

Rory had not slept well the night before. He never slept well when he remembered the night he'd been cursed by the witch or the day seven months ago when...when his life had changed. Coming home to Lilacfall Abbey brought all the memories back.

By dawn, he was so tired he pulled a pillow over his head and fell into a restless sleep. That was when his valet came in and said, "Pardon the interruption, my lord."

"Go away, Chaffer," Rory said from under the pillow.

"I would, my lord, but there is a problem."

"Tell Mr. Notley to stay out of the wine cellar."

"It's not Mr. Notley this time, my lord. It's your daughter."

For a long moment, Rory's mind went completely blank. It was a clean slip of foolscap. He didn't have a daughter. But then he remembered Frances. Rory pushed the pillow off his head and sat. "What's she done now?"

"She's missing, my lord."

"What do you mean? She's seven. She can't be missing." Rory stood and looked for his dressing gown. Chaffer handed it to him.

"Mary was sleeping in the nursery—" Chaffer paused as Rory splashed water on his face from the basin.

"Go on."

"When she awoke this morning, Miss Frances was gone."

"Get me something to wear, Chaffer. Not that coat. Yes, that shirt and breeches. Where has the staff searched?" He paused while the shirt tumbled over his head. "The staff *has* searched?"

"Yes, my lord. They have searched the entire house—"

“Forget the cuffs, Chaffer. The breeches. Hurry.”

“—even Mr. Notley’s chambers were tossed, as he was found sleeping on the floor of the library.”

“What about the attic?” Rory fastened the fall of the breeches, pushed his hair back and out of his eyes, and shoved his feet into the boots Chaffer proffered.

“I will have to ask Gables, my lord.”

“How long has she been missing?”

“I couldn’t say, my lord.”

But Rory was already walking out the door of his bedchamber and bellowing orders. “Gables,” he said to the butler. “Has the attic been searched? Where’s Mary? When was the child discovered missing?”

The staff swarmed around him like bees to the hive. They buzzed and bickered until he couldn’t separate the words of one from the next. Meanwhile, he stomped through the house, throwing doors open and roaring for Frances. When he came to the library, he found Munro Notley face down on the rug. At Rory’s shout for Frances, Notley looked up and gave him a bleary-eyed glare. “Has the war come to England?” he croaked.

“No. I’m searching for my daughter.”

“Haven’t seen her. Go away.”

Rory closed the library door again and continued searching. When no one had found her after an hour, Rory began to consider the possibility that she had fled the house. Where would she have gone? How far could she have traveled? He paused at one of the windows and peered out into the lawn.

And then he peered closer, putting his hand on the windowpane and narrowing his eyes. “I’ve found her,” he said. The staff tripped to move out of his way as he marched to the front door, yanked it open, and stood in the doorway. “What the devil is the meaning of this?” he shouted.

Even in his exhausted and panicked state, he could admit shouting had been a mistake. His focus had been on Frances, and she jumped and shrank back at his voice. Then he turned his attention to the woman with her. At first, he assumed it was one of his servants, but he’d never seen this woman before.

He would have remembered.

This woman didn’t jump or shrink back from his shouting, which further proved she was no servant. She was dressed better than a servant, in a green gown with a square neckline and a bit of gauze at the throat for modesty. She had a green umbrella and a green hat to match. Her hair was bright red, and she’d tucked it neatly under the hat.

Then there was her face. Her lips were pursed in disapproval, and her emerald eyes flashed at him. As she neared, she raised her brows in obvious condemnation. “Is this he?” she said, looking down at Frances, who had her doll in one hand and the woman’s hand in her other.

“That’s the cruel prince,” Frances said. “I warned you.”

“Thank you for that.” The woman cleared her throat. “My lord.” She gave a quick curtsy. “Miss Frances, Harriet, and I were just coming in for breakfast.”

Now it was Rory’s turn to start. Harriet? He shook his head. “Where have you been?” he said to Frances. Then to the woman in green, “Who are you?”

“I am Genevieve Brooking, my lord. I’ve come to speak to Mrs. Mann about the position.”

Rory looked behind him, found his housekeeper in the crowd of servants, and beckoned her forward. “What position?”

“The governess position,” Miss Brooking replied calmly as though she always appeared unannounced at people’s doors with runaway children in tow.

“What are you doing walking about the grounds with my daughter?” he said. “We have been searching the house for her this past hour.”

Miss Brooking glanced at Frances, and a look that spoke volumes passed between them. “I think it would be best if we discussed that in private.”

“You think—” Rory sputtered and couldn’t seem to form any further syllables.

“Right now, Miss Frances is quite famished. Harriet too.” She indicated the doll, and Rory was thankful at least one piece of this muddle snapped into place. But why was a grown woman speaking about a doll as though she were alive?

“I’ll take her into breakfast,” Mrs. Mann said, reaching out for Frances’s hand. But Frances drew back, using Miss Brooking as a sort of shield.

“I won’t go unless Genevieve comes with me.”

“Don’t argue, child,” Mrs. Mann said, grasping for Frances, who simply jumped behind Miss Brooking. Miss Brooking raised a hand, and to Rory’s surprise, Mrs. Mann straightened and waited. He watched in wonder as Miss Brooking knelt on the ground, no doubt dirtying her dress, and spoke quietly to Frances, her hands on the girl’s shoulders. Then she lifted the doll and spoke to it as well, which made Frances giggle.

The sound shot straight through Rory. It was a sound he had never heard from his child, a sound that did something to his heart before he pushed whatever the feeling was back down

again. The little girl nodded at Miss Brooking, then, just as primly as you please, stepped away from her and held out her hand to Mrs. Mann, allowing herself to be easily escorted away.

Rory watched his housekeeper lead his daughter to the dining room then turned back to Miss Brooking, who was dusting off her skirts. “Should I wait for Mrs. Mann or come back another time?” she asked.

Rory simply stared at her.

“About the position,” she clarified.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said. “You’re hired.”