

# Prologue



Euphemia Reeves was a very irritable young woman.

This would have surprised most of the other servants at Hartfield – in fact, if you had asked the esteemed housekeeper, Mrs Sedgewick, she might have told you that Effie was nearly the *ideal* sort of chambermaid. As far as Mrs Sedgewick was aware, Effie never shirked her duties and always conducted herself with perfect composure.

Mrs Sedgewick would have been shocked to hear the words that currently spilled from Effie’s lips.

“... no consideration whatsoever, *none!*” Effie hissed to herself, as she scrubbed down the wooden floors of the entryway for the third time that day. Mud caked the floorboards once again, as the men of the Family had come tromping inside one by one from the nasty winter weather outside. “Ought to be against the law to go out ridin’ when there’s mud an’ snow!”

Lord Culver and his younger brother, Mr Edmund Ashbrooke, had little awareness of the spectacular messes that they left behind. Effie would have received quite the tongue-lashing for leaving her boots on back home, but Lord Culver – more than fifteen years her senior! – was so used to messes magically disappearing behind him that he saw little use in peeling off his own boots until he’d already tramped up to his room. Some poor laundry maid would soon have to scrub his entire outfit once he’d pulled it off.

“*There’s no use gettin’ angry,*” Effie’s mother used to chide her. “*It’ll just get you into trouble. You can think all of the angry thoughts you want, but they’ve got to stay inside your head!*”

“Muddy, puffed-up popinjays, the lot of ’em!” Effie muttered at her brush. “Well, birds are smarter, aren’t they? At least they clean their own feathers!” The words tumbled out beneath her breath today, instead of staying in her head. *Sorry, Mum,* she thought apologetically. *I’ve run out of patience again.*

Normally, when Effie became this cross, she went to find some convenient mending – she’d always found needlework to be remarkably soothing. But the Ashbrookes were hosting yet *another* ball tomorrow evening, and the staff was running about like mad trying to prepare for it once again. Lady Culver had only married Lord Culver last year in London, and ever since he’d returned with her, she’d been determined to take charge of the household to run things *her* way.

Unfortunately, Lady Culver’s way mostly seemed to involve dismissing any servant who happened to displease her and refusing ever to replace them.

*The way Lady Culver goes on, she must think she’s hired a bunch of magicians instead of a bunch of servants,* Effie thought tiredly. *She ought to put that in her next advertisement – maybe England’s court magician will show up and do her laundry!*

This thought, of course, only made Effie even more cross than ever. She sighed and dug into her memory, searching for a nursery rhyme. The cook used nursery rhymes to time her preparations, and Effie had taken to using them as a method of last resort to calm her nerves. She narrowed her eyes and carefully recited at the floor:

“Wind the bobbin up,  
 Wind the bobbin up,  
 Pull, pull, clap, clap, clap.  
 Wind it back again . . .”

The long frustration of the day dimmed a bit beneath the monotonous rhyme, and Effie relaxed her shoulders minutely. She had just started the verse again, leaning back into the cleaning, when she was interrupted.

“Lydia! Are you about, Lydia?” Mrs Sedgewick’s thin, reedy voice snapped through the air in the hallway behind Effie. “For goodness’ sake – has anyone seen Lydia? I haven’t the time to be tracking down every maid in this household!”

Effie took a deep, steadying breath and tried to erase the scowl from her face as Mrs Sedgewick came around the corner. The stern old housekeeper strode out towards Effie; the wooden soles of her half-boots made a neat clipping noise as she went. Mrs Sedgewick was in particularly immaculate form today, with her dark hair pulled back into a tight bun upon her head. She was dressed in her black silk housekeeper’s gown, of course – for she was inordinately proud of the thing, and she preferred never to be seen in any other clothing.

“Effie!” Mrs Sedgewick said. “Have you seen Lydia? Her Ladyship would like the piano in the ballroom dusted again. She says she can still hear the dust in it.”

Effie flinched at the suggestion. *We’ve already dusted that dratted piano twice!* she thought crossly. *Perhaps someone ought to test Her Ladyship’s hearing, in case she’s going deaf.* But what Effie actually said aloud was, “Mr Allen sent Lydia to air out another of the guest rooms, Mrs Sedgewick.”

The housekeeper’s eyes flared with irritation. “Mr Allen did?” she observed icily. “Well, well. And since when did the maids of the house start taking orders from the *butler?*”

Effie swallowed down a frustrated sigh. Mrs Sedgewick had been at odds with their new butler, Mr Allen, ever since he’d been hired on at Hartfield. Lady Culver had dismissed the old butler, Mr Simmons – but since Hartfield really could not get by without a butler, Lady Culver’s family had insisted on sending Mr Allen to take over the job. He had been a very well-regarded

butler in London, before he'd deigned to take over Hartfield. Everyone knew that he was only there by some noble relative's earnest request. Unfortunately, Mr Allen's immediate reorganisation of the household had infuriated Mrs Sedgewick, who was quite used to working with Mr Simmons and not at all fond of this newer, more refined interloper.

Lord only knew who was originally to blame for the initial spat between the butler and the housekeeper – but the rivalry had grown worse and worse as the weeks went by, until even the stable hands found themselves forced to choose an allegiance to one or the other.

"I don't know much more than that, Mrs Sedgewick," Effie said. "But Lydia should be upstairs if you're lookin' for her." Effie scrubbed at a patch of mud on the floor, keeping her eyes carefully on the ground.

"Ordering around the maids!" Mrs Sedgewick huffed again. "Oh, that nasty man, getting above himself! Lady Culver will hear about this – see if she doesn't!"

Effie did not respond this time, though she was sure that Mrs Sedgewick *wanted* her to do so. She had learned that if she did not react to the housekeeper's dramatic pronouncements, Mrs Sedgewick would eventually give up and go seek out one of the more gossip-friendly maids.

"Mr Allen might well spoil the ball at this rate," Mrs Sedgewick added insistently. "I tell you, I shall not hesitate to lay the blame upon him if he does."

"Yes, Mrs Sedgewick," Effie murmured obediently.

The housekeeper thinned her lips to a neat line. "Well," she said. "I am *buried* in work. I cannot simply stand here gabbing at housemaids all day." Mrs Sedgewick said this as though it were *Effie* who had started their conversation, and not her at all.

"Yes, Mrs Sedgewick," Effie repeated carefully. But her mouth had begun to twitch in annoyance, and she knew

that she didn't dare look up for fear of showing her irritation on her face.

Mrs Sedgewick turned on her heel and started for the hallway again, the wooden *clip-clop* of her boots slowly fading behind her. As soon as she had gone, Effie let out a long, weary breath.

"None of us has time to gab, of course," Effie muttered at her brush. "Just imagine that! *Time!*" She glanced at the bucket of water next to her and sighed, shoving to her feet. She was going to have to spread fresh sand over the entryway all over again—

The front door opened abruptly.

