

# Ophelia

by Angeline Hawkes-Craig

It had been easy to pack up her life and move when the lawyers contacted her concerning her inheriting her late uncle's estate. Her heart danced at the prospect of obtaining his castle although the lawyers assured her it was in need of many repairs and much restoration. She was surprised to see just how little she owned—it all fit into four packing crates and three suitcases. She sighed. So, that was her life: four crates and three suitcases?

The castle was massive and came complete with a weathered, old caretaker who liked to be called Henry. No sir or mister involved. Just Henry. He had to be at least eighty. Henry had been born at the castle and, except for a brief foray into college life; he had lived there ever since. He had also been her late uncle's best friend. So, he knew all sorts of interesting family gossip that Ophelia had never been privy to. After a few weeks of rummaging through old chests and cluttered drawers, Ophelia began to slowly clean out and organize her new home. She learned which parts of the castle were uninhabitable and which parts were just plain unsafe due to the level of dilapidation. Henry had a massive collection of blueprints, sketches, bills, and any document pertaining to the castle going back for a good four hundred years.

Just studying Henry's collection was a historical undertaking. The wealth of information was incredible. Henry, himself, was a walking encyclopedia on the castle. He knew everything—where that vase came from, how old that rug was...He was the expert on Castle Piper. Castle Piper, at one time, had possessed a lovely garden, but now the roses grew wild and unruly stretching their thorny arms this way and that, latching onto whatever might be in their way. The blossoms were spectacular, no matter how corrupted the garden had grown.

One night, late, Ophelia wrapped her bathrobe around her, and candle in hand, for not all the halls and staircases had been wired for electricity, made her way to the kitchen for a cup of hot chocolate. Henry was already there, dozing by the enormous stone fireplace that had once been used for cooking. Not wanting to wake him, she tiptoed around the stone floored room, looking for a pot. She then found the milk in the refrigerator and the cocoa and poured her ingredients in the pot, placed it all on top of the burner on the old 1940's gas stove. Ophelia stirred the bubbly milk slowly, leaning against the stove and basking in its heat.

Henry snorted and looked around from his chair where he had been slouched over, arms crossed around himself in a warming embrace. "Miss. Sorry. Didn't hear you come in." Henry sat up straighter and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Oh, it's okay. Didn't want to wake you and I wanted some cocoa to help get me off to sleep." Ophelia smiled. "Would you care for a cup?"

Henry smiled. "That's thoughtful of you. I'd love a cup. You know the cook would come live here and work fulltime for a slight increase in her salary. She lives in a boarding house and doesn't like it much."

Ophelia smiled. It would be nice to have another woman in the house even if she was older. "That would be great. I'll have a talk with her about it. I'm sure there's plenty of living space!" Ophelia laughed. "Why didn't Uncle Elias have her on fulltime?"

"Your uncle was too tight with the money."

"But, surely just a little increase would have been worth the benefit of having a cook here at all times."

"Your uncle didn't like women too much either." Henry laughed.

"He didn't?" Ophelia thought that was strange seeing how her uncle had been married four times. "What about all of those wives?"

Henry laughed a little harder than before. "I think that is why he didn't care for women very much!"

Ophelia laughed. "Oh. That makes sense. I wonder why he chose me to leave his estate to; I mean he had his brother, my father and numerous male relatives. Why me?" Ophelia turned off the range and cautiously poured the hot cocoa into the stoneware mugs.

"Elias said that there was something in this castle that you needed."

Ophelia's eyebrows rose as she sat down at the table and sat the two mugs down as well. "He didn't happen to be a little more specific about that, did he?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Don't scare easy, do you?" Henry blew on his steaming cocoa.

Ophelia frowned. "Not unless it has eight arms and legs or slithers really fast." She chuckled.

Henry nodded seriously.

"Why? What's so scary that's lurking in this old place? You know besides the usual creaks and groans and things that go bump in the night in a four hundred year old building?" Ophelia laughed lightly.

"The older the building, the longer it has for spirits to take up the place as their permanent residence." Henry tapped on his mug.

"Well, that's okay by me. There's enough space here for all of us—walking or floating." She smiled not wanting to offend the old man's apparently serious beliefs. Besides, she had dabbled in the ghost and hauntings fascination herself and decided long ago that anything was possible. "Still wonder why Uncle Elias didn't leave it all to my father. Would've made more sense as his logical choice."

