

THE COFFIN  
MAKER'S WIFE

Ariel Robyn

Oak Fern Publishing

Copyright © 2025 Ariel Robyn All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Previous versions of this story were serialized on several online platforms under the title "The Coffin Maker's Wife" with varying character names. It was first posted under the author's pseudonym FanficsR4Nerds in 2023 before being reposted under the name Ariel Robyn in 2025.

ISBN-13: 9798278952152

Cover design by: Ariel Robyn

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

*For anyone who has ever lost someone they would  
burn the world down to find again.*



THE COFFIN  
MAKER'S WIFE

Ariel Robyn



He smelled of pinewood and resin most days. The dusty scent of sawdust clung to his skin and permeated the air around him. It was a safe, warm aroma—the smell of a hard day's work, the indication of laboring with love. When he wasn't toiling in his workshop, he smelled of spiced apples and bright honey wine. The touch of sweetness was enough to warm the soul whenever anyone came near him.

She smelled of fresh-baked bread and herbs from her garden. She smelled of home and the comforts and security found in four walls. She smelled of peace and contentment, and all who came near her got the sense of the life she created in their cottage. Whenever they were needed at the church, she would gently apply lavender oil to the sensitive skin behind her ears and on her wrists. The oil distilling in her would calm the air around her, and all she brought into her embrace would sag in relief at her touch.

On rare days, when he was able to shirk his work, he would take her into their bed until the room smelled of nothing but *them*: dark and rich and bright and warm. This was what life in the coffin maker's cottage smelled like.

His name was Thomas, and he'd learned his trade from his father, who had learned it from his father before him.

*There will always be a need for a coffin maker, so long as the Good Lord keeps us from Eden.*

Thomas's coffins were beautiful, shaped and carved with precision and love. He devoted himself to his work, taking great care that each coffin was just so.

Because of his utter devotion, his coffins were known far and wide, and princes and paupers had all come to him, seeking his services.

He never turned anyone down.

*The Lord takes us all, in the end, and it is the right of every man, woman, and child to have a safe place for their eternal rest.*

Her name was Beatrice, and she had been married to the coffin maker for several years now, though to those who knew them, it seemed much longer. Bea and Thomas always *were*. Since the days of their childhood, they had grown around each other, like intertwining vines, creating a single, beautiful plant. No force on earth could part them; together they were a single *whole*.

She was a good wife, beautiful and knowledgeable. Her hands were calloused and strong, though her touch was often gentle. She had a way about her, a glint in her eyes that belied her true intelligence. She took to tending their home with great passion and commitment, but in his heart, the coffin maker knew she was meant for more.

In a fit of uncertainty and despair, he had once asked her why she had settled for this life with him when she could have been *so much more*.

She had wound him in her arms, held his tear-stained face to her chest, and brushed her fingers through his hair.

*Our love is more than I could ever become on my own, she had whispered. Any life without you is no life for me.*

She had a strong mind and a soft heart, and when she looked upon her husband, her infinite love was palpable.

They lived on the edge of the village, where they had space for a large garden which she tended with great devotion. He wanted to give her the world; she only wanted a garden.

His workshop was a small building set beside her garden, and from there, he'd watch the satisfaction on her face as she worked the earth.

They lived a simple life, but one that was wholly and completely their own, and in that, they were both content.

What more could they need than each other and a place to rest their heads at night, side by side?

Never had two souls been better suited than the coffin maker and his wife.

It was early autumn when the stranger arrived at the cottage. It wasn't unusual to get an unknown or unexpected guest at the home of the coffin maker; strangers often came and went from their small home.

The coffin maker was out, harvesting fresh lumber from the neighboring forests, and Bea stood in her garden, her back aching slightly from being curled over the soil all afternoon. At her feet, a harvest of sweet berries gleamed proudly.

"Good day!" the stranger called, sliding off his tall brown stallion.

Bea wiped her hands on her apron. Her fingertips were stained purple from the berries.

"Good day, sir." She watched as the unfamiliar man led his horse by the bridle toward her gate.

"My horse is in need of watering," he said, looking her over.

She nodded. "Certainly. There is a pasture just beyond the garden. Let me take you."

She wiped her hands once more on her apron and approached the stranger. He was a tall, thin man with dark hair and eyes that were difficult to read. She motioned for him to follow her as she led him toward the area where they kept water and fresh hay for their animals. "Your horse will be safe here."

The stranger nodded. The air around the meadow smelled of sweetgrass and honeysuckle that grew along one area of the fence.

"Thank you, madame." He released his horse to the pasture before turning to her.

"How can I help you today, sir?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, I am hoping to see the coffin maker."

Bea expected this. "He is gathering lumber this morning, but you are welcome to wait for him in our home." She motioned toward the cottage. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head. "Thank you, madame."

She guided him back to the garden, gathering her harvest of fresh berries before leading him into the cottage. She didn't fear a strange man in her home; she was a tough woman, and this was *her* home. Any attacks here would be at her adversary's disadvantage.

The scent of freshly baked bread still lingering in the air, and herbs drying from the ceiling in small bundles greeted them as she opened the door. Her home smelled of soft smoke and beeswax and the unmistakable combination of her and her husband: sweet, earthy, and warm. These were her favorite perfumes in all of the world.

She moved into the cottage, heading straight to the small stone fireplace in her kitchen. She crouched by the hearth, stoking the fire back to life as she set the kettle over the flame. "Have you come to seek my husband's services?" she asked, turning back to the stranger.

He nodded, looking grave, and she motioned for him to sit at the small table. He was too tall, and when he settled himself down, it reminded her of a frog, folding its long legs together to squat on a lily pad.

"I have indeed." He cleared his throat. "My mistress is ill."

Bea's brow dipped in sympathy. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

He cleared his throat once more. "I should take heart," he said after a moment. "She will be with the Lord soon." He paused, crossing himself, and Bea nodded, bowing her head in a small, silent prayer. The stranger was quiet for a moment, and Bea busied herself with unwrapping the thick loaf of bread she'd baked that morning. She cut a hearty slice, the heavy sawing of her bread knife matching the crackling of the fire.

"I'm sorry for my ill manners," the stranger said, and Bea looked back at him. "My name is Oliver Reynolds." He dipped his head in her direction, and she nodded.

"Bea."

She plated the thick bread, gathering a bowl of berries and cutting off a wedge of firm, salty cheese. She offered the food to

Mr. Reynolds, who took it appreciatively. "Thank you, madame."

She nodded, and when the kettle began to whistle, she poured him a cup of tea. When her guest was settled at the table, she sat across from him, a mug of mint tea in her palms.

"Tell me, madame," Mr. Reynolds said, his eyes flickering up at her. She nodded for him to continue. "I've heard your husband produces the finest coffins in the entire kingdom."

Bea smiled. "He does." She was boastful of her husband's work, but it was not without reason. Her husband was an artist at his craft.

Mr. Reynolds nodded, sliding a dark berry into his mouth. "I've heard he is so skilled a carpenter, he is able to even customize the coffins to hold precious items?"

At this, Bea froze, her dark eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "What is it you ask?"

He cleared his throat, caught off guard by her directness. He sipped his tea, his long fingers drumming on the table before him. "Perhaps this is a conversation best left for your husband," he said quickly.

Bea looked him over. In the greater kingdom, women didn't have much voice or way to be heard. She knew this, though it made her blood boil with the injustice of it. She had never once been treated so by her husband. They were in all things, partners.

She hated being dismissed in her own home, and her mouth began to open, ready to fight against his words, when she heard the unmistakable sounds of the lumber cart coming down the road outside. Bea stood from the table and opened the door, her heart lifting at the sight of her husband.

Now that she could see him again, all would be well.

The coffin maker was a strong man. He'd grown up hauling lumber, planing boards, and learning to work with nature to craft absolute beauty. He worked with his hands daily, and there had yet to be a single obstacle too big for him to take on.

When the door to his cottage opened, and his eyes landed on his beloved wife, the coffin maker felt invincible. She was beauty and grace personified, her dark hair tucked up neatly around the back of her head, her ever-present apron stained with rich berry juice and dirt. She had a smudge of something dark across her cheek, and he wished to kiss it from her creamy skin.

A shadow moved behind her in the cottage, and for a very fast, very terrible moment, the coffin maker's heart froze. He hated leaving her alone, though he knew no one—man or woman—was more capable of protecting themselves than his beloved and spirited wife. Still, they received visitors from all over the kingdom, and he knew better than to trust most men.

The smile gracing his wife's face eased his heart, and he stopped, tying the horse to the fence before he moved through the garden gate. She was in his arms before the gate had swung shut.

He breathed in the deep scent of fresh herbs and earth on her skin, and he treasured her with all that he was.

"How was your trip?" she asked, pulling back and glancing over his shoulder.

He nodded, his rough fingers coming up to tuck strands of hair behind her ear. "Fruitful," he told her.

Her eyes met his again, and she smiled. "You have a patron," she told him, tilting her head toward their cottage.

His eyes flickered up to the door, and he nodded. He pressed a kiss to her hair, a silent prayer giving thanks she was all right in his absence. She stepped aside, watching as he straightened his tired back, heading inside their home. She shouldn't go in and linger. It was clear that Mr. Reynolds wished for privacy when speaking to her husband. Only the knowledge that Thomas would tell her of Mr. Reynolds's requests immediately upon his departure kept her from barging inside.

She instead turned, moving to the fence where the horse was still tethered. She reached out to the soft nose, patting her gently. A deep bark greeted her, and she smiled as she caught sight of Bear, their large brown dog.

She bent at the waist to greet the mutt, and he barked in delight, licking the side of her face. She laughed. "Welcome home," she said, rubbing the dog behind his large ears. "Did you do as I asked and keep your master safe?"

The dog barked as if he understood her, and she grinned, rubbing the top of his head. "A treat tonight," she promised him. Bear shook out his shaggy brown fur and trotted into the garden. She turned to the mare pulling the cart. "Come along, my love," she whispered, rubbing the bridge of the mare's nose. She untethered the horse, leading her and the cart around the back of the cottage to her husband's workshop. She didn't unload the

cart, knowing he'd prefer to do it himself, but she did set the stand, gently unclipping the mare from her bridle and harness. She brought the mare to pasture, where the stranger's horse was still grazing. "There now," she murmured, rubbing the haunches of the mare. "Take your rest."

When their animals were cared for, she returned to her garden. Gathering together a basket of vegetables harvested in the early morning hours, she brought them down to the small creek that ran behind their home. Bear barked as he joined her, sniffing the water's edge as she settled in. She washed the vegetables, rubbing them tenderly to remove the clumps of earth that still clung to them.

Early autumn provided a bountiful harvest, and Bea had a massive task ahead of her to store as much food as she was able for the upcoming winter.

The stranger was exiting the cottage when Bea returned, her vegetables cleaned and ready for their supper. She met his dark, guarded eyes as he stepped out into the fading daylight. "Will you dine with us?" she asked, hoping that he wouldn't.

He offered her a tired smile. "A generous offer, madame, but no. I must head back to the village before night falls."

She nodded, and her eyes shifted to her husband as he stepped out of the cottage as well. As always when seeing him, her heart swelled with a love so deep and fierce it almost frightened her.

He pressed a kiss to her hair again as he passed, and she leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering shut.

He moved on, helping Mr. Reynolds retrieve his stallion. Bea entered the cottage, setting the vegetables on the table. She got to work, preparing supper, carefully cutting the vegetables into appropriate bites for a simple stew.

She was adding the last ingredient when the door of their cottage opened and her husband came back in, Bear right behind him, barking his greeting.

It was difficult for anyone observing the coffin maker and his wife to determine which of the two of them held more passion for the other. The coffin maker was fearsome in his love, and all sensible men of every village within a day's ride of their cottage knew better than to make any advance toward his wife.

Rarely was it ever a problem, though, because the coffin maker's wife was steadfast in her utter devotion, and her fiery tongue and quick mind had been unleashed on several men, sending them cowering before word had even made it back to her husband of their advances. Everyone knew that, despite the coffin maker's strength, it was his wife who was not to be crossed.

When the coffin maker entered their simple home and caught sight of his beloved, he felt his soul shift within him, settling and finding peace, like a wary animal, curling up by the hearth after a long day.

In two strides, he was across the cottage, and he brought his wife into his arms, her small body tucking in against his perfectly. They had been carved of the same soul tree: two halves of one perfect whole.

His lips met hers, and she tasted of sweet and tart berries. He groaned against her mouth, ravenous for more of the meal she provided.

She matched his hunger, sweeping clear the table and shifting her skirts as she perched on top of it. Her husband stepped between her legs, his tongue lapping at her mouth, sampling her day.

He tasted of the bread and salty cheese he'd eaten on his journey and apples, *Lord in heaven, how* he tasted of those delicious tart apples.

She didn't know if her love of apples predated him. There was no time before *them*; they had always *been*.

As it always was between them, words were not needed as their bodies sought each other. His rough hands grabbed her hips, holding her to him as she settled on the table. It was indecent to take her in this way, but for the life of him, he couldn't move them. She demanded from him with such urgency that he decided he *wanted* to be indecent.

His lips found her jaw, sucking and kissing her tender flesh, and her fingers tangled in his tunic, twisting the fabric to draw him closer to her. He felt her fingers start to sink lower and lower to the tie at his breeches, and he groaned as she ran her hands over him, his tongue flicking out to lick the dark berry juice from where it still sat against her cheek.

"You taste of summer." He moaned, his lips tickling against her skin, sampling the sweetness that reminded him of long summer days berry picking with Bea when they were children.

She turned her head, her fingers pausing as her lips caught his again. "You taste of apples." She grinned against his lips. She felt his smile. She'd been telling him this since they were children, stealing kisses behind their parents' backs. She tugged at his trousers, and he stepped deeper into the cradle of her thighs. He brushed aside her skirts, wishing he could be rid of clothes altogether.

*Later*, he promised himself. Later, when the fire had died down, he would unwrap his precious wife and lose himself in worship of her.

"Thomas." His name on her tongue was an ardent plea, and his lips captured hers again as he freed himself from his trousers. Their bodies met with a blind precision that comes from much practice, and both shuddered when they were joined. She shook in his arms, her heart beating so hard, she felt it in her throat, behind her eyes... She felt him everywhere. Her body ached, a desperate frenzy settling over her mind.

She directed him without words, and he answered her call every time.

It was divine, she thought, the way their bodies came together. The holiest of unions, their love was sacred, blessed by God himself.

She knew it by the pleasure that seized her, the overwhelming force of joy and love that flooded through her body as he drove her to peaks inaccessible to everyone but those lucky few who lay with their soulmate.

