

RUTH WARE

# The Turn of the Key

Virtualventures

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7 September 2017  
HMP Charnworth

Dear Mr Wrexham,

You have no idea how many times I've started this letter and screwed up the resulting mess, but I've realised there is no magic formula here. There is no way I can MAKE you listen to my case. So I'm just going to have to do my best to set things out. However long it takes, however much I mess this up, I'm just going to keep going, and tell the truth.

My name is ... And here I stop, wanting to tear up the page again.

Because if I tell you my name, you will know why I am writing to you. My case has been all over the papers, my name in every headline, my agonised face staring out of every front page – and every single article insinuating my guilt in a way that falls only just short of contempt of court. If I tell you my name, I have a horrible feeling you might write me off as a lost cause, and throw my letter away. I wouldn't entirely blame you, but please – before you do that, hear me out.

I am a young woman, twenty-seven years old, and as you'll have seen from the return address above, I am currently at the Scottish women's prison HMP Charnworth. I've never received

a letter from anyone in prison, so I don't know what they look like when they come through the door, but I imagine my current living arrangements were pretty obvious even before you opened the envelope.

What you probably don't know is that I'm on remand.

And what you cannot know is that I'm innocent.

I know, I know. They all say that. Every single person I've met here is innocent – according to them, anyway. But in my case it's true.

You may have guessed what's coming next. I'm writing to ask you to represent me as my solicitor advocate at my trial.

I realise that this is unconventional, and not how defendants are supposed to approach advocates. (I accidentally called you a barrister in an earlier draft of this letter – I know nothing about the law, and even less about the Scottish system. Everything I do know I have picked up from the women I'm in prison with, including your name.)

I have a solicitor already – Mr Gates – and from what I understand, he is the person who should be appointing an advocate for the actual trial. But he is also the person who landed me here in the first place. I didn't choose him – the police picked him for me when I began to get scared and finally had the sense to shut up and refuse to answer questions until they found me a lawyer.

I thought that he would straighten everything out – help me to make my case. But when he arrived – I don't know, I can't explain it. He just made everything worse. He didn't let me *spea*k. Everything I tried to say he was cutting in with 'my client has no comment at this time' and it just made me look so much more guilty. I feel like if only I could have explained properly, it would never have got this far. But somehow the facts kept twisting in my mouth, and the police, they made everything sound so bad, so incriminating.

It's not that Mr Gates hasn't heard my side of the story, exactly. He has of course – but somehow – oh God, this is so hard to explain in writing. He's sat down and talked to me but he doesn't *listen*. Or if he does, he doesn't believe me. Every time I try to tell him what happened, starting from the beginning, he cuts in with these questions that muddle me up and my story gets all tangled and I want to scream at him to just *shut the fuck up*.

And he keeps talking to me about what I said in the transcripts from that awful first night at the police station when they grilled me and grilled me and I said – God, I don't know what I said. I'm sorry, I'm crying now. I'm sorry – I'm so sorry for the stains on the paper. I hope you can read my writing through the blotches.

What I said, what I said then, there's no undoing that. I know that. They have all that on tape. And it's bad – it's really bad. But it came out wrong, I feel like if only I could be given a chance to get my case across, to someone who would really listen ... do you see what I'm saying?

Oh God, maybe you don't. You've never been here after all. You've never sat across a desk feeling so exhausted you want to drop and so scared you want to vomit, with the police asking and asking and asking until you don't know what you're saying any more.

I guess it comes down to this in the end.

I am the nanny in the Elincourt case, Mr Wrexham.

And I *didn't* kill that child.

I started writing to you last night, Mr Wrexham, and when I woke up this morning and looked at the crumpled pages covered with my pleading scrawl, my first instinct was to rip them up and start again just like I had a dozen times before. I had meant to be so cool, so calm and collected – I had meant to set everything out so clearly and *make* you see. And instead I ended up crying onto the page in a mess of recrimination.

But then I reread what I'd written and I thought, no. I can't start again. I just have to keep going.

All this time I have been telling myself that if only someone would let me clear my head and get my side of the story straight, without interrupting, maybe this whole awful mess would get sorted out.

And here I am. This is my chance, right?

140 days they can hold you in Scotland before a trial. Though there's a woman here who has been waiting almost ten months. Ten months! Do you know how long that is, Mr Wrexham? You probably think you do, but let me tell you. In her case that's 297 days. She's missed Christmas with her kids. She's missed all their birthdays. She's missed Mother's Day and Easter and first days at school.

297 days. And they still keep pushing back the date of her trial.

Mr Gates says he doesn't think mine will take that long because of all the publicity, but I don't see how he can be sure.

Either way, 100 days, 140 days, 297 days . . . that's a lot of writing time, Mr Wrexham. A lot of time to think, and remember, and try to work out what really happened. Because there's so much I don't understand, but there's one thing I know. I did not kill that little girl. I *didn't*. However hard the police try to twist the facts and trip me up, they can't change that.

I didn't kill her. Which means someone else did. And they are out there.

While I am in here, rotting.

I will finish now, because I know I can't make this letter too long – you're a busy man, you'll just stop reading.

But please, you have to believe me. You're the only person who can help.

Please, come and see me, Mr Wrexham. Let me explain the situation to you, and how I got tangled into this nightmare. If anyone can make the jury understand, it's you.

I have put your name down for a visitor's pass – or you can write to me here if you have more questions. It's not like I'm going anywhere. Ha.

Sorry, I didn't mean to end on a joke. It's not a laughing matter, I know that. If I'm convicted, I'm facing –

But no. I can't think about that. Not right now. I won't be. I won't be convicted because I'm innocent. I just have to make everyone understand that. Starting with you.

Please, Mr Wrexham, please say you'll help. Please write back. I don't want to be melodramatic about this but I feel like you're my only hope.

Mr Gates doesn't believe me, I see it in his eyes.

But I think that you might.

12 September 2017  
HMP Charnworth

Dear Mr Wrexham,

It's been three days since I wrote to you, and I'm not going to lie, I've been waiting for a reply with my heart in my mouth. Every day the post comes round and I feel my pulse speed up, with a kind of painful hope, and every day (so far) you've let me down.

