

## In an Instant

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**Prose:** 1st Place Winner of 3rd Annual Creative Writing Contest  
Kansas City Kansas Community College

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Ella was married.

At sixteen her parents and brother-in-law, James Prescott, decided Ella would fill her deceased sister, Sophia's, shoes as mother to four-year-old Charity. Sophia had passed six months before while giving birth to her second child, a long awaited boy, who survived her by only a few hours. After Sophia's death Ella barely ate for weeks and had only recently begun sleeping through the night. She'd heard her parents whispering at night about Charity and how she needed a mother; Ella knew it was common for a man to marry one of his late wife's sisters, but since she was in mourning, she'd thought they would never consider her. She'd been wrong.

Yesterday, Ella had gone down to breakfast to find James at the table with her parents. Ella greeted James with a murmur, assuming he was merely visiting, apparently without his daughter since she wasn't at the table. Slightly off-balance because of James' presence at the table, she hadn't seen him since her sister's funeral, Ella picked at her food and halfway listened to the conversation between her parents and James. They spoke of James' business and Ella's mind turned toward her sister. As her mind skimmed across memories of Sophia: walking in the garden as children, shopping for Charity's frocks, talking late at night, Ella's ears perked at the mention of marriage.

Confused, Ella looked up and asked, "Are you getting married again?" James didn't answer, he only looked at her parents, her father looked at her mother, and her mother looked at her. Before her mother even spoke dread settled over Ella like the weight of a wet cloak.

"Ella," her mother began, "James feels that it's time he remarried."

"Oh, yes, I suppose Charity needs a mother." Ella responded. No one spoke so she awkwardly continued. "A young girl would be lost without a mother to guide her."

"We're so glad you agree." Her mother answered chipper and breathless, almost too happy about Ella's answer. "We've decided that even though you're still in mourning you should be a mother to Charity." Ella, numb, waited for the shock and disbelief to hit her, but it never did.

"Ella, I know this is sudden, but you know Charity needs a mother, and you're the best choice. If she can't have, Sophia," her mother paused, as if pained to say her name, "then she can have you." Her mother rose and came around the table and sat next to her. "You would have been out of mourning and looking for a husband soon, and James is a good man."

Sophia had been seven years older than Ella was. Ella had looked up to her, mimicking everything she did; everyone said they were just alike. Sophia had been quiet and complacent, so Ella was quiet and complacent, even when it was difficult. When James had proposed to Sophia, despite the fact that he was nearly a decade older than she was, she'd said that he was just the kind of man Mother and Father would have wanted for her. She'd said nothing of loving him, but Ella had seen the way Sophia's eyes had shown when she'd talked of James. She'd been so excited to be a mother. Ella had watched the way Sophia was with Charity, loving, affectionate, they way their own mother hadn't been, and Ella knew she wanted to be the same kind of mother. She knew she could be to Charity.

"Yes, Mother." She heard her own voice, not even realizing she'd spoken. Her mother rose and went back to her seat.

Her father finally spoke, "We've decided the wedding should be as soon as possible, James has arranged the ceremony at the church; you will leave for his home after the ceremony." Her father turned back to his food.

Ella looked at James, expecting a smile or any sort of sign that he was her future husband but he merely looked at his plate. He looked a lot older than she remembered. He was nearly seventeen years her senior, but he'd always seemed young before. Now he had gray in his hair and lines on his forehead. Her father looked at her, and then spoke. "You'll make a fine wife and mother, Ella. We're sending your dowry with you, and James has agreed to give you pen money every month. No need for you to worry about anything, we've talked it all out and everything is settled."

Everything was settled except the fact that Ella didn't want to marry James. Ella looked at him again. He wasn't the kind of man she wanted. He was cold, almost calculating. He was Vice President of a bank, with the promise of President someday. The bank was all he'd ever talked about. He was too old for her. She wanted someone closer to her own age, someone smart, funny, and attractive. The thought of even kissing James, much less, letting him touch her, caused her stomach to tighten.

"When is the ceremony?" Ella asked no one in particular.

"Why, it's today." Her mother answered as if Ella should have known she was to be a wife and mother before days end.

"Today? But I don't even have a wedding dress, I haven't told any of my friends. Who will be at the wedding?"

