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FATAL INHERITANCE

Written by Rachel Rhys

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Fatal Inheritance

Rachel Rhys



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*I have lived twice as fully, loved a hundred times too much.
Gulped the beauty from the world like an oyster. Just to prove I
am worth more than the worst thing I ever did. But at night, in
the relentless dark, when I am completely alone, that worst thing is
still the only thing.*

Guy Lester

1

20 May 1948

IF VERA ARRIVES before Harry her whole life will change. Eve watches and waits. Really she ought to be outside, whipping sheets off the line before they are completely sodden, but her limbs remain pinioned to the sofa. Her eyes follow the progress of the two raindrops down the pane of glass until they pool together at the bottom, Vera merging into Harry, having not, after all, triumphed. A fleeting tug of disappointment.

But hadn't she intended it to be the best of three? Most assuredly she had.

Eve scans the top of the window until she locates two more likely looking drops whom she names Bert and Louisa. But before they reach the bottom, she is disturbed by the shrill ringing of the bell.

Mr Ward, the postman, has a florid round face which is forever glazed with some form of precipitation, whether perspiration from the summer heat or, as now, a steady drizzle of rain. He is friendly and nosy and always seems to be expecting something more from his interactions with Eve than she is able to give.

‘One for you in there,’ he says, handing over a stack of envelopes.

Eve’s heart sinks. The only person who writes to her is her mother and she does not think she has the fortitude today to withstand the force of her mother’s disappointment.

Mr Ward is lingering on the step as if he expects her to open her letter right there and share the contents with him. But Eve is in no hurry.

‘Thank you, Mr Ward,’ she says, closing the door so he is caught out mid-mop with his white handkerchief aloft.

Eve flings herself back down on to the lumpy sofa, but she cannot recapture the pleasant indolence of a few minutes before. Even though the letters are safely hidden from view on the table in the hall, the knowledge of them is like a persistent insect buzzing in her ear.

She glances up at the ugly grandfather clock on the opposite wall. All the furniture is Clifford’s. Dark, heavy pieces that originated from his grandparents’ house and that his grim-faced father reluctantly passed on after she and Clifford married, observing that as Eve most likely didn’t know the first thing about caring for furniture of such quality, they would no doubt fall into wrack and ruin.

Chance would be a fine thing.

It is 12.15. Apart from the fifteen minutes from four o’clock when she can lose herself in *Mrs Dale’s Diary* on the wireless, the remaining hours of the day stretch ahead long and empty, the silence punctuated only by the tick-ticking of the hideous clock.

At 5.40 Clifford will come home. There will be the usual flurry of anticipation – *company, conversation* – followed by the inevitable downward readjustment when Clifford settles

into his armchair, right leg crossed over left, newspaper hiding his face, the only hint of animation provided by the occasional twitch of his right shoe, shined every Sunday evening.

When they were first married she used to fling herself on to the floor by his chair and question him about his day, about what was in the news. But he had soon curtailed that. 'My dear, I am a company director. My entire day is taken up by people asking things of me. When I come home, I should so appreciate a little bit of quiet. I'm sure you can understand.'

So now she waits until dinner time.

The rain seems to have drained away, leaving behind a grey soupy day. Through the bay window she can see the opposite bay window of Number Thirty-Nine. A mirror image of this house. Semi-detached with a garage to the side and a neat front path leading up to the leaded glass-panelled front door. Two elderly sisters live there whom, even nearly two years on, Eve still knows only as the Misses Judd. Sometimes she will see one or other of the Misses Judd standing at one of the upstairs windows, gazing out on to the street. *I will go over there*, she tells herself on these occasions. *Who knows what stories they will have to tell. We might become friends.* But she never does.

Awareness of her mother's letter waiting on the hall table weighs heavily on her. Eventually she can stand it no longer. She gets to her feet and makes her way across the sitting room with its thick wine-coloured carpet and once more out into the hall, where she snatches up the pile of envelopes and searches impatiently through all the letters addressed to Mr C. Forrester until she comes to one with her own name.

But – *oh*.

In place of her mother's cramped, precise handwriting in

blue ink on the usual thin, pale blue envelope, there is a typed address on thick yellowy paper. *Mrs Eve Forrester.*

Eve feels a faint tingling in her nerve endings. She replaces the rest of the envelopes and wanders back into the sitting room. The drawing room, as Clifford insists on calling it. As always when she crosses the threshold, there is a sense of the air being displaced, as if she is walking into a solid mass and pushing it out of shape.

She resumes her place on the sofa, only this time her back is straight, and she perches on the very edge of the cushion with her feet firmly on the floor.

Silly, she scolds herself. *To get excited about a letter.*

She slits open the envelope to find a satisfyingly thick sheet of manila folded in three. She takes her time about opening it up and notes first the letterhead printed in bold at the very top of the page.

Pearson & Wilkes
Solicitors
Commissioners for Oaths

The print is slightly embossed and she runs her fingertip over the raised letters.

She takes a deep breath, and reads on.

