

THE WITCHWOOD KNOT

(CHAPTERS 1-3)

VICTORIAN FAERIE TALES

BOOK ONE



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STARWATCH
PRESS

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CONTENT WARNING



Dear Readers,

I would like you to know that *The Witchwood Knot* includes mild, non-graphic sexual harassment of both a female employee and a child. Though these instances are unlikely to trouble the average reader, those with a specific history of sexual harassment might find them distressing. Please be kind to yourselves.

CHAPTER 1



The hundred eyes of Witchwood Manor loomed above, grinning through torrential rain.

Winnie had secured a ride up to the house from a charitable farmer in the village—but his charity had run out at the wrought-iron fence line of the property, such that she now dragged both her skirts and her travel trunk through the mud. Thunder rumbled ominously overhead, and she found herself quietly cursing the sky for its insolence.

On a clear and sunny day, Witchwood Manor might have been beautiful. The countryside mansion sprawled so broadly in either direction that several of its famous stained glass windows disappeared entirely behind the Witchwood's tall oak trees. Pointed gables pierced the cloudy sky, reaching for arrogant heights, while elegant white columns rooted themselves in the earth below like skeletal fingers. Though it had long been the style to build such splendid manors from stone, Lord Longfell had chosen to build the impressive Gothic house from the English white oak trees which had once stood in its place. Despite this eccentricity, he had clearly spared

little expense in the manor's construction; even in the gloom, it was a wonder to behold.

Winnie's breath came short and laboured as she hauled her trunk up the stairs to the door. Cold, miserable rain dripped down her neck, pasting white-blond strands of hair to her skin. Half of the pins that had once held her bun in place were missing; her coal grey frock lay soaked and limp against her skin, nearly as heavy as the trunk she pulled behind her. The silver chatelaine at her waist jingled sullenly with each step, knocking together the tools which dangled upon its chains.

Winnie drew herself up before the door, brushing excess water fruitlessly from her shoulders. A chill had already started setting into her limbs though, and she hadn't the patience to compose herself any further. She raised one white-gloved hand to pound at the heavy oak door.

Thud. Thud thud.

Winnie waited for nearly a minute with no reply, before knocking once again.

Thud-thud-thud.

Again, there was no response. Winnie's teeth chattered, and she let out a soft growl of frustration. Surely, someone was at home; she had seen distant threads of smoke rising from the house's chimneys on her way up to the manor. "Hello!" she yelled over the storm. "Would someone please let me inside? I daresay this is terrible hospitality!"

Winnie leaned her full weight into another series of hard raps at the door. This time, she continued knocking without pause—until finally, the heavy wooden door creaked open all at once.

Winnie's fervent knocking nearly overbalanced her as the door gave way to air. She caught herself against the door-

frame just in time, though rough splinters dug through the fabric of her glove to bite into the skin beneath.

Someone else reached out to steady her smartly, with a hand against her shoulder.

“Goodness,” drawled the man who’d caught her, “let us not be inhospitable.” His voice was dark and low, with a hint of dangerous humour.

Winnie glanced up at him through her sopping mess of hair.

He was a tall man of short black hair and ghastly pale complexion. His eyes were narrow and naturally suspicious, tinted the colour of dark red wine. The crimson jacket he wore offered him the air of a servant—but there was something insubordinate about his posture which immediately warmed Winnie’s opinion towards him.

Winnie straightened her shoulders—and then, very delicately, she reached up to remove his hand from her shoulder.

“Finally,” she said. “I was beginning to think that the house was empty, after all.”

The man at the door looked down at her with one raised eyebrow. There was an odd depth to his reddish eyes which seemed to draw in all of the light surrounding them. “And who is it that comes calling at Witchwood Manor?” he asked.

Winnie plucked absently at the slivers which still jabbed into her lefthand glove. Distantly, she noted that several red pinpricks of blood had now stained the white fabric. The doorframe *had* bitten her, she decided abruptly—rather like a surly old hound. “My name is Winifred Hall,” she said. “I have come to fill the governess position. The dowager invited me here. And yourself, sir?”

“I am the butler here, Miss Hall,” the man replied smoothly. “You may call me Mr Quincy.” There was still an air

of dark amusement about him as he spoke—as though he'd made a private jest of their entire conversation.

Winnie squinted at him dubiously, trying to decide whether she was the butt of whatever joke he'd told himself. "Are there no footmen on hand to answer the door?" she asked.

Mr Quincy offered her a sharp smile. His teeth flashed far too white and feral in the darkness of the house. "You will soon find that Witchwood Manor has great trouble keeping servants," he told her. "If you are indeed the new governess, then I suppose we shall discover your mettle in short order." He stepped back from the door in order to admit her.

Winnie eyed him, considering her options. "I don't suppose that you might help me with my trunk, Mr Quincy?" she asked. "I am awfully tired, and I seem to have hurt my hand."

The butler glanced idly at the trunk next to her feet. He'd clasped his arms behind his back now, and the gesture lent him a faintly arrogant posture. "You are correct," he said.

Winnie blinked. "Pardon?" she asked slowly, replaying the conversation in her mind. "Correct about... what?"

Mr Quincy's feral smile now turned bland. "You are correct in not supposing," he said. "I will not step outside with you." But his reddish eyes flickered to the blood on Winnie's hand, and he inclined his head in an odd gesture of deference. "If you bring your things inside, however, I will handle them for you from there."

Winnie thought this was awfully contrary of the butler—but she didn't see the point in pressing him further. She hauled her trunk through the door one-handed, letting it thud to the ground on the wooden floor inside. The cloister which acted as Witchwood Manor's entryway was panelled in the

same beautiful oak that made up the house's bones. Carved leaves wound their way around the mouldings, writhing oddly in the flickering light of the candelabra next to the door. A small recess in the wall concealed a reliquary shrine with its own stained glass window, but the picture in the glass was neither saint nor family crest—rather, it had the appearance of a black and green knot twisting in upon itself.

“I believe you will find Cook in the kitchen at this hour,” Mr Quincy told Winnie conversationally. “Ask her for some tea to warm yourself up—but don't let her go at your splinters unless you want to lose more blood.” He leaned down to pick up the travel trunk with surprising ease, balancing it upon one slender shoulder.

Winnie nodded at him with a bit more gratitude, rubbing at her injured hand. “I'll do just that, Mr Quincy,” she said. “My thanks for the assistance.” She turned her head to search for an obvious way into the servants' passageways, and saw that there was a green baize door nestled just beneath the stairs.

“Oh... I wouldn't thank me if I were you, Winifred Hall,” Mr Quincy said. The dark humour had seeped back into his tone.

Winnie frowned. “And why is that—”

But by the time she turned her head again, the butler had entirely vanished.



THE STAIRCASE which led down into the servants' passageways was dark and narrow. No candles currently burned there, and Winnie soon decided to pull off her walking boots rather than attempting the tiny stairs with her slick rubber heels. Exposed

copper piping ran along the walls beside her like a geometric spider's web. She couldn't help but imagine the walls reaching out to snag her like a foolish wandering fly—but the only thing which assaulted her was a stray drop of water leaking from the ceiling.

Despite the labyrinthine nature of the servants' passageways, the kitchen was relatively simple to find; as Winnie turned a corner in the darkness, she discovered a glimmer of candlelight near the end of the hall, where a door had been left open.

Winnie paused just outside of the doorway, looking into the room. A weak, greyish light filtered down from a tiny window near the kitchen ceiling, barely enough to illuminate the cramped quarters within. Tallow candles flickered on counters at each corner of the room, pushing back the stormy gloom. The scent of beef and cooking fat suffused the air with a surprisingly pleasant aroma, which nearly warmed Winnie's bones all on its own.

A short woman in a black frock and a white apron toiled over a coal range near the window, stirring a large stew pot with a tall wooden spoon. Though there were only a few threads of silver in her chestnut hair, her posture was stooped and tired, and her hands shook visibly on the spoon.

"Cook?" Winnie asked politely.

The woman turned her head to look at Winnie. Her skin was somehow even more sickly and sallow than Mr Quincy's had been. Black circles had taken up residence beneath her bloodshot brown eyes. "That's me," said the woman, in a clipped and weary tone. "But who're you?"

Winnie swept her eyes over the woman's bent posture, taking in each detail of her obvious misery. "I'm Winifred Hall," she replied. "I'm the new governess."

