

THE
CRUEL
DARK

BEA NORTHWICK

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Epilogue

Acknowledgements

Here's to finding ourselves.

Chapter 1

I'd never questioned the presence of my wits more than the moment I stood in the frigid morning air and watched the hired car arrive. The vehicle, sleek and ostentatious, was said to be capable of going fifty miles an hour, and I pretended it was the prospect of that speed making my stomach do somersaults.

The car pulled to a smooth stop, and a tall, ruddy driver unfolded himself from the front seat, introduced himself briefly as Joseph Dempsey, and went to collect my bags. It was short work; I had only one. I wasn't a woman of means. As the gentleman loaded my valise into the trunk, I ran my bare fingers along the smooth deep sea blue of the wheel hull. This was, undoubtedly, the worst decision I'd ever made, but there were few options, and this was by far the least evil of them.

I glanced over my shoulder to the doorway of the little bookshop I'd come to know as home, where the stooped owner, Mr. Helm, had appeared, his blue eyes uncharacteristically red-rimmed. I'd never seen him on the verge of tears, and my heart constricted painfully. I rushed to him, pulling a thin cotton handkerchief from my pocket. It wasn't in his character to embrace, so he enveloped both of my hands in his. They were large hands, covered in the ink stains of his trade as an antique

book restorer, a business he had been teaching me for the past year despite his once firmly held belief that restoration was not for women.

Mr. Helm had been a tall man in his youth, but the war and many years hunched over a workman's table had scuttled his stature. I didn't need to lift my chin to look at his face, which was working to arrange itself into something less aggrieved. I was glad for his trying, because I would call off everything if even one tear rolled down his cheek.

"My dear," he said, his voice hitching. "You will be sorely missed."

"Oh, Mr. Helm." My own words warbled. "I'm positive you'll find another helper soon, and she'll give you grief about leaving out your tools and scold you for all the ink on your shirts."

He squeezed my fingers.

"Horseshit. Where will I find another assistant who reads ancient scripts *and* makes the best damn coffee this side of the country? No, you're one of a kind, Millie, my girl, and I hope you find peace and happiness in your future. Leave the dark, lonely rooms of old forgotten bookshops behind you and all your ghosts with them."

It was the first time Mr. Helm had ever officially referred to me as his assistant and the first he'd ever acknowledged the dark moods I tried so hard to keep to myself. I loved him more for his knowing. Eighteen months ago, I'd come to the bookshop seeking employment as a housekeeper. My official

responsibilities had been to keep the shop in order and tend to Mr. Helm's household needs. Those had been few for a gruff, busy old man used to living alone, and a month of grueling boredom had come and gone before I'd snuck one of the fragile texts on the Battle of Assandun and began reading it in my downtime. It wasn't the most riveting read, but any new knowledge was worth having. He'd discovered my secret without reprimand and then began requesting my help with his work in the smallest of ways. That seemed a lifetime ago.

I tried to offer him my brightest smile.

"I'll come back when this assignment is finished. It won't take the professor more than a year to write his paper, and then..."

I lost my train of thought.

Professor Callum Hughes was the master of Willowfield, a small historic estate a full day from Boston, where I'd shown up, not a penny to my name and a gaping black hole where years of memory should be.

"This Professor Hughes," Mr. Helm started, and I steeled myself for another of his grave warnings, a tale of caution, one of the hundreds offered to me like sparkling farewell wishes from longtime customers who'd heard of my plans. A young woman taking any position in a widowed household was risky. Mr. Helm appeared to change his mind about what he was going to say, alerting me to my expression. I consciously relaxed the tense muscles in my forehead.

“Give it your best,” he offered instead. “If you must leave for any reason, you’ll always be welcome here.”

“I know,” I replied, and this time tears wet my cheeks. Mr. Helm took my handkerchief and wiped my eyes, then cupped my face in his hands and placed a sound kiss on my forehead.

“God be with you, Millie,” he said.

I sniffed, nodded smartly to show him I was keeping a stiff upper lip, then headed to the car before I started to bawl like a lost child. As I climbed in, I combated my sorrow with the knowledge that I was working my way up in the world, closer to the day I could live a safer, less haunted existence.

Mr. Dempsey fell heavily into the driver’s seat with the grunt of a man whose back wasn’t as good as it used to be. I waved once more to Mr. Helm through the window before the vehicle lurched and began its slow crawl down the road clogged with walkers and shoppers. The old bookkeep watched the car like a man watching a hearse carry off the dead.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Millicent,” I admonished myself. I was letting my morbid fancy run away again. The driver gave me an odd look in the rearview.

I adjusted my threadbare wool bengaline skirt, the nicest I owned though it was secondhand. Blue and brown plaid made it dowdy, especially when paired with a white blouse and tan pullover as it was. I touched the felt of my cloche hat, knowing it didn’t become me the way it did the other young women I saw walking the

streets of Boston, their hair cut short, their moon faces painted in kohl and cheery rouge. It was 1928, a year of evermore daring fashions, but I remained comfortable and unnoticed wrapped in unassuming beiges, though I'd dabbed a bit of blush to my cheeks to make me seem alive. At only twenty-six years old I felt I was approaching sixty but had no energy to mind it. I glanced again at the throngs of youth mulling near the Jordan Marsh department store on Washington Street as we passed. They were all little stars brightening the walkways with their smiles and their eyes full of mischief and freedom. I was the dust being swept from under their feet.

“How long until we arrive?” I asked.

“It's a good 120 miles, and the state of the roads out west are something else. We'll be seeing the better part of a six-hour trek, and that's with a bit of speedy driving, if you don't mind, miss.”

My skin became clammy. “Er, no. No, I don't mind. It's better to get there faster, I think.”

He gave me a cheeky wink. “I promise I won't break thirty.”

I settled against the seat, wondering about our destination. Before the silence grew too thick to break easily, I asked, “Do you know much about Willowfield?”

“Only that it's deserted these days. Just a couple of staff left to the whole place.” He glanced back at me, waiting for my reaction. The news *was* startling. I'd been under the impression the estate was large, a home built

at the turn of the century by a family who made their fortune, as many other families had, in the flowering shipping trade. I'd assumed it would be bustling with the typical activity expected of such an estate. My knowledge of the professor was further limited, and all I was sure of was he was currently on sabbatical, studying Celtic folklore and the psychology of myth. He was desperate for an assistant who knew enough ancient language to help him organize his notes and who wouldn't mind living out in the middle of nowhere. The image of a meandering, lost-in-thought academic was so typical it was almost a caricature, but the messier he was, the better for me. The longer I was there, the more money I could squirrel away to escape my current reality: no savings, no living family, and a psychiatric hospitalization, which turned most decent employers away, clutching their breast.

Mad Millie.

I had planned to use the size of Willowfield's staff to my advantage by staying hidden in the chaos and being present only when needed. The less one-on-one exposure I had with my employer, the less difficult it would be to avoid damning personal conversations. I'd been quiet for too long. One of the driver's eyebrows was slightly raised.

"I'm surprised," I said carefully, "that Professor Hughes went through the trouble of hiring an assistant and a fancy chauffeur service if he was struggling financially."

The delight in the driver's eyes was evident. He was giddy with his knowledge.

“Oh, the professor is still wealthy, miss. Aside from family money, the man owns a perfumery. He's got two factories and greenhouses all across the country.”

He purposefully said no more, waiting for me to ask.

“Then why so little staff?” I obliged, sighing inwardly.

“Well, I reckon it's because of the ghosts.”

Despite myself, I laughed. The sound was sudden, incredulous, filling the small space uncomfortably. My hope for decent information crumbled. I wasn't interested in rumors and ghost stories, but the chauffeur bouldered on.

“Not a laughing matter, miss. I imagine there'd be ghosts anywhere someone died so tragically.”

There it was. The information I'd been hoping for.

“Yes, I'd heard Mrs. Hughes had passed away.”

“A sad state of affairs. Had herself a fit. Professor Hughes called in a doctor from town to calm her nerves, you know, medicinally. The professor says she ran out of the house in the middle of the night, screaming, and threw herself into a river.”

The chauffeur was making a riveting story, and my belly curdled.

“How terrible. The poor woman.”

“Oh, I can't imagine the professor minded much.”

Of everything he'd said so far, this incensed me the most.

“What an awful thing to say!”

“Oh no, miss. It was likely a relief to him. Everyone in town knew Mrs. Hughes was mad as a hatter.”

Mad.

Mad Millie.

Shock punched through my morbid curiosity, and the car interior began to close, the windows growing dark, the ceiling lowering until I was cramped and coiled, the air thick with heat, the stench of exhaust gagging me.

“Miss Foxboro?”

Mr. Dempsey's concerned call roused me from the oncoming attack, and my vision cleared, though my heart continued to rabbit in my chest. I held my breath against the stench of the imagined fumes, my hand pressed over my nose and mouth. I'd hunched my shoulders forward as though I were in a small space. Hurriedly, I straightened myself.

“That's enough storytelling for now,” I replied weakly.

“I didn't mean to upset you, miss.” He sounded sincere. “It's better you know what you're going into in case you decide to change your mind. It's a long way from the estate back to any town.”

“Thank you for your concern, but I don't take stock in rumors. It's just car sickness. I didn't eat breakfast.” I

was lying. Nerves had led me to eat a large breakfast, one I was beginning to regret.

“Let me know if I need to stop anytime, miss.”

“Yes, thank you. I will.”

I fell silent, inspecting the passing scenery. We moved out of the town and into a stretch of country, fields wet and dreary on either side of the road. Despite the dappling of the morning sun through the clouds, they remained a bitter picture of stagnant life and didn't lift my spirits.

I began to ask myself for the thousandth time why I was doing this, leaving my tedious but safe existence as a shadow in a bookshop for what was a decidedly suspicious assignment far from anything and anyone familiar. But I knew why.

A month ago, a round little man sporting the most absurd mustache I had ever seen bustled into Mr. Helm's shop looking like a kindly walrus. It had started to rain, the dramatic kind of affair that poured as neatly and vigorously as a garden faucet. I'd been on a step stool, covered in dust, arranging a collection of newly rebound anatomy books from the early nineteenth century. No one had entered the door all morning, and I hadn't expected anyone to come for the rest of the day. People usually didn't, even when the weather was nice.

I greeted him. He gave me a cursory glance, said a cheery hello, then began to browse, likely wanting to waste time while he waited for the weather to change. After a few moments, he asked me if we had any fairy

tales. He wanted it as a gift for one of his longtime clients. He was the doctor for an established family who'd been reduced to their only son, a recent widower, and the doctor hoped the gift would help bring some brightness to him.

I regretfully had to disappoint him, because the single type of book lining the shelves at Helm's Bookshoppe was academic: history and science, mathematics and astronomy, books from decades to centuries old, and even a small copy on evolution written by Mr. Darwin. Few people knew that one was there.

His disposition was so pleasant that I hadn't the heart to leave it at that. Somewhat guiltily, I referred him to a competitor on the far side of town that I frequented myself for fairy stories. The rain had not let up, and we'd chatted to pass the time. He'd been curious about my interest in fairy tales, and we whiled away nearly half an hour talking about the folktales his Irish mother had told him as a boy, many that I'd heard before and some I hadn't. By the time the rain turned to a mere drizzle, we were almost good friends, and he took his leave with a smile and a tip of his hat. That would have been the end, but the very next day the doctor returned to the shop to offer an employment proposition I couldn't refuse, mainly because the pay was extravagant.

The car bumped over an unfriendly stone, jarring me out of my memories. I recognized the way we were going.

Soon, the immensity of Our Lady of Grace Hospital would be in view. Before the World War, it had been a

well-appointed university always at complete enrollment, but with the draft, its once-hallowed halls emptied and became a countryside extension of a hospital specifically established to treat patients with physical and psychological injuries from battle.

Now, it treated patients of all backgrounds, including civilians. I myself had woken in one of its humorless, white-washed wings only two years ago.

I turned my face away from the upcoming view of it, staring purposefully at the bleak landscape instead, determined to think of nothing else but what might lie in store for me and my new future at Willowfield.

Chapter 2

The length of the car ride proved challenging, especially as we left the straight, sure roads of the city and entered the country lanes that meandered in long curves through the naked hills. Hours passed and a headache marched in time behind my weary eyes. I'd had enough of surveying the passing views, which didn't differ from one mile to the next this time of year. My attempt to read the book I'd brought was a failure and likely the cause of both my headache and my unsettled insides.

Despite the driver's earlier gregariousness, he wasn't much for conversation, and it remained quiet. I was tired and had run out of things to speculate about Willowfield, so I gave in to a small amount of self-pity. I hadn't wanted to leave the shop. In fact, it had been my plan to stay with Mr. Helm until his last day on Earth. But the old gentleman's eldest son had begun to convince him to retire and settle down with his children in Ipswich. All I might have expected was a severance fee of one month's salary and then I would be sent on my way to nowhere and nothing. Though I'd been nearly two years in the city, I had no friends, few acquaintances, and no reason to reject a sum of money that would allow me to return to New York, where I had lived my entire life before the deaths of my parents.

The thought of them sent a sharp chill through me, and I decisively considered other things. I pictured the doctor's trustworthy face, his excitement for having found a willing employee for his struggling friend, and my foolishness for having said yes so quickly without considering all the potential pitfalls of the arrangement. I'd been desperate. I still was.

The road became less rocky, and the car hummed along smoothly, the warmth of the modern heater core all new cars had keeping me comfortable despite the snow flurries swirling outside. A blizzard was not uncommon this time of year, though spring was just a breath away.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Well, if we keep ahead of this snow, another three hours, miss. But if things get choppy, we'll need to stop for the night.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. I gave an annoyed glance back to the snow-filled sky, cursing its lack of sympathy for my nerves. A swift movement among the bare trees lining the roadway drew my eye. Something darted along through the spindly winter trunks in the same direction as the car. It must have been a deer, and I was excited to glimpse one after living in the city for so long. I searched for it again. There. Another flash, something gossamer white, moving fast and sure in the underbrush. It was keeping up with our speed, and I was having a difficult time deciphering its shape. With the shadows and dense changing of the

landscape, the creature looked so odd. I could have mistaken it for human.

Uneasy, I turned to the driver to comment on the bizarre shape racing through the woods, when a woman ran into the road directly ahead of us, dressed in white, her translucent hair whipping in the wind, obscuring her features. She raised an arm to shield herself from the impact, clutching a bouquet of pale flowers in her fist. We hit her with a bone-jarring thud, her body disappearing beneath the hood.

I jolted awake with a squeak. We were still moving, and there were no snow flurries, no storm clouds in the sky, no woman in white. Everything was quiet.

The driver glanced at me apologetically.

“Sorry, miss. The roads this far from the main aren’t maintained well, wasn’t able to avoid that divot. You hit them just right and they’ll shake your teeth out of your head. Did you enjoy your nap? You’ve been sleeping like the dead for the last two hours.”

I released an uneasy breath, aggravated at this man for having put such macabre nonsense in my head at the onset of the trip. His tactless ghost stories were already giving me nightmares.

“Yes,” I replied vaguely. The terrain had changed, the dense forests sloping into hills, dormant orchards, and low stone fences. “Where are we?”

“Coming up on Willowfield, miss,” he replied. “You can see it just ahead.”

The trees had opened up to a swath of rolling hills, cleared of their brush and forests to make room for the estate's orchards, open lawns, and the famous sprawling gardens. Even from a distance I could appreciate their magnitude. Oaks, willows, and cypress had been placed meticulously to draw the eye to what might have been a sight from a fairy tale in spring but was now fractured, bare, and frightfully sad. A glass greenhouse rose wistful from the west, its glass ceiling reflecting the gloom of the evening, and standing guard at the center of it all, a Châteauesque manor, forbidding against the cold gray sky. It was awe-inspiring, monstrous, and my gasp was part delight and dismay. An army of spires and turrets topped the hipped roofs, stabbing toward the heavens, and a peppering of stone chimneys further crowded the roofline, though only a single one puffed with warm smoke. Curved dormers attempted to soften the severity of the sharp-lined gables and brown masonry but made only to give the estate an air of exhausted life, turning the many windows into hooded eyes, dark and unwelcoming.

The driver whistled low.

“Extravagance was the name of the game when they built this place. Used to be mighty fine once. Practically magical,” he said. “They opened the gardens to the public every spring and hosted some excellent dinners, invited the whole town. The missus and I used to bring the ankle biters in the summer for their Independence Day festival. Look at it now. Big place like that with only a handful of

people in it. Isn't right. Hughes would be better off selling the place to the university."

"They offered?"

"Oh sure, several times. Don't know why he won't let it go, what with all the bad memories. If it were me, I would've left first thing. Too much grief. Too many ghosts."

"Not again with the ghosts, Mr. Dempsey."

"Not literal ghosts, miss. Though, as I mentioned, I wouldn't bet against there being a few of those roaming the halls. Strange things bloom where grief lives."

We pulled into the gravel drive, the house looming huge overhead, glaring down at me like an old dowager, suspicious of new things. It was not a welcoming house with its dark windows and suffocating vines creeping up the walls and over the front entrance as though it were trying to seal up whatever was inside. The fountain at the center of the driveway was an enormous affair of carved stone, featuring a woman with arms raised in welcome, an apple resting in the fingers of one hand as though an offering to guests. Stone birds, the likes of which didn't exist anywhere outside of dreams, preened and perched on her shoulders, and hid beneath her unpinned hair forever caught in a phantom wind. Around her legs resting on a set of rising waves were pitchers that should have been pouring water from their spouts. But there was no water. Instead, the fountain was dry save for the basin, which held several inches of stagnant, algae-ridden sludge, a paradise for mosquitos come summer.

The car came to a slow halt, and for a moment both the driver and I sat in the warmth of the cabin, staring out the windows.

“Miss...” Mr. Dempsey broke the silence with a nervous twist of his hands on the steering wheel. “My conscience won’t let me drop you here alone—I don’t see a soul, and it’s miles back to anywhere resembling civilization.”

“Oh, that’s silly,” I reprimanded a bit harshly as I was having second, even third thoughts, myself. “I’m sure there’s someone.”

“There’s not a light in the whole place.”

“It’s not dusk yet.”

It was the weakest argument to ever be uttered, but it was the only one I had. He was right. Every window was dark, all empty eyes in a forbidding face.

Before he said another word and perhaps even convinced me to turn and run the other way, I opened my door and exited, shoes crunching on pebbled granite. The early evening smelled of ice, and the chill of the air took my breath away. I reached back in for my things as the chauffeur continued to stare up at the mammoth structure through the windshield.

“Come on, Mr. Dempsey, it’ll all be just fine, and it’s cold.”

He glanced at me again then reluctantly straightened himself from the car and traveled to the trunk to remove my bag as I threw my coat on. I decided against my hat,

which was old and merely for function rather than style. First impressions were as important as they came, and I wanted to look as unlike a street urchin as possible.

The driver brought my things, and we made our way together up the stone steps to the front entrance, a fancy affair despite the Boston vines creeping up the front. They were undisturbed, a testament to the lack of guests. The double doors were heavy oak, carved with winding roots and climbing branches that reached into the transom, where an inlaid glass of blue and green made a whimsical canopy. The Nouveau style was out of touch with the estate's harsh early-century elements but was appealing and still enchanted me.

"It's the tree of life," I muttered, tempted to caress the ornate handle resembling something from a storybook.

"Tree of what?" Mr. Dempsey grunted, eyeing the entrance distrustfully.

"Tree of life. It's Celtic. Surely you're familiar?"

"I'm Protestant, miss." The twinkle in his eye kept me from being annoyed at the wisecrack.

"It represents a connection to nature, strength."

"Huh," he replied. "There's some irony for you."

I disregarded his callous comment and instead motioned to an inlaid brass button that still appeared new, garish next to the faded glory of its surroundings. "There's an electric door chime. It appears some of their renovations were completed after all."

I pressed the button, expecting the typical buzz of ringers that had become so common in the last decade. Instead, there was a peal of chimes, low and whimsical, echoing beyond the thick wooden door panel. My heart trilled along with the sound, so fanciful it banished some of my disquiet.

“The wealthy and their gadgets,” Mr. Dempsey jested, fascinated by the bell but still unsettled.

Several moments passed as we stood next to each other in the cold. I imagined we both felt we were children at the feet of an unfamiliar authority, unsure of whether praise or punishment awaited.

“Miss, I really don’t think there’s anyone here.”

“Hey ’o!”

A mustachioed man appeared around a scraggly copse of evergreen bushes at the corner of the house, and I was extremely relieved.

“Dr. Hannigan!” I exclaimed gladly as he jogged toward us.

“Millie, my girl! You weren’t expected until nightfall! These machines, what a feat of engineering, eh?” He slowed as he reached the car to admire its sleek body and bright paint. “Fifty miles an hour. It should be fiction, but here you are all the way from Boston before the sun’s even set!”

“It was an adventure,” I said politely, offering a tiny grin to the driver to show him I was appreciative. He wasn’t minding me. He was fidgeting, uncomfortable.

The doctor met us on the steps and waved to the door. “I was preparing to leave—my own car is at the back there, a much older model, of course—but I heard your voices. Everyone is probably miles away from the front door, it’ll take them ages. Come, come, everything’s unlocked. It always is.”

He moved to take the bag from the driver, who appeared to want to say something, but at last, handed my things over.

“You’re positive you want to stay, miss?”

“Very, Mr. Dempsey. Thank you for everything and be sure to drive safely.”

He tipped his flat cap to me then hurried down the steps, eager to be back in the warmth of the car and as far away from the estate as possible. With a last wary glance at the house, he pulled the beautiful roadster out of the driveway and onto the way that would lead him through the woods toward town.

“A kind fellow to be so concerned for you,” the doctor complimented, watching the car for a moment, his cheeks as rosy as St. Nick’s. “Nothing to worry about, though. I’d trust the professor with my life. Ms. Dillard, too, even though the woman is darned hard to read sometimes.”

I laughed and followed him to the door. “He spent some of the ride trying to convince me this place was haunted.”

Dr. Hannigan stopped short and I nearly ran into him.

“Haunted? What nonsense!”

He seemed so genuinely displeased I was sorry I’d said anything.

“That’s exactly what I told him. He was just trying to pull my leg, no harm done.”

Seeing I wasn’t put off by spine-tingling tales, the doctor was placated.

“All of that rot is what’s nearly done this place in, the nasty rumors and the ghastly lies about spirits. One by one all the servants quit, and as the place became emptier even the sturdiest of them got spooked. A place like this is filled with nothing more than memories. I’m glad to know you’re of sturdy mind.”

The door was heavy and impeded by the vines. It took the doctor a good bit of effort to open.

“Damn this door. No one uses it anymore. The hinges are worthless, and all these weeds are growing over it like the blasted secret garden. The few who make it to the estate just use the back entrance; I should have taken you that way.”

With another heave, the door finally gave, complaining every inch it moved. Slightly winded, the doctor raised his arm in a dignified gesture, inviting me in.

I stepped into the foyer, my breath leaving me. Towering marble pillars drew the eye to the imposing

arch it supported, separating the entryway from the main hall beyond. The focal point from the door was a magnificent staircase sweeping to the second floor, branching out left and right before climbing again to the third and final level above. Titanic lanterns, topped with frosted globes, flanked the first steps, the intricate styling of each arm boasting what appeared from here to be animals of all kinds. I longed to get a closer look.

The stairs themselves were in a state of ruin: sections of banister missing, cracked marbling only partially replaced, the great red carpet runner rolled and discarded on the floor, dusty and worn. Here was evidence of halted renovations, projects half done and abandoned by superstitious workers. Giant pots of ferns loomed around the main hall, surrounded by seating that invited a guest to linger, to wait for the appearance of their host. I imagined the fine women who must have made their entrance down the steps into a crowd of waiting admirers, smiling and glittering with anticipation.

I pulled my attention back into the foyer where we stood, more stairs flanking us, practical and less resplendent but beautiful with their carved banisters and worn floral runners. These went only one floor up and appeared oft used but sturdy. Slightly visible from here were hallway doors above, painted white. The deeply embossed Lincrusta wallpaper, gold and blue, added an almost mind-addling dimension to the space. But there, near the edges of the windows and around the plaster ceiling coffers, seeping water stains pulled and marred

the designs, bloating the wall beneath. I imagined the soft, pulpy feel of it under my fingers and shivered.

The house as a whole was astounding, a show of both impressive wealth and work, but I wondered what aspects of the opulence would fall away upon closer inspection, what other decay might be discovered if I dared peer closely enough. Yet even in disrepair, the house was far grander than anywhere I'd ever laid my head. I allowed myself to enjoy a positive thought. With the staff being so reduced, I could explore unhindered. The prospect was thrilling.

“Just wait here, my dear. I'll go along and let Callum know you've arrived.”

I hadn't considered the possibility the doctor would leave me alone. The remaining daylight was enough to illuminate the entrance hall, but there were no electric lights on, and no gas lights besides. The sun was beginning to make its western descent, turning the cloudy sky a bruised purple. Soon dusk would fall and I might very well be standing in the dark. Despite my concerns, I gave a cheerful nod, and Dr. Hannigan took off to the left, skipping up the stairs with commendable spryness for a man of his age. I stood awkwardly alone for a minute and contemplated the plaster ceiling but felt so silly and small waiting by the door. To shake the unsettling sensation of being fully alone, I made the most of the remaining sunlight and ventured to peek into the great hall.

I gingerly made my way through the middle of the vast space, between the ferns that reached like fingers toward the ceiling, miles above. Without the archway blocking my view, I could see the glass domes set above the plants to offer them the light they needed to thrive. The cold, however, had sealed their fate, and this close I discovered they were dry and brown. My curiosity led me farther to the stairs where the lanterns loomed, formidable and exquisite. I had been right. The brass arms of the lamp were each set with an exotic animal in motion. Giraffes lifting their heads toward the glass, a rhinoceros with front legs raised in stampede, elephants whose mighty trunks wrapped around the patinaed branches of a tree, and a lion, sitting proudly at the bottommost arm, its face turned toward the hall like a sentinel. The lion's gaze was so mournful, as though it longed to see anything but the dark, empty space of this once-glittering house. I ascended a stair to brush my fingers along its carved muzzle when a woman's scream pierced the silence, filling the hall with an echo of fear. I lurched sideways away from the wail, lost my footing, and tumbled to the floor.

Chapter 3

I hit the floor on my hands and knees, a twinge shooting up my right wrist at the clumsy way I'd caught myself. With the echoing shriek still bouncing between my ears, I looked up, no doubt resembling a frightened animal, to find an even more frightened housemaid, both hands tightly clasped over her mouth. Her breath came in quick rushes from her dainty nose, and she trembled as though she'd seen a corpse rise from its grave. Whatever color might have been present on her ivory cheeks had drained, and she was as white as the linens that spilled haphazardly from the laundry basket she'd dropped to the floor.

I was annoyed. She'd scared me witless, but, apparently, I'd done the same to her. As I worked to pull myself together, an older woman, somewhere in her fifties, and a golden haired man came rushing across the hall from opposite directions.

"What in heaven's name!" The elder lady's fair features were softened by her years, and though her hair was still primarily chestnut brown, she'd fashioned it in an outdated billowing coif that made her look like an aging Gibson girl. She wore a modest gray dress, plain and uncomplicated, and a starched white apron, not a smudge on it. I surmised she belonged to the house.

As for the man, if I'd been a schoolgirl, I would have called him an Adonis, blond and tan, sun-soaked despite the brutal weather. It was clear he spent his days outside, regardless of the temperature. He checked the maid's well-being with a glance, then leveled his bright eyes, cornflower blue, in my direction, curious. He was average height and broad, muscular from labor. Dirt was smudged along the exposed skin of his arms where his sleeves had been rolled up, and the mud caking his work boots had made a long, dirty trail behind him. This was the groundskeeper Dr. Hannigan had mentioned, and the woman was surely Ms. Dillard, the head housekeeper—all of Willowfield's staff gathered in the main hall.

Ms. Dillard finally gave me her attention, flustered concern deforming into something mildly bitter, as though she'd bit into a lemon rind. Decorum spirited away the unpleasant twist of her lips and a waxy neutrality reformed her face. This was not a woman who wanted guests in the house, especially not guests like me.

“You're Miss”—she paused, searching for the name—“Foxboro.”

At this point, I and everyone else realized I was still sprawled on the floor. I hastily prepared to stand at the same time the groundskeeper rushed to aid me. He smelled of frost and damp earth, and something else, something sweet. His touch was gentle, his fingers calloused. His nose, likely broken once or twice, tilted slightly to the right, adding a bit of devil to his otherwise angelic face.

“Sorry, miss,” he apologized, though I wasn’t sure why.

“What’s all this?” came the harried voice of the doctor. Though he’d completed the job of announcing my arrival, Professor Hughes was not with him. “What’s happened?”

He bustled toward me, Ms. Dillard opening her mouth to say something before being brushed aside. She huffed, pestered by the insolence. The maid had not moved but continued to stare, a paralyzed horror lingering in her eyes.

“Millie, are you light-headed? Are you hurt?” Dr. Hannigan was all business, shooing away the groundkeeper, who still had his hand at my elbow, and taking my chin, tilting my head one way and another, searching for injuries.

I took his hand gently, removing it from my face. The attention flustered me, making it feel like I was back in Our Lady of Grace again being poked and prodded, asked all manner of questions I’d been unable to answer. The last thing I wanted or needed was any reason for these people, my new peers, to decide I was a basket case.

Mad Millie, my mother’s voice echoed in my ears.

I’d been fine, though the scare had peaked me, but now my throat tightened, the muscles in my shoulders coiling up and building an ache in the base of my skull. In a moment, the world would collapse on top of me. I took a measured breath.

“I was on the *bottom* step when I lost my footing.” I emphasized my position to ease his mind. “I haven’t hurt myself. Honestly, I’m all right. Is she?”

I purposefully directed everyone’s attention away, and three gazes shifted to the waifish maid, whose gray eyes were a bit too large for her face, giving her an ethereal appearance that likely handed her plenty of masculine attention.

“I’m fine,” she half whispered. “I wasn’t expecting to see anyone here in the foyer. The house has been empty for so long. I thought...”

Ms. Dillard shushed the girl, not unkindly, and patted her back. “It’s all right, Felicity. Some strong tea will do you good. Rodney, come take Felicity to the kitchen. I’ll be there in a moment.”

She passed the young woman to the groundskeeper, who placed a hand on her back in a brotherly way and shuffled her off. She cast me one last glance over her shoulder, unblinking, and they disappeared into a portico.

“I’ve already alerted Callum to the young lady’s arrival,” Dr. Hannigan informed Ms. Dillard, who still hadn’t introduced herself to me. I took the initiative.

“I apologize for my chaotic arrival. You must be...”

“Ms. Dillard,” she finished for me, uninterested in pleasantries. “I manage the household for the professor. Welcome to Willowfield.”

To my ears, it didn’t sound like a welcome at all.

My cheeks burned, frustration making knots in my shoulders. I hadn't even seen my employer yet and things were already going disastrously. I couldn't have made a worse first impression, and this woman who was the overseer of everything that transpired within these walls was unhappy there was an interloper in her midst.

"I'm delighted to be here," I said, determined to make friends.

"I'm sure the professor is waiting for you." Ms. Dillard sought silent confirmation from the doctor, who nodded and offered me a reassuring shoulder squeeze.

"When Felicity recovers, she'll take your bags"—she paused and corrected herself—"bag, to your room."

Dr. Hannigan left my side, approaching the housekeeper, who continued to survey my clothes with faint disdain. My friendly conviction wavered.

"Well, it's past time I depart. I leave everything in your capable hands, Ms. Dillard."

"Doctor," she responded dismissively.

The doctor's expression became dour, and the two of them locked eyes, some unknown animosity passing between them. Then, the air cleared, and Dr. Hannigan presented me with a smile, the corners of his mustache lifting. "Enjoy Willowfield, Miss Foxboro. It has its charms."

Ms. Dillard sniffed.

The doctor made his way out, going not to the front door but the same way the groundskeeper and the maid

had gone, toward a back entrance somewhere in the servants' halls. Ms. Dillard turned abruptly and walked away, expecting me to follow. Apprehensive, I abandoned my bag and headed after her.

“We’ll take the long way so you’ll get your bearings. Please pay attention as we go. The house can be a maze. It won’t do for you to get lost every time you attempt to find the library. We’ve put you in a room as close as possible to where you’ll work with Professor Hughes to eliminate unnecessary wandering.”

My exploration plan wasn’t as solid anymore, but she hadn’t expressly forbidden it yet. I felt there was still room for interpretation of what exactly *wandering* meant, unless I was kept locked in my room.

Every inch we traversed, there was more and more for my eyes to behold. Elaborate floral cornices and exquisite gilded vines were stenciled to the plaster ceiling where brass chandeliers with twisting serpentine arms lifted candles, half burned.

“No electric lights?” I asked with tentative curiosity.

“Willowfield was originally built too far from civilization to partake in the modern marvel of electricity. Professor Hughes endeavored to make the switch when it became possible, but the project is incomplete. Only parts of the house are wired.”

I offered an understanding hum and continued the game of trying to see all the many elaborate elements of the hall as we passed: statues of women languishing in the laps of their lovers, draped in luxurious fabrics,

crowned with flowers. Portraits, carvings, and stained glass transoms depicting the sweeter and more whimsical fairies that were popular now.

Since she'd answered my previous question so readily, I ventured another.

"This house, the professor's father built it?"

"Grandfather. If you ask me, it's a Gilded Age monstrosity, but full of history and, before recently, pride." Ms. Dillard caught herself bringing up the recent trauma of the household and pressed her lips into a thin line.

"Was he a whimsical man?" I asked, noticing yet another cluster of carved flowers teeming with miniature creatures from myth. Unicorns, sea monsters, and ethereal women climbing from their sealskins.

"No. He came from a very pious lineage that rejected whimsy, though not wealth, in all fashions. His wife was an Italian heiress, equally dedicated. They both despised what they called the eccentricity of simple folk."

"Ah," I said, insulted from beyond the grave.

"The flowers, the fairies—it was all Professor Hughes's mother. They did considerable cosmetic renovations to the estate when their company expanded. She was in charge of it."

I didn't offer my opinion on this, unsure from her tone how she felt about the professor's mother, but I was enchanted. I longed to linger and study each carving and

relief, every bit and piece of wallpaper and carpeting that held magic like secret kisses.

“Does the professor spend a lot of time here?” *Alone* was the word I omitted.

“This is the longest he’s been present in the house in the past two years. He’s been traveling extensively for business. He plans to remain here only until his research is done.”

This explained the short-term contract of my employment, the sum of money undeniably set to tempt a potential employee to take the position despite the environment they’d be working in.

“That’s impressive, to run a business and continue to teach,” I said.

“As I’m sure Dr. Hannigan mentioned to you, the professor is taking a sabbatical,” she replied, adding with a trace of sympathy that revealed her affection, “Though, someday soon, he’ll be forced to choose one or the other.”

We arrived at the doors of the library, two hulking slabs of oak that were unique only due to their lack of ornamentation. There were no carved faces, flowers, gilded animals, or fleur-de-lis. Its only adornment was the handles, bronze and glinting in the final daylight.

Ms. Dillard knocked sharply three times to announce our arrival, then pulled the door open with relative ease, the hinges well-oiled. The scent of cedar wood and polish invaded my senses in a rush, and a wonderland appeared

before me. Herringbone parquet and damask carpets warred with mahogany bookshelves, trimmed in gold leaf and green marble, for the attention of the eyes. Though the room was not a full two stories high, track ladders were necessary to reach the topmost shelves, all packed tight with books and curiosities: jars of moss and lichen, bone-colored candelabras, bronze mantel clocks featuring cherubs and fauns, skeleton clocks under glass revealing their delicate innermost workings. Ruby brocade was the fabric of choice for the high-backed Victorian parlor chairs arranged around the fireplace that opened to my full height. A mantel matching the dark wood of the bookcases was carved to depict a conspiracy of ravens taking flight, extending up into the room, creating a lifelike quality that enthralled me. Above the fireplace was an oil painting of the same woman from the fountain, hair like the early sunrise, her magnificent birds perched on her raised arms as waves crashed at her feet. Unlike in the hallways, there was electricity here. Stained glass lamps flanked the chairs, warmly illuminated. A crystal chandelier the size of Mr. Dempsey's automobile hung above head, light bulbs in place of candles, though for now unlit.

“Professor”—even Ms. Dillard's voice was warmer in this space—“Miss Foxboro has arrived.”

“Show her in,” came the absent response in a velvet baritone that raised my brows ever so slightly.

In my awe of the library, I'd missed the man rifling through a stack of papers, shuffling them one after another, his back to us. He stood bent over the desk in a

manner that made his imposing height evident. Over a starched white collared shirt, he wore a tailored tweed vest the color of flint, the cut of it bringing attention to the broad expanse of his shoulders. His slacks were still perfectly creased despite the hour, as though he hadn't sat in them the entire day, and a matching business jacket lay discarded on a nearby chair, too warm for the room. Based on the tailoring alone, I deduced that the outfit had been ludicrously expensive. I smoothed the hem of my modest and much-mended sweater and stepped inside the library's warm arms, relieved to finally meet the professor.

"Professor Hughes, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance," I said, channeling every drop of my professionalism.

"Miss Foxboro," he intoned, drawing my name into a rumination, not turning but instead discarding the paper in his hand onto the floor to join several others that had not proved useful to him. I perceived this as a fire hazard.

When he spoke again, his voice was a honeyed lilt, sending a tingle through me.

"Mé Líadain, rocarus-sa Cuirithir: is fírihir adfiadar."

A log in the fireplace gave way, sending the flames high and casting a momentary bright light before dying down again, stretching the shadows.

"Sir?" I faltered.

“Translate it.”

I rushed to gather my wits. “Ehm, I am Líadain who loved Curithir: It is true, as they say.”

“Identify the origin.”

My brain kicked and sputtered, reviewing all the Gaelic poetry I’d stored in the ditches of my memory.

“The seventh-century poetess Líadain. She’s writing about her love.”

“Fluent?”

“Not at all, sir. I studied at school, and it was merely a pursuit of interest. I didn’t think I’d ever have need of it.”

“Hm.” He seemed displeased and grew silent again, his back still turned. I was beginning to feel a little offended. When the silence stretched so long as to be uncomfortable, Ms. Dillard cleared her throat.

The professor gave a minor start and sighed, gazing out of the towering windows into the growing night. “Fear gorta. What is it?”

I tried to stay on my toes.

“A starving ghost appearing especially during times of famine. It—”

“And the Abhartach?” he interrupted, not waiting for me to expound.

“A sort of”—I stumbled—“vampire creature.”

“Sort of?”

“There’s differing lore. It doesn’t always drink blood.”

“That will do. It’s enough you know a bit of Old Irish. I’m sure it was explained to you what your function here would be?”

“Your assistant, sir.”

“Yes. It’s a devil tracking all these manuscripts, and my notes are in piles.” He motioned around him with a gruff exhalation. “I don’t have the time nor the mind for organizing.”

He still wouldn’t turn to face me.

I tried to catch Ms. Dillard’s eye, questioning. She pointedly ignored me, her expression stony. This was no way to be welcomed in any place. I stared so hard at the back of the professor’s head there must be a hole burning there. Surely he would *feel* me looking.

“I’m more than capable of assisting you, Professor,” I said smartly, tiny spines of irritation thickening in my throat. “When will I be needed?”

Another long silence, only the crackling fire breaking the rude quiet.

“Professor,” Ms. Dillard said quietly, a small, unintrusive prod.

“Tomorrow,” he said, his voice weary. “Tomorrow. I’ve so much work to do still. I’ll greet you properly in the morning when my mind is fresh. Ms. Dillard, please show Miss Foxboro to her room.”

I was being dismissed without him ever laying eyes on me. Indignation was a hot iron in my sternum.

“Professor Hughes,” I began, fully prepared to apprise him of my displeasure. His head turned ever so slightly, revealing his olive complexion, the plane of his cheekbone high and proud. He was listening. I came to my senses. To lose this job for my insubordination before my first day had even begun would be a new low.

“Good night,” I finished lamely.

“Good night” was the terse reply.

Ms. Dillard guided me out the door we’d stepped through not even five minutes ago. We departed the light and warmth of the room with its cold master, and as the housekeeper pulled the door closed behind us, I sensed that I was poorly prepared for Willowfield.

Chapter 4

The hallways had become almost too dark to walk. We had barely enough time for Ms. Dillard to stop by the kitchen to fetch a gas lamp. She wouldn't let me come in, insisting I wait on the house side of the threshold. As I was also an employee, it was silly not to allow me in servant areas. Growing up in a household that had never wanted children, I'd lived underfoot of the servants. The downstairs liveliness had been my home far more than the stuffy formal rooms of my parents.

At one point, my mother remembered I existed and forbade me to ever again associate with the help. However, what she didn't know couldn't anger her, and I continued to spend most of my free time being an absolute nuisance to the staff before being shipped to Mount St. Mary's school for girls across the state, a blessing in the most basic sense.

Unlike the school experiences of girls in great sorrowful classics, I had no mean matrons or bullying classmates. Instead, I had an endless monotony of etiquette classes, supplemented with a few fascinating subjects like history and languages, all with a healthy dose of chronic boredom. There had been moments where I'd have risked my mother's wrath just to be free in the warm belly of that house where Ms. Reeves, the

cook, had loved me like her own. The memory was so real I could smell the yeasty aroma of bread rising, and the slight sea tang of fish brought fresh from the bay. I hadn't been sad to leave home, but I still experienced a bittersweet wave of nostalgia. Ms. Dillard returned, a lit gas lamp in hand.

“There's one of these in your quarters. We're too short-staffed to light all the remaining gas lamps. Besides, there's no one here to need them. Professor Hughes stays in his rooms or the library, Rodney lives in the groundskeeper's cottage, and Felicity and I handle our duties in the God-given light of day.”

We walked the long back hallway, keeping to the servant's highways, all sensible walls and wood floors boasting none of the opulence of other parts of the house.

“This is the fastest way to get to the library from your room. I recommend keeping to this route. I don't have time to acquaint you with the full estate, and you *will* get lost.”

Though it was likely the truth, her tone suggested a lack of faith in my competence. This woman was grating, but not directly unkind. She'd handled the maid so gently, and the lines of time on her face were indicative more of laughter than scowling. I resolved yet again to ignore my initial distaste for her and change her mind.

