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THE
Dauntless
GIRL

The Dauntless Girl

by
Whitney Blake



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by
Whitney Blake



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Text by Whitney Blake

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Dedication

For N.

You're quite marvelously the Gentleman Pirate to my Blackbeard. I pr
won't cut off anyone's pinky toe, though.

Dedication

For N.

You're quite marvelously the Gentleman Pirate to my Blackbeard. I promise I won't cut off anyone's pinky toe, though.

Author's Note

This novella follows last year's *The Dauntless Boy*. You can absolute it on its own, but it does take place after the first story, so there are references you'll enjoy if you read them in order. Both novellas were inspired by a legend I encountered in an anthology of Norfolk folktales supplied by a dear friend. This time, I also use elements from yet another local ghost story (There are so many of them floating around, pun intended.) If you have familiarity with the region, you might notice these influences. As I'm not to do, I've switched up some of the genders and dynamics featured in these traditional stories.

Additionally, I borrow just a smidgeon of character and circumstantial inspiration from Arthur Conan Doyle's story *The Adventure of the Mazarine Ritual*. If you're a Sherlock Holmes fan, you may recall it doesn't feature a ghost haunting. It's still pretty fitting for Halloween.

And lastly, there are allusions to a miscarriage present. It's not depicted on the page nor discussed in any detail. I felt it was worth mentioning because it can be an emotional topic for some readers.

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This novella follows last year's *The Dauntless Boy*. You can absolutely read it on its own, but it does take place after the first story, so there are a few references you'll enjoy if you read them in order. Both novellas were inspired by a legend I encountered in an anthology of Norfolk folktales supplied by a dear friend. This time, I also use elements from yet another local ghost story. (There are so many of them floating around, pun intended.) If you have some familiarity with the region, you might notice these influences. As I'm prone to do, I've switched up some of the genders and dynamics featured in the traditional stories.

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Chapter One

Shelfanger, Diss
June 21, 1780

WHEN FRANCIS SUGGESTED they travel a little, Ariadne only expected parts of the country she'd never visited. She didn't expect to encounter another ghost.

They already had a ghost at home, and the ghost was affable now that they knew her story.

No, their female specter did not strike her as disagreeable or evil, but exotic. For Ariadne, *exotic* just meant worldly things she had not been privileged enough to see. She was unbothered by anything otherworldly, and that was a quality that her beloved Francis was keen on and chuckled at, though he did not always approve of her zeal for finding spirits.

He was just as gently entertained when she made enthusiastic noises about whatever struck her as novel. While on their way to see his friend, Squire, who had recently acquired an old house near Diss, she did this a few times.

To be sure, they had not gone far from Norwich. But for someone whose family had had to count every last coin—and whose desperate, ill father had put her into employment at Gold House with its infamous reputation—every new sight was welcome. Wandering had always been an alluring prospect, but one she felt she'd never be able to take. So she eagerly accepted her husband's proposition.

She was treated to all sorts of new sights, from the way the light shined on the fields to the curve of flocks of birds against a dusk sky. And Francis, patient even though he'd grown up with opportunities she'd never had, gazed at her with warmth whenever she exclaimed over something he took for granted. Before they'd arrived at their destination, which was a dignified, old house, the most recent thing to make her gasp was a particularly well-plumed bird, most likely a pheasant at a distance.

“You’ve seen them. You’ve prepared them,” Francis had said with amusement as he watched her, love in his brown eyes.

“That isn’t the same,” she replied. She’d not had the opportunity of one with such plumage.

“No, I suppose it wouldn’t be.”

She’d glanced away from him, then, trying not to be perplexed by the way he treated even her most commonplace joy as though it were more precious than gold. The true reason for their journey was not one she wished to lay upon – a week ago, she’d lost a pregnancy. He’d assured her she would be able to see a doctor, and with all her knowledge of herbs and the body, she knew she would be able to counteract the effects. Part of her was pleased he understood the unpredictability of such matters. They were out of one’s control, but she couldn’t help being disappointed that she’d disappointed him.

It was a ridiculous thing to assume, for many pregnancies ended in miscarriage or even stillbirths. This must have been very early, for she hadn’t noticed any signs yet. It also never occurred to her that she should have children, which was somewhat unusual for a man of his wealth. Most wanted heirs. But he’d told her he was content with none at all, and when he’d said it, she believed him. And she was not avoiding her touch, which she supposed most men might do if the women were so easily repulsed.

Samuel, Francis Gold was many good things. Perhaps most of all, he was kind. She was drawn to his kindness like flowers following the sun, and whose thought of losing his sunlight was terrible. This journey was his way of helping her take her mind off things. For the most part, it was working very well. She had seen the pheasant yesterday.

to her, Today, she was in a sunset-lit room wondering if anyone else heard her strange scratching sounds through the wall and doing her best to ignore them out of politeness. Even now, she was unused to being of the same social standing as those who’d once been far wealthier than her.

always They were visiting Mr. Samuel Leaver, Francis’ boyhood friend, known to her, upon being introduced, had immediately said, “Call me Samuel, please.” Within Ariadne’s experience of men, the only ones so cavalier about their names was a Christian name she wanted something from her that she was not interested in supplying. She’d glanced at Francis, surprised. But he smiled and said she should.

Later that evening as they were tucked in an unfamiliar bed in a

id with ceilinged room overlooking a field, their hands touching, she learned
was not inclined toward women. He was, Francis said fondly, a mol
7 to see regretted questioning his cordiality, for Samuel seemed a very jovial
From a wealthy family to begin with, she wondered if he found his
disposition an advantage when conducting business. He was an afflu
because and traded in cloth like Francis.

recious Indeed, another specter was the last thing she expected to witness
o dwell excursion. It was all so normal. Although she believed in them – how
s not at she not after the way in which she and Francis had come together –
he was not know if they could lurk just anywhere. Even if everywhere sto
of such same chance of hosting all kinds of events that became lost to time.

worried *Anyway, one can die tripping as they walk downstairs.* Something
always need to be dramatic to be deadly. After all, the woman who'd
in early Gold House had *not* been murdered by one of the Gold men, as local
is. He'd claimed. She'd expired of a natural cause.

al from Yet tongues loved to wag, minds loved to fabricate, and time of
ould be many truths with their help.

he was Ariadne would try *not* to assume the most histrionic explanation
y were scratching behind the wall. Perhaps Samuel had a problem with r
would not have been unheard of in a country house, and though this c
was just beautiful, it was well over a century old and not terribly well-kept.
, so she had recently purchased the property and mentioned something about
way of story that hampered efforts to sell it, so it had remained empty fo
. months before he arrived. Almost a year.

She was certain there must be vermin. If only she could convince
ard the the scratching did originate from them.

re them Francis seemed to be looking in the direction of the noise, too.

e social He was not obviously moving to see anything, but without turn
head or belying an enormous change in his attention, he did look ou
d who, corner of his eye. She was certain only she noticed, and she was seat
please." next to him. He was still listening to jocund Samuel, who was telling
about of his widowed aunt taking a lover who'd later been exposed as some
always of smuggler or highwayman out for her wealth.

e'd just The aunt had a veritable fortune and she'd recently returned to E
from abroad, so she was ripe for such a scheme. Ariadne would have
a steep-the story diverting if she wasn't so distracted.

Samuel Once the scratching ceased and she thought she could return her n
ly. She Samuel and his Aunt Mary, an unseen hand manipulated an ordinary o
fellow. A patinaed candlestick rose from a side table, hovered in mida
affabledisconcerting moment, then catapulted to the center of the room
uent citdropping to the tawny rug under their feet. Thankfully, the candlesti
not being used at present, so there was no risk of fire. Ariadne embra
on thismysterious intrusion, but she admitted that was not an ordinary respon:
v could Where she might run to see something that scared her, others wou
she didin the other direction. The last month or so had been taxing, so she we
ood theany oddity to distract herself. “This has *never* happened?”

Samuel stared at her, and she could understand why nobody would
did notask such a thing. He closed his mouth and shook his head. “I wouldr
died inthought to have guests if I was plagued by some awful force. I have jus
legendservants. It was all but impossible to find them. Not that I would w
anyone to compromise their sense of safety.” He swallowed. “J
bscuredgroundskeeper lives here all of the time, but he is often drunk and
enormous. I don’t suppose anything frightens him.”

for the “How do we know it’s awful, then, *or* that it’s plaguing you? You
nice. Itof the friendliest creatures on God’s earth.” Francis covered Ariadne
one waswith his own. “It *is* only one candlestick.” She smiled at him, pleased
Samuelhad reflected enough on his experiences with the preternatural to rema
a localin the face of something so odd. When they’d met, he’d been mired ir
r someplace because of his haunted home.

“I don’t *know* if it’s awful,” said Samuel.

herself Francis shrugged. “I should think it’s nothing to lose your head ovr
As though to spite him for downplaying the occurrence of a h
candlestick, a delicate figurine of a Pekingese dog tumbled fro
ing hisfireplace’s edge to the hearth below, where it rolled once to a quick stc
t of the Ariadne stood and went closer, bending to inspect the figurine. “N
ed rightchipped.” She returned it to its place and straightened her dress.

a story “So it’s only one candlestick *and* an unscathed... porcelain dog,’
mannerFrancis. He raised his eyebrows. “Well, perhaps someone here just
cats. I know I do. On the other hand, there are some in the city who cl
Englandwife is a witch, so my judgment may not be the best. I evidently
e foundwitches and felines, so don’t trust me.”

She scowled a little. As a woman and an herbalist who was not at

notice toof apothecary with proper, respectable training, she courted controversy. the years she and Francis had been married, she'd learned to care less for it, but she was also shielded by his money. Everything they heard was beforethat, hearsay, and never said to either of them in person because Francis's wealth was respected.

ced the "If I *am* a witch, at least I'm a decent one who helps people."

se. "While we were on a walk a few days ago, you were telling me that I'd headknew exactly which plants along the path might fell a man."

lcomed "Very well, then I *could* be a malicious witch who harms men at will."