Effie staggered back with a surprised shriek. Her foot caught on the bucket of water, and she found herself toppling backwards.

"Good God!" a man exclaimed. A strong, sturdy arm snaked around Effie's waist just in time to keep her from plummeting downwards.

Two warm brown eyes blinked down at her. A pleasant, sturdy scent engulfed her – sandalwood, Effie thought, and just a hint of the outside. She coloured as she recognised Mr Benedict Ashbrooke's strong, handsome features.

"Ah!" Effie squeaked. "I . . . I'm so sorry!"

Benedict blinked again. His dark hair was pleasantly mussed and scattered with melting snow. Benedict was the youngest brother of the Ashbrooke family. Effie had always said that he was also the most *handsome* brother – or at least, she had quietly *thought* as much, before he had left a few years ago to travel the Continent. Now that he stared down at her with that sheepish smile, holding her in his strong, warm arms, Effie found herself struck utterly dumb.

"Nothing to worry about," Benedict assured her. "I should be the one apologising, I'm sure." He set Effie carefully back onto her feet – though his hands lingered on her shoulders with a hint of concern. He knit his brow at her. "I swear I know your

face, miss. Have we met before? Are you staying here for one of Lady Culver's balls, perchance?"

Effie blinked dazedly. *For the ball?* she thought. *What on earth does he mean by that?*

"I should think you *do* know me, yes!" Effie said. She shouldn't have dared to be so pert – but her heart was still racing in her chest, and her head felt warm and muddled from his nearness.

"I knew I must have," Benedict said ruefully. "Do you know, I am terrible with names – but I normally remember far better when there's such a pretty face attached."

Effie widened her eyes. *I don't know what's going on at all any more*, she thought.

"Benedict, good heavens!" Lady Culver's voice called down from the stairs, and Effie glanced up towards her. The matron of the household was barely older than Effie herself – but the terrible scowl which currently lay upon her fine, aristocratic features made her seem more like old Mrs Sedgewick. "You're back from your tour, then?" Lady Culver asked impatiently. "Why did no one tell me to expect you? And for that matter – why are you exchanging pleasantries with the help?"

Benedict knit his brow again. He glanced back towards Effie, who shrank with embarrassment beneath his gaze. As she did, she caught sight of the old, fraying lace attached to the neckline of her gown.

*I am wearing one of Lady Culver's old hand-me-down gowns*, Effie realised belatedly. *But really, no one with half a brain ought to mistake me for a lady.*

"Oh," Benedict said. "I see." He managed another helpless smile at Effie. "Well," he told her. "I suppose I have made fools of us both. Do forgive me, miss."

"You're forgiven, of course," Effie mumbled out. It was the only thing she could think to say in the moment.

Benedict cleared his throat and looked back up the stairs

towards Lady Culver. "I sent a letter to Thomas," he told her. "But I suppose he forgot to pass it on, did he?"

Lady Culver narrowed her eyes. "So he did," she said. "Well, Benedict – you are lucky that we have aired out the rooms. The lodge is uninhabitable at the moment, but there may yet be an extra room for you at Hartfield in spite of my husband's oversight." She paused. "There is a ball tomorrow evening, however. You will have to make yourself available to the young ladies for dancing, or else we shall never hear the end of it."

Benedict chuckled at that. There was a warm, earthy sound to his laugh which Effie suddenly found very difficult to ignore. "I enjoy dancing," he told Lady Culver. "So that is no imposition at all."

Benedict nearly took off up the stairs – but he paused thoughtfully and glanced down at his feet. He took one careful step back and pried his muddy boots from them, one after the other.

"There's really no need to make *extra* work for you, is there?" he said to Effie apologetically. He headed up the stairs before she could find the wherewithal to respond.

As his figure disappeared, Effie was struck by a horrified realisation.

"Oh, bother," she said. "I think I've just fallen in love."





## Chapter One



“Even Mr Allen thinks Lady Culver ought to hire more servants for the work she has us doin’,” Lydia sniffed as she stabbed at the sock in her lap with a needle. She and Effie were settled onto the narrow beds in their shared room below-stairs, working on a quiet bit of mending just before bed. “I heard him sayin’ it to George when he didn’t see me round the corner. Mr Allen said it’s a crime how little she pays the rest of us, too!”

Effie shook her head worriedly. Her brother George worked as a footman for the household, and he was often far too chatty for his own good. “George and Mr Allen ought to keep their voices down better,” Effie said, as she stitched up a tear in the silk hem in front of her. “Even Mr Allen’s fancy references won’t save him if Lady Culver hears he’s said somethin’ the least bit bad about her.”

“Well, Mr Allen’s right, isn’t he?” Lydia said impatiently. “Look at us, Effie! After midnight, and we’re only just now mendin’ our own things!” She frowned as she considered Effie. “But . . . oh no, what is *that*, Effie? That can’t be Mrs Sedgewick’s gown! I thought you’d already mended it a few weeks back!”

Effie sighed heavily. “It *is* Mrs Sedgewick’s gown,” she said. “She wants it fixed for the ball, just in case some guest catches

sight of her. Mrs Sedgewick said she doesn't trust anyone else to stitch it up for her."

"An' you volunteered to do it, didn't you, Effie?" Lydia accused her. She wrinkled up her nose in distaste. "You know what you are, Effie? You're *chronically helpful*. It's a disease. We ought to call you a physician." Effie wasn't sure what the word *chronic* meant, but she was sure that Lydia must have overheard it from someone recently; the other maid was fond of interesting vocabulary, and she often plucked new words from the conversations she overheard naturally during her work.

"Is it a bad thing to be chronically helpful?" Effie mumbled. "Does it really hurt anyone?"

"It's terrible," Lydia informed her bluntly. "You never turn anyone down, not ever. All anyone has to do is say very loudly what a problem they've got, an' you'll try to solve it for them. An' that's why you always end up doin' everyone's mending, Effie, even when they're perfectly capable of doin' it for themselves."

Effie pressed her lips together at that. Earlier that day, just after that strange incident with Benedict, she'd had a lovely few minutes where she'd felt as though she were floating her way through the manor. But a full day of running breathlessly to and fro had crushed that tiny sense of elation back into her usual, miserable frustration.

"I can't just say no to Mrs Sedgewick," Effie sighed. She stuffed her frustration down with an effort. A few more stitches calmed her mood slightly, though they did little for the growing headache behind her eyes. "If either Mrs Sedgewick *or* Her Ladyship decides they want rid of me, I'll be back at home an' takin' food off my mum's table. She can't afford that."

