

‘Dark, heady and bold, *Fyneshade* is a seductive treat, with a protagonist who is both wicked and irresistible. I was entranced from the first page to the last’

Antonia Hodgson, author of *The Devil in the Marshalsea*

‘With a satisfyingly dark anti-hero at its core *Fyneshade* makes for compelling storytelling and proves Kate Griffin’s a new standout voice in gothic fiction’

Susan Stokes-Chapman, author of *Pandora*

‘A tour de force! I thoroughly enjoyed this darkest of dark tales with its canny and complicated heroine, and a final twist that made me gasp out loud. Gloriously wicked’

Rosie Andrews, author of *Leviathan*

‘A darkly delicious joy of a historical gothic novel. Mature and accomplished storytelling that’s utterly compelling. I loved it’

Essie Fox, author of *The Somnambulist*

‘A dark and sophisticated gothic novel of the governess tale with a twist. Marta is the anti-heroine you won’t help rooting for’

Laure Van Rensburg, author Of *Nobody But Us*

‘Absolutely pitch-black brilliance. Dark, creepy and utterly compelling with characters who jump right off the page – this is gothic suspense at its very best’

S.J.I. Holliday, author of *Violet*

‘What a devious and delightful tale. In *Marta*, Kate Griffin gives us one the most inventive and compelling characters of recent years. A gloriously gothic and often darkly funny story.

I devoured it whole’

Anna Mazzola, author of *The Clockwork Girl*

‘A gothic triumph. With so many hidden secrets, you won’t know who to trust’

A.J. West, author of *The Spirit Engineer*

‘An elegant iron fist of a novel cast in tattered finery and soaked in velvet darkness. Its darkness cloaked me to the end. Magnificent’

Matt Wesolowski, author of *Six Stories*

‘I loved the gothic horror of *Fyneshade*. Dark flashes of *Fingersmith*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw*, with witchy governess *Marta* taking on the secrets that scratch around the walls. Deliciously dark and twisty’

Tina Baker, author of *Call Me Mummy*

‘Stunning. With a refreshingly complex protagonist and a story as richly threaded as the tapestries within the beautiful rooms of *Fyneshade* itself, the novel left me guessing its secrets till the very end’

Polly Crosby, author of *The Illustrated Child*

‘A piercing, acerbic, deliciously dark take on the governess tale; dripping with atmosphere, cobwebbed with twists, and with an anti-heroine you’ll never forget’

Lizzie Pook, author of *Moonlight and the Pearler’s Daughter*

‘A delightfully dark gothic tale, beautifully written, with a beguiling narrator. The seemingly innocent Marta turns out to be more than a match for the other occupants of a house full of secrets. An excellent read’

Guy Morpuss, author of *Black Lake Manor*

‘A bleak atmosphere and sense of foreboding whispers through the walls at Fyneshade. This historical suspense draws you in through its pages towards a looming fate. Full of gothic intensity, dread and a twist of seductive humour’

