REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED ICE COLD

The delicate crystallised droplets tickle my nose and my cheeks as I make my way up the long driveway to the manor. My stay will be short, two nights at most. The snowfall signals the thaw. With the temperatures rising, I have a brief window in which to make my mark.

The thaw also signals the fall. Timing is everything; for it to look like an accident, I have to control the descent.

I should have asked to be dropped off at the house, but I wasn't expecting the pea shingle drive to be carpeted in white candy floss. The powdery snow drifts and drapes the ornately manicured privet forming the formal element of the façade lining the drive. The manor, being surrounded on three sides by an ancient woodland, provides the solace and privacy which my father craves. Neither the house nor the woodland is welcoming. The house, whilst maintained, is a fifteenth-century manor that exudes history from every nook. The four red brick turrets are chimneys, yet on a freezing cold day in February, only one emits smoke.

When I was growing up, I was convinced that Father was trying to recreate an ice house inside because the one in the garden was no longer in use. I had explored the old ice house on many occasions. It was more accessible in winter when the shrubbery growth was stunted by the cold. The indistinguishable mound covered neatly in grass bore a resemblance to something out of The Lord of the Rings. Its entrance, no more than four feet high, opened up into a bricked interior with a well, which, back in the day, would have been filled to the brim with ice.

The woodland is my father's domain. Ten acres of oak, ash, hazel, maple and holly. A few trees still standing are older than the house, scarier than the house. The oak and ash dominate with their broadleaf canopies, shading smaller variations below. It's uncluttered and well maintained, with several bark-lined paths providing ease of access. Annually, he carefully removes interlopers and bullies with a nip and a tuck, thus permitting new life to see the light and meet its potential. The woodland has the potential to swallow you, and whilst Father seemingly knows every inch of it, even after twenty-five years of hide and seek, I fear the shadows. It isn't what I can see that frightens me; it is what I can't.

The next thirty-six hours will be dominated by the hunt. Father will want to capture the largest and most ornate specimen for his trophy. The cull won't happen until Saturday morning, by which time I will have set the stage. I just need to ensure I am with him when he discovers it.

'Morning, Miss Forster,' says James.

'Morning, James, looks like my arrival is perfect timing.'

'Yes, Miss Forster, your father has already led one party into the woods.'

'He's keen as ever,' I reply. James is the resident game keeper, come handyman, come kitchen help when needed. A lovely man, who has worked the land ever since I can remember and many years before that.

'You know your dad, in all the years I have lived here, he's never let anything get in the way of the cull. Come here, Miss Forster, let me grab your bag, if you stay out

here too long, you will freeze.' James grabs my lone pull-along out of the snow and makes for the entrance.

'Yes, James, I need not reminding of where my father's priorities lie.' I follow behind, my head now bowed, my cheeks cold but burning. The immense door is ajar, and with a nudge from James, it slowly opens up into the reception hall. I follow in only three steps behind, and shake myself down like a wet dog spraying the flagstones.

'Sorry, Miss Forster, I didn't mean to offend.'

'No need to apologise, and no offence taken. We all know it, but it takes a brave man to say it.'

'Would you like me to take your bag up to your room?' asks James.

'No. No worries. I packed light, I can only spare a couple of nights this year.'

'Let's hope nature plays ball, it only takes a couple of degrees in either direction, and the show will be over. That would be disappointing for your father.'

'Quite,' I reply.

'Your brother is already here, he's in the drawing room.'

'Thanks, James.' James disappears down the wide corridor towards the kitchen, from which I can detect the aroma of fish if I'm not mistaken. I might know Johnny would be in the drawing room, the warmest room in the house, the only one with the fire lit.

The intensity of the warmth emanating from the doorway as I enter is comforting. The warmest room by far, made even warmer by Johnny's presence. Father always insisted on keeping the temperature low. He stated quite regularly that 'it was a mismanagement of a house to disrespect nature's offering, if it is cold outside, so be it inside'. The fabric of the house, therefore, took precedence over the occupants. Five years ago, when my mother was home for palliative care, Father insisted that a cold atmosphere was better for her.