We emerged onto a landing that branched into two heavily carpeted halls, taking the left back into the more decorated byways that belonged to family and guests. I

was already turned around, and we'd barely rounded a handful of corners.

We passed innumerable rooms on both sides of the hall, their doors shut tight, and occasionally a blank space on the wall where a gas lamp had been removed to prepare for the introduction of electricity, the line capped off but not covered. How alive this place might have been had the lights ever made it in.

Ms. Dillard slowed as we came to a set of double doors, white as the others with gleaming gold leaf beveling. She placed her hand on the well-polished knob and paused for a moment, her lips pressed in a grim line. This, I guessed unfairly, was her signature expression.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I’ve forgotten to tell you the house rules,” she responded curtly, opening the door. “Well, I’ll go through them quickly so you can be on with your rest.”

She ushered me inside.

The room was massive, the ceiling so high above head the chandelier was a mere shadowy phantom. Furniture-shaped smudges hulked in various corners, the only inviting space the fireplace with its white mantel and marble relief depicting a virginal woman, her hair a halo around her head, asleep naked beneath a fruit-bearing tree surrounded by meadowsweet. A fire had been laid and roared merrily before a settee of blue brocade, a teapot and small plate of bread and fruit waiting on a nearby side table, inviting. The light of the fire cast a cozy glow only far enough to illuminate the gossamer

curtains that hung around the palatial bed, its comforter a matching set to the seat, the headboard painted wood inlaid with delphinium velvet. There were so many pillows, crisp and snowy white, it was easy to imagine someone getting drowned in them while asleep. Though the rest of the space was submerged in gloom, I deduced it mirrored the same color palette. I could see only shadows of other bits of furniture, and swiftly searched for a specific one, but couldn't find it looming against the walls.

“No wardrobe?” I asked.

Ms. Dillard set her lamp down, preparing to light the one at my bedside.

“The elder Mr. Hughes thought himself modern, and there is a compartment near the bureau built into the wall. You may hang your dresses there.” She pointed vaguely in the direction of a nine-drawer dresser, and I spied the outline of a door. I released a relieved breath, small enough to be unnoticed. I couldn't stand wardrobes. They reminded me always of giant caskets.

“Everything has been put in order for you,” she continued. “There is a bathroom just there.” She motioned the opposite way of the closet. “Hot water should be readily available. Everything you might need is laid out, and anything you see is yours to use as you like. All right, house rules: do not use the main staircase. You must have noticed that it's been stripped and is unfinished. It's not safe and we don't want a fall.”

She gave me a look as though I needed help remembering my embarrassing tumble.

“Most of Willowfield is shut tight for the winter and for general lack of use and staff to tend to it. If a door is locked, it’s off-limits. Several parts of the house, especially the third floor, are unsafe to set foot in due to their state of abandoned renovation.”

I recalled the driver’s comment that, despite the tragedy, there were still significant household funds.

“Why were the repairs canceled? I was led to believe there was no financial suffering.”

“Finances are certainly not the trouble. It’s people. The superstitious foolishness of the crews got the better of everyone, and they quit one by one. Even when apprehension subsided, and the workers were willing to return, the professor didn’t want anyone in the house. He canceled the public fetes, fired what little staff had been sensible enough to stay, keeping only those of us who outright refused to leave, and then shut the house up. Made it a tomb.”

She was speaking so frankly, her words laced with regret.

“I’m so sorry. That must have been very difficult.”

“Well.” Her stiff formality snapped back into place. My sympathy seemed to be something Ms. Dillard didn’t want. “Life goes on. If you need anything in the night, Felicity and I are downstairs in the staff hall, though it’s better if you just wait until the morning unless it’s a life

or death emergency. Don't bother with the servants' bells. They're disconnected. Breakfast is set promptly at eight thirty in the dining room, never later."

Before she excused herself, I asked the question scalding my insides.

"Ms. Dillard, is the professor always so"—I searched for the least rude word—"standoffish?"

The woman peered at me, trying to determine how much she should divulge to the *temporary* assistant.

"As you can imagine, the professor hasn't been the same since he lost his wife. He used to be the gregarious sort. Boisterous. Well-liked. Now he's rather solemn, prone to getting lost in his thoughts. He doesn't think of other people. We hardly exist to him. In his mind, we are ghosts in this house."

Ghosts.

Ms. Dillard sighed, ready to finish the conversation. "He's still grieving, Miss Foxboro. I ask that you treat his peculiarities with some understanding."

"Of course," I replied, somewhat chastened.

She appraised me more baldly than she'd previously done, as though she'd say more. Instead, she gave a curt nod and departed.

"Good night," I said to her retreating back. She closed the door. I half expected to hear the turn of a key in the lock, shutting me away in this melancholy house, making me a prisoner.

When Ms. Dillard was gone, I trudged to the settee and slumped into it, rubbing my fingers into my eyes. This had been a hard day, I allowed, but not the hardest. With an exhausted interest, I studied the tea tray with its rolls and fruit and a few round yellow cookies dusted with powdered sugar. The teakettle was pewter and the cup a delicate thing, absurdly thin. Thankfully, the tea in the pot was still hot, its aroma pleasant and floral. I took a sip, tasting the summery flavor of jasmine, honey-sweet chamomile, and a tart note I couldn't place. With Willowfield being the flower haven it was there were any number of possibilities. The tea warmed me, and I felt more suited to my body.

The soft roll and fruit filled the hole in my stomach, and the cookies were dry, but once plunged into the tea, they were a treat. I dusted the sugar from my fingers and considered what to do next. I wasn't tired as the hour was still early, barely nine o'clock.

With only the small globe of light from the gas lamp to guide me beyond the firelight, I fumbled around and busied myself with unpacking. I tested the drawers of the bureau, needing only one for my stockings and underthings, then slid back the heavy panel door of the closet to find a spacious affair with room enough for a king's wardrobe. My meager items—a day dress, three skirts, a pullover, and four blouses—looked silly and sad hanging on the rack inside. My clothes handled, I drew out a night slip and explored the bathroom. Luckily, a larger candelabra stood proudly on the vanity top with brand-new white tapers ready for use. I lit all eight and

took in my new surroundings. Similar to the bedroom, the light didn't touch the ceiling, and shadows thick as smog filled the space above my head, making it seem I was staring into a starless night sky. Discomfiture crawled along the back of my neck like a centipede, its many legs tickling every nerve. I shone the candlelight around, enough to be assured the room was as opulent as my bedroom appointments: marble floors, white wood panels, and elegant gas sconces. I tried the knob of the nearest lamp to test the gas, hopeful the lines were still connected, but there was no telltale hiss.

No electric lights, no gas lights. I had a distinct feeling I'd been sucked back in time. I shook a little to dislodge the idea and tested the bath taps. They were not only working, the hot water was nearly instant—a true luxury. While the bath filled, I admired the polished chestnut vanity, faceted mirror, and an array of glass bottles glinting in the candlelight. I'd been given free use of these items but decided to be as simple as possible. Regardless of what Ms. Dillard had said, these things weren't mine. A small cake of new rose soap was sitting in a dainty porcelain tray by the tub. That would be enough. I picked it up to remove the delicate paper cover to find that the name "Hughes" was printed on the front, surrounded by florets of pink blossoms and the angelic face of a golden-haired child. This soap had come from the professor's company. I raised it to my nose, and it was like holding a fresh summer rose in my hand.

The hot bath temperature and the soft scent of the soap relaxed some of the tension in my bones. I

submerged myself to the neck, only my head and the white caps of my knees above the surface. If I hadn't come to Willowfield, I'd be in my little bed in the attic room of the shop. It had been fitted with electric lights at the turn of the century, and my table side lamp would be on, its faded blue shade and scraggly tassels illuminated. I'd be reading whatever I'd managed to get my hands on. I compared the scenario in my head to my current one but couldn't determine which was better.

There was a sound in the murkiest part of the room where the pink rococo wallpaper receded into a smoky gray before becoming a waxy, impenetrable dark. Why was the darkness so profound here? Like sable paint on a dirty canvas. My head began to empty as I stared up into the murk, a hollowness spreading from behind my eyes, like my soul was seeping out of myself and into the water, leaving only a void.

The noise occurred again, a long scraping like a heavy door on unbalanced hinges moving across the floor. I imagined an entry I'd missed in the corner, someone opening it, slipping in to watch me from the shadows.

I sat up, heart pounding, sloshing a bit of water onto the floor, willing my eyes to translate the gloom. My sudden movements made me light-headed, my surroundings spinning slightly. The water was too hot, and the fresh rush of adrenaline tipped me into vertigo. I clung to the side of the tub, fighting the sensation of being upside down while simultaneously trying to keep my eyes focused in case someone advanced. I had no way of defending myself against an intruder. I was naked, the

only things in reach a slippery bar of soap and a white cotton towel.

And the candelabra.

Fear overriding my modesty, I surged out of the water and grabbed the heavy brass candle holder, thrusting it forward. Several of the flames extinguished in the chaotic motion. If someone was revealed sneaking in the shadows, I could always use the thing as a weapon. I had no qualms about bludgeoning a person to death if my life was in danger. The light touched enough to prove there was no door, merely an ornate bench and a dainty white cabinet where more towels were folded.

I was trembling, trying to catch my breath, still dizzy, but there was no threat to me but my own imagination. My ridiculous reaction exasperated me. I climbed carefully out of the tub, still steaming, and wrapped in the soft towel, taking deep breaths to dispel my vapors. I gingerly approached the vanity, where I'd left my night slip. I rested on the tufted stool to unpin my hair and wait for the queerness to pass. My ears buzzed. Maybe I'd caught something. I rejected the idea as though I had the power to turn away sickness and examined myself in the mirror. I was paler than usual, the typical rosy hue of my lips ashy and purple. My hair, the color of old copper wire, rested on the tops of my shoulders, long and out of fashion. I touched the damp, curling tips with my fingers. I'd been tempted to cut it short and sport the sharp bob that was all the rage these days, but I was too self-conscious. It was a hairstyle for carefree youth, which I wasn't.

I wondered if I'd ever been.

I lingered in the bathroom to inspect the bottles littering the vanity, well-dusted and sparkling in the flickering light, many with the name "Hughes" etched into them: expensive perfumes, lotions, and skin-softening elixirs meant to keep the lines of age away. There were also gold lipstick tubes, half a dozen, and a silver-handled powder brush resting by a tin container, images of gold lavender blooms embossed on the screw-top lid.

This was not a Hughes brand, but the same type of lavender powder my mother had used.

The wooziness returned at the thought of my mother, who had precise rules regarding what I was allowed to touch on her vanity, which had been nothing.

But I remembered her now and again, letting me sit in silence nearby while she applied her makeup for a party. This was the only maternal memory I had of a woman who hadn't had the temperament to raise me. She would tell me what she was using, where it had come from, and how much it cost. The scent of the powder lingered on my skin even after my mother left for her social events. I'd breathe it in and dream she loved me. It had been my favorite scent until the morning I'd gotten too curious and opened the tin without permission, dropping it and powdering the vanity and expensive rug in thin white dust.

The hairs on my arms rose, and I pulled my fingers away. But my mother was gone. Long gone.

I opened the lid.

The familiar smell of crushed lavender buds and talcum rose first, followed by something sour, old. The more pungent, rancid notes clung stubbornly, and I brought my hand to my nose. There was something gray sticking from the otherwise undisturbed pressed top of the powder and I took hold of it, expecting to discover a small powder brush, but as I pulled, the white surface of the makeup bulged, discolored, and the body of a long-dead mouse, mummified in talc, rose from its chalky grave.

Yelping, I tossed the little corpse away. It hit the wall with a soft thud, falling to the floor and leaving a white residue in its trail. Disgusted and frightened, I reached frantically for the candelabra, not paying enough attention to the direction of my grasp. My hand struck one of the ornate arms, sending a jolt of pain through my already aching wrist and knocking the thing to the floor. The remainder of the candles extinguished, leaving me in pitch black. In the absolute quiet of the darkness that settled over me, I heard a laugh, trembling, soft, and feminine, from the other side of the bathroom door. I held my breath, listening. Movement, a soft rustling of steps on carpets.

Someone was in my room.

My pulsing fear and the fresh pain in my hand metamorphosed into anger. With furious intention, I rushed out of the bathroom and directly into a wall of stifling heat. The fire roared angrily in the grate, too big

and too bright. The air was stale and heavy. My skin prickled, and while frantically casting my eyes around for the prowler, I hurried to the window, attempting to unlatch it and relieve the worst of the heat, but my fingers fumbled. I was panicking. I needed to calm down, take several breaths, and let my mind rest, but I might as well have asked my body to fly.

The hinges of my bedroom door creaked, and I twisted around in time to see it click shut. The acrid punch of new outrage helped clear my mind. Someone had been in my room, invading my privacy. I could cower here, giving them reason to think I was too meek to protest, or I could face them now and make sure it never happened again. I ran to the door, threw it open, and lunged out into the bitter-cold hallway.

Chapter 5

I emerged, having no idea what to do if someone was waiting for me, but there was only a soft pad of retreating footsteps. In the chill of the corridor, I trembled, more from the remnants of my panic than the cold. Even if this was a prank to haze me as a new staff member, I wouldn't abide being the butt of anyone's jokes. My mind made up, I raced through the unlit hall in pursuit, my heart pounding in my ears. I'd already made several turns before I thought about how ludicrous this was. I couldn't even hear the footsteps anymore. Slowing, I allowed myself to reason away my experiences. It had been a long day. The mouse had given me a shock. I wasn't feeling well. I should go back, go to sleep, and in the morning everything would be more sensible. But as I turned on my heel, a murmuring rose from a mere room away. No light shone from the seams of the doorframe. Someone was talking to themselves in the dark.

In a few rabid bounds, I'd barged in, finding a sizable oval room filled to the brim with furniture and assortments of rectangle-shaped pieces, all covered in dust cloths. Nothing moved or made a sound. On the opposite wall was another door open to the milky illumination of moonlight. I hurried past lumpish, blanketed figures, sure that someone or something would soon jump out and assault me, but I made it safely

and emerged into a new wing. The apprehension building with every turn and twist of this chase was working me into a nervous state, and my belly knotted, nauseating me. This property was a maze. I was the mouse. My thoughts filled with the corpse of the mummified creature I'd discovered in the talc, and I recoiled from my own mind.

Millicent.

My name was spoken like a lover's sigh, and I startled, unable to determine the direction it had come from. In a fit of savage apprehension, I looked up, expecting to find a figure clinging to the ceiling like a spider, their neck twisting round to catch me in an ember glare before dropping onto me from above.

There were only the decaying cornices.

My fear and anger were fading into acute anxiety. I'd let my outrage and paranoia get the better of my common sense. I had no evidence of foul intentions. The noises were an old foundation making its usual sounds, the firewood collapsing and shifting in the grate. The poor mouse had unwittingly burrowed into the powder at the factory and been sealed inside. And the bedroom door, well, I wasn't positive it hadn't already been shut. I'd been in a panic.

The whispers.

That I could explain away as a mingling of my tired mind, uncanny circumstances, and the night. I'd arrived here expecting something strange and unusual, and my fancy fulfilled those expectations. A similar thing had

happened before, when my disturbing thoughts got carried away, rattling and confusing me.

It had been a frosty morning in Boston and a street trolley lost control on a patch of hidden ice, toppling and scarcely avoiding a young mother and the baby she pushed in its frilled carriage. The woman had shoved the carriage out of the way, and it tipped, spilling the baby out onto the street where it wailed in alarm. The mother and infant survived the incident suffering only from terror, but the near disaster played in my mind's eye for days, distracting me and suspending me in a state of perpetual dread, as though death hadn't been satisfied and would come looking for its stolen prize. The phantom sound of infants screaming often jolted me awake, robbing me of sleep—a misery that eventually faded.

My life was newly disarranged, and I was only suffering the same.

This logic slowed my heartbeat and relaxed the tense muscles in my neck. I'd found an explanation for everything, and my head was clearing. At a much more cautious pace, I picked my way down the new corridor I'd found, lined with lead glass windows, the half-moon offering its watery light in seeping, fractured beams. Shadows congregated along the wall where wallpaper hung down in strips. Debris littered the floor, an abandoned paint ladder and several rags discarded haphazardly on one side—more proof of forsaken renovations. In my dogged determination, I'd run pell-mell through the house, taking no notice of where I was

going. Turning around to retrace my steps would have been an option if I remembered them. Instead, if I kept going and stuck to the exterior hallways, surely I'd find myself somewhere familiar. Soldiering on to the end of the hall, I rounded the corner and ran headlong into the barrier of a solid body.

I opened my mouth, prepared to scream, but stifled the noise against my palm when I laid eyes on the man who'd been on his own midnight walk.

A most bewitching man.

The single candle flickering in his hand cast a stark shadow into the hollows between the high bones of his cheeks and the square structure of his jaw, a day's worth of stubble framing a wide, severe mouth, one that didn't seem to be capable of smiling. The high bridge of his nose gave him an air of a classical warrior carved from stone, while the black hair that hung in curling disarray around his temples suggested a character of little reservation. His amber eyes gleamed in the candlelight, trapping me in a stasis of shock and something much more pleasant.

"Miss Foxboro," he said, disapproving, the timbre of his voice smoky. I recognized it, mortification flooding me.

"Professor Hughes." Embarrassment made my voice weak.

"Is it in your nature to break the rules as soon as they're given to you?"

I was standing far too close to him, close enough that I was forced to tilt my head to see his face. I'd expected an older man, someone slipping quietly into their midlife. But by any guess, Professor Hughes was barely in his thirties. I took a hasty but sensible step back, regretting the decision when his gaze dipped to notice what I was wearing, which was nothing but a night slip.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, bringing a hand to press against the bareness of my collarbones.

"Did Ms. Dillard not tell you to stay in your room at night?"

"She didn't specifically say I couldn't leave."

This was a long stretch, but I couldn't tell my employer I'd been chasing a waking nightmare through his home.

"Is that so?" he murmured. "And you decided to explore despite the knowledge of unsafe conditions in portions of this ghastly house. How brave."

His tone made it clear it was not, in fact, brave.

With no other excuse, I simply lied.

"I couldn't sleep."

At my confession, he lifted his gaze from mine, searching the darksome landscape beyond the window as if he was expecting to find something there besides the obscurity of the night.

"I often can't either," he replied.

His expression was tense, tired. The professor was not only a stranger but my proprietor, yet this melancholy inspired my empathy. I nearly reached out to place a comforting touch on his arm as I'd often done with Mr. Helm when the missing of his grown children grew heavy. I stopped myself, but not before my hand had moved, catching his attention, and inviting his eyes to where I still clutched at the neck of my slip.

“Is that all you brought? It seems insufficient for winter nights.” One brow lifted slightly.

I tried to reclaim some dignity.

“I didn't think I'd need any more than this. No one warned me that the house was in disrepair,” I said, snappish. “Besides, my room is boiling.”

To my fortune, he ignored my tone and gave a low hum of understanding.

“If you'll open your window a quarter, it will balance the fire. As for your wardrobe, I'll have Ms. Dillard acquire you a robe.”

His advice lacked condescension, and my tense shoulders relaxed. This exchange was possibly salvageable.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

My gratitude had a negative effect on the professor, his countenance falling stern again, his eyes stormy.

“That's not an invitation to wander. There are dangers hiding where moonlight doesn't reach.”

His about-face rankled me, and to my shame, I let my temper come out of my mouth.

“For goodness’ sake, Professor. You’re as bad as the driver. Are you trying to frighten me with ghost stories?”

“Ghost stories?” he echoed, bemused. “There is no central heat, and many renovation projects were abandoned when my wife...”

He stumbled here, then cleared his throat. “It’s left areas unsafe to walk. You’ll either catch your death or fall to it.”

Without thinking, I scoffed, rousing a bit of the professor’s pique.

“And do I dare mention you are alone in the dark with a man you don’t know?”

A low blow.

“Or perhaps *you* are alone in the dark with a woman you don’t know,” I countered, painfully aware of how nonsensical I’d just sounded.

“How perplexing,” he mused. “I wonder who is right.”

I knew I was balancing on a dangerous precipice, and if I moved just one inch incorrectly, I’d plummet into unemployment. Still, it was necessary to set boundaries of my own lest everyone assume I was easy to bully. I weighed the cost and benefit of drawing a line and decided that working for a man who believed I was weak-willed and easy to fret would be unbearable.

“Sir, I’ve been cautioned about your moods, and while you *are* my employer and it is my last desire to vex you, I’d appreciate a little more decorum.”

“Decorum?” Another pointed look at my slip.

The insinuation and his disinterest in my attempt to regain some footing in this exchange unbalanced me again. I prepared to speak, and this time, my words would undoubtedly earn me a place in the freezing night, bag at my feet, but the professor cut me short, offering his own pronouncement.

“Please return to your room, straight down this hallway and a right at the next corridor. Don’t leave again until morning. We’ll become better acquainted in the light of day.”

The dismissal was curt, and for a moment following, we stood glaring at one another.

For the millionth time, I considered my options and found them lacking.

I was the first to turn away, lowering my eyes, though it took great effort. I moved to step around him, ready to be done with our wretched meeting, but when we were side by side, our arms nearly touching, he spoke.

“And Miss Foxboro?”

I stopped in my tracks, forced again by our proximity to tilt my head back. This close, I could feel his warmth and smell the lingering scent of library cedar on his clothes. He shifted toward me, raising the candle,

offering it. Though I wanted to decline, it was too foolish to do so. I took it in hand.

“If I catch you wandering again,” he said, his voice taking on the low quality of a warning, “I may think you mean to tempt me.”

My breath caught, and indignation swelled in my chest in company with a wicked, unwelcome thrill. Not allowing me time to regain my composure and defend myself, he moved away, his steps as silent as a wraith. Insult and bewilderment were dumbing drugs, gluing me to the spot. I watched as he disappeared beyond a distant corner, leaving me abandoned in the oppressive stillness of the house.

Chapter 6

I awoke to a bleak, pale morning, head hollow. My sleep had been fitful, full of misty faces and long, dark corridors I could never reach the end of, chased by a voice, familiar and dreadful.

Mad Millie.

Crazy as a March hare.

She'll murder us all in our sleep.

There had also been a woman; a woman in a white shift day dress crying in the doorway of every room I passed, her delicate hands pressed to her face, vines of flowers in her hair, their blossoms like fairy bells against her crown.

Though the night still troubled me, things were less terrible in the day. The meager early sun transformed the once-ominous cave of a room into a picture of floral elegance. Soft green rugs with budding lilacs, briarwood wallpaper of grass cloth, and dusky rose curtains brought princesses and enchanted castles far more to mind than ghosts and villains. The fire had burned out, and I climbed out of the warm cocoon of the blankets, regretting I didn't have a robe. Thinking of the robe brought a quick surge of disgrace. I carried it like a stone in my stomach as I dressed in the warmest things I had—

the blue and brown wool skirt I'd arrived in, and a sleeveless knit chemise beneath my nicest sweater, its high neck decorated with a single velvet bow just below my hairline. I hoped the professor wouldn't notice I was wearing the same skirt two days in a row, but it was unlikely. He'd never laid eyes on me until he caught me waltzing around his house in my slip. I flushed again, wanting to slap my cheeks.

When I entered the bathroom, I thoroughly searched for the tiny corpse of the mouse. I found it lying half beneath the glass-front cupboard where the linens and towels were kept. Without the dark of night to run my imagination wild, I felt sorry for the creature who'd met its terrible end suffocated in powder. I gingerly laid a face tissue over it and planned to alert Ms. Dillard at the next opportunity. I would take extra care not to come off as bothered—after all, it was a mouse, not a monster.

The thought of monsters did little to lift my spirits, and as I sat at the vanity, pinning my hair in the mirror, my shoulders began to curl ever inward, habit hijacking my posture. I was making myself as small as possible, something I'd often done growing up. When I glimpsed my reflection, the hunched, scared woman I saw didn't please me. I squared my shoulders. I would go to breakfast, chin up, and offer no apology. The professor's behavior had been atrocious, not mine. I would be taken seriously, refuse irreverence, and neatly handle whatever trials were handed to me.

My new self-respect satisfied me, and I styled my hair as usual, with a soft finger wave that touched the crest of

my cheek, and a sensible tuck of the remaining curls into a twisted bun at the base of my neck. When no one came to fetch me to breakfast, I assumed it meant Ms. Dillard considered me capable enough to find my way. She was right; in the daylight it was relatively easy to find the kitchen again, which sat adjacent to the dining room. The mahogany double doors stood open and inviting, the scent of warm bread and fresh coffee tickling my nose. Several steps from the entrance, my confidence faltered. I patted my hair again with dread and anticipation warring in me as I stood there procrastinating, wondering if the professor would mention the previous night or if we'd both stay silent and try to forget it had ever happened.

Prepared for battle, I stepped into the dining room.

There was no one there.

Several covered dishes and a place setting of only one were arranged on the formidable dining table, its seating meant for twelve. There was no indication anyone else would be joining me, so I let my anxious breath go and appreciated my luck. I'd come too late to dine with the professor.

I found eggs, oatmeal, ramekins of nutmeg and cinnamon, a mountain of toast, a pat of fresh butter, and a little bowl of cranberry preserves. Thankful for no eyes watching, I tucked into the food, ravenous, and filled myself painfully full. The coffee in the pot proved to be strong and bitter. There was cream, but I drank it black, steeling myself for the day.

The dining room was as opulent as the rest of the house, two crystal chandeliers hanging heavily over the cherrywood table, glinting in the pleasant sunlight that streamed through the windows, casting a golden hue on the marbled green mantel and the brass sideboards. A statue of two women, plaiting their hair with flowers, watched from their spot in the corner by the door, unimpressed with me.

The door to the kitchen creaked, and I turned gladly to greet whoever had entered, only to find I was still alone. I stood, taking several dishes in hand and carrying them to the door, which I pushed cautiously open to peek inside.

“Hello in there! Do you need any help?” I called.

My words echoed around the cavernous space like unanswered prayers. There was no one. Everything had been tidied, no evidence of a breakfast cooked. I took my plates to the sink, at a loss. Beeswax shone on the recently sealed wood counters, and the copper sink and stove were bright as new pennies. There was a large ice box, its drip pan dry. I spent the next half hour cleaning breakfast away, washing the dishes but leaving them on the counter, unsure about their place. I planned to learn. I couldn't continue to ask Ms. Dillard and Felicity to cater to me when there was so much other work to be done. At any rate, I was also staff and fully capable of holding my own.

Assuming I would be needed for work, I left for the library, but when I arrived, the room was dark, the

curtains drawn, and the fire unlit. The uninviting atmosphere was a great disappointment, but small butterflies flitted in my stomach as I realized now was the perfect opportunity to explore. I could see where I stepped and who was nearby, easily avoiding being surprised by wolfish, unearthly men.

I blushed but lost no resolve. If anyone had been interested in keeping me from poking around, they wouldn't have all disappeared.

I first approached the room directly next to the library. It was locked. I considered the likelihood that most doors would be. However, the next one I tried opened, hinges chirping like a startled bird. Judging by the giant piano, half draped in a sheet, it had been a music parlor. Everything else was equally dressed in dusty gray shrouds like so many dead. The following several rooms were unlocked, but uninteresting, either empty or filled with items hidden beneath the ghostly covers.

At last, I discovered a tiny room, the bright light of its east-facing windows showcasing airy woods and more floral prints similar to the ones in my accommodations. There were no dust sheets, and everything was clean, ready to be used. A delicate writing desk had pride of place, and anyone who sat there could view a garden labyrinth, its high walls brown and thorny with dormant rosebushes. This was a lady's office. Everything here was frail, easily stained. The severe elegance of this place didn't invite guests but repelled them.

Don't linger here, it admonished, don't rest.

Had it belonged to Mrs. Hughes?

I was curious about the former lady of the house who had brought to ruin a once-flourishing estate with her death. The thoughts of her turned my mind to her widower, and I indulged in a frustrated breath, shaking off the strange sensation the room inspired in me. I abandoned the office and turned into another passageway, identical to the one I'd met the professor in. Palladian windows lined one side and I peered out, searching for a discerning feature in the landscape I could recall if I ever got lost again. There, among the bare trees and naked bushes, was a stone building, its chimney billowing a hearty, cheerful smoke—the groundskeeper's house.

I pressed it like a flower in the pages of my memory.

The rest of my exploration revealed more of what I'd seen yesterday during the short trek with Ms. Dillard. Professor Hughes's mother had instilled in the very bones of Willowfield a personality of magic, an otherworldly presence that would have inspired anyone's sense of heart and imagination if it had not been plagued with dust and the signs of neglect. Humidity had bloated oil paintings and mildewed the runners, exuding a musty, wet smell that reminded me of an icy bog. Where there were no likenesses of the fae, there were floral motifs: baby's breath wallpaper, tulip moldings, rosette rugs. They were an homage to the business that had kept the Hughes family afloat.

I left the windowed hall, wandering an endless array of inner corridors that circled back on themselves. It was dimmer in this part of the house with no natural light to shine upon the faded runners except what seeped through an occasional stained glass window and from under the many doors. After trying a few handles, all locked, I found myself at the foot of a narrow servants' stairwell leading to the third floor.

I stared up the narrow steps, weighing the worth of veering farther off path, into a part of the house that had been expressly forbidden. Yet there was something about this stairwell, something pulling. The door at the top was firmly shut and surely must have been locked. It couldn't hurt to check. I placed a foot on the first step to ascend.

"Felicity!" Ms. Dillard bellowed, unseen but coming my direction. "Felicity, where in heaven's name are you? The fire in the professor's chamber hasn't been laid!"

I froze to the spot and held my breath, willing myself to disappear. I reached for reason to waylay the panic rising in my breast. It was only the housekeeper. I'd tell her I'd been looking for her. She would direct me out of this maze with the condescension of someone who'd known this would happen, and no one would strike me or lock me in a wardrobe because I was an adult and my mother was dead.

I turned tail, a coward in the face of childhood memories, and ran.

"Felicity?" Ms. Dillard's voice faded away.

By some great miracle, after only two blind turns, I emerged at the top of the grand staircase I'd tripped down yesterday. I knew exactly how to get back to my room from the main hall so down I went, skipping over jagged marble and exposed board, ready to plummet to my death rather than face that sour woman. I made it to the level floor, my life still attached to me, traversing the familiar territory with ecstatic anxiety, finally slipping into my room and shutting the door, taking care to make as little noise as possible.

Making it back was such a relief to my nerves I began to giggle, resting my forehead against the doorframe, letting laughter ease me. I'd foolishly behaved like a child caught in mischief. I took a deep, anchoring breath through my nose, then lost control and giggled again. I should be glad I'd roamed. The most important thing I'd learned was that the house was dark in many places, empty and sad, but there was nothing untoward, only lonely rooms with no one to love them. A sense of longing sobered me.

"Miss?" squeaked a meek voice.

I screeched and flung myself around, plastering my back against the wall.

Felicity screamed in return, her blue eyes wide and disturbed.

She'd been laying the fire when I rushed in, crazed and snickering to myself at the door.

We stared at each other for ages before I could no longer contain myself and began to giggle again.

The woman I'd nearly scared to death twice since arriving continued to gape, perhaps waiting for me to lunge.

"I apologize, Felicity," I said, finally catching my breath. "I was running from Ms. Dillard."

Another beat of silence passed, and I worried the girl might start crying. Instead, she bowed her head and joined my laughter.

When she was finally able to speak it was in a soft, dreamy voice, tears of mirth still shining in her eyes.

"I've done that a few times myself," she confided, charmingly self-conscious. I warmed to her. She cleared her throat daintily, composing herself, and motioned to the bed where several outfits had been laid out for me.

"I was instructed to bring you these."

Curious, I wandered to the bedside to examine the items. The first two were drop-waist dresses of wool crepe, identical in style, with pleated skirts and low sashes, each a different color: one a soft lilac, the other the deep green of summer moss. Their necklines were high, the sashes satin, and both were monstrously expensive. There were three plain wool skirts of varying colors—tan, blue, and chardonnay red—accompanied with long neutral-colored cardigans and bow-tie blouses. I ran my fingers over the silky lengths of the bows, shaking my head in wonder at their perfection.

The last item was a robe, a long, tie-waisted affair of creme velvet, its sleeves, collar, and hem a

conglomeration of jewel-toned flowers.

“The professor supplied these?” I asked.

When she noticed my hesitation, her face became wary.

“I’m just surprised,” I clarified. “It was awfully short notice as I’ve only been here a day. Is there a shop in town?”

A tailor or ready-made department store nearby would give me somewhere to go if there were more days when I was left to my own devices and time stretched, empty and uncompromising.

“We knew you were coming, miss,” she said. “The professor ordered ahead, just in case. The winter air is different here, and the house is so cold.”

“How did he know my measurements?”

Felicity blushed so fiercely she resembled a spring poppy.

“Dr. Hannigan guessed.”

I ran my finger along the hem of one of the skirts.

“What an odd thing for someone to do,” I mused, and in response, the maid gave a gasping snort.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, surprised at her own laughter. “No one here says things like that out loud.”

Out loud. Trepidation niggled me.

“If you like,” Felicity said gently, changing the subject, “I can help you get ready to meet Professor Hughes this

afternoon when he returns.”

“Oh, is he gone?” That explained this morning. I considered Felicity’s offer. I liked this girl, and the urge for some uncomplicated companionship was appealing. “And, yes, maybe you can help me style my hair in a way other than ‘dowdy.’ Making myself up isn’t my strong suit.”

Pleased, Felicity agreed and suggested I choose one of the new outfits. I balked. I was, honestly, a little rankled. Professor Hughes had expected my clothes to be unsatisfactory. However, I had no real reason to refuse, so I chose the tan skirt and navy cardigan and dressed behind the teak wood screen, permitting myself to admire the quality of the fabrics. The outfit was a bit snug in the waist, only barely, and that was disguised by the roominess of the cardigan, which slouched prettily around the tops of my thighs. The doctor’s guesses had been miraculously accurate.

Felicity made her fuss, waving the hair around my face with a violet scented pomade and pinning the rest into an under plait, giving the illusion of a shorter fashion. We surveyed the results in the mirror when she was done. I was stunned by the way the simple change altered my face.

“Oh, miss,” Felicity said, “you look like...”

She stopped as though the air had left her.

“What’s the matter?” I asked

There was an impatient knock, and a harassed Ms. Dillard hurried in, not waiting to be invited.

“Felicity, there you are. I’ve searched high and low for you. The fires, see to them immediately, then Rodney needs your assistance in the garage. He’s put a trellis through one of the windows.” She rolled her eyes high to the heavens to indicate this wasn’t the first time he’d broken a window.

No further word was spoken, and Felicity dipped her head and hurried away, Ms. Dillard watching until she was out of sight. When she finally regarded me, she studied my ensemble and my hair, the corners of her lips turned down, aging her.

“Don’t you look nice, Miss Foxboro,” she said. My skin prickled at her odd tone. “The professor will be ready to meet you after lunch. He’ll not join you, as he often wishes to dine privately.”

“All right,” I barely managed as she whisked away, leaving me on my own again.

Chapter 7

I redressed in my old skirt and white flannel blouse. Ms. Dillard had seen the impropriety in accepting gifts from an employer, no matter how practical, and I should have too. I chose, however, to leave my hair as it was since Felicity had been so kind to do it.

As expected, there was only one place setting in the dining room. I ate cold sandwiches in silence, an insignificant presence at the expansive table, and didn't linger. The library door was slightly ajar when I arrived, warm light pooling on the carpets. Hoping to understand what I was walking into, I peeked cautiously through the crack.

Professor Hughes towered over his desk, heaps of papers, books, and journals surrounding him. His face was clean-shaven, his dark hair tamed into the sleek, smooth style so popular now. He didn't look as dangerous as he had in the moonlit halls, but his beauty still irked me. Men like this got everything they wanted, behaved however they pleased without repercussion or reprimand. Nature had made it a law.

A pang of guilt followed my unkind thoughts. The man had lost his wife, and here I was, skulking and judging him for being handsome.

“Isn’t it unsuitable for a lady to lurk in doorways?” Professor Hughes said, not looking up. I’d been caught.

I rolled my eyes then plastered a warm smile on my face and entered.

“Afternoon,” I said, refusing to acknowledge my sneaking.

He made a harsh noise in return and regarded me.

“Did the clothes I had delivered not fit you?” he asked.

“I brought my own clothes, Professor Hughes.”

He returned to the book he’d been examining. “There’s a tear in your skirt.”

I glanced down, finding he was right. A rip tattered my hem, the fabric hanging lopsided. I cursed it to hell for its betrayal.

“Consider the clothes a benefit,” he continued, closing the book with a vigorous flip of the hand.

As I suspected, he believed he’d have his way.

“I’d prefer a higher salary, sir,” I said, my abruptness forcing a short, genuine laugh from him.

“Is the wage not agreeable to you?”

“It’s satisfactory,” I lied. It was excessive.

“Well, prove your salt in this jungle of research, and perhaps it can be negotiated. Hannigan told me you have extensive knowledge of Celtic folklore.” He shuffled papers, looking for something lost in the mayhem, and I groaned inwardly.

“*Sufficient* knowledge,” I corrected him. “I told Dr. Hannigan many times that my interest is personal, not academic.”

“You simply enjoy fairy stories.”

It came across as a judgment.

“Well, I don’t—”

“My mother loved them as well,” Professor Hughes remarked, halting my defense. “It’s why I bothered with the whole doctorate mess. She obsessed over their mischief, and every particle of her believed the Sidhe had blessed our family. I wanted to study that belief, all the peculiar things humans invent to explain both the horrific and ecstatic mysteries of life.”

The way he spoke, he might have been starting a lecture at the head of a class. Against my wishes, I found it endearing.

“It sounds fascinating,” I ventured, too timid to share that I read purely for pleasure: for the romance of the warriors, the devilment of the fae, and the thrill monsters of myth could inspire. I enjoyed the excitement of facing a beast on the safe side of the page, where defeating it meant only closing the cover. “What are you hoping to gain from this research?”

He considered for a moment.

“Insight to the human mind. To our love of superstition,” he said. “Or perhaps I’m just hoping to remind myself that it’s all make-believe and there’s nothing but the flesh.”

The smile had vanished, his countenance shifting, becoming a shadowy field.

“Do you believe in monsters, Miss Foxboro?” he asked absentmindedly.

He must be teasing me.

“Yes,” I replied, teasing in return. “The human kind.”

“Well done,” he muttered, then motioned with a new sense of energy to the disaster surrounding us. “Your personal interest in all of this benefits me better than the academic mind of a stuffy student constrained to rote memorization. I’ll need your help organizing these notes first. I’m finished with them, and I’m afraid I let them accumulate.”

He gave me a few other directions, and we were to work.

Despite the long bouts of quiet, I contented myself with the music of rustling papers and a crackling fire. The contents of the pages I examined interested me, and I lingered longer than necessary over a note or two, absorbing the information.

The Bodach I was familiar with because of Ms. Reeves, who took joy in trying to scare me silly with little tales from her childhood. It was a boogeyman of sorts, a creature of varying mischief and ill intention depending on the story, more unsettling than fatal. Through reading famous legends, I’d learned of Caoránach, the dragon who birthed demons, banished by Saint Patrick. But I hadn’t known Clíodhna, the queen of the banshees, had

also been revered as a goddess of love, and I'd never heard of the Dobhar-Chú, the otterhound who ate anyone who came near to their waters.

All of these entries were of malevolent creatures that threatened or predicted doom to the well-being of humankind.

"Professor," I ventured, interrupting a long stretch of silence, "there's an entry here for Gancanagh, but there's no description. What is it?"

"A fairy who seduces women," he replied, glancing from his work and concluding, "to their deaths."

"Ah," I replied, penning in the missing information, trying to seem untroubled. Willing away the awkwardness, I continued, "I know of Leanan Sidhe, who does the same to men; I wasn't aware she had a male counterpart."

"Well"—the professor divided his attention between me and his notes—"Leanan at least gives something of value to her lovers in return for their short lives, mostly inspiration and success. The Gancanagh is just a bastard."

His candid comment caught me off guard, and I laughed. He offered a small smile of his own, and some of the tension between us abated. We worked until the natural light began to fade. To my mild annoyance, we'd barely made a dent in the chaos, even after several hours of focus. I tsked silently, sitting back in my chair, my eyes dry and head full. As I released a tired sigh, I found the professor observing me, the fresh murk of the room

turning his expression into one similar to what he'd worn that night in the hall. How long had he been watching me? When our eyes met, he didn't turn away.

"I think we made some progress," I said, not wanting the silence to stretch too long.

"Yes," he replied, breaking his gaze and pressing a hand to his temple. "Thank you, Miss Foxboro. We'll resume tomorrow after breakfast."

I bid a courteous goodnight and left with a sense of accomplishment. Despite the rocky start, everything was going rather well after all.

For the next week, I dined alone in the morning and then met Professor Hughes in the library to work until nightfall. We took a light lunch together in the afternoons and drank so much coffee between us that we were likely supporting the industry single-handedly. The formal stiffness began to weaken, and though I caught him monitoring me occasionally, he left me to mind my responsibilities. I wasn't much more than a glorified secretary, and my knowledge of myth and Celtic languages came in handy only a few times.

Despite the peculiarities, I enjoyed my purpose and looked forward to leaving my room with an engaging job to do, especially since the nights in this house were still strange and challenging. I awoke often in the midnight hours, hearing odd noises, voices that grew quiet when I opened my eyes. I'd hoped the unsettling dreams and

dogged restlessness would calm, but this shift in my life had me muddled.

While filtering through variations of each folk creature, I came across more notes on Clíodhna, queen of the banshees, and a sudden tremor of recognition electrified my brain.

“Professor, the goddess Clíodhna, is that who the fountain in the front of the house and this portrait is meant to represent?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, taking a moment to rub his neck, stiff with reading. “In a variation of her folklore she fell in love with a human, invited him to live on the immortal isle of Tír Tairngire, then drowned him in the sea when he wanted to return to the mortal realm.”

“Did she mean something important to your mother?”

He raised a brow and then his eyes.

“Speaking with Ms. Dillard?”

I don’t know why my cheeks grew hot; surely his mother’s fairy renovations were not a secret.

“She gave me a short history lesson on Willowfield.”