Jo Furniss, author of *All the Little Children*

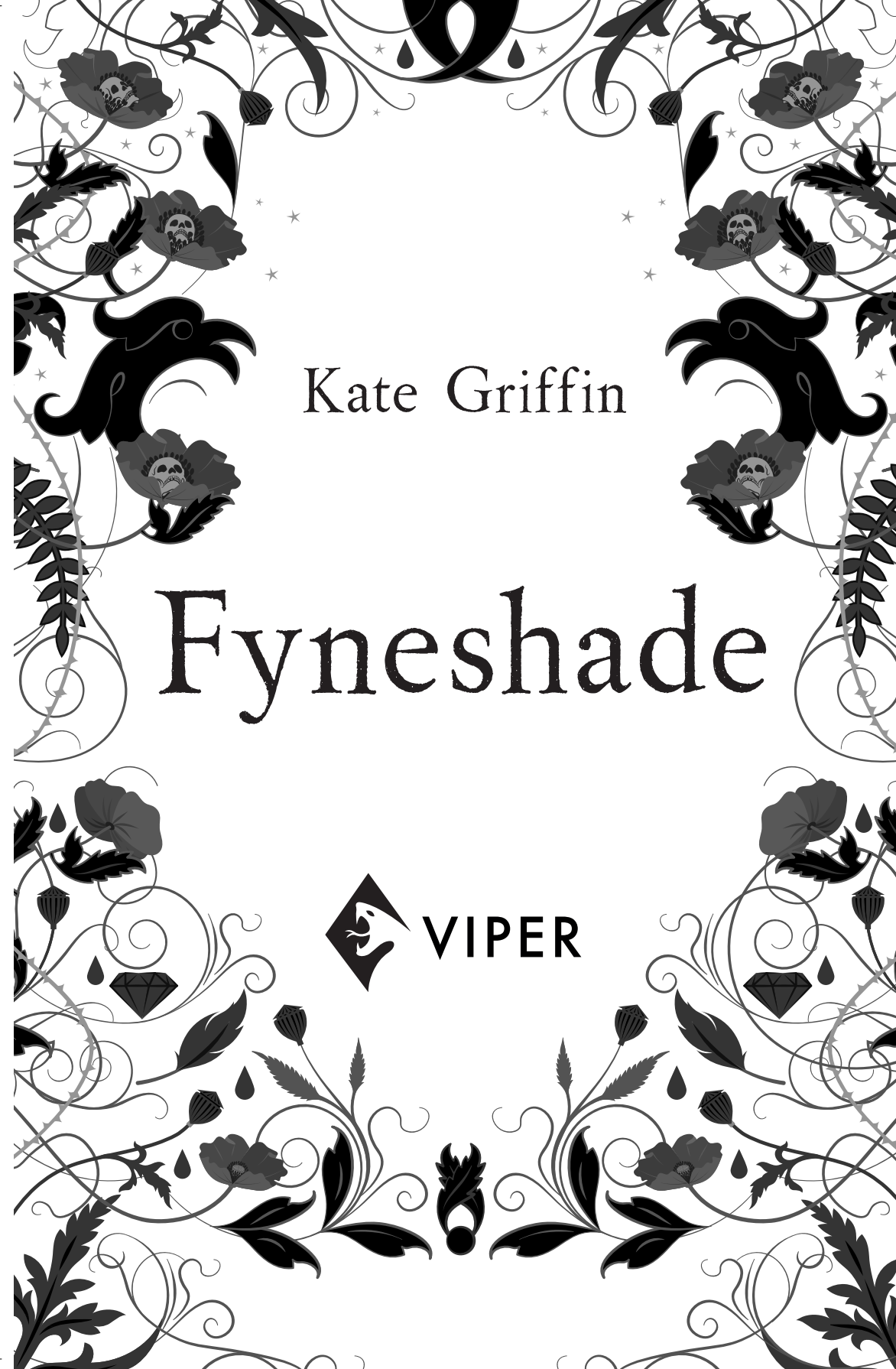
‘I absolutely adored this unforgettable and original take on the governess gothic. Marta is the anti-heroine you can’t help rooting for: I was under her spell from the very first page. A deliciously dark and decadent novel, sure to bewitch readers everywhere’

Emilia Hart, author of *Weyward*

‘The most delicious nastiness one could hope for. Marta is Jane Eyre with the darkest of hearts, and *Fyneshade* is every bit as ghoulish as she is. Devour alone by candlelight!’

Kate Simants, author of *Freeze*

Fyneshade



Kate Griffin

Fyneshade



VIPER

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Copyright © Kate Griffin, 2023

Text Design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781788168731
Trade Paperback ISBN 9781788168748
eISBN 9781782838838



For Stephen

‘It may be, of course, above all, that what suddenly broke into this gives the previous time a charm of stillness – that hush in which something gathers or crouches. The change was actually like the spring of a beast.’

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*

A decorative border in a gothic or macabre style. It features dark, swirling vines, leaves, and flowers. Several flowers contain a small skull with a cross on its forehead. Small stars are scattered throughout the border. The central part of the page is plain white.

Wolf Moon



Grandmere died in the midst of a winter white and hard as the alabaster monument marking the entrance to the Van Meeran family crypt. Death took her slowly, gnawing her flesh to the bone before casting her aside. It was cruel that her mind was sharp until the end. Her eyes, black like mine, refused to shut even when the last breath left her body.

I was safe while Grandmere was alive, but as I listened to the Reverend Van Meeran wheeze through the liturgy in the churchyard beside the rimed hole that swallowed her coffin, I knew that my days in the village would soon be over. Aunt Clare would see to that. And so would the Reverend, who had noted the way his son looked at me during his interminable sermons.

I glanced up from the frosted earth piled at the edge of the grave. Nathaniel Van Meeran was staring at me now. Just for a second, the tip of his tongue appeared between his lips. I cast my eyes down, stepped forward and scattered a handful of dirt onto

the coffin below. It pattered across the brass nameplate attached to the wood. I slid a look at the Reverend to reassure myself that he hadn't noticed Nathaniel watching me today.

If he knew the truth, I would have been sent from Croyle a long time before Grandmere died.

For my part, I liked Nathaniel well enough. I liked his stiff red hair, his soft pink mouth and his hard green eyes. But most of all I liked the fact that one day he would be rich.

Nathaniel was not destined for the Church. He would, in due course, inherit the family estate and a title. When his father's older brother died without issue, the Reverend and his family would leave the flint-walled rectory and move to the fine old manor house on the hillside above the village.

