

Table of contents

1. [Chapter One](#)

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I whip into the driveway of Rossiter Manor, my little Fiat practically bouncing on the cobblestones. How it has survived this journey astonishes me. It'll also amaze the mechanic who failed the MOT.

Gravel crunches beneath my tires as I pull to a stop, and I take a deep breath, smoothing down the freshly-ironed white shirt that unfortunately has a ketchup stain just above my right nipple. I knew stopping off at a McDonald's drive-thru was a mistake.

I step out of the car, the crisp Berkshire air nipping at my cheeks. Honey-coloured stone glows warmly in the afternoon sun, chimneys adorned with cascading ivy. This is no ordinary home; it's a bona fide country estate, and I'm here for the housesitting interview. Deep breath in, nerves take hold. Let's do this.

I adjust my tie, and take another deep breath. I can't screw this up. I take a moment to appreciate the manicured perfection of the gardens. It looks like a football pitch, only twice the size. I tried gardening once, almost chopped my thumb off by shearing some grass. Never again.

I clutch my briefcase (there's actually nothing inside, but they don't need to know that. Just thought it looks professional), grab one last glance at myself in the wing mirror, and march up the flagstone path. A polished brass knocker shaped like a Stallions head leers down at me, and I rap it smartly.

The door swings open a moment later to reveal a woman who can only be described as formidable. Her iron-grey hair is pulled back in a tight bun, and her tweed suit looks as though it can withstand a nuclear blast. This must be Anthea Rossiter. Her eyes, sharp as a hawk's, scans me from head to toe. "Elliot, I presume?"

"That's me," I manage, trying to strike a balance between confident and desperate. Rent's due in two days, and pride won't pay the bills.

She ushers me inside, the cavernous hallway swallowing us whole. Walls adorned with enough oil paintings to stock a museum stretch before me. "We have had a nightmare trying to get someone at such short notice," she says, "and with our current situation, you can imagine how difficult it is to get somebody we can trust."

I perch on the edge of a floral monstrosity of a sofa, clutching my briefcase like a shield. "Oh, I can imagine," I tell her. "Discretion is my middle name, Mrs. Rossiter," I assure her, my voice smooth as butter, "and I take house-sitting very seriously. References available, too, of course."

"So, Elliot," she begins, "I read on your profile that you're a country boy at heart. Used to the finer things in life— fresh air, long walks, that sort of thing."

I swallow hard. "Well, I wouldn't say I'm exactly... from the country," I mumble. "But I do live close to the Garth mountain in Wales. They actually made a film about it years ago." Anthea doesn't seem the slightest bit

interested in this, but I plough ahead. "Hugh Grant starred in it. I'm sure the title has something about a hill in it. But not the film he's famous for."

A smile flickers across Mrs. Rossiter's face, and she continues. "Yes, right, well, okay. Now, about the gardens..."

Oh, crap. My botanical knowledge extends to keeping a peace lily alive on my windowsill. But hey, how hard can it be? I'll just avoid shears this time. I puff up my chest, feigning confidence. "Absolutely! I have a green thumb, you see. Give me a trowel and I'll have those roses blooming in no time."

A ghost of a smile flits across her lips. "Perfect," she says, then flips through a worn leather-bound diary. "Now, about the..." she pauses, her voice dropping a notch, "guard dog?"

Guard dog? That sounds ominous. Dogs and I have never had a good relationship. I don't mind them, but every time a hound sees me, I don't know what it is, but they just want to rip my limbs off. But a month's free reign of this gorgeous estate, with a pay packet to erase all my financial worries? A little canine company seems like a small price to pay.

"He's more like an extended member of the family, really," Mrs. Rossiter says. "He's a gentle giant. I'm sure you'll love him."

"Oh, I'm sure I will," I lie. "I adore our canine pals." The last time I admitted to not liking dogs, the homeowner reacted like I'd just confessed to spitting in the Queen's tea.

Anthea Rossiter, she's some kind of number from the Earl, or something like that anyway. Or is it her husband that has those aristocratic links? Either way, they're so posh they sit in the box next to the King at the Royal Variety Show. But they're not exactly appreciated by everyone, to say the least. In a town where most folks bleed council tax and dream of second-hand Fiestas, her brand of wealth reeks of something more exotic – offshore accounts and whispered scandals.