Lydia let out a disgusted noise. "Oh, an' they *would* dismiss you for that, wouldn't they!" she muttered. "You remember when poor Lucy got pregnant an' they tossed her right out on her behind? I heard Lady Culver gave Lucy not one

farthing – not even a carriage ride home!” Lydia shook her head, as though to rid herself of the unpleasant memory. “Anyway – imagine bein’ a housekeeper! We could have other servants doin’ all our chores as well, couldn’t we? I bet Mrs Sedgewick is already asleep in her bed, while *you* mend her skirts!”

Another shot of anger jolted through Effie at that. She hunched down over the gown, clenching her jaw. *It doesn’t do any good to get angry, Effie reminded herself. I can’t change things, so getting angry will just get me into trouble.*

“It isn’t worth complainin’,” Effie muttered. “Here, let’s talk about somethin’ nicer – did you see that Mr Benedict came home today?”

Lydia knit her brow. “Is that nicer?” she asked. “He’ll be another member of the Family underfoot for *another* awful ball.”

Effie coloured. “He isn’t all that bad,” she said. “An’ at least he’s pleasant to look at, isn’t he?”

Lydia grinned. “Ooh,” she said. “Have you got a *tendre* for him, Effie?” Effie had not heard the word “*tendre*” before, but she was fairly certain of its meaning based on the way that Lydia said it.

“I do not,” Effie lied stiffly. “That’d be silly of me, wouldn’t it?”

Lydia shrugged and set aside her sock. “I don’t know,” she said. “It’s sometimes nice to dream. An’ if we haven’t got the time to sleep sometimes, at least we can still *daydream*.”

Effie stared down at the gown in her lap. “Yes,” she said softly. “I guess there’s that.”

The single candle on the table soon burned down, and Effie was forced to set aside the gown. As she closed her eyes and tried to sleep, she found herself dreaming of warm brown eyes and a pleasant, heart-tingling smile.



Effie didn't have very long to dream.

Six in the morning came around in no time at all – whereupon Lydia began to shake Effie by the shoulder, hissing about the fireplaces. The two of them rushed to get their usual day-to-day chores out of the way, grimly aware that last-minute preparations for the ball would interrupt their schedule all day long. Sure enough, Lady Culver soon began calling for maids to help with her hair, and Mrs Sedgewick dispatched Effie to polish all of the mirrors in the ballroom one last time.

By the time Lydia joined Effie to lay out the last flowers, neither of them had managed breakfast, or even a quick noon-time snack. But the guests soon began to arrive, and there was still no time for rest.

Mrs Sedgewick hustled into the ballroom from a side door, grasping at Lydia's and Effie's shoulders. "Would someone please go and check on Cookie?" the housekeeper demanded breathlessly. "And where *are* the punch trays?"

Lydia closed her eyes with the slightest groan. Effie fought back her instinctive retort – *Perhaps they got forgotten along with our breakfast!* – and pasted on a polite smile. "I'll go and check, Mrs Sedgewick," she said, with an infinite patience that she did not feel at all. *At least I might pick up something to eat while I'm down in the kitchens*, she thought.

Effie slipped out the side door and down into the passages which led below-stairs. Excited laughter trickled in from the entryway above, where the guests still mingled. A strange stab of longing went through her chest as she imagined herself standing in that front entryway, instead of down below it.

Perhaps Benedict was up there, mingling with the guests. If Effie had truly been the noble lady for which he'd mistaken her, she would be there with him, dressed in her evening best – or rather, she would be dressed in something akin to Lady Culver's evening best. Effie imagined herself in a lovely cream gown, with plenty of lace and embroidered embellishments. Benedict

would smile upon seeing her, and ask whether she might save him a dance—

“Out of the way, Effie!” a voice hissed from behind her. Effie’s brother George nudged at her back, and she realised that she had paused in the middle of the narrow confines of the servants’ passageways, listening to the party above.

Effie hurried forwards, flushed with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry!” she mumbled. “I’m so tired, George; I’ve lost my mind a bit.”

“Haven’t we all?” George grumbled behind her. Effie opened the door to the kitchens and entered, stepping aside for him. George coughed harshly into his hand as he passed, and Effie frowned at him.

“That’s quite a cough,” she said. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” George assured her. “Just tired.” Effie rummaged for her handkerchief and offered it over – but George shook his head and pulled out his own. “I’ve got one,” he mumbled. “Yours is so nicely embroidered. I wouldn’t want to ruin it.”

Effie sighed heavily. “You ought to get some rest,” she said.

“Maybe I ought,” George said ironically. “An’ maybe I ought to be paid more. An’ maybe, while we’re at it, there ought to be fewer balls. Do you think Her Ladyship would take a meetin’ with me about it over tea?”

“You *really* need to watch your mouth, George,” Effie told him tiredly. “You know what Mum would tell you.”

“Mum’s not here right now,” George replied bluntly. “I’ve been up at dawn an’ goin’ to bed at midnight every night for the last week, Effie. It’d be unnatural if I *didn’t* complain at least a little bit.” He nudged at her again, more insistent this time. “Now stop holdin’ me up. I just want to get through this awful night.”

Effie backed herself into the kitchen, and George passed her for the exit before she could pester him further.

The estate’s head cook – more affectionately known as

Cookie – was in the process of plating some cold meats and biscuits. Effie saw the punch trays off to one side, and she grabbed one quickly. “I’ll just take this one up!” she called to the poor, beleaguered cook. Cookie barely nodded at her, but it was enough to signal her agreement. Effie hurried back out of the kitchen and up to the ballroom.

The guests had begun to filter inside; one of the ladies had sat down at the grand piano, idling her way through a playful tune. Effie headed out among the guests with the tray of punch, keeping her eyes carefully upon her feet. The very last thing she needed was to trip over herself in her tiredness and spill the punch all over some important lady.

“Oh, I’ll take one of those, please.” A blonde woman in a blue gown reached out to pluck a glass from the tray. Her hair was done up with a golden chain, and her cheeks were tinted faintly pink with rouge.

“I think I will as well.” Benedict spoke from Effie’s other side, and the sound of his voice froze Effie neatly in place. Benedict took a glass from the tray, and Effie glanced up at him. He was dressed just as finely as the other guests, in a fine golden waistcoat and a black jacket. There was such a warm smile on his handsome face that Effie found herself staring at him.

Her heart sped up in her chest. For just an instant, as his eyes glanced towards her, Effie found herself caught between daydreams and reality. An irrational conviction overtook her: Benedict had recognised her! Was he going to ask her to dance, right here and now?

“Duntham!” Benedict called then, in a cheerful voice. His eyes had fixed upon someone just past Effie’s shoulder. “How many years has it been now?” He swept past her with a laugh . . . and Effie’s heart plummeted all the way down into her feet.