With some heat, she smiled at him, knowing he was aroused and really thought. *That was a revelatory conversation.* She'd noticed him as if it havelightly from foot to foot while she enumerated the peculiar, deadly quality of a few of a harmless-seeming leaf – it was only the leaves, not the stems that were fish fortroublesome – and quickly got to the bottom of things.

ust the It necessitated a quick journey to the bedroom and hurried excursions always Stephen, but the poor majordomo had gotten used to their amorousness

by then. So he turned a somber eye to polishing the silver. Stephen and I're onetraveled with them to Samuel's home to help get the old house in order. 's handreturned quickly. They heard rather more clanging than was necessary that heaccomplishing the task of polishing. But not for long, because they ultimately in calmdistracted each other from the noise.

in a dark She knew Francis was quite intrigued by the thought of his wife killing some insidious means to kill him. But he only said to Ariadne in that moment, presumably to alleviate Samuel's perplexed expression, "I never harm anyone."

overing Then the insistent scratching began again, this time over their heads. Samuel rose and picked up the candlestick, replacing it gingerly. I prayed she kept a serious expression. It would not do to laugh at him, not evenfrightened in his own home, and Samuel looked pale despite his color.

"Try not to be too nervous," she said. "You know that Francis and I've addedealt with this kind of matter before."

prefers He seemingly did not recall, or at least the stress of the moment had helped him forget. "What kind of matter?"

prefer "A ghost." This was not turning out to be a predictable, restorative way with her husband, but it might be better than predictable. "Didn't you kindnot you say there was some story attached to this place?"

ersy. In “Indeed, there is. But since I am not from here, I did not give i
s about credence.”

was just “You may as well tell it,” said Francis, leaning back. He grin
ncis or crossed his arms, shaking his head a little. “You loved to tell tales at sc

Scoffing, Samuel shook his head. “None of them had to do wit
who drowned in the duckpond I can see from my bedroom window. It
hat you another matter when the stories happen near one’s own house.”

Tilting her head a little, Ariadne asked, “You believe it did not hap
ill.” They’d also had experience with stories grown wilder than their ro

by the and Francis, and she knew it was far more comforting to believe th
shifting never happened in any form at all. Not that her own mind allowed for
ualities easy way out. She was convinced most legends had some truth.

at were “It is the matter of ghosts I find unbelievable. Well, troubling. Bu
really did drown in the duckpond some years ago, and that is recorded

uses to “You just witnessed a candlestick float,” said Francis. “And st
ischief reserve your belief?” He raised his eyebrows. “What must you have
en had of me during all the years I was talking of *my specter*?”

ler. She Samuel must not have understood Francis was teasing, for he flus
ary forthought nothing horrible, I assure you. Not one ill thought crossed m
imately about your predicament.” He sighed, very much the picture of an exas

gentleman who had retreated to the country and found things were no
nowing to plan. They had eschewed formal attire for more relaxed clothes
at that their visit, and neither man wore a wig, but Samuel’s bearing w
“You’d obviously trained and poised. “I just... I wanted a simple, beautiful p
my own.”

heads. “Ah,” Ariadne said, understanding his reticence. “So you just don
Ariadne to believe what you’ve seen.”

a man “Or heard,” added Francis.

ng. “Just so. But I must admit the sounds and now that damned can
I have have swayed my mind toward being more accepting of what
understand.”

ent had “I am sorry, Samuel,” said Ariadne. “But perhaps if you tell us w
been happening, we can try to help.”

ve time

l... did



Francis was of the same mind as his wife. He wanted to help Samuel, who was probably his most loyal and levelheaded friend. In essence, he had been a friend, the last person to remain in his life from both their days at school. His fraught adult years. But then, he and Ariadne often were of the same mind. She could rarely ignore a person in need. He supposed some of her inclinations were usually motivated by curiosity rather than altruism, and the end result was help provided.

"Open?" Samuel poured three glasses of wine from a heavy decanter onto the sideboard and handed them to his guests and kept one for himself. Ariadne had accepted hers with a murmur of thanks. Francis said, as he took his glass, "Have strange things happened since you arrived here?"

"Yes. A few," said Samuel, taking a new seat near the unlit hearth. "The manmen had just removed the last of the prior occupants' personal belongings. The day I took residence – I guess they did not wish to take much, or had they left you and from that first night, I was beset with noises. Nothing moved on in the house, though. That only began last week, and it was only small things until now. Things that I assumed I could have done and forgotten."

"I appeared thoughtful, Ariadne sipped from the small, stemmed glass. She said nothing, though Francis waited for her to speak before replying. "Then when he saw she was still thinking, he said, "Perhaps the house is more comfortable with you, now."

during "I do wish it wasn't."

was still "Go on, then... what's the story? The one that had all the locals talking about a way from this place."

"Oh, it's terrible," said Samuel with a displeased frown. "And it doesn't want decent folk away. But I was told some of the young men like to do anything other to go inside."

"Yes, well, the ones about ghosts and deaths often are terrible. A bad omen sounds like the sort of thing that would instigate bad choices. Like bad things don't go into a house."

Casting a doubtful look at Ariadne, Samuel said to Francis, "That has delicate."

"I assure you that my wife is not delicate." Ariadne dimpled, happy with his assertion, and shrugged as if to say, "It's true."

He smiled at her, then said, "Besides, even if she was, she'd just do what you're going to say from me."

el, who Though she was extraordinarily empathetic, a trait that served her is only her work as a wise woman of sorts who traded in medicinal plants, he'ool and known her to be weak or easily frightened. *The opposite is moe same problem* – she'd go toward something she probably shouldn't of her investigated.

but the Like a haunting.

“The man who died was happy in his life,” said Samuel with a g on the “Reputedly, anyway. And according to an official – a constable, I thi Ariadne recall correctly – who was summoned after the death, it seemed lil is own, gone outside in the night and lost his footing only to trip, tangle hin some weeds in the water and drown. It needn't be a deep pond for so “Some to die, of course, but this one isn't shallow. It's quite treacherous.”

ings the “He said it was an accident, this constable?” Ariadne said.

little – “Yes,” Samuel said. “No signs of anything awful or untoward.”

ts own, Francis said, “It's easy enough... especially at night, even if you til just your way around. My mother always cautioned me against wanderin the river even if I'd had just a few gulps of ale.” That was the gentlest ass. She putting it, for his mother was incredibly vigilant. He could only think i have to do with his father's early passing, though Father's death l thing is involved the Wensum, drink, or any kind of water at all.

But as Samuel said, it didn't need to be deep water to be fatal, part if weeds were present.

staying Ariadne nodded. “Father was similar with us, and we weren't as c water as Gold House is. I suspect nothing, but I'm trying to have a th id keep picture.”

re each “Some of the men down at the pub have pulled me aside. They was a ghost light that lured him astray. They've said it's good I don' nd that here, always,” Samuel said. “They would be the same age as this l reaking perished, or rather, he'd be the same age as them. I haven't any noti that element of the story fits. Could be drunks' imaginations, but t s, “It's more than a death, is what kept this house empty for so long. superstition... or a supposition, really... influence people so strongly?”

py with “It didn't influence *you*,” said Ariadne. “Of course, hearsay ca many people, but...”

ist hear “No. But I almost worry that perhaps it should have. *Is there an in light* – an insidious thing – out there, just waiting for me to have a mo

well inclumsiness? Worse, is it something that might have the ability to charm
d never Francis knew he should reassure his friend and tell him rationalit
ore the always win the day. The trouble was, he knew it was not true. Sometin
t havedark really held a secret, sentient presence – and sometimes, that p
wanted something.

And he had a feeling this one was trying to secure what it wanted.

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clumsiness? Worse, is it something that might have the ability to charm me?”

Francis knew he should reassure his friend and tell him rationality could always win the day. The trouble was, he knew it was not true. Sometimes, the dark really held a secret, sentient presence – and sometimes, that presence wanted something.

And he had a feeling this one was trying to secure what it wanted.

Chapter Two

FRANCIS HADN'T KNOWN how poorly Samuel was really feeling about the circumstances. He had not mentioned it. Still, even if Samuel wished he didn't seem as though he could go back on this purchase of a house and a pair of shoes. It wasn't an ill-fitting waistcoat or a pair of shoes.

He watched Ariadne pat her face dry with a clean scrap of cloth. Inwardly, he was both rueful and celebrating this peculiar situation. It was hard to say what had first pulled him to suggest visiting Samuel, but he mentioned last month he was going to be dwelling in Shelfanger for a while.

Now it felt like their visit was supposed to happen, only he could not convince himself it would be precisely *good* for Ariadne when resting and investigating, was what he wished she would do on their travels.

Here they were on the brink of some tantalizing thing to undergo. In the process she quite enjoyed. Yes, he was grappling with himself.

It might be better to have her heed the distraction than it would be to enforce serenity. She did not say so, but he suspected she felt guilt about the loss. *Their* loss, or even *his* loss, he supposed most people would understand. Though, to him, it was obvious who'd borne the most pain, men or women, physical.

No, he'd not claim it as theirs or his. But he was happy to walk along with her as she dealt with it and show her his feelings for her had not changed a bit.

Well, whatever force or deity was giving him a prod, the prod was that Samuel was an enthusiastic correspondent who always took care to see that he was in London, but they hadn't visited one another since they were younger. With Francis taking on his late father's responsibilities far more than he'd planned, and the underlying complications brought by a woman who smelled of rosewater, there'd been precious little time for leisure.

"You think he's right, don't you?"

Ariadne, a vision in one of his shirts and crowned by her loose, dark

came to the side of the bed he didn't occupy. She arranged herself to her side, facing him where he rested on his back, and scrutinized him that he could see her eyes; he only felt them. He was studying the outline of her breasts, illuminated by the candlelight through thin cotton.

Shaking his head to clear it, he glanced up and returned her look. "about what?"

out his "There being a ghost light. Or something that can charm him."

ed to, it "I don't know if I think *that's* the truth, but there's something underneath.

nd land. "You looked troubled, just now, and I haven't seen you make an expression since we met." She smirked. "It was also instigated by a specter of linen.

