

There Comes a Time

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Harker Hildebrant was even more insufferable than usual. A wiry, fastidious man who never left home without an opinion to share, he barged into the Philanthropy Society gathering, demanding to speak with his mother privately. Augusta, an elegant woman in a red wool suit that stood out in a sea of muted tweeds and fussy hats, calmly asked him to wait until the meeting was concluded. Harker took that to mean he should pace back and forth in the hallway, clomping loudly from one end to the other until the women filed out, darting uncomfortable glances at him.

When the room was empty, Augusta waved her pouting middle-aged son into the cavernous library. I focused on picking up the plates and glasses left behind by Augusta's guests, making every effort to ignore him. Over time, I'd learned that was the best approach.

Harker crossed the room and muttered something to his mother. When the tray was loaded, I looked at Augusta. She shook her head slightly to let me know that she didn't need me to stay.

"It's *mine*," he said petulantly. "You can't just take it—"

"Perhaps we could talk about this later, my sweet," she replied. "I have an important call to make."

I turned around quickly to hide my smile. Every once in a while, she delayed his gratification in a way that I found satisfying.

"Fine," he snapped. "I'll be back."

I was walking rapidly toward the kitchen when, to my horror, Harker called out after me in his high, nasal whine. His habit of staring intensely at you was disconcerting enough. Add to that the way he pontificated at length on subjects he knew nothing about. But the worst was how he sidled up when you least expected it and trapped you in an unwanted conversation, as he was attempting to do right now.

I increased my speed.

“Kate!” He repeated my name with exasperation as he chased me. “Might I have a word?”

I paused, riding out the wave of revulsion that his proximity always triggered, and turned around warily.

His murky brown eyes bore into mine. “Have you noticed anything odd about Mother?”

“What do you mean?” I adjusted my grip. He didn’t care that I was holding a heavy tray. It never occurred to him to take into consideration someone else’s situation.

“You’ve been working for us—how long?” He regarded the end of the cigar in his long, thin fingers, then sniffed it. Augusta didn’t let him indulge in the house, so he had taken to haunting the patio wreathed in gray smoke, surveying the vast property he would one day inherit.

“Ten years.” I’d moved in as a housekeeper for his mother right after high school and considered myself lucky to be here. There weren’t many job opportunities in our small Vermont town, and I didn’t have any family to rely upon.

“A decade already?” He stuck the cigar into his breast pocket and patted it. “You’ve certainly gotten to know her. Does she seem different lately? Is she making less

sense than usual?” He followed that with a wheezy chuckle. “Forgetting things? Misplacing items? Talking to herself? Losing track of days?”

“I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Well, I’m concerned that something is...off. Keep me informed.” He did a little flick with his hand to indicate that I should step backward so he’d have more room to pass. Then he strolled down the hallway, hands in pockets, whistling a discordant tune.

The jarring notes set my teeth on edge. I sighed and lugged the tray through the swinging door into the cheery yellow kitchen. After washing the dishes and tidying up, I prepared a pot of tea, using the blend Augusta always made herself in the lovely greenhouse out back.

Thankfully, Harker had completed the conversation with his mother and was leaving the house as I carried the tea to the library. After he banged the door shut behind him—bestowing one final irritation—a peaceful silence descended.

Augusta was sitting in an antique wingback chair near the fire, smoothing her white hair that had been pulled back into a chic twist. She’d drawn a blanket over her legs in an effort to keep warm, which was no small feat on a cool autumn night in a house as large and drafty as this one.

When I set down the tray on the small wooden table next to her, Augusta smiled. “Thank you, my dear. I was hoping it was time for our nightcap.”

She always called her evening tea “a nightcap” and invited me to join her. It was one of the many things I’d come to find endearing over the years. We had developed a routine and friendship for which I was most grateful.

I poured and handed her the tea, then settled into the other wingback chair with my own cup and saucer.

“Oh, how the women loved those delicious desserts you whipped up—my, you’re talented, Kate. Have you ever thought about opening a bakery?”

I laughed and blushed.

“It was a splendid meeting.” After a beat, she clucked her tongue softly. “Though the big news of the day is as follows: due to what he called my deteriorating mental state, my son has decided that I should move into a senior living arrangement, where I will be cared for properly.”

