

Black Dog - Chapter 22

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Even though Auntie Imogen had initially promised to stay out of the way of the clearing, she appeared several times a day 'to see how things are going' and it slowed the process considerably. Finishing clearing the first room was a cause for celebration, in Olivia's opinion.

"But of course," Verity grinned. "Something to mark the occasion. Smile," she instructed, producing a camera from her handbag.

Olivia frowned. "Doesn't that belong to Giles?"

Verity's guilty expression answered that question. "But he left it here," she protested. "He can't want it so much if I found it under the armchair, can he?"

Olivia didn't waste her breath on how the camera would have ended up under the armchair, or how Verity would have found it there. "You'll have to give it back to him, you know."

"But he left it behind," Verity pouted. "I swear I'll give it back if he asks about it." She clicked the button and there was a blinding flash. "Oh, cheer up! Don't you think Imogen would like some more pictures of you for the family album?" She grinned devilishly. "I'll even talk her into getting rid of that school photo on the mantelpiece, the one you hate so much, if we can take a nice replacement." She fired off another couple of snapshots, and handed the camera to Olivia. "Now me," she demanded. "Unless you don't want me in the photo album, that is."

Olivia imagined it would be easier to indulge her than to argue about the camera. "Go on then." She'd return the camera to Giles herself when she saw him next, and pay him for the film they used.

Verity struck a pose, then cried "Oh! Wait!" She disappeared into the hallway. "Just a minute!" She ran past again with a burgundy-coloured dress streaming out behind her like a banner, and locked herself in the bathroom. She wasted a full hour, maybe more, trying on clothes and getting Olivia to take pictures.

Eventually, having run out of film, Olivia called a halt to the fashion parade. "If we move that cabinet out from in front of the window, we can make a start on the next room." she said.

Verity gave her a Look. "I do not move furniture," she said haughtily.

Carefully, Olivia manoeuvred the cabinet away from the window herself, and pulled back the moth-eaten curtains. Sunlight streamed in through the grimy windows, making Verity wince, narrowing her eyes to slits against the brightness.

"Sorry," said Olivia. "Are you all right?"

"I have sensitive eyes, you know."

"Sorry. Didn't think."

Olivia could barely see the view out of the window through all the dirt and cobwebs of the decades, but in the sunlight the room inside looked ten times worse. Black mould crept over the wallpaper in huge and intricate blooms. The faded carpet was covered with dust and debris, dead spiders, the tiny bones of mice or birds, and the last remnants of the shattered blue glass glittering. Still, cleaning and redecorating would be jobs for another day.

They found the second room in much the same condition as the first, and despite the twin hindrances of Verity and Auntie Imogen, Olivia worked hard to pile the hallway with boxes of things destined for the bin or the church jumble sale. In the face of the sheer volume of what she had to sort, she began to find it easier to be unsentimental, though she set aside an assortment of jewellery with the intention of getting a professional opinion. One silver locket required careful handling with a handkerchief in order to avoid another painful burn, but still Olivia admired the roses engraved on it, and wondered who that twist of dark hair behind the glass could have belonged to. She moved a couple of bottles of wine and some other spirits to the step in front of the cellar door before realising she didn't have the key. She only really indulged herself in the books, setting the likely rarer and more valuable tomes aside for later study.

Verity's idea of interesting finds, however, mostly consisted of: some of the stranger romance novels; bizarre little knick-knacks which had never been of any use to anyone; a teetering stack of obscure periodicals from decades long past; and the paper-thin skull of some unfortunate bird that had found its way into the house and died there.

While Olivia sat down to file through a box of 78s, Verity disappeared into the wardrobe, digging through a box of long-forgotten clothes and emerging every now and then to try things on. "Ooh,

pretty!" she exclaimed. She held up a dress that must have been Auntie Imogen's at some stage, and would have been scandalous when it had been new. Verity pressed it against herself to get some idea of the size, then immediately leapt for the next in the box, unfolding the dress and eyeing it critically. "Needs mending, but not a hopeless case," she murmured to herself. "Or perhaps I could get a pattern from it. What do you think?"

"You can find much nicer ones in town," said Olivia, who couldn't imagine taking the time and effort of deconstructing the dress and sewing a new one in its image. "But if you want Auntie Imogen's old clothes, I'm sure you're welcome to them."