He did not wish to admit he'd been distracted by her breasts. It was admitted the other truth. "I am troubled. Samuel seems more distraught who'd he's allowing himself to say."

time. She nodded and put her hand on his unclothed chest, idly stroking his skin and playing with the short hair there. "I agree, and I do not know you do." Her fingers stilled briefly. "But is that all?"

ouldn't skin and playing with the short hair there. "I agree, and I do not know you do." Her fingers stilled briefly. "But is that all?"

ng, not Thinking through what he could say, he decided to be prevarication had never been natural between them. "I don't want you to be overly worried about you, because I'm truly not, but I had hoped to be to this mystery as though you're leading a charge. We *did* see a candle call it.

avel, a Prevarication had never been natural between them. "I don't want you to be overly worried about you, because I'm truly not, but I had hoped to be to this mystery as though you're leading a charge. We *did* see a candle call it.

d be to could be... tranquil... while we were here. Now, I'm wary you shall call this mystery as though you're leading a charge. We *did* see a candle call it.

ver her he chuckled. "Float. And what could be more galvanizing than that?" She was listening to him as he spoke, her face shifting with expressions of tenderness, perhaps some guilt, then amusement at his tal and

She was listening to him as he spoke, her face shifting with expressions of tenderness, perhaps some guilt, then amusement at his He didn't think she would address his concern for her, and his perceptively accurate.

ongside He didn't think she would address his concern for her, and his perceptively accurate.

anged a "A friend in need might be. And you're right; I'm intrigued. I can't wonder if there's some absurdly simple truth or solution to all of the end, that's all Gold House needed. *She* just needed us to understand Robert Gold wasn't some sinister man." She smiled softly. "He was an earlier lover."

is clear. "A friend in need might be. And you're right; I'm intrigued. I can't wonder if there's some absurdly simple truth or solution to all of the end, that's all Gold House needed. *She* just needed us to understand Robert Gold wasn't some sinister man." She smiled softly. "He was an earlier lover."

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e much Robert Gold wasn't some sinister man." She smiled softly. "He was an earlier lover."

earlier She referred to the specter who'd beleaguered Francis. In truth, she had been a woman whose name was Anne Jennings. He and Ariadne had been at the church where she was put to rest only a stone's throw from Gold's mark hair, Robert had been her master *and* her lover, and in a decision that would have dazed his family and peers, he'd wished to marry her.

rest on m. Not Robert shattered and notoriously reclusive.

line of That wasn't what everyone said, though. Even generations later, himself had believed a more nefarious, far more ambiguous tale "Rightforebearer who'd committed murder and relied on his status to hide the

When he'd started to fall in love with Ariadne, he'd tried to distance himself with practical arguments. *You're too old, too solitary, too melancholic.* And the idea that she might come to harm because of her hereditary bloodlust was also horrifying, if more fantastical. After a while he reasoned, if a relation could do it, so could he. Besides, men did awful things to women without any special circumstances.

Right than Happily, she had not let him dissuade himself. Or her. He'd come to realize he was not *too much* of anything, and there was no latent heartache in his in the Gold line.

him as "You're completely correct about that, so it's something to keep in mind," he said. "As to this house, I don't know." He had been through the area many times but only for travel, and he wasn't familiar enough to feel parochial happenings to say what might assuage a local spirit. And if he'd learned anything at all from his own life, it was that even if he thought he knew – or others thought they knew – a story, the truth was usually difficult to pin down. Tales took on lives of their own. Some were docile, others grew

Anne and Robert's story was one of the ones that had grown fangs. A small child who cherished plants, might prefer to say its vines had become tangled words. But he envisioned a darkness-loving creature with venomous teeth.

ion was Still, he couldn't argue with a suspended candlestick. That had to be an incredible bid for attention, as it was accomplished in front of three people. *And there was the little dog that fell, too.*

this. In "Perhaps we should start making some inquiries," said Ariadne.

her stand "What sort?"

was her "Exactly the sort I made last time."

He huffed, knowing these were essentially what most devout people would deride as ungodly. Before they'd wed, she'd been his housekeeper, his only servant besides his incredibly loyal butler and taciturn, workaholic hostler – and he'd left the house with clear instructions not to pursue preternatural matters.

"I hate giving you the satisfaction –"

rich left “You decidedly do not hate to give me satisfaction.”

Her smug interjection made him grin, for he was cheered she'd r
FrancisHe started again. “I hate giving you the satisfaction of knowing that t
e of ayou went against my wishes is what helped everything come out righ
e deed. end.”

issuade “You *were* a bit of a curmudgeon, but more than that, you were
y, *too*and trapped.”

if some “One could argue I'm still a curmudgeon.” He felt more whimsica
ll, he'dcurmudgeon, but he did share many of the same traits.

I things “No, I don't think so.”

“Thank you.”

ome to Ariadne shifted, bringing herself closer to him. She brought a palm
essnessside of his face and drew him closer to her lips, kissing him very

“And even if I find my days suddenly occupied by a new mystery, I
keep ingiving up nights with you to a ghost.”

igh this He smiled against her mouth, nodding once, pleased she still wa
with itstouch him. He would have understood why she didn't wish to. “I w
if he'dwant you to.”

ught he

ferent.

7 fangs.



riadne,IT TURNED OUT they did not have a choice in the matter and some hou
ed as itmidnight, Ariadne woke to the touch of cold fingers on her bare left a
th. of her was bare, so she supposed it could have been even more intrusi
o be anit already was, but she knew immediately that it was not Francis. The
people.was quite stale due to the day's heat. Due to the combination of sumr
and their own inclinations toward carnal activities, they were both nak

Of course. Why would we be clothed to meet a ghost?

As she sat up and let her eyes adjust, she wondered if she shoul
Francis and tell him to dress. They might not want to *stay* in the ro
peoplecould hardly expect to wander Samuel's halls without something c
eeper –person.

nderful Rather, she might want to look around, and if she wanted to e
ish anyFrancis would want to accompany her. There was no “they” about it,
She'd lead; he'd follow.

Instead of rousing him immediately, she waited, listening to the sounds made within the house and the June sounds outside. It was exceedingly comfortable the way when her eyes had become accustomed to it, she relied on the meager light from the window to see anything. First, she noticed nothing new.

But when she turned her head to see the chair nearest her side of the bed, she was startled. The shadowed outline of a man in a hat was seated casually, though this was his room and he was taking a quick rest. She had more than assumed it was a trick of her eyes; she had, after all, just been asleep. The touch on her arm could have been a nightmare, it was true.

She *might* have believed that if the shadow hadn't leaned forward, she'd just spoken to him, and he was now about to make a reply. Stunned and fascinated, she couldn't even summon shame at the thought of being naked. There was no room for it amidst the shock. Keeping her hand on the shadow, she placed her hand on Francis's shoulder and lightly touched him. He slept most heavily after they'd exerted themselves in bed, so she didn't need to speak as well as shake.

But if I do speak, the shadow might leave.

She didn't know why she thought so, for nobody had ever instructed her on what faceless shadows did or how they reacted to anything. Her father would have disdained such a sight as witchcraft, while her father would have denied she'd seen it at all. One had been religious, the other unimaginative.

To their horror, she was neither religious nor unimaginative. Instead of speaking in a normal tone, she bent down and said, with her lips against his ear, "Francis." He kept still, so she repeated his name, paired it with another, slightly more insistent, shake. It did rouse him, he grumbled and turned his head, tangling their lips in a kiss. Since it felt like a sharp blade slicing through her interest in the shadow like a sharp blade through fabric, she didn't have the ability to halt him.

Especially when he murmured, all ardor and seduction, "You want to come back again? I could."

It took willpower she didn't possess to say, "There's someone in the room."

But she could only eke it out and he must not have heard properly, so she really found herself rolled over and held beneath him. It was very satisfying, her mind and body were caught between two disparate wishes. While he was thrilled by her husband's drowsy pursuit of gratification, he

stillness demanded they address the unknown entity in the chair. “Francis!”

lark, so His lips were on her throat. “Mm?” He punctuated it by grazing her light against her skin. She closed her eyes and tried not to moan. It was the strangest time she’d felt any kind of desire, but she still uttered a low moan. He chuckled. “Like how you say my name.”

ally, as She took a breath to steady herself. “I need you to look at the chair.”
linked, Perhaps she couldn’t blame him when he fixated on the first few seconds. And “I know what you need,” he said in a voice like honeyed whisky.

“Francis...” She waited.

and like After a moment, he seemed to glean the rest of what she’d said.
“Pardon?”

thought “The chair.”

er gaze He looked in its direction, and she felt his quick intake of air. “Francis, what the hell is that?”

o she’d Relieved he could see it, too, although she knew even if he hadn’t, he would have believed her, Ariadne shut her eyes and let his warm hands ground her. “I don’t know. But if it’s still here, I hope it hasn’t attacked her about what we’re interested in...”

mother She didn’t have to open her eyes to understand what his next words meant, and she waited to hear what she suspected he’d say.

itive. “Holy... it’s gone, just now. As though it could *hear* you.” He sat down, and she moved with him, putting her arms around his shoulders. They rearranged themselves so they could sit alongside each other. “Are you... hurt you? Are you all right?”

, but he “Entirely.” She grinned. “What good luck.”

It good, “I don’t know if I’d call it good luck. How long was it here?”

ne silk, “A little longer than it took me to wake you,” she said, arching her eyebrow. “Perhaps it stayed because it liked what it saw.”

it to go He chuckled once, then gathered her to him and rested his back against the headboard. “That would be understandable. You’re divine. But Francis said, I hope it hasn’t any designs on us.”

for shedidn’t.”

but her “In a *more* suggestive way?”

er body “I think it might have touched my left arm.” She demonstrated where it had touched, and Francis pressed his fingertips tenderly to the same spot.

didn't seem jealous or threatened, merely curious.

his teeth "That could have been a dream."

was the "You saw a shadow in the chair and still think it likely that I dream, keentouch? The touch I dream about is yours." She shook her head smoothed some of her hair away from her face. "I feel... it might have wanted attention."

words. "Yet it didn't even speak," said Francis.