There had been Van Meerans in Croyle since the days of William and Mary. In six generations they had become prosperous without ever achieving anything of note, although I believe that many years back a variety of tulip – a startling shade of crimson – had been named after a distant female cousin in Leiden. I imagined the girl as a blowsy creature, topped with the vivid red hair that suited Nathaniel but made his three pale, plump sisters look tired and cheap.

When we retired to the cottage after the funeral, Judith, Caroline and Susannah crammed themselves into the window seat overlooking Grandmere's herb garden. They clashed with the improvidently early daffodils fluttering beyond the glass. The day was unexpectedly bright and the low sun made the yellow flowers glow with a delicate beauty the Van Meeran girls could never hope to attain. In the sky, the sliver of the new moon curved like a jewelled hairclip above Susannah's head. Grandmere had died with the waning light of January's Wolf Moon. In the last

days her body had been devoured swiftly and mercilessly by the scavenging beast within her.

Fat Judith had already eaten her slice of mourning cake. Now she was chasing the crumbs around the plate with a stubby finger. The way her small eyes darted to the funeral breakfast laid out along the parlour table told me that she was wondering when it might be permissible to pay a second visit.

I watched my aunt move among the mourners. Our little parlour was rank with the musty smell of cloth dragged from the back of dingy cupboards. I'd always thought it an irony that the stiff black dresses and dusty coats carefully hoarded for the most formal occasions became shabby through underuse. I would never keep things for best. I knew I was born to feel the finest cloth next to my skin.

Most of the village had come to see Grandmere buried. I suspected that some of those present were there to reassure themselves that she was truly dead. The fact that she was French by birth and had never lost her accent had always been a cause for mistrust, but it was mainly her skill with herbs that caused people to whisper.

Aunt Clare had no interest in Grandmere's recipes. In truth, I knew she was more than a little frightened that the villagers might regard her with the same suspicion.

I heard the word 'witch' only once when I went out with Grandmere. It was when she took me to visit old Mrs Canvin of Lytes Farm, who had been struck by palsy. I was around ten years old and thought it natural that a woman should prepare tinctures and syrups of ease. In the centre of the village a group of boys, simple lard-faced fools, gathered under the thatched roof of the butter cross and watched us as we walked by. They

were silent, but I heard the crunch of their boots on the stones as they turned to see where we went.

‘Witch.’

The word was hissed at our backs, but Grandmere did not react and neither did I. Later, after we had left Mrs Canvin’s bedside and were returning to the cottage as a full moon rose over the roof of the manor house, Grandmere stopped and cupped my face in her hands. Behind her the empty butter cross was a mound of shadow. Her black eyes caught the silvery light.

‘What do you think, *ma petite*?’

‘Think of what, Grandmere?’ I knew very well what she meant. Until that day, I had never heard anyone call her witch to her face, or even to her back for that matter, but from the mutterings and occasional raised voices I heard through the boards of my attic room, I knew Aunt Clare was fearful for our reputation.

Grandmere smiled. ‘Am I a witch, Marta?’

She always said my name in the French way.

I thought of the farm boys at the butter cross and shrugged. ‘Witches exist only in stories for children.’

She ran an age-smudged hand over the shawl covering the pots and herbs in her basket and nodded. ‘*Bien*. Then neither are you, *ma petite pie*. But stories have a great power. They often hide a truth. Always remember that.’

I did. And sometimes I wondered if her words were a warning or a simple statement of fact.

I watched Aunt Clare batter flies from the funeral baked meats. There was nothing of Grandmere in her form or her thoughts. My aunt was small, stout and pink. The buttons down the back of her black crepe mourning gown pulled and gaped across her wide shoulders.

Looking back, I believe Grandmere must have known about that little tin hidden beneath a board in the corner of my bedroom, but when she first gave me that French pet name, *pie*, I simply saw myself as the magpie to her crow. I never met my mother, she died before I could form a memory of her, but I imagined she was also a crow or perhaps a rook. Or maybe a jackdaw.

Aunt Clare was a hen, but not the maternal kind. Here was an ordinary domestic fowl that scratched and quarrelled. She disliked me and I think she also feared me.

Now she turned from the baked meats and flapped a small puffy hand at the Reverend and his wife. They were talking to Mr Colson, a farmer, and his wife Rebecca, who was standing half in the room and half in the hallway. The dark bulge of Rebecca's belly, the only part of her visible through the door-frame, announced the imminent arrival of another Colson child. This would be her fifth. In six years, I'd seen Rebecca's neat body spread. Now her pretty features were blurred by the flesh of childbearing.