Two pieces, coming back together to make a single, precious whole.

"He seemed awfully nervous." Bea paused, her hand hovering over the bowl, the ladle full to the brim of steaming stew, though not a drop was spilled in her practiced hands.

Her husband offered her a small smile. "Grief shows its face in many ways," he said wisely.

She arched a brow, but then finished pouring the soup into the bowl. She dipped the ladle into the pot again for more. "He wouldn't speak to me."

She could hear petulance in her tone, and she hated it. She wanted the men in her world to take her as seriously as they took her husband, and she knew her temper—and subsequent proclivities toward tantrums—did nothing to aid her.

She heard the chair scrape against the wood floor, and then his arms wrapped around her, his apple scent grounding her as his head rested on her shoulder. Her body sang at the contact between them, and she felt the tension leave her back as she sank into him.

"No one knows," he murmured, his lips running along her skin. "Just how lost I'd be without you." His tongue painted a picture on her neck, and her head rolled to the side, providing him better access to his favorite canvas.

Her breaths grew deeper, her chest rising heavily, and he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the delicate bones beneath her

throat. "They have no idea you are the brains behind any of my genius."

She turned to him, her whisky eyes bright with firelight and hunger. Not for the bowl of soup cupped between her palms, but for her husband. "You are the most skilled and passionate man I know," she whispered, her voice reverent. "You have more than earned your reputation."

His hands shifted over her body, gently wrapping under her jaw, cradling her head. His lips met hers tenderly, and they spoke more in their touches than they ever could with words.

He pulled back from her, his thumbs brushing her cheeks and lips before he let her go and took the bowl from her hands. She let out a small breath, turning to fill the second bowl.

With Bear happily gnawing a pair of chicken's feet in the corner, the two of them sat down for supper.

"His mistress has heirlooms," Thomas said, a few moments after they started to eat. His wife looked up at him. "Heirlooms she doesn't wish to go to any of her descendants."

Bea nodded. "What sort of heirlooms?"

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It left a drop of soup at the corner of his mouth, and before he could make any move to wipe it away, his wife's fingers were there, gently rubbing him clean. He smiled, kissing her fingertips.

"Rings, a few pendants. One coronet that should be quite slim."

He watched his wife's eyes flicker to life, her mind racing with intricate and flawless designs. She really was the brains behind his unique coffins. It had been her idea, back when they were children, to build hidden places into his coffins. She had a mind for mechanics, and with his practiced hands, together they began to construct coffins with built-in compartments; places to hide family heirlooms or relics. Sometimes, people wanted to be buried with their things without the risk of being robbed in the grave, and sometimes people wanted to hide things from their loved ones. It was never their place to judge; the coffin maker and his wife only constructed according to their client's wishes.

"The rings and pendants should be easy," Bea said slowly, her finger tracing absently over the tabletop. "The coronet might take a little more work."

The coffin maker loved watching her plan. She sparked to life when given a challenge, and he loved to see her passion bloom behind her eyes.

"Will we be able to get specific dimensions?" she asked, meeting his eyes.

He nodded. "Oliver said he would return in a fortnight to accompany us to Whitehall Manor."

Bea's eyes widened. "Whitehall Manor?" she asked, and her husband watched the emotions flicker over her face as she took in this information. "Nobility." The word was a whispered

thought, not a question, though her husband nodded in agreement anyway. Bea blinked, tucking the information away as her mind ran over the rest of his announcement. "Us?"

Thomas smiled, and his large, warm hand gathered up hers on the tabletop. "Yes, my love. Us. I told him I would not work without you."

*A good man*, her heart sang, every time she laid eyes upon her love. *Such a good man.*

They woke before the sun.

Both held strong ethics in their work, and rarely did they allow themselves to doddle.

She began with the fire, coaxing it to life as she prepared their morning meal. He began in the barn, checking their mare and goat before tending to the small flock of chickens they kept. When he had milked the goat—she would continue to produce through spring if they were lucky—and gathered all the eggs, he returned to the cottage. His wife had porridge gently boiling, and she took the milk and eggs, happy to have something so hardy to cook with.

He stepped outside again while she continued to work, taking Bear with him to the edges of the woods to check his traps. He set them every few days so they would have fresh meat. It was just enough for them.

One of his snares caught a rabbit, and he gathered it up before making his way back home. The porridge was ready when he returned, and he delighted in the fresh berries he was able to stir into it.

They sat and ate, speaking of the work ahead of them—he had a coffin he was nearly finished working on, and she needed to make a trip to the village for a few supplies.

He ate two bowls of porridge, and it wasn't until he was nearly done with his second that he noticed she was eating slowly, sipping her mint tea with a far-off look in her eyes.

"My love?" he asked, his hand reaching out to her. She blinked, her eyes coming into focus on his face. "What weighs on your mind?"

She smiled, her head shaking as if she was trying to disrupt her thoughts. "There is much to be done before the weather turns," she said slowly. "I'm trying to remember it all."

He nodded, his calloused fingers rubbing the back of her hand. "What can I do?"

She gazed at him, her palm flipping up under his to hold onto him. "The woodshed needs to be stocked, and we need to check the feed for the animals."

He nodded as she began listing tasks. He marveled at how she could hold them all in her head so effortlessly. "I'm nearly done with my coffin," he said, bringing her hand up to kiss her knuckles. "When I'm finished, I'll begin work on these tasks."

...

The village they lived just outside of was small, but it had been home to them all their lives. Everyone knew her as she made the journey into town, and she stopped to speak to several people, happy to spend the time with them. She loved the isolation of their cottage, but she enjoyed conversing with old friends on occasion as well.

Her first stop was the apothecary. She grew most of what she needed, but a few plants were just out of her grasp. It was expensive to buy them, but they were necessary for continued health.

The bell above the door jingled lightly as she entered the apothecary. The old, familiar place smelled of herbs, spices, and beeswax. The air was dusty, the urge to sneeze seizing anyone who came through the door. Bea loved the shop, despite the stuffy air inside. She loved gazing at the amber bottles that lined the shelves, loved sniffing the plants—some foreign and some so familiar.

The apothecarist was a tall, elegant man with skin as dark as night and a smile as bright as the sun. She adored Monsieur Antoine, who was nearly the only man in the village who spoke to her as an equal.

As the door shut behind her, setting off the little bell again, Monsieur Antoine turned, his bright smile flashing contentment through her. "Mistress Bea," he greeted, his tone rich and warm. "What a pleasure it is to see you in town."

She stepped to the counter, her smile easy and genuine. "Monsieur Antoine, it is good to see you, my friend."

Monsieur Antoine leaned across the counter from her, his dark eyes alight with his joy. "How have you been, *chérie*?"

Bea wove a hand in front of herself. "Just fine," she said, her hand motions expressing much more to him than her words.

He grinned knowingly. "More ginger?" he asked, stepping back from the counter.

She nodded. "Yes, please."

He moved behind the counter, gathering the root for her. He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Might I recommend a few more herbs?"

She motioned for him to continue, and he set down the ginger root on the counter before striding across his shop. He returned with a glass jar full of green powder. "All the way from the far-off jungles," he said, setting the jar before her. "They call it Moringa." He paused, tapping the jar. "It is good for maintaining health over the winter."

She eyed it. "I've never heard of it," she said slowly. She saw him nod out of the corner of her eye. "Is it safe?"

She had heard of herbs coming from far-off lands, touting their amazing abilities, only to inevitably kill users. She was cautious of anything she could not grow herself.

"*Oui, chérie*. I have taken it myself." He tapped the jar again. "It is a good plant. *Bonne énergie*."

"All right," she agreed. "I'll take some."

"*Magnifique*," he said, gathering the jar. "Is there anything else?"

She shook her head, and he set about preparing her order. "How has your husband's sleep been?" he asked, glancing at her over his shoulder.

She nodded. "Better, now that he is no longer injured." The coffin maker had broken bones in his left hand a few months back, and it had not been the pain that had kept him up at night, but his sheer restlessness. He needed to carve, to work the wood. It was his calling.

Monsieur Antoine nodded as he measured out her order. "This is good news," he agreed. He glanced at her. "And your sleep, *chérie*?"

She hesitated. She hadn't slept well the last few weeks, but she was certain Mr. Reynolds's new project would help settle her mind. "It will get better," she said definitively.

Monsieur Antoine smiled as he poured. "Undoubtedly." He chuckled. "Insomnia bows to a mistress as strong-willed as yourself."

She smiled. He finished her order and brought it to the counter, setting it before her. "I dreamt of you and your husband last night," he told her, a memory lighting his eyes. "He stood in a field, shrouded in mist. You stood apart from him, a torch in your hands, calling out his name." He paused, his eyes unfocusing on her as he sought his memory. "A yew tree stood between you in the field, its red berries as bright as blood on snow."

She felt a chill slide down her spine. "What happened?"

He looked at her, blinking back into the present, then smiled, his bright teeth gleaming at her. "You set the torch to the tree and burned it down. In the light of the blaze, you found your husband."

She smiled. "There is nothing I wouldn't burn down to find him," she agreed softly.

He laughed, and the sound was rich and deep, like waves washing upon a rocky shore. "Of that, *chérie*, I have no doubt."

"My love." His voice was rough with sleep, and she knew immediately they were the first words he'd uttered that morning.

She turned in bed, her body seeking his, her eyes still heavy with exhaustion. "Is something wrong?" she asked, forcing her eyes to blink open. He was dressed—why was he dressed?

His lips brushed over her tired eyes, across her sleep-warm cheeks, and down to her full lips. "Nothing is wrong, my love. The sun is nearly rising."

She frowned as his face pulled back from hers. "Is it?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

His rough palm came up to gently cup her face. "It is." His thumb swept over the apple of her cheek. "You were so restless last night," he murmured, his concern showing in the tenderness of his touch.

She sighed. "I couldn't sleep."

"Rest more," he told her. "I'm going to make a delivery."

She began to sit up, despite his instructions. "There is much to be done," she said, shaking her head.

"Rest, my love." He sat beside her, his other hand coming up to cup her face more fully. "I've taken care of the morning chores. There is nothing that needs immediate tending."

She was heavy with her exhaustion, and she leaned her forehead against his. "I'll be awake by the time you return," she assured him.

He kissed her forehead. "Rest well, my love," he murmured against her skin. "I'll return to you shortly."

...

When she awoke again, the sun was near its midday arc. She felt confused, disoriented, and despite the hours she'd gotten after falling back asleep, she was still exhausted.

She forced herself out of bed, dressing slowly. She set about her morning routine, but everything in her felt off from her uneven sleep.

She cast her mind to the previous night as she set water to boil. She'd been unable to sleep; this was true. She had lain in bed, her mind running again and again over problem after problem. First, she'd thought about all that was to be done before winter, the stores they needed to gather, the things they needed to prepare. Then, she'd turned her mind to Monsieur Antoine and his dream.

It was a bad omen if she'd ever heard one, and even though she'd found a way in the dream, she knew that not every obstacle could simply be burned down.

Worry had settled in her heart, keeping her mind from rest.

She made herself a cup of ginger and mint tea, her stomach still too confused for food quite yet. She brought her cup outside, moving to the apple tree beside her husband's workshop. She sat against the trunk, admiring the ripening apples heavy on the branches. In the pasture, she heard Bear bark once, and she imagined he was trying his best to persuade the stubborn goat into something. She smiled, leaning deeper into the tree, bringing her teacup to her lips.

Slowly, the warmth of the tea and the sun above, mingled with the scent of the apples and the sawdust from her husband's workshop, worked to soothe her weary soul.

By the time the last drop was drunk, she felt renewed.

She stood under the tree, reaching up to pluck an apple from the branches. With a swipe of it over her apron, she brought it to her lips. The apple was sweet and tart, and settled her further. Finally, she was ready to move on from her restless night.

...

She'd lost too much of the day. She hated that. Still, there was no use lingering over it and bemoaning her wasted hours. Instead, she set to work, trying to make up for the time she'd spent lingering.

Bear came to her near sunset, and she'd been so engrossed in her chores that she didn't realize the late hour until his smiling face was bounding toward her. She rubbed his head as her eyes swept over the pasture, searching for their mare. Her husband

had yet to return, and while it wasn't too unusual, it did worry her.

She forced herself to keep working, gathering the dog and her harvest for the day and taking them both inside. She made a simple supper of roasted rabbit, but still, he had not returned. It happened, on occasion, that the coffin maker was asked to stay until the funeral. He didn't like to do it, but sometimes he felt he couldn't refuse.

She forced her mind to stay in a bright place. Likely, he'd been caught up, and if he didn't wish to travel in the dark, he'd be on the road again, first thing in the morning.

Though she loathed it, the coffin maker's wife set about her evening chores, and when everything was done, she locked up her home and curled in her empty bed. The space was too large without her husband, and in a moment of vulnerability, she invited Bear to sleep at her feet. There was no space when the coffin maker lay beside her, and the dog jumped up happily, nuzzling her toes with his nose as he settled in.

Despite her unease, she fell asleep quickly, her exhaustion coming back to her tenfold.

He had still not returned the next morning. She did the morning chores, and when she was sure her animals and home were taken care of, she set out for the village, her dog on her heels. She didn't know where his delivery was, but she was sure someone in the village would know.

Her pace was swift, her steps fueled by her anxiousness to see her husband once again.

She knew immediately that something was amiss in the village. People huddled together, whispering fervently to each other over garden walls. They pointed toward the edge of town, where the cemetery lay, and she felt her pace quicken. What had happened? Had there been an accident?

Beside her, Bear—sensing his mistress's distress—picked up his pace, the fur on his neck rising with his alertness.

They rushed to the cemetery where it seemed half the village was gathered. She pushed her way through the crowd, her eyes desperately taking inventory of the faces she passed. None were her husband's.

"Now, there is no reason to be worked up!" she heard a deep voice shouting. "This could be some elaborate ruse!"

She reached the edge of the crowd, her heart plummeting to her feet when she saw what had shaken the village.

A grave had been disrupted, the dirt piled up around the site, and the coffin dragged to the grass lay empty. This was beyond grave robbing. *Where was the body?*

"Please!" the constable shouted, his hands waving wildly. "Disperse immediately!"

No one listened to him, and Bea felt herself take a step closer.

"There she is!"

Her head turned in time to see someone point to her, and her heart lurched. She turned to the constable, and he climbed down from the patch of soil he'd been perched on when he saw her. "Mistress Carver!" he called, motioning her toward him. She took a step from the crowd, approaching him. "We've sent a messenger to your home to collect your husband."

