

Hillcrest Cottage

By Mili Drover

To whom it may concern,

If you have the misfortune of finding this letter, then you are presumably the new owner of Hillcrest Cottage. And for that, I sincerely apologise.

I have tried everything within my power to ensure that this property never lands in someone else's hands. But as the years go by, my mind and body fail me, and I worry that all my preparations have been made in vain. One can never fully prepare for every occurrence.

As such, all I can do now is offer what little advice I have gathered over the years, in the hope that whatever poor soul is reading this will be able to avoid the fate that myself, and all those before were doomed to experience.

- 1. Never use the back door. It does not lead where you presume. If you hear knocking or scratching at said door- DO NOT RESPOND. But be sure to leave an extra plate of food that night. And pretend not to notice when there is nothing left behind come the morning.*
- 2. Never pick the roses from the garden without being willing to give something back in return.*
- 3. Do not light the fireplace in the spare room. There is something living there, and the flames will be seen as an invitation.*
- 4. Those are not people by the lake, and they do not like it when you stare.*
- 5. The third step will creak if you step on it during the day. Pay no attention to how it growls when you do the same at night.*
- 6. Do not touch the books on the fifth shelf.*
- 7. No, that corner was not always that dark. Do not investigate it.*
- 8. Do not answer the whispers you hear at night. They do not only seek to wake you.*
- 9. The mold in the corner of the living room is not mold. Act like you don't notice it.*
- 10. If - for some reason- you feel someone is watching you from the shed, they are. Do not be tempted to look back.*
- 11. Those are not mice moving in the walls.*

12. Not all are evil. Some will just watch.

13. The house on the corner does not have a gardener. But if he smiles, smile back.

Good luck. I will pray for you.

Charlie's blood ran cold as he grimaced down at the paper. No return address, no name. Although thin, the paper seemed to be testing his strength. Charlie had never been able to stomach horror in his life. He was always alone on Halloween, in hiding from the witches and the werewolves and the murderers that would pop out of corners and chase him down alleyways. But this letter was worse. Week one in his new home and, already, he was petrified that the house itself might kill him.

He pondered who might have wished this burden upon him. He guessed the letter to be from the previous owner, considering the letters' contents. Though, he'd never even spoken with the previous owner; she'd refused communication ever since Charlie showed interest in the cottage. He wondered how upset she'd need to be about handing over her home that she would have sent him such a horrifying letter; a strikingly abnormal way of telling him to leave.

Although this was strange, he wasn't surprised. He had been made aware through whispers in the village that she was crazed and ancient, blunt, and bizarre, always appearing a little bit dazed. Having said that, she had taken good care of the cottage. So well, in fact, he'd wondered how such a frail old woman could have managed it all on her own...

The bin looked tempting. He thought about it, but something told him he shouldn't dispose of it just yet. He set the letter on the table in the kitchen and decided he was tired. Wandering off to his bedroom, he passed the living room and his eyes lingered on the mould in the corner. A dreadful feeling danced in his stomach, but he continued.

He came to a halt when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He had stared down at his feet as he walked, but his eyes now shifted to the third step. He noticed his palms becoming clammy and he sucked on his cheek anxiously. Without thinking about it, he skipped the first and second step. Now his right foot hovered above the third. He gently lowered his foot down, earning a low, violent creak from the strained wood. It was as if something was right there, furious and watching. Charlie froze cold. The dread in his stomach danced again, viciously. Time stood still for a few moments. It was as if the walls were holding their breath. Then, he squeezed his fists before bolting over the step and

darting upstairs into his bedroom. His eye caught the fireplace of the spare room - something shifted - he could swear it. Though, he decided swiftly that he wasn't going to double-check as the dread in his stomach overbore. He collapsed onto his bed.

Burying himself in his sheets, he tried hiding from his own hysterical conspiracies. He even thought about the neighbour's gardener who he had seen this morning. He was cutting their hedges as he glanced at Charlie passing in his car. The gardener had indeed smiled at Charlie, but Charlie was too busy admiring his new house from afar to react. Though, he did regard that the gardener appeared rather pale, with sunken eyes void of expression.

Charlie was sitting uneasily on his bed when he noticed something blocking the window. As his eyes adjusted to the heavy darkness, it became unmistakably clear that this was no tree branch staring back at him. It was the gardener. The same gardener he had ignored that morning, plain as day, face pressed against the window with a terrifying, sinister grin spreading from cheek to cheek. Charlie couldn't breathe; it was as if the gardener was choking him with his bulging eyes. He sat gasping for breath, when it suddenly hit him: *If he smiles, smile back*. So - weakly - he obliged, a tiny smile appearing at the corners of his mouth. The gardener remained for a few more seconds before his smile grew monstrously. And then he was gone.

Charlie sat stunned. What unnerved him the most was not the man's protruding, watery eyes or his rotting, orange teeth. No. It was the fact that the gardener, although having a seemingly small physique, had been smiling at him through his second-story bedroom window.