I'm sorry. That sounds like emotional blackmail. I don't mean it like that. I get it. You're a busy man, and it's only three days since I sent my letter but ... I guess I half hoped that if the publicity surrounding the case had done nothing else, it would have given me a certain twisted celebrity – made you pick out my letter from among all the others you presumably get from clients and would-be clients and nutters.

Don't you want to know what happened, Mr Wrexham? I would.

Anyway, it's three days now (did I mention that already?) and ... well, I'm beginning to worry. There's not much to do in here, and there's a lot of time to think and fret and start to build up catastrophes inside your head.

I've spent the last few days and nights doing that. Worrying that you didn't get the letter. Worrying that the prison authorities didn't pass it on (can they do that without telling me? I honestly don't know). Worrying that I didn't *explain* right.

It's the last one that has been keeping me awake. Because if it's that, then it's my fault.

I was trying to keep it short and snappy, but now I'm thinking, I shouldn't have stopped so quickly. I should have put in more of the facts, tried to show you WHY I'm innocent. Because you can't just take my word for it – I get that.

When I came here the other women – I can be honest with you, Mr Wrexham – they felt like another species. It's not that I think I'm better than them. But they all seemed ... they all seemed to fit in here. Even the frightened ones, the self-harmers and the ones who screamed and banged their heads against their cell walls and cried at night, even the girls barely out of school. They looked ... I don't know. They looked like they belonged here, with their pale, gaunt faces and their pulled-back hair and their blurred tattoos. They looked ... well, they looked *guilty*.

But I was different.

I'm English for a start, of course, which didn't help. I couldn't understand them when they got angry and started shouting and all up in my face. I had no idea what half the slang meant. And I was visibly middle class, in a way that I can't put my finger on, but which might as well have been written across my forehead as far as the other women were concerned.

But the main thing was, I had never been in prison. I don't think I'd ever even met someone who had, before I came here. There were secret codes I couldn't decipher, and currents I had no way of navigating. I didn't understand what was going on when one woman passed something to another in

the corridor and all of a sudden the wardens came barrelling out shouting. I didn't see the fights coming, I didn't know who was off her meds, or who was coming down from a high and might lash out. I didn't know the ones to avoid or the ones with permanent PMT. I didn't know what to wear or what to do, or what would get you spat on or punched by the other inmates, or provoke the wardens to come down hard on you.

I sounded different. I looked different. I *felt* different.

And then one day I went into the bathroom and I caught a glimpse of a woman walking towards me from the far corner. She had her hair scraped back like all the others, her eyes were like chips of granite, and her face was set, hard and white. My first thought was, oh God, she looks pissed off, I wonder what she's in for.

My second thought was, maybe I'd better use the other bathroom.

And then I realised.

It was a mirror on the far wall. The woman was me.

It should have been a shock – the realisation that I wasn't different at all, but just another woman sucked into this soulless system. But in a strange way it helped.

I still don't fit in completely. I'm still the English girl – and they all know what I'm in for. In prison, they don't like people who harm children, you probably know that. I've told them it's not true of course – what I'm accused of. But they look at me and I know what they're thinking – *they all say that*.

And I know – I know that's what you'll be thinking too. That's what I wanted to say. I understand if you're sceptical. I didn't manage to convince the police, after all. I'm here. Without bail. I must be guilty.

But it's not true.

I have 140 days to convince you. All I have to do is tell the truth, right? I just have to start at the beginning, and set it all out, clearly and calmly, until I get to the end.

And the beginning was the advert.

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WANTED: Large family seeks experienced live-in nanny

ABOUT US: We are a busy family of four children, living in a beautiful (but remote!) house in the Highlands. Mum and Dad co-run the family architecture practice.

ABOUT YOU: We are seeking an experienced nanny, used to working with children of all ages, from babyhood to teens. You must be practical, unflappable, and comfortable looking after children on your own. Excellent references, DBS check, first-aid certificate and clean driving licence are a must.

ABOUT THE POST: Mum and Dad work mainly from home and during those periods you will have a simple 8–5 post, with one night a week babysitting, and weekends off. As far as possible we arrange our schedule so that one parent is always around. However, there are times when we may both need to be away (very occasionally for up to a fortnight), and when this occurs, you will be *in loco parentis*.

In return we can offer a highly competitive remuneration package totalling £55,000 per annum (gross, including bonus), use of a car, and eight weeks' holiday a year.

Applications to Sandra and Bill Elincourt, Heatherbrae House, Carn Bridge.

I remember it nearly word for word. The funny thing was, I wasn't even looking for a job when it came up on my Google results – I was searching for . . . well, it doesn't really matter what I was looking for. But something completely different. And then there it was – like a gift thrown into my hands so unexpectedly I almost didn't catch it.

I read it through once, and then again, my heart beating faster the second time, because it was *perfect*. It was almost too perfect.

When I read it a third time I was scared to look at the closing date for applications – convinced I would have missed it.

But it was that very evening.

It was unbelievable. Not just the salary – though God knows, that was a pretty startling sum. Not just the post. But the luck of it. The whole package – just falling in my lap, right when I was in the perfect position to apply.

You see, my flatmate was away, travelling. We'd met at the Little Nippers nursery in Peckham, working side by side in the baby room, laughing about our terrible boss and the pushy, faddy parents, with their fucking fabric nappies and their home-made –

Sorry. I shouldn't have sworn. I've scribbled it out but you can probably see the word through the paper and, God knows, maybe you've got kids, maybe you even put them in Little Plushy Bottoms or whatever the fashionable brand was at the time.

And I get it, I do. They're your babies. Nothing is too much trouble. I understand that. It's just that when you're the one having to stockpile a whole day's worth of pissy, shitty bits of cloth and hand them back to the parent at collection time with your eyes watering from the ammonia . . . it's not that I *mind* exactly, you know? It's part of the job. I get that. But we all deserve a moan, don't we? We all need to let off steam, or we'd explode with frustration.

Sorry. I'm rambling. Maybe this is why Mr Gates is always trying to shut me up. Because I dig myself a hole with my words, and instead of knowing when to stop, I keep digging. You're probably adding two and two together right now. *Doesn't seem to like kids much. Freely admits to frustration with role. What would happen when she was cooped up with four kids and no adults to 'let off steam' with?*

That's exactly what the police did. All those little throwaway remarks – all those unedifying facts. I could see the triumph on their faces every time I dropped one, and I watched them picking them up like breadcrumbs, adding them to the weight of arguments against me.

