



The Ashton Witch

By David A. Rollins

A Short Preview

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Prologue

Ashton, Maryland

June 21st, 1867

Estrella was running out of time. She only had a few minutes at best. The sound of the dogs approaching from the nearby woods grew louder in the pre-dawn air. She had to get out of the house. Her heart raced with fear as she hurriedly gathered a few belongings and some food to take along on her desperate flight, stuffing it all in a cloth sack. Then she darted for the back door, hoping to make it across the field to the trees before being spotted.

Pausing briefly on the porch, Estrella nervously surveyed her surroundings. A foggy mist covered the ground between her and the woods, illuminated by the soft light of the moon. She waited till the moon disappeared behind a cloud and then she pulled the hood of her dark cloak over her head and made a mad dash for the trees.

As she raced across the field, the woods looked to be miles away, especially with the excited baying of the hunting dogs sounding in her ears. Suddenly, a bright flash from between the trees on the edge of the woods lit up the night, stopping Estrella dead in her tracks. Her eyes widened as she stood in the misty grass, frightened and confused. Another flash lit the night, and another, and another. One by one, torches lit along the boundary of trees. A moment later a determined group of men, thirteen in all, stepped out into the open, circling and trapping her.

Estrella recognized most of them, men from town. They were armed and taunting her. Two of them had dogs on tight leashes. The animals barked wildly at Estrella as they strained to break loose. Their owners kept the fierce animals fast in their grip, holding them back. The other men pointed rifles at her and yelled obscenities. Terrified, Estrella kept turning around inside the closed circle of men, looking for any means of escape as they callously laughed at her fear, only to find every possible exit blocked. Defeated, she fell to her knees and began to cry. At that moment, the malicious mob parted like the Red Sea to let one man step forward. He came forth and stood over Estrella, looking down at her with ruthless eyes.

“Where’s the boy?” he demandingly asked.

Estrella kept silent, too frightened to answer. She knew this man well. His name was Caleb Beil, an elder in the town, a man of great influence among the people of Ashton, a man who held little patience for outsiders or anyone who he saw as “different”, and in his narrow view, Estrella was definitely different.

“Keep her here,” he ordered his men, and then he walked off toward the house.

Caleb entered the front door where he stopped to look around. Thin candles lit the interior. The furniture reflected a feminine style, as did the decorations, with plants and flowers throughout the room and lush tapestries on the walls and floors. A fire burned under the cauldron in the hearth, giving warmth to the room. Above the hearth, on the long mantle, set an assortment of finely designed boxes and intricately painted ceramic jars. Caleb ignored it all and made his way to the back of the house, as if he knew where he was going.

He passed through the kitchen. The shelves were well stocked, though not with the normal pantry items one might expect to find in a usual Ashton household. Instead, he found various sized jars of colorful powders and strange roots stocked there, along with odd shaped bottles with foreign labels and aromatic herbs and plants hanging from the shelves and rafters, all looking very unusual. From there, he made his way across the kitchen and started up a narrow enclosed stairway leading to the upper floor.

At the top, the stairway emptied out into a long hallway. He passed Estrella’s bedroom. The bed sat unmade, the sheets and covers mussed, and there were clothes scattered about the bare floor --- a young man’s clothes.

He continued down the hall.

The next room looked like a small sitting room. A sofa and two high back chairs sat squarely on a hand woven carpet in the center. As with the previous rooms, this room too lent itself to curious speculation. On the table in front of the sofa sat a large hand carved candle, its yellow light illuminating a peculiar assortment of mysterious diagrams and symbols drawn on the walls. A thick leather bound book also sat on the table, along with a bone china teapot and two empty tea cups on a silver tray. Caleb entered the room long enough to retrieve the book, and then he continued on his search.