She swallowed hard. "My husband is not home."

The constable's brow furrowed. "Where is he? His services are greatly needed."

Bea shook her head. "He went for a delivery yesterday. I don't know when to expect him back." She didn't say he should have been back already.

The constable's dark eyes narrowed. "Perhaps, mistress, you might know then..." He motioned her toward the empty coffin and she hesitated, taking a step toward it. "Please, mistress. We need to know, to whom did this coffin belong?"

It was then she understood. There was no headstone, no marker of any sort. Had it been lost or removed?

She took a breath as she approached the coffin. She recognized her husband's beautiful work immediately. The coffin looked fresh, bright wood still gleaming despite the mud on it. She knelt in the mud, her skirts growing dirty as she felt along the inside of the coffin. Simple linen lining, nothing extravagant. The coffin smelled like sawdust and her husband's work shed, like earth and lumber. There wasn't a trace of death upon it.

Her brow furrowed as she settled deeper over the coffin, her hands exploring the interior. It didn't make sense.

Her fingers brushed a latch and with surprise, she tugged it open. There was a hidden compartment located under the place where the right hand would have laid. The compartment was simple in its design and execution. She had not designed this.

The space was shallow and well insulated as if something needed to be stopped from rattling in it. Her fingers brushed through the hay but came up empty.

She turned to the constable, a frown deeply etched over her face. "When did this happen?"

He cleared his throat. "We found it this way this morning."

She turned back to the coffin. "And no one was buried in the last three days?"

She looked back at him in time to see him shake his head. She sat back on her heels, examining the scene in front of her again. Her eyes traveled to the coffin lid, and she frowned when a small hole in it caught the light. She reached out, closing the lid, and yes, there, perfectly hidden in an intricate design on the front was a small hole.

It was too precise to be random, and she felt her confusion deepen.

"Do you recognize the coffin, mistress?"

She looked back at the constable. "I do, though I don't know for whom it was built." She got to her feet, brushing the mud from her skirts. "There is no sign of a body?"

The constable looked nervously at the crowd. "No, mistress."

She frowned. "It looks like a coffin for a woman or a short man," she said after a moment.

The constable's mustache twitched. "Thank you for your help, mistress."

She looked at him. "I'll send my husband as soon as he's home," she promised.

The constable let out a relieved breath. "Thank you, mistress."

There was no sign of her husband in the village. She didn't know whom he'd been to see, but everyone she asked reported not having seen him in days.

With each shake of a head, her heart sank lower and lower.

She returned home to their cottage, daring to hope to see him there, in his workshop or perhaps napping under the apple tree as he was fond of doing throughout the summer and warmer days of autumn.

His workshop was dark, and the only thing under the apple tree was the long grass that bowed gently in the breeze.

Her heart grew wearier by the moment.

By the time night fell, she knew something was gravely wrong.

She could not return to their bed, not until exhaustion demanded it of her, so instead, she curled up by the fire, her mind racing over every possibility. He would never willingly leave her, and though he'd been gone for days on end before, he'd always sent word to her if it was longer than expected. He would tell her how he anticipated being gone some time, and she would miss him, but her heart and her mind would continue onwards because she had to and because she knew he would return to her soon.

She felt adrift with his absence, pulled out to sea without a thing to anchor her in the world.

Bear rested his heavy head at her feet, trying to provide his mistress with any comfort, but his own animal heart was weighed down without his master as well.

She fell asleep by the fire, her heart heavy and nightmares plaguing her mind.

When she awoke in the middle of the night to a quiet hearth, she knew what it was she needed to do.

Knowing what lay ahead, she climbed out of her chair, beckoning a sleepy Bear with her as she curled up in bed. He climbed up beside her, his back curling into her own back as he let out a long sigh that she felt matched the sound of her heart.

Thankfully, she was asleep again shortly.

The village was buzzing again as she made her way to town. The frenzy of the day before was nothing compared to the flurry now. She had a set course, but she paused, reconsidering her route. People were rushing to the cemetery again, and she steeled herself to follow them.

Her heart sank when she saw how many people had gathered, and she silently prepared herself for more disturbing news.

"The blackest blasphemy," one villager muttered, shaking her head as Bea passed. The villager's hard eyes were glued to the field before her, and Bea turned to take inventory.

Several graves had been upturned, but the scent of decay in the air told her that these coffins still held bodies.

"Grave robbers?" she asked, startled.

"It's the *revenant*," the woman muttered, crossing herself. "She's come back to eat our dead."

Everyone around her crossed themselves. Bea felt a chill settle over her spirit. She knew the word *revenant*, though she'd never had the need to use it. But her husband was a coffin maker, so of course, she knew the tales.

They were beings come back from the dead. Some were malicious, intent on eating and killing and destroying, while some were sent as omens.

She never believed in the old superstitions of *revenants*, though she could remember her husband's father telling tales of them when she was a child.

She glanced at the gossiping group beside her and frowned, pushing past them. The constable was back, looking ill as he gazed down at the open graves.

"Constable?" she asked, catching his attention.

He looked up at her. "Mistress Carver," he breathed out. "Has your husband returned?"

She shook her head. "No, and I have not heard word from him." She paused, glancing down into the nearest open grave. Her stomach rolled when she caught sight of the rotted corpse below. "This is undignified," she protested softly.

The constable nodded in agreement. "We're working to put them back to rest, but—" He paused, looking at her. "We could do with your husband's aid."

She looked at him. "Is there any idea what's happening?"

The constable looked down at the desecrated grave. "Too fresh to determine yet," he hedged. She stared at him, realizing that he had a theory, but he would not tell her. Whether it was because she was a woman or because his theory scared him, she didn't know.

She swallowed hard. "Good luck, Constable."

She turned, pushing her way through the crowd. She called Bear to her side, and he came running, his bark startling several people. She was on a mission today, and she didn't need to be slowed down by the superstitious fears of the village.

The apothecary was blessedly empty when she pushed the door open. The bell rang out, signaling her arrival, and she smiled when Monsieur Antoine's face appeared from behind the back curtain. "Another visit so soon, *chérie*, I'm honored."

They stepped up to either side of the counter, and Bea's hands twisted together in her anxiousness. "I wish it were a social visit," she murmured. "My husband is missing."

Monsieur Antoine's face became immediately serious. "Missing?"

She sighed. "He left the day before yesterday for a delivery. There has been no sight nor word from him since."

He tapped the counter in thought. "And it is normal for him to contact you if he's to be longer?"

Bea let out a breath. "He always sends word if he can't make it home. This is the longest I haven't heard from him in our entire lives." She felt sick to think of it, and her hands settled high over her stomach, willing the anxiousness roiling in her to settle.

"*Mon Dieu*," he muttered. "What can I help you with, *chérie*?"

She opened her mouth, but as she began to speak, the door chime rang out again. She turned to see a young, light-haired man enter the shop. "Have you heard?" he called out, his attention on closing the door behind him. "They say the dead are walking!"

He turned forward, and his blue eyes widened when he saw Bea. "My apologies, Mistress Carver. I didn't mean to..." He paused, reaching up to rub his neck. Bea was familiar with Monsieur Antoine's apprentice, Colin. He was young, a little impulsive, but overall had been of generally good spirits whenever she came across his path. She liked the young man.

"The dead are walking?" Monsieur Antoine asked dryly, looking Colin over.

Colin's neck flushed under the scrutiny of his master and Mistress Carver.

"That's what they're saying," he hedged, stepping into the shop. "They said a witch rose yesterday, and she's been raising the dead since."

Bea rolled her eyes. "No witch has risen." She grunted. The men both turned to look at her. "I don't know who was in the empty coffin, but I can assure you, this has nothing to do with magic." She turned back to Monsieur Antoine. "My husband knows something. I sense it deep in my bones." She hesitated. "He needs me."

The apothecarist looked her over. "Have you an idea of where to start looking?"

She sighed. "The nearest village," she said slowly. "No one here has seen him. I need to find where his last delivery took place."

Monsieur Antoine nodded. "It's a dangerous time to be traveling alone," he said slowly. Bea's eyes hardened. "I am not accusing you of inadequacy," he said, holding his hands up placatingly. "I know you are quite a capable woman, *chérie*. But the Autumn quickly darkens, and..." He paused, his eyes meeting hers.

She swallowed hard. "I know," she whispered.

Colin watched the two speak, wondering what he was missing. They seemed to be speaking in some sort of code that he was not privy to.

"I will accompany you," Monsieur Antoine said.

"No," Mistress Carver said quickly. "You have the shop to look after, and I know that you aren't comfortable on a horse anymore."

A riding accident years ago had proven to be one thing too many for Monsieur Antoine. His back had not allowed him on a horse since.

"I cannot let you go alone," he said with a firm shake of his head.

Colin took a breath. "I'll go," he offered. They both turned to him, and he was struck by just how similar these two were. Despite the obvious differences—one dark as night, one pale as the moon; one tall and wide, one short and delicate—they were able to summon the same looks of surprise and skepticism.

It would have wounded Colin, had he been older and known what those looks were meant to convey. "I'm strong on a horse, and I don't mind a journey," he continued, looking first to Mistress Carver for her thoughts before turning to his master.

Bea considered it. Travel *would* be easier with a companion, and though she didn't particularly relish the idea that she needed a man to help her, she was smart enough to understand how the world around her truly worked.

She turned to Monsieur Antoine. "Can you bear to lend your apprentice?" she asked.

The apothecarist's eyes were focused on the young man before him. Colin had been his apprentice since the boy was seven years old. He'd had more hand in raising the boy than the boy's mother had. Colin was still young, still impulsive, but he *did* trust him.

"You are to do exactly as Mistress Carver instructs," he said, his voice turning hard to convey the severity of the situation. Colin immediately snapped to attention. "Your utmost priority is her safety, am I clear?"

Colin nodded. "Yes, sir."

Monsieur Antoine turned to Bea. "Let me put some things together for your journey," he offered. Bea nodded, grateful. He turned from the counter as she turned back to Colin.

"You're sure of this?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, mistress. I won't let you down." His eyes were bright, warm, and hopeful. He wanted to be of use, wanted to help her as much as he could. She could see his desire for adventure and to prove himself to not only his master but, perhaps, to himself.

She smiled then, just a little, at the brave boy offering her help. "I believe you."

Bea hoped that she would only be leaving home for a couple of days, but reality told her if something was truly wrong, she could be gone for months in search of her husband. She tried not to dwell on the possibility.

She did what she could to prepare her house for her absence, and when she was satisfied, she went to fetch the mare. Bear followed her, eager as always to be a part of whatever it was she was doing.

Colin waited for her on the road, perched on the back of his mare.

Bea joined him on the road once she was seated in the saddle. It had been a while since she'd ridden a horse, and though her muscles remembered quite accurately, they were stiff and out of practice.

She met Colin's gaze. "We're going to travel to the nearest village south of us. We need to figure out where he was last seen."

Colin nodded. "After you, mistress."

"How old are you now, Colin?"

His bright, sapphire eyes met her whisky ones. "Seventeen, mistress."

"Seventeen," she mused, her smile evident in the corners of her mouth. "I was seventeen when I was married." She looked up at him in time to see his neck flush. This time, the smile tugged free, spreading across her face. "Is perhaps marriage a thought upon your mind?"

He cleared his throat, glancing at her anxiously. "It is something I've considered," he said carefully. "Though, I'm not sure I'm worthy of any prospects."

"You are apprenticing under one of the most brilliant minds our village has ever known," she said, her head tilting slightly as she examined him. "One day, you will be a very revered and respected man. Surely your prospects would reflect that?"

Colin's eyes flickered to her and away, his shame apparent. "No matter how much my master has taught me," he said slowly. "I'll still be a bastard."

Bea flinched. She knew his mother's story as well as anyone in the village. Amelia Price had been a friend of Bea's—only five years her senior—when she caught the eye of a soldier passing through town. Amelia had been a bright, kind person before the soldier came. After he left, she was sullen and withdrawn. No

one spoke of it directly, though it was suspected what had happened.

Bea had never recovered from the injustice that Amelia went through. Something horrible had been done to her, and she—a girl of only fourteen—had been blamed for it.

Amelia had never married, and when Colin was old enough, he was sent to apprentice with Monsieur Antoine in the hopes that he would learn a skill valuable enough to overcome the circumstances of his birth. In the eyes of many in the village, Colin was a hard-working and capable young man, but Bea knew that he was right. In order for his prospects to increase, he'd likely have to leave the village and travel somewhere no one knew him. It was horribly unjust.

"How is your mother?"

Bea felt guilt in her heart that she hadn't seen her old friend in nearly a year now. She made a silent promise to visit Amelia as soon as she and her husband were home safe.

Colin smiled, his eyes crinkling around the edges as he squinted at the horizon. "She's well," he said, and his tone suggested something more was happening. Bea's head tilted toward him, curious. "She, uh..." He paused, looking down at his horse's mane. She watched his fingers run over the edges of the reins in his palms. "She has a suitor."

Bea's heart blossomed in joy. "Has she?" she murmured. "That is wonderful news."

Colin nodded in agreement. "I believe they will be wed in the spring," he continued. Bea's heart felt as light and warm as a sunflower at midday. Amelia had once been considered the most beautiful girl in their village. It was whispered that she was lovely enough to even catch the eye of nobility, should she so desire. When she became pregnant, there was no shortage of suitors who were offering to wed her, to spare her the shame of a child born out of wedlock. She had refused them all, and privately, Bea had worried the damage done to her friend had been enough to close her heart entirely.

She was happy to hear this was not the case.

She and Colin rode in companionable silence for a while, Bear barking out on occasion whenever he caught the trail of a rabbit or squirrel.

Near midday, they stopped to water their horses. Colin slipped into the woods to relieve himself while Bea fetched two apples and wedges of cheese she'd brought for them.

They ate, perched on mossy stones under a cover of sharp green needles. The landscape had changed, converting from fields to forests. Bea knew that this meant they were close to the next village, though she could not recall just how close it was.

"Mistress?"

She looked up, meeting Colin's gaze. "Yes?"

He cleared his throat. "Why is it you think your husband is in some sort of trouble?"

She swallowed hard. "My husband is a very considerate man," she said after a moment. "He knows how I worry about him when his work takes him from home. He always sends word to me if he will be longer than he expected."

Colin frowned. "And he hasn't sent anything?"

Bea shook her head. "No, not in two days."

Colin looked down at the apple in his hands. "Do you think..." He paused, and Bea watched the boy curiously. He glanced at her, looking embarrassed. "Nevermind. I don't wish to offend you."

