

The Cotswold Curse

Being the True Story of the Late Mysterious Happenings in Rural Oxfordshire, Together With the Perilous Adventures of Miss Mary Goodweather and Her Pesky Virginhood

Darkly humorous Regency-set Historical chock full of sexual tension, plot twists, wicked awesome description, and plenty of LOLz.

Written by [Erica Ridley](#), [Ann Aguirre](#), [Carrie Ryan](#), [Darcy Burke](#), [Diana Peterfreund](#), [Elizabeth Hoyt](#), [Julie Leto](#), [Kalen Hughes](#), [Lacey Kaye](#), and [Tessa Dare](#).

This interactive choose-your-adventure novella first appeared on the [Manuscript Mavens blog](#) and can also be viewed on the Manuscript Mavens [website](#).

Prologue

The freezing air nipped at Mary's throat where her too-small cloak gaped in front. There hadn't been money for a new cloak this winter. Nor the winter before. Gathering the threadbare garment about her as best she could, she hastened her steps along the ice-crusting path. The distant thwacks of an axe cleaving wood cut through the thick blanket of silence. A thin curl of smoke from a nearby cottage disappeared into the winter-white sky. All was grey; all was quiet--just as it had been ever since the tragedy. This was Cotswold's season of sorrow.

But a smile warmed Mary's cheeks, for the air tasted of snow--crisp with anticipation, sweet as a secret. A lone snowflake twirled from the gray silence, and she caught it in her hand, admiring the bit of crystalline lace as it melted on her palm. And then it was gone. The first snowflake of winter, and a scrap of beauty none but her would ever see. The rest of the villagers kept to their thatched-roof cottages, or trained their eyes on the loamy soil beneath their feet... but not Mary. Mary looked to the sky.

Written by **Tessa Dare**

Chapter 1

With a sudden crack of thunder, everything changed.

The once-fluffy white snow clouds turned black, heavy, oppressive, stringing across the sky like sticky strands of oily taffy. Flakes turned to sodden mush, falling from the shadows in dark glops, splattering across her face like mud spraying from a carriage wheel.

Actually... the rumbling thunder sounded too much like uneven wooden wheels skittering across the slushy rocks to be anything but. Mary leapt to the side of the road, dead grass crackling beneath her booted feet.

Skeletal horses clattered past, their ghostly gray flanks tethered to a black four-wheeled carriage, a hunched gnome of a driver perched atop the box seat to sting the horses with his whip. Viscount Nightshade, the town's fearsome recluse, lounged across the rear seat, making no attempt to refasten the collapsible leather top. He did not wipe the greasy sleet from his overlong hair or from his greatcoat. He did not bid the driver to hurry faster.

As the ancient barouche rolled past Mary, Viscount Nightshade turned his pale, unblinking gaze upon her. His eyes glittered. He smiled. Mary saw--well, she thought she saw--oh, for Heaven's sake, she didn't see any such thing, did she?

But in the space of a blink, he'd resealed his bloodless lips around his strange white teeth and vanished onto Satan's Fury, the most notoriously unsafe bridge this side of Nottingham.

What the devil was a recluse like Nightshade doing tearing hell-for-leather through the streets in weather as foul as this? For that matter, what was Mary doing gaping after him instead of seeking cover until the worst of the storm passed? She could take her chances crossing the slick planks of the rickety bridge... but what if

the viscount lurked there or she tumbled into the ice-crusting river below? No, the far better plan would be to find shelter immediately before the warmth of a fire.

She glanced up and down the wet, deserted road. No friendly faces glanced back at her. No people dotted the barren countryside at all, despite the sudden conviction she was being watched. She glanced over her shoulders, scanned the horizon, squinted into the thick tangle of trees lining the road. No smoke plumed from any of the brown-thatched cottages... save one.

Some said Hemlock House was haunted, but Mary was not so superstitious as to believe in such things. At least, not when she was shivering with cold and soaked straight through to her shift.

Another vicious crack of thunder rattled the rocks beneath her feet. Her heartbeats quickened with the increasing fury of the swirling black sky. She sprinted for the front step. Her feet slipped and slid on the slush-coated dirt. She'd lost both her bonnet and her breath by the time she reached the rotted wooden door. She knocked until her cracked knuckles bled. Despite the stench of acrid smoke above the decaying thatches, no one answered.

Mary twisted her chapped fingers around the icy brass doorknob, and...

- A) *...a snarling ghost floated through the door, becoming more real by the second.*

Hemlock House was totally haunted. Duh.

- B) *...the decomposing flesh of a corpse's hand ripped at her frayed pelisse.*

She was being watched. By zombies.

- C) *...the door swung open, revealing a sharp-eyed old grandmother.*

With a still-wet knife.

- **D) ...the door wouldn't budge--the bloody thing was locked tight.**

Leaving her standing there helpless when Viscount Nightshade careened back around the corner.

Written by **Erica Ridley** [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 2

"Oh, stuff!" She kicked the base of the door, bringing a jolt of pain to her otherwise numb toes. Hoping someone had come into view to aid her plight, Mary turned to search the lane again. Nothing. No sound. No people. Slushy snow blew into her eye and she turned away from the wind, blinking profusely.

"May I be of assistance?" The deep baritone cut through the air as surely as the chill stole through her threadbare cloak. Mary swung about with a gasp...and stared into eyes the color of ice.