The door to the last room he came to was closed, though a dim light shown under the bottom. Caleb turned the knob and gently pushed the door open. The room sat bare of any furniture and had no windows, though it was far from empty. A wide circle had been etched on the floor with four black candles spaced evenly around the perimeter. Inside the circle, sprawled on his back across a descending pentagram, laid the naked body of a young man, perhaps eighteen to twenty years old, his arms and legs outstretched. His wrists and his ankles were nailed to the floorboards, his torso laid open from his chest to his groin. His organs had been removed, as well as his penis and testicles, and placed in bowls around the victim. Caleb stood in the open doorway, silently staring down at the gruesome sight.

Outside, Estrella feared for her safety and her life. There would be no reasoning with these men. She anxiously worried over what they might do. She could see the evil lustful thoughts in their eyes. They leeringly tugged at her clothing, poking and jabbing at her, and lifted her dress with the barrels of their guns. She feared she would be raped, but sexual pleasure was not what these men had in mind. As she cowered on the ground, fighting off their lewd advances, Caleb returned. Something in his eyes told Estrella that she had more to fear from him than all the rest of the men combined.

“Bring up the wagon,” Caleb ordered one of the men.

The man he gave the order too hesitated. “What about my son?” he anxiously asked. “Did you find him?”

“Yes, I found him,” Caleb coldly replied. “He’s dead.”

The dread on the man’s face quickly changed to anger, an anger filled with intense hate. He immediately raised his rifle and pointed it at Estrella, poised to shoot.

“You murdering whore!” he screamed with tear filled eyes. “You killed my son!”

Estrella screamed out in fear as the man tightened his finger on the trigger. Just before the gun went off, Caleb grabbed the barrel and shoved it into the air. The distraught father looked at him in confusion.

“Not here,” Caleb said, still holding the barrel. “Go get the wagon.”

Caleb cautiously let go of the gun barrel. The distraught father lowered his rifle and walked off to do Caleb’s bidding. Caleb then turned his attention back to Estrella.

“You’re a witch!” he accusingly said, “and we shall deal with you appropriately.” He then turned back to his men. “Bring her,” he ordered them.

The men got Estrella to her feet. The wagon was brought up. On the back sat a plain pine box, freshly fashioned, the inside painted black. Terror showed in Estrella’s eyes when she saw makeshift casket. She began struggling wildly to free herself from her captor’s grip. Two of the men took the box from the wagon and placed it on the ground.

“No, no,” she tearfully whimpered. “Please don’t do this.”

Caleb remained unforgiving. “You have been justly accused and tried by this assembly,” he told her. “And now you must pay the price for your crimes.”

“You have no right!” she desperately screamed. “How can you do this to me?”

Caleb moved in closer to her, holding up the book he took from the house. “You’re sins have done this to you, not I,” he unrepentantly replied. “This book is proof of your guilt.” He then turned back to his men. “Put her in the box,” he ordered them.

Estrella’s screams echoed in the night as they lifted her up and placed her inside the box. She kicked and clawed at them as they struggled to hold her down. One of the men retrieved the lid from the back of the buckboard and lowered it down on top of the pine casket. Estrella forced her hands over the edge, trying to keep them from closing her in, only letting go when the lid smashed her fingers. She was still screaming when they began nailing the lid shut.

After securing the lid, they lifted the casket up and walked off into the dark woods, guided by their torches. They soon came to a small clearing where a grave had been dug and lowered the box down in to it. The men formed a circle around the grave, except for Caleb, who stood over the burial site with a shovel. The silence hung over the clearing like the mist on the grass. Even Estrella had stopped screaming from within her

nightmarish prison. All that could be heard was the crackling of the flames on the torches.

“Give witness to this justice we are about to execute,” Caleb said, breaking the silence. “Let no man speak against us, for we are righteous in our will, deliberate in our actions, and we shall not fail in our endeavor.” He took the shovel and scooped up a blade full of dirt. “We return you to the soil, to the domain of worms and insects, where your soul shall rot in perpetuity for the sins you unleashed upon the living. Let this justice be your penance, for it is well served.”

