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## Spring and a Young Woman's Fancy

*From Veronica Crandall's diary -*

April 21, 2016

I'm not sure how long I'll have to wait before my husband's body is discovered. I hope the police or park rangers find him before a park visitor stumbles across the scene of the murder, far from the established trail. What an unfortunate shock that would be! Suppose it was young couple, spending their first vacation on the island? *Oh God, I hope not.*

Suppose they had a small boy? A precocious pre-teen. The sort guaranteed to venture closer, driven by an irresistible sense of curiosity that frequently compelled him to take risks he shouldn't. He would probably assume my husband was a fellow explorer, a kindred spirit out for a hike. The crude seat on which Toby rested, assembled from large chunks of granite to resemble a stone age, Adirondack chair, would certainly catch his attention. The boy might even be envious. After all, the seat was a choice spot, providing the best possible view of Long Pond, far below.

Would the parents stop their too-inquisitive son before he got close enough to see the blood on my husband's scalp? The gaping wound in the top of Toby's skull? I know what would happen next. Cell phone coverage is good enough for Mom and Dad to make a frantic call to 911. It wouldn't be long before the police arrived.

But I doubt anything will happen today. It's already dark, and I know the loons on Long Pond have already begun their evening song. I'm sure their haunting calls are audible from that secluded spot near the top of Beech Mountain. At least it is a peaceful place to sit beneath the stars. A little cold perhaps, but that isn't going to be a problem for Toby. Not anymore.

April 22, 2016

I was visited by the police this morning. I learned my late husband was discovered soon after dawn. That was 16 hours ago. I think it's important to capture the details while they're fresh in my mind, before going to bed and trying to sleep.

At breakfast, I remember Dorothy complained because I only picked at my food. If she had known what I knew, maybe she wouldn't have been able to eat either. Soon afterwards, a detective rang our doorbell. It was a good thing I took time to disguise the remnants of a black eye. Amazing what you can accomplish with a little make up.

He was a handsome man with a rugged face and blue eyes that were quite attractive. He was nothing like Toby, who was quite a bit older, overweight, with a soft face and weak chin. I estimated the detective to be in his mid-thirties. Probably five years older than me. He announced himself as Detective Sergeant Nicholson, but when I studied his ID, I saw his first name was Dashiell.

There was a time when I fantasized about meeting someone new. A man who wouldn't look at me with cold, lifeless eyes whenever he drank too much. Instead, the detective regarded me with the eyes of a man who knows murders are most often committed by someone close to the victim.

Sergeant Nicholson commented on how well I seemed to take the news of my husband's sudden death. It's hard to act surprised when you know what's coming. He asked if I could account for my whereabouts yesterday afternoon. When I explained I was hiking, the detective automatically assumed I'd been with my husband. His brow creased with suspicion when I said although I was familiar with the spot where Toby's body was discovered, I was climbing the Acadia summit while my husband was hiking the Beech Mountain trail.

Unfortunately, no one could vouch for me. I told the detective I passed a few hikers but all of them were strangers. Other than an affectionate golden retriever who stopped to give me a sniff and let me give him a rub in return, there were no witnesses who might validate my alibi. I remembered the dog more clearly than the couple who owned him. And I doubted his owners would remember me.

The morning was damp and cold, so I asked if I could take his trench coat and offer him a cup of coffee. I suggested one of the servants could light the fire in the drawing room and perhaps he could warm himself. After all, it was the least I could do for a member of the Maine State Police Force. I was disappointed when he declined, but I suppose he does have a job to do.

As he stood there with pad in hand, dripping on the floor in my foyer, he continued to ask questions. Was it common for Mr. Crandall to frequent the area of the park around Beech Mountain? Why did I wait until full dark before calling the police? I insisted if he was not able to remove his damp coat and join me for a cup of coffee, the least we could do was to find a place where we could both sit down. I refused to answer any more questions standing in the foyer. He finally relented, and when we sat down opposite each other, my skirt rose to the point where my legs were prominently displayed. I insist on working out at least two hours every day

and my legs are quite well toned and shaped. The bruises have completely receded, leaving no trace of discoloration.

