

“In the shadows where silence breathes,
fear whispers secrets we dare not speak.” - Sirrie Buitendorp

Odessa awoke with a start, a silent cry escaped her lips, her heart thundering against her breast like a wild creature desperate for escape. The pallid light of the moon seeped through the heavy drapery, casting elongated shadows that danced ominously across the walls of her chamber. The remnants of the ghastly nightmare clung to her mind like the cobwebs in the corners of her soul. The large sash windows rattled as a shiver went down her spine, a tempest brewed outside, heavy with the promise of rain and despair.

“Tis nothing but a dream,” she murmured, though the chill that snaked through her veins felt all too real.

The specter of her late husband loomed large in her thoughts. Oh, her sweet Reid. His absence was a gaping maw that swallowed her whole. Guilt, an insidious serpent, coils tightly around her heart, squeezing the breath from her lungs. She could not shake the unforgiving feeling that his death was a betrayal of their vows, an act of abandonment that left her adrift in a sea of sorrow.

With a shuddering breath, she slipped from her bed, the luxurious fabric of her robe whispering against her skin like the ghostly caress of a lover long lost. Grasping a lit lantern, its flickering flame casting wavering shadows upon the opulent furnishings, she ventured from her chamber into the dimly lit corridor of the manor, her pulse quickening with each tentative step. As she sauntered down the long, moonlit halls accompanied by the sound of the squall and the sway of her nightdress, her thoughts consumed her head. The memories of her husband's untimely death swirled her mind. A carriage accident, they had said, but the details were murky, surrounded by whispers and hushed tones. The more others pressed for answers, the more elusive they became. Chums who had once been so close had distanced themselves, their eyes avoiding hers as if they knew something she had not. This had left her ensnared in a web of mystery and grief.

A sudden gust of icy wind whipped through the corridor, stirring the curtains, sending a chill down her spine and breaking the chains that bound her thoughts. The lantern flickered dangerously as she turned her gaze towards the window balcony at the far end; its drapes fluttering ominously. "Naturally," she muttered to herself, a brittle laugh escaping her lips, "Servants must have neglected it so."

She hurried toward the window, the storm outside howling. The air was thick with the smell of rain and she could hear the cracks and crazes of thunder against the sky, a portrait of the turmoil that mirrored her own heart. With trembling hands, she shut the window and secured it, locking out the tempest that sought to invade her sanctuary. "Great heavens," she sighed. Odessa reached for the servant bell next to the window and pulled the string, its soft chime reverberating through the air like a ghostly lament. She turned her gaze to the opposite wall, many portraits of Reid and her were now draped with a mourning cloth; laughter and coos that once filled the air now replaced by desolation. The plans once shared, now nothing but echoes of what could have been. Why had he left her and their children with so little? Why the hushed tones of secrets? Why? too many questions for a heavy heart. A small whimper bubbled up from her throat as her vision became obstructed by tears.

Soft humming broke the lonely silence, a loud gasp escaped. Her skin became goose-flesh. "Is someone there?" she called into the oppressive silence, her voice echoing back to her, a haunting refrain. No response, save for the soft, mournful creaking of the manor, as if the very walls lamented her plight. In a moment of desperation she pulled the servant bell again, her breath hitching.

A flicker of a movement caught her eye- a shadow flitting at the periphery of her vision. She turned quickly, heart pounding. There was nothing, only the dim embrace of the twilight creeping through the corridors, casting distorted shapes on the wall. Panic rose within her. With a swift motion she made the decision to run. Her nightgown flowing behind her like a ghostly pursuer, her salt and pepper hair falling wild out of its tie. She ran to her chamber, bare heels

thudding hard against the crimson carpet. Odessa feared to glance behind her, she feared that whatever lurked in the shadows would pounce at the sign of weakness.

Then, as if summoned by her dread, the soft humming came again. A tune she knew all too well, a song that once soothed her. Odessa halted at her chamber doors, breath heavy as a brick. The lamp that she's holding shakes like the trees against the draft. Her heart twisted painfully in her chest at the memories. "Reid?" she called, her voice barely above a whisper, swallowed by the shadows.

The humming grew louder, a deep siren song beckoning her to follow. "I must be going mad. Just the wind, the tempest!," her voice grew louder, louder than the rolling thunder. "I shall turn, there will be nothing but moon beams." With a twirl of her body, her very blood ran cold. There, illuminated by the pallid moonlight, stood a shadowy figure, the unmistakable silhouette of her beloved husband.

"Reid?" she breathed, hope igniting within her, a fragile flame against the encroaching darkness.

The figure stepped closer, the familiar contours of his face emerging with each heartbeat.

Relief flooded her.

"Reid..." she whispered, stepping toward him, the lantern trembling in her grasp. "Is it really you?"

He didn't answer. He didn't look at her, he only walked past. Close enough that the air should have stirred between them; close enough that she could have sworn the hem of his coat brushed her sleeve.

Yet he didn't pause, flinch or see her... he didn't **see** her.

Odessa frowned, confusion prickling along her skin. She turned slowly, watching as Reid moved with heavy, deliberate steps down the corridor, his face pale and drawn with a grief that hollowed him.

“Reid?” she tried again, louder now. “My love?” Nothing. Not even the slightest turn of his head. A cold unease began to bloom in her chest. The lantern flame wavered violently. And in that trembling light, she noticed. The carpet beneath her feet lay smooth and undisturbed. No shadow stretched from her form across the floor. Her breath stuttered. Reid stopped at the far wall before a great portrait draped in mourning black. With slow, almost reverent hands, he reached forward and pulled the cloth away. The fabric whispered to the crimson carpet. Odessa's gaze lifted and the world dropped out from beneath her.

It was her. Painted in warm, living color. Her smile bright, eyes full of light. Her hand resting gently on Reid's, as though the painter had captured them mid-laugh. A thin, broken sound escaped her throat.

“No...” she breathed. Memories crashed all at once. The storm, the carriage and the distant sound of Reid shouting her name flooded her thoughts.

Her fingers loosened. The lantern slipped from her grasp, only to turn to smoke when it hit the floor. Odessa didn't move. She couldn't. Reid stood before the portrait for a long moment, shoulders heavy with grief that time has not softened.

Then, very quietly, his voice rough with longing, he murmured...

“Oh, Odessa, What I wouldn't give for one last dance”