She smiled at the wonderment in his tone. "Anne's spirit never spoke to you," she reminded him. "Or to me. Or to any of the Gold said, just..." Sometimes Anne had made animalistic noises, but rather than embarrass him, Ariadne had not asked Francis to detail which sounds had been him and which were Anne.

ick me, "Would have done a damned lot better if she had." Francis had borne Anne no ill-will, but sometimes, Ariadne suspected that he was a little still bitter she hadn't communicated any more effectively or quickly than she could. Ariadne's theory was that specters could not do so, for if they could, they would. The world had to be different from their perspective and that difference certainly lead to a struggle to speak.

startled She turned to meet his eyes. "What do you wish to do now?"

"I may need some time to recover."

up and "No." She laughed at his hangdog expression. He likely assumed she meant in terms of bed sport. "I meant... do you wish to try to go to bed? Or did it sleep? I don't think there's any point to waking Samuel, or I'd get dressed."

She was curious about whether Francis could manage sleeping in a situation that must have been reminiscent of his days at home, long before they were here.

"If you don't think it's possible to sleep, I'm happy to try to find something to do." "The housekeeper isn't here at night, remember?"

"Can you sleep after seeing that?"

against Considering the question, she found she probably could. "Yes. I can. It was... as you feel it was malevolent. Just... it seemed intrigued."

He nodded. "I know it would be impossible to explain why, but it's similar for me. And poor Anne." He sighed. "Until you lived in Gold too, she always felt very... not hostile. But... she felt very frustrated at the time I saw or heard her. And knowing what we do know about her, I cannot find it within myself to blame her."

got. He Ariadne kissed his cheek, lingering along his stubble. She preferred

when he was not fully clean-shaven, so he didn't shave as frequently had before they wed. She felt it gave him a delightfully roguish air. 'I am awed and should encourage Samuel to do a little more investigating on the land and shed here. It's not the only possible cause for a specter... a house like this should have bound to have other accidents. Illnesses. But it's somewhere to start perhaps it *really* is the cause of all the strange things. Not everything is as convoluted as Robert and Anne's story.'

He really said "Thank Christ."

She said She smiled. "In the interim, though, I'd be happy to distract you from more than misgivings."

He said "Because you're secretly a nymph."

She said "Well, *you* could rival a satyr. But I thought I was a witch, not a nymph."

He said "Nymphs have magic, too, don't they?"

She said slightly "They can change form. If I have any magic at all," said Anne

she had chanced a quick look at the ordinary chair before bringing her lips

to his cheek. "I wish I could use it for answers to things like this. I certainly

it could no need to turn into a tree to avoid anyone, least of all you. But I do

have questions I cannot answer."

Francis turned his head and touched his lips against hers. "I would cross indeed if you stopped coming up with them."

And she

went

back to

the

situation

she'd met.

over tea.

I didn't

think it felt

like the

House,

but every

now, I

remembered it

when he was not fully clean-shaven, so he didn't shave as frequently as he had before they wed. She felt it gave him a delightfully roguish air. "I think we should encourage Samuel to do a little more investigating on the lad who died here. It's not the only possible cause for a specter... a house like this is bound to have other accidents. Illnesses. But it's somewhere to start. And perhaps it *really* is the cause of all the strange things. Not everything can be as convoluted as Robert and Anne's story."

"Thank Christ."

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"Because you're secretly a nymph."

"Well, *you* could rival a satyr. But I thought I was a witch, not a nymph."

"Nymphs have magic, too, don't they?"

"They can change form. If I have any magic at all," said Ariadne, chancing a quick look at the ordinary chair before bringing her lips back to his cheek. "I wish I could use it for answers to things like this. I certainly feel no need to turn into a tree to avoid anyone, least of all you. But I do always have questions I cannot answer."

Francis turned his head and touched his lips against hers. "I would be cross indeed if you stopped coming up with them."

Chapter Three

“I SAY,” SAMUEL uttered. “It truly *has* notched up since you both arrived. I was horrified; Francis could tell from the state of his wide eyes. “What have you done?” Although the sun was out and the waning day was still filled with light, he seemed shaken. He and his guests had taken a short walk around the duckpond, Ariadne having suggested the scene was suitable for a discussion of the specter it had probably bred.

“Don’t blame us, Samuel,” Francis said with a wry smile. “We are here to help, but we won’t be made the cause of your troubles.”

Before their arrival, Francis had understood Samuel was still concerned with some business matters even from a country residence. Now, he questioned that might be to distract himself from other, more uncanny things happening in his new house. Of everyone in the world, Francis knew what it felt like to wonder why one might choose to throw themselves into working and thinking that should be real rather than admit they were experiencing something otherworldly.

For all the legends and folktales humans told themselves, it was another issue to be living in one.

Immediately after breakfast, the butler had handed Samuel a letter that needed a quick response. Though initially, Samuel said his plan was to venture out and ask a few questions of that bastion of local gossip, the nearby public house’s landlord – he’d had to pause and make a reply. He then needed to wait to discuss anything preternatural, which was just another matter.

The poor butler seemed agitated even with three people in the house, not counting the maid and the housekeeper or the groundskeeper who lived in his own little cottage, and Stephen to boot. They couldn’t allay the frustration. Francis had watched the man’s gray eyes darting from corner to corner as though he waited to see a monster. To be fair, he was still doing his duty, he just wasn’t being very dignified about it.

Having spent much of the afternoon speaking with the landlord,

Reginald, about the subject of local deaths, Samuel was now back with information to relay. Or so he claimed. He was actually just relearned drawn to the topic of the ambulatory shadow in a chair, so neither he nor Francis had yet learned what information he held, if any at all.

“I wouldn’t even be able to sleep in that room, much less...” Samuel gave a look at Ariadne, who, Francis noted with amusement, tried to look as if she butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. “Do anything else in that room.”

“We tend to be fairly single-minded,” said Francis. Then he frowned. “How do you know we were up to *anything else*?”

His friend made a dismissive noise and raised his black eyebrow in a good-natured challenge. “It’s written on you both. No need to deny it. You’re truly happy for you.”

And what was more, he was. Samuel loved love, always had, and he’d often felt sorry he had not found his own. He’d often been teased at school for his starry-eyed disposition, too. But what he yearned for could not be impeded for he was not the only gentleman who eyed gentlemen. While the landlord was regrettably strict, Francis did not believe it should supersede romance. He hoped Samuel might find love one day.

Ariadne smothered a laugh and Francis had to grin. He said, “What didn’t accomplish *anything else* once I understood what was underfoot?”

“On that count, we’re just as shaken as you are. And you’ve never seen a shadow... man before?”

“Never.”

Turning away from the gentle light sparkling off the pond to Francis and Samuel, Ariadne said, “What did the landlord say?”

“He seemed knowledgeable. I suppose that follows as he did go here. And I suppose now is as good a time as any to mention it, but you won’t see him walking about in the evenings. He does that,” Samuel said. “There was a small human there when they retrieved the body – there was a small human observer, apparently, which I can imagine – but we already knew someone died here.”

He looked at the pond as though it might become capable of speech in the next minute. It was idyllic in late June, belying very little of its macabre past. Unlike Gold House, which seemingly everyone in the neighborhood used to swear looked ominous and marked, the pond before Tobias could be any cheerful little spot in England.

h some Continuing, Samuel said, “There are supposedly two or three ta
ntlessly circulated after the drowning.”

Ariadne “Just two? Or three?” said Francis. “That’s nothing.”

 Samuel chuckled. “For you, perhaps, Mr. Gold. But we aren’t all
uel casthydra-headed family legends. Thank God.”

ok like “Family curses, you mean.”

 “One of the stories is, the man was trying to make off with the sil
owned. *was* clutching a candlestick. But *I* say he was probably just using it to
might any of us if we went out in the middle of the night. I asked the l
ws in aif there was any other silver found with him, and there was not.”

it. I am Francis felt his confusion become visible on his face. Samuel had
of meandering with his words, but more than that, it didn’t seem right
Francis that someone who was pleased with his circumstances would really
for his make off with his employer’s silver. And surely there would have bee
ossible, of it recovered with the body were this the case. “Huh.”

aw was “I also wanted to know if any silver was actually missing fr
and he house,” said Samuel. “But the constable could find nothing out of j
save that single candlestick.”

ell, we Pensively, Ariadne said, “I suppose they didn’t need to search th
ot,” he for anything, then.”

er seen “I doubt it. If nothing was missing, then nobody would see the pur
doing so,” he replied. “When he said none of the other articles were
didn’t ask.”

survey “What’s another of the stories?” she asked.

 “Ah.” Samuel beamed. Francis thought he knew what was comi
row up given his friend’s affinity for romance. “The man was rumored to
ou maylover. But nobody seemed to know their identity. Very secretive
Said he evidently. Reginald said he could have been leaving – perhaps to elo
ddle of *he was* found with a small bag of personal effects. As though he wa
omeone commence on a journey.”

 “Then why carry a candlestick from the house if he was plan
human leave? How would he return it?” queried Francis.

le of its “He had to see,” said Ariadne.

city of Samuel chuckled; Francis smirked at her, then glanced at him.

re them “As do we all. But... I only ask because you did say he was happ
life. A happy person wouldn’t take something that didn’t belong to

les that would they?”

A possible elopement could make sense, of course, not least of because a clandestine love affair was also at the heart of his own ghost used to. An array of reasons existed that might entice a couple to elope rather openly court and wed.

“You know that *happy* doesn’t always mean thoughtful, or clever. He planning, or rich,” Ariadne said. “It might have been an oversight on his part to see, as Or perhaps he didn’t think it mattered much if his employer was more and lord. She smiled wanly at both Francis and Samuel, and when Francis looked at his friend, he saw the same look of mild, clueless lack of knowledge and a wayward countenance. “Neither of you has been poor. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

want to “True,” said Samuel, regarding Ariadne curiously.

in more Francis had forgotten he hadn’t told his friend of Ariadne’s back; not out of any shame, but because it had never mattered much to him. “It seems to me like he might’ve been on his way to the stable.”

place... Samuel nodded. “It is just over there, and I expect he would have a horse if he was planning on going very far.” He motioned to the pond building that was just on the other side of the pond. It was not quite a normal location for a stable, but it did seem like a later addition to the property. “Depending on the way one walked, it would be very easy to get to. Much of the pond was bordered by tall grasses, and they mutually obscured any tangled plants under the water itself. The rest was shaded by old trees.

ing next “And he wouldn’t exactly be *stealing* a horse if he left it at the next tavern, say, with instructions for its safe return,” Francis said. People in the affair, only usually they owned the horse or had an owner’s permission to ride it – for “A patron at the public house overheard us speaking and claimed to the ghost is angry because his candlestick has been removed from the pond,” said Samuel. “But I can’t see how that would make any sense at a time when the candlestick has been gone for years.”