"Please, speak your mind."

Colin hesitated. "Do you think he might have something to do with it?" When she frowned, his chin jutted back in the direction of the village. "The dead walking."

Bea let out a breath. "I'll tell you again, Colin. The dead are not walking."

He looked skeptical. "But do you think he's got something to do with it?"

Bea hesitated. "They were his coffins that were unearthed," she said slowly, her eyes fixed on the apple between her palms. "But, that's not saying anything. All the coffins for miles around us are his." She shook her head. Still, she couldn't shake the hollow feeling in her stomach that her husband did have something to do with the current mystery in town.

What his role was though, she had no idea.

The coffin maker's wife and the Apothocarisist's apprentice arrived in the village shortly before nightfall. The days were growing shorter and shorter as Autumn crept closer. Soon, the equinox would be upon them, and then the world would tip into darkness, preparing for hibernation.

Bea found them accommodation at an inn near the edge of the village, and while she bartered for two rooms, Colin tended to the horses and Bear, making sure all were properly watered and fed for the night.

When he returned to the inn, it was to find Bea sitting at a small wooden table, a large metal cup between her palms, her eyes unfocused as she gazed outside.

"Any word?" Colin asked, sliding in across from her. She turned her gaze to him, and he was struck by the depth he saw in her eyes. He felt her worry, even if she didn't articulate it too much.

"None yet," she answered, sliding a mug toward Colin. He took the ale happily. "Tomorrow we need to ask around in the village."

Colin nodded as he took a large drink from his mug.

"Don't worry, mistress," he murmured, setting the flagon down on the table. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "We'll find your husband."

He spoke with the confidence of someone young enough to still hold blind faith.

Bea gave him a thin smile.

The innkeeper's daughter appeared, bringing them both hot meals, and Colin dug in immediately, happy for the food. Bea gazed down at the roasted chicken and felt her stomach curl. She was too nervous to eat.

She longed to be out in the village, knocking on doors, looking for her husband. She longed to demand answers, to learn definitively if they were even on the correct path or not.

Her husband was a formidable man. It would take nothing less than divine intervention to stop him from returning to her.

She feared what the silence from him meant.

"You should try to eat, mistress."

Her heavy eyes turned to Colin, who was nodding toward her plate encouragingly. "We've had a long day, and we're likely to have a long one again tomorrow."

She nodded, bringing the plate closer to her. "You're right," she muttered softly. She wasn't hungry, but she knew she needed to keep up her strength. She'd do her husband no good if she was faint with hunger.

She ate what she could, and when she couldn't take another bite, she offered the rest of the food to Colin. He was a growing lad and he happily accepted more food.

They ate in relative silence, though Colin offered commentary on the food or their surroundings every few minutes. Bea offered him thin smiles in return. He could see Mistress Carver was weighed down by her concern, and he wished there was anything that could be done to help her.

The door to the inn opened, bringing in a frigid breeze as well as four new patrons that slung themselves at the bar. Colin turned, hearing them each order a pint of ale.

"It should be a double," one man groaned. "It's not a night for sober contemplation."

The other three men crossed themselves and swore under their breaths.

"What's out there?" the innkeeper asked, pouring the men their drinks.

"Nasty rumors," a man on the end said. "They say the dead is walking."

Bea sat up quickly, her eyes sliding to the group. "The dead walking?" she asked before she could stop herself. The men turned to her at the bar. "What do you mean the dead are walking?"

One man grabbed his pint and settled at the bar, his eyes narrowing on her. "Now what would that have to do with a pretty little thing like you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What makes you think the dead are walking?" she asked again, her voice even.

The man stared at her so hard that his gaze felt violating. "You're asking too many questions," he growled. "Perhaps a full throat will shut you up." He grabbed at himself through his trousers, the meaning of his gesture unmistakable. Colin was on his feet so quickly that his chair scraped the ground and clattered backward.

"That is enough, sir!" he shouted. "I demand an apology at once!"

Beside the foul man, his companions were a range of amused and mortified at his behavior.

"Little pup trying to bark for his mistress?" The man sneered at Colin. "Run home, little pup. Leave this to men."

The innkeeper cleared his throat. "Now, James. That's quite enough. I won't have you speaking to my patrons that way."

They all turned their attention to him.

Bea's face was warm from her anger. Not at the way the man spoke to her, because she was quite used to foul-mouthed men. No, she was angry because she knew that no matter what she did, she would never have enough power in this group of men. No one would believe her; no one would take her seriously. There was a good chance no one would even listen to her.

"What makes you think the dead are walking?" she asked again, her anger making her voice tight.

One of the man's companions turned to her. "We saw her, the Dead Witch, not an hour ago."

Bea froze. This was the second time she'd heard reference to the Dead Witch. "Where?"

They all eyed her warily. "Up near the cemetery," he said finally. "You won't find her though. She slipped into the night."

He crossed himself, and beside him, his comrades did the same.

Bea was out the door before anyone could stop her.

The night was dark and cold. The mist had settled into the grass, tainting the air with a thickness that Colin felt cling to his skin as he raced after Mistress Carver. She was fast; he gave her that. For someone so small, she could truly run well.

Colin slipped a few times on slick cobblestones, but thankfully, he caught up to her before they reached the cemetery.

"Mistress," he panted. "What is it you hope to find?"

She was breathing hard as she set a brisk pace. "The dead are not walking," she said, shooting him a hard look. He shrugged lightly. "But if there have been more grave disturbances, that might mean some clue about my husband."

Colin watched her warily. He didn't know which he found more unsettling: her disbelief in the Dead Witch or her belief that her husband was somehow involved in the grave disturbances.

He wished they had a lantern as they raced through the darkened streets. A candle ... *something*. He felt too exposed in the dark night, in a village he was unfamiliar with.

Bea blazed ahead, unconcerned for trivial things like their safety.

The village was slightly bigger than hers, but she'd been here before, and she knew the general direction of the cemetery.

"Mistress, what is it you hope to find?" he repeated.

Colin feared her answer, but his eyes flickered to her face anyway, waiting.

She didn't answer him, but he saw a shadow pass behind her eyes that had nothing to do with the darkness cloaking them.

They reached the cemetery and Colin hesitated at the edge of the property. Mistress Carver barreled straight in, her skirts sweeping through the fog clinging to the dewy grass. He swore under his breath then crossed himself before following her into the land of the dead.

She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she figured she'd know it when she saw it—or hopefully, didn't see it. Unlike most people she knew, Bea did not fear the cemetery. She couldn't, being so involved in what her husband did for work. Cemeteries were more often thought of in her mind as galleries where her husband's work was worshiped and admired. Of course, most of the time his coffins were buried, never to be seen again, but the memory of them always endured.

She could feel the nervous energy rolling off the young apprentice as they navigated the thin paths of the cemetery. She wanted to soothe him, but she also wanted to reprimand him for distracting her.

Her sharp eyes scanned the ominous shapes through the mist, hunting. They navigated the cemetery, and she was starting to feel as if she would find no answers here when she froze, ice gripping her spine and freezing her lungs.

There, a few paces ahead of her—it was unmistakable. The scent of rot and decay, of putrefied flesh and freshly turned soil.

She took a steady breath, preparing herself to face whatever lay ahead in the fog.

Beside her, the young apprentice nearly relieved himself of his supper as he followed his mistress toward the upturned grave.

It was a terrible sight. His eyes scanned over the pieces of the wreckage, trying to make sense of the unimaginable. His eyes settled on strands of flaxen hair in the dirt in front of him. It was dull, lifeless hair, but it had probably once belonged to a young woman. It almost looked like his mother's hair, but it was a little paler. His eyes followed the strands, trying to soothe himself as he focused on them.

His eyes paused when they landed on the ends of the hair, the chunk of scalp that had been ripped from the body.

He understood too slowly, and when he realized what it was he stared at, he turned and emptied his stomach on the grass.

Bea commanded herself to stay rational, to be calm. The body was still very much in the coffin, though she'd been horribly handled, and in her state of decay, parts of her had flown off. Her head hung off her neck, broken and mangled like someone had ripped something from around her throat.

Bea's eyes turned from the mutilated corpse and focused on the coffin. She recognized it at once as her husband's work.

She sank to her knees, knowing what she had to do next, though she did not relish the task. She remembered the coffin, knew where to look, and her fingers slid along the lining, searching for the hidden opening. Her knuckles grazed the cold corpse, and she fought a shudder.

Her middle finger found the latch, and she quickly flicked it open.

The hidden compartment was empty, this woman's most prized possessions gone.

Bea felt her heart fall, her suspicions gaining further confirmation. Her eyes wandered the face of the dead girl, her gaze landing on the hollow sockets where her eyes once sat, on the torn hinge of her jaw, gaping in a silent scream.

"Mistress." Colin groaned, gaining her attention. "We mustn't linger here."

Bea let out a breath and nodded, climbing to her feet. She cast her gaze once more on the girl whose life had been taken from her too soon, and now, who had also lost the dignity of her death.

She was cold to the touch.

He would have worried about her constitution if her eyes weren't so fierce and focused.

"Mistress?"

He'd guided her back to the inn, past the rowdy drunks now slumped at the bar, and up to her room. He'd coaxed the fire back to life and urged her to sit.

Her eyes were distant, but not glazed over. Rather, she looked thoughtful. This made him even more nervous. "Mistress?" he tried again.

She blinked several times before her whisky eyes slid to meet his. "In the morning, we will ask if anyone in the village has seen him," she said slowly, her voice thoughtful. "If our search turns up fruitless, we will travel to the home of his most recent commission."

Colin was visibly upset, and Bea watched as the young man fell back onto the floor, his knees coming up to his chest, his elbows resting on his bent legs as he settled his face in his palms.

"We just saw..." He paused and a shudder went through him.

Bea swallowed hard. "I know," she whispered.

He glanced up at her, his sapphire eyes glossy with tears unshed. "Shouldn't we tell someone?"

Bea nodded. "Yes, we should."

Neither of them moved.

"You are a very brave lady, mistress."

Bea offered him a thin smile. "I've known death many times," she said gently. "I'm no stranger to it."

Colin shuddered at such a notion. He had never seen a corpse before, at least, not one so decayed. He had once accompanied his master to the home of an old man who had died moments before their arrival. It had not nearly been the same experience.

"What does it mean?" he asked, looking up at Mistress Carver again. "Why are graves being dug up?" Colin pressed, clarifying. He shook his head, his eyes drifting from Mistress Carver to his hands, to the rafters above his head before coming back to her. "What is the purpose of such..." his voice trailed off, and he felt tears sting the back of his eyes.

This was evil, plain and simple, and in his young years, the apprentice had never known anything like it.

Both were quiet, lost in their own thoughts, the sound of the popping and crackling fire the only noise to be found.

Finally, the coffin maker's wife spoke.

"We need to go to the home of Lady Catherine," she said after a moment, her brow dipping. "My heart tells me she is somehow involved in this."

Colin frowned, pulling himself out of his troubling thoughts. "The countess?"

Bea turned to him, her eyes finding him again. "Yes."

Colin considered this. He'd never met the countess, though he'd heard many stories of her, of course. She was a great woman, respected and feared in equal measure. Meeting her would be perhaps as close to meeting the King as he'd ever get in his life. Surely, someone with such great power *would* have answers. Wouldn't they?

"You know the countess?" he asked again, wanting to be sure he was clear.

Bea shook her head. "She sent a valet who called upon my husband." She frowned lightly. "I've never met her."

Colin felt his hope plummet. They were going to head to the home of a woman who had more power than they ever would in this life, unannounced and without any sort of established relationship with her? They could be killed for such informality.

Bea sat up before he could voice his concerns. "Please go downstairs and let someone know about the sight we uncovered in the cemetery," she said gently. "I need to bathe and then rest."

Colin stood, understanding he was being dismissed. He left her room, and Bea let out a long sigh. She wasn't sure Lady Catherine would have answers for her, but she suspected that the countess was involved in this plot, even if she was unaware of it. It seemed too suspicious of timing that her man would arrive on their doorstep only days before these foul acts began.

Bea felt her stomach roil at the thought of having to traverse the path ahead of her, and she crossed her room to pick up her earlier abandoned cup of tea. The ginger and peppermint warmed her, despite the fact the tea was ice cold, and she felt her stomach start to settle.

One way or another, she would soon have answers.

Whitehall Manor was an extraordinary estate, about two days' ride from the home of the coffin maker and his wife. Bea and the young apprentice were already halfway along their journey, so the next morning after conducting an as thorough as they could manage investigation of the villiage—which yielded them nothing but suspicion from the locals—they set out for the estate.

The coffin maker's wife was quiet, and her young companion looked upon her in secret, wondering after the state of his mistress's spirits. She seemed solemn, which he understood, but there was a determined look upon her face that he admired. Mistress Carver was a formidable woman, and it was clear she would not rest until her husband was safe at home.

The dog wandered the trail between them as they rode on from the village, entering the woods once more. Mistress Carver seemed to know where they were going, which was useful, as Colin had no idea.

When the sun was overhead, Colin and the coffin maker's wife stopped to let the horses drink. The dog busied himself sniffing bushes and chasing after small forest creatures.

"It may be past dark by the time we arrive at Whitehall."

Colin looked up at Bea, who was busy gazing at the small stream the horses drank from.

"Should we make camp before that?"

Colin didn't think he'd be successful in keeping everyone safe and on the move once night fell.

Bea shook herself, seeming to snap out of her thoughts. "Nonsense," she said, her tone dismissive. "It will be far safer for us to reach our destination by tonight."

Colin frowned. "What if..." He stopped, and when Mistress Carver looked up at him expectantly, he took a deep breath and released it before continuing. "What if they do not receive us at Whitehall?"

"Then, my dear Colin, we shall convince them."

...

It was past dark as the coffin maker's wife had suspected when they approached the grounds of Whitehall. In the growing dimness, the manor glowed with a brilliance that was unviewable in the daylight. Though not every window blazed, enough shone against the darkness of the night to lighten the grounds beyond the front doors.

Bea dismounted her horse, glancing back at Colin as he did the same.

"I will go in," she told him. "Wait here for me."

He wanted to protest, but Colin knew better. This was how it should be done.

So rather than follow his mistress, he took the reins of Bea's horse and waited.

Bea took a deep breath, gathering her courage, strength, and determination.

Collecting her skirts in her hands, she started up the manor steps toward the grand double entrance.

Bea brought her fist to the thick oak doors, putting enough force behind her knock to be heard. She waited, her anxious hands smoothing the front of her simple frock down. Under different circumstances, she would have dressed more appropriately to meet the countess.