'Reverend.' Aunt Clare called across the room and waved again. Her wrist was red where the crepe caught too tight.

I felt a hand on my arm and turned. Nathaniel offered me a thin slice of crumbling mourning cake on a small china plate.

'Sweets to the sweet,' he bent to whisper in my ear. I took a currant and pushed it between my lips.

'Shakespeare.' I looked up at his wide green eyes. 'That line is also spoken at a funeral – or did you think it to be a compliment?'

His grip tightened on my arm. 'I have to speak to you, Martha. In private.'

It was too late for us. Nathaniel Van Meeran had thrown away

his chance to make me his wife, and less than a month later, I'd thrown away his child. Besides, I knew that we were not destined.

'Not here.' I shook my head and drew back, aware of a flutter of interest from the window seat. I glanced at Judith, who was staring at us. A fresh morsel of cake between her fingers hovered before her open mouth.

'Martha!' Aunt Clare's voice was shrill above the dismal murmurings. 'Join us.'

I freed my arm from the pinch of Nathaniel's fingers and walked slowly around the table. Aunt Clare was standing with the Reverend and with his sour-faced wife, Agatha. Her grey eyes travelled from me and back to her son on the far side of the table. For once she looked almost happy.

'Martha, I have some news for you. Away!' The beads on Aunt Clare's gown rustled as she batted at yet another fly. Agatha Van Meeran's eyes locked on mine as the fly fell to the white tablecloth. Some of its legs still moved.

My aunt dabbed at her fingers with a square of cotton and gave me a small, tight smile. 'Reverend Van Meeran has an old friend in Derbyshire in need of a governess. We have decided that this position would be most suitable for you.'

A decorative border in a gothic or macabre style. It features dark, swirling vines, leaves, and flowers. Several flowers contain a small skull with a cross on its forehead. Small stars are scattered throughout the border. The central text is framed by these elements.

Bone Moon

2



The Pritchard carriage was fine enough but it reeked of dog. It was too cold to open the window for fresh air so instead I held a square of cologne-soaked cotton to my nose as I watched the landscape harden into the north. We had passed through the last village some time ago and now we were rumbling along a rutted track. Beyond the glass, the world was blank. The craggy hills that rose and fell beside us were smothered by snow and the twisted branches of trees that sometimes scratched across the top of the carriage were black as the cane Grandmere had used in her last months.

If Aunt Clare had expected me to argue against the plans so carefully laid to remove me from Croyle – and from Nathaniel Van Meeran – she must have been disappointed. I made no objections to the position offered and within a fortnight the Pritchard carriage was sent for me. An honour, according to Agatha Van Meeran.

The lane to the cottage was narrow, so the carriage waited by the butter cross while the groom – a dark, stooped man – came to collect me. When I followed him to the square Aunt Clare did not accompany me. In fact, no one came to see me off on that frozen February morning. Winter had returned to snuff out the heralds of spring two days after Grandmere's funeral.

The carriage was darkest red and its lacquer reflected the snow that lay thick on the ground. It was grander than the Van Meerans' landau and more elegant. On the door the letter 'P' was painted in scrolls of gold. Before I climbed inside, I traced the outline of the letter with the tip of a finger.

Nearly everything I possessed was packed into the leather-bound travelling trunk the groom had strapped to the back of the carriage. Occasionally, when we juddered over a furrow in the road, the trunk bumped hard against the wood behind my head. My old life knocking.

I smiled at the thought, folded the scented cotton to a square and tucked it into my sleeve where I had hidden Nathaniel's note. I slipped out the little square of paper and flattened it over my knees. He had passed it to me two days ago when Aunt Clare and I left the last Sunday service I would ever attend in Croyle. His hand had brushed mine as we stepped out into the porch side by side. A small hard parcel had been pushed into my palm.

I stared at the paper scrap, stark against the black bombazine of my skirt. It was fortunate that mourning became me so well.

'Not long now, miss,' the groom called from the box. 'You'll see her down in the valley after the ridge.' I heard the crack of a whip. The carriage veered left and started to descend as I tore Nathaniel's passionate declaration into strips. Sliding the glass, I let the papers fly away. His bleating promise disappeared into the

snow. The sudden sharp chill caught my breath, but I thought of the flush that would come to my cheeks and left the window slightly open.

I linked my gloved hands together and rested them in my lap. Through the thin leather, I felt the little stone in the ring Nathaniel had pressed upon me. It was a simple thing – a gold band set with a ruby. I wore it on my smallest finger and saw no reason to cast it to the snow after the note that had wrapped it.

