

505:

**Into the Woods**

**[Theme music; opening credits]**

**[Sounds of writing]**

**Lenore:** Mrs. Perrault had warned me about the woods. She loved telling stories where unwary travellers wandered off the path, of course, where innocent maidens were waylaid by men or faeries or animals in disguise. But she had also told me to stay out of our woods specifically, or at least not to go there after dark. She really was like an overprotective grandmother.

I wasn't worried as I went into the woods with Bella. The sun, though westering, had not set, and the path lay clear and shining before us. And besides, all the girls in Mrs. Perrault's stories were walking alone. I couldn't seriously worry with Bella by my side.

No sooner had we passed beneath the trees than Bella slipped her hand in mine, and I felt at once like I was a schoolgirl again. Biscuit ran on in front of us, happily barking, and I could smell the heady scent of pine and clematis. The path wound for a half-mile or so towards the sea. The afternoon sunlight dripped through the branches, dappling us in gold. It felt like we were adventuring into the wide world, and at the same time it felt very intimate, like being held inside our own private fairytale.

After fifteen minutes or so we emerged onto the cliffs. The woods fell behind us, and we were on a wide grassy pathway overlooking the sea. The sun was just disappearing beneath the waves, and the sky was a deepening into purple.

We sat on the grass and Bella surprised me by reaching into her clutch and pulling out a little flask. She handed it to me and I drank from it. It tasted like licorice with something else

underneath, something sharp and sweet.

“It’s absinthe,” she said. “I stole it from mama.” We each drank more and giggled, leaning against each other by the cliffside. She was warm against my side, and I thought suddenly of Radcliffe.

As if reading my mind, she said, “It’s such a romantic view. Does Radcliffe ever come here with you?”

“No,” I admitted. “But we could. It’s not that he wouldn’t. We just haven’t.” She looked dubious, and I added, “We spend many romantic nights together.” This was true, but it rang hollow as I said it to Bella, sitting above the sea with the absinthe warm in my mouth.

To her credit, she did not press me on it. She sighed and laid her head on my shoulder. “What is it like?” she asked. “Being married?”

“I don’t really know,” I said. “It’s been such a whirlwind. It’s this place,” I waved toward the house, lost in the trees behind us, “and it’s strange and new. But it’s safety and comfort. It’s wine and sex and fine meals.”

“That’s just money,” Bella said. “You don’t need to be married for that.”

“It’s being connected to another, but not like when I was with Mama. Even when he’s not here, I feel him nearby. It’s easy. Familiar. I don’t know. I don’t have anything to compare it to.”

“You didn’t say love,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You said familiar. You said wine and food and safety. You said sex. You didn’t say love.”

“Of course it’s love. It’s love above all,” I said. “That goes without saying.”

She lifted her head and peered at me through the deepening gloom. “Are you his first?”

I choked on the mouthful of absinthe I had just taken. “We’ve never talked about that!” I

said. I was glad of the dark as I know I must have been blushing furiously. “He is older than me. I assumed he has lived a life...”

But Bella interrupted me. “I don’t mean *that*,” she said, laughing. “We all know what men are. Especially men like Racliffe. I mean, has he been married before?”

Had he? I didn’t know what to say. It suddenly occurred to me how little I knew about Radcliffe, how few facts I had about his life before he started appearing at my mother’s parties.

“He would have told me,” I finally managed.

Bella didn’t answer me, but laid her head back on my shoulder. The moon was visible now, full and white as it lifted above the sea.

“I should go,” Bella said. “It’s later than I thought.” We stood, and I brushed off my dress. A wind was coming up the cliff from the water, smelling of salt and moonlight. “Does this lead back to town?” she asked, pointing along the cliff path away from the woods. “It’ll be quicker for me to go that way, I suspect.”

“I don’t like you walking alone,” I said. “Stay the night here.”