We had an interesting conversation and I've tried to capture it, as best as I can remember. I started by asking if he preferred Dashiell, or Dash, and was quite dismayed when he replied simply, "Detective is fine, Mrs. Crandall, or Sergeant Nicholson, whichever you prefer."

"Well then, *Detective*," I remember saying, making sure to emphasize the last word in a way that communicated my disappointment, "I had no idea my husband hadn't come home after his hike. The house is large enough the two of us can go for days without seeing one another. It wasn't until Henry said something that I realized my husband was not home."

"Who's Henry?"

"The butler. A very capable man. He manages the staff and does just about everything except cook and clean."

"Any other staff?"

"We have a gardener—Pietro, but he doesn't live in the house. He has an apartment over the garage."

"Other than you, Henry and Pietro, who else is part of your household?"

"There's Dorothy. She's does the cooking. We also have a maid named Sally."

I remember pausing for a moment and then correcting myself. "I'm sorry. I guess I should have said that *I* have a maid named Sally—not we."

"No one else?"

“I almost forgot. There is one other person. My older brother, Johnny. But he doesn't live here.”

“Just visiting?”

“My brother hasn't been feeling well. Shortly after he was discharged from the hospital, I asked if he would like to stay with me—just until he's stronger. We've always been very close.”

“I'll need to speak with everyone.”

“Individually?”

The detective nodded.

“I'll ask Henry to select a suitable room you can use for interviews. He can also explain which rooms were being used by Toby. I'm not sure.”

The detective arched one of his eyebrows. “You're not sure which rooms were being used by your husband?”

“As I said before, it's a big house.”

April 23, 2016

My detective returned today, this time with additional police officers and a search warrant. It took the entire day to search the estate. It was a chaotic day, but I'll try to capture the high spots.

I remember Dorothy was beside herself. The police made such a mess of her kitchen. I accompanied the officers and while they were in the library, I discovered Dashiell has read many of the same authors as me. Not surprisingly, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was one of his favorites. I learned Dashiell was very familiar with many of the classic mysteries and mystery authors.

“I can tell you really know your Holmes,” I said. “But what about your namesake?”

“Hammett was required reading when I was growing up. It was my mother's idea to name me after the author.”

“Do you think she had a premonition her son would one day become Sam Spade?” I was joking, of course.

Dashiell shrugged. “Spade was a private detective, but of course you know that. I suppose however, police detective is close enough. My mother always said life was stranger than fiction.”

I would have liked to continue the conversation, but after all, the police were in the middle of a search. They didn't finish until dinnertime. When it was over, Dashiell only shared one finding, but it was significant. I am an avid rock climber and keep my gear stowed in the gardener's shed. Dashiell noted the absence of an ice axe among the large selection of climbing tools. He googled a photo on his phone and showed me a picture of one.

“I find it hard to believe you don't own one of these, Mrs. Crandall. As far as I could tell, you have everything else a climber might need.”

“Not very useful here on the island.”

“Does that mean you don't have one?”

"Is it important?" I asked, even though I already knew it was.

"A tool like this could easily have made the wound that killed your husband."

"I do own one, Detective Nicholson. I've climbed some of the mountains in Canada. The ice axe should be in the shed. If it isn't there anymore, I don't know what happened to it."

He gave me the same suspicious look I remembered from yesterday, after telling him Toby and I had hiked different trails on the same afternoon. Fortunately, the missing ice axe was the only fruit from his search. I have a very special place where I hide my diary. It would have been embarrassing if Dashiell read some of my entries from the last few days.

The detective had done his homework and knew about the prenuptial agreement which stated I did not receive any significant funds in the event of a divorce. In the event of Toby's death however, I inherited his entire estate.