The carriage lurched and the trunk bumped again at my back. I wondered about Grandmere's bowl. It was wrapped in my shawl and tucked into the folds of my second-best gown, but if it was to crack would it still serve? I moved closer to the window and scanned the pallid landscape for the house. The carriage was moving faster on the decline. The horses in the traces, two fine bays, whinnied – a sure sign that they were nearing their stable.

And what was coming to me?

My employer was a widower. His wife Sophia had died ten years ago in childbirth. I gathered, despite Reverend Van Meeran's delicacy on the subject, that the child was unexpected given Sophia's age. Now the girl required a female companion. At Grandmere's funeral breakfast, I had watched Agatha's fingers pluck at the black ruffles of her bodice while her husband talked about his old friend. Occasionally her eyes flicked to my face and then quickly away. She seemed uneasy. I decided that she thought I might make a scene, or worse, that Nathaniel might disgrace himself before the better half of the village.

In truth, I *was* angry that day. I was furious to think they had decided my future. Without Grandmere to protect me, I was to be packed off to Derbyshire like a chattel. But as I listened to the Reverend describe his friend's simple requirements and then his

estate and house – one of the finest in the county – I began to reconsider. I knew I would accept the offer when Reverend Van Meeran said his friend was Sir William Pritchard.

The trunk thumped loudly as the carriage pitched forward. We were rattling down from the ridge at a sharp angle.

The groom called again. ‘Down there, miss. Through the trees to the right.’

I moved to the edge of the seat. It was late in the day and the light was failing. The snow on the hillside was bruised with purple. In the valley below, snow-shrouded trees huddled beside a frozen river. At first there was no sign of the house, but then, just as the groom had said, it appeared through a break in the woodland.

It was huge and grey. More like a fortress than a house, it marched in a disorderly fashion along the curve of the river. I saw three square towers, turrets, a wide stone gateway and a multitude of tiny windows, but then it disappeared from view again behind the trees as the carriage turned on the zig-zag track.

It was several minutes more before we clattered under the arch of the gatehouse and came to a halt. The groom opened the door and I stepped down to a stone-paved courtyard. I stared up at the building that loomed above me. Crenellated towers nibbled the sky.

‘Your things will be sent up, miss.’ The groom nodded and went to the back of the carriage. I heard a dull thump as he hauled my trunk down to the stones.

I hoped I had done enough to protect the bowl. It was, in a way, why I was here.

The water whirled about. Grandmere sprinkled salt on the surface and then I handed her a small glass phial. I watched as she

poured the sticky blood from my monthly courses into the bowl. As the milky water stilled, the blood pulled itself into the shape of a letter. It was clear as the moon that shone through the open window of Grandmere's bedchamber.

'There is your fortune, little pie.' She smiled and raised a finger to her lips. 'Your fate will turn on the letter P'

I watched the carriage rumble across the courtyard and disappear through another arch in the furthest wall.

'You're here at last!'

I turned at the voice. A woman was standing in the shadows at the top of a ragged flight of steps leading to an arched doorway beneath the central tower. It was too dark to make out her face as she spoke.

'I wondered if you might have to break the journey, with the snow and all. The nearest inn is six miles off and that's an afternoon's ride in this. Come inside then, Martha.' She bustled down the steps and now I saw that she was a homely woman wearing the simple clothes of a servant. The ribbons of her white cotton cap flapped in the wind.

'Marta,' I corrected her. 'My name is Marta.'

She halted for a moment and stared at me. 'You're a mite . . . younger than I was expecting.'

I had the impression that 'younger' was not the first word that had come into her mind. I smiled and waited her for to continue.

'Well, no matter. Miss Grace has been looking forward to meeting you. She's been watching the ridge from the tower room all day.' The woman's accent was as broad and flat as her face.

The deep bark of a dog echoed from the doorway. There was scuffling and a moment later a huge grey hound bounded down the steps. It ran in a wide circle around us, swaying its massive

shaggy head from side to side, and then it came close to snuffle at my skirt. I stepped back and held my hands to my breast. I was not fond of dogs.

The woman smiled. 'He might be the size of a pony, but Lancer wouldn't hurt a fly.' She gripped the dog's collar and scratched the wiry fur at its neck. 'Did she send you down to greet her new governess, my lad?'

Lancer yelped once and lolloped back up the steps.

The woman pointed at my trunk. 'I'll have that sent to your room. Now, you follow me.' She started back up to the door. She paused just before the entrance and turned to me.

'Where are my manners? I'm Mrs Gurney, the housekeeper. Welcome to Fyneshade, Miss . . . *Marta*. Welcome indeed.'

3



At the top of the grand wooden staircase that rose from the centre of the hall Mrs Gurney turned right and set off down a dark panelled corridor lined with sombre paintings in heavy frames. Generations of Pritchard men and women leaned out from the wall, watching me.