"Your father and I will be there to witness it. You can wear your new dark green dress. There is no need for a big ceremony. You need to leave at once and get home to Charity. She needs someone and James needs a wife. You can write to your friends." Her mother pushed her chair back and her thin form up and toward the door. She stopped at the threshold and turned to Ella. "It is your duty to be a mother to Charity and wife to James. I had hoped you would be wise enough to understand that you are not a child anymore. You have responsibilities like the rest of us." With that, her mother left from the room.

Ella sat stunned. She tried to take a bite of the food on her plate but she found it had lost all flavor. The ceremony would be today. Today. She repeated it to herself over and over. She thought of her friends, she'd barely seen them while she was in deep mourning, but now that she was only in half-mourning they could visit. She'd been expecting a few friends for tea, but she would invite them to a wedding instead. She had to go; Charity needed her.

She looked from James to her father. Neither of them would look at her. "Well, that is certainly faster than I would have thought, but James, I'll be your wife and a mother to Charity." He looked at her and she could see something in his eyes, pain maybe. "If you will excuse me I need to pack my things and send notes to my friends. Please send a maid up to help me prepare for the ceremony whenever you are ready." Ella set her napkin on the table, stood, and left the room on numb legs.

She wasn't sure how she made it to her room but she did. She drew her trunk from its place at the foot of her bed and began packing all her belongings into it. She expected the day she packed to leave home she would cry. But as she packed her childhood mementos, her china dolls, her first sampler, and a music box, she didn't tear once. Her eyes felt almost too dry. She glances around her room with its soft hues of blue and gold set against maple wood. She'd picked the colors herself when she'd moved from the nursery. Sophia's room at James' house was done in pink and brown colors.

At some point Karen appeared to help her pack, brushing Ella's hands away, and taking over. Ella sat at her vanity, sent a few notes to her friends, telling them of the wedding at noon, and then she took down her long chestnut braid, and began brushing it. She brushed methodically until Karen came over and began arranging her hair into a twist at the back. Soon she found her self made-up and in her best dress, dark

green with black velvet trimming and a black velvet hat with a violet plume in the side. She never focused on herself in the mirror just sat, even after she was dressed. When Karen murmured the time, she stood and made her way to the door and downstairs.

At the foot of the stairs, she realized she hadn't spoken a word to Karen. Ella looked for her but neither Karen nor the other servants were in sight. James came into the foyer from the parlor.

"Good. I thought I would have to come fetch you. I see you're ready. You'll be taking my carriage to the church." James draped her fur-lined cloak over her shoulders, handed her her muff, grasped her elbow, and led her to his carriage outside. He helped her into the carriage then went back to the house. Soon she heard her trunk being loaded. James didn't reenter the carriage. Instead, when the door swung open her mother climbed in.

"I wanted to talk to you about your wifely duties." Her mother settled next to her, her sharp elbow digging Ella in the side. There was plenty of room on the bench seat but her mother pressed her sharp form against Ella. As if trying to be close to Ella for the last moments before Ella moved, but Ella had her doubts. Her mother had never been affectionate, never told her daughters a single affectionate word. Ella stared out the window, at the house wishing it weren't winter; maybe if there were sun or some bit of green she would feel better about the change in her circumstances. The house she'd grown up in was pieced together before she was born from a farmhouse. The house was originally four rooms, but her father had constructed new wings and a second floor over the original structure until an imposing brick structure sat where a clapboard farmhouse had once stood. The yard was immaculate thanks to their gardener. He'd also constructed a meandering garden in the back with a fishpond and a few fountains. She'd spent hours of her childhood in the gazebo at the back of the garden playing. She'd imagined she was a princess trapped in the woods where she made friends with the animals and taught them to talk to her. The sunny image of the garden faded and in its place was the structure of the house, the last time she would see it, at least for a while. The short ride from the church was filled by her mother's embarrassing explanation about what happened between a man and wife.

"Ella, I know your sister may have told you some about the wedding night, but I wanted to assure you that it's nothing to worry about. Every man expects his wife to be available to him when he comes to her. James will expect you to accept him without a fuss. A woman should lie there and let her husband take his pleasure. Just close your eyes and think of something pleasant. It will hurt, at least at first. Eventually, though, the pain will fade when your body accepts the act."

