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*For Jess*



## PART ONE

'The hope I dreamed of was a dream,  
Was but a dream; and now I wake,  
Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,  
For a dream's sake.'

*Christina Rossetti*





*It does not take much to remain unseen in a house like this. A soft tread, a downcast eye, knowledge of the creaking stairs and loose floorboards that betray my presence. And the inhabitants, of course, so busy with their own lives – their troubles – their desires – so busy with themselves they do not notice the ones like me bearing witness from the shadows.*

*But I see them. I see it all. The things I am supposed to see – and the things that I am not. I see the flare of a cigarette lighter in a dark room, and the lipstick marks on a glass. I see the indentations on a pillow, the bloodstains on the sheets. I see furtive looks – trembling hands – clenched fists – tear-stained handkerchiefs.*

*It's all there – the secrets of their lives – if you will only look. Because a house like this has eyes.*

*I am the eyes of the house . . . and I am always watching.*



## CHAPTER I



She wakes a little after midnight, too hot and with the sheets tangled round her legs. Something insistent has pulled her from her dreams, tugged her from a fitful sleep. Lying in bed, the house stretching vast and silent around her, she tries to think what it could be. Rustlings. Whisperings.

She waits for it to come to her: the room. It is the room of trees. The sound of the wind moving through their branches, the trembling of the leaves. The trees are calling to her, singing their night song.

Ignoring the protestations of her old joints, she slides out of bed and retrieves the ornate brass key from its secret place, heading barefoot into the dark corridor, following the curved staircase down into the entrance hall, her feet feeling carefully for each step, her fingers trailing the dusty banisters.

A draught blows under the front door, its cool breath moving over her too-hot skin, sending a stray brown leaf scuttling across the tiles. She drags the heavy tapestry to one side and unlocks the door behind, following the winding corridor until she stands outside the room that has called her. She steadies herself against the doorframe, before stepping over the threshold.

She isn't entirely sure if she is awake or asleep as she walks ghost-like in her white nightdress among the trees, the musky scent of the place wrapping itself around her,

her hands running over smooth, grey bark, her fingers tracing knots and whorls as familiar to her now as old friends. Overhead, the canopy hangs dense and rich. In the darkness she imagines she can see its opulent flashes of blue and green and gold. And the eyes – those ever-present eyes – watching her as she goes.

Tiredness comes, as it does so frequently these days. She sits, allowing it to claim her. It is so easy to drift away. It is so tempting to leave the present and wander through chambers of the past – to return to familiar faces, cherished moments and memories. She meanders the corridors of her mind, only jerking awake at a piercing scream – high-pitched, like the shriek of a peacock, or a woman in pain.

Real or remembered she isn't sure, but the darkness looms all around her, thick and cloying. An acrid scent hangs heavy in the air. Her nightdress clings to her sweat-soaked body. She does not feel like herself. She does not feel well. It's not real, she thinks. None of it is real. But gone are the trees, the shimmering leaves, the watchful eyes. All lost in a thick cloud of soot and smoke. She presses a hand to her forehead. She is so hot – burning up – and the smoke – the black, smothering smoke – rolls ever closer.

She drops to the floor, afraid and disorientated, crawling on her hands and knees. Is it real or imagined, the voice she can hear calling to her through darkness? 'Lillian. Lillian, can you hear me?'

Her mouth opens to answer but no sound comes. Instead, smoke rushes in, filling her lungs, stealing her voice and her breath. The trees crackle and hiss. Orange embers rain down. 'I'm here,' she says. 'I can hear you.' But the words are lost and so is she, cast into suffocating darkness.