But that's the thing, Mr Wrexham. I could spin you a web of bullshit about what a perfect, caring, saintly person I am – but it would be just that. Bullshit. And I am not here to bullshit you. I want you to believe that – I want it more than anything in the world.

I am telling you the *truth*. The unvarnished, ugly truth. And it is all that. It is unpolished and unpleasant and I don't pretend I acted like an angel. But *I didn't kill anyone*. I just fucking didn't.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to swear again.

God, I am messing this up so badly. I have to keep a clear head – get this all straight in my head. It's like Mr Gates says – I should stick to the facts.

OK then. Fact. The advert. The advert is a fact, right?

The advert . . . with its amazing, dizzying, fabulous salary.

That should have been my first warning signal, you know. The salary. Because it was *stupidly* generous. I mean it would have been generous even for London, even for a live-out nanny. But for a nanny in someone's house, with free accommodation provided, and all bills paid, even down to the car, it was ridiculous.

It was so ridiculous in fact that I half wondered if there had been a typo. Or something that they weren't saying – a child

with significant behavioural needs maybe? But wouldn't they have mentioned that in the ad?

Six months ago, I probably would have paused, frowned a little, and then passed on without thinking too much more about it. But then, six months ago I wouldn't have been looking at that web page in the first place. Six months ago I had a flatmate and a job I liked, and even the prospect of promotion. Six months ago I was in a pretty good place. But now ... well, things were a bit different now.

My friend, the girl I mentioned at Little Nippers, had left to go travelling a couple of months ago. It hadn't seemed like the end of the world when she told me – to be honest, I found her quite annoying, her habit of loading the dishwasher but never actually switching it on, her endless Europop disco hits, hissing through my bedroom wall when I was trying to sleep. I mean, I knew I'd miss her, but I didn't realise how much.

She had left her stuff in her room and we'd agreed she'd pay half rent and I'd keep the room open for her. It seemed like a good compromise – I'd had a series of terrible flatmates before we found each other, and I wasn't keen to return to posting on Facebook Local and trying to weed out weirdos by text message and email, and it felt, in some small way, like an anchor – like a guarantee that she would come back.

But when the first flush of freedom wore off, and the novelty of having the whole place to myself and watching whatever I liked on the shared TV in the living room had started to fade a little, I found I was lonely. I missed the way she'd say 'wine o'clock, darling?' when we rolled in together from work. I missed sounding off to her about Val, the owner of Little Nippers, and sharing anecdotes about the worst of the parents. When I applied for a promotion and didn't get it, I went to the pub alone to drown my sorrows and ended up crying into my beer, thinking how different it would have been if she had still

been here. We could have laughed about it together, she would have flicked Val the vees behind her back at work, and given her earthy belly laugh when Val turned round to almost catch her in the act.

I am not very good at failing, Mr Wrexham, that's the thing. Exams. Dating. Jobs. Any kind of test, really. My instinct is always to aim low, save myself some pain. Or, in the case of dating, just don't aim at all, rather than risk being rejected. It's why I didn't go to university in the end. I had the grades but I couldn't bear the idea of being turned down, the thought of them reading my application with a scornful snigger. 'Who does she think she is?'

Better to achieve perfect marks in an easy test than flunk a hard one, that was my motto. I've always known that about myself. But what I didn't know, until my flatmate left, was that I am also not very good at being alone. And I think it was that, more than anything, that pushed me out of my comfort zone, and made me scroll down that advert, holding my breath, imagining what lay at the other end of it.

The police made a lot out of the salary, when they first questioned me. But the truth is, the money wasn't the reason I applied for the post. It wasn't even really about my flatmate, though I can't deny, if she hadn't left, none of it would have happened. No, the real reason ... well, you probably know what the real reason was. It was all over the papers, after all.

I called in sick to Little Nippers and spent the entire day working on a CV and getting together everything that I knew I would need to convince the Elincourts that I was the person they were looking for. DBS – check. First-aid certificate – check. Spotless references – check, check and check.

The only problem was the driving licence. But I pushed the issue aside for the moment. I could cross that bridge when I

came to it – if I got that far. Right now, I wasn't thinking past the interview.

I added a note to the covering letter asking the Elincourts not to contact Little Nippers for a reference – I told them that I didn't want my current employers knowing that I was casting about for another job, which was true – and then I emailed it off to the address provided and held my breath and waited.

I had given myself the best possible chance of meeting them face-to-face. There was nothing else I could do now.

Those next few days were hard, Mr Wrexham. Not as hard as the time I've spent in here, but hard enough. Because God, I wanted that interview *so much*. I was only just beginning to realise how much. With every day that passed my hopes ebbed a little more, and I had to fight off the urge to contact them again and beg for an answer. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that looking so desperate would certainly not help my case if they were still deciding.

But six days later it came, pinged into my email inbox.

To: supernanny1990@ymail.com  
From: sandra.elincourt@elincourtandelincourt.com  
Subject: Nanny position

Elincourt. The surname alone was enough to make my stomach start churning like a washing machine. My fingers were shaking almost too much to open it, and my heart was hammering in my throat. Surely, surely they didn't often contact unsuccessful applicants. Surely an email must mean ...?

I clicked.

Hi Rowan!

Thank you so much for your application, and apologies for taking so long to get back to you. I have to admit, we were slightly taken by surprise at the volume of applications. Your CV was very impressive, and we would like to invite you to interview. Our house is rather remote, so we are happy to pay your train fare, and can offer you a room in our house overnight, as you will not be able to make the trip from London in one day.

However, there is one thing I must make you aware of up front, in case it affects your enthusiasm for the post.

Since we bought Heatherbrae, we have become aware of various superstitions surrounding the house's history. It is an old building, and has had no more than the usual number of deaths and tragedies in its past, but for some reason these have resulted in some local tales of hauntings etc. Unfortunately, this fact has upset some of our recent nannies, to the extent that four have resigned in the past 14 months.