With the advice to lie there patiently while James took his pleasure in her ears, her mother began lecturing on how to be a good mother. By the time they pulled up in front of the doors to the church bile was crawling up Ella's throat and knots were tightening her belly. Her tension eased a little when she saw three of her friends standing in the doorway. She smiled at them as she climbed from the carriage. Her father was waiting to guide her inside.

"Ella," her best friend Alice called from the church door. "Ella, we were so surprised to get your note. I can't believe you're getting married. You never said anything."

Ella just smiled at them, not wanting to say she didn't know herself. "I know. We just planned it so fast. I'm sorry I didn't tell you." Her father cleared his throat. "Well, I guess we're starting." Ella waited while her friends and mother sat in the pews. They were the only guests. James waited at the end of the church. Ella's stomach tightened even more.

The ceremony took less time than the drive to the church. James gave her a chaste peck on the cheek, accepted her father's handshake while her mother hugged her, and cried on her shoulder. Her friends crowded around saying the polite platitudes, but she could tell they thought the situation was strange. They wouldn't look her in the eye and they kept shooting sidelong glances at her new husband. James drew her away and she signed the certificate and they were off to James's carriage, this time James joined her. They were rolling away when she realized she hadn't even told her parents or friends goodbye. Hadn't hugged her father nor kissed her mother. She twisted to see out the window but a cold November

rain had started to fall and obscured her view, but she didn't see anyone in the churchyard watching her roll away.

This wasn't how Ella wanted to be married. She'd been only eleven when Sophia married James, but she remembered the ceremony well. Her sister had worn a white dress and carried white lilies. The scent of lilies danced around her while she walked down the aisle. Sophia had been happy. She'd practically glowed with it. Ella remembered what James looked like as well. He'd been smiling the whole time, beaming at her sister. He didn't once take his eyes off of her.

Her wedding had been hurried and James had only touched her when he'd put the ring on her finger and placed a kiss on her cheek. There were no flowers; she didn't have a bouquet of mums or poinsettias. The feeling in the church had been one of coldness and shock, not love and happiness. It was not the romantic setting Ella had wanted, but it was too late now. She was married. Ella kept repeating that to herself; maybe if she said it enough times she would believe it. The carriage kept rolling until they were beyond town and headed to her new home three hours away. The foot warmer which had barely penetrated the chill in Ella's feet before they started the journey was now doing nothing to keep the cold out of the carriage. She stared out the window huddled in her fur cloak cursing herself for not wearing one more pair of wool stockings. "You're cold." Ella turned to the voice; James was looking at her as if he were seeing her for the first time today. He'd stared over her head at the wedding. He didn't wait for her to answer, what really hadn't been a question in the first place; he just pulled another fur from under the opposite seat and spread it across her lap. "Don't worry," James said, "Mrs. Plumm will have a nice fire when we reach the house. She'll make sure you're comfortable."

Ella murmured her thanks and went back to looking out her window. *She'll make sure you're comfortable.* The words echoed in her head, why had he left it to someone else to make sure she was comfortable? "I want you to know," James stopped and cleared his throat. Ella turned to face him again. He looked uncomfortable, strained, and tense. "I want you to know that I loved your sister. And I love my daughter." Ella didn't say anything. She knew he'd cared for Sophia, he'd seemed softer when they were first married, but she hadn't seen him soft since then. The cold must have made her brain fuzzy because she couldn't tell if she was supposed to respond to his statement or not. He took the choice from her.

"I provided a good home for your sister. We have several servants and I will do the same for you. Mrs. Plumm, you remember, is the housekeeper and cook, there are three maids, two downstairs and one upstairs; she'll act as your lady's maid. There is the driver, Mr. Plumm, and he is also the butler. There is also Mr. Gervase, the gardener. We have all the comforts you could want.

"All I want you to do is run the house, raise Charity, and be a good wife. You need not want for a thing. When our period of mourning is over you're welcome to entertain at your leisure. Charity, of course, will begin school with a governess in a year but until then I leave it up to you to handle her. I've had a few nurses in the past few months. I assume now that you're here we will not need one of those anymore." James looked at Ella pointedly. Ella assumed he was telling her he'd better not be wrong that she could be a mother to Charity.