"V-V-Viscount Nightshade," was all she could manage. How had he approached so silently? A moment ago the road had been devoid of life.

"Your fingers are bleeding." He took her hand from her breast - for she had grabbed at her chest in her surprise - and studied her battered knuckles. Mary couldn't tear her gaze from his face. The nostrils of his aquiline nose flared. His pale lips parted and she heard his intake of breath.

Mary pulled her fingers from his leather-clad hand. "I am fine."

"You are freezing." He swept her with an assessing look from her bonnet-less head to her shoddily clad feet. "Miss Mary Goodweather, isn't it?"

"How do you know my name? You hardly ever leave Blackcliff."

He arched a brow as black as the night sky. "I am a recluse, not a simpleton. I know everything that goes on in Cotswold."

She opened her mouth, but he took her arm and began walking her toward his ancient barouche. "Come, I'll take you home."

No! She mustn't get into that horrible vehicle! The last person he'd

taken for a ride-Mary tripped. Strong arms caught her and pulled her against an even stronger chest. He was wide, she realized, and not frigid as she'd expected him to be. Warmth emanated from beneath his flowing black cloak.

"Careful."

"I'm fine. You must let me go." She stared into his pallid face, his odd gray eyes boring into her, making her feel as if he saw much more than anyone else. The moment stretched and the world, even the storm, fell away. Finally, she found her tongue once more.

"Please. Let me go."

"Nightshade!" a high-pitched voice wailed from behind them. Mary spun in the viscount's arms, but saw nothing. She was sure the scream had come from Hemlock House.

"We have to go." The viscount grabbed her more firmly.

"No. I want to go home." Panic unfurled in Mary's breast, spreading its frantic tentacles until her entire body shook.

"You can't go on foot." He steered her toward the carriage, even though she tried to dig her heels into the frozen ground.

"Nightshade!" The eerie shriek sounded again, closer, but there didn't seem to be anyone else about, save the viscount's gnome-like driver.

"No." Mary pulled free, but he swept her into his arms and tossed her over the side of the barouche onto the wet seat.

"Don't you understand? She's coming closer. We must find shelter. You haven't forgotten the tragedy have you?"

Nightshade climbed into the barouche. Mary shook her head and...

- A) from the corner of her eye, saw a zombie staggering off Satan's Fury. She screamed and the world went black.

- B) jumped from the barouche. A banshee floated up from the Dire River.
- **C) gasped at the sight of her sister running from Hemlock House. Nightshade whispered, "Isn't she dead?"**
- D) the barouche lurched forward. Mary pitched forward, knocking the viscount onto the opposite seat and sprawling across his lap

Written by Darcy Burke [[web site](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 3

His stare was accusing, intense, terrifying. He climbed into the barouche.

Mary shook her head and gasped at the sight of her sister running from Hemlock House.

Nightshade whispered, "Isn't she dead?" He reached around Mary and began tugging at the aged, collapsed barouche top with one hand. The other—warm, strong, and firm against her arm—steadied her as the carriage lurched forward. "She ought to be dead. Has this foolery not gone on long enough?"

Mary whipped her head around to plead with him. Her sister was alive. How many years had they waited for news? Yet he behaved as if Sarah's sudden return were another tragedy and not cause for celebration. "You must turn back!" she cried. "Please, please, my lord! Stop your carriage!"

But he ignored her. She ducked from the pointy danger of his elbows as he yanked the barouche top into place. "My God," he muttered, affixing the snaps together, "I'd no idea there were two."

She blinked against the snow dampening her lashes and icing her brows. The ragged top, gaping with holes and the irregular edges of rat nibbles, did not prevent cold slush from blowing into her face. But the viscount made no move to set the oil flaps into place—or wipe the sleet from his own eyes.

When he also did not explain his cryptic mumbling, she asked over the wind, "Two what?"

"No, not what, my dear Miss Goodweather. Two who. Have you no notion of the danger you were in?"

"Please, sir, set me down! I wish to see to my sister. She will fall

ill from the cold." When this plea did not sway him in the least, she added, "Have you any idea of the danger I am in presently? If there is a thread of goodness in you, sir, spare my innocence!"

He laughed, a deep, rich rumble that scattered through trees and blurred as the carriage sped down the lane. "Perchance, once, I considered myself a threat to your guilelessness and virtue. But that was before."

"I do not understand you, sir, when you speak in riddles. I wish to be put down." She tried to address him with the conviction of a woman who would prefer the cold company of her possibly dead sister than the frigid, confounding company of a terrifying recluse with a wicked pair of eyes.

He said nothing. She peeked at him, clasping the frayed edges of her coat to her neck. He was staring ahead, the cold, blank look in his eyes as empty as if they had never spoken, never chanced on each other's solitude. Tendrils of icy air snaked into the gaps of her coat and coiled around her arms, sliding like cold, wet scales down her back, and she shivered.

The trees ahead became familiar. She was given no chance to remark on it, however, for he finally drawled, "Ah, but I do not wish it. Have you any care for my reputation, Miss Goodweather? I have borne too much since the tragedy, I fear. I will not have yet another life on my hands."

Mary went cold. He had killed, then, as the rumors said. Once. Perhaps more.

Perhaps even...her sister.