Cook turned back to her stew pot, and the slump in her shoulders deepened once again. "You should leave," she told Winnie simply. "This place is unwholesome."

Winnie settled herself at the long wooden table at the centre of the room, wiping the water from her eyes. Like everything else in this house, it was made of oak—the same wood that currently itched beneath her skin. The idea made her strangely uncomfortable. "I certainly won't be walking back out into that storm within the next hour," Winnie replied. "But I would be obliged for a hot cup of tea, and perhaps for something with which to dry off."

Cook glanced at Winnie again, wrinkling her nose. Winnie had a fair guess at what she saw there. It was the same thing people always saw: a prim and proper spinster in her twenties, both lovely and suspiciously unmarried. "Fine," she said. "But only because you're dripping on my floor." She tilted her head towards the hotplate. "You'll have to stir the pot while I'm gone."

Winnie sighed and pushed to her feet. "Everyone here is just so welcoming," she murmured. "At least you're straight to the point."

Winnie took Cook's place at the stove, stirring slowly at the pot while the woman disappeared down the hallway. Eventually, Cook returned with a stack of towels, which she left upon the table. She then put a kettle on the hotplate next to the pot and took the spoon back from Winnie. "You don't seem troubled by the state of things at Witchwood Manor," Cook observed brusquely. "Most new people who show up here have the good sense to look uncomfortable about it."

Winnie sat back down in a chair, pulling the remaining pins out from her hair one by one. Wet blonde strands

uncoiled from her head like serpents. "I've seen far worse," she said simply. "I spent some time in the workhouses."

Cook stopped stirring abruptly, once again. Most people, Winnie knew, would not have admitted to such a shameful thing so openly. But Cook must have decided to err on the side of politeness, for all that she said next was: "A pretty thing like you?"

The last pin came free of Winnie's hair, and she shook it out around her shoulders. "How do you think I *survived* the workhouses?" she asked wryly. "People often have a soft spot for pretty things." Winnie dabbed at her hair with a towel. "This place is a drain on the spirit in other ways though, isn't it? The farmer who brought me here told me that the house is cursed."

This time, Cook did not respond. Instead, Winnie's words dropped to the floor like lead weights, holding down the silence between them.

Winnie considered herself to be a sensible, straightforward sort of woman. She barrelled on regardless. "Is Witchwood Manor truly cursed?" she asked.

Cook let out an odd sound—something between a low growl and an exasperated hiss. Her lip curled with faint derision. "You should leave, Miss Hall," she said again.

Winnie narrowed her eyes at the other woman's back, considering that response. "I have made up my mind to stay," she replied, with cold steel in her tone. "I decided that well before I ever left London. I would be grateful for any help which you can offer me to make the best of my position here."

The kettle began to whistle—a high, keening noise, growing louder by the second. Cook jerked her chin towards it, and Winnie rose to take it off the heat.

Cook weighed the woman in front of her. Whatever her

prejudices, she must have set them aside in a moment of Christian charity—for finally, she spoke again. “I cannot help you in the way you want,” Cook said simply. “It’s beyond me, Miss Hall. But if you keep your eyes open, I’d wager you’ll find something to assist you.”

She gestured towards a cabinet. “Tea’s in there.”

Winnie rummaged in the cabinet, searching through the drawers and coming up with a tin full of tea leaves. She took a teapot from one of the shelves on the wall and measured out a generous dose of tea. As she did, she cast her eyes around the kitchen, searching for the clues which Cook had clearly implied that she might find.

Finally, Winnie’s eyes fell upon the doorway through which she’d just entered. Above it, someone had nailed an iron horseshoe—old and red, with flakes of bloody rust.

“Hm,” murmured Winnie. “As I thought.”

“Indeed,” rasped Cook. She stared down at her wooden spoon.

Winnie left the tea to steep as she continued blotting the rain from her skin and clothes. “There are faeries, then, at Witchwood Manor,” she mused aloud. “But you cannot speak of them, can you? I find that most intriguing.”

“Lord Longfell doesn’t believe in faeries,” Cook informed her curtly. “You’d best not mention that theory around him once he arrives, Miss Hall.”

Winnie blinked with surprise. “Doesn’t believe in faeries?” she repeated. “But that’s nonsensical. I understand they’re rare these days—but everyone knows *someone* who has met a faerie.”

“Lord Longfell says the Lord Sorcier drove all the faeries out of England,” Cook murmured. She lifted a spoonful of stew broth to her lips—then scowled, and reached for another

dash of rosemary. "He won't hear otherwise, so don't you try arguing the matter with him."

Winnie draped one of the towels around her shoulders like a shawl, turning this idea over in her mind. "And what of Mr Quincy?" she asked. "Does *he* believe in faeries?"

Cook released the wooden spoon. It thudded against the pot with a hollow sound.

"Is something the matter?" Winnie asked curiously.

"Where did you hear that name?" Cook asked sharply. Her shoulders had now gone visibly tense.

Winnie knitted her brow. "Mr Quincy is the one who let me in the door," she said. "He *is* the butler here, isn't he?"

Cook turned to look at Winnie directly; her fingers curled tightly into her palms at her sides. "Witchwood Manor has not had a butler for weeks now," she said. "Not since Mr Williams fled the manor in the middle of the night."

Winnie closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "Oh dear," she said. "It seems a faerie has just stolen all of my unmentionables."

CHAPTER 2



Witchwood Manor was indeed supremely understaffed, with only a cook, a gardener, a gamekeeper, and a maid-of-all-work—the last of whom refused to work at night or sleep upon the grounds. Thankfully, Lord Longfell rarely visited the estate, and so the servants upkept only the most important areas of the house, leaving the rest of the place carefully packed away while they waited upon the dowager’s needs.

The maid in question, Miss Margaret Chambers, eventually came down to the kitchens to retrieve the dowager’s supper, at which point Cook instructed her to lead Winnie to her bedroom.

Margaret was young and gangly, with the last flush of youth still on her cheeks. Though she was obviously harried by the volume of her work, she responded to Winnie’s inquiries with carefully guarded cheer as they mounted the narrow servants’ stairs. “I’ve just turned nineteen years of age,” the maid told Winnie. “The dowager pays me nicely for my trouble—I’m one of the only people willin’ to see to the

house these days. She said if I worked hard enough, she'd make me housekeeper—a housekeeper, at nineteen!—but then I'd have to sleep here, an' I'm still not sure I'd dare it."

As they left the underground passages and came back out into the main house, a subtle tightness in Winnie's chest began to ease. Margaret took her up the grand, curving staircase just beyond the cloister, balancing a silver dinner tray while Winnie carried a candle for the both of them. The storm still howled outside, casting strange, skittering lights through the stained glass windows and across the wooden floors; where the wind blew through the rafters of the house, it evoked such a dreadful moan that Winnie found herself wondering just how sturdy the walls truly were.

"And why don't you dare to sleep here?" Winnie asked Margaret absently—as though that awful moaning wasn't more than reason enough.

Margaret glanced back at her from the top of the staircase. Shadows clung to her rounded apple cheeks in the candlelight. "I only slept here once," she said. "I tried to resign, after that... but the dowager begged me to stay, an' my family needs the money somethin' awful."

Winnie pursed her lips, raising her sodden skirts carefully with the hand that did not hold the candle. The main stairs were broader, at least, than those on the servants' staircase... but some niggling instinct told her that this was precisely the sort of house which might hide nasty trick stairs. "You slept here once," Winnie repeated slowly. "That does not... *precisely* answer my question, does it? But you cannot speak of what you've seen here, just like Cook."

Margaret fell silent, staring back at Winnie in the gloom. The maid fidgeted uncomfortably, pressing her lips together.

After a few seconds of this, Winnie nodded at her in acknowledgement.

“I understand,” said Winnie simply.

Margaret turned back down the hall, now mildly subdued. “Everyone in the village thinks I’m mad to stay,” she said.

“We all do what we must,” Winnie observed quietly. “Especially for those we love.”

Margaret’s cheer returned somewhat at that statement, and she smiled back at Winnie hesitantly, over one shoulder. “Do you have family, Miss Hall?” she asked.

Winnie nodded. “My family is quite large,” she said, “but I am closest with two of my sisters in particular. I believe they might have come here with me, if they could—but they have enough concerns, themselves.”

Margaret came to a stop just outside of an ornately carved wooden door on the second floor. The leaves and branches that Winnie had seen below continued here, winding themselves around a twisted wrought iron door handle.