The memory of those last few days with Mother bundled under cellular blankets and wearing a knitted tea cosy on her head still makes my eyes smart. As my brother and I maintained a vigil at Mother's bedside, our living breaths lingered in the air; my mother's dying breath was stunted by the icy cold atmosphere. My father jollied himself in the woods. When she passed, he did not come in to pay his respects until the cull was safely stored. He said it had been a 'momentous year,' one which he could not have missed for anything.

That was the year I woke up. I grew up really and realised that the seemingly idyllic Manor House environment I had been born into and lived in for the past eighteen years was in fact a prison. It was and is not a home full of warmth, love, affection and fun, but a prison, stark, cold, detached with enforced behaviours and a bullying guard, my father.

Leaving was easy for me, but not for Johnny. I escaped to university and never returned. Johnny had two more years after Mother's death before he could escape. Father had ensured that he maintained control by paying in advance for schooling. He heaped guilt on us at the mere suggestion of changing schools, or dare I say, quitting. University was the first time either of us could determine our own future.

Curled up on the chaise in front of the roaring fire, Johnny looks peaceful. Unaware of my presence, I select a peacock feather from a vase and proceed to tickle his ear, nose, and then mouth.

'Puh, stop that, get away,' says Johnny, shooting upright and wiping the invisible offender from his face.

'Anyone would think you were a student. Did you have a late night, or maybe a heavy night?' I ask.

'Oh…Hi Sis. Both actually.' Johnny stretches and seats himself to one side of the chaise, making room for me to join him and to steal some heat. 'Glad you're here, I actually have someone to talk to now.'

'Not seen Father then?' I reply.

'No. Well, yes, I have, but only in passing. I arrived as he was already heading out with the first hunt party.'

'Did you speak?' I ask whilst my arms are outstretched in an effort to toast my hands like marshmallows.

'Not really. He acknowledged me, waved a finger in my direction and said to his cronies, 'Meet my son.' The group groaned a response and nodded in my direction before scuttling out the door after Father. They're all as bad as he is, totally preoccupied with the hunt, and of course, the impending cull. To be honest, Sis, I don't understand why we're here. He knows we're not interested; it's just because he insists. This hold he has is unbearable. I cannot believe five years after Mother died, we're still at his beck and call.'

'You know why,' I reply.

''Yes, money. Are we that shallow? The constant threats of being disinherited. You and I are worth more than this house, surely. Our sanity for one.'

'I agree, Johnny, I do.' I cup my now soft, warm hands around Johnny's pale, thin, slightly stubbly face and hold it gently and warmly. 'I don't keep coming back in the hope of a bung one day. I come back because of Mother. She is still here, in this house, on this estate. He can't live forever, you know. One day this house will exude warmth, love and happiness from every room, and we will create new memories.' Johnny's tired eyes hang on my every word. I cannot let him down either.

'Miss Forster.'

'Yes, James,' I reply.

'They're back, and sitting down to lunch. Do you want to join them? Your Father is keen to get back out as soon as possible to make the most of the light.'

'Yes, of course, James. Thanks for letting us know, we're coming now.' James's head, which had appeared attached to the door frame, suddenly disappeared. The crackles of the fire invite a top-up. Johnny gingerly moves the cage and throws on two more logs before we make for the door. 'Come on, Johnny, game face on.'

The great hall, with its ornate carved oak panelling and exposed ceiling and wall beams, is dark and gloomy. Cold light taps on the windows but fails to enter sufficiently to illuminate. Wrought iron candlesticks placed at intervals along the refectory table provide a glow to their immediate surroundings but do nothing to lift the ambience.

The table can seat sixteen comfortably, but today, Johnny and I are shoehorned in between the hunters with their stout girths.

James, and Maud, the cook, come housekeeper place large terrines of chowder on four strategically placed slate trivets. Baskets of bread are passed between the hungry. Maud then shuffles cold broth bowls in front of each guest.

'Thanks, Maud. What flavour today?' I ask.

'Your favourite, Miss Forster. Haddock.'

'That will please my father.'

'I told him the market was out of clams, he didn't believe me, but then he can't cook, so there is not a lot he can do about it,' says Maud. Her tone soft, but mischievous.

'You're a star, Maud. Nicest thing to happen to me today.' I reply.

'I hope the day gets better, Miss.'

'Be assured, Maud, it will.'