I bit my lips and, when Mrs Gurney wasn't turning back to offer some prattle on the house and its treasures, I pinched my cheeks hard between my fingers and thumb. Not that I needed the sting to bring colour to my face. Money was not wasted on the heating of Fyneshade. My breath misted the air and a chill was trapped beneath the bell of my dress. The house was not unkempt, but it was – in some way – forgotten. Like the clothing worn by the mourners at Grandmere's funeral, it had grown stale through lack of wear.

But as we walked, I came to see that Mr Pritchard was indeed rich.

The corridor was lit by scores of candles clumped together in the branches of ugly wall brackets. Aunt Clare would never have permitted such wanton extravagance. Thick rugs muffled the sound of our footsteps and forced flowers tumbled with voluptuous ease from china basins, filling the air with the sweetness of wealth.

Mrs Gurney was not leading me to my room, I was certain of it. Flowers would not be wasted on a governess.

Halfway down the corridor she paused before a painting of a young woman with a child in her lap.

‘That’s Lady Sophia, Miss Grace’s mother.’ She sighed. ‘A good woman and a fair mistress.’

I stared up at the painting. Sophia Pritchard was pretty in a pallid manner. Her fair hair, caught loosely with a yellow-striped ribbon, tumbled over one shoulder and a rope of pearls gleamed beneath the gauzy neck of her dress. Her large eyes were blue and her lips were very pink. She looked younger than me and the fat infant on her knees was no longer a baby. The way the child leaned and stretched a hand towards the small dog hidden in the folds of its mother’s skirts suggested that it would rather be crawling and playing.

Reverend Van Meeran had said that Mrs Pritchard had died in childbirth. I was also quite sure he had suggested that she was an older woman, not the cream-faced girl on the wall above me.

I wondered if perhaps this was some sort of memorial, a sentimental fantasy created to flatter and soothe the grief of a widower and, in time, his motherless daughter. I glanced at Mrs Gurney, who seemed lost in thought as she stared at the painting. She shook her head again and the little jet earrings dangling from her ears twinkled in the candlelight.

'I sometimes think I catch a sight of her in Grace. But it's a fleeting thing. Poor lamb.'

She turned from the painting and carried on along the corridor. At the end we passed through an archway draped with heavy red curtains and came into a small panelled lobby.

'Here we are.' Mrs Gurney gestured at a pair of double doors. They looked too grand for the bedroom of a governess. Clearly it was just as I had hoped: I was about to be introduced.

I smoothed the line of my skirt.

'I am to meet Mr Pritchard now?' I looked down and secretly bit hard again on my lower lip. Nathaniel always said it was slightly too full and too wide to be a perfect match. He liked to crush it against my teeth with the fleshy pad of his thumb before kissing me.

'Dear me, no.'

I looked up. According to the chimes of a golden clock we had passed in the passage – Mrs Gurney had pointed it out as a particularly valuable French timepiece – it was not yet seven. Surely it was too early for Mr Pritchard to retire?

Now she was holding a silver chatelaine close to her eyes and sorting along the keys on the ring.

'It's late for Miss Grace, but I promised her that as soon as you arrived, I'd take you to her.'

There was a thumping sound from the corridor beyond the velvet curtains. The large grey dog appeared and nudged between us to scratch at the doors.

'Here we are.' She found the right key and bent to fit it to the lock. As I stared at her rump, I wondered why it was necessary to lock a child of ten in their room.



The dog pricked its ears, yelped and bounded through the open door. I followed Mrs Gurney, who rustled ahead.

‘Grace.’ She tucked the chatelaine away, planted her hands on her hips and called again.

‘Come now. Don’t be a silly girl.’ She glanced at me, in a way that seemed almost conspiratorial, tutted quietly and took a lighted candle from a table just inside the door. She held it aloft. ‘You’ve been looking forward to meeting Miss Martha . . . Marta,’ she corrected herself, ‘and now you won’t show yourself.’

She walked a little way forward. Her sturdy body blocked the light from the fire blazing in a wide stone hearth, but the candle in her hand and the flickering glow from several others set about the room showed that we were in a library. Rows of books climbed into the shadowed gloom of a vault so high above us that I could not clearly see where the shelves ended and where the ceiling began. Heavy curtains were drawn across three tall windows set at intervals between the volumes lining the wall opposite the door.

The room was very long and filled with furniture: couches, tables, chairs and desks were arranged at irregular angles and positioned to create smaller, more intimate spaces. As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I saw stacks of books set out on some of the tables. The air was warm and smelt of applewood and leather. It was the retreat of a gentleman.

‘Miss Grace!’ There was a sharpness to Mrs Gurney’s voice now. ‘Come out!’ She looked at me and shook her head. ‘Not two hours earlier she had her nose pressed to the glass in the tower to catch a glimpse of you.’

