. Tomorrow, Marc has soccer practice." Antoinette closed the piano lid.

"Well, is there anything you would like to do now?" Perhaps allowing Antoinette to choose would help them bond.

"We could go for a walk in the woods. We all enjoy doing that."

"Where are the woods?"

"A mile or two down the road." The dark-haired girl gestured vaguely. "We can leave immediately. I will show you the way. I just have to change my clothes."

Cassie had assumed the woods were within the estate and was taken aback by Antoinette's reply. But a walk in the woods—that sounded like a nice, healthy outdoor activity. Cassie was sure that Pierre would approve.

\*

Twenty minutes later, they were ready to leave. Cassie looked into every room as she escorted the children downstairs, hoping she would see Marnie or one of the other housekeeping staff, so she could tell them where she was going.

She didn't see anybody and had no idea where to start looking. Antoinette was impatient to leave, jumping from foot to foot with excitement, so Cassie decided that humoring her good mood

was more important, especially seeing they weren't going to be gone for too long. They headed down the gravel drive and out, with Antoinette leading the way.

Behind a huge oak tree, Cassie saw a block of five stables—she'd noticed them when she arrived the previous day. She walked over to have a closer look and found they were empty and dark, the doors standing open. The field beyond was unoccupied, the wooden railings broken in parts, the gate hanging off its hinges and the grass growing long and wild.

“Do you have horses here?” she asked Antoinette.

“We used to, many years ago, but there have been none for a long time,” she replied. “None of us ride anymore.”

Cassie stood staring at the deserted stables while she absorbed this bombshell.

Maureen had given her incorrect and seriously outdated information.

The horses had played a part in her decision to come here. They had been an incentive. Hearing about them had made the place sound better, more appealing, more alive. But they were long gone.

During the interview, Maureen had stated that there would be an actual opportunity for her to learn to ride. Why had she misrepresented things, and what else might she have said that wasn't true?

“Come on!” Antoinette tugged her sleeve impatiently. “We need to go!”

As Cassie turned away, it occurred to her that there was no reason for Maureen to falsify information. The rest of her description about the house and the family had been fairly accurate and as an agent, she could only pass on the facts provided.

If so, that meant it must have been Pierre who had lied. And that, she realized, was even more troubling.

Once they had rounded a bend and the chateau was out of sight, Antoinette slowed her pace, none too soon for Ella, who was complaining that her shoes hurt.

“Stop whining,” Antoinette advised. “Remember, Papa always says you mustn't whine.”

Cassie picked Ella up and carried her, feeling her chubby weight increase with every step. She was already carrying the backpack crammed with everyone's jackets, and her last few euros in the side pocket.

Marc capered ahead, breaking branches from the hedges and throwing them into the road like spears. Cassie had to remind him constantly to keep off the tarmac. He was so inattentive and unaware, he could easily jump into the path of an oncoming car.

“I'm hungry!” Ella complained.

Exasperated, Cassie thought of her untouched plate of breakfast.

“There's a shop around the next corner,” Antoinette told her. They sell cold drinks and snacks.” She seemed strangely cheerful this morning, although Cassie had no idea why. She was just glad that Antoinette appeared to be warming to her.

She'd hoped the shop might sell cheap watches, because without a phone, she had no means of telling the time. But it proved to be a nursery, stocked with seedlings, baby trees, and fertilizer. The kiosk at the till sold only soft drinks and snacks—the elderly shopkeeper, perched on a barstool next to a gas heater, explained there was nothing else. The prices were freakishly high and she was filled with stress as she counted out her meager stash of money, purchasing chocolate and a can of juice for each child.

While she paid, the three children rushed across the road to take a closer look at a donkey. Cassie shouted for them to come back, but they ignored her.

The gray-haired man shrugged sympathetically. “Children will be children. They look familiar. Do you live nearby?”

“Yes, we do. They are the Dubois children. I'm their new au pair and this is my first day of work,” Cassie explained.

She had hoped for some neighborly recognition, but instead, the shopkeeper's eyes widened in alarm.

“That family? You are working for them?”

“Yes.” Cassie’s fears surged back. “Why? Do you know them?”

He nodded.

“We all know of them here. And Diane, Pierre’s wife, used to buy plants from me sometimes.”

He saw her puzzled face.

“The children’s mother,” he elaborated. “She passed away last year.”

Cassie stared at him, her mind whirling. She was unable to believe what she’d just heard.

The children’s mother had died, and as recently as last year. Why had nobody said anything about this? Maureen hadn’t even mentioned it. Cassie had assumed Margot was their mother, but now realized her naivety; Margot was far too young to be the mother of a twelve-year-old.

This was a family that had recently suffered bereavement, been ripped apart by a major tragedy. Maureen should have briefed her on this.