As you can imagine this has been very disruptive for the children, not to mention extremely awkward for myself and my husband professionally.

For that reason we wanted to be completely honest about our predicament, and we are offering a generous salary in the hopes of attracting someone who can really commit to staying with our family for the long term – at least a year.

If you do not feel that is you, or if you feel at all concerned about the history of the house, please say so now as we are very keen to minimise further disruption to the children. With that in mind, the salary will be made up of a basic stipend, paid monthly, and then a generous year-end bonus on the anniversary of employment.

If you are still keen to attend interview, please let me know your availability for the forthcoming week.

Best wishes, and I look forward to meeting you,  
Sandra Elincourt

I closed down the email and for a moment just sat there staring at the screen. Then I got up and did a little silent scream, punching the air in jubilation.

I had done it. I had *done* it.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

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I had done it, Mr Wrexham. I had cleared the first hurdle. But it *was* only the first hurdle. I had to get through the interview next – and without slipping up.

Almost exactly one week after I had opened the email from Sandra Elincourt, I was on a train up to Scotland, doing my very best impression of Rowan the Perfect Nanny. My normally bushy hair was brushed to a shine and tamed into a neat, jaunty ponytail, my nails were buffed and my make-up unobtrusively on point, and I was wearing my best ‘approachable yet responsible, fun yet hard-working, professional yet not too proud to get down on my knees and clear up sick’ outfit – a neat tweed skirt and a white cotton fitted shirt with a cashmere cardigan over the top. Not quite Norland Nanny, but definitely a nod in that direction.

My stomach was flipping with butterflies. I had never done anything like this before. Not the nannying, I mean. Obviously. I had done that for nearly ten years, though mostly in nurseries, rather than private homes.

But ... *this*. Putting myself on the line. Setting myself up for rejection like this.

I wanted this so much. So much that I was almost scared of what I was going to find.

Much to my annoyance, the train was delayed, so that it took nearly six hours to get to Edinburgh instead of the timetabled four and a half, and when I got off the train at Waverley, stiffly flexing my legs, I found it was gone five o'clock, and I had

missed my connection by a good hour. Fortunately there was another train due, and while I waited, I texted Mrs Elincourt, apologising profusely, and warning her that I would be late into Carn Bridge.

At last the train arrived – much smaller than the big Intercity, and older too. I settled myself in a window seat, and as the train headed north, I watched the countryside change from rolling green fields to the smoke-blue and purples of heathered moors, mountains rising behind, darker and bleaker with every station we passed. It was so beautiful it made me forget my irritation at being late. The sight of the huge hills rising inexorably around us somehow put everything else into perspective. I felt the hard lump of trepidation lodged in my gut start to soften. And something inside me began . . . I don't know, Mr Wrexham. It was like I began to *hope*. To hope that this could truly be real.

I felt, in some twisted kind of way, like I was coming home.

We passed through stations with half-familiar names, Perth, Pitlochry, Aviemore, the sky growing darker all the time. At last I heard 'Carn Bridge, next stop Carn Bridge' and the train pulled into a little Victorian station and I got out. I stood on the platform, jumpy with nerves, wondering what to do.

*Someone will meet you*, Mrs Elincourt's email had said. What did that mean? A taxi? Someone holding up a sign with my name?

I followed the small straggle of travellers to the exit and stood, awkwardly, while the other passengers dispersed to cars and waiting friends and relatives. My case was heavy, and I set it down by my feet as I looked up and down the dusky platform. The shadows were lengthening into evening, and the fleeting optimism I had felt on the train was starting to fade. What if Mrs Elincourt hadn't got my text? She hadn't replied. Perhaps a pre-booked taxi had come and gone hours ago, and I'd been marked up as a no-show.

Suddenly the butterflies were back – and badly.

It was early June, but we were pretty far north, and the night air was surprisingly cold after the fuggy summer warmth of London. I found I was shivering as I pulled my coat around me, a cool wind whipping down from the hills. The platform had emptied, and I was all alone.

I felt a strong urge for a cigarette, but I knew from experience that turning up to an interview stinking of fags was not a great start. Instead, I looked at my phone. The train had arrived exactly on time – at least, exactly at the revised time I had told Mrs Elincourt in my text. I would give it five minutes, and then call her.

Five minutes passed, but I told myself I'd give it just five minutes more. I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot, badgering them if they were stuck in traffic.

Five more minutes ticked away, and I was just digging in my bag, looking for the printout of Mrs Elincourt's email, when I saw a man walking down the platform, hands in pockets.

For a moment something seemed to stutter in my chest, but then he got closer and looked up, his eyes meeting mine, and I realised, it couldn't possibly be *him*. He was much too young. Thirty, thirty-five at the outside. He was also – and even in my nervousness I couldn't help but clock it – extremely good-looking, in a scrubby unshaven kind of way, with tangled dark hair and a tall, lean frame.

He was wearing overalls and as he came up to me he took his hands out of his pockets, and I saw they were grained with something – soil, or engine oil, though he'd made an attempt to clean them. For a moment I thought perhaps he was an employee of the railway, but as he drew level with me he spoke.

'Rowan Caine?'

I nodded.

'I'm Jack Grant.' He grinned, his mouth curling disarmingly at the edges, as though appreciating a private joke. His accent

was Scottish, but softer and more distinct than the Glaswegian girl I'd worked with after school. He pronounced his surname with a lilt, to rhyme with ant, not the longer English aunt. 'I work up at Heatherbrae House. Sandra asked me to pick you up. Sorry I'm late.'

'Hi,' I said, suddenly shy for no reason I could pin down. I coughed, trying to think of something to say. 'Um, it's fine. No problem.'

'It's why I'm in such a state.' He looked ruefully down at his hands. She didn't tell me you'd be wanting a lift until half an hour ago. I was halfway through fixing the mower, but I was worried I'd miss your train, so I just set out, dirt and all. Can I take your case?'

'Honestly, it's fine.' I picked up my case. 'It's not heavy. Thank you for coming out.'

He shrugged.

'No need to thank me, it's my job.'

'You work for the Elincourts?'

'For Bill and Sandra, aye. I'm ... well, I don't know quite what my job title would be. I think Bill's got me on his company payroll as a driver, but odd-job man would cover it better. I do the gardening, fix the cars, run them in and out of Carn Bridge. You'll be the nanny?'

