



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

“You’re Dr. Alma? OK . . . So do I just . . . talk for an hour?”

“Yes. You can talk about anything you like, Thomas. This is a safe space.”

“Should I lie on the couch, or can you just shrink my head from over there?”

“Sit wherever you like.”

“Because, you know, this wouldn’t be the first time someone’s poked around in my head. There was this crazy witch last year . . .”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“Never mind. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“OK, so tell me something I would believe. Your father says your girlfriend ran off to boarding school without saying good-bye. Tell me about this Belle.”

“No, thanks.”

“Thomas, might I make a suggestion?”

“I’m guessing you’re going to whether I agree or not. I mean, that’s why the Parents’ Association hires ladies like you, right? To crack into our heads?”

“I may be employed by Marlowe, but I’m on your side, Thomas.”

“That’s rich. Even for this place. . . . You know, you look familiar. Have we met before?”

“No. Now, don’t change the subject. Let me suggest this: if you don’t want to talk to me, why don’t you try keeping a journal? You can write about it in private. No one would read it. I think it would help.”

“Whatever you say, Doc.”



“A Halloween wedding? How gauche,” said Mrs. Spencer as she plucked a single unruly hair out of her own head. She was sitting in the ballroom of New York’s Four Seasons hotel, straining to see the floral wedding arch from her seat in the thirtieth row. “Are those black roses? And what’s the idea sitting us all the way back here? She’s learned nothing in her time here, Genevieve. Nothing!”

“The roses are crimson. And I think it’s beautiful,” said Mrs. Wirth—Mrs. Spencer’s oblivious best friend and a lover of all social opportunities. “I love the fall.”

“Charles looks scrumptious, though, doesn’t he?” Mrs. Spencer sighed. Now that Charles Goodman-Brown, the most prominent banker in the city, was no longer a bachelor, there was little strategic reason to play coy. He was taken now; might as well salivate freely.

“What do you think she’ll wear?” Mrs. Wirth asked as she

surveyed the room. It was midday, but thick curtains were drawn all around the ballroom to create a heavy darkness. Instead of sunlight, thousands of mismatched, misshapen candles lined the walls and crevices of the room, creating an illusion that the ballroom was on fire. Even the light fixtures above their heads had been replaced with four specially imported antique candle chandeliers. The effect was nothing short of spectacular. “She has wonderful taste,” Mrs. Wirth droned. And Mrs. Spencer had to admit, she would never have thought to mismatch the candles to mask the artificiality of it, or to challenge every fire code ordinance for the sake of ambiance, or to create an ancient feeling by blowing gentle streams of cold wind into the room, antiquing the chairs with rust, making the chandelier swing just slightly every few minutes as if it might be trying to run away . . . and what a clever idea, singeing the edges of the curtains. *Wait, were the curtains singed before?*

“If she pulls a Miss Havisham, comes out here all cobwebs and dust, I’m leaving,” said Mrs. Spencer. “The woman is *bizarre*.”

“She won’t,” said Mrs. Wirth. “Trust me. She likes to get a reaction with this stuff, but I’ve never seen her looking anything but impeccable.”



Across the room, Mrs. Wirth’s son, Connor, sat with his lacrosse friends and pretended not to notice the spitballs hitting the back of his head courtesy of Marlowe’s resident nerdling, John Darling. Connor’s best friend, Thomas Goodman-Brown, was standing next to his father, the groom, under the crimson-flowered arch. Thomas’s eyes were bloodshot, as usual, and he was fidgeting. He kept pulling

at his bow tie as if it were choking him. A few drops of sweat dotted his hairline, and he wiped them away with his sleeve.

“I can’t believe he didn’t sober up for his dad’s wedding,” Connor muttered.

“I can,” Wendy Darling said, and then turned to her brother. “Enough with the spitballs.” Connor ignored her. He hadn’t forgiven his ex-girlfriend for last month’s incident with the resident adviser, even though Peter was fired and long gone.

“Fine,” muttered John, and he went back to tweeting on his phone.

