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UNDER A
DANCING
STAR

AN UNCORRECTED EXTRACT

LAURA WOOD

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“I know you of old”
- *Much Ado about Nothing*, Act II, Scene 1

Part One: England

June, 1933

DON PEDRO.

Your silence most offends me, and to
be merry best becomes you; for out of
question, you were born in a merry hour.

BEATRICE.

No, sure, my lord, my mother cried;
but then there was a star danced,
and under that was I born.

- *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act II, Scene 1



CHAPTER ONE

“That’s it,” I murmur, as I creep closer. “Nearly got you...” My hands are steady and I hold my breath, waiting for precisely the right moment to pounce. With a deft twist of my wrist I manage to capture my prey and I screw the lid on the jar with a triumphant flourish.

Victory surges through me. I close my eyes and lift my face to the sun, enjoying the warmth as it ripples across my skin. Nearby, a garden warbler is singing, the melody dancing through the air as the bird marks his

territory. For a moment all is right with the world.

“Beatrice! Not again!” A dismayed voice drags me from my thoughts and I open my eyes to see a figure stalking furiously down the path towards me.

“Hello, Mother!” I exclaim. “Sorry, I was miles away.” I see her jaw tighten. “What are you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the party?” Mother has been talking about nothing but tonight’s dinner party for months.

“I *am* ready for the party,” she replies frostily, and now that she is closer, I can see that this is true. Mother always looks very elegant, but she is more dressed up than usual thanks to the rope of pearls around her neck and the dusty pink evening gown that – though it has seen better days – still retains an air of faded glamour.

“Oh, yes,” I say with what I hope is a mollifying smile. “You look very nice.” Mother’s disapproving glare somehow snaps straight on to the jam jar that is concealed by my dress and would be completely invisible to any other person but her.

“And is there any *sensible* reason,” she asks, her voice dangerous, “why you are standing barefoot in the

middle of our lake?”

To be fair, it’s really more of a large pond than a lake, but I cannot deny that I am certainly in it. And that my feet are bare, and covered in mud and weeds. As are my legs. And a fair few inches of my dress.

I clear my throat and try the smile again. I aim for the sort of soothing tone one might employ upon a highly strung horse. “*Lampyrus Noctiluca*.” I hold the jar forward and tilt it slightly. “Absolutely fascinating.”

Mother’s face remains stony.

“They’ll be more interesting later on,” I explain. “They’re currently in their larval form, but I want to observe the bioluminescence more closely once they graduate to adulthood.” No response. “They glow,” I add, a little desperately now. “They’re glow-worms.”

“Of course.” Mother’s voice is flat. “You went into the lake to get glow-worms.”

“Yes.” I nod encouragingly. “Lovely, magical glow worms.” I hope that some of my enthusiasm might prove contagious, although if history is anything to go by it is unlikely that the woman in front of me is about to suddenly develop a keen scientific interest in the natural

world. Far *more* likely that I'm about to receive a lecture. These can last quite a long time and require minimal input from me, and so I keep a wary eye on her but turn my mind to the question of what I should feed the larvae while they remain in my care.

Mother lifts her hands weakly to her head, rubbing her temples, a weary gesture that I am all too familiar with. "And did the hunt for these magical ... *worms* ... drag you through some kind of swamp?" It seems we haven't reached the lengthy monologue section of the telling-off yet, and there are still questions for me to answer.

"Well, you see," I begin carefully, "I initially went out on the lookout for butterflies and I was on the trail of quite a sweet chalk hill blue when I slipped and fell in the lake, which is when, as luck would have it, I spotted the glow-worms." I pause. "Only, and I just want to be *completely* clear about this, Mother... a glow-worm isn't *actually* a worm at all, you know – they're beetles, in the order *Coleoptera*."

"I see." Her voice is painfully reasonable, which I know means she is working herself into a towering temper. "And presumably it is this fall that explains the

foliage." Her gaze flickers to the top of my head and I reach up to find a long, green strand of algae clinging to my dark hair.

"Mmm." I make a nondescript murmur of agreement, then, "Snails!" I exclaim, as the answer to my problem flashes across my mind.

"What?" A look of disgust flickers across Mother's face, and she takes an uneasy step backwards. "Where?"

"Sorry," I explain, "I wasn't talking to you; I just remembered that in their larval forms, glow-worms are particularly partial to snails. I'll have to try and find one for them." I begin wading towards the grassy bank, scanning the ground, my eyes lingering on the wall around the flowerbeds – currently covered in riotous overhanging greenery, and the perfect spot for a lurking *Mollusca Gastropoda*.

