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**AT DEATH'S DOOR AGAIN**

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## AT DEATH'S DOOR AGAIN

Megan started paying attention to where they were driving when she noticed the tall stone wall topped with colorful broken glass shards and wrought iron spikes. "Wait, I thought we were going..."

Watson didn't look away from the road, but gave a wry smile. "They lost the house in town."

"Oh," Megan said. The stone wall gave way to an equally tall, ornate, wrought iron fence that gave a clear view of a vast overgrown park beyond, and tantalizing peeks of a large house in the distance.

Watson slowed the Divine Sarah and turned in at a driveway guarded by two enormous black iron dogs. As they approached the gate, Watson reached into her tweed sportscoat and fumbled with something in the inner pocket. The gates glided apart. Megan continued to be riveted by the statuary, and said, "What's with the dogs?"

Her girlfriend snorted a laugh and said, "Welcome to Baskerville Hall."

Megan's gaze slewed around to Watson. "You're kidding me."

Watson gave her a jaundiced look. "You're saying that to a woman named for three major characters in the Doyle body of work?"

"Never mind," Megan said, looking up the winding drive. There were tall, unkempt evergreens lining the way, so it wasn't until they actually entered the circle in front of the hall that she got a good view of the house.

It was a boxy, sprawling approximation of an English country house. The brick building had dark half-timbering in a style Megan and Watson's architect ex-girlfriend G jokingly called "Pseuda-Tuda": Gothic decorative elements framed the massive front door that was not, in fact, pointed on top, but should have been. Gothic windows, some with leaded glass,

decorated the front, though the windows up at the third floor were small dormer-style things. Wings thrust out to either side of the central house, topped with white-painted terrace railings that added an incongruously French accent to a house that was otherwise stolidly English. On the right side was a glassed conservatory. The left side of the house had gloomily submitted to being strangled by a dark overgrowth of ivy that had begun to inveigle tendrils under the roof slates. There were a few patches where the slates had slid loose, and some of them were lodged in the gutters.

Watson pulled in behind a small hybrid sedan in the circular driveway and shut off the motor of the VW bus. "They've had kind of a rough time," she said, without looking at Megan.

Instead of saying, *Haven't we all?*, Megan said, "It's okay."

Watson nodded, and they got out.

The doorbell bonged hollowly in the distance. While they waited, Megan said, "How many rooms?"

Watson said, "Forty-two principal rooms. Not including the basements." In response to Megan's raised eyebrow, Watson said, "Our grandparents liked to throw big house parties."

The door opened before Megan could say anything else. A hook-nosed, balding, elderly white man with a slight stoop that defied his otherwise rigid military carriage stood in the doorway, turning a studied bland expression on the visitors.

Watson, apparently surprised, burst out, "Hudson?"

The man's facade shattered into a wide smile, and in a refined British accent, he said, "Oh, Miss Watson! What a pleasure it is to see you!" He looked up (and up) at Megan, and said, "And your friend as well, of course!"

Watson grinned and said, "Megan Amazon, Mister Sebastian Hall, my parents' butler. I'm sorry, Sebastian, old habits die hard." To Megan, "My father insisted on calling him Hudson. Because of the ridiculous Holmes thing."

"Ah," Megan said, and shook Mr. Hall's hand gravely. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Watson has told me a great deal about you." She remembered that Sebastian Hall had been Watson and Death's stand-in for their father through most of their childhood. She suspected Watson had told her more, but she wasn't good at remembering things these days.

They stepped into a dim, coffered entrance hall that was lit primarily by a tall bronze lamp attached as an overgrown finial to the decorative newell post at the foot of the stairs that curved up to the second floor. Mr. Hall shut the front door and said, "Miss Death and her family are in the dining room, of course." He gestured to a hallway that went past the stairwell on the left. Through an archway to the right, Megan could just glimpse old-style furniture in a darkened room.

