

It was a hot July day, and the garden was close to bursting in flames. The two little children crawled out from the shade beneath the rose bush, and found themselves face-to-face with their nanny.

“Good children don’t climb under plants,” was all she said.

“Sorry miss,” the girl started.

“We were just having fun!” The boy finished.

The nanny glanced at the dirt on their clothes and sighed. She grabbed the children’s hands and marched them back to the big house that stood on top of the hill. The gravel crunched under the six feet, and kept on crunching. Steam rose from the pavement, and for a second, you could have sworn you’d seen a flicker still walking towards the house. The nanny pulled a key out from somewhere in her apron and the big oak door creaked open,

“Go clean up. Mother will want you to look presentable for dinner.” She shook her head for a moment. “These headaches just won’t go away,” she complained. The door creaked and blew open again. No one noticed the shadow creeping along the floor. “Someone has to fix that thing soon.” The nanny stared at the children still staring at her. “Well? What are you still doing here? Go! Shoo!” She gestured with her hands and the children scurried away.

“Yes ma’am,” the little girl looked over her shoulder.

“On our way!”

“Perhaps you should,”

“See the doctor.” The little boy’s voice echoed around the corner.

Nanny tapped her temple. The shadows on the floor wrapped around her form, a deep sucking sound filled the air, and Nanny shivered. Slowly she walked out of the hall, her shadow following close behind.

Upstairs in the bathroom, Melinda was absentmindedly pulling at the wallpaper while Philip ruffled through the closet. The shower was on, but neither child had any interest in getting clean.

“You think,” Melinda’s nails scraped against the wall.

“Maybe it’s another one of,” Philip’s voice was muffled.

“Mom’s crazy dinner parties?”

“I dunno,”

“Well you asked.”

Melinda stopped asking questions, she tugged at her ponytail and the rubber band snapped against her hand. Philip let out a whimper of pain.

“What did you,” He asked coming out of the closet and rubbing his head.

“Do that for?” She finished his question.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t like it,” She shrugged.

“Anymore.”

“Exactly, and I can do whatever I,”

“Want. I know, that’s what,”

“Mom said.” Melinda lifted her chin. “I’m the,”

“Oldest, I know, you’ve said it”

“Before.” Philip sat next to her and pulled on the same piece of wallpaper. “Just next time, a little,”

“Warning, okay?” Melinda nodded. “Okay.”

The two children sat on the side of the shower pulling at the wallpaper. Neither seemed to notice the loud sound of running water or the mess of towels on the floor. They were too engrossed in the wallpaper. Without a sound, Melinda stood up. Philip immediately reached to lift her up. She was trying to reach for a crack that ran along the top of the wall, but Philip didn’t quite aim her right. She didn’t have to give him directions however, it was as if he just knew.

Downstairs two people were setting the table for dinner. There was an impressive wooden table, covered with gold silverware and silk napkins. The light streaming in the window bent through the glasses, making pretty designs on the floor. Nanny came in and looked distraught. She approached the two and directed a question to the young woman.

“My dear Cynthia,” she sighed, “I’m so terribly worried.”

A pretty seventeen-year-old girl looked up from folding napkins. “How might I be of service?”

“These headaches of mine are so terrible, and they’re upon me almost every hour.” Nanny sat down. “You’ve so very much in your time, can you help me...?”

The pretty girl sat down in one of the chairs. “It was ages ago in Constantinople, I had some friends,” she sighed, “some very good friends. They suffered as you do now.”

Nanny leaned forward. “And what did they do?”

“They tried herbs and poultices, nasty poultices I remember. Unfortunately, for all their pains, nothing worked.”

“Cynthia have you no answer for me?”

“Perhaps you should ask George. He has always taken a special interest in the healing arts.”

The young man at the other end of the room looked over. He was extremely tall — easily over six feet — but walked like an old man. “I remember. That doctor was pure bogus. It wasn’t until they visited that old medium in Seville that a cure was found.”

“What was the cure?”

George looked out the window. “The sun’s setting. There are preparations that require our urgent attention. Let us go, Cynthia.”

Cynthia smiled at Nanny and disappeared with the tall man.

Nanny looked out the window. The steam was no longer rising from the pavement, instead an eery coldness had settled over the whole property. The tightness in her forehead melted away as the candles flickered. Something shifted in the chair in the shadowy corner.

“Hello Nanny. I heard you wanted to talk.”

Melinda and Philip walked slowly down the stairs. Melinda pulled at the frills on the collar of her dress, and Philip nervously adjusted his bowtie.

“You think they’ll”

“Be excited to see us?” He shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Oh.”

The strains of violins drifted towards them, and their skin prickled with goosebumps. The children carefully stepped around a particularly creaky patch on the floor and watched as the maids and butlers scurried around.

“You think George”

“And Cynthia might”

“Be around?” Philip looked at his clean fingers with disgust.

“Maybe, probably in the”

“Kitchen.” Just as Philip spoke Nanny came bursting out of the kitchen doors.

“There you are, you two! Your mother has been looking for you and all the guests have been asking for you.”

“Oh,”

“Sorry.”

Nanny straightened their clothes and pushed them towards the ballroom doors.

“You seem”

“Better.” Melinda noted.

“Let’s just say I jumped at my own shadow and now it doesn’t cast itself so long.” Nanny frowned and pulled at something behind Melinda’s ear. “You been pulling at the wallpaper again?” Melinda looked at the floor.

“It’s not”

“My fault!” Melinda cried.

“There’s something there,”

“And we just want to know what it is!”

Nanny tapped her foot. “Fine, but it can wait till after the party.” She whisked the children through the doors.

The children looked at each other nervously before linking hands. They spotted their mother in the crowd. The setting summer sun was still dancing on the floor, but yet the coldness, a terrible coldness, had already overtaken the room. The children held onto each other and watched as the dancers circled

around them. The candles flickered, the chandeliers glowed, and the dancers waltzed on in ever wider circles, unseen by the mirrors on the ballroom walls.