“The house has been haunted for years and we cannot argue with that at least,” said Ariadne. “But is that the basis for the ghost light, do you think it’s the missing candlestick?” She wrinkled her elegant nose in thought and Francis had to remind himself he couldn’t just lean over and kiss it in front of them, Samuel. Or perhaps he could. Samuel probably wouldn’t mind.

someone have gotten it wrong and muddled the man's candlestick into which insidious ghost light?"

Francis's tale. "It does sound like something gossip could do," said Francis.

Francis rather than "I haven't any idea," said Samuel, innocent in the way of

gossip-mongers. For a citizen involved in matters of commerce and trade, Francis had been remarkably protected from malicious talk. It was likely his father's part-influence, for all of them had been as fair-minded and jovial as him.

Francis sneered. "What's the man's name?" Ariadne asked what they should have done. Francis immediately noted Francis with a small twinge of shame. After all, the man had been a person.

Francis said to "Oh!" Samuel brightened. "That I do know for certain. Adam.

Combes. It was in the documents I've seen myself, but Reginald confirmed it.

They were friends, he said." He paused and looked distantly troubled. Reginald seemed Reginald was rather shaken by this discussion, actually. Francis said to him. "It why he spoke to me at all... I'm so new."

A pragmatic reason might exist, thought Francis, having to do with the need of gaining a new patron. But it did attest to how small the community was. The small landlord appeared upset.

Francis said to "Well, I imagine a name will make it easier to talk to him," said Ariadne. And there was a glint in her blue eyes that Francis wasn't sure he liked.

Francis said to "Will it?" Samuel asked.

Francis said to "Unwittingly, he was walking right into chaos. Ariadne was persuaded by hatching some wild scheme as quickly as she could, but he would have been aware of her ability and, indeed, inclination to do so. Francis certainly did not believe in witches, or if he did, his idea did not match with most people's views. But she certainly had a witch's cunning.

Francis said to "And a witch's interest in matters like these.

Francis said to "She'd mentioned how her mother had even tried to discourage her from being invested in her father's trade, which was to say his herbalism, but she had no ill. The disapproval never stuck. Ariadne took to it. Women, apparently, do not

become herbalists. They became wives and mothers. Francis was quite sure that, at least, he'd never met her mother, for he might be induced to an act of violence.

Francis said to "He shook his head, hoping to stave off the inevitable. "I shouldn't have said that. We need to make it any easier. A man-shaped shadow sat in our back of chair last night. He *knows* how to make himself known."

Francis said to "But we don't understand why he wants to make himself known

o some first place! Did he just intend to take some kind of walk? How terrible
died instead. Was he running away to elope? That's terrible, too. This
lover. And what does he want, now? We really should see if we can in
ays of said Ariadne, and it was difficult not to succumb to her earnestness.
he had felt his resolve ebbing away. "Now we know his name!"
family's Like it or not, he would probably witness exactly what he didn't ge
the first time she had done it: his wife was going to try to speak to a sp
e asked
is spirit



Adam "YOU KNOW ANNE wanted us to see something. She wanted us to find R
rmed it. account of what had happened to her," Ariadne continued. She s
led. "It against the light that flared on the still, insidiously serene pond's s
wonder "Why shouldn't it be the same in this case? I'm sure this Adam
something."

lo with Samuel had been told what had happened in Gold House to end th
as if the of harrowing activity. In fact, because she could not read much, Fran
read her the first letter he'd sent him. It detailed how they discov
Ariadne, disused box containing the truth of things: a written account of wh
occurred between Anne and Robert.

"I think I can conjecture what you're going to propose," Francis s
robably glowered.

dn't be "Propose?"

did not Not taken in by her bland look, Francis said, "Let me."

others' "Let you what?" Samuel interjected.

"Let me try to talk to Adam, this time."

"This time?" Samuel was valiantly trying and failing to follo
er from words.

but the Ariadne's lips parted and she sighed. Francis had been protective
did not since she'd miscarried, yet she didn't think it meant she was now phy
ite glad fragile. It could, of course, end poorly for many, but she felt si
ce. unscathed. *In body*, she amended. While she did not feel melar
't think exactly, she did feel mentally taxed. The only thing she could liken it
ed room having too little sleep over the course of a week: she was distractable,
startle, and generally bewildered.

1 in the

le, if he “Very well.”

k of his “Thank you.”

quire,” “What did you just agree to?” Samuel asked Ariadne directly, but Francis patient but curious.

“Before we were married, I tried to speak to the ghost in Gold. Well, I say speak. She didn’t *speak* to me, but she... showed me the box we’d later find. The one with Robert’s records in it.”

“I remember. But you... saw... her?”

“No. But Francis did see her frequently, and I saw her through a window the once. But she was able to communicate, to tap on the walls,” said Robert brightly. “It helped me find a little hidden compartment, and that convinced me the key to Robert’s box.”

Samuel digested this like he might digest a bit of cake, she imagined. She could tell he still had questions, but such was his and Francis’ friendship that he appeared willing to trust his friend and his friend’s advice on the obscure matter of specters.

“She conducted this little experiment while I was away in London. Without my permission.” Francis spoke tenderly, not with censure. “A grateful. Without that intervention, I might have been lost for years.”

Listening, Samuel smiled. “I must admit, it’s good to see you married. Hey you were when we were lads.” He asked Ariadne, “How do you properly contact him? I imagine it’s not as simple as posting a letter.”

She considered their options and all of the stories she and her sister Eleanor, had discussed under cover of darkness when Father and Mother were gone to sleep. Years ago, when they were still close. People had tried various ways to speak to those who’d passed, apparently, and some believed in their rules and methods. Others taught they were all sacrilegious and whoever performed them was bound for hell.

If so, I am.

When she had induced Anne to knock on the walls of Gold House she hadn’t taken much, but she’d followed no procedure or guidelines to be sure of. She’d simply felt her way through it. They couldn’t post a letter and wait for a reply; obviously, Samuel was correct.

Then a particular memory came to her. *We could use writing,* she thought. “Writing,” she said, glancing at Francis.

“Pardon?”

“When we were girls and she was far less... far less self-absorbed,” Samuel covered a polite chuckle with his hand— “I remember my sister once told me a story about an old woman who could use her body to write the dead.”

House. Instantly, Francis took on a wary expression, but it was how she’d made him consider the thought. He knew such things, far-fetched, could work. “That sounds like a charlatan’s trick.” He did not say, “*That’s blasphemous.*” But if he had, he might well have to reconsider his windowed life and repent.

he said “Then why look so guarded? If it’s impossible, it can’t happen, and if it’s only a trick, you’d be the best to take on the task. You wouldn’t fail; you are too honest.” He scoffed. Flushing a little, for she’d never discussed her level of illiteracy in front of anyone in her new life but he carried on, “I cannot write well enough to do it – what if some word I don’t know how to spell comes through? And *you* are distrustful. Or you might be.” He was the most believing disbeliever she’d ever met. “If some word does surface by your hand, should we try, it might well be valid.”

and I’m He reached for her right hand and interlocked their fingers. “Very well, my nymph. I shall try my hand at writing for a dead man called Adam.” He said, “Really, though,” Samuel said. “We could just say no more of these we leave things as they are.”

But he didn’t sound convinced. “If you wish,” she said. “I haven’t been hounded as Francis has, and if it gets any worse, I suppose I could call a vicar. Do they provide counsel for issues like this? I’d imagine that only the Catholics who believe in such? Perhaps I would need a priest instead. I am not a devout man.” He shrugged. “I could return to my home in the town. That’s as quiet as I once expected a grave to be. Well, barring the noise of London, but the clamor is so customary to me that I hardly notice it.”

Some might call Samuel’s penchant for babble irksome, but she found it endearing. Then again, she often babbled when she was enthused.

to speak “It’s been an age since I’ve been able to be a good friend to you,” he said, and Francis, some mischief in his eyes. Ariadne did so love that as the months passed from their unconventional courtship, the more he revealed himself, the more she found him quite spontaneous. “And as odd as all of this is, I am happy to try to help.” One might say I’m uniquely well-suited to helping in a matter such as this. “He raised his eyebrows at Samuel. “Besides, most others would

bed” –you to be mad, even if they were spreading rumors about a ghost or a l
tellinghouse in the next moment.”

for the “That, I cannot argue with,” said Samuel, his words dry.

“What do you have to lose?”

e knew “Fine, let us do this mad thing together and see what transpires.”

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you to be mad, even if they were spreading rumors about a ghost or a haunted house in the next moment.”

“That, I cannot argue with,” said Samuel, his words dry.

“What do you have to lose?”

“Fine, let us do this mad thing together and see what transpires.”

Chapter Four

HE WOULDN'T ADMIT it for all the world because Ariadne would be excited and Samuel too nervous, but he felt different. Francis gripped the table wishing he believed something was *not* about to happen. He knew it would be difficult to convey, but every nerve stung almost as though he'd been in the wind and cold for too long. He couldn't quite hear them, either because of the wind or like his head was underwater.

And he did not wish to worry his wife or his friend, neither of whom would allow him to suffer, although he wasn't precisely in pain. Ariadne would not stand for it even if she *was* initially intrigued: she'd see the damage his own mind could do to his state.

Some of it was due to a specter, he now knew, but not all of it was. There were dark moods, his lack of sleep, his self-imposed seclusion. They were preternatural at their core and had everything to do with him.

This, though, this hazy winter feeling in his limbs and face, was decidedly foreign, invasive. It felt neither familiar nor his. He didn't know which would be worse: speaking up now and calling the entire arrangement off while they had but one candle burning in the morning room – or listening in silent and discovering a spirit was indeed about to influence his hand.