Henry shifted in his chair and stared into the fire. He turned back and looked at Ophelia, who looked even younger than her thirty years in the rosy glow of the fire. "Begging your pardon, Miss, but your uncle thought your father was a bastard. Not in the literal sense of the word, of course."

Ophelia laughed. “Bastard is an understatement! So, Uncle Elias didn’t like him either. I always thought we never saw him much because of the miles between us all. Well, my uncle was not alone in his feelings.”

Henry looked at her a bit startled by her confession. “Did Uncle Elias ever say why he thought my father was a bastard, as you say?” Ophelia was curious as to how much of her family scandal had circulated through the rest of the family.

“Elias said he was an abusive tyrant. Especially after your mother died.”

“Elias was right.”

Henry nodded knowingly. “Met him twice myself. Bit rude. Kept to himself mostly.”

“Lucky for you.” Ophelia smiled wryly.

Henry got up and retrieved the iron poker from a storage space in the wall and poked the fire and the tilting logs. “You have a brother?” He asked, back turned.

“Yes. He’s a lawyer. A lot like my father.”

“Ah.” Henry said again in a knowing manner.

“Did Uncle Elias mention him?”

“No. Only knew because when it came out that you had inherited the estate, he called Elias’ lawyers trying to get a piece of the pie for himself.”

Ophelia laughed. “I would have expected as much!”

“His name wasn’t mentioned in the will.” Henry said matter-of-factly. “It was as if Elias didn’t know he even existed.”

“Well, to Elias he practically didn’t. I think the only times my brother ever wrote Uncle Elias was thank you letters for the various presents Elias sent us.” Ophelia got up and went to the pan on the stove. “There’s still more. Would you like another cup?”

Henry nodded no.

Ophelia poured most of the remaining cocoa into her mug and sat back down.

“Well, I should turn in. Didn’t mean to fall asleep in m’ chair. Fire was so warm, lulled these old bones to sleep.” Henry chuckled.

“That’s okay. Fall asleep wherever you want. This old place is more your home than mine.” Ophelia smiled warmly and watched Henry leave.

“Good night, Miss.”

“ ‘Night, Henry.”

Ophelia watched the fire dance and sizzle—orange and red, flashes of yellow—before her in the fireplace. She had done a lot of thinking, starting on her flight over from the states. Then during the entire time she was unpacking and re-organizing the habitable rooms. Going through her uncle’s things made her focus on family issues she had put out of her mind for so many years. Old photos of her uncle and her father and their other brothers, all now deceased except for her father—letters, diaries—all of these personal everyday things dragged her dysfunctional past right out there into the light of the present. It came kicking and screaming. Ophelia suppressed most of the junk for longer than psychiatrists would probably say was healthy.

Her childhood had been saturated with abuse—both psychological and physical—for some reason she had become the scapegoat for all that was wrong with the world as far as her father had been concerned. Most of her family knew about it. It was just one of those big fat family secrets everyone swept under the rug where you couldn't see how ugly it was, even though you knew it was there. Not such an easy thing to do if you're the one getting pounded on and smacked around daily. When she had met her ex-husband, Justin, in college, her father had decided that she was insane for wanting to throw her life away on him, as he claimed. So, her father had disabled her car and refused to allow her out of the house. Justin had to literally help her escape from her bedroom window like the character in some cheap teenage romance novel.

Justin had turned out to be only a step up from her tyrant father. Jealous and insecure of her relationships with her friends, and later her fellow archeologists; he constantly demanded to know her whereabouts, demanded complete hour by hour itineraries whenever she traveled on assignment and often he would just "show up" at a dig site. Her colleagues could not stand his intolerable behavior, but they put up with him mainly because they knew that she had been humiliated enough by his shouting and public fits of jealousy and resentment.

It turned out in the end, that he had been a completely faithless husband with so many girlfriends on the side that there never had been an exact count. He could not keep track of all the liaisons he had over their ten years of marriage. He filed for divorce and ran off with his business partner's secretary—who turned out to also be his business partner's wife. Now, Justin had the audacity to call and ask her for money after hearing she had inherited Elias's estate. He had left twenty-three messages on her answering machine. The last one Henry had the pleasure of overhearing. She was sure he had just loved the angry tirade that Justin lapsed into when he realized that—again—he had reached her answering machine.