‘Are you certain there has been no mistake?’

Clifford is looking at her in a way that clearly suggests a mistake has indeed been made and that it will turn out to be hers.

‘The letter is definitely addressed to me. And there can be no confusion about what it says. I am requested to present

myself at the firm's offices in London next Tuesday to hear something to my advantage. Isn't that deliciously mysterious?'

'It's deuced inconvenient, is what it is. I have an important meeting next Tuesday.'

'So you intend to come?'

Clifford blinks at her as if she has begun, for reasons quite her own, to talk in Swahili.

'Of course I must come. This whole business sounds fishy. We have no idea who these Pearson and Wilkes are or whom they represent. For all we know this could turn out to be some sort of racket and I'm afraid you, my dear, are a sitting duck. Don't forget, Eve, that you moved here straight from your mother's house. You have very little experience of looking out for yourself.'

Clifford is in the middle of eating and a white crumb of potato is lodged in his moustache. Eve watches the crumb move up and down as he speaks. Already she feels the excitement of earlier trickling away.

In the end, then, it is to turn out to be a mistake. A racket, as Clifford says. They will come back from London and everything will be just the same as it ever was.

'But they are offering to cover all travel costs,' she remembers now. 'Would they do such a thing if there was something underhand about the whole affair?'

Clifford, who has paused with his fork halfway to his lips, now resumes his original intention, delivering a brown lump of liver into his mouth. It seems to take for ever to chew. Mrs Jenkins, who comes in two mornings a week to cook and clean, does not believe in lightness of touch when it comes to preparing meat dishes. 'Who knows what germs they could be harbouring,' she said the one time Eve dared ask if they

might have their precious chops, still rationed even three years after the war, just a little less well done. Clifford swallows and Eve follows the progress of the lump down her husband's throat. Finally he speaks.

'The first rule of business is that you never trust anyone until they have proved themselves deserving of your trust, and that is a good rule to apply in life, Eve. Otherwise you will be taken advantage of. I will do my best to rearrange my meeting so that I may accompany you.'

He dabs the corners of his mouth with his napkin, dislodging the crumb. As usual, his blue eyes, so close together that at times they almost seem to cross over, remain fixed on a point just past Eve's shoulder, so she feels she is always ceding attention to someone just behind her.

'Thank you,' she says.

2

25 May 1948

‘I EXPECT YOU must be quite bemused by all this.’ Mr Wilkes gestures expansively around his office with one of his pudgy hands. ‘I expect you must be thinking, “Just what in the blazes is all this about?”’

His brown eyes, peeping out between cushions of flesh like the glass-eyed teddy bear Eve had as a child, are focused exclusively on her. So unused is she to the experience of being looked at, she feels her cheeks burning and has to fight the impulse to raise her hand to determine how hot they are.

‘We are curious, as you can imagine,’ says Clifford.

All the way from Sutton in the train he was cold and unresponsive, leaving Eve in no doubt about the sacrifice he was making to accompany her on this fool’s errand. When she tried to engage him in conversation about the terrible murder of poor little June Anne Devaney, which all the newspapers were full of, he shut her down by refusing to indulge in ‘ghoulish gossip’. However, since they arrived at the grand corner building in a smart road off Chancery Lane

and were shown up in the gilt-edged lift to the offices of Pearson & Wilkes, he has mellowed markedly.

Now he seems almost eager. Leaning forward in his seat when they first arrived, he remarked upon the solid oak desk and the modernity of the telephone system. 'I shall have to invest in one of those myself,' he said. 'For my own company,' he added. He was marking himself out as a man of means, Eve understood, and had surprised herself by feeling embarrassed on his behalf.

'I shall put you out of your misery immediately,' says Mr Wilkes, beaming as if they are all in on the most enormous joke. 'The fact is that I had a client – a very esteemed client – by the name of Guy Lester. Does that name seem familiar to you at all?'

Brown eyes on hers, that uncomfortable sensation of being *seen*.

'I see that it does not. Which is a pity. I did form the opinion the last time I spoke to Mr Lester on the telephone that he intended to contact you in person, Mrs Forrester, to explain matters.'

'Who is he? This Guy Lester?' Clifford wanting to regain control of the situation, to be factored in.

'*Was*. I'm afraid Mr Lester passed away ten days ago, quite suddenly. We'd known he wasn't well but there was no indication he would be taken from us quite so quickly. He lived permanently in the South of France, so he came into the office here only once or twice. But he made himself very popular nonetheless.'

Eve is conscious of Clifford sitting up a little straighter in the leather-cushioned seat next to her, can almost hear his brain whirring.

‘The truth is, Mrs Forrester, that Mr Lester made a provision for you in his will.’

‘For me?’

Surprise wipes Eve’s mind clear.

‘But why?’ asks Clifford. ‘Who was this Mr Lester to *my wife*?’

