

First Night in the Ruins

The house was already bleeding when I arrived.

Red seeped through the cracks in its stone walls, dark and slow, like the building itself had a pulse. The villagers called it rot. I knew better. Rot did not watch you approach.

The carriage had stopped at the base of the hill, the driver refusing to go farther. "Gate's as far as I take passengers, miss," he'd said, not meeting my eyes.

I'd offered him triple. He'd only shaken his head.

"New beginning for you, then," he'd said. "The house has been waiting a long time."

Now I stood before the iron gate, my fingers wrapped around bars gone green with age. Beyond it, the path wound upward through dead gardens where statues stood half-buried in brambles. At the top of the hill, Greymoor Hall rose against the gray sky—three stories of crumbling stone and broken windows, its eastern wing collapsed entirely, its western tower leaning like a drunk.

It wept from the mortar, pooled in the foundation cracks, stained the ivy in bloody fingers.

I pushed open the gate.

It screamed as it swung inward, and somewhere in the house above, I heard bells answer. Small bells, wind-chimes perhaps, though there was no wind.

The walk up felt longer than it should have. The brambles pulled at my skirts with deliberate fingers. By the time I reached the front steps, the sun had nearly set.

The door stood ajar.

I thought of the driver's words. The house has been waiting. For what?

For you, Lilla, whispered something that might have been wind.

I had not told the driver my name.

I pushed the door open. The entrance hall stretched before me—black and white marble dulled by dust, a grand staircase curving into shadow. Portraits lined the walls, their subjects' faces obscured by grime.

All except one.

She hung at the top of the stairs, illuminated by the last light through a broken window. A woman in a black dress, her hair the color of coal, her eyes the color of the bleeding walls. Beautiful in the way winter is beautiful—cold and sharp and unforgiving.

A small plaque beneath read: Lady Meredith Greymoor, 1847-1869.

Twenty-two years old when she died.

I crossed the threshold.

The door swung shut, and every bell in the house began to ring.

I woke to the sound of breathing.

Not my own—this was slower, deeper, the inhale and exhale of something massive. The walls themselves seemed to expand and contract, the red stains pulsing faintly in darkness.

I sat up. I had collapsed onto a dusty chaise in what had once been the library, too exhausted to unpack.

Except now I was in a bed. A proper bed, with sheets that smelled of lavender and rot.

The breathing grew louder.

I rose and followed the sound through doorways I did not remember opening, down hallways that should not have connected this way. The house rearranged itself around me, showing me stairs that led both up and down at once.

And everywhere, portraits. More of them now, but they all showed the same woman. Lady Meredith in her wedding dress. At a piano. Standing in this very hallway, her hand extended as if reaching for someone just outside the frame.

Reaching for me.

I stopped before the largest portrait—Meredith seated in a chair from the entrance hall. As I watched, her eyes moved. Just slightly. Just enough to meet mine.

“You came,” she said, though her lips did not move. “I knew you would. We always do.”

“We?” My voice cracked. “Who are you?”

“The first mistress of Greymoor. The last, until now.” Her smile was almost pitying. “Did you think you chose to come here, Lilla? That your husband’s gambling debts were called in by creditors who just happened to hold the deed to this estate? That his death freed you to inherit it?”

My blood turned to ice. “How do you know—”

“The house knows everything. It has been calling you through dreams you thought were nightmares, through the restlessness that drove you from city to city.”

She stepped out of the portrait.

Not emerged—stepped, as if the frame were merely a doorway. She was translucent in the moonlight, but solid enough that when she reached for my face, I felt the cold press of her fingers against my cheek.

“You are the new beginning,” she whispered. “Not for yourself. For Greymoor.”

"I don't understand."

"The house dies without a mistress. It has been dying since I left it, crumbling stone by stone, bleeding its life into the earth. But it cannot truly die—it is too old, too hungry. So it waits. It calls. And when the right woman comes, when she crosses the threshold of her own free will, it binds her."

I stepped back. "I can leave. I can walk out right now."

"Can you?" Meredith tilted her head. "Try."

I ran.

Through shifting hallways, down stairs, past rooms that appeared and disappeared. The front door should have been close, but every corridor led deeper into the house's heart.

Finally, gasping, I stumbled into a round tower room I had never seen. Its walls lined with windows overlooking the dead gardens. In the center stood a mirror, tall as the ceiling, its surface dark and rippling.

Meredith stood beside it, waiting.

"The house chose you because you are like me," she said softly. "Alone. Unwanted. Running from a life that tried to break you. Your husband's creditors did not hold the deed by chance—I arranged it. I have been arranging it for years, waiting for the right soul to call home."

"I am not you," I whispered.

"No. You are stronger. You will not make the mistakes I made." She gestured to the mirror. "Look."

I looked.

The reflection showed Greymoor Hall as it must have been in Meredith's time—whole and beautiful, its gardens lush, its stones white and clean. And in every window, I saw myself. Not as I was, but as I could be. Dressed in fine gowns, my face no longer drawn with exhaustion but serene with purpose.

"The house will give you everything," Meredith said. "Safety. Belonging. Purpose. All it asks is that you stay. That you tend it. That you love it as I did."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you leave at dawn, and the house continues to die, and I continue to wait." Her smile was sad. "But you will not refuse. You have nowhere else to go. And the house has already begun to love you back."

The walls pulsed. The red stains brightened, spreading like veins filling with blood. The floor warmed. The air wrapped around me, a gentle pressure that felt almost like an embrace.

I thought of the village below, where I knew no one. Of the city I'd fled, where my husband's name was poison. Of the life I'd left behind—the creditors, the empty rooms that had never felt like home.

If I left Greymoor, where would I go?

"What happened to you?" I asked. "Why did you leave?"

Meredith's expression softened. "I did not leave. I became part of it. As you will, someday, when the house calls its next mistress home. But that is decades away. And you will not spend it alone."

She reached for my hand. Her fingers were cold but gentle, and when I took them, I felt the house sigh. The bleeding walls slowed. The breathing deepened, steadied.

"Welcome home," Meredith whispered.

And though I had not spoken the words aloud, I felt the binding settle into my bones. Felt the house recognize me, claim me, weave itself into my soul.

When I woke, dawn was breaking through the tower windows.

Meredith was gone. The mirror showed only my reflection—exhausted, disheveled, but somehow more solid than I had felt in months.

I descended the stairs, which no longer shifted, and found my way easily to the entrance hall.

The portraits were still there, but Meredith's expression had changed. She no longer looked out at the viewer but to the side, as if watching something beyond the frame's edge. As if she were no longer waiting.

I opened the front door and stepped outside.

The house still bled, still crumbled at its edges, still leaned against the sky. But the red stains had brightened to scarlet, almost beautiful in the morning light. The ivy had grown thicker overnight. The windows, though still shattered, seemed to catch the sun with deliberate grace.

In the dead gardens, I saw the first green shoots pushing through the soil.

Not a restoration. Not yet. But a beginning.

I looked back at the house, at the tower window where I'd stood hours before. For just a moment, I thought I saw her there—a figure in black, her hand raised in farewell or blessing.

Then she was gone, and there was only the house, breathing steadily, waiting for me to come back inside.

I closed the door behind me and did not lock it. There was no need. Nothing would take me from Greymoor.

The house had claimed its mistress.

And I had claimed it in return.