But Maureen hadn’t known about the horses being gone, because she hadn’t been told. With a stab of fear, Cassie wondered if Maureen had even known about this.

What had happened to Diane? How had her loss affected Pierre, and the children, and the entire family dynamic? How did they feel about Margot’s arrival in the home so soon afterward? No wonder she could feel tension, taut as a wire, in just about every interaction within those walls.

“That’s—that’s really sad,” she stammered, realizing that the shopkeeper was regarding her curiously. “I didn’t know she’d died so recently. I guess her death must have been traumatic for everyone.”

Frowning deeply, the shopkeeper handed her the change, and she put the meager stash of coins away.

“You know the family background, I am sure.”

“I don’t know much, so I’d really appreciate it if you could explain what happened.” Cassie leaned anxiously over the counter.

He shook his head.

“It is not my place to say more. You work for the family.”

Why did that make a difference? Cassie wondered. Her fingernail dug into the quick of her cuticle and she realized with a shock that she’d resumed her old stress habit. Well, she felt stressed all right. What the elderly man had told her was worrying enough, but what he was refusing to say was even worse. Perhaps if she was honest with him, he would be more open.

“I don’t understand the situation there at all, and I’m scared I’ve gotten myself in over my head. To be honest with you, I wasn’t even told Diane had died. I don’t know how it happened, or what things were like before. If I had a better picture, it would really help.”

He nodded, looking more sympathetic, but then the phone in the office rang and she knew the opportunity was lost. He walked out to answer it, closing the door behind him.

Disappointed, Cassie turned away from the counter, shouldering her backpack which seemed twice as heavy as before, or perhaps it was the disturbing information the shopkeeper had given her that was weighing her down. As she walked out of the shop, she wondered if she would have a chance to come back on her own and speak to the elderly man. Whatever secrets he knew about the Dubois family, she was desperate to find out.

## CHAPTER SIX

A frightened scream from Ella jerked Cassie back to her present situation. Looking across the road, she saw to her horror that Marc had climbed through the split-pole fence and was feeding handfuls of grass to a growing herd that now included five hairy, gray, mud-encrusted donkeys. They flattened their ears and nipped each other as they crowded him.

Ella screamed again as one of the donkeys barged into Marc, knocking him flat on his back.

“Come out!” Cassie shouted, sprinting across the road. She leaned through the fence and grabbed the back of his shirt, dragging him away before he could be trampled. Did the child have a death wish? His shirt was soaked and filthy, and she hadn’t brought a spare. Luckily the sun was still shining, although she could see clouds gathering in the west.

When she gave Marc his chocolate, he stuffed the entire bar into his mouth, his cheeks bulging. He laughed, spitting bits of it onto the ground, before racing ahead with Antoinette.

Ella pushed her chocolate away and began crying loudly.

Cassie picked the young girl up again.

“What’s wrong? Are you not hungry?” she asked.

“No. I’m missing Mama,” she sobbed.

Cassie hugged her tight, feeling Ella’s cheek warm against her own.

“I’m sorry, Ella. I’m so sorry. I only just heard about it. You must miss her terribly.”

“I wish Papa would tell me where she went,” Ella lamented.

“But…” Cassie was at a loss for words. The shopkeeper had clearly said that Diane Dubois had died. Why did Ella think otherwise?

“What did your Papa say to you?” she asked carefully.

“He told me she went away. He wouldn’t say where. He just said she left. Why did she go? I want her to come back!” Ella pressed her head into Cassie’s shoulder, sobbing her heart out.

Cassie’s head was spinning. Ella would have been four at the time, and would surely have understood what death meant. There would have been a chance to mourn, and a funeral service. Or perhaps there hadn’t been.

Her mind boggled at the alternative; that Pierre had deliberately lied to Ella about his wife’s death.

“Ella, don’t be sad,” she said, rubbing her shoulders gently. “Sometimes people leave and they don’t come back.” She thought of Jacqui, wondering again if she would ever find out what had really happened to her. Not knowing was terrible. Death, though tragic, was at least final.

Cassie could only imagine the agony Ella must have endured, believing that her own mother had abandoned her without a word. No wonder she had nightmares. She needed to find out the real story, in case there was more to it. Asking Pierre directly would be too intimidating, and she wouldn’t feel comfortable mentioning the subject unless he brought it up himself. Perhaps the other children would tell her their version, if she asked at the right time. That might be the best place to start.

Antoinette and Marc were waiting at a fork in the road. Finally, Cassie saw the woods ahead. Antoinette had underestimated the distance; they must have walked at least three miles, and the nursery was the last building she had seen. The road had become a narrow lane, its paving cracked and broken, the hedges bushy and wild.

“You and Ella can go down that path,” Antoinette advised, pointing to an overgrown track. “It’s a shortcut.”