Was the woman on the road truly Sarah? Cold streaked down Mary's back. Sarah was dead. Even Viscount Nightshade had heard the rumors. Or maybe...maybe he had indeed murdered her. Maybe it was guilt that made him see a Sarah in every pale woman he found on the road.

Maybe that had not been Sarah after all.

Viscount Nightshade's lips turned down. He turned and held his hands palm-up for Mary's inspection. She looked without thinking. His gloves, once a buff fawn, had worn to a gray shine across the palms. The chestnut red of dried blood splashed over the leather, darker in some places than in others. At Mary's sharp gasp, he said, "Ah, I see you do remember."

She nodded mutely. Her fist felt frozen to her coat, and she did not need to look down to know her own blood had iced in a crust over her bruised knuckles. Yet when his hand raised toward her face, she did not turn away. "These gloves hide a secret, Miss Goodweather," he murmured, drawing a stitched fingertip across her stinging cheek. "They conceal a curse. One, I fear, that allows me to promise you have nothing to fear from me."

"You will not...touch me, then?"

Chagrin transformed his face. The sharp aquiline profile of his nose could not be changed, but the hollows of his pale cheeks rounded just before a puff of steam became lost in the wind. For one moment, the tight, almost unnoticeable lines etched around eyes the color of sleet and loam disappeared, replaced with a wistful softening. Save for his pallid skin, he looked remarkably...human.

What a fanciful idea! As if the viscount was truly otherworldly. Mary shook her head, dislodging a damp curl of hair stiffened by the cold. Tearing her gaze from Viscount Nightshade's oddly arresting face, she looked past the hunched, cloaked form of his driver. "Satan's Fury!" she gasped. "And Hemlock House! My lord, we have come in a circle!"

He nodded grimly. "'Tis the other part of my curse." He leaned back against the damp, cracked squab of his barouche and the indifference he had worn when first she'd laid eyes on him masked his face. His voice became flat. "I offered her everything I have, believing I loved her. She wanted nothing but my time, which I

could not give. Now we have an eternity in each other's company to sort it out."

Mary felt more than saw him glance at her. She darted her eyes toward him just in time to see the very corner of his lips turn up. A lace-like snowflake cracked and melted at the edge, and she almost wanted to-

"I'm afraid," he continued, seemingly unaware of her sudden fascination with his mouth, "that is the real tragedy."

She laughed. She could not help it. The peal of bells, the chirp of a well-fed bird on a Sunday morning, the chime of coins jangling in a pocket-these could not compare to the bubble of mirth that escaped Mary. She laughed until she could hardly breathe for it. Wind whipped against her cheeks, stinging the icy trail of a tear as she leaned to rest a hand against a stitch in her side.

The last of her laughter caught in her throat as the barouche tilted on the right two wheels. Her breath turned to a scream as her frail body slammed into the carriage wall, and it died in an oomph as the surprisingly heavy weight of Viscount Nightshade slid against her, catching her in the chest.

The cackle of a woman scorned followed them over the edge of the barouche as they tumbled to the ground in a painful heap. Elbows bit into tender places. Legs entwined. Suddenly, Viscount Nightshade was lifted from Mary, leaving a cold imprint against her front.

Mary pushed snow-crueted hair from her eyes and gasped at the sight of...

• A) Sarah, her sister, holding Viscount Nightshade up over her head, the muddy tails of his coat swirling around her gray body like tendrils of death. You know what they say about a woman scorned...

- B) A zombie clutching his zombie stomach, rotted hands clasped around his entrails as Viscount Nightshade pulls a machete from his corpse.
- C) A handsome, virile woodsman, ruddy from the exertion of cleaving wood and chasing down a ghost-like barouche. He is pressing a jewel-tipped dagger to the pale white throat of Viscount Nightshade.
- D) Sarah, her sister, preparing to toss Viscount Nightshade over Satan's Fury. A powerful gust of wind prevents Mary from leaping up to save him. But does she even want to?

Written by Lacey Kaye [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 4

"S-Sarah," Mary quavered. "You never used to be so strong."

"No, dear sister," Sarah moaned, her voice as cold as a really cold icicle. "But then I never used to be dead!"

And with a girlish twist Sarah threw Lord Nightshade at her sister's feet.

"Damn me," that epitome of pale British aristocracy grunted as he hit the ground. "I hate it when she does that."

"Dear Sir, never say she has done this before?" Mary cried as she helped the viscount to his feet. "Sarah was ever a gentle soul."

Her sweet sister was advancing toward them and Mary had not seen such a look on Sarah's face since that unfortunate incident involving a borrowed white pelisse and a bowl of cherry preserves.

"Not so gentle anymore," Lord Nightshade muttered as he elbowed Sarah smartly in the face. The girl staggered back, but recovered with inhuman speed, advancing once again. "Not since the night of the tragedy. The night when she became--"

"The undead!" Sarah shrieked. She flew at the gloomy viscount's face, her fingers like claws. "Doomed to this half-life, this shadowed existence, forever doomed, doomed, DOOMED!"

With each doomed Sarah slashed at Lord Nightshade. He parried her blows, but it was evident that he was tiring under her otherworldly strength.

But Mary had no sympathy for the viscount. "O, vile despoiler of womanhood! You have cursed my sister, taken her natural life, and stolen her innocence--"

"Er, actually-" the viscount started.

