

MRS WILKINSON'S GRAVE

November 1844

The moment of waking is the hardest lesson.

Each time he has to return from the strange world of his dreams he has to rediscover the loss of his four sisters—especially the loss of Katy. And then he has to remember the loss of his wife. Of Lilly.

He ignores the cold on his face and the numbness of his fingers because he is overwhelmed by the day's renewed grief. He is outside the circle once more. It is like this every morning. Left to his dreams, he still hears Katy and her sisters laughing down the hall by the fire, and his wife—his Lilly—still giggles at his quiet jokes. Most mornings, when he has overcome the nausea, he becomes gradually sensible to his bed and the need to get out of it; to the pressing business of the day and the need to get downstairs to the heel-iron. He does not normally grow wakeful to the realisation of snow.

That he has been sleep-walking is quickly apparent, but Sidney is still making sense of his surroundings. He blinks at the dark, snow-capped gravestones, craning his neck in amazement until he is peering south toward the distant Minster's speckled towers. He must have walked a mile or so to be here and he considers his slippers wondering how it could be so. A snow flake touches his tongue and he realises his mouth is open.

He turns back to the headstone of the mound beneath him.

Lilly Wilkinson 1816 ~ 1840

With Thee O Lord, Forever.

Nausea regains its grip on his stomach. It is the message he had to cut to fit the stone-carver's fee.

He scrambles off his wife's grave and looks around at the others. In comparison Lilly's is grotesquely over-sized; rising a foot or more from the ground, making the earth itself seem pregnant with the deceased.

Sidney mutters the words, making plain what his dreams have been telling him.

“There's someone else in there!”

It is a dull and lightless winter's morning as Sidney shuffles home down St Margaret's Hill. There is a faint, unbounded glow in the sky over Julian's Brewery—most likely the sun but it is neither bright nor warm enough to make a full claim to its title and what heat it produces certainly does not trouble the pockets of snow settled in the folds of Sidney's dressing gown.

The poor man's shuffle is slow and pained by the cold, but he is unfeeling, his mind not fully woken for want of warmth and he is writing a confused revision of history as he makes his way. Who is his dead wife's companion? The candidates parade before his mind's eye, familiar for having been silently accused so many times before. He now has new sense of certainty that would allow him to dismiss all those oh-so-convincing protestations of innocence—were it not for the uncompromising fact that none of the accused are dead.

David Woolcott? He has claim to be a close friend. He ensures that every order for boots from Canford House goes to Sidney's workshop but his generosity, Sidney has often thought, is cause for suspicion itself. Lilly liked his rounded, big-hearted, generous soul. But he isn't dead. They drank together in the Rising Sun not two nights ago.

Then there's Arthur Greene. He can just see Arthur snuggling up to Lilly in their grave, whispering in her ear some snide joke that bought a laugh at Sidney's expense. It fuels his anger—but with false accusations since Arthur is as plainly alive and unburied as David.

He stops by the Three Lions where two farm workers with a dog by their side stare at him long enough to remind him he's still in his dressing gown.

He is puzzled, shivering across the Square towards the Minster, that passers by seem to think he needs help. He simply needs to get home and get warm and he tells them so, adding that he does not know anyone who is dead. The friendly face of Mrs James appears as they step onto the High Street, but she looks frightened and wants to know what has happened.

He has to wake again; finds himself in his bed with a fire in the grate, the room and his head warm but his body still cold at heart; thinks to call

for Lilly and remembers why she will not come and remembers once more, the pregnant grave.

He groans at the recollection and David Woolcott responds from the bed-side where he is sitting unnoticed.

"Sidney? You're awake. Are you warm now?"

Sidney complains about his feet—which feel distant.

"You were a-sleep walking they say. That right?"

He was. He owns to the fact and recalls his discovery.

"Her grave, David! Is huge, like a barrow!"

Woolcott frowns at him—but not at his words. It is as though he is looking a glass pane in front of him.

"Have I lost my mind?" Sidney asks.

"You have lost your wife, my old friend. And Lord knows it has struck you hard. Rest now. Let your nerves a-settle."

So Sidney rests, tended to by his over-sized and wheezing friend whose Lord and Lady—as luck would have it—are sitting out the winter in London. He is visited by Arthur also—who manages to find time away from Kingston House. They tut at Sidney's antics, chuckling with a tone of admiration at his somnambulant feat, "a mile-and-half!".