But the situation was growing more dire with every coffin unturned, and Bea didn't have time to slow down for formalities.

She would simply have to make do.

She was about to bring her fist up to knock again when the sound of heavy iron locks turning stopped her. A moment later, the door was being opened, and an older gentleman with greying hair and a finely tailored suit opened the door.

"Madame," he said in acknowledgment.

Bea took a deep breath. "My name is Beatrice Carver. I'm here to beg an audience with Lady Catherine."

The man hesitated but then inclined his head. "Please enter, Mistress Carver."

She stepped past the threshold, quickly taking in her surroundings before turning back to the butler. "My companion is outside with our horses."

The butler nodded. "Of course. I'll have someone tend to them. Please come through to the parlor."

He motioned her forward, and she followed him, her leather boots making soft squeaks on the highly polished wood floor. The parquet was inlaid with alabaster, making her eyes dizzy if she gazed down at the flooring. Her eyes lifted, searching around the room as the butler led her into the parlor. Both the grand entrance as well as the sitting room were resplendent, draped in details of opulence and grandeur. She was certain there was more wealth here than her entire village had ever seen.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," the butler said, motioning toward a low settee. Bea nodded and fluffed her crumpled skirt before taking a seat. The butler left, and with his departure, Bea could not stop herself from standing and investigating the room.

There was an sleek clock above the mantel, rich in its design, that drew her forward.

She'd never seen a clock with a glass door that showed the inner workings of the mechanics inside, and she was lost in amazement to gaze upon such delicate and precise machinery.

Oh, how she wished she could design such elegance.

She watched the gears click forward, her eyes desperately trying to track the perfectly choreographed dance that let the clock tick on. It was some of the most beautiful work she'd ever seen.

"That was a gift from my late husband."

Bea turned to see a woman dressed in blue silk at the door. She was aged, her white hair carefully pulled back from her face in an intricate updo. There was powder on her face, making her appear younger than she was, but Bea could see from one glance at the woman's hands that she was well on in years.

"My Lady," Bea said, dropping into a deep curtsy. Lady Catherine motioned for her to stand, and Bea looked back at the clock. "It is a stunning piece."

Lady Catherine's eyes traveled to the mantel. "Harold was rather fond of mechanics," she said slowly. "He believed them to be dignified perfection, proof of God's masterful design."

Bea smiled. "I would agree with your late husband," she admitted.

Lady Catherine's pale eyes flickered to her. "Mistress Carver, the hour is late, and I do not know you. Please explain to me why you have come to call."

Bea turned away from the clock, taking a careful breath. Lady Catherine moved across the room to sit on a sofa, and Bea moved back to the settee.

"My husband is Thomas Carver, the coffin maker."

Lady Catherine showed no sign of recognition, but Bea had to believe that was just for show. She continued on. "Four days ago, he disappeared from our home." Bea paused, watching the

countess' face. Still, Lady Catherine showed no signs of recognition.

"Mistress Carver, you are young, but surely you are not too young to know that a beautiful face at home is often not enough to keep a man from wandering."

Bea immediately bristled at the implication. "My husband is a faithful man," she said, her lips tight to keep her anger in. "The last caller we had before his disappearance was a man of your estate."

At this, Lady Catherine shifted, her gaze flickering away. "I see not how this pertains to me."

Bea took a breath. "A man comes to my home, and the next day my husband has vanished."

Lady Catherine's eyes narrowed. "Are you implying some sort of foul play?"

Bea shook her head. "No, I don't believe that to be the case. But the timing cannot be a mere coincidence. Whatever your man spoke to my husband, it has since led to his disappearance."

Lady Catherine shook her head. "This has nothing to do with me. What is more, now that I have heard word of the coffin maker's disappearance, I shall be forced to seek accommodations elsewhere."

Bea opened her mouth, desperate to make the woman understand when the doors to the parlor banged open.

The countess let out a startled shriek, and Bea's hand immediately flew to her waist where a small blade was tucked into her skirts.

"Colin," Bea cried when she saw the boy's winded face.

"Mistress, in the village!" he gasped. "More graves have been unearthed."

"What in heavens is the meaning of this?" Lady Catherine demanded.

Colin continued on, ignoring her. "What is more, there is a band of thugs spotted robbing the graves. One is described to be your husband."

Bea left every trace of decorum behind as she sprinted out of Whitehall.

Colin, who indeed was younger and stronger, struggled to keep up with her as she hastened outside.

"Your horse!" Bea screamed at the valet. "I need your horse!"

So commanding was her cry that without hesitation, Lady Catherine's stable boy surrendered a horse to her, despite the valet's protests.

In the most unladylike fashion, Bea tucked her skirts around her legs and mounted the horse with practiced movements. She knew anyone watching her would be appalled, but she didn't care.

Bea dug her heels into the beast's sides, urging it into a gallop as she raced toward town. Frantic from her energy, the horse took off, its hooves clapping loudly over dirt and stone.

The village was not far from Whitehall, and the moment she was within range of it, Bea set her eyes on the dim horizon, scanning for *anything*.

Nothing seemed out of the norm, apart from the gathering lantern lights south of town.

Bea directed the horse in the direction of the cemetery. There was a riot of villagers about, pushing past each other to get looks at the upturned graves.

She drove the mare into the mix, scattering farmers and merchants who swore at her. Her eyes scanned the faces, desperate, but not a single one was familiar to her.

She dismounted, her hands letting go of the reins as she pushed her way through the crowd.

The scent of damp earth and decay assaulted her, and she brought one hand up to her nose, trying to block out the stench.

Two graves had been fully disturbed, the third half-dug and abandoned, as if someone had caught the graverobbers mid-act.

"It's Old Mrs. Daniels," someone said beside her, and Bea turned to set eyes on the corpse of the woman nearest. "Remember how she told everyone she'd come back?"

Bea rolled her eyes. She didn't have time for their superstitions, especially when it was evident Mrs. Daniels had been dug up and robbed, and not reanimated. She turned instead toward the rest of the crowd, searching for an official.

"Who spotted the thieves?" she asked into the crowd when she failed to find anyone useful. Faces turned to her.

"I did," a man said, raising one hand. Heads swiveled toward him.

"How many men were there?" Bea demanded. "Did one of them have dark hair?"

The man bristled at her tone, sucking in a breath, his chest puffing out. "Now hang on a minute," he said. "Who are you to be asking such questions?"

Bea's teeth grit together. "Please, I need to know," she said, moving toward him. He frowned down at her. He was a large man, with dark eyes and a thick beard. He reminded her of her father, at least, who her father would be, were he still alive.

"I don't think I should be telling you," he said slowly, his eyes cautious. "It's no good to scare a delicate constitution like yours."

Bea felt the urge to reach out and slap him. Instead, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her skirt, taking a breath.

"Please," she said, gentling her tone even though she was filled with anger and frustration. "I'm seeking my husband. I fear he might have been taken." Real tears glittered in her eyes, and she saw the man soften a fraction.

"It was too dark to see the details of them," he said, his voice quiet, but the note of shame discernable. "I'm sorry."

Bea felt her stomach curl, with anger, fear, frustration, disappointment. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

She turned from the man, stalking away with her head bent. It would do no good to search the coffins. She recognized her husband's work, and she knew the valuables would be missing there as they were at the last site.

Bea sought out the horse, wanting to return the beast swiftly so that she and Colin could regroup and come up with another plan.

"Mistress?"

Bea paused when a grimy hand connected with her shoulder. She looked up, surprised to see the face of the young man staring at her. He was likely around Colin's age, perhaps a touch younger, and appeared to be homeless if his tattered clothing and dirt-smearred face were anything to go by.

Bea's heart swelled with sympathy for him, and immediately, she reached for her coin purse. She didn't have much, but she could spare a few coppers to feed the lad.

"Oh, no, mistress," the boy said, shaking his head when he realized what she was doing. "I ain't here to beg. I only mean to ask, are you Mistress Carver?"

Bea's heart skipped a beat. "I am," she said, her voice breathless, verging on hopeful.

"Your husband bade me deliver you a message."

Bea stopped breathing for a moment, before gasping and nodding for the boy to continue. "Please, tell me," she begged, reaching out to him.

The boy swallowed, looking regretful. "He wanted you to know that he's sorry."

Bea frowned. "Sorry?"

The boy nodded.

"Was there more?" she asked, tears burning her eyes.

The boy shook his head. "No, mistress. That was all, jus' said to say he were sorry."

He gave her a sad look before stepping away, leaving her in her devastated confusion.

*I'm sorry.*

*I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry...*

"Mistress?"

Bea's eyes fought to focus. They felt dried out from staring into a dwindling fire. She looked up at Colin who was sitting across the narrow table from her, a frown on his handsome young face.

"What?" she croaked.

Colin managed to track down the coffin maker's wife with Lady Catherine's valet. After exchanging horses and promising not to return to Whitehall, he brought her to a tiny inn at the edge of the village. He had tried to get her to eat and drink, but she couldn't shake the words of her husband's message as they rattled through her.

*I'm sorry.*

"It's past the midnight hour," Colin said softly, glancing over his shoulder at the barkeep who was giving them sour looks. "I believe they want to retire."

Bea shook herself. "Yes, of course." She stood automatically, unthinking. Colin rose beside her, bending to gather their meager belongings. "Should we get rooms?" she asked, her voice distant.

Colin cleared his throat. "I acquired them already."

"Oh," she responded, sounding hollow. "I'm sorry."

*Sorry, sorry, sorry...*

"Mistress?"

Bea blinked, looking at Colin once more. She cleared her throat and nodded, following him toward their rented rooms.

The accommodations were small but clean, housing a tidy double bed, chair, wash bowl, and a neat hearth that had a small fire burning.

"This is your room, mistress," he said, stepping in to put her belongings on the stool. "Shall I rekindle the fire for you?"

"That's fine," she said, her voice far off again. She sank onto the edge of the double bed as Colin got to work, coaxing the flame back to life. "Colin?" She watched the boy turn back to her, a question on his face. "Where is my dog?"

"With the horses, mistress. The innkeeper wouldn't let him inside."

Bea frowned, feeling cold. Her whisky eyes dragged to the window, imagining she could see the stables from her perch.

"Will he be warm enough?" she asked, her gaze flickering over the dark sky.

"Yes, mistress. He's well cared for," Colin assured her. A plume of flame lit in the hearth, and Colin turned back to it. "There now. This will keep you warm tonight."

Bea swallowed. "Do you have somewhere to sleep?" It occurred to her only now that she hadn't paid for any accommodations for the boy, and likewise, he hadn't asked her for any money.

"My master gave me coin," he assured her. "I'm taken care of."

Bea licked her chapped lips. "Good," she murmured.

"Try to get some sleep, mistress," Colin urged quietly. "Things will be different in the dawn, you'll see."

Bea blinked, staring at him. She wondered how long it would be until life turned on him too.

"Good night, Colin."

The boy dipped his head. "Good night, mistress."

When the door shut, Bea tugged her shawl tighter over her shoulders and leaned back on the foreign bed. It was stiff and lumpy, but it didn't matter. She needed to think, not be comfortable.

*I'm sorry.*

If Thomas had been able to send any message, why would it be this one? Surely, he must know how worried Bea had been for him. She wouldn't care about an apology; she just wanted him home.

In her heart, she knew things couldn't be as they seemed. She laid the facts out before her, trying to imagine them on their

heavy oak table at home. She pictured every piece laid out, waiting for her examination. She was good with puzzles—she would sort this out; she just needed time to think.

*There were coffins being unearthed, their carefully hidden contents stripped. The bodies were all accounted for... no, that wasn't right. One body was still missing.*

Bea frowned, trying to put that piece together, but it just wouldn't fit.

Thomas was at the center of this, though what his role was remained unclear. Still, Bea knew that despite the tone and implications of the message the boy had delivered to her, there was no way her husband was the mastermind of all this.

For one, he'd never leave her of his own free will, and for another, he'd never keep her in the dark of his plans. They told each other everything. There was no reason for secrecy in their marriage.

Bea rolled onto her side, facing the fire. Her eyebrows tugged together. Who could have her husband? Why wasn't he able to come home, but had managed to send a message through the boy?

Things weren't adding up yet, and the frustration of it brought tears to Bea's eyes.

She didn't want to be in the room, alone and locked away. She needed another body, even if that body was limited to the proximal warmth she could find in sitting with her faithful dog.

Rising from the bed, she pulled her shawl tight around her shoulders again and slipped out of the room.

The stables were warm enough, and dry, though the scent of hay filled Bea's nose until she felt as if she would sneeze.

Bear met her with a light whine and a thump of his heavy tail as she settled in the hay beside him. He leaned into her touch, his chin resting on her lap as he curled into her.

"Are you homesick too?" Bea asked, her voice a murmur as she rubbed his soft, dark head. Bear's tail thumped and she took that as a *yes*.

She let out a long sigh, her head resting back against the wooden wall of one of the horse stalls. "I can't find him," she admitted, her voice as soft as a whisper. "I can't find him, and I'm worried he's going to be lost forever."

Bear let out a soft whine against her lap, and she looked down, running a soothing hand across his head.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I shouldn't worry you with my burdens." She smiled at the hound, bending to press a kiss to the tip of his nose. She scratched his ears, and he settled again on her lap. Bea let out another long sigh, leaning back again against the wooden wall.

Though her heart was no less heavy, she let sleep come, comforted by the warm weight of her loyal dog and the soft breathing of the horses behind her.

She soon fell into a deep slumber.

...

Bea woke with a start, her heart thundering in her chest as she sat up, eyes wide but still unseeing as she pulled herself out of sleep.

She wasn't sure what had woken her yet, but slowly she realized that Bear was no longer by her side, and behind her, the horses were restless.

Her body snapped to attention, every part of her stilling as she strained to listen to the night sounds.

Everything was quiet... and then...

The creak was small, like someone opening an old box, but it flooded Bea's body with energy.

*Someone was there with her.*

Silently, she climbed to her feet, her heart thumping heavily in her chest, moving up toward her throat as she reached into the dark, seeking a weapon. Her fingers found the splintered wood of the horse's stall and gently stroked across the surface as she sought anything to use in defense.

The soft squeak of leather on stone made her freeze.

Whoever it was in the dark was moving toward her.

Bea's tongue wetted her chapped lips, and she continued her search, hoping she could remain silent.

Two stalls over, a horse let out a surprised nicker, and Bea's heart thudded faster.

Her fingers brushed against cold metal, and she reached for the farrier nippers, grasping them heavily in her palms. Her heart was erratic in her chest as she held the nippers in front of her, now ready to face whatever lurked in the dark.