*And what was I expecting?* she thought wearily. *I have a tray this time. That makes me as good as invisible, doesn’t it?*

As a servant, Effie was used to being overlooked. In fact,

being overlooked was considered a crucial skill for someone of her status – noblemen generally preferred their servants to seem as non-existent as possible. But somehow, the experience of being overlooked by *this* particular gentleman stung her unexpectedly. If only Benedict had never spoken to her so charmingly, Effie thought, she would not have got above herself so foolishly.

An awful, jaded disappointment mixed with her fatigue – the feeling rose from her stomach all the way into her throat, knotting there like a stone. Hot tears pricked at the corner of Effie’s eyes, and she backpedalled towards the wall with horror.

“Oh, Lydia!” she gasped. “Can you take the tray, please?”

Lydia slumped her shoulders. “You’ve only just come up with it, Effie!” she whispered plaintively. “Can’t you hand out drinks just a *bit* longer?”

“I’m about to cry,” Effie informed Lydia, with as level a tone as she could manage. “I need a bit of air, or else I doubt I’ll stop.”

Lydia took the tray from her with a knowing sigh. “Oh dear,” she said. “Well, go an’ get it over with. I may need to go have a cry myself by the time this evening is up.”

Effie swept past Lydia for the side door, down into the servants’ passages. As she did, her tears spilled over, and she found herself weeping with anger and shame.



Crying fits had become somewhat more common among the staff these days, but Effie still had no desire to be caught sobbing in one of the cramped passageways below-stairs. She sought her way outdoors, therefore, just outside the large hedge maze which curled its way behind the manor.

Normally, the hedge maze would have been a source of amusement for at least some of the guests, but the mud and snow had rendered it far less pleasing tonight. As a result, Effie

had the bench outside the maze to herself. She settled herself down onto it, wiping at her face and rubbing at her arms. The cold, brisk air tempered her misery, and she took a few deep, steadying breaths.

The faint strains of the grand piano trickled down towards her from the windows above. The dancing had begun, Effie thought. All of those handsome gentlemen would soon invite all of those lovely ladies in their lovely gowns out onto the dance floor. Benedict was probably asking some woman to dance even now.

“That hardly matters, does it?” Effie mumbled to herself. “Why should it matter what he’s doin’? Certainly, no one was ever goin’ to ask *me* to dance.” She blinked a few times and forced out a laugh. “Hah! The very thought!”

“Oh dear.” A soft, curious voice came from Effie’s right-hand side, and she froze in place. “Is that such a strange thought? But now I am even more compelled to ask than I was before! *Would* you like to dance, miss?”

Effie stumbled to her feet. She turned to look at the man who had spoken . . . and found herself even more confused.

He was a tall, lithe man, dressed in a fine, black velvet jacket. His hair was every bit as black as his jacket, and tousled faintly at the ends. His eyes were a shocking emerald-green, like budding leaves in the springtime – they glowed faintly from within in a way which made him stand out in the moonlight. He was not wearing a cravat, Effie thought, but there was a blossoming rose twined around his neck which served the purpose.

“I . . . I’m so sorry, sir,” Effie managed. “I’d never have come out here if I thought I’d disturb someone—”

“Oh, but I am not disturbed at all!” the man said earnestly. He smiled at Effie, and her aching heart gave a twinge as she thought how handsome it made him appear, even in the semi-darkness. His features were very elegant; his cheekbones were sharp enough that she could have cut her finger upon them.



“I am so very pleased to meet you, in fact,” he added. “How exciting this all is!”

Effie swallowed, clasping her hands in front of her. There was something very odd about the way the man spoke to her, but she’d yet to put her finger on just what it was. “Sir,” she said slowly. “You are . . . aware that I’m a maid here?” She had no wish to repeat her disappointing interaction with Benedict from the previous day.

“Are you?” the man asked. He looked her over, and his eyes lit up. “My goodness, you *are!*” He seemed somehow even more enthused by this revelation. “How delightfully perfect. Please, would you tell me your name?”

Effie blinked. She could not remember the last time that a nobleman had asked for her name. “Er . . . my name is Euphemia Reeves, my lord,” she said. “But most people call me Effie.”

“What a lovely name!” The nobleman beamed at her with such excitement that Effie found herself wondering whether he had ever been displeased by anything in his life. “Well,” he said. “I am Lord Blackthorn. And I should ask you again – *would* you like to dance, Miss Euphemia?” He offered out his hand at this, and Effie realised that he truly meant for her to take it.

*That is not a good idea*, Effie thought. Beyond the fact that she should not be dancing with guests, some part of her had noted that Lord Blackthorn was an uncomfortably strange man – and besides which, Effie had never heard of any land called “Blackthorn”.

But Effie’s body had run away ahead of her thoughts, and she found that she had already taken his hand. Lord Blackthorn’s fingers were very long and fine, and he somehow carried with him the scent of fresh roses, even in the middle of February.

“I believe I know this dance!” Lord Blackthorn said with pleasure. “Why, Lady Hollowvale must have taught it to me only last week!” He took Effie by the waist, even as she

struggled to sort out whether she had heard of somewhere called “Hollowvale” or not. Lord Blackthorn twirled Effie about, and she stumbled clumsily over her shoes with a soft gasp. “Now, Miss Euphemia,” he said fondly, as though she hadn’t just fumbled her very first steps. “I must ask you a very important question: would you say that you are powerless?”

“I – what?” Effie asked dazedly. She stumbled again, now utterly frantic to keep up – but Lord Blackthorn hardly seemed to notice her difficulties. *Something about that question seems like it ought to be improper*, Effie thought. But she couldn’t pinpoint exactly *what* about the question was improper, and so she said, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, m’lord.”

“Well,” Lord Blackthorn said thoughtfully. “Given the choice, would you say that you are *powerful* or would you say that you are *powerless*?”

He spun her about again, and Effie began to feel dizzy. *I don’t think this is how the dance goes at all*, she thought. Effie’s mind caught up to his words, and her temper surged. “Beggin’ your pardon!” she said crossly. “But I’m quite powerful enough to step on your toes if you decide to take liberties, sir!”

Lord Blackthorn tilted his head at Effie, apparently befuddled. As he did, she saw that his ears were gently pointed at the ends.

Effie’s heart leapt into her throat with sudden terror.

*An elf!* she thought frantically. *Oh, lord save me, I’m dancing with an elf!*

“Have I insulted you, Miss Euphemia?” Lord Blackthorn asked. “Oh, that wasn’t my intention at all! You see, I have been investigating English virtue of late. I thought that it was all to do with fine boots and expensive jackets – quite tedious, I think you’ll agree? – but Lady Hollowvale informed me that it was really to do with being kind to the powerless and cruel to the powerful. And so I have been searching all over for one or the other, so that I might test the concept!”

Effie widened her eyes. “I’m not powerful at all, sir!” she hastened to assure him. “Quite powerless, me!”