Grateful for any shorter route, she headed down the narrow path, pushing her way through a profusion of leafy bushes.

Halfway, the skin on her arms started to burn so painfully that she cried out, thinking she'd been stung by a swarm of wasps. Looking down, she saw a swollen rash had broken out all over her skin, wherever the leaves had brushed her. And then Ella screamed.

"My knee is stinging!"

Her skin was swelling into hives, the welts deep red against her soft, pale flesh.

Cassie ducked too late, and a leafy branch lashed across her face. Immediately the stinging spread and she yelled in alarm.

From beyond, she heard Antoinette's shrill, excited laughter.

"Bury your head in my shoulder," Cassie commanded, wrapping her arms tightly around the young girl. Taking a deep breath, she barged along the path, shoving blindly through the stinging leaves until she burst out into a clearing.

Antoinette was screaming in glee, doubled over a fallen tree trunk, and Marc was following suit, infected by her mirth. Neither of them seemed to care about Ella's outraged tears.

"You knew there was poison ivy there!" Cassie accused as she lowered Ella to the ground.

"Stinging nettles," Antoinette corrected her, before bursting into renewed peals of mirth. There was no kindness in the sound—the laughter was utterly cruel. This child was showing her true colors and she was without mercy.

Cassie's surge of rage surprised her. For a moment her only desire was to slap Antoinette's smug, giggling face as hard as she could. The force of her anger was frightening. She actually stepped forward, raising her hand, before sanity prevailed and she lowered it quickly, appalled by what she had nearly done.

She turned away, opened her backpack, and rummaged for the only bottle of water. She rubbed some over Ella's knee and the rest over her own skin, hoping it would soothe the burning, but every time she touched the swelling, it seemed to make it worse. She looked around to see if there was a tap nearby, or a water fountain, where she could run cold water over the painful rash.

But there was nothing. These woods were not the family-friendly destination she'd expected. There were no benches, no notice boards. No garbage cans, no taps or fountains, no well-maintained paths. There was only ancient, dark forest, with massive beech, fir, and spruce trees looming out of tangled undergrowth.

"We need to go home now," she said.

"No," Marc argued. "I want to explore."

"This is not a safe place for exploring. There's not even a proper path. And it's too dark. You should put your jacket on now or you'll catch a cold."

"Catch a cold, catch me!" With a mischievous expression, the boy darted away, weaving swiftly through the trees.

"Damn it!" Cassie plunged after him, gritting her teeth as sharp twigs tore at her inflamed skin. He was smaller and faster than her, and his laughter taunted her as he dove through the undergrowth.

"Marc, come back!" she called.

But her words only seemed to spur him on. She followed doggedly, hoping he would either get tired or decide to abandon the game.

She finally caught up when he stopped to catch his breath, kicking at pine cones. She grasped his arm firmly before he could run again.

"This is not a game. See, there's a ravine ahead." The ground sloped steeply down and she could hear flowing water.

"Let's go back now. It's time to go home."

"I don't want to go home," Marc grumbled, dragging his feet as he followed her.

Nor do I, Cassie thought, feeling sudden sympathy for him.

But when they arrived back in the clearing, Antoinette was the only one there. She was sitting on a folded jacket, braiding her hair over her shoulder.

“Where’s your sister?” Cassie asked.

Antoinette glanced up, seemingly unconcerned.

“She saw a bird just after you left, and wanted to have a closer look. I don’t know where she went after that.”

Cassie stared at Antoinette in horror.

“Why didn’t you go with her?”

“You didn’t tell me to,” Antoinette said, with a cool smile.

Cassie breathed deeply, controlling another surge of rage. Antoinette was right. She should not have abandoned the children without warning them to stay where they were.

“Where did she go? Show me where exactly you last saw her.”

Antoinette pointed. “She went that way.”

“I’m going to look for her.” Cassie kept her voice deliberately calm. “Stay here with Marc. Do not—*do not*—step out of this clearing or let your brother out of your sight. Understand?”

Antoinette nodded absently, combing her fingers through her hair. Cassie could only hope that she would do as she was told. She walked over to where Antoinette had indicated, and cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Ella?” she shouted as loud as she could. “Ella?”

She waited, hoping to hear an answer or approaching footsteps, but there was no response. All she could hear was the faint rustle of leaves in the strengthening wind.

Could Ella really have gone out of earshot in the time she’d been away? Or had something happened to her?

Panic surged inside her as she headed into the woods at a run.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Cassie ran deeper into the forest, weaving through the trees. She yelled Ella's name, praying that she would hear an answer. Ella could be anywhere; there was no clear path for her to have followed. The woods were dark and creepy, the wind was gusting harder, and the trees seemed to muffle her cries. Ella might have fallen into a ravine, or tripped and knocked her head. She could have been snatched by a vagrant. Anything could have happened to her.