Ophelia sighed and gulped down the last of her, now stone cold, cocoa and lighting the candle went on back to her room. She had chosen one of the rooms next to her uncle's former room. This room must have been a room of one of his former wives as it was decorated in flocked lavender wallpaper and deep purple velvets. It was stunning and Ophelia changed very little in the room. She entered the room to find the fire roaring and the bed turned down with a toasty hot bed warmer inserted between the sheets.

"Henry." She whispered with a smile on her face. What a wonderful old gent he was. She couldn't sleep after so much activity during the past days, so instead she decided to read. It was so quiet. All she could hear was the papery rustle of each page she turned and the crackling of the fireplace. No electronic buzzing, no plumbing groaning, just blissful silence.

That's when she heard the laughter.

Ophelia froze, her heart bashing against her ribs, her blood exploding through her veins and swishing in her ears—what was that? Sitting perfectly still, breath held, she listened. She heard it again. Very distinct deep, echoing male laughter. Where was it

coming from? She lit the candlestick once more by the fire, and slipped into the hall. Stealthily, she crept down the great stone hall with deep brown stained wood flooring—she stopped and waited.

There it was again. She turned her head. It was coming from the bedroom three doors down. She tiptoed up to the door, and put her ear against it to listen.

“Well, don’t just stand out there in the hall, girl. Come in before you catch thy death.” The deep voice boomed.

Ophelia jumped; startled by whomever it was closed in that room that knew she was outside of the door. Ophelia pushed the heavy door open slowly. It creaked and groaned on its hinges as if it hadn’t been opened for a good while. Ophelia saw two chairs pulled up before another blazing fire and the semi-opaque presence of a man seated in one of the chairs.

“Sit down. Brandy?” The man asked waving his slender hand towards a small teacart that held crystal glasses and a decanter of liquor.

“Uh. No. Thank you. I don’t drink.” Ophelia stuttered and observed the ghostly figure with some reserve.

“Well, go ahead then. Get it over with. Have your look-see.” The man said while sipping his drink.

“You’re a—”

“Ghost? Aye. Have been for quite some time now, Ophelia. I may call thee, Ophelia, yes?” The man chuckled.

Ophelia sat down in the free chair with a plunk. The man was dressed in what appeared to have been velvet breeches, a white shirt, a vest, and hose and shoes. He looked every bit the part of the gentleman. “How did you know my name?” Ophelia asked. In the back of her head she was mentally kicking herself for caring about how a ghost came to know her name. A GHOST for Pete’s sake. Damn. She was sitting here making small talk with a spirit.

“Thy uncle told me.” The ghost said matter-of-factly.

“You knew Uncle Elias?” Ophelia asked.

“Aye. We were very good friends. He had a fond spot for thee. Felt you got dealt a bad hand in life.” The ghost uncrossed his legs and stood up. He was taller than he had appeared sitting down.

Ophelia frowned. “Henry says Uncle didn’t like women much.”

“Had bad taste in women, he did.” The ghost laughed. “Pretty, brainless, gold-digging cheats—the whole lot of them.”

“That’s sad.” Ophelia leaned closer to the fire.

“He weren’t an easy man to live with.” The ghost turned around, looking her full in the face and smiled at her.

Ophelia just about jumped over the back of her chair and bolted for the door. The poor man had a gash running down the length of his left side of his face. His nose had been all but pulverized, and he was missing his left eye. Ophelia swallowed hard. What had happened to this man?

“Were you in a battle?” She asked delicately.

The ghost laughed uproariously, leaning back, hands on his hips.

“I’m sorry. Have I offended you?” Ophelia felt that mental kicking again. She was now apologizing to a god damned ghost.

“No. No. A battle? Dressed like this? Would’ve been killed pretty quickly in this get up.” The man smiled, most of the teeth on his left side were gone too. “How did thee get that scar—there?” The ghost pointed to a one-inch scar over her eyebrow. Ophelia frowned. So this was it, a tit for tat exchange of information? What sort of specter was this anyway?

“Oh, got that when I was a little girl.” Ophelia absently caressed the slightly bumpy skin over her brow.

“Thrown from thy pony’s saddle, I assume? A beautiful lady as thyself must have made a charming little girl on a pony!”

Ophelia shook her head and sighed. “Didn’t have such an idyllic childhood, I’m afraid.” Ophelia frowned. She didn’t have to give him his answer either. Two could play at this game.

