

*November 21, 1979 (Post Sunrise)*

When the girl said 'they' were coming, I believed her, though I could still hear nothing. My only question (narcissistic creature that I am) was, Who were 'they' coming for? Charity? Or myself?

My answer came soon enough. From the depths of the air vent I heard the hollow echo of a distant rattling, followed soon after by the click of metal on metal, the squeal of uncoiled hinges, and a violent thumping sound.

There were voices as well, though too distant to be distinguishable; one brisk and sharp, the other angry and frightened, succeeded in short order by the sounds of a struggle.

Then there were no sounds at all.

I lay back on the room's narrow cot and closed my eyes. A focusing action only since, after adulterating my Special One's blood with that of the flight attendant, I could no longer daywalk and, consequently, had neither the need nor the desire for sleep.

*They come when they want to use her. Use her for what, do you think?*

What, indeed? Now that the child's constant chatter had been silenced (at least for a time) I pondered our conversation.

*She knew his name. Curtis. And if she knows that, what does that say about her claim that she can speak with the dead? Not to mention her tales regarding creatures—or demons, or whatever they might be—swimming in the emptiness of the afterlife to hunt and consume the souls of the deceased?*

I suppressed a snort. Long ago I had discarded all childish notions about a loving deity living amongst the clouds, or any associated fables regarding an afterlife paradise as a reward for the faithful, to the same dusty closet space which, in my youth, had kept company with tales of the Easter Bunny and Father Christmas.

But now . . . ?

This cannot be, I thought irritably, there must be some other explanation. After all, during my own (admittedly abbreviated) childhood, I had known another whose pretense of similar gifts had frequently excited, even at times terrified, her gullible clientele, a woman whose talent for reading a mark was so astute there were times I wondered, in my weaker moments, if the old fraud could actually read minds.

What if that were the case with Charity? True, telethésia on the surface sounded as absurd as her ridiculous claims of communing with the netherworld, but those would at least be far less consequential. More comforting by far to conclude that

the child was some sort of mutant telepath than to accept the existence of an afterlife, with all the complications and ramifications such an assumption would necessarily entail.

Not to mention, whose afterlife? For if the child spoke the truth, and death was in fact a crossroads into a second, even more profound reality, then who was to say what form that reality might actually take? Perhaps, in Charity's visions, there were no gods. Or, rather, no gods anyone from this world might recognize.

*Other than the creatures the child spoke of, that is. But then, who's to say what truth lies beyond this supposed veil? What if that which the girl sees is like the mythology of the ancient Greeks, who witness the lightning and explain it as bolts springing from the hand of Zeus? What if the Afterlife has nothing to do with such religious or mythical tales and is instead simply the natural order of things? And if that be the case, what if what waits for us beyond this life, not just for 'sinners and heretics' but for everyone, is a horror beyond imagination?*

I put the question out of my mind. Nonsensical, not to mention pointless, speculations, particularly when I had more immediate concerns.

I sniffed the air. Jester had chuckled the first time I told him that I could smell the sunrise, a laughter soon quelled when I proved it to him. But then, I had always possessed a keen sense for odors. When I was a child I could smell the oncoming seasons, Fall especially.

And as my nostrils flared, I caught the daystar's fragrance, like warmth mixed with the scent of flowers. An hour past sunrise, I estimated. Maybe more.

*Nothing to be done now. Perhaps these people will busy themselves with the girl until dusk. Then, once the sun has set, we shall see what the night brings.*

Lacking any other meaningful activity in which to engage, I stilled my body and allowed my mind to travel back in time, to the day I first met the White Lady.

#

Not that it had been day. Rather a late evening, smothered in a frigid London fog as thick as soot and tasting of ash.

I had spent the dusk roaming the streets, layered in a series of ragged coats whose gaping holes were, at least in part, masked partially by their fellows as I went about my business. Most girls of my tender age, too young to be wed or bled, made their coin stationed streetside parallel to the constantly ongoing traffic, tin trays hanging from their necks on a bit of string to make what pence they could of a day hawking items such as watercress or some other form of produce, with the most slovenly (or the poorest) selling matches.

