

Danse Macabre I

PROLOGUE

The house was too quiet.

Victoria plucked the honeyed strands of her porcelain doll's hair with her plump fingers and put the doll down, being careful not to muss her dress. On an ordinary day, she would have simply thrown the doll aside, earning a stern reprimand from her nanny, and wandered off to snatch a more entertaining toy from Evangeline, her baby sister. But this, Victoria had concluded half an hour ago, was decidedly not an ordinary day. She got up and walked around the nursery in search of some other toy that had not yet bored her to death.

Victoria had gone to sleep in one world and awakened in another. A completely alien one, it seemed. Yesterday, their cheerful nanny had read the two sisters a bedtime story—*Puss in Boots*, Victoria's favorite—and laughed while answering their questions. Today, the stout woman had not cracked a smile since she had roused her charges before dawn. She had stuffed both sisters into black bombazine dresses that scratched at the collar and wrists, brought them breakfast, and told them not to make noise or leave the room. Soon thereafter, Evangeline got a bellyache from too much strawberry jam—Victoria was proud of her ability to avoid such unpleasant outcomes—and the nanny immediately tended to her. That left the older sister on her own, without any explanation for the sudden and strange rules. Stranger still, neither their papa nor their mama had come to the nursery this morning. Perhaps, Victoria thought, staring at the scruffy face of an old teddy bear, she really had traveled to another world. And, instead of her parents, she would meet the evil queen with the poisoned apple. Or the big bad wolf with a taste for small children.

No, she thought, scowling. She dropped the bear—for a split second, its face seemed to twist into a snarl—and resumed pacing the darkened room. Her mama always said fairy tales were just silliness and fabrication, and her mama was always right. Yet, no matter how long Victoria chanted “fabrication” under her breath, unease took root in her mind and spread throughout her body. Not once in her six-year-long life had the manor house been blanketed in such profound silence. It weighed on her narrow shoulders like a heavy, rain-soaked cloak. The wind, moaning in the darkness

and hurling sleet against the windows, reminded her more and more of the howling of ravenous wolves. Her nanny wasn't coming back, she thought. And Evangeline was gone. What if fairy tales were not fabrications after all, and her little sister and the rest of the household had been spirited away by a goblin king?

Minutes ticked by on the wall clock, and Victoria's worries wound into a knot that kept growing until she could not take it any more. There was only one solution to her predicament, she concluded: she had to find her mama. Then and only then would she know for sure she was still home and not in some ghastly underground kingdom. And even if that were true, her mama would know what to do about it.

Victoria urged herself onward, the once discarded doll pressed tightly against her belly. Holding her breath, she soundlessly cracked the door open and slipped out into the hallway.

The hallway was just as dark and silent as the nursery. But, at least, the walls no longer seemed to be closing in on her, and Victoria instantly felt braver. Her nanny could give her a good beating and send her to bed without supper, but the nanny had been gone for more than an hour. So Victoria decided if the requirement that she not leave her room was not renewed, it was no longer valid. And even if it was, surely rescuing household members from trolls was more important than remaining cooped up within four walls. Mama would certainly approve of her daughter taking responsibility in this situation. But where to find her?

It took Victoria three tries to count possible locations on her fingers. Resolute and bold enough to hold her doll by only one arm, she made her way to the stairs.

Victoria found no trace of her mama in the master bedroom, the library or the second floor drawing room. The further she went, the more her uneasiness returned. By now, it resembled those black inkblots that so often ruined her handwriting exercises. The hallways had never looked so cruel. The shadows, untouched by the light of gas sconces, so hostile. She imagined one of them turning to face her, its black, toothless mouth open in a jeering grin. She hugged her doll, her hand closing over her own mouth to suppress a terrified shriek, and hurried on as fast as her short legs could carry her. She looked neither right nor left. Something was indeed amiss, but suddenly she no longer wanted to find out what it was. She just wanted her mama.

After searching for what felt like hours, even days, Victoria heard the most wonderful sound in the whole world: her mama's voice.