The ghost laughed. “I’ll tell thee my secrets, if you tell me thine.”

“That depends on which secrets I’m divulging.” Ophelia laughed.

“Your as elusive as thy uncle was.”

Ophelia laughed hard again. “He was pretty elusive.”

“Never mentioned me, I’m sure?” The ghost asked.

“No. Not quite the sort of thing you bring up at family reunions. Not my family reunions anyway.”

“Did thee fall down some steps?” The ghost asked suddenly.

“What? What steps?” Ophelia was thrown off by the abstract question.

“The scar!” The ghost smiled and pointed again.

“That again. No. No steps. No fall.” Ophelia laughed. “You are persistent, aren’t you? Are you this way with all of the ladies?”

“Only the pretty ones.”

Ophelia laughed, but felt herself blush. “I’m not that pretty. You can spare me the flattery.”

“Whomever told thee thou weren’t pretty? You shouldn’t have believed the fool.” The ghost sat back down in the chair.

“It’s not that simple.”

“Family never is.” The ghost tapped his fingers on his knee.

Ophelia was a bit rattled by the ghost’s knowledge of her family and life. “Who are you anyway?” She asked at last.

“Lord William Essex.”

“Ah, well, Lord Essex,” Ophelia got up and tightened the tie to her bathrobe, “I have to go to bed now. I don’t know if ghosts need much sleep, but we mortals do...and I am tired!” She started for the door.

“Thee doesn’t mind if I keep my quarters then?” Essex followed behind her.

"It's all yours." Ophelia laughed and walked through the door he held open for her.

Ophelia carried her candle back to her room, blew it out, and crawled into bed. She was exhausted. She would ask Henry about Lord Essex in the morning. Ophelia chuckled as she pulled up the blankets. This was the part where she should start screaming, but she wasn't like ordinary women. What was a little ghost?

The next morning, Ophelia found Henry outside nailing on a loose shutter. "Henry?" Ophelia asked from behind him.

"Oh! Ah! 'Mornin' Lass! How did you sleep last night?"

"Wonderful! Thank you so much for the fire and bed warmer! I was all prepared to come into a freezing cold room." Ophelia smiled warmly.

"I didn't, ah! You had a run in with Lord Essex. Sounds like his doin'. He can be charming when he wants to be." Henry laughed and gripped a nail in his teeth as he hammered in another one.

Ophelia waited for a break in the hammering. "That was my next question. I, uh, met Lord Essex in his quarters last night. He offered me a drink."

Henry took a nail out of his mouth and looked at Ophelia. "Brandy, was it?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Brandy decanter was missin' last night. Figured he was the one that had it." Henry pounded the last nail into the shutter. "There. That should hold her."

"So, he's been around for awhile then?" Ophelia asked.

"Oh, since the castle was built. His castle. He comes and goes as he pleases. Don't have to worry too much about him most of the time."

"Oh, I thought he seemed perfectly harmless." Ophelia smiled. They were talking about a grotesquely mutilated apparition like he was a paying houseguest or someone.

Henry stepped down from the stepladder and knitted his brows. "Don't you believe for one minute that that ghost is harmless. He is a mad, raving lunatic who has killed many a man who has stayed in this castle."

"You just said I didn't have to worry about him! Will he try to kill me?" Ophelia suddenly grew worried.

"No, girl. I said you didn't have to worry about him most of the time. And no, he won't try to kill you. Except for one time, he only kills men. He's very protective of the women under his roof. He'll be good to have around seeing how you're all alone except for cook and me. Just be wary of his influence."

"You aren't in any danger, are you?" Ophelia grew worried again.

"No. Not me. Essex and I are old friends now. Might even move in with him once I shuffle off this mortal coil m'self!" Henry let out a laugh, quite a vivacious one for such an elderly chap." Got to run. Meeting a contractor in town soon about repairs to the gutters." Henry shuffled off leaving Ophelia staring at the newly repaired shutter. She didn't get a chance to ask about Essex's wounds. Ophelia practically counted down the minutes until nightfall. Where she had gotten the idea that ghosts only manifest at night was beyond her, but she thought it seemed appropriate. She found herself primping in

front of the mirror as if she was going out with friends and laughed out loud. All of this for a bloody ghost!

This time she didn't sneak down the hall or tiptoe. This time she strode right up to Essex's door and boldly knocked. Silence. Ophelia knocked again and then just pushed open the door and stuck her head in.