Cassie skidded down mossy tracks and stumbled over roots. Her face was scratched in a hundred places and her throat was raw from shouting.

Eventually, she stopped, gasping for breath. Her sweat felt cold and clammy in the breeze. What should she do now? It was starting to get dark. She couldn't spend any more time searching or she'd put them all in danger. The nursery was her closest port of call, if it was still open. She could stop there, tell the shopkeeper what had happened, and ask him to phone the police.

It took her ages, and a few wrong turns, to retrace her steps. She prayed that the others would be waiting safe and sound. And she hoped beyond hope that Ella might have found her way back.

But when she reached the clearing, Antoinette was stringing leaves together in a chain, and Marc was curled up on the jackets, fast asleep.

No Ella.

She imagined the storm of anger on their return. Pierre would be justifiably furious. Margot might simply be vicious. Flashlights would shine into the night as the community hunted for a girl who was lost, injured, or worse, as a result of her own negligence. It was her fault and her failure.

The horror of the situation overwhelmed her. She collapsed against a tree and buried her face in her hands, trying desperately to control her sobs.

And then Antoinette said, in a silvery voice, "Ella? You can come out now!"

Cassie looked up, staring in disbelief as Ella clambered from behind a fallen log, brushing leaves from her skirt.

"What..." Her voice was hoarse and shaky. "Where were you?"

Ella smiled happily.

"Antoinette said we were playing hide and seek, and I mustn't come out when you called, or I would lose. I'm cold now—can I have my jacket?"

Cassie felt bludgeoned by shock. She hadn't believed anyone could dream up such a scenario out of pure malice.

It wasn't just the cruelty, but the calculation in her actions that chilled Cassie. What was driving Antoinette to torment her, and how could she stop it from happening in the future? She could expect no support from the parents. Being nice hadn't worked, and anger would only play right into Antoinette's hands. Antoinette held all the cards and she knew it.

Now they were heading home unforgivably late after telling nobody where they had gone. The children were muddled, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. She feared that Antoinette had done more than enough for her to be instantly fired.

It was a long, cold, and uncomfortable walk back to the chateau. Ella insisted on being carried the entire way, and Cassie's arms had just about given out by the time they reached home. Marc trailed behind, grumbling, too tired to do more than throw an occasional stone at the birds in the hedgerows. Even Antoinette seemed to be taking no pleasure in her victory and trudged along sullenly.

When Cassie knocked on the imposing front door, it was snatched open immediately. Margot faced her, flushed with rage.

"Pierre!" she shouted. "Finally they are home."

Cassie started to tremble as she heard the angry stomping of feet.

“Where in the name of the devil have you been?” Pierre bellowed. “What irresponsibility is this?”

Cassie swallowed hard.

“Antoinette wanted to go to the woods. So we went for a walk.”

“Antoinette—what? For the whole day? Why the hell did you let her do that, and why did you not obey your instructions?”

“What instructions?” Cowering from his wrath, Cassie longed to run and hide, just as she had done when she was ten years old and her father had gotten into one of his rages. Glancing behind her, she saw the children felt exactly the same. Their stricken, terrified faces gave her the courage she needed to keep facing Pierre, even though her legs were shaking.

“I left a note on your bedroom door.” With an effort, he spoke in a more normal voice. Perhaps he’d noticed the children’s reactions too.

“I didn’t find any note.” Cassie glanced at Antoinette but her eyes were downcast and her shoulders hunched.

“Antoinette was supposed to perform at a piano recital in Paris. A bus arrived to collect her at eight-thirty but she was nowhere to be found. And Marc had soccer practice in town at twelve.”

A cold knot tightened in Cassie’s stomach as she realized how serious the consequences of her actions had been. She’d let Pierre, and others, down in the worst possible way. This day should have been a test of her capabilities in organizing the children’s schedules. Instead, they’d headed off on an unplanned jaunt into the middle of nowhere and missed important activities. If she had been Pierre, she’d have been livid, too.

“I’m so sorry,” she muttered.

She didn’t dare tell Pierre outright how the children had tricked her, even though she was sure he suspected it. If she did, they might end up suffering the brunt of his anger.

A gong sounded from the dining room and Pierre glanced at his watch.

“We will talk about this later. Get them ready for supper now. Quickly, or the food will get cold.”

Quickly was easier said than done. It took over half an hour, and more tears, before Marc and Ella were bathed and in their pajamas. Thankfully, Antoinette was on her best behavior, and Cassie wondered if she was feeling overwhelmed by the consequences of her actions. As for herself, she was numbed after the catastrophe the day had become. Half drenched from bathing the children, she had no time for a shower. She pulled on a dry top and the welts on her arms flared up again.