Victoria could not make out what was said. The words were muffled and cut off, as if by a sword. But none of that mattered. She forgot her troubles and flew toward the sound of the voice, her small booted feet pattering against the floor. Mama would make the maids turn up the lights, she thought. Forbid the nanny to lock us in the nursery. And, with a wave of her hand, disperse the stupor that had drawn the mansion and its inhabitants into itself like the insects sealed inside Aunt Lenora's amber brooch. Mama would make everything right.

“I am so sorry, my lady.”

Victoria pressed against the wall, trying to blend in like a chameleon. The lizard that Gregory, one of her papa's well traveled friends who had once described. She instinctively knew she should not be hearing a single word of this conversation. She should turn around and sneak back the way she had come and pretend she had not taken a single step out of the nursery. But the feeling the questions she had been agonizing over since waking up would be answered here and now was just as strong. Curiosity won out. She tiptoed across the hall and hid inside a window niche, separated from the corridor by a heavy velvet curtain. There would be no trouble as long as she was not seen. She only wanted to find out why her mama was talking to a strange man and what he was sorry about.

Silence stretched through the hallway. Thinking the conspirators had slipped through a wall, Victoria peeked around the curtain's edge. From her hiding place, she could only make out blurred silhouettes, but that was better than nothing at all. A single illuminated curl of auburn hair was enough to eliminate any remaining doubt about the identity of the tall, slender woman, although she did look strangely worn and pale. The back of the man was covered with a long woolen cloak, but Victoria felt confident that she had not ever seen him before. And that she did not want to see him ever again.

“Such is our duty,” her mama said, and then took a deep, shaky breath. In her right hand, she clutched a white embroidered handkerchief. But her eyes were dry, hard and empty. An involuntary shudder crept up Victoria's back, and she hugged the doll tighter.

“Are you here for him already?”

The broad-shouldered man bowed his head. The gas sconce scattered specks of gold onto his shining black hair that looked like pixie dust. Perhaps he had arrived

from fairyland, she thought, and had lured Mama into his trap.

“I’m afraid that is so, my lady. His time in this world has come to an end.”

“I should have been prepared for this.”

Her mama clutched the handkerchief so tightly her knuckles jutted out, almost tearing her skin. She barely moved her lips as she spoke. “The doctor warned me there was no hope, yet I—”

Her mama broke off as if she had scalded her tongue and was silent for a long time, staring into the circle of light the gas sconce cast on the wall. For a second, Victoria was afraid her mother had frozen with the rest of the manor and turned into a stone statue, but then she stood straighter than before.

“Where are they staying, then?”

The stranger did not answer, just pointed to the right. Victoria caught a glimpse of silver on his finger, but then something else captured her attention.

Her father.

Seeing him out of bed and moving on his own, Victoria was overcome with a joy her six-year-old mind could neither grasp nor describe. She stepped out of her hiding place and opened her mouth for a greeting. Then she froze before the slightest sound had left her lips. Yes, that man was her father.

Yet, at the same time, he was not.

Victoria shrank back behind the curtain, her eyes following the man while he made his way towards her mama and the stranger. Her papa walked slowly, but his step was not as unsteady as it had been lately. His back was straight, his shoulders squared, and he looked like the papa who had given his daughters piggyback rides just a few weeks ago. Although, on the surface, her father seemed to be better, his expression was lifeless. He neither smiled nor frowned, only stared straight ahead. He would probably have remained frozen on the spot had a boy in black who held him by the hand not patiently guided him along.

They stopped next to her mama and the strange man. Her mama did not so much as glance at her papa—how curious, since normally her parents never missed a chance to show affection—and fixed her eyes on the boy. Just for a moment, her eyes blazed with unusual fire. Victoria withdrew deeper into the niche. A second later, the flame was swallowed by emptiness.

“He has grown.”

The black-haired boy remained impassive, as if unaware that he was the subject of the conversation. The broad-shouldered man nodded.

“He is a marvelously apt student. This is his second independent journey. I am merely accompanying him to ensure nobody starts to question his age and abilities.” The stranger grasped the boy's shoulder. The boy did not seem to notice. “Your husband is in good hands, my lady.”

Her mama's chin twitched, and she bit her lip, violating one of her own strict rules: “A real lady never bites her lips, Victoria. Your mouth will become crooked, and then nobody will want to look at you anymore.”