When the first blade of dirt hit the top of the casket, Estrella again screamed out in horror at the evil being perpetrated against her. Caleb could hear her pounding desperately on the lid of the box from inside as he continued shoveling dirt into the grave. With each blade full of soil, her screams grew more muffled, until he could no longer hear her at all. When the last blade of dirt topped off the grave, Caleb addressed his mob once more.

“Come,” he said. “We have one more task. We must burn the house.”

“What? What are you talking about?” the distraught father anxiously asked him.

“This land must be cleansed of all evil,” Caleb replied.

“But my son is in there. Let me get him out first. Let me take him home to his mother so we can bury him in our family plot.”

“Would you spoil the sanctity of that Holy ground?” Caleb heartlessly asked. “Your son has been seduced by this witch. His soul cannot be saved. Your weakness as a father has caused his death. Now you must be strong and do what must be done.”

“But he’s my son,” the distraught father pleaded.

“If you have doubts about our purpose here, then perhaps you would like to join him,” Caleb threatened.

Caleb’s words put fear into the distraught father’s heart. He looked at the waiting faces of the other men, and then he stepped back, his head bowed, his eyes staring at the ground, and silently shook his head no.

The men exited the woods and approached the house with their torches, prepared to light the dead boy’s funeral pyre.

“The others are waiting,” Caleb said to the boy’s father. “You must be the first.”

The boy's father knew he had no choice. He walked across the field to the house. As the other men watched, he took one more pleading glance back at Caleb, hoping for any sign of mercy or compassion for his son. Finding nothing in Caleb's eyes to comfort him, he turned and tossed his torch through the open door. In turn, the other's tossed their torches into the house as well. The flames began to spread. Caleb did not participate. He stood back from the others.

All at once, the house seemed to suck in air, as if it were taking one last breath, and then it exhaled, spewing fire from every window and door like a flamethrower. The streams of fire shot through the air across the yard at the unsuspecting men, setting them all ablaze, and then the fire in the house extinguished itself. Caleb stood silent as the terrified men ran screaming into the night, engulfed in flames, until their burnt bodies fell lifeless onto the ground. Then he turned and walked away, disappearing into the trees.

Chapter One

Present Day

The drive into Ashton is a pretty one, especially in the fall. A lonely two-lane highway leads into the town, snaking up through the dense woods of the Appalachian Mountains in western Maryland, offering a picturesque view of the valleys below at times. Robert Nicholas gazed out at the spectacular scenery, admiring the view as he drove along, while in the seat beside him his wife Emily intently scrutinized a map of the area.

“We should be coming up on the town soon,” she mentioned without looking up.

Robert turned his attention to his wife, smiling playfully. “Are you sure you’re reading that thing right? I thought you said you knew where you were going.”

“I do know where I’m going,” she confidently replied. “Just drive the car.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been up here?” he asked, pushing his wife’s patience.

Emily looked up from the map. “What does that matter?”

“How long, Em?” he impishly repeated.

“I was nine,” she reluctantly admitted.

Robert jokingly began counting back the years on his fingers.

“That’s twenty-one years ago.”

Emily started to defend her knowledge of the area again when they passed a sign post on the side of the road.

“There!” she victoriously exclaimed, pointing to the sign. “Ashton, one mile. Now do you believe me?”

Robert chuckled. “I never doubted you, dear.”

Emily gave him an annoyed look as she refolded the map.

Like many of the towns in the area, Ashton is an old community, with buildings and homes dating back to the civil war era. It prides itself in its history, even though nothing historical ever took place there. Nevertheless, that pride, combined with the isolation from the encroachment of modern day society, helps to maintain the town’s feel for its roots. Of course, improvements have been made over the years --- the roads were paved, and the buildings updated with modern conveniences such as electricity, telephone lines, and indoor plumbing --- though even with those modern upgrades, when you drive into Ashton, you feel as if you are stepping into the past.