But Sarah kicked him in the stomach and screamed as he bent and oofed out air, "Not a despoiler, not a stealer of innocence-"

Mary looked from the viscount, now on the snowy ground with his legs curled around his most masculine bits, to her gray and grim sister, still kicking him in a rather un-cricket-like way. "You mean . . . ?"

"He couldn't perform!" Sarah shrieked to the heavens, a woman truly scorned. "I'm doomed to an eternity of virginhood!"

Which certainly explained her ire.

"That never happened to me before. I think it was the wine," the viscount began to explain, but at that moment...

- A) The werewolves showed up.
- B) Sarah turned to Mary and said, "And you will spend eternity with me!"
- C) The door to Hemlock House burst open and an army of zombies staggered out, prompting Lord Nightshade to curse under his breath.
- **D) The Marquis of Moonlight galloped across Satan's Fury, his long, golden hair flying behind him.**

Written by Elizabeth Hoyt [[web site](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 5

"The zombies are coming! The zombies are coming!" he screamed, his voice as womanly as his hairstyle.

The door to Hemlock House burst open and an army of zombies staggered out, prompting Lord Nightshade to curse under his breath.

Arms outstretched and mouths agape, the animated corpses lumbered toward Mary. What horrific groans they made! Their unearthly chorus chilled her blood. Why, it almost sounded as if they were moaning... her name?

"Maaaary. Maaaaaaaarrrrry."

She stood rooted in the path, frozen with terror. The zombies grew nearer and nearer, and still she could not force her boots into motion. Then a man pushed his way to the front of the horde, moving with calm authority. Though his raven-black hair was disheveled, his clothes were exquisitely tailored to his broad form, and Mary noted with relief that his skin was neither bloodless nor rotting, but a healthy bronzed hue.

He was heart-stoppingly handsome.

Just looking at him, Mary felt a strange yearning building inside her. A hunger.

With a wave of his hand, the man stilled the menacing throng. "Mary, darling, where have you been? I've been out of my mind with worry."

Mary blinked. Did she know this man? Oh, she certainly hoped so. "I... I was out walking," she said numbly.

"Yes, dear. I know how fond you are of walking." The handsome

gentleman strode forward and took her hand, patting it gently. His touch was warm. Folding her chilled fingers into his palm, he addressed the others. "Lord Nightshade, Nurse Goodweather -- I expected better of you. You were supposed to find Mary and bring her back to Hemlock House, not begin another of your lovers' quarrels."

"I don't love her!" Nightshade objected.

In the same instant, Sarah said, "I don't love him!"

Behind them, the zombies tittered with amusement.

Mary shook her head, dazed. She turned to the handsome stranger. "Did you say back to Hemlock House?"

"Yes, sweet. Hemlock House Institute for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Unfortunate Undead. It's your home." His amber-brown eyes met hers. "Our home."

"Our home? But I couldn't get in. The door wouldn't open."

"Darling, we've discussed this. Don't you remember? You have to turn the little knob just so?" He stepped closer, folding her into a light embrace, and his scent flooded her awareness -- teasing hints of musk and formaldehyde. Suddenly, memories bobbed to the surface of Mary's mind, like submerged corks. The tragedy. The Institute. Reginald.

"Give it up, Doctor Hemlock," the viscount sneered. "You can't save her. Can't you see she's already brainless?"

"It's true," Sarah said. "She's my own dear sister, and I hate to say it, but just look at her! She can't open a door. She spends hours just staring at the sky. A single snowflake holds her utterly rapt." Her spectral sister floated across the ice-crusting mud, coming to hover a few feet before them. "Doctor Hemlock, sooner or later you must face the truth. There is no hope."

The doctor's arm tightened around Mary's shoulders. "There is always hope," he said, his voice resonant with emotion. "Where there is love, there is hope."

Love. The word sparked a fire within her. Mary looked up into his handsome face. "Oh, Reginald."

His hand shot up to cup her cheek. "Do you see?" He spoke to the others, but his gaze never left hers. "She remembers me. In time, she will remember everything."

Would she? Mary forced the gears of her mind into motion, churning through thoughts, sensations, emotions, searching for those elusive bits of memory. There was something she needed to tell him, she felt certain of it. Something he needed to know. The key to it all - the tragedy, her cure, Lord Nightshade's unfortunate condition. An image flickered before her eyes - a picture of something thin and silver slashing through the dark. But the instant she grasped for wisps of truth, it melted away. Like a snowflake.

Reginald brushed a lock of hair from her brow, still staring lovingly into her eyes. Oh, how she wanted to kiss him. She longed to press her lips to his, to twine her fingers tightly in his hair and hold him close as she ravaged his mouth, tasted him, feasted on his br--

Dear Lord in heaven! Mary leapt back, pressing a hand to her mouth in horror. "Reginald, you must let me go. We can never be together. You know what I am."

He moved toward her, and Mary took another step in retreat. "Please," she sobbed. "Let me go."

"Never," he replied, his expression resolute. He tilted his head toward the army of restless zombies. "You are not one of them. I was able to halt the transformation that night. I believe I'm very close to reversing the contagion completely. As we speak, I have a new infusion brewing in my laboratory." He held out a hand to her, his eyes glimmering with emotion. "I will not abandon you, Mary."

The strength of my love for you transcends even death."

Oh, how she wanted to believe him!

But oh, how she wanted to eat him!