“Then do what you must.”

The cloaked man bowed low and walked away first, heading toward the end of the hallway, where a gas sconce had burned out and shadows were thick and dark. The boy followed, holding her papa by the hand. It was then that Victoria realized two things: the strangers were taking Papa away, and he would not be coming back.

Up to this point, fear had hovered just out of the reach of conscious thought. Now its grip on Victoria tightened. She glanced anxiously at her mama, not understanding why she did nothing to send the unwelcome visitors away and pull her papa from their thieving hands. Her mama stood with her back to Victoria, as still as an ice statue, her eyes following the retreating trio. Victoria noticed nearly imperceptible shivers shook her shoulders. All this time, her papa was moving further and further away.

Choking on the overwhelming despair, Victoria threw caution to the wind and left her cover. A single thought filled her mind: if I do not act now, I will never see Papa again. And she knew “never” meant a very long time.

Victoria did not get the chance to call out or take a step towards the trio. As if sensing her intentions, the black-haired boy turned his head and looked straight into her eyes, pressing a finger to his lips. Not quite understanding why, she stopped and closed her mouth. Both sorrow and fear receded like a wave returning to the sea after reaching the shore. As she stared into the boy's dark, almost black eyes for a moment, she believed that everything was all right.

Then the trio melted into the shadows and vanished from sight.

Her mama sank back against the wall and choked out a heart-wrenching sob. Victoria remained rooted to the spot from which she had last seen her papa and began

working out ways to visit him.

CHAPTER ONE

In which questions are asked, decisions are made, and dancing slippers are donned

“Good morning, Mother.”

I quietly closed the door to the study and turned to face the woman sitting behind the heavy, carved mahogany desk. The servants had probably strained their backs lugging it upstairs.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“I did, thank you.”

The curtains were drawn, and the table lamp was dimmed. This meant Baroness Sarah Jane Ellington had another headache, but etiquette forbade complaining. She continued writing as if alone in the room. Sighing, I shifted from one foot to the other. I was used to being ignored, even forgotten. Still, every time it happened, disappointment pricked my heart like a thorn. What was I doing wrong?

On any other day, I would have accepted the curt rejection and left my mother alone with the taxes she had taken on after Papa’s passing. Not this time, though. I had been waiting for too long to leave without being heard out.

“Mother, I need to speak with you.”

My mother turned the page and dipped her pen into the inkwell, tracing smooth loops and arcs on yellowish paper. I watched the pen dance with awe and envy. If I tried hard enough, my handwriting looked like something a crow might have scrawled with its foot. On other occasions it was completely illegible.

“It can wait.”

I heard the words she left unsaid: “Stop disturbing my work and go away.” And underneath that, softer still: “Why can’t you disappear and never come back?” I bit my lip but did not relent. Not this time. If Mother did not let me to broach the sensitive subject discretely, I would have to get straight to the point.

“Mother, I will be leaving for Upper London in two weeks time.”

I paused, waiting for a sharp inquiry regarding my business in the capital. Or an immediate prohibition to leave the manor house where I was born. At the very least, I expected a perplexed stare. When the only thing that broke the silence was the scratch of pen on paper, I cleared my throat.

“I am enrolling in the Academy.”

Mother ended the sentence with a period, put her pen back in the inkwell, and finally looked at me. I was glad she had woken up. Never mind the ashy tint her face had taken on in the gloom of the study and the cheeks hollow enough to cause health concerns. Sparks lit her blue eyes with a fire that had been long absent. Eyes were the only feature I had inherited from my mother. The rest—my tall, slender frame, wide mouth and pointed nose—came from my father.

“Do you realize what you're saying?”

The tone of her voice was enough to rattle my resolve, but I gritted my teeth and fought the instinct to withdraw. I had been preparing for this moment for years. It was too late to give it up.

“Yes, Mother. This semester, I will enroll in the Academy as a first year—”

“Those are the most ludicrous words that ever come from your mouth.” My mother did not shout. She did not even raise her voice, yet each word contained such venom I should have dropped dead where I stood. Mother would hardly have been so cross if I had announced I wanted to join a traveling circus.