He nodded. “That’s good of her. To answer your question, yes. My mother respected the dangers of the Good Folk as much as she admired their charm. Clíodhna is a creature of beauty and passion whose love has the power to be a boon or a curse. The likenesses of her are an offering and also a warning. For a mortal to accept the favor of the fae is a gamble on their life, and

there are always consequences. Favors must always be paid back. Their love often means death.”

“That’s awful.”

“Some would say everything about the Sidhe is awful,” he said. “But equally beautiful with their individual purposes, like poisonous flowers.”

“Maybe that’s why people are so drawn to them,” I mused.

This theory interested him, and he motioned for me to continue. “Explain.”

I hadn’t been prepared to give an exposition. I sputtered and almost declined to answer, but his attention was rapt. He wanted to hear my theories. “We know they’re *better* than us in so many ways. They’re all the strength and beauty and power humans could never hope to have for themselves, so we crave their love despite their abuses because their love means we are unique. To be favored is a worthwhile danger because it means that among the masses of mortal life, we’ve been singled out and are, in some way, special. That’s what most of us want, isn’t it? To not feel so small and inconsequential in this vast world.”

I hadn’t explained myself well, but a glimmer of appreciation softened his typically stern expression.

“Do you feel inconsequential?” he asked, and the unexpected gentleness in his tone inspired warmth in my chest.

“We all do at some point or another. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar or an idiot.”

My irreverence roused a smile from him. “Well put.”

Nearing the eighth day, when the desk had been mostly cleared of its disorder and we’d moved to the floor piles, I discovered notes written in a scrawl different from the professor’s. It was a shaky, hurried sort of writing as though the pen had been held by a nervous hand. Perhaps I wasn’t his first assistant. This encouraged some jealousy. I’d been second choice, or maybe even a last resort. I sighed but didn’t bother inquiring.

I’d finished transcribing margin notes from one of the professor’s many books into a neat file when his chuckle drew my attention. Mussed hair was becoming his typical style lately, as he often ran his hands through it as he thought, and he sat casually in his wool pullover, looking every bit a preoccupied man of books. He’d relaxed over the past several days, which I counted as a victory. My hopes for camaraderie were heightened when he chuckled again and waved me closer, holding open a battered notebook, the kind I used to carry to classes at St. Mary’s. It had endured a lot and barely held at the spine. Illegible writing filled almost all of the two visible pages, but in the bottom corner existed a cartoonish drawing of some fiend with several eyes and a dreadful but humorous jowl. It was a funny thing, a child’s creation.

“Who drew this?”

“I did,” he said, smiling in a nostalgic, boyish way. “Many years ago when I was a student myself.”

“What in the world is it?”

“The dormitory matron.”

My laughter came so abruptly it was nearly a cackle, and I pressed my fingers to my lips.

“Professor, how awful!” I admonished half-heartedly. “I hope she never knew what you boys thought about her. I’m sure she was doing her best.”

“She was a fair woman, actually, but boys are mean if they’re scolded by a woman who isn’t their mother, especially when their mother is sorely missed.”

My stomach did a flip, bitterness rising into my throat. I had also gone to a boarding school, but my mother had never been missed. He closed the book and stood, his hand brushing against mine like a whisper. An accident, but it made the skin on my knuckles tingle, and I pressed them into my skirt as he passed.

He retrieved his cold cup of coffee from the couch table.

“Where did you go to school?” he asked, sipping the drudges.

I shrugged my shoulders to show that the answer wouldn’t be interesting.

“Mount St. Mary, in New York. I didn’t mind it, but it was dull. No one got into any trouble, really, and the matrons were all decent. The only classes I ever enjoyed

were the ancient languages, but those were only twice a week.”

“Was it your interest in old things that brought you to work in Mr. Helm’s shop?”

I froze.

Like a fool, I hadn’t considered what I’d say if someone asked me about how I’d come to be in Massachusetts in an old bookstore, because I hadn’t expected a friendly conversation.

“I...no,” I answered before my hesitation became too obvious. “My parents died, and I was suddenly on my own, so I left New York and traveled to Boston with no plans. Mr. Helm just happened to be hiring.”

I omitted a most crucial part: upon returning home from university graduation, which neither of my parents attended, I’d found the house empty of staff, and both my mother and father shot dead in their room. The investigation revealed a straightforward truth: murder-suicide. Death had been my father’s graduation gift to me. Shortly after their funeral, I’d left the house carrying only a few belongings and woke up in a Massachusetts hospital with a gaping hole in my memory.

Traumatic amnesia.

Mad Millie, my mother’s hateful voice rang in my ears.

The professor’s gaze was piercing me through, perhaps perceiving the omission.

“How lucky for me that your unextraordinary circumstances led you here to help me in my hour of need.”

The taunting tone perplexed me, encouraging my ears to grow warm. I picked up the notebook he'd abandoned in the chair, giving my hands something to do.

“Where should I file this?” I asked, eager to be moving.

“Hm?” He was still considering me, his thoughts far away.

“Your cartoon book,” I joked.

He focused. “Oh yes, on the shelf with the yearbooks over there. It's worthless, but I'm a fool for nostalgia.”

An unlikely characterization.

A silence fell as I walked to the bookshelves. Its heaviness unsettled me, and in an attempt to continue the tenuous but pleasant easiness that we'd been enjoying, I ventured to keep him talking.

“You said your mother inspired your interest in folklore, but what made you focus your study on the malevolent?” I asked.

He didn't respond, and I thought he hadn't heard me. I pressed the book into its spot and turned to find he'd grown still, cup hovering a mere breath from his lips. After a moment, he cleared his throat, drank the remainder of the cold coffee, then replied, “My wife.”

The mood soured quickly, my stomach with it. I'd managed to ask the wrong thing.

I didn't have a chance to apologize or salvage the moment as the professor put his cup down and politely excused himself to retrieve files he'd left in his quarters. When he'd gone, I indulged in a hearty curse and pressed my palms against my eyes until I saw stars. I clearly wasn't fit to navigate the moods of an isolated widower.

Without the professor for company, the library became vast and the remainder of the work insurmountable. With no guess as to when he'd return, I continued my duty, picking up a stack of bound papers that someone with forethought had tied together. There were five or so, and they were heavy. I overjudged my ability and lost hold of the top two as I carried them to the desk, and they fell, exploding into a shower of paper, sliding in all directions, including under the heavy furniture. Tears stung my eyes.

I'd deposited the surviving stacks in a nearby chair and begun fishing for the wayward notes under the sofa when I spotted another drawing. I pulled it closer, expecting one of the professor's childhood caricatures. The beast depicted wasn't a boyish sketch done in jest but a monstrous rendering made even more foul by the earnestness of the artist. The figure was man-shaped, hooded in black, its eyes nothing but two glittering spots in the dark void of shadows hiding its face. The body levitated, white hands raised in a gesture of invitation. Beneath the drawing, a description read:

Gancanagh

Seduces human women, feeding on their love until they waste away and perish. One kiss will seal a victim's fate.

I recognized the handwriting—the same as the notes I'd assumed had been written by the professor's former assistant. This was only the second time I'd encountered a mention of the Gancanagh in all of the essays and annotations I'd examined. I checked a few other papers and, though there were no more drawings, everything in the stack belonged to that hand. Whoever the previous assistant had been, at least they were organized, if not macabre. I returned to the task of gathering the scattered papers, picking up several bits at once, when a small pocket journal, bound in green cloth, slid into view, having been tucked carefully in the stack. It didn't look like the others I'd found in the research piles, and I opened it curiously to where a fraying white ribbon marked the last used page. The same handwriting greeted me.

"Every day his eyes darken," the first line read.

He's grieving. I can't give him the family he so desperately wants.

My brow furrowed, an alarm sounding in my conscience. This wasn't research. I should close it, set it aside. I didn't.

I sometimes wonder if he regrets our marriage; it happened so quickly. But when I begin to think he hates me, he'll envelop me in his passion, opening my body up to him no matter where we are. This morning he debauched me in a hallway alcove, the statue of the goddess Brigid watching over us as he pleased me with his tongue. I believe he would have had me there on the floor if we hadn't heard the voices of staff moving our way. I've feared several times we'd be discovered, but even these anxieties don't restrain me. His desires are too intoxicating, and I can't deny him.

My face grew hot.

I know he believes he can break the curse I suffer if only he loves me viciously enough, but losing myself in him seems only to attract my troubles all the more. My Callum. He will be the death of me.

A noise at the door caused me to startle, and I raised my eyes to find Professor Hughes. He looked lethal, a vicious scowl marring his handsome features, turning them deviant. As I moved to stand, he approached, reaching me in only a few long strides. My instincts

implored retreat, but he was already upon me, yanking the book from my grasp and throwing it into the fireplace, where it hit with such force that embers blew out like gore from a blunt force wound, burning the rug.

“Professor,” I said, astonished, but I balked at the fire in his eyes, as unforgiving as the one turning the book to cinders.

“Those were not papers meant to be pried over,” he barked.

“Yet they were in a pile of notes you asked me to organize,” I retorted.

“Are you incapable of deciphering between personal entries in a journal and academic notes on mythological bogeymen?”

“Professor Hughes,” I raised my voice, the warring sense of shame and indignance overstimulating my nerves, “I won’t be blamed for reading private notes when those very notes were mixed with items I am being paid to examine! I had no intention of prying into your personal life, and I ask that you not scold me for something that wasn’t done with ill intentions.”

Some of the anger left his face, but he remained darkened, sadness in his eyes as he stepped away. He let out a breath of disbelief and stalked to the fireplace, where the rug had begun to smoke dangerously. He snuffed out the embers with the toe of his shoe, then stood and pressed both hands into the mantel, watching the book burn. I witnessed his regret, not for his

behavior toward me but for his rash decision to destroy his wife's journal, possibly one of his last pieces of her.

"You stand up for yourself," he said, still turned from me. "I'm surprised."

It was such an odd thing to say. I didn't know what to make of it, and the sparks of my vexation were not extinguished as easily as the ones on the carpet.

"Were you hoping I'd be a simpering schoolgirl you could bully?"

He appeared so stunned by the accusation that I winced. I'd gotten carried away.

"I apologize. We're both upset. I want to be an asset to you, Professor Hughes, and for us to have a respectful working relationship. I promise to be more careful in the future, knowing personal documents are incorporated. I hope we can agree to make this our last argument."

I held the olive branch out despite my pride and with much sincerity while also appreciating the fact that this exchange could end my employment.

He turned to me, resembling again the man I'd met my first night at Willowfield. The heat in my chest dipped to my lower belly and intensified when he glanced at my mouth.

"I very much doubt that, Miss Foxboro."

Freshly rankled by his rejection of my peace offering, I unmuzzled my temper.

“If you insist on being an absolute tyrant, then you’re correct.”

“We’re done for the day,” he said sharply. “Ms. Dillard will advise you.”

Still roiling with indignant fury, I ignored my sense and departed with one last volley.

“Of course, sir,” I said with utmost sweetness, far too much, like poisoned honey. “I am at your beck and call.”

I escaped the library in a tiff, floods of thoughts overwhelming me. With no interest in returning to my room, I stormed to the front door, unlocked it, and yanked it open with all my might. The door was so heavy that my rage didn’t move it much, only enough to slide into the fresh air, the cool early spring chilling my hot skin. I longed to stalk toward the gate, a significant part of me begging me to run and leave Willowfield and its grim master behind forever, but with every step I took, my thoughts leveled. If I were to leave, be turned out, I’d be worse off than I’d begun. My heated footsteps slowed, and I crossed my arms over my chest, finally feeling the cold without my coat.

I would see this through. After all, the professor’s reaction had been marginally justified. A woman he hardly knew had found a personal journal belonging to his late wife describing the most intimate details of their love. I was at the threshold of shame, but curse me and my curiosity; I’d wanted to keep reading. The pull of this place, that man, was powerful, and I struggled to recoil against it.

The way he'd looked at my mouth.

I stopped dead still and inhaled the chilly air, hoping to clear my head. When at last I looked up at the house, I found the professor standing at the library windows, watching after me. My heart beat several times, hard and uneasy before he disappeared from view.

He will be the death of me, his wife had said.

Chapter 8

I slept fitfully, bothered by all the sounds I'd attributed to an old house. I yearned for my little room back in Mr. Helm's bookshop, where the noises of the busy street below offered comforting assurance and drowned out the creaks and groans of the building until I was asleep.

I was awake before dawn sitting in my bed, parched, my stomach uneasy and my head hollow. I hadn't drawn the curtains, finding the absolute dark too oppressive, and I watched the morning light brighten the room. Though I was sure I'd be perfectly fine after breakfast, I resolved to tell Felicity when she arrived to make the fire for the morning that I was unwell and would be taking a day to rest. I wasn't ready to face the professor.

When the knock came at my door, I answered, prepared to look convincingly miserable, and came face-to-face with Ms. Dillard.

"Are you ill, Miss Foxboro?"

I might have been able to exaggerate my condition to Felicity, but Ms. Dillard would see through it, I was certain. With my plan foiled, I shook my head.

"I'm a little tired is all. The noises keep me up."

"Noises?" Ms. Dillard asked, her eyes narrowing.

It was silly to have mentioned it.

“Just the settling of the house. I’m not used to it.”

Ms. Dillard clicked her tongue.

“Country sounds eventually become background noise,” she assured me, not completely dismissive. “I’ve come to tell you that the professor has just departed and will be gone for a few days.”

“Oh?” Though I’d been glad enough to play sick, the idea of Professor Hughes being away from the house was an unhappy one. It was empty enough as it was. “Where has he gone?”

“Despite the professor’s passions as an academic he still runs the family business. There’s been an issue at one of the packaging warehouses in Boston, so off he’s gone.”

The mention of Boston made me homesick for the shop. I resolved to ask the professor to let me travel with him the next time he went so that I might visit Mr. Helm.

“At any rate, he’s left instructions for you to do as you please until he returns and to not worry yourself with work.”

The meaning of this time off was clear as day—the professor didn’t want me in the library alone in case I came across any more sensitive reading material. Well, he had a right.

“We’ll continue to serve meals at the same time in the dining room, but you may otherwise do as you’d like. Within reason.” Having added this last bit, Ms. Dillard looked at me pointedly and I understood.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Those hallways and that staircase haven’t been cleaned in ages, Miss Foxboro. Your footprints in the dust were as clear as black ink on a white shirt. I suppose we’re all very lucky that you’d make a terrible criminal.”

It sounded curiously like a jest, and I smiled.

Though she didn’t smile back, the woman tilted her head thoughtfully and offered, “The weather isn’t brutal today. You might have a look outside. Nothing’s blooming but the gardens are still a worthwhile sight.”

“Thank you, Ms. Dillard. That sounds lovely,” I said sincerely.

“Well, it will keep you out from underfoot. Breakfast will be ready in an hour.”

She went off without another word.

I readied myself, forgoing my own clothes this time to dress in the much warmer garments the professor had delivered. He’d been right about my wardrobe not being sufficient, but like the stubborn mule I enjoyed being I’d continued to wear only what I’d brought. Admittedly, it was partially to vex him for his criticisms.

But the professor wouldn’t see me today, and Ms. Dillard couldn’t judge if the purpose was for practicality, so I let myself enjoy the navy wool skirt and low hemmed cardigan, choosing my own sedate beige blouse to complete it. I pressed the brown cloche hat low over my hair, to protect my ears from the cold, and shrugged on my aged coat. I was glad the professor hadn’t offered a

new one; I'd be too afraid to explore outside and get the thing smudged.

After a hurried breakfast, I took myself back to the front of the house. Yesterday when I'd stormed off, I hadn't gotten far before the cold drove me back inside. Today wasn't warm, but the chill in the air was reduced by the bright sun that shone down unimpeded from a cloudless sky. I planned to walk the perimeter of the house to get a look at it from every angle, determined to figure it out, especially after getting so hopelessly lost. Positive that I wouldn't stumble anywhere I wasn't supposed to be, I began a confident stroll. The gardens stretched the full west and north of the house. I was anxious to visit them, but kept on the periphery for now, surveying the windows and turrets on this side of the estate, trying to map it.

There, the library windows near the drive, and along this same outer wall the dining room, the smaller kitchen windows, and the door beneath them on the below-stairs level that must be the cellar, likely connected to the kitchen pantry. This would allow easy come and go from the back where a small herb garden lay dormant for the winter. Beyond the kitchen were windows for rooms I hadn't been in, doors locked tight against curious eyes. Then at last the rose hedgemaze came into view, flanked by a vine-buried garden wall, gray with dead moss. I'd seen this from that feminine office and located the window easily. As I approached the back left corner of the house, the groundskeeper's cottage became visible, built of rough field stone and a simple wood roof. It

looked quaint and picturesque. As with everything about Willowfield, the look had been curated to the height of fancy.

If I could see the cottage here, the hallway I'd navigated must be on the back of the house. When I took myself around the corner, I was met with a peculiar sight. A tower. It was an addition to the house, unlike the rest of the French gothic architecture. It had been added on a whim or as an afterthought, and it demanded attention. Built up from the third floor, invisible from all vantage points but the north gardens, it was crafted in the same field stone as the cottage, but had been laid more smoothly and evenly, perhaps to denote a higher class of person residing there. Its conical pale roof boasted a chimney that leaned quirkily to one side as though it were ancient. It might have once been romantic, but with the creepers hanging dead like lank hair, and the dirt of neglect fogging the windows, it inspired an ominous sense of unease. Despite how it looked on the outside, the view from that room would have been extraordinary.

I continued my trail and traveled around the remainder of the estate, finding a sizeable carriage house, converted to keep modern vehicles, and the apple orchards, which stretched out as far as I could see to the east. I was familiar with none of the rooms on this side and shook my head, finding a grudging sense of respect for Ms. Dillard and the work required to manage such a place.

My task completed, I headed back to the gardens with undisguisable excitement and began at the spot that had fascinated me most: the rose labyrinth. I meandered through the twists and turns, the gravel ways littered with dried petals and leaves from last season. I misturned only twice before finding the center, set with two stone benches facing each other from opposite points. Marking the middle of the circle was a fairy ring of morel mushrooms that must have been encouraged to grow in a precise circle. The child in me longed to step inside, just to enjoy a little thrill, but I listened to the hum of caution in my breast that advised me to move on.

Unlike a typical labyrinth, the rose maze had an alternative exit, leading into the once-fine topiary quarter, full of beasts and approximate human shapes. The centermost shrub was larger than the rest, and from its vaguely manlike head, two great oak branches had been secured like splendid horns. Every shrub was cut to mimic a flurry of activity. Great dogs, rearing horses, snapping wolves, all facing one direction toward a stag, the only bush that had been lovingly maintained. There were no overgrowths of limbs, no holes from decay, only thick evergreen and perfectly manicured edges. I reached up to caress its muzzle as I passed, the leaves rustling against my touch.

I ventured onto the overgrown pathways that may have once led many visitors through their tour of the decadent colors and scents of spring. There were pergolas, cherry blossom tunnels, and innumerable bramble arches and clusters of broom waiting patiently

to flower. A majestic weeping willow sighed low over a murky pond where a stone kelpie reared half out of the water, searching for a rider.

I left the kelpie pond, walking a path between two gardenia bushes and found myself at the Willowfield greenhouse I'd seen in the car on the way up the winding drive. The distance and the reflection of the sky had hidden its flaws then, but the grisly state of it was visible now. Where glass panels were not cracked or completely missing from their frames, there was dirt, bird excrement, and oily soot—the remnants of a fire. Flames had ruined the hothouse at some unknown time, and the damage had never been remedied. I walked closer, trying to peer inside, but silhouettes of long-dead plants prevented me. After a short search, I found the door, rusted and hanging ajar. Telling myself it wouldn't hurt to look, I entered cautiously, wary of loose glass.

The inside was a sadness of charred foliage, once a variety of warm weather greenery that would have made this little square of land feel like a tropical arcadia. I spotted remnants of banana leaf trees, cat ferns, and birds of paradise. A wasted lemon tree made its pride of place in the least damaged area, showing off the carcasses of its fruit that still hung stubbornly to their branches. Near this was a large cedar workbench, scarred with soot and splayed with shears, wire, and an assortment of cracked vases, shards of ones that didn't survive littering the dirt floor. This workbench interested me most, and I picked my way through to it, passing a pyre of wicker that had once been chairs and a glass-top

tea table, cracked through the center. I traipsed over the ruins of a scorched rug, laid out for the comfort of visitors, and it squelched beneath my feet.

The workbench was in much better shape than it seemed, and didn't give or rock when I tested its sturdiness. This must have been a floristry table, where the bouquets and arrangements were made for the house. Ms. Dillard had mentioned something about Willowfield being full of flowers even in the winter months. That meant that this greenhouse had likely belonged to Mrs. Hughes.

A small sadness settled around me as I respectfully examined all the forgotten paraphernalia of a hobby once enjoyed by a person no longer here: gardening gloves, scissors, stalks of dried hydrangea and lavender, the smell of them, though dull, still drifting around the space like a memory.

Ms. Reeves had told me about phantom smells, the calling cards of the dead who come back for a moment to revisit the places where they were most comfortable. The thought of lavender and ghosts elicited a sickening reaction in me, and despite the warmth of the sun through the glass, my flesh rose with goose bumps, and I became light-headed, the world pitching forward and taking me with it. Throwing out my hand to stop my descent, I caught the top of the workbench, leaning heavily, unsteady. The jostling of the table knocked a pair of shears and a shower of old petals to the ground. I took several deep breaths, forcing the miasma to retreat. Lavender had never been a favorite scent of mine, but I

had never reacted so strongly to it. It was all the strangeness of the house, the intensity of my interactions with the professor, and my unknown future. I assured myself that I was just more sensitive to the panics now because of stress and lack of sleep.

To divert my mind, I bent down on my hands and knees to reach under the cabinet and retrieve the scissors. Being close to the cool earth focused me, and I reached under, my fingertips finding the edge of something hard and smooth. I dipped my head farther to see it. Another journal, the cover as green as the other. It seemed Mrs. Hughes had once made a habit of hiding her private journals, and I imagined it made sense to do so in places where she spent the most time. My conscience battled with my interest in knowing more about the mysterious Willowfield wife, but ultimately it lost, and I reached for the book, pulling it from its hiding place. I was mildly repulsed with myself for my grotesque curiosity, but still, I flipped open the cover to investigate the handwriting on the inside. It was the same harsh, nervous script.

I skimmed the first several pages, trying not to look too closely, but after a moment it was plain that this hadn't been a secret, passionate diary, but a botany notebook. Mrs. Hughes had drawn various types of plants—their stalks, petals, and seeds—labeling each with different notes for uses, scents, distillations, and arrangements. I continued to flip through, keen on studying what made this estate and, admittedly, its former mistress so fascinating. As I came near the

middle of the book, the attitude of the botanical sketches shifted. Gone were the delicate renderings of baby's breath and lilacs and in their place, harsh black scratches eking out vines and twisted flowers with sparse notes beneath, some so rushed as to be unreadable.

At last, I flipped a page and found no more drawings of flowers, only a single word.

CALLUM

There was a rustling over my left shoulder, a movement through the dried-up memories of a once-vibrant life, and I sucked in a breath and whirled around, expecting to find Ms. Dillard. There was already a hot flush running up the back of my neck. But there was no one. The rustling rose again, disturbing the brown leaves of a banana palm a few steps away, and a crow burst forth, wings flapping wildly. It darted past me, so close I felt the flutter of its feathers, and then dove through a copse of potted fern. Its quick exit was followed by a short squeak of hinges. Purposefully giving very little thought to my next action, I tucked the botany journal quickly into my pocket. It was, after all, filled with academic notes. Certainly safe to borrow. I would replace it once I'd made an examination and perhaps learned a thing or two about flowers. I followed the crow's path back into the garden and away from the greenhouse, leaving it to mourn its mistress in peace.

As I emerged out of the garden proper, movement from the house drew my eye up and I looked toward the tower, where one of the curtains had been raised. There

was a shape there, a person. I couldn't make them out. Ms. Dillard or Felicity checking on me, maybe. Though why they'd be on the forbidden third floor was a mystery. I waved, hoping whoever it was would find the gesture friendly, and become aware that I knew they were watching.

The figure moved away quickly, the curtain dropping back into place.

Maybe it was an attempt to disband my growing discomfort, or perhaps it was just the absurdity of my entire situation, but no matter the reason, I found myself laughing.

“Having a good morning, miss?” a bright voice inquired.

My laugh turned into a choked squeak, and I flinched, turning to find Rodney standing a respectable distance away, a warm smile on his tanned face. His golden hair was unstyled, hidden beneath a cap, the same beige of the flannel button-up that was tucked neatly into brown corduroy trousers, the knees dark with earth and garden labor. He leaned on his shovel, observing me with some amusement.

“Rodney! Oh, you frightened me! People here seem to enjoy doing that.”

He chuckled. “I know the house is spooky, Miss Foxboro, but don't cling to your superstitions out here. These gardens are the most peaceful place in the world. Not even the heaviness of Willowfield can touch them.”

I begged to differ but smiled anyway.

“It is lovely even though nothing’s growing.”

“Oh, on the contrary,” he said. “There’s plenty growing, just very little we can see yet. In a few weeks, I’d guess this whole place will be hazy with green. It’s a sight.”

“I’m sure it is,” I replied, now grinning with sincerity. My first impressions of Rodney in the formal hall hadn’t been too off. He was extremely handsome, golden in the way all the girls I’ve ever known would go for. He was comfortable, easygoing, with no intensity about him at all. I didn’t feel out of sorts standing there with him in this empty space. Instead, I felt happy to have some company that didn’t unsettle me.

Rodney looked up at the house again and sighed, forlorn.

“It’s such a shame Willowfield is going to rot. It’s always been a real magical place. I predict the professor will wash his hands of it in the near future. He’s hardly ever here as it is anymore, and with only three people to keep the old girl from falling down to its foundations... well, there’s not much hope for it.”

“You sound fond of Willowfield. Have you worked here long?”

“A few years, right before Mrs. Hughes...well...before everyone left. But way before that, back when I was a kid, my parents worked here. Lived in that same cottage.” He nodded his head in the general direction of the little

stone house. “My old man passed shortly after Callum’s mom did. We moved down to the village, but missed the place. So Felicity and I came back on and took our parents’ old posts.”

“Felicity is your sister?”

“Since the day she was born.” He winked at me.

“She’s very sweet,” I said, thrown by his open playfulness.

We stood in companionable silence, enjoying the wind and looking around the grounds, likely both of us imagining what this world would look like in a few more weeks.

“She’s sensitive, Felicity is,” Rodney said, suddenly earnest. “Been having nightmares since the whole tragedy with the professor’s wife. She thinks there’s something wrong with the house.”

My skin crawled.

Rodney scoffed in a way that only brothers can.

“I told her that’s a bunch of nonsense,” he said, “but she’s believed Willowfield is haunted since she was a kid. If she goes talking about anything strange, just let me know. Anyway, I’ve kept you long enough. Thank you for passing some time with me, miss. It was pleasant.”

He flashed me a smile that I couldn’t help but return. I thought he truly might be flirting, and despite the chill he’d just given me, I rather liked it.

“It was,” I responded. “Have a good day, Rodney.”

He nodded, then headed away with the shovel over his shoulder, whistling to himself, carefree.

I turned back to the house, not ready to go inside, but feeling like I likely should, at least to see if Ms. Dillard needed any help with lunch. I was about to be on my way when Rodney called out, “Oh, Miss Foxboro.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sure someone’s already mentioned it, but just in case, feel free to explore, it’s safe as a nursery everywhere out here except the northern end, past the Italianate—there’s a ravine near there, earth’s crumbly around the mouth. Wouldn’t want you to fall.”

The ravine. The place Mrs. Hughes had died.

I could barely bring myself to nod.

With a touch of a gloved hand at the brim of his flat cap, Rodney turned behind a hedge and disappeared.

I stood there for a long time after he left, the sun no longer warming me.

Chapter 9

The rest of the day passed without incident, and I spent the majority in the gardens, hunger and the early sunset eventually driving me inside. Dinner was another quiet affair, and I didn't enjoy it, too conscious of one less person in the house. The disquiet turned my stomach, and I picked at my plate, eating little and deciding to call it an early night.

When I arrived to my room, the fire roared nicely, and eager for my weariness to carry me into a deep, dreamless sleep, I prepared for bed. As I began to unbutton my blouse, someone knocked at the door.

It had become a nightly ritual arranged by Professor Hughes for Felicity to bring me tea before bed, but exhaustion and the dark kaleidoscope of my thoughts had made me forget to expect her. I'd tried a few times to turn her away, telling her she shouldn't worry about me, but my attempts were consistently rebuffed. She insisted it was bad manners to allow a guest, staff or not, to go to bed with a cold belly. I opened the door with some weariness, meeting an unusually cheerful maid.

"You didn't eat, so I brought you some shortbread. Ms. Dillard made it and it's nice and fresh. I made your tea a little stronger tonight too. Extra honey."

"How nice of you," I said, grateful.

She set the tea tray on the table by the fire and poured a cup. We chatted easily, and I found myself happy for her company after all.

“You’re in good spirits,” I said conversationally. “Ms. Dillard was less grumpy today as well.”

“Oh,” Felicity said, offering a bashful shrug. “The professor is away, that always takes a bit of the pressure off.”

Her candor warmed me to her further.

“He’s intense.”

“Yes...” Felicity buttoned up at my observation, and I suspected I’d gone too far. I attempted to rejuvenate the previous easiness.

“I met your brother today.”

“Rodney?” she asked as though she had more than one brother working at Willowfield. “Oh no. Did he bother you, miss? He’s an unapologetic flirt.”

“He is,” I agreed with a grin. “I didn’t mind. He seems to love this place.”

“He does,” she sighed. “And even after everything, I do too. It’s home.”

Not for the first time, I was sorry I’d never seen Willowfield in its glory days. Why did I always find myself with the ashes of something once extraordinary in my hands?

Felicity said her goodnights, leaving me in solitude. The sight of the shortbread made my stomach feel its

lack of dinner, and I ate several bites one after the other, the dusting of white sugar on the top making a mess of my fingers. I wiped the powder from my fingertips then took a sip of tea, its high sweet notes tickling my tongue. It truly was more potent than usual. After a cup, I changed into my night things. As I put away my day clothes, the journal I'd discovered in the greenhouse fell to the floor.

I stared at it, shocked at myself anew for having taken it, but they were only botany notes. I picked it up, abandoned my clothes on the foot of the bed, and sat to drink another cup of tea and pore over the pages. I opened the journal and began where I'd last read.

CALLUM

The following entries were more of the same: hastily drawn flowers and weeds with their attributes, many of them toxic, written underneath. Underlined several times were the words *bitter* and *small lethal dose*. Mrs. Hughes's fascination with poisons disquieted me, but as I sat back and admired the fire, I worked out her purpose. As a fledgling botanist and the new empress of a perfume empire, it was likely in her best interest to be familiar with which flora on her property posed a risk. I would have wanted to know the same.

Once, as a child, I'd wandered to the kitchen garden to steal cherry tomatoes growing red and enticing. While plucking a pocketful of my ill-gotten snack, I'd spied beautiful purple berries growing at the house's foundation and indulged myself in these as well. I was

dangerously ill a whole week following, with only my father coming to check on me in my worst bouts of cramping. The doctor diagnosed me with pokeweed poisoning, and I never stole from the garden again.

I shook my head at the memory, finding it a fond one despite my illness. It had been one of the only times my father had openly lavished me with affection, as typically doing so induced the wrath of my mother, who was selfish of his attention. I pushed away the final memory of him, lying prone in his bed, my graduation notice clasped in his hand, my mother's body on the floor.

I took a fortifying drink, and the tea was still too hot. It burned. I focused on the pain as it scalded down my throat, and my breathing returned to normal, my heart rate slowing. The next entry came with no pictures, only a block of words.

Tonight, after our last dinner guest had gone home, Callum took me on the dining room table.

These were words never meant for anyone but their writer to see. I stopped, sucking in a breath. I should close the journal. This wasn't meant for me, but the words were heady, and my carnal interest instant and powerful.

There's a stain on my dress from the wine we knocked over. I have no idea what the staff thinks, but

we've never once been interrupted, so I hope they know never to come knocking on closed doors.

We'd had an argument. The wife of one of his dearest friends, who is always so sweet to me, brought up seances during the meal, and I was fascinated. Spiritualism is experiencing a revival, and I've always been interested in the showmanship of it, even though I'm not a believer. Or, at least, hadn't been. Recent events are changing my mind. With everything going on in the house, in my head, I was eager for a chance to make sense of it, even if it meant indulging in something Callum finds ridiculous.

He openly opposed the idea of hosting a seance, and for the first time in front of our friends, we were at odds with each other. The remainder of the affair had gone on warmly enough, though I was aware of Callum's irritation. When we were alone at last, I demanded he explain his reasoning.

My inquiry had landed me on my back, my skirts hiked to my waist, and Callum saying only, "This is all there is, my love. There is nothing more."

I love him so dearly, but I believe he's wrong.

The last line carried an acute agitation along with the dark yearning unfolding in my lower belly. My breath came uneven, shallow, my head heavy with images of passion painted on the page in the hand of a woman who had gone to her grave afraid of Willowfield. I stood quickly, shaky, either from the sudden movement or the

intensity of my unexpected desire. Hot-faced, I attempted to reject the unwanted barrage of sensual ideas by finally going to sleep. My body grew heavy as I crawled beneath the covers, more tired than I'd known, but for a moment, I allowed myself to stare into the dark, thinking terrible, beautiful thoughts.

I dreamed of golden eyes gleaming in the moonlight and strong hands in my hair, then sometime in the dead of night, a low moan of feminine ecstasy jolted me awake. It sounded so close, as if the impassioned woman were lying next to me. I listened to the dark. The fire, only embers, offered a gentle crackle, but there was something else: a whispering that grew as I focused on it, hissing like a kettle preparing to scream. The scent of honeysuckle filled my nose as if the brambling weed had grown wild in the room while I slept. The smell and the incessant noise became too much, overwhelming me, and I covered my face, crying against my hands to break it apart.

Silence fell, and the scent of summer abated. I raised my head.

My bedroom door was open. Near the floor, on hands and knees, a human body, face peeking in, obscured by tangles of pale hair.

A frightened scream assaulted my vocal cords, and the thing retreated backward, spiderlike, knocking the door wide in its haste. This could not be explained away. This was a *person*. Made of flesh and blood and tormenting me for reasons beyond my understanding. Recklessly, I

lunged out of the bed to follow with no self-doubt adding me. I tried to imagine the meek Felicity or the proper Ms. Dillard crawling into my room, but the picture was too absurd. There was no one else unless...

The front door. The doctor mentioned it was always unlocked.

Someone was in this house.

I was dimly aware that my courage was abnormally elevated, but my urgency suffocated my doubt, and I pursued the intruder. They turned a corner, the white hem of a skirt visible in the moonlight.

“Stop! I’ve seen you already! I’ll call the police!”

For the first time, it dawned on me I had no idea where to find a phone. I didn’t even know if Willowfield had a working one. I’d never seen it. I lost sight of them, with so many doors to disappear into I thought the chase was over. Yet there, at the far end of the hallway barely visible, a figure crouched, trying to hide in the murk beyond the last window.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, causing them to scuttle on hands and feet like an animal down another hallway with a speed I found disturbing, as though moving this way was natural. I had no way of knowing if this invader was dangerous, and surely I had reason to believe they might be. No sane person scabbled on all fours. Still I pursued, intoxicated by my own adrenaline. The floor felt insubstantial, as though it were made of unset clay, and my awareness undulated from inside my body to above it. My rising panic began

to demand proof that I wasn't pursuing another nightmare, and I slowed, light-headed and heavy bodied. Was I still asleep? A quick gasp of ecstasy turned my head, and I found the woman several doors behind me, hands like claws on the floor and with a shiver, she slunk into a room, her movements a symphony of rustling leaves, dry and dead.

I hurried to the door she'd disappeared through, still partially open no longer sure why I was continuing to follow, only feeling profoundly compelled to. But as I crossed the threshold, the brutal determination lifted, like a spell broken, and I stumbled to a halt.

There *was* someone in this room.

Professor Hughes stood gazing into the aggressive glow of the fireplace, looking up with a start as I entered. Discounting the hour, he was fully dressed though disheveled, unkempt hair touching the tops of his cheeks, shirt ruffled and unbuttoned halfway, revealing the hard lines of his collarbones and the undershirt beneath. A half-empty glass of amber liquid sat on the mantel where he leaned, turning a small white packet between his fingers like a magician about to enthrall an audience with sleight of hand. His initial surprise turned to something more forbidding as he took in the sight of me, breathing hard and likely looking berserk.

"Professor." A fresh wave of horror having nothing to do with the thing that had led me here brought me back to my body abruptly, like a drunk doused in ice water. "You were meant to be away."

“Clearly, I’ve returned.”

“Please, there’s someone...”

I couldn’t say more. I’d seen a woman crawl into this room, yet there was no one else here, unless she happened to be hiding under the bed. I glanced in that direction, regretting it as soon as I had.

“Someone,” he asked darkly, noting where my attention had gone.

I straightened myself, trying to be sure of what I had experienced, newly bewildered by the realization that I wasn’t just in any room with Professor Hughes. It was a bedroom, and it was his.

“I’ve seen someone in the house,” I said. “I followed them here. I think they came in at the front door. We need to call the police.”

Professor Hughes made a silent point by motioning around the empty room. There was only the two of us. I had no way of proving myself, no evidence to offer other than my word, which I was beginning to doubt.

“This entire thing,” I said shakily, finally voicing my experiences at Willowfield, “is very uncommon.”

“Oh, this particular circumstance is *most* uncommon, Miss Foxboro,” he replied with meaning, measuring me with a critical eye. He didn’t believe me. “The front door is locked. Ms. Dillard makes sure of it every night, and no one has come into this room, unless, of course, you count yourself.”

As he spoke, he walked toward me in a lazy, evocative amble, the half-finished glass in his hand. He seemed to be giving me time to retreat, but the tilt of his head, the satyric look in his eyes, suggested that if I ran he would pursue me.

“I didn’t realize this was your room.” I had nothing else to say. Trying to argue it would have made things worse. I needed to leave and process what had happened before attempting to face my mortification and all the new questions raised.

“Mmm, but I’m sure you *do* realize we are here, alone together in the dark of night,” he replied, still advancing. “I feel like this has happened before.”

“Professor...” I tried to sound level-headed, chastising, but it was barely possible with his tall, broad body moving forward the way it was, prowling.

“Once again, you are in nothing but a threadbare nightdress.”

The words themselves weren’t what encouraged heat to quake through me. It was the timbre of his voice, low and dangerous, full of warning and promises a decent woman should disdain.

His honey eyes were set on me with such intensity that I felt bare, and I crossed an arm over my chest. The horror of the previous moments were dulled, replaced with an urgent awareness of my scarcely clad body, and the way his nearness made it hum with deranged yearning.

One corner of his mouth lifted into a mocking grin. “At a loss for words? You seemed perfectly capable of speech yesterday. Quite scalding speech if I remember.”

Still too warm and off balance, I used the only weapon I still had my wits to wield—indignance.

“You’re exaggerating,” I said firmly.

He took another of the smallest steps, and though my unhinged instinct was to lean into him, I forced myself to take a dignified shuffle back toward the exit, only to misjudge the direction and run my hip into the corner of a side table, hard enough to disrupt the vase there. I sucked in a startled breath, and the professor moved confidently to catch the urn as it fell, righting it again and bringing him closer than ever. We’d been this near in the library many times, scanning and notating manuscripts, but that had been business done in the pure light of day, and now, as he’d noted, we were alone in the dark.

Despite how my body responded, I remained defiant and didn’t attempt to shirk away again.

“What should I do to prevent you from forgetting my warnings?” he murmured, his gaze making a deliberate path from my mouth to the arm I still held as a shield against my chest. “Throw you over my knee?”

The image of being draped across his lap inspired a small tremor, and he smiled, slow and treacherous. I unwisely looked away, trying to gather my wits. This near, I could smell the rich scent of the whiskey on him, notes of oak and peat, smoky and dangerous. I was eye

level with the smooth skin beneath his collarbones, and the pulse that moved in the hollow of his throat drew my attention. If I reached out, I could place a hand on his chest and feel his heartbeat.

“Or”—he leaned in a fraction—“maybe I should bend you over this table.”

My soul deserted me, but I somehow maintained enough sense to disguise my breathy gasp as a scoff. These advances were nothing more than a liquor-driven attempt to admonish me for heedlessness. Ever the instructor, he was offering a fable of what happens to careless girls.

“You’re drunk,” I said, trying to cool my feverish skin with condemnation. “Your moral lesson is noted, but you can’t frighten me, Professor Hughes. I’m not a maiden from a folktale, and you wouldn’t have your way with me like a monster just to prove a point.”

“Wouldn’t I?” he murmured.

He lifted the glass and pressed the cold bottom of it into the soft skin below my right ear, sending a jolt of sensation into my low abdomen. The condensation teardropped and made a chilling track downward, slipping over my shoulder and into the front of my slip. He tracked its journey with half-lidded eyes.

I didn’t consider my next words first. They surged from me with their own mind.

“Then do it,” I said.

To my credit, they sounded more like an exasperated challenge than a desperate request.

His brows arched up, and I was sure I'd shocked him, beaten him at his own game with the goading invitation. Instead, he laughed, the sound rich as a lover's midnight, shattering my smug confidence.

"With pleasure," he said, calling my bluff, and he inclined his head as though to kiss me, but bypassed my mouth, leaning farther to place his tongue at the slope of my shoulder, dragging it along the path the water droplet had fallen until he arrived at my ear. I became a pyre of lust, all the carnal images I'd conjured in my head inspired by his wife's journals playing in an erotic loop. My breath barely left me.

"You don't know the dangers of this game you're playing, Millie."

"Tell me what they are," I whispered, my will to resist him decimated by the sound of my name in his mouth, a song I wanted to hear again. If we were playing a game, I wished him to be the victor if it meant he'd close the last small distance.

He straightened, his warmth receding as he moved sharply away from me, as though I'd slapped him. As he retreated to the fireplace, he drained the remainder of the whiskey.

"Go back to your room, Miss Foxboro, and resist roaming this house at night. I won't be responsible for what happens next time you find yourself inclined to

wander.” He took up a crystal decanter and poured the newly empty glass full, and did not look at me again.