"Those are your duties. Sophia...Sophia and I shared a suit of rooms; you and I will do the same. I expect that Charity will be more comfortable now that you'll be there. She's been acting out."  
"I expect that's normal when a child loses a parent." Ella answered softly.

"Yes, well. I believe that Sophia indulged her too often. I believe what she needs is discipline. I expect you to implement that. When she does something wrong she should be punished, not coddled. I want her to learn to be a great lady, and I'm sure her mother would have done that; I expect you can as well. She needs a firm hand." James turned back to the window.

Ella stared at him for a moment. She felt like an army sergeant not a wife or mother. She felt her eyes burning for the first time today and swallowed hard. Not here. Later, in the privacy of her room, she would give in to the emotions clawing at her, but until then she would sit docile and keep her feelings to herself.

That was all she had left now. What she felt no one could take away. She might have lost some of her dreams today, some of her freedom, and maybe some of herself, but she wouldn't lose how she felt. She knew he was wrong about how to raise Charity. She knew exactly what that child needed, and she was beginning to doubt James was capable of the emotion.

James glanced at his new wife; Ella didn't look like a bride. When he'd married Sophia, she'd been all smiles, she looked at him with adoration, and he knew that that look was mirrored with his own features. James had always known how Sophia felt, her face read like a book, but the girl who sat next to him now was an enigma. She showed nothing on her face, no emotion, no feeling, no reaction. When her parents told her she was to be a wife and mother by the end of the day she didn't react. He expected a smile, but he saw nothing. Ella did as she was told; Sophia did as she was told as well, but usually because she agreed with his way of thinking. Did Ella agree with him, or not?

James looked at his new wife; his new wife was looking out the window, not at him. He had no idea what she was thinking; he'd always known what Sophia thought, and if he didn't know she would tell him what she was thinking, which usually agreed with what he was thinking.

The coach was cold, winter was coming in full force, but his new bride didn't even shiver. Any other girl would have been complaining, even her sister had complained, but Ella stared out the window not looking at him.

"Ella?"

Ella turned and looked at him.

"Are you too cold? There's another blanket under the other seat."

She blinked at him, for a moment looking owl-like before her features went blank again. "No, I'm fine, thank you." She looked at him for another moment, as if considering him, and then turned back to the window. James opened his mouth to say something else, anything to end the silence in the carriage, but he couldn't think of anything to say to the girl sitting next to him. Instead, he closed his mouth and turned back to his own window. Sophia. Sophia had been more than he'd hoped for when he'd married her. She really loved him, and he loved her back, and they had a beautiful daughter. But Sophia was gone as was his son. For the past six months he tried to raise his daughter, but everything he did, trying to comfort her like Sophia did, failed. Charity was worse now than right after Sophia died.

Coddling didn't work. Coddling had turned his daughter into a screaming baby again, and that was the last thing he wanted. Charity needed to be a great lady; Sophia had been a great lady, regal and poised, and he wanted his daughter to be like her mother. They had the same parents, Ella should be just like Sophia, and she should be just like Sophia. He hoped she would open up to him, and be a great mother, as he needed her to be.

Hours later, half-frozen, and decidedly miserable, Ella descended from the oppressive carriage in front of her new house. It loomed large before her, bigger and more intimidating than she remembered it being. The three-story structure was brink and Italian in style. Despite winter's coming, it had a manicured lawn and she knew there was a garden hidden in the back. She just stood staring up until James took her elbow and steered her into the house.

Once inside, a maid appeared instantly and took her wrap and muff. She looked around expecting to see Charity peeking over the banister of the stairs or around one of the corners as she'd always done when Ella came to visit before. But the hall was empty; Charity was nowhere in sight. She also noticed the lack of servants except the maid. She would have expected them to be lined up to meet her, but they were all absent. Her trunks, she assumed, had been unloaded and taken up the back stairs by the driver, but where was everyone else?

She stood in the entrance hall. The hall led away from her straight to a door she knew led to the kitchen. Off that hall, a parlor, drawing room, dining room, and pantry. She also knew that behind the stairs that disappeared into the ceiling leading to the family's rooms was the library with its own entrance, so James could come and go undisturbed.

Mrs. Plumm came rushing from the kitchen. "Mrs. Prescott, I am so sorry I wasn't here to greet you. Welcome home."