“Go find your sister. If you have time to concoct such silliness, you have time to prepare for the ball.”

Mother bent back over her notes. The refusal was clear even without a finger pointed at the door. However, I gathered all the resolve I had in me and did not budge. This was not the time to behave like a well-bred lady.

“Mother, I am serious. Don't you want to learn what really happened to the late Lord Ellington?”

Mother's thin hand froze. Black ink spread around the sharp tip of the pen, swallowing the half-written word. When she spoke, her voice was so strangled I barely heard her.

“Lord Ellington died of pneumonia. That is all there is to that.”

I clenched my hands so tightly the nails I had painstakingly manicured for the ball dug into my flesh. This was neither the first nor the tenth or even hundredth time we had had this discussion. The outcome was always the same. I mentioned uncovering the true circumstances of my father's death; my mother repeated the story about pneumonia. We then squabbled a little and then went about our day until the next clash occurred. Not today, though.

“Then, who was that man you were talking with the night Father died? And the boy who took him away?”

“Let this be the last time I hear about this.”

I shivered at the singular chill in my mother's voice. Goosebumps appeared on my skin.

“Otherwise, I'll have no choice but to send you off to Bedlam.”

Although I had come with a rather militant attitude, I recognized the threat. And since I had no wish to spend the rest of my life locked up in a lunatic asylum, there was only one way out.

“Good day to you, Mother.” Straight and stiff as a candle, I turned and glided toward the door. “I hope to see you at lunch.”

The barely perceptible nod indicated Mother would forget lunch and stay buried in work she should not even be doing until the ball started. Sighing, I closed the door with a soft click, although my mother would hardly notice if I had slammed it with all my might. There were rumors circulating in the manor, rumors about the state of Mother's health. Mere days ago, I overheard two maids gossiping their mistress would soon be knocking on Death's door. Seeing my mother like this, I could not shake the feeling they were right.

Still, Mother's health—or lack thereof—was hardly her main problem. I turned to leave and finally let my shoulders slump. Such atrocious posture would drive my governess into an early grave. This was my one shot, my one way of discovering what had really happened on that wintry night when my father had passed away after a year of lingering on the brink of death. Ever since then, Mother refused to mention it, leaving me without any guidance, plan or way to move on.

“You didn't really believe she'd let you go, did you?” I said to myself.

No matter how hard I wanted to deny it, the derisive voice was right. Even as I stepped inside the study, I expected the conversation to end in failure. This was not the first time my mother had thwarted my intentions; this time, however, I could justify my actions. If my insane plan came to fruition, it would bring irreversible humiliation not only onto my own head but also upon the entire Ellington family, including the relatives on my mother's side, the Carmodies. The reason was simple.

Women were prohibited from studying at the Royal Academy of Magic.

I did not know the origin of this rule, but did know the medieval founders had

deemed men alone fit to be educated in magic. Until now, there had been not a single progressive mind to argue that female students could be just as good as male students in learning mysterious skills such as battle magic, construction of magical formulae and healing. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. As it was, though, I could not have cared less about the Academy's curriculum. I would not have had any interest in the school at all if the place did not hold the answers to the innumerable riddles surrounding my father's demise.

Perhaps that was a stretch, I grudgingly admitted as I turned a corner and lifted the hem of my wide skirt to avoid tripping over all those ruffles of pale green silk that threatened to send me tumbling down the stairs. There was no proof that someone at the Academy could solve the mystery I had been struggling to untangle for years. Still, considering that before his death my father had been the chancellor of the school, this was the logical place to start. It was likely someone among his colleagues had seen or heard something that could point me in the right direction.

No matter how hard my mother tried to prove otherwise, I did not believe for a second that it had been pneumonia that had robbed me of my father. The reason behind my doubt was a scrap of memory from my childhood. One night, my father had been sitting by the fireplace, my sister and me perched on his knees, as he gazed thoughtfully into the flames consuming the oak logs. "Magic is a dangerous business," he had said. These words had become lodged in my head, although then I had had no idea what he was talking about. "Magic can raise someone up in glory or strike them down, and there is no knowing which of the two will come to pass."

