

## Tasteful Settings

“Come on, come on, we’re gonna get soaked,” Freddie said, jabbing a finger into her back.

“I’m *trying*.” The keys rattled as she spun the ring, trying to find the right one. She was already nervous, breaking into her grandmother’s house like this, and her Uncle Richard didn’t have any of the keys labeled.

“Let me do it,” her boyfriend suggested.

“I know how to open doors, Freddie,” Anna said, and provided the evidence a moment later. The kitchen door of the old mansion screamed in protest as it swung inwards.

It was dark inside. The electricity had been shut off for years, and with the storm rolling in, there wasn’t much of the noonday sun to be found.

“Yes!” Freddie shoved her forward into the gloom and then slammed the door shut behind them.

It reeked of mold and decay, and Anna’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “I don’t like this.”

“Then quit dawdling, let’s grab the loot and go.” Freddie scurried over to a side cupboard and opened the top drawer. Inside lay rows of silverware, blackened with tarnish. He lifted a fork and crowed, “Ha, real silver! I knew this was a good idea.” He began shoveling handfuls of the stuff into his duffel bag.

“Have a taste.”

“What?” the young man asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Anna said, moving further into the house. She stepped into the great room, a massive chamber with a table for six, a desk at the far wall, and two overstuffed armchairs in front of the fireplace. A large mirror hung over the mantle, cloudy with dust.

“I hate that mirror, it gives me the creeps,” she said.

Freddie and his jingling duffel bag came into the room. “Well, good, we’re not taking it. It’s too big.”

Anna ran her hand over one of the chairs. *Was this where her mother sat?*

“She killed them right here, you know? At her own table. Her own family. Servants, too. Everyone but Uncle Richard. She’d have killed him, too, but he was running late that night. Lucky him. What kind of woman poisons her own family?”

“Aww, babe, are you all right?” Freddie looked guilty, and annoyed about it.

“Have a taste.”

“What?” Anna asked.

“I said ‘We have to do this.’ You know that, honey. This will get us out of this town for good. We can’t wait for the trust to transfer over to you, the job isn’t gonna be open forever.”

“I know,” she said. She looked up at the mirror again and gasped, spinning towards the kitchen.

“What? What?” Freddie tried peeking around her to see what had scared her.

“There... there was a woman, she...” Anna turned back to the mirror, but couldn’t see anything.

“Just the reflection of the crazy witch’s portrait. Get it together.”

“People break in all the time,” she said.

“Not since that couple that got sent to Mendota.”

A pair of trespassers had spent the night four years earlier. They were hauled away the next day, raving and biting at the cops. They were both still at the asylum, wearing those hockey mask muzzles, if you believed the stories. Anna got a hard time at school over the house, she supposed that that was what convinced her to take off with Freddie. He had a fracking job waiting for him in South Dakota, good money, but first they needed the cash to get there.

“Listen, the jewelry’s all upstairs, why don’t you run up there and grab it so we can get out of here.” She frowned at the portrait, raining hate on a woman she never met.

“Good plan, doll.” He kissed the top of her head and then made his way to the stairs.

Anna ran her hand over the chair again, and once more stared into the cloudy mirror.

*There she was again!*

\*^\*^\*

Freddie took the stairs two at a time, then halfway up peeked back at Anna to see if she was okay. She was just standing in front of the fireplace, looking up at the mirror with a dull, open-mouthed stare. If she kept this creepy act up much longer, he wasn't taking her to South Dakota.

The second floor was a maze of antiques. He supposed most of the things in the drafty old manor were valuable at some point, but they needed to travel light and stick with the portable, pawnable stuff. Treasure, in other words. There was bound to be some treasure.

At last, he found the master bedroom. A giant canopied bed took up most of the room. It was huge. A grin spread across his face, and he wondered if he shouldn't call Anna up there so they could-

“Have a taste.”

Freddie jumped. He spun in little circles, trying to find where the voice had come from. Anna could have beaten him there while he was exploring the other rooms...

Nothing. He was getting as loopy as she was.

He cursed himself out and then got back to business. There was a vanity near the door to what he assumed was a master bath, and *that* was where the treasure was hiding.

Jackpot. Diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, all in tasteful gold and silver settings. Anna wasn't kidding, her grandmother was loaded. If he played his hand right, they wouldn't even be sleeping in the van until his checks started coming in, they could stay in some motel. Heck, a *nice* motel.

He grabbed a jewelry box and shoved it in the duffel bag, then another, and another. He got a little clumsy in his excitement, and a ring bounced under the bed. No way was he leaving that behind, that rock was as big as his thumbnail!

Freddie flattened himself out on his belly and slithered under the bed. His hand wrapped around the ring, and suddenly Anna screamed. Not “scary part in a movie” screamed, screamed like she was being murdered.

He cracked his head against the bedframe and swore, then slithered back out.

The window was right there, he could, *should*, just take the jewelry and go. But if it turned out that Anna was fine and she found out he ditched her there, well, the law had a long arm.

“Babe?” he called out. “Babe, what’s up?” Nothing.

He grabbed the duffel bag and sprinted for the stairs. *If this turns into an emergency room visit, Uncle Rich is paying for it.*

He found her still in front of the mirror. That empty look was gone, now, and she was smiling. No, *beaming*.

“What the heck were you hollering for?”

“Oh, it was a rat. Crawled right over my foot, they’re brave.”

“Mighty big noise for a rat,” Freddie sulked, “I wasn’t even done raiding the bedroom.”

“There’s cash in the desk,” Anna said dismissively. “Secret compartment, top right drawer.” She went back to grinning at her reflection.

“Well, you could’ve said so earlier.” He walked past the table and set his duffel bag on top of the desk. The drawer was full of legal pads and envelopes, and he scooped them onto the floor. He poked and prodded, feeling for a latch or a button or something. When he pressed the bottom near the back of the drawer, the front pivoted up.

“Yes!” Freddie slid his fingers under the panel and lifted it up. “Geez Louise, Anna, these are hundreds! There’s gotta be like thirty thousand dollars here! We’re rich!” He grabbed one of the manila envelopes and started stuffing the stacks of cash in it.

“Forty,” she said. She gave one last wink to her reflection and then walked to the front door. It opened easily. “Come on, Freddie. I want to make sure there’s a nice, hot meal waiting for Richard when he comes back.”

The young man frowned at that. They’d been dating for almost a year, and she’d never cooked anything for *him*. He didn’t even know she *could* cook. Whatever, there’d be plenty of time for all that when they left town. He put the last stack in his pocket and made for the door.

“Aw, crud, the jewelry.” They could keep some of that, now. It would look good on Anna.

As he turned back to the desk, he caught a glimpse of Anna in the mirror. Not by the door, the angle was wrong for that. He saw her right in front of him.

He looked down and didn’t see a thing, but when he looked back at the mirror, there she was, pounding on his chest and crying her eyes out.

“Hurry up, Freddie,” said the woman at the door. “I’m not getting any younger.” She smiled, and the storm broke overhead.

Fin.