



## **ANGELINE**

by

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**A somber silence had fallen over the house on Jackson Street. It was after midnight.**

**Mary Stanford sat on the window seat in her third floor bedroom and stared out at the full April moon that reflected off the choppy waters of San Francisco Bay. She had expected to see a blanket of fog rolling up the hill towards Pacific Heights, and was pleased to find the night clear instead.**

The moonlight would help her plan. She wouldn't need a candle to descend the stairs. Once she reached the first floor, she could light one just long enough to sneak into the front parlor and open the drapes.

Then she would rescue Angeline from the darkness of the coffin.

The thought of the beautiful doll being trapped with her cousin's rotting corpse was too much for Mary to bear. Paulette's burial was to take place the next morning. A wagon would be arriving early to transport the body to the cemetery.

If Mary's plan succeeded, Angeline would be left behind.

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It was Saturday – just after midnight. Mary crept barefoot down the carpeted stairs, holding a small candle in one hand and using the other to hold up the skirts of her white cotton nightgown. She paused at the foot of the grand staircase on the cold slate floor – on the exact spot where Paulette had landed.

Her spoiled cousin had broken her pretty blond neck in the fall. Mary had wanted to laugh.

They'd been arguing over Angeline. Paulette had promised Mary she could have the doll for a whole day, but had reneged on the offer by noon.

Well, that was the last time Paulette would ever break a promise.

Mary lit her candle with a match stolen from her father's tinderbox. She wrinkled her nose at the strange chemical smell in the air and walked slowly into the entrance hall.

The front parlor was on her left. She paused in the doorway, listening, and could only hear the faint sound of a dog barking somewhere.

She held the candle high and tiptoed across the room to the tall windows facing the verandah. The green velvet drapes were heavy, but she managed to get them open without too much effort.

Moonlight poured into the flower-filled room. Mary blew out her candle and turned around to face her cousin's gleaming mahogany coffin.

The lid was closed. She'd heard that it had never been opened and wasn't surprised. After all, her cousin wasn't pretty anymore.

Mary's anguished parents had tried to make her feel guilty for the "accident." If only they knew the truth.

Their twelve-year-old orphaned niece was everything they had ever wanted in a daughter. Mary, a year older, was plain, dark, and chubby – a big disappointment.

For birthdays and Christmases, Paulette got fancy dolls and frilly dresses. Mary received clothes that were a size too small, and hefty, boring books.

After five years of putting up with her parents' blatant favoritism, Mary felt she deserved a reward. She deserved Angeline.

The coffin lid wasn't as heavy as she'd feared. It opened silently.

Mary set the support rod in place and took a step to the right to avoid blocking the moonlight.

Paulette lay on the white satin with her arms wrapped around Angeline. They looked alike.

Both had long, golden curls and ivory complexions, but now dark bruises covered Paulette's damaged face. Their blue eyes were closed. They had on matching dresses and hair bows made of blue-gray silk.

Mary's mother had insisted that Paulette not be separated from her favorite doll.

**“Don’t worry, Angeline,” Mary whispered. “I won’t let them bury you forever.”**

**She grabbed hold of the porcelain doll with her right hand and pulled.**

**It was almost as if Paulette was holding on. Mary tugged harder and Paulette’s body shifted towards her.**

**“Give her to me, you selfish little witch,” Mary said, not bothering to whisper.**

**She took hold of Paulette’s arm with her left hand and pried it away from Angeline. The doll was free.**

**Mary stepped back with a sigh of relief, and then jumped as a shrill scratching noise reached her ears.**

**The wind had picked up outside. A tree branch was scraping one of the parlor windows.**

**Mary set the doll in a nearby wingchair and tiptoed back over to the coffin. She moved aside the support rod and began lowering the lid – just as Paulette’s eyelids drifted open.**

**Mary gasped and sprang away from the coffin. The lid fell closed with a muffled *thunk*.**

**She rushed over to the wingchair. Angeline’s blue eyes were open now, too. Mary snatched the doll up and sprinted out of the room.**

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**No one seemed to think anything was amiss the next morning, even though Mary had left her little candle sitting on an end table. She had also forgotten to close the drapes.**

**It hadn’t mattered. Everyone blamed the servants. Her parents were so grief-stricken, they probably wouldn’t have noticed if all the furniture had gone missing.**

Mary was ordered to stay in her room and reflect on the tragedy. Her father would follow the undertaker to the cemetery, where there would be a brief service. Her distraught mother would no doubt stay in bed until evening.

That was just fine with Mary.

She took Angeline out of the closet and brushed and re-curled her long, blond locks.

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On Tuesday afternoon, Mary sat on her window seat and waited patiently while her prim and proper governess finished grading the day's lessons. She watched the carriages rumble by, competing with the noisy motorcars that were chugging up the hill from the city.

She saw Mrs. Endicott's black Newfoundland drag her maid up and down the street several times.

Finally, Miss Lawson got up from the desk and warned Mary to practice her French more diligently. The governess had never had to scold Paulette.