'Not yet,' I said nervously, but he grinned sideways at me, and I smiled in spite of myself. There was something infectious about his expression. 'I mean, that's the position I'm going for, yes. Have they had many other interviewees?'

'Two or three. You're doing better than the first one. She didn't speak much English – I don't know who she got to write her application, but from what Sandra said it wasnae her.'

'Oh.' Somehow his words made me feel better. I'd been imagining a parade of starched and fiercely competent Mary Poppins types. I stood straighter, smoothing the wrinkles out of my

tweed skirt. 'Good. I mean, not good for her, I suppose. Good for me.'

We were outside the station now, walking across the little sparsely populated car park, towards a long black car on the opposite side of the road. Jack clicked something on a fob in his pocket and the lights flashed and the doors opened, shooting up like bat wings, making my jaw drop involuntarily. I thought of my stepfather's bland grey Volvo, his pride and joy, and gave a short laugh. Jack grinned again.

'It's a bit conspicuous, isn't it? It's a Tesla. Electric. I don't know if it would have been my choice of vehicle, but Bill ... well, you'll see. He's into technology.'

'Is he?' The words were meaningless as a response, but somehow ... just the knowledge of this small thing was a little nugget, a connection to this faceless man.

Jack stood back as I put my case into the rear of the car.

'Do you want to ride in the back, or up front?' he asked, and I felt my face colour up.

'Oh, in front, please!'

The thought of sitting regally in the back, treating him like a chauffeur, was enough to make me squirm.

'The views are better anyway,' was all he said, but he clicked something that made the bat-wing doors at the rear of the car swing closed, and then held open the front passenger door.

'After you, Rowan.'

For a moment I didn't move, almost forgetting who he was speaking to. Then, with a start, I pulled myself together and climbed into the car.

I had known, on some level, I suppose, that the Elincourts were rich. I mean, they had a driver slash odd-job man, and they were offering fifty-five grand for a nanny position, so they must have had cash to spare, but it wasn't until we reached Heatherbrae House that I began to realise quite *how* rich they were.

The knowledge gave me a strange feeling.

*I don't care about the money* I wanted to tell Jack as we stopped at a high steel gate, which swung slowly inwards, clearly sensing some sort of transmitter in the car. But it wasn't completely true.

*How much do Sandra and Bill make?* I found myself wondering.

The Tesla was eerily silent as we drove up the long, winding drive, the sound of the gravel beneath the wheels louder by far than the hushed electric engine.

'Jesus,' I muttered under my breath as we rounded yet another bend, and still no house was in sight. Jack shot me a sideways look.

'Big place, isn't it?'

'Just a bit.'

Land must be cheaper round here than down south of course, but it couldn't be *that* cheap. We bumped across a bridge over a quick-running burn, the waters dark with peat, and then drove through a cluster of pines. I thought I saw a flash of something scarlet through the trees and craned to look, but it was getting dark, and I wasn't completely sure if I had imagined the movement.

At last we came out of the shelter of the trees and into a clearing, and I saw Heatherbrae House for the first time.

I had been expecting something ostentatious, a McMansion, maybe, or a sprawling log-built ranch. But that wasn't what greeted me at all. The house in front of me was a modest Victorian lodge, four-square, like a child's drawing of a house, with a glossy black door in the centre and windows on each side. It was not big, but solidly built of granite blocks, with lush Virginia creeper rambling up one side of it, and I could not have put my finger on exactly why, but it exuded warmth and luxury and *comfort*.

Dusk had fallen, and as Jack turned off the engine of the Tesla and extinguished the headlights, the only illumination from all around was the stars, and the lamps from inside the house itself, shining out across the gravel. It looked like something from a sentimental illustration, those nostalgia-soaked twinkly photographs on the front of the jigsaws that my grandmother had loved.

Soft grey stone, lichen and weathered, golden lamps shining out through the clean rippled glass of the windows, overblown roses scattering their petals in the dusk – it was almost too perfect, unbearably perfect, in some strange way.

As I stepped out of the car and the cool evening air settled around me, pine-scented and sharp and clear as mineral water, I felt suddenly choked with longing for this life and all that it represented. The contrast with my own upbringing, the cheerless boxy suburbia of my parents' 1950s identikit bungalow, every room except my own neat as a pin, yet all utterly devoid of any character or comfort, was almost too bitter to bear, and it was more to banish the thought than because I was ready to meet Sandra that I stepped forward into the shelter of the covered porch.

Instantly, something felt off-kilter. But what was it? The door in front of me was traditional enough, panelled wood painted a

rich glossy black, but something seemed wrong, *missing*, even. It took me a second to notice what it was. There was no keyhole.

The realisation was somehow unsettling. Such a small detail, and yet without it I was left wondering – was the door a fake? Should I go round the other side of the house?

There was no knocker either, and I looked over my shoulder, seeking Jack's guidance as to how I should announce myself. But he was still inside the car, checking something on the big illuminated touchscreen that served as the dashboard controls.

I turned back and put out my hand, ready to rap on the wood with my knuckles, but as I did so, something embedded in the wall to the left of the door caught my eye. A ghostly illuminated icon in the shape of a bell had appeared from nowhere, shining out of what had seemed to be solid stone, and I saw that what I had taken for simply part of the wall was actually a cleverly inlaid panel. I went to press it, but it must have been motion-sensitive, for I had not even made contact when a chime sounded from inside the house.

I blinked, suddenly thinking of Jack's comment in the car. *Bill ... well, you'll see. He's into technology.* Was this what he had meant?

'Rowan! Hello!' The female voice seemed to come out of nowhere, and I jumped, looking around for a camera, a microphone, a grille to speak into. There was none. Or none that I could see.

'Um ... y-yes,' I said, speaking to the air in general, feeling like a complete fool. 'Hi. Is that ... Sandra?'

'Yes! I'm just getting changed. I'll be down in ten seconds. Sorry to keep you standing around.'

There was no 'click' to tell me that a receiver had been replaced, or any other indication that the conversation was over, but the panel faded back to blank and I stood waiting, feeling curiously both watched and ignored.

