

# THE HOUSE

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The letter, addressed in my brother's flamboyant hand, had been steamed open and resealed by his overly attentive housekeeper. Of that, I was certain. The message had been written in our own special code, so she would not have gained anything, but the meaning had been clear to me: "I'm going."

There had never been any doubt that Dylan would die - it was only a matter of timing. No male on our father's side had lived past the age of thirty. Dylan had been twenty-eight. Two days ago, he had silently succumbed to the knowledge that had hung over him all his life. There would be no more male heirs.

On the flight from San Francisco to Boston, I'd had plenty of time to ruminate on the future of our beloved home. As the plane landed, I began to worry anew that, in his last days Dylan may have given in to the woman who had begun to question certain happenings in the house and revealed to her the secret we two had shared down the years. God, I hoped not. I didn't need somebody popping up when the will was read, insisting my brother had not been of sound mind.

I paid off the taxi, went up the broad steps and fitted my key in the lock. I put my suitcase down in the hall and opened the French doors that gave onto the living room. I still loved everything about it: the chintz curtains and matching overstuffed chairs, the carved mirrors and family portraits done in oil. The patterned rugs were still soft under my feet, although I noticed that between the dining area and the kitchen, years of traffic had begun to wear away the pile. I sat down and put my feet up. Still, I could not rid myself of the feeling that everything could go terribly wrong.

I needed to clear my mind. I forced myself out of the chair and went into the kitchen to make a good strong cup of coffee. The jar of beans was in its right place: second shelf in the pantry, and the grinder was stowed in the lower cabinet where it had always been. Nothing had been changed, thank god. I felt a little clutch inside my chest but shook it off and got to work putting water on to boil and settling the filter in the cone atop my favorite cup.

The kettle whistled. As I reached for it, I realized my hand was shaking. But, surely, I thought, the details that had so carefully been put in place on my last visit would not have been tampered with.

After stirring in a dollop of honey, I took a satisfying sip of coffee and asked myself if my darling brother had lived anything approaching a full life, and if so, by whose standards? He hadn't been outside the gates in at least ten years, not since mother and father had gone on leaving the two of us to manage on our own.

"Dylan." I said, hoping that from a dimension we knew most people could neither see nor hear he would find a way to answer. After all, that had been our agreement. "Dylan." I repeated. But instead of a quiet response from my brother I heard the sharp sound of the knocker hitting the front door. My first thought was that the housekeeper would answer but, of course, the moment I knew Dylan was leaving this world, I had notified her that she was no longer needed. I stepped softly into the dining room and peeked out through the draperies.

"Damn." It was her: Mrs. Faber, the former housekeeper. I realized it had been foolish to think I could escape dealing with her face to face. She had obviously wanted to give me the key rather than slip it through the mail slot as I had suggested on the telephone. Surely, she was here to press me for details about the will. I took a deep breath, deciding I may as well get it over with.

“I knew you’d be here.” Her words were a crisp accusation; as if I had no right to be in my own house.

I lifted my chin. “Yes. I got here a short time ago. Thank you so much for bringing me the key.” We both knew this was not the real reason for her visit. After she put the key into my hand she strode past me. I followed, feeling my blood start to boil. In the large kitchen, Mrs. Faber turned to face me. “I’m sure you are aware that I waited on your brother hand and foot for the past six years while you were traipsing around Hollywood.” She clasped and unclasped her thin hands as she stared at me.

My cheeks burned but I determined that I would not defend myself against her silly remark. To her, anyplace in California was Hollywood. I forced a smile. “Mrs. Faber.” I couldn’t keep my voice from rising. “My brother was fully capable of taking care of himself until the last few days of his life. Please don’t try to insinuate something that clearly was not in the agreement we made with you. You were hired to take care of the house with the bare minimum of obligation toward Dylan. There was a nurse with him toward the end, as you know.”

“Hump! That shows what you know!” She took a step toward me. “I fetched and carried for him all the time! You weren’t here to see what was happening so don’t get smart with me!”

I reined in my desire to smack her. I’d always known the woman was conniving and self-serving, that she saw herself as the head housekeeper of a large staff when, in truth, most of the rooms had been closed up. When I went away she became mistress of a twenty room house in which only four were in use. I was certain she saw me as an interloper who had come to snatch away her inheritance. The gleam in her eye felt threatening. I glanced toward the cutting board and was relieved that there were no knives in view. It took all my energy to feign a softening toward her; to put out my hand and lay it gently on her arm. “Look. I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot. Of course, I know you were very

fond of Dylan and feel as upset as I do at his passing. I'll let you know just as soon as the lawyer notifies me, okay?"

She sighed suddenly. "Dylan was such a dear boy. I felt terribly sorry for him that he couldn't run around like any other child. He was always with a book in his hands or busy working a puzzle. Sometimes, we played chess together. I'll bet you didn't know that."

"No," I said. "I didn't." It was true - I had never pictured her in that role and doubted she was telling the truth. First of all, Dylan was hardly a boy or a child. He was a grown man, six feet tall, for Pete's sake.

She went on. "And, sometimes he would ask me to read to him, you know, when his eyes grew weak." She sighed again. "Such a lovely boy. He must have been awfully lonely. Sometimes, as I was busy with some task, I could hear him talking to himself."

I could see where this was going and I had to put a stop to it. There was no way I would get anywhere near the subject of spiritual communication.

"Please. Mrs. Faber. I'm afraid I'm very tired. I've had a great loss and the plane trip was tiring. I need to rest. I'll call you as soon as I have been notified regarding the reading of the will."