Lord Blackthorn laughed with pleasure. “How fortuitous!” he said. “I wondered how long I might need to search – but here you are! In my very backyard, as it were.” He spun Effie about, but she couldn’t bring herself to take his hand again. Instead, she tumbled into the mud, whimpering with fear.

Cold, wet muck coated Effie’s hands and soaked through the knees of her skirt. Under other circumstances, she would have been horrified, knowing that it meant extra laundry. But the terror of her current situation far outweighed even that of an extra, dreaded laundry day. Effie’s mother had told her many cautionary tales about the Fair Folk; almost every one of those stories ended quite terribly for the hapless baker or shoemaker or milkmaid who happened to meet a faerie. In fact, many of them ended with the poor protagonist accidentally giving away their very soul.

Lord Blackthorn laughed as though Effie had intentionally flung herself into the mud as some sort of joke. He offered out his hand, but she simply stared up at him from the muddy ground. At her continued silence, he reached down to haul her up by the arms with an unnerving sort of strength, setting her back onto her feet and brushing delicately at the mud on her gown. This, of course, did little to clean the fabric.

“Oh, excellent!” Lord Blackthorn observed. “You have stained your gown! Surely this is a terrible inconvenience. Would you like my help to clean it?”

Effie pressed her lips together helplessly. *People in faerie tales get most into trouble when they say the wrong thing*, she thought. *Perhaps I can just say nothing at all, and he will leave.*

Lord Blackthorn blinked his too-green eyes. “Have you hurt yourself as well?” he asked. “I fear I cannot heal you. Such power is beyond me. But –” He pounded one gloved fist into his hand in sudden inspiration. “– I could remove whichever limb concerns you and replace it with a new one!”

Effie widened her eyes in abject horror. “No!” she cried out, before she could stop herself. “No, no, no, that’s . . . too generous! Please don’t even think of it!”

Lord Blackthorn blinked at this. “But it isn’t generous at all,” he said. “I would have to ask for some kind of payment in return, no matter how much I might wish it otherwise. I fear that is simply how faeries must do things.”

Effie forced a shaky smile at this, kneading her fingers into her palms. “I’m quite poor,” she said. “Couldn’t pay you even if I wanted to, Your Lordship. I’m afraid you’ll just have to find someone else to help.”

Lord Blackthorn frowned thoughtfully. “I do not require money,” he said. “I could take your happiest memory, perhaps – or else some small part of your name. Really, you would barely miss a syllable or two.”

*Lord, Effie prayed silently. Just let me be safely rid of this faerie, and I’ll tithe extra to the collection plate this Sunday.* “That’s so nice of you,” she said, very slowly. “But I prefer to solve my own problems. My mum always told me it builds character.”

Lord Blackthorn looked so deeply crestfallen at this that Effie almost felt bad for him. “I was so sure that this would work out perfectly,” he sighed. “I was convinced that you had some awful problem that I might solve. But . . .” His eyes turned curious. “If I might ask – what *were* you crying about, Miss Euphemia?”

Effie swallowed. She was sure that nothing good could come of telling a faerie about her troubles. But those strange green eyes fixed upon her, and the words rose up into her throat, spilling free without her permission. “I fell in love with someone,” Effie said hoarsely. “It was awful stupid of me. An’ I was reminded tonight that he can’t ever love me back.”

Effie cursed her mouth for running ahead without her. *I didn’t mean to say any of that!* she thought. *Has he done something magical to me already?*

“How terrible,” Lord Blackthorn sighed – though he said it in such a way that Effie wasn’t sure if he was pleased or sympathetic. “But why can he not love you back, Miss Euphemia? You seem like a perfectly lovely human being. You have a full soul of your very own, and all of your original fingers!”

Once again, Effie tried to keep her silence – but Lord Blackthorn had lingered oddly on the syllables of her name, and the sound of that name tugged at Effie’s very soul, forcing a brand-new answer from her lips.

“He’s the son of a baron, Your Lordship,” Effie blurted out. “An’ I’m just a maid. No baron’s son will ever marry a maid. It just isn’t done.” Lord Blackthorn looked terribly perplexed by this, so Effie added, “It’d be like . . . like you givin’ me a favour without me payin’ you.”

This addition brought the light of understanding into the faerie’s eyes, and he nodded sagely. “I see,” Lord Blackthorn said. “Ah, what a problem. What a *remarkable* problem!” He smiled brightly. “Precisely the sort of problem which requires the most remarkable help!”

“I don’t think there’s any help to be had there,” Effie said warily. “Really, it’s fine. I’m feelin’ better about it already, Your Lordship.”

Lord Blackthorn shook his head at her. “But the matter is simple!” he said. “Tell me, Miss Euphemia – who would a baron’s son normally marry?”

Again, Effie felt the overwhelming need to reply. She pressed her lips together, fiercely concentrating to prevent herself from responding . . . but the words burst out of her all the same. “He’d marry someone like him, Your Lordship,” she said in a breathless rush. “Maybe a baron’s daughter, or – oh, *bother!*”

It was her name, Effie realised miserably. She had given the dratted faerie her name, before recognising him for what he was. Dimly, Effie seemed to remember that faeries could do terrible things with one’s name. *I’ve already gone and said the*

wrong thing, Effie thought with a rising dread. *But how unfair that is! I had no way of knowing what he was at first!*

Lord Blackthorn smiled at her response. “What a relief!” he said. “Well, that is no trouble at all, Miss Euphemia. I can simply turn you into a baron’s daughter, and you shall marry the man you love!”

Effie shut her mouth abruptly, with a loud *clack* of teeth.

For just a moment, all of her fear – all of her wet, muddy misery – evaporated at the touch of that unexpected suggestion.

“You . . . you could do that?” Effie whispered. This time, she knew, it was not the mention of her name which made her speak.

“I could indeed,” Lord Blackthorn said. His eagerness was painfully apparent, now that he had found something that truly seemed to pique her interest. He reached out to take her hand, patting it fondly. “I could make you any sort of English noblewoman you liked – for all of those purposes which matter to your situation, I mean to say. Why, I could do it right now! Would you like to go to that very ball behind us and dance?”

Effie’s mouth went dry. Her throat nearly closed up again with tears. She jerked her hand back from the faerie, pressing it desperately to her chest.

Just minutes earlier, Effie had stood in the passages beneath that ballroom, dreaming that exact, impossible dream. All of those visions now came rushing back to her in an instant – brighter and more alluring than ever before. But this time, the dream was close enough to touch. All she would have to do is say *yes*, and she could walk into Hartfield as an equal rather than as a servant.

*Yes. Yes, please.* The words were on her tongue. But Effie noticed the surge of wobbly emotion that came with them just in time, and she closed her eyes fiercely.

*“If wishes were horses,” she recited softly, “beggars would ride. If turnips were bayonets, I would wear one by my side.”*

Effie opened her eyes and found Lord Blackthorn watching her with a puzzled expression. He was still close enough that the scent of fresh roses came to her with every breath.