The child was obviously playing a game. It occurred to me that it would be best to make Grace Pritchard my friend from the beginning.

'Is this hide and seek?' I went to stand beside Mrs Gurney and scanned the furniture. I stretched my mouth into a smile that shaped the appealing tone of my next question.

'I am fond of games too. Do you want me to come and find you, Grace?'

The answer was a muffled giggle from the shadows at the far end of the room. I heard footsteps, the sound surprisingly heavy, and the scratch of the dog's claws on wooden boards. A moment later there was a shimmer of sound.

Mrs Gurney gasped and started off up the room, picking her way through the maze of furniture.

'You come here this instant, Miss Grace. If you touch that harp—'

I stood by the fire wondering whether to follow. I caught a muttered conversation during which the word 'naughty' was repeated three times, then, after a moment more, Mrs Gurney returned. The dog, Lancer, padded at her side. The wagging of its great grey tail caused a draught that made the flame of her candle dance on the spines of the books.

Mrs Gurney's left arm was caught behind her back. She turned to speak to the girl she had, presumably, dragged from her hiding place.

'Step out now and say hello to Miss Marta, just as we practised.' She shook the hand caught fast in her own and yanked hard. I heard a snort and something like a word. Then Grace shuffled out from behind the ample shield of Mrs Gurney's body and stared frankly at me.

Her large face was round and pale as the moon. Her nose was small, but splayed wide, her mouth hung open and her mild pale eyes tilted oddly at the edges. The only resemblance between Grace Pritchard and Sophia, her pretty mother, lay in the mass of fair hair that tumbled over the child's pudgy shoulder. There was even a ribbon attempting to detach itself from the remains of a plait.

The girl made the noise again. I could not describe it as an identifiable word, although it must have been meant as a greeting. She stared at me while she dug a finger into her nose. Then, shyly, she grinned and offered her hand.

4



We had little to say to one another. It was quite clear that the pretty speech I had prepared for my new charge – promises of friendship, companionship and pleasurable entertainment – would be wasted. A few minutes after our meeting in the library, Grace was collected and led away to her bed by an elderly woman introduced as Old Maggie. The girl turned to look back at me as she went out through the door.

The dog padded over to snuffle at my skirts. When I did not pet it or acknowledge its existence in any way, it gave a snort of disappointment and trotted after Grace and the ancient nursemaid.

The girl's ribbon had slipped to the floor. I let Mrs Gurney stoop to collect it. 'Well, that went as well as to be expected.' She wound the pink satin around her fingers and glanced at me. Briefly, I saw appraisal in her eyes. 'Before I take you up to your room, I daresay you must want something to eat, Miss Marta?'

We went down to a small parlour where cold meat, bread and cheese and slices of dense dark fruit cake had been laid out. There was also a teapot set ready over a copper burner. The room was plain but neatly furnished. A fire glowed in the hearth. I recognised it immediately as the domain of the woman who settled herself at the plain oval table.

‘Sit.’ Mrs Gurney reached for the pot. ‘You didn’t know about Miss Grace.’ It wasn’t a question.

I watched her fill my cup and busy herself with the bread.

‘There.’ She pushed a plate towards me. ‘The bread’s fresh baked today but I recommend cheese with the cake. I daresay it’s not regular but that’s how we like it here.’

I took a small piece of cake. Mrs Gurney was wrong on one count. Hunger was not what I felt.

She placed a thin slice of cheese next to the cake on my plate and carried on: ‘I could tell, as soon as you looked on her. Your face told a tale.’ She helped herself to a corner of pale cheese and pressed it to a square of cake. ‘That’s not right – not for you or for the little one. Right from the start, I told him . . .’

She stopped herself. The parlour was silent except for the crackle of the fire. She meant Sir William, I was certain. I wondered *what* she had told him, and whether it might be useful. I waited for her to continue but when she started again, she was on a new track.

‘Now you’re here at Fyneshade . . .’ she smiled at me, ‘. . . I hope you’ll make the best of it. For all her . . . troubles, Miss Grace has a loving nature and she deserves kindness. We’ve done our best but we’re old women and she needs a young lady, such as yourself, to help her find her way.’

At Grandmere’s funeral breakfast Reverend Van Meeran had

told me that my particular skills had ‘impressed’ his widower friend. What use would French and music be to a girl like Grace? I crumbled cake between my fingers. I had no appetite for sweetness tonight.

I found I could not look across the table in case the woman read my features a second time.

‘Can she speak, Mrs Gurney?’

‘Sometimes. Not always and not always so as you’d understand, but yes, she does . . . talk. Mainly to the dog.’

‘Has she had any lessons before? Or a companion?’