Me? I was no sales girl, I was a messenger. Typically a boy's job, I earned my coin ill shod and fleet of foot, for while there was money to be made, the greatest rewards came from tips. But tips were most generous, as a rule, when they came from those with the most to give. This being so, I learned to size up a prospect by a careful examination of the man's wardrobe, particularly his shoes. A poseur wore his clothing (frequently bought on credit, often secondhand) like a smile, but good shoes, well taken care of, set a true gentleman apart from his imitators. And a message from one such was—at least most times—sent to another of comparable economic and/or social standing. True, I had to compete with the boys, who could be harsh and rough, especially when it came to their coin. But I had sharp teeth, even then.

Delivering missives too timely to trust to the postal service was, however, an adjunct to my true profession, that of guide, for it allowed me to learn all manner of secret places unfamiliar to most. Like Sylvie's, where a man might find pleasures far more exotic than some warm company on a cold night. That barge of a woman (for she was no lady) had, more than once, tempted me with the possibility of large purses of coin, should I elect to join her establishment and entertain gentlemen of particular appetites who, shall we say, preferred the taste of lamb and veal to that of mutton and beef.

But though a part of me was curious (and growing more so with each passing day) as to the secret goings on between men and women, I greeted all such entreaties with an embarrassed smile and a shake of the head.

Over the course of time, I had managed to cultivate a reputation for knowing just where and how to find almost anything an adventurous soul might desire, no matter how odd or strange. I can only attribute the events of that particular night to this.

I was standing beneath a gaslight, my flag (a scarf of bright crimson) knotted about my neck as I scanned the crowds looking for potential customers. One shabby urchin looks very much like another, but I had done a special favor in exchange for that scarf (what favor need not concern you), and over the past few months it had become my badge, identifying me to prospects who had yet to make my acquaintance. It was a biting cold evening, a true red-cheeker. Sharp winds had frozen the puddles from an earlier rain, and my feet were almost numb within what laughingly passed on my feet for shoes. A mug of coffee from Barney's booth warmed my fingers against the growing chill as I stood just barely within the glowing circle cast by the hissing flames overhead.

The clopping of horse hooves caused my ears to perk and I took half a step back, ready to slip out of the light and into the shadows if need be (for there were those who, curiously enough, lacked a proper appreciation for my professional

talents). As I lifted my head, I saw an unusual sight. A carriage black as coal, gilt with gold and pulled by four enormous dray, drew close. Such an elegant coach, I had never seen its like. Two men sat atop the driver's bench, one holding the reins with the other, in footman's garb, scanning the shadows. He saw me, then struck the driver on the arm and pointed in my direction.

I stood in place, divided in mind. There are levels of wealth and power the attention from which good rarely comes. But sometimes it did, and at such times the rewards were commensurately . . . rewarding.

So instead of fleeing—my first instinct—I held my place, eyeing both men from beneath my cap, my muscles tensed like strung wire.

"Are you the one they call Little Feet?" asked the footman, as his companion glowered in my direction.

"Yessir," I replied. Not my real name of course; that was Nelly. But only my family (such as it was) and a few close friends knew this.

The footman nodded, then opened a panel and spoke in low tones to someone inside the carriage. After a brief exchange he slid the partition shut and looked down at me.

"M'Lady would like a few words with ye," he said as he jumped down. I hung back, prepared to run if necessary, but he came no closer. Instead he made his way to the double doors of the carriage and, with a quick motion, released some sort of catch, lowering a set of steps before beckoning me forward.

I advanced warily, circling a bit. He smiled, a grim contortion of the lips, before opening one of the carriage doors and standing aside.

Approaching the stairs like a dog suspicious of the bone being offered, I kept my eye on the footman until I was inside, whereupon he shut the door behind me.

I looked about. Such a large space. Two pairs of seats greeted me, one set empty, the other occupied by a man and a woman.

The man looked like a fairy tale prince, slim and handsome, clad in garments exquisitely tailored, his coat edged with fur. But it was the woman who drew my eye. She was young, so very young, with a face that might have decorated a cameo. A necklace clotted with gems hung from her alabaster neck, the stones glittering like fire in the soft glow of the oil lamps illuminating the interior. She was modestly dressed, and yet there could be no doubt what charms lay beneath her gown, a confection of white lace. Made for her, I realized, and her alone.

"I have been given to understand," she whispered in a voice like cold air blowing over the mouth of a crystal goblet, "that you have some knowledge of the, shall we say, less traveled parts of the city?" She rested the tip of her chin on the back of her gloved hand. "Is this true?" "Yes'm," I mumbled.

