

## Chapter 7: Cold Case

I crept down the broad staircase with my laptop in tow, attempting to keep quiet and avoid piquing my staff's suspicions. Although none of them would dare ask me what I was doing directly, speculation would run rampant through the vacant hallways. Rosa stood at the base of the steps like a sentinel, waiting to help me prepare for my planned escape.

"Miss Callista, are you ready for your trip?" she asked. The sadness in her words belied the smile she wore.

"I've actually decided to postpone my return to New York, Rosa."

"You've chosen to stay here?"

"For now."

Her face brightened, but her voice turned wary. "May I ask why?"

"I've come across a few things I need to do before I'm ready to leave Barnard Hall." Like figure out who killed my best friend one hundred years ago, why her ghost was stuck hanging around the house, and how the mirrors fit into the whole scenario.

"Do you know how much longer you will be with us?"

"I'm not sure." However long it took for me to explain the unexplainable, give up trying, or commit myself, whichever came first.

"It will be a pleasure to have you for as long as you decide to stay. Perhaps you will find that you like it here."

“Hmmm...” That was highly doubtful.

Her eyes locked on my worn briefcase. “Are you going out or should we be expecting guests?”

“Neither. I just want to do a little research. I’m going to be in the library for most of the morning.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Unless you’re privy to information regarding the person who killed my childhood friend back in 1912. “But I’ll let you know if I come across something.”

“Alright. I will be sure to serve you lunch if time gets away from you.”

“Thank you,” I offered before heading in the direction of my stepfather’s former sanctuary.

Even after his death, I expected to be reprimanded for entering this forbidden room. I took a steadying breath and pushed open the heavy oak door. My senses were immediately assaulted by the intense scent of invisible cigars; their smoke had permeated the wooden paneling encasing the walls from floor to ceiling. There should have been a ghostly figure wearing a top hat scolding, “No women are permitted here,” but the room remained eerily silent.

Two large bookcases, decorated with repetitious bindings and faded titles, filled the space on the eastern wall. If I wasn’t completely focused on my mission I would be drawn to the thousands of books stored there. The familiar crackle of pages had always made me smile. Like countless others before me, reading had served as an escape from reality. Lately I needed an escape.

An ornate mahogany desk stood guard in front of the many volumes. There were bulky leather chairs and couches placed about the room, giving the library a distinctly masculine feel. The furniture was arranged to make conversation impractical; the organization made sense in an antisocial way.

I sat my laptop on the desk and plugged in all the necessary cords, silently thanking Jim for installing updated internet services; waiting for dial-up would be excruciating after years of high-speed wireless connections. I fired up the search engine and typed LONDON TIMES NEWS into the search bar. Luckily, the newspaper had an extensive online archive. I already knew the dates, so, in theory, the research should be easy.

Reading about Tilly's death was not how I wanted to begin my investigation, so I started with the rest of the Daltons. Beth had mentioned that the family's deaths had marked the beginning of the "curse."

My stomach lurched as I clicked on the link to the appropriate issue and waited for the page to load. A small part of me had been wishing that the entire tale had been fabricated. However, the large photograph of charred remains from the carriage house adorned the front page. The blackened plot of land was barely recognizable as the spot where the building once stood.

Below the picture was a photo of the Dalton family. And there she was; my best friend sat on a white, high-backed chair at the bottom of the photograph. She looked almost exactly as she had when I had first met her. Her dark curls were pulled back and she wore a black dress with a pristine white apron over the front. In my experience, photos from that time period had

always seemed so lifeless; but there was animation in Tilly's eyes. She wasn't smiling but she looked... excited.

How could this photo have been taken over 100 years ago when I had dreamed of meeting one of the subjects last night?

My eyes went to her older brother, Nicholas II. His complexion was darker than Tilly's and his hair was as black as those charred remains. Like his sister, Nicholas was not smiling, but there was something mischievous in the way his eyes crinkled at the edges; it was as if he had a barely concealed secret bursting from within.

Tilly's father, Nicholas I, had a handsome face, but his coloring was quite fair. Mrs. Dalton, however, looked like an older version of her daughter. She had long, dark hair with tamed curls falling softly over her petite shoulders. Before this moment I had believed my mother was the most beautiful woman in the world; however, Mrs. Dalton was equally as stunning if not more beautiful than Sylvia Franklyn Burns had been. The apparent happiness on Maria's face gave her the winning edge.

The photo of the cheerful family left tears welling behind my eyes and a pain in my head as I refused to let the drops fall. Tilly had spoken about her parents and brother with such love; reading about their deaths made me feel as though I had lost a second family. It really was such a tragedy for these people to have died so horrifically. Premature death was an epidemic around the world yet this single event seemed infinitely worse. Maybe it was because the tragic fire had taken place only yards away from where I now sat.

I pulled myself from the haunting photo long enough to read the article.

## FATAL BARNARD HALL FIRE

*One of the largest, most alarming fires this year broke out at Barnard Hall on August 24<sup>th</sup> between the hours of three and four am. The fire continued burning until half past five in the morning. The local Fire Brigade was engaged, endeavoring to subdue the blaze, but their efforts fell short. The event ended tragically, claiming the lives of three victims: Nicholas Dalton I, his wife Maria, and his heir Nicholas II. The coroner held an official inquiry as to the circumstances regarding the deaths. The only surviving member of the family was the daughter, Lady Matilda Westbrook, and her husband Lord Timothy Westbrook.*

Tilly had been married at the time of the fire? I tried to hold on to that one happy detail instead of allowing myself to be pulled into a pit of misery for the deaths that had occurred over a century ago. There was no other pertinent information, so I clicked the link for the next issue. A headline on the second page immediately caught my interest.