@SciFiClub @FutureCEOs @Page6News Thomas baked at own dad’s wedding. (Goodman-Brown shindig. Whatevs. I was invited ages ago) #MyAwesomeLife

“Hah! 140 characters exactly on the first try! Suck it, psssh.”

“John!” Wendy turned around again. “Shut up!”

“It’s OK, Wendy.” Connor sighed. Since last year, he knew less than anyone about his supposed best friend, Thomas, who was hanging out less and less with Connor and the other athletes and had begun going out to clubs, sometimes with the boarding-school kids, sometimes alone. Once in a while Thomas made time for Annie Longborn, who sparked some interest in him and seemed to be the only person who could summon the old Thomas back, even for a few seconds. If Connor asked her, Annie would tell him how Thomas was doing. But Connor didn’t ask. Annie and her best friend, Roger, weren’t in his circle of friends. And Connor didn’t want anyone to know that Thomas barely had time for him anymore.

A boarding-school boy with white-blond cornrows, a fifth-year super-senior who was probably already twenty, leaned over and said, “Got a lighter?”

“You can’t smoke here, stupid,” said Connor.

“Why not?” said Cornrow. “The best man is as high as a bird over Amsterdam.”



Overwhelmed by eager guests, Charles Goodman-Brown didn’t have time to notice his son’s agitation, or his bloodshot eyes, or the fact that he seemed to have drowned (or smoked out) his sorrows by himself all morning long. In the months since Thomas’s first real girlfriend had left, there were a lot of mornings when people couldn’t say where Thomas was or why he had committed this reckless act or skipped out on that midterm exam. In just a few short months since last spring, Thomas had transformed into a sad, brooding creature. Though he wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t keep up a good charade. Thomas was still the most popular boy in school, still a debate team champion and future lawyer, and even now he was the quiet eye of a hurricane of high-school girls.

“He’s just growing up,” Mrs. Wirth liked to assure Thomas’s father. “Just send him to the school counselor.” But ever since Belle Faust moved to that boarding school in Switzerland, Thomas’s “growing up” had taken a turn for the scary.



The string quartet, featuring only cellos and basses, began to play an eerie version of Bach’s *Sleepers, Awake!*

A gust of wind blew through the room. A few candles went out.

From the shadows in the back, a regal figure stood shrouded in silhouettes.

And then Nicola Vileroy, unaccompanied, unrepentant, began her slow procession toward Charles Goodman-Brown, her future husband. Maybe it would be more accurate to call him her *next* husband. None of the guests knew, because no one dared to ask anything about this woman's history. Had she been married? How many times? What had happened to the other men? Did she have children of her own? No one asked why the five orphans she had adopted were absent from the wedding. Yes, they had moved to Switzerland for boarding school, but could they not take a weekend off for such an important occasion? Did they not miss their surrogate mother?

As the beautiful governess walked down the aisle, no one thought these things. They were busy taking in all that surrounded them — all the old and the new — because unlike the aged fabrics, the amorphous piles of wax that were the candles, and the rusted chairs adorning the room in an old-world splendor, Madame Vileroy looked fresh and mesmerizing and in every way an incoming queen. She wore a long-sleeved dress made of ivory silk that elongated her figure and flared out like a mermaid's tail at her feet, then stretched and dragged behind her, gathering dust and insects with its heavy creep. She was a vision, not of a governess but of someone better. Someone a step above, who answers to no one.

Not a wily governess nor a mousy nurse.

A stepmother.



The trouble with having a stepson like Thomas was that he had experienced way too much of the uglier side of Madame Vileroy. He had been the victim of Victoria's Sunday dinner games. And he had

watched Belle transform before his eyes at a school dance. Did he really see what he thought he saw? Did Belle become ugly? Did her face change and crumble onto itself like a wax doll? It's so easy to convince oneself that the mind is playing tricks. It's easier to question your own sanity than to give way to the supernatural—the devil, hellish faces, and other worlds.