The sudden shift in the direction of our exchange tipped me upside down, and I despised it. He hadn’t believed my fear then had teased my desires free only to reject them. I turned on my heel and escaped, attempting to keep my steps even, and not too eager to flee.

I was confused, muddled, and knotted with the myriad of sensations that had overrun me in the past hour. When I’d made it far enough that I expected he wouldn’t hear, I let my feet fly as fast as they wanted, the ground solid under me. I no longer felt I was floating above myself. The journey back was miles long, but I finally made it, slamming the door to create a barrier between myself and my awful humiliation.

I shook with feelings I wasn’t able to name, jumbled together in a knot that resembled anger, but I knew better than to diminish them. What I truly felt was alone. Perhaps the professor was lying, baiting me with lust to distract me from the truth. This possibility was troubling, but the thought that lingered worst of all, the one keeping me from my bed until the first light of day, was that I had chased a ghost through the halls of Willowfield.

Chapter 10

The morning arrived. There was no need to pretend to be ill; I simply refused to come down. The sunlight trying to break its way into the room was barely enough, but it did the job of relaxing my most terrifying imaginings, and I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

If anyone had come searching, they'd allowed me to remain in bed undisturbed. I awoke when the clock chimed noon, still discombobulated but much less tragic. I'd spent most of the early morning hours convincing myself I'd been sleepwalking, a habit I'd fallen out of after arriving at St. Mary's as a girl. It wasn't a comforting conclusion, as my sleepwalking escapades had once endangered my life, but it was much more palatable than the alternative.

I'd make sure my door was locked at night, not always a preventative, but any barrier was better than none, and at all costs, I should keep the affliction to myself. I'd considered fervently my option to return to Mr. Helm's shop. He'd told me I'd be welcome there, but I wouldn't be able to explain why I was back. I was reaching the end of my second week at the estate, tens more stretching ahead, but my best option remained to stay and work as diligently as possible, finish the assignment early, and

leave Willowfield with a brand-new life's worth of salary in my hand.

When I left my room at last, I ventured toward the kitchen, not hungry but with no interest in checking to see if the professor needed me in the library. Despite the sunlight, walking the hall raised the hairs on my neck. Every shadow shifted oddly, every corner holding a danger I couldn't name or substantiate. I hurried.

The corridor stretched in response to my anxiety, and seconds lengthened, becoming an agony of time. At last, I emerged, the relief of exit making it easier to laugh at myself for being so easily spooked. Further distracting me from my anxiety were voices, masculine and angry, arguing from deeper in the house, the same direction as the library. They rose together then fell again, heatedly debating something I couldn't make out. I strained to hear, but the aggressive back and forth ceased abruptly, like someone snapping off a radio. A door down the hall opened and shut, and with unabashed nosiness, I slowed my walk toward the dining room, interested to see who'd been part of the dispute.

Dr. Hannigan emerged from the adjacent corridor, medical bag in hand. I focused hard to keep the surprise from my face. I'd never heard the man say a harsh word. He didn't seem like the type to get worked up. His face was graver than I'd ever seen, but when he caught sight of me, he smiled, eyes brightening.

"Millie! I was just on my way out, but how lovely to see you."

“Good morning, Doctor,” I gave my best effort to return the joyful expression, as I was genuinely fond of him and glad not to be alone.

“What brings you to Willowfield today?” I asked, avoiding mention of the overheard dispute.

He took a breath, glancing back the way he’d come as though the answer was behind him. He adjusted his bag and smiled again, this time more stiffly.

“Callum and I are old friends; I often visit to catch up and check in, make sure he’s not running himself ragged with work. He has a bad habit of overdoing things to keep his mind off...ah...well...were you going to lunch?”

Everyone’s refusal to speak of the death of the professor’s wife was baffling, as though they were afraid to say the name of the dead, to talk about her within the walls of the house. I understood the professor’s reluctance, and perhaps he’d ordered his staff to avoid mentioning her, but the doctor? I was prepared to ask, but propriety prevented me. It wasn’t my business. It would never be. I was here briefly, and this house was not mine. The people were not mine. Someday soon, I’d leave this grave mausoleum and its sad inhabitants, and I didn’t need to know.

“Yes,” I answered at last, hoping my pause had not been too obvious. “Would you join me? I usually eat by myself, and I’m a bit lonely for company.”

Without hesitation, Dr. Hannigan said, “What a splendid idea. Ms. Dillard puts more charm into her

cooking than anything else she does, and my bachelor meals are far inferior. I would be delighted.”

I was glad, and now I knew Ms. Dillard was the phantom cook, always one step ahead and never seen.

The meal was the most enjoyable I'd had at Willowfield, and the company buffeted me, returning my appetite. I ate well. The food was fortifying, and the doctor was lively, telling me stories of his time as a medical student and having me in fits of laughter so often that it took us a long time to eat.

As we eased, he stood and went to the side table, helping himself to a decanter I'd always noticed but never inspected. He poured himself a small glass of whiskey, then another, which he brought to the table for me.

“There you are, my dear. Late enough in the day.”

I took the small crystal glass, the amber liquid inside strong smelling. Memories of the same glass, the same spirits, affronted me. Besides, I had no tolerance. Prohibition had begun during my time at the women's college and only the wealthy with fancy liquor and wine stores had access. I was about to decline when the memory of my mother bemoaning the “drunk masses” encouraged me to bring the glass to my lips, taking a hearty sip, much more than I should have all at once. I managed to swallow and cough only twice. The doctor tried not to smile.

“Steady, Millie,” he said with the unmistakable affection one might offer a beloved niece.

“It’s strong,” I said, chuckling then coughing again. “I don’t like it.”

Dr. Hannigan barked a laugh of his own, then raised his glass.

“Neither do I!” he exclaimed, knocking back the rest in one go. “Now, you’ve let me go on and on. I’m curious about you and how you’re doing here at Willowfield.”

The warmth of the alcohol was already spreading.

“Peculiar,” I replied, trying to be honest without revealing my troubles, especially not to a family doctor who, no matter how kind, might find it dangerous for his friend to be giving shelter to a woman who ran through the halls at night after her nightmares. “Of course, I understand. The professor is still grieving, and I’m a stranger in this house, so the staff are wary of me. At any rate, the work is interesting.”

As are the journals.

“Are you sleeping well?” he asked, gaze merely inquisitive, not knowing.

“Do I look that tired?” I replied with a self-deprecating grin.

“You’re pale, is all,” he remedied. “I notice these things. It’s my job to.”

“Well, I’m all right. I’m having a little trouble sleeping, but only because it’s such a big house, and I’m not used to the noises.”

“Noises?” The doctor was keen. Ms. Dillard had reacted similarly interested, and I needed to tread carefully. I adopted a tone of mild embarrassment.

“Oh, regular, foolish things. Wind and creaking and quiet. I’m used to city noises.”

The lie was as bitter as the alcohol and twice as strong. I rethought my decision to leave it unfinished and raised the glass for another sip.

“I understand,” Dr. Hannigan said. “When I first moved here as a medical resident from New York, I had trouble with the quiet myself.”

My interest was piqued. “You’re from New York?”

“I am! I grew up in Yonkers, moved some forty-odd years ago to do my residency at the army hospital outside of Boston, Our Lady of Grace.”

Alarm flipped me upside down. The glass slipped out of my fingers, and I moved to catch it with bleary instinct, but the heavy crystal struck my plate and shattered the side, leaving only sharp porcelain to grab. The pain in my hand was immediate, and I shot to my feet as the angry red of blood bloomed on my palm and dripped onto the tablecloth.

Dr. Hannigan was at my side in a blink, holding my wrist and putting pressure on the veins there.

“Keep your head,” he instructed as he saw my eyes grow distant, distress and the pain creating a perfect combination for swooning. I took deep breaths, focusing

on his face until the gray at the edges of my vision retreated. “Well done.”

“I’m so sorry,” I managed.

“It’s all right, my girl. It happens to the best of us. Felicity! Ms. Dillard! One of you ladies, if you please!” he bellowed into the house.

Ms. Dillard materialized like a magician on a stage.

“What is all this?” she demanded.

Felicity rushed in with a broom in her hands, her eyes wide and frightened.

“Miss Foxboro had a scuffle with the dinner plate. Lost, I’m afraid. It doesn’t appear deep, but I’ll need my bag. Felicity, will you fetch it? It’s in the hall.”

As she went to retrieve the bag, Ms. Dillard came clucking, grabbing a white napkin from the table to press against my hand, her attention firm but not aggressive.

“Don’t let her bleed all over herself, Laurence, for goodness’ sake.”

“I was worried I’d incur your wrath if I used the white table linens, Hellen,” he retorted.

Ms. Dillard stared at him, a fit of strong, stony-faced anger leaving the tops of her cheeks pink, then she released my hand and stormed back to the kitchen.

“That woman,” he said, shaking his head. “Face of an angel, temper of the devil.”

His cheeky comment drove away the worst of the wooziness. Dr. Hannigan thinking Ms. Dillard was in any

way angelic was unexpected.

Felicity arrived with the bag, which he dropped open onto the floor next to himself and rummaged for the items he would need. Inside among the bandages, bottles, and accouterment of medicine were several white paper packets like the one I'd seen Professor Hughes turn in his fingers. Felicity stood awkwardly nearby as the doctor dressed my wound until Ms. Dillard called her sharply into the kitchen.

In all the fuss, I'd had a few moments to gather my wits again. I observed the doctor as he worked, then under the guise of needing a distraction, I asked a painful question.

“How long have you been the professor's doctor?”

He glanced at me, clearing his throat.

“Well, let's see, I finished training at the hospital in 1886 and moved here to be a stress-free country doctor.” This part was stated with some impish irony. “Callum's father was a school friend of mine, and Willowfield was just becoming a sight to behold, drawing in all sorts of work and sightseers. Open your fingers. There you go. Some years later, the blasted war broke out, and I returned to Our Lady of Grace to help the best I could with all the men returning in such terrible shape. A quick pinch. Now the bandage.”

He was quiet as he wrapped my hand, concentrating on the tension and placement so that it wouldn't slip. Suspended in anxiety, I was aware that I was shaking, my skin icy.

“Then,” he finally continued, “the government closed the hospital’s doors in 1920 due to lack of federal funding and reopened a year later as a private general hospital. I was back here by then, thankfully.”

Pure relief was a more effective pain reliever than the doctor’s ministrations and medicines. I inhaled shakily and smiled, grateful for the doctor’s help and the mercy of this information.

Dr. Hannigan hadn’t been present during my admission.

“That should do it.” He finished wrapping and patted my hand gently. “There you are, Millicent. All set. Not too bad, right across the meaty part of your hand here. It bleeds like the devil but heals quickly. You’ll be right as rain in no time. Do be careful. In my experience, keeping all your fingers is helpful in life.”

I thanked him excessively, and he bristled with the pride of an old doctor who cared about his work, then picked up his bag and returned my thanks for the company. As he made to leave, trailing promises to check in again in a few weeks, he paused, worry creasing his brow.

“Millie, let me know if you continue having trouble sleeping. Insomnia can be an unexpected evil after a time.”

“I promise.”

Satisfied, Dr. Hannigan tipped his hat and said goodbye.

I sighed and set to work gathering the broken pieces of the plate, feeling stupid. As I was cleaning, Ms. Dillard appeared and shooed me away somewhat viciously.

“You’ll cut yourself again, silly child.”

“Ms. Dillard,” I responded more forcefully than I intended, causing her to stop and glare at me in offense. I softened my tone. “I’ve been wanting to tell you. I feel awful having so much free time when the professor is away. I’m being paid as a member of staff here, and I should be doing something. Will you please let me help you in the kitchen?”

She opened her mouth and then shut it again.

“That’s quite nice of you,” she said at last.

“I grew up in a kitchen.”

“A poor girl, were you?” She kept busy, folding shards into the bloodied napkin, unbothered by the gore.

Determined to make nice with this cold woman, I barreled on.

“No, the opposite. But the kitchen was the safest place in my house, and our cook was a mother to me.”

Ms. Dillard’s eyes went queer, the red stained linen clasped in her hands.

“I don’t need help in the kitchen,” she said briskly, turning to leave.

I ceded defeat, the throbbing in my hand making me too irate for further patience. Just as I resolved never to speak to this woman again more than I must, she called

to me, and I turned to find her standing with the kitchen door half-open, her face turned only slightly so I might hear her but not see her expression.

“If you’d really like a way to make yourself useful, check with me some other time. I’m sure I can find something.”

Without waiting for a response, she stepped away and closed the door.

This was a breakthrough. My previous worries were momentarily overshadowed by the relief of my secrets being safe and the joy of tentative fellowships being formed. Despite the burn of the cut in my palm, I was elevated. I had a better chance of facing whatever this assignment delivered as long as my secrets were safe and I wasn’t alone.

Chapter 11

I peeked into the library and found it blessedly empty. Though I'd been practically forbidden to go there without the professor present, I was desperate for something to distract my attention the way the doctor's presence had, but Ms. Dillard had no time for me, and Felicity had disappeared. I decided to return to the gardens and wander until I found Rodney. I'd bother him for a chat and pass some of the afternoon. However, it felt too strange to brazenly seek out the groundskeeper, so I plotted to borrow a book and take it as my excuse.

I was looking for a place to read, I would say and avoid any embarrassment of seeming I was chasing his attention. Not that Rodney wasn't a beautiful man whose attentions I'm sure would be nice.

Imagining the groundskeeper's golden hair and robin's-egg eyes tricked me into thinking of a darker head, darker eyes, promising things I was frightened to have but wanted so badly. The memory of his tongue on my neck began to shatter my resolve, and I almost turned around and left the library straightaway, but gave myself a stern mental shake.

The man had been drunk. He was probably still in bed with a terrible headache and no memory of last night. Better for all and especially for me. Still, I didn't take my

time in the task I'd come to do. I hurried to the bookshelf where I'd shelved several titles concerning the Good Folk after uncovering them from their piles. One title in particular had caught my attention, and I searched for it now, running my fingers along the spines, squinting in the dimness as I'd had no courage to turn the lights on.

Celtic Nightmares: Monsters and Mayhem in Myth

Aha.

I considered my choice again, second-guessing my interest in the one book filled with the worst of the things I had seen written in the various notes and essays I'd picked through. I guessed it was a snub of my fears, a stubborn sniff at the house and its people, and my strange mind. A dare. At any rate, if my plan went the way I'd hoped, I wouldn't be reading it. I'd be standing in the sun chatting with a ray of light made human, and I would go to bed tonight feeling more myself and less like the trembling, haunted woman whose skin I'd somehow stepped into.

I abandoned the gloom of the house and stepped back into the world. Though my hand stung, my mood was cheering. Proper spring lingered far away yet, but the midwinter harshness seemed to be begging off. I made my path, knowing my purpose. My previous exploration of the grounds had yet to make me an expert on the place. Still, I was less worried about getting lost behind the evergreens, arbors, and stone walls sectioning the gardens into their little wards where once upon a time,

carefully tended flora had transported guests to entirely new worlds.

I traipsed past the kelpie pond, stopping to regard its lichen-blanketed muzzle and the carve of tense muscles in its shoulders. His flank, below the water, had turned green with algae, and despite being a creature of death, I pitied it for the neglect befallen it. The longer I peered into its wide, stone eyes, the more real it became, giving the impression that it was merely in suspension, that at any breath it would reanimate and drag me to my watery death. My lungs burned with phantom pain igniting a panic that expanded in my chest. I sucked in a long, cooling breath, reminding my body that I was on land, above water, safe, and breathing life-giving oxygen. The kelpie's determined glare was not helping me decompress, and I turned away, hastening to the tunnel of cherry blossom trees that would lead me into the Italianate gardens. The bare branches clicked together in the breeze, welcoming me.

I'd been fond of the kelpie pond from a distance, but having regarded it closely, the rosy veil of magic had fallen away, frightening me. Callum's mother had built shrines to the beautiful and deadly powers of the otherworld, and I had forgotten that they were meant to be portents. I made a concerted effort to stroll instead of scamper, to walk leisurely again and enjoy myself, but as my feet were beginning to listen to reason, the loud snap of a branch frightened my heart back into its anxious rhythm. I glanced over my shoulder through the tunnel.

The hulk of a body jumped toward me from the left, goosing me in the waist. I yelped and sent my elbow back, landing a grazing blow in Rodney's ribs. He'd anticipated my flailing and moved back in time to avoid the worst of it.

"Oof, close one." He grinned, taking hold of my elbow to steady me. I was so relieved to see him, my fright turned to a soft giddiness. I'd been pranked. I smacked him with the book good-naturedly, returning the smile.

"You're going to get yourself injured sneaking up on people like that."

He grasped his arm where the book had landed its blow and grimaced theatrically.

"Already have. Forgive the joke, I saw you get spooked back at the pond and couldn't help myself. No work today?"

"Erm," I fumbled, then lied all the way from my toes, "the professor's not feeling well."

"Ah," he replied, and in that one word he seemed to reveal that he knew exactly what I meant. He leaned against a nearby tree trunk, enjoying a broad shaft of sunlight. His demeanor was so serene it was impossible not to relax. I knew I'd made the right choice seeking his company. He nodded to the book in my hand. "A bit of light reading?"

"Not much else to do on afternoons like this. Ms. Dillard has practically forbidden me to help her."

“She’s an old fusspot,” he said with fondness. “She has her way of doing things and woe is anyone who tries to interfere. Anyway, I’m glad you got sent outdoors. What’s the subject today?”

I told him the title and regretted my decision instantly. His agreeable smile tightened into a tense, hard-shelled grin. He was struggling to keep it.

“I see you enjoy the dark fairy tales. Mrs. Hughes did too.”

“Yes, I can see it in the way she built the garden. Especially the kelpie.”

“No, not Callum’s mother. His wife.”

A cold tingle began to spread out from the center of my back. I didn’t know what to say.

“He treating you all right? The professor?” Rodney asked out of the blue, his attention intense, and after a second he added, “Not working you too hard?”

I released a relieved laugh, but now the professor and last night’s humiliations were fresh on my mind again. “No, the work is fine. Tedious but interesting. I don’t mind it.”

“He can get a little zealous when his sights are set on something. If you ever need an escape, my cottage door is always open.”

There was a twinkle in his eye that wasn’t hard to interpret. Before I could playfully shame him for being fresh, his expression grew somber and he straightened himself from his casual posture. Looking over my

shoulder without a drop warmth on his face, he tipped his hat to someone approaching.

“Rodney,” Professor Hughes said by way of greeting as he neared us. My pulse became a hummingbird in my veins. “A surprise to see you. I thought you were on a town run today.”

“Going in a few hours, Professor. Got word that the mulch shipment was running late. Didn’t want to waste time waiting around town for it.”

“Prudent,” the professor said rigidly.

“Well, I best be getting ready to leave. Professor. Miss Foxboro.”

He nodded to me, his eyes meaningful, then took his leave, disappearing back through the naked trees the same way he’d come.

Professor Hughes watched him out of sight, his countenance inscrutable. I was annoyed. I’d been having a lovely time bantering. Frustrating me in turn was the unwelcome delight at this sudden appearance. I regarded him icily. He didn’t look hungover or sleep-deprived. His face was clean-shaven, his hair arranged with only a few strands blown out of place by the wind, but even this looked intended. There were no dark circles beneath his eyes as I’d seen under mine that morning, and as usual there was not a wrinkle or a wayward fold on any of his clothing from the starched collar peeking from the neck of his Fair Isle sweater, to the hem of his well-fitting umber slacks brushing the tops of his shining black shoes.

“Professor Hughes, what brings you outside?” I asked with a brusque clip.

“Can’t a man roam his own garden without ulterior motives?” he asked, a faint turn at the corners of his mouth.

“Of course,” I replied, chastened.

“I do have one, though, an ulterior motive.” He glanced at his feet, as sheepish as I’d ever seen him before lifting his eyes back to mine. “Will you walk with me?”

I had every justifiable reason to deny the request, but I wasn’t ready to return to the gloom of the house, and the professor’s company was better than none. I forcefully ignored the fluttering in my stomach denoting other reasons I was about to agree.

“All right, I don’t mind a brisk walk, then I suppose you’ll want to get back to work.” I turned, hoping to seem righteously put off, but the first step I took was on top of a branch, which rolled beneath my weight, sending me sliding forward into what would have been a sprawl had Professor Hughes not caught me on the way down, saving me from further injury. Heat expanded through me, a smelted combination of embarrassment and the shameful want inspired by the warmth of his arms. I’d been hoping that those inklings had been merely the crazed jumble of fear and the dark of night, but here in the bright sun, I felt it as intensely as before. As he steadied me, he took notice of my wounded hand, and with no awareness of how he affected me, he took it in

his to examine the bandages. His touch was surprisingly gentle.

“What happened to you?”

“Your crystal glasses are heavy, and I’m clumsy,” I replied, though not snappishly. His tender handling had belayed the worst of my annoyance.

He pressed a small puff of air through his lips, conveying he found my explanation suspect, but after inspecting the bandage one last time, he finally let me go.

“Dr. Hannigan was still here, I see. I trust he treated the wound well, so I won’t worry, but maybe skip the whiskey next time.”

I colored. How had he known? He didn’t try to hide his smile this time.

“The only crystal glasses we own are for the spirits. I can’t imagine Ms. Dillard put one out for tea.”

I realized the picture this painted of me was not a flattering one. “I apologize. I shouldn’t have. The doctor offered, and I assumed I wouldn’t be working today.”

“It is not a reprimand,” he assured me, catching me off guard with his repentant tone. “Miss Foxboro, it is vital I apologize to you for my inexcusable behavior last night. Admittedly, it’s all a fuzzy farrago in my brain. I can’t recall everything I said to you, but I’m sure it was inappropriate and monstrous.”

Unlike the professor, I remembered every syllable he’d uttered and more. I wouldn’t bring it up; I was too thankful that he’d forgotten what had transpired. I

wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth and remind him.

“I admit, I attempted to treat my insomnia too aggressively, and I wasn't expecting company. Truly, as I said, it was inexcusable, no matter the circumstances. I don't expect forgiveness, but I humbly ask it anyway as I'd like to maintain your assistance, though you'd have every right to leave.”

Won over by his sincerity, I softened but took the opportunity to insist on my own honesty. “I am sure I heard something, saw something. I would never have...”

Come to your room in nothing but a thin slip in the middle of the night.

“I never would have bothered you,” I finished with plenty of self-respect.

“I did manage to recall your worries this morning, and I assure you I've combed through the house myself. I even had Dr. Hannigan's assistance. We checked all possible places a person could be lingering, and I guarantee you there is no one.”

Knowing the doctor had been aware of my ravings made his comment about my lack of sleep sensible. It also made it all the more mortifying.

“I admit, the house in its current state inspires a most awful imagination. I've found myself seeing things from the corner of my eye. I chalk it up to my studies of all the things that go bump in the night. Being familiar with the

worst of people's imaginations makes it easy for my own mind to believe."

I weighed the merits of confessing my sleepwalking malady and found many reasons not to. I took the opportunity instead to veer the conversation away.

"You're not a believer at all, Professor?"

A raise of his eyebrows.

"No. This"—he regarded the house—"this is all there is."

This is all there is, my love. There is nothing else.

Damn me, I blushed.

"Are you, Miss Foxboro?"

"Am I?"

"A believer?"

"Once," I admitted, gladly thinking of something else.

He motioned with his hand toward a garden path, hoping to continue our walk. It wasn't the company I had been expecting, but I didn't mind. There existed two parts of me, an earnest part wanting desperately to have a positive relationship with my employer, and a perverse part that longed to be near him for the gratification of my wanton thoughts.

"Long ago?" he asked to continue the conversation.

"Not so long. It was more fancy, really. I enjoyed believing in something else, the romance of powers we

can't see working for and against us. It's the potential of something else other than this hard world."

"For such a sweet view, I wouldn't have expected you to be so drawn to monsters."

He motioned to the book I still had clasped to me. I held it up.

"It's my challenge to the fear inside me," I admitted.

"You're quite daring," he said in such an admiring way that I was flattered.

"Do your studies ever frighten you?" I asked.

I wanted a sense of camaraderie, to believe this wasn't my solitary experience.

He considered the question with seriousness, then answered somberly, "Sometimes, at night, I will let fantasy get the best of me. Especially in the winters, when everything here is bleak, and there are only my thoughts and the cruel dark."

We slowed, approaching an arbor leading into the dormant rose gardens where the fairy-tale tower was in clear view.

"During the worst of it, it feels I'll never see the light again, yet..." He reached out, his sudden proximity jarring, and I wildly believed he meant to caress me. Despite my craving for it, I shifted slightly away, only to find he was reaching past me to pluck a small pink bloom from its place in the tangled vines overhead. "It comes."

Charmed, I took the tiny flower as he offered it to me.

“It must be beautiful here during the warm months.”

“Most beautiful.”

He was looking at me, and I had nothing to do but look back. We smiled at the same time, an unexpected peace settling between us.

“Actually, I was searching you out. Not just to apologize but to ask a favor of you.”

“Oh?” I tried not to be wary.

“It’s always been a tradition at Willowfield at the sign of the first bloom, we host a dinner party to wake up the house in a sense. They stopped after...” He hesitated here, then course-corrected. “After we lost so many staff, and it might be time. Nothing extravagant. It would certainly help me, and perhaps you get out of the ghastly grasp this place sometimes has.”

I thought the idea was lovely and expected him to ask me to help Ms. Dillard prepare.

“I’d be honored if you’d come as my guest,” he said instead, “as I confess several of my colleagues and friends are interested in the scholar I’ve hired to help with my work.”

Pleasure rippled along my shoulders, and I gave a small laugh to hide it.

“Hardly a scholar,” I amended.

“I disagree.”

We walked companionably a ways longer, and he pointed out various plants and when they would flower,

assuring me Willowfield would be unrecognizable soon. He appeared so lighthearted, so in love with the potential of this sad place. When we'd made an entire loop of the house, he wished me a good afternoon, told me Ms. Dillard would be in charge of my dress for the party, and not to worry.

Then, at last: "I have business in town this evening, but I will see you in the morning, and we'll set back to work on the mess I've made."

Feeling friendly, I assured him, "I'm sure we can make it right."

"I very much look forward to trying."

He smiled and left me at the door to walk to the garage on the east lawn, near the orchards.

I watched him go, and along with the desires of my body, I felt my heart squeeze in a way that discomforted me.

Chapter 12

Night came, and with it, another unexpected change. For the first time since I arrived, Felicity didn't appear. Nor did I see her the next morning. The mystery was uncovered when a harried Ms. Dillard informed me, as she was rushing to tend to extra chores, that Felicity had caught a dreadful stomach flu and was quarantined to her rooms until she was well. I offered to help Ms. Dillard tend to her, but she brushed me off and sent me to the library, where the professor was waiting. He immediately asked after my injury, which was barely a dull ache thanks to Dr. Hannigan's medical attention, then the day commenced, productive and filled with ease. Professor Hughes was much gentler in his demeanor but kept a professional distance, coming near only to examine notes I had found or show me where to index a new file. He wasn't as stormy as usual, and his smiles, though controlled, were frequent. He ventured to ask me no personal questions, and I took his cue, and we spoke only of the work at hand. Though, as before, there were times when I looked up to find him examining me, his aspect severe and inscrutable.

Professor Hughes left as soon as our work was done, and I didn't see him again for the remainder of the evenings. My nights were quiet and less restless. With employment, concerns abated, and the house's

strangeness no longer new to my senses, I'd begun to settle. I walked familiar halls to visit my favorite statues and views. I crunched through the brown grass and mulch of the garden, chatting with Rodney, who was always proud of the way things were coming. He often flirted with me in his careless way. One afternoon, while the professor was in town for business, he entertained me by showing me the method of tying broom plants back to separate the kelpie pond from the topiaries. When the broom bloomed, it would create an artificial wall of yellow flowers until fall. At one point, he looked at me in a manner that suggested he might recite a poem. His cheerful smile had taken on a wistful softness, and I finally noticed his resemblance to Felicity. When he reached out his calloused hand, I remained perfectly still, thinking he meant to caress my face. I wasn't against the idea. Rodney seemed a stable sort, hard-working and in love with the gardens. His laugh was catching, and he didn't brood, a much better choice for me than dark-haired types prone to moodiness. He brushed his fingers against my temple and came away with a ladybug that had been crawling along the curls there.

“Pretty little thing,” he said, lifting his blue gaze to mine and offering another of his cheeky winks before the strawberry-shelled insect took flight.

I tried to bring the sunshine of those afternoons inside with me, and at the very least my trips through the hallways at night had ceased. Though I'd woken up once two nights ago lying on the bedroom floor near the door, it seemed the lock had done its job to deter me. The fact

that I was still sleepwalking wasn't soothing, but that I could be so easily hindered was a positive sign.

To further keep me occupied was the fascinating consideration of the dinner event, which would be held in two weeks. I had nothing to prepare as Ms. Dillard had already taken my measurements for the dress. I'd argued with Professor Hughes about supplying me with even more clothes until, with an exasperated sigh, he said, "Did you bring an evening dress with you, then, Miss Foxboro?"

I faltered, "I didn't realize the dinner would be a formal event."

"All the dinners at Willowfield are, the guests expect it, so please don't vex me anymore with your obstinate pride." I should have been insulted, but he was grinning as though he found such obstinate pride endearing rather than vexing as he had said.

"I'm not the obstinate one," I muttered, unable to give him the last word but willing to acquiesce this once. After all, it was true that I didn't own a formal dress.

He glanced at me sideways but said no more.

So I enjoyed the anticipation, which I'd had for nothing in a long time.

Halfway to the date, the professor was required to leave again for business in town, expressing his regret that he still had the family perfumery to run. I asked how he was able to balance both the company and his career as an academic.

“Sometimes I don’t,” he replied with a self-deprecating smile and departed.

Determined to make myself useful, I showed up in the kitchen the next day to find Ms. Dillard elbow-deep in soap suds, scrubbing the pots she had used to make lunch. Without Felicity, she no longer had the ability to make it seem as though meals appeared by magic.

Without a word, I began to dry the washed dishes. She eyed me distrustfully at first, then began to instruct me where to put the clean items. When that was done, she handed me a large basket, pointed me to the pantry for dry ingredients, and put me to work arranging the dough for a turnover. My trip into the pantry revealed that I’d been right about the cellar. There was a flight of stairs set into the naked stone wall, leading down.

“Do you need help preparing for the dinner?” I asked when I returned. “It’s nice being here, I like this kitchen.”

It was true, though this one was much larger and more formal than the one I’d grown up in, it was the most comfortable and familiar of all the places in Willowfield, and the touches of whimsy here were not ostentatious. There were small painted clovers on the tile behind the stove and a threadbare woven rug under the table where staff took meals, medieval illuminations of unicorns in its corners.

“The professor is having the meal catered by an out-of-town company,” she replied, satisfied with the decision. “I’ll be having a night off.”

“That sounds lovely. I’m sure you don’t get many with such a large house to tend alone.”

Another suspicious look.

“Please,” I said at last, “I’m trying to make friends. I understand if you don’t want to, but can we at least be civil to one another? I am not a lady, a guest, or anyone of any consequence at all. I’m here as staff for six months, perhaps less if Professor Hughes and I keep progressing at the pace we are. There’s no reason to be so standoffish. I’m not going to bite you.”

I said the last bit with a petulant punch to the dough.

“Tell me about your cook, then,” Ms. Dillard said when I thought she wouldn’t respond. “You said she was like a mother to you.”

It was such a personal thing to start with, but Ms. Dillard’s tone had softened considerably. I knew she was reaching across the table in her own way.

“Well, she was loud and always sounded angry but never was. She wouldn’t let me help much because it made my mother so angry to find me covered in flour or grease, but she would give me chores to do to keep me occupied, and she brought books back for me when she went to town. She taught me the names of the spices in the pantry and let me organize everything. I lived under her feet for years, and she never scolded me for my hand in the honey jar or fingerprints in the bread dough.”

I glared at the dough I was kneading and felt the keen loss of her.

“She plied me with almond cookies when I was sad and promised me the world outside the house was good when the world inside wasn’t.”

She’d also been the one to release me from the wardrobe at night when my mother had fallen asleep.

“It’s a shame you didn’t learn how to cook” was all Ms. Dillard said in response, her voice strangely thick.

“I wanted to, but didn’t get the chance. She died after I graduated from university.”

And I hadn’t been there. Well, maybe I had been. I didn’t remember the last days of my beloved adoptive mother’s life. They were in the mists somewhere with the other memories and the years I’d lost following my father’s unbelievable act.

I was starting to feel hot; the kitchen was stifling with the stove going and the hard work of kneading the uncompliant dough into something usable. I stopped momentarily to catch hold of myself, and Ms. Dillard gently moved me away and took over the kneading.

“Go on now. You’ve helped plenty, and really you’re more in the way than anything. Dinner will be ready at six.”

She turned her back to me and set quietly to work; our conversation was over. I left both fulfilled by the progress with housekeeper and hollowed out by my memories.

The weather turned abysmal, with icy rain making it impossible to leave Willowfield without a death wish. I

wandered the halls as much as I dared, knowing Ms. Dillard would be able to tell if I had gone somewhere I shouldn't. I became bold enough to search for the staircase again, the one I'd found on my first tour. I was curious about the tower. I imagined it was probably unsafe and better if I never came upon it, but I thought of it often, sometimes a disproportionate amount. I blamed the short days and long nights with nothing to do but think.

Before I could get myself into trouble, Professor Hughes returned, drawn and exhausted, shadows of worry beneath his eyes. When we met to work, he was gruff but polite, and I imagined things had been hard for him. I wanted to offer comfort but had few effective ways of doing it without egregiously breaching the barrier of our now well-established professional relationship.

"Professor Hughes," I ventured, bringing him out of his thoughts and causing him to stare into the fire with such disquiet it seemed he had found his own demons watching him back from the flames. "I'm ignorant when it comes to your business, but I can tell you're troubled, and it would be bad of me not to ask after you. If there's anything I can do to help, please tell me."

He rubbed a finger across his bottom lip, deeply troubled. "All that burdens me could be solved with one decision, but it's a decision I can't make in good conscience as it could either repair the problems at hand or destroy everything."

I had no words of wisdom, having never been able to successfully fix any of my own struggles without causing further disruptions. Sorry I couldn't help, I went back to annotating a series of notes concerning the Dullahan, a headless horseman of Crom Cruach. This creature was a favorite of mine, but my brain wouldn't allow me to focus, so I stared at the words, seeing only angry ink on a snowy page.

"Miss Foxboro?" Professor Hughes's tone was husky, heavy with emotions he wouldn't share. My heart tripped over itself, and I didn't dare glance up.

"Yes?" I asked, feigning distraction with the papers.

"If you were given an opportunity with equal power to heal all ills or irrevocably maim at its pleasure, would you risk taking it?"

I considered my own life and all of the escape routes I'd not taken for fear, moments when a chance at happiness grew hopeful but died from lack of attention. Desperation had finally driven me to reject safety, and it had led me here.

"I wouldn't have, once," I replied truthfully, "but I'm afraid I've become a person who wouldn't miss an opportunity for good even if the chances of evil were equal. I'd rather know I'd opted to give myself happiness and failed than live always guessing what might have been."

"And so here you are at Willowfield," he murmured.

"Yes. Here I am," I said.

“Have you found it for good or evil, Millie?”

The unexpected use of my name sent a wave of electricity through me, stunning my senses and provoking the longing that had become, after much effort, tolerably latent.

I took a small, slow breath and looked up, but not at him. Giving myself a moment to gather my wits, I ran my gaze up the bookcases stretching from floor to ceiling, gradually becoming organized with my efforts. I tried to focus on them and the puritanical value of this work.

“Have I asked the wrong question?” Professor Hughes mused when I didn’t answer right away.

I finally looked at him and wished I hadn’t. He sat leaning forward in the chair, his elbows on his knees, fingers resting loosely together. He’d undone his tie, and it had not affected me before, but now I saw only the hollow of his throat. I recalled how close he had been the night I’d accidentally invaded his room, so close I could smell his skin. The weight of his attention was considerable, given the intensity in his eyes.

“It’s been trying. The house is beautiful but unusual and lonely,” I replied, choosing my words as carefully as I was able. “But if I could go back, I believe I would choose to come again.”

He searched my face as though he was sure what I said wasn’t true. Then he stood to his feet and took up the sheaf of papers he’d been leafing through before his thoughts had overtaken him. He ambled to the desk where I was leaning. I wanted to stand straight, to not be

in such a relaxed pose as he came near, but moving would give me away. So I remained, and he bent to place the papers on the table again, close enough that if I would move forward only a little more, I could press my lips against his neck. As he straightened, he caught my gaze in his own, holding me hostage in it as though feeding on the yearning he found there. A touch of mortification slipped beyond the haze of my want, and I wondered how clear my feelings were to a man who had already loved so fervently and lost. I didn't avert my eyes, enthralled in an almost uncanny way.

“You shine a light in this dark house, Miss Foxboro. I pray you let nothing extinguish it.”

At last he looked away and moved past me to leave, his hand brushing mine again, bringing to memory my first night at Willowfield, which felt like so many years ago, though it had been only a month.

“Good night, Professor.” My voice was barely audible.

“Good night,” he replied.

To my intense relief and regret, he departed.

Chapter 13

I returned to my room with all the hope and misgivings I'd amassed in one evening, comforting myself with the knowledge that, at the very least, I was getting the hang of Willowfield, and that the day after tomorrow would bring an incredible distraction: the dinner. Thinking of the event brought to mind something else: the journal I'd squandered from its hiding place in the greenhouse. I'd left it undisturbed, not wanting to give myself any further reason to be fascinated with the professor or the history of this place. I glanced toward the dresser, where I'd hidden it among my slips. It was a childish and obvious place to hide things, the first place any of the girls at St. Mary would have looked for something. But there were no prying adolescent eyes here.

As I wickedly considered bringing it out, a knock announced Felicity's arrival. She looked dreadful, barely well, her time abed creating hollows in her once-round cheeks. The purple hue beneath her eyes made it clear she hadn't slept well in the nights she'd been away, and I was immensely sorry for her. I took the tray with an exclamation of disbelief and rushed to set it down before guiding her into the room to rest.

“Felicity, you hardly look recovered! Sit.”

She didn't fight me but sat in the chair, primly as though she were in a matron's office.

"I'm much better, miss, honestly. It was awful, but I'm well now, just exhausted. The best thing for it is to move. I've been in bed far too much these past few days." Despite her proper posture, she seemed more relaxed with me than usual, and I sat with her, pouring her tea and offering her half of the cookies she brought. She pardoned herself from both, saying her stomach wasn't settled enough for sweets, and that Ms. Dillard had forced her to drink so much tea during her illness that she swore she'd never have it again.

"To be honest," she said, "it's the professor's own blend, and I'm not very fond of it."

"It is different," I offered, though I'd been enjoying it.

"Ms. Dillard is bringing your dress tomorrow," she said, changing the subject.

"Oh, for the dinner," I said, taking a sip and expecting the same summer flavors as before. This time the sweetness bit my tongue, and I made a small face.

Felicity caught the expression.

"Have I made it too strong? Oh no, I've put too much sugar in it."

"It's all right," I assured her and took another drink to waylay her self-consciousness. She must have been distracted by her own exhaustion. Not her fault, really.

"Miss Foxboro, I need to tell you something, and I hope you won't get angry with me."

“Did you put the mouse in my powder?” I asked jokingly as I bit into the shortbread, trying to alleviate the tenseness that had suddenly settled over us.

She looked affronted and I immediately backtracked.

“I was only playing with you, Felicity. You can tell me. If anyone in this place might be my friend, it’s you. Don’t worry about upsetting me. I’m sure whatever it is, we can fix.”

Her nose pinkened and it appeared she’d cry. I reached to take her hand, squeezing the slender fingers in my own to comfort her.

“Oh, please don’t worry, it can’t be that bad.”

“It’s only...please stay out of the kitchen.”

“What? Why?” Of all the things she might have said, this was the last I assumed it would be.

“The professor was angry when he found you’d been there. His moods are normally not so volatile. It must be the stress. He frightened me a little, if I’m being honest. He instructed us to turn you away if you were to come there again, as it wasn’t your job to help with the housework.”

He’d said nothing to me, made no sign he’d even known I’d been there. His harassing of Ms. Dillard and Felicity for something beyond their control rankled me. I took another drink of the too-sweet tea and fumed inwardly, my previous feelings fairly abated.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it so harshly,” I compromised. “You’re right to mention his stress. He

was in a mood tonight as well. You know him better than I do, though, so I promise to stay out of the kitchen, at least until I've talked to him."

She shot up, grabbing my hands in earnest.

"Oh no! Please don't tell him I said anything, please!"

"All right, all right," I soothed, and as I tried to comfort her anxieties, I happened to glance to where her sleeve had risen past her wrist. A ring of fresh bruises purpled the pale skin like berries crushed against white linen. When she saw me notice, she pulled her hand away as though my touch were scalding.

"An accident," she muttered. "I flailed while I was ill and hit my wrist on the bedpost. I bruise easily. It looks much worse than it is." She thanked me for worrying and expressed her hope to see the dress tomorrow. To salvage our exchange, I asked if she might have time to help me do my hair again. I was rewarded with a genuine smile and happy agreement, and we said our goodnights.

I abandoned the sugary tea and, moments later, ended up at my dresser, lifting the journal from its hiding spot. There was something almost metaphysical about the way it drew me to it, its contents compelling me to disrespect the sanctity of Mrs. Hughes's secrets and my own moral compass. I tucked into bed, flipping it open to where I'd last read. The following several pages were again filled with botany drawings of various flowers and weeds; these were more focused and precise, the inscriptions less burdened with haste. I wondered over the number of plants that could be used in such toxic

ways, though judging by the notes, they each had pleasant uses as well. Some were perfect for perfumes, other flora made the pigments for makeup without the effect of their poison, and still, others would be cooked low into fragrant essences often added to candles and linen bags. The majority of these plants were dangerous only if ingested.

My body grew heavy with want of sleep, and I decided to look at only one more page—another diary entry. I sat up slightly. I'd lost a large portion of my shame about reading the personal entries, desiring to know the professor through the eyes of a woman who had loved him.

I've done something inexcusable, though I don't regret it. Margaret came for a visit while Callum was on business. I found her friendly, and though she is strange and the company she keeps even stranger, I began to feel warmly toward her. It was nice to believe I'd finally found someone to confide in all the horrors of my night wakings—all of the things Callum tells me are my wild imagination and lack of sleep. He's tried so hard to cure my insomnia, even asking Dr. Hannigan to mix a sleep serum for me. Nothing works. I only get worse.