My mouth fell open. She was only in her early seventies and undeniably sharp.

“I presume that he wants to take command of Hildebrant House. I told him he could move in, though, between the two of us, that might make me *want* to move out. I adore Harker, but one does need a *little* space to oneself.” She laughed softly. “What can you do? My sweet boy was a handful as a baby, and he’s a handful now.”

From what I’d observed, Harker was beyond handful status. More like an advanced parasite. He lived off of the abundant money Augusta had inherited from her family—like his father had before he passed away from a heart condition years ago. Neither man had been inclined to challenge themselves in the employment sphere, though they both enjoyed living the high life. Harker had attended the most exclusive schools, dressed solely in couture, traveled the world as desired, and resided in a luxurious bachelor pad, yet he never displayed any gratitude. Augusta doted on her son despite his endless demands for more and more. She had never complained about his entitled behavior, and sometimes I wondered if she could see him for who he truly was—perhaps there is a blurring effect built into the maternal vantage point.

After another sip of tea, she continued. “His fiancée is surely behind this sudden plan, don’t you think? Their wedding is next month, after all, and apparently, Caroline doesn’t care for his apartment.”

Caroline Windham did strike me as someone who would love to brag to whoever would listen that she lived in Hildebrant House, a sprawling mansion on a hilltop overlooking Herringbone. Augusta had commissioned it before she married Dexter, and, judging from the photographs on every conceivable wall, it had been a happy home for their family as well as a popular location for social events. Among other things, Augusta was a skilled decorator, and every room was exquisite. She had a habit of redoing one room a year, and I’d had a first-row seat to the care she took in selecting fabrics and furnishings, bringing together unexpected juxtapositions to achieve a charming, sophisticated ambiance.

The grounds were also gorgeous, and Augusta had kindly allowed scores of couples to hold their weddings among the vibrant clusters of flowers, manicured hedges, and stone statues. The Herringbone Botanical Club did annual tours that showcased Augusta’s extraordinarily green thumb, claiming on their advertisements that her gardens had everything that anyone could ever need. Augusta’s prize-winning roses were but the tip of the iceberg. She also grew vegetables, compiled starter-plant kits, and made herbal tinctures from the bounty, which she shared with the community. She was beloved among the townspeople and renowned for her generosity.

“Do you think he will move in?” I held my breath, willing her to say no.

“We’ll see,” she said vaguely.

“You might be interested to hear that Harker asked me to keep an eye on you and report anything unusual,” I said, watching her closely. Although I tried not to say

anything negative about her son, to respect her feelings, she deserved to know what he'd mentioned.

Her shoulders went rigid, but she placed her cup into the saucer gently. Augusta had never lost control of her emotions as long as I'd known her.

"What do you want me to do?"

She tilted her head. Her dark eyes flashed in the light. "Report back to him as needed. I have nothing to hide."

"Would you like a story?" I asked, intentionally changing the topic. Augusta often enjoyed a reading along with her nightcap.

"How about some Poe? 'The Cask of Amontillado,' perhaps." She laughed. "I suppose I'm in the mood for a tale of revenge."

* * *

I was chopping celery for soup when Augusta came into the kitchen several days later, wringing her hands.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think my son may want to kill me." She sank onto the stool next to the marble island, looking dazed.

"*What?*"

"He pulled a knife on me just now."

I abandoned the celery and picked up my cell phone. "Where is he? Are you okay?"

She nodded and gestured toward the library. After I'd ensured that she was steady enough to be left alone, I raced down the hallway.

Harker looked up from behind the desk, eyebrows raised. He held up one finger while he finished his conversation on the old landline. “I know, I know,” he said. “We do deserve—yes, I’m trying—I have to go.”

“What did you do to Augusta?” I asked as soon as he hung up.

He scowled. “What are you blathering about?”

I began to dial 9-1-1. “She said you pulled a knife on her. Stay right there—”

“A knife?” He chortled, which turned into a cough. Once he’d recovered, he held up a silver letter opener. “You mean this? Clearly not a knife. It’s for the mail.”

I stared at him suspiciously, but I didn’t press the final digit on my keypad.

His eyes narrowed into slits. “But thank you.”

“For what?”

“You just provided me with more proof that my mother is becoming increasingly confused and is now paranoid on top of it.”

