

# Cleaning House

*Here's my take on what went on with Mary. It's the first time I've sent a fan fiction to be 'published', so I'd really appreciate your input. The characters are not mine, but I am grateful for them. I borrow them only in the hopes others will enjoy them here. No harm intended.*

*Author, 2003*

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Mary Straker Rutland put her hands to her back and stretched her tired muscles. She really craved a good long soak in the tub, but she knew if she quit now, she wouldn't have the will power to finish tonight. She'd been going through her parents' things and trying to get their affairs settled for weeks now and wanted to put the job behind her. She pushed a loose curl back under her headscarf, picked up another box and sat it on the table before her. As she opened the box, she realized it wasn't part of her parents' things, but a box they'd been storing for her.

"Oh, my." Her breath caught as she pulled out the stuffed bear. She hugged it to her, closing her eyes against tears as memories of her son swept over her. "NO, I will not cry." It seemed to her that she had done little else the past few weeks since the death of her father, the last of her family. They had always been close, especially so after her mother's death. He had been her tower of strength and she was going to have to find an inner strength now. She took a steadying breath, placed the bear safely to the side and looked back into the box. There were other toys of Johnny's and some storybooks. Going through the books, she discovered one covered in cloth. It was her diary. The lock had been broken for years, so it fell open when she picked it up. She stared at the page and sank into the nearest chair.

*Dear Diary,*

*I met the most wonderful man today. He has the bluest eyes I have ever seen. They are absolutely gorgeous! He is soft-spoken, but seems so confident of himself. So unlike the boys I have known. But most of all, I like his sense of humor and the way he smiles. His name is Ed Straker and he's a pilot. Doesn't that sound exciting? I gave him my number. I'm sure Mother wouldn't approve, but I know he will be able to charm her when they meet. And I just know Dad will like him.*

*What am I thinking? Just because I gave him my number doesn't mean he'll call. He must know all kinds of women who are prettier and more sophisticated than me. Oh, Diary, what if he doesn't call?*

Slowly, she turned the page.

*Dear Diary,*

*He called! Ed really called! He wants to take me out to dinner. I'm so excited. He's picking me up Friday night. I still haven't told Mother or Dad. But I'm sure mother will let me go. It would be "poor form" to cancel after I've accepted. I have to check my wardrobe now. I have no idea what I'll wear. Maybe I can borrow something from Meg?*

Poor form. Yes, appearances had been important to Mother.

*Dear Diary,*

*I'm so nervous. He'll be here any minute! Mother says I am not to go downstairs until Dad calls for me. They want to "speak to this young man" first. Oh, I hope Ed isn't put off by all this fuss. It's so embarrassing. OH. He's here. I can hardly breathe. I'm going to the door &*

*listen!*

And she had listened. Ed had been wonderful with her parents. She remembered being a little jealous of how easily he spoke with them. She was certainly never that self-assured when talking to them. No matter how many times she told herself she was a woman, she always felt like a child, especially with her mother.

*Dearest Diary!*

*This evening was just marvelous. Mother didn't intimidate Ed at all. Dad seemed quite impressed with him. Ed said he could understand why my parents were so protective of me. He said when he has a daughter, he's sure he'll be much worse! Dinner was wonderful. I hated for the evening to end. But he's asked to see me again next weekend.*

Mary flipped through the pages. Alec's name caught her eye.

*Dear Diary,*

*I met Ed's best friend today. His name is Alec Freeman. He's from Australia, but he's lived in England for quite some time. He's a pilot, too! He's not at all like Ed; maybe that's what makes them such good friends. Alec is quite the flirt. I rather feel sorry for the woman that marries Alec, if he ever marries. I think he would enjoy making her jealous. I know Ed would never treat me like that.*

Mary flinched. She put the diary down and went to get a glass of tea. If she kept this up, she wouldn't get finished and she certainly didn't want to face these boxes tomorrow. Determined, she turned back to the half unpacked box. Unfortunately, at the bottom of it, she found their wedding pictures and burst into tears. After a few minutes, she accepted the fact she wouldn't be completing her task tonight.

She washed her face in the bathroom sink while running water in the tub. She poured a generous supply of bath salts in and heard her mother's voice in her head. "You're so wasteful, Mary!"

Mary turned on the radio, undressed and stepped into the tub, leaning back against the cold surface. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind, but the memories of their wedding day wouldn't go away. Ed had been so handsome in his uniform. He'd held her hand tightly as they cut the cake. She'd driven to the motel, while he sang from the passenger seat. They'd stopped along the way for Ed to cut the cans from the rear of the car and to change clothes...behind the bushes. She smiled at that memory. Her eyes flew open. How could anything from her time with him bring her pleasure?

But there had been good times, hadn't there? They'd gone dancing and held each other close. She could see in his eyes how much he loved her. She remembered how excited he'd been she'd told him about the baby. He'd even had a drink to toast the news. It was his first since he'd been called away from the airport the day they were to leave for Athens on their honeymoon. After the meeting with Henderson, he'd become more serious. He'd still been considerate and loving, but his new responsibilities had changed him. Not the responsibilities of being the head of their little family, but the responsibilities of his new job. He hadn't known about those until days after their wedding. Thinking about that now she wondered, if he had known, would he still have married her? Would she still have married him? Immediately, she knew the answer. Of course she would have married him! If they hadn't married, there never would have been Johnny. Losing him had been devastating, but never to have had him in her life at all was unthinkable. She was sure Ed felt the same way.