They trooped disconsolately downstairs.

Pierre and Margot were waiting in the small lounge next door to the dining room. Margot was sipping a glass of wine while Pierre refilled a brandy and soda.

“Finally we are ready to eat,” Margot observed tersely.

Supper was a fish casserole, and Pierre insisted the two older children serve themselves, although he allowed Cassie to help Ella.

“They must learn etiquette at an early age,” he said, and proceeded to instruct them on the correct protocol the whole way through dinner.

“Put your serviette in your lap, Marc. Not crumpled on the floor. And your elbows must stay in; Ella does not want to be poked in the side while you are eating.”

The stew was rich and delicious and Cassie was starving, but Pierre’s haranguing was enough to put anyone off their food. She restricted herself to small, delicate mouthfuls, glancing at Margot to check she was doing things in the correct French way. The children were exhausted, unable to comprehend what their father was saying, and Cassie found herself wishing that Margot would tell Pierre that now was not a good time for nitpicking.

She wondered if dinners had been any different when Diane was alive, and how much the dynamic had changed after Margot’s arrival. Her own mother had kept a firm lid on the conflict in

her quiet way, but it had erupted uncontrollably when she had gone. Perhaps Diane had played a similar role.

“Some wine?” To her surprise, Pierre filled her glass with white wine before she could refuse. Perhaps this was protocol, too.

The wine was fragrant and fruity, and after just a few sips she felt the alcohol suffuse her bloodstream, filling her with a sense of well-being and a dangerous relaxation. She put her glass down hurriedly, knowing she couldn’t afford any slip-ups.

“Ella, what are you doing?” Pierre asked, exasperated.

“I’m scratching my knee,” Ella explained.

“Why are you using a spoon?”

“My nails are too short to reach the itch. We walked through nettles,” Ella said proudly. “Antoinette showed Cassie a shortcut. I got stung on my knee. Cassie got stung all over her face and arms. She was crying.”

Margot banged her wineglass down.

“Antoinette! You did that again?”

Cassie blinked, surprised to learn that she’d done it before.

“I…” Antoinette began defiantly, but Margot was unstoppable.

“You are a vicious little beast. All you want to do is cause trouble. You think you are being clever, but you are just a stupid, mean, childish girl.”

Antoinette bit her lip. Margot’s words had cracked her cool shell of composure.

“It’s not her fault,” Cassie found herself saying loudly, wondering too late if the wine had been a bad idea.

“It must be really difficult for her dealing with—” She stopped herself hurriedly, because she’d been about to mention their mother’s death, but Ella believed a different version and she had no idea what the true story was. Now was not the time to ask.

“Dealing with so much change,” she said. “In any case, Antoinette didn’t tell me to take that path. I chose it myself. Ella and I were tired and it looked like a good shortcut.”

She didn’t dare look at Antoinette while she spoke, in case Margot suspected collusion, but she managed to catch Ella’s eye. She gave her a conspiratorial glance, hoping she would understand why Cassie was siding with her sister, and was rewarded with a tiny nod.

Cassie feared that her defense would leave her on even shakier ground, but she had to say something. After all, she knew what it was like growing up in a fractured family where war could erupt at any moment. She understood the importance of an older role model who could offer shelter from the storms. How would she have coped without Jacqui’s strength during the bad times? Antoinette had nobody to stand with her.

“So you are choosing to take her side?” Margot hissed. “Trust me, you will regret doing that, just as I have done. You do not know her like I do.” She pointed a crimson-manicured finger at Antoinette, who started sobbing. “She is just the same as her—”

“Stop it!” Pierre roared. “I will not have arguments at the dinner table—Margot, shut up now, you have said enough.”

Margot leaped to her feet so suddenly her chair overturned with a crash.

“You are telling me to shut up? Then I will go. But don’t think I have not tried to warn you. You will get what you deserve, Pierre.” She marched to the door but then turned back, staring at Cassie with undisguised hatred.

“You will all get what you deserve.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Cassie held her breath as Margot's angry footsteps retreated down the passage. Glancing around the table, she saw she wasn't the only one shocked into silence by the blonde woman's vicious outburst. Marc's eyes were saucer-wide and his mouth was tightly closed. Ella was sucking her thumb. Antoinette was scowling in wordless fury.

With a muttered oath, Pierre pushed back his chair.

"I'll deal with it," he said, striding to the door. "Put the children to bed."

Relieved to have a job to do, Cassie stood up, glancing at the plates and dishes littering the table. Should she clear the table, or ask the children to help? Tension hung in the air as thick as smoke. She wished for a normal, everyday family activity like washing up to help dissolve it.

Antoinette saw the direction of her gaze.

"Leave everything," she snapped. "Someone clears up later."

Forcing cheerfulness into her tone, Cassie said, "Well, then, it's bedtime."