There was the charity gala, for instance. The one where millions meant for famine relief supposedly vanished into thin air, leaving behind a trail of bewildered donors and a sour taste in everyone's mouth.

Of course, Anthea vehemently denied any wrongdoing. But the whispers lingered, clinging to her like the scent of expensive perfume. She's been hounded by the press and ostracised by her neighbours ever since.

House-sitting for Anthea Rossiter isn't all about the money, though the sum is certainly enticing. It is about the challenge. The chance to crack the veneer of the woman and see what lies beneath the gloss. Maybe, just maybe, there is more to Anthea Rossiter than the rumours suggest.

Crisp linen scratches at my arms, an unwelcome contrast to the worn jeans I usually favour, but I thought I'd make an effort today. Anthea continues to sit across from me behind a polished mahogany desk. Her smile, if you can call it that, does little to soften the steely glint in her eyes. "Elliot," she tilts her head, "tell me about your previous house sitting experience."

Sweat prickles beneath my collar, the crisp interview attire suddenly suffocating. If she finds out what really happened in my previous house-sit role, she will kick me out of her home so quickly, and she'd have every right to do so. So, I do what I've sadly become far too accustomed to - I lie.

"Well, Mrs. Rossiter," I begin, channelling my inner salesperson, "I've been housesitting all over the UK for the last decade and change. Never had so much as a cross word said about work. Unfortunately, there's no reviews on the particular website I messaged you on because I had to create a new account after forgetting my password. The bane of my life, those things. But as I mentioned earlier, I can get you plenty of references, if needed."

They're all AI quotes, but she doesn't need to know that.

A flicker of something, amusement maybe, dances in Anthea's steely eyes. I casually brush aside a bead of sweat trickling down my forehead. I have to remain cool. I can't let her sniff out my lie. Not with the secret I am desperate to bury. This isolated mansion, shrouded in the quiet embrace of the English countryside, is the perfect hiding place. I press on, my voice oozing fabricated confidence, all while weaving a taller tale than any beanstalk.

A sardonic glint flickers in Anthea Rossiter's eyes. "Now, Elliot," she begins, her voice a crisp contralto, "let's be perfectly clear. This place runs like clockwork— and I expect it to continue that way while I'm away on business. I don't want to be bothered with anything. Everything you need is in the documents I forwarded to your email address."

I shift in my seat. I may have deleted that email without even reading it. It must've been in my spam account, but I can't allow her to know this. "Of

course, Mrs. Rossiter.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” she said, a humourless smile playing on her lips. “You’ll have help around the place, too. A groundsman will pop over a couple of times a week. As will our maid. And we have a stable girl to take care of the horses, but they won’t be your responsibility at all. But there is something I need to discuss.” She leans forward, her gaze sharp. “There are things... not included in the email that I want you to do for me.”

Unease prickles my skin like a thousand tiny needles. The air hangs heavy, thick with the cloying scent of perfume and the polish on the antique desk. It isn’t just the interview that sets me on edge, but the unspoken secrets that we are both hiding.

"But more on that later," Anthea says, while standing up. "Let me show you where you'll be staying."

My steps echo hollowly on the grand staircase as I trail behind Anthea Rossiter. The initial grandeur of the Rossiter home seems to fade with each floor we ascend. The air grows stale, thick with neglect, and the once opulent wallpaper seems to sag from the damp, clinging to the walls like cobwebs. A shiver runs down my spine, and it isn’t just from the chill. There is something unsettling about this place, a hidden darkness beneath the faded grandeur.

“This will be your room, Elliot,” Mrs. Rossiter says, gesturing towards a shadowed doorway at the end of a dimly lit hallway. "It'll be like having your own little apartment."

My heart thumps a nervous tattoo against my ribs. I've seen enough movies and read enough books to know nothing good happens behind a doorway like that. And I am right.