They entered the walnut-lined dining room, as dim and impressive as any Victorian scene in a BBC show.

Megan had been afraid that she wouldn't recognize Death when she saw her. The moment she saw the tight bundle of Gothy rage standing at the head of table, she knew she shouldn't have worried.

Death was wearing a high-necked, floor-length black Edwardian confection of silk and lace, bound tight by a black corset defiantly on the outside of the dress. She wore a large silver locket in the shape of a scarab at her breast, and a single rose gold signet ring with some design Megan couldn't see carved into the flat carnelian. Her chin rose angrily when Watson entered the room, but her face stayed still and gloweringly composed as a Victorian photograph.

Other people were settling around the table, and Megan was relieved to be able to recognize Death's husbands, Diarmid and Al. Diarmid came forward with his customary broad smile on his dark face, but Megan remembered him well enough to be able to see the lines that had deepened around his eyes in the nine or ten months since she'd last seen him. They shook hands warmly, Diarmid saying, "I'm glad you two could come. We've missed you."

Megan couldn't help but glance aside at the two sisters greeting each other diffidently, one with her arms crossed under her boosted bustline, the other with her hands shoved deep into jeans pockets. Diarmid winked at her, and then she was being hugged tightly by Al, who held on a little longer than usual, saying, "Watson let us know kind of what was going on. I'm so sorry, Megan."

"Getting better," she murmured, overwhelmed with all sorts of welcome memories of hanging out with shy, pretty Al and outgoing, urbane Diarmid in the forge, and helping them repaint the fence behind their old house, and discussing home renovation projects with them while Death and Watson debated the many things they usually debated.

"I'm glad," he said, releasing his grip on her waist finally and grinning up at her. How had she forgotten that grin?

Death greeted her with a nod and a tight smile that didn't go anywhere near her eyes (probably for fear of being annihilated). Megan noticed a surprising amount of grey in the dark hair that was piled on top of Death's head. Death said, gesturing toward the table, "Megan, I'm sure you remember Denny Silver, Vivian Chen, and Mack Janetsdottir."

Megan gave her a grateful look that garnered a slightly softer smile, and went to lean across the table to shake hands with Mack, the big, square, 60-something white woman with butched iron gray hair; Vivian, the short, extremely curvy Asian femme 30-something; and Denny, the stocky, androgynous 40-something. None of whom she remembered. Or, at least, remembered clearly.

Death added, "And I don't think either of you have met LaTanya Gold," with a gracious gesture of presentation.

LaTanya was a round-faced, smiling black woman whose deep voice rolled around a very slight West Indian accent as she said, "So pleased to meet you," while she shook Megan and Watson's hands. "I was Death's roommate in college," she added, by way of explanation. Her manicure was perfect, each nail an individual work of art in gold and garnet.

Everyone found their seats — Megan was touched that Diarmid had built a chair in her size that matched the rest of the dining room chairs. "It makes a great centerpiece for the living room when you're not around to use it," he said from his station at Death's right hand.

Watson was sitting on Death's left hand, with Megan, LaTanya, and Mack, along the side of the vast mahogany table that faced the curtain-hung French windows. Diarmid, Al, Vivian,

and Denny arrayed the other side. The chair at the foot of the table was empty, though a place was set there.

Al saw Megan's curious look as he passed the mashed potatoes to Vivian, and said, "For the mansion ghost."

Megan's eyebrows shot up.

"It's mostly a joke," LaTanya said, passing her the green beans. "Though most of us have had some odd experiences while living here."

"Like the person-shaped dent in Vivian's bed that 'got up' when she noticed it," Mack said.

Vivian cackled, and said, "What about the scratching on your headboard?" to Mack, so that Megan only just heard Watson inquiring quietly, "... running a boarding house now?"

Death's response, similarly quiet, was still sharp: "Yes. Not *all* of us have accommodating gay vampire landlords."

Watson said, mildly, "Is that why you're pissed at me?"