“I don’t understand, Miss Euphemia,” he said. “Are you making a wish?”

“No,” Effie said softly. “I’m remindin’ myself that it’s no good to wish.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I fear I must go back inside, Your Lordship. I’m supposed to be workin’ at that ball. If I linger here too long, then other people will have to do my work, an’ that’s not fair.”

Lord Blackthorn knit his brow in obvious consternation. “I see,” he sighed. “Helping the powerless is much more difficult than I had first imagined. I should not wonder that English virtue is so rare, I suppose!” He smiled gently at Effie, as though he had understood something very different than she had meant to say. “It’s no matter! I shall not give up right from the beginning, Miss Euphemia. Since you have been kind enough to give me your name, I shall give you mine in return. My true name is Juniper Jubilee. If you should ever need the slightest thing – anything at all! – then all you need do is say that name three times, and I shall be back to help you at once.”

Effie couldn’t help but blink at this. “Juniper Jubilee?” she repeated, before she could stop herself. “What a strange name!”

Lord Blackthorn – or rather, Effie thought, *Mr Jubilee* – merely beamed at her as though she had given him a compliment. “Why, thank you, Miss Euphemia,” he said. “I chose the name myself. I am still quite fond of it.”

Effie shook her head slowly. “Er, well . . . Mr Jubilee,” she managed. “You really don’t mind that I have to go back an’ work? You won’t be offended, I mean to say?”

Lord Blackthorn smiled again. “How should I be offended?” he asked. “You have given me your valuable time and conversation, Miss Euphemia. And you were even kind enough to dance with me.”

Effie shrank beneath his unearthly green eyes. If any human being had addressed her in this way, she might have been flattered. But there was something about those eyes that reminded her just how dangerous every word of this conversation could be. She averted her gaze uncomfortably towards the ground.

“I’ll . . . I’ll be goin’ then, Your Lordship,” Effie said.

But when she looked up again, the elf was already gone.



## Chapter Two



If not for the mud still on her skirts, Effie might have convinced herself that her entire encounter with Lord Blackthorn had been a daydream. In truth, she still wondered whether she had hit her head or started hallucinating from weariness – but she had no chance to remark upon the meeting to Lydia either way. The moment that Effie returned indoors, she was forced to borrow a spare frock from one of the other maids so that she could rush back into the ball to wait on the guests. The rest of the evening was so breathlessly long and tiring that none of them had the time to speak of much, other than punch glasses and courses for supper and the need to find room at the table for someone’s inconvenient extra cousin.

By the time Effie finally fell into bed, all thoughts of strange elves had utterly fled her mind. She woke up only a few hours later, as Lydia moaned about the fireplaces. Even the morning after a ball, there was *always* the fireplaces.

“She’s goin’ to kill us,” Lydia mumbled, as they both lurched their way back upstairs to light the hearths. “Lady Culver, I mean. This can’t go on for ever, Effie.”

“Let’s not waste breath complainin’,” Effie begged. “I’m so tired today, I don’t think I have the energy for it.”

Today, at least, the servants below-stairs had the chance to

settle down to breakfast, as the Family was all abed sleeping in. But even breakfast came with its own miserable, extra surprise.

“Lady Panovar made mention of her French maid about a dozen times last night,” Mrs Sedgewick informed the staff tiredly. “Lady Culver ended the night in a fury. She has insisted that I should find her some French maids at once.”

Lydia’s mouth dropped open. “What?” she laughed. “Just like that? An’ at *her* wages? Aren’t French maids rather dear?”

It was a sign of how very exhausted they all were that Mrs Sedgewick did not upbraid Lydia for her impertinence. The housekeeper normally insisted that the staff show strict respect for the Family, even when outside of earshot. “Obviously, there are no French maids to be had in the area, and Her Ladyship hasn’t the budget to import one like Lady Panovar,” Mrs Sedgewick sighed. “And so, to sum the matter up – you shall all need to *become* French maids.”

Effie blinked slowly. “Mrs Sedgewick,” she said carefully. “I don’t mean to be pert, but . . . what does that mean, exactly?”

Mrs Sedgewick shot Effie a tight smile. “It means that you shall need new French names,” she said. “At least when you are above-stairs. And you will need to practise a French accent.”

“Er,” George spoke up, with a slight cough. “Not the footmen, too?”

“No,” Mrs Sedgewick said long-sufferingly. “Lady Panovar does not have any French footmen as far as I know, and so Lady Culver does not require any French footmen herself. You may remain English for the moment, George.”

“Not,” Mr Allen added sharply, “that either Lady Culver *or* Mrs Sedgewick has any say in the matter of footmen, George.” The esteemed butler stood off to one side, waiting patiently for Mrs Sedgewick to finish her announcement so that the upper servants might retire to a different room for *their* breakfast. His coat was somehow immaculate in spite of the long evening they’d all had, and his steel-grey moustache was neatly

trimmed. Truly, Effie thought, Mr Allen was every bit the marvellous professional that he had been made out to be upon his arrival at Hartfield.

Mrs Sedgewick glared openly at Mr Allen, but she did not contradict him for the moment. "Lydia . . . I suppose you shall be 'Marie'. And Effie – er, let us say you are now 'Giselle'."

Effie sucked in her breath. Somehow the casual name change felt even more offensive than the entirety of yesterday's miserable ball. *And just like that*, she thought blearily, *I am suddenly not even allowed to be myself*.

George must have caught the look in Effie's eyes, for he made a sympathetic face. "The Family still calls me 'James,'" he offered. "I think he was the last footman?"

"We never had a James," Lydia observed glumly. "It's just what the Family prefers to call footmen. None of them actually know any of our names. I doubt Lady Culver will remember the new French names, either."

"*Nevertheless*," Mrs Sedgewick interjected sharply. "I shall need you to practise your French accent. Do not forget. I will be testing all of the maids at the end of the week."

Groans went up along the table, but Mrs Sedgewick did not bother to upbraid the girls. Instead, she turned towards Mr Allen with a deep scowl and stormed back through the door to retreat to her own breakfast.

"Practise a French accent," Lydia mumbled at her plate in a disbelieving tone. "Do *you* know what a French accent sounds like, Effie?"

"I think I've heard Lady Culver say a few French words once or twice," Effie muttered back. "You got 'tendre' from her, didn't you?"

Lydia narrowed her eyes. "One of the gents at the ball started yellin' in French when he spilled his punch," she said darkly. "Maybe I'll practise some of *those* words."

Effie didn't reply to this. She knew that Lydia was merely

venting her frustrations – none of them would *really* dare to curse in front of Lady Culver, no matter how upset they were. As she glanced away uncomfortably, however, her eyes came to rest on a tall, prim figure standing near the door to the servants' hall.

Effie froze in horror.