"Well, she's no need for them now, and it's such a pity for them to rot up here, out of sight. Most of them just need a good wash and maybe a few stitches here and there. And alterations, of course, because Imogen was quite a bit taller than me, and a bit bigger in the bust." She went back to the wardrobe, her voice muffled by thick winter coats as she continued to chat away to herself. "Ooh, shoes!" she squealed. "These are so pretty!" She turned around with a pair of black satin slippers, one in each hand, and a happy grin on her face. "What do you think?" She unlaced her pointy-toed boots and slipped her toes into one shoe. She frowned. "Damn!" and threw the slipper to the floor.

"Too big?"

Verity glared as if it was Olivia's fault. "Too small ." Then again, "Damn! Imogen can't have smaller feet than me, she simply can't!" She tried on several pairs of shoes, more outraged at every attempt.

"I didn't know you were that vain," said Olivia quietly.

Verity stood frozen, a pair of patent red high-heeled slingbacks gripped in her little fists. " Excuse me? "

"I just... I mean..." Olivia was less concerned with her words and more with preparing to dodge flying heels. "All that fuss about some stupid old shoes. And wanting to take patterns from those old dresses when you can easily pick up something nice in the high street."

"I can't help it if it's difficult to find pretty clothes these days! It's important to look your best, but modern girls all seem perfectly content to wear ugly blouses and boring skirts and trousers ! Trousers always make girls look frumpy or mannish. And don't even talk to me about what those abominations that dressmakers are so determined to foist upon us these days." Her eyes blazed with passionate hatred, and Olivia would have liked to see the dressmaker who would dare to foist anything at all upon Verity.

"Well, when you put it like that," she said, when she thought it safe to do so.

"I'm not some silly vain little girl," Verity told her sternly. "I just like to look pretty. Don't you?"

"I do believe you've shown me the light."

"Don't mock me, Olivia," Verity growled, one slingback still raised in anger.

Olivia held up both hands in surrender, and also to ward off possible projectiles. "I wouldn't dare ."
Then, in an effort at diverting Verity, "Had you noticed there's another door in here?" She hadn't seen it herself until a moment ago, camouflaged as it was amongst wooden panels and hidden by the shadows, obscured by the heaped clutter.

Fashion temporarily forgotten, Verity rushed to the secret door, her eyes alight with curiosity as she stroked the dark panels. "Let's see what's in there straight away!" she said, bouncing on her toes.
"Come on: we need your keys."

Olivia had managed to label a fair few of the big bunch of keys, but just as she matched any key to its lock, three more mystery keys turned up. Verity pestered her as she sorted through them all.

"Give me a minute, they all look the same!"

"They're not the same at all," said Verity, fidgeting in anticipation. "If they were all the same, what would be the point of having a lock? Look at them: flat keys and round keys and square keys and fat keys. Big ones, little ones, shiny silver ones and horrible flaky rusty ones. Brand new keys and keys as old as the house, and the rest all sort of in between, of course..."

"Verity?"

"Yes?"

"Do shut up."

"How rude."

The lock clunked, and the door swung uneasily into darkness. Stepping through, Olivia discovered a small and cluttered room, where an ominous smell lingered heavily in the dead air.

Verity, close behind her, took a hasty step back. "Ugh! What a pong!"

"What is that smell?" asked Olivia. The damp and catty smell that permeated the house had been overwhelming at first but she'd grown accustomed to it. This was something different; something so appalling she couldn't bring herself to breathe it in to identify it. She too retreated.

Verity wrinkled her nose. "Smells like something died in there. Hmm, I wonder what?" her eyes widened theatrically. "Or who?"

Olivia was in no mood to go poking around and stirring up the source of the noxious odour, and said so.

"Well it's not going to improve with time, is it?" said Verity.

"All right, you're the expert: what do you think it's going to be? It can't be mice, because I found several dead ones in the first room, and it didn't smell half as bad back there. I hope it's not a dead cat. I don't know if I can cope with that."

"Don't be sappy. We're only talking about the physical vessel from which the soul has departed." Then she grinned, evil and devious. "You're not squeamish, are you?"

Olivia wished she'd never mentioned it. "Don't be like that. I'm just not keen on the idea of uncovering a decomposing body. What kind of person would be?"

"A graverobber," Verity answered promptly, still grinning in an obscenely cheerful fashion.

"Has anyone ever told you you're awful ? Right then, let's find this thing and get it over with." She fumbled for the light switch, but it only gave a hollow click and left the room dark.

"Never mind," said Verity brightly. "I can see in the dark well enough." Holding her nose, she waded in, a black shape disappearing into darkness. A minute later Olivia heard the hiss of curtain hooks sliding along a rail, and a small square of light appeared, Verity silhouetted against the window. "Is that better?"

