

Widow

Amelia Larraby awoke in the new sunroom among her "necessities". The room glowed, she thought, with a warm, almost Italian light. Mrs. Larraby squinted and found the shape of her glasses on the writing table. Putting them on, she surveyed her world.

She loved her sunroom. After Harlan died she had needed something. The room's creation had occupied her for months. She had put Richard through a lot, but if not to provide for their mothers and see to it that they lived comfortably, what else would sons be for? Still, she couldn't help feeling a little guilty at the demands she had made.

There had been so many decisions to make, choices of colour scheme, flooring, windows ... not to mention the stained glass. Richard had certainly balked at that.

She tilted what she considered her fine aristocratic chin and stared up at the circular stained glass skylight. She had always wanted to design one of her own and now, at last, she had it. A rich, colourful quilt of light fell across the sunroom floor. Containing it all was a net of black leading. When the maids installed her in her customary position, the light fell around her like a multi-hued tent. She sighed, luxuriating in the warmth, and mentally ticked off her surroundings.

Her knitting was neatly tucked into the hold all she and Harlan had bought in Athens. Her stationary, a Christmas gift from Richard, lay ready upon the writing table. This morning she had watched Annie draw out the expensive vellum and her address book. She really must write someone, one of these days.

Nearly everything had been as she liked it. Annie had put her books on the table to her left: the Barbara Cartland novel, her dictionary, her knitting pattern, and the field and garden guide.

Annie had placed the small bell and the two remotes nearby. One controlled the television - she had rationed herself to one soap opera - and the other played the five disks in the disc player. All five were music she and Harlan had enjoyed: Benny Goodman, Chopin's Nocturnes, Mozart, the Selected Arias, and, she smiled, Billie Holiday! Oh Harlan, you rogue! Then she frowned.

Annie had placed the telephone within reach, though she rarely needed to call anyone. Everyone came to her. Her entire world was here within her grasp. However, Annie had forgotten something, hadn't she?

Amelia had waited. The maid had almost reached the broad French doors before she rang the bell. She smiled inwardly at the Annie's exasperated sigh. So close to escaping.

"Yes, Mrs. Larraby?" the maid said, from the doorway.

Mrs. Larraby waited until, a moment later, Annie's round figure entered her line of sight.

"Yes, Mrs. Larraby?"

"There's no need to raise your voice to me."

"I didn't raise my voi..."

"I shouldn't have to shout from room to room. As usual, you have forgotten something." She flicked her wrist toward the table.

"I don't under..."

"Well, what's missing? Or do I have to spell it out for you?"

"It's ... it's all there."

"It is not all there! The glass! You have forgotten the glass, haven't you?" She seasoned her words with just the right pinch of sarcasm.

"Oh, yes, the hourglass. I had no idea you wanted it out every day. Yesterday, you ..."

"Yesterday was yesterday. Today is today. Can't you get anything right?"

"Mrs. Larraby, I'll get the hourglass if you'll just calm your..."

"I don't need you telling me when to calm myself, and, if you'd do your job instead of whiling away your time, swilling coffee, things would run a lot smoother. Do I make myself clear?"

"But, Mrs Larr..."

"Do I make myself clear?" With this Mrs. Larraby placed her hands on the wheelchair arms as if to push herself up into a standing position.

"Yes, Mrs. Larraby," the maid bleated, rushing to stop the old woman from raising herself, "... I'll get the glass. Just ... wait a minute."

Mrs. Larraby smiled and tugged her shawl over her shoulders as she listened to Annie scurrying toward the bedroom.

Moments later, the maid returned and set the hourglass on the table, positioning it as she knew it must be. Again Mrs. Larraby waited until Annie was almost out of the door.

"Annie..."

A silence, then, "Yes, Mrs. Larraby?"

"How's Frank?"

The maid crept back into view. She held her mouth tightly, as if holding back words ... or was it tears?

"Found work yet?"

"No," Annie mumbled.

"Now that he isn't drinking any more, people will be more willing to hire him."

She listened with satisfaction to the whimper she knew was the beginning of Annie's tears. Oh, Amelia, you are naughty, she thought to herself. Richard would be angry with her. After the last maid quit he'd been quite ... what, forceful. Come to think of it, he had even lectured her on her ... her what? "Your wickedness, my dear," she said aloud, and smiled again, peering up at the skylight.