Now, twelve years later, aimlessly wandering the halls and getting in the way of maids busy preparing the manor for the evening ball, I wondered whether my father had been talking about himself that night. What if he had known what was would happen and had tried to warn his daughters? Perhaps he had already been expecting strangers to come for him, known he would never come home to his family again. If only I could ask him.

Magic could cure fatal illnesses, turn iron into gold, and build whole cities in the air, yet it could not raise the dead. I had to look for the answers on my own, and the first step was to devise another way of getting inside the Academy.

"There you are!"

I turned to see a fast-approaching mass of checkered cotton and unruly dark

brown curls. I took a wary step back, but the apparition stopped almost a full foot from me. I found myself staring down into sparkling almond-shaped eyes.

“And here I thought you'd gone and dropped over the edge. But then I remembered I was not in London anymore. How silly of me!”

The shorter girl laughed, then wove her arm through mine before I could object and swung both our arms back around.

“Where are you off to, wandering on your own?”

“I just went to check on Mother, Lottie. She didn't join us at breakfast.” I fell into step beside my friend, doing my best to ignore the prick of jealousy. For some unknown reason, my mother had denied her daughters the opportunity to participate in the Season—or, as my old nanny called it, the Marriage Market—for the second year in row. Charlotte Soloway's parents were much more lenient. My cousin had spent the entire summer in Upper London with a friend and arrived at the Ivy House just two days ago, saying she would not miss Aunt Sarah's ball for anything in the world. I had reasons to suspect Lottie's enthusiasm had a certain connection with my older brother Albert's return from India. I concealed both my assumptions and my desire to live at least a day in my cousin's shoes and instead focused on enjoying her company. My cousin had a way of lightening the day with her presence alone.

She did not look particularly light at the moment, though.

“I know it's not my place, but Aunt Sarah doesn't look...” Lottie trailed off, lines creasing her smooth forehead. I could almost see her weigh and discard comments of varying levels of politeness, until she finally decided on, “She doesn't look well. Have you suggested she speak with a physician?”

I answered with a weary look, and Lottie's usually smiling face clouded even more. Clicking her tongue, she turned her eyes back to the hallway.

“That bad, you think?”

I did not have to explain. My cousin lived in a manor a few miles away yet spent enough time at the Ivy House to notice changes in the mistress's appearance and behavior. A few years ago, Lottie had joked that if Aunt Sarah kept it up, the Ivy House would get its own ghost, just like any self-respecting manor should. Now that my mother's condition showed no improvement, Lottie did not find it amusing anymore. No one found it amusing. I could not recall the last time the walls rang with real laughter.

Before Papa died, I guess.

Before I could count the times I had asked after my mother's health or begged her to see a physician, an encouraging press on my elbow pulled me from my reverie. Lottie's smile was blinding.

“Come along now! The ball is mere hours away. We must get ready!”

In truth, they had more than a couple of hours before the ball began, and it was far too early to begin getting ready, but I did not protest. For Lottie, this was an excuse to take our minds off our ills—her worried glance said as much. I decided I would rather think about dresses and jewelry than bemoan my situation, so even if my smile was not as genuine as Lottie's, at least it was sincere.

“Let me guess—you arrived with your whole wardrobe, didn't you?”

It turned out to be true, and soon I found myself up to my elbows in muslin, silk, and taffeta, deliberating whether it would be a tragedy if the gloves did not exactly match the color of the dress. Lottie thought it could create a fascinating effect that would draw attention, whereas I countered that although it would most assuredly attract attention, colors should be coordinated. If not, it would turn the wearer into a laughing stock. Mercifully, our debate was purely theoretical, as I had had matching evening gloves and pearl-studded slippers made to complement my cream-colored dress. I spread the gown out on the bed to check for wrinkles. Lottie ceased digging through her jewelry box and glanced first at the dress, then at me, her eyes wide.

“Please don't tell me you plan on wearing that!”

I gave my gown a puzzled look, trying to understand why it had earned such severe criticism. The dress had been tailored specifically for this ball, trimmed with lace and delicate satin ribbons. It was without doubt the most beautiful gown I had ever owned.

“What's wrong with it?”