There was a ghostly swishing sound, like fabric moving, and Bea let out a breath.

"Who's there?" she asked, her voice strong despite her fear. She heard Bear let out a snarl in the dark, and her heart squeezed in her chest.

The sound fell silent, and Bea stepped out from behind the stall, her heart hammering, the farrier nippers held up near her head in a defensive stance.

"Bear," she breathed, willing the dog to come to her side. She felt his strong body move against her legs, and she let out a tiny, relieved breath. She could feel the tension in his body as he leaned against her legs, almost as if he was trying to urge her to flee.

She couldn't see anyone, but the moonlight was weak as it filtered through the slats of the stable's walls.

"Show yourself!" she demanded, putting more courage behind her voice than she truly felt.

"What are you doing here?" a rough voice rasped out. Bea had never heard such a voice and couldn't identify if it was a man or woman.

"I said show yourself," Bea demanded again.

"You aren't meant to be here," the voice rasped again. "Get out!" The words were a shriek, and Bea sensed movement in the dark. Beside her, the horses stirred, restless and anxious, as the voice's pitch rose. Bea's hands tightened on the handles of the nippers. "Get out!" the voice cried again, louder and closer this time. Bear let out a terrible snarl again, and Bea's pulse jumped.

Bea's stomach dropped as a white face appeared in the moonlight. She was pale as death under the mud that coated her. She was disheveled, her nails jagged as she reached her hands up as if to swat at Bea.

*She looks as if she's just crawled from the grave.*

Bea's heart shrank in fear. She didn't believe in the revenants, but the scent of decay on this woman was unmistakable.

The dead were walking, and they had found her at last.

It occurred to Bea once she was back inside the inn that she had no idea where Colin was spending the night. She assumed he was in a room somewhere not far from her own, but which room, she had no idea. It was far too late to bang on doors, and rather than wake the entire house, Bea slunk back to her room, hushing Bear as she snuck him in with her.

Her poor dog was agitated and eager to be back outside, but Bea silenced him, inviting him onto the rented bed despite the mud and hay stuck to his fur. Together, they curled up on the old mattress, and it wasn't until she was safely tucked under covers, did she realize she was shaking.

Bea didn't believe in ghosts. Her mind was a rational place, where logic and order ruled. She had no reason to believe in ghosts because she'd never seen evidence of one.

But no matter how hard her mind insisted on what it saw, her body continued to shake, terror flooding her limbs.

She sought sleep, but none came, and by the time the sun was breaking the horizon, Bea was more determined than ever to get to the bottom of things.

She snuck Bear back outside before the innkeeper could catch him inside. This time, when Bea returned to the stables, she carried with her a heavy iron fire poker she'd taken from her room.

The stables were quiet as she and Bear entered them. Her eyes scanned the dark shadows, but aside from the farrier nippers on the ground where she'd dropped them, there was no sign of anything having happened the previous night.

Bea picked up the nippers and returned them to the wall where she'd grabbed them from. She sniffed the air, but even the scent of decay had vanished. Her nose filled with the smell of horses and hay.

Sighing, she turned to head back to the inn when her boots caught on something in the hay.

Bea frowned and bent down, digging through the debris on the floor until her fingers caught on cold metal. She brought the object up toward her face as she stepped toward the open door, seeking light.

Her heart dropped when she looked at the object she'd found.

It was an old pocket watch, with a battered and scratched cover. She recognized it immediately and flipped it over, knowing already what she would find on the back.

*My whole heart, forever.*

*-B*

Thomas had been here. Since Bea had given him this pocket watch as a wedding present, he'd never been without it. Thomas had been here, and she'd missed him.

Her body was shaking, with a mix of fear and frustration. Where was her husband? Why couldn't she find him?

...

Colin wasn't sure what he expected to find when he checked on Mistress Carver the next morning. She'd been so distraught the night before, so vacant. He'd never seen her so hopeless, and it had frightened him. He didn't know what to do to re-instill hope in someone, especially someone as formidable as the coffin maker's wife.

There was no answer when he knocked on her door, and Colin supposed perhaps she was still sleeping. Not wanting to disturb her, he left her room and made his way toward the front rooms where he'd eaten the night before.

To his great surprise, Mistress Carver was pacing in front of a fireplace, her head bowed as her hands passed something back and forth between her palms. She was muttering under her breath, seeming oblivious to the world around her.

"What's wrong with her?" the innkeeper asked Colin when he made eye contact with the man.

Colin shook his head and didn't respond. He wasn't someone to share personal information with strangers, especially when it wasn't even his story to tell.

Instead, he made his way toward Mistress Carver, wary of the state she was in.

"Mistress?" he asked, his voice soft and hesitant.

She looked up, and for a moment, there was something feral and terrifying in her eyes. "Colin!" she gasped, reaching out to him. Her small fingers wrapped around his bicep and squeezed, much firmer than he would have thought possible. "Colin, he was here. Thomas was here."

Colin swallowed hard. "Yes, mistress, you said that boy told you so yest—"

"No, Colin," she said, shaking her head. "No, he was *here*."

She thrust something out and Colin caught it, surprised. His hands pulled away from his chest, clutching an old, tattered silver pocket watch.

He looked up at the coffin maker's wife, confused.

"This is his," she said, reaching out to tap the glass. "Last night, when I was in the stables, I saw a woman. She might have been the missing body from that grave back in the village, and when I went back this morning, I found this in the hay," she stressed, her fingers curling around the watch in his hand. "He was here."

Colin's head was spinning. He didn't know where to start with her story. She'd been in the stables? She'd seen the Dead Witch?

Colin let her take the watch from his palm, and while she was gazing down at it, he stepped back from her and crossed

himself, terrified at the idea that the Dead Witch could be walking around anywhere nearby.

"Mistress, I..." He was at a loss for words.

It seemed to not matter though, because Bea reached down to the floor, grabbing her satchel. She looked up at him, hope and determination burning in her eyes.

"Come on, Colin. We're going to go hunt the dead."

The sleepy village was already bustling by the time the coffin maker's wife and the apothecarist's apprentice ran out of the inn.

Merchants were gathering in the town center, selling their goods, and the scent of fresh baked bread and ripe apples filled the air. Colin wanted to stop, to take it all in, perhaps even indulge in a hot bun, but Bea was on a mission, her eyes only on the path ahead of them.

"Mistress," Colin said, wishing to slow down her small but swift steps. "Where are you going?"

Bea glanced back at her young companion. "To find the boy," she said. "We're going to get more answers."

Colin was not sure exactly how she planned to do that, but he daredn't speak his mind against her. Instead, he followed behind, dutifully looking after her.

Bea cut through the town center deftly, as if she'd walked the path many times. Her eyes scanned, her mind racing ahead as she plotted.

She was determined that there would be no more nights without her husband by her side.

She spotted the boy leaning against a low stone wall, his knees to his chest as he rested on the cobbled ground. He had a stale bun in his hands, and when he brought it to his mouth, Bea saw that the boy had to gnaw on it. It must be *very* old.

"Colin," she said, stopping and pulling coins from the purse at her hip. "Go buy some fresh buns. Apples too," she directed, pressing the coppers into his palm. He looked surprised but nodded, immediately taking off to find the vendor. Bea turned her attention back to the boy.

She made her way toward him, and he looked up at her as she approached, wary.

"May I sit?" she asked, motioning to the ground beside him. The boy's eyes widened in surprise, but he nodded.

Bea took care to arrange her skirt under her as she sat on the dirty ground.

"I 'aven't more messages, lady," the boy said, looking nervous.

Bea shook her head. "I know," she told him, hoping her voice was reassuring. "That's not what I want to talk to you about."

At this, the boy's eyes widened. When he didn't bolt away from her, Bea continued. "What have you heard of the graves?"

The boy let out a shuddering breath and reached up to cross himself. "It ain't right," he muttered. "What they doin'. Ain't right at all."

Bea nodded in agreement. "No, it's not right," she said softly.

"They unburied me mam," he said, his dark eyes burning with unshed tears. "Tore her out, desecrated her grave, and left her broken behind 'em."

Bea brought a hand to her mouth, horrified. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, anger flooding through her.

"I go to visit her," he said, his eyes dropping to his hands. "Every day. We only had each other, me mam and me." His eyes shut, and Bea could imagine he was fighting back tears. "When I found her that way..." She saw him swallow. "I did the best I could," he said softly. "I put her back, said me prayers, and put flowers on her grave. But it ain't the same, 'cause I'm no priest, and now..." His voice was shaking. "What if me mam's been kicked outta heaven on account of this?"

Bea wound an arm around the lad's shoulders, offering him comfort. He leaned into her embrace, letting out a few sobs against her shoulder.

"God's mercy is great," she murmured. "Your mam is in good hands, even if her body has been abused this way." She rubbed circles into the boy's back as he cried.

Colin appeared before them, his purchase in his hands, his eyes unsure. Bea motioned him over, holding out her free hand for a bun.

"Here," she said softly, offering the fresh bun to the boy. "Eat up. It's no good wasting away. You've got to live a life your mam would be proud of. Grow big and strong," she said, giving him a smile.

The boy's eyes widened, but he nodded, taking the bun eagerly. He eyed Colin as he settled with them, but the boy was clearly too hungry to care much about the newcomer.

"This is Colin," Bea said, motioning toward him. "I'm Bea. What's your name?"

The boy sniffed, his mouth full of fresh bread. "Billy, mistress," he said around the food.

"Thank you, Billy," Bea said softly. "For all you've done, delivering my husband's message, taking care of your mother." She paused when she saw an intensely vulnerable look come over Billy's already tender face.

"He found me when I were covering Mam up," he said softly. "I thought he were one of them robbers. I tried to fight him. If I were bigger, I would have tried to kill him," he admitted, looking ashamed. "He told me to look for a beautiful lady with eyes the color of sunlight at dusk," he said, giving Bea a sheepish, shy look. "Bade me to tell you his message. I think there were more, but then the men came. They knocked me out and dragged him off."

Bea's heart was thundering in her chest, her breathing tight. "Do you know which direction?"

Billy shook his head, looking forlorn. "No, mistress. I'm sorry."

Bea let out her breath, trying to curb her disappointment. "It's okay, Billy. You've done much for me, thank you." She plucked an apple from the small sack Colin had procured and offered it out to Billy. He took it eagerly.

On her other side, Colin was chewing his own bun, looking thoughtful.

"Billy," he said, leaning forward to see the boy around Mistress Carver. "Have you heard any tales of the Dead Witch?"

Billy immediately crossed himself. "Yes," he breathed, his eyes wide and terrified. "Yes, she lives nearby."

Bea's heart leapt in her chest. "She's here?" she demanded, trying to temper the desperation in her tone.

"Aye," Billy said, shaking his head. "She's in the woods. Not many know she's there, but..." Billy looked off, his gaze distant. "I see her," he said quietly, his voice haunted.

Bea couldn't fight the chill running down her spine. "Will you show us?" she asked, her voice tight with her barely applied control.

Billy looked at her in surprise. She could see him starting to deny her request, and she reached a hand out. "Billy, please. She has something to do with my husband's kidnapping. I need answers," Bea said, tears burning her eyes.

"It's unholy," he said, his voice a whisper. "She's a shadow of death."

Bea smiled ever so softly. "I've never feared the dark," she answered him. "Nor death."

Billy let out a tense breath, his shoulders slumping.

"Aye, mistress. I'll show you the way. But pack lightly, it's a long descent into Hell."

Colin arranged for the horses to stay in the stables a few more nights, after Billy told them they would have to traverse through the woods on foot.

He wasn't particularly thrilled at the prospect of traveling off the beaten path, especially with a guide who was barely more than a child, but Mistress Carver seemed determined.

While he secured the horses, the coffin maker's wife purchased rations for the three of them.

When they regrouped, Bear happy to be back at his mistress's side, they turned to their young host.

Billy looked wary but nodded to them, turning toward the woods at the edge of the village.

"This way."

...

The way was rocky at first. Large stones littered the edge of the woods, and some were so slick with moss, she had to get on her hands and knees to crawl over them. Soon, the stones became not more than pebbles as rock gave way to trees.

Immediately, the path fell dark, succumbing to the heavy canopy above.

Bea knew the woods around her home. She was familiar with the sounds, the smells, even familiar with the unexplainable,

though her logical mind often fought for reason whenever she encountered anything odd.

These woods were connected, though they spanned a great distance, but she was utterly unfamiliar with them. It frightened her enough to sharpen her senses, and she proceeded with caution, keeping Bear close to her so that he was not lost in the dark.

Their small procession walked in silence at first, with Billy at the front, Bea in the middle, and Colin picking up the rear. The apprentice felt responsible for the party and preferred it if he could keep both eyes on everyone.

After a time, Bea found she had so many questions, she couldn't keep them to herself a moment longer.

"Billy?" she asked.

He glanced back at her, his dark eyes hard to see in the shadows.

"How do you know this Dead Witch lives nearby?" Her voice could not fully conceal her skepticism, and behind them, Colin smirked a little, knowing how little the coffin maker's wife believed in this element of the supernatural. He thought it must be a mark of her desperation for answers that she'd entertain the Dead Witch at all with Billy.

"I seen her," Billy said, shrugging one shoulder. "Every night, for three nights now."

Bea frowned, and at the back of the party, Colin crossed himself in fear.

"You've seen her every night?" Bea asked.

"Aye," Billy said, shaking his shaggy head. "She comes here, long after dark."

"And you've followed her?" Colin asked, wanting clarity on whether their young guide had actually ventured into the dark woods or not.

"Once," Billy said, his voice quiet. "It weren't right. She were..." His voice trailed off, and behind him, Bea and Colin could see the tension in the boy's shoulders. "She weren't right... She were howling like a wild thing, cursing and spitting. I figured she were making spells, and I ran out of the woods fast as I could."

Bea considered this, turning this piece of the puzzle over in her mind. What did this Dead Witch want? Why was she hanging around?

What did she have to do with Thomas?

The troupe traipsed deeper and deeper into the woods, their conversation dying off as they went. Each of them felt the weight of the forest, the steady unrest that lurked in the shadows.

The woods were uneasy, and it put them all on edge.

Sometime past noon, Billy turned to the party, motioning for them to be silent. Both the coffin maker's wife and the apprentice eased their footsteps, walking as softly as they were able as they edged forward.

"There," Billy said, stopping beside a large, lichen-covered boulder. "She's there, mistress."

Bea took a deep breath that tasted of moss and shadows, and she stepped forward to set eyes on the glen of the Dead Witch.