Still, once a particular horror has been blamed on a mind trick once, it is impossible to hide a similar occurrence that way again. And that was the reason that, as she walked down the aisle and took Charles's hand, Nicola Vileroy was thinking of one thing only: how to put an end to the party. Because you can't pull off the same trick twice, and she could feel herself changing now. Even though she had her old body back, last spring's weaknesses were far from gone, her body struggling and then failing, so that soon she would be the plain-faced nurse again.



After the ceremony, the crowd adjourned to the lavish banquet hall, and Nicola Vileroy retreated to the bride's room, where the ancient governess doubled over and heaved. She looked up to examine her flawless face in the mirror—though not flawless any longer, because now she had a mark here, a blemish there.

She looked down at the train of her dress. Was it that long before? Or had her body shrunk just a tiny bit? She had only about an hour, and then she would have to retreat to her nightly solitude . . . it had come early tonight. Every night since regaining her beautiful body, she had shrunk back into the body of the nurse for a few hours of private recovery. Usually, this was the time she slept. But

tonight, she couldn't leave before her guests. She had to hide, since this was a ritual she couldn't avoid. Not yet.

Not to worry, she told herself. Very soon she would regain all her previous strength and the nurse would appear less and less, and then maybe never. Earlier in the fall, when she had not yet repaired the governess Vileroy, the school nurse had been the biggest part of her. At first twenty-three hours a day, then eighteen, then ten, as the beautiful French matron recovered at night. Then there had been the incident with the Darling children, and the nurse was beaten and no longer able to bear the brunt of the everyday. Luckily, by then Vileroy had recovered—her favorite character to play—and now . . . now she was almost finished with the nurse's tiresome face . . . though it still plagued her, sometimes appearing unexpectedly.

She slathered makeup onto her graying skin, pulled herself to her full height, and swept out of the bride's room. The reception was already in full swing and Madame Vileroy marveled at the guests' capacity for frivolity and waste. *Look at their foolish preening and pretend happiness.* After thousands of parties and balls and galas and coronations attended over the centuries, this old governess could almost hear each of the guests ticking things off lists. Even the ones who weren't here to suck up to the groom or finish off a business deal or win an invitation to Mrs. Wirth's Christmas party had their agendas. She eyed a middle-aged man in a cheap suit, sitting alone in a corner. He didn't belong here. He was probably here as someone's date, and he looked like he was worrying about a hundred small things.

Work is not everything. I will have fun like a normal person.
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Madame Vileroy nodded to the man and plucked his name from among his thoughts. *Paulie*. She would keep this for later. Then she spotted her target. Thomas was sitting alone at an empty table, while his friends were gathered around the bar.

“Hello, Thomas,” she said as she accepted a glass of champagne and sat in the chair beside her new stepson.

“Hi, Nicola,” said Thomas. “Look, I’m thinking of taking off.”

“Call me Mom.”

“No,” said Thomas. Madame Vileroy was not surprised at his response, since this wasn’t the first time they had had this conversation. He got up and started to walk away.

“Leaving so soon?” Madame Vileroy asked.

“I’m tired.”

From one side of the room, the photographer emerged and began snapping candid shots of Madame Vileroy and Thomas. From another side, a trio of women started to descend on the governess with their oohs and aahs about the wedding and her dress and her exquisite taste in cakes (“There is no food like devil’s food!”). Madame Vileroy saw the middle-aged man watching her from his lonely corner. She made a show of ignoring the women to approach him. As she came closer, she saw him sitting up higher, looking around nervously as if he expected the bride to be approaching some invisible person sitting next to him.

“Hello, Paulie,” she said, and took the seat beside him. *The police commissioner. That’s handy.* “I’m so glad you could make it.”

The man’s watery eyes grew large, and he pointed to himself and said, “Me?”

Madame Vileroy laughed. “Who else? Look, darling, I have a

favor to ask of my favorite police commissioner. Though I really shouldn't make you work."

"Why not?" The man was looking eager now, and curious. He tried to make a joke. "Your other guests are working."

"I'm sorry?" she asked, pretending not to get the joke, because it is always good to make people feel inadequate and grateful.