“She’s *not*,” I said indignantly. “You must have done something to make her think you were threatening her.”

“Kate, I opened an envelope. That’s all.” He rubbed his chin. The sound of his hand on the bristles made my skin crawl.

“Did you point it at her?”

“No. I pointed it at the *envelope*,” he said, in the kind of tone you use to explain something to small children.

I wasn’t going to let his condescension deter me. “Were you having an argument?”

“No. I was being my usual delightful self.”

It was difficult, but I refrained from commenting on that one.

“What were you talking about?”

“I’d asked her about some business matters. And I fail to see how it’s any of *your* business.”

I ignored the jab. “That doesn’t seem to be her impression—”

“Look, you’ve done a fine enough job here, Kate, but you might want to start looking elsewhere. We may not have need of your services for much longer.” He reached over and removed a cigar from the wooden box he insisted be kept on the desktop. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to pay the bills. Something else she’s starting to let slip.”

A chill ran through me. I turned the consequences of losing this position over in my mind as I returned to the kitchen, where Augusta was gazing at the marigold arrangement just outside the window.

“Harker’s still here, in the library. Do you want me to ask him to leave?”

“No. What did he say?” She turned her head and met my eyes.

“That he was applying a letter opener to an envelope.”

Augusta caught her breath. “That’s a lie. He held a knife to my throat, and he told me that I’d better give him whatever he wanted.”

I sat down and patted her hand, which felt papery to the touch. “That must have been terrifying.”

“It was. He’s stronger than I thought. He has youth on his side.”

I lowered my voice. “Did you struggle with him?”

“I was so surprised that it took me a minute, but yes, I pushed him away. Look at my neck—do you see a mark?” She pulled down the collar of her brocade jacket and lifted her chin.

If I squinted, I could make out a small red dot, exactly like I'd imagine the point of a knife would leave. "I'm so sorry."

Augusta nodded. "What else did he say?"

"That you weren't paying bills."

She shook her head. "That is categorically untrue."

"And he told me I'd better start looking for other employment."

She gasped and clutched my arm. "Don't listen to him. I make that decision, and you're not going anywhere."

Relief flooded my body. "May I get you anything?"

"A bit of whiskey might be restorative."

I retrieved the bottle and poured the dark golden liquid into a glass. After the first swallow, she regarded me fondly. "You are so good to me. Truly the daughter I always wanted. Maybe it would be better if I did go along with Harker's plan."

"Why would you do that?"

"So that you would be able to get *on* with things. I fear I'm holding you back. You're incredibly bright—my goodness, you've read every book in the house—and you could do anything with your life. Anything at all." She finished the rest of her whiskey. "What *do* you want to do?"

"I'm happy here," I said simply. "For as long as you need me."

"Thank you, my dear."

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment.

"He *really* said that he didn't do it?" Her eyes searched mine.

"Yes. Now I'm worried that he's trying to gaslight you. Do you know what that means?"

She laughed. “Yes, I’ve seen the film. It was excellent.”

“Should we call the police now?”

“Oh no,” she said decisively. “Harker wouldn’t actually hurt me. He must have momentarily lost control of his manners. I’m sure he’s stressed because of the wedding, come to think of it. I probably overreacted.”

“You didn’t overreact. If anything, you might be under-reacting. That is *not* the kind of thing you should ignore,” I said firmly. “Don’t talk yourself out of the seriousness of what happened.”

She stared into the empty glass. “If he denies that he’s done anything wrong, as he did when you spoke to him, what proof do I have to offer the police?”

“I don’t know if the proof part matters right now. You’d have it on record that he was aggressive with you. It’s important, Augusta.”

“As much as I don’t want anyone to make a fuss, I do trust your instincts. Will you make the call, please?”

The front door slammed.

“At least he’s gone,” she said grimly.

“Maybe you should have the locks changed.”

Augusta nodded. “I’ll sleep on it. Would you mind brewing up some coffee for the officers? And perhaps arrange some of those heavenly dessert bars on a plate? I do like to be hospitable whenever possible.”

* * *

The next afternoon, I was helping Augusta find a space on the shelves for some new books when the door chime echoed through the house.

Our eyes met.