"Anyone home?" She called out in a sing-songy voice.

"Can't a man get any bloody privacy around here?" Essex growled.

"I came to chat awhile." Ophelia came in and closed the door behind her; crossed the floor and sat down. Essex was staring out the window.

"Can you go outside?" Ophelia asked as she observed how Essex looked out with such a longing on his good side of his face.

"No. I'm bound by the walls of the castle."

"I see." Ophelia nodded. "Not much to see out there anyway. The garden's a mess."

"Aye. Elias wasn't much of a gardener."

"I'm afraid I'm not either." Ophelia chuckled.

Essex laughed and clasping his hands behind his back crossed the room and faced Ophelia. "Are we friends now?" He asked.

"I just thought we could talk."

"Is this because you've no one else to talk to? No friends or family?" Essex said almost cruelly.

"I have friends. They just live in the states, mostly, or are very busy. That's all."

"What are these states? Oh, wait. Elias told me about that. Colonies, a King named George, war and all that."

"And all that." Ophelia pulled her feet up under her dress and settled into the chair. "It all was a long time ago. Long before my time anyway! Are you going to tell me how you got hurt?"

"Ah. Just going to come right out and ask it, are you? No beating around the bush for thee!"

"Well, I didn't know how else to bring it up again but to just come out and ask." Ophelia shrugged.

"Thee first."

"Me first, what?" Ophelia frowned.

"Thy scar. How did it happen?"

Ophelia's hand went up and touched the scar. She sighed. "A very large man's boot was introduced to my head with a foot still in it."

Essex's one eye grew very wide. He sat down. He let out a low whistle while shaking his head. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Had four stitches." Ophelia shrugged.

"Thy father?"

"That would be the man on the other end of the foot in the boot." Ophelia chuckled.

“How doest thou laugh about this?”

“Ah, well, you know, my sense of humor has kept me sane all of these years.”

Ophelia shrugged again. “Okay. I told you. Your turn. Fess up.” Ophelia pointed to Essex’s gashed and mutilated face.

Lord Essex sighed deeper than Ophelia had done before. “It’s not a pretty story.” He sighed again.

“Out with it.” Ophelia smiled.

“Mmm. My wife and her lover wanted to marry. But, they wanted my money. I had no heirs. If I were dead, Margaret inherited everything. So, she and her bloody bastard of a lover slipped into my chambers while I slept and tried to chop off my head with an ax. They missed. This is the result of their attempt. I died anyway. Then they buried my body in the deepest cellar under the castle. No one ever found out. End of story.”

“And Margaret inherited everything and they lived happily ever after.” Ophelia added.

“Not exactly.”

“She eventually got caught?” Ophelia asked curiously.

“Only by me. That was her mistake. You see they cursed themselves with their hatred and violence. They trapped me here in my home through their violent, sudden act. I found I didn’t cross over to the other side of the spirit realm; instead I awoke back in my own castle, bound for all eternity by its walls. I also discovered I had the ability to seek vengeance for those in need of it, for betrayals, for wrong doings. I appeared to Margaret and so frightened her that she slipped and fell to her death at the end of the East stairs.”

Ophelia’s mouth was agape. “Wow.”

“Her lover I simply pushed out the open window. Ironically, he was impaled on the upturned arrow of a statue of Cupid that sat beneath the window I helped him out of.”

“Nice touch.” Ophelia said.

“Aye. I thought so.”

“I’m so sorry all of that happened to you, and now because of their violence, you’re trapped here forever!” Ophelia sighed. Finding out Essex’s secret cast him in a whole new light for Ophelia. He was now the man done wrong—not just some ghostly spook hanging around. She felt sorry for him.

Months passed and Castle Piper began to feel more and more like home. One day, Henry came bustling up to her room walking faster than Ophelia had thought possible for a man his age. “Miss! Miss!” Henry came running through her door into her room.

“Hello, Henry. What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a man. With suitcases.” Henry stopped, clutched his chest, and gasped for air. “Downstairs. He says he’s your father.”

“Oh, damn!” Ophelia sat down on her vanity stool. “Is he alone?”

“Aye. Aye. But he says he’s come to stay!”

“Oh, no! That is NOT going to happen!” Ophelia got up and paced the floor.

"What are you going to do?" Henry asked worriedly.