Finally, after what felt like a long time, but was probably less than thirty seconds, there was a sudden cacophony of barking and the front door opened. Two black Labradors shot out, followed by a slim honey-blonde woman of perhaps forty, laughing and snatching ineffectually at their collars as they ran rings around her, yelping joyfully.

‘Hero! Claude! Get back here!’

But the dogs paid no attention, leaping up at me as I took a couple of steps backwards. One of them shoved its nose into my crotch, painfully hard, and I found myself laughing nervously, trying to push its muzzle away, thinking of my one spare pair of tights in my bag, and gritting my teeth in case the dog ripped the ones I was wearing. It jumped up at me again and I sneezed, feeling an itching begin in the back of my skull. Shit. Had I brought my inhaler?

‘Hero!’ the woman said again. ‘Hero, *stop it.*’ She stepped out of the shelter of the porch towards me, holding out her hand. ‘You must be Rowan. *Calm down,* Hero, honestly!’ She managed to clip the lead she was holding onto the dog’s collar and dragged it back beside her. ‘Sorry, sorry, she’s so friendly. Do you mind dogs?’

‘Not at all,’ I said, though it was only partly true. I didn’t mind dogs exactly, but they triggered my asthma if I didn’t take my antihistamines. Besides, asthma or no asthma, I didn’t want their noses shoved between my legs in a professional situation. I felt my chest tighten, though out here it couldn’t be anything other than psychosomatic. ‘Good boy,’ I said, with all the enthusiasm I could muster, patting it on the head.

‘Good girl, actually. Hero’s a bitch, Claude is the boy. They’re brother and sister.’

‘Good girl,’ I amended half-heartedly. Hero licked my hand enthusiastically and I stifled the impulse to wipe my palm on my skirt. Behind me I heard a door slam, followed by Jack’s feet

crunching across the gravel, and it was with some relief that I watched the dogs turn their attention to him, woofing happily as he retrieved my case from the back of the car.

‘Here’s your case, Rowan. Pleasure meeting you,’ he said as he set it down beside me, and then, turning to Mrs Elincourt, ‘I’ll be getting back to fixing the mower, if it’s all right, Sandra. Unless you need me for anything else?’

‘What’s that?’ Mrs Elincourt said distractedly, and then she nodded. ‘Oh, the mower. Yes, please do. Can you get it working again?’

‘I hope so. If not, I’ll call Aleckie Brown in the morning.’

‘Thank you, Jack,’ Sandra said, and shook her head as he walked away round the side of the building, his silhouette tall and square-shouldered against the evening sky. ‘Honestly, that man is *such* a treasure. I don’t know what we’d do without him. He and Jean have been absolute rocks – it’s what makes the whole nanny business all the more inexplicable.’

*The whole nanny business.* There it was then. The first reference to the odd fact that had been at the back of my mind all the way up here: four women had already walked out of this post.

In the initial flush of exultation, I hadn’t really worried very much about that part of Sandra’s letter. In the context of getting an interview, it hadn’t seemed very important, but as I reread the emails and travel instructions on the way up to Carn Bridge, I had stumbled over it again, and this time the remark had stuck out – its strangeness and faint absurdity. I had spent some time thinking about it during the long, boring hours on the train, turning her words over in my mind, torn between a desire to laugh, and something more puzzled and uneasy.

I *didn’t* believe in the supernatural – I should say that up front, Mr Wrexham. And so the legends of the house didn’t bother me at all, in fact the whole idea of nannies and servants

driven out by mysterious spooky happenings seemed more than a little ridiculous – almost Victorian.

But the fact was that four women had left the Elincourts' employment in the last year. Having the bad luck to engage one nervous, superstitious employee seemed quite likely. Getting four in a row seemed ... less so.

Which meant that there was a strong chance that something else was going on, and all sorts of possibilities had run through my mind on the long journey up to Scotland. I had been half expecting to find that Heatherbrae was a draughty ruin of a house, or that Mrs Elincourt was a very difficult employer. So far, at least, that didn't seem to be the case. But I was reserving judgement.

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Inside Heatherbrae the dogs were, if anything, more boisterous and excited to find a stranger admitted into the house, and at last Mrs Elincourt gave up trying to control them and dragged them both by their collars through to a room at the back, to shut them up.

As she disappeared, I hastily fumbled my inhaler out of my pocket and took a surreptitious puff, then waited for her just inside the front door, feeling the atmosphere of the house settle around me.

It wasn't a big house, just a family home. And the furnishings weren't ostentatious, just incredibly comfortable and well built. But there was a sense of . . . of *money*. That's the only way I can put it. From the polished wooden bannister and deep peat-coloured carpet runner that curved around the long, elegant flight, to the squashy bronze velvet armchair squeezed beneath the stairs and the frayed Persian rug spread across the worn flagstones in the hall. From the slow sure tick of a beautiful grandfather clock standing beside the long window, to the deep patina of age on the refectory table against the wall, everything conspired into an almost overwhelming sense of luxury. It wasn't that it was neat exactly – there were piles of newspapers scattered by the sofa, and a child's wellington boot left abandoned by the front door – but there was not a single thing that felt wrong. The sofa cushions were plump with feathers, there were no drifts of dog hairs in the corners of the room, or muddy scuffs on the stairs.

Even the *smell* was right – not a trace of wet dog or stale cooking, just beeswax polish, woodsmoke, and the faintest hint of dried rose petals.

It was ... it was *perfect*, Mr Wrexham. It was the house I would have made for myself if I had the money and the taste and the time to create something so deeply, infinitely welcoming and warm.

I was just thinking all this, when I heard a door shut and saw Sandra coming back from the far side of the hallway, shaking her heavy, honey-coloured hair out of her face and smiling.

‘Oh dear, sorry, they don’t see many strangers so they do get terribly excited when new faces appear. They aren’t like this all the time, I do assure you. Let’s start again. Hello, Rowan, I’m Sandra.’

She held out her hand for the second time, slim and strong and tanned, and studded with three or four expensive-looking rings. I shook it, feeling her fingers grip mine with unusual firmness, and returned her smile.

‘Right, well, you must be famished and rather tired after such a long trip. You came up from London, is that right?’

I nodded.