Death's answer, if she made any, was lost in the general hilarity at Al's apparently new-to-the-household description of the closet light that only went on when he was "keeping company" in his bed.

The stories about the house were seemingly endless, for a ghost that was "mostly a joke." But it kept conversation light during the actual meal. There were still a number of short, brusque exchanges in undertones between the sisters, but Megan was unable to overhear more than the tone.

When everyone finished their pie, Death said, with excessive formality, "Shall we repair to the parlor?"

"Of course, Madame!" Mack said, jumping up to get Vivian's chair.

"Shall I pour the sherry?" Denny asked, also rising.

"Silly!" Al said, tapping Denny on the shoulder gently as he minced past in mock-flaming mode. "You know we break out the *good stuff* for guests."

"You mean the *hard* stuff," LaTanya said, gliding out the door.

"Only for them as likes that kind of thing," Mack said.

Megan opted for club soda — she was still getting used to the seizure medication — and the threads of conversation slipped away from her while she poured for herself. When she refocused, she heard Mack saying to Watson, "... well, I wasn't *planning* to retire until I hit seventy, but things at the U got pretty hostile toward women's studies and it seemed like the better part of valor. Make more room for junior faculty with the energy for that crap."

"I wish I had the option," Denny added, accepting a glass of something amber-colored from Vivian. "But things are... improving, I think, since everything went down. And the physics department mostly flies under the radar of the new shithead-in-chief."

"It helps that you're carrying two of the largest grants at the U," Mack said. "That thoroughly outweighs your womanly flaws."

Denny grimaced. Watson said, "So the university was that fundamentally altered?"

"Most of the administration was swept out the door," Mack said. "The president put in place wasn't one of the enhanced telepaths, but his executive secretary and staff all were."

"The staff is all gone, of course," Denny said. "They're either in jail or under investigation. But the shithead-in-chief is still there."

"If you're still employed and Mack has retirement, how did you guys lose your place?" Watson asked.

The pair looked at each other, and Mack's gaze flicked to where Vivian and LaTanya were deep in discussion about something. Al strolled past, casually refilling glasses as he went.

Denny said, "We had something big enough it was at the edge of what we could afford. Mack's pension isn't the same as her salary, and Vivian's business took a major hit."

"You'd think that locksmiths would have been in demand under the former regime," Watson said.

Megan's attention was drawn to Death talking in low tones with Diarmid.

"I just got an alert," Death said, gesturing with her StarPhone. "Someone's doxxed LaTanya again, and they got this address."

"Reconsidering the dog I suggested?" Diarmid said.

"Be serious," Death said.

Diarmid's jaw clenched, the closest Megan had ever seen him to angry. "So turn on the death rays or whatever that shit is under the fence."

Death glared at him. "Like we need to deal with the bureaucracy on *those* permits?"

"Well, I better get out to fix the damn fence out back tomorrow, then," Diarmid said.

Megan said, "I could help with that," and they both turned to her in surprise. She added, "Sorry for overhearing."

"No, that would be great, thanks," Diarmid said with a sheepish smile. "There's just so much to do here."

"I'm kinda out of work right now," Megan said.

"A common malady," Death said dryly.

Megan let that pass, as she'd let several other comments go by earlier in the evening. After all, the lawyer Watson got her managed to push through the disability paperwork, whereas unemployment for most people in town was still tied up in knots of red tape. "Anyway, I need something to do."

Death slid out of the conversation, and Diarmid said, "You are exactly what I need. This place is in shit shape, and we have to keep it *looking* in disrepair — so we can afford the taxes — but I'd really *like* to, you know, patch the roof and stuff. But Al hurt his back, and everyone else has other issues. Mack has helped some, but she's got a thing about heights."

"I probably shouldn't do too much ladder work," Megan said, glancing down ashamedly. "Until we know the seizures are under control. I really can't damage myself, but collateral damage could be kind of high."