"I am afraid this provides a considerable motive," Dashiell suggested.

"I understand, Detective, really I do. After all, a young woman married to a much older man and she stands to inherit a fortune. It's only natural I should be a suspect," I replied.

"When I interviewed your butler yesterday, he indicated Mr. Crandall left the house at approximately two thirty. The coroner puts the time of death at roughly 4 PM, give or take half an hour. That would have given your husband at least an hour to get to the spot where his body was discovered, maybe two. Your house is close to the trailhead. More than enough time for him to have covered that much ground before he was murdered."

"What's your point, Detective?"

“I was hoping you could pin down the time you left for your own hike, and when you finished.”

“I had lunch at the Asticou Inn. I remember starting the trail at 2 o'clock. By the time I reached the top of Acadia Mountain, my phone said it was three. I enjoyed the view for a while before starting back. It was close to five thirty by the time I got back to the house.”

“And we established yesterday nobody can verify you were on the trail when you say you were?”

I raised a finger as I made a point. “At the same time, I'm sure no witnesses saw me on the Beech Mountain trail either—because I wasn't there.”

“Suppose I said we had a witness.”

“You'd be lying.”

The detective didn't say anything else. I tried to read his blue eyes, but he was careful to empty anything useful before I looked. I assumed this was the part where I was supposed to break down and confess. Instead, I asked him a question. “Do you honestly believe a woman such as myself, weighing all of 120 pounds (I may have told a white lie on this point, based on the last time I stepped on a scale), managed to successfully charge and overwhelm my 250 pound husband with nothing more than adrenaline and determination?”

“Mr. Crandall was found seated, with his back to the direction the killer would have come from. It was a windy day. The gusts near the summit would have been enough to disguise any noise the killer might have made.”

“Seems thin to me.”

“Maybe. Another possibility is this played out a different way. Suppose you had an accomplice, Mrs. Crandall? I suspect a young and beautiful woman such as yourself would have no trouble finding a strong and willing man who was able to do the job.”

Dashiell smiled, and his rugged façade melted away. His face became quite boyish, which I found to be very attractive. I am embarrassed to admit I may have blushed when he commented on my looks. As I sit here at my desk and finish this diary entry, I find myself hoping he will come back tomorrow.

April 24, 2016

Today was the third day in a row my detective came to call. I was so delighted when he agreed to have tea, I couldn't wait for bedtime to make my usual diary entry. Our conversation is still crystal clear in my head, so the words on the page are probably more accurate than my last few entries.

The weather had improved and although it was still too cool to eat outside, there was a spectacular view of the mountains from the enclosed sun porch. Dash was pleasant, and we talked about favorite authors and what each of us were currently reading. I showed him my dog eared copy of *Catcher in the Rye* and explained it was a favorite. He was envious when I explained I had majored in literature. His own degree was law enforcement, but he had always loved to read.

“This tastes like green tea,” Dash said, “but there's something else I can't quite place.”

“I like to add a pinch of pomegranate cranberry.”

Dorothy came into the room and placed a basket of popovers on the table. I offered one to Dash and asked, "Can I entice you?"

The detective hesitated for a moment. I suspected he was trying to decide if I was referring to the basket in my hand. "No thanks," he said, "I probably shouldn't."

I shrugged and helped myself. The popovers were still warm. I opened one and slathered it with strawberry jam before taking a bite. After a two hour workout and no breakfast until then, it was heavenly.

At this point, I could tell that Dash had something to say but wasn't sure how to bring up the subject.

"Mrs. Crandall," he eventually began.

I interrupted, "Veronica, please."

"Mrs. Crandall," he insisted. "This may come as a shock, but we have learned your husband was having an affair. She owns one of the art galleries in downtown Bar Harbor. Her name is Alison Schnelle. I have to ask, were you aware?"