The coffin maker's wife had been born brave.

She had been a precocious child, never satisfied with the bare minimum of answers. Her mother often recounted the look of knowing Bea had in her eyes, even as an infant.

*You were born knowing too much*, her mother had said countless times. *Knew everything, 'cept how to be afraid.*

Bea wasn't fearless, but her curiosity combined with her need to understand the world had often overridden her fear, allowing her to plunge into the unknown.

It was a quality that the coffin maker had always loved about her.

The coffin maker had been born wise.

He'd had an old soul, his gran had said. He was appropriately cautious, and sometimes when the adults around him were speaking, one could find the boy's head tilted, his toys abandoned as he sat and listened and learned.

He'd made plenty of mistakes in his life, surely, but he learned from those mistakes rather quickly and had grown accordingly.

But without his willful wife, the coffin maker was prone to overthinking and rumination over action.

Likewise, without her husband, the coffin maker's wife was impulsive and impatient, prone to rashness that bordered on the reckless.

They forgot these parts of themselves, the ones that were unbalanced without their other half, because so rarely had they spent any sort of time apart.

It had been days since the coffin maker's wife had seen her husband, and she had been left to her own instinct to get him back.

So rather than surveying the glen of the Dead Witch and proceeding with caution, the coffin maker's wife picked up the heaviest branch she could find and charged forward, like a Viking off to battle.

She was glorious and terrifying, and both the apothecarist's apprentice and the orphaned boy watched her in stunned amazement, left standing in the shadows of the woods.

"Witch!" Bea screamed, her branch brandished over her head. "Deliver my husband to me!"

She took in the small glen, pieces of it clicking into place in her fast mind: the disturbed earth by the river, where a stone ring suggested someone had been tending to a fire in the midst of a camp; the rope tied to a lower branch of a tree on the edge of the glen, where likely stores were kept at night. There was no permanent dwelling. Whatever was happening here was only meant to be for a short while.

Bea made her way to the campsite, her boots kicking at the dirt in frustration.

She knelt by the fire ring, picking up a second stick to prod at the charred pieces of wood. Some of them were still smoldering underneath, and she swallowed hard, realizing that someone had been here, *recently*.

Her eyes moved up, taking in the woods around her from her lower angle. She frowned when she saw a second rope tucked high into a tree. This one looked to be holding something up.

Bea stood quickly, dropping the smaller stick as she made her way across the small glen to the tree. She prepared herself to climb then realized her boots would hinder her ascent. The dress she could deal with—she'd been climbing in dresses all her life—but the boots would have to go.

She bent over to begin unlacing them.

"Mistress?"

She glanced over her shoulder as her fingers worked the knotted cords of her boots.

"There is something in the tree. I'm going to climb up to grab it," she told the boys.

Colin's eyes widened as he looked up.

"Please, mistress," Billy said, stepping forward. "Lemme gets it for ya. I'm quick as a squirrel," he promised her. She straightened up, surprised but acquiescing.

In a matter of moments, Billy was pulling himself up into the tree, and with the strength and agility of youth, he was scaling the tree until he reached the parcel.

He untied it carefully, and Colin positioned himself under the tree to catch it. Billy let it fall and Colin scooped it up, his arms curling around the package protectively. He set it on the ground as Billy scaled back down, and Bea squatted down, her fingers reaching for the thin twine keeping the parcel wrapped.

They worked to loosen the bindings, and by the time Billy's feet were back on the ground, they had pulled the bundle open.

Bea felt the breath leave her body.

This was not the glen of the Dead Witch at all.

"Are that..." Billy's voice trailed off, his hands coming up to cross himself.

Bea reached into the pile of artifacts, her fingers pushing past piles of tangled rings, bracelets, brooches, and necklaces. She paused, her stomach turning over when a small, shriveled lump surfaced, a gold ring still attached to the digit.

Behind her, Bea heard one of the boys turn away and heave.

She ignored the finger, her body burning with rage and disgust. Not at the corpse, who had clearly been torn apart, but at the thought that *dozens* of corpses had been violated.

*Had these thieves no humanity?*

Bea recognized some of the items, and she knew they had come from coffins her husband had made, hidden compartments she had designed.

Her confusion only grew deeper.

"Mistress?" Colin's voice was raspy, and she looked up at him, standing upright once more. "We shouldn't stay here. What if whoever has been squatting here comes back?"

Bea let out a tight breath. "Let those scoundrels come back," she snarled.

Colin winced. It would do no good to leave her here to face what inevitably would be a fight, but he wasn't sure how to convince her to leave, either.

"Do you see evidence of your husband, mistress?"

Bea surveyed the glen, its beauty now marred by the secret it was forced to keep. Her heart felt tight, frightened, for the truth was, aside from the artifacts that she knew had passed through her husband's hands at the time of their burial, there was nothing else here to suggest he'd been this way.

Her clues were thin, scattered, and unreliable.

But in her heart, she knew there was more. There was some sort of trace of him, invisible to the eye, only detectable by her instincts. She couldn't explain to the boys why she knew Thomas had been here; she just *knew*.

"We shouldn't be here when they return," Billy added. "We're sure to be outnumbered."

It was a fair point, one Bea conceded to reluctantly. She surveyed the land once more before turning to the lads watching and waiting for her.

"We'll slip into the trees," she decided. "Billy, when you saw the witch come through, she came to this glen? You're sure of it?"

Billy looked pale as he nodded. "Aye, mistress. I'm sure."

There was something there, some sort of thought she couldn't quite latch onto. She was missing something that was right in front of her face.

"She's only shown herself at night," she murmured. "Perhaps if we return tonight."

Both boys looked petrified at the idea, but neither spoke up against it.

Bea paced, circling the campsite once more, hoping to uncover any sort of clues.

*Tonight, her mind told her. All will become clear tonight.*

Despite the young age of the apothecarist's apprentice, he was not foolish. He was naive, perhaps, and certainly had his share of reckless moments, but the boy knew when something was a bad idea, and more often than not, he'd been able to stop himself from getting into a truly dangerous situation.

Likewise, the orphaned boy had learned from an early age to keep himself safe.

He didn't have the luxury of being too reckless—he had his own hide to watch out for. No one would do it for him.

Returning to the glen that night was one of those situations where both the apprentice and the orphan knew better. Both boys could *feel* how foolish and reckless it was, and had they been calling the shots, they wouldn't have tried it.

But above all, the boys were loyal, and Mistress Carver needed help. They wouldn't leave her to fight these demons on her own.

After a long, tense day of waiting wherein Mistress Carver said not much, and the boys said even less, the three of them returned to the woods in the dark.

It was much more ominous without the sunlight filtering in above them, and Billy's ears strained for the sounds of nocturnal wildlife.

It would be just his luck to cross the path of a bear or wolf when he was already out risking his neck.

The coffin maker's wife and her hound led the two boys into the woods, trailed by the apprentice, their group followed up by the orphan.

Despite their efforts, each step through the dried foliage felt loud and intrusive.

The moon above was nearly full, but the beams of moonlight were weak as they struggled to filter through the thinning branches above.

If the boys had been able to see the face of the coffin maker's wife, they might have known that despite her sure step and her straightened back, her eyes were giving away her fear and that she carried worry in the way her teeth bit at her lower lip.

Somewhere beyond their small party, an owl let out a soft call, as if warning them to turn back.

Billy caught the scent of smoke first, his body stiffening as his mind processed the meaning of the smell.

He let out a soft breath, rushing forward, past Colin, to reach out to the coffin maker's wife.

"Mistress," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "There's smoke."

The party froze, faces tilting toward the sky as everyone took a breath in.

Bea smelled the woodsmoke and faint whiffs of meat roasting on the fire, and her blood burned inside of her. They were there, in the glen.

She charged forward, heedless of the panicked boys trailing after her.

They neared the glen, and she paused still in the cover of the woods to survey.

There was a group of men, perhaps five of them, around a campfire. From their loud, slurred voices, Bea suspected they were drinking with their supper. She tried to make out her husband, but the men were too far from her vantage point.

Behind her, the boys shifted, anxious and frightened.

Bea had a carefully laid plan, one that she had explained several times to the boys, though each time her two young companions had looked confused and frightened by it all.

Still, they were with her in this, and they would not let their mistress down.

In the distance, there was a soft hoot of an owl, and Bea thought she heard the snap of a twig not far from that. She told herself it was a doe, some lost creature out too late and finding its way home.

Bea turned to the orphan. "Billy, it's time, go," she urged. The boy gave her a frightened but determined look before he nodded

and turned, slipping through the trees and disappearing into the night.

At her side, Colin stared at her warily.

"You remember your task?" Bea asked him, turning to face the young man.

"Aye, mistress," he agreed.

Bea nodded. "Good," she sighed. She noted the worry the boy carried around his eyes and mouth, saw his uncertainty, and she found herself reaching out to him. "All will be well, Colin. I promise."

Colin looked at her, swallowing hard. "I trust you, mistress. I'm with you to the end."

She noted the straightening of his shoulders, the determination setting his eyes, and she smiled. The young apprentice was growing into a fine young man. His master would be proud.

"You're a good man, Colin," Bea said softly. "One day, the world will also know how great you are too."

She couldn't be certain, but she thought she saw the boy blush in the darkness.

The coffin maker's wife smiled, turning back to the camp. She waited, her heart hammering in her chest as she took in the scene once more.

"It's time," she whispered to him.

Colin reached up to cross himself. "God be with us all."

The coffin maker had been away from his wife for far too long. His chest ached with the thought of her, with the worry he imagined must be settling on her shoulders. He'd never wanted so desperately to talk to her.

He knew there was *very* little chance that she was still at home, waiting for him to return, and he feared what sort of peril might have found her in her search for him.

His eyes swept the group of bandits that had been holding him hostage.

He'd been a fool, arrogant and reckless. He knew he shouldn't have been boasting of his wife's masterful designs, the clever pockets only he could find concealed in coffins, but he'd been blinded by his admiration of her genius, and in a state of love-struck stupor, had spoken about it to the wrong person.

His delivery had meant to be a simple one—there and back—though he'd had one other point of business to attend to before he returned to his loving wife.

Instead he'd been kidnapped, forced by the violent gang to aid them as they desecrated the dead. He loathed himself for his involvement in it.

He wondered just how many graves these villains would sack, how long they would hold him hostage. He wondered if he'd ever see his beloved again.

The men were drunk, congratulating themselves on another grave defiled. Thomas kept himself as much away from the group as was possible, for he feared if he spoke too much, the scoundrels would kill him for all the ill things he had to say about them.

The sound of their laughter was loud, bawdy, but over it, Thomas could hear the soft hooting of an owl, far off in the trees. He longed to slip into the forest, to escape these villains, but he feared that they would simply hunt him down, and heaven forbid they followed him home to his wife.

The coffin maker's wife was a strong woman, but he would never forgive himself for bringing such violence into their home.

"Oi!" a man shouted from the fire. "Coffin maker!"

Thomas's eyes shut, willing the men to ignore him and go back to their drinking.

"Ever put anyone"—here he hiccupped so heartily, it made him stagger on his seat—"in tha groun' near Kirkland?"

Thomas didn't want to answer, but he could feel the eyes of every man on him, and his brain raced to come up with a clever answer. Kirkland was at least three days' ride from here, a far larger village than the ones they'd been robbing, and much wealthier. Thomas *had* done some dealing in Kirkland, but it was nothing riding all the way out there for.

Still, if he could drive the men on a long journey toward a bigger city with constables...

"Oi! You dumb?" another man shouted.

The coffin maker blinked. "Yes, I've done business in Kirkland," he said slowly, regrettably.

The men turned toward one another, elbows jostling into each other's sides. Thomas could hear them hatching a plan, and he turned back to his meager meal, miserable.

Oh how he longed to see the face of his beloved once more, even if only to tell her...

Thomas's thoughts drifted, for there in the woods, he could have sworn he saw her. *Bea*.

His heart leapt in his throat, his food falling to the earth as he climbed to his feet. Before the bandits could shout at him, there was a tremendous sound, and then men were streaming in from the forest, pitchforks and swords glinting in the moonlight as they descended on the thieves.

The burglars sprang to their feet, but they were slow and stupid from ale and food, and their practiced hands were clumsy as they reached for their weapons.

Thomas found his chance, slipping out of the fray and edging the woods, dodging as more and more men poured into the small clearing. If the men of the villages were here, that must mean...

There was a loud bark, right before a body collided with his, and small strong arms wrapped so fiercely around his chest, he could not breathe.

He smelled her lavender scent and nearly fell to his knees.

"Bea," he sobbed, his body shaking as his arms encircled her. She was trembling in his grasp, her face pressed so deep into his chest, it felt as if she were trying to peer into his heart.

"Thomas," she cried. "My Thomas."

No sweeter words had the coffin maker ever heard.

"My love." The coffin maker's voice was quiet, reverent as he kissed every inch of his beloved's face. She had gentle tears rolling down her cheeks, her large brown eyes gazing up at her husband as if she feared he would disappear. Her arms were wrapped around his waist, her grip deceptively strong as she clung to him. Around their legs, their loyal hound barked, his nose nudging his master's knees in his apparent joy to be reunited as well.

"Mistress!"

There was a loud commotion across the camp, and the couple flinched, their gazes turning to see one of the men rush from the firepit toward her. "Oi, another bandit!" he shouted, pointing at Thomas.

"No!" Bea shouted, her heart lurching in her chest. "No, stop, this is my husband, the captive."

Even as she spoke, the coffin maker gently moved his beloved from his embrace, sliding her behind his body to protect her.

She, of course, wouldn't stand for such foolishness.

She stepped in front of him, despite his garbled protest, and planted her hands on her hips. The men of the village looked puzzled, but did in fact stop in the face of the tiny formidable woman.

"This is the hostage I told you about," she said, her voice steady despite the attention of the men before her. She was glorious and fierce, and Thomas felt the love in his heart swell for her. "Have you secured the bandits?"

The man blinked at her stupidly before nodding, his head swiveling back to the men now roped and bound.

"Aye, we ha' 'em like you said," he said, turning back to her.

The coffin maker's wife nodded, poised in her posture. "Good, please ensure the men are taken back to the village. I've sent a man to the home of Countess Dumount," she continued. "Make sure these men are secured until the countess may decide what to do with them."

The men looked confused, but given that she seemed to be the only one who understood what was going on, they followed Mistress Carver's orders. She watched as they secured the bandits, Colin working to ensure that the items that had been stolen were properly protected to be returned to their rightful owners.