"That's okay," Diarmid said, waving a hand dismissively. "I can do the ladder work for now. Or maybe we can build some scaffolding. I really need a partner in crime, though."

They sat down at a low table, and Diarmid started sketching the one wing of the house that was in worst shape on a cocktail napkin. Megan, folded nearly double to see, started asking questions, and soon they were entirely immersed in slate and eaves and roof decking. It felt awfully good, almost normal.

Death's low, angry voice cut in from the hall and brought them both up from their happy distraction. "You never even *emailed*," she was saying to Watson, standing just beyond the doorway.

Watson's jaw convulsed with tension, and she swallowed at least twice before saying tensely, "I was a *little* busy."

Death's cheeks were flushed. "We lost the store, we lost our house. Goddammit, I've got a fucking *arrest record* now, and I know that doesn't mean *shit* to you, Miss Civil Disobedience..."

"I know, I know, and I'm *sorry* I didn't answer that call," Watson said, visibly fighting her voice down to something approximating an undertone. "I've told you, there were reasons for me not to talk to you on the phone or visit."

"All of which could have been eliminated by you moving out of that house," Death snarled.

"Oh, yes, that would have been *jolly*," Watson said, not looking jolly at all. "Once I was tagged by the surveillance, I doubt they would have just let me wander off, and then *you* would have been dealing with the same shit, on top of *everything else*."

"If you'd left when you first noticed..."

"I couldn't."

"So that's it, then? You've always been like this: I'll do my cryptic thing and fuck family."

"As surprising as it may be, I have more family than just you." Watson opened her mouth to say more, and snapped her jaw shut with a clack.

"Playing your para games," Death snapped.

"When you're done being a self-centered bitch," Watson hissed, "maybe we can actually talk." She turned on her heel and walked back into the parlor. When she saw Diarmid and Megan staring her way, her cheeks reddened, but she kept walking until Death followed her, saying in a louder voice, "You can't just walk away and expect me to shut up and cope like I did when we were kids..."

Death stopped dead when she realized that not only Diarmid and Megan, but everyone else in the room was staring at them. She blanched.

Watson's face lost its customary bland cynicism, and she whirled on her sister, raising her voice for the first time. "If you're so *fucking* pissed at me, why did you *even* invite me over?"

There was a ringing silence as Death stood in astonished outrage at Watson's sudden turn.

"I have been sitting here tonight, sucking up all your goddamn barbs at every turn," Watson went on. "Even biting my tongue when you pointed that shit at my girlfriend. Let me tell you that yes, I'm very sorry you lost so much and had to deal with so much, and I'm actually

perfectly fine with you being here and god! I'm glad *someone* is getting benefit from this pile after so long. But there was shit going on in other people's lives too — more specifically in *my* life, and I couldn't just walk away from it. So no, we didn't somehow end up shoulder-to-shoulder facing the world, but you wouldn't have wanted that *either*. And now it's turned into a scene, just like *old times*. Are you happy?"

In the next silence, one of the brandy snifters on the table in front of Mack shattered suddenly.

Simultaneously, Death and Watson snapped, "Fuck off, Granddad."

Megan covered her mouth to keep from giggling totally inappropriately. Diarmid looked down at the table, biting his lip. She couldn't tell if he was dealing with the same urge, or if he was just massively uncomfortable with the "scene."

Death finally broke their staring match, looking away toward the unpopulated side of the room, and said, "I... asked you here because... I need to unlock Mother's laboratory. And the locks the executors put on the door require both of us to consent."

With a shadow of her usual tones, Watson said, "Which would have been very inconvenient if one of us had actually died one of the times their nemeses tried to kill us, wouldn't it?"

Death's back remained ramrod straight as Megan watched her struggle with the array of emotions flickering over her face. Finally, she said, "Mother had a lot of very specialized tools for which I've had... an offer of substantial compensation. Neither of us is ever going to use them."

Watson's posture relaxed. "We certainly won't, and shrines to the dead are hard to eat. Of course I'll help."