With lunch over, Johnny and I join the afternoon party in the woods. Not that anyone I know in my city life would call what we were doing a party. Father had mapped the woodland years earlier, and now it was just a matter of strategically walking routes and marking the potential catch on a grid. Technology has not quite arrived at Chaucer Manor, so armed with a clipboard, pencil and woodland map, I set out in search of this year's prize.

Certain factors determine the size of the catch. No two winters are the same. Results can't be guaranteed. The six weeks of snowfall have provided the canvas on which the creations would be painted. Storm Genevieve brought with it sub-zero temperatures, so the sitting snow was then accompanied by a hoar frost, which has lingered. Heavily laden branches bow slightly under the weight. Occasionally, short, sharp rays of sunshine stream through the canopies, providing sufficient daily warmth to generate a melt on the lower branches, followed by repeated sub-zero nights. This seasonal phenomenon provides the perfect environment for the conical shapes to form. It is just a matter of how long, how wide and how beautiful they will be. No two are the same. Every day, water droplets trickle down the stems, elongating the creations. The droplets will not fall to the ground, but they will halt, stunted by the cold air below.

I appreciate their beauty, but they have stolen so much of my life, my mother's life and Johnny's life that to me they are monsters, capable only of hurt and pain.

My father treats them like possessions. They are his prizes, which he studies and catalogues. The purpose of his work is unclear. I have never known him to do anything else. His study is stacked with papers, journals, photographs and moulds. Every trophy recreated for prosperity.

The clear glass spines are strong and heavy. Water frozen, held in stasis, crystals captured. When the time comes to cull the prize, it will be James who does the honours. I have helped James on many occasions set up the cherry picker, prepare the anchors, and warm the wires. I don't feel the need to do that this year. I have other plans.

On the day of the cull, which, if the hunt goes to plan, will be in less than thirty-six hours, Father will be at the forefront of the show, a front row seat directing

proceedings. Like the lion hunter snapping a photo with his kill, Father will pose beneath the pristine specimen, Lord of the Manor, staking his claim. A photo is always captured before human intervention. For someone who wants to live at one with nature, the brutal act which follows demonstrates his hypocrisy.

With darkness descending, we return to the manor and despite the absence of artificially generated heat, the house does feel a degree warmer than outside. The majority of the party depart for the day, with just George Banks and his son Henry from Long Fallow Farm staying the night. James and Maud prepare a warming meal, which is accompanied by wine for those who partake, and the evening is rounded off with port in the drawing room.

I have never quite acquired a taste for port, and neither has Johnny, but with the drawing room being the warmest in the house, a refusal would seem foolish.

Friday morning arrives and starts positively with a break in the snowfall. By eleven, a streak of sunshine breaks through the canopy, and steam starts to rise from the trees. The icicles glisten and stir as if the sunshine has brought them to life. The pitter and patter of droplets, which have nowhere to cling, hit the densely matted undergrowth and the barren patches which have formed at the base of the trunks.

The icicles are impressive. I have two contenders for the prize, one approximately ten feet long, some twenty-five feet above the ground and one maybe eight feet long but hung lower and more accessible. The higher they hang, the more force they bring with them when they fall.

Father's methods for removal are unorthodox. Most would be culled with snow shovels, brushes, or a chainsaw if thick. Father prefers a hot wire. The icicle will, in effect, be garrotted. He wants a neat cut line to preserve the specimen. He fears that sawing or knocking of any kind will damage the structure and ultimately his research.

The freeze/thaw cycle provides me with an opportunity to interfere with nature to my benefit.

By mid-afternoon, the prize has been identified. A potential twelve-foot specimen found by George and Henry. We are all called to order and gather under the tall Ash tree to view the catch. Everyone concurs that it is the best of show for length, width and clarity. The boughs are still heavily laden, and this specimen is not an only child. Multiples of glass daggers hang precariously from branches, forming a glistening ceiling of death. It could happen now, out of my control. Only a degree in variation is needed to affect a loosening of the foundations.

James carefully manoeuvres the cherry picker into position. Now is not the time, though, the light is dropping, and Father always wants the best picture possible. The scene is set, we will return in the morning. With the weapon marked, I know what I have to do.