‘Let me show you to your room and then when you’ve changed and made yourself comfortable, come down and we’ll have something to eat. I can’t believe it’s so late. Gone nine already. Was your journey awful?’

‘Not awful, no,’ I said. ‘Just slow. There was some kind of points failure at York, so I missed my connection. I’m really sorry, I’m usually very punctual.’

That at least was true. Whatever my other flaws and failings, I’m very rarely late.

‘I got your text. So sorry I didn’t reply, I didn’t see it at first, I was up to my elbows in the kids’ bathtime when it came through, and I only just managed to rush out and tell Jack to collect you. I hope you weren’t waiting at the station for ages.’

It wasn't a question exactly – more of a remark, but I answered anyway.

'Not too long. Are the children in bed then?'

'The three youngest, yes. Maddie is eight, Ellie is five, and the baby, Petra, is just eighteen months, so they're all in bed.'

'And your other child?' I asked, thinking of the flash of red I'd seen between the trees on the drive up. 'You said in the advert you had four?'

'Rhiannon is fourteen going on twenty-four. She's at boarding school – not really our choice, I'd prefer to have her at home, but there's no secondary close enough. The nearest day school is more than an hour's drive and it would just be too much every day. So she boards over near Inverness and comes home most weekends. It breaks my heart a little bit every time she goes, but she seems to enjoy it.'

*If you want her at home that badly, why don't you move?* I thought.

'So I won't meet her?' I asked. Sandra shook her head.

'No, unfortunately not, but to be honest your time would be spent mostly with the little ones. Anyway – it means we can have a lovely chat now, and you can get to know the kids tomorrow. Oh, and I'm afraid my husband – Bill – can't be here either.'

'Oh?' It was a surprise – a shock even. I wasn't going to meet him, then. I had been so sure that someone would want to meet the person they were considering hiring to look after their children ... but I tried to keep my face neutral. Non-judgemental. 'Oh, that's a shame.'

'Yes, he's away, working. It's been a pretty horrendous struggle, I have to say, with so many nannies leaving this year. The children are understandably very destabilised and the business has really suffered. We're both architects in a two-man firm. Well, one man, one woman!' She flashed a smile, showing very white, perfectly even teeth. 'It's just me and him, and it means

that in busy periods when we've got more than one project going on, we can get terribly stretched. We try to juggle it so that there's always one of us around but with Katya leaving – she was our last nanny – it's just been chaos. I've had to pick up all the slack here, and Bill's been trying to hold the business together – I need to be completely honest and say that whoever does get the post isn't going to get a very smooth introductory period. Normally I try to work from home for the first month or so to make sure everything is going OK, but that just won't be possible this time. Bill can't be in two places at once and we have projects that desperately need me to be there and on the ground. We need someone very experienced who isn't going to be fazed by being left with the kids early on, and they need to be able to start asap.' She looked at me, a little anxiously, a furrow between her strongly marked brows. 'Do you think that describes you?'

I swallowed. Time to shed my doubts and step into the role of Rowan the Perfect Nanny.

'Definitely,' I said, and the confidence in my voice almost convinced myself. 'I mean, you've seen my CV –'

'We were very impressed with your CV,' Sandra said, and I gave a little blushing nod of acknowledgement. 'Quite frankly, it's one of the most impressive ones we've had. You tick all the boxes we need in terms of experience with the various age groups. But what's your notice period like? I mean obviously –' she was talking quickly now, as if slightly uncomfortable – '*obviously* getting the *right* nanny is the most important thing, that goes without saying. But actually we do need someone who can start pretty much ... well, pretty much now, if I'm being completely honest. So it would be disingenuous of me to pretend that's not a factor.'

'My notice period is four weeks.' I saw Sandra's mouth twist in a little worried moue, and added hastily, 'But I think I could

probably negotiate an earlier finish. I have quite a bit of annual leave left, and I'd have to sit down with a calendar and do the sums, but I think there's a good chance I could get it down to two weeks. Maybe less.'

*If Little Nippers were prepared to be flexible, that was. God knows, they hadn't given me much reason for loyalty.*

I didn't miss the flash of hope and relief that crossed Sandra's face. But then she seemed to realise where we were.

'Look at me, keeping you talking in the hallway. It's hardly fair for me to be interviewing you before you've even got your coat off! Let me show you to your room, and then we can retreat to the kitchen and have a proper talk while you get some food inside you.'

She turned, and began to make her way up the long curving flight of stairs, her feet silent on the thick, velvet-soft carpet. At the landing she stopped and put her finger to her lips. I paused, taking in the wide sweep of space, the little table with a vase of blush peonies just beginning to shed their petals. A corridor disappeared off into semi-darkness, lit only by a rose-tinted night light plugged into a wall socket. Half a dozen doors led off from it. The one at the far end had wonky wooden letters stuck on it, and as my eyes got used to the low lighting, I made out the words. *Princess Ellie* and *Queen Maddie*. The door closest to the stairwell was slightly open, a night light shining dimly in the recesses of the room. I could hear a baby's soft snorting breath coming through.

'The kids are asleep,' Sandra whispered. 'At least, I hope so. I heard some pattering earlier but it all seems to be quiet now! Maddie in particular is a very light sleeper so I do have to tiptoe around a bit. Bill and I sleep on this floor, but Rhi sleeps upstairs. This way.'

At the top of the second flight, three further doors led off a slightly smaller landing. The middle one was open, and inside

I saw a small cupboard housing a jumble of mops and brooms, and a cordless Hoover charging on the wall. Sandra shut it hastily.

The door to the left of it was closed and had *FUCK OFF, KEEP OUT OR YOU DIE* written across the panelled wood in what looked like smeared red lipstick.

‘That’s Rhiannon’s room,’ Sandra said with a slight lift of her eyebrows that might have indicated anything from amusement to resignation. ‘This one –’ she put her hand on the knob of the door to the far right of the stairs – ‘is yours. Well, I mean –’ She stopped, looking a little flustered. ‘I mean, it’s where we always put the nanny, and it’s where you’ll be sleeping tonight. Sorry, don’t want to be too presumptuous!’

I gave a slightly nervous attempt at a laugh, as she opened the door. It was dark inside, but instead of groping for a switch Sandra pulled out her phone. I was expecting her to turn on the torch, but instead she pressed something, and the lights inside the room flickered into life.