When he emerges out of doors, he finds himself the topic of conversation. Mrs James, in her Sunday bonnet, tells him how far he walked—in the snow as well! She reports from Gerald Marcher how he was spotted through the undertaker's windows on West Street, walking like a ghost. The next day his barber offers an explanation before he has even tied the towel to his neck. Excess wind caused by grief, so he says; easily resolved with a moderate dose of Dr Scholl's curative powders.

His exercise is considered remarkable while Sidney has only the size of the grave in his mind; he can recall his delusional conviction that 'there was someone else in there' and his recovery only tempers his licence with saying it out loud.

He knows better than to raise the question with Arthur or David; they will refer to the occasion when his suspicion fell upon a brooch that proved a gift from her mother; the trail of unexplained afternoons that led, ultimately, to the library; the over-friendly butcher who, they demonstrated, laughed that way with every customer to enter his shop.

All he can do is show them. He insists. Come Sunday all three of them are in the graveyard. Sidney stands with lilies in his hand, tears dripping from his chin, unable to move for fear that the embarrassment and rage will boil out of control. He'd thrash the flowers to shreds on the headstone if he so much as moved.

"I never did think of it 'til that morning I came a-sleep walking," he tells them, "although, when I saw it again, I said to myself—it's not right. When they was a-lowering it in, she didn't go half as deep as I were expecting, but I didn't think nothing of it at the time. But then I saw it again, with all the soil on top and that—look at it, just look—I says to myself, *There's Someone Else in There!*"

His two friends—one round, one thin—frown at the over-sized grave like it was a pregnant daughter.

"You always insisted that your wife was with someone else." Arthur observes.

"Well just look!" Sidney insists, "There's your proof. I was right!"

"Sid, it may be there's something else in there, but you can't blame Lilly for that." David explains. "She were... well, she were dead, weren't she? Didn't have no say in it."

Sidney sighs with the effort of forcing David to understand.

"They were interred *together!*" he insists. "He were her lover!"

All three of them look back at the grave and then at the other townspeople nearby paying their respects to the deceased. Sidney lowers his voice to nearly a whisper.

"He's broken hearted, see. Takes his own life. Pays the undertaker to sneak him there with her!"

"But if he's already taken his own life..?"

"Oh, alright, the other way round!"

David and Arthur are full of questions. Has Sidney asked the undertaker? The Gravedigger? And who could it have been? No-one else has died.

"I'll tell you what, though," says Arthur, "the Bugger Verger's gone missing, hasn't he?"

Neither Sidney nor David know what he is talking about. Arthur thinks they should have heard, but since they haven't he informs them.

Ellis, the verger at the Minster, disappeared just recently. Went to the church one evening for choir practice—never came home again. Not a squeak heard of him since and everyone knows he was murdered and they know who did it. Out of the blue without a word of warning, Squire Guthrie's brother—the younger one—took off for India with his valet. Fled the country. Stands to reason.

The three of them turn once again to Lilly's grave. Arthur is wondering what manner of man is in there with his wife and all three of them have eyebrows raised.

"*Ellis*, did you say his name was? The Verger?"

David confirms that this was his information. "His brother just opened that wine store on West Borough."

"And you called him the Bugger Verger?"

Woolcott looks a little uncomfortable at the expression. It was not his creation, he points out. The name was given him by the choir boys.

"Oh," says Sidney.

"There was that boy that died in the river? Remember that?"

They do.

"He was in the Minster choir."

Woolcott nods his head, shaking folds of loose skin on his neck.

"Right unpleasant that. Some said it were on account of the Verger and his way with the boys. Drove him to it. Hadn't heard he was gone missing."

They look back at the over-sized grave again, frowning now at the distasteful rings of thought.

"The Verger?" Sidney asks. He has no recollection of Lilly faking any new religious sensibilities. Her church attendance was perfunctory. Besides which, "Is he that scallywag what lurks by the vestry? Never shaves. Looks like a workhouse warden?"

"That's him," Woolcott replies.

"And they call him the Bugger Verger?"

"Aye. Well, they used to."

As they walk back into the centre of town, Sidney's two closest friends discuss what must be done. Should they let matters lie, or is it a question for the magistrates?

Sidney listens mournfully, pitying his poor, dead Lilly. He never gave her credit. His suspicions always proved false and now he finds himself wishing he'd been able to trust in her, to believe that there was no-one who could take her away. He just wants her back.

The discussion continues alongside him, circling pointless loops as Law is being pitted against Emotion; Duty against Propriety.

"Let her be," Sidney mutters, silencing his friends.