MIRROR MAGIC

Books by Claire Fayers

The Accidental Pirates:

Voyage to Magical North

Journey to Dragon Island

MIRROR MAGIC

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MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

For Linda, who loves books



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These are the terms of the covenant between the Human World and the Unworld.

The Fair Folk will withdraw from the world and take all magic with them to form their own realm. Yet the Human World must not be left wholly without magic. Magic mirrors will be created, two by two, each pair forming a doorway between the Human World and the new Unworld. Any person may cross through, if invited from the other side. Furthermore, the Unworld will supply all magical goods and services requested through the mirrors.

While the mirrors stand, so shall this covenant. If it ends, the Unworld will end with it. What is written must come to pass.

Mr Matthew Harcourt
7 Mill Lane
Cambridge

16 June 1852

Dear Mr Harcourt,
My deep and sincere condolences on your loss. I knew your parents well and I learned of their passing with great sadness.

It has come to my attention that you are facing some financial hardship. I am in need of a clerk at my offices here in Wyse and it would please me greatly if you would consider accepting the position.

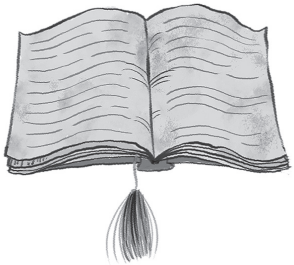
I recall that you have a sister, who will be eleven or twelve years of age now, and my invitation extends to her, also. I will have no trouble securing her a suitable position in a household in Wyse.

I look forward to welcoming you at your earliest convenience.
Yours sincerely,

Lord Ephraim Skinner

Her Majesty's Government, Taxation and Compliance (Unworld)
Waning Crescent, Wyse, England

CHAPTER 1



The town of Wyse, set precisely on the border of England and Wales, is remarkable for one thing: it is the only remaining human town where magic works. Or it will be, in the mid-nineteenth century. As for other time periods, don't ask me: I'm only a book.

The Book

Ava leaned out of the carriage window as the road wound and ducked between the rolling hills to Wyse. The English countryside appeared disappointingly ordinary.

'I don't see any enchantments,' she said.

Matthew gave her a tired smile. 'You will soon enough. Just wait a while.'

But she didn't want to wait, not when everything else in the world seemed to rush on so fast. Ava sat back down, wriggling her feet in between a pair of boxes. Six months – it sounded like a long time but it felt like nothing. In six months, their lives had fallen apart, their parents taken by typhoid fever, their

home sold to pay their debts. And now, travelling in a borrowed coach, with their last belongings stacked around them, they were headed back to the town they'd left behind when she was two years old.

'You still haven't told me what Lord Skinner is like,' she said, trying to distract herself from her thoughts. She didn't remember him at all, but lately every time she thought about him she had the uncomfortable feeling that she was suffocating.

Matthew rubbed a hand over his eyes. 'I don't remember much about him either. He was large, and wore fancy clothes. Everyone liked him.'

'Father didn't.' A tight pain knitted together in Ava's chest. *Stay away from mirrors, Ava*. Father's words as he lay, feverish. And then, muttered over and over: *Don't trust Lord Skinner. He's not what he seems*.

'Father was sick,' Matthew said. 'He didn't know what he was saying.'

'But it is still strange. Father saying his name out of the blue like that so soon before he . . .' Ava took a breath. 'Before he died. And then the letter coming. It's almost as if Lord Skinner was watching us.'

'That's just silly. No doubt he heard the news from a relative in Wyse. It's hardly a secret.' Matthew's voice had an edge to it now. 'We have work and a home, even if it's not what you would like. Let's be thankful.'

'I know. I'm sorry.' She hadn't meant to upset

Matthew. Her hand crept up to the mark on her left cheek – a thin moon-shaped crescent, left over from a measles rash, or so her parents had said. Even back home in Cambridgeshire, however, almost as far from Wyse and magic as you could get, Ava had caught people looking at her oddly and whispering about fairy marks.

Because, of course, Father had been a conjuror once. He had owned one of the few working magic mirrors left in the world. Father, who never gave orders or raised his voice, had summoned fairies from the Unworld to do his bidding.

Ava's imagination failed when she thought about it. Her father had never talked about life in Wyse, only saying he'd sold the magic mirror to his nephew, along with everything else, and it was best forgotten. Yet something must have happened to make him abandon that life. Why would you choose to live somewhere ordinary like Cambridgeshire when you could be living in the last magical town in all of Britain?