She smiled and touched my face. “Sweet Lenore. I’m fine. The moon lights the path. My mother will worry if I stay too late. I’ll be back.” She kissed my cheek and wandered away, down the grassy path towards Gévaudin.

I turned back towards home, my mind and my heart full. I missed Radcliffe, and I was glad to know he would be home tomorrow.

I passed under the trees, where the light of the full moon only fitfully shone. Just as I did, I heard a howl. Off in the distance, but closer than I liked. I only then realized the position I had put myself in. The ten minutes I would spend under the trees before reaching the lawn stretched before me, dark and interminable; the underbrush seemed to press close in around me, and as I

hurried down the path I felt roots pulling at the hem of my dress, branches reaching toward my face like fingers.

After five minutes I heard something moving in the trees, rustling toward me with an unsettling quickness. Biscuit pressed close against me and growled. I grabbed his collar and held him still, and closed my mouth and breathed through my nose, trying not to panic, reassuring myself that it was simply my imagination, that I was rattled by the Reverend's stories, disoriented in the dappled dark.

But then it became impossible to ignore. Something large and fast just beside the path, hidden by the shrubs and vines. Biscuit broke out into a wild barking, and I began to run calling him to follow. I could only hope to make it to the open lawn before whatever was in the woods stopped me. My head was full of the Reverend's grim news—the missing child, the slaughtered livestock. My pulse was pounding in my ears.

My foot caught in a trailing vine, and I cried out as I fell on the path. I rolled on my side and tried to get my legs underneath me, to rise as quickly as I could. Biscuit stood bristling beside me, and then something stepped out of the underbrush and onto the path ahead of me.

It was Talbot.

“You should not be out here,” he said. As always his voice and manner were as gruff as his appearance. But there was also something in his face that I had ever seen before. He looked...I suppose “uneasy” is the word. Like underneath his exasperation he was actually worried. Even as he spoke, I could hear something else moving in the trees, a little further off.

“Is it a wolf?” I said, and Talbot frowned. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me down the path, rushing me toward the house.

We stumbled along behind him, my heart beating in rhythm with my feet. I couldn't tell if

the other thing in the woods was following, or even if it was still there, the clamor of our own passage was too great. Soon we burst onto the lawn, sending the ravens cawing into the sky. It was fully night now, but the moon was shockingly bright. The grass, my easel, the scattered remains of mine and Bella's picnic, everything was etched in silver. Talbot kept moving, pulling me toward the doors. I felt something at my back, but I was too frightened to look over my shoulder. I imagined breath, panting just behind me.

And then we were inside, and Talbot was locking the French doors behind us. I could see the whole of the lawn through the glass. Nothing was there.

I stood with my hand on my chest, gasping to catch my breath. "Talbot," I said. "What was it? Why were we running?"

"Your supper is getting cold," he said, and moved past me, deeper into the house.

### **[Sounds of writing]**

My supper, it turned out, had not gotten cold, because it had been taken from the table and put into the oven to keep warm. I ate it at the tall wooden table in the kitchen that was most often used as a chopping block. Mrs. Perrault affected being furious with me, but eventually she softened and brought me a glass of wine. I had already drunk more than usual with Bella, but I took it gratefully all the same.

"You can't go wandering in the forest like that," she said, stroking my hair. "It's not safe."

"Why not?" I wanted to know. "Quit talking to me like I'm a child. You and Talbot both. If there's something to be afraid of, tell me what it is."

“You’ve got to trust us, Lenore,” she said.

I pulled away from her. “Is it the wolves? Reverend Baring-Gould told me about the child who went missing.”

Mrs. Perrault’s eyes widened. She moved away from me and opened a drawer. She scattered its contents across the wood block counter—knives, forks, the corkscrew she had just used to open the wine.

“These are heirlooms,” she said. “Here when your husband moved into the house. Not plated. They’re solid silver. All very sharp.”

I’m sure I looked at her like she had lost her mind. I tried to keep my doubts from my voice as I said, “Oh yes?”