I laughed, which was probably not the appropriate reaction. A piece of jam escaped the side of second popover and landed on the tablecloth. I used the distraction to clean it up with my napkin while considering my reply. "I cannot say I recognize the name, but it wouldn't have been the first time. I was under no illusions. My husband could, when the mood suited him, be very charming and humorous. It was a quality that first appealed to me. Unfortunately, after we married, he chose more and more to share that charm with other women."

I was tempted to add this wasn't the only thing to change after we were married, but I still find it difficult to talk about the physical abuse. This diary is the only record of the injuries I've sustained. If there is one bright spot in all of this misery, it is the knowledge that at last I am safe. But I was careful not to share any of this with Dash. I suppose in a way, I'm ashamed—although I know I shouldn't be.

There was an awkward moment of silence before Dash continued. "I apologize in advance, but I'm sure you understand I have to pursue all possible leads. I've heard rumors you were also having an affair."

I took another bite. "People gossip, Detective. Who am I supposed to be having this affair with?"

"Pietro, the gardener. He's a big man, strong as well—a man accustomed to the heavy work associated with landscaping. He could have easily overpowered your late husband. He's also one of several people who don't have an alibi for your husband's time of death."

I laughed again, very convincingly, or at least I hoped. "If you're suggesting Pietro murdered my husband because he and I were having an affair, you're wrong."

"Wrong on which count?"

"I am not sleeping with my gardener. As to whether Pietro killed Toby, you should ask him—not me."

I watched Dash's face carefully. At that moment, his countenance was awash in sunshine and his blue eyes looked out impassively from a face that could have been carved from the

granite on which the porch was resting. I could deduce nothing from his expression. I am worried he does not believe me.

I could think of only one way he could have heard a rumor about an affair between me and my gardener. It would need to have come from Pietro, himself. I am sure this will become a problem for me.

April 25, 2016

I confronted Pietro earlier today, and he responded by threatening me with blackmail. I think he was stunned when I called his bluff. Pietro backed down, but I'm not sure for how long. He could destroy everything.

Henry knows about the blackmail attempt. He came to me and suggested I fire the gardener. Pietro frequently drinks too much, and this is not the first time Henry has asked me to give him the sack. I refused. Usually, I try not to disagree with my butler. Nothing gets past Henry and he has a good head on his shoulders. I know I can trust him. Just the same, I was afraid it would look suspicious. My brother agreed.

Johnny is worried about Detective Nicholson and the police investigation. He thinks the detective is eventually going to arrest me for my late husband's death. Ever since Mom died, Johnny has been overprotective. It's sweet but I wish he wouldn't worry so much about me.

After dinner, I googled capital punishment for the State of Maine. I fear I'll have nightmares again. I suppose it's time to put the diary away and take another pill before bed.

April 26, 2016

Toby's funeral was today. I really wished Johnny could have been there, but I wasn't surprised when he apologized and said he couldn't attend. He hasn't been able to endure a memorial service since the Accident that claimed Dad's life. Besides, my brother and Toby were like the proverbial bulldozer that couldn't be stopped and the wall that couldn't be moved. The result was always a lot of noise but very little ever got accomplished.

While I learned to ignore my husband's infidelity and endure the way I was treated, Johnny insisted on getting in Toby's face at every opportunity. My brother's presence was enough to stop the physical abuse whenever he was in the house, but tensions escalated to the point my husband was insisting I ask Johnny to leave. I knew what would happen as soon as my brother was gone.

Toby was not the least interested when I suggested Johnny was not yet well enough to leave. Considering the animosity between them, I suppose it would have been hypocritical for my brother to attend the funeral.

However, I was pleased to see my detective at the church. Dash expressed his condolences and used sympathetic words appropriate to the occasion, but I think we both know I am not exactly grief-stricken. I watched as he mingled with relatives and friends. I'd like to think he was offering comfort, and although that may have been true to some extent, I suspect he was also asking questions about my relationship with my late husband.