Ophelia felt faint. "I don't know. I'm terrified of that man. I don't know what to do! I don't want to see him!" Ophelia felt a blanket of fear and terror cover her. She felt like she was suffocating the fear was so intense. Henry saw the terror on her face and now realized the depths of Ophelia's fear and Elias' hatred. "I could show him to a room—far from yours—to stall?"

"Oh, Henry! Would you? I hate to pull you into this, but, oh, my God, I don't believe he is here! He's doing this to torture me! I hate him. I hate him!" Ophelia's whole body shook visibly.

"You just stay here. I can have cook bring your meals to your room. Maybe if you fail to show up after a couple of days, he'll just go on and leave." Henry suggested.

"Okay. Okay." Ophelia doubted her father would leave so easily, but she was far too petrified to think of any other options at this point. Ophelia locked the door behind Henry and began to pace back and forth. She tried to fight the tears that threatened to gush, but they came anyway. Here! He was here! Why did he come? What did he want?

"Go away! Just leave, damn you!" Ophelia cried to herself while huddled on her bed.

"Ophelia?" A voice whispered.

Ophelia sat up abruptly. She clutched a pillow defensively. "Oh, it's only you. You scared me!"

Lord Essex walked to her bed and sat down at the end. "I heard Henry."

"You have very good ears." Ophelia forced a smile.

"What are thou going to do?" Essex asked seriously.

"I don't know! I don't want to see him. I don't want to talk to him!" Ophelia wailed and began to cry again. "I just want him to go the hell away!"

Lord Essex looked around the room absently. "This man really terrifies thee?" Essex looked at Ophelia.

"You have no idea how bad he is!" Ophelia rocked herself. "How bad he treated me. How much he hurt me. I was just a little girl!"

Essex's expression grew angry. "Don't come out of this room. I will protect thee."

Ophelia huddled into a ball and cried even harder.

"Ophelia! Ophelia!" It was her father's voice shouting through the halls, searching for her room. "I want to talk to you!"

Ophelia began to shake. Essex looked at her questioningly. "No, I don't want to talk to him! I don't even want to see him!" Essex went to the door and in a loud voice stated, "Sir! The Lady wisheth not to speak with thee! Please take thy bags and return home!" Ophelia's eyes grew wide.

"What? Who is that? Who is in there? Is she in there with you? The little whore! Are you her boyfriend, hiding in there with her? Is that it? Telling me what to do?" Ophelia's father raged and hit the door a few times, shaking it within the frame roughly.

“Sir! Thee would be advised to do as I have said,” Essex said sternly. He turned to Ophelia. “Do not open this door. No matter what he threatens. Do I make myself clear?”

Ophelia nodded, tears streaming down her face. She heard her father’s angry shouts and then she could hear his heavy footsteps stomping away. Suddenly she heard shouting of a different sort. “Are you the boyfriend, then?” Then it was followed by, a “My God!” Her father gasped, she heard running, and then she heard screams. Then silence.

Ophelia stood by her door, ear to the wood, trying to hear what was happening out in the hall. She heard Henry and what sounded like Essex talking, and then Henry was outside of her door. “Ophelia? Miss? It’s safe to open the door now. Uh, he won’t be bothering you no more.” Henry said gently.

Ophelia came out of her room and looked down the hall. Essex stood at the top of the stairs, tall and erect, strong and defiant. At the bottom of the stairs, lay her father, crumpled and lifeless. Silent at long last.

After the police came and went, Henry came to her room. He had a leather bound journal, with brittle yellowed pages. It was old, very old. He showed it to her. “This is a record, hidden from all eyes but the owners of the castle. This is a record of Lord Essex’s methods of protection. I warned you he was a dangerous force to be reckoned with.” Henry put the book in her hands.

Ophelia smiled. “I don’t care, Henry. What he did for me...” She paused. “I’m finally free!” Henry frowned and left the room muttering to himself about how foolish she was. Ophelia turned the brittle pages. One by one the entries in warbled ink told of Essex’s deeds. Essex was right. He did have the powers to exact vengeance on the wrong doers. Ophelia closed the book. She felt deliriously happy. Essex appeared.

“I see Henry gave you his little book.”

Ophelia laughed. “Yes, but I don’t care.”

“I can take care of that other bastard in your life as well.” He said purposefully.

“Justin?” Ophelia all but clapped her hands together.