“You'll blend in with the décor, that's what's wrong. No one will notice you in this dress, and if they do, they'll promptly forget you. You need something that brings out your eyes. Wait here!”

Without further explanation, Lottie vanished through the door that joined their bedrooms. I heard rustling sounds and peevish grumbling. So Lottie had been serious, but that hardly excused the fuss. Standing up, I held the dress in front of me and walked to the mirror, head tilted. Yes, perhaps this shade of cream did make my skin

look sallow and dulled my eyes. Still, I had no reason to complain. When I had shown my dress to my mother, a ghost of a smile playing over her lips. That was a sure sign the dress was perfect.

Regrettably, Lottie did not share her opinion.

I was beginning to assume my cousin had become lost in her own wardrobe or stumbled upon another world when the door opened wider and a heap of pale blue muslin shuffled in.

“Help me set it down!”

I hurried to assist her, afraid my cousin might trip and hurt herself. The only place we could lay out the new dress was the bed, which was already occupied by the rejected cream gown. I shot a quick glance around the room.

“We could hang it on the back of a chair—”

Lottie threw the gown on top of mine. I cried out and ran over to salvage what I could.

“Are you crazy? You'll crumple it!”

“So what? You might as well stuff this rag back into your closet, the deeper the better.” Lottie gave an unrepentant shrug and started arranging the ruffles of the blue dress. “Look at what I brought you!”

Shaking my head, I gave up on any further effort to save my poor dress. I knew this tone. Lottie would not relent until I listened to everything she had to say and praised her resourcefulness.

“Sometimes I wonder why I let you inside my room.”

“Oh, quit complaining! You'll thank me later.”

Lottie smoothed the folds of the gown and, lifting it up by the puffy, cloudlike sleeves, handed it to me.

“See for yourself! If you wear this, suitors will be lining up at your door.”

“I'm not looking for suitors,” I muttered, taking the dress and returning to the mirror, careful not to drag the hem on the floor. Behind me, Lottie sniffed contemptuously.

“But you should. You're already eighteen, my dear girl, and you're not getting any younger or more desirable. It is bad enough that you're not allowed to take part in the Season. You must seize every opportunity.”

“You're one to talk! I don't see a fiancé by your side, either—if you haven't

made a trip to Gretna Green to marry in secret, that is.”

In the mirror, I saw Lottie's cheeks turn pink. She did not let herself be thrown off the track that easily, though.

“Just so you know, I received three marriage proposals this Season.”

“So why didn't you accept any of them?”

Now Lottie faltered. Her blush deepened.

“They...They were not worthy of me,” she said a little too loudly and ducked her head, straightening lace on the gown. I suppressed a smile. So I was right, after all. I should probably find a good time and subtly question my brother.

“In any case, we're talking about you, not me. So quit squirming and look at the dress.”

Several apt remarks were on the tip of my tongue, yet I took pity on my cousin and directed her attention to the gown in my hands. The sooner I gave in to Lottie's wishes, the sooner I could salvage my own dress, which I still intended to wear.

Yet the longer I stared at the mirror, the more I liked the dress Lottie had selected for me. It was thin muslin, blue so pale it reminded me of ice crystals. The gown was not as elaborate as my own, decorated with only a few rows of lace and ribbons. Still, the fashionable cut of the skirt and the sleeves that offered a teasing glimpse of my shoulders would attract more attention than a mountain of pearls. I smiled without meaning to, and then took a step back, noting how the color of the fabric emphasized the brightness of my eyes. Perhaps my cousin was right, after all.

“Look at you, you're in love! It's decided, then.”

Lottie gathered up the cream dress from the bed and, disregarding my faint protest, and stowed it deep inside the closet.

“You are wearing this, and don't you dare complain!”

I quashed the impulse to save the cream gown and turned back to my reflection. My cousin might be correct, but I was not going to admit it out loud. It was not as if I could step out of the room dressed in this muslin fantasy, anyway.

“I have no matching gloves or shoes.”

“Do you think I would have offered you this dress if I had no matching accessories? Honestly, you underestimate me.”

Lottie sighed with exaggerated hurt. “I know how obsessed you are with matching your ensemble. Wait here!”