There was a point when I came to his rescue, when I noticed he had been trapped by Aunt Sophie. She never passes up the opportunity to take advantage of a sympathetic ear. I could see the helpless look in the detective's expression and realized he was no doubt learning about my

aunt's most recent ailment and the inevitable surgery that usually resulted. He said he was grateful when I managed to pry the two of them apart. I remember we were even able to share an innocent jibe at my aunt's expense, at least until I sensed Dash remembered he was talking to a murder suspect. It was the first time I've heard him laugh. The sound was unabashed and made no excuses to anyone who might be listening. I liked it.

April 29, 2016

I have been very busy and missed a few journal entries. Yesterday, Henry discovered Pietro's body in one of the gardens. Today, my favorite detective was back but I'm afraid he was very unhappy with me. Dash told me the wound in the back of Pietro's head matched the one that killed Toby. He had another search warrant. Two searches in less than a week was too much for Dorothy. I had to restrain her when she tried to defend her kitchen with a cast iron skillet.

"It looks as though we missed the ice axe during our first search," Dash said. "We won't make the same mistake a second time. You could make this a lot easier if you know where it is."

I knew it was resting on the bottom of Echo Lake, but I was careful not to share that information with Dash.

"We've already had this discussion," I said. "I made the point there was no way I could have overpowered my husband, who weighed twice as much as me. Pietro was just as big, most of it muscle. He was also younger."

“We found a nearly empty hip flask in his pocket. After the autopsy is complete, I’m sure we’ll find although Pietro was younger, he was also drunk. If he had drained the flask, a marching band could have snuck up on him and he wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Why would a marching band want to kill my gardener? Pietro loved music.”

I noticed the almost imperceptible upturn of his mouth before the detective caught himself. He quickly wiped the nascent smile from his face and pursed his lips. “This is hardly the time for humor, Mrs. Crandall. We also found a half empty bottle of very expensive Scotch in his room. The other bottles in his trash were cheap stuff. It makes me wonder if he wasn’t supplied with a bottle he normally could not afford. Two murders and you make a viable suspect in both.”

“Why would I want to kill Pietro?” I replied, feigning an innocent expression.

“You denied having an affair with your gardener.”

“Still do.”

“You could have decided he was a loose end.”

“He wasn’t a loose end, for God’s sake. He was a gardener. He wasn’t even a good gardener. God knows why Toby hired him.”

“When we searched your home before, I noticed a novel in your library. It was the ‘First Deadly Sin’, by Lawrence Sanders.”

I knew where the detective was headed. “I’ve read the book. The murderer is a rock climber. He kills his victims with an ice axe.”

“So, you admit you’re familiar with the story line.”

“I also keep the complete works of Edgar Allen Poe on the same shelf. *For the love of God*, Detective, if I'd already gotten him drunk, why not wall up poor Fortunato in my basement?”

The incipient smile was back. My detective was still angry with me, but he was also amused by the reference to *The Cask of Amontillado*. I remained hopeful. Persistence might yet win the day.

“Perhaps,” I said, “you'll join me for lunch while your fellow officers take the house apart?”

“I don't think that would be appropriate, Mrs. Crandall.”

I sighed because it was so discouraging. I spent the last year in a failed marriage with a man I despised. Now I had finally met someone exciting, and all he wanted was to coax a confession out of me. It seemed hopeless, but I am not easily dissuaded. I decided to change the tone of the conversation by sharing a story he might find interesting. “Are you familiar with the case of Dennis Larson?”

He was obviously surprised. “Of course, but it's hardly relevant.”

“I disagree. As far as I know, it's the only recorded murder ever committed in Acadia National Park.”

The detective nodded. “In 1987, Larson pushed his bride over the side of Otter Cliff, shortly after taking out a huge insurance policy.”