The name, Mrs. Prescott, struck Ella. She almost turned and looked for her sister. She schooled her shocked features before James could notice. Ella remembered Mrs. Plumm. She was warm and welcoming. A mother. Ella forced a smile to her face, the manners that had been drilled into her all her life taking over. "Mrs. Plumm." Ella felt her smile broaden into a real one as she approached the housekeeper. Mrs. Plumm's hair was pulled back under a mobcap, and there was some flour dusting her round form under her black dress outside her white apron. She carried the smell of the kitchen, cinnamon, herbs, and cookies. "Don't worry about a thing. It's good to see you again. The trip was a bit long, the roads were muddy..." James interrupted. "Mrs. Plumm, I am sure Mrs. Prescott would like to be shown her rooms." Ella looked back at James. He was looking over the top of Mrs. Plumm's head, as he had with Ella at the church. Something clicked in Ella's subconscious, before she could explore it, he steered her towards the stairs. Mrs. Plumm toddled off down the hallway. James practically pushed Ella up the stairs. There was pressure behind her elbow. He wasn't exactly pushing her, but had she resisted she was sure he would have propelled her forward. Besides, no one refused James, at least Ella had never seen anyone do it. Up the stairs there were paintings decorating the wall. Ella knew they were members of James' family, and all men.

Once upstairs, James stopped. They were standing at the intersection of halls and rooms. At the head of the stairs was a small sitting room. There was a window instead of a wall facing the stairs, which the occupants could open or close for privacy. From there a hallway led to the family's suit and the guestrooms. Down the hall in the opposite direction, past the sitting room were the nursery suit and the servants' stairs. The third floor was servants' rooms.

Ella had been through the house before, but as she looked around at the gleaming wood, oriental carpets, and sparkling chandeliers she realized that this was her home. She wouldn't be staying in a guest room she would be in Sophia's room. She had taken Sophia's place. James turned her toward her room.

"This is our suite. The sitting room off the hall separates the bedrooms. The left is yours and mine is to the right." He let go of her arm and opened her bedroom door.

Ella stepped through the doorway. The room looked the same, clean and tidy, colored in pinks, Sophia's. Ella felt a tightening in her chest as she stepped in. She expected it to smell like Sophia, like the delicate fragrance, she wore, but instead the room smelled of beeswax and starch. Ella glanced around. Her trunk had been brought up and set at the foot of the bed. There were two doors leading from the room. One was a closet and one was a bathroom.

James spoke from the doorway. "Cathy will be up soon to help you unpack and change. Given the long journey today, I suggest you rest. I'll have Mrs. Plumm send up a tray. There is no need for you to do anything today. Charity has her nurse until tomorrow. I will see you tonight." With that, James left and shut the door behind him.

Ella stared at the door. Silence thundered in the room. The fireplace adjacent to the bed was crackling, but that was the only sound in the room. Ella sat down on the bed and stared at the fire. Soon the door creaked open.

"Mrs. Prescott? I'm Cathy." Ella looked over, again surprised to here herself called Mrs. Prescott, to see a girl about her age in a servant's uniform.

"I know. I remember. You were Sophia's maid as well." Ella didn't move from the bed.

"I'll help you undress Ma'am; you'll want to rest after today." Ella stood and let Cathy help her out of her gown and strip to her chemise. Ella crawled onto the bed and slipped under the counterpane, suddenly very tired. Cathy pulled the curtains leaving Ella in the dark. Ella heard her moving about the room putting her things away. Despite her exhaustion, Ella couldn't seem to fall asleep. Her eyes began to burn as she stared at the dark curtains enclosing the bed, soon she felt tears begin, and for the first time today, the true reality of her situation hit her, and she gave in to the emotions she hadn't let herself feel.

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"Ma'am?"

Ella didn't know when she fell asleep or how long she'd slept. Cathy pulled the curtain back letting the light from the fire and the lamps pour onto the bed. Ella sat up, her head was pounding, and her throat felt swollen and achy. "Yes, Cathy."

"Mrs. Plumm sent a tray up for you. She thought you might be hungry. Mr. Prescott also told me to tell you went out, but that he would be back tonight." Cathy turned away from the bed and disappeared. Soon, Cathy had pulled all the curtains back to posts illuminating the entire bed. Ella sat in the middle of luxury: velvet curtains, silk wallpaper, rich fabrics, and crystals on the chandelier on the ceiling. Her material life had improved, not that she'd grown up poor. Her parents were wealthy, but nearly as wealthy as James was. She might be the mistress of a mansion with a ballroom large enough for fifty, but she felt like she'd lost everything.