“You think I’m a senile old woman,” she said, and I was shamed. “But you need to remember this. This is a silver corkscrew. These are silver knives.”

I said, “Is this about the wolves? Surely there are better ways to defend myself?”

“Wolves move quickly,” she said. “And you never know where you’ll be when your life hangs by a thread.”

“No wolf is going to be in the house, surely,” I said. I didn’t *quite* laugh, but her solemn tone was becoming ridiculous. “And Radcliffe is a hunter, with him here I am safe as I can be.”

Mrs. Perrault closed the drawer. “Houses don’t always protect us like we think they do,” she said.

I thought distinctly that if she was trying to convince me she was not senile, she had chosen the wrong tack. But she had never shown signs of not being in her right mind before now, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, and that was true. “But I will remember what

you've told me."

"See that you do," she said, and patted my head before disappearing from the kitchen.

I have sat down at the little desk in my bedroom to write this down. It has been a terribly exciting day, in both happy and upsetting ways. I was delighted by my afternoon with Bella, and though I was scared in the moment, the walk home was an adventure of a different kind.

Tomorrow Radcliffe returns. I am so happy to know we'll be together again [**she doesn't sound it**]. Oh, I've had too much wine. I don't look forward to the headache I'm sure I'll have tomorrow morning. To bed now. Though I am sure I'm too wound up to sleep.

**[Later—sound of writing]**

The woman has been here again! And this time I know I was not dreaming, and Radcliffe is not here to tell me I imagined it. I had not even slept. But I now think she may be...oh I hesitate to even write the word. This is what happened:

It was just after midnight; I know because the clock in the foyer had just rung through the house. I was alone in bed with the little book of Hindu art. I had been thinking of how to best capture the light against Bella's throat, or the curve of her waist, but these thoughts kept getting tangled with the pictures in the book, and I eventually quit thinking at all.

But then I heard a footstep in the hallway. I quickly pulled a sheet over myself and listened. I assumed Mrs. Perrault was up for some reason, so after a moment I called out to her.

There was no direct answer. I thought I heard a second creaking movement, and I could faintly hear something like a sigh. I got up and drew on my nightgown. The silk was cold against my naked skin as I went to the door as silently as I could.

She stood at the head of the stairs, just as she had in my first dream all those days ago. Same white dress, same dark hair and blue eyes. The same torn throat.

We stood looking at each other from either end of the gallery, and suddenly there were sounds outside. As before, there was a great howling from the lawn, or perhaps from the woods behind. There as a clatter against the window, and over the woman's shoulder I could see two ravens clamoring at the casement.

The woman turned and moved down the stairs. I ran after her, calling "Wait! Who are you?" but she neither stopped nor answered. She moved steadily, and I ran to catch her.

At the bottom of the stairs she turned into the parlor and kept on, down the hallway with its bookcases. I felt, rather than saw, someone else in the hallway with us, standing at the far end, a tall dark man like I had imagined when the Reverend visited. But the woman was still walking, and I followed.

She entered the sitting room with the hunting prints, crossed to the locked door, and put her hand on the handle. Strangely, though it was dark, the framed prints were clearer than they had ever been: the beasts were now obviously wolves, big shaggy animals, monstrous in their size and in their bloody jaws. The carnage of their clash with the hunters was gruesome, and I couldn't look at them long.

I glanced back at the woman, who stood with her hand on the locked door. Her throat was bleeding freely, and the stain spread from her dress onto the floor beneath her. Though we were deeper in the house and away from all windows, the howling from outside seemed louder than ever.

"Some wolves," she said, "wear their fur on the inside. What great eyes and what great teeth. The loup garou will come for you."



Then she went into the room. Or at least I think that's what happened. She turned toward the door, twisting the handle as she went, and then she wasn't there. She must have gone in.

But the door was locked when I tried it, the handle refusing to move. My bare feet were standing in the pool of blood that had fallen from her throat, and I was alone in the dark.

**[Theme music; closing credits]**