Mary backed away, horrified by the manner in which her heart ached, even as her belly growled with an unholy hunger. She must run away. She could never hold dear Reginald again. But before she could turn and bolt for the trees...

- A) Hemlock House exploded, shooting flame and rotting wood into the winter-gray sky. "The antidote!" Reginald cried.
- B) Lord Nightshade turned on the doctor. "Enough!" he cried. "Let the girl go. Must the rest of us suffer while you pursue a lost cause?" Behind him, the zombies muttered in agreement. The viscount's pale lips curled, revealing an elongating set of fangs. He stepped toward the doctor, his eyes hard and glittering. "You promised me a cure for this wretched curse. Now deliver... or die."
- **C) Sarah's bitter laughter rang through the snowy silence. "Hemlock, your stupidity knows no bounds. You can't want her to remember everything. Even if you manage to reverse the contagion... If she remembers what you did that night, she'll never forgive you."**
- D) A mob of angry villagers streamed forth from the village, brandishing torches. "Kill him!" The Marquis of Moonlight's high voice pierced the snowy silence. "We must kill that meddling doctor and rid Cotswold of this evil plague forever!"

Written by Tessa Dare [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 6

Mary blinked, frozen in place as surely as the icicles that hung from the moldering thatch of Hemlock House. Reginald went so pale he almost looked unappetizing. Her stomach growled again. Why couldn't she remember? Why? It hardly seemed fair that her ghoul of a sister and even the sniggering zombies all seemed to know. Wasn't she a zombie? Shouldn't she know at least as much as the others?

"Yes, Hemlock," the viscount's icy voice brought the temperature even lower. "Why don't you explain to your sweet little Mary exactly how she became a zombie?"

Reginald's eyes widened, his mouth opened as though to speak, but no sound came out.

Her sister laughed again, a cruel sound that even Mary's dim zombie brain shrank away from, the retreat as instinctive as a roach skittering away from the light. "Yes, explain why she became what she is. Why you did this to all of us!"

"Reggie wouldn't--"

"Reggie wouldn't," her sister parroted. "Reggie did! This is all his fault. My death, Nightshade's eternal circling round and round and round and round. Even the horses are cursed, all because Hemlock here couldn't bear to let me go!"

"You? Reginald loves me, he just said so." Her logic was perfect. Zombie brain indeed. Reginald had called her "darling". He had said that there was hope because there was love. He loved her. Her not Sarah. Sarah always thought everything was about her.

"He loves you now. He loves you because you're stupid."

"Docile," the viscount said with a snap of his odd teeth.

"Easy. Silly. Quiet. Too Stupid to Live!" the zombies chimed in all at once.

"Ask him to explain about the zombies. Ask him where they came from in the first place? Why no one else is left alive."

Mary looked into the eyes of the man she loved, the man whose arms she wanted to shelter within . . . the only living, breathing, edible person left alive. He must have had a reason, a good reason. Mustn't he?

"Reggie?"

The doctor shifted his weight from foot to foot, staring at the ground. "I was trying to save Sarah you see . . ."

Sarah. Why was everything always about Sarah. Mary felt the urge to eat his brain grow. Her mouth watered. His brain, maybe his eyes, maybe even his heart. She could hear it beating. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Like a dinner gong summoning her to the feast.

"If I'd managed to cure her lycanthropy I'd have shamed them all. Frankenstein, Jekyll, Van Helsing. They'd have been nothing next to me! Don't you see, I had to do it."

- A) The pale man in the spattered gloves made an exasperated noise. Mary looked at his sharp face. Did she know him? He was looking at her like he knew her. Behind him the gang of street urchins rolled their eyes. "He had to do it," they all said in a chorus. "Had to." There were the filthiest urchins she'd ever seen. "Had to make our village into a giant devils snare, trapping us all here and attracting every undead creature in England like moths to the flame."

- B) Mary sat bolt upright in bed and put one hand to her clammy cheek. It was a dream. Just a dream. Her heart slowed as she

calmed herself. A low moan worked its way through her bedroom door, like the sound of a bare foot on an ancient hardwood floor. The handle rattled and the door swung open...

- C) "And I have to do this!" Mary leapt upon the doctor, her sharp teeth easily crushing his skull and revealing his tasty, tantalizing brain. Blood sprayed across her face and the zombies cheered.
- D) "My what?" Sarah screamed. "I didn't have lycanthropy, you moron. I had leprosy. Leprosy!" And with that she vanished just as quickly as she'd appeared. A few of the zombies sniggered and poor Reggie looked abashed.

Written by **Kalen Hughes** [[web site](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 7

Nightshade cracked his neck and flexed his hands in their spattered gloves. "Mary my dear, is it just me or are you famished? I for one think the good doctor here is big enough to share."

Mary pressed her fists to her temples. This was too much to take in. Zombies and dead sisters and men who couldn't perform and this aching, raving hunger... and they kept calling her stupid! She hated that. Sister Sarah had always been both the smart one and the pretty one - at least, until her wasting disease had left her looking like a half-rotted corpse.

It was a fate Mary had no interest in sharing. She'd show them whose brain was really mush! "Reginald," she pleaded, batting her eyes. "Help me." And then she swooned.

Or, at least, she looked like she did. And as Reginald, always the smarmy, patronizing gentleman, stooped to catch her, she reached around and pulled the scalpel out of his pocket.