Ella left the bed, the floor chilled beneath her feet, despite the fire. For the first time she noticed the winter wind howled against the windows. The curtains were drawn against the chill, but the cold still seeped in. Ella noticed a velvet robe resting at the end of the bed; it was Sophia's. She picked it up, her fingers running along the soft material. It was rose colored. She took a deep breath and put the robe on. It had been cleaned, she could tell; it didn't smell like her sister.

There was a small table in the corner flanked by windows. On the table was a silver tray and cover. Ella padded over to it. She lifted the cover steam rose from the plate. Roasted chicken with herbs, and sausage and chestnut stuffing. There was also dish of peaches and bread and a hunk of cheese. The steam brought the spicy fragrance of the stuffing and the yeasty smell of the bread to Ella, and her mouth began to water and her stomach rumbled.

Ella sat at the table watching as Cathy straightened the bed. She noticed her trunk was missing and her personal things had been set on the vanity. She ate with gusto, polishing off the meal in record time. After she felt sleepy again, but refused to crawl back into bed. The clock on the wall read 8:00. Realizing she's spent most of the evening sleeping, she was overcome with the urge to see Charity. "Cathy?" Ella covered her empty dishes with the cover. "Where is Charity? Is she in the nursery, sleeping? Eating?"

"Ma'am, Miss Norris, put her to bed just a little while ago I would guess. She usually puts her to bed around now. Do you want me to send for her?"

Ella didn't want to bring Charity to her room as if she were being reviewed, immediately she decided to go to the nursery instead. "No. I think I go there. Would you help me put on the gray lawn. No, No corset." Ella made her way down the hall toward the nursery. She could hear the nurse talking as she approached the nursery. The door from the schoolroom was open into Charity's room. A dim light from the fireplace flitted across the parquet floor as Ella approached.

"You need to go back to sleep. I know but little girls need sleep if they want to grow up to be pretty ladies," the nurse whispered.

Ella peered around the door. The nurse was standing over the brass, bed arms crossed. Charity was curled on her side away from the door, facing the fire. Ella could hear her whimpering. Ella hadn't made a noise, but the nurse must have sensed her presence because she looked over at her. She ducked her head

immediately and walked toward Ella, backing her into the schoolroom shutting the bedroom door behind her.

"Ma'am. Miss Charity is sleeping. I don't think she should be disturbed." The nurse, a woman about forty years of age was in her dark gray, high-collared uniform. Her hair was pulled back, not a hair out of place; a lace cap covered her crown. Her face, not one someone would classify as pretty, was pinched and lined. "I'll bring her to your room in the morning."

Ella stared at the woman. The nurse had to know that Ella was the new mistress of the house. How she could deny Ella the right to see Charity shocked Ella into silence for a moment. The woman's eyes were cold, and mocking, a little glint of a smile, although no smile showed around her pursed mouth. "No." Ella, as she had earlier that day, heard herself speak before she knew what was coming out of her mouth. "No, you won't. I am going to see her now. You're dismissed." Ella swept around the woman's stunned form and through the nursery door.

"Charity," Ella called toward the bed, she could still hear Charity whimpering. "Sweetie? What's the matter?"

Charity sat up in bed. "Aunt Ella!" She crawled out from under the covers and toward Ella. Ella sat at the foot of the bed as the child crawled into her lap, curled in a little ball. Her brown curls were fuzzy from lying down and the stray hairs brushed Ella's chin. She brushed the child's hair away from her face and off of Charity's. She felt the tears on the little girl's face and the heat from her crying. Charity didn't say anything else; she just wrapped her little arms around Ella and sobbed into her chest.

"Charity, what's the matter? Why are you crying?" Ella rocked Charity on her lap, cuddling her, brushing her hair with her hand.

"I miss Mama." Charity's little voice was muffled against Ella's dress.

"I know. I miss her too. Did you have a dream about her?" Ella asked her shifting the girl and carrying her to the rocking chair in front of the fire. She felt Charity nod against her chest.