Death stared at her face hard. "You're not going to ask who's offering?"

Watson shook her head. "I assume you've done all the vetting necessary. Despite our being able to push each others' buttons like we're teenagers, we're both adults, and you've always been a more competent adult than I have." She glanced over her shoulder at Megan, with a very lopsided, sheepish smile. "Please excuse us."

The two sisters left the room, if not at peace, at least with an armistice. The guest and household all looked at each other.

"I've known Death for twenty-plus years," LaTanya said, shaking her head, "and I've *never* seen her look like that."

Diarmid chuckled. "They're kind of like matter and antimatter. That's why they don't spend a lot of time in the same place."

"Which is which?" Denny said with a grin. Having fetched a dustbroom and pan, she started to sweep up the shards of glass on the table.

"They'd throw off all your calculations anyway, Den," Mack said. "I suspect they switch polarity, or whatever it is."

Nearly half an hour passed — during which time Megan and Diarmid ended up working with Al and Mack to work out how much slate and wood they probably needed to start the roof work — before the sisters returned.

Watson had an odd half-smile and abstracted gaze that Megan recognized as thoroughly suppressed rage. Death's jaw was set in a resigned and tolerant expression that would have certainly included eye-rolling in someone twenty years younger.

Diarmid stood up immediately and started toward Death, who shook her head very slightly.

Watson gave Megan a quick appraising look and raised an eyebrow inquisitively. Megan nodded.

Watson looked around at the assemblage and forced a smile. "Well, folks, I think it's time for us to take off."

Everyone got up to shake hands and make farewell noises.

"I can catch the bus out tomorrow," Megan said to Diarmid as she was hugging Al.

"Right," Diarmid said. "We can go pick up some initial materials and build our scaffold."

"Will you be coming back soon?" Denny said to Watson. "I can get those articles you were interested in."

Watson exchanged looks with Death. Death cleared her throat and said, "You are, of course, welcome any time."

Watson quirked a corner of her mouth. "I'll probably come by tomorrow evening to pick up Megan."

"Oh, great," Denny said. "They're just at my office. I'll make a note to bring them home."

LaTanya shook Megan's hand. "I'm glad you're helping Dee out. Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to you."

"I hope so," Megan said, smiling.

"Let's compare Holmes fandom notes," LaTanya said with a wink.

"Hah! I'd like that."

Out in the Divine Sarah, Megan couldn't contain herself any more. "What *happened?*"

Watson turned the ignition on and sighed, leaning her forehead on the steering wheel. "One of the executors of our parents' estate was... a former supervillain who'd become a friend of theirs. But he had some... quirks. One of them included hiding things and leaving cryptic puzzle limericks as clues."

"Oh, *no*," Megan groaned.

"So the asshole locks up an empty lab," Watson said, gripping the steering wheel and gently banging her head against it, "and leaves fucking stickie notes with limericks on them all over the lab. Except, of course, it was 1982. And the adhesive gives out. So some of them are still in place, and most of them are on the floor. Near where they were originally, but not exactly in place. Which affects some of the clues."

"Why did the others let him?" Megan said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Probably because they thought we'd get a laugh out of it, someday," Watson said. "So the equipment is *somewhere* in the house, scattered all through it, like some kind of goddamn scavenger hunt. Poor Death, she just said, 'I should've known it wouldn't be easy, nothing in

this family is *ever* easy.' And I'm just sorry Paddy O'Limerick died five years ago, because I'd really like to throttle him right now."

"Is Death going to let you help figure it out?" Megan asked Watson put the van in gear and started navigating around the curve of the driveway.

"It's up to her, really," Watson said, guiding the van out the gate. "But I've already figured out a half dozen of them. Not that I've mentioned that." In response to Megan's pained expression, she said, "I'll do my cryptic thing and fuck family." She snorted. "At least, until family asks nicely. She learned how to hold grudges from *me*."