"How marvelous," she said, as though we two were the only people present. "I have heard tales of a certain medium, Madame Claudette." She tilted forward, her eyes a pale aquamarine blue. "Do you know where this lady might be found?" "Yes'm," I said again.

"Excellent!" she replied with a light clap of her fingers. "Would you be so kind as to escort us there?"

I shook my head. "No'm."

"Oh?" The tiniest of frowns appeared on her forehead. Her companion said nothing, observing our exchange in silence. "May I ask why not?"

"Madame Claudette, she don't live whereabouts she conducts her business," I said, "and she doesn't conduct business at 'er home. You'll need to schedule aheads of time."

"Ah." The delicate beauty gave the briefest of nods. "I understand. One requires an appointment."

"Yes'm."

"And could you be troubled to make such?"

I glanced at her companion, whose sullen gaze threatened to peel the skin from my bones, then returned my attention to the lady. "Yes'm."

She then pressed a coin in my hand, closing my fingers around it with a strength that gave my breath pause. "Then it is settled. We shall meet you here, at this very same spot tomorrow night, at which time you will guide us to your employer's offices and in exchange receive two additional such coins for your services. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes'm!" I said, observing with surprise the half crown resting on my palm.

"Very well," she said, giving her companion a signal. He tapped on the door, which immediately opened to reveal the footman. "Until tomorrow," she said.

#

Mrs. Gray lived in a two story house, which she leased from its owner, in what had once been an up and coming London neighborhood, but which now had begun to deteriorate. Her one-time husband, Percival, had passed away some two years prior. A government man on a pension, he had left behind only a modest inheritance to support his young bride, a former actress who now supplemented those dwindling funds by entertaining customers under the guise of the gypsy medium 'Madame Claudette' at her 'residence', a crumbling mansion (also leased) a stone's throw from the Devil's Acre, a notorious slum crouching like a vagrant in the shadows of Westminster Abbey.

I was not her only agent, and by far the youngest. But I had a talent for spotting customers of means whom I subsequently steered in her direction, and for this reason she made extensive use of my services.

The morning after my encounter with the strange albino princess, I slipped past a loose board in the rear fence of Mrs. Gray's home to knock on her back door. (While my employer did entertain a certain, shall we say 'restrained', affection for my person, my debased social standing would never have allowed me entrance via the front.) The spinster house maid, Miss Brummel, opened the door with a glare down the length of her long, aristocratic nose, as though she smelled a cesspool bubbling at her feet, before stepping aside to allow me entrance.

"M'Lady will meet you in the parlor," she told my retreating back as I made my way towards the front of the house.

Once there I took my rest mere feet from the fireplace, its embers  
smoldering.

There was no wood to add, which suggested that my visit would be most welcome. I resisted an impulse to stir the dying coals and instead simply huddled, almost in the ashes, for warmth.

"I see you have made yourself quite at home," Mrs. Gray said as she entered the parlor with a tea tray, a shawl covering her shoulders and prominent bosom. "There is wool to be gathered, I take it?"

"And right sharp for the fleecing it be," I replied with a grin, duly returned by my employer. Unlike so many others obsessed with the burgeoning fashion of Spiritualism, Mrs. Gray never hid from me an acknowledgment of the theatricality of her profession. "And a good thing it is too, what with my lack of tin, or else I might be havin' to put the white poodle up the spout," I said, tugging on my outermost coat.

The lady sighed. "I hardly know which is the more offended, my nose due to your pronounced allergy to bathwater or my ear for how you mangle the King's English so." She placed her tray on a low table just before her favorite chair. "All the poor lambs truly seek is a bit of comfort," she said while pouring the tea. "A reassuring memory that a loved one, a child or perhaps a spouse, is happy and now in a better place. And if such grants them a more peaceful sleep, free from unwelcome anxiety or unpleasant dreams, then who are we to argue with that?" She stepped forward, offering the cup to me. I took off my gloves, freeing my daddles before I took it from her, fingers curled about the delicate porcelain to soak up the warmth. Pouring herself a serving, she sat opposite me.

"If'n you say so," I replied with a shrug while blowing on the amber liquid, "but that jammiest bit of jam looks a bit young to be a wife, much less a mother."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Gray cocked an eyebrow. "And how young might that be?"

"Like a child bride for some old toff," I told her. "Pale as mother's milk. And not just her skin, but her hair as well, paired with eyes as blue as a cloudless sky."