A small spider crouched in a corner of the molding. It had built a web across part of the skylight. Amelia had first noticed it when a tiny shadow flitted

over her knitting. She was outraged at first and ordered Annie to sweep the web away. That had been a month ago, but, though they tried, the little spider kept coming back and her heart had softened at its persistence. Instead, she'd asked Richard to buy her a field and garden guide. Of course, he'd bought it. He was so helpful that way.

The spider had become her secret ally and, sometimes, when she was sure she was alone, she spoke to it.

"Let's see," she said now, reaching for her book, "where were we? Oh, yes, those nasty wasps. Must be careful of them, my dear. It says here the Spider Wasp will sting you and, oh my goodness, paralyze you! Then they lay their eggs inside you so that when their young hatch they feed upon you. Oooo, disgusting! We certainly can't have that."

Laying the book aside, she stretched, full and warm. She reached for her knitting and the CD remote.

The arias. Yes, the arias. Italy was what she needed on such a glorious afternoon. As her needles clacked, music filled the room. Soon she was worlds away with dearest Harlan, strolling the ruins of the Borgia's palace at Sinigaglia.

An hour later, the door buzzer woke her. Richard. He and Annie mumbled together briefly and then she heard him coming toward her. She closed her eyes.

"Mother."

"Mmmm," she smiled, as if awakening. "Richard, how nice."

She allowed him to peck her cheek and said, "I was just dreaming about how your father and I used to travel together."

"Yes, mother," he paused, looking nervous. "I have a few items I want to clear up and ... a surprise for you."

"A surprise? How wonderful! You have your father's way about you, Richard. Did you know that? He was always surprising me."

"Yes, yes. Well ... this isn't exactly the same."

"Come now, I'm sure I'll love it, no matter what it is. Richard, you've got a tan! Wherever did you get that? Have you been south?" She tried to remember how long it had been. Could it really have been three weeks?

"Yes, I've been away ..."

"Oh, you've been on a holiday and you've brought me something. Just like your father, always bringing back little surprises from his trips ..."

"Mother, please stop it and listen to me."

"You don't have to be so ... so unpleasant, Richard," she pouted.

Suddenly, Annie was there. She handed Richard her keys to the apartment and to the Lincoln.

"Those are mine," she protested.

Annie froze.

"That's all, thank you," Richard said, "We'll call you if we need anything further."

"That is most certainly not all! Annie, you get back here!"

But Annie was gone. What was going on?

"Oh, I see, Richard, this has to do with your surprise, doesn't it? You need my keys to ..."

"No mother," he said, "I'm taking your keys."

"What do you mean? Those are mine!"

He sighed heavily before continuing, "We can't go on like this any longer."

"Can't go on like what?"

He paused and stood up from the chair. He walked to the window and stared out at the city. "Mother, I will not allow it any more."

"I have no idea what you are talking about ..."

"Oh, come now, you know very well! You sit here all day with nothing to do. It is shameful! Look at you. You haven't been out in months. You don't call anyone. You see no one, but the women I hire to care for you and those you abuse!"

"I do nothing of the sort. I ..."

"Six maids in the past year! That's how many have run screaming out of here. Day after day you sit here playing your sick little games ..."

"What are you talking about? What do you ..."

"I'm talking about making their life hell. Being so disagreeable they can't possibly please you. I'm talking about using their weaknesses to shame them. Annie is frantic right now. She can't do anything right and you keep throwing her husband in her face ..."

"But he's a drunk!"

"So was my father," he barked at her, "your precious Harlan! He was a drunk and an adulterer and you know it. Yes, he brought you presents from his ... business trips. Remember the little gift he brought you from Denmark?"

She was silent then. How could Richard have known? It had been shameful, but a doctor Harlan knew had been ... discreet and she had told herself all the necessary lies, so they could go on and put it behind them.

"Your father was a great and wonderful man. How could you say such things?"