“There were no witnesses and no physical evidence tying him to the crime,” I said. “Just like our current situation. Larson wasn’t arrested until months later. Eventually, a detective much like you got him to confess. If not for that, he’d still be a free man.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting you are a more formidable opponent than Dennis Larson. That would be a mistake.”

“You make me sound like Professor Moriarty.” I winked and blasted him with an impish grin. “Is that really the way you picture me?”

Dash smiled and said, “I have a confession to make.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line? You’re not going to tell me it was you who killed Pietro in my backyard, are you?”

“No, of course not. I’m finding it hard to believe you’re a murderess. You don’t fit the profile. No prior record, everyone knew your marriage was on the rocks but none of your friends will say a word against you. Incredibly enough, even your late husband’s friends expressed more sympathy for you, than they did for Mr. Crandall.”

“I was trapped in a terrible marriage, Dashiell. All our friends knew it. Have you ever been married? I couldn’t help but notice you’re not wearing a wedding band.”

“We’re getting off subject.”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “If you haven’t been in that situation, you can’t know what it was like.”

Dash sighed with exasperation. "I don't understand you, Mrs. Crandall. You're being investigated for murder and instead of worrying about it, you're concerned whether the detective assigned to your case is married."

"It's one thing to accuse me of murder," I joked, "but I'm no home wrecker."

Dash pursed his lips and seemed to consider what I said. "Mrs. Crandall," he said, "if your plan is to seduce me so you can derail my investigation, you're wasting your time."

"You never answered my question."

"I have a job to do," Dash finally said. "I'll keep investigating until I either prove it was you, or I find a better suspect."

It was my turn to be surprised. "I assumed you and I had an exclusive relationship. I hope you're not seeing other suspects behind my back."

I remember thinking my words must have caught the detective off guard, because even though I'm sure it isn't part of the usual interrogation routine, he laughed.

He started to say something but stopped himself.

"Mrs. Crandall," he began for the second time.

"Veronica," I insisted.

"Very well... Veronica, I know most of your staff were not on good terms with Mr. Crandall. I never met him, but it is apparent he was not well liked. Your butler despised the man. I'll need to question everyone in your household again."

"I'm afraid you've just missed Johnny, but everyone else is here."

“Where’s your brother?”

“He still has an apartment in Boston. It’s been a long time since he was last there and wanted to pick up a few things. He should be back in a day or two.”

The detective checked his notepad and confirmed with me that he had the correct address and phone number for my brother’s apartment.

Dash joined the rest of his team and I decided to have lunch while they completed their search. I was picking at a salad nicoise and finishing the last of my iced tea when the detective found me on the terrace. He was waving a slip of paper as though he had found the smoking gun that closed the case.

“We found this on the desk in your bedroom,” Dash said, handing me the note.

It was a warning slip from one of the park rangers. I had found it on my windshield after returning from my hike to the top of Acadia Mountain.

“Why didn’t you say something about this before?” Dash said, angrily.

“I didn’t think about it. What’s the big deal?”

“I know we looked through that desk the first time we searched your home.”

“After I parked my car at the Acadia trailhead, I realized I left the pass for my car at home. I didn’t think the State Police were responsible for enforcing parking regulations.”

“Not funny. You know what I mean. This clearly documents your car was parked where you stated, at 3 PM on the day your husband was murdered. You should have said something.”

It took a minute, then I realized what must have happened. "I took a book with me when I hiked Acadia Trail. I forgot about it, but after returning home, I remember using the slip as a temporary bookmark."

"It wasn't Salinger, was it? *Catcher in the Rye*?"

I nodded my head.

"That's the book you were reading the last time I visited. We talked about it."

"I didn't think it was relevant."

"It's *very* relevant."

I shook my head. "You said time of death was 4 PM, give or take half an hour. It's only a few minutes from that parking lot to the trailhead for Beech Mountain. It's not much of an alibi."