Winnie stared at the door handle for a long moment.

Margaret’s smile weakened a bit. “Lots of iron in this house,” she said. “Least there’s that.” She glanced up at Winnie from underneath her eyelashes. “I can get you a horseshoe if you want. The lord wouldn’t like it—he thinks it’s all nonsense—but he won’t be goin’ in your bedroom anyway once he gets here, will he?”

Winnie shot the maid a look of cool assessment. People often made assumptions about Winnie’s *availability*, based solely on her lovely features. Governesses also had a reputation, for some reason, for being wanton women, no matter how carefully they acted or how muted they dressed.

But Margaret’s expression held no trace of innuendo, and

Winnie finally decided that the girl was simply cheerfully oblivious.

“I need no horseshoe for my door, Miss Margaret,” Winnie assured her. “I have my own ways of staying safe. But I do appreciate the offer.”

Winnie closed one hand reluctantly around the iron door handle to open it. A nauseous shudder crawled its way along her skin as she touched it, even through the fabric of her glove—but she did her best not to show the revulsion on her face. Still, she released the handle instantly as soon as the heavy door creaked inwards.

“Do you require the candle?” Winnie asked Margaret, as she stared into the darkened bedroom.

“You keep it,” Margaret assured her. “I know the house by now.”

Winnie inclined her head. “If you would be so kind then, Miss Margaret... do let the dowager know that I am here. I will join her as soon as I’ve composed myself.”

Margaret nodded back. “You’ll find her in the attic,” she said. At Winnie’s arched eyebrow, the maid added: “She likes the height. I can’t say as it makes much sense, but when the dowager gets somethin’ in her head, there’s not many as can tell her no.”

“Interesting,” Winnie murmured. “That is... a new quirk of hers, to be certain. I suppose that I will meet her in the attic, then.”

Margaret hefted the silver tray once more and headed for the stairs, leaving Winnie alone in the doorway of her new bedroom.

Winnie had to admit that the quarters she’d been given were more than generous. Most governesses would have been thrilled to have a private room at all—but the dowager had

clearly made certain that Winnie was kept in comfort, with a large four-poster bed, a feather down mattress, and even her very own writing desk. A circular stained glass window on the western side of the room cast the light of pale white daisies across the floor. A door to the left led into what Winnie supposed to be an adjacent classroom.

Much to Winnie's surprise, she found that her travel trunk had been left inside her bedroom, just next to the door. Though she had left the trunk locked, its brass latch was now undone. Someone had opened the trunk—and what's more, they wanted Winnie to *know* that they had done so.

Winnie glanced warily between the trunk and the twisted iron door handle. "Now *that* is troubling," she muttered darkly. Clearly, Mr Quincy *also* wanted Winnie to know that trifles such as iron door handles would be no real defence against him or his kin.

Nevertheless, she set her candle down on a side table and opened the trunk to check its contents. All of her clothing was still there, Winnie noted—neatly folded, just as she'd left it. But one thing was indeed now missing: Within a black silk handkerchief, in place of the tiny vial of bay berry perfume which Winnie's sister Clarimonde had given her, there was now a folded up bit of parchment.

Winnie unfolded the parchment to reveal a note, written in a long and spidery hand. It said:

*Miss Winifred Hall,
For my service, I have taken as payment
your lovely perfume. I believe that it will suit the
lady of this house.*

Do let me know if you require anything else.

The note was signed with the initials: AQ.

Winnie crumpled the note in her palm with a soft noise of fury.

The perfume which Mr Quincy had taken was important—Clarimonde had mixed it specifically in order to protect Winnie from dangerous magic. Though Winnie had dabbed some of the perfume at her neck and wrists that morning, the rain had already washed it all away. She had planned, in fact, to reapply the bay berry scent once she'd dried herself off.

Had Mr Quincy recognised the perfume's magic? Surely, he had. His choice of payment could not possibly be a coincidence.

"Well played, Mr Quincy," Winnie muttered tightly. "But now that I know what you are, you will find me a far more difficult target."

Winnie slipped a hand through the side slit in her frock to access the pocket she'd tied above her petticoat. She rummaged for a moment before extracting a tiny white cat's skull, barely the size of her palm. Winnie's other sister, Bellamira, had *insisted* that she bring the skull with her, despite her protests. The skull had once belonged to the mouser at Mrs Dun's orphanage—a deeply spoiled black shorthair who'd loved the girls there with a literal undying affection.

"Bellamira was right," Winnie sighed at the skull. "I *do* require your help, Oliver. I hope you don't mind terribly."

A single tiny pinprick of ghostly yellow light flared within one of the skull's eye sockets in reply.

Winnie smiled affectionately. "You're far too good to us,

Ollie,” she said. She kissed the skull very gently and turned to place it on the mantle of the small fireplace opposite from the bed. “I just need you to watch my room,” she told the cat. “I hear that there are faeries about, and they seem to have found a way around all of the iron here.”

The yellow light within the skull flickered and curled, rather like a cat’s broad yawn.

“If Mr Quincy should happen by,” Winnie added, “I hope you’ll give him a significant fright.”

If cats could laugh, Winnie expected that she might have heard a breathy snigger.

Winnie settled onto the edge of her bed, peeling off her gloves to examine the splinters in her left hand. That the doorframe had afflicted her with splinters was a curious thing, since the wood there had seemed smooth to the touch. But there were indeed several long slivers of white oak stuck beneath the skin of her palm and fingers. Winnie did her best to pick them loose with her nails—but a few tiny splinters remained, despite her best efforts.

Finally, Winnie sighed and abandoned the attempt. She rose from the bed to dig into her trunk, pulling out her nice gown and shaking it loose before her. The high-collared green muslin was a bit worn, and a bit damp at the edges—but it was the perfect gown for a severe countryside governess with no desire to seem wanton.

“I suppose that I will leave the room in your care, Oliver,” Winnie said to the skull. “It’s well past time I greeted my employer.”



BY THE TIME Winnie had redressed herself in dry clothing, her strength was badly flagging—but somehow, she still managed to climb her way up the creaky wooden stairs to the dowager's attic room.

Winnie stopped in front of the door at the top of the stairs, shivering against the cold. The wind was harshest here at the top of the manor, where it rattled the floorboards with every breath. Thunder cracked like fireworks when it struck, and the roof seemed like a terribly flimsy shield against it.

Though it had been years since Winnie's last in-person conversation with the dowager, she rapped only once at the door before entering, feeling confident of her reception.

Someone had done a passable job of converting the attic—once a servants' quarters—into a bedroom fit for a lady of the dowager's stature. Half of the broad, vaulted room had been given over to the lady's bed and dresser, while the half closest to the triangular oak and ivy stained glass window had been converted into a sitting room. The dowager herself sat in a tall-backed chair before a round oak table, picking absently at the rolls and stew which had been set before her. A second place was made up at the table across from her, with another covered tray of food.

Lady Longfell had aged badly since the last time that Winnie had seen her. The dowager's once-brown hair was now pure white, and noticeably brittle where it brushed the middle of her back. Her faded blue eyes were watery rather than alert, and her shoulders were thin and fragile-looking beneath her blue linen wrapper.

Though the attic had a stove left over from the days in which it had housed servants, it was still noticeably colder than the rest of the house. Surely, living there could not have been good for the dowager's health.

The lady looked up as Winnie entered the attic—and all at once, a great tension drained from her posture, replaced with palpable relief.

“Miss Winifred,” the dowager sighed, in a faintly cracking voice. “Oh, there you are—every bit as lovely as the day I met you. Lovelier, in fact, if my eyes do not deceive me.”

Winnie closed the door behind her, padding over to the small table on slippers. “You are too kind, Lady Longfell,” she said. “The storm has made a mess of me.” Winnie settled herself into the other chair at the table. “I assume that this supper is for me,” she added. “Thank goodness. It has been an awfully long day.”

Lady Longfell smiled tremulously at Winnie. “I asked Margaret to fetch you something when she said you had arrived,” she explained. “Please—you must eat before we discuss anything else. You have come so far, just to help a silly old woman.”

Winnie set aside the tray’s cover. The bowl of stew beneath it still steamed against the cold air in the attic, and her stomach rumbled faintly with hunger. Most of the stew that could be had in London was thin, with tiny shreds of meat—but this meal was more meat than liquid, plentiful with beef and mutton, and Winnie couldn’t help the surge of hungry greed which overcame her at the sight.