‘No, none at all. I hold myself responsible there, mind. I tried, but . . .’ She paused again. ‘He wouldn’t accept it . . . accept *her*. After the mistress died, he wouldn’t so much as look on her, poor mite. And then, when it became clear to us all that she . . . she was . . .’

‘That she was . . . different?’ I prompted.

Mrs Gurney nodded. ‘Yes, that’s right . . . *different*. It was as if she didn’t exist for him. But that’s not right. We agreed.’

I took a sip of tea. ‘You mean you eventually managed to persuade Sir William to engage a . . . companion for his daughter?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

Quite suddenly, she leaned across the table and caught my hand. ‘She’s no trouble, Miss Marta. Little Grace deserves better, poor lamb. You’ll help us, won’t you?’



I watched the sky lighten from the window. My room faced due north and looked out across a rounded inner yard at the back of the house and onto a hill shaped like the back of a bull. Brackish

light slowly defined the snow-covered flanks of the brooding creature as I considered my position.

I had slept little that first night. The bed was comfortable, the room was grander than I had expected, well appointed and warm – a fire was already burning in the massive stone hearth when I retired a little after eight o'clock – and my trunk was waiting for me as promised.

It was a relief to find that Grandmere's bowl had survived the journey intact. I would use it again as soon as my courses came in time with the full moon. Now it was wrapped in a shawl and stowed safely with her spice box and my tin of stolen treasures beneath the hinged panel at the centre of the window seat in front of me. I had placed a pair of tapestry cushions on top of it.

I felt cheated.

I had seen children like Grace Pritchard before. A boy in Croyle, Jim Padfold, had shared her distinctive features. The Padfolds had already produced several healthy children before the arrival of Jim, whose slow manner and odd appearance marked him as different to the rest of them. He died young. According to Grandmere this was to be expected for '*un enfant touché par le fées*'. In the next village an older girl called Tally Hess still worked as a dairymaid. The men took advantage of her soft mind and soft body. There was something of Grace in the cast of her eyes.

I remembered the way that Agatha Van Meeran had fiddled at the ruffles of her bodice and failed to catch my eye while her husband talked about the requirements of his fine friend in Derbyshire, and I knew that I had been tricked.

The Pritchard girl didn't need a governess, she was in want of a nurse. For all Mrs Gurney's misguided optimism, there was little

I could do. I thought about our conversation in the parlour. After catching my hand in her own, the housekeeper had released me with an embarrassed apology. We had sat in silence for a minute or two more and then she had offered to show me to my room.

We were at the second landing of the staircase when the sound of many clocks chiming the hour filled the gloom. Jingling, jangling, chinking and the deeper strike of bells came from all around.

‘You’ll have to get used to it.’ Mrs Gurney had raised her candle to show a particularly fine longcase patterned in the chinoiserie style on the landing just above us. ‘There are more than fifty of them throughout the house. I should know, I’m the one who winds them. A deal of trouble they’ve caused me.’ She shook her head. ‘Sir William’s father had a fascination for all manner of clocks and such.’

At the mention of my employer I had asked, again, if I was to be introduced the following day, but the housekeeper’s answer was blunt.

‘No. No you will not, Miss Marta.’

I turned from the window, huddled my nightgown around me and went to poke at the embers of the fire still glowing in the hearth. I knelt on the rug and watched tiny golden flames flower anew beneath a half-charred log.

Grandmere had promised to teach me to read fortunes in a fire, but she had passed only the most basic principles of the skill to me before she died.

I plucked five hairs from my head and plaited them together. This was simple country divination, the sort that clucking girls might use to question the intentions of a lover. I cast the black twist into the fire, inscribed the shape of a five-pointed star in the air with my thumb and whispered my question.

The sudden brilliant blue flare that leapt from the left of the hearth was my answer. Surprised, I sat back and considered the message. There was no mistake. The colour and the position of the dancing flame was explicit. I was, indeed, meant to be here at Fyneshade.

5



Grace sucked her thumb and scribbled on the paper I'd put before her. The sound of the pencil set my teeth on edge. I wanted to beat hard on the desk to stop the squeak of the lead, but instead I moved my hands to my lap and tightened my fingers into fists.

The schoolroom was midway up a winding staircase in the eastern tower. It was plain and clean. Four small wooden desks with bench seats attached told of Pritchards long past who had submitted their infant minds to education here. One of the drab women who flitted through the passages had lit a fire in the tiled hearth. The crackling of the logs, the scratching of the pencil and the continual sucking were the only sounds.

My own larger desk was next to a long window that looked down over the front of the house. Snow had fallen throughout the night. Flurries still danced in the air like feathers plucked from a goose. The courtyard below was smooth and white as a