“I’m glad that sign was there,” Robert said as they entered Ashton. “I might have blinked and missed the whole town.”

“I like it here. It’s quaint,” Emily offered in rebuttal.

“It’s certainly that,” Robert sarcastically replied. “What’s the address we’re looking for?”

“Twenty-seven Kenton Road. It’s the second right.”

“How many rights can there be in this town?” he jokingly remarked.

They were seeking the law office of John Slone. They had hired Slone to handle a legal matter for them in Ashton. His office sat on the second floor of an old brick building in the center of town. Robert and Emily entered the lobby and checked the wall directory for Slone’s office, and then they started up the long flight of stairs.

“I guess they haven’t heard of elevators out here yet,” Robert grumbled.

Emily stopped half way up the stairs and turned to him. “Are you going to do this all day long?” she huffily asked.

“Do what?” he innocently inquired.

“Complain! You’ve been grumbling the entire trip.”

“I have? I thought I was just joking around.”

“Well stop it! You’re getting on my nerves.”

“I’m sorry, Em. I was only trying to lighten the mood.”

Emily sighed and took his hand forgivingly. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just feeling a little anxious. I don’t know what to expect.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have had us drive all the way up here if he didn’t have good news.”

“No, I suppose not. Let’s just go hear what he has to say.”

At the top of the stairs, they came to a door with a frosted window. Imprinted on the frosted glass were the words, *John Slone, Attorney at Law*. Slone’s receptionist greeted them when they entered the office, a mannerly woman named Stella Campbell.

“Good afternoon,” she politely said. “How may I help you?”

“We’re here to see Mr. Slone. I’m Robert Nicholas. This is my wife, Emily.”

“Yes, of course. He’s expecting you. One moment please.”

Stella pressed a button on the intercom. “Mr. Slone?”

“Yes, Mrs. Campbell?” a voice answered.

“Mr. And Mrs. Nicholas are here to see you.”

“Very good, send them in please.”

“You can go right in,” Stella informed them.

“Thank you,” they answered in unison.

Slone’s office was spacey, though sparsely furnished, with only a desk near a large window and a conference table in the middle of the room. When Robert and Emily entered, they found Slone seated at the far end of the table with an elderly woman. He immediately stood up.

“Come in, come in,” he greeted them. “I hope you didn’t have any problems finding us.”

Emily pinched Robert’s arm before he made a stupid joke. “No problem at all,” she replied.

“Good. This is Mrs. Gardner. She’ll be assisting us today.”

They all exchanged greetings and then sat down.

“I have the deed,” Slone informed them. “The house is yours, free and clear.”

Emily’s eyes lit up. “That’s wonderful!”

“No surprises?” Robert skeptically asked.

“No, no surprises. Mr. Beil has relinquished all claims to the property. Mrs. Gardner here has fully researched the deed with the County Registry. Her investigation revealed that the property was bequeathed to your grandfather by his father, making him the sole owner. His father’s Will is also properly filed. The only evidence Beil’s lawyers could offer were some suspect rental contracts dating back to the 1800’s, which he claims predates the deed, but he lacked any legal documents showing that his family ever owned the house. Without those records, those rental contracts were not enough to substantiate his claim, so the judge sided with us.”

“That sounds easy enough,” Robert said, sounding relieved.

“Well, it might have been easier had your wife’s grandfather not abandoned the property,” Slone mentioned.

“He didn’t abandon anything,” Emily tersely corrected him. “He disappeared!”

“That may well be true, Mrs. Nicholas,” Slone patiently replied. “However, Beil’s lawyers produced several witnesses that claim to have seen your grandfather pack his belongings and leave Ashton, witnesses of good standing in this town I might add.”

“I don’t care what they say or who saw what,” Emily argued. “I haven’t seen or heard from my grandfather in several months. He’s lived here since I was a child. He wouldn’t just pack up and leave for no reason. Something has happened to him.”