Olivia sighed. "I'll manage."

"That's the spirit." There was a rustle and a slithery, papery splat in the gloom. "Oops! Do you still have that shoebox handy? I think I've found some more photos."

It wasn't physically hard work like clearing the garden, but the apparently interminable nature of the

task made it exhausting. Gradually, Olivia began to remove Auntie Imogen from the decision making, in the interest of finishing the work during Olivia's lifetime.

A clinking noise from across the room, followed by a heavy rolling sound of liquid sloshing, distracted Olivia from how to handle Auntie Imogen's faithful subscription to Woman's Weekly .

Verity was attempting to shift several large jars of pickled onions. "Do you think she'll want these?"

"Not personally."

"Obviously. But should we take them down to the kitchen? That's what I meant." She thought about it a moment. "Actually, what I meant was: should you take them down to the kitchen. They're too heavy for me, and I wouldn't want to drop one of them. It would shatter and make such a dreadful mess."

"I'll take them down to the kitchen. I'm sure we can use them."

Verity stood in front of a shelf of assorted smaller jars. "Imogen's work?"

"Mm-hmm. When I was little there used to be a vegetable patch in the garden, but it got all overgrown when Auntie Imogen couldn't do the gardening by herself." Memories of summers in Auntie Imogen's garden flooded back. Every year, Auntie Imogen had harvested more runner beans than she could possibly have eaten, even if she'd eaten runner beans morning, noon and night. But, if any of those jars were of salted runner beans, they'd be foul after all these years unattended. More work to sort out, and if Olivia wanted her own runner beans, she'd have to buy some seeds and plant them herself. "Do you like gardening?" she asked Verity. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew the answer should have been obvious.

Verity wrinkled her nose at the very thought of getting sweaty and muddy. "No."

"You could give it a try. You might find you like it."

"I know what I like."

Olivia got up from where she'd been crouched on the floor, rubbing her calf muscles as they prickled. "All right, let's get these..." She tried again. "What I mean to say is, I'll get these jars down to the kitchen."

"I'll see if I can get them to the door for you, so you don't go tripping over anything in the dark," said Verity graciously, and began to push the first big jar across the floorboards, making a dreadful noise.

"Although I somehow expected a werewolf to have better night vision." She went back and picked through the smaller jars. "Onions, onions, pickled cabbage maybe, and this..." She wiped the film of dust from the jar and fell deathly silent.

Olivia couldn't see her face in the shadows. "Verity? Are you all right?"

Verity seemed to have forgotten entirely that Olivia was there. She looked up, as if waking from sleepwalking. "I, err..." Slowly, she walked into the light, the jar held delicately in both hands.

"What's the matter? It's just a jam jar full of..." Olivia wasn't sure what it was, even when Verity held it up for her to see. The contents appeared to be mostly vinegar, with a solitary shape, small as a child's fist, curled floating in it. A shape familiar only from biology textbooks. Olivia gave a cry of horror and Verity nearly dropped the jar.

"Is it..." Verity's voice was quiet with childlike uncertainty, "I mean, what does it look like to you?"

"It looks..." said Olivia, rather proud of herself for keeping her breakfast down. She shook her head. "It can't be what it looks like." Where could it have come from?

Verity held the jar up to the light, squinting at it. "I thought, at first, baby bird." Pale and small, with the too-big delicate skull and the blue of eyes behind translucent lids that had never opened. "But that's wrong, isn't it? No beak. No little quills. Teeny weeny finger nubs."

Olivia shook her head again, recoiling, refusing to look at the thing that held Verity fascinated.

Verity took a deep breath, gathering her nerves. "Imogen Lockwood!" she screeched at the top of her voice, "You come here right this instant!"

Imogen materialised between the two girls immediately, cross at having been disturbed during her poltergeisty practice, especially when it had been going so well. "Verity!" she scolded, "There's no need to shriek like that."

"No need?" said Verity indignantly. "I think there's every need, actually. What is this?" she demanded, brandishing a dusty jam jar. "And what on earth is it doing lurking amongst the pickled onions?"

Imogen stared at the jar. She swayed, feeling as if she might faint. She wanted to disappear, and came close to sinking through the floorboards, never to be seen again. The shame was unbearable: Verity's accusing tone; the look of shock on Olivia's face. Poor Olivia, she deserved an explanation at

least. "I didn't think anybody would ever find it."

"Is it yours , Imogen?" Verity asked, putting it down gently on the windowsill, where it looked strange and sad in the harsh light of day.