"Because they are true!" He stared at her defiantly. She wondered how much more he knew, but he continued, "We are going to make some changes. I have power of attorney. You signed it over, remember? All of this is costing too much. There were reverses, you know, and father didn't leave all that much. Besides, you are obviously incapable of running your own life. We are in charge, now. Do you understand?"

She was so weak her arms shook as she clutched the arms of the wheelchair.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. Think, Amelia, she said to herself. Think!

"I said, do you understand?"

Play along. Find a way.

"We are doing this for your own good ..."

We?

"You cannot treat me like a child," she protested, "I am your mother ..."

The buzzer sounded.

"That will be Mrs. Larraby," Richard said, loudly enough for Annie to hear. "Annie, please show her in."

"Mrs. Larraby?"

"Yes, mother. You are about to meet your new daughter-in-law."

Richard, married? Wasn't he a confirmed bachelor? She had always mused that perhaps he was gay. The last thing she would have expected was him not consulting her on his choice of a wife. Surely he hadn't gone off and married someone without her approval.

"Tell me you're joking Richard."

"Why, mother? Don't you think I'm capable of making my own decisions?"

"Of course you're capable. It's just that ... a wife is so important for a man in your position. It's vital that she be ... of the right sort."

"And exactly what do you think is the right sort?"

"Well, the proper family, a good upbringing, you know, that sort of thing."

"You must be Annie," said a smooth, confident female voice. "How nice to meet you."

Amelia craned around in her wheelchair. There were three people in the

doorway, a woman and two children.

"Now, remember your manners, you two" said the same voice.

The woman walked toward her with her chin raised and a smile upon her tanned face. Her hair was a gleaming black. She was tall, shapely, and confident. As the woman stalked purposefully toward her Amelia began to realize that here was the future. She had always pictured him married to someone ... malleable, not this.

"Mother, this is Charlotte. We were married two weeks ago."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," the woman said, holding out her hand, "Richard has told me so much about you."

"Yes ... ," was all Amelia could fumble out. She was staring into a pair of hypnotic green eyes. Reaching out blindly, she caught her palm on one of the woman's sharp, crimson nails.

"Oh!" she said, startled.

"And these are my ... our ... children now, Jonathan and Sarah. By my previous marriage, of course." Charlotte said, her eyes still not leaving Amelia's.

The children loomed toward her, invading her room.

"Hello," said the girl. The boy nodded uncomfortably at her.

"Look Jonathan," Charlotte exclaimed, "your grandmother has a book about insects. You love bugs, don't you, Jon?"

The boy brightened and reached for the book. As he did his arm brushed the hourglass and it tottered.

Amelia reached for it as it spun, but it rolled away from her and off the table, crashing to the floor where it smashed, spraying sand and glass across the parquet.

"I am so sorry!" Charlotte said.

"Never mind," said Richard, "we'll get her another."

Amelia's heart pounded in her ears. Where are you, Harlan? Come and save me.

"Oooo, look," said the little girl. She was pointing up at the spider's web.

"A spider!" said the boy, excitedly.

"Annie, please bring a broom and a dustpan. There's some glass to be swept up, said Richard."

"She can get rid of that spider at the same time," Charlotte added.

"No," Amelia whispered. Her head was whirling. She felt drugged. "No, don't ..."

"Don't be silly, mother. We'll get rid of it for you."

"I want it for my collection," the boy exclaimed. "Can we get a jar to catch it."

"No ..." Amelia's voice caught in her throat.

Richard said, "Bring a jar, Annie, we'll trap it for Jon."

Annie entered the room with a mason jar and handed it to Richard before crouching to sweep up the sand and glass.

"Now," said Richard, "reach up with the broom and knock that web down."

"No ..." Amelia tried to speak, but her throat was constricted.

Annie swept away the web. Richard and the boy scrambled after the spider, trapping it against the wall and sealing it into the jar.

"There you go, Jon," said Richard. "Now, mother, as I was saying, we're going to change things a little bit. You're coming to live with us in the big house. Annie is coming, too. I'm selling the apartment and the Lincoln. You never use it anyway. We should get a good price for them. Then we can all be together." He and the woman grinned down at her.

Amelia stared at the patterns of light on the floor, broken now by the children's moving shadows. She tried to ignore the gnawing inside her, eating its way toward her heart.