"I woke up and Miss Norris was there telling me not to scream. I told her I wanted Mama, but she said Mama was gone and I couldn't. I just want to see Mama." Charity began to cry again.

"Mama went to heaven. Remember? I know you miss her, but she is in heaven with your baby brother, taking care of him." Ella paused considering how to tell Charity that she was her new stepmother. "But you don't need to be scared, or lonely, anymore because I'm going to live here now. I am going to take care of you."

Charity sat up and turned to look at Ella. "You're going to stay here? I can see you everyday?" Charity smiled the quick reversal from crying to smiling, not unusual for a child. Charity's blue eyes sifted from Ella to the door. "Will Miss Norris still be here?" Charity whispered.

Ella smiled and cuddled Charity back against her chest and began rocking her. "No sweetie. Miss Norris will be gone in the morning. I'll be taking of you. There's nothing for you to worry about." Ella continued to rock Charity. Soon the child fell asleep in her arms. Ella continued to rock staring at the fire, feeling Charity breathe and lightly snore against her.

Ella opened her eyes when she heard James say her name. She turned her head to look at the door. James stood in the doorway arms crossed. "Ella, what are you doing, it's nearly midnight."

"James, I came to see Charity and she was upset. I was talking to her and she fell asleep, then I fell asleep." Ella didn't realize that it was the longest sentence she'd spoken to James all day.

"Put her to bed." James spoke harshly then left the nursery.

Ella stood and gently laid Charity beneath the covers. She smoothed her hair one last time before leaving the nursery. She followed James to the hallway, but he didn't stop. Cathy was in the hall, discreetly off to the side. Ella spoke to her, instructing her to stay in Charity's room that night. Ella followed James down the hall to their suite. He was waiting in the sitting room for her.

"I told you that Charity needed to be disciplined, not coddled. I expected you to do as I asked. I understand that until now you have always been her aunt, it was never your job to discipline her, but now it is. She needs structure and discipline." James paused, but before Ella could speak, he continued. "Charity has bad



dreams, but I instructed Miss Norris to handle them. She will be fine, if we just let her scream. If not, she will grow up nervous and terrified."

"James, I understand that, but she was upset. She misses Sophia and I only wanted to reassure her that I will be here from now on." Ella didn't mention she had no intention of letting Charity scream all night when she had nightmares. "I will be disciplining her as needed, of that you have no need to worry. I didn't mean to fall asleep with her on my lap, but it's been such a long day that I must have drifted off. It won't happen again." Ella ducked her head, staring at the floor, not the least bit sorry.

James didn't speak for a moment, he didn't even move. He eventually sighed then spoke, "I know it's been a long day. I forgive you. I suggest you go to bed." James turned and strode to his own room. Ella moved slowly to hers.

The lamps had been turned down and the fire had burned low, the cold outside lending a chill to the room. She added wood to the fire and stirred the flames back to life. Her dress buttoned down the front, allowing her to undress without Cathy's help. She was standing in front of the fire fingering her braid when she heard the door to her room open. She knew it wasn't Cathy; this was her wedding night.

James came up behind her. She didn't move, but her breathing changed. Her mother's explanation of the marital act began running through her mind. Ella swallowed hard, waiting for James to touch her. But he didn't he just stood behind her; Ella could hear him breathing. Eventually he spoke. "Come to bed." It wasn't the soft request Ella would have imagined she'd hear from her husband on her wedding night, but more of a command.

Ella turned toward the bed walking to it, her limbs jerky, and stiff. She crawled beneath the covers, eyes closed. She heard the curtains swish shut around the bed, shutting her in darkness, beneath her lids the light from the fire extinguished. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head away as she felt James join her in the bed. He turned to her beneath the covers and began to pull her chemise up. Ella took deep breathes. He didn't kiss her as she expected, but he did begin touching her in ways she hadn't imagined.

It was over faster than she thought it would be. It had been painful like her mother said. James left the bed and room as soon as it was over, without a word to her. Ella, cheeks flaming, left the bed as well and washed at the stand behind a screen in the corner. In a fresh chemise, her old one in the fireplace, she climbed beneath the covers pushing the soiled sheet away, curling on the bare mattress. She left the curtain facing the fire open, staring at the flames and for the second time that day let her emotions take over, soaking her pillow before falling asleep, lonelier than she'd ever been.