“Another tyrant in need of punishment.” Essex grinned his lopsided grin. The wheels in Ophelia’s head began to turn. It could be so easy! There had been practically no questions at all about her father. It was cut and dry. Older man, slips, falls to his death on a steep, stone staircase. The end. Ophelia thought about Justin. He might be a little tougher to make go away, but judging from the little tome that Henry had provided, Essex was rather crafty and creative. She thought it best to not ask questions. She giggled like a mad woman. Ophelia began to think of Essex as he best friend. Henry very openly disapproved.

“Essex has a price for those who seek his services. It’s madness. There is a reason why your uncle never asked for Essex’s help with his wives. Oh, Essex offered, even with them being women! He offered, but your uncle had the sense to turn him down. Essex will make you pay! The guilt will drive you mad!” Henry wagged a finger in front of Ophelia.

“Uncle Elias planned this! He knew I’d use Essex to rid myself of my father!” Ophelia smiled.

“Did Essex tell you this?”

“I have no guilt. Essex gave me my life and took away the fear I lived in. That’s what he did.” Ophelia sighed.

“What Essex did was murder.” Henry said sternly.

Ophelia laughed. “You say potato, I say potatoe.”

“Mind yourself, lass! Mark my words! There will be a price to pay.” Henry stomped off.

The next year, Ophelia had an assigned dig in Chile. Essex knew about it as they had spent many a night discussing the traditions of the people and what Ophelia hoped to discover at the dig. Ophelia came into Essex’s room.

“Will you be okay next month while I’m gone?” Ophelia asked jokingly. “I finally received all of the final arrangements from the agency.” Ophelia crossed the room and added a log to the fire. Being a ghost, Essex didn’t get cold. He just liked the fire for atmosphere. Ophelia was cold.

“I won’t be alone.”

“Have some ghost buddies you’re inviting over while mommy’s at work?” She laughed.

Essex was serious. “Call thy former husband. Invite him and his bitch to the castle. Tell him you’ll be gone.”

“What?” Ophelia gasped, she didn’t want that bastard vacationing in her home.

“Good will. Extending the olive branch. Sealing the breach. Get the idea?” Essex waved a hand in the air.

Ophelia arched her eyebrows. “Oh.” Was all she uttered.

“Tell our good man Henry before you take thy leave. We don’t need any interference from him.” Essex clinked the ice in his glass and swirled the golden liquid around. Ophelia had long ago learned that Essex couldn’t actually drink the liquor, he just swirled it around and went through the motions to have something to do with his hands that reminded him of his mortality.

Ophelia smiled broadly. “I love you! You do know that?” She laughed.

“I know.” Essex laughed too.

“I’d kiss you if I wouldn’t just float through you or something!”

“You’d kiss me? Even with this?” Essex touched his face.

“Even with that.” Ophelia nodded seriously. She really thought she might be in love with him—or going completely insane, one or the other.

The next month, Ophelia loaded her bags into the car. “Oh, Henry. My former husband, Justin and his new wife are coming to stay while I’m away. Basically, they’ll just be here to sleep. They have the whole thing planned. Staying here will save them some money on hotel rooms.” She held her gloves in one hand as she reached for her briefcase.

Henry squinted his eyes together tightly and hissed. "It's Essex that's put you up to this!"

Ophelia laughed. "It's just a vacation." She leaned in closer and whispered. "Sssh. Don't let people hear you talking about a GHOST like this. They might start to say you're a bit crazy."

Henry frowned at her. She got in the car and left for the airport.

Two weeks later she got a distraught call from Justin's new wife. There had been an accident in the North Wing. A beam had fallen on Justin. He had been pronounced dead at the scene. "Why were you in the North Wing? It's been condemned. There are signs everywhere!" Ophelia said very emotionally. The new wife cried hysterically. Justin wanted to explore, didn't care about the signs. She had watched from behind the boarded up entrance too afraid to go in. It looked like someone had just shoved the beam right onto him. Ophelia comforted the new wife. "You're devastated. Have a drink and get some sleep." She told her.

When she returned home, the chief of the inquest provided her with a full report of the incident and assured her there was no fault being cast on her or her staff as the wing was clearly boarded off with all of the required signs posted warning of the extreme danger of the condemned part of the castle. The chief sadly stated that Justin had defied the warnings and as a result paid dearly for his defiance. The new wife had gone home before Ophelia had returned.