The room isn't a room at all, but a narrow staircase wedged between a dusty tapestry and a suit of armour that gleams ominously in the flickering candlelight. I climb the creaking steps, each one groaning in protest. I keep glancing behind me, making sure I'm not going to be trapped in here. But Mrs. Rossiter hasn't even bothered following me down the hallway.

The attic is a cavernous space shrouded in cobwebs and gloom. A single, grimecoated window offers a sliver of moonlight, illuminating a ramshackle collection of furniture – a chipped armoire, a chaise longue upholstered in a fabric that resembles flaking pastry, and a four-poster bed draped in a shroud of moth-eaten lace.

The air is thick with the smell of neglect and something else, a metallic tang that makes my throat clench. Yep, I do not have a good feeling about this place at all. I don't care what she says, I will not be staying in this room. The second she's out of here, I'll take my pick from the seventeen bedrooms she has.

In the corner, a rocking chair sways gently back and forth, as if propelled by an unseen hand. A shiver dances down my spine once more. Is there anything creepier than an empty rocking chair?

The Rossiter house, I am starting to realise, isn't quite what the neatly penned online ad had portrayed.

I edge towards the window, my freshly-polished shoes whispering against the dustcoated floorboards. Pushing it open a crack, I am greeted by a fresh wave of fresh air and an unsettling view.

The sprawling gardens that greeted me upon arriving here have made way for a tangled wilderness, choked with weeds and skeletal branches that claw at the inky sky. In the distance, a dilapidated greenhouse looms, its glass panes milky with neglect. Anthea certainly hides this in all the photographs. Can't say I blame her.

I turn back to the room, my gaze snagged by a glint of metal beneath the chaise longue. Curiosity piqued, I crouch down, my fingers brushing against a tarnished locket. It flips open, revealing a faded portrait of a young woman with fiery red hair and a mischievous glint in her eyes. A name is etched on the inside: Amelia Rossiter. 1892. No clue, whatsoever. Probably just an ancient relative, or something equally boring. But, it looks like it's worth a few quid so I tuck the locket into my pocket.

I make my way back down to Mrs. Rossiter, who's smiling and asks if everything is okay. I nod, but I think my pale and sweaty face gives the game away because she frowns before leading me down the staircase and into the living area.

It's started to rain now. The elements lash against the living areas' grand window panes, the wind howling like a banshee outside. Gotta love the British summer.

"Right, shall we go meet Carter?" Anthea asks while clasping her hands together.

The wrought-iron gates shriek as Anthea pushes them open, the sound echoing through the manicured stillness of the garden. A manicured stillness that feels anything but still. A prickle of unease crawls up my arms, a low growl vibrating in the air.

There, guarding the entrance like a furry Cerberus, is a Rottweiler the size of a small pony. Black as night, with eyes like polished obsidian, it stands stockstill, a low rumble emanating from its throat. This isn't a playful pup, no question. This is a beast honed to a silent menace. I'm certainly not getting the "gentle giant" vibes promised to me by Anthea.

I take a tentative step forward, offering a placating hand on the behest of Anthea, all the while praying I'll still have it intact after meeting Carter.

"Hello, Carter," I say, my voice strained. "Good boy..."

The dog doesn't so much as twitch its tail. Its eyes remain fixed on me, the growl deepening into a menacing snarl. The air crackles with a tension I can taste. There's at least a 50-50 chance that this house sit role ends with me becoming dog chowder.

"Make yourself comfortable," Mrs. Rossiter says as we make our way back into the living area. "My lawyer is just in the process of faxing over the paperwork. In the meantime, I'll get you some tea."

True to her word, a few minutes later, I am nestled within the plush confines of the Rossiter manor, a mug of chamomile tea warming my hands. "It's very hot, so please be careful." I feel like telling her I know how to drink a cup of tea, but I just nod and smile.

A ringing phone reverberates throughout the house, and Mrs. Rossiter clasps her hands together. "Oh, you'll have to excuse me. That's the telephone." And with that, she shuffles out of the room leaving me all alone.

A low rustling above my head causes me to look up, and what I see makes me almost jump out of my skin. It's a bat. An actual bat, perched on the chandelier. But that's not the worst part. It then decides to swoop down and attack me, causing me to leap up, sending tea spilling everywhere in the process. Terrific. Just bloody terrific.