She shivered and realized the water had cooled. She pulled herself out of the tub, towed dry and got into her gown and furry slippers. The slippers were clumsy to walk in, but they

were warm and made her feel better. She shuffled back to the kitchen, poured some milk into a pan and warmed it on the stove. She glanced at the diary, poured the milk into a mug and placed the pan in the sink. Well, she wouldn't be finishing the boxes tonight, anyway, might as well get this out of her system. Sighing, she picked up the diary with one hand and the mug of warm milk in the other and went into her bedroom. She slid her feet out of her slippers, sat the mug on the nightstand and climbed into bed, fluffing the pillows into position behind her and pulling the bed covers up to her waist. Taking a sip of milk, she opened the diary.

*Dear Diary,*

*I felt the baby kick for the first time today. It was the most amazing feeling. There's just no way to describe it. The life inside of me, made of me and of Ed, is reminding us he (Ed is so sure it's a boy!) is there. I wish Ed could have been here, but he's spending more and more time at work. I know it's wrong to feel sorry for myself like this - it's probably just 'my condition' - after all, Ed is the one missing out. And it isn't as though he's out on the town; he's working. I know he's working. Oh, I'll be glad when the baby is here and I feel like myself again. Surely by then, Ed will be home more.*

But Ed hadn't been home more. He'd gotten home later and later. She'd been alone. Alone, except for her mother's phone calls. She'd hated those calls and she'd hated Ed not being there. Eventually, her mother's words had eaten away her confidence in Ed. She'd tired of defending him and when the detective had showed her the pictures, she'd let her mother take over completely. It had always been easier to do what her mother wanted. She'd even let her choose her second husband. Her mother was sure Mary needed someone to take care of her and that Steven Rutland would be right for the job.

Mary had been anxious to get herself and Johnny out of her parents' home. Of course, her father was wonderful with his grandson. She smiled as she thought of Johnny in Dad's lap. But she hadn't wanted Johnny to grow up with the constant criticism that she'd endured as a child. She didn't want her son seeing her through her mother's eyes. So she'd become Mrs. Steven Rutland. Her mother had been pleased. If her father had reservations, he'd kept them to himself.

It was ironic, she thought, closing the diary. Ed had made her miserable by his absence; Steven Rutland had made her miserable with his presence. Oh, Steven had been a good provider, as her mother predicted. He had worked hard and expected - no demanded - peace and quiet when he got home. Unlike Ed, her second husband was home for breakfasts, dinners, and weekends. Still, he'd never played with Johnny. He'd rarely even called him by name. Even while Johnny was in hospital, he'd simply said they'd see 'the boy' through it. Not 'Johnny', but 'the boy.' He had kept on him about his assignments and his grades. In truth, he was a lot like Johnny's grandmother. He'd set high standards and expected both Mary and Johnny to live up to them. No wonder Johnny had looked forward to his monthly visit to Ed's. Those weekends had been the longest days of Mary's life. She'd had no one but Johnny. Steven had 'discouraged' her from spending time with friends, saying it would take time away from her duties in their home. She'd made excuse after excuse when her friends had called to invite her to one outing or another until finally they had all stopped calling. She'd become isolated, seeing people only when her husband was with her.

That last day - the last time he'd brought Johnny home - Ed had wanted to talk to her about Johnny. She'd cut him off, assuring him that Johnny - and she - were fine; that they were all fine. What if she'd swallowed her pride and told him the truth? Would Johnny be alive today? She'd gone over that day again and again in her mind. She'd relived it until she was

nearly crazy, until the doctor had wanted to admit her to hospital. In the end, she'd been 'treated' at home. Steven Rutland's wife couldn't be hospitalized like a common nut case. And he couldn't leave her, what would people say if he divorced her after the death of her son? So he'd left her drugged and alone while he visited other women. He'd come home with their scent on him, talking about how they made him feel like a man. He'd never touched her again. And she had been glad. When he'd finally had a fatal heart attack in another woman's bed, she had been too relieved to feel shame and too tired to be angry.

Mary put the diary aside. Maybe she'd look into her past another time. But for now, she needed to plan her future. She had married once for love and once for security. After Steven's death, she had sworn 'never again.' While her dad was living, she'd had someone to lean on and to share the events of the day. Since his death, she'd been totally alone.

"Like Ed." The thought came from nowhere.

She realized now that Ed had been alone even when Johnny was alive, except one weekend a month when Johnny visited. Mary had stretched those to every 5 - 6 weeks whenever she could. Thanks to her, Ed and his son had less than 12 weekends a year together. She had stopped punishing Ed years ago, after Alec Freeman had come to her and finally convinced her that Ed had been working with a group of people 'that night'. It was too bad the detective hadn't gotten pictures of the others. No, she hadn't been punishing Ed; she'd been using Johnny as a lifeline.

She'd never told Ed that she'd forgiven him. She'd never accepted responsibility for her part in Johnny's death, even though she'd just stood there as Johnny ran past her toward the road. She hadn't even called his name until she heard the car horn blow. She'd continued to allow Ed to blame himself for their divorce and for Johnny's death. She hadn't been strong enough to face the truth. She had been a coward or - at best - a weakling.

Her son and her father were together now and it was time she made them proud of her. She glanced at the clock and decided to take a chance. Taking a deep breath, Mary reached for the phone.

"Operator, give me the number for Harlington-Straker Studios, please."