I understand his hesitation; his mother so desperately believed in something beyond this world, and in the end, her belief harmed him. But she must have known there was something in this house. It's why she tried so hard to show reverence with her

monuments and decorations. Those same things I once loved are nefarious to me now.

Margaret is adamant I'm suffering from a haunt, a creature I lured with my interest in the cultish things my husband and I are studying. She frowned firmly at our research and told me malignant entities best remain unknown. The more we think of them, the more attractive we become. I argued that it was my recent obsession with evil spirits that had encouraged Callum to study them. I had to defend him in some way. Margaret doesn't like him well, though her husband is his good friend.

When I asked her to advise me on what to do, she said she'd arrange a seance for me. If we could name the spirit haunting me, we could arm ourselves better to fight it. Callum wasn't due home for several days, and I agreed, though he would be furious if he knew.

The night came, and I was a nervous wreck. We held the seance in the greenhouse, where I'd last seen the woman in white, and it was all I'd ever expected. Margaret brought several of her friends, and we arranged ourselves in a circle around the round glass tea table. There were candles and dried herbs, tarot cards and cymbals. The night was thick around us, and it felt as though we'd been submerged in a glass coffin into the depths of the ocean. Margaret called on the spirit tormenting me to come forth and name itself. The other women were nervous, their fingers trembling in mine. Without warning Margaret thrashed, yanking her hands free from the circle and flinging her head

back. Her eyes were rolled up so that only the whites were visible, and one of her friends screeched. Margaret called Callum's name in such an unholy voice, again and again as though he were there in person, fucking her in the wicker chair. I became shaky, light-headed with shock, and I knew what was coming without any power to stop it. I fainted.

When I came to, there was smoke, yelling. Margaret knelt next to me, prayers on her lips and tears on her cheeks. Her crying frightened me, and to make it all worse, Callum came home and found us in this state. I've never seen him so angry. He carried me from the flaming greenhouse, roaring for help, and Rodney soon arrived with several men in tow to put out the fire, but the damage was done.

Margaret was adamant that an unseen entity had started the blaze, flinging the candle at me and igniting the tablecloth. She insisted I leave Willowfield and my husband behind. In the moment that followed, Callum didn't resemble the man I loved, but a demon, roaring obscenities, damning Margaret to the fiery pits. He approached her as though he would snap her in two, and Margaret was so frightened that she fled into the gardens, in the opposite direction of the house. Rodney followed to keep her from plunging to her death in the dark ravine nearby.

Callum carried me into the house, insisting that I'd passed out, and on my way to the ground, had pulled the linen cloth with me, knocking the candle askew and igniting the dried herbs scattered there. When the fire

was put out, Callum took me to bed. He didn't lecture or scold me, only held me close and cried into my hair. I couldn't tell him about the woman, the woman with my own face crouching in the corner of our room just outside the firelight, crying.

I'll never tell.

He wouldn't believe me.

Horror stricken, I slammed the journal shut and threw it across the room, my breath coming in shuddering gasps. Like a child, I climbed deep under my blankets and pulled them to my chin, hoping for sleep and being greatly deprived of it. I slipped in and out fitfully, finally drifting off when the clock struck two. After mere seconds of peace, I awoke to a keening that sent fingers of ice crawling up my back. The fire was out, the room bitter cold, and my breath was visible in the moonlight streaming in, brighter than ever. One of the windows was open to the night air, the curtain whipping in the vicious wind that rushed in to freeze everything. There was another wail, and as the curtain billowed, I finally saw the woman. She was the same apparition I'd chased through the halls, the one Mrs. Hughes must have seen. She was so loud, moaning into her hands with such agony that surely someone besides me heard her. She tilted her head toward the black sky, her back to me, hands grasping the hair at her temples. I knew her pain so acutely, having cried this way in the wake of my parents' deaths. Tears came to my eyes, and I stood

slowly as though she were not an apparition but a true person I might startle if I moved too suddenly.

Her cries quieted, becoming sobs that sent tremors through her shoulders, and she grabbed the window's ledge and climbed onto it. Disturbed, I rushed forward, my arms reaching, but I arrived too late, and her body disappeared in the darkness. I tripped on my own feet, careening into the windowsill and nearly flipping out myself. I clung on for dear life, toes lifting from the floor, and looked down into a great abyss that should not have existed, the ground too far away for a window only two stories high. I screamed, my voice echoing in the cavern of the night.

Strong hands grabbed my waist and pulled me inside, holding me upright even as my knees buckled. With some roughness I was flipped around to face my rescuer.

Professor Hughes.

His eyes were wild, his breath coming heavy. He'd been running.

"Millie! What were you doing? You could have fallen!" he was yelling, pushing me further into hysterics.

"A woman! A woman was here. She was crying, didn't you hear her? You had to have heard her! She's jumped!" I violently pointed out the window, desperate for him to look, to find and help her. Gentle, warm palms cupped my cheeks, turning my face from the window.

"There is no one here but you," he soothed, fingers pressing damp hair from my forehead. "I heard your

crying all the way on the other side of the house. When I arrived you were standing at the window. You climbed onto the windowsill, Millie.”

“No, no, I didn’t. I...”

But as the fog of it all began to clear, the realization of what had happened slowly dawned on me, and the haze of my waking nightmare began to fall completely away. My eyes focused, and I looked at the professor again with clarity. He noticed the shift.

“There you are,” he said, relieved.

The occurrences of only a few moments ago were already going fuzzy as all dreams do, and the reality of what had almost happened caused me to tremble.

“God, you frightened me.” The professor rested his forehead against mine for a breath of a moment, then pulled away to wipe the half-frozen tears from my face with his thumbs. “I wasn’t sure I’d make it to you in time.”

“That would have been upsetting,” I replied, stupefied by his unexpected affection.

I hadn’t meant to make a joke. It wasn’t supposed to be funny, but addled with lingering alarm, we both began to laugh breathily, dispelling some of the anxiety of the moment.

“Why didn’t you tell me you suffered from sleepwalking? I’d have made Willowfield safer for you. This explains your wandering the halls at night. You should have said something.”

My temporary giddiness was gone, replaced by the temper that comes only with a terrible fright or an extraordinary embarrassment, both happening to me simultaneously.

Mad Millie.

“I haven’t sleepwalked in years! And it wasn’t your business! You don’t deserve to know every last thing about me. I’m your assistant, not your...”

I didn’t say the word *lover*, though it sat in my mouth, bittersweet.

“Don’t you think I care if someone in my household lives or dies?” he asked, his question harsh with hurt. “Do you believe it wouldn’t affect me to find you were harmed when I could have protected you?”

“I’m not a damsel in distress, Professor. I don’t need to be protected.” What I needed was no more reason to feel helpless.

“I disagree.”

He moved to pull me farther away from the window. The sudden shift in our weight startled me, and I yelped, clinging to him as though it were only one small wrong step out into the thin air after all. His arms came around me like a shelter, pulling me nearer, protecting me from the freezing breeze still pouring in. He moved our bodies, turning us both so he could place himself between me and the night. We may have both realized at that exact moment our situation, my hands pressed to his bare chest, our barely clothed bodies a mere inch apart.

I did the worst thing and looked up at him.

He regarded me with an expression I didn't have to guess, an open want so clear even I couldn't mistake it. I immediately bowed my head again, but in a motion I found dizzying, he took my chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted my face forcefully back to his, pressing his mouth over mine in a hungry, fervent kiss.

Beyond common sense, I opened my mouth to invite his tongue. He cupped my backside, greedily crushing me against him, fingers so painfully close to the hot, yearning place that ached for him. I felt his desire hard against my stomach, and in the heat of my lust I nipped his lips between my teeth. He made a noise low in his throat like the growl of a beast in the wilderness.

"You're constantly testing my restraint," he rumbled, as though it would do any good, put me back on a path where I'd walk away from this with nothing lost.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but you don't seem the type to have any," I replied, breathless.

"You impudent creature," he chuckled. "Where do you find your gall?"

I didn't have to consider an answer. He swept me back toward the window, this time to the dresser nearby, and lifted me on its top, scattering perfume bottles to the floor. He was between my legs, shoving my slip around my hips, so the last barriers to overcome were only the silk of his pants and my cotton underthings. The chill of the room had been biting, but now its intensity was erotic, serving to fuel my appetite for the heat of this

man's body. His mouth returned to mine, demanding, his hand in my hair, pulling my head back to expose my neck, which he trailed kisses upon. Coming to the loose strap at my shoulder, he pulled it down, the tips of his fingers trailing my skin and leaving goose bumps in their wake. He slid the front of my neckline over the crest of my breast, exposing it to the cold, and my nipples hardened. The hand still in my hair twisted, forcing me to arch my back, chest rising closer so he could drag his tongue across one stiff peak while his free hand fondled and pinched the other. A strike of lust-dusted pain bolted into my groin, and I gasped. I'd never been pinched or bitten or touched roughly in this way before and it was gratifying.

“Enjoy that, did you?” His voice was coarse with desire. “You may find this agreeable as well.”

His hands abandoned their previous positions, tucking beneath my knees and lifting my legs up. My bottom slipped forward, and I was forced to brace myself with my hands to stay upright. Pressing my legs outward to expose me to his intentions, he dipped his head, lips brushing the damp cotton between my splayed thighs with the whisper of a touch. Then came the warm pressure of his tongue against the fabric, teasing the small swell of nerves and sending a searing shock wave into my core. Overwhelmed, I tilted my head, my breath halting in preparation for the next sensation of his mouth.

I saw her then.

The same creature who'd only moments ago thrown herself out the window into the night. She crouched on the outskirts of the firelight in the shadows between my bed and the settee. Though her face was concealed by shadows, I knew she was watching us.

"Callum," I choked out, newly frightened, barely able to speak at all.

At the tone of my voice, he raised himself, blocking my view of the apparition for a mere second, long enough for it to vanish. The conflict on his countenance was as evident as the desire had once been. He'd misunderstood my shock as reluctance, and I had nothing to show him. No proof to give. I'd hallucinated the same thing I'd read in the forbidden journal.

The journal. I'd thrown it. It lay open somewhere on the floor, calling out my guilt.

"I'm a fool," he muttered, gently pulling the strap of my gown back to rights, stepping back, and running a hand over his face in an aggressive attempt to clear his mind. "I'm taking advantage of you. You've had a fright, you're not thinking straight. Neither am I, and for you to regret..."

I was desperate for him to touch me again, angry at myself for letting something so clearly unreal damage the moment. "Don't you think I'm capable of knowing my own desire?"

The word *desire* rocked him, and he closed his eyes.

I moved to eliminate the horrible distance he'd created, but footsteps and high voices were coming down the hall. I slid off the dresser and straightened my nightclothes mere moments before Ms. Dillard came rushing in with Felicity trailing her, wide-eyed. Felicity and Ms. Dillard were wrapped in warm winter robes, the coil of Ms. Dillard's normally tightly coiffed hair hanging loose over her shoulder. She looked softer this way, the worry in her eyes humanizing her.

"Who's hurt? Felicity said there was wailing. Fetched me from a dead sleep."

She stopped, taking us in, and for a moment, it appeared she'd drawn her own conclusions about the sounds Felicity had claimed to hear. Callum explained the barely avoided calamity, then gruffly excused himself and left me to Ms. Dillard, who made a severe commotion, ordering Felicity to fetch tea and a snifter of whiskey and bustling me back into bed. At last, she went to the window and closed it tight against the night.

"We need no more tragedy in this house," she said, latching it with a snap.

Chapter 14

Sleep didn't find me until dawn wept through the latched window, but when it came at last, it was dreamless. When I awoke, it was early afternoon and my insides immediately began to roil with worry over what had transpired the night before: my sleepwalking, my sensual encounter with the professor, and the disturbing fact that I was sure I had seen something, someone, in the room, even when I had been fully awake.

At ten till one, Ms. Dillard opened my door without even a knock and barged in with a tray, exclaiming I'd missed breakfast and lunch and that she wouldn't allow anyone to become a skeleton on her watch. I was uncomfortable with the extra attention, but the woman didn't listen when I insisted I was all right.

She bustled around the room, pulling the curtains farther open and stoking the fire, her demeanor as stony and inscrutable as ever. I climbed out of bed, and Ms. Dillard immediately whisked a robe to me.

"I was awake all night worried you'd caught Felicity's illness. How is your stomach? You say you're not hungry, which I take as a bad sign. Sit, eat."

She hadn't waited for me to tell her the status of my insides, which were somewhat hollow but fine. My head, however, was pounding. I expected that this was due to

unruly thoughts, not a malady. I did as she said and ate the plain oatmeal provided without a hint of sugar or cinnamon. She then demanded I drink a glass of orange juice and a strong cup of coffee, no cream.

As I ate, she began straightening things, and to my horror, she picked up the journal I'd thrown right where it had fallen, pages splayed open. She didn't even glance at it more than to take it in her hand, close it, and place it on the dresser where Callum had nearly defiled me.

I flushed, fidgeting.

"The professor is in town all afternoon making last-minute preparations for tonight, so don't bother yourself with going anywhere. Stay in bed."

I couldn't stand the idea of sitting in this room. The dinner wasn't for another seven hours.

"Are you sure Professor Hughes didn't leave me any work to do while he was gone?"

"What should I know about that?" she snapped, suddenly cranky for reasons I couldn't fathom. She seemed to realize she'd been too abrupt, and gentled.

"You need to rest."

Her concern touched me, or what I assumed was concern. It was hard to tell with Ms. Dillard.

"At any rate, it'd be a shame for you to miss the dinner."

The acidity had returned to her tone, and again I was confounded. Lack of sleep and general unease made me

ill-tempered, and I turned in my chair and confronted her directly.

“Ms. Dillard, did I do something to upset you? Or is it my mere presence making you angry with me?”

The woman stopped short, looking not at me but at a distant spot on the wall across the room. Her attention to this area was unsettling enough that I followed her gaze to the bathroom door, firmly shut, though I remembered it being partially open when I’d awoken that morning.

“You shouldn’t be here in this house, Miss Foxboro,” she said after a long silence, jolting me. “It’s a tomb fit only for ghosts and bad memories. Girls like you don’t belong in Willowfield and never have.”

I was speechless.

She came to the table and removed the tray, said she’d be sending the dress, and left. When she was gone, I hurried to the dresser, took the journal, and shoved it back in the drawer, slamming it shut violently, full of insult and dismay and unable to express either to anyone.

I stayed in my room, managing another two hours of sleep before taking a bath and finally indulging in the prettily scented items arranged for me when I’d arrived. I wanted to take my mind off the mess things had turned into, yet there was also a grave need in me to impress the people who were coming, to prove I was good enough to be here at Willowfield, even if Ms. Dillard didn’t think so. Had the death of Mrs. Hughes truly been so terrible that it sullied every memory ever made here? Perhaps there

had been no good memories at all, and every shining history told was only from the perspective of those who had never lived within these walls.

As I sat in the bath, rubbing the rose cream through my hair, my thoughts wandered to the elder Mr. and Mrs. Hughes. Callum's parents. He talked only about his mother, barely, and there were no pictures hanging anywhere of their likenesses. Now that I was considering it, there were no pictures of real people anywhere. No family portraits, no ancestors. Not a single frame with human eyes. I'd never noticed, never once ventured to look. Where were they all?

Chilled by the peculiarity of the realization, I sunk into the bathwater, submerged to my ears, glancing at the ceiling where the plaster filigree weaved in and out, gold leaf flowers dull in the watery light. A storm was rolling in with a temper, and I heard the distant rumble of thunder even underwater; it was darker than it should be at this hour.

As I sat up, a rushing noise filled the room, echoing off the tiles like a wave against an angry shoreline. Rain. Torrential and unforgiving. There was another sound, a rustling beyond the door, which I'd kept open slightly to release the steam of the bath. It grew louder as I listened, someone moving, drawers opening and closing, the tinkle of bottles on the dresser top.

"Hello?" I called out.

There was no answer, but the noises stopped.

“Who’s there?” I demanded, skin rising with gooseflesh.

“It’s only me, miss,” came Felicity’s soft voice. “I’ve brought your dress. I didn’t want to disturb you. Should I leave it on the bed?”

“Oh, please wait. I’m coming out. And call me Millie!”

I climbed from the water and wrapped myself in a robe.

When I left the bathroom, Felicity was arranging my slip, taken from the bureau drawer, on the bed next to a box, glittering gold with a sprig of baby’s breath tucked under a diaphanous black bow.

“It arrived a few moments ago,” she said, cautiously excited, like a schoolgirl waiting for her friend to share the contents of a love letter. If Ms. Dillard had chosen to hate me, Felicity had chosen the opposite, and despite her timid nature, I believed we had somehow become friends. I gave in to the moment, rushing to open the box with Felicity bouncing on the balls of her feet.

In the parcel, nestled in cream tissue paper, was a silk evening dress, the charming shade of rose quartz. I took it at the shoulders and pulled it forth, filled with vague disbelief at the beauty I held. The gown was a modern style, sleeveless and shining with a low waist, tiers of beaded gold scallops making the skirt, which would hang no longer than knee length. It was heavy and sparkled in the light. The box also contained a pair of low-heeled satin slippers in the same blushing shade.

“Oh, Millie, you’ll be lovely,” Felicity breathed.

I didn’t share her positivity. I was an imposter. I felt as though I’d merely intercepted it on its way to the actual owner—an elegant woman who knew how to hold conversations and keep her temper. A woman with no holes in her memory, who didn’t see things that weren’t there.

I dropped the dress back in the box, unsure, only for Felicity to pick up the entire package, shoes and all, and rush me behind the changing screen.

With no real excuse, I pulled the dress from the box to hang it on the small hook. When I bent to retrieve the shoes, I discovered there was more to be found, folded neatly beneath another layer of tissue: a silk bandeau brassiere with a delicate lace front panel and a matching step-in pantie, short enough to be invisible under the hem of the dress. There was also a pair of lace garters, trimmed with gold, and a set of silk stockings.

I didn’t let myself consider the professor had supplied them. Ms. Dillard had been in charge of acquiring the gown, and it was sensible to include these elements as well. They were logical accompaniments to the outfit. The woman’s attention to detail and sense of duty wouldn’t have allowed her to order items unfit for the Hughes family, even if she wasn’t particularly fond of the person she was ordering for.

I dressed in the luxurious items, taking care not to rip the stockings, drawing them over my knees to fasten with the garter. The underthings were something to be

admired, but the dress was a show of its own, and I gazed at myself in the white floor mirror. I traced the beads at the neckline, then touched the ends of my unstyled hair. Even dressed in such beautiful things, I didn't see a woman of the modern age. Above my shoulders I was every matron at every girl's school in the country. I searched my own face, looking for a spunky, vivacious woman that I wished existed. I considered the high bridge of my nose and the rounded slope of my cheeks. These features were reminiscent of my mother, who had been beautiful and cruel. My current outfit would have caused her a tantrum. I sighed at my reflection, then had a devilish urge.

I emerged feeling both a queen and a fraud. Though Felicity wasn't the exuberant type, the awe in her eyes was enough to make me flush. She complimented the beads and the dress's flattering fit, and I loved her for it.

"Will you cut my hair?" I asked, imagining my mother rolling in her grave.

"Cut it?"

"Yes, short, like they wear it in the city." It crossed my mind that Felicity had been sequestered here in the middle of nowhere for who knows how long. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Like in the Sears catalog?" she asked, taking a lock of my hair and examining it.

"Yes, exactly," I said, surprised Ms. Dillard allowed a Sears magazine in the house.

She considered for a moment, a smile spreading across her pretty mouth. She disappeared for several minutes then returned with scissors and immediately guided me to the bathroom, draping a towel over my shoulders. She repeatedly warned me she'd never cut hair and asked me if I was sure before we finally began. The process was full of small gasps and bits of laughter, and I held my breath as my hair fell to the tile in snaky, coiled heaps.

When Felicity was done, I found someone new peering back at me in the vanity glass. A woman who wasn't afraid of old houses, wasn't teased by men but did the teasing, who didn't care what old housekeepers thought about her, and who slept well at night sure her worth was more than any could afford. The edge of the straight bob hung a touch below my cheekbones. The ends still wanted to curl, and Felicity tamed them with a comb and an exotic-smelling ointment in a crème tin. While she was working to straighten the flyaways, I ventured for some insight.

“Are you familiar with any of the people who were invited tonight?” I asked.

“Yes, all of them,” she replied. “They all came frequently until Professor Hughes shut up the house and stopped letting visitors in.”

“Can you tell me anything? I'm dreadfully nervous.”

We went down the list, a short one of only six people.

“Well, I know Mr. and Mrs. Terrance own stock in the perfumery, and Mr. Terrance is a board member. He

spends a lot of time at the factories. Mrs. Terrance helps design some of the labels. They're both very nice. Mr. Terrance does tend to be blunt."

This didn't seem too frightening.

"You know Dr. Hannigan already. He always comes to these. His niece will be coming tonight too, and she's a friendly sort."

"And Horace," I finished. "Jack Horace and his wife."

Felicity fumbled the comb, and it caught, pulling. We locked eyes in the mirror.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm surprised is all. Mr. Horace is a wonderful man. He's Professor Hughes and Mr. Terrance's old school friend. He teaches literature at a boys' institute somewhere east of here. He's always got the best stories. His wife..." She paused. "She's odd, and Professor Hughes doesn't get along with her. She caused trouble in the house some years ago."

An ominous sensation unfolded beneath my sternum.

"What sort of trouble?"

"She lied about something significant, and it devastated Mrs. Hughes. I'm sorry, miss, that's all I can say. It's not my place."

The frightened look I'd often seen returned to her eyes, and she shrank in on herself.

"It's all right. Thank you for warning me. Also, I beg you, don't call me miss. Just Millie."

A tentative smile chased the apprehension off her face.

“Well, what do you think of your new style, Millie?” she asked.

“I believe I’m ready to face whatever this party throws at me,” I replied.

This wasn’t true.

Before she left, though I knew it might upset her, I asked one last question.

“Felicity, if you don’t mind, what’s the name of Mr. Horace’s wife? It doesn’t say on the list.”

She stared at me, fairy eyes large and worried as though the woman would appear if her name was spoken.

“Margaret,” she said. “Her name is Margaret.”

The guests began to arrive at a quarter to eight, laughter and unfamiliar voices causing a commotion in the front hall. Though I was anxious, I was also eager for the opportunity to enjoy myself. Of course, I could also foul up spectacularly. I continued to repeat over and over that I had nothing to lose. If Professor Hughes hadn’t fired me already for any vast number of reasons, he wasn’t going to, and I knew my manners well enough not to embarrass myself in front of people who were used to high society. Not wanting to be the last one to arrive, I departed my room with a tight chest and a buzzing head.

Emerging from the side hall, I stepped into another world. Within mere hours the main corridor had been transformed. Oak limbs stood either side of the open door, woven together to create an arch. Within the branches were tucked roses the color of a virgin's blush and black hellebore, the scent of them sweetening the air. Shimmering silks in pink and gold draped across the ceiling creating a canopy where incandescent light bulbs had been strung, their light dimmed by the thick fabrics resulting in an enchanting glow. I'd never seen lights used this way, not in person. I'd once read an article about the use of electric lights strung together in *Harper's* magazine. In that case it had been for the wedding of one of the richest families in the country. I never imagined seeing the effect with my own eyes, and I gazed at them in wonder. For further luxury, the same flowers adorning the arch had been sewn to the silk in clusters, threaded through with gold twine, which sparkled in the light.

On the ground, wide white vases held sprays of bare branches wrapped in tight winds of glittering metallic thread, and next to them, candelabras as tall as myself, boasting countless arms of white tapers, lit and dancing a moody, fiery waltz. The floor itself was littered with gilded petals that invited the guests to the dining room where recorded big band jazz played at low volume, embellished with general noises of conversation.

I stalled, as I had my first day, too afraid after all to face these strangers and the professor all in one night. With my heart pounding in my ears, I retreated

backward and ran into someone who had approached from behind with such a gentle step I hadn't heard them. A hand pressed upon my waist, and I turned my head to find Professor Hughes.

I stepped away, not trusting my body, still angry with him for reasons I knew were both justified and overblown. His tuxedo and waistcoat were a depthless black worn over a white pleated-front shirt, and a square of white and gold silk was folded in the breast pocket. His attire somehow heightened his devilishness, and the glint in his eye when he peered down at me did not help.

"You are devastating in that dress, Miss Foxboro," he murmured. "And your new hairstyle suits you."

"Thank you," I replied stiffly, too stubborn to let on that I was pleased. I wanted to create distance and make it clear how annoyed I was, but I was unsure of how to escape as I didn't want to enter the dining room first.

"I see you managed to pass the rest of the night in one piece." There was a ghost of a smile, and I resented it.

"Well, I didn't find myself lying with a broken neck outside my window or wandering to your bedroom in the dark." I tried to sound light, as though those two things were such silly, unlikely events as to be jokes.

"The first image is ghastly," he replied, taking a moment to observe my hair again, running his gaze along the newly shorn ends, down to my mouth, swiped with a hint of red at Felicity's insistence. The bold colors gave me confidence. The Millie I was would say nothing and let the innuendo hang in the air, the upper hand still

firmly belonging to the professor. But the Millie I wanted to be tonight wouldn't follow the rules.

“And the second?” I asked pointedly.

When he raised his eyes to mine, I didn't look away. It was a challenge, and we both knew it. Another slight rise at the corners of his mouth, amused, pleased, both. I had no idea if I was playing into his hand or beating him at his own game.

“My manners prohibit me from replying,” he said.

“You have manners? A true surprise.”

Eager for the last word and unused to sparring this way, I stepped closer to the dining room, no longer caring if I was the first to enter.

Yet there again, the hand at my waist, fingers digging gently against my lower ribs to stop me in my tracks. He leaned into me, the warmth of his chest against my back, his voice a warning in my ear.

“Don't attempt to start a war with me. You won't win.”

Despite the heat in my cheeks, which in a brighter light might have given me away in a snap, I turned my face toward his, lifting my chin as though offering my mouth. There was a mere whisper between us, and his half-lidded eyes suggested he was waiting for me to close it.

“I think you'll find you've underestimated me,” I said, breaking away and entering the dining room with a friendly smile and a belly full of butterflies.

The throaty chuckle behind me didn't inspire my confidence.

Chapter 15

The dining room was no less extravagant than the entrance hall, candles alive in every corner, their light twinkling from crystals that hung suspended from the ceiling on long metallic threads like raindrops. The hellebore had been replaced in the table arrangements by white iris and complemented the blushing English roses that lay scattered between the fine china and crystal glasses. A phonograph played the music, pouring it from the brass horn that opened like the petal of a trumpet flower. No one had been seated yet, all guests still milling near the side tables set with old bottles of champagne and a full array of hors d'oeuvres: canapes, oysters Rockefeller, cheese, fruit, stuffed olives, and deviled eggs. Regardless of my nerves, my mouth watered.

“You’ve outdone yourself again, Callum. The decorations are extraordinary. I’m only sorry Ms. Dillard was not the one in charge of the meal this time. I’m sure it will still be delightful, but she is a true miracle in the kitchen.” A woman in her forties, her beauty enhanced by the fine lines around her eyes, spoke first upon our arrival. She was draped in gold, the satin sheath dress pooling on the floor in liquid splendor, cowl neckline dipping modestly in the front. The amber skin of her exposed shoulders glittered with a reflective powder that

had been dusted there, and as she turned to place her empty glass on the table, the splendid line of her back was visible, the dress plummeting to her hips where a large bow, lined with embroidered crystals, sparkled in the candlelight. Her hair was fashioned in delicate finger waves, the same crystals from the bow shining in each precisely positioned turn.

A giant man with a tawny complexion, tidy salt-and-pepper beard, and bald head thundered up to me, taking my hands in his, squeezing with such honest goodwill and welcome that the knots in my stomach eased. He was dressed in a similar black tuxedo as Callum, but his waistcoat and pocket square mirrored the gold of the woman's dress.

“Burt Terrance,” he boomed by way of introduction. “It's lovely to meet you, Miss Foxboro. I've been dying to see what type of woman could stand working with Callum for more than a week without setting him on fire.”

His wife was at his elbow, guiding him away in a gentle fashion, and when he released my hands, she offered hers.

“Burt forgets he isn't the size of a teddy bear, but he's got the heart of one, don't worry. Lottie Terrance, it's so nice to meet you.” Her handshake was firm, her smile open and honest. I found the Terrances remarkably endearing. “What an exquisite dress. Pink is your color.”

“It really is.” Another of the women present came forward, her hair copper and shining. She'd curled it

tightly at the nape of her neck, held in place by a black sequined band and a spray of matching feathers fanning like a peacock's tail. She was full-figured and rosy, her onyx gown simple to the waist before erupting into a riot of gossamer pleats, secured at the hip by a mother-of-pearl pin, its iridescent pink nacre drawing the eye. Not possibly more or less than a year from my age, she seemed so painfully familiar that my mind cartwheeled through memory to find her face.

"I'm Florence Hannigan," she said, offering her satin-gloved hand and kissing my cheek. She smelled of powder and oranges. Though she seemed a sunny person, when she stepped away from me her lips were tight, her smile strained.

"Oh!" That explained the sense of familiarity. "Are you —"

"My niece!" The doctor appeared with a plate of olives and eggs, and I smiled at him with all the sunshine in me. "Visiting all the way from Chicago."

"Terrible weather," Florence forced, trying to be lighthearted. It didn't seem as though she was too excited to be here. "Not as bad as here. I don't know how Callum stands it, or anyone. You're made of some strong stuff."

"Your hair!" Dr. Hannigan exclaimed. "How perfect, it suits you exactly. It's a good sign when a woman is open to change."

He glanced at Professor Hughes, who was busying himself with a glass of wine, with a bemused expression.

“I hear women change their hair when they’re mad at a lover.” The smoky voice settled over the little crowd and smiles faltered. A tall, slender woman entered the dining room on the arm of no companion, dressed in a silver gown that hugged her waifish figure like a second skin, coin-shaped tokens sewn in rows from top to bottom to form a fringe. Her pale sun-spun hair was bobbed, though longer than mine, and she wore a beaded flapper cap whose lengths of silver beads framed her heart-shaped face. The color of the dress didn’t flatter her sun-kissed skin and clashed with the pinks and golds surrounding us. I didn’t need any introduction, because of the people invited, there was only one couple I hadn’t met.

“Margaret,” Professor Hughes greeted with some impatience, taking a sip of wine to disguise it. “Where have you left Jack?”

“The poor dear’s in a dreadful state,” she said dramatically, pulling off her gloves and tossing them onto the back of one of the dining room chairs. “A cold, I’m sure, but you know how men are. I had him stay home and came to pay my respects to Willowfield.”

She examined my outfit with explicit scrutiny.

“You look a doll, you must be the new girl.”

Her tone nettled me.

“This is Miss Millicent Foxboro,” the professor said, offering her a glass of wine, distracting her eyes from me. “The woman who’s taken the post as my assistant.”

“Oh yes,” Mr. Terrance interrupted, not offering Margaret a chance to speak. “How is your research on all the otherworld nonsense going?”

“All still nonsense,” Professor Hughes replied with humor, “but interesting nonetheless.”

“So, you’re a scholar, Miss Foxboro. You read old Irish?” Florence asked, taking two olives from her uncle’s plate.

“Rudimentarily,” I offered. “Latin and Greek as well, and some old English. Nothing to brag about. It was required studies at my secondary school. Mostly I used it to expand my reading material.”

“Lots of fairy tales, I bet. You seem the type who’d enjoy fairy tales,” Mr. Terrance said jovially, casting a glance at his wife as he reached for a glass of wine. She raised an eyebrow and shook her head. Still, he retrieved two glasses and offered one to me. I took it with no intention of drinking.

“Oh, I do. I like stories with an element of thrill, even a bit of horror. Fairy tales have plenty of both usually. It’s easy to enjoy things like that when you can just close the cover anytime and be safe.”

“Not always,” Margaret singsonged.

The professor’s eyes were daggers. I ignored her comment, realizing the trouble she had caused Mrs. Hughes with the ill-fated seance had not been forgiven.

“It’s fascinating to read some of the stories in their original state and compare them with similar ones from

different regions. They all have their unique take, but it's been a trial to figure out Professor Hughes's...um...filing system," I said, catching my stride.

There was silence, and I wondered if I'd said something wrong, but then the laughter poured through the room, lighting every shadowy corner.

"She's trying to save you the embarrassment, Callum. A kind soul, a kind soul."

"We're all aware the man is a hopeless mess. Imagine what it's like for us at the factory."

"You should've seen our dormitory at university. An utter fire hazard."

The tinkling, good-natured jabs saved the mood and encouraged an atmosphere of friendship. It was obvious why the professor and his wife had hosted so many dinner parties.

"Yes," Margaret drawled. She'd taken a cigarette from her purse and was lighting it, looking pleased as a cat before it catches a mouse. "If your employment ends only when this man is in sorts, it's safe to say you've got a pretty permanent job."

"At the rate we're moving, we'll be finished in a fortnight," I said breezily, casting off her comment. It was untrue. There were still at least two months of work with what remained of the filing and the annotations, but there was no need to make anyone believe I had plans of staying that long, especially not the professor.

“Ambitious,” Professor Hughes said, eyeing me with some suspicion.

A man dressed in a catering uniform entered from the kitchen and announced dinner, leading everyone to take their seats. It was strange to see other people in Willowfield’s intimate spaces. The professor sat at the head of the table, and I was seated with Mr. Terrance on my left and Florence on my right. The doctor sat across from his niece, and I assumed Mrs. Terrance would sit across from her husband, leaving Margaret as my table partner. But Mrs. Terrance took the chair hurriedly, leaving the silver-clad woman to sit in the remaining seat, farthest from me. I glanced around, gauging everyone’s reaction to Mrs. Terrance’s ouster of Margaret to the edges of the group. A few tight smiles, a laugh, then Dr. Hannigan was boisterously telling one of his old stories that had everyone roaring in moments.

The meal was dreamy and the conversation lively. Margaret was suspiciously quiet except to make a droll remark between cigarettes. I sipped wine from my glass, only to find the professor’s eyes on me. I took another spiteful drink, much bigger than I wanted, and winked at him. His expression altered, turning severe and reproving. I’d rankled him, but I didn’t care. There was no insubordination I wouldn’t consider tonight. If he wished to terminate our agreement for it, then I’d kindly remind him of his offer to let me leave, ask for my wages, and run away like the sensible woman I was.

Despite my earlier stunt, I didn’t touch the wine again. It was too heavy in my stomach.

The conversation continued to flow when dinner had passed and desserts were eaten. There were so many questions, and I answered them all with as much honesty as I thought prudent. They were simple enough. Where had I gone to school, where had I grown up, more curiosity about my interest in the professor's work. The discussion moved fluidly on to each of their lives. They all had so much history with one another and I basked in their comfortable familiarity.

I pointedly ignored Professor Hughes unless it was required to keep the conversation moving and avoid any suspicion of our conflict.

Eventually, the table became restless, and Florence suggested a game of the Minister's Cat, leading Professor Hughes to recommend moving to the sitting room. This piqued my interest.

In the hall, one of the locked doors had been opened to a gentleman's parlor, all brown leather and dark green fabrics, though even this room had not escaped the Willowfield touch and the large mahogany mantel of the fireplace had been carved with the face of a man made of leaves and brambles, blossoms tucked in his wooded beard. There was a phonograph in here too, already playing, sending a crooner's dulcet voice curling through the air. The furniture had been arranged in a way conducive to group games, circling a low coffee table, and a sideboard had been set with coffee. As the others entered, I excused myself back to the dining room on the grounds that I'd left something behind. I needed a moment to arrange my thoughts. The hour was late, and

though the company was mostly charming, I was becoming increasingly bitter. This life was not mine. While these shining people would always be a central point in my own story, I was merely a guest in theirs.

I requested a glass of water from one of the caterers cleaning the table. When it was in hand, I drank it down in three gulps.

“So, Millie,” Margaret said, having trailed my escape and appeared in the dining room, sidling to me and reaching for a chocolate roll that hadn’t been cleared away. She took a bite and grinned, friendly as a snake. “How does it feel to be in Willowfield?”

I assumed she was asking how it felt to be a girl *like me* in Willowfield, and I considered exploiting my upbringing in a wealthy New York neighborhood but couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“What do you mean?”

“The house. Doesn’t it give you the creeps?”

I furrowed my brows, not liking where this line of questioning was headed.

“And how about Callum?” she continued, not allowing me to answer her first query. “How’re you two getting along?”

“The professor?” I refused to use his name, hoping to make it clear our relationship was a professional one. “Well enough. He’s intelligent, a little off-color, but I manage. I enjoy the work.”

“I’m sure.”

That was enough. I set the glass down with a harsh hand, rattling the remaining silverware.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Listen, dove.” She put the pastry down and offered the sad eyes of a friend prepared to deliver hard news. “Just keep your wits. Callum has a way with women like you.”

“Like me?” I grew hot.

“Sure.” She smiled indulgently. “The kind that takes strange secretarial assignments for recluses in practically empty mansions. In a word, mad.”

“Sounds right,” I replied evenly, so angry that white stars began dancing in my periphery. How I managed to keep my voice steady will be a mystery for future scholars to determine. “Now let me read you. You married rich, but it’s not a love match, so you spend your time and your husband’s money dressing yourself up like a fortune teller and going about to make a fool of him in some perverse form of retaliation for the bleak lack of passion.”

I was making mean guesses, not caring if they were correct, only that they were insulting, but the new crimson cast to her cheeks revealed that I’d hit the mark.

“You little...” she sputtered. “You don’t have a clue what you’re dealing with. Callum sucks dames like you dry then spits out their husks. You don’t even know—”

“Margaret, there you are,” the professor rumbled, strolling into the dining room with a sense of casual

cordiality. “Your husband mentioned you had a tendency to wander, especially after too much to drink.”

The double entendre was noted. Her nostrils flared.

“I didn’t want you to get lost. If you’ll make your way to the sitting room, there’s coffee, it’ll help you keep your wits. There’s a girl.”

With a huff and a mouthful of venom she was now too afraid to spew, she stormed from the dining room, turning only once to glare at me at the threshold before taking her leave.

“I was worried what Margaret had in mind, but shouldn’t have been. You held your own.” The fact Professor Hughes was surprised was an insult in itself. I was still boiling, and there was no one else to punish.

“She’s a terrible person.”

“She is.”

“You invited her.”

“I invited her husband. She wasn’t supposed to be in town. You look very upset. What did she say to you?”

“Nothing I’m sure I wouldn’t have figured out.”

“Do tell.”

“Perhaps another time,” I retorted. “They’ll be wondering where we are, and I don’t want to give them any reason to use their imaginations.”

I made it out of the dining room and turned toward the light of the parlor, but I’d taken less than two steps when Professor Hughes grabbed my arm, his grip firm

but not painful. I was angry that he was so calm when everything inside my head was pure chaos.

“I’m truly sorry Margaret upset you,” he said, “but anything coming from her mouth was either a wild exaggeration or a straight lie.”

“And I should believe you?”

This, at last, made him angry. “You should.”

“Why?” I demanded, digging my fingers into the small opening of his frustration. “Your behavior since the moment I arrived has been suspect at best, threatening me in the hallways in the middle of the night, making your suggestions.”

“Millie, you’re raising your voice.” His tone was an omen I didn’t heed.

“Let them hear!” I yelled, flinging my hand to indicate their general direction, sealing my fate.

He caught that hand in his, much less gentle this time, and I found myself being pulled roughly to the nearest door, which he opened and spirited us into. The party preparations had not made it to this room, and it was unlit save for whatever sad illumination made it in from the stormy night.

“And here you’ve whisked me away to a lonely, dark room, how on pattern.”

My voice had instinctively gone lower, quieter to match the night in the room. The dark shushed me, and in it, I was not as brave. His tall bulk blocked the door, giving me no chance to leave without getting close to

him, and that was out of the question. The shadows did something to Professor Hughes, something unholy. In the light he was attractive, captivating in his charming, polished way. But here where no sunbeam or cast of firelight could touch him, he was a being of the underworld, a shapeshifter made treacherous and devastating by the dark.

When he spoke, it was with a menacing drawl.

“Your mouth is running away with you.”

“Shouldn’t it? Maybe no one has ever had the nerve to tell you straight to your face that your behavior is abhorrent and ungentlemanly!”

The last word was weak, but I was so flustered nothing else came to mind. The fact that his response to my declaration was a low and throaty laugh made me all the more furious.

“I am appalled you find that I am not a gentleman,” he managed.

“And I am appalled I somehow fell for your trap.” The courage to finally move came with wrathful exasperation. I tried to sidle around him, reaching for the knob.

“A trap, you say.”

“I’m going to the parlor to enjoy more pleasant company. Stay here in the dark like the beast you are,” I said, managing to open the door ever so slightly.

He moved with unhurried resolve, leveraging my new position between him and my escape against me. He pivoted, pressing his hands into the heavy oak on either

side of my head, enveloping me in a cage of his body, leaning in to close the door again with a sharp click. I turned, prepared to object, but when I faced him my words retreated. He surrounded me, every bit the rake I'd accused him of being.

“Is that really what you think of me? That I'm a monster waiting for the opportunity to sully any maiden who walks unwittingly into my den?”

“An apt self-portrait,” I replied, and damn it to hell, it sounded breathless. Without any other ammunition, I blurted, “Even if you don't remember the night I wandered into your room, surely you remember last night when you came into mine.”

“Well,” he intoned, so salaciously that my heart skipped a beat, “do you want to know what I think of you, Miss Millicent Foxboro?”

“No,” I replied. I really didn't.

“It's only fair...” He moved an inch closer to me, and I had nowhere to go. “You're stubborn and odd-tempered. You're obstinate and snappish and nosy.”

All valid in some way, all hurtful to hear. I prepared to defend myself, but he grabbed my chin, lifting it, his thumb brushing my bottom lip.

“But you're smart, disarmingly romantic. Everything about you vexes and beguiles me. I think you're bedeviled by your temper and your secrets and all the passions you're terrified of. Furthermore, your face gives away everything, and I know you're lying, Millie, when

you say you believe any word Margaret has said against me. As for my *suggestions*, they were all promises that I fully plan to fulfill. I *am* a gentleman, Millie, but not always, and I certainly don't intend to be one right now."

