
Chapter 1

The lane—that had started out to be wide enough for a carriage—had become a path, then a footpath, and was now something animals probably used, although not recently, apparently.

As it had become narrower and narrower, so had the foliage around it become thicker and thicker, such that, now, it was impossible for her to move through it without being touched by bushes and trees, which, when it had begun, while the sun was up, was fine. But now that she ventured forward with naught but the moon to guide her, she began to wonder if she oughtn't have heeded the advice of the coach's driver.

He'd tipped his hat as he'd handed her the pitifully small valise that held everything she owned in the world. "That way lies nothing good, young miss. You should ride on, if you can afford it, stay the night at the Owl's Head Inn down the road a piece, and come back in the morning, if you must—preferably with a well-equipped, strong, brave man who can talk you out of such foolishness before you each meet a bad end. Like as not, that's what's going to happen if you venture into those woods."

"But I have to—I'm going to live with a distant relative, Lord Statler—at Wildwoods Manor."

The mere mention of her destination caused alarm to register on the big man's face before he covered it up. Nonetheless, he assured her, "I've lived in these parts all of my life, Miss Little. I've never heard of a Wildwoods Manor. I'd be glad to put you up myself at my humble home rather than knowing you'll be on a fool's errand to find that place."

She tipped a particularly pretty, delicate face up to him, delicate wisps of baby hair blowing in the light breeze. "I thank you for your kind offer, Mr. Holt. Truly, I do. And I don't doubt your knowledge. But I am quite certain that I am where I should be, and I am expected this evening. I wouldn't want to worry Lord Statler."

With that, she'd set off on her own, assuming that the path that Y'd off the main road was heading in the correct direction.

Mr. Holt watched after her until she disappeared from sight, just in case she changed her mind, shrugging fatalistically when she didn't. Then he clicked to the horses to set them on their way again, content that he had done everything he could as a good Christian to see to her welfare. It was no skin off his nose if she couldn't see her way to accepting his offer of assistance.

The longer she walked down the rougher and rougher path, the more she wished she'd not worn her winter coat to do so, but then, anything less than that and she might well have ended up with tears or stains on her dress beneath, she realized.

And the further away she got from the main road—and the relative civilization that the stage from Bellevue represented—the stranger Miss Mercy Little felt. Not sick, exactly, but weaker, somehow, in the flesh, in a way she'd never experienced. She realized with a start that her skin had become inordinately sensitized—her nipples tight buds beneath the corset that commenced to rubbing against them most distractingly. She wondered if she was becoming ill, because there was also a slickness between her

legs that she knew shouldn't have been there. Her monthly wasn't for nearly ten days or so, not that she'd ever been what could be considered regular, unlike most of her friends—or those who were willing to discuss such improper subjects, anyway. They were all like clockwork, or so they said.

None of them had ever experienced monthlies accompanied by blinding headaches, crippling cramps, or the following of veritable floods of blood, so much so that she became pale and weak from it, and more often than not was confined to bed for several days because of it.

And always when she could least afford to be so encumbered, seeing as she was the only support her poor ailing mother had. The older she got, the more it had become a trial to survive it every four weeks.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she forced them back. Mama was gone now—in a better place, where her myriad maladies were gone, and she was free to be the person she should have been—mobile, healthy, and happy rather than debilitated, crippled and—in the end—quite miserable.

It was she who had suggested, however reluctantly, that—when it was all over and done with—as she had no close living relatives, she should go live with her father's distant cousin, Hugh Danvers, who was Lord Statler. Indeed, she had posted a letter from her mother to the man—who was a stranger to her but with whom her father had remained in contact, if sporadically—some months ago, when it had looked as if this was the last summer she'd see.

They'd received a short, terse reply of just three unwelcoming words, "If she must."

And then, Mercy had sent another one, herself, when she'd set out.

She'd never met Lord Statler, and her mother had nary a good word to say about him except mysterious claims she must've gotten from when Father had read her his letters—that he was

too smart for his own good, and he dabbled in things he oughtn't, in the name of science.

That was one of the reasons why her mother had refused to allow her to be educated—particularly to be able to read—although her father had taught her to do so surreptitiously, usually while his wife had taken to her bed with yet another ailment, as she did so frequently. But they kept that their secret, and she had continued to do so even after her beloved father had died.

Now the valise she carried was mostly full of the books she and her father had managed to accumulate, rather than clothing. She really only had a day dress, as well as her black Sunday best, which she was wearing in deference to mourning her mother, and also because she was to meet someone who had been special to her father, and possibly his son, if he was still living there. Mother hadn't been sure about that, as they hadn't kept in touch after Papa's death.

Both of her garments were barely passable cast offs from her mother that had been hemmed and patched and repaired and altered till there was precious little left of the original dresses, barely enough to cover her decently, anyway, making her that much more thankful for the coat. Although she loved to admire the new dresses in the shops when she was out and about, fashion wasn't something she could consider, and it certainly had passed her two garments by years ago.