Supper before business, Winnie decided, as she dug into the meal. Though she did her best to display a semblance of polite manners, she soon discovered that such manners barely mattered. The dowager was watching Winnie with the same sort of hunger which Winnie had directed at the stew. The older woman was clearly desperate to discuss the matter which had brought them together in the first place.

Winnie finished her supper with slightly more haste than

she might otherwise have done. As she pulled out a handkerchief to dab at her mouth, Lady Longfell cleared her throat delicately.

“Would you care for something more substantial?” the lady asked tremulously. “I eat more lightly these days, but Cook always keeps something extra on hand. I could ask Margaret to fetch us some coffee—”

“If I put off this conversation any longer, I believe that you might eat *me*,” Winnie observed dryly, settling back into her chair. “Let us get on with it, Lady Longfell.”

The dowager let out a slow breath, straightening the collar of her night gown against the chill. “I am just so grateful you have come,” she admitted in a small voice. “I was not certain that you would.”

Winnie inclined her head in acknowledgement. “You were kinder than many to me, Lady Longfell,” she said. “I believe I owe my own lessons with a governess to your good charity, in fact. But that is not why I have come. I have an interest in the history and circumstances of this manor for reasons of my own. And, of course... I was promised payment.”

Lady Longfell twisted her fingers nervously in her lap, bunching up the fabric of her wrapper between them. Mention of *payment* was impolite in the extreme... but they both knew that Winnie was not really well-bred company. “You will be paid,” the dowager assured Winnie. “I still have many resources to my name, despite appearances to the contrary. It’s just that no money in the world can pay most servants to stay here. They all leave the manor eventually, one way or another.”

“I do not require money, Lady Longfell,” Winnie responded softly. “It is information that I want. But let us first speak of the work you wish to set for me.”

Lady Longfell looked up at her sharply. "I have hired you on as a governess," she said. "I thought you understood—"

"But I am not a governess, Your Ladyship," Winnie said carefully. Despite her best efforts, she found herself reaching for another roll as she spoke. "I am terrible with children. I was under the impression you had different work for me—work which perhaps Lord Longfell would not understand."

The dowager smiled tightly. "You are here to protect my grandson, Robert," she told Winnie. "He need not like you, Miss Winifred—nor even learn a thing from you. I only ask that you keep him safe until he is able to leave for Eton in September. Robert and his father will be here very soon—perhaps tomorrow, if the weather calms."

Winnie frowned. "You want me to protect your grandson from... whatever is happening here in Witchwood Manor," she clarified. "But the servants cannot speak of it. Can you?" She stole a single, ladylike nibble from the roll in her hand.

If Lady Longfell found fault with Winnie's manners, then she kindly overlooked it. Instead, the dowager rubbed her withered hands together—partially for heat and partially from anxiety, Winnie thought. As she did, Winnie saw that there was a bulky ring upon her left thumb—a twisted knot of white oak and dull grey iron.

"I can speak of the curse," rasped the dowager, "but I fear I do not know the whole of it." She swallowed, with great difficulty. "There has always been something wrong with Witchwood Manor, ever since Lord Longfell had it built. At first, it was less noticeable—little noises in the dead of night, and whispers in the halls. But then... the servants started leaving. Some disappeared entirely. I woke at night to awful, screaming faces in the walls..."

The dowager shuddered and fell silent, now worrying directly at the ring on her finger.

Winnie took another, larger nibble of her roll. "You are aware that there are faeries here?" she asked.

Lady Longfell nodded dully. "I have seen the iron which the servants hang above the doorways," she said. "But the faeries here avoid me, Miss Winifred. When my son first left for London, he gave me this ring and told me never to take it off. It protects me, I believe, from the terrible things which haunt the others here."

Winnie pursed her lips, now eyeing the ring more openly. Iron was bane to faeries, and... *unkind*, at least, to human magicians. The idea of a magical iron ring seemed like a paradox. But just for now, she decided to accept the possibility. "Is Lord Longfell a magician, then?" Winnie asked. "He has no reputation for magic of which I am aware." In fact, the man had little reputation at all, except with regard to his impressive lumber exports and his eccentric country manor.

"I never thought so before," Lady Longfell murmured, shifting the knotted ring back and forth across her fragile thumb. "But perhaps he has acquired a secret talent for magic. If so, he has not shared the truth with me."

Winnie traced the room slowly with her eyes, as though she might discover screaming faces in the walls which she had not seen earlier. "Are there, perhaps, no faces in the attic walls?" she asked. "Is that why you are up here?"

The dowager reached for the glass of wine in front of her with shaking fingers. "I still see them sometimes," she admitted. "Even up here. But..." She trailed off uncertainly, before warning: "You will think me mad."

Winnie laughed pleasantly. "You are living in a house with

faeries, Lady Longfell,” she said. “To be *sane* would be unnatural.”

The old woman nodded uncertainly—but she lowered her voice when she next spoke, all the same. “It is the earth beneath us, Miss Winifred,” she said quietly. “The earth, and the trees which surround this house. They have such hate for me—I can *feel* it. If I could climb up to the roof, by God, then I would do it, just to gain an extra inch between us.”

Winnie thought again of the splinters in her left hand, which by all rights should not have been there. “This house was built from Witchwood oaks,” she observed. “If the trees despise you, Lady Longfell, then surely the walls and the doors and the tables do, as well.”

The dowager’s hand now shook so badly that she had to put down her glass. As she fumbled the motion, a few drops of blood red wine spilled across the table, and Winnie found herself remembering the faint sense of scorn in Mr Quincy’s wine-red eyes.

“The house despises *all* of us,” said Lady Longfell hoarsely. “It will be the death of me, I know it. All I ask is that you save my grandson, Miss Winifred. I know that you can do it. Your magic—”

Winnie set down the remnants of her roll sharply. “Speak more softly of that subject, Lady Longfell,” she warned the other woman. “You have not been to London recently. The new Lord Sorcier has staunch opinions on most forms of magic. The lower classes do not have sufficient character to practise magic at all, he says. We are all black magicians, in his mind.”

The dowager blinked at Winnie very slowly. The idea had shocked her visibly. “But... surely he could not take issue with *you*, Miss Winifred—” she started.

“He could,” Winnie interrupted her bluntly. “He very well might do. Especially since I have taken issue with *him*.” She reached into the pocket which she had left tied beneath her gown, drawing out a small black box. “I will ask you only once, Lady Longfell—and you must be certain of your answer. Are you *sure* that you wish for me to perform this task? I will do it, if you ask. But you understand now that you have employed a black magician, and that is surely bad enough. Where *faeries* are involved, as well... the price might be unthinkably high.”

Lady Longfell crossed her arms over her chest, curling in upon herself. “I am committed,” she said, in a deceptively strong voice. “I am already dying, Miss Winifred. If there is some terrible price to be paid... then let me be the one to pay it.”

Winnie had not known this particular detail... but it did not terribly surprise her, on reflection. The woman across the table from her was frail and waning, compared to the one from her memories, and there was a weary certainty in her voice as she made the declaration. Winnie decided to acknowledge the fact without further comment. “Then let us start by asking questions,” she said.

She opened up the wooden box in front of her, slipping free a battered deck of playing cards. As she started shuffling the cards, Lady Longfell looked on with open fascination.

“It has been ages since I saw you do this,” the dowager murmured. “What question will you ask the cards, Miss Winifred?”

“I will ask about your grandson, Robert, and his future,” Winnie replied. “But I will need you to describe him for me. Be as honest as you can be, Lady Longfell. What sort of boy is he?”

The dowager hesitated. "Robert is... unruly," she admitted, with a hint of apology. "I have not seen him in some time—but I hear he is a monster to his tutors back in London. He has always been an angel to me personally... but I suppose that is to be expected."

Winnie nodded to herself. "He is selfish, with a streak of cunning," she said firmly. "I was the same, I think, when I was young."

The dowager blinked. "You were so well-behaved, though, when I visited," she said. "You climbed into my lap and read to me from your primers."

Winnie smiled very pleasantly at her. "My point precisely," she replied. "Well then—we shall say that Robert is the Knave of Hearts."

With this decided, Winnie started laying out the cards by threes, withdrawing cards from each cluster as their relevance suggested. This work took quite some time—but the dowager kept her silence obediently. Cards soon cluttered up the table, so that Winnie was forced to shove her bowl aside and move the candles—and even stack one card atop a roll. Overhead, the sky continued rumbling, and the rafters shook.