Imogen paced the room, sure that nothing she could say would make Olivia and Verity understand. The sight of the jar had taken her straight back to that April morning in her youth, and she was a rail-thin sapling of a girl again, with dark hair in abundant waves. "Mother gave me something to drink. She said it would help with the morning sickness."

Mother wouldn't say what it was: something that smelled citrus-sharp and clogged the throat like sawdust. Imogen had vomited much of the concoction all over the bedspread, and Mother had come back a bit later with another cup of it. She'd stood by, watching as Imogen choked it down, along with her tears.

"What could I do? Mother was furious. I wasn't married, not even engaged. Beryl said I was confined to my room for a week, delirious and screaming about... well, Beryl always said I had an overactive imagination. I don't remember much. I thought Mother had killed me. I remember afterwards , tottering around the garden like a baby deer, with Mother holding my arm so hard it hurt. I remember asking what happened to the..." she gestured to the jar. "Mother made me keep it, to always remind me of what I'd done, so I'd never be so stupid again." She sat down on the windowsill beside the jar. She knew there had always been the risk of somebody finding it, regardless of where she hid it, but it had been safe for decades in the dark. "They said I was lucky not to end up in an institution. They said I should have been put out on the street. He didn't want anything to do with it." Bitter tears of grief and anger rolled down her face and evaporated in the air as they fell. "He had his own problems to deal with, was what he said..." Her voice trailed off into helpless, silent sobbing, and she hung her head so that the long dark waves of her hair hid her face.

Olivia and Verity exchanged a glance in pained silence.

"I'm sorry I shouted, Imogen," said Verity softly.

Imogen shook her head, her dark locks withering back to dry grey, brittle white. "It's not your fault," she said, forcing the words out, broken and distorted by her crying. "I should have done something about it years ago. I knew somebody would find it one day, even if it was after I was dead." She should have been dead and gone, safe beyond the reach of guilt and shame. "I should have done something," she said again.

Gently, as if approaching a half-wild animal, Olivia sat down on the windowsill, with the jar between

her and Imogen.

"I don't regret it so much," said Imogen. "That's the worst part, isn't it? If I'd really wanted the baby, I'd have stood up to Mother and taken the consequences. I'd have gone as far away from here as I had to. But I was so scared, Libby. Please, don't be angry with me," she begged.

"Auntie Imogen..."

"Please! Tell me you don't hate me for it!"

Olivia drew back, looking appalled. "Of course I don't hate you."

"What good would it have done to be an unwed mother?" Verity chimed in. "Nowhere to go, no job, no future. What choice did you have?" Imogen nodded. It was what she'd been telling herself for over sixty years, but hearing her own old excuses given real voices was something new.

"You can't hide it in here forever, though," said Olivia.

"That's true," said Verity. "If we put it back where we found it, it'll only come back to bite you another time."

Imogen sat in silence for a long time, her head bowed. "I wanted to give it a decent Christian burial, after Mother was gone, but I couldn't tell the vicar without risking everyone else finding out."

Verity took a deep breath, internally debating what she was about to suggest. "Do you remember the new vicar at St Peter's?" she asked.

"Reverend Milton? He's a nice young man, but I don't think he'd understand."

"Well," said Verity. "We'll make him understand." She nudged Olivia sharply with her elbow. "Won't we?"

Verity sent Olivia over to the vicarage, but refused to go with her. Shortly after, the telephone rang and Verity jumped, glaring peevishly at the noisy trilling nuisance. She didn't like telephones. But, since there was nobody else about, she answered it.

"Is Olivia home?" A young man's voice, stuffy and hoarse as if he had a heavy cold.

"No." Verity didn't recognise him, but was intrigued by the thought that Olivia had a gentleman caller.

"Can I take a message?"

He didn't answer at first, the line crackled loudly, masking the sound of his breathing. "It's Giles," he said. "I just wanted to say sorry. Sorry for what I did. It was nothing personal, I just couldn't take it any more. I couldn't bear another month of this curse, and I would've passed it on to anybody ."

It took a moment for Verity to realise what he meant, but when she did, she laughed. "You ridiculous boy! You can't get rid of a cold by sneezing on somebody else!"

Another long, crackling pause. "But I thought, if I passed on the curse, I'd..."

"You thought you'd magically get better? Well all you've done is made her sick too, haven't you? What do you think about that?"

He slammed the receiver down, leaving Verity standing alone with the dial tone. What a silly boy, believing he could rid himself of his werewolf curse by biting somebody else. Didn't he have any idea how these things worked?