The more she walked, the more sensitized she became, as if she could feel the very air against her cheeks, while its scent became more loamy and feral. Her breath began to come quickly as if she was exerting herself when the way—while not easily discernable—was hardly enough to break a sweat over, certainly not enough to make her pant as she was.

Still, Mercy persevered, certain that, around every corner, there would be the welcoming lights of her not very closest relatives' no doubt warm and welcoming manor, even as the path

itself essentially disappeared, and she had to keep moving forward on her own, with no real idea whether she was heading in the right direction.

Once the path died out, the way did become much more arduous. She found herself climbing steep hills and trying to remain upright while making her way down hillsides, some of which she ended up falling down more so than walking.

It was one of those times, when she found herself flat on her back and lay there for a moment, trying to catch her breath, that she realized with a start that was the last thing she wanted to do while in the deep woods.

All of a sudden, she was aware that there were likely wild animals in these parts, and she was terribly afraid that one of them was following her, tracking her as if she were prey. She wasn't sure why she was so certain that it was—she listened carefully, straining to hear something, and all was disconcertingly quiet—but she knew it bone deep.

Soon, her own panting wasn't the only that she heard ringing in her ears, and she would have sworn that she could hear the occasional footfall from behind—and sometimes beside—her, but always far enough away that she couldn't see what it was. Not that, in the moonlit night, the creature—whatever it was, wolf, fox, bear—would have to be that far away from her in order to remain well hidden from her.

And it did, almost teasing her with its presence as she trudged along, as if it enjoyed terrifying and terrorizing her, at times making her deliberately aware of its menacing presence, and others remaining eerily silent, as if preparing to spring at her and bring her down.

It was on the crest of one hill that she saw something hopeful. It looked like the spires of a beautiful if foreboding castle, and there was a light in one tower room, as if to guide her to it, she thought whimsically. Surely, they knew she was coming—her third cousin, multiple times removed or whatever he was, his son,

and his undoubtedly large staff—and had put a light in the window to guide her to her new home.

She set off again—exhausted by now from all of her exertions—but still buoyed by the evidence she'd seen that she had been travelling in the right direction all of this time, by some miracle.

It was a good thing she'd caught sight of it, too. By the time she found herself at the big, imposing front door to the impressive manor, she was glad there were lamps lit on and nearby it that threw light for some distance around. Whatever beast had been hunting her was seconds from leaping, she was quite sure, just as she stepped into the halo of the lamplight.

There was an enormous knocker on the door in the shape of a fearsome wolf or something like that, and it was just that much more imposing because it was in disrepair, looking deformed, somehow, and dirty, with cobwebs and such detritus forming a disgusting layer of filth over it.

She covered it with the only thing she could use—a ratty old handkerchief—knocking loudly three times, hoping she wasn't disturbing the household too badly. Mercy didn't know what time it was, exactly, but she was pretty sure that it was the middle of the night.

After waiting for what she thought was a polite amount of time, she knocked again, careful not to do so any more loudly than before, so as not to convey that she was angry or impatient that no one had answered the first time.

But the third time she had to knock, she showed no such courtesies, as she was tired, cold, and hungry, and she wanted to go inside, still looking anxiously over her shoulder every time she heard any kind of noise from the woods around her.

Still, no one came, and, in desperation, certain that she could hear a deep, throaty growl from somewhere that was entirely too close for comfort, Mercy reached for the doorknob and tried to turn it, amazed to find it yielded to her quite readily.

Although she couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was trespassing, she nonetheless entered the big hall, closing the door behind her and turning the key she found there mere seconds before she felt something slam hard up against it. The force with which it was hit nearly knocked the big slab of wood down entirely, rattling its hinges, after which there was the terrifying sound of claws being dragged across it as it shook from the power of whatever was attacking it.

That was more than enough to send her away from it, careening backwards into a blackness that was much more complete, much more enveloping than she'd experienced outside, the sound of her well-worn heels tapping and echoing with suspense in what seemed to be a great void.

Mercy whirled around, eyes filled with darkness, knowing she should allow herself time to become accustomed to it, but too scared by what had just happened at the door to prevent herself from having to bite down on her fist in order to keep herself from screaming.

Suddenly, a door opened along the far wall that she hadn't seen before, even though she hadn't seen anyone around it, and she found herself drawn to the light she saw there. She approached it cautiously, calling out to the man she had expected to greet her as the owner of the place, although not terribly loudly, as her voice seemed to echo eerily about the place.

He must be on the other side of the door, having opened it for her.

Mustn't he?

"Lord Statler?" Her mother had never mentioned what the man's son's name was, if indeed she had even known it. "It's me — Mercy Little. I tried to estimate when I'd get here when I sent my note after my mother passed, but I'm afraid I'm a little later than I had intended."