Finally, Winnie looked over the cards before her, taking in their meaning.

"So many prisons," she murmured.

Lady Longfell frowned, craning her head to search the cards for some hint of the statement that Winnie had made. "I don't understand," she said.

Winnie glanced up at her. "Look," she commanded, gesturing towards a set of three cards. "The Knave of Hearts is penned in by two sevens. And here, the Queen of Spades—she is a widow, just like you. She has been trapped by the other two sevens. The Knave of Spades, an ill-bred and mischievous

man, is trapped by tens." She knitted her brow. "All of you are tied together. Perhaps you trap each other?"

The dowager made a worried noise, near the back of her throat. "This house is a prison," she said. "Perhaps that is the meaning. You must make sure that Robert leaves again, Miss Winifred."

Winnie nodded. "I will do my best," she promised. "Thankfully, I am here in this reading as well... but I am not trapped." She tapped one finger on the card atop the roll. "I have always been the Knave of Diamonds—a liar, through and through. I have the Ten of Diamonds soon ahead of me—a journey which the Nine of Diamonds says will be exhausting."

Winnie looked over the entire series of cards again, and drew in a hiss of irritation. "We are three Knaves, all together," she bit out. "What a mess. We cannot help but trouble one another. Quarrels and false friendships lie ahead."

Lady Longfell now plucked at her wrapper with agitation. "This is all so very ephemeral," she said. "Can you not ask the cards how best to help my grandson?"

Winnie raised one pale eyebrow at her. "The more exact I make my readings, the less accurate they will become, Your Ladyship," she said. "The future is a river with many trickling branches. I must start by gauging where the general current leads." She pointed at the sevens. "Four of these means intrigue with a servant. I think the Knave of Spades must then be Mr Quincy. That feels correct to me; he is central to your grandson's future. What do you know of Mr Quincy, Lady Longfell?"

The dowager shook her head. "I do not know the name," she admitted. "Who is he, Miss Winifred?"

Winnie thought back to the man who'd opened Witchwood Manor's front door. "Mr Quincy said he was the butler

here,” she observed. “If he was a faerie, then he cannot lie... but I do not know what that could mean. You did not hire him, and so he cannot be *your* butler.”

Lady Longfell cracked a weary smile. “My memory is not yet so far gone that I would forget an extra butler,” she assured Winnie.

“Two tens,” Winnie murmured to herself, still staring at the table. “Someone here might change their role. That does make sense; most faeries only play at being servants in the first place. Perhaps tomorrow, Mr Quincy will decide to be the gamekeeper.”

She scanned the cards a few more times, ruminating on their meaning. Eventually, however, Winnie began to scoop them back up one by one, tucking them back into their deck.

“Is that all?” Lady Longfell asked, bewildered.

“Not at all,” Winnie told her. “It is a start. I know, at least, that I must find out more about the extra butler.”

This, at least, seemed to mollify the dowager’s anxiety a bit. “You said that you required information, Miss Winifred,” she said. “Whatever you are seeking, I will do my best to offer it.”

Winnie slipped the box back into her pocket—along with the extra roll. She pushed up from her chair with a prim smile. “I have already learned some answers which I sought,” she told the dowager. “I will have more questions for you at a later date.”

Lady Longfell nodded slowly, though this reply had clearly baffled her. As Winnie headed for the door, however, she said: “Sweet dreams, Miss Winifred.”

I do not think that likely, Winnie mused internally.

But she kept the statement to herself as she closed the attic door behind her.



MARGARET HAD TAKEN the time to light Winnie's fireplace, at least, before she left for the night. The heat took time to sink into the air, however, and Winnie shivered as she sat before the fireplace, digging the last of Witchwood Manor's tiny splinters from beneath her skin. The brutal exercise smeared blood across her hands—but Winnie persevered, suspecting greatly that the pain was worth the task. She tossed each splinter into the fireplace in turn, watching as the flames consumed them.

Only once Winnie was absolutely certain that she had torn free every splinter did she wipe her hands and crawl beneath the covers of her bed, waiting for the down feathers to trap her body heat and warm her further.

Eventually, she must have drifted off—for sometime in the dead of night, she woke abruptly to a still and silent room. The storm, she realised, had now passed.

Dimly, Winnie became aware of twisted whorls within the ivy carvings on her walls which had not been there previously. Though the embers of her fireplace were not bright enough to illuminate their detail, she knew in her heart that they were faces.

Even as Winnie perceived those whorls, she heard a rising susurrus of whispers from the hallway. The breathy voices which had made them were dark, and unmistakably unfriendly.

Winnie shook her head and buried herself beneath the covers once again. "No," she declared tiredly. "Absolutely not. I haven't the energy to be investigating apparitions tonight. I'll walk your ghostly halls tomorrow night, I promise."

The whispers, of course, did not reply. But later in the

evening, Winnie heard a high yowl and a muffled *crash* in the hallway outside of her room, even from beneath her pillow. Incredulous male swearing soon followed.

Perhaps five minutes later, a heavy feline weight settled itself atop Winnie's feet, with a deeply satisfied purr.

Winnie smiled and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 3



Winnie awoke to the sound of someone fiddling with her fireplace.

Margaret had stepped in quietly to sweep the ashes from the hearth and start a fresh new fire with some sturdy logs. Though Winnie had seen at least one coal-fired stove since her arrival, the fireplaces in her bedchamber and the common rooms still burned wood—likely taken from the Witchwood oaks nearby. The maid was clearly trying not to wake up Winnie as she worked, which Winnie thought was awfully kind of her—but old instincts always seemed to flare when people approached her while she was sleeping, such that she was now woefully and irreversibly alert.

The feline weight at Winnie's feet had gone, but she knew that Oliver was likely prowling around, on guard for enemies (or treats). Though the tom cat could no longer *eat* anything, he still seemed to appreciate the chance to sniff at a bit of fish or a bowl of cream when such was provided.

Winnie had pulled the covers over her head while sleeping, in order to block out the whispers—but now, she poked her

nose out with a soft yawn. “Good morning, Miss Margaret,” she said primly. “I take it that the faces in the walls are gone?”

Margaret squeaked and nearly fumbled her small broom. She glanced sharply at Winnie over her shoulder, with a pinched and wary look upon her soft features. “The... the walls seem normal, Miss Hall,” she said tremulously.

Though Winnie was loath to leave her nice warm bed, she wriggled up to a seated position and started combing through the tangles in her hair with her fingers. “The whispering is fairly harmless, as far as faerie tricks are concerned,” Winnie said absently, “but I will admit, the faces in the walls are somewhat harrowing. I wonder if the faces signify, or if they’re simply further frightening illusion.”

Margaret stared at her. “Tricks?” she repeated dimly.

Winnie smiled at her slyly. “Mr Quincy was prowling outside of my door last night,” she said. “He has been putting on illusory performances for the servants here at night, in order to frighten them off. He has a flair for the dramatic—I will readily admit it. But he slipped up and revealed himself last night, and now the curtain is pulled back.”

On some level, Winnie couldn’t help but admire the faerie. If he was indeed the primary instigator of all of Witchwood Manor’s troubles, he had made a sterling job of them with only dreadful hints and bits of cobweb magic. He was, in short, a one-man terror.

Margaret now looked stunned and faintly nauseous, as though Winnie had struck her over the head. “D’you mean to say that... that Witchwood Manor isn’t even dangerous?” the maid demanded. “We’ve all been scared for nothin’?”

Winnie shook her head. “This place is dangerous in some way,” she assured the other woman. “I am certain of it. But I suspect that most of you were frightened off too quickly to

meet its true dangers.” She pulled the blankets around her shoulders like a cape, now seriously considering that idea. “Mr Quincy has all of the answers that I seek, I am sure of it. But how will I force him to *tell* me those answers?”

“Are you... askin’ *me*?” Margaret interjected tremulously.

Winnie blinked. “What?” she asked. “Oh, no. My apologies. I didn’t mean to draw you into all of this, Miss Margaret. I’m simply speaking to myself aloud.” She peeled the blankets carefully from her shoulders, daring the chill morning air only reluctantly in order to fetch her housecoat. “I’ll need to corner him somehow. But Mr Quincy knows this house much better than I do, I would hazard. I’ll spend today looking through the manor and getting a sense for it —”

“After you meet the young master, you mean t’say?” Margaret asked carefully. Her tone was wary now, as though she were addressing a wild animal and not the lovely woman she had met the night before.