Mrs. Gray paused while lifting her cup. "Indeed," she said, as if distracted. "A pale beauty, you say?"

"So will you, m'lady, when you sees 'er. The kind who looks as though she's never set foot out of doors a day in 'er life without a parasol overhead. Nor had to," I added sullenly.

"I see." Mrs. Gray suddenly looked thoughtful. "A pampered beauty as well, then." She sipped from her cup. "Such a shame, that some be so blessed while the rest of us must make do with whatever modest charms nature has seen fit to bequeath us." She coughed delicately. "No doubt her lips have been similarly blessed?"

"Ruby red," I muttered enviously, "as though stained from eating cherries all the day long." My brow knit as I stared at Mrs. Gray, whose hand had taken on a bit of a tremble.

"Did she offer you her hand?" my employer asked. I nodded. "And were her fingers cool to the touch?"

"Would have been surprised if'n they weren't," I answered, "judging by 'ow cold it was last night. But yes, when she handed over my coin, I did feel 'em, even through them thin gloves of hers. Like icicles, they were. But being she had so little meat on her bones, 'twas hardly surprising."

Mrs. Gray nodded, though her eyes appeared to be focused on something much farther away. "And she desires a reading?" she asked, lifting her cup to her lips. "Did she say why?"

"Not to me, she din't," I said, before taking a cautious sip of my own. Mrs. Gray served her tea fresh off the stove, and it could peel the skin off one's tongue if one were not careful.

"Not the usual sort of appointment," she mused. "I take it you were unable to procure a name I could investigate via my, um, sources?"

"She din't offer one. But no worries," I reassured her. "I've seen you perform without a script before, partic'ly with the young 'uns. You'll be fine."

Mrs. Gray looked past me into the fire, now with a bit of a blaze to it. "I suppose we all should be grateful that speaking to spirits is such mummery," she said. "Can you imagine the ramifications if one could actually commune with the departed, privy to so many of our secrets? Being a medium might then become a dangerous profession."

"One would have to be a fool to admit to such, I be thinking," I said with a grin.

"Yes," Mrs. Gray murmured. "One would."

#

However frigid the previous evening had been, the next was even worse, with temperatures so low that I sought shelter within the canvas walls of Barney's coffee shop, paying extra for a second mug rather than be forced into the open air with a chill deep enough to freeze one's spit before it could reach the macadam. Huddling near the snapping doorflap, I peered out every now and again, alert for the white lady's ebony chariot.

Near to giving up, I finally saw it approach, a wet shadow in the driving sleet. Waiting till the last possible moment, I darted out, my outermost coat pulled over my head as I slipped and skated my way forward. The footman, same one as before, leaped down from his perch and, opening the carriage door, bid me enter.

I clambered inside and took my previous seat. Opposite me sat the pale princess, but this time with a different man. His hair was the color of summer straw, falling to either side of a sardonic face, its mouth curled into the kind of smile one sees from a sharper who has caught scent of a country gull.

"I assume all of the proper arrangements have been made?" the lady husked while sorting through the contents of her bag. I nodded, then added, "Yes'm".

"I have heard rumors that this 'Madame Claudette' is little more than a perspicacious charlatan," the newcomer drawled while dragging the nail of his right index finger over the upholstery with a loud rasp. "It will be *such* a disappointment should this prove to be the case." He turned then, offering me a tooth-filled smile which never once reached his eyes. I swallowed, despite myself.

"Pay Jester no mind," the lady said as she removed a compact from her bag to dab a bit of powder on her perfectly-formed nose. "I, for one, am quite satisfied that the reputation of your mistress is well earned."

The man ducked his head briefly, a submissive gesture. "No doubt you are, as always, quite correct," he said, still smiling as he rapped on the carriage door with the head of his cane, a thick rod tipped with what looked to be a weighty silver knob. The door opened and the footman bobbed his head.

"Assist our young friend here and place her safely between you and the driver," the man called Jester said.

The footman nodded, offering me his hand, which I accepted. Once outside, he reached around my waist and, with disconcerting ease, lifted me to the box seat where a fringed hammercloth stretched overhead, giving the three of us a bit of protection against the elements. Gigantic in their traces, four Yorkshire Coach

Horses stood stamping in the slush. After the attendant joined us, the jarvey flicked his whip near the ear of the lead, a brawny bay. Tossing his massive head, the beast lifted his hooves and set off, along with his compatriots.