Thankfully, the bat flies out of the window and I breathe a sigh of relief. Dusting myself down, I realise I've spilled the tea all over a bear-skin rug. Fuck sake. Not the ideal first impression.

I frantically start scrubbing away at the stain with my shoe, to no avail. Maybe Anthea won't notice. Or I'll just play dumb, I've become quite the pro at that over the years.

When Mrs. Rossiter returns, with paperwork in hand, and surveys the scene, she just laughs. "Oh, don't worry. We all have accidents. It's absolutely fine."

"There was a bat."

"Oh, dear," she chuckles. "The things we see in the countryside. Anyway, I've got all the paperwork, so if you want to follow me through to my office."

The ormolu clock on the mantelpiece in the chimes like a disembodied cough, echoing through the cavernous Rossiter hallway as I'm led into the office.

Pen, hovering over the contract handed to me by Mrs. Rossiter, I glance around the room. That nagging feeling to run still looms heavy in the pit of my stomach. But I've never been one to avoid red flags, just check out my Tinder profile for proof of that.

She hands me a leather-bound folder across the table. In elegant calligraphy, the words "House Sitting Agreement" are embossed on the cover. "Just a few legalities," she says, waving the pen dismissively. "Sign here, and there you have it. The NDA is signed. Any questions?"

"What's an NDA?"

"It's a non-disclosure agreement," Mrs. Rossiter informs me. "It's just a document that protects yourself and my family from anything untoward getting out."

I have a feeling this won't be a typical house sitting gig. For one, there is the house itself— a rambling Victorian monstrosity that looms over the quaint Berkshire countryside like a slumbering giant.

The rooms are impersonal, furnished with an eye for opulence rather than comfort. Most unsettling are the veiled portraits lining the hallways, their subjects' eyes seeming to follow my every move.

Then there is the job description. Beyond the standard house-sitting duties, the contract stipulates avoiding a specific room – the “Red Room” – which is strictly off-limits. I can't help but wonder what lies behind that forbidden door. Nothing good, I'm sure.

Despite my misgivings, I sign on the dotted line of both the NDA and the job contract. The financial incentive is undeniable. I can almost hear my aching bank account sigh with relief.

Mrs. Rossiter snaps the contract shut, his thin lips curling into a humourless smile. “Welcome aboard, Elliot. I trust you'll find your stay... pleasant.” Anthea then thanks me for coming, and looks forward to seeing me again, before ushering me out of her home.

Relief washes over me as I return to my car. Mission accomplished. Despite the sense I get that something a little weird is going on there, it still beats the hell out of having to step over a homeless man to get into my flat.

I pop open my briefcase. Yes, I lied when I said there wasn't anything inside. There is. It's a Meal Deal from my local Tesco Express - Ham sandwich, Ready Salted Crisps, and a bottle of water. Some call it boring, I call it perfection.

A whole month living here all alone. It'll fly by, I tell myself as I tuck into my sandwich. I can do this. I just have to avoid the Red Room and the

creaking floorboards, and hopefully those creepy portraits won't come to life at night. Oh, and Carter doesn't eat me alive, of course.

I steer my car away from the imposing iron gates of Anthea Rossiter's estate. The housesitting gig is secured, and with it, a summer of peace and quiet in the English countryside. Or so I hope.

Just as I round a bend, I spot a flash of red in the distance. A woman, dressed in jodhpurs and a mud-caked jacket, is struggling with a restless chestnut horse. The animal rears, its whinnies echoing through the quiet country lane.

Instinct takes over. I pull over, leaping out of the car as the woman wrestles the horse's reins. As I approach, her face contorts in a mixture of exertion and something else entirely – an intense stare that lingers a beat too long. Countryside folk are weird. They just are.

"Need a hand?" I call out, hoping to dispel the sudden unease that has gripped me. The woman finally tears her gaze away from me, a curt nod her only response. Together, we manage to calm the spooked horse, a wordless exchange passing between us during the brief encounter. But her final, lingering look sends shivers down my spine – a look that hints at something far deeper than a simple horse-related mishap.