Winnie stumbled over one of her walking boots with a soft curse. “Yes?” she said—though the word sounded more like a question than she might have preferred. “I mean... yes, of course. I’ll meet with the young master. If he should arrive today, that is.” A hint of crossness slipped into the words, despite Winnie’s best efforts. Really, it was ridiculous, the idea of handing her a child to mind. She’d barely enjoyed the company of children when she *was* a child.

“Lord Longfell’s footman arrived ahead of him a few minutes ago, along with some of their things,” Margaret informed her. “He said His Lordship will be here well before noon.”

Winnie pressed her lips together, mentally revising her schedule for the day. In fact, she realised, she barely had

enough time to eat and make herself presentable. She glanced warily at Margaret.

“Have you ever met him?” Winnie asked. “The young master, I mean to say.”

Margaret shook her head. “Lord Longfell only visits every so often,” she said. “An’ he’s never brought his son before.”

Winnie narrowed her eyes. “Curious,” she muttered. “Why go to such expense to build a house you never live in?” Perhaps, she thought, the faeries were an unexpected menace. The servants had all warned her that Lord Longfell did not believe in faeries... but Winnie had begun to think that this was not true either.

She sighed and straightened her shoulders. “There is a long day ahead of me, I think,” she said more loudly. “Would you mind telling me, Miss Margaret, how we take our breakfast here in Witchwood Manor?”



GIVEN that the dowager took most of her meals in her room, this meant that there was little structure to breakfast for the rest of the household. Winnie stopped by the kitchen to procure some cold eggs and sausage; there were a handful of half-stale bread rolls from the evening before as well, which she purloined without hesitation.

“You’re well-rested,” Cook observed suspiciously, as Winnie nibbled at a sausage. The other woman’s eyes were still sunken with exhaustion as she sat down at the table to eat her own breakfast.

“For now,” Winnie replied. She studied Cook considerably. “But you have been awake all night. It cannot only be the whispers, can it?”

Cook, of course, did not respond. She speared a forkful of eggs instead, with a bleak hint of violence.

"I am going to look through the house today," Winnie continued blithely. "Are there any rooms I should avoid?"

Cook sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "We've shut up several rooms," she said. "That doesn't mean they're empty. If you see a room with Holland covers, I wouldn't wander through it." She paused, then added: "Stay away from the conservatory, especially."

Winnie nodded dutifully. Eventually, she would inspect the conservatory, of course—but it seemed most reasonable to learn the safer areas of Witchwood Manor first, in order to establish some familiar ground.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs—and soon enough, Margaret peeked her head into the kitchen. "They're here!" she said breathlessly. "Lord Longfell's valet is puttin' up a fuss. He says he wants to hand the young lord over to the butler—but I keep tellin' him we haven't got one!"

"I'll need to take charge of the boy, I expect," Winnie sighed. She stood up from the table, abandoning her plate with one last longing look. "What is his name? The valet, I mean to say."

Margaret shot her a grateful look. "It's Mr Turner, I think," she said. "I barely got a word in edgeways, but I heard someone use his name."

Winnie brushed out her green muslin gown and put on her most severe expression. "I will handle them both," she assured the maid.

As Winnie made her way back above-stairs, she discovered travel trunks of every size littering the house; luggage was still stacked within the cloister, such that she had to step around it. An unfamiliar man lingered near the front

door, looking terribly put upon by the child standing next to him.

The man in question was tall and handsome; his long black hair was pulled back neatly from his face, displaying his shapely cheekbones to best effect. His dress had something of the city about it, despite his recent journey—his dark waistcoat was too-neatly pressed, and his calves were left on display in somewhat impractical stockings.

The brown-haired boy next to him was also dressed quite well, but with less overall dignity to his manner. He wore tailored breeches and a waistcoat, except in miniature, with a long jacket overtop them. Though his clothing was adult, his expression was decidedly childish—the sour twist of his mouth made it clear how little he wished to be there.

“Mr Turner?” Winnie asked, as she stepped around a leather trunk.

The man in the doorway responded to his name by turning to look at her. He quickly took in her gown and her general comportment, as though calculating how much respect he ought to offer her. Quietly, Winnie thought that he *should* have paid a great deal of respect to the wicked silver pocket knife visible upon her chatelaine—but men rarely did notice the important details. Regardless, he settled on a neutral sort of politeness. “That would be me,” he replied. “And who am I addressing?”

“My name is Winifred Hall,” she told him. “I am the governess. I will take charge of the young man from here.”

Mr Turner adjusted his expression with an inch more civility at Winnie’s stated position. As a governess, Winnie was neither servant nor quite Family—but either way, she was not a safe target for his current poor humour in the same way that a maid like Margaret might be. Nevertheless, the valet

nudged the boy towards Winnie with impatience, obviously eager to be rid of him.

“Miss Hall,” he said, “this is Lord Longfell’s only son, Master Robert. I leave him in your capable care.”

Winnie glanced at the boy, who had yet to speak a word. “You look weary, Master Robert,” she said. “I believe your room is ready, if you wish to rest before supper.”

Robert’s surly expression deepened at this suggestion. “I would rather stay at the lodge with Father,” he said. His voice was high and slightly nasal; this alone would not have been unpleasant—but every word he spoke seemed to come with a hint of a sneer, which set Winnie’s teeth decidedly on edge.

Winnie redirected her attention to the valet. “At the lodge?” she repeated questioningly.

Mr Turner had already begun to turn for the door. At this latest interruption, he paused with a grimace, with his hand at the doorframe. “Lord Longfell has settled himself into the gamekeeper’s old residence,” he explained. “Master Robert is to stay here at Witchwood Manor, where you can look after him.”

“I see,” said Winnie. Those two words carried an entire world of meaning, which it might have been imprudent to speak aloud. What Winnie saw, in fact, was that the lord of the manor knew better than to sleep beneath its roof. Despite this fact, Lord Longfell did *not* seem terribly concerned about leaving his son to deal with Witchwood Manor’s curse.

Mr Turner did not understand any of these things from Winnie’s two word response. Rather, he took her reply as a dismissal, and as a chance to escape the conversation entirely. He straightened his jacket, nodded once at Winnie, and then whirled back outside—presumably angling to join Lord Longfell at the lodge in question.

Robert stared up at Winnie. Winnie stared back at Robert.

In this moment of extended silence, it swiftly became clear that neither of them wished to remain in the other's presence.

"I'll show you to your room, Master Robert," Winnie said finally. "Perhaps you could do with some tea to help settle you." The words sounded awkward, even to her own ears.

"I don't require a nursery maid," Robert said flatly. His expression was downright hostile, now that the valet had gone.

"How fortunate," Winnie replied smartly. "I happen to be a governess, and not a nursery maid. In fact—one might say that it is incumbent upon me to teach you the difference between the two, among other things." Though Winnie had no desire to be a governess in the first place, she never had been able to ignore an opportunity for acerbic commentary.

Robert narrowed his eyes darkly, crossing his arms over his chest. "I have real tutors, back in London," he said. "They teach me maths and Greek and history. What are *you* going to teach me? Embroidery?"

"Oho," said Winnie. "What a quick study you are, Master Robert. You have already learned to insult the servants." She clasped her hands behind her back and leaned in towards him. "Since you have so kindly asked—I think that I *will* teach you embroidery. We will make it your first lesson."

Robert recoiled with such abject horror that Winnie briefly felt the need to apologise to embroidery on his behalf. "You can't do that!" he hissed. "I'll tell my father!"

"Will you?" Winnie asked him archly. "It sounds as though you'd need to *find* your father first."

This observation, Winnie realised belatedly, was perhaps a bit too cutting. She was far too used to dealing with adults, who endured such slings and arrows with relative stoicism—

or who did, at least, deserve them roundly. Though Robert had opened their verbal sparring match with as much cruelty as his inexperience could muster, he now fell conspicuously silent, staring down at the floor with a trembling in his jaw.

Robert had—like so many upper-class children—been shoved into a corner like a piece of unused furniture. Had his father been able, Winnie was certain that he would have thrown a sheet over the boy until he was considered old enough to be interesting. In this respect, Robert was rather like the closed-up rooms in Witchwood Manor.

It was not, however, within Winnie's nature to retreat from those who had declared themselves her enemy. Despite her sudden unease, the thought of apology was so very foreign that it did not even occur to her. Instead, she offered mercy by pretending they had fully resolved their conversation. "Upstairs, Master Robert," she said. "Follow me."