As soon as my glass is empty, I hug Johnny and bid everyone goodnight. Whilst the cull will not take place until eleven the following morning, I have work to do. Once in my room, which is at the back of the house, I lock the door. I wait until I hear the last of the guests ascend the staircase and the heavy oak doors slam shut. Dressed from head to toe like a Ninja, I climb out of the leaded window and onto the narrow stone ledge. With a stretch, I straddle the vertical trellis and descend into darkness.

Just nine hours earlier, as everyone was leaving the woods, I placed a lit torch on top of the cherry picker. No one would have noticed it at three in the afternoon, but

now it is my marker. Prior to my arrival at Chaucer Manor, I acquired a portable hot wire cutting pen. If a hot wire, which James uses, can slice through the icicle, then a hot wire pen should be able to penetrate and destabilise it. It is a risky plan, one which could fail here and now tonight, one which could fail tomorrow by hurting someone I love, or one which could work, symbolising a thawing of Chaucer Manor for good.

The transition from snow-covered lawn to woodland is not subtle. My feet go from trudging to skipping in an instant. Having memorised the grids, I'm soon upon the cherry picker, which is illuminated by the shadows created by the dimming light from the torch. James taught me well. The settings are all prepared, I just need to turn it on in order for me to control it from the basket. The basket controls are simply on/off and an emergency stopper. With both set to go, I angle the lever upwards, and the basket rises through the branches. The Ash is decorated with hundreds of mini glass trinkets. The vibration on the ground below is sufficient to displace several, which plummet, snapping on the carpet below.

Once at full height, the prize is within my grasp. Wearing James' gloves, which he's left in the basket, I tentatively hold the throat of the prize with one hand and then, with my other, remove the hot wire pen from inside my jacket and flick the switch to turn it on. I wait what seems like an eternity in the cold for the red light to turn green. For a second, I pause. This might not work; the risks are obvious. If it doesn't work, what then? It's one in the morning, I'm in a scary wood on a cherry picker, which is thirty feet above the ground, and I'm about to plunge a hot wire needle into the base of a lethal monster also known as a giant icicle. I'm mad, I know, I'm sad too because of Mother and Johnny, I'm angry because of Father, and this is my revenge.

My stomach takes a noisy leap, which attracts the attention of the slumbering birds, a couple of which fly into the canopy above. Hesitating no longer, I press the needle head against the smooth surface and wait for it to sink inwards to its core. In the past, I have seen James use a wire between two clips, which slowly and cleanly melts through, slicing it clean. I just want to destabilise it in the hope that the morning sunshine will do the rest at the precise time. With the base being approximately 18 inches in circumference, I make nine puncture marks through the pristine glass. When I'm finished, it's still intact, still hanging. The nighttime temperature will keep it stable, but hopefully, I have done enough to preempt its fall.

I descend quickly, mindful of switching off the picker and preserving the battery for the morning. Remembering to remove my torch, I exit the woodland out into the garden, making my way back across the snow-covered lawn to the safety net of my trellis, balcony and bedroom. Once inside, I disrobe, hanging my damp joggers on the back of the door. My bag is ready for my departure. Only one thing now will make me stay longer.

Whilst my bedsheets are crisp, I soon warm, relax, and drift off into the abyss.

My eyes are still shut when I sense movement on the landing outside my door, which is followed by a tap, tap.

'Come in.'

The door remains closed; instead, the round brass knob twists and turns furiously. I leap out of bed, shouting 'coming' and proceed to turn the key in the lock.

'Morning, Sis, sorry to disturb you, it looks like we won't be getting a lie-in. Father's already rallied the troops, and once breakfasted, we are to all head out to the

woods. It's a clear morning, and the sun promises to start breaking through just after ten.

'Sure, I'm on my way. Have I got time for breakfast?'

'Yes, just, if you get a move on now. The only reason I'm up so early is that George Banks snores like a lion roars. The pictures in my room were dancing all night. I thought at one point they were going to fall off the wall. Anyway, the sooner it's over, the sooner we escape, right, Sis?'

'Right, of course, now bugger off and let me get dressed.' As soon as Johnny's gone, I grab my joggers. The cuffs are still damp from my nocturnal meanderings, but with fresh socks and my boots on, no one will notice. I layer up and head down, ducking into the great hall to grab some toast.