"I don't want to go to bed," Marc protested, swinging his chair back. As the chair overbalanced he screamed in mock fright, grabbing at the tablecloth. Cassie leaped to his rescue. She was fast enough to stop the chair from falling over, but too late to prevent Marc upsetting two of the glasses and sending a plate crashing to the floor.

"Upstairs," she ordered, trying to sound stern, but her voice was high and unsteady with exhaustion.

"I want to go outside," Marc announced, sprinting toward the French doors. Remembering how he'd outrun her in the forest, Cassie dove after him. He'd already unlocked the door by the time she caught up, but she was able to grab him and stop him from opening it. She saw their reflections in the dark glass. The young boy with his rebellious hair and unrepentant expression—and herself. Her fingers clutching his shoulders, eyes wide and anxious, face sheet-white.

Seeing herself in that unexpected moment made her realize how badly she'd failed in her duties so far. It had been a full day since she'd arrived, and not for one minute had she been in charge. She was fooling herself if she thought otherwise. Her expectations of fitting in with the family and being loved, or at least liked, by the children could not have been more unrealistic. They didn't have a shred of respect for her, and she had no idea how she could change things.

"Bedtime," she repeated wearily. Keeping her left hand firmly on Marc's shoulder, she removed the key from the lock. Noticing a hook high on the wall, she reached up and hung it there. She marched Marc upstairs without letting go. Ella trotted alongside and Antoinette trailed despondently behind, slamming her bedroom door without so much as a good night.

"Do you want me to read you a story?" she asked Marc, but he shook his head.

"All right. Into bed, then. You can get up early tomorrow and play with your soldiers if you go to sleep now."

It was the only incentive she could think of but it seemed to work; or maybe tiredness had finally caught up with the young boy. At any rate, to her relief, he did as she asked. She pulled the duvet up, noticing her hands were trembling from sheer exhaustion. If he made another break for freedom she knew she would burst into tears. She wasn't convinced that he would stay in bed, but for now, at least, her job was done.

"I want a story." Ella tugged her arm. "Will you read me one?"

"Of course." Cassie walked to her bedroom and chose a book from the small selection on the shelf. Ella jumped into bed, bouncing on the mattress with excitement, and Cassie wondered how often she'd been read to in the past, because it didn't seem to be a customary part of her routine. Although, she supposed, there wasn't much about Ella's childhood that had been normal so far.

She read the shortest story she could find, only to have Ella insist on a second one. The words were swimming in front of her eyes by the time she reached the end and closed the book. Looking up, Cassie saw to her relief that the reading had soothed Ella, and she was finally asleep.

She turned off the lamp and closed the door. Walking back down the corridor, she checked on Marc, keeping as quiet as she could. Thankfully, the room was still dark and she could hear soft breathing.

When she opened Antoinette's door, the light was on. Antoinette was sitting up in bed scribbling notes in a pink-covered book.

"You knock before coming in," she chastised Cassie. "It is a rule."

"I'm sorry. I promise I'll do that from now on," Cassie apologized. She dreaded that Antoinette would escalate the broken rule into an argument, but instead she turned back to her notebook, writing a few more words before closing it.

"Are you finishing off homework?" Cassie asked, surprised because Antoinette didn't seem like a person who'd put things off till the last minute. Her room was immaculate. The clothes she'd taken off earlier were folded in the laundry basket, and her school bag, neatly packed, was set under a perfectly tidy white desk.

She wondered whether Antoinette felt as if her life was lacking control, and was trying to exert it in her immediate environment. Or maybe, since the dark-haired girl had made it clear she resented the presence of an au pair, she was trying to prove she didn't need anyone to take care of her.

"My homework is done. I was writing in my personal diary," Antoinette told her.

"Do you do that every night?"

"I do it when I am angry." She placed the lid back on her pen.

"I'm sorry about what happened tonight," Cassie sympathized, feeling as if she were treading on ice that might shatter at any moment.

"Margot hates me and I hate her," Antoinette said, her voice trembling slightly.

"No, I don't think that's true," Cassie protested, but Antoinette shook her head.

"It is true. I hate her. I wish she was dead. She's said things like that before. It makes me so angry I could kill her."

Cassie stared at her in shock.

It wasn't only Antoinette's words, but the calm way she spoke them, that chilled her. She had no idea how she should respond. Was it even normal for a twelve-year-old to have these murderous thoughts? Antoinette should surely be helped to manage this anger by somebody better qualified. A counselor, a psychologist, even a parish priest.

Well, in the absence of anyone competent, she guessed she was the only one available.

Cassie sifted through her own memories, trying to remember what she'd said and done at that age. How she'd reacted and what she'd felt when her own situation had spiraled out of control. Had she ever wanted to kill anybody?