Robert followed wearily as Winnie led him to the bedroom a few doors down from her own. Though larger than her own room, it was still quite plain for a young lord-to-be, with only a small bed and a few pieces of utilitarian furniture. Robert's nostrils flared with distaste as he stood in the doorway surveying it. The final insult, of course, was the stained glass window wrought with cheerful yellow daffodils. Daffodils were a child's flower—a fact which marked the room as more of a nursery than a bedroom.

Thankfully, Margaret had started up a fire in the hearth in anticipation of Robert's arrival; this lured him inside, despite his abject loathing for his new surroundings, and he soon stood warming his hands before the flames.

"I'll go request some tea," Winnie told him.

This time, Robert did not reply. After his ill-fated attempts

to sting Winnie with conversation, he seemed intent now on remaining sullenly silent.

Perhaps that is for the best, Winnie thought, as she closed the bedroom door behind herself and headed below-stairs.

There was already hot water on the boil when she reached the kitchen, since Cook was making tea for herself. As such, Winnie decided to simply take a pot of tea back with her, along with the last few cold sausages. But by the time she made her way back upstairs with both, a niggling feeling of unease had begun to tickle at the back of her mind.

When she saw that the door to Robert's bedroom was standing open, she let loose a very unladylike word.

"Of course," Winnie muttered to herself. "I'd probably have done the same." She left the tray on a side table in the empty bedroom and stormed back out, searching the hallway for clues to the young master's whereabouts.

Winnie's wish to explore the manor was soon granted in a backhanded sort of way, as she threw open doors one by one in search of her lost charge—though she hadn't the time to investigate any of the rooms in detail.

Her search led her down to the ground floor, currently empty of servants. Even during the daytime, Witchwood Manor seemed as quiet as a graveyard—littered with abandoned travel trunks like awkward headstones. Lord Longfell's city servants had clearly decided that, in the absence of a butler or a resident footman, they might simply leave the luggage where it lay and wait for someone else to handle it.

Winnie was *relatively* certain that Robert was not hiding in one of the travel trunks. If he was, she thought, he well deserved to stay there for a good long while. As such, she passed the luggage by—spiralling slowly outwards from the centre of the manor, from empty room to empty room. The

first door she attempted, just off the main hall, was locked. Across from it, she found the dining room, which had very few potential hiding places for a determined young boy. To the east, there was an ante room still kept in relative order, though the drawing room beyond it looked as though it hadn't seen a servant's broom in ages.

Frustration built within Winnie with each new door she opened, along with keen embarrassment. Perhaps Lady Longfell did not expect her to be a proper governess—but Winnie *had* promised to watch over Robert while he was at Witchwood Manor, and she could hardly accomplish that goal without him present to be watched. Briefly, she considered letting Robert navigate his own fate. Perhaps the dangers of Witchwood Manor would snatch him up; perhaps they would not. Either way, wasn't it natural for faeries to abduct naughty children who refused to listen to adults?

But Winnie required the excuse of her employment as a governess in order to investigate the manor. If Robert disappeared, then that employment would be over.

Winnie sighed heavily and returned to her fruitless search. Just as she was beginning to despair that she had been outwitted by a twelve-year-old boy, however, she heard the scrabble of small shoes on wooden floorboards, just behind her. She turned just in time to catch a flash of Robert's half-sized jacket tails disappearing around a corner.

"Hide and seek in a faerie-cursed house was *not* on my schedule for today," Winnie grouched beneath her breath. Nevertheless, she hiked up one side of her skirt and followed after the young master, keeping her steps as light and stealthy as possible.

As Winnie headed up the northern hallway, her slippers began to collect dark smudges of dust. The early afternoon

light which filtered through the windows was barely adequate to light her way—but while her eyes struggled to adjust, she caught the unmistakable creak of a door opening, just ahead of her.

She picked up speed, intent on catching the boy before he could outpace her. A thread of sickly light announced the door that she was looking for at the very end of the hallway, still partially ajar. Winnie shoved her way beyond it...

...and found herself in the exact room which she had hoped to avoid.

Witchwood Manor's conservatory was a relatively small, octagonal room, all draped in ghostly white hangings. Abandoned planters lingered in the corners, crawling with the dry remnants of dead flowers. Two bare orange trees clawed for the ceiling, as though attempting to escape their torment. The room had only one wall of which to speak—across from that wall, dusty stained glass windows stretched from floor to ceiling, straining any genuine sustenance from the feeble sunlight. Sharp images of multi-coloured roses crowded the stained glass, choking out all suggestion of the world beyond the house—and for the first time since her arrival, Winnie found herself truly thinking of the place as a prison, just as her cards had portrayed it.

Cook had warned Winnie that there was something dangerous about the conservatory, though the woman seemed unable to elaborate upon it. Winnie believed her, of course... but if Robert had come here, then she had little choice but to follow him inside.

Winnie slowed her gait warily as she entered, eyeing the white-draped furniture around her. Each lump was an ominous mystery waiting to be unveiled—all easily large

enough to hide an unruly child beneath them, had said boy been of a mind. The slightest draft within the manor set them rippling here and there, as though they were all phantoms, gently breathing. The Holland covers in the conservatory should have been dusty and relatively undisturbed... but Winnie's sharp gaze caught upon one sheet near the far window which had no dust at all, covering something which she guessed to be a pianoforte. She walked towards it as silently as she could manage, measuring each slippered step with care.

Winnie narrowed her eyes at the sheet. The unimpressive light of the conservatory still outlined a faint silhouette beneath it—roughly the size and shape of an irritating young boy hiding beneath a piano bench.

"This has all been so *thoroughly* unnecessary, Master Robert—" Winnie began.

But as she tore the sheet away, she found herself perplexed.

Beneath the white drape was indeed a pianoforte—old and dignified, stained such a deep brown colour as to be nearly black. Its ivory keys had clearly seen significant use; some of them had tiny grooves where ghostly fingers had once touched them.

But now that Winnie had unveiled the piano, there was no boy beneath the bench.

The scent of Clarimonde's bay berry perfume tickled at her nostrils, sweet and taunting.

"How far the governess has wandered," Mr Quincy said from behind her.

Winnie heaved a heavy sigh, pressing a hand to the back of the piano in front of her. "Another illusion," she observed. "Well done, Mr Quincy. I thought you were all sound and fury

and no subtlety... but in truth, you have an artist's flair for details. I wonder just how detailed you can be."

Mr Quincy circled Winnie slowly, out of the corner of her eye. There was an obviously predatory nature to his movements now that his identity had been called into question. The butler had cast off the mild disguise which he'd employed upon their first meeting. His wine-red eyes were brighter and more unnerving than Winnie last recalled them; his cheekbones were inhumanly stark, and his figure far too slim. Most startling of all was a long rat's tail which trailed out from beneath his jacket, careless as you please.

"I would not wonder," Mr Quincy told her. "It is likely bad for your health, Miss Winifred Hall."

He emphasised the name with a peculiar, threatening air... and Winnie realised then that Mr Quincy believed it to be her *true* name.

Every magician knew well that names had a deep and terrible power. Any creature with a hint of magic could make dreadful use of a person's full and honest name.

Truly, Winnie thought to herself, this world was made for liars. The name 'Winifred Hall' was something which she had created specifically for this position, with the assistance of the dowager's endorsement. Only Winnie's old mentor knew her true name, which was likely too strange to use in human company.

Nevertheless, Mr Quincy's crimson eyes watched her with great expectation, and Winnie decided it was best to let him think that he had cornered her.

"I find that I dislike the way in which you speak my name, Mr Quincy," Winnie told him slowly, injecting a hint of wariness into her voice. "Have I done something to offend you?"

Mr Quincy's circling steps continued, angling for the

other side of the pianoforte. He entered Winnie's line of sight directly now, fixing her with a hard stare. His rat's tail twitched behind him furiously. "You know very well what you have done," he responded in an icy tone. The butler's hand, which rested now upon the pianoforte, was marred by several ugly-looking gashes—roughly in the shape of Oliver's claws.

Winnie couldn't help it. She burst out into high, mirthful laughter.

Mr Quincy raised his eyebrows with cold fury. Ominous whispers hissed to life within the conservatory, as though to punctuate his dark mood. Strange, sinister growls accompanied them, crawling along the stained glass roses like angry, writhing insects.