It wasn’t just the main overhead light – in fact that was turned down very low, giving off nothing but a kind of faint golden glow – the reading light by the bed had come on too, as well as a standing lamp by the window next to a little table and some fairy lights twined around the bedhead.

My surprise must have shown on my face, because Sandra gave a delighted laugh.

‘Pretty cool, isn’t it? We do have switches, obviously – well, panels – but this is a smart house. All the heating and lights and so on can be controlled from our phones.’ She swiped at something and the main light grew suddenly much brighter, and then dimmer again, and across the room a light turned on in the ensuite bathroom and then flicked off again.

‘It’s not just lighting ...’ Sandra said, and she pulled across another screen and tapped an icon, and music started playing

softly out of an invisible speaker. Miles Davis, I thought, though I wasn't very well up on jazz.

'There's also a voice option, but I find that a bit creepy so I don't often use it. Still, I can show you.' She coughed, and then said in a slightly artificial raised tone, 'Music off!'

There was a pause, and then the Miles Davis shut abruptly off.

'Obviously you can also control the settings from the panel.' She pressed something on the wall to demonstrate, and a white panel lit up briefly as the curtains on the window opposite swished closed, and then opened again.

'Wow,' I said. I really wasn't sure what to say. On the one hand it was impressive. On the other hand ... I found myself coming back to Sandra's word. Creepy.

'I know,' Sandra said with a little laugh. 'It's a bit ridiculous, I do realise. But being architects it's a professional duty to try out all the cool gadgets. Anyway –' she looked at her phone again, checking the clock this time – 'I *must* stop talking and get the supper out of the oven, and you must take off your coat and un-pack. Shall I see you downstairs in ... fifteen minutes?'

'Sounds good,' I said, a little faintly, and she gave me a grin, and disappeared, closing the door behind her.

After she'd gone I set my case on the floor and crossed the room to the window. Outside it was completely dark, but by pressing my face to the glass and cupping my hands to my temples I could just make out a star-spattered sky and the dark shapes of mountains against the horizon. There were almost no lights.

The realisation of how isolated this place really was made me shiver, just for a moment, and I turned my back on the window and set about surveying the room.

What struck me instantly was that it was an odd mixture of traditional and modern. The window was pure Victorian, right down to the brass latch and the slightly rippled glass panes. But the lights were twenty-first century – no boring bulb in the

centre of the ceiling. Instead there was a plethora of spotlights, lamps and uplighters, each focused on a different part of the room, and tuned to a different warmth and brightness. There were no radiators either, in fact I couldn't see where the heat was coming from, but clearly there must be some source – the night was cool enough for my breath to have left white mist on the windowpane. Underfloor heating? Some kind of concealed vent?

The furniture was more conservative, with a strong air of an expensive country-house hotel. Opposite me, facing the window, was a king-size bed covered with the ubiquitous array of brocade cushions, and beneath the window was a small plumply stuffed sofa, with a little table beside it – the perfect space for entertaining a friend, or having a drink. There were chests of drawers, a desk, two upright chairs, and an upholstered blanket chest at the foot of the bed that could have done duty either as storage or additional seating. Doors led off to either side, and opening one at random I found a walk-in closet filled with empty racks and shelves, spotlights flickering into life above the bare shelves automatically as I pulled open the door. I tried the second one, but it seemed to be locked.

The third was ajar, and I remembered it was the one that Sandra had lit up to show the bathroom inside. Venturing in, I saw there was a panel on the wall, like the one Sandra had pressed by the main door to the room. I touched it, not entirely expecting it to work, but it glowed into life displaying a confusing configuration of icons and squares. I pressed one at random, not completely sure what was going to happen, and the lights became slowly brighter, revealing a state-of-the-art wet room with a huge rainwater shower and a concrete vanity unit the size of my kitchen counter. There was nothing faux-Victorian about this room at all. It was space age in its complexity, sleek and modern in its styling, and had more glamour in one metro tile than most bathrooms possessed in their entirety.

I thought of my bathroom at home – hair in the rusting plughole, dirty towels kicked into the corner, make-up stains on the mirror.

God, I wanted this.

Before ... I don't know what I had wanted before. I had focused on nothing except getting here and meeting the Elincourts and finding out what was at the end of this advert. That was it. I honestly hadn't even thought about actually getting the job.

Now ... now I *wanted* it. Not just the fifty-five thousand a year, but everything. I wanted this beautiful house and this gorgeous room, right down to the sumptuous, marble-tiled shower, with its sparkling limescale-free glass and polished chrome fittings.

More than that, I wanted to be part of this family.

If I had had any doubts about what I was doing here, this room had crushed them.

For a long, long moment, I just stood at the vanity unit, my hands splayed on the counter, staring at myself in the mirror. The face that stared back at me was somehow unsettling. Not the expression, exactly, but something in my eyes. There was something there – a kind of hunger. I must not look too desperate in front of Sandra. Keen, yes. But desperation – the kind of hungry desperation I saw staring back at me now – that was nothing but off-putting.

Slowly, I smoothed down my hair, licked a finger, wetted an unruly brow back into place. Then my hand went to my necklace.

I wore it every day – had done ever since I had left school, and jewellery was no longer banned by uniform codes. Even as a child I'd worn it at weekends and whenever I could get away with it, ignoring my mother's sighs and her comments about cheap nasty tat that turned your skin green. It had been a present for my first birthday and now, after more than two decades, it felt like part of myself, something I barely even noticed, even when I reached to play with it in moments of stress or boredom.

Now I noticed it.

An ornate silver R on the end of a dangling chain. Or rather, as my mother had so frequently reminded me, not silver, but silver plate, something that was becoming more and more apparent, as the brassy metal beneath shone through where I had rubbed the pendant absent-mindedly with my fingers.

There was no reason to take it off. It wasn't inappropriate. The chances of anyone even noticing it were very low. And yet ...

Slowly, I reached round to the back of my neck and undid the clasp.

Then I put on a slick of lip gloss, straightened my skirt, tightened my ponytail, and prepared to go back downstairs to Sandra Elincourt and give the interview of my life.

## Virtualventures