Quick as you please, she sliced off the top of his head like a Halloween pumpkin and peeled back his overlarge parietal bone. (Yes, she had paid attention during the interminable and agonizing anatomy lessons he seemed to think made good date conversation.) She carved up the good doctor's grey matter, saving the frontal lobe for herself.

"Here." Mary tossed the chewier occipital lobe at Nightshade, then let the remainder of the body drop to the ground, where the other zombies swarmed around it, snatching at the skull in a desperate attempt to score a soupçon of cerebellum.

"Bless you!" Nightshade said, his mouth full of gooey bits. "It's been ages since I've had a decent brain to eat. All Hemlock ever allowed us was a few village idiots here and there."

As the genius physician's organ of intellect (which had always been his most useful organ) slid down Mary's throat, she felt her own mind clear. Reginald had been looking for the cure in all the wrong places. The secret wasn't necessarily abolishment, just management. And all it took was one simple twist and flick of the scalpel.

Already she felt the fullness of the doctor's knowledge seeping into her soul. It was as if, by eating his brain, she was absorbing everything that Reginald had been. She smiled serenely at the horde of zombies fighting over scraps of the spinal cord. She felt like a hero.

Of course she and the others had been growing more and more mindless all the time. They'd been eating the brains of farm animals, of simpletons and psychos. What did he expect? But oh, to consume a mind like Hemlock's!

Gone were the horrific hallucinations of Sarah, the muddy memories of old sibling rivalry. Gone too was the source of all that rivalry: Dr. Reginald Hemlock. Two birds, one brain.

"Much better," Mary said, daintily wiping her bloodied hands on the doctor's coat. She caught sight of her reflection in the surface of the scalpel. Also gone were those horrible rotting sores on her skin. Her face was smooth and fair and exquisitely pale. Brains, apparently, were fabulous for the complexion. Good thing, too. She had no desire to look like her leprosy-ridden sis.

In fact, the only thing left was Nightshade, looking both substantial and scrumptious now that his meal had put a bit of color back into sharp-boned cheeks. Mary stretched out her hand...

• **A) "Come here, big boy," she said, as blood lust quickly turned to lust of another kind. "Let's break a curse or two... together."**

- B) ...Still gripping tightly to the scalpel. "Nightshade, I have freed you from servitude to that life-preserving mad scientist. Become a servant to me, your zombie queen, and you can eat anyone you want. Be stubborn and perish."
- C) "Behind you!" she shouted, pointing. Nightshade turned and gasped. "The villagers! It's our doom!" Mary rolled her eyes. "You mean our dinner." She'd keep the priest for herself. At least he could read. Unlike the magistrate.
- D) And beckoned to the zombie horde, who had just finished licking clean the good doctor's cranium, and had begun to shuffle towards the village, a look of whetted hunger in their heretofore lifeless eyes. They ignored her.

Written by **Diana Peterfreund** [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 8

Nightshade held out his gloved hand, which she took and led him back to Hemlock House, the zombies groaning over their meal behind them. Once inside, Mary locked the door and glanced around. They were alone.

Nightshade grabbed her roughly by the arms and made a feast--figuratively speaking--of her neck. In between nips and nibbles, he told her what he intended to do to her in naughty detail.

"Promises, my dear, Viscount. I require action. Unless, perhaps what my sister said of you was true?"

With a growl, he grabbed her hand and pressed it to his hot, thick sex. "I could not perform with Sarah. She did not fire my blood with her perfection. I wanted a real woman."

"But I am not a real woman any longer, sir," Mary reminded him.

"No," he grinned, his icy eyes alight with heat. "You are better."

Mary inhaled deeply and realized the air smelled different now. The pungency of death surrendered to the fragrant notes of need and desire. On a burst of laughter, she shot up the stairs, the viscount on her heels. They stopped at each doorway to kiss and grope and arouse. By the time she found a room that met her needs, both of them could not wait another moment for fulfillment.

Hemlock's laboratory. Vials and beakers bubbled and steamed, filling the air with a dizzying perfume. The liquids inside, burbling in hues from richest amber to brilliant sapphires, enhanced the illusion that this was all a dream. With Nightshade behind her, pawing at her skirts until they bunched over her hips, she cleared the detritus from Hemlock's desk, spun around, and climbed atop the teak surface.

Nightshade's pupils expanded so that only a thin rim of silver gave off any light. In seconds, he'd ripped off his clothing and stood naked and proud before her. Mary could not help but peruse his sex hungrily, but luckily for both of them, her stomach was full. She wanted him inside her the old-fashioned way.

Boldly, she ripped away the stays of her dress. Only her chemise remained, though her action left a tiny hole in the silk, just above her nipple. She shifted so that the dark nubbin poked through, causing Nightshade to fall to his knees with desire.

And then he had his mouth on her, his tongue wicked as his hands worked their way up her thighs. She stopped him when the leather scraped against her flesh.

"Take off your gloves," she demanded.

"I cannot," he murmured against the swell of her breast.

"You must," she insisted. "Do I not deserve as much? For what I have gone through? For what I have suffered at Hemlock's hands? Only you can wash away the memories."

Nightshade tore himself away from pleasuring her flesh with a reluctant groan, then undid the buttons at the base of his gloves. First the left, then the right. He moved to put a finger in his mouth, but she grabbed him by the hips, pulled him forward and whispered, "Allow me."