He emphasizes the last two words as if establishing ownership. Eve feels a pinprick of irritation, though why that should be so she does not know. When they were first married, nearly two years before, she used to invent excuses to drop the phrase ‘my husband’ into conversation, and thrill at hearing Clifford describe her as his wife. It occurs to her now that she hasn’t heard him say it in quite a long time.

Mr Wilkes is sitting behind his desk on a chair that looks altogether too insubstantial for his considerable girth. His greying hair is neatly parted above his ear with the longer strands combed over his bald pate. His dark waistcoat strains across his belly.

Clifford, by contrast, is trim and handsome. Or so Eve had once thought. His hair, about which he is quite vain, is thick and fair, his moustache luxuriant, his nails perfectly kept. Eve has been surprised by how much attention Clifford pays to his personal grooming, how particular he is about his clothes and who is allowed to cut his hair.

Yet Mr Wilkes seems so kind. Even when he frowns, as he is doing now, it appears to be in a spirit of empathy rather than reproach.

‘I’m afraid I am as much in the dark as you are about the nature of Mr Lester’s connection to Mrs Forrester, if indeed any such connection existed.’

‘Nonsense,’ says Clifford. ‘There must be a connection.’

People don't go around leaving things to people they don't know. You must get in touch with your mother straight away, Eve. We can send a telegram. She must know something.'

'If I might make a suggestion.' For someone of his size, Mr Wilkes has a dainty way of talking. Eve is grateful for his interjection. She does not want her mother introduced here, to this office, doesn't want to give her the chance to snuff out the spark of excitement she has felt ever since the letter arrived.

Mr Wilkes goes on: 'We have found in our experience that recipients of potentially valuable bequests often prefer to wait until after they ascertain the full facts before deciding whether or not to let other people know.'

'So you think this inheritance could be valuable?' Clifford is sitting on the edge of his seat, his head so far inclined towards the rotund solicitor that he appears at risk of toppling over.

'There again, Mr Forrester, I must disappoint you. The fact is I do not know the nature of the bequest.'

'I don't understand.'

Eve hears the giveaway twang of impatience in Clifford's voice. 'If you don't know, Mr Wilkes, who does?'

'The exact details of Mrs Forrester's legacy are contained in a codicil to Mr Lester's will, which she can have read to her just as soon as she presents herself at the offices of Mr Lester's notary, Monsieur Bernard Gaillard, in Cannes.'

'I beg your pardon!' Clifford's exclamation explodes from him like a cough. 'You can't seriously be expecting us to drop everything and travel down to the South of France at vast expense just to find out what my wife may or may not have been left by a man neither of us has even heard of?'

Mr Wilkes looks pained. His mouth turns down at the corners, making dimples appear in his chin.

‘I understand this must come as quite a surprise, Mr Forrester. But Monsieur Gaillard instructed us to cover all travel expenses – first class, of course – and the cost of staying at the wonderful Appleton hotel. Though you are welcome to choose a different hotel if you prefer.’

‘I’m afraid it is still out of the question. I am a businessman, Mr Wilkes. I run a very busy haulage contractors. I cannot just up and leave on a moment’s notice.’

Clifford always talks about the company he established three years before as if it is a large, thriving concern, and yet the one time Eve visited his offices on the outskirts of town, she found them cramped and rather depressing; a dusty yard, two or three idle trucks. And she sometimes wonders why, if he is doing so well, they cannot afford some furniture of their own, or why Mrs Jenkins can’t come five mornings a week instead of two. Of course, in these post-war times, everyone in business has suffered, but it is the incongruity between the way Clifford talks and the way they live their lives that Eve finds so odd.

‘I completely understand, Mr Forrester.’ The portly solicitor gazes at Clifford with a look that seems to say, *How put upon we are, we men of substance*. ‘But with all due respect, it is only Mrs Forrester who is required to be present when the will is read.’

‘Impossible. Eve is not the adventurous sort, I’m afraid, Mr Wilkes. She has led a sheltered life. Why, she rarely ventures into the centre of Sutton, let alone crosses the Channel and travels through a country where she cannot even speak the language.’

‘Well, that’s not exactly true.’ Eve is surprised to find herself contradicting Clifford in public.

‘What I mean is, I do speak French. I learned it at school. Not well, admittedly, but certainly enough to get by.’

Mr Wilkes beams as if she has single-handedly brought about world peace.

‘Excellent. And all the arrangements would be made by ourselves, or by Monsieur Gaillard at the office in France. So really all you would have to do is pack a small bag and *voilà!*’

‘But this is ridiculous,’ says Clifford. ‘Surely there must be a way to just find out what it is that she has been left without having to travel to the ends of the earth. It could turn out to be anything. A painting. Or a *book*.’

Clifford says the word ‘book’ as if it is the lowest life form he can conceive of.

‘It is true that I have no idea what it is that Mrs Forrester has been left. And, of course, it is for the two of you to decide whether you are prepared to undertake such a journey. But I do think you ought to know that Mr Lester was a very wealthy man. His grandfather made a fortune out in India and Hong Kong at the end of the last century when there were such fortunes to be made, and Mr Lester inherited a very considerable trust.’