"You won't forget?" She drilled me with a particularly steely gaze.

"No, I won't forget, I promise. And, by the way, thank you for the flowers and card you sent to the funeral home and for all the help and care you gave Dylan."

This last bit of fake sincerity seemed to work. She offered me a tight smile and headed for the door. I closed it behind her and shot the bolt home. Stepping to the phone, I called the locksmith, gave my address and name, saying, "I need all

the locks changed as soon as possible. There are four outer doors and each will need a dead bolt.”

Those few minutes of doing battle with that woman had been draining. I went back into the living room, threw myself into my chair to find the air as well as my coffee had turned cold.

Looking around the familiar room, I felt the enormous weight of being alone in a new reality. I'd known this day would come and now, here it was. For the past few years, my brother and I had been the only people who knew exactly what went on in our house - that it contained a portal into another dimension. Dylan had the gift of second sight but I would have to uncover my own latent talents. Hopefully, I had them. I already missed Dylan terribly, but when the tears rose up I reminded myself that he was not really gone, that his essence would always be with me. It was up to me to keep the secrets of the house; especially from people like Mrs. Faber. Oh! That Mrs. Faber! The day I hired her, she had seemed just right for the job –a stern-faced, single-minded person who, for a few hours a day, would keep her attention on tidying up a few rooms and preparing simple meals for Dylan when I was away. During her interview, she had certainly fooled me. In all honesty, I had been overwhelmed by the response I'd gotten to my ad for a housekeeper. Women had lined up outside the front door, eager to see inside a mansion where so little was known of the generations who had lived and died in privacy. Our family had avoided making a splash in their shallow social pond and they resented it. Among the circus of the curious, Mrs. Faber had seemed the least intrusive. Oh, well. As it turned out, she had truly caught me off guard.

However, she had not fooled Dylan. He had been wise to her from the start. We

two agreed that so soon after hiring her, asking her to leave would only stir up all kinds of nonsense.

Many in our quiet community assumed our home was haunted, or worse. There were whispers of murders and bodies buried in the cellar. It was that kind of crazy talk that people seemed to love. Dylan was a recluse so naturally, it was rumored that he was insane. In order to meet airline schedules, I came and went at odd hours of the night. Ergo, I was suspected of removing body parts in my carry-ons. We had given up trying to make small minds believe we actually lead anything like a normal life; taken the low road, and allowed Prying Polly to remain. Somewhere along the way, she had adopted the weird notion that whatever else I was up to, I was in the movie business. I hadn't felt the need to explain my frequent trips to San Francisco. She didn't need to know that I had spent the past few years setting up an institute that dealt exclusively with the after life so that it could operate without my constant attendance. She need not be privy to the fact that, with Dylan on the other side, our house would become my permanent place of study. Here, I would communicate with those who had gone on before. At least, that was my plan. First, I had to learn how to make contact. It now dawned on me that I had allowed myself to become completely sidetracked. If I was going to get anywhere, I had to remove Mrs. Faber and everything else from my thoughts. I closed my eyes and spent a few minutes clearing my mind.

“Dylan”. I said, “Do you hear me?”

Quite suddenly, I had the strong impression that I must go to a certain room on the second floor. Climbing the stairs, I was aware of a light touch on my shoulder. I went down the short hall and unlocked the door with the special key that hung around my neck. I saw that Dylan had set up candles and mirrors and crystal globes for my use. Despite all my intellectual knowledge, I was still a novice. My dear brother had not needed such devices.

The last of the winter sun was coming in through the tall windows. I stepped across the room to pull down the shades. As I did so, I saw Mrs. Faber looking up at me. Evidently, she had been standing across the street waiting to see if I would enter the rooms that had been locked away from her. I smiled and waved.

“I’m such a fool”. I said, turning away. I had to get rid of that woman. Until she was out of my life, she would continue to haunt me. I couldn’t kill her, but at that moment, I certainly wanted to. What ever had possessed me to encourage the idea that she would be mentioned in a will? I finished pulling down the shades but the spell had been broken. I gave up, went downstairs and picked up the phone.

“Tony, darling. It’s Olivia. Will you do me a favor?”

“Whatever it is; you only have to ask.”

I relaxed. That was my Tony. “Well, it’s the matter of Mrs. Faber. I believe we’ve got to pretend that Dylan’s estate has bequeathed some money to her. Could you draw up an official-looking letter, say something befitting her past six years of service, and include a nice check?”

Tony laughed. “Something that would allow her to take a very long cruise?”

“Yes, at least round the world a couple of times. I’ve got to put an end to that relationship. Would you call her into your office? I absolutely can’t face her again.”

“Certainly. Is tomorrow too soon?” He laughed in the way that had always endeared him to me.

“Tomorrow would be perfect. See you tonight?”

“Just try to keep me away.”

I blew him a kiss and hung up, feeling greatly relieved. Tony was in love with me. I loved him. But ours would not be a traditional union. He would move in with me - into a situation that would subject him to more raised eyebrows than his role as a first-rate criminal attorney. He would be married to a woman many thought



peculiar at best and evil, at worst. Most of all, Tony would be privy to all Dylan's and my secrets.

I went back upstairs, lit all the candles and sat down with my hands hovering above the crystal globe. Before long, the air in the room grew chilly. Shivering a little, I said, "Dylan". I waited and then repeated his name. There was a flickering of the candles and then a quiet voice said, "Hi."

An image began to appear in the globe. Tears sprang to my eyes. "Hi." I said, releasing a long sigh. Everything was going to be all right.