“Unfortunately, the investigation into his disappearance has not provided any concrete proof of his demise,” Slone argued. “Conversely, since no one has him in recent months, the court ruled that his demise was probable, and thus allowed the transfer of the deed via the terms of his Will. As of today, according to the law, your grandfather is now legally presumed dead. However, that fact does not preclude you from continuing the investigation into his disappearance. How are those investigations going anyway?”

“No leads,” Emily despairingly told him. “He seems to have just dropped off the face of the earth.”

“I am sorry,” Slone sympathetically replied. “I know it must be difficult for you not knowing what happened. If you ever get a lead on that, let me know and I’ll handle the case for you. For now, I have some paperwork for you to sign and then Mrs. Gardner will take you out to the house. Did you remember to bring my fee?”

After all the documents were signed and monies exchanged, Robert and Emily left the law office and followed Mrs. Gardner out to the house. The house set out on Carrington Road, about a mile from town, in a big secluded field surrounded by woods.

“The house needs some work,” Mrs. Gardner informed them as they exited their cars. “No one has been in there since your grandfather left.”

“Did you know my grandfather?” Emily asked.

“No, I can’t say that I did.”

“What about this Mr. Beil? Do you know him?”

“I can’t say that I know him personally,” she carefully answered, “but if you stay in Ashton long enough you’ll discover that everyone knows Aaron Beil. His family is one of the oldest families in Ashton.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing,” Emily curiously remarked.

Mrs. Gardner quickly corrected herself. “Oh no, not at all. I just meant that he’s well known.” She then changed the subject. “Shall we go in and look around?”

The three of them prepared to enter the house. Mrs. Gardner slid the key into the lock and struggled to get the door open. The lock wouldn’t budge. She took the key out and inspected it to make sure she had the right one and then she tried again.

“It must be jammed,” she said as she wiggled the doorknob trying to force the key. Finally, the key turned. “Got it!” she said, pushing the door open.

As she did, the house seemed to suck in air from the outside. The vacuum created a sweeping gust of wind that kicked up the leaves and pulled the door out of Mrs. Gardner’s hand. It seemed to moan as it rushed by, like tortured voices crying out in agony. At the same moment, hundreds of birds suddenly took flight from the surrounding woods, noisily disappearing into the horizon. Emily seemed especially affected by the peculiar event. A chilling, almost frightened feeling came over her as she stood on the porch listening to the moaning wind and the startled sound of the fleeing birds.

“What the hell was that?” Robert confusedly asked, watching the birds fly off.

“They’re migrating,” Mrs. Gardner answered, equally confused. “I suppose the wind could have startled them. It gets a bit gusty up in these hills.”

Emily said nothing, hiding her anxiousness as they stepped inside.

“Well, it’s not as bad as I thought,” Mrs. Gardner remarked as she looked around. “At least it’s clean.”

“Cleaned out is more like it,” Emily disdainfully replied. “Someone wanted to make it look like my grandfather left.”

Mrs. Gardner disregarded her comment. “Let me show you around.”

“I think I know my way around this house,” Emily retorted. “I’ve been here many times as a child.”

“Oh yes, I forgot,” Mrs. Gardner embarrassingly replied. “Perhaps I should just leave you the key then, unless you have any other questions.”

“Maybe that would be better,” Robert amiably agreed. “I think we’d like to be alone for now.”

Mrs. Gardner handed him the key. “Are you planning to stay here?” she nervously asked.

Emily immediately picked up on the nervousness in her voice. “We haven’t decided on that yet. Why do you ask?”

Mrs. Gardner seemed hesitant to answer. “No reason. I just thought if you planned to sell the property, I would leave you my card.”

Emily looked at her suspiciously. “Well thank you, Mrs. Gardner. We’ll let you know if we decide to go that route.”