As we approached the Devil's Acre, the streets grew ever narrower, till I began to wonder whether or not our broad carriage might get stuck before we reached our destination. In later years those neighborhoods would be cleared and their residents displaced, all in the name of improving the lives of its inhabitants, in truth displacing the poor. But in those days it was a shadowy realm, though still quite crowded, even at that late hour.

I spotted the house ahead to the right and pointed, our carriage now blocking almost the entirety of the street. I clambered down, then slipped beneath the overhang of the entryway while the footman unfolded a large umbrella, holding it in one hand while lowering the stairs and opening the coach doors. Jester exited first, glancing from right to left as though he expected a gang of ruffians to materialize at any moment. Behind him followed the white lady, who startled me by leaping like a doe from the bottom carriage step all the way to where I stood. I jumped back, breath caught in my throat.

"These are delicate shoes," she explained as Jester joined us. "Had I anticipated such foul weather, I would have worn something more appropriate. But I am a bit of a shut-in, you see, and unaccustomed to being long out of doors," she finished with the barest of smiles.

Bobbing my head in acknowledgment, I turned to give Mrs. Gray a warning knock, so as to let her know that her customers had arrived, then preceded our party inside.

A single lamp provided just enough illumination to allow us to navigate the narrow hall. Dimness was, Mrs. Gray had told me more than once, singularly conducive to creating a proper mood for her performances. I turned back, expecting to see the little princess hanging back, intimidated by the dense shadows, but no, she kept close to my heels, disconcerted not at all by the minimal light. Jester brought up the rear. The other two men were, apparently, expected to wait with the carriage.

A thick coat of dust overlay what little furniture there was in the hallway, another atmospheric touch. I led my little group to the end, then to the right where a flickering glow awaited us. We entered.

Mrs. Gray sat at her table, a shawl wrapped atop her head as though she were a Moor. Large earrings, a collection of hoops, dangled from her lobes. Multiple bracelets clicked one against the other as she stood to welcome us. Two large pillar

candles, thick as my forearms, rested on the table between us. There was no other illumination.

"Enter, and be welcome," Mrs. Gray rasped solemnly.

I slipped to one side that I might keep all within my range of vision. The white lady smiled, a subtle motion, before nodding slightly. "Your reputation precedes you, Madame Claudette," she murmured. "I look forward to profiting from it."

Jester, sardonic smile still in place, pulled out a chair opposite of Mrs. Gray, then waited until his lady had taken her seat before availing himself of one of his own. I stepped back towards the stove and its warmth, taking care to avoid the coal scuttle. This room had been the kitchen once upon a time, and had been equipped with a dumbwaiter for shuttling foodstuffs, coal, etc., between it and the basement below. I took my station near it.

"Should there not be a crystal ball?" Jester asked, gesturing towards the empty center of the table.

Mrs. Gray smiled. "I am a medium, sir, not a clairvoyant."

"There is a difference?" he asked flippantly.

"We shall see." 'Madame Claudette' straightened, then focused on the pale princess. "How may I be of service to you?"

"Should we not discuss your fee before we begin?" the lady said in reply.

Mrs. Gray shrugged, causing her earrings to tinkle. "Once we are done, feel free to set the value of my services however you please."

My jaw almost struck my feet. In all the times I had attended one of the old stagehen's séances, I had never heard such a statement pass her lips.

"Are you that confident?" the princess asked, her head tilted.

"You shall be the judge of that," Mrs. Gray said, lowering her head in an eerie simulacrum of Jester's similar gesture earlier in the carriage.

The lady smiled. "You intrigue me," she said.

"And you me," replied Mrs. Gray.

Both women locked gazes, as though in preparation for a bartering session. I switched stares from one to the other, disquieted, yet curious to see what would come next.

"I require your palm," said Mrs. Gray, reaching out. "Unclad," she added.

The lady glanced at the glove covering her hand and forearm almost to the elbow, then shrugged as she removed it. And as she did, I could not help but gasp, as I understood then the reason for her gloves, for her nails had been painted a crimson red.

Albert's fartleberries, I realized in dumbfounded amazement. She's a whore!

Mrs. Gray, in turn, merely looked puzzled. Small wonder that. After all she was (for all the evenings spent in her youth cavorting from one stage to another) a proper lady, with little reason to be consorting with Covent Garden nuns and their ilk.