"I said your husband left the house by two thirty. He would have been well into his hike by the time this slip was left on your car. That means you couldn't possibly have followed him from the house, and if you didn't, there was no way you could have known where to find him. The spot where he was murdered wasn't even on the trail."

I remember thinking everything was unraveling because I forgot about the damn warning slip. I needed to salvage my status as suspect number one, so I said the first thing that popped into my head. "Unless I knew where my husband was going to be."

Dash's eyebrows shot up. "Is that a confession?"

"No," I replied hastily. "Merely an observation. All I'm saying is the warning slip doesn't prove anything."

“Veronica, this is ridiculous. I’m arguing you’ve got an alibi and you’re disagreeing with me. You know how this is supposed to work, don’t you?”

My detective was getting comfortable using my first name. I remember thinking this was a big improvement over Mrs. Crandall. I was making progress.

“What kind of a game are you playing?” he asked.

“I’m not playing games, Dashiell. You’re the one who keeps insisting this is serious business.”

The detective paused a beat. Then he said, “Fine. I’m keeping the warning slip. I’ve already interviewed your staff again. When the search is over, we’ll be out of your hair.” He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

May 3, 2016

I regret to write I have not seen my detective in days. I’m worried it’s because of the warning slip from the park ranger. The evening after Dash found it on my desk and waved it in front of me, I wasn’t able to sleep. Taking another pill didn’t help.

On several occasions, I have found myself sitting on the porch, remembering the short amount of time we spent there. I am convinced Dash is thinking of me, as well. I only need to find a way to bring us back together.

May 5, 2016

Dash returned today. I wish I could write something positive about his visit, but it was one of the worst days of my life. He tracked down my brother and talked with him. I was afraid something like this was going to happen. Johnny confessed, just like Dennis Larson.

“Your brother was furious about the way you were being treated. He told me about the black eye. Johnny followed Mr. Crandall to the parking lot for Beech Mountain. When your husband left the trail, Johnny knew where he was going. He said you and he had been there before. It was a simple matter for Johnny to sneak up on your husband from behind. But Pietro saw him leave with the ice axe. Your gardener sealed his own fate when he tried to blackmail your brother.”

I already knew all of this. After killing my husband, Johnny had immediately come to me and explained what happened. The version I heard from the detective was essentially the same. The only difference was the part about the blackmail. Pietro had come directly to the lady of the house. If I refused to cooperate, Pietro threatened to turn my brother over to the police.

It was a mistake for me to tell Johnny. I knew that now. When he learned Pietro wanted *me*, as well as Toby's money and the house—in exchange for his silence, my brother was almost blind with fury. It was then I realized the hospital should never have released him from the psych ward. It became clear the only way to avoid further bloodshed was to call Pietro's bluff. At first, it seemed to work. But then Henry found Pietro's body and I suspected what had happened. I was going to explain all this to Dash, but he raised a hand to stop me before I could say anything.

“He insisted you knew nothing about the murders,” Dash said. “That's what I decided to put in my report.”

“How do you know he’s telling the truth?”

“He told us where to find the ice axe. The diver came up with it in less than an hour.”

Dash had answered a different question than the one I asked, but I suspected he knew that.

“He didn’t confess until I told him we were about to arrest you.”

I could feel a single teardrop begin to slide down the side of my cheek. It was just like Johnny to look out for his little sister, right up until the end. Dash was very sweet and tried his best to comfort me. I wasn’t in the mood. It is almost unbearable to know I am going to lose my brother.

“Johnny is all I have left,” I said. “What will happen to him?”

“That’s not for me to decide.”

“If you weren’t so persistent,” I said, “my brother would be free.”

Dash was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “Is that really what you wanted?”

The single teardrop turned into a steady flow that blurred my vision. I could taste the salt on my lips. Dash offered me a handkerchief and I wiped my eyes. “I don’t feel very well, Detective. Perhaps you should leave.”