Mrs. Gardner stood in the doorway, as if she were struggling for something to say, and then she turned to leave without saying anything further.

“Mrs. Gardner?” Emily called to her.

Mrs. Gardner stopped and turned back to face her. “Yes?”

“How long have you lived here?”

“I was born here,” she proudly answered.

“So you must know a lot of people in Ashton.”

“Oh yes. It’s a small town. Most of us know each other.”

“Then how is it you didn’t know my grandfather? He lived here for years.”

“Well, I knew of him. I just didn’t know him personally.”

“Did you see him leave?”

“I live in town. I wouldn’t have seen him leave.”

“Do you know anyone who saw him leave? Surely you two had mutual friends in Ashton.”

Again, Mrs. Gardner seemed to struggle for a reply. “I really wish I could help you,” she apologetically replied. “I just don’t have the answers you need.”

“My grandfather disappeared without a trace, Mrs. Gardner. Someone in this town must know what happened to him. I’m going to find out who.”

Mrs. Gardner hesitantly walked back into the room. “All houses have bad memories,” she sympathetically said. “It’s bad luck to wake the ghosts of the past. Let them sleep.”

She then turned and left, crossing herself as she exited through the door.

“What was that all about?” Robert asked with a chuckle.

“She knows something,” Emily suspiciously answered.

Robert gazed skeptically at her. “Don’t go getting paranoid already, Em,” he warned. “Just because she lives here is no reason to accuse her of something sinister.”

“I didn’t accuse her of anything, and I’m not paranoid,” Emily insisted.

Robert didn’t want to argue the point, so he changed the subject. “This is a big house. It’s much nicer than I imagined considering how old it is. Mrs. Gardner was right though. It’s going to need some work. I suppose we could come out on weekends.”

“I want to start right away,” Emily determinedly said.

“That’s fine with me. Let me go out to the car and get some paper so I can take some notes on what we’re going to need. I’ll be right back.”

After Robert left, Emily started looking around. Memories from her childhood began flooding her mind. She remembered how the room looked when her grandfather lived there, the table and chair over by the window where he sat and in the evening with his coffee, tinkering with old timepieces, and the grandfather clock in the corner, which he built himself and always seemed to be adjusting. It made her sad to think those memories were all she had now, and angry to think that his possessions were taken. For all she knew, they could be still be right there in Ashton, sitting in someone else’s home.

Those memories were abruptly interrupted by the sound of something banging on the upper floor. A moment later, a horrified scream filled her ears, as if someone were screaming out in great pain. The sound of it chilled her blood.

“Robert!” she frighteningly called.

Robert was leaning in through the window of the car, looking for his notepad, when he heard Emily's frightened call. He immediately ran back inside the house.

"What's wrong?" he confusedly asked.

"I heard something upstairs," she nervously informed him.

"Heard something? Like what?"

"I heard someone scream."

Robert stood there bewildered. "You heard someone scream?"

"Yes, Robert!" she stringently whispered, as if not wanting her voice heard by the unknown intruder above them. "Someone is up there."

Robert wasn't sure what to make of her claim. He hesitated, wondering what he should do next.

"Are you sure it wasn't just the wind?" he asked.

"Robert! I know what I heard!"

"Okay, calm down. You stay here. I'll go check it out."

"No, I want to go with you," she pleaded.

Robert reluctantly agreed. "Alright, come on then, but stay behind me."

As Robert started up the kitchen stairs with Emily, the ridiculousness of the situation finally hit him.

"This is crazy," he said to himself. "There's nobody here, Em."

"Then why are you hesitating?" she argued.

He sighed wearily as they continued up the stairwell. At the top, he stopped and listened for a moment, gazing down the hallway.

"Do you see anything?" Emily whispered from behind.

"Yes, an empty hallway," he sarcastically replied.

Emily smacked him on the arm. "That's not funny!"

"There's nobody up here, Em," he insisted.

He stepped out into the hall with Emily close behind him.