"You're trying to intimidate me," I said.

"Are you intimidated?"

"No."

"You're trembling."

"Do you like it?" I'd meant to insult him, suggest again that he was the craven monster I'd accused him of being. But there was too much yearning in my voice, and it came out a whisper.

His hand moved to the door handle, turning the lock.

"Yes," he replied, then claimed my mouth with his.

I was ready for it, and I met him with equal fervor, arms encircling his broad shoulders, our height difference requiring me to stand on tiptoe, his arm a stabilizing force around my waist. He deepened the kiss as our bodies met, and I parted my lips to his tongue, ready to be devoured. Already he was hard as granite, wilding me. I untangled myself just enough, leaning into his arm as I made enough space to reach between us and slide my hand along the length of him, finding it imposing.

He nipped my mouth in response.

"Don't be too naughty, now, Miss Foxboro, or I'll have you making noises everyone is bound to notice."

“If my mouth is properly occupied, that won’t be a concern.” I’d never said such lurid things in all my life, but I meant it with every nerve in my body. I held his concealed shaft against my palm and drew up again.

He released a tight breath of want.

“All this time you accused me of being a beast, while you were a little devil,” he said, his voice like velvet. In a smooth, forceful movement, he slapped my bottom.

“Professor,” I gasped, shock and delight increasing my appetite for him all the more.

“I should have done that the night you barged into my room.” He cupped his hand around the stinging cheek he’d assaulted. “And much more besides.”

“You said you didn’t remember...”

“I lied.”

So quickly that it left me unsteady, he turned me around, pressing his desire against my back. With a step, he repositioned us in front of a bronze-framed mirror hanging to the left of the door. It had been placed to reflect the stately oil painting on the opposite wall, but now accommodated the outline of our figures. A hand found the hem of my dress, hiking it above my thigh to expose the garter, and finally the black silk underwear.

“I’ve decided not to make this easy for you,” he murmured in my ear. “You’re going to have to keep quiet on your own if you don’t want everyone to know what we’re up to.”

His hand disappeared beneath my dress, roving its way to the waist of the pantie and slipping down inside it, his fingers roaming through the curls between my legs. My breath came uneven as his thumb slid along the most sensitive part of me, teasing it stiff. The growing bloom of ecstasy made my knees weak, and I raised an arm to grasp the back of his neck, giving myself balance. He slipped his fingers farther between lust-swollen lips and dipped deep into my wet heat, forcing me to fight the sound rising in my throat inspired by that exquisite invasion. I kept my eyes on our reflections. Though we were barely more than silhouettes in the glass, I could make out enough to enjoy the sight of his hand tucked between my thighs.

“Mmm,” he hummed, satisfied with my lust. He pressed his palm flat against my mound to encourage the growing pleasure with pressure, then withdrew his fingers and slid them in again, much farther this time. I rocked against his hand, but in response to my eagerness, he removed it, leading me to open my mouth in protest, only to inhale sharply as he found the tight nub of nerves again, fondling it between thumb and forefinger.

“This is unfair,” I managed despite my muddled brain.

“No, it’s perfect retaliation for your cheek tonight,” he said in my ear, his talented fingers continuing their work. I glanced down to watch the rise and fall of the fabric of my skirt, painfully obstructing the view. He could have

asked anything of me, and I would have mindlessly obeyed, a servant to the longing he was building in me.

“Look at how beautiful you are,” he murmured, his free hand at my throat, tilting my head back to rest on his chest as he fingered my pleasure.

His ministrations became slower, teasing.

“I warned you not to start a war with me.” He guided his thumb in an achingly slow arch. “I should stop right now to punish you for being impertinent.”

“You wouldn’t,” I moaned, so close to climax that the thought of it being taken away was like death.

Another brush of his fingers, a flick that sent me shivering.

“Callum, you can’t.”

The smile in his voice was maddening.

“Keep watching, kitten.”

To my relief, he began massaging again, swiftly now, less lazy, driving me to a pinnacle I was made to dive from. I arched, reaching behind to caress his shaft, imagining the bliss of being filled with it. I was rewarded with a low groan, the sound undoing me. Lightning struck as I reached my climax, his hand moving from my neck to my mouth to stifle the cry and save me from embarrassment after all.

He held my quaking body, fingers pressed against the pulse of my ecstasy until it slowed.

“There’s a sound from your lips I would love to hear again,” he said.

The doorknob of a door I hadn’t even noticed rattled. There was another entrance to this room, set between two high cabinets, concealing it in shadows, and someone was trying to get in. We hastily parted from each other, and Callum grabbed my arm once again, this time to pull me into the hallway.

We managed to escape without notice, no one waiting in the corridor as we emerged. He closed the door softly as to not give us away.

“Ms. Dillard is always roaming around checking every unusual noise,” he grumbled, irate.

We locked eyes and after a beat, both started to laugh. Surprising me, he enveloped my body in his arms, pressing his face into my hair as the delight and thrill of the circumstance tickled us.

There were more sounds now, voices coming from the sitting room, and we parted again, trying to control our faces. Callum pushed me to start walking, keeping behind a respectable distance.

Dr. Hannigan appeared from the sitting room.

“There you are!” he bellowed.

“The caterers were overwhelmed,” the professor lied easily, a natural. “Miss Foxboro was trying to direct them, but I had to step in. It’s all in sorts now.”

“The kitchen is a creature of its own,” the doctor agreed. “Come, we’re starting charades.”

“First, let me excuse myself. I need to clean up after our escapade.”

“All right, all right, but go quickly. Everyone’s eager to start.”

The doctor returned to the parlor to a rise of cheerful voices as Callum moved down the hall, glancing back with a smirk that reignited me, despite my recent relief.

Before I could enter the parlor, Margaret moved from where she’d been standing in the shadows of an alcove, smoking yet another cigarette and bringing to mind, bizarrely, the caterpillar from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

“Enjoying yourself?” she asked, haloed in a cloud of smoke.

“Yes,” I said shortly, trying to wave it away.

“Tepid response for a woman who just got her bell rung. I saw you and Callum come sneaking out there all pleased with yourselves.”

“You need to mind your own business,” I grated with such a hateful sneer I was surprised at myself.

“Please, dove,” she said, so earnest that tendrils of doubt began to choke my anger. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Like you helped Callum’s wife?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Enough to be sure you’re no good.”

“Listen, whatever you’ve been told, it’s not the whole story. I loved her like a sister. It was all honest.”

“Callum doesn’t think so.”

“Callum is a fool and a liar,” she snapped, throwing her cigarette onto the rug and extinguishing it with her shoe before leaning in, menacing, far too close. “I told his wife what she needed to hear to save her life. The evil in this house ruined her. If you don’t leave, you’ll find the same thing out for yourself the hard way.”

With a disgusted click of her tongue, she returned to the others, leaving me alone with her cruel, haunting words. I wanted to hold my head high and walk through those doors, play the games, and have a good time, letting the knowledge that Callum genuinely wanted me be a balm to soothe my dignity. Instead, I turned away from the warm light, boisterous jazz, and bright laughter of the party and rushed into the gloom of Willowfield.

Chapter 16

Morning came angrily, another storm brewing, which was strange for this time of year when it was more likely to see last-minute snowflakes falling than hear thunder rumble. Ms. Reeves would have said it was a good sign the warm spring was heaving its way in earlier than expected.

I assumed the party had continued even after I'd run away like a coward to hide in my bed, crying tears I couldn't attach an emotion to. The euphoria of the professor's attention had soured with the cruelty of Margaret's premonitions, reigniting a lingering dread that there was more to Willowfield and its enigmatic master than I could handle. I was not a woman who moved easily in flirtatious circles; I didn't know or care for the rules, and whoever I'd tried to be last night was a woman who would, eventually, crumble beneath the pressure of her fear.

Look at how beautiful you are.

I covered my face with my hands, still daring to believe he'd been honest, feeling lighter hearted for it. I was wary of seeing Professor Hughes again. I mused momentarily at my inclination to continue using his title, despite how his hands had... I cleared my throat to

banish the thought. I didn't need to bring my fantasies to the library this morning.

I dressed, and when I glanced at myself in the vanity, I gave a start. My hair. I'd forgotten all about it. It curled at the ends, but not unbecomingly, and after a brush and some of the same hair ointment from last night to smooth it, I left it alone and admired the way it fell. When at last I arrived for breakfast, I found Professor Hughes sitting at the table, a newspaper in hand, taking a hearty drink of coffee. He appeared fresher than I'd ever seen him. When he saw me, he folded the paper, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and smiled so cheerfully I might have mistaken him for a completely different man.

"Good morning, come, eat." He motioned for me to sit beside him, his eyes dragging themselves over my body as he took in my wardrobe. "You look lovely."

The compliment pleased me.

"Thank you, but I do have clothes of my own, and these were really unnecessary." I paused, then added my true feelings. "Though I'm grateful you considered my comfort."

"Let yourself have nice things, Millie. I have them to give, so please indulge me."

His sincerity was moving, and our eyes locked for a moment and we both smiled. He sat with me while I ate, continuing reading his paper and making small comments regarding its contents. I was interested in the topics but couldn't focus on them. He blessedly didn't

ask any questions about where I'd gone last night and made no mention of the party following except to say it was late when everyone disbanded and, gratefully, Margaret had left first.

"I hope she doesn't come back," I said, spreading marmalade on slightly overdone toast, but it wasn't my place to say such things, and I almost retracted the statement when the professor chuckled.

"I'm glad you see through her. Don't worry, she's not welcome here again. I saw what she did to the rug."

It was my turn to laugh, and the mood was lifted.

We moved to the library to work, neither of us making a peep about the things that had gone on in the dark little room after dinner. However, the professor was so at ease I finally glimpsed the true scholar he was, obsessing over his notes, completely undistracted, waving bits of paper at me to ask what in the devil he'd written because he couldn't read his own hand.

This happened several times over the morning until he finally offered me lines I couldn't decipher. I winced apologetically, unsure how to tell him what I saw was nonsense.

"I'm afraid..." I couldn't stop myself and began to giggle. "It's completely illegible."

"Christ," he replied, embarrassed, running his hand over his mouth.

"What are these notes for? What were you transcribing? If we find the book, we can at least get a

start on decoding it.”

We made our way to the bookcase together and began scanning.

“Did you have a library in your childhood home? You’re always at ease here.”

I was shaken by the question, but I recovered.

“No,” I said regretfully.

The answer was, of course, yes, but I had never been allowed to use it. I took over so he couldn’t ask me any more questions about myself.

“Did you grow up in this house?”

He pulled out a book, scanned the cover, then put it back.

“I did. It’s been a constant in my life for so long, equal parts haven and burden to my soul.” He was working to keep levity in his tone, but a ribbon of sorrow crept in, and I felt for him. “My grandfather built this place. He died shortly after its completion, leaving it to my father—a young man at the time, recently married to my mother, and suddenly the master of a ridiculous mansion and a large fortune. He had no idea what to do with it, and almost went bankrupt. But then my mother took the helm. The cosmetics industries began to boom with the opening of all the new department stores in the cities, and she insisted they be part of it. Her family had consisted of a long line of herbalists and perfumery was most natural.”

“Your mother sounds like a force to be reckoned with,” I offered, wishing I’d had an opportunity to meet her.

“She was. She was also a doting parent. I have many fond memories. Of course, she had her idiosyncrasies. She’d spent most of her life in County Cork, and she brought her superstitions.”

“Yes, you mentioned all the fairy motifs were her doing.”

“They were,” he replied after a small pause. “She believed the Good Folk had given her blessings. All good things that happened were a miracle from the Seelie. She worshiped them happily, and so much of Willowfield is a dedication to them.”

“That’s quite magical.”

“It could be; she made it so.” He grew silent, his search slowing.

“When I was twelve,” he continued, somewhat unsure as though he was still deciding whether he should reveal the next information, “she contracted tuberculosis and died shortly after. On her deathbed, she told me the fae were collecting on the debt she owed them for so many years of prosperity. And for me.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled, rueful. “She thought I was a fae child, gifted to her after years of being barren.”

I dropped my hand from the books, lifting my head to see his eyes, but he wouldn't return my gaze. He appeared pained.

I reached to touch his arm. It rested there for a moment before he placed his hand over mine, holding it.

“You were so patient to listen to all of that.” He released me, and we returned to searching for the elusive text. “I'm sure Ms. Dillard told you the entire history of this place with all its hidden bitterness. She didn't care much for my parents.”

“Ms. Dillard doesn't seem to care much for anyone.”

“You're being unfair, Millie,” he scolded, though not too harshly, aware of the type of person Ms. Dillard was. “She's got a hard shell, but she's a warm person underneath it all.”

“Hm,” I said, unconvinced.

“Dr. Hannigan is hopelessly in love with her.”

I was so surprised, my laughter came out a high squawk.

“You're lying!”

“You always accuse me of being a liar, it's really unfair.” He was joking, but I was contrite.

“Do you truly think he is?”

“I would bet my own life on it. I'd also venture to wager she's sweet on him too, and her own feelings

infuriate her.”

I could empathize.

“He’s doomed,” I lamented playfully.

“All men in love are.”

His lids lowered as, at last, his gaze dipped to find mine, too full of meaning. I hastily retreated.

“We won’t have any luck,” I said, heading to the desk and crumpling the paper, unsure why I did, other than the simple explanation that I was panicking. “We’ll have to mark this one as a loss, and you’ll have to be more careful with your notes in the future. If I can’t decipher this chicken scratch, no one can.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and I scoffed.

“I’m not a matron.”

“No.” That tone was in his voice again as he pulled a book from the shelf, waved it at me to indicate he’d finally found what we’d been after, and brought it to the desk, laying it down.

I stared at it, only because I didn’t want to see his expression.

“You gave up too easily, Miss Foxboro,” he chastised gently.

My cheeks warmed, and I began to smooth out the paper I’d wrinkled into a ball.

“Well,” I managed, “at least I didn’t eat it.”

A beat of silence, followed by a rumble of laughter, encouraging my own smile, partially glad the tension was broken.

He shook his head. “I doubt it would have deprived the world of any genius if you had.”

“Certainly not any decipherable by the human eye.”

“Such cheek,” he replied with theatrical offense.

“They call it honesty,” I corrected, shaking the paper in front of him for him to take.

We smiled some more, both of us like fools.

“This”—he gently took the paper from my hand—“is the most civil conversation we’ve had to date.”

The moment began to burn, his comment unfair, making me feel unruly and unpleasant.

“Maybe if you weren’t so tyrannical...” I began to turn away, hoping to hide my self-conscious discomfort.

“Me?!” Now his laugh was one of disbelief, and before I could shun him entirely, he slipped an arm around my waist. “I rather think it’s you.”

As he pulled me to him, I caught myself, hands on his chest to prevent our bodies from meeting and catapulting me toward another state of recklessness, though I wanted badly to give in.

“Professor...”

“Millie,” he said tenderly, “it’s Callum.”

He kissed me with such soft affection I nearly began to cry, and my inhibitions melted, forming me to his body. The ache opening in me was more than my body wanting him, it was the dangerous longing of my heart.

“Do you still think I’m a beast?” he asked against my lips.

“You are,” I responded playfully. “But I don’t mind anymore.”

“Good, because it was very hard pretending not to be.”

He grinned with plenty of devilry and took my mouth again more fiercely this time. The slow molten heat of desire filled me until I was on my tiptoes again, pressing close. My eagerness dissolved his caution, and he cupped my backside with both hands, crushing me to him. All at once we began stumbling together, searching for somewhere, anywhere, to stabilize ourselves. He turned us toward the desk, and I threw out a hand to help as he lifted me onto it, only to knock the book we’d just finished searching for onto the floor. It hit spine first and opened to a center page where a folded sheet of paper had been tucked like a bookmark.

I don’t know what terrible urge made us both look down, but there, staring up at us in his wife’s nervous handwriting, was a single word bolded, underlined.

CALLUM

I couldn’t fathom what I was seeing. Callum cleared his throat and broke away from me, leaned to scoop up the text, closed it with a snap, and took it back to the shelf

where he shoved it into the spot it hadn't been absent from for more than a few moments.

The break in the spell was torture, and I was riled by the odd premonitions worming their way through me.

“Are you toying with me?” I demanded, unable to believe the horrible coincidence.

He leaned on the bookcase, refusing to face me.

“I assure you, Millie, I'm not,” he said, his voice low.

“Did you know the note was there?” Anger at my foolishness made my voice viperous. “If it's your goal to make me so desperate I come begging for you, I swear I'll never do it!”

My accusation hit a nerve, and he turned toward me, eyes dark with his own quickening fury.

“Do tell me again how you swear you never will,” he growled.

I ignored the twinge in my lower belly, the dangerous glint in his eye. I'd stoked his anger. Good. I embraced my own, tired of games. I grabbed another of the books off the desk, wanting to throw it at him, instead turning the opposite direction to the bookcases as far away as possible. I was attempting to find a sense of calm to prevent making a fool of myself, but with each step I only grew more furious.

“I have never in my *life*”—I slammed the book onto the shelf in emphasis—“allowed someone to have this sort of torrid power over me, but you...”

I faced him again, wishing he was close enough to slap.

“You make me feel like I’m burning,” I grated, “like I’m going to die from it. All the while you’re only baiting me along so I’ll dance to your tune and amuse you. I hate it, and I won’t fall for it anymore!”

His voice rose to match the volume mine had become. “I’ve been trying my best *not* to give in to my worst impulses and defile you to within an inch of your life despite the many opportunities you’ve offered, and you’re *angry* with me?”

“Of *course* I am! You’re playing the puppet master, pulling all my strings to your own delight. I’m not here for your amusement, and I never have been. My body and my desires aren’t for you to play with! I will never plead for anyone to want me. I’m calling your bluff, Callum Hughes, and you can fuck off!”

I’d wanted to say it so badly, driven by a frenetic need to expel the buildup, but as soon as I’d let off the pressure, I was ashamed of myself. I huffed, pressing a hand to my hot cheek, preparing to run from this as I had last night.

“Are you telling me,” he said, pinning me in place with the intensity of his glare, “my only two options are to never touch you again or to fuck you senseless right here, in the middle of the day, with the Good Lord’s bright light shining on us?”

I balked. “That’s not at all what I—”

“It’s an easy choice.”

He moved toward me with a dark purpose, his long strides bridging the distance so quickly it seemed supernatural. His hands were on my blouse, undoing the top buttons with such speed I might have thought they’d never been fastened.

I raised a hand to stop him, but he grabbed my wrist, taking advantage of the momentum to pin it above me against the shelves. He grabbed the collar of my shirt and ripped the buttons from their fabric in one savage pull, and they fell to the parquet floor like hail. The silk chemise I wore was the one he had gifted me, and it chafed me to see the smug curve of his lips when he recognized it. The barbaric action and all of my previous rage compounded, causing an eruption of white-hot lust that burned away my previous shame.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it, Millie?” His tone was harsh, combative.

“Yes,” I snarled in return, matching his brutality by grabbing his tie and pulling him toward me where we met in an angry, forceful kiss. He released my wrist to slide his hands beneath my chemise while I dragged my own through his hair.

The kiss was bruising, but we were ready to consume each other no matter what pain came from it. He tucked his fingers into the band of my skirt and, with a quick yank, popped the button at the top, loosening it enough for it to slide easily down the silk underthings and pool on the floor at my feet. No time wasted, he was grasping

my hips, hoisting me so I could wrap my legs around his waist, my back against the bookshelves. Without preamble he ground himself against my soft heat, the firm ridge of his shaft running over the taut hill of my desire, causing me to gasp.

He moved slowly, making love to me with our clothes still a thin barrier separating us.

“Someone could walk in,” I rasped, this realization partially obscured by the haze of want.

“They have ears, don’t they?”

“Callum...”

He rocked his hips forward roughly, sending shock waves to my core, brushing his lips over mine.

“Have you decided you’ve finally bitten off more than you can chew?”

It was a dare and we both knew it.

“Hardly,” I replied, shifting my hips to meet him in the next motion. He groaned, low and short, shaken by the intensity of the sensation, then he tucked an arm under my bottom and carried me back to the desk nearby where we’d started this whole thing in the first place. As soon as he’d placed me down, he began to undo his belt, and I joined his efforts of undressing by untucking his shirt, which he finished unbuttoning as I unfastened his pants.

The view of the firm plane of his stomach and the dark trail of hair dipping out of sight was intoxicating

and as he discarded his shirt on the floor, I slid my hand into the loosened waist found his stiff arousal.

My touch incited a delicious, guttural sound from him as I freed his lust, wrapping my fingers around the base and slowly pulling up the daunting length. He was rock hard, and I guided my hand along the velvet shaft again, enjoying the enticing view before lifting my eyes to find his half-lidded, alight with a fire that grew ever more fierce as he watched me handle him. Enjoying my power, I lowered my mouth to the silky head, circling it with my tongue.

One hand twisted my hair, though exerted no force, and I traced the tip again with my lips. I didn't take him in my mouth but instead pulled my hand thrice more down his length in languid strokes.

He took in a sharp breath, tightening his hold on me in warning.

“Now isn't the time for teasing, Millie,” he said.

“A tease for a tease,” I replied, ready to repay him for his wicked fondling of me last night. I parted my lips to take in only the tip, tormenting him with a coquettish suck.

“Enough of that,” he said, pulling my head back until I had no choice but to sit upright. He reached around, taking hold of my waist and flipping me so that I was bent over the top of his desk. In a fluid movement, he'd pulled the silk underwear down, letting it fall to my ankles, followed by a sharp, glorious pain as his fingers dug roughly into the soft flesh of my bottom, pushing me

forward until my hips were angled up and the head of his need was positioned at my wet cleft.

I grasped for a hold on the desk, trying to press onto him, but he held me in place and instead slid his cock past my entrance and across my throbbing clitoris. I objected loudly.

“A tease for a tease,” he echoed.

Before I could protest further, he drew back and entered me with no tenderness, burying himself to the hilt in one swift movement. I exhaled with a short groan. No one had invaded me this way for years. Unused to the onslaught, my body tried to resist him, causing me a brief moment of discomfort that became such bliss I was almost senseless. This resistance elicited a vulgar exclamation from Callum, who stilled but remained buried in me.

“You’re not a virgin, surely,” he said, voice rasping with the strain of holding back.

“Don’t I look the type?” I rasped, frustrated he’d stopped, annoyed he assumed I wasn’t, though my virginity was long gone. I certainly wasn’t virtuous now, naked from the waist down and flung over a desk.

“Do you want me to answer?”

“Callum, would you just...” The words were stuck on my tongue, words I’d never spoken before, strange in my mouth.

“Just what, kitten?” Though there was no more room inside me, he pressed farther, encouraging a short moan.

I realized what he was doing. I'd sworn I would never beg, and he was making sure I couldn't stand by my word. Lust unraveled my pride.

"Just fuck me," I commanded, every ounce of desperation in the final word, "please."

"The lady has a dirty mouth," he rumbled, withdrawing only to surge forcefully in again, the intensity rocking the desk out of place. He slipped an arm under my hips, pulling me so close against him my feet were nearly off the floor, removing my ability to reciprocate. I could only hold on for my life as he took me mercilessly. The message was clear: I was not in control. But I didn't want to be. His fingers found and parted the swollen lips between my thighs to stroke the taut flesh he'd only so recently explored, knowing already how to pet me so my pleasure rose, bringing with it the gasping sounds of ecstasy. As I began to rise to the tipping point, he pulled out.

"Not yet," he murmured, guiding me to stand and face him again, sliding me onto the desk and pulling my legs up to encircle him. "We're nowhere near done yet."

He cupped the back of my neck and angled my head so I could watch as he reentered me, and our bodies merged again. The sight of him disappearing into my tight heat fractured me a little more each time, until I felt like mere fragments of myself lost in a bright sea of sensation. The eroticism of the moment made me light-headed, and in the thrall I grabbed the wrist of the hand still buried in my hair. He eased his grip to allow me to

arch, and I brushed my fingers along my silk-clad stomach and over my breast to find the hard peak beneath the chemise, pinching it to bring my mind away from the oncoming orgasm, prolonging the euphoria.

“For fuck’s sake, Millie,” Callum groaned, the sound a low, vibrating pulse. With the same disregard he’d demonstrated with my blouse, he took the strap of my chemise and pulled with such brutality the delicate lace front ripped to my sternum, exposing the swells of my breasts and leaving the garment hanging in tatters.

“You’re going to keep doing that,” he said, and I could only comply. With his hand at my back to balance me, I brushed my fingertips across the sensitive skin and fondled myself, rolling my nipples between my fingers and teasing them to rigid crowns as he devoured me with his eyes. He slowed his rhythm to impale me powerfully once, and I lost my will to remain quiet, crying out, craving more.

“Again,” I pleaded, hoarse, my body flushed.

He assaulted my cunt a second time with a strong thrust, each motion a claiming. After the third, he resumed his swifter rhythm, thumb stroking the swollen crest of my clit, coaxing my pleasure to build again until it came too high, and I closed my eyes, even the pinches not enough to drag me back into my body.

“That’s right, darling,” he urged, seeing I was about to break apart. He drew me up, and I wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. While his grip bruised my thighs, my fingernails dug into the sinuous muscle of his

back, and with his shirt no longer a hindrance, they sank into his skin. Moaning, he drove faster, and I tightened my hold on him, his solid body a conduit of disastrous need. We sped madly together toward the pinnacle, and at last I climaxed, whimpering his name into the crook of his neck, seeing nothing but bright white stars. With a final vicious thrust, he met his own release, head tilted back, a swear on his lips.

We clung to each other, both of us stunned, catching our breath and descending from our orgasms at a lazy, satiated pace. Callum's heart beat a mile a minute, his skin hot, the faint smell of his cologne peppery and grounding.

"Are you satisfied now, Miss Foxboro?" he muttered when we'd both gathered our wits.

"Never," I said, and it was true. I would never have enough of Callum Hughes.

He chuckled, kissing my temple so gently that any lingering part of me not belonging to him surrendered. I drew back to better see his face, only to find there was blood beneath my nails. Horrified, I gently swiped my fingertips across his back, my skin coming away smeared with red.

"God, you're bleeding."

"I'm not surprised."

"I'm so sorry—" I started.

"No," he interrupted, unyieldingly stern. "Don't ever apologize for your passions. I would happily bleed again

if it brought you pleasure.”

His honeyed irises glowed in the firelight, his black hair disheveled and wild around his temples from the fervor of our lovemaking. He looked like a god, ferocious and celestial, and he was pledging to bleed for me with grave sincerity.

His expression softened.

“Come.” He pulled the surprisingly intact straps of my chemise over my shoulders, the tattered front of the article barely offering modesty. He fixed himself, then gathered my clothes off the floor. I slid from the desk, wobbly and already deliciously sore. As he shrugged on his shirt, heedless of the red stains he would leave, I attempted to dress. The skirt was loose on my hips with the button missing but would stay. My blouse, however, was destroyed. With a playful quirk of his mouth, Callum took it from me, tossed it into the paper basket, no consideration of who might find it, then grabbed his suit jacket and draped it over my shoulders. I wondered how I would dare make it to my room in such a state. When I was sorted, he took me by the hand and led me to the library door, pausing to glance cautiously down the hall, making sure no one was nearby.

“Where are we going?” I asked, still feeling tipsy.

“After all that, I certainly don’t plan on excusing you for the day.”

Clandestine lovers, we trekked down hallways still kissed with afternoon sunlight, watching for anyone who

might intercept us, and soon arrived at a familiar room.
His. He ushered me in and locked the door behind us.

Chapter 17

The sunset found us lying in the professor's bed, wrapped in the sheets, my head against his chest. He stroked my hair, running his fingers along the short ends with reverence. My body was as satiated as it could be and sore in several areas I wouldn't confess. Callum's passions were voracious, and I'd been unwilling to deny him anything. Repeating in my head were echoes of the things he'd whispered: obscene instructions, sensual encouragements, and words of love.

Before him, I hadn't been untouched, my virginity lost at eighteen to a graduate student I'd met at a Christmas party. I'd hardly known him, but I'd wanted to get it over with, to remove a life mystery that loomed over the heads of all of my friends. It had been quick, uncomfortable, and passionless. Of course, my mother had never talked to me about sex, not even to shame me, and I'd often wondered if it was simply because it wasn't anything special. My first experience corroborated my theory.

Callum had shattered that conception.

As we lay together, the dark growing longer, he pulled me close and slipped his fingers into mine.

"Tell me your secrets, Miss Foxboro," he whispered into my ear.

My secrets. For some short blissful hours I'd forgotten I'd had any, but here they were to haunt me again in my happiest moment.

Shaking my head slowly and trying to battle the fresh guilt plaguing me, I replied, "Tell me yours."

He was quiet.

"You asked me about opening the house again," he said at last. "I've decided to. However, when the cold comes again, I'm going away."

"Away?"

"I need separation from Willowfield. The winters here are too harsh. If the work still isn't done, I'll bring it, and if you would oblige, I'd like for you to come as well."

I shifted, propping myself up to properly see his face. My addled brain wasn't following his logic.

"As your assistant?"

Stunned, he stared at me for two agonizing beats, then began to laugh. It was the first time I'd heard the sound so unreserved, resonating, shaking his body, and he became beautiful in a new way.

"No, you little fool," he managed when he'd finally caught his breath, eyes bright with mirth. He drew me back to him, and I tucked my head beneath his chin and listened to the thrum of his heartbeat in his throat, sheltered momentarily from my dark thoughts.

"I think it's unsuitable, with the things I've done to you," he said, running his fingers along my naked side,

“for you to continue to refer to yourself as my assistant.”

“It’s true none of this was in the job description.”

“Do you have complaints?”

“None at the moment.”

“Hard to please,” he murmured. “I like it.”

I indulged in the daydream. “Where will we go?”

“Wherever we’ve any inclination to. Somewhere away from this place until it’s alive again.”

I silently observed the fire from over the swell of our tangled legs, enjoying the sweet speculation of a future with Callum while I was able.

“Now you, my dear. What are you thinking? What do you hide from me?”

His intentions were impish, playful, expecting I divulge some silly secret or romantic hope, pillow talk that would lead us to a satisfied sleep.

You stupid girl.

My mother’s voice was clear as a bell, and I jolted, breaking from Callum’s arms to sit straight up, clasping the blankets to my chest, cold with the knowledge of what I bore. I couldn’t bring my lies into a life with someone else.

“Millie?”

He rose slowly behind me, resting on his elbow and caressing my bare shoulder with a tender touch that was like a knife in my heart.

“I need to tell you something. It will change your mind about all of this, and I am afraid to say it.”

“Have you murdered someone?”

“Callum,” I snapped, turning to face him with a scowl, unable to hold back the tears slipping down my cheeks. When he saw my countenance, he sat fully, cupping my face in his hands and wiping the wet away with his thumbs. I savored it.

“Tell me.”

“Two years ago, I woke up in Our Lady of Grace.”

“The hospital.”

“Yes.” I paused, anxiety consuming me, turning me inside out with a slow pain. This would be the beginning of the end of my bliss. “In the psychiatric ward.”

The concern smoothed from Callum’s brow, his eyes becoming two dull pools, void of expression. He said nothing and I barreled on, holding on to his hands, still cradling my face as though touching him would keep me from drowning in my shame. “I don’t remember how I got there. They told me I’d suffered a hysterical breakdown from a traumatic event. They had no other information for me, and there still aren’t any answers. I was eventually released to a women’s program, which is how I got the job with Mr. Helm. I’ve lost years of my life, and I don’t know what I did, with whom, or where. I don’t know if I’ve committed crimes. I could’ve killed someone and I don’t recall it. I could’ve been a madam at a downtown brothel and I’ll never be the wiser.”

My tirade grew feverish, I was nearly yelling, but at the last and final word, I simply stopped and waited, expecting to be rebuffed, or at least to be buried in an avalanche of questions I couldn't answer. I waited to be pushed away, for his sense of betrayal to crush me. Instead, he took my desperate, grasping hands and kissed my knuckles.

"I know," he said.

"You what?"

I analyzed his expression, searching for a lie, a terrible joke, but his solemn face proved his sincerity.

"Of course I know."

"What do you mean *you know*? How?"

"Don't you think I'd make it my business to know everything about a stranger entering my home? Dr. Hannigan worked at that hospital. He recognized your name when he met you in Boston in the little bookshop."

"He told me he hadn't been there when I was!"

I felt lied to, unsure of how to proceed, my entire experience at Willowfield shifting, feeling foreign, as though the memories weren't mine.

"You were a special case. Many of his old colleagues continue to share information with him concerning confounding illnesses, and it just so happened you were one of them."

"You knew before hiring me and still accepted my application?"

“Who else has your qualifications? It was a damn miracle Dr. Hannigan even came across you. The fact your history is unfortunate had no bearing on the decision.”

“Why?”

“Millie, we can’t exclude people from life because of their struggles.”

The unspoken part struck me. His wife. His wife had been ill, fragile, and tormented. His genuine compassion had grown from his once loving a woman who had struggled. Why shouldn’t he be able to love another?

“I’m *extremely* angry with you, Callum,” I croaked, new tears welling up. “How dare you keep that from me? I was so afraid. I...”

With utmost gentleness, he gathered my body to his, shushing me.

“May we have a lifetime for me to beg your forgiveness.”

I cried against his bare shoulder, letting the anxiety and the sorrow of my worries rack my body. He held me as I shook, spilling my grief.

“You don’t really know anything about me,” I sobbed.

“Then tell me everything, my love.”

So I did.

My parents, Thomas and Laura, had been married in their teens, my grandparents on both sides hoping to

consolidate their wealth with the union. My mother had grown up in a strict house and had high tempers, so people, including my father, tended to care for her at a distance. He showered her with as much luxury as he could afford but didn't offer any true affection no matter how much she asked for it. When I was born, the little attention my father paid to her shifted to me, and I think that's what made her hate me.

I was abandoned to nannies until I was five and the expense was considered unnecessary. Then, aside from required schooling by a spiritless private tutor, I was left to my own devices. I remained mostly in the kitchen with the only person in the house who loved me, the cook, Ms. Reeves.

It would've been best for me if my mother had forgotten I existed, but sometimes, she'd search me out and try to be a mother after all, but the encounters always ended poorly. I said the wrong thing, looked the wrong way, or had manners she disapproved of. I was slapped, pinched, and screamed at for minor trespasses, and the worst of all were the times she came to me already in a rage, already beyond mercy. It meant there'd be nothing I could do to please her, and inevitably she'd lock me in my wardrobe as punishment. Sometimes she'd leave me there for a full day until Ms. Reeves or my father knew she'd fallen asleep and could release me. I learned to be quiet. Crying and screaming only made me hoarse, and no one dared try to save me and provoke the wrath of Laura Foxboro.

When I turned thirteen, my troubles multiplied as her friends started wondering why I wasn't at family dinners and parties. My presence was suddenly expected. To prevent my embarrassing her, she drilled me endlessly on etiquette, conversation topics, and politics. She hit me with a brush if I gave the wrong answer and pricked my fingers with pins if my hair wasn't curled at night.

My saving grace, but also my greatest mortification, was when I began wandering the house at night, asleep and chasing dreams, opening doors and windows, rifling through drawers, pulling down plates from the kitchen and towels from the cupboards. I'd wake in the middle of the chaos I'd created not knowing how I'd gotten there. At first, my mother took it only as an opportunity to laugh at me and criticize my weak mind, but one night I made it to her room, rummaging through her makeup. When she woke to yell at me and I continued to only knock bottles and powders to the floor, my father told me she'd slapped my face, and in retaliation I'd attacked her, beating her about the head with the same brush she often used on me. It left her unfit to be seen for weeks. I don't remember any of it, though I'm glad it happened. I'm happy I hurt her. When I asked my father later why he hadn't stopped me, his only answer had been a hug. It was the last one he ever gave me.

Following this, Mother was scared of me, of what I might do at night, and my room was locked from the outside whenever the sun went down. She told her friends I was a lunatic and should be sent to a sanatorium for my safety. My father intervened and sent

me to St. Mary's boarding school instead. I was never welcomed home. I spent winter and summer holidays in the dormitories, and when I attended the ladies' college in New York City, I stayed in a tenement with four other girls working as a telephone operator at night.

When at last I graduated, my mother decided I was enough of a success to be a boon to her and called me back. Her letter demanded I return so she could prepare me for life as an educated wife to a man she'd already chosen, a divorced older gentleman I knew from childhood with a bad temper and deep pockets. My father sent a separate letter begging me not to come and enclosed money enough for me to go anywhere to start my life on my own. But I *wanted* to go back, at least to look my mother in the eye and defy her by saying goodbye, to see her face when I spurned her plans, when I proved to her I couldn't be bullied and beaten into submission. I'd lived years without her, but I burned with the need to serve her the rejection she'd always given me. It was all that filled my thoughts.

When I arrived, the house was empty. No staff anywhere. I learned later from Ms. Reeves that everyone had been fired, kicked onto the street with no sorry or severance pay. I wandered around, calling their names, searching for *anyone*. At last, I looked in my mother's room, her vanity perfectly arranged, a dress pressed and hung on the changing screen, prepared for a party, and her white rug soaked in blood from the heap of her lifeless body, half of her face destroyed by a gunshot

wound. My father lay nearby on the bed, pistol still in his hand. He'd shot himself as well.

In a haze, I covered him with a cashmere blanket from the foot of the bed, ignoring the shell of my mother, and walked downstairs to call the police. When they moved my parents' bodies they found the tragedy's catalyst: the letter declaring my return, tucked in my father's pocket. It had been delayed, and was delivered only that morning mere hours before I arrived. As soon as their funeral was over, I sold the house, took the little money left over after my parents' debts were paid, and bought a train ticket to California. I boarded that train with no plan, no more money, and woke up in Massachusetts four years later.

Callum held me through the confession of my life, and when I was finished, having said out loud the most essential parts, it was fully night, leaving us in only the shadows of the firelight.

"I lost so many years," I whispered. "I've got a terrible temper, and I'm haunted by my mother's voice, and by nightmares of weeping women jumping out of windows."

I couldn't help the sardonic laugh, shaking my head at my own derangements, but he remained silent. At last, I spoke the fear I'd never revealed to another soul.

"I killed my parents, Callum. They're dead because of me and my pride."

“No,” he replied, his tone uncompromising. “Your father made his own decisions.”

“To protect me from myself.”

“To protect you from your mother. But he didn’t know you very well, Millicent Foxboro. You would have had the courage to leave just as you’d planned. His ignorance of his own daughter’s strength drove him to make his final mistakes. None of that is your fault.”

“Don’t be insincere,” I murmured, uninterested in counterfeit admiration even if it was given to soothe my pain.

“You must stop always thinking the worst of me.” He lifted my chin, his eyes wandering over my face as though memorizing every line, every hollow and dimple. “And yourself. You’re a force of nature, and despite your trials, you’ve survived with a spirit worthy of its own folklore. Up to now you’ve made your way through hell all alone, but you’re not on your own anymore, Millie. Never again.”

I began to weep anew, and he kissed my forehead, drawing me back to his body, whispering his sweet, comforting words. When all my tears were spent, we made love in the peaceful glow of the dying fire.

Chapter 18

In the early morning hours, I untangled myself from Callum. He'd insisted it didn't matter if everyone knew I hadn't slept in my room, but I thought we should enjoy the secret awhile longer. For the first time, I ran through the halls of Willowfield with a light step, unafraid of the gloom. There was a glow to the world, a new magic making the once-sinister corridors radiant and full of possibility.

The following days, at my request, were busy with attempts to keep the others from suspicion. It wasn't too difficult a task as the professor had sought to renew the renovations on Willowfield, requiring him to often be out meeting with companies who'd contract the work. He hoped to have time to organize the spring fete, welcome the community back to the house, and, as he said, "Hopefully, put all the nonsense about haunts to rest."

He involved me in everything he could, and I found myself working on accounting lists for repairs, flower orders, and payments for the workers who littered the gardens preparing the earth for its grand reveal. I was still having strange dreams, whispers tickling my ears even in the light of day, touches of fingers on my shoulders, in my hair, but with enough concentration and force, I could will them away, remind myself they

were phantoms born of unnecessary fear. I was in control of myself, capable and calm, and I liked the business of the preparations, which gave me work to do at every moment of the day and relieved me from constantly thinking about Callum and the things we got up to when no one was looking.

I discovered I'd been right regarding Mrs. Hughes's botany notebooks. Being familiar with the flowers growing on the estate was an essential aspect of managing things, and with only a drop of guilt remaining, I removed the journal from the bureau and began to read again from the beginning, studying it with a close eye and copying information for myself in a separate book of my own. I silently thanked the woman, rest her soul, for leaving behind her knowledge and the legacy of her love for Willowfield. One afternoon, I paused my transcriptions and sat back in the chair, gazing out of the window and into the gardens. Callum had insisted I take over this little office with all of its delicate furniture. I'd been uncomfortable for the first day or two, none of the things to my liking. I was an intruder in this space, though everything I needed was here.

Mrs. Hughes had once sat in this very chair and done her own work, possibly stopping as I did to survey the gardens. Though I still knew so little about her, I felt sorrow for the happiness stolen and resolved not to let the same happen to me. Callum enjoyed stopping by between errands to sit in the delicate chairs, humorously

too dainty for him, and talk to me concerning things I had no experience with.

I laughed at him one morning. “I have no business savvy, and listening to all your talk on stocks and factory safety is like hearing someone speak another language.”

“You’ve got a mind like a steel trap. You’ll catch up. At any rate, these are all things you’ll need to learn, so might as well begin, but first...” He grinned and stayed long enough to throw me onto the chaise, wrap my thighs around his shoulders, and plunder me with his mouth. My want for him in all ways was unquenchable, and I was determined to become the mistress Willowfield needed, and Callum deserved.

When I’d transcribed enough of the plant notes into my own book, I brought it outside to map the growing spots of each flower. I wanted to be familiar with where to find them, so when the time came for bloom I could revisit and discover their individual beauties and scents for myself. It was a delightful scavenger hunt. As I took my leave of the topiary, I almost ran headlong into Rodney, covered in dirt but happy from head to toe.

“Miss Foxboro! Lovely to see you. What’ve you got there?”