Lord Blackthorn currently watched the gathered servants with a marvellously curious expression on his face. Effie had no idea just when the faerie had appeared – but while he stood out like a sore thumb among the servants, with his fine velvet jacket and his bright green eyes, no one else in the room seemed to pay him any mind at all.

“Lydia?” Effie whispered tremulously. “Do you see that man near the door?”

Lydia turned her head and pursed her lips. “Oh yes, him,” she said, as though there were nothing unusual about the elf’s presence whatsoever. “What about him, Effie?”

Effie blinked very quickly, trying to square the ridiculousness of the situation with her own expectations. “Well, he – isn’t he odd?” Effie insisted. “Look at him again, Lydia! He’s got a rose wrapped around his throat!”

Lydia knit her brow. For just a moment, concern flickered across her features . . . but it soon smoothed away again into a dazed distraction. “So he does,” she said. “Isn’t that somethin’?”

Lydia turned back to her food then, and seemed promptly to forget the entire conversation.

“Miss Euphemia!” Lord Blackthorn had caught Effie looking his way, and now he headed over towards her with his usual delighted gait. His bright green eyes sparkled with cheer. “What a lovely morning it is outside! It is very sunny out, you know.” He paused, then frowned thoughtfully. “Oh dear! I keep forgetting that English conversation is not always about the weather. Shall we talk of dolphins instead?”

Effie glanced around herself helplessly, searching for anyone

who might come to her aid. But, just like Lydia, all of the other servants had entirely lost interest in the elf in front of them. Effie turned back towards Lord Blackthorn with a helpless, terrified sinking in her stomach.

“I thought you’d left, Your Lordship,” Effie offered tremulously. She wasn’t at all sure how to answer his question about dolphins, and so she swept right past it.

“But why should I leave, Miss Euphemia?” Lord Blackthorn asked Effie. He sounded utterly bewildered now. “Surely you cannot think that I would abandon you while you are in distress! That would not be very virtuous of me at all!”

Effie’s stomach dropped all the way to her feet. As exhausted as she had been this morning, she had managed to forget all about her encounter with the elf. And wasn’t that arrogant of her! Effie had somehow convinced herself that she had cleverly avoided the faerie’s attention for ever, unlike those *other* foolish women in her mother’s faerie tales.

“That is . . . so thoughtful of you, my lord,” Effie said desperately. “But really, I insist. You’re an important, er . . . elf, obviously. I can’t be takin’ you from your duties like this.”

Lord Blackthorn pressed one gloved hand to his chest. “How noble you are!” he cried. “How humble! Why, you only make me more certain of my choice by the second, Miss Euphemia. Truly, you deserve so much better than your current circumstances!”

Effie sank down into her chair, pressing her face into her hands.

“But what is the matter?” Lord Blackthorn asked her. “Now you are upset again! Is it about the French, Miss Euphemia? I could teach you French in a moment, you know. I would be only too happy to do so.”

“N-no,” Effie whimpered. “That’s all right, Your Lordship. I really ought to learn the French on my own.”

“You are very tired-looking,” Lord Blackthorn mused. “Has

your sleep been restless? I could help you fall asleep, for certain. How long do you think would be best? I think at least a year is traditional—”

Effie sprang up from her chair. “I have chores I really ought to get to!” she blurted out. “Lots of sweepin’ to do, after that big ball!”

Lord Blackthorn blinked at her. “But you have not yet finished your breakfast, Miss Euphemia,” he pointed out.

Effie blanched. “I’m . . . not hungry,” she lied. She glanced sideways at her breakfast. It was only bread and porridge, mixed with a bit of the leftover ham from the previous evening’s ball, but her poor stomach still gurgled plaintively as she thought of leaving it behind. Effie quietly promised herself that she would later sneak down to the kitchens for a snack, once she was safely free of the elf. “Er, why don’t *you* have it?” she added on inspiration. Surely, faeries also ate food, didn’t they? Perhaps if Lord Blackthorn sat down to eat, he would stay out of Effie’s hair for at least a few minutes.

Lord Blackthorn rubbed thoughtfully at his chin. “Are you sure?” he asked her. “You really wish to give me your breakfast, Miss Euphemia?”

There was an odd undertone to his voice as he asked the question, but Effie simply didn’t have the energy to parse it. “Yes,” she sighed. “Yes, I’m sure. Please have a seat, Your Lordship.” She gestured obligingly towards her empty chair.

To Effie’s great relief, Lord Blackthorn sat down in her place, still looking thoughtful. “How generous!” he murmured. “Is this what all English maids are like?”

Lydia turned to look at him. “Well, hello!” she said. “Where’d you come from, *monsieur*?” Effie winced at Lydia’s half-hearted attempt at a French accent. *Oh, we are never going to be believable*, she thought.

“I come from Blackthorn, of course!” the elf replied cheerfully. “And what is *your* name, young lady?”

Effie widened her eyes at the question. She snatched at

Lydia's arm, hauling her up bodily from her seat before she could respond. "I'll need your help, Lydia!" she gasped. "With all of the . . . sweepin'!"

Lydia's mouth dropped open. "What?" she asked incredulously. "But – my breakfast—"

"We've already had enough to eat," Effie hissed to her. "You ought to give His Lordship your breakfast too, Lydia. He's very distinguished company, after all."

Lydia narrowed her eyes – but Effie pinched her side, and she yelped. "Oh, all right!" Lydia huffed. "Take my breakfast too, why don't you?"

Lord Blackthorn stared at them both, looking suddenly overwhelmed. "Must I?" he asked. "Well . . . I suppose I must, if you insist."

Effie forced a smile his way, even as she began to drag Lydia towards the door. "Do take your time!" she said.

As soon as they had cleared the door and hurried out into the hallway, Lydia pried her arm free of Effie's grip. "What *is* the matter with you, Effie?" she demanded. "I only got a few bites, and I know you did the same!"

"Did you not see *anything* odd about that man you were just talkin' to?" Effie asked in despair. "His ears are pointed, Lydia! His eyes are strange! I told you before that he was wearin' a rose around his neck, an' it barely seemed to faze you!"

Lydia frowned. This time, however, Effie's words seemed to penetrate somewhat. "I feel like . . . like I would have noticed somethin' like that," Lydia said dubiously. But she suddenly seemed less certain of herself than she had been before. "He did come out of nowhere, didn't he? An' I realise now that I don't even know his name."

"He's an elf!" Effie moaned. "I talked to him last night, Lydia. I'm such a fool – I thought he'd gone for good, but he's clearly still here! Whatever you do, you mustn't give him your name or make any deals with him!"

Lydia pressed her fingers to her forehead. “But are you sure?” she mumbled. “Do elves really wander into the servants’ hall an’ eat people’s breakfasts? That seems like such a funny thing to happen.”