“The police?” I ventured. We’d been up late last night filling them in. They hadn’t seemed all that concerned by her description of events, but perhaps they’d come to their senses. Or maybe that was just how they were supposed to act, to keep the victim calm. I didn’t have a lot of experience with the authorities, thank goodness.

I climbed down the ladder and hurried to the front door. The stained glass in the sidelights prevented me from seeing who was out there. It was an appealing artistic effect but utterly useless in terms of safety precautions. I needed to remind Augusta to evaluate her security measures as soon as possible.

When I pulled the heavy door open, Caroline Windham, dressed in white from head to toe, showed me her teeth. She didn’t find me useful enough to bother mustering up an authentic smile.

“Hello, Kate,” she said in her squeaky voice. “Is Augusta home?”

“She’s in the library.” I stepped back and waved her inside. As she passed, her cloying floral perfume enveloped me. I wished I could warn Augusta, who found strong scents annoying—one of the reasons she despised Harker’s cigar habit.

Caroline took mincing steps down the hallway, her stiletto boots evidently not providing sufficient support for her feet. She paused before the door, took a deep breath, and went inside, greeting Augusta brightly.

I started to head for the kitchen to give them privacy, but Augusta called after me to join them.

Caroline perched on the sofa without removing her coat. She did, however, take off her gloves to reveal the enormous engagement ring that Augusta had confided cost more than her car. “I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Hildebrant—”

“Augusta,” her future mother-in-law said pleasantly.

Caroline produced a wide smile. “Thank you. The police came to visit us this morning, Augusta, about the misunderstanding yesterday. I was absolutely horrified to hear that you believe Harker would *ever* attempt to hurt you.”

I realized with a start that I’d never seen Caroline on her own before. Throughout her courtship with Harker, she’d always shown up alongside him, whispering loudly into his ear, urging him to say or do this or that. Augusta was not a fan of such conversations, during which her son appeared to be controlled by a passive-aggressive puppet master.

Caroline waited, but Augusta did not reply. The younger woman blinked rapidly and patted her blonde hair. She repositioned her garish diamond and inspected her nails. She unbuttoned her coat and brushed something off of her sleeve. Eventually, she ran out of things to do. “Harker only has your best interests at heart,” she mumbled.

“Like shipping me off to a home so the two of you can live here?” Augusta inquired calmly.

Caroline’s hand went up to her chest, and her blue eyes widened. “*What?*”

“Don’t play coy,” Augusta said. “It’s unbecoming. Let’s skip to the part where we discuss this like adults. Regardless of what my son has told you, I am perfectly lucid.”

Caroline’s mouth opened and closed, but no words emerged.

“I’ve told Harker that you are welcome to move into Hildebrant House with me after you’re married. All you have to do is *say* that you’d like to live here, and arrangements can be made. But we all know that I don’t need to leave my home in order

for you to do that. That may be what the two of you prefer, and I honestly don't blame you for wanting this place to yourself, but you do *not* have the right to evict me."

Caroline sputtered. "I'm heartbroken that you would think that. We love you, Augusta."

"My son has a strange way of showing it."

"He didn't mean to threaten you, and we don't want you to leave." Caroline pressed her lips together.

"Harker told me himself, in no uncertain terms, that he does. Where you stand on this issue is your business, but I've said all I care to say on the matter," Augusta informed her.

"I understand," Caroline replied, swallowing hard.

"And if this tension between us makes it difficult for you to hold your wedding here, I understand," Augusta said politely.

"But the invitations have already gone out," Caroline cried, rather desperately.

"A month is plenty of notice to send out cancellations." Augusta's tone was carefully neutral, but it was clear that the trump card had been played. "Why don't we both take a day or two to consider our options?"

The bride-to-be clasped her hands together and looked down, surely thinking hard about the dream wedding that seemed to be slipping out of her grasp. "Is there any way to fix this?"

"I'm sure you'll figure something out." Augusta gave her a benevolent smile.

"Thank you," Caroline said stiffly. She grabbed her gloves and wobbled out on her elegant boots.

After the door closed, I asked the obvious question. “Do you want them to get married?”

Augusta pondered this. “She’s not good for my son, but I will support whatever makes him happy. That’s what I’m supposed to say, right?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been a mother. It seems complicated.”