He couldn't see a thing, for they had wound a scarf about his eyes. He knew where he could write. He also knew Samuel was on his left, Ariadne on his right. Every time he tried to breathe, he drew in air smelling of pipe smoke and coughed. Ariadne claimed it was necessary because the herbs cleared the mind, and all he found was they might clear his lungs instead.

But even the coughing felt more distant than it should have, since he knew how his ears were only permitting muffled sounds.

A ring.

He tilted his head toward a man's husky voice near his right ear. It wasn't muffled.

The ring. Is it gone?

Not Samuel.

My ring. Where is it?

No, not Samuel at all. The accent was different, local.

Not my ring. I've mine. His ring. He has it. He should have mine, t

Francis was compelled to stand but found he couldn't, so he was the man to speak again. Could they all hear him? Surely, they could.

be too *That damned pond.*

he pen, The one they'd stood near, earlier?

ould *That fucking pond.*

een out A hand, warm, on his shoulder, and another hand loosening the
; rather shielding his eyes. "Francis?" Ariadne kissed his forehead. He opened
eyes to her bemused expression. "It worked. Probably."

whom When he looked around and saw Samuel, his back was turned to the
Ariadne was lighting more candles. Slowly, the morning room held more illumination
in what much like Francis's body began to feel more his own. He noted he'd closed
the pen – how could he not have noticed that? – and had been rather

as. His with the inkwell, but such a thing couldn't be helped while one was
ere not blindfolded and playing conduit to a hellish force.

Francis cleared his throat. "Did you hear him?"

it was She was putting out whatever infernal smoking leaves she'd placed
t know dish, which was only causing more thin plumes of smoke. Whatever
gement leaves were, they were ordinary, for they'd been available in Samuel's
keeping kitchen. But the smoke was worse than church incense.

yes. He "Hear him?" She finally trapped the smoldering herbs under a decorative
dish. "No, dear heart. I think you might have been the only one who did

adne on "I didn't hear a thing past your writing," said Samuel, returning
tch. He table. He looked lively, much more like a lad than he had previously, if
red the little unsettled. His trepidation made sense. In truth, though his guest
leave if things became too chaotic, he couldn't. Not without preparing
nilar to property and making sure it couldn't be interfered with after he'd departed
any rate.

Francis could empathize with him. He knew the intrigue behind
side. It preternatural occurrences and how it warred with human fears or customs
"What happened?"

"You started to write. It was... extraordinary," said Samuel. "We
hand began to move. First it was scribbles, nothing at all."

“For how long?”

“I should think fifteen minutes, perhaps? Not so long, but long enough.”

“Then?”

“The candle on the table guttered as though someone was trying to blow it out, but it remained lit,” said Ariadne. “And you wrote.”

“What the hell did I write?”

Samuel handed him the paper. “See for yourself. *Ring and pond*. All.”

RING and POND were gouged into existence, furious ink on the scarf background, alternating and repeating several times under scribbling. He found he had to look away though the paper was still crumpled in his hand for the raw feeling created by the shape of the letters was not comfortable. Still, he murmured the words aloud, and perhaps it was not necessary to be terribly clever to divine what they meant.

Then he recalled what the slightly rasping voice said: *He should have written messymine, too.*

But barely as he'd opened his mouth to remark upon it and suggest words on the paper might not be so obviously unified in their meaning, most were missing...

Ariadne was up in a flash and heading out of the room in a rush, her pink fabric and dark curls.

Samuel's



decorative

It WAS ABUNDANTLY clear to Ariadne, or at least she thought it was. So she ran to the house almost immediately and heard Francis and Samuel trailing after her. She had little care for it being nighttime, although she remembered to be cautious when she reached the pond's perimeter. As she was almost reaching the hold her skirts out of harm's way and kneel in the mud, Francis reached out a gentle hand where her neck met her shoulder and said, “You can't possibly hope to find anything.”

She looked at him and shrugged. “How likely is it that of all the things I've written, you chose *ring* and *pond*? The suggestion seems apparent to me.”

“Things aren't always as they seem.” He tucked some of her hair behind her ear, probably willing her with his mind to think it all through. He

better; she wouldn't. "I heard more than I wrote."
ugh." "Maybe it's that simple."

"I would think it's incredibly difficult to search an entire pond to blow Samuel. He smiled kindly. "By yourself and at night."

Francis regarded her in the moonlight, appearing reluctant to im-
disagree with her. "You think there's a ring in it." It was not a quest
That'sknew her well enough to know what she'd dashed outside to do, a
knew she probably looked like a cunning – or unbalanced – fairy queen
a pale the moon. Unfortunately for him, his restraint irked her. She felt he'd
Francis her to be more sedate, even if last night he'd seemed supportive
s hand, escapade here, and she wasn't certain she appreciated it.

ring at "And you don't?" She never really raised her voice, for it remind
ssary to too much of how her mother had spoken to her father. But her an-
rang clearly enough.

ld have "There is more I was going to say before you came out here."

She blinked at him and noticed his disquiet. It was reminiscent
gest the unrest when they'd first started talking, when she'd disregarded his ru-
ming... kept speaking to him even though he'd plainly said to keep to the
floor as part of the parameters for her employment. Because he lived
of soft stairs and was often out of the house, he seemed to assume this would
their contact.

"What, then?"

Luckily, he had been and still was easy to sway where she was con-
"I didn't notice I was writing at all, but I heard a man in the room
she fled near me, or in my mind, because you and Samuel didn't hear him –
behind said..." Francis paused and gathered what exactly he'd heard. He po-
ed to be an excellent memory even under pressure. "'Not my ring. I've mine. He
eady to He has it. He should have mine, too.' So... I don't... I don't know
ested a means anything is in the pond." He glanced dubiously at the water gon-
possibly and silver in the night. "No matter what two words I wrote."

Ariadne's response was cut off by Samuel's yell. Francis quickly
ings to toward his friend. "What the hell is... are you all right?"

." "Fine, fine." Samuel lifted a trembling hand and gestured to the far
behind the pond. "Look."

he knew There on the edge of the water was a young man of perhaps twen-
dripping wet, his dark skin oddly gray at the extremities. Of course, i

have been the moon's cool glow making him look nearly frostbitten, effect did not lead one to believe this could be a living, breathing person," said Francis. He did nothing save look at them, and nothing was remarkably new about his appearance, but it was unnerving enough how he'd *pede orappeared*. When Ariadne thought of the sole time she'd seen Anne, it was a terrible sight, like a skull whose only cover was faded leather.

and she But this was still eerie indeed.

Francis took a gentle hold on her wrist and edged slightly in front of her. She didn't have the heart to dissuade him from the gallant movement, but she could have pointed out that there was already plenty of space between them and what she assumed was the spirit of Adam Combes.

And Adam wasn't moving.

Just... staring.

"That's about what he did last night in the chair," said Ariadne.

She considered. "If the thing in the chair is the same thing we see before, I don't want to contemplate whether there are two spirits in the chair." Samuel said. She could not see him, but she could hear his shiver.

Around the same moment that Samuel made his plaintive declaration above Francis said, speaking just over his shoulder to her, "What do you think Ariadne?"

"He's only gazing at us. The shadow leaned forward in the chair, and he had had a face..." she looked hard at the man across the pond, past Francis's shoulder. "It would have been staring at me. I don't think it's another spirit – well, all. I think they are the same. The way he's carrying himself seems right and he..." Francis trailed off.

Curious, because her husband wasn't one to talk overmuch about feelings or instincts, she prodded him slightly in the lower back through his shirt. "Go on."

"There's this kind of... winter-wind feeling I had when you were blindfolded and I heard the voice. I have it now, too. And I didn't return when we were in bed because I was..." he considered his words and a little titter. "Distracted and desirous. But I had it then, too, a little, not at the end of I'm thinking of it."

Fascinated, she tried to glean what he meant, intrigued by the thirty-five, feeling so cold or wind-chafed when it was so warm. Or while on it could be aroused.

but the Samuel huffed, then exclaimed, "You were heaven-sent for each other. How are you so calm? This isn't a time for a normal conversation or a macabre There is a – whatever *he* is, right there."

simply She bit back a smile, as well as a quip, and kept her eyes on Adam. The edges of his body seemed to soften like an outline of a house seen through fog.

"I was starting to wonder, because even beyond the wintry feel of her. Francis began again. Then he paused, his attention apparently caught though Adam's new haziness. "What's happening?" he asked, as though anyone between would know.

"Don't ask me. I just thought I was on the brink of fainting and my head went funny," said Samuel blithely. "I have never swooned, but all this has taught me is that there is most likely a first time for everything." "Well." Swooning, sounds in purely empty rooms, shadows looking like us." floating candlesticks..."

house," Then it was as though the fog that had been softening Adam's edge overtook the man. Within the space of a few breaths, he was gone as if by magic, as Samuel had shouted. Immediately, Ariadne tapped Francis on the shoulder. He seemed locked in place, eyeing where the figure had been, his back and stiff.

and if it "You were saying?" She wondered if Adam's appearance and Francis's disappearance, while Francis was disclosing a particular detail, was a coincidence. This didn't seem to be a time for coincidences.

ht." The entire night felt charged, alive of its own accord.

He turned to her and began to smile. "We should perhaps look with our feelings was standing."

summer "I thought there was *nothing important* in the pond." But she tempered her words with a look that was both tender and droll. His smile bloomed into a grin.

realize it "I shall wait over here if you choose to look," said Samuel. "I gave a desire to go anywhere near, perhaps not for several days and now that daytime."

"Wise," Francis said.

idea of "Of course, if you do find something, I'll be quite pleased."

he was Francis chuckled and seemed poised to wait until morning. Ariadne, however, was already taking careful steps to the approximate place

another! Adam had been standing. She'd never thought of herself as wise and banter. about to begin now.

As she knew he would be, Francis was only shortly behind her.

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Adam had been standing. She'd never thought of herself as wise and wasn't about to begin now.

As she knew he would be, Francis was only shortly behind her.