I was not about to counter that. Over the years, I had determined that whenever my cousin took up a task, she was ready for anything. Until now, I had deemed Lottie's incessant planning useless; now my opinion began to shift. Had I taken a page out of my cousin's book instead of making fun of her, I would not have gotten myself into this mess. And even if I had, I would have found another solution instead of wallowing in misery. Then there would be no barriers to my enrolling in the Academy, and I would not have to worry about missing registration.

“Okay, talk to me. What is bothering you?”

My head shot up, and I met my cousin's eyes from across the room. Lottie was standing in the doorway, holding not only slippers and gloves but also a shawl. All the playfulness was gone from her face, and I suppressed a shudder. That expression meant Lottie would pull the answer out of me, even if she had to use tongs. Turning away, I stared at the mirror until I had composed my face into a mask of cool indifference.

“Why would something be bothering me?”

“Because I have known you since we were crawling around the nursery in nappies. Others might fall for your pretenses, but not me.” Lottie set the accessories on the nightstand next to a well-worn copy of *Jane Eyre*, and crossed her arms.

“Talk.”

I turned my back to my cousin and carefully laid the ice blue dress on the bed, smoothing out each fold to stall for time. I had to say something. Lottie would not just let this go, and she would likely catch my lies at once. Still, was I ready to unveil the truth? We had a strong bond, yet I found it difficult to answer this question. Lottie and I were closer than sisters, and I had never kept anything from her, but still...My wish to join the Academy and untangle the mystery that maybe—just maybe—did not actually exist was a clear sign of lunacy. If I stepped into my mother's shoes, I could even justify her willingness to send me to Bedlam. No sane person would think like this.

But since my father's death, I had not been exactly sane.

“It's a long story.” My chances of wriggling out of a response exhausted, I circled the enormous bed and set the pale blue pearl-studded slippers on the floor. “Be a dear and call the maid. We should start getting dressed if we don't want to be late.”

Lottie did not move. She, too, knew it was too early to worry about being late.

“I’ve got time.”

I lifted the hem of my gown and, after removing one of my everyday shoes, tried on a dancing slippers. If I were to lie, I had to think quickly, but to what point? My mother had made it clear she forbade me to even considering enrolling. I had neither the influence nor the money to repeat the Marchioness of Winchester's feat and become the second female student of magic in the history of the school. Irrked, I kicked the second shoe off my foot. The doors to the Academy were closed to ordinary women.

But not men.

The realization hit me like a boulder. My thoughts twisted and turned and rushed ahead of me, and still everything was clear as a moonlit night. The solution had been in front of my nose the entire time, but I was too blind to see. I would have to become a man.

There was a disconcerting cough by the door.

“Should I be worried about your mental health?”

“No.” I slipped on the second dancing shoe and stood, finally facing my cousin. My lips formed a wide grin, brought on both by Lottie's rattled expression and my epiphany. “No, everything is perfectly fine.”

Lottie shifted from one foot to the other and glanced over her shoulder, as if expecting me to fish an axe out from under the bed and attack her.

“What is going on, then?”

I thought my face would split open in an ear-to-ear grin. I crossed the room in confident strides, half-aware the slippers were chafing my feet a little, and caught the frozen Lottie by the shoulders.

“I am going to enroll in the Academy!”

If my cousin did not flee, I was certain she would scream for help and contact Bedlam without waiting for my mother. But Lottie did not even look surprised.

“So you finally thought of that. I was wondering how long it would take.”

I barely held it together, staring at my cousin. Had I believed Reverend Fitzalan's sermons, which I was obliged to hear each Sunday morning, I would have thought Lottie was possessed by demons. But since I no more believed in demons than in other fantastic creatures made up to frighten children, I was determined to find a logical explanation.

“Um.” I fidgeted, unable to meet my cousin's tranquil gaze. “I did not, hmm, mean the St. Clarence Ladies' College.”

“Of course you didn't.”

“Oh. I just wanted to make sure we were in agreement.”

For some time, the silence in the bedchamber was almost palpable. I was still holding my cousin by the shoulders, and Lottie still made no attempt to escape, and I still could not fathom how that was possible. When I had informed my mother of my plans, I had barely avoided a one-way trip to the madhouse, whereas my friend acted like it was the most reasonable decision in the world. In the end, the questions ran out of room in my head and tumbled out in disjointed babble.