'Morning, morning,' I say to George and Henry, both seated at the far end, tucking into bacon and eggs.

'Morning, Claire,' they reply in unison.

'Morning, James,' I say as James enters with a tray of fresh toast and a steaming pot of tea.

'Morning, Miss Forster, what can I get you, eggs?'

'No, I'm fine with toast, don't want to delay proceedings,' I say whilst stuffing a buttered crust into my mouth.

'Quite right,' booms a voice. 'We can't delay proceedings just because you want feeding.' My father's presence suddenly dominates.

'God forbid I eat, Father,' I mutter whilst finishing off my second slice. No sooner had he arrived than he disappeared again.

By ten fifteen, the small culling party is ready, and we make our way out through the manor entrance, across the carpeted grass and into the woods. There, the cherry picker sits parked beneath the conical structure, the prize which my father seeks.

A stream of sunshine peaks through and bounces off the variegated canopy, filtering down onto branches and undergrowth below. There is a freshness in the air, and water droplets create a mist which lingers. I stare high above the cherry picker towards the throat of the beast, waiting for it to be bathed with sunlight. I want it to feel some warmth, to be caressed by the rays. The water running from the throat is barely distinguishable. A trickle signifying the melt. The holes I made only hours earlier are invisible to the eye. They are, though, a wound to its structure, to its very fabric. Like Samson losing his hair, the prize had lost its podium. It has nothing to steady it; its root has been undermined. As the sun rays strengthen, the trickle quickens. My father is too preoccupied to notice, and James is fiddling with the controls of the cherry picker, preparing it for its unnecessary ascent.

'It's time, Claire, you need to move away from there. Go and stand by Johnny, you won't be in the way there.' Says my father. His tone cold, his words short. For the first time in forty-eight hours, he calls me by my name, only to tell me to move.

'With pleasure,' I reply. As I walk towards Johnny, I focus on the prize. Father manoeuvres himself under the specimen, craning his neck to get a view of the point. Risky move anytime, but even more so when he is in fact the target, and the guidance gear has been engaged. His face swells as he smiles broadly, smugly proud of his prey. George snaps the first of the photos, but seems distracted by the sunlight, which is now

beaming through the trees, radiating onto the throat, weakening its grip. I hold my breath; it is now or never. I grab Johnny's hand and squeeze it tightly.

My eyes glaze from the concentration. I am willing it to go, to drop, to plummet with force.

'Just one more,' says George. 'Hold your position, smile.'

Father lifts his arms triumphantly, broadening his own target area, and with a wide open mouth looks skyward. At that precise second, the whoosh signals the fall. The tip travels eighteen feet in less than two seconds. Impact lasts no more than a couple of seconds as the weapon obliterates the target, carving through his head, shoulders and torso as if smashing open a watermelon.

I scream, not because of the shock of the suddenness of the fall, but because of the horror of the obliteration. Strike one.

There is no immediate rush to provide aid; that would be futile. The damage is irrecoverable. Stunned to silence, the party stop breathing. The long intake is followed by a deep outpouring, followed by a cry to get an ambulance. Henry rushes to my side and turns me and Johnny away from the sight which is unfolding. People are mumbling that can't be so, but I cannot make sense of what they are saying. I find myself walking, being walked back towards the house and into the warmth of the drawing room. There, the fire roars and is permitted to permeate. Johnny and sit conjoined on the chaise and wait.

'I'm so sorry, Miss Forster,' says James. 'He knew the risks, he thought he had timed it to perfection, but somehow he miscalculated the strength of the sun.'

'It's not your fault, James. As you say, he knew the risks. Father wouldn't have wanted to go any other way.'

'I'm sure Miss. Everyone's gone now, the police and undertakers have finished. It's just you and Master Johnny. What would you like me to do?'

'James,' I say. 'Take a break, you must be in shock too. What we need is warmth to stop the chill. Light the fires, light all of them. I want to feel warm, I want to feel alive.'

'Yes, Miss, I definitely will. Will you be staying the night, Miss? You had said you were to be gone today.'

'Yes, James, I will. In fact, I will be staying as long as the house wants me to.'

'Right you are, miss.'

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