She suddenly remembered one of her dad's girlfriends, Elaine, a blonde with long red fingernails and a high, shrieking laugh. They'd hated each other on sight. During the six months that Elaine had been on the scene, Cassie had loathed her with a vengeance. She couldn't remember wishing her dead, but she'd definitely wished her gone.

Probably this was the same thing. Antoinette was being more outspoken, that was all.

"What Margot said wasn't fair in the least," Cassie agreed, because it hadn't been. "But people say things in anger they don't mean."

Of course, they also came out with the truth when they were angry but she wasn't going to go down that road.

"Oh, she meant it," Antoinette assured her. She was fidgeting with the pen, twisting its lid violently from side to side.

“And Papa always takes her side now. He thinks only of her and never of us. It was different when my mother was alive.”

Cassie nodded sympathetically. This, too, was her experience.

“I know,” she said.

“How do you know?” Antoinette looked up at her curiously.

“My mother died when I was young. My father also brought new girlfriends—er, I mean a new fiancée—into the house. It caused a lot of clashes and hostilities. They disliked me, I disliked them. Luckily I had an older sister.”

Hastily Cassie corrected herself again.

“I have an older sister, Jacqui. She stood up to my dad and helped protect me when there were fights.”

Antoinette nodded in agreement.

“You took my side tonight. Nobody has done that before. Thank you for doing that.”

She stared at Cassie, her eyes wide and blue, and Cassie felt a lump in her throat at the unexpected gratitude.

“That’s what I’m here for,” she said.

“I’m sorry I told you to walk through the nettles.” She glanced at the welts on Cassie’s hands, still swollen and inflamed.

“That’s really no problem. I understand it was just a joke.” Tears were flooding her eyes now as sympathy welled inside her. She hadn’t expected Antoinette to let down her guard. She understood exactly how lonely she must feel, and how vulnerable. It was terrible to think Antoinette had suffered previous verbal abuse from Margot, with nobody there to protect her and her father deliberately siding against her.

Well, she had somebody now—Cassie was in her corner and would support her no matter what it took. The day hadn’t been a complete disaster if it meant she’d managed to get closer to this complex and troubled child.

“Try to sleep now. I am sure things will be better in the morning.”

“I hope so. Good night, Cassie.”

Cassie closed the door, sniffed violently, and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Exhaustion and emotion were getting the better of her. She hurried down the corridor, grabbed her pajamas, and headed for the shower.

When she was standing under the steaming jet of water, she finally allowed her tears to flow.

\*

Although the hot water had soothed her emotions, Cassie soon realized it had caused her skin to flare up again. The nettle stings started itching unbearably. She scrubbed herself hard with her towel in an effort to scratch the itch, but only succeeded in spreading it.

After climbing into bed, she found she was so uncomfortable she couldn’t sleep. Her face and arms were throbbing and burning. Scratching offered only temporary relief and actually worsened the pain.

After what seemed like hours of unsuccessfully trying to will herself to sleep, Cassie admitted defeat. She needed something to soothe her skin. The cupboard in the shower room had housed only basic essentials, but she’d seen a large cabinet in the bathroom beyond Ella’s bedroom. Perhaps there would be something there that could help.

She walked quietly to the bathroom and opened the wooden cabinet, relieved to see that it was filled with tubes and bottles. There was bound to be something for allergies. She read the labels, struggling with the complicated French, nervous that applying the wrong remedy might make things even worse.

Calamine lotion. She recognized the color and smell even though the label was unfamiliar. This would soothe her skin.

Pouring some into her cupped hand, Cassie slathered it onto the burns. Immediately she felt cool relief. She replaced the bottle and closed the cabinet.

As she turned to leave, she heard a sound and froze.

It was a rough shout, a muffled scream.

It must be Marc. He'd gotten out of bed and was causing trouble with Ella.

She hurried down the corridor but realized after just a few steps that this side of the house was quiet and the children were asleep.

There it was again—a crash and a thud and another scream.

Cassie froze. Was somebody breaking into the house? Her mind raced as she thought of all the treasures it contained. In the States, she would have locked herself in her room and called the police. But there was no cell signal here, so the best she could do would be to alert Pierre. It sounded as if it was coming from that direction anyway.

She would feel braver if she had a weapon. She glanced into her bedroom. Perhaps she should take the steel poker by the fireplace. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Grasping the poker firmly, Cassie tiptoed down the corridor. She rounded the corner and found herself facing a closed wooden door.

This must be the master suite, and the noise was coming from inside.

Cassie leaned the poker against the wall, so she could grab it quickly if she needed to. Then she bent down and peeked through the keyhole.