She nodded. “I think I’ll go work in the greenhouse for a while.”

“Do you want any company?”

“No, thank you, dear.” Augusta winked. “Now that Caroline and I have cleared the air, I need to dig around in the dirt to clear my mind.”

* * *

I was setting the table for dinner that night when Harker burst into the dining room, quivering with rage. It was the first time I’d seen his bow tie askew.

“Where is my mother?” He strode around the first floor, calling for her, then returned to glare at me as I folded napkins.

“She’s in the greenhouse,” I said, pointing toward the window, through which she was visible sitting at the counter across the yard beneath the bundled herbs hanging from the ceiling rack.

Harker rushed past me. I followed him out of worry for Augusta. The greenhouse door was open, and the notes of a familiar concerto were carried along the crisp evening air. Harker tramped on the grass, then stomped inside. I hovered in the doorway, ready to intervene if necessary.

Augusta rested her gloved hands on the counter and turned to him with a curious expression.

“What are you doing?” he whined. “First, you call me so that I interrupt your meeting, then pretend you don’t know why I’m there.”

She shook her head briskly. “I did no such—”

He raised his voice and talked over her. “You claim that I’m trying to kick you out of your home. You accuse me of holding a knife to your throat. You call the police on me. That’s a lot of crazy, Mother. I was willing to let it go. I was. But now you’ve threatened to displace the wedding of your own son? After you let everyone else in the universe get married here? That’s too much. Caroline is right. We can’t continue like this. Something must be done.”

Augusta frowned and turned back to the pile of dried leaves in front of her. She transferred the last of them to a mason jar. “It’s true that we didn’t end things on the best note today. I’ve made Caroline some of her favorite tea. Will you please take it to her?”

She screwed on the lid and held the gift out to him. He ignored her. Augusta placed the jar on the counter next to her cell phone, which was still piping out the concerto. “You’re right. We can’t go on like this. Why don’t we sit down and sort things out? Kate’s made a delicious meal, and you’re welcome to join us.” She looked at me. “How much longer until dinner?”

“Twenty minutes or so,” I said.

She reached out and touched his arm gently. “You could smoke on the patio in the meantime.”

Harker gave a begrudging nod and went to the library to fetch a cigar. After complaining about it being the last one in the box and grumbling that the replacement order was late, he settled into a wrought iron chair and was soon puffing away contentedly.

Augusta stood, removed her gloves, and beckoned for me to come inside. “I need to tell you something, dear.”

When I was next to her, she gestured gracefully to the house and grounds. “This will all be yours.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have given so much to me, each and every day, in a thousand ways. All that my son has done is take, take, take. So a few months ago, I completed the necessary paperwork, though I only informed Harker this week that he is no longer my beneficiary. You heard him protest the night of the society meeting, I assume? That’s what spurred him to begin planting seeds about my capacities faltering. I knew he would try something like that, but I was surprised by the speed with which he launched his campaign.”

Harker began to cough vehemently.

Concerned, I glanced through the door at him.

“Listen carefully,” she said. “This is my favorite part. The sweetness is almost unbearable.” She turned up the volume, and the exquisite music filled the greenhouse.

Harker’s cough grew louder.

Augusta increased the volume once more.

When I looked over again, Harker was slumped forward, eerily still.

I began to move toward him, but Augusta gripped my arm. “Don’t.”

I pulled away. “We have to help—”

“He’s already gone.” She gazed at her son and smiled. “Everyone will blame his heart, just like they did with his father. He was a taker, too.”

My own heart began racing at the implications of her words.

“Perhaps it’s better that Caroline never received her tea,” she mused. “She can be cast off more easily now, with far less attention.”

I couldn’t reconcile the woman I knew with this stranger beside me.

Augusta sighed. “Such poison runs through this family. Believe me, I held off as long as I could. Yet there comes a time when you can no longer deny the necessity of action. You must reach for the light. This is a fitting conclusion to his story and a beautiful beginning to your own. Whatever happens to me, you may stay, dear daughter. I’ve made sure of that.”

“The cigar—” I whispered.

“With a few drops from my latest tincture,” she said with satisfaction. “The evidence is burning off as we speak. It’s true what they say in town: you’ll find that the gardens here have everything you could ever need.”

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