Chapter Five

THERE WAS NO ring lurking in the mud, and there were no footprints to indicate anyone had been there. Francis should not have been disappointed, but a tiny part of him was. He gazed at his teacup as he tried to be logical.

Samuel was furnishing Ariadne with a basin of warm water with which to wash her muddied hands. With no servants available at night, he filled the roles of lady's maid and valet with alacrity. He'd already seen to Francis's hands and, before that, he had made tea. The kitchen was full of soft light and the warm, dry-books scent of Assam, and although it had been far longer than an hour since they'd seen him, even the barest idea of Adam seemed to have slipped away.

"Thank you," she said, "I could have done with cold water, but... thank you, Samuel." He could tell she felt strange having a man and, in addition, a man above her prior station, do such a chore for her.

Samuel smiled gently and shrugged. "It is the least I can do under the current circumstances." Though wealthy and well-situated, he had never really learned to lord his circumstances over others. Francis always appreciated his seemingly natural sense of humbleness.

Sitting at the wide table that likely served as a workspace for the housekeeper, maids, and cook, Francis poured her a cup of tea while her hands were dry and did the same for Samuel, remembering that he preferred milk and sugar and his friend preferred just sugar.

"I'm not sure what to say." And there it was, for it felt inevitable that if Samuel wished to keep this house, he may just have to expect a preternatural intrusion as time went on. Francis wanted to believe it might be a terrible circumstance, but his experience told him to be wary. "I don't see a threat at all in being here, but that doesn't mean one wants to treat a stranger's corner in one's house as though there might be someone lurking in the shadows waiting."

"Do you think it is possible that the landlord you spoke to, or some-

else, might be able to help?" Ariadne asked, looking to Samuel.

"How?" Samuel sipped his tea with the air of a man who wished brandy or perhaps whisky to it. "I told you, everyone except for young seemed to avoid this place like a pox. Now I think we've discovered w

"Why did you purchase it?" Francis hadn't asked. It wasn't something that had occurred to him to question when plenty of men rints toilk kept more than one home. He had lived his life more unusu jointed, entombing himself in one. "In spite of what you heard, I mean. I know cal. not sit well with you, and you didn't wish to believe it, but wa /hich to anything else that drove you to it?" lled the

Francis' Before answering, he blew on his tea, causing rivulets in the lic don't know."

ght and He was lying.

ss than Francis knew because it was the same face he'd made when the worlds young, and his mother had asked Samuel how *on earth* he had ended such obvious lovers' marks above his coat collar. Samuel had m . thank something about a girl named Clara when, in actuality, it had bee lition, a named George. The three of them had always enjoyed such discussions, though as far as Francis knew, Samuel's mother never k der the was a molly.

ly been She had entered the marriage with her own money because her ited his traded in silver, but she was also a woman who'd married up rath down. So she was of a rather frank, if kind, disposition, and it had ev for the taken Samuel Leaver the elder some time to grow accustomed to her ten her tact.

is wife The question regarding who'd marked Samuel's throat was not ou common way or even really shocking to either of the lads. But Sa e that if warm, dark skin had grown quite ruddy; his countenance had spo t more expression like that of someone who had passed a tannery.

ight not "Neither of us will judge you."

feel no Red about the neck and ears, Samuel said, "I had a dream about it."

t every "You never said," Ariadne said. Kindly, she added, "What ng and dream?"

omeone "Well, I had seen it passing through, and after that, twice I dreame mine." Samuel shrugged. "It looked just as it does now, but happier. that sounds ludicrous when it's only a house, but it seemed mu

shadowed. Even in the summer, as you see, it feels...”

l to add “Sad,” she finished. “Cold.”

, rogues *And rather lackluster because no one will tend to it,* thought I
hy.” which was what had been part of the problem with Gold House. V
: really people, without events and life, houses simply fell ill and withered. It
of their just specters or hauntings that posed problems.

ally by “Just so,” said Samuel. “After the second dream, I asked after who
w it did it. Never in my life have I done something so impulsive.”

s there “It is not as though it has sent you into ruin,” Francis said. “If
does, you can chastise yourself if you wish, but you really just sper
quid. “I money and now find yourself with a plagued house.”

“I’d hope it doesn’t carry that kind of curse.”

“I don’t think it’s cursed at all.”

y were “I hope you’re correct.”

up with “The situation isn’t hopeless,” said Ariadne, cutting into the few m
umbled of pensive silence. Francis was praying he hadn’t spoken too rashly.
n a lad sitting here unbothered by anything we cannot see. If things were ter
candidam sure we would be contending with something more belligerent. I
new he fear at the prospect of retiring for the night. I still think it’s likely that

Adam – just wants something and you, Samuel, are somehow poised
family What about –”

er than Three loud, hollow thuds interjected.

vidently Samuel took a breath, she blinked, and Francis calmly put his
lack of down on his saucer. He was much more receptive to an abrupt sour
knew his mind was not fabricating it and others had heard it.

t of her He’d had his fill of phantom noises tonight but was quite seren
amuel’s these thuds, even if they were something otherworldly, purely beca
rted an companions had also reacted. He looked to Samuel, already knowin
the noise was, but deferring to the one who knew the house best.

After all, Francis reasoned, the unexpected was possible here.

’ “The main door,” said Samuel. He rose with a frown, setting aside
sort of “I don’t know who it could be.”

d it was
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ch less



WHEN SAMUEL OPENED the door to reveal a rather mysterious-looking man in dark clothes that were likely several years old, but of high quality and good condition, Francis, Ariadne half-expected it was another specter. She watched the man, and without she liked him, as silly as such a quick, uninformed decision was. He wasn't younger than Francis and Samuel, and older than her.

"Oh, good evening, Reginald." Samuel was clearly taken aback by the unannounced visit, but he did know the man. True to the form she'd seen in the past, he greeted him with a smile.

"The landlord?" thought Ariadne. Francis looked back at her, and it was as if something between his eyebrows. It was possible Samuel had left something behind at the public house, she supposed. Perhaps Reginald was returning after closing the premises.

"Evening, Mr. Leaver. I wondered if I might stop in for a moment to see how you're getting on." It occurred to Ariadne that Reginald seemed a little out of place. He peered into the house past Samuel, his brown eyes keenly observing the interior. "We're well beyond Samuel. 'I'm aware it's irregular, sir, most irregular."

"Oh, ah, I suppose so, yes," Samuel said. "Do come in. We've been feeling no having a rather interesting evening, you see, and I would welcome any man – company."

The invitation seemed to relieve some tension in Reginald, who stepped forward. His shoulders did relax under his burgundy coat, and he stopped trying to hide behind Samuel. Ariadne stopped trying to see him from behind. He seemed satisfied that he would be joining them as a guest. She was interested to see if he wanted, why he seemed so tense, and why now, of all times, he'd decided to come.

"My apologies, but I saw someone near your duck pond just now. I used to see his walk and thought there was a figure by the trees."

"Perhaps Adam has been visible to more than just us."

"You walk so late?" Francis asked, tilting his head. It earned a smile of reproach from Samuel. Ariadne recalled how Samuel had met her at his tea, and how offhandedly that the landlord was fond of walking.

"I keep strange hours," said Reginald, shrugging. "Late evenings when I can manage."

"That is kind of you to alert me," said Samuel. "Come." Francis stepped slightly aside to permit Reginald entry. Samuel locked the door after he went inside, and Ariadne tried to look less eager for every word from a stranger.

man in “He looked quite familiar, you see, but I think I must have made a mistake.” There was a soft sadness to the assertion, she felt, though she couldn’t say why.

He was Samuel offered, “Perhaps it was the moonlight.”

“Perhaps it was.” Reginald, seeming to realize he’d intruded on the people rather than just one, looked properly at Francis, then Ariadne, for the first time. “I know this is incredibly odd, but as Mr. Leaver and I have recently discussing, this house has stories. While it was unoccupied, the house became something of a game for young lads to break inside... I wonder what they shall do the same thing even now.”

Samuel made an airy, dismissive gesture with his right hand. “I appreciate the thought. Might I introduce Tobias Reginald, landlord... Reginald might like to see my friend, Mr. Francis Gold, and his wife, Ariadne, come from Norway on a visit.”

Although Reginald started to give a small attempt at polite behavior, his attention was caught by the paper Francis must have brought from the morning room when he’d followed her outside. It rested on an old side table that shouldn’t have been in a foyer at all, and it was face-up to reveal the scribbles and the gouged words. She followed Reginald’s eyes and sighed for him to speak. It was evident that he wished to, for he was pressing his fingers together in thought.

Francis, Francis said, watching him, too, “We were engaged in an experiment in what some, she knew, would run from the house at the very implausible chosen. Thankfully, they were past the time of witch burnings. *For the most part*...”

Reginald’s lips opened, then closed. At length, he said, “I should like to see the premises encourage them.”

Samuel said, “I know you told me several things when we spoke of anything else ever occurs to you, you have but to say. I am convinced there is more underfoot here than mice and ghost stories.”

But Reginald was only half-listening, and he touched the edges of the paper almost reverently. Then he traced the word “ring” and looked at Samuel. “Have you ever found a ring in the pond?”

“No,” he said, and if he was taken aback by the question, he hid it. “But then, I have not been in residence long enough to examine the pond.”

“Ah, of course.”

Ariadne watched Reginald’s fingers move over the ink, stroke

... been though it's soft flesh, she thought, surprising herself. A nebulous con-
... gh she formed, then. But when she tried to focus on it, it became no clear
... loss, she said, "That is a lovely ring you have, yourself." She nodded
... one he wore. It was modest, a thin flash of silver or pewter with a tiny
... n threestone that could have been more chartreuse than emerald.

... for the "Thank you." And as soon as she'd said something about it, his
... I were disappeared in his pockets.

... pied, it They stood in silence for a few moments. She tried to coax out t
... nder ifforming at the edges of her thoughts, and it had to do with the rever
... fingers along ink and Samuel mentioning he'd had a dream about this l

... appreciate "Would you like some tea, Reginald?" Samuel asked.

... , this is Neither eager nor laconic, Reginald nodded. "Yes. Then... I can be
... wich to way."

