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Someone At The Door

by Mia Sundby

The syrupy tones of Vic Damone oozed through the otherwise silent chateau. It had been silent since we had got here, I realised. Sure, our laughter had filled the hollowed out farmhouse with light and sound for a few minutes at a time, our music had meandered through the cold interior, had wandered along the chipped terracotta tiles in the floor, and bounced off of the peeling paint and the splinter-filled beams. But as I stood in the hallway leading out into the garden, it struck me just how still the place was. It put me in mind of how my mother used to sit silently at the dinner table, waiting for the moment to start a fight.

A prickle ran up my neck, and I spun around.

The hall was empty.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I exhaled slowly. I'd had too much wine last night, of that I was certain. But even too much to drink didn't explain what I'd seen; I've never been known for my imagination. It's just not something I'm good at. I wouldn't have agreed to come out to the middle of the countryside in Southern France to do up this farmhouse if Fran hadn't asked me, in part because I would have got here, fixed the boiler, patched up anything that was actively falling down and then sat in the middle of the bare living room, waiting for direction. It's Fran who sweeps into any space and immediately rattles off a list of things which could be done to liven it up --a trim on that lampshade, a velvet cushion there, the music could be a little louder... I just trail in behind her with my toolbelt and my stubbornness.

It was for that reason that I just didn't think I had it in me to imagine someone standing in my doorway last night.

The record's gentle playing drifted back to me as I stood in the hallway, looking out at the patio and the garden beyond. The sun illuminated everything in warm, buttery hues, the grass shifted in the breeze, cicadas chirped and birds sung in the trees above. The patio itself was cracked and grimy but Fran had found a moth-eaten tablecloth for the table.

Weaving around the rickety little table was Frances, humming along to the song.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way outside. She looked up as I stepped out, smiling. "Good morning sleepyhead. I didn't hear you getting up."

My own smile felt thin and false on my face. "I didn't really go to sleep."

She frowned, placing a beaten up placemat on the table. "You didn't? Was it the wine?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, there's a lot of odd noises out here in the country."

I swallowed. "Yeah."

Fran's hands stilled. "...'Yeah'?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I looked away. "This sounds silly--"

Fran cut me off. "You're trying to tell me something."

I nodded grimly. "Sadly enough, I am. And it sounds in my ears like an apology." What was I hoping to say? *Sorry Fran, dear, your new home is haunted. I know you haven't got anywhere else to go, but I've been seeing things, have you?* Clearing my throat, I added, "I hope it is not. An apology, I mean."

A fly landed on the salad she'd put out. She wafted it away impatiently. "I'm going to set out lunch."

I nodded. "Good." Lunch was good. Lunch was normal.

"Wine?"

"...At midday?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Will I need wine for your apology?"

Meeting her eyes, I grimaced. "I'll go get a bottle."