"May I?" my employer said, reaching out.

There was the briefest moment of hesitation on the part of the lady opposite her before the girl stretched out her hand, allowing Mrs. Gray to grasp and turn it palm up.

"Such cool fingers," my employer said. "I must apologize for the lack of warmth, but coal, at least for such as I, is expensive. I hope you understand."

"Continue," the lady said brusquely, giving me the impression she was uncomfortable with being touched.

Mrs. Gray nodded, then bent over the upturned palm, focused on it to the exclusion of all else. Then she looked up, a strange look, almost of panic, in her eye. "What knowledge do you seek?" she asked.

"What do you see?" the lady said, ignoring the question.

Mrs. Gray wet her lips. "You have traveled a great distance," she whispered slowly. "Though not of your own choosing. You were, in fact . . . compelled."

As I watched, Mrs. Gray's hand (the one holding the lady's) convulsed. And when it did, a thin line of red stained the air as the albino princess pulled loose her fingers, her hand striking one of the candles, which flew past my head splattering wax in all directions. A fiery drop of it struck my lip. Without thinking, I licked it away.

"Begging your pardon!" Mrs. Gray squealed. "My ring is missing a stone. I have pricked you, I fear."

Then I saw one of the oddest things I had ever witnessed in my admittedly brief life, for Mrs. Gray took firm hold of the lady's hand once more, then lowered her head to the wounded digit where a large drop of blood marked the fingertip, to suck at it desperately.

For a moment, no one moved.

"You *dare!*" the white lady hissed.

Then, moving with a speed that took the air from my lungs, she grabbed Mrs. Gray by the hair with her free hand, slamming the middle-aged woman's head into the table with such force that one of Mrs. Gray's teeth popped out of her mouth and bounced across the table like a stone. Stunned, I watched it skip by.

"But then, of course you do," the lady said as she lowered her face next to Mrs. Gray's. "Because you *know*. Don't you?"

The man called Jester stared with a knotted brow at the tableau. "How can this be?" he asked.

"Because she is the genuine article, masquerading in the guise of a charlatan," the white lady replied. "Who, after witnessing the opportunity I presented her with, could not resist availing herself of it."

"Please madam!" Mrs. Gray whimpered.

The pale beauty ignored her, speaking instead to her companion. "It would be best if we were to continue this conversation in private, elsewhere," she whispered before lowering her mouth to Mrs. Gray's ear. "For this purpose, your presence will be required."

Then she turned her eyes on me.

"Yours, however, will not."

As soon as those words passed her lips, I turned and leaped into the dumbwaiter.

Of course, there was no dumbwaiter, not anymore. After another similar experience where things had gone horribly wrong, I had made preparations in advance for an emergency escape by removing the device prior to stacking several bags of straw at the bottom of the shaft. Something gave a hard tug on my leg, followed by a burning along the length of my calf. Much later, after a breathless run through the narrows and barrows of the Devil's Acre, I would discover three slashes parting the wool of my skirt to rake the flesh underneath, each wound seeping blood.

Once at the bottom, my breath a white plume, I rolled out and headed for the coal chute. The dumbwaiter shaft was far too narrow to allow anyone larger than a child to navigate it, but I had no way of knowing how long it would take one or both of them to find the stairway leading down.

Wriggling up the coal chute with scarcely a look behind me, I emerged outside and fled, breathlessly, into the shadow-choked maze of the slums.

#

I never saw Mrs. Gray again.

And as I lay on the metal cot in Milly's basement, mulling over those long past events, I thought about my one-time employer and wondered, What if . . . ?

A sudden noise broke my reverie. I opened my eyes as a distant clattering and clanking subsided, replaced soon afterwards by a series of choking sobs.

Once again I stood atop my purposeless cot. "Charity, is that you?" I whispered.

The girl's breath hitched as she wept, her sandpaper cries intermixed with words I could not quite make out.

"Breathe deeply," I told her. "I'll never understand a word you say otherwise."

Eventually her weeping slowed. "I'm sorry!" she finally choked out. "I'm sorry!" Her words floated like ice crystals from the vent overhead. "What are you sorry for?"

In reply, she broke into a fresh wave of sobs.

"Charity?"

"I couldn't help it! They made me tell!" she finally managed to choke out.

As I processed her words, I heard the distant sound of approaching footsteps.

"Now they're coming for you," she whispered.