It had taken a degree of convincing to get the men motivated to act in retaliation. They were all hungry for retribution, but not if a woman was to lead them to it.

In the end, it had been young Colin who had influenced the men in the village to band together and take back the sanctity of death from these thieves.

Bea had been incredibly proud of the young apprentice.

She felt her husband at her back, and she turned, her arms sliding around him once more. Before he could breathe another word, she reached up, cupping his face gently between her palms. She lifted up onto her toes, and without a word, brought her lips to his.

He let out a harsh breath, one that spoke of his trials and tribulations, and let himself sink into her embrace, nearly overcome by tears at his relief to hold her once again.

The coffin maker's wife could taste the salt tears on her husband's lips, but despite that, he'd never tasted sweeter.

She pulled back, her hands still clutching his dear, beloved face.

"I love you," she murmured, her eyes so bright and fierce, they glowed in the night.

"I love you with all that I am," he said back to her, meaning every word.

Bea opened her mouth, perhaps to declare further love, or perhaps to admonish him for leaving for so long, he couldn't tell.

Her eyes flickered past his shoulder, and in a moment, her face turned as pale as the moon, her mouth dropping open in a silent, shocked scream.

The coffin maker spun around, his hands busy securing his wife behind his body again, as he prepared to fight whatever new nightmare would dare to part them again.

The coffin maker's wife had seen much in the last few days that would've caused men far larger than her to cower. For truth, she'd *seen* men shake with fear as she stared down the horrors the bandits had left behind. Never once had her courage failed her, and she wasn't about to let it start now.

When she saw the bone-white face of the Dead Witch emerge from the shadows of the trees, Bea did not hesitate.

Her husband whirled around, his body trying once again to block hers, but her anger was great, and she was *tired* of the unexplainable.

So, Bea did what came naturally to her.

She bent down, picking up a thick stick by her feet, and when she stood, she charged the ghoul with a battle cry that would honor her ancestors.

"Be gone, Witch!" Bea screamed, lifting the stick above her head as if brandishing a sword.

The witch's white face paled further, and she let out a scream, her hands rising above her head as she cowered.

At the same moment, strong arms wrapped around Bea's waist, holding her back.

"My love," her husband gasped. "Stop, this is not what you think!"

Bea struggled in his arms a moment longer before his words had a chance to penetrate her mind. When they finally did, she whirled on him, fire in her eyes.

"Explain this," she demanded.

Thomas gently tugged the stick out his wife's hands, tossing it from her reach before securing his arms around her waist again. When he was sure she was *mostly* harmless, he beckoned for the young woman to come forward.

Bea turned to glare at the girl, who was looking at the coffin maker as if he were her knight in shining armor. Bea was not by her nature a jealous woman, but she'd been separated from her husband a long time, and it was clear these two shared a secret.

Before she could stop herself, she felt resentment toward them build in her chest.

"My love," Thomas started, his hand gently rubbing her hip through her dress. He knew the calming focus it often brought on his wife, and she shot him a dirty look for pulling such a trick. "This is Amelia Wood," he said softly. "Amelia, this is my wife, Bea."

The young woman turned huge round eyes toward the coffin maker's wife, and with clumsy movements, dipped into an awkward curtsy. Bea finally took time to take note of the girl's dress. It was filthy, as if she'd been rolling in the mud.

"My love, I have a lot to tell you," Thomas said softly.

Bea turned to her husband, gazing at his beautiful face. She turned back to the young woman and felt a stone slide into her stomach.

"Very well," she said, her voice taut with her tension. "Start at the beginning."

...

The coffin maker had been dispatched to the home of one Alton Bryant, nearly one year ago, with a coffin made for the patriarch of the house.

Alton had been young, in his early forties, when he'd succumbed to fever. He left behind eight daughters, most of whom were far too young to bring in any money to the house.

The coffin maker had spent the day with the Bryant family, comforting the bereaved as much as he could. It was one of those times he wished his beloved had been with him, for he knew no one could soothe as she could.

Thomas had been at the house only one night, but in that time, he'd been around enough to hear Widow Bryant make plans for her eldest daughter.

She was to marry a rich landowner a day's ride away. The man was old, a widower twice over already, and sought a lovely new bride with whom he hoped to spend the rest of his days. The eldest Bryant daughter, Sarah, could not have been more than sixteen years old, and had that night, cried herself to sleep at the prospect.

Moved by the young woman's fear of marrying a man more than thrice her senior, the coffin maker made an uncharacteristically rash decision.

He would help the girl fake her death, shortly after her marriage, so that her family might still be cared for, and she would be free to live a life of her own choosing.

It took time to coordinate, and for a while, the coffin maker doubted his ability to pull it off. But with the help of Monsieur Antoine, Thomas arranged for the girl's faked death and swift burial. Put into a special coffin of his own design, the girl was set to rest only two hours before the coffin maker was digging her up again. He set her up in a new village, with support of women who would tend to her and give her a new name and a new life. Her family, though grieving their loss of her, were cared for as promised.

Since his heroic, though rash, adventure, the coffin maker had kept his ear to the ground, looking for any and all opportunities to help the young women he knew were often shoved into disagreeable marriages.

It had then happened that two such arrangements were occurring at once. The first, a girl named Mary who had been merely fourteen years of age, and then Miss Wood, three towns over. Thomas had managed to dig up Mary, to free her from her coffin and set her on her way, and was on his way to help the next girl, when things started to go awry. Amelia, who was no older than fifteen when she'd been slated for marriage, had

received the sleeping draught from Thomas, and had been presumed dead as planned.

The part that had *not* gone to plan, however, were the events that followed. The untimely death of a maid, and the shockingly shrewd perspective of her family, had poor young Amelia buried in a coffin with an actual corpse, thrown into the ground before the coffin maker could find his way to her. Even if Thomas had been able to make it to her village in time, he'd been intercepted by the bandits, taken hostage long before then, leaving poor Amelia stuck in the coffin not built for her.

To his horror, the girl had clawed her way from the grave once she awoke, and she had been leaving a haunting tale in her wake as she tried to meet the coffin maker as planned.

As he told all this to his beloved wife, he watched her face warily, aware that at any moment, she could scream for him to stop, beg him to silence this madness.

Instead, she turned to him, eyes glowing with her fury. "And you thought you could not share this side venture with me?" she hissed, her tone glacial. "Would you think I would turn down these girls?" She turned to Amelia. "Is this why you chased me from the stables?"

Amelia nodded, tears in her eyes. "Y-yes," she hiccuped. "I feared being seen and recognized by anyone." Her eyes flickered to the coffin maker. "I was told to keep out of sight, but I didn't know what to do. I heard a stranger had brought his horse to the stable. I hoped it was you," she cried.

The coffin maker flinched, and Bea spun out of his arms, clearly furious. She removed the shawl from her shoulders and reached out, winding it around the young and frightened Amelia.

"We'll take care of you," Bea promised her. "You're safe now, love."

The young girl nearly burst into tears in the coffin maker's wife's embrace.

Thomas's eyes met his darling's gaze, and he let out a breath. "I should have told you," he said softly over the girl's head.

"Yes, you should have," Bea said fiercely.

Too late, he saw tears in his wife's eyes, and he felt his heart constrict. He'd wounded her by keeping her in the dark. He'd only ever sought to protect her, but he should have known better.

Bea didn't need protection; she needed partnership.

The coffin maker let out a deep breath, watching his wife tenderly care for the young would-be bride. In his heart, he vowed that he would never again let anything come between them. He would never keep anything from her again.

"There is another," Thomas said after a moment, his heart thundering against his chest. "Mr. Reynolds... that was the business he sought. His younger sister has been sold into an abusive marriage. I am meant to meet him within a fortnight," he said slowly.

Bea's determined eyes met his gaze over the girl's head. "We will rescue the poor woman," she said fiercely. "Together."

## | Epilogue |

The world was white and frozen, but inside, the home of the coffin maker blazed with warmth and life.

He opened the door to the rich scent of spiced stew and mulled wine, and he quickly shut the door again, trying to block out the cold. At the hearth, his wife sat in her seat, attentively working on her mending.

"Are you done for the day?" she asked, standing and stretching.

The coffin maker was momentarily distracted watching the new swell of her body. She'd told him of the child she carried once they'd been home and after they'd fallen into bed, limbs tangled, bodies sated, hearts beating against another once again. He had never been happier, nor more horrified to think of his wife and his unborn child facing the world as they had to find him.

He thanked God daily that his family had lived to rectify his foolishness.

"I am," he said, blinking to focus himself. "I was rather hoping to spend the rest of the day holding you in our bed."

The coffin maker's wife grinned, setting her mending down.

"I see no reason why not," she agreed, one hand sliding over her stomach. "That is, if you can get close enough with our child in the way."

The coffin maker's heart flipped in his chest. *Our child.*

He moved in two strides, across the cottage, sweeping his darling into his arms. She let out a squeak of surprise, laughing and kissing him deeply as he carried her to their bed.

"Aren't you hungry?" his beloved asked with a small giggle as she broke their kiss.

"Absolutely famished," he agreed, kissing her lips again before traveling down and pressing a kiss to the swell of her breasts. She let out a light sound, breathy, almost a laugh, as her fingers wove through his hair.

"Supper," she started again.

"I'm not yet famished for *food*," he corrected her, sliding down her body to press a tender kiss to her stomach. Her eyes flickered down to him, and a smile stretched over her lips.

"Monsieur Antoine thinks it will be a boy," she said, her hand splaying over her belly. His fingers wove through hers as he kissed her stomach once more.

"Our child could be a woodland creature," he said softly. "I care not, so long as they are born healthy and whole."

Bea let out a soft giggle. "You shouldn't taunt the Old Ones that way," she admonished lightly.

He grinned. "I'll leave a bowl of milk for them," he promised. He kissed her belly once more before moving further down her body.

Her winter clothes were too thick, he decided, with far too many layers.

He heard his wife giggle as he struggled to make his way beneath her skirts. When he finally found her soft thighs, he pressed kisses to them, making her muffled giggles turn into moans.

The coffin maker's wife bent her knees, opening her legs wider as her husband's mouth played and explored her flesh. She wished she could see him, but he was lost under piles of wool that, despite her best efforts, were not pooling around her waist well.

It hardly mattered when she felt his tongue on her, hot and slick and knowing.

She let out a cry, her back arching slightly as he feasted on her, bringing her body to a frenzy. She had been prepared for pregnancy well enough, but none of the women she'd spoken to had warned her how much her need for her husband would grow.

She wanted him, *always*.

He was all too eager to oblige.

The coffin maker drove his wife to the brink of ecstasy, knowing her body so well, he played it as finely as a court musician might play a violin.

He knew when her body had reached a peak, knew when she tipped over into sweet ecstasy, and he continued to lap at her, wanting to taste all of her.

"Thomas," she rasped, and he barely heard her through her skirts. Reluctantly, he pulled his head out from under her dress. When he emerged, his hair was on end, and his wife let out a sweet laugh, bringing him up her body to kiss him firmly. "My love, help me out of this dress," she said with a giggle, releasing him.

He happily obliged.

Many grunts and giggles later, both the coffin maker and his wife were free of their clothing, their bodies sliding together in perfect unison. Together, they navigated each other toward pleasure, and when they finally found that bright, shining ecstasy, they fell together, arms wound around each other, hearts beating as one.

...

"Love?"

Bea was exhausted, her body worn out from a rather rigorous night. "Hm?" she asked sleepily.

Thomas pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "I must get back to work," he said softly. "I have to finish the box for Monsieur Antoine before dinner tonight."

Bea's eyes popped open, and she smiled. *Tonight*. They were dining with their friends in celebration of the engagement of Amelia, Colin's mother, to her new suitor, one Mr. Porter. Bea had seen her old friend a handful of times since her adventures with the young apprentice, and she had grown close with the woman once more.

"I have a pie to bake," the coffin maker's wife said, climbing out of bed. "Will you make sure there is wood by the hearth so that..."

"It's done, my love."

Bea smiled at her beloved husband. Tonight would be the first time they were all back together. Monsieur Antoine and his new apprentice, the young Billy, would be joining Colin and his mother, as well as the young Miss Amelia who Colin had started to court. They were too young to marry yet, but never had the coffin maker's wife seen such a pair in love. Outside of her and her coffin maker, of course.

Tonight would be a joyous night, surrounded by loved ones and friends.

"Have you heard word yet?" Bea asked, turning to her husband. He looked up at her as he continued dressing.

"Yes," he agreed. "Young Miss Danvers has received the sleeping draught, and knows the plan."

Bea nodded. "Good, and the arrangements in the new village?" she asked.

"Taken care of. The sisters are eagerly awaiting their newest ward," Thomas explained.

Bea let out a breath. She'd been furious with him for his secrets he'd kept, but once she'd had time to reflect on it, she'd realized her husband's unexpected venture shouldn't surprise her.

His heart was good and kind and pure, and it made her proud how much he cared for those who needed help.

She went with him now—while she still could—and was a source of comfort to the girls as they were unburied and transported to their new lives. Bea brought them clothes and food, and assured them with wisdom and kindness that their lives were now their own.

As it had always been, it took both the coffin maker and his wife to create the perfect balance.

Bea knew she wouldn't always be able to go with him. Her baby would be born in a few months, and it was too risky to bring an infant on such campaigns. But now that she knew of the scheme, she was able to plan. She designed the coffins to be more efficient and comfortable for the girls, and helped her husband pack supplies to set the girls up.

She would do what she could, from wherever she could.

Thomas leaned toward her, pressing a kiss to her mouth once more before leaning lower and pressing a kiss to her stomach.

Bea smiled, her hands coming up to press into her stomach. She pictured her son, gentle-hearted as his father, with the cleverness of his mother. She imagined a child who would grow to live up to his father's legacy, a boy with a heart to help those in need.

In only a few short months, she would have a babe at her breast, her friends gathered around her to welcome this miracle of new life. Her child would be born safe and loved, raised in the tender loving hearts of the coffin maker and his wife.

**The End**

## **Acknowledgements**

A million thank you's would never be enough for the incredible team of hard-working people that made this story possible. Melissa Carter, my devoted and talented editor, Jillian O'Connor who was my creative sounding board and co-conspirator, and Pamela Stephenson, for her never-ending cheerleading. Thank you to my online communities, both fic and fiction, who have read and followed this story for years. Your continued support and encouragement has meant more to me than I can ever express.

## About The Author



### **Ariel Robyn**

An ever-curious learner, Ariel has been writing stories since she was four years old. Living in Southern California with her family, two massive dogs, and cat, Ariel can often be found wandering through green spaces, following new adventures, and always learning.