## ARSON SUSPECTED

*Authorities suspect the fire at Barnard Hall, which claimed the lives of three members of the Dalton family, was arson...*

The hair on the back of my neck stood tall, and my arms were riddled with goose bumps. A terrifying feeling settled over me; those cops back then had to have been right in their suspicions. It was certainly more plausible that the fire had been a result of human influence than a curse.

Unfortunately, the following years of articles held little significance. No criminal was ever charged with arson and the case had been forgotten in light of more pressing social issues. I

scrolled to August 24, 1912. There wasn't a large article about Tilly, only a small mention of her death in the obituaries.

*Lady Matilda Westbrook, formerly Matilda Dalton, died on August 24, 1912. According to the coroner, she passed away in the early morning hours following a fall from the roof of her family's summer home, Barnard Hall. This tragedy comes ten years after her father, mother, and brother were killed in a fire at Barnard Hall.*

I wasn't sure how I knew it, but Tilly had not committed suicide. I believed in her innocence to the very core of my being, of my soul. Through my own biased perspective, it appeared as though she and the rest of her family had been murdered. Now all I needed to do was prove it.

Watching crime shows like CSI and NCIS had been a guilty pleasure of mine for years; unfortunately, countless hours of television did not make me a trained detective. How was I supposed to solve a crime that had occurred over one hundred years ago? Investigators had a plan, a course of action.

Everyone said that the best place to begin is at the beginning. Following that logic, the first crime was where I needed to start. Each crime had taken place on August twenty-fourth; the dates had to hold some significance. I had to find out who had been present at the time of the fire. More than likely, a guest or one of the staff had witnessed something vital to the case or had been responsible party. It was a stretch, but one of the families still living in the area could possibly have passed stories of the event through generations. One-hundred-year-old hearsay was better than nothing. Also, I needed to find out if anyone had held a vendetta against the Daltons. Would it be possible to access information from a police investigation from 1902?

My notebook was lying open on the desk. I frantically jotted down the ideas flickering in my mind. The disjointed thoughts and lazy shorthand would make little sense to anyone but me, which was perfect. If someone got wind of what I was doing my sanity would be more than in question.

I turned my attention back to the article, searching for some clue, for anything to direct me in my course of action. When I read the last sentence in Tilly's obituary, I knew my mission was fated; I was meant to find out what had happened to the Daltons—and who was responsible for their deaths.

*Lady Westbrook is survived by her husband, Lord Timothy Westbrook, and her daughter, Lady Callista Westbrook.*

The room began spiraling around me. The floor tilted to the left, righted itself, then pulled right. I was too old to believe in curses or magic, wasn't I? Coincidences like this couldn't span time, could they? The spinning was making me nauseous, and I could not sit still any longer. I rose and began unsteadily pacing the room as it rocked beneath my feet. The name had to be a coincidence; there was no other *logical* explanation.

“Miss Callista?”

Adrenaline coursed through my veins before my heart slowed to its normal pace. “Rosa, you startled me.”

“I'm sorry, dear. You have been in here for hours, and I thought you may be hungry for some lunch.”

My stomach growled when I smelled the smoked turkey sandwiches she offered. It was hard to believe that half my day was over. Sure enough, the sun was kissing the treetops as their leafy shadows engulfed the fertile lawn.

“Thank you, Rosa.” The nourishment helped clear my head and settle my stomach; an idea came to me as I chewed. I stopped my housekeeper just as she was leaving the room.

“How long have you worked here?”

“I have been employed at Barnard Hall for thirty years.”

“So you started in 1982?”

“Yes. The summer of 1982,” she confirmed.

“In all those years you must have learned some of the history from this place.”

“Some.”

“Have you ever heard of the Dalton family?” Rosa’s reaction intrigued me; her friendly demeanor shifted to something darker, harder. “What do you know about them?”

“The Daltons owned Barnard Hall in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.”

“Is that all?” I pushed. Rosa had been at Barnard Hall even before I was born; she had to have heard something in the past thirty years that could help me.

“There are some... stories concerning their untimely deaths.” Her voice broke on the final word.

“I know.”



Rosa was silent for a minute, her face thoughtful. “I am sure the staff has been talking again, especially in light of recent events. If I may offer a word of advice: do not believe everything you hear, Miss Callista. Rumors only grow more vicious and inaccurate with time.”

Was my lack of sleep was playing tricks on me or was there was a sharp edge to her voice. “Do you mean the curse?” She nodded, her eyes wary. “I have been meaning to ask you what you know about that.”

She sighed before answering. “There are some in the village who believe Barnard Hall is cursed. They say the first family to be affected was the Daltons. The mother and father were killed in a fire along with their only son. Then their daughter, precious thing, fell off the roof.”

“She *fell* off the roof?”

“Well, she most certainly did not jump, if that’s what you’ve heard,” she snapped.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” I prodded.

“One of the later owners was killed in a hunting accident on the edge of the property, and a girl in the 80’s went missing. Now your mother and her husband have been killed.”

“Why do they think it’s a curse? It seems like a primitive explanation to me.”

She smiled. “People blame the things they cannot explain on the supernatural—curses, ghosts, and magic.”

“Is there anything else, more superstitions surrounding Barnard Hall?”

“It is said that the house will continue killing its occupants until it is returned to the rightful owners. But these are all silly superstitions. Do not believe what anyone says,

especially about the Daltons.” She repeated her passionate warning a second time. Rosa smiled sadly before she turned to go. She paused with her hand on the doorknob and whispered, “Everything is not as it seems.”