I glance back up and notice that Mother's mouth opens and closes, but no noise comes out. I immediately attempt to arrange my features into an expression that is winsome and respectful, because I have observed this phenomenon before, and it is generally followed by a rather lengthy fit of hysterics that I am – naturally – keen

to avoid.

Mercifully, at that moment we are interrupted by enthusiastic barking and I just have time to register the look of horror on Mother's face before Eustace comes crashing through the hedgerow.

In theory Eustace, the scrappy terrier before us, is supposed to be a working dog, a ratter who lives in the barn with the horses. I christened him Eustace after the patron saint of hunters in an attempt to encourage him to embrace his destiny, but it was not to be. Eustace is, it seems, dreadfully afraid of rats and more fond of sleeping at the bottom of my bed than concerning himself with matters in the stables.

At this exact moment he is grinning – yes, actually grinning – at my mother, his pink, sandpaper tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as he gathers himself up, all the better to hurl his mud-sodden body at her. For some reason – possibly because she actively dislikes him – Eustace is loopy for my mother, head-over-heels devoted to her.

“Beatrice!” the object of his affection shrieks, and I drop the jar on to the grass, lunging across the pond

to intercept the filthy dog cannonballing towards her evening wear.

Clutching the yelping creature to my chest, I mutter soothing words into his ears, scratching him in just the right place so that he settles down to enjoy the fuss, only occasionally casting yearning looks at Mother.

“We will discuss this another time, Beatrice,” she says tightly. She has obviously decided that the party is the priority at the moment, and that fact has earned me a reprieve. “The most important thing is to try and get you looking vaguely respectable.”

Her eyes travel over me with a look of weary despair and a shudder passes through her fine-boned body. I must admit that the addition of a mud-splattered terrier has done little to improve my appearance, but at least he has distracted her from the matter of the glow-worms. It's important to look on the bright side in these situations.

“The guests will be here soon,” she continues, an edge of panic creeping into her voice. “Go and clean yourself up *right now*.”

“Of course, Mother,” I murmur obediently. I tuck

Eustace under one arm and, while her back is turned, scoop up the jam jar, following her meekly inside.

“Evening, Hobbs,” I sing out to the stony-faced butler who stands looking creakingly proper in the great hallway. It is, I notice, looking slightly less shabby in here than usual and there are several large vases dotted around, full of blooms offered up by the garden, and hiding the worst of the peeling paint and mouldering woodwork.

“Good evening, Miss Beatrice,” he intones gloomily. Not by so much as a flicker of one winged white eyebrow does he register my dishevelled appearance.

“Did you adjust the seating plan, Hobbs?” Mother asks anxiously, and while they are both distracted I slip up the sweeping stone staircase, a wriggling Eustace still gripped firmly in my arms.

Langton Hall is my family’s ancestral home and you would be hard-pressed to find a more crumblingly Gothic monstrosity in all of England. One particularly dissolute member of the family tree gambled away the Langton fortune a few hundred years ago and the following generations have survived on increasingly

tight purse strings. This means that there are whole sections of the rambling old building that are completely uninhabitable – by humans, anyway, although we’ve got our fair share of bats and ghosts. We also have cobweb-filled hallways, glowering gargoyles, and ominously creaky floorboards that add up to make a storybook-worthy ghostly pile. As a matter of fact, the first time I read *Northanger Abbey*, I wondered if Jane Austen had ever been a guest at Langton Hall herself.

What we *don’t* have here is comfort or warmth, either literal or metaphorical. It may sound exciting, I daresay even *romantic*, to live in a decaying stately home, but let me tell you there’s nothing romantic about rotting windowsills, and freezing cold baths, and damp wallpaper. Even the most Byronic of brooding heroes would quake in the face of the groaning, ancient plumbing system. It’s less like living in a home and more like living in a badly run museum.

Add to this the fact that the estate is about to run completely and utterly out of money and you’ll get a sense of the perpetual state of gloom that hangs all over the place like a fine morning mist. Unless our luck

changes, and soon, we'll have to sell everything when Father dies. As far as I can tell there are no practical solutions under consideration – my suggestions that we sell off land or that I get a job have been met with a level of horror that one might typically associate with Herod's slaughter of the innocents.

I have a terrible suspicion that their hopes are pinned on my own matrimonial prospects. The fact that I am only seventeen and have no interest in getting married, settling down, or remaining at Langton once I do, doesn't seem to be of much importance. My parents have always been obsessed with what's going to happen after they're gone, and the topic of my father's demise is fairly common conversational material around here.