Had Winnie been anyone else, she might have found this appropriately terrifying—but since she knew these sounds to be an illusion, she couldn't help perceiving them instead as a kind of childish tantrum, all too similar to Robert's earlier posturing. *This* revelation only made her laugh even harder, clutching at the pianoforte for support as she imagined Mr Quincy as a child half his size, scowling up at her with a sullen faerie pout.

"Am I humorous to you, Miss Hall?" the butler hissed, leaning across the piano towards her. "I could remedy that shortly, if you wish." His rat's tail thrashed again, with obvious, growing violence.

Winnie wiped at her eyes, struggling to catch her breath. "Well, I... it's just..." She gestured helplessly towards his tail. "I had no idea. Oliver always was a champion mouser. He must have found you irresistible indeed."

Mr Quincy's jaw tightened. His crimson eyes flashed. "How pleased I am to be of entertainment," he said. But since the illusion had so obviously failed to move her, he seemed

content to let the magic slowly fade. The ominous whispers died, trickling back into an icy silence.

Winnie sucked in a few deep, steadying breaths, reaching up to push back the strands of hair which had come loose from her bun. "I might feel sorry for you if you hadn't been skulking around outside my room in the middle of the night," she told him bluntly. "You *must* admit how very untoward that is, Mr Quincy."

At this, the butler rounded the piano. In the space of a single, sudden breath, he was there before her—tall and looming and foreboding. His dark figure made a smudge against the dirty stained glass roses as he leaned over Winnie, curling his lip into a sneer.

"You have come here with some cunning tricks, Miss Hall," he drawled, with quiet menace. "But they will not save you. And if you continue with this false bravado... I do believe that it may be your end."

Winnie looked up at Mr Quincy, studying his features closely. His face was even narrower than she recalled, and his chin a hint more pointed. There was a striking magnetism to him, though, which could not be denied—as though the darkest corners of the manor were drawn to the edges of his figure, offering an outline to his gaunt and ghostly form.

"Bravado?" Winnie asked softly. "I fear you're incorrect, Mr Quincy. I have not put on any false bravado." She offered a regretful smile. "All of my worst fears take the form of human beings, you see. As soon as I realised you were a faerie, I lost my fear entirely. Unwise as that may be, it's simply how I feel—I cannot change my own mind for your benefit."

The darkness in Mr Quincy's gaze did not falter... but somehow, Winnie thought that she detected a subtle shift in his appreciation of the situation. For once, she had uttered a

truth aloud, unprompted; perhaps he had detected its veracity.

Mr Quincy tilted his head at her, now lowering his voice. His red eyes burned strangely in the gloom of the conservatory. "Nevertheless," he murmured, "what you do not fear will deign to eat you up, Miss Hall. I have your magical perfume. Your churlish cat cannot be everywhere. And now, you cannot even ask for help."

This last suggestion baffled Winnie. "Can I not?" she asked.

Mr Quincy's lips curved up into a ghost of a smile. "Do try," he told her. "You will find you cannot speak of me to others. Nor can you discuss the nature of the curse on Witchwood Manor."

Winnie pursed her lips thoughtfully. *I was perfectly able to speak of Mr Quincy to Margaret earlier this morning*, she thought. But slowly, a suspicion came upon her, and she let out a soft 'ah'.

"You have used my name to bind me," Winnie guessed. "Just as you have bound every other servant in this household. How many names have you collected, Mr Quincy?"

The butler smiled tauntingly. He leaned in closer, such that his breath brushed Winnie's ear. The scent of bay berry was warmer than she remembered, as it wafted off his skin. Beneath it, she could swear there was a hint of copper-tasting blood.

"I have collected one *more* name since this morning," Mr Quincy whispered to her.

Winnie froze.

"You *have* seen Master Robert, then," she observed carefully. Suddenly, she did not dare to move, despite the faerie's close proximity.

"Oh, I have," Mr Quincy told her pleasantly. Now that he

had discovered an advantage over Winnie, he was suddenly all smiles. "Ask me where he is, Miss Hall."

Winnie clenched her fingers into her palms. She had little choice but to play along. "Where has Robert gone, Mr Quincy?" she asked, with forced obedience.

The faerie laughed and drew back once again. "Somewhere very dangerous," he assured her. "Give me a truthful answer to one question of my own, and I will tell you more."

Winnie drew in a long and forceful breath, reminding herself to practice patience. Mr Quincy *wanted* her to be afraid. Perhaps, if she conjured up an illusion of that fear, he'd offer her more answers. It was a little lie, all things considered.

Winnie slipped a quavering note into her voice. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

Mr Quincy narrowed his red eyes. "Tell me of another trick you've brought with you to Witchwood Manor," he said. "One I do not know of yet."

Winnie pressed her lips together, thinking quickly. "I have a very sharp knife upon my chatelaine," she said, "and I am practised in its use."

Mr Quincy scoffed. "I saw your knife yesterday, when I opened the door for you," he said. "Tell me something *useful*, Miss Hall—or else I shall take my leave."

Winnie cursed internally. Mr Quincy was still too clever by half. She had only two useful answers left to give—and of course, she did not wish to give them. But that was in the nature of a deal, after all.

Winnie debated for a long and painful moment, before deciding that her cartomancy was the worthier secret of the two which she had left. Instead, she offered up the other one.

"I have brought lies with me, Mr Quincy," she responded

reluctantly. “I have told you several crucial lies already—and to my knowledge, you’ve believed them.”

The butler weighed this answer strongly. Faeries could not lie—though neither were they bound to tell the truth, exactly. That other creatures might tell outright falsehoods rarely occurred to them, as a result.

But Winnie had reminded Mr Quincy of this oversight now... and surely, he would be on guard against it in the future.

“*Take me to the gamekeeper’s lodge,*” Robert’s voice demanded suddenly. His small silhouette appeared beneath a white sheet across from Winnie with its hands on its hips, addressing Mr Quincy with the boy’s trademark sneer. The drape rippled like a faceless funeral shroud—as though Robert’s ghost had moved it.

Mr Quincy turned his head towards the illusory voice with a smile. “And who is it that asks me?” he addressed the shadow, pressing a hand to his chest.

“*I am the next Lord Longfell, you dolt,*” Robert’s illusion declared with contempt. The likeness was so perfect that Winnie couldn’t help but cringe.

“Of course, my lord,” Mr Quincy said, with an obsequious bow. “But please, what is your *full* name? I find myself at quite the disadvantage.”

“*I am the Honourable Mr Robert Murray,*” the young boy’s voice said with impatience, “*and I demand you show me to the gamekeeper’s lodge.*” The shape beneath the white drape pointed its finger at Mr Quincy.

“I fear that I cannot go with you,” Mr Quincy replied, with gravest apology in his tone and a sinister amusement in his dark red eyes. “But I will give you the directions that you seek, since you have so kindly offered me your name. You will find

the gamekeeper's lodge to the east of Witchwood Manor, down a trail which leads into the woods."

Winnie groaned aloud. Already, the foolish boy had made her job a hundred times more difficult, handing out his name so casually—and for such a *pittance*, too.

The shadow disappeared. The white drape slowly fluttered into stillness. When it had settled entirely, Mr Quincy turned to look at Winnie with his hands spread at his sides. "There," he told her. "To the best of my knowledge, the Honourable Mr Robert Murray has gone to the gamekeeper's lodge. I trust that answer is sufficient to your question."

Winnie pressed her lips together. "You told me he was somewhere very *dangerous*, Mr Quincy," she observed.

The butler straightened and stepped aside with a mocking smile. "I always tell the truth, Miss Hall," he said. "There is a monster in the Witchwood. I count it very dangerous, myself."

Winnie nearly bolted for the exit of the room, all at once—but she forced herself to linger, painfully aware that further information would be far more valuable than speed. "What sort of monster is it?" she asked, with a rising edge to her voice.

Mr Quincy shook his head. "You have had your question," he told her. "I'll be of no more use to you today, Miss Hall—you may rely upon it."

Winnie whirled with a curse, and started sprinting for the front door of Witchwood Manor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivia Atwater writes whimsical historical fantasy with a hint of satire. She lives in Montreal, Quebec with her fantastic, prose-inspiring husband and her two cats. When she told her second-grade history teacher that she wanted to work with history someday, she is fairly certain this isn't what either party had in mind. She has been, at various times, a historical re-enactor, a professional witch at a metaphysical supply store, a web developer, and a vending machine repairperson.



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