One by one, she snagged the tip of the gloved fingers in her mouth and ripped the leather free. When she was done, she looked at his bare hands and gasped...

- A) "What manner of curse could do such damage to you?" she asked, tears brimming at the corners of her eyes.
- B) "I see now that the size of a man's hands is indeed reflective of the size of his --"

- C) Nightshade yanked his hands away, pressing them behind his back. He went lax and Mary silently cursed. Why could she not learn to keep her mouth shut until after the man had rid her of her pesky virginhood?
- D) **"Why, sir..." she breathed, her entire body going hot as her mind danced with a hundred possibilities.**

Written by **Julie Leto** [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 9

"You're all thumbs!" she said in disbelief.

He sighed, the air rushing from him like a squished zombie lung. He flexed his ten thumbs, trailing one across her nipple one last time but her body failed to respond.

Both their shoulders slumped as the sexual tension in the room fizzled like the beakers surrounding them.

"Curses," she whispered. "I was really looking forward to that." She started to pull her clothes back on, thanking heavens that her stays were broken and would no longer be cutting into her undead flesh.

"Just one curse, I'm afraid," he said. He let his head drop to his hands, his thumbs tugging at his too long tresses. "I was kinda hoping you'd be able to help me with it, too."

She sighed, flicking a fingernail against one of the boiling beakers: plink... plink... plink. She admired her many different fingers: index, ring, pinkie.

"I blame your sister, really." He continued, holding his right hand up and inspecting his cuticles. "It was she I was first in love with. She I wooed in my carriage that night. She my life has always revolved around. But then when I couldn't," he coughed, his nubby thumbs covering his mouth, causing Mary to shudder and look away. "Well, your sister cursed me for being so fumbling. I hate to say it, Mary, but she's kind of a witch."

Mary stopped pinging the beakers with her fingernails. "I know," she admitted. "It runs in the family. Along with a few other things. Doesn't every family have its skeletons? Or rather zombies?" She felt a familiar pinch of hunger in her stomach and stole a sidelong glance at Lord Nightshade. Idly she wondered what sort of defense

he'd be able to muster with his hands being as ungainly as they were.

She could feel her senses leaving her, the clarity she'd felt after eating Dr. Hemlock dissipating. "Any idea of that handsome Marquis of Moonlight is still around?" she wondered out loud. "I'm feeling a might peckish. Perhaps a snack will help fuel the flames." She hopped from the table and began pacing around the lab, peering through boiling beakers of various colors, watching the way the light played off her ever-dried out and deadening skin.

"Is that all you ever think about, Mary?" Lord Nightshade asked. "A man stands cursed before you, begging entrance to your body. A tragedy stirs about your village and your sister is goodness knows where, ready to strike again. I can't even leave this place without coming back here because my stupid imp can't ever figure out what I'm pointing to and only knows how to turn right. And here you are asking about a snack!"

Now he was up pacing as well. Mary had to admit, he was working himself up to a rather tasty smelling sweat. She licked her lips. "Seriously," she croaked. "I think we need to find this Moonlight guy posthaste. Or maybe, since you brought him up, your impish driver is available?"

"Mary," Nightshade growled. "You don't want to eat the imp, his brain is rotten and he's a horrible driver. Even killed a man once while I was in the carriage. But that is not the point. Do you not see we have bigger issues than your stomach! Get a grip on yourself!"

He was making her feel stupid. Just like Hemlock made her feel stupid. She was quite tired of feeling stupid. "You've never truly understood me, Nightshade," she said. "You know I can't think on an empty stomach." She stalked closer towards him, knocking beakers from tables as she passed. "And here you are complaining about too many thumbs. Perhaps the way to end the curse has been before us all along." She pulled one of his thumbs into her mouth, her lips closing around the soft, tender flesh.

His eyelids flitted shut. "This isn't what I had in mind when I said we needed to find a way to break the curse," he groaned. He felt her tongue wrapping around his skin, her teeth encircling the joint. He stepped back until his hips rested against one of the tables. He could feel the steam from the tipped beakers behind him. His skin tingled, his every nerve alive as if he were on fire.

"You know, Mary," he gasped. "I really think you must realize that..."

- A) his voice turned into a scream as Mary's teeth ripped through his flesh. Somehow Nightshade didn't feel as if this cure was going to turn out so well for him, after all, things hadn't ended too well for poor Hemlock...
- B) **"My coat is on fire. And your sister has reappeared over there. And I think I might have figured out how to save the town from tragedy. And I'm certain it might have been you I loved all along. I think. Oh, and it appears the combination of liquids we've spilled are combining to create some sort of cloud of elixir to rid us of our curses. You're no longer a zombie, my fingers have returned. We are saved." He turned back to his cuticles. "And I think it might cure the zombies too. Just saying, is all."**
- C) Before he could finish, Mary tried to say something, her words garbled by Nightshades thumb in her mouth. "Huh?" he asked. "I said," she said, "That I finally remembered what it was I was trying to remember before...."
- D) "Oh curses," Nightshade mumbled. "It's that infernal Marquis of Moonlight here to rescue the damsel again. I hate it when he does that!"