Henry wouldn't talk to her. He had been brooding for weeks. Essex was reveling in yet another success story. Ophelia began to obsess with the possibility of someone finding out the whole truth. She stayed reclusively inside. Kept most of the heavy drapes pulled tightly shut and didn't talk to anyone on the phone.

Her friends at home thought with the death of her father and the death of Justin and all happening right in her own home, might have been too much for the fragile Ophelia. They were afraid she had cracked. Ophelia was haunted by bad memories from her past. Bad memories of her father's death scene. The voice of the chief of the inquest played over and over in her mind ticking off the details of Justin's demise. The phone call from the new wife rang and rang and rang again.... Ophelia was stuck in a loop of glee and despair. Henry feared the worse.

Essex found Ophelia shredding petals from a bouquet of roses. One by one she plucked the petal and let it twirl and flutter to a pile beneath her on the floor. She stared vacantly, her eyes transfixed on each floating individual petal.

"Ophelia? What is it thou art doing?"

"I'm watching the petals. They wither and die. So easily. One by one." She said in a sing-songy voice.

"You need to snap out of it." Essex said coldly.

"I'm too deep in it now. So deep. I can't get out. Deep. Deep." Ophelia chanted to herself.

"Thou hast gone daft. That thou hast." Essex sat down and stared at her.

Henry came bursting into the room. "This is your fault. You devil! You've done this to her."

Ophelia didn't blink, but continued to pluck the petals from the roses.

"She's gone mad from guilt, you murderous fiend!" Henry raged.

"Murderer?" Essex laughed. "I punish those who are in need of punishment. I am a savior to those in their grief."

"Who set you up as judge and jury?" Henry shouted angrily.

"Ophelia did." Essex said plainly. "Just like all of the rest. I offered help—she accepted. It was her choice all along."

"One for you." Ophelia gave Essex a picked over stem. "One for you." She handed one to Henry. "Watch the thorns they cut and bite." She whispered.

"She's plum mad." Henry watched Ophelia skipping about the room like a giddy schoolgirl.

"Then we'll take care of her. I won't let anyone else hurt her." Essex said to Henry.

"You've hurt her the worst of all." Henry said sadly and turned to leave. "You drove her to a level even more depraved than the depraved ones who hurt her in the first place."

"No. She was weak. She should have been happy her tormenters were gone, but she lets them continue to torture her even from the grave. They're still tormenting her life." Essex shook his head.

Henry sighed. "They're still punishing her. You've punished her, don't you see that? Until she dies she will be forever punished."

Essex frowned. "No." He paused. "She wasn't meant to be punished. She is good. Pure. Broken. —" He stopped.

"You punished her." Henry said simply.

"I have to mend this situation. I had no idea she would be so fragile." Essex got up and paced.

"You just go away. Go back to the cellar and scare rats where you belong! You've ruined enough lives with your mending of the situation!"

Essex stopped in front of the window and buried his face in his hands.

The next morning, Ophelia did not come out of her bathroom. Cook was summoned. After Henry opened the door with the master key, Cook went in and found Ophelia floating face down in the rose petal strewn water in her massive brown marble bath. Cook began to cry.

Henry cried bitterly as the police called yet again at the castle. "Bad bit of luck this house is." One officer said to Henry.

"Cursed place if ever there was one." Another burly officer commented. Henry shook his head. "Aye. That it is."

Henry buried Ophelia in an Egyptian sarcophagus she had helped discover. The museum donated it to her as a parting gift. He buried her in the cellar next to Essex's grave. He had to get a special permit and had to have it declared a family mausoleum, but

he decided she would have liked the idea. She had grown to love Castle Piper. Said she felt like she was living in a bit of history. The kind of history she spent digging up for a living. He buried her beside her friend, Lord Essex, who for all his misguided attempts at help, he had in the end, given her what she wanted.

Henry was seated before the fire in the kitchen after the undertaker had left. He was tired from crying, tired from being pleasant, and tired from living.

"I'm going to make some hot chocolate, would you like a cup?" A familiar voice asked.

Henry turned around to see Ophelia standing by the stove, pan in hand, a smile on her face.

"I, I, I—" Henry stammered.

Ophelia sat down three mugs as Lord Essex entered the room wearing his crooked, half-smile. "It's really more for you, you know." She said to Henry and smiled a happy smile.

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