“Well, hopefully he will take at least a *little* bit to eat our breakfasts,” Effie breathed. “I’m not even sure what to do, Lydia. Do we . . . do we go an’ tell Mrs Sedgewick? Or maybe Mr Allen – he’s from the city, isn’t he? Surely he ought to know somethin’ about dealin’ with faeries!”

Lydia shot Effie a sceptical look. “I don’t know that even Mr Allen will have dealt with faeries before,” she said. “But you’re right – we really ought to say *something*.”

Effie started heading down the hallway towards Mrs Sedgewick’s quarters, where she knew the upper servants would be taking their breakfast. Lydia followed after her, though she dragged her feet reluctantly as they went.

Neither of them particularly wanted to knock at Mrs Sedgewick’s door. But Effie knew that it was *her* trouble at issue, and so she forced herself to rap her knuckles there very loudly.

Mrs Sedgewick’s wooden soles clip-clopped towards the door. Presently, the housekeeper opened the door, looking tired and peeved. “This had better be an emergency, or else I – oh! Effie!” Mrs Sedgewick’s combative tone softened somewhat. “Is something the matter?”

Effie stared at the housekeeper for a moment, speechless. It had seemed only natural to tell the housekeeper about the faerie in their midst, but now that Effie was standing before her, she wasn’t sure just *how* to phrase the problem. *I cannot just say, “There is a faerie in the servants’ hall eating my breakfast”*, she thought in a panic.

Unfortunately, Effie’s tired mind had run away with her, and so she did indeed say, “There’s a faerie in the servants’ hall eatin’ my breakfast, Mrs Sedgewick.”

Mrs Sedgewick blinked. Somewhere behind her, Effie



heard the clatter of plates as the rest of the upper servants ate their food.

“Effie,” Mrs Sedgewick said slowly. “I do not know what on earth is going on with you. You normally have such a steady head on your shoulders. Surely you haven’t let one of the other servants bait you into a silly dare?” Mrs Sedgewick glanced suspiciously at Lydia, who normally *would* have done something of the sort.

“N-no, Mrs Sedgewick!” Effie said desperately. “Oh, I’ve said it all wrong. But I really mean it, Mrs Sedgewick: there *is* a faerie, and he’s goin’ to cause all sorts of trouble—”

“We are all very *tired*, Effie!” Mrs Sedgewick said. This time, there was a hint of ice in her voice. “I have neither the time nor the energy to deal with this silliness. Now, I do not want to hear another word on the subject, do you understand me?”

Effie stared at the housekeeper helplessly. She turned to give Lydia a pleading look.

“There . . . *is* a faerie, Mrs Sedgewick,” Lydia said, though Effie knew that she still didn’t entirely believe the words. “He asked me my name, an’ everything.”

“I *said* not another word!” Mrs Sedgewick snapped. “Not from either of you! And if you persist in this foolish prank, girls, then I will have you in the scullery every day for the next week, so help me!”

Mrs Sedgewick did not give them a chance to respond this time. Rather, she slammed the door shut with a dread sense of finality which made Effie weak in the knees.

“I guess we should’ve expected that,” Lydia sighed. She turned towards Effie. “You don’t think we might ignore the faerie an’ he’ll just . . . go away?”

Effie shook her head mournfully. “I thought he’d gone last night,” she said. “But then he showed up this morning, an’ now nothin’ I say can convince him to leave!”

“Well . . .” Lydia wrinkled up her nose. “Maybe he’s a

helpful faerie? He could be one of those that mends shoes or spins thread.”

Effie shook her head despairingly. “No, not at all,” she said. “He’s a *lord*, Lydia. They’re always the worst of the bunch, castin’ curses on people an’ trickin’ them out of their souls!”

Lydia grimaced. “Normal lords is bad enough,” she muttered. “*Faerie* lords must be somethin’ else entirely.” She pursed her lips. “But who else are we supposed to tell? I’m fair certain Mrs Sedgewick would have us whipped if we tried to spin a story for Lady Culver.”

Effie rubbed at her face. Mrs Sedgewick was right about one thing: they were all *far* too tired to be dealing with faeries right now. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “George would just laugh in my face, I’m sure. Oh, this is awful. I . . . I guess I might write to my mum? She does know all of those faerie tales, so maybe she’ll know how to keep him out.”

Lydia nodded. “Yes, ask your mum,” she said. “I’ll talk to Cookie, too. She once told me all the herbs to use for a love spell, so she might have a plant to set a faerie straight.” Lydia frowned worriedly. “We really do have to get to chores though, Effie, or we won’t be workin’ here much longer either way.”

Effie wilted on her feet at the very thought. “Why must all of this be happenin’ at once?” she murmured to herself. “Surely I didn’t do somethin’ terrible enough to deserve this?”

“What was that?” Lydia asked her, halfway through a yawn.

Effie flinched. “I . . . nothing,” she sighed. “I was mutterin’ nursery rhymes again.”

“You do that at the oddest times,” Lydia mumbled.

They walked themselves wearily up the stairs towards the green baize door, searching out the brooms as they went.

But when they came out into the house’s front entryway, there was not a single mote of dust to be found. In fact . . . it was already perfectly clean.

“Oh no,” Effie said.

“Oh, thank God!” Lydia said.

The entryway ought to have been full of mud and dust from all of those guests trudging in and out of the weather in their booted feet. Effie had noted the awful mess as she’d passed it that morning to tend to the fireplaces.

But the front entryway currently looked as clean as the day it had first been built. All of the floorboards had been scrubbed spick and span – someone had even cast a brand-new layer of sand over it all to finish it off! All of the other surfaces in the entryway had been carefully dusted; the lamp wicks were neatly trimmed; the curtains had been beaten!

“This is a disaster,” Effie groaned. “But how did he do it, Lydia? We never made a deal with him! I certainly never promised him anything!”

A broad smile crept over Lydia’s face. “Oh, what’s it matter, Effie?” she asked. “It’s done! All that awful mess from the ball, just magicked away!” Lydia’s eyes widened, and she hurried towards the ballroom. There, she threw open the doors and laughed with delight. “Look, Effie! The ballroom’s clean, too! We might even have time for a nap, if everythin’ is this way!”

“You’re not listenin’!” Effie told Lydia. She glanced past the other maid into the ballroom, and her heart sank even further towards her knees. The mirrors had all been cleaned and stashed away somewhere else. It all looked just as it had before they’d set up for the ball at all. “There’s goin’ to be a *price*, Lydia,” Effie said. “An’ what will a faerie make us pay for all of this?”

“I don’t care, not one whit!” Lydia declared. “I’m goin’ back to bed, Effie. I feel like I could fall asleep on my feet.”

Effie knew she ought to go after Lydia, as the other maid danced away with her broom in her arms. But she found herself stuck staring into the empty ballroom instead, frozen with an unspeakable dread.