“How did you—I didn't—It was so—”

“My dear girl, you are hardly a criminal mastermind. You did your best, though, I'll give you that.” Lottie disentangled herself from my grip and, sitting on the edge of the bed, patted a spot next to her. “You play your part well, but I've heard you quarrel with your brother about uncovering the truth. And I know how deeply you loved your father. Don't worry,” she added quickly, noticing my shock. “Your secret is safe with me. I even want to help you.”

I was overcome with sudden dizziness. Feeling my knees turn to water, I stumbled across the room and fell back on the bed beside Lottie.

“Why?”

“You really do underestimate me.” My cousin stuck her nose in the air in feigned indignation. “I would think I at least deserve a ‘thank you’ and unrestricted favors in the future.”

“Of course,” I immediately agreed and only then realized the favors were unspecified. Now that confusion was receding, more important questions emerged.

“Why would you help me? You don't even know what I have in mind!”

“Because I find this rather fascinating,” my cousin replied. “And because you are my best friend. Do you really think I would let you get in trouble all on your own? As for what you have in mind, I expect you to tell me everything. Otherwise it'll be taxing to help you.”

I opened my mouth but, realizing my voice had deserted me, simply shook my head. Sometimes I had no idea how I deserved a friend like Lottie. My cousin was right. Without an accomplice, executing the plan would become more complicated

and help would be more than welcome. Still, Lottie did not yet know the half of it.

“All right, I'll tell you everything. But you mustn't interrupt.”

Lottie locked her lips with an imaginary key and threw it over her shoulder.

Since I had run out of options, I took a deep breath and, for the first time in my life, spoke willingly of the strange circumstances surrounding my father's death. From the sudden onset of the illness to the strangers present at his passing. Of my mother's reluctance to acknowledge the incident and, finally, of my decision to join the Royal Academy of Magic to understand what had really happened twelve winters ago. True to her word, Lottie did not make a sound while I spoke. Instead of disbelief or unease, she showed genuine excitement. Only when I explained how I was would sneak into the Academy did Lottie's face cloud over, yet she held back her opinion until the story was finished.

“I think you are going overboard,” Lottie said after a stretch of silence. I worried that my friend would disappear like lightning. “It sounds fantastic. An act this heroic deserves to be put into song and praised for generations, but is this circus really necessary? I understand disguising yourself adds drama, but you won't be the first woman to walk the halls of the Academy. The Marchioness of Winchester did not trade skirts for breeches to obtain her diploma.”

“I need the diploma as much as a cat needs a saddle,” I replied, quashing the small voice that suggested it would not be so bad to become a certified mage. “Trust me, I would never set foot within a mile of the Academy if I had a choice. Yes, they would admit me if I pressed hard enough, but they would avoid me like a leper. I wouldn't learn anything that way. I have to blend in, earn the trust of students and teachers alike. It's the only way to the truth.”

Instead of arguing, Lottie nodded her head, as if she realized how foolish it would be to thwart me. Or maybe I really had underestimated her.

“All right, so you masquerade as a boy. If you are careful and inconspicuous enough, perhaps you won't be discovered. But how are you going to enroll?”

I frowned. I had only given passing thought to that stage of my plot. All of my brainpower had been focused on what I had to accomplish once inside the school.

“I'll go to Upper London and head for the Academy to be entered into the registry—”

“See, this is exactly why you need me. Alone, you would never get past the

perimeter.” Lottie shook her head, giving me a look so patient it had to be feigned. “When you register, you will be asked to provide parish records and your family Bible to verify your identity. You do have these documents. As a female.”

Fine, so I had underrated Lottie. I promised not to make this mistake twice.

“What do you propose?”

“You need another conspirator, someone who could falsify your papers.” Lottie's eyes came alive with devilish sparks. “I wouldn't mind doing it myself, but an associate of an incontestable reputation would be much more beneficial.”

This time I did not have to wonder long. Her sly grin would have made the Cheshire Cat proud.

“I think I know who to ask.”

[End]