"Maybe they're hiding," she whispered.

By that point, Robert felt convinced that no one else was in the house. He got his nerve back and started down the hall toward the first room.

"Hello!" he boldly called out. "If you're up here, show yourself. We won't hurt you."

He waited for a reply. When none came, he turned back to his frightened wife. "See, Em? I told you. Nobody's here."

At that exact moment, every door to every room on the floor slammed shut, scaring Robert out of his wits and causing Emily to scream out loud.

"Jesus!" he exclaimed as his heart skipped a beat.

"What's going on?" Emily nervously asked.

"It was probably just the wind," he replied, trying to convince himself as well. "I told you downstairs, that's all you heard."

"I heard someone scream," she argued again.

Robert's confidence slowly returned. He walked up to the first room and opened the door to look in.

"See? It's empty," he calmly said.

Emily peeked into the room, still not convinced that they were alone. Robert then walked down to the next room with Emily following behind and opened the door.

"This one's empty too."

As they approached the last room, the hallway suddenly got very cold, the same chilling cold Emily felt before they entered the house, and she hugged herself for warmth.

"Where's that cold air coming from?" she asked.

"I'll check the attic later," Robert mentioned as he reached for the doorknob to the room. "There's must be a bad draft up there."

The door wouldn't budge. Robert leaned his shoulder into it and gave it a hard shove. When the door finally gave way, Emily suddenly felt weak. A wave of dizziness overtook her as she stood in the hall. The feeling surrounded her, passed through her, and then it was gone, as if something unseen inside the room had escaped and rushed by her. Her knees buckled a little and she put her hand against the wall to steady herself.

"Robert?" she weakly called.

Robert turned to see his wife leaning against the wall. "Em? What's wrong?"

He rushed to her, catching her in his arms, easing her down as she sank to the floor.

"They're gone," she mysteriously said.

"Gone?" Robert confusedly asked. "Who's gone?"

Emily didn't answer.

“Let’s get you downstairs,” he concernedly suggested.

He helped her to her feet and held her as they walked back down the stairway. Once they were downstairs again, Emily seemed to recover from her dizzy spell. She sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. Robert opened a window to let some air in.

“Feeling better?” he caringly asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“What happened up there?”

I don’t know,” she woozily replied. “I just got dizzy.”

“You’re not pregnant are you?”

Emily looked at him annoyingly. “No! But thank you for asking so sensitively.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Em. You just scared me. I thought you were going to pass out.”

“It scared me too,” she anxiously admitted.

“Maybe we should just head back,” Robert suggested. “This has been a very stressful day for you.”

“No, I’m okay. Go ahead and make your notes. I’ll just sit here till you’re done, then we can leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Really.”

“Okay, I won’t be long.”

Robert returned to the car to get his note pad, convinced that everything was fine again with his wife. However, Emily lied. She wasn’t fine, nor could she tell her husband how she really felt. She sat on the floor contemplating what had happened. Obviously, Robert had not experienced the same feeling, either at the door when they entered the house or upstairs when they entered that last room. Emily herself did not know what to make of it. All she kept hearing over and over in her mind was Mrs. Gardener’s dire warning about not waking the ghosts of the past.

Robert spent the next hour inspecting the house for defects, making detailed notes of what he would need to correct them. Emily remained on the floor, waiting for him to finish. When he finally completed his notes, they locked up the house and prepared to leave.

“This is a nice piece of land,” Robert commented as he looked around. “We’ll have to get a boundary map. I’d be interested to see how big the property really is.”

“It goes way back into the woods,” Emily informed him. “I used to played in the clearings back there when I was a little girl. It’s funny, I haven’t thought about that until just now.”

“You can show me next time. I think we should get going before it starts getting dark.”

As they drove out of Ashton, Robert noticed that his wife seemed quiet and introspective.

“Are you alright over there?”

“I’m just tired,” she dismissively replied.