"Um . . . my date," he said. "Never mind . . . I just meant that Cindy's networking with clients over there, so I have time. What can I do for you?"

Madame Vileroy glanced at the chattering redhead wearing a pantsuit to a wedding. "Lovely. Well, I know you're enjoying the party. People come to these things to have fun, after all." And then she laughed and touched his hand. "But since you're offering, I'm worried about my new stepson. I think he may be under the influence of the wrong sort. . . . I'm not sure. . . . I think some of his friends may have crashed the wedding . . . and maybe even carried in unsavory substances." She whispered the last part and looked at him with whimpering eyes. Did he see the broken left eye? Probably not. She had a way of displaying or hiding it according to her needs.

Commissioner Paulie practically jumped up from his chair. "Which one's your stepson?" he asked, and Vileroy smiled with genuine satisfaction—because this oblivious man was the only person at the party who didn't know exactly who was whom. His world was made up of suspects and victims and perps, so much so that he apparently hadn't even noticed Thomas standing in front next to his father all throughout the ceremony.

“That one,” she said, and pointed to a circle of boys that now included Thomas, Connor, and an out-of-place John Darling. “The little one . . . the one with glasses.” And then she pointed right at John Darling. “That’s my Thomas. Please be discreet.”

A few minutes later, Madame Vileroy was at her new husband’s side, surrounded by acquaintances, hangers-on, and well-wishers. From the corner of her eye, she watched Commissioner Paulie in action.

First he stood a foot away from them, expertly scanning each teenager to see which one was most likely on drugs. Which one was fidgeting? Which one had red eyes?

She willed him to move faster. Already she could feel herself losing the battle to keep her body for a few more minutes.

In the middle of Mrs. Wirth’s monologue about upcoming fundraising activities at Marlowe, she began coughing uncontrollably.

“Are you OK, Nicola?” Mrs. Spencer asked.

She nodded and dabbed her lips, now just a bit thinner, with a napkin.

Commissioner Paulie had zeroed in on Thomas and was approaching the boys. He took care to place distance between Thomas (*the perp*) and John Darling (*the victim*). Having recovered somewhat, Madame Vileroy smiled graciously at her guests.

The commissioner pulled Thomas aside. At first they talked quietly.

Then Thomas began gesticulating, and the commissioner grabbed his wrist.

Thomas shoved him away.

It took only a second for Paulie to pin Thomas's hands behind his back.

"Oh, my goodness," said Nicola as she pulled on Charles's tuxedo sleeve to distract him from his conversation with Mr. Wirth. "What's happening to Thomas?"

Charles looked up and immediately started to rush over to his son. By now, the whole room had grown hushed and everyone was watching. Before Charles could reach the commissioner, Paulie had pulled a small plastic bag of herbs out of Thomas's pocket.

"What in the hell is going on here?" Charles demanded. "Who are you?"

"Don't worry, sir," said Commissioner Paulie. "I'm taking this boy in. You just go on with your party."

"That is my son, you loon!" Charles roared. "Let him go right now!"

The commissioner looked baffled. His face went white, and he began to stammer. "But . . . but . . . she told me . . ."

A few snickers and disbelieving sighs drifted from the crowd of guests. The police commissioner's wife, Cindy, stood by horrified, probably hoping that she hadn't introduced Paulie to anyone important. The commissioner was humiliated. From across the room, Nicola Vileroy challenged him with her eyes, daring him to see the truth. A blue and broken flash telling him that it didn't matter what these people thought. He collected himself and faced Charles. "I'm sorry, but I have to take him in," he said. Suddenly his job was everything to him. "I have to do my job."

With that, Thomas was dragged away.

Charles Goodman-Brown forced out a funny speech asking the

guests to stay and enjoy the party. He and his new wife made a quick and strategic exit — he to the police station, she to the warmth and privacy of her nightly bath, where she shut herself each night, avoiding Charles, communing only with the colonies of moths who, for a few nightly hours, were the only witnesses to the whereabouts of Marlowe's missing nurse.