I, for one, would be more than happy to live somewhere where I could have a nice warm bath on demand, but Mother and Father see things quite differently. They understand their lives only in the context of this big, crumbling house and its acres of land. We're not alone in this, you understand – what few family acquaintances we have seem to be in a fairly similar situation, though, generally speaking, with

slightly more money to throw at the problem. All these grand, ancient names with draughty old houses to care for – it reminds me of the story of the king of Siam, who used to gift courtiers with white elephants. A white elephant was sacred and so, on the one hand the gift represented an enormous honour, but on the other the extortionate expense of keeping the animal was enough to bankrupt a man. That's what these houses seem like to me – great lumbering white elephants hunkered down into the land.

I do sympathize with my parents. It's been just the three of us and a few lingering and ancient servants rattling around this big house like the last sad pennies in an old tin for my whole life. I think they rather assumed they would have a brood of like-minded sons to save the estate rather than one wayward and slightly baffling daughter just as they had given up hope of having any children at all. As far as my parents are concerned, daughters aren't a terribly useful asset. I'm not supposed to go out in the world and actually *do* things. They'd like me to be more ... ornamental. I'm just *too much* for them. Too big, too loud, too clever.

My father is bluff and hearty, with a bristling moustache and watery blue eyes. He taught me to ride, one thing that we both love, although he was pretty disgusted by my refusal to join the hunt on the grounds that I thought it a barbaric exercise in cruelty. And I have never seen him more furious than the time I laid down false trails to draw the dogs away from the fox they were hunting, leaving them chasing their tails in circles. “What does a girl want with all those brains?” I have overheard him sigh more than once.

Mother is altogether more delicate – willowy and elegant and rather tired, like the sort of hothouse flower that droops easily. She is lovely looking now, but I’ve seen the pictures and I know that she was very, very beautiful when she was my age. She still carries that beauty around in her bones in a way that makes people turn in the street to look at her. Let’s just say, she definitely wouldn’t see the appeal of removing her stockings to feel the mud squishing between her toes.

Upon reaching the bathroom I deposit Eustace in the ancient tub and do my best to wash him off despite his vigorous protests. (And really, who can blame him

– even in June the water in this house feels like it has been drawn from an Arctic glacier, and I shudder as I contemplate my own looming ablutions.) When Eustace is relatively clean and has had a good shake, spraying me with even more water, I let him flee downstairs where he will no doubt get in everyone’s way and try to pinch the food intended for the dinner table.

I put my *Lampyris Noctiluca* specimen on the shelf I keep for my discoveries, alongside my fossil collection and the carefully mounted skeleton of a raven that I unearthed, wonderfully complete, in the garden a couple of weeks ago. Mother said she thought the thing was morbid, but I think one could say the same of the decaying family crest that we were standing beneath at the time. Anyway, I don’t think it’s morbid; I think it’s quite beautiful, and I have named it Edgar. My eyes stray once more to the jar of larvae and from there to the desk, buried under piles of scribbled notes.

A bell rings downstairs – a long, shrill ring that somehow conveys a sense of panic. I sigh. Mother urgently summoning Hobbs to deal with some domestic emergency – a crooked dessert fork, perhaps. The bell

rings again, with increasingly hysterical urgency. Poor old Hobbs can't move as fast as he used to.

There really is no time to begin my observations of the glow-worms now. Mother is already having palpitations over this dinner party and if I'm late it might well send her over the edge. I have learned the hard way that if I want to study in peace, it's best to cultivate at least an appearance of interest in these social activities.

Catching sight of myself in the mirror I am forced to admit that Mother's look of despair might have been warranted. My long dark hair is bundled on top of my head in a style that most closely resembles the rooks' nests that tangle in the treetops outside my window. The ends that have tumbled down from the hastily inserted hairpins are sodden, dripping on to the soft material of my dress – once a pale blue, but now a dirty grey, and streaked with grass stains, dark swathes of mud and several paw prints. The dress is old, like everything else in my wardrobe, and slightly too small for me, pulling tight across my chest and hips.

Unlike my mother I am built on sturdy lines, more a reliable workhorse than high-bred filly.

I turn away from my reflection and prepare to do battle with my appearance. I have less than thirty minutes before the guests are due to start arriving and the thought is not a particularly inspiring one. At least this dinner party will be something different, I tell myself, aiming for optimism. At least it will actually involve *other people*. Maybe it will be a resounding success and my parents will be so delighted by my model behaviour that I'll avoid a further scold over the glow-worms and the lake and the bare feet.

I fall to my knees and lift my hairbrush to my lips before raising it aloft, pledging my troth like a knight of old. "I solemnly swear," I say, "that this time nothing will go wrong and I will be a perfect daughter."

Full of hope and good cheer I clamber back to my feet and head for the bathroom to wash off the grime from the lake and transform myself into a proper young lady.