Henry must have been listening from a discreet distance because he suddenly appeared at Dash’s side. My butler’s body language was obvious. The lady of the house just asked you to leave, or weren’t you listening? The detective got the hint and let Henry quietly led him to the front door.

May 10, 2016

I've hired the best possible attorney for Johnny. He wants to squash the confession. I don't think it will work, but it's part of a strategy to negotiate the lightest possible sentence.

I got the chance to talk with Johnny. I wanted to be strong for him, the same way he was for me, but I started crying. He held me in his arms and stroked my hair until the worst was over. I was sixteen years old the last time he'd done that. It was the day Dad died and everything changed forever. The day my brother came home from football practice and found his only sister coiled in her bed, bruises on her face and blood on her pillow.

It would have been impossible to misunderstand the look of fury on Johnny's face. I tried to talk him out of anything foolish. I pleaded it was me who started the argument with Dad.

The authorities agreed our father died as the result of an accident. No witnesses came forward to contradict Johnny's version of the story, because there weren't any. By the time I got downstairs, it was already over. Between that and the extenuating circumstances, the jury felt they had no choice except to render a verdict of not guilty.

I remember my first reaction was relief. It was over. Those were the exact words I wrote in the diary I purchased after the trial. I was wrong. It was just the beginning. Ever since the Accident, Johnny has been in and out of mental institutions.

It is like the past 14 years never happened. I wanted to tell him how guilty I felt, but I couldn't get the words out of my mouth. We had come full circle. He was on trial again and it

was all my fault. I'm horrified at the possibility all of this may have been lurking at the back of my mind the day I invited him to stay with us.

If I'm honest with myself, the truth is that Toby would still be alive, and my brother would be a free man. I know these thoughts are not healthy. It's almost as if I've begun to abuse myself in Toby's absence.

May 12, 2016

Dash stopped at the house today, to inquire about me. Henry told him very little has changed, and he was under strict orders to advise all visitors I am unavailable. I didn't really give him any such orders, but I know Henry is just looking out for me.

It's just as well. I'm not very good company. Dorothy continues to admonish me for not eating enough. It's spring and the gardens are suffering because I don't have a gardener anymore. Henry wants to hire a replacement, but I simply don't care. I'm not in the mood for flowers. I don't deserve them.

June 11, 2016

It's been almost a month since I made my last diary entry. There is a saying that time heals all wounds. Bullshit. Maybe bruises and broken bones but that's the limit. What really happens is you gradually learn to accept your new reality. Perhaps the fact I've restarted the diary is a good sign. I was going to destroy it, but I've changed my mind. This diary has

become my very own picture of Dorian Gray. Instead of keeping me beautiful, it keeps me honest—at least with myself. That's better than being beautiful.

Apparently, my detective is persistent about everything he sets his mind to. I can identify with that trait. After several more visits, I finally agreed to meet with him, and we had lunch on the patio. That was today. Maybe that's another reason I've begun making diary entries again. Dorothy was thrilled when I finished my lunch.

Afterward, we took a drive along the Park Loop Road and stopped at Otter Cliff. It was warmer than usual for the first half of June and the sun felt good on my cheeks. We stood at the edge and I told him it was 80 feet to the granite ledge at the bottom. I asked him, "Have you ever tried rock climbing, Dash?"

"No, but it looks interesting. I don't suppose you'd be willing to give me a lesson, Veronica?"

"My friends call me Ronny. And I'd love to give you a lesson. You really learn to trust someone when they're belaying you with a rope while you're climbing a rock face. If they're not paying attention and you slip...well, it could end badly."

"How about next Saturday?" Dash responded.

I remember smiling. It was awkward at first, from lack of practice. Like when you try to move your arm after it's been in a cast for six weeks. I know what that feels like. I'm confident I'll get the hang of it. Smiling is like learning to ride a bicycle. You never forget how.

I'm actually excited at the prospect of giving climbing lessons to Dash. I guess this means he really trusts me. Go figure.