I showed him the little book and told him what I was up to, and he gave me some directions for where to find the flowers I hadn’t yet documented. He beamed at me, then leaned on his shovel and scratched his forehead below his ever-present flat cap. “Willowfield is lucky.

There hasn't been a lady so keen on this place since we lost Mrs. Hughes."

Rodney was the only one to speak about the woman so openly. The secrecy concerning her remained heavy as a curtain around a deathbed. I still couldn't even manage to ask Callum, in case it brought him undue pain. I didn't want to inspire lines of grief on his face.

"I'm worried to ask too many questions in case I upset someone, but you seem least bothered. What was Mrs. Hughes like?"

He considered for a second, then released a long, whooshing breath. "She was a fragile one, jumpy and quiet, easily overwhelmed, but when she was in this garden, she shone bright as Venus, and she kept the entire place filled to the brim in winter with all the flowers from the greenhouse. Overall, a fine woman, and many people loved her. It's a shame what happened."

"What *did* happen?" I asked with some air of frustration I hadn't meant to express. Rodney appeared to understand and grew grim.

"It was a quick thing, to be honest. She became paranoid and fitful, couldn't sleep in the house. Hell, I can't either. It's why I stay in the cottage. Several mornings I found her out here asleep on the ground, in the labyrinth there, inside that damnable fairy ring. She cried all the time, a miserable soul and a shadow of herself. I'm not a person who should have guesses, but Professor Hughes didn't handle her gently enough. He

kept asking for more and more of her the worse she got. Really, she just wasn't well in her mind."

My blood ran cold.

"The house has been a graveyard for the last few years. Though, with you here, Miss Foxboro, things are looking up."

"My assignment's only for a few more months, Rodney," I reminded him.

"I'm not so sure," he said, managing some tact. "I've known Callum since we were kids. It's clear he's taken a liking to you. This may be forward, but he's been searching for someone to fill the hole in his life for a while now."

Irritated our attempts at secrecy weren't working, I was prepared to tell Rodney it *was* too forward when he added, "That man's got a type, and he'd be a fool not to have his eye on you."

He was so bold, but with his nerve came a sort of harmless affability that kept me from being too angry with him.

"Be careful, Millie," he said, turning to the house, love and loathing at war in his eyes, "Willowfield and its master demand a lot from anyone who loves them."

He wanted to say more, and I wanted him to explain. Instead, he tipped his cap and excused himself back to work, lamenting the likelihood the new hires were off tearing something up.

Several hours later, Ms. Dillard walked into the library to find me and Callum in a fit of laughter, clinging to each other over another of his boyhood sketches we'd found, this time of the school principal.

"Having a good old time, are you?" she asked, side-eyeing us both as she set down the tray of coffee.

When she'd gone, I sighed after her. It had been clear she suspected.

"We haven't done an excellent job hiding this," I bemoaned.

"There's nothing to hide." Callum pressed a kiss to my temple, then put the irreverent picture back in its place to be rediscovered someday. "There isn't anyone in this house who wouldn't celebrate our happiness."

Despite the evidence proving it was no use to pretend anymore, I continued to insist I be present in my room when Felicity brought my evening tea. Tonight I was particularly impatient, pacing and waiting ages for her to arrive, anxious to return to Callum's arms. Time stretched on lazily, and just as I'd planned to pass the time with a bath, Felicity arrived with the tea and a plate of almond cookies dusted with cinnamon and the usual powdered sugar.

"Ms. Dillard made these?" I asked, picking one up and taking a bite, the familiar flavor inspiring a surge of love and grief in me for Ms. Reeves.

"Yes, she said you'd mentioned they were a favorite of yours."

Gratitude rapidly thawed my heart toward the woman, and though she would probably dislike it, I planned to hug her when I saw her next. Felicity registered the new tenderness in my face and smiled.

“She’s really quite nice,” she said. “She’s always been so good to me.”

I thanked her then gave my bath as an excuse for not lingering over conversation as we often did. Despite this, she was hesitant to go.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, feeling a terrible friend for hurrying her off. “Here, sit. We can chat about it.”

“No,” she said, then opened her mouth as if she might change her answer, only to shake her head. “Have you been sleeping well?”

The question put me on guard. Felicity too? I could have laughed, but she was so distraught I thought it better not to. Callum had said no one in the house wouldn’t celebrate us. Felicity wasn’t jubilant at all. She looked disturbed.

“I’ve been sleeping all right,” I answered, measured. “Why?”

“I’ve been hearing noises at night,” she said in a rush. Mortified and thinking she’d heard our lovemaking, I prepared to explain when she continued.

“A woman crying. I assumed it must be you, and I was worried.”

The air grew thin. There wasn’t enough oxygen. My knees wobbled, and I sat under the guise of preparing the

tea.

“It wasn’t me,” I said, trying to sound curious and not frightened. “Ms. Dillard?”

“Ms. Dillard sleeps in the room next to mine. She was quiet as a mouse. Are you sure you’re all right, Millie? You’d tell me if there was something wrong?”

Though her earnest friendship affected me, I had no way to remedy her anxieties. I might be able to put her own fears to rest, but not mine.

“Of course.” I sipped the tea to disguise my lie. Aside from the intense sweetness I’d come to expect recently, it was bitter, far too strong. I barely managed to keep from spitting the mouthful back into the cup. The taste lingered on my tongue even after I swallowed, sticky and biting. I lowered the cup and noticed a filmy white residue floating at the top, undissolved. The tea had gone bad.

“Do you believe in spirits?” she said, her voice fragile as butterfly wings.

I nearly dropped the teacup.

The slight color in her face had completely disappeared, and she seemed a ghost, pale and small in the late twilight seeping through the windows.

“No,” I said firmly.

“Mrs. Hughes did,” she whispered.

“I know,” I replied, then made up my mind. “It was me. I’ve been crying at night, Felicity. I’m sorry. I miss

Boston, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do after this job is finished. I'm so sorry it frightened you. I promise I'm better now."

Her small shoulders slumped with such relief that I got up from my seat and encircled her in my arms. Shocked, she stiffened and I held a statue, but as I moved to release her, she raised her arms to return the embrace. She smelled of honeysuckle and lanolin, and I wished she was somewhere happier.

"You're a good friend, Felicity. Thank you for checking on me. Please don't worry. Everything is fine," I assured her, giving her one more squeeze.

When she left, after repeatedly asking if there was anything she could do for me, I went back to the table and shakily leaned against it. I tried to convince myself she'd overheard my and Callum's activities and misinterpreted, but that was unlikely.

I needed to see Callum, needed to hear him tell me how absurd people who believed in spirits were, yet I was reluctant to go when I was in such a state. My fear embarrassed me. I was being silly, and so was Felicity. To prove I could approach things with a level mind, I decided to take a bath after all. I shoved one of the cookies in my mouth, hoping to dispel the horrible, rancid flavor of the tea, and headed to the bathroom.

I ran the bathwater as hot as I could stand, pouring in the scented salts. The fragrance filled the room with the luxury of violets, and I breathed it in, trying to banish the new unhappiness Felicity's revelation had stirred in me.

As I began to undress, I caught sight of myself in the mirror, fingertip-sized bruises spotting my hips and thighs from Callum's vigorous handling of me. I touched them gingerly, desire blooming. Standing there naked, I tried to see what he did, and appreciate every part he sought to devour in his love.

Perhaps this was what Rodney had meant with his cryptic warning. Callum's demands of my body were many, but weren't my demands equally consuming? I'd never left his arms feeling less, as though something had been taken from me. No shame filled me, no sense of anxiety. When he was close I became *more*.

Heartbeat thrumming with need, I slipped my fingers between my legs and over the tight knot of pleasure, singing with want of him. I imagined the number of times Callum had done this job, as recently as this morning in the library as we'd stood poring over a poorly annotated text. His hand had traveled up my thigh, and he'd ordered me to stay perfectly still and continue reading aloud as he stroked me from behind, correcting my pronunciation when the building ecstasy caused me to fumble my words. I rubbed myself with sure movements, still knowing better than anyone how to efficiently satisfy my desire. Despite the mastery of my own body, the knowledge that this couldn't sate me stoked my passion all the more. I closed my eyes, the stimulation leaving me curiously light-headed, the sensation of being unbound to gravity seeping through my limbs with every brush of my fingers. I brought myself to orgasm with a shuddering exhale.

When the bliss abated, I remained unmoored, aloof in a strange haze not as rosy as it should have been. I didn't feel contented, but slightly ill, air heavy in my lungs. I opened my eyes to find the bathroom so thick with steam my image in the mirror appeared ghostlike, a mere smudge of color. My heart pounded, my stomach turning over as I hurried toward the tub to close the tap. As I approached, my feet splashed in hot water. The tub was overflowing onto the floor, and I berated myself for the brazen lust that led me to forget the bath and make such an ungodly mess. Something unusual became visible within the heavy vapor, the peculiar shape making me hesitate even as the scalding rivulets washed over my toes. I waved a hand through the haze to clear my line of sight.

A woman's body floated at the crest of the water, lengths of white hair draped over the lip of the tub, pulled by the current. Her knees were folded beneath her as though she had drowned while kneeling to pray, and the tap spilled onto the back of her head, making it bob sickly up and down. Instinctively I charged forward to save her, hooking my arms under hers to haul her out. As my hands met her skin, it pulled away from the muscle and bone in soft, bloated patches. I opened my mouth to scream but gagged instead, shaking the fleshy gore off of me. It clung to my fingernails like clay. The motion caused me to slip, and I flailed backward. My effort to stay upright only imbalanced me further, and I careened to the floor, the side of my head grazing the porcelain bath. White filled my vision, and I lay on the floor,

clutching the throbbing spot above my ear as nausea roiled up from pain and revulsion. I concentrated on rolling over and crawling to the vanity without vomiting, daring to glance back as I pulled myself up, only to find the tub empty of corpses. There was no woman, no decaying body tissue, only the tumult of water still rushing onto the floor.

Disoriented and horrified, I grabbed my robe as a noise reached me from beneath the bathroom door.

Crying.

As quickly as I could manage, careful not to lose my balance, I pulled the robe over my shaking shoulders and stumbled into the bedroom, falling again onto my hands and knees as the world kicked and spun. The crying was piercing, the force of every grief a body could feel filling my head. The woman in white stood at the foot of my bed, wailing into her hands, her body curled in on itself. I was asleep. Unconscious. Perhaps my body was still on the bathroom floor where I'd slipped, and my soul was wandering. It must be. Ghosts weren't real. My stomach rebelled and bile rose in my throat. I lurched to my feet, my eyes never wavering from the figure barely a yard from me.

“What do you *want*?” I demanded, hoarse, overwhelmed by the moment and at a loss for what else to do.

The creature crouched at the sound of my anger, waiting to attack or to be attacked herself. She wavered, rocking on her hands before finally bolting from the

room on all fours as she had done the night I chased her to Callum's room. I knew she expected me to follow, leading me somewhere I shouldn't be, like the room of my employer or to an open ledge, but I couldn't stay here. If I did, I could never be at peace with Callum or Willowfield.

Clutching my robe around me, I ran after the ghost of Mrs. Hughes.

Chapter 19

The spirit appeared to be leading me again to Callum's room, and though I fumbled, I kept up, already knowing the way. I floated in a fog of pain and desperation, following, drunk with the need to solve this horrible mystery. If this was truly the ghost of Mrs. Hughes, I wanted so badly to know what drove her to haunt this house. Perhaps she hated me for being where she should have been, loving the man who had once been hers. The new danger of this option faltered my resolve, but my speculation would leave me nowhere but cowering and ducking at shadows forever. Whatever this wraith wanted, I needed to know.

I worried vaguely about tripping on torn-up rugs or stepping on carpentry nails that were left behind, but my feet managed to find the safest places, and I kept Mrs. Hughes in sight as she arrived at Callum's door. Instead of slipping inside, she took a sharp turn into the belly of the house where I'd once gotten lost and into the near complete dark of the inner corridors where no windows offered the forgiveness of moonlight. Any thoughts I'd once had that this thing might be human were dashed when I beheld the preternatural glow that kept her from fading into the gloom around us.

She came to a halt, righting herself from the hellish crouch she'd lumbered in, hands rising to her face in her eternal pose of sorrow, but her howling didn't resume. Instead, she stood silently, waiting like a stone angel grieving over the cold graves of the lost. Cautiously, I bridged the space between us, reaching out.

"Mrs. Hughes?" I whispered, my fingers brushing the loose curls of her hair, which floated lightly as though she were still submerged in the water of the ravine. My touch didn't pass through as I suspected but tangled in the locks. I could *feel* her.

The contact sent her into a spasm, and she jerked away from me, fleeing ahead and turning at last into a door. I pursued, but at a torpid pace now, still stunned by the contact. The doorway she'd entered was not a doorway at all, but a stairwell, the one that had enticed me with the gravity of its secrets for so long. I looked up into the narrow passage, pale light shining down from the landing where the door stood open. My desire to go up was inflexible, alien, and I thought it might not be mine at all.

I took the stairs up, a hand to the wall to steady myself, ready to turn and flee if needed, prepared at every second for a horrible face to appear at the top and chase me down. Such a thing never happened, and I finally reached the landing without incident.

The room I entered was small but bright with moonbeams from two high windows set into the curve of the wall to my right, draped in yellow fabrics with white

lace violets. It was a sitting room, more meager than the one downstairs without the frills and frippery formal spaces required. Dust sheets hung draped over some things, but others were uncovered, all the most practical pieces: a chair and table, a yellow settee, and a small writing desk with stationery and a pen laid neatly atop it. There were two doors leading out of this room catty-corner to each other. My breath came in shaky pulls, my head throbbing and my stomach still troubled with fear, but I'd already come this far. I picked my way through the space to the door nearest me, but it was locked tight. I pressed my ear against it, hearing nothing.

Then the low sound of crying resumed, and I turned to find the remaining door slightly ajar. Creeping to it, I pushed inward, the hinges gently singing, and stepped into a room full of storage. I might have thought it an attic space, but the ceilings were too high, too ornate, the windows dressed in soft white muslin. I trod cautiously, understanding there were many places for something or someone to hide. For a white-hot moment, my logic took center stage, and I realized that no one was likely to find me up here if something were to happen. I'd decided to bolt when I spotted the frilled bassinet tucked near a window, half obscured by other items crowding around it. I approached and looked inside.

The small crib had been made up neatly with lace-trimmed white cotton. I touched the mobile hanging above, its twinkling stars spinning around a stationary crescent moon, sequined and shining. Pulling the cloth off the nearest bulk revealed an oak rocking horse, its

nut-brown mane brushed and braided. Baby things. But Callum had no children.

The first forbidden words I'd read rang in my ears like a high, shrill bell.

I can't give him the family he so desperately wants.

This had been a nursery. My eyes filled with tears, a phantom ache opening in my womb, rocking me with a seizure of muscles that sent me careening into a nearby changing table, where a set of cloth diapers was folded and ready to use, yellowing with age. The contractions intensified, blurring my vision, then at last let up, leaving me breathless and damp with sweat. Was this what Mrs. Hughes had wanted me to see? Her expectations for a bright future that never came?

A new sound distracted me from my horrible thoughts. Against the wall on the opposite end of the small room stood a wardrobe, white wood to match the nursery's other elements. It wasn't large, only big enough for all the necessary items one would need for an infant. Big enough for a person to hide in. My urge to recoil was defeated only by the sight of a hand pulling the door closed from the inside. I didn't need to hurry, and couldn't have besides, the pain in my head and stomach too fierce. If there was someone there, they couldn't go anywhere. I arrived at the doors, grappling with the memories that begged me to leave this thing be. But I would overcome this, I *would*. I flung open the door and quickly shoved my hands into the things hanging inside, nursing robes, woven blankets, and fresh cradle linens. I

touched the back of the wardrobe, the sides, finding nothing human shaped. I was about to start crying when a heavy blow struck me in the center of my back, knocking the wind out of me and pitching me forward. I grabbed on to a robe, but it fell from its hanger and I fell with it. Another great shove lifted my hips higher than my head, my face crashing into the inside corner as my body was folded into the small space. The door slammed shut against me, crushing my foot, which still hung slightly out, against the trim. I screamed in pain and flopped over, trying to roll onto my back, freeing my foot but allowing the latch to find purchase and click closed.

Wild with panic and pain, I screeched, trying to throw my weight onto the inside doors, but I tangled in the fabrics of never-used linens. I slammed my hands again and again against the unyielding wood, the healing wound in my palm opening up, sending shock waves down my arm. I begged for help, and in my feverish flailing, I called out for Ms. Reeves, long dead, my childhood enveloping me. I was going to suffocate in here. This was my grave.

My mother's voice echoed in my ears.

Die in there for all I care, you little bitch! Don't ever touch my things again! Mad Millie, we should send you away to a sanatorium and they'll lock you in a little room just like this. No one loves you. No one's ever loved you!

With a final wail of effort, I flung my shoulder into the door and placed my feet against the back wall, pushing

with all my might until, at last, there was a crack of wood and the latch gave way with a shower of splinters, leaving me to tumble onto the floor, my head cracking against the boards. I rolled over onto my stomach and retched nothing but frothy yellow bile. Weakly, I reached up to find something to help me stand. My hands grasped only the thick canvas of another dust cover, pulling it from its place. As it fell, I looked up to find the face of the ghost mere inches from mine.

I screamed until the dark closed in, and I ceased to see and feel anything more.

Chapter 20

I awoke in Callum's bed, my head pounding and a fever pulsing in my temples. My mouth felt like the inside of a cotton mill. I turned my stiff neck, searching for something to ground me, to dispel the wretched disorientation. I recalled voices and the weightlessness of being carried, but the rest was dark. There was a gentle touch at my forehead, pushing back a wet strand of hair, and I expected to find Callum, but instead, there was Felicity, her eyes rimmed with red. When she saw that I'd registered her presence, she quieted me.

"You're not safe," she whispered.

"Why?" I rasped, my throat raw from screaming and stomach acid.

"He wants too much." She pressed a kiss to my head, her tears dropping onto my cheeks as though they were mine.

The door opened and she moved away from me, busying herself with gathering an armful of bedclothes waiting to be collected from the chair nearby. Callum had entered, followed closely by Ms. Dillard, and he stopped Felicity as she tried to hurry out, leaning in to speak at a volume I couldn't hear. The maid glanced at me, then departed.

Ms. Dillard took to the bedside, hands on my forehead. She urged me to sit up and helped me drink a glass of water before easing me back onto the pillows. My hair was damp and smelled of black pepper soap, and I assumed I'd been bathed, though I had no memory of it. She excused herself to prepare something my stomach might tolerate and left me alone with Callum, whose face was drawn with worry.

The sight of him banished Felicity's dark message. I wanted only to feel him near, and I raised my hand to him. He came quickly to the bedside and sat next to me, holding my fingers so tight I thought he might bruise my bones. I didn't complain.

"Did you call a doctor?" I managed, unable to directly broach the subject of what had happened to me.

"Dr. Hannigan is here. He came early yesterday morning." His cheeks were hollowed out, his eyes tired and miserable. "He's already diagnosed you with that terrible thing Felicity had not too long ago. Some stomach flu. It likely exacerbated whatever's been driving you to sleepwalk. He promised to stay for a day or two to ensure you recovered."

"Yesterday morning?" I grated. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Nearly two days."

"I'm so sorry," I said. Sorry for worrying him, sorry for going where I shouldn't have gone, sorry for his wife, whose pain I'd felt and whose ghost tormented me.

“Don’t apologize.” He squeezed my hand again, brought my knuckles to his lips, and kissed them gently. “Millie, why were you upstairs in the tower?”

The tower. The fairy-tale thing that had so intrigued me was full of the dead and all their withered hopes. I wasn’t ready to confide in Callum the things that had led me up those stairs, but I was ready for answers.

“I was following noises,” I offered this much but no more. “Callum, there was someone up there. I saw her, I touched her. We were inches from each other.”

“Millie, darling, you pulled the dust cloth off an old mirror. We found you lying in front of it.”

I shook my head disbelieving, unsure of my experiences. I tried to gain footing by asking a question of my own, though it barely came out.

“Did you have a child?”

Sudden grief struck a violent blow, and he pressed a hand over his eyes as though he could hide from it, his mouth a thin line of sorrow.

When he’d gained control of his voice, he replied, “None more than a hope. We lost two pregnancies very early.”

“Callum...” It was my turn to squeeze his hand, “You need to tell me about your wife.”

He took a long moment, seeming to search for a reason to avoid the conversation, to say nothing and pretend she didn’t haunt us both in one way or another. At last, he sighed, leaning to rest his elbows on his knees,

weary, my hand still clasped in his, thumb rubbing circles over my ring finger as he tried to organize his thoughts.

“She was—” He paused, his voice breaking. “She was brilliant and beautiful and she loved Willowfield. Ms. Dillard’s cousin brought her to visit for a few months one spring. She’d been in a bad way, and they hoped the beauty of the gardens and the good weather would lift her spirits. The plan worked. By the time I made her acquaintance at the Independence Day dinner, she was shining. They say there’s no such thing as love at first sight, but it truly was for me.”

My heart constricted with a jealousy I was ashamed of.

“She was a fountain of questions and curiosity about the gardens, the perfumery, and my work. I’d just begun teaching at the local college then. There wasn’t a topic she didn’t want to discuss, but, like you, she was most fascinated by ghost stories.”

“You mentioned it was her idea you write about malevolent fairies.”

He looked up at me. “Not quite. Within a year of our marriage, she started losing sleep. Her insomnia kept her in the library until late at night, and she came across some of my notes on the Dullahan, a headless horseman, and asked for more reading on it. I carelessly guided her to every book I had on monsters. I thought it was harmless, charmingly eccentric, but she became enamored by the enigma of their myths. She grew

withdrawn, exhausted. To bring her back to me, I chose to undertake that damnable project and included her in the research. In the beginning, it had an amazing effect. She was her old self again, and we had such a good time about it.”

He laughed a little, remembering some long-ago moment of joy that I’d not been a part of.

“Then suddenly we were expecting our first child, and her interest in the research waned, replaced by all the concerns and joys that come with impending parenthood, but during her second month, she became violently ill and miscarried. I thought she would never recover. She stayed in bed, wouldn’t see anyone but me. I was hurting but it was nothing like the pain she suffered, and I could do nothing for her. We were surprised to find she was expecting again a few months later, and Dr. Hannigan believed there was nothing to fear. Again, she became so sick she couldn’t leave the bed, and the baby was lost.”

Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes, and my empathy responded in kind. My jealousy had vanished, replaced by deep sorrow at the agony the woman must have experienced, the struggle they’d both endured.

“We went to a specialist, some new doctor in Boston. He was condescending, snide, and without even doing a thorough examination, looked at my wife and told her she didn’t have the constitution to carry children. She was destroyed. I wanted a second opinion, but she refused to see more doctors. After that she was jumpy,

afraid of her own shadow, and newly obsessed with hauntings. She started spending an awful amount of time with that broad Margaret.”

The mention of Margaret caused his jaw to clench, and he spent a moment silently fighting his rage.

“I did the only thing I could think of,” he finally continued. “We left on a long holiday. A few months away. By and by, she seemed to get better. I should have never brought her back.”

He put pressure on the bridge of his nose, warding off the memories. He seemed ready to stop, but I knew the story wasn’t finished and needed to be.

“You have to tell me what happened to her, Callum,” I said.

When he looked at me, there was something I’d never seen before darkening his golden eyes. Shame.

“As quickly as she’d begun to mend, she took a turn for the worse. She refused to eat or drink and then began to reject even me. She wandered the gardens when she wasn’t inside, pulling up flowers, scribbling in her journals. She raved about spirits, a woman who wailed through the night, and I became tormented by the memory of my beautiful mother wasting away from illness, telling me the Good Folk had come for her as payment for our good fortune, as payment for *me*. I knew my wife had somehow internalized my mother’s stories and her obsession with them. They’d snaked into her mind and festered there. I was rash and confronted her,

upset her all the more. She screamed at me, accused me of being a changeling.”

“What did you do?”

I couldn't imagine how that must have felt, to be believed inhuman by two people you loved the most. He shook his head, unwilling to continue.

“What did you do?” I repeated softly.

Now his eyes filled with all the tears he'd been trying to hold back.

“Damn me to hell, I grabbed her, shook her and insisted she was being terrorized by nothing more than her own nightmares. She needed gentleness, and I selfishly gave in to my own desperation. Of course she ran away from me. I'll carry that guilt forever.” He cleared his throat, tried to regain composure. “There was a hellish storm, and she fled right out into it. I followed after her with the doctor and several staff, Ms. Dillard included. The ravine was full, and it rushes like mad during bad weather. We were worried.”

I already knew what happened next.

“The screaming, God, it was unspeakable. I still hear it at night, but it wasn't even her.”

He stood from his seat and left me, the memory too vile, taking his grief to the fireplace so I wouldn't have to witness it.

“It was Felicity,” he said at length, raw. “We found her on her knees by the embankment of the ravine, making that unholy noise with Rodney trying to pull her away.

My wife had jumped into the water. It was black as the pits of hell and rushing so swiftly we couldn't see her. I tried to jump in myself to save her, but Hannigan restrained me. He knew better than I did her chances of surviving. Her remains were discovered the following week by the police at an embankment several miles away. She was in such bad shape they wouldn't even let me..."

He broke down then, a hand covering his face, shoulders shaking.

I threw off the blankets and crawled, trembling, out of bed, hurrying to him as fast as my weak legs would carry me. He heard me coming and turned to catch me in his arms. As we embraced, he sank to his knees, I with him. I held his head against my shoulder as he wept. When the grief seemed to subside at last, he shifted and gathered me into his lap, pressing his lips against my forehead.

"You're precious to me," he said. "I wish you to be well."

My heart seized, full of love, sorrow, and fear, because I had seen the things walking the halls of Willowfield and didn't believe his wife had been mad.

Chapter 21

Spring had come in full bloom, and I walked through the sun-drenched gardens, barefoot and light as air, the scent of roses and hyacinths filling me with bright anticipation. The world was new, and the darkness that had lurked inside me long gone.

I could hear Callum's laughter, deep and beautiful as a church bell, and I ran joyfully towards the sound, around high green hedges and through arches of gardenia. I called for him, and his voice responded in turn, drawing me into the rose labyrinth, violent red with blossoms.

I navigated its mysteries with sure, quick steps, excited to see the face of my love, but when I made it to the middle, I tripped to a halt. Callum lay tangled in the arms of a woman on the grass inside the fairy ring, their naked bodies writhing together in an unnatural twisting that disoriented me. I choked on my hurt, and he looked up, never stopping his carnal onslaught, fucking this stranger while his eyes were locked on mine. He smiled, slow and mean, grabbing a fistful of the woman's hair just as he often did to me, pulling her head back so that I could see her face.

She had none.

There was only dying flesh stretched across delicate bones, mere impressions in the skin where features should be. The creature's hand rose up above her head, reaching for me, screaming with no mouth. I screamed in return.

I awoke in the early morning light, my own distressed sounds having brought me from sleep. The dream fled quickly but left a hard knot of hurt in my chest. I stared at the ceiling above, focusing on the feel of the mattress beneath me, the sheets around me, and the warmth of Callum beside me. I turned my head to find that he was awake.

“What’s tormenting you, my love?” he wondered, his thumb on my chin, imploring me to confide. The worry in his eyes was a small proof, but I needed more. The strange, angry arousal from the dream lingered, so I sat up and threw a leg across his hips, straddling him. His maddening length hardened immediately, but I took more satisfaction in the way his demeanor shifted from concern to shadowy desire. Taking ahold of the hem of my slip, I pulled it over my head.

“Millie, are you well enough...”

I quieted him by raising myself onto my knees and reaching between us beneath the waist of his silk pajamas to stroke his erection from base to tip before drawing it out. The guttural sound he made was encouraging, and again I ran my fingertips up his cock. He was willing to engage with me now, tucking his

fingers into the silk leg of my underwear to pull it aside, worshiping me with his eyes, before moving his fingers between the flushed lips to aid my pleasure.

“No,” I said firmly and he stayed his hand, lifting a brow as I showed him my intentions, guiding the silky head over the pulsing nub of my clitoris, teasing myself with it. I was provoking him, hoping to incite a need so fierce it hurt. Any amusement at the novelty of my antics had faded from his eyes, replaced by the unyielding want I’d hoped to inspire. I was aware that I didn’t have much time left to tease before I lost my advantage so lowered myself onto him.

His hands came to my hips in a moment, but I grabbed his forearms, pressing my nails into skin, making my point. I wanted just a second of power, a breath of time when I was sure what the next steps were. I rocked forward and his eyes closed, a low groan vibrating in his throat. I angled myself so that with every motion his pelvis gave friction to my pleasure, luring me toward euphoria. He gave leeway, watching me ride him with the focused intensity of a man trying to control himself. My climax approached, but I shifted as it reached toward its zenith, denying myself just for the pure joy of desperation. I moaned.

“Millie,” Callum warned, his restraint wound so tight I knew it would soon snap.

I surrendered to him.

“Show me,” I panted. “Show me your love.”

He needed no further encouragement. He sat up to meet me, embedding himself into my cunt with such force that I cried his name. Keeping me straddled across his lap, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and planted his feet onto the ground, holding me at an angle that allowed him the most freedom. With a strong arm at my back and another around my waist, he guided my body, raising then lowering, repeatedly filling me with his insatiable lust. I discovered the rhythm, pressing my knees into the mattress to follow it.

“I will never have enough of you,” he murmured, his confession both riling and soothing me.

“You can’t know that,” I replied breathlessly, testing my heart with pessimism to see if there were still any holes for doubt to crawl through.

He slowed the measure of his movements into long, intentional strokes, eyes raising to lock with mine, mesmerizing but severe. He appeared almost angry, bedeviled.

“Even when I come to know every inch of you, every sound,” he said, his tone as intense as his expression, moving inside me in a way that encouraged one of those very sounds from my lips, his hand raking through my short hair, twisting the strands “Even then, it won’t be enough. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I gasped.

“I will go to my grave needing you, Millie” he rasped, and I believed him.

He brought my face to his and kissed me with all the passion of his promises sweet on his lips, and I drank it in. My love was encouraged by his words, my lust by his ferocity and in that wild roiling desire, I bit his bottom lip. He inhaled sharply, the iron taste of blood touching my tongue.

“Wicked girl,” he growled, before claiming my mouth again with little gentleness. Our lovemaking became primal, his hands bruising. Every small pain that his fingers brought in the way they dug into my waist or pinched my sensitive skin was proof of my life. The nips of his teeth on my own lips and neck, the jarring force of him plunging into me, all made me feel human, anchored in the reality of sensation. He coaxed me violently to climax, pulling me close to feel me shudder and tighten around him.

“My God,” he groaned, ramming into me twice more before finding ecstasy of his own.

He held me, my head resting in the crook of his shoulder, his hands running down the length of my bare back. I was exhausted, body satiated but thoughts still uneasy. He had loved his wife in this same way, and it hadn't been enough.

“Do you plan to make me bleed every time we make love, kitten?” He asked, playful and languid in the afterglow of our pleasure.

I tried to enjoy the game.

“You promised to bleed for me. Change your mind?”

“On the contrary,” he replied, and I could hear the lawless smile in his voice. “I look forward to the next time.”

“So do I.”

His rumbling laugh vibrated through my body, and he placed a long, tender kiss near my temple.

“You’ll be the death of me,” he muttered.

I tilted my chin up, pressing my nose against his warm neck, feeling the whisper of his pulse and trying to rekindle the peace that had been destroyed by his wife’s words on his lips.

When the sun had risen fully, Dr. Hannigan arrived to check up on me. He was the gravest I’d ever seen him, but despite his demeanor, his diagnosis was heartening. My fever had broken, and I’d eaten several meals with no trouble. Since the days were becoming more friendly, he told me I needed to spend as much time outside as possible to avoid the dust of the resumed renovations and keep fresh air in my lungs. After encouraging me to take a small aspirin, he told me he thought the worst was over.

“Dr. Hannigan,” I said before he could leave, feeling that if there was anyone I could speak to it would be him. He turned back towards me, his bushy eyebrows raised in an open way that encouraged me to tell him what was on my mind. “I worry I may be relapsing. As you know by

now my sleepwalking is getting worse, and even in the day...I hear things. Can you tell me what's happening?"

My throat began to close, my eyes burned, and he tutted and patted me consolingly.

"Don't worry yourself," he said gently. "You've been through so much, and I believe the upheaval of your life recently has caused your troubles. That in combination with the detestable state of this place," he added. "Callum has let the bitter memories set to rot here. I see the happiness returning to his face, and he has hope for this place, but I fear it may be at a high cost. It's better, in my mind, if he took you away from here and left Willowfield to molder and die alone."

His inclusion of Callum in the recommendation of my recovery exasperated me.

"Does everyone know, then?" I asked with some petulance.

This actually inspired the man to laugh, the sound of his honest humor breaking up the weight on my shoulders.

"Millie, my dear, you've spent the last two nights together in this room."

A flush traveled up my neck and into my face. My ears burned.

"Ah," said Dr. Hannigan. "Now that's a healthy look about you. Not to worry, my girl, there's no judgment. This is an age of new ideas. Let the past drown in its own self-righteousness."

After he left, I heard his voice outside the door, too muffled to comprehend most of what was being said. I stood and tiptoed closer. I caught the end of something Dr. Hannigan was saying.

“...too much for her. This was a terrible mistake. You need to get her away from here immediately.”

Answering was Callum’s voice.

“What if...”

Their conversation lowered and I couldn’t hear the rest.

“I’ll be here, just in case,” Dr. Hannigan said, then the conversation ended and the door opened, nearly hitting me in the face. I couldn’t pretend that I hadn’t been listening.

Callum grinned at me.

“Listening through doors? You naughty girl.”

“What was all that about, Callum? You need to tell me right now.”

He seemed undisturbed by my having overheard, which calmed me.

“I’ll tell you, but not here. Let’s take a walk together, the gardens are greening.”

I bathed and dressed. The water washed away some of my stale fear, and I was more myself, the self that had arrived at Willowfield still ignorant of what nightmares and raptures awaited me.

I met Callum in the front hall, and he offered me his arm. It felt strange and beautiful, behaving as an honest couple going for a stroll. I leaned against him and took in the hazy green world that seemed to have sprung up overnight. He pointed to patches and trellises and talked to me of the things that would grow there, and what they could be used for.

The fresh air purged me further of my darker thoughts, but already I was thinking of having to return inside, to be swallowed up in the house where either ghosts or my own insanity lived. I tried to enjoy the moment, as I worried that it wouldn't last.

"I'm afraid I have to travel again, this time for quite a while," Callum said. "I've already turned over the opening of the house to Rodney. He'll handle preparations while I'm gone. I want you to come, I've already arranged it all."

I laughed a little. Spending nights together in a mostly empty house was a far cry from traveling together like a married couple.

"Don't you think that would be improper?"

"Improper?" He stopped us walking and turned to me seeming to have taken the word at great offense. When I looked up into his face, questioning, I saw the mischief there.

"Should I show you what's improper?" he asked and reached for me. I danced away, partially in fun and partially worried that he truly would take me here in the middle of the garden with all the men wandering around.

He chased me about, pinching my bottom when he got close enough, then capturing me at last, kissing me soundly.

“I’m my best self with you, Millie,” he said when the kiss was done. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable with *improper* behavior such as traveling together as mere lovers.”

With an enchanting sleight of hand, he produced a ring, holding it between thumb and forefinger. Its center glinted green, emeralds sparkling in a setting of gold-work vines, interwoven to form an unbreakable knot.

I furrowed my brows, the world suddenly insubstantial, like a golden cloud.

“Marry me, Millicent Foxboro,” Callum said, his eyes shining.

“Marry,” I repeated dumbly.

“Will you?”

I threw my arms around his shoulders, nearly knocking him off-balance, and he returned the embrace, spinning me, my feet leaving the earth. I was flying through a haze of joy that flowered as beautifully as the world around us. A perfect mirror of the life Spring was bringing to Willowfield, Callum had brought life to me.

“Yes!” I cried. “Yes, I will.”

When he placed me on the ground again, another kiss was mine.

“We leave tonight,” he said, both of us breathless.

“Tonight?” I balked. “That’s so soon.”

“Not soon enough, my love. We’ll apply for a marriage license tomorrow morning in Boston. Everything can be supplied on very short notice there. We only need ourselves and a judge. After that, we’ll leave for Europe. I have some business to attend to in London and Paris, but we can extend the stay and make it a fine honeymoon. When we return, we’ll have a proper wedding. One that’ll do justice to such a beautiful bride.”

It was all so fast, such a whirlwind of life-changing occurrences. I was glad, but it seemed unreal, undeserved.

“Are you happy?” he asked, unsure of my reaction.

“Terribly,” I replied, then tilted my head to be kissed again.

Callum was about to comply when a snap of underbrush alerted us to someone arriving. Rodney emerged into the rose garden, looking at us both with what I could describe only as brutal disapproval. Rodney and Callum locked eyes, intense, silent communication electrifying the air with a new animosity that I hadn’t seen between them.

“Congratulations are in order,” Rodney said, making it clear he’d overheard.

Callum put an arm around me, offering a tight, dishonest smile.

“They are, we thank you. Willowfield will have a new mistress come tomorrow.”

“Blessings to you both,” Rodney said, though it sounded more like a curse. He leveled his bright blue eyes on me, and I felt he was trying to relay a message somehow, one that I couldn’t fathom and didn’t think I wanted.

“Thank you.” I was the one to reply this time, putting my own arm around Callum in a show of solidarity in the only face of disapproval we’d encountered.

“May Willowfield bring more joy to you than it has done.” These were Rodney’s parting words, spoken directly to Callum, and he straightened his rolled-up sleeves aggressively, going back the way he’d come and leaving anger in his wake.

“Why in the world would he act like that?” I asked.

“It might be that he’s had his eye on you,” Callum said grimly.

“That’s ridiculous!” But I flushed remembering our flirtations and recalling the earlier time when I thought it might be nice to be with someone as carefree as the golden-headed groundskeeper. “He knew about us before I even did. Surely he wouldn’t interfere.”

Callum gave me a look that made me feel like a schoolgirl again, ignorant and naive.

“Margaret would disagree.”

“Margaret?” I paused, then processed. “Margaret and Rodney? Together?”

“Several times to my knowledge. Rodney has never cared much for whether a woman was attached. Hence

my previous comment about his plans on you.”

My opinion of the groundskeeper transformed. I thought it was one thing to trust about and entirely another to do it when one of the people trusting was married.

“Does Mr. Horace know?” I hoped he did and that it was an agreed-upon arrangement.

“He does, but Margaret hasn’t got a clue he’s aware,” Callum replied.

“But you trust him?”

“Rodney? To run the grounds of Willowfield? Absolutely. The bastard knows more about the gardens than anyone else but myself, and I haven’t the time to tend to them. His proclivities have always been his own and never affected me or this house until now.” His tone suggested that Rodney had become a problem he would have to figure out.

I leaned into him. “Let’s not think about those things right now,” I said, trying to retrieve the previous mood we’d been enjoying.

“What shall we do instead?” Callum asked, his voice low. The encounter with Rodney had put a new look in his eye, a jealous one. He took me in now as though he would have me on a table in the middle of a crowded banquet just to show the world I was his. For the second time that morning I was at risk of being ravished in the middle of a garden. My own desire responded, so I took his hands and began to lead him toward the greenhouse.

“We’ll think of something,” I said.

Chapter 22

We stumbled out of the greenhouse an hour later, as thunderclouds began to move in, darkening the landscape, but not our elated spirits. Still dressing, Callum rushed me to get my things, but even as he insisted I hurry, he delayed me in his arms to place kisses on my cheeks.

“You are my blessing,” he said. “Who knows, perhaps there’s some magic in this place after all.”

“If there isn’t now, there will be,” I said, looking into his eyes and promising with all my heart.

We rushed through the gardens together, and I thrilled at knowing my way.

Mine, my soul sang.

I dodged Callum’s playful grasp several times as we ran to the house, kissing once more in the halls before heading our separate ways to prepare. I was filled to bursting with a sense of well-being, and I flew to my room, feet barely touching the ground. An overnight bag was enough for the little I was packing, and the old case I’d brought with me to Willowfield would do. I pulled it from the closet with gracious reverence, recalling my first steps through the door.

I hadn't known what I would face here, the nightmares, illness, and resurgence of my old anxieties and habits. If I thought of this only, I would rightly say that Willowfield was the worst decision of my life. But there had been so much more. Here, my mind was engaged, my resilience tempered, my body sated, and my heart made new. It was as Callum had said, like a magic long dormant coming to life again.

As I clasped the bag closed, the door opened, and there stood Felicity with a tray in her hands, her eyes wide. She glanced to my bag.

"You're leaving," she said.

"Well, yes, I..." I didn't know how much I should say.

"Professor Hughes proposed. Rodney told me."

She walked to the table to place the tray down as usual, though I held the valise and my hat in my hands, ready to go. She lingered, struggling with something, and a wave of fretfulness sent my belly into a somersault.

"Why do you look so unhappy?" I asked, exasperated by the sudden bleak cloud that loomed over my bright mood.

She turned to me, looking much smaller than I'd ever seen, shrinking in on herself with every passing moment. I knew that look, the hunch of the shoulders, the fidgeting. I knew it very well.

My previous hardness melted, and I set down my case and went to her, taking her hands between mine.

"Felicity, please, you look so frightened."

“I need to show you something.” Her voice was barely audible, and she searched my face for safety, belief, all the things I’d been looking for myself. “He may kill me for it, but I need to show you.”

The hair on my arms rose, and a hot flash of fury exploded behind my eyes.

“Who?” I demanded, ferocious with a protectiveness I’d never felt for another person. Felicity was so small, gentle, and quiet. The idea of someone threatening her, frightening her, made me murderous.

“Please, just come with me.”

I followed her, wondering if I should alert Callum to the situation first, but she took the turn away from Callum’s rooms and led me through the hallways with sureness until we arrived at the servants’ steps that led to the third floor, where I’d chased the ghost, where it had trapped me in the wardrobe and given me its pain.

At first, I refused to go, but Felicity took hold of my arms, despairing.

“Please, Millie. I’m begging you.” She was so earnest that at last I gave in, and she led me into the awful anteroom. Instead of going to the nursery, she produced a key from her pocket and unlocked the only other door.

Compelled, I followed her inside.