The lights were on in the bedroom. Her view was limited, but she could see one person—no, two. There was Pierre, his dark hair gleaming in the light. But what was he doing with his hands? They were wrapped round something—he was gripping and shaking it violently. Another plaintive, choking scream reached her, and she drew in her breath sharply as she realized he was grasping a woman's neck.

Cassie's heart pounded as she translated the scene playing out through the tiny hole in the door, where Pierre was murdering Margot.

## CHAPTER NINE

Cassie recoiled from the heavy wooden door, adrenaline flooding through her as she replayed the deadly scene in her mind. Heavy hands clamped around a pale neck, those panicked, choking screams. There had been something else as well; a splash of vivid color she couldn't make sense of.

She needed to call for help, and fast.

Who could she call, though? The housekeeper was the only person she knew, and she had no idea where to find her. In any case, if she wasted time looking for her, Margot would die. It was as simple as that.

Instead, Cassie herself would have to intervene.

If she burst into the bedroom, shouting at the top of her voice, it would cause a distraction that would hopefully allow the blonde woman to break free.

Terror overpowered her at the thought, but she told herself it had to be done. Even if her legs turned to water and her voice was no more than a pathetic squeak, she had to try and be brave.

As she reached for the door handle, she heard another sound that stopped her in her tracks.

It was a deep-voiced groan of pleasure.

Hesitantly, Cassie bent and peered through the keyhole once again.

Moving her head from side to side to make the most of her narrow view, Cassie realized the object she'd seen was a brightly colored scarf. Margot's wrists were tightly bound, and the scarf was knotted to a brass rail that must be the headboard.

Cassie gasped as she realized what was happening.

This wasn't murder, but a sexual act—dark, violent, and prolonged. She could see Margot struggling to free herself. This wasn't just kinky experimentation; it looked downright dangerous. And she wasn't at all sure that it was consensual. Margot didn't seem to be a willing partner. Perhaps Pierre was punishing her for her earlier outburst, or using it as an excuse to do what he was doing now.

Cassie told herself firmly that however horrifying the act, it was taking place in private and certainly not her business. If Pierre or Margot found out she'd been watching, she'd be in serious trouble. And if one of the children were to see her peeking through the keyhole, she didn't want to imagine what the consequences would be.

Cassie stepped back, but in the shock of what she'd seen, she forgot all about the poker she'd placed against the wall. She knocked it with her foot and it clattered loudly down onto the marble tiles.

The groans stopped suddenly. After a heartbeat of silence, Pierre called out, his voice sharp.

“What's that? Who's there?”

He'd heard. And the sudden creak of bedsprings and the thud of feet on floorboards told her that he was on his way to see.

Cassie picked up the poker and fled down the corridor, running as fast and silently as she could. She prayed that Pierre might stop to put on a gown or slippers, and that she'd be out of sight by the time he opened the door. Because if he saw her, if he even guessed she'd been there, she had a world of trouble coming her way.

She rounded the corner and skidded on the marble tiles, grabbing desperately at the wall to stop herself from falling. Her finger bent back painfully and she swallowed a cry. From behind her she heard the latch click as the bedroom door swung open. And then she heard the pounding of feet down the corridor. Pierre was pursuing her at speed.

Nightmare scenarios raced through Cassie's mind as she headed for her bedroom. She closed the door as quietly as she could and placed the poker back in the fireplace, trying to stop her hands from shaking so it wouldn't rattle against the grate. A moment later she leaped into bed and yanked the covers up to her chin. With her heart banging in her throat, she waited for Pierre to pass by.

Because of course he would pass by, wouldn't he? There would be no reason for him to knock if he saw her door was closed.

The footsteps stopped outside her door, but Pierre did not knock. Instead, to Cassie's disbelief, he simply opened it. He snapped on the light and stood in the doorway. His face was flushed, he was barefoot, and he was wearing a burgundy dressing gown.

Cassie's first immediate and overriding thought was that this was a complete invasion of privacy. No way was it appropriate for an employer to enter an employee's bedroom alone and after hours without knocking. His presence in her private space was making her feel defensive and vulnerable, triggering old memories that had morphed into nightmares. People in her room. Hiding under the bed. *"Hey, little girlie..."*

Pierre stared at her and then took a look around the room, his gaze resting on her bath towel hung on the hook near the door, and the pile of clothes she'd left folded on the armchair near the fireplace.

Cassie sat up, straightening her pajama top and instinctively crossing her arms over her chest. She wanted to shout at him to get out, to scream that he had no right to enter her room without permission.

But this was not a good time to discuss boundaries—not when she'd been peeking through his bedroom door at his private activities.

"Did you hear anything, Cassie? There was a noise just now."

The loud clattering he'd heard was undeniable evidence that someone had been up and about. It was her job to respond to noises and disturbances at night, so there was no way she could claim she hadn't heard it. She had to offer Pierre a coherent explanation for what had happened.

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