... "I have a wonderful Assam and very few with whom to share it."
... rior, his was already making his way back to the kitchen. Francis, more used
... om the rhythms, followed readily, while Ariadne went third and Reginald can
... le board her. She felt his eyes on her back, but he said nothing.

... al all of "You'll excuse the fact that we are congregating in the kitchen,"
... | wait said over his shoulder. "I'm sure."

... his lips "Oh, I do not mind at all," said Reginald. She heard the small smile
... voice. "I am at home in a kitchen."

... iment." She didn't need to tell anyone present that a landlord likely spent
... ication of time in the kitchen. Still, as she had during their whole visit, she e

... irt. Samuel's lack of affect. He went to procure a fourth teacup from the s
... d think were using, a floral affair with gold edging on the handles.

... "I quite like the pace of life in – oh, my word."

... , but if Francis took a step toward him and the shelf where there were
... there is three sets for tea service. "What now?" Knowing that insects cou
... refuge in a disused teacup, Ariadne expected it to be a spider. Per
... of the copious amount of dust.

... d up at "It's wet in the cup and there's something hard in it." There was
... clink of metal against porcelain. Mouth open in consternation, Samuel
... it well to the three of them, holding something small and glimmering on the
... nd." his palm.

... Francis spoke first. "A ring." He should have been more incredul
... ing. As was decidedly not. But how could any of them be? Creeping f

nection Ariadne looked at it. The fact that it was silvered metal with a small
er. At a stone did not move her as much as the way it was wet. Samuel's ha
d to the slightly damp, almost as though he had somehow washed just the or
y green and neglected to dry it.

She started to smile and looked at Reginald. He remained a step
s hands away from her, and at least four from Samuel, his trepidation clear.

face warred gratitude, pain, and shock. The connection she'd started
he idea moments ago took shape. She recognized love when she saw it. Th
ence of thought of what Francis had recounted by the pond – *he should hav*
house. *too.*

“I think it is yours,” she told him. “For you, I mean to say.”
e on my Wordlessly, Reginald took a breath. As much as she was certain
conclusion, she was also bursting with questions. There were thir
Samuel would not ask him, of course, for who knew how he'd feel to have t
d to his the open. He could not know about Samuel, or indeed if she or Franc
ne after hospitable to men like him. They were, but that was not always a giver

She took the ring carefully from Samuel, who closed his hand. Th
Samuel leaned across the small distance between herself and Reginald and p
onto Reginald's trembling palm.

e in his Francis watched with dawning comprehension, doubtless pair
mention of a possible elopement with the two matching rings. S
t plenty though palpably baffled about how a ring had materialized inside a
enjoyed looked on the verge of tears. He was jovial, but he did not lack intelle
set the scene before him must have been very moving in its implications.

Perhaps he dreamed about the house because Adam knew the
similar. It would make the most sense to approach someone who felt f
two or Receptive.

ld take “I thought it was lost,” Reginald said. “All of this time, I thought
rhaps a just... gone.” He gazed at the ring on his own finger, then at the on
hand. “For it was not with his effects and it was not on his person. No
s a tiny had a legal or familial claim on either, but I looked as much as I dared
l turned no more. I could not risk arrest.”

e flat of Though she knew – they all knew – who *his* referred to, sh
“Adam's?”

ous and At that, Reginald smiled. “Yes.”

orward, “Would you...” Samuel looked askance at Ariadne and Francis,

l, green was speaking to Reginald. "We would like to hear the story, should you
nd waste to give it."

ie hand "You are not among the zealous or the upstanding," added Francis
helps. I was thought mad for decades." Ariadne chuckled and he sn
or two her. "And my wife is a witch who has a habit of solving spectral traged
On his Though Reginald looked at sea when it came to what Francis me
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ien she Like an ancient incantation, the words seemed to release a burd
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was speaking to Reginald. “We would like to hear the story, should you wish to give it.”

“You are not among the zealous or the upstanding,” added Francis. “If it helps. I was thought mad for decades.” Ariadne chuckled and he smiled at her. “And my wife is a witch who has a habit of solving spectral tragedies.”

Though Reginald looked at sea when it came to what Francis meant, he said, “Yes. I do think I should wish to tell you.”

Like an ancient incantation, the words seemed to release a burden that Ariadne imagined he’d carried a long time.

Epilogue

REGINALD STAYED INTO the night and did not depart until early the morning, when it was time for him to return to his public house. He revealed everything they wished to know. It was all a rendezvous gone wrong, a lovers' plan that was unfortunately felled by fate or something even more heartless. Young Adam Combes really did die by drowning.

Not unexpectedly for an experienced landlord, Reginald was an excellent conversationalist. The tale he wove was emotional and as engaging as Shakespeare's plays, and all of them were enthralled. It made what they had not been able to learn make sense, and it explained all the other versions of the same general story.

Quite simply, there were elements it was not safe for Reginald to tell or correct. They stayed with him. It meant everyone who was interested had their own accounts of the lad who died. And why he died.

Until we came, thought Francis, once again nakedly ensconced in his wife drowsing in his arms.

Adam *had* been running off to elope, more or less. But it was not the sort of elopement recognized by law and, indeed, it was derided by the religions. He and Reginald worked in the same village and had met without wanting anything from the encounter at all. Yet eventually, they decided to try being together somewhere new. The revelations were stunning in their ordinariness. What had happened could happen to anyone.

Once settled with his tea, Reginald had not held back.

"He intended to take a horse from his master and return it at the inn when he arrived there. So that it could be retrieved. But..." he had sighed. "I could not make it to the stable. An accident, I'm sure of it." He'd not let go of the ring since Ariadne handed it to him. "And he wore this... they were so expensive that I think you'd need to be very observant to notice we each had one all so costly. We could not have afforded them otherwise." With an apologetic smile, he'd added, "Nobody ever remarked upon them. What utter luck."

can hide in plain sight.”

“Were you supposed to meet him, then?” Ariadne had asked.

“Oh, yes, and when he did not arrive, I assumed the worst.”

“You did not believe he would abandon you,” Samuel had said in wonder. “Or change his mind.”

“No. I knew he would not do so,” was the equally gentle reply, recognizing like. “I made my way back after dawn and already there were people waiting for the constable.” With a deep breath, he’d specified, ‘pond. By... him.”

The person who benefited almost as much as Reginald from this was Samuel. Francis saw it on his face and watched hope blossom there. He was glad for his friend, for the world could not be so lonely as one might have made it out to be.

Ariadne began to speak after a small yawn. He looked down at her, a syllable, brought back to the present.

“Funny how we have not heard anything out of Adam,” she murmured. He kissed the top of her head. “Is it? I should think he can rest, now.” The adamant words he’d heard in his head, *He should have it*, resounded. Since last night, they’d experienced no scratching noises, no shadows, no men lingering near ponds, no floating objects, no falling figurines, no small pieces of inexpensive – but precious – jewelry appearing where they had no business to be.

Where that ring had been before the teacup, he could not guess.

Certainly not around the perimeter of the pond where he’d muddied his hands up to the wrists. Trying to find an answer took some of the maddening rightness, out of it. As he gazed at Ariadne and felt her warm body against his, he knew that if he’d had to, he would keep something symbolic until the time was right. He knew why Adam had, even if he could not explain *how* he had done so.

“Mm, he was waiting all this time to give that ring to Reginald.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it was in the pond all along? Somewhere deeper? Or would the metal not degrade, somehow?” She paused. “Even if he was wearing it, imagine it could have slipped off, somehow. Fingers get smaller as they’re... cold.” She winced.

He stroked her arm softly. “I would not begin to think I know v

was, but you are right. It could have fallen from his finger.”

“He wanted the correct person to have it,” she said wistfully. “If he had not.”

He said with a smile, “I still cannot wonder too much about what it’s like.”

“What?”

“Being a spirit.”

Ariadne sighed, her breath a comfort against his arm. “If I go first, you will find me.” He found he was not sad at the prospect of being haunted until he thought of her death itself. “But...” she continued, “I also do not know if I’d wish for you to live without me.”

“Whyever not?”

“You are not built for melancholy, Francis. It consumes you.”

“But you are?”

She arched herself up and kissed him warmly on the lips. “I would not want to see you suffer and pine, especially if I could do nothing about it. I would save scratch on some walls or make a room smell of rosewater.”

“Poor Anne,” he thought. It had been a while since he’d smelled her. Syrupy, rosy harbinger, and he hoped that meant she was settled. “I know, not, but sadness is the price of deep love in the end. I am not scared of it, and not said. He thought of Reginald, who still seemed as smitten with Ariadne as they had been before his death. “And since we cannot escape it, we must concentrate on love instead of thinking of what might be beyond us. I do not mean to know, I think.”

“Anyway, I do suppose you could remarry.”

He beamed at her, teasing in equal measure. “I thought it would be unlikely for you. At my age? I would be ancient by such a time, darling.”

“Is that the only thing that would hinder you?”

“No,” he said. “I have never found another person who has made me happy simply by being themselves. You are the only one who has.” He had known her from the earliest days of their acquaintance in Gold House, back when he had come to set her free and she would not leave.

Would he? For a small moment, she looked relieved enough to cry. He recalled the first time he’d whisked them off – to rest, to forget. But in truth, neither was necessary, nor perhaps it was more apt to say rest might take many forms. Ariadne was in constant motion, and so her rest could not look like being guarded. Where would it be? For her, that would not be restful; it would be torturous.

He shook his head, kissed her softly, and set upon proving just how he could concentrate upon love itself. There was enough time here; he would savor the lifetime they had.

The End

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He shook his head, kissed her softly, and set upon proving just how well he could concentrate upon love itself. There was enough they were meant to know here; he would savor the lifetime they had.

The End

About the Author

Whitney is a bit of a wanderer and something of a bluestocking. She tells stories since childhood, when she would rewrite the endings of favorite books and movies (or add “deleted scenes” to them). When she is writing or reading, she enjoys cooking, dancing, and going for long drives with no specific destination in mind.

Literary work comes naturally to Whitney and she’s very excited pursuing her passion – rich storylines, vibrant characters, and most of all, happily ever after.

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