Mary was listening to yet another admonishment when she suddenly heard a little girl's voice, sweet and low.

What was she saying?

"Young lady, are you listening to me at all?" Miss Lawson glared down at her with bony hands on bony hips.

Mary nodded, and then glanced out the window to see if someone was standing below.

There was no one about.

Miss Lawson gave an exasperated sigh and stalked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

There it was again. The sound was coming from the closet.

Mary got up and approached the closet door. She put her hand on the knob, and the voice spoke again, this time clearly.

“Three days in the grave, Mary. Three days in the grave.”

She yanked the closet door open.

Nobody was inside. Everything was in its place, including Angeline, hidden behind an old hatbox filled with photographs.

The servants were playing a trick on her somehow, or perhaps it was simply her overactive imagination.

Mary took Angeline off the closet shelf and walked over to the vanity table. She picked up some blue ribbons and went and sat on the canopy bed with the doll in her lap.

She removed the big silk bow that was pinned in Angeline’s golden curls.

“It’s time we changed your dress, too,” Mary said. “I put all your fancy clothes in my cedar chest.”

Mary gathered up handfuls of Angeline’s hair and began weaving in the blue ribbons.

Her fingers came across something soft and slimy. She pulled her hand away and stifled a yelp.

Maggots! There were maggots in Angeline’s hair.

As Mary watched, shivering with revulsion, the creatures seemed to multiply. They began falling onto her lap, onto the bed, rolling off onto the hardwood floor.

“No, no, no.”

Mary jumped off the high bed and brushed the maggots off her skirts. She swiped them off the quilts onto the floor and crushed them with her shoes.

Dozens of them still squirmed in Angeline's hair. There were too many to get rid of.

She ran across the room to the cedar chest and threw it open. With a shudder, she buried Angeline among the blankets and doll clothes, and then slammed the lid shut.

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Two days later, Mary felt brave enough to retrieve Angeline from the cedar chest. She could find no trace of the maggots. They had disappeared from the floor and the canopy bed by the time Mary had returned upstairs from supper Tuesday night.

Maybe she had fallen asleep while playing with the doll and a crazy nightmare had fooled her.

That explanation made sense.

Mary took Angeline over to the window seat and changed her dress. She put a red taffeta outfit on the doll with a matching bow.

"My, my, how fetching you look," Mary said.

A noise in the hall brought her to her feet. She set Angeline in the corner behind the pink curtain and darted over to her desk.

Miss Lawson walked in. "You'll be eating your supper early tonight. Cook has a wedding to go to. Make sure you finish your history lesson before then."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, that's better, then. I'm glad you haven't forgotten all your manners."

The governess left the room and Mary got to her feet. She still had time to play with Angeline.

She started to cross the room, but stopped when something tickled her neck, right underneath her front collar. She felt around and touched something long and squirmy.

It was a worm. Mary let out a strangled cry and flung it to the floor.

“Five days in the grave, Mary. Five days in the grave.”

Mary hurried across the bedroom and tore aside the curtain. Large, black spots covered Angeline’s porcelain face and her left eye was missing. Dark red worms crawled in and out of the empty socket.

A suffocating, foul odor permeated the room.

Mary took a step backwards, away from the window seat. “Stop it, Paulette. I know you’re doing this to me. If you hadn’t been so mean, you wouldn’t be dead. It’s all your fault, do you hear me? It’s all your fault!”

“Mary, what in heaven’s name are you screaming about?” Miss Lawson was standing in the doorway with a scowl on her face. “What’s the matter with you, young lady? You’re about to spoil your mother’s rest, and you know how bad her nerves have been this last week.”

“I...I’m sorry,” Mary said, swallowing hard. “I was just daydreaming, that’s all.”

Miss Lawson couldn’t see Angeline behind the curtain. She obviously didn’t smell the stench that hung in the air either.

“Some daydream it must have been – more like a nightmare. You should get back to your studies until supper. I’ll be grading your lessons soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Lawson shook her head and closed the door behind her.

The foul odor was gradually disappearing. Mary didn't want to look behind the curtain again. She hoped accusing Paulette would make her stop these cruel games. If not, she would have to find another way.

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Mary went to bed late that night, leaving Angeline hidden behind the curtain on the window seat. She would have to move her to another hiding place soon, but she wasn't brave enough to do that yet.

She snuggled under the quilts in the middle of the canopy bed and quickly fell asleep.

A noise woke her a few hours later. It was a little girl's voice again, pitiful and soft.

"It's cold and damp and dark in the grave, Mary. The worms are in my head. It hurts when they move around, eating me inside out. There's no escape, Mary. No escape."

Mary choked back a sob. "You can have Angeline back, Paulette. I'll bring her to you. Just please, stop what you're doing. I can't take it anymore."

Mary didn't hear the voice again.

Just before sunrise, she rose and put on her gray wool outfit and sturdy button-up shoes. She found a roomy wicker basket with a lid and put Angeline inside. The doll looked even worse than before. Her lips and fingers and toes had turned black.