She peered into the enormous room, seeing no one but noting that there was a cheery fire lit, with two large wing backed

chairs—one about three times the size of the other and obviously reinforced—positioned in front of it, as if two someones had spent a bit of time reading in front of it and enjoying each other's company, she imagined. The fire was so inviting that she made a beeline for it, even though no one had answered her calls, turning herself slowly around to thaw every side of herself to a toasty warm, and standing there for the longest time just absorbing the delicious heat of it.

When she was warm enough, Mercy pulled down the big hood of her cloak, revealing a riotous mass of golden curls that tumbled down the back of the worn coat.

Something—that sounded frightfully akin to whatever wild animal had been stalking her before—emitted a low growl when she did so, but it was just soft enough that she managed to convince herself that whatever it was that had done that wasn't in the house with her.

Then she took off the coat entirely, folding it carefully and—for lack of a better place—hung it over the back of the nearest chair, smoothing out the wrinkles of her best dress—such as it was—as best she could, noting that it had been muddied and dirtied during her trek there.

It was then that she noticed in the firelight that only one of the chairs looked used recently at all. Both of them were worn, but the one on which she hadn't hung her cloak was dusty and dirty looking, as if it hadn't been sat in for quite some time.

The other one was well used, too, but there was no accumulation of dust on it, as if someone had been sitting in it relatively recently.

That gave her a bit of hope that her benefactor might just be out or something easily explainable like that.

Why he didn't have a staff waiting on him, especially considering the size of the house, she would never know.

There was a pull by the fireplace, which she availed herself

of, hoping that someone—anyone—would appear, but no one did.

Finally, exhausted, she curled up in the huge but cleaner chair. It was practically big enough to be a couch for her, her feet not touching the ground as she sat in it! She availed herself of the blanket that was over the back of it and found herself enveloped in a strong—but not unpleasant—scent that was familiar, somehow, yet she couldn't place where she might have smelled it before. It had the strangest effect on her, making her feel surprisingly safe but agitated in the most inappropriate manners at the same time.

Luckily, she was tired enough that she could overcome the way it made her want to squirm in quite an obscene fashion, keeping her hands from between her legs by putting them beneath her head in a prayerful position.

Despite the way she wanted to rub herself over the upholstery of the chair as if she was a cat, Mercy nonetheless fell into a deep sleep moments later without having done so.

And thus, she didn't see the two figures emerging out of the darkness of the corners of the room to come stand over her. One was slight and small, hardly bigger than she was in any aspect, peering at her as if she was some sort of specimen.

But it was the other one who would have concerned her, had she known she was being inspected by him.

Even merely outlined in a great coat, he was massive—well over six feet, with shoulders that challenged the width of the fireplace he stood before, enormous hands clasped behind him—as if to keep himself from touching her—as he moved restlessly on equally enormous feet.

"She's very pretty," the smaller one remarked, reaching out a hand to touch her, only to find it caught and twisted up behind his back while a large paw covered his mouth so that he wouldn't disturb their very special guest.

"Ben! I told you not to touch her. She's not for the likes of

you," he growled into the smaller man's ear. Then he let him go, coming closer—drawn to her like a magnet to steel—even though he knew he really shouldn't trust himself to do so, and crouching down before her, one giant hand above her on a wing of the chair, the other on the arm, both of them gripping the upholstery fit to break the chair beneath. But he refused to allow himself to touch her, either, knowing, now that he'd seen her, the bald truth was that she was much too fine for either of them.

Especially him.

And yet she was his only hope.

But he couldn't keep himself from a low, whickering purr that began in the depth of his loins, rose up through his broad chest, up his throat, and out a mouth that held too many more- and sharper—teeth than most men.

And even though she was deeply asleep, she responded to his undeniable call by undulating in the chair, somewhat hesitantly, at first, but then more urgently.

"I have got to make her mine!" he groaned, but, surprisingly, Ben's small hand on his big bicep was enough to stay him. He didn't say anything, not at all daring to give the big man orders. But it was enough to bring him back to his senses.

After a long moment, the big man said quietly, "Thank you, Ben."

Ben actually colored at that. It wasn't often that he got any kind of acknowledgement of his behavior from Simeon that wasn't unpleasant in one way or the other; he was much more likely to be on the receiving end of a cuff or a slap or, occasionally, the bit of lash of a whip—or even those teeth. That was one for the books!

"You're welcome, sir—milord."

"We should let her sleep. I'm afraid she had a bit of an ordeal getting here—for which I bear a certain amount of responsibility—and we have several things to get accomplished tonight." He made as if to turn away from her, then he turned back again as if

he couldn't resist doing so. "She had a hard time getting here. I wish I had been able to pick her up at the carriage stop and bring her here."

"You did what you could for her. You kept the other animals away from her."

Simeon drifted back to the darkest corner of the room where he belonged as Ben trudged along behind him, much less at home in the shadows than his master.

"Yes, but who's going to keep me away from her?" the giant asked rhetorically, knowing that no one alive on the planet would be able to do so, now that she was here.