“All in all, I’d say it was a good day,” he offered. “We won the court case, and the house isn’t really in that bad a shape.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Emily asked, taking him by surprise.

Robert chuckled. “Ghosts?”

“Yes, spirits that inhabit old houses.”

“Oh, I get it. That Mrs. Gardner got you thinking, didn’t she?”

“I felt something in that house,” she replied.

Robert wasn’t sure how to answer such a ridiculous claim. “That’s a little out of left field, isn’t it?” he questioned her.

She didn’t answer.

“Em, what did you mean when we were upstairs and you said, *they’re gone*.”

Emily looked at him with despair. She knew it was useless to talk about it. Robert would only laugh at her. She turned away to look out of the window. Seeing that she didn’t want to talk, Robert decided not to push the issue.

Several Hours Later

Back in Ashton, Lena Gardner and her husband Sam entered the Ashton Inn, a favorite bistro of theirs in town. They were shown to a table and given a menu.

“What are you having, Lena?” Sam asked.

“The fish sounds good,” she answered, perusing the menu. “How about you?”

“I can’t decide,” he replied.

“Try the veal,” she suggested. “I had it the last time. It’s very good.”

“Veal gives me the winds,” he shamelessly admitted.

Lena gave him a disgusted look. “Oh, Sam!”

“Order some drinks, I’ll decide when I get back. I have to use the rest room.”

After Sam left, Lena ordered drinks and then sat back to wait for him to return. She took a compact out of her purse to check her makeup. As she put it away, someone sat down across from her. Lena looked up, expecting to see her husband. Instead, she was shocked to find Aaron Beil sitting there.

“Aaron!” she gasped.

Aaron Beil had a sinister look about him, long and lean, with a skeletal face and piercing eyes, a serious man, not easily given to laughter or known for his jovial nature. In fact, his seriousness could be very unnerving at times . . . like now.

“Good evening, Mrs. Gardner,” he politely said. “I’m sorry to intrude. This won’t take but a moment of your time.”

“What do you want? My husband will be back in a moment,” she anxiously mentioned.

“I understand you took Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas out to see the house today.”

“It’s their house, Aaron.”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“It has nothing to do with me,” Lena argued. “All I did was research the deed. I was only doing my job.”

“How convenient,” he sarcastically replied. “However, that’s neither here nor there. Did they show any interest in selling?”

“I mentioned it. They didn’t seem to be very receptive to the idea.”

“I’d like to make them an offer. Perhaps you would be kind enough to pass it along to them on my behalf.”

Lena just shook her head. “Aaron, why bother? You’ve been trying to get your hands on that property for years. The research is conclusive. The house never belonged to your family.”

“Just because you never found the records doesn’t mean they don’t exist,” Aaron argued.

Lena looked at him, exasperated. “Okay, you can drop your offer by my office. I’ll see that they get it. I have to tell you though, I really don’t think they’re interested in selling.”

“And why is that?”

“Mrs. Nicholas was asking about her grandfather.”

Aaron’s expression tightened.

“She’s convinced that something happened to him,” Lena explained.

“And what do you think, Mrs. Gardner?”

“That’s none of my business,” she nervously answered.

Aaron sat and stared hard at her for a moment. Lena felt her heart begin to race as he leaned forward across the table and placed his hand on hers.

“There are many suspicious people in the world,” he whispered to her. “Suspicion can be a contagion, a contagion that we should guard against in our lives lest we become susceptible.”

Lena was too frightened to answer.

“I’ll have my offer on your desk Monday morning,” he said, standing up. “I’d appreciate it if you give it your immediate attention.”

Lena was literally shaking when Aaron walked away. Her breathing became labored and she felt a tightening in her chest. She reached for her drink, downing it all in one gulp to calm her nerves. A moment later, Sam returned to the table and noticed her empty glass.

“You drank that already?” he asked. “You’re really becoming a lush lately, Lena.”

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