Written by Carrie Ryan [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]

Chapter 10

"No, no, no," the director snapped. "You've completely forgotten your lines again, *Nightshade*. And you, 'Mary', how long were you going to let him ramble before giving him a cue?" The man sighed and ran a harassed hand through his extravagant platinum locks. "This will never do, not even for the likes of Bishops Itchington."

The actress who played Mary felt her cheeks heat because she quite enjoyed watching 'Nightshade' when he got flustered. With a face like his, he couldn't have a mind like a steel trap. You could bounce a quarter off those abs. Too bad she wasn't ten years younger, and he... about twenty IQ points smarter.

"Go. I can't look at either of you." Their director covered his eyes in a dramatic gesture that suggested he was valiantly fighting back despair. That, or trying to keep his eyeballs from leaping from his skull.

"Why didn't I take the job in my uncle's chapeau shop?" Julian muttered in mock despair. "I might've at least met some interesting men."

She sighed and walked offstage, tugging off the matted wig that gave her the proper maddened zombie look. Yuck, she'd actually eaten the stupid cooked meat-brain thing. Again. And it did not taste like chicken. Her stomach gurgled, and the effluvia from whatever the props master had dumped on the floor to give the stage the smoky look suited to a mad scientist's lab stung her throat. And she'd have to do it all again tomorrow, assuming the pretty idiot could remember his lines this time.

Let's not forget the dress. And then a two-week run.

"Jesus," she said aloud, peering at her reflection in the mirror. Were those two new lines on her forehead? Did she need Botox?

No, she knew what she *needed* to do. She just didn't want to do it. Not again. Such things carried a price, and she didn't want to pay. No more heartbreak.

If she hadn't needed the job so badly, she never would've taken this two-bit role. Dinner theatre, for Christ's sakes. She'd never get back to London at this rate, not playing opposite Sexy Mr. Hair-for-Brains himself, Colin Queene. She just couldn't take a former male model seriously; no matter how he looked the part of the pale, doomed lover. He just couldn't muster the emotional intensity.

To make matters worse, the director fancied himself a playwright. He'd penned this 'tragedy', claiming it a match for the Bard himself. She reckoned Julian claimed some sort of osmotic inspiration, given they were in the Stratford-on-Avon district. Why Julian's brother-in-law thought a dinner theatre would thrive in this backwater hamlet was beyond her.

"Zombies are the new vampires," Julian had said. "It'll be too delicious, I promise. Imagine the merchandising. I can't pay up a lot up front, but it's going to be huge. We start in Bishops Itchington but I guarantee once the press gets wind of this show, we'll hit London and then New York. I'll bring you back to Broadway, darling."

Maybe it had been the Chivas or the Xanax, but it had sounded so wonderful in that bar, and Julian had been wearing such a shiny shirt. She sighed. That ought to serve as an object lesson. *Never trust a man who sparkles.*

Out front, she heard the sounds of a terrible row. Something to do with printing costs for the program because of the ridiculously long title: *The Cotswold Curse: Being the True Story of the Late Mysterious Happenings in Rural Oxfordshire, Together With the Perilous Adventures of Miss Mary Goodweather and her Pesky Virginhood*

Virgin. Now that was a good one. If it wasn't so unladylike, she'd snort over that. Sarah creamed off her makeup, noting that she looked every one of her years. Soon there would be nothing to do but take the parts of matrons and then eventually, God forbid, grandmothers.

Screw it, she'd retire before then---damned if she would wind up like Meryl Streep, playing cartoon villains in live action movies. At least here in Bishops Itchington, few would see how the mighty had fallen.

"You are Sarah Wellesley," she told her reflection fiercely. "You starred on Broadway. You won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress!"

"I know." The man who played Nightshade stood in the doorway of her dressing room, pale and preternaturally beautiful. "I'm sorry I ballsed it up today."

Under his silvered gaze, she felt odd. Shopworn. If it wouldn't have shredded the last of her dignity, she would've grabbed the feathered mask discarded on a chaise nearby, left over from the dream sequence dance number.

Yep. Dancing zombies. Julian sure could write. So what the hell did it matter if this pretty boy could act?

She made herself smile. "It's all right. Everyone has bad days."

He shook his head. "Not you. And that's why I... why I can't get it right. No matter what I do, it won't live up to *your* performance. You... shine, Sarah. You blew my mind in *The Empire Never Ended*. Shit, half the time I can't believe I'm in the same building with you, let alone sharing the stage."

Now he radiated emotional intensity, shy, tentative, and full of a raw, terrible delight. She'd thought he never spoke to her because he saw himself as better than her, a rising star to her falling arc across the sky. And now she saw something else entirely.

"Would you like to get a coffee?" she heard herself ask. "We could talk the play over. Perhaps run lines later. And I could... give you a few tips, if you'd like."

Are you really going to do this again, Sarah?

"God, yes," Colin said, and it fed her battered ego to hear his eagerness. "You're so lovely," he added, almost as if he couldn't help himself. "When you turn your head just so, there's a gorgeous Audrey Hepburn quality to your profile. You're just so..." Words appeared to fail him.

Old. You have no idea. But she didn't speak the words aloud. Instead she got her purse and smiled up at him. "She had a certain ageless appeal, didn't she? I think I can teach you a few things, darling. Don't worry...I don't bite."

Much.

THE END

Written by **Ann Aguirre** [[web site](#)] [[blog](#)] [[reader responses](#)]