Mary sneaked down the winding stairs and out the side entrance. She borrowed a small spade from the gardener's tool shed and headed up the street. The sun was just starting to rise, turning the sky a delicious pink.

St. Genevieve Cemetery was located on a bluff overlooking the ocean, about a mile away. Mary knew exactly how to get to the place. Sometimes she would sneak off to the cemetery to be by herself. It was lovely and peaceful there.

Remembering where her family's plots were situated was easy for her. All she had to look for was a freshly dug grave in that area.

She made it to the cemetery in less than thirty minutes, despite the steep hill that almost killed her. She went directly to the giant eucalyptus tree near the edge of the bluff – and found Paulette's grave. They hadn't put the elaborate headstone in place yet.

Mary sank to her knees and dug a hole in the center of the grave. She placed Angeline inside, face-up – and resisted the urge to cry. Instead, she listened to the waves crashing against the rocks below the bluff.

When she'd finished shoveling the moist, black dirt in on top of the doll, she stood and brushed herself off.

“There, Paulette. I did what you wanted. Now leave me alone.”

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Mary stayed up late Saturday night working on her studies, trying to get her mind off Angeline.

It wasn't fair. Paulette always had to have her way.

She finally turned down her oil lamp a little after midnight and crawled into bed, yawning.

Selfish Paulette. Mary hoped she *could* feel pain in the grave. Mary hoped she would be cold and scared for eternity. Her cousin deserved it.

She was just about to drift off to sleep when something wet and cold plopped onto her cheek. She wiped it off with her fingers, but it was too dark to see what it was.

Mary sighed, and scooted out of bed. She walked carefully over to her desk and fished out the matchbook she had taken from the tinderbox. Three matches remained. She lit two small candles and approached the bed.

The putrid stench had returned, and it was even worse than before. If Mary had had a free hand, she would have covered her nose and mouth.

“No,” she whispered, “this can’t be happening again.”

There was a stain growing on the underside of the cloth canopy, and a brownish liquid was dripping onto the bed.

It was blood mixed with something else. Mary didn’t want to know what.

*This isn’t real. I’m just having a bad dream. I’ll wake up soon – I know I will.*

Mary set one of the candles on the nightstand and pulled a chair over to the bed.

Trembling, she climbed up and held the other candle high.

What she saw nearly stopped her heart.

“Eight days in the grave, Mary. Eight days in the grave.”

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As soon as the burns on her arms and legs healed, Mary would be transferred from St. Elizabeth’s Hospital to the Santa Clara County Insane Asylum.

They all thought she was crazy for setting her bed on fire. She'd tried to stop them from putting out the flames, but her father had overpowered her. She'd been tied up for her own good and carted off to the hospital immediately.

Mary had confessed everything on her arrival there. She had to make them understand what was happening.

But no one wanted to believe her. Poor little perfect Paulette was an angel in heaven now – and not the avenging kind.

Mary lay wrapped in bandages soaked with stinky ointment in a spacious open room on the hospital's top floor. It was a lonely place. The doors to the room were locked, and all the other female patients refused to talk to Mary.

Around noon on her fourth day at St. Elizabeth's, Miss Lawson came to see her. Her father had only visited her once so far, and he hadn't had much to say.

One of the nurses let the governess in and locked the door behind her.

Miss Lawson smiled as she approached Mary's bed. She was holding a big yellow shopping bag. "I hear you're doing a little better now. You're lucky your father pulled you away from the fire when he did. Your injuries could have been much worse. And you'll be glad to know that they're already fixing your room back the way it was – not too much damage after all."

Mary sighed. "It doesn't matter. I won't be going home again for a long time. The doctor said so."

Miss Lawson cleared her throat. "Well, one never knows what might happen in these cases."

The governess moved a chair close to the bed and sat down. She lifted the shopping bag onto her lap. “Mrs. Stanford wanted me to bring you a few things to help pass the time.”

Miss Lawson began pulling out books – hefty, boring ones. A few magazines were in the bag, too, along with a tiny box of chocolates.

“And here, I’ve saved the best thing for last – something to keep you company,” the governess said.

Mary shrank back against the pillows in horror as Miss Lawson pulled Angeline out of the bag.

The doll looked hideously real. Blackened strips of skin hung off her hands and feet. Her blue-gray dress was soaked with a foul liquid, and her head was almost ready to fall off. Worms and maggots crawled in and out of her eyes and neck and mouth.

“Get it away!” Mary screamed. “Get it away from me!”

Miss Lawson clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Now, Mary, I thought you understood. There’s no escape from the grave.”

Mary jumped out of bed and ran as the doll’s shrill, childish laughter followed her.

There was only one way to escape the nightmare. Mary understood what she needed to do.

She bolted across the room and threw herself against one of the tall, wide windows. It shattered easily, but Mary didn’t feel any pain. She found herself flying through the air like a bird, weightless and free. In those final moments before darkness claimed her, she felt truly special.

She felt beautiful at last.

**THE END**