We entered a bedroom, its decor far removed from the rest of the house with its whimsical rustic touches, belonging more to a woodsman’s cottage in a fairytale than an old mansion in New England. There were no

chandeliers, no rich paneling or brocade wallpaper, no luxurious silks or gilded filigree. The floor was a plain cedar, a thrall of wool rugs laid out to warm the feet. Each piece of furniture was made of dark, carved wood, unadorned with frills and sanded to a high gleam; they included two dressers, a set of nightstands, and a large, canopied bed, sheer white curtains tied neatly back. A vanity rested near the centermost window, fashioned to look like a natural element, grown on its own out of the floor, its every facet a curve of twisting wood and whittled leaves. The fireplace mantel was unhewn, rough, and in the grate the remnants of recent fires, the woody scent still lingering.

“Professor Hughes spends a lot of time here,” Felicity said with a meek twist of her hands.

“But his room is downstairs.”

“It is now, but it wasn’t before.”

Comprehension dawned. This had been their room together, Callum and his wife. The nursery nearby for their children, a private sitting room for peace from the bustle of the house. The furniture was uncovered because it was being used. By him.

I struggled to excuse it. This had been a happy place for Callum once, and then a place of intense sadness. He visited for solace, to grieve. Wouldn’t any man do such a thing? I walked deeper into the room, running my eyes over the pieces and pages of the life that had thrived here before me. As I passed the nearest dresser, I noticed a drawer had been pulled slightly ajar. I might have missed

it if I hadn't looked down at the exact right moment. A familiar pattern. I pulled the drawer open, and inside lay a silk pajama top, royal hued summer flowers embroidered in the sleeves and on the collar, the same as my robe. I pulled it out, imploring my eyes to see something else. The strangling grasp of anxiety wrapped itself around my heart. I shoved the pajamas back in the drawer and hurried to the closet nearby, pushing the door aside. It was filled with women's clothes, and I rifled through them looking for something specific. There, wool jackets, hanging alone without their matching skirts, the skirts Callum had given me.

“My clothes, the gifts from the professor, they came from here?”

There were two spots of red on Felicity's pale cheeks. Shame.

“Yes. The perfumes and lotions too, the brush and the mirror, we brought them from Mrs. Hughes's things, all except the dinner dress. That was the only thing truly made for you.”

My hands trembled against the wool of the jacket, and I drew away. I tried to keep my voice even, but it cracked, breaking with hurt. “Why would you lie to me? Why would you do something like this?”

“I had no choice.” There was dreadful pleading in Felicity's tone. She wouldn't approach me, afraid perhaps that I would strike her, but she held out her hands to me, like I might take them for comfort. “Please, I need you to understand.”

“What else? What else was hers?”

Felicity withdrew, instead grasping the skirt of her apron in both fists and glancing over my shoulder to the bed. I turned, not knowing what I was going to find, seeing at first only the white lace comforter with blue forget-me-nots embroidered in the center, and the blue tasseled lamps, their brass bases shining with care. At last, my eyes discovered the jewelry box sitting open on the nightstand.

I walked to it as though I were walking to my death.

The box was ornate silver, embossed with threads of vines, and on its front, two hands held a heart adorned with a crown. A claddagh. A symbol of eternal loyalty and love. I looked into the box, filled with glittering earrings and bracelets, delicate necklaces hanging on small hooks in the lid, their pendants tucked into a band of velvet. At the topmost portion was a row of cushions to display rings, and here there was only one, a wedding ring whose band boasted shining bright emeralds. Next to this, an indentation in the soft stuffing where another ring had long been stored. A ring that now encircled a finger on my left hand.

Tears at last spilled over, falling to the velvet and turning it black. Everything I'd been given, all the parts I'd played as a research assistant, a guest to his dinner party, a planner of his accounts, a partner in his bed had all been to mimic Mrs. Hughes. When Callum looked at me, I was not the woman he wanted to see. Mrs.

Hughes's ghost wasn't trying to harm me, she'd been warning me of Callum's intentions.

Called by my thoughts, the woman's spectral form materialized in the vanity mirror, her head resting in her arms as she cried. Following the appearance of this phantom, another moved through the door, crossing the room so quickly to the bed it frightened me. She lay down, covering her face with her arm. Still more appeared, going about the routines they'd become accustomed to in life. A chill at my shoulder had me turning to find that I stood mere inches away from another specter, her back to me, reaching down into the jewelry box for a ring that was no longer there. My head swam, filled with Mrs. Hughes, and I brought my hands to my face, pressing the palms into my eyes to will the visions away.

"Millie," Felicity whispered, "you have to leave now before it's too late."

"What are you doing in here?" Callum's furious voice cracked like thunder in my ears, breaking me from the spell. I lowered my hands. The spirits had fled, and in their place was a yawning sense of betrayal. He loomed in the doorway, his brow furrowed in a rage I'd never seen. Felicity, who'd been standing near the dresser where I'd discovered the silk pajamas, took a shaky step away from him.

"This room was locked," he boomed, and he was looking at the maid. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“I...” she started, but I marched to her side, stepping in the path of Callum’s anger, shielding her with my body. He started to speak, but I grabbed a perfume bottle from the top of the dresser and hurled it at him with a furor of my own. He caught it as it careened toward him, then threw it on the floor, where it shattered, saturating the rug and filling the space with an oppressive citrus scent.

“This is what the clothes were for, the gifts,” I hissed, wanting to throw more, to rip down the curtains, tip the dresser, fracture the vanity mirror. “All of the things that used to be hers *for me.*”

“Millie.” Callum’s voice had dipped, smoothed into a cajoling tone, low and easy, the way someone would speak to a frightened mare. He took a step toward me, holding his hands out as Felicity had done, but instead of offering an embrace, they were a command for calm, and I knew he would grab me if I let him get close enough.

“No,” I grated. “I will not be the empty shell that your wife’s ghost fills.”

This time, I grabbed a decorative brass gas lamp with both hands and threw it. Unable to catch this without injury, he was forced to dodge. I took the opportunity to sprint, rushing around him toward the door, but he caught my wrist. Using the momentum I’d already created, I rounded with the entire weight of my body, striking him across the face. The shock loosened his grip, and I wrenched away, running with all of my might, pulling down pictures and pieces of furniture as I went. I

made it to the stairs, and this time my feet barely touched the steps for an entirely different reason than only an hour ago. This time, I was running for my life.

I could hear his footsteps behind me, unable to determine how close he was. I put every bit of effort I could manage into running all the faster. He called to me, yelling my name over and over. In a panic I thought only to run where I could be safe for now. He'd surely catch up to me if I tried to make it outside. I careened down the hallways, making it at last to my room with just enough time to fling myself inside, closing the door and locking it as the bulk of him made impact upon the wood, shaking the knob, pounding.

"Millie!" he yelled repeatedly, rattling the door as I stood there trembling, hoping he didn't have a key.

There were more voices in the hallway now. Ms. Dillard and Dr. Hannigan.

"Calm yourself, son!" the doctor bellowed at the same time Ms. Dillard was begging, "This must stop. It must!"

There was a bodily tussle, then Callum's frantic yelling dissolved into weeping. The sound of it might have killed me, seizing my heart with so much anguish I could barely remain standing. Though I shook with the force of my own tears, I didn't make a sound. I couldn't let him hear me cry.

The voices quieted, and at last Callum agreed to leave. I listened to a pair of footsteps retreat from my door, and at length there was a gentle knock.

“Millie?” Ms. Dillard called with all the tenderness of a mother consoling a terrified child. It was the first time she’d used my name since I’d arrived. “Millie, will you let me in? I know you must be afraid, but if we could just talk...”

“Go away this instant!” The last word was a high shriek that ripped through my vocal cords, leaving my throat raw.

“All right,” she replied, sorrowful. “All right.”

When I could no longer hear her footsteps, I collapsed into a heap by the door, wailing my sorrows into the boards and beams of Willowfield.

When I was too exhausted to continue, I hauled myself up and returned to the bag I’d packed. A mere hope ago, it had represented a new life, and now it was all I had left to my name, ready to leave with me again just as we had come.

I removed the clothes that weren’t mine and hurled them into the dormant fireplace. Though there was no fire burning, it gave me pleasure to know it was where it all belonged. Thankful I hadn’t thrown my old things out, I collected them, going to the drawer to gather my underwear and stockings, disgusted by the sight of the expensive silks, not knowing if they had once been worn by Mrs. Hughes. I yanked my old slip from the drawer and with it came the small botany journal, tumbling to the floor.

I bent to retrieve it, my hatred so potent I thought it might be enough to start the fire I’d imagined. I hurled

the offensive thing toward the grate, missing. It hit the mantel instead, spine first, and exploded into a shower of papers, pages scattering. I would have left it there, but the silk binding of the back cover had come away, and a tightly folded letter peeked partially out.

I stooped to pick it up, giving in to a final morbid curiosity and a spiteful sense of entitlement. Why didn't I have a right to know everything this woman had written about their lives? Her own husband had tried to make me her duplicate. I unfolded the papers to find the word:

Gancanagh

There were angry slashes of ink that I could barely make out, but Callum's name was written in savage repetition followed by a picture of a peculiar bell-shaped flower, one I'd seen before in ashes of the greenhouse, and adorning the head of Mrs. Hughes's ghost like a crown. The words below were smudged with too many tears to read, but the next page was legible, the author steady.

I should have guessed sooner. His mother had known when she'd looked into his eyes that he wouldn't be a regular man. She knew that the Good Folk take and take, and to love one is to be walking toward death. She died for her son, and it seems now I will as well. My beloved Callum, how could he? How could he? I've loved

him with everything I am, I've given him all of me. I found the datura. Devil's trumpet. I found it in a neat little white packet, tucked inside the breast pocket of a suit jacket he'd left on the back of his chair in the library.

This is what the spirit was warning me of, why she keened every night so that only I could hear. She cried for my children, and she cries for me.

I sank to my knees, the papers falling from my slack grip.

Callum had poisoned his wife.

Chapter 23

When I was able to stand, I took the papers and tucked them into my pocket. Forsaking my bag, I slipped to the door, opening it enough to make sure no one stood in the hall waiting for me. The corridor was empty. As quickly and quietly as humanly possible, I made my way toward the kitchen. The sun was setting below the horizon, leaving only dusky light to see by, but I knew the way. I prayed fervently to no god I could name that I wouldn't be caught. To my relief, no one interrupted my escape. I stole through the empty kitchen and to the pantry, then down the stairs to the cellar where I was sure I'd find the door I'd seen from the outside of the house. The walls of the staircase were stone, cold to the touch, the storeroom itself even colder, the early spring freeze lingering in the windowless cavern where caskets of wine and other spirits languished. To my great relief, the exit opened easily, and I ran out into the twilight, straight for the groundskeeper's cottage, tears making a trail behind me.

Callum had driven his wife mad, had possibly chased her into the night where she'd taken her own life to escape him. From all the stories, Mrs. Hughes had been hallucinating so extensively in her last days, she'd screamed of demons, spirits, and a woman in white. But I'd seen the same woman myself. My addled mind couldn't determine whether or not the spirit was real or a

figment of my imagination, encouraged by toxins and ghost stories. My world was unraveling, and all I knew to do was run.

I fell upon the cottage door, banging my fists against the smooth sanded oak, hurting myself with the force. I called out as loud as I dared hoping someone was there.

The door opened, and Rodney's shocked face appeared. He was half dressed, wearing only his work trousers and a white sleeveless undershirt. Despite this, I collapsed into his arms, and he caught me like a man who'd been waiting forever, then pulled me farther inside, kicking the door shut with his foot.

"It's all right, Millie," he soothed. "I'm glad you came. Look, here's Felicity, she's told me everything."

I raised my head up from his shoulder and found his sister standing near the small kitchen table, looking like death warmed over. She'd been crying extensively and her nose was raw, her usually neat hair coming undone from its pins, clinging with sweat to her neck and cheeks.

"Millie," she said, pained, and I left Rodney's arms to run to hers, anxious for comfort from a friend who had done so much to help me when I wouldn't help myself. We clung to each other, Felicity's sobbing beginning anew, encouraging mine. Rodney allowed us our moment to weep, and at last I pulled away.

"We have to call the police," I said.

"I don't think the police handle this sort of thing," Rodney said regretfully, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Callum’s been poisoning me.”

He stilled.

“What?”

“The tea he made Felicity bring me at night, I think he’s been poisoning it. He poisoned his wife too. Here, I have the proof.” I pulled the papers from my pocket and pressed them into his hands. He kept a disbelieving eye on me as he unfolded them, then read through Mrs. Hughes’s final journal entry.

“Where did you get this?”

“I found it in the greenhouse. She must have hidden it there when she was trying to escape, before the ravine. She might have hoped someone would eventually find it.

The red of rage tinted Rodney’s tan skin.

“I knew the man was touched,” he muttered, “but I didn’t ever expect...”

“What’s datura? Devil’s trumpet? That’s what he’s using.”

“It’s a flower. It grows prolific around here in the spring. It was always part of my father’s, now my, job to keep it out of the gardens so someone unsuspecting couldn’t accidentally poison themselves just by smelling it. The professor must have been growing it himself somewhere, because I haven’t seen hide nor hair. It causes hallucinations. Have you been seeing things?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“The son of a bitch has been trying to drive you crazy. And now we know he did the same to poor Mrs. Hughes.”

“But *why?*” I said, torn apart inside, prepared to dissolve again, but Rodney put a comforting hand on my shoulder, squeezing and dipping his head to catch my gaze.

“Millie, whatever his reasons, it’s not your fault, and we’re going to make it right. Come on.”

He released me and hurriedly grabbed his shirt from a hook on the wall, pulling it on. Up to now, Felicity had been standing wide-eyed and silent, but at this proclamation, she gave a visible start, watching her brother ready himself to leave.

“Where are you going?” she asked, her anxiety palpable.

“The only phone is in the house, so we’ll have to go to the police in person. I have the keys to the truck, but we need to hurry before someone realizes Millie’s here.”

“But—”

“Felicity, don’t argue with me,” he snapped, authoritative, inflexible.

She shut up immediately. I didn’t like the exchange, but it was easy to see that Rodney was worked up, bothered by the situation, and ready to take action. I reached out to her and she grabbed my hand.

“How are you feeling right now?” Rodney asked, hand on the doorknob.

Emotionally, I was destroyed, but I knew that wasn't what he was asking.

"I'm all right. I haven't had any tea for a few days."

"All right, stay on your feet. We're going to run to the garage, it's on the opposite side of the estate. We'll have to head across the back. Both the tower and Callum's new room have windows facing that way so stick close to the house. No talking. No noise at all."

These instructions delivered with no room for question, he opened the door and we ran.

It had started to rain, large drops pelting down onto our heads, soaking us through. I could only be grateful that the torrent would obstruct any view through the windows, making it easier for us to reach the garage undetected. Felicity clung to me as we successfully crossed the back of the estate the old building coming into view. Once a carriage house, there was room aplenty for several vehicles, though I'd never seen a single one coming or going. A sickening thought dawned on me. All the times that Callum was supposed to be away on business, had he ever left at all?

When we arrived, Rodney shuffled us around to the side door and into the dry, cavernous space. There were two vehicles, one covered in a tarp to protect it from the elements, and an old work truck, its underside caked in dirt. Rodney switched on a single electric light, which barely offered any illumination, then busied himself with raising the heavy door. The wind rushed in, bringing the

stinging, freezing rain in its wake. Felicity and I moved closer to the truck, out of the way of the gale.

Rodney cursed.

“The keys,” he said, “I left them in the old tack room. Stay here, I’ll be back.”

Leaving us alone in the bare light, shivering in the damp, he ran off toward the back of the garage, disappearing in the heavy shadows. As soon as he was out of sight, Felicity started to cry. Thinking her afraid, and needing comfort myself, I hugged her again, but my affection only encouraged her weeping all the more.

“I’m sorry,” she cried into my shoulder.

“It’s all right,” I assured her gently, “You couldn’t have known about the tea.”

Her sobbing quieted, and I was relieved she’d calmed.

“I tried so hard to make you leave,” she murmured, voice still thick with misery, and my arms stiffened around her. “I was trying to save your life.”

I pulled away, hands gripping her diminutive shoulders, searching her face.

“I thought he was going to let you go, but he won’t. He never will.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t Callum,” she whispered, the whites of her eyes shining in the dark, imploring me to understand.

“What are you girls chatting about, hey?”

Rodney had returned, swinging a chain of keys around his finger, lackadaisically like we were preparing to take a country drive. All of his previous urgency had vanished, and he smiled, approaching us in the slow, relaxed way I knew him for.

Felicity stepped in front of me as I'd done for her, guarding me from the approach of her brother.

"Nothing," she lied, but it was too obvious, and too late.

Rodney reached us, features shifting into a theatrical look of disappointment.

"Felicity." He shook his head. "You little idiot."

Urgently she whipped around, pushing me towards the open garage door with what strength she could find in her small body.

"Run!" she screamed and Rodney moved like a cobra, taking hold of her hair and using all the force in his labor hardened arms to smash her face into the window of the truck. The girl had no chance to defend herself, not even to raise her hands to slow the momentum of her skull striking the inflexible surface. There was a nauseating crack. Fear propelled me backward, but my feet tangled and I sprawled to the ground as the groundskeeper bashed his sister's head against the glass, until blood began to spread through the web of cracks the impact had created. When at last Felicity went slack, he released his hold and she collapsed into a heap.

“Look what’s happened,” Rodney said, a strange note of regret mixing with the hate in his voice. “Look what I had to do because you just wouldn’t die.”

A kick of adrenaline revived me, and I turned over, scrambling to my feet to run out into the rain. I’d made it only two steps before a crushing grip encircled my arm, yanking me off balance. I landed against Rodney’s chest, and he wrapped me in the cage of his arms, fingers finding my throat. He squeezed hard enough to momentarily block my breath, and I clawed at his hand.

“Callum calls you kitten, isn’t that right?” he cooed, unaffected, “Well, kitty, I’ll loosen my grip if you stop trying to use your claws.”

I had little choice, my head already swimming. Against my every instinct I went still, and as promised he eased the pressure, allowing me to suck in several lungfuls of burning air.

“There’s a girl.” he said into my ear. “The racket you and Callum made in that greenhouse today was enough to make a whore blush. You know, you should’ve picked me. I would have had to kill you one way or another, but you’d have lived longer and we could’ve had a real good time.”

“You’re disgusting,” I grated.

“I’ve been called that once or twice by women feistier than you. Listen, since we’ve never had the pleasure, tell me...” The arm around my waist shifted as he slid his hand toward my crotch, pressing his body against mine.

To my eternal horror, he was aroused. “Did Callum take good care of that sweet little...”

I thrust my backside into him, grinding against his erection, and he sucked in a harsh breath, caught off guard. He loosened his hold on my neck, his sick mind likely believing I was reciprocating his lust. Utilizing my new range of movement, I smashed the back of my head into his face. The cartilage of his nose crunched, and a warm splash of something, blood or saliva, hit my neck, running down into the collar of my shirt. He cursed and though he didn't release me, he moved his offensive hand away from my thighs, only to slap me flat across the front of my face with his palm. My lip caught against my bottom teeth, opening the skin up. The metallic taste made me sick.

“How do you like it, crazy bitch?” he growled, then took a deep breath through his wounded airways, laughing his golden laugh like I hadn't just broken his nose, like he hadn't just killed his sister. “It's all right. I know what you need.”

He wrenched me around, pinning me with his hips and one arm against the hood of the truck as he rummaged for something in his pocket.

“Take your medicine, Millie,” he coaxed. Four of his fingers were in my mouth, further opening the wound from his assault. They were coated in something powdery and sweet that dissolved on my tongue before I could even swallow. I tried to bite him, but gagged

instead, and he took the window to remove his hands from the danger of my teeth.

“A bit of datura for your final trip,” he sneered, smearing the remainder of the powder and my own spit across my face. At last he released me, tucking the toe of his boot against my ankle and shoving me sideways. I tripped, stumbled wildly, then by some miracle remained on my feet, putting on speed to careen out of the garage and into the pouring rain.

“That’s right, little rabbit,” Rodney called behind me, howling with laughter. “Run, run while you can!”

Chapter 24

As I sprinted back across the house, I screamed for help, stopping for barely a moment to pull on the cellar door. The latch on the inside had clicked closed, locking me out. I looked over my shoulder to find Rodney coming after me, his pace unhurried. With nowhere else to go, I turned to the gardens. The rain made the terrain treacherous and unfamiliar, and I struggled to navigate. Rodney called out my name, high and frantic. If anyone heard him, it would seem he was searching for someone lost, but in truth he was only letting me know he wasn't too far behind. Making my progress all the more grueling was the poison working its way through me, mixed with the powdered sugar. I thought of the sweets that Felicity occasionally brought me, sprinkled with white. It had never been the tea. It had never been Callum.

I stumbled, falling on my shoulder in front of the entrance of the rose labyrinth. My head swam, the ground beneath me undulating, breathing. I rolled onto my back, sick and terrified and so very tired. Every step I had ever taken toward bettering my life only seemed to ruin it all the more. Rain pooled on the lids of my closed eyes.

Millie.

I turned my head toward the sound of my name, expecting to see Rodney towering over me, but it was the woman in white, crouching at the labyrinth mouth, watching me through stringy strands of wet hair.

A hallucination. She was a figment of my imagination. But nothing explained why I shared her with Ms. Hughes.

The now familiar sensation of being drawn to her by a physical, invisible force had me sitting up, gingerly standing to my feet. The apparition, whatever it was, hallucination or ghost, stood with me, and we looked into each other's eyes for the first time.

Her face was mine.

Millie, she said, though her blue lips remained closed, water running from the sides of her mouth, down her chin.

Then like a deer startled by the gunshot of a hunter, she sprinted away from me, and with all the life I had left, I followed. She twisted through the topiary garden, past the tunnel of trees and through a break in the hedge wall of gardenia. I staggered after her, barely keeping her in sight, passing through an unfamiliar quarter of the garden grounds with its terracotta terraces overgrown and untouched by care, cypress trees untamed, and gravel paths marred with the brown carcasses of weeds. This was the Italianate.

I knew where she was going.

I emerged from beneath a marbled arch into a wilding path, worn only by the feet of a few who dared come into the wilderness of the woods that surrounded the estate on every side. We wound through the pines and naked oaks, the ground covered in winter moss and old leaves, wet and rotting, and I heard the water. It was so very loud. The phantom approached the edge of the ravine, made nearly invisible by the underbrush, then turned toward me, her back to the dark water rushing ferociously from the downpour.

I was empty of energy, supporting my weight against the spindling trunk of a young fir.

“Don’t,” I said, words drowned in the sound of the rain and river.

The apparition’s body hurtled backward, arms flailing, and fell out of sight into the rapids below. I made a small, useless noise.

There was a crunch of leaves behind me, and I pivoted on my heel, turning in time to meet a savage slap across my face that sent me sliding down the sapling trunk, woozy.

Rodney rubbed the pain out of the palm of his hand, a mocking apology in the rise of his brow.

“Sorry, Millie. I really didn’t want it to come to this, but people just can’t follow instructions.” He took off his soaking flat cap, folding it and tucking it into his pocket before running a hand through his wet hair, dark as earth with rain. “My bleeding heart sister was giving you too little too infrequently. Unfortunately, you’re fucking

half-immune by this point, so that nice little dose I gave you back there probably won't kill you."

I wiped blood from my mouth, trying to focus.

"Did you kill Callum's wife?" Words were gravel in my throat.

"His—" He interrupted himself with another bark of laughter. "You poor, stupid thing. No. I didn't kill her. I did poison her though."

"You were Callum's friend." I knew this was untrue, but I needed to keep him talking long enough to figure out how to defend myself. I spread my fingers into the dirt, looking for a stone, a branch, a sharp stick, anything.

"Never," he replied, disgust like acid at the edges of the word, and he spat on the ground. "Our parents worked for Callum's family for years. Dedicated. Then Dad gets a little drunk on the job—who wouldn't working for the stuck-up Hughes family—falls off a dormer and breaks his leg, but also knocks the damn ladder over onto the Hugheses' precious car. Dad gets fired and we have to leave the only home we've ever known. The bastard was mean after that, beat Mom something terrible until he died with a curse on his lips from alcohol poisoning. My bitch of a mother followed right behind with a heart attack, too weak to stick around for her kids. Felicity and I had to fend for ourselves for years while the rosy Hughes family lorded it on the hill."

This is home, Felicity had said.

“When the elder Hughes finally kicked the bucket and left everything to their eligible bachelor son, I had a few ideas. Felicity isn’t bad to look at, and I figured with Callum and her being friendly as kids they’d hit it off nice. We got jobs at the house again, and he and Felicity were getting on fine.”

This sounded maniacal, but Rodney’s sure tone made it clear he believed his idea to pawn his sister off to the heir of Willowfield was coherent. Possible.

He kicked a bevy of wet leaves in my direction just to make me flinch.

“But a few months later that ridiculous bitch arrived, all delicate and nervous. She took away our chance of having our lives back. *Our Willowfield.*” He slapped his chest in emphasis. “But then, see, I happened to come up on a nice patch of bell flowers growing by the greenhouse. Dad taught me a thing or two, I knew what they were, and I got my better idea: poison Mrs. Hughes to death and frame Callum! Not an easy job, but I don’t shun hard work. A bit of datura in her meals here and there, a packet of dried petals tucked into Callum’s jacket. And now this.”

He produced the paper Mrs. Hughes had written with all of her fears.

“The nitwit was so ready to believe it was Callum. Well, she had a little help. A suggestion here, a warning there. You know how it goes.”

“You’re a lunatic.” My fingers finally closed around a stone about the size of my palm, not heavy but sizable

enough to be a last resort.

“Oh no, not me. I’m just a simple Machiavellian man. I get what I want at whatever cost, and I want Willowfield.” He cast a look around and chuckled. “Now, I don’t really believe in luck, but I’d say this is pretty damn lucky, because I get another shot at this, in the exact place you should’ve died two years ago when I pushed you into that ravine.”

My lungs ceased to work, pinpricks traveling up my spine.

“So, you see, it’s you who’s crazy, I’m afraid. Mad Millie Foxboro.” He approached until he was standing close enough to look down on me with all his psychotic glee present on his face. “Mad Millie Hughes.”

My consciousness lurched, two worlds colliding in all the violence of a train wreck, sending shards of memories screaming through my head like shrapnel, rending my senses.

“Remembering now, sweetheart?” He knelt. “Dr. Hannigan made it clear we were to be very careful springing it on you like this, in case it fractured your poor mind. Seems he was right. You don’t look well.”

“They found a body.” I pulled myself together enough to tighten my fingers around the rock.

“Obviously wasn’t you, was it? Must have been some other dozy bitch who happened to drown and wash up on shore a week later. They never let Callum or anyone see the corpse, it was so decomposed. So we say a big thank-

you to the police for being complete fucking morons and tying everything up so neatly. They were happy to assume you'd killed yourself. We were in the clear and you were dead.”

He took my chin in his hand as Callum had often done, making me want to retch.

“How inconvenient for you to show up again,” he said. “Well, anyway, let’s give it another try.”

I swung the rock toward his temple but was too sluggish and he caught my wrist, tsking, wrenching me up by my arm. He’d meant to get me on my feet, but I collapsed in dead weight, nearly pulling my shoulder out of place, but preventing him from moving me.

“Don’t be like this,” he said, bending to take hold of my hair. He dragged me through the mulch of the forest floor this way, by arm and scalp, toward the raging water of the ravine. I tried to catch my feet on trees or rocks, slow him down, but it was in vain.

A roar broke through the white noise of the storm and the river, and with it came an impact that ripped Rodney’s hands away from me, felling him to the ground.

Callum had found us, perhaps followed our voices through the wildwood of his home, and he’d heard enough. Despite Rodney’s stocky build, Callum had caught him unaware, and his significant advantage in height left the groundskeeper grappling uselessly on his back to gain the upper hand. He landed only one impotent blow to Callum’s chin before being pinned under all the rage of a man who had nearly lost

everything he loved twice. Callum's fist found purchase again and again, even as Rodney twisted his body to strike the side of his head with his elbow. Just as the other, the blow barely registered, and the onslaught continued, turning the face of my would be murderer into pulpy rubbish.

I climbed unsteadily to my feet, legs trying to buckle, forgetting how to carry my weight. I tripped twice on my way toward the brawling bodies. I had no idea what I was going to do when I made it there. A gunshot shattered my hearing, and Callum seized backward, clutching his shoulder, screaming in pain. In a few unstable lunges I was by his side, falling next to his body, rigid with agony. His breath came in hard gasps, blood seeping through his fingers before washing away in thin red streams. The bullet had caught him just beneath his left clavicle, but I couldn't determine how close to his heart. I touched his cheek, too scared to do any more lest I harm him further. Bits of old memories of him merged with new ones, confusing me.

"Millie," he huffed. "Get out of here."

Another gunshot, close enough to send earth up like a bomb had detonated, but no bullet hit us. I looked up to find Rodney, his face purple, deformed with swelling, and his nose turned crooked on his face. He looked like the fiend he was, and he held a revolver in his left hand. When he spoke, the sound was muffled, slurred.

"She can't leave, can she? Too drugged up." He spat blood. "But this is perfect because now you can watch her

die and then you can fucking bleed out here on the ground you claim to own. Two birds with one stone. I'll tell everyone she went berserk and killed you then shot herself. Isn't that a perfect story, Millie? Especially after what your father did to your poor mother. It's just all too believable."

Before he could raise the gun, I used the energy built from the final burst of rage Callum's pain had inspired in me, and I lunged at his arm, catching his wrist in my hands and biting until I felt the bone crush, his blood filling my mouth in a horrible iron spurt. He bellowed, dropping the weapon, but I was within his grasp now, and he wasn't going to give up. He took hold of me, and though I struggled, I was no match for him in my current state. He wrestled me in several swinging, dreadful lurches to the edge of the ravine, holding me near the edge to face my death. I stared down into the water crashing over the rocks a full story below us. I knew what that water tasted like, what it felt like in my nose and lungs, how it stung my eyes and pulled me under, and I was afraid.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Hughes," Rodney said.

A third shot rang through the air, and the groundskeeper gasped, like someone had pinched him, his grip easing. He looked down, and my eyes followed to the wound in his side. He released me to press his hands over the hole as if it would make a difference. I turned my head, finding Felicity, standing with her feet planted wide, both arms still locked straight before her, the revolver shaking in her hands. Her face was no better

than her brothers, bloodied and bruised, and full of heartache.

“Felicity?” Rodney asked, confused and betrayed.

I rose to my knees and with a throaty cry, full of all my loathing, I shoved my palms into Rodney’s ribs, the way he’d shoved his into mine two years ago at this same horrible gulch. Time slowed as he flailed his arms wide, trying to stay balanced, to keep his footing on the slick, muddy ledge. At last, the momentum of his upper body carried his feet along, and he slipped headfirst down, crashing against the rocks before sliding into the water, which took him under as though reclaiming something it had lost.

I fell onto my hands, crawling, making my slow way back to Callum. I thought as I went that maybe Rodney had been wrong about how much datura he’d given me. The world was shrinking, my vision cloudy, numbness weeping out into my limbs. Felicity had sunk to the ground and was silent, cradling the gun in her hand like a dead bird. I could hear yelling not too far away, so many voices rising over the rain, which had eased to a drizzle. I crumpled on top of Callum’s body, resting my head beneath his chin. His breath came slower now, in shallow, struggling gasps. His skin was icy, and I willed my fate to match his. If he couldn’t leave this forest with his life, then neither would I.

“I’m Millicent Hughes.” I whispered. “I’m your wife.”

Though his voice was weak, fading, he responded.

“Yes, my love,” he said. “You are.”

Epilogue

Willowfield bloomed into a haven of green and every other color the eye could fathom. The roses grew high, unpruned and unattended, the broom blossomed yellow, and cherry trees pink, carpeting the lanes with their petals. The kelpie pond became a home to a family of ducks, the chicks fluffy and mischievous, unimpressed with the stone monster in their midst. They swam around its flank, nipping at each other's tails and chasing unsuspecting water bugs.

I sat on a bench in the center of the labyrinth, watching a caterpillar worm its way toward a mushroom in the fairy ring where a haze of chickweed had bloomed. I breathed in every smell, every wonderful scent of spring, and closed my eyes.

Callum had begun searching for me as soon as they'd heard my cry for help at the cellar door, the same time Dr. Hannigan called for the police from a phone that did indeed exist in the parlor I'd never entered. By the time Callum had been shot and Rodney had fallen to his death, the police were already looking for us, headed in the direction of the gunshots. For the second time, I woke up in a hospital bed after being nearly murdered by the same man. The odds of my survival were not lost on

me. Callum's wound had been significant, but thankfully closer to his shoulder than his heart.

Moved by our story, the nurses had granted me permission to spend the first several days of my own recovery lying in his hospital bed as he slept. When he awoke, we said very little, and merely basked in the unlikely third chance we'd been given. When he tried to speak to me about all that had happened, I told him I needed time and he acquiesced.

I returned to Willowfield ahead of him by several weeks, taking to the room I'd inhabited while I was Millicent Foxboro, not ready to face the ones we'd shared. At first Ms. Dillard was the only person I would see, a woman I'd missed so much without ever knowing it. She'd been the entire reason I'd even come to Willowfield that fateful summer when Ms. Reeves waylaid me at the train station and demanded I stay with her and start a new life. By then, her cousin, Ms. Hellen Dillard, had already invited her to visit the estate and I was brought along. In the weeks and months and years that followed, Ms. Dillard became a dear friend and a great confidante with many nights spent playing cards and laughing too loudly into the early mornings. She comforted me when Ms. Reeves passed at seventy-seven, two weeks after the wedding, and she'd been the first to warn me away from Willowfield when things became particularly bad.

"You're too bright a light to belong in a house like this, Millicent. Callum should sell the estate to the

university, and you should both find a nice home in town with fewer dark corners and ancient memories.”

I’d thought her silly then.

When I inquired about her frigid way with me upon my return, she confessed that she hadn’t trusted herself not to dissolve or embrace me in a way that might agitate my healing mind. It was better, she said, to stay away. Callum had tried a similar method, steering clear of me to the best of his ability for as long as he could, all the while knowing he wouldn’t be able to keep a professional distance forever. And he hadn’t, much against the wishes of Dr. Hannigan, who’d come across me in Boston by accident. Having recognized me immediately and finding that I didn’t know him, he’d organized the entire ruse, telling Callum to bring me back to the house and surround me with the people and things I would be familiar with in hopes it would bring me around. He gave explicit instructions for everyone to let me move at my own pace.

I grappled with my anger over these secrets, despite their good intentions, and confessed to Dr. Hannigan when he came to check on me that I didn’t know if I would ever conquer it.

“Perhaps you won’t, my girl,” Dr. Hannigan said, as tender as he’d always been with me since the first day we’d met at Willowfield’s famous summer fete. “I think all of us who have had deep hurts in our life never escape the anger it inspires. It simply melds into the people we

become, and sometimes takes the shape of something new and unexpected, like courage.”

He predicted it would take a month for the poison to leave my system completely. It had been building up in me so long that the effects were lingering. For the first many days, while Callum remained at the hospital, I still saw my own ghost running through the halls, but she no longer clawed and crawled her way. She was as free as I was and didn't bother me. The hallucinations of my mother's voice were taking longer to fade, but I subscribed to a hope that over time even those echoes would be too quiet to mind.

The Terrances had dropped in to visit me for a short while, phoning first to ask if I was well enough. With tears in their eyes they embraced me, Lottie reminding Burt to handle me gently as I was still recovering, but in truth, Lottie's hug had been the tightest. While Mr. Terrance took to the business of monitoring the gardens, making notes for Callum as he was indisposed, Mrs. Terrance had fussed over me for several hours, helping me order new clothes for the spring, as well as new perfumes and makeup at the company discount.

The police had come and gone, having uncovered the basics of the wild story that unfolded at Willowfield, ever more dazed and surprised at the turns. At the violent behest of her brother, Felicity had slowly poisoned me with datura leaves mixed with the powdered sugar she'd dusted on Ms. Dillard's sweets. The tea had been just that. Tea. A special blend Dr. Hannigan had made for Callum to give to me to help me sleep. It was chamomile,

jasmine, and strawberry leaf. That was all. Felicity had adamantly maintained that she'd never wanted to hurt me, that she'd done everything she could to frighten me away with talk of ghosts, of Callum being dangerous, anything to have me leaving on my own so that Rodney couldn't harm me further.

She was currently on trial for attempted murder, but at my request, Callum acquired her a fine attorney, and Dr. Hannigan gave professional testimony that she'd been driven by abuse. She was expected to be given a light sentence at a women's center in Pennsylvania, likely free in a few years with a trade to help her by. Though I hoped to never lay eyes on her again, I wished her the healing I myself had found and a life free of her own darkness.

Margaret had finally come clean regarding her affair with Rodney, and his threats to reveal them if she didn't participate in my downfall by exacerbating my fears with talks of demons. She claimed she never knew he was trying to kill me, only that he wanted me to leave Willowfield. Callum's contempt and her seemingly honest concern for me had driven a spiteful return at the dinner party, where she tried again to frighten me away with lies, but discovered enough empathy in herself last minute to be concerned she'd reveal too much and harm me. She was never arrested, but Jack filed for divorce, and that was the best we would ever get.

As for Rodney, Felicity testified that he'd acquired the datura from a patch he cultivated in his cottage, drying and crushing the leaves to a fine powder that he mixed

with the sugar. He'd left his sister to carry out his dirty work, except on the night I'd discovered the nursery. Tired of waiting for me to expire, he'd dumped a handful of the poison into my teacup himself and followed Felicity to my room. When I later emerged, ill and hallucinating, they trailed me through the shadows, tracking my delirious wanderings to make sure the drug was doing its job. As an extra act of cruelty, Rodney had taken the unexpected opportunity to lock me in the nursery wardrobe, hoping the shock would kill me. But he was the one who was dead. Dead as a doornail and without any doubt. His body had washed up not much farther down the gorge, with a gunshot wound in his gut, a fractured skull, and several broken bones in his face.

Though my memories of Willowfield had returned, they had come back as fuzzy as a dream. When I'd first arrived, Callum's parents had recently passed, and he was grieving in his own way, immersing himself in work and trying to maintain the estate and the perfumery while also teaching at the small private college in town. When he could no longer do all three, he was granted an early sabbatical to write his book, and figure out his next steps. I'd discovered some notes of his, forgotten on a garden bench, and returned them with questions. In six months' time, we would be married. Following my believed death, Callum withdrew from his tenure track at the college and closed his books, opening them again only for the scheme that would bring me back.

I opened my eyes to let the light of the morning back in, retreating from the past.

Now, Callum was back at Willowfield with strict instructions to rest, but we hadn't. Making love with his arm in a sling had proven an interesting task, but we made do, and I slowly began to find my way back to him. Despite our physical reconnection, we hadn't spoken more than a handful of words, at my own requirement. As much as I longed to be near him, I wasn't the same woman he'd come to love, and I was afraid of what it would mean to tell him that truth.

Footsteps on the mossy grass turned my attention, and Callum appeared in the arch, dressed in navy trousers and a white cotton button-up. He couldn't bother with ties or jackets and had a difficult time shaving, a five-o'clock shadow a near constant on his face these days. His left arm was tucked against his ribs, secured with a sling that he would likely wear until the fall. The sight of him made my heart sing.

"I got your invitation," he said, waving the small piece of stationery between his fingers.

I'd written a note asking him to meet me here in the center of the labyrinth like two besotted undergrads.

I patted the bench.

He came to me and sat close enough that our arms touched, and I thrilled at his warmth as I always had. I knew that this one thing would be the same no matter how the future shaped me.

We sat quietly together for a peaceful moment before I finally spoke.

“I barely remember the woman I was the first time I was here.”

He threaded his fingers through mine, reassuring me.

“What can you recall?”

“Well,” I said, “I remember our first kiss.”

It seemed the sweetest place to start.

He smiled. “Here on this very bench.”

I grinned in return, happy to flirt and delay the conversation.

“Why do you think I chose this as our clandestine meeting place?”

“Is that all you remember?” He gently guided me back to the topic, somehow knowing I was stalling.

“I remember Willowfield, how it used to be. I remember you, of course, Ms. Dillard, Dr. Hannigan, and sweet Florence.” Dr. Hannigan’s niece had been the maid of honor at our wedding. “I remember the pregnancies.”

I paused here, an unexpected wave of grief sweeping me under. His own eyes welling, Callum pressed a kiss onto the back of my hand, a gentle reminder that he was by my side.

“But other than that,” I continued around the lump in my throat, “everything seems like someone else’s thoughts. One thing I do know for certain is that I’m not the same person, Callum. I’m not the woman you first fell in love with.”

“You’re not,” he agreed softly.

I finally asked the question that had burdened my soul for weeks.

“Does that change how you feel about me?”

His reaction was heartening. A smile lifted the corners of his lips, and he looked away from me with a disbelieving shake of his head.

“I adored that timid woman Ms. Reeves brought here. She was bright and fanciful, scared of her own shadow. It inspired the knight in me. With her, I believed I’d reached the pinnacle of love, that my heart couldn’t hold more.”

Hearing him talk of the past me was difficult.

“Then,” he said, “I met you again, and found I was mistaken.”

“Callum,” I said, ready to bawl again. I’d come to be certain that a person could never be cried out. So many times I’d thought the last tear I would ever shed had fallen, only to discover there were always more. Good and bad, there were endlessly more.

He wrapped his good arm around my waist and encouraged me onto me onto his lap. We held each other in peaceful contentment, until he spoke again.

“I love every piece and part of you, then and now, and I know I’ve made so very many mistakes, but if you’ll forgive me and my stupidity, then I swear I will love every part to come.”

I raised my head to gaze into his eyes, golden in the dappled sun.

“I may be the luckiest woman alive,” I said.

“And why’s that?”

“Because I got to fall in love with you twice.”

His expression softened with adoration, my words touching him, filling his eyes again for reasons far removed from grief, and he kissed me. It was a kiss of beginnings, and it held its own kind of magic.

“Tell me your secrets, Mrs. Hughes,” Callum said, drawing me closer.

“Tell me yours.”

“I’ve never been happier in all my life than I am now.”

“Is that a secret?”

“No,” he laughed. “It isn’t. At last, I don’t have any.”

I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes again, letting spring and the man I loved warm me through.

“Neither do I,” I replied.

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