The carriage bounced and jiggled over holes in the road, taking them ever closer to Wyse. Ava kicked her heels against her seat. 'If Father hadn't moved away from Wyse, you might be a conjuror now.'

Matthew groaned and shook his head. 'For the last time, I'm quite happy to be a clerk.' He frowned at her. 'And you'll be happy with whatever Lord Skinner

finds for you. We can't afford to be choosy.'

Ava shrugged, looking back out of the window. Matthew might think himself lucky to be a clerk, but a position in a household for her? Ava wanted more than that. They were coming home to Wyse – town of magic mirrors. If she could find Father's mirror, if she could stand in front of it just for a moment, who knew what she might see?

But then she forgot everything because, as the carriage reached the top of the hill, she caught her first glimpse of Wyse.

From the pictures Ava had seen, she'd expected the town to glitter as if it was made of gold and fine jewels. Instead, it looked more as if a child had put it together out of cheap glass. A dizzying array of colours bled across the buildings, smearing from red to green to yellow. The narrow roads that wound between were pale silver and gave off a sticky gleam like slug trails.

If this was what fairy magic looked like, Ava didn't think much of it.

'I thought you said Wyse was the grandest town in Britain,' she said.

Matthew leaned out of his window to see. An open-top carriage came towards them, heading out of the town. It shimmered with a rainbow of bright jewels and the four ladies inside boasted golden skin and hair in various shades of green. A faint haze surrounded

them all as if Ava was seeing them through a light mist. She rubbed her eyes, but the mist remained. The ladies waved and giggled, their hands leaving gold streaks in the air.

Matthew raised his hat and waved back, making the ladies giggle even harder.

'It doesn't even look real,' Ava complained.

'It's not supposed to – that's the whole point.' Matthew replaced his hat. 'Fairy enchantments always have a coloured aura, especially the cheaper ones. It's just a bit of fun.'

People thought it was fun to drive around in carriages looking blurry? Ava picked at the edge of her seat as their own carriage rattled on past a patch of overgrown parkland and over a narrow stone bridge into the centre of town. Some of the buildings they passed were large and grand, four or five storeys tall, with high, arched windows, but they all looked as if they needed a good clean beneath the shimmering layer of enchantments. Some were quite obviously empty, with birds nesting on the chimneys and trails of ivy crossing the fronts. Even the theatre, which was supposed to be the sixth largest in the country, seemed dejected, covered in peeling posters.

Mr Radcot, gentleman conjuror. All wishes guaranteed.

(*All* wishes, Ava wondered, or just wishes for fake-looking enchantments?)

Mr Edmund Footer, conjuror by royal appointment to Queen Victoria. Private audiences granted Monday–Friday.

Langhile and Gaddesby, conjurors. Children's parties a speciality (ask about our summer offers).

Ava tried to imagine Father's name on a poster. *Alfred Harcourt, conjuror. Special offers on Fridays and Saturdays.*

'Mr Edmund Footer is our cousin,' Matthew said, touching Ava's arm. 'He's the one who bought Father's mirror before we left Wyse. I always felt sorry for him; his mother is horrible.'

His mother – their aunt. More people Ava had never met. They hadn't even come to the funeral, though Aunt Lily had sent condolences.

Then Ava spotted a group of people standing outside the theatre holding signs that read *Fair Folk: People, not Fairies* and *Ban All Conjurors*.

'Who are they?' she asked, forgetting about the Footers.

A boy left the group and ran after the carriage. 'Freedom for Fair Folk,' he said, shoving a leaflet into Ava's hand. 'We meet every Thursday. Number two, Church Street, behind the town hall. Fair Folk are people too.'

He ran back to join the small group of protesters. Ava watched him go. He looked about her own age, and his smile had been friendly, but what would he

say if he knew she was a conjuror's daughter? She bet he wouldn't be half so friendly then. She tucked the leaflet into the top of one of their luggage bags. Why would people protest on behalf of fairies, anyway? '*Are* fairies real people?' she asked.

Matthew gave an indifferent shrug. 'Father always said they were, and he should know, I guess. Whatever they are, though, they're not like us. I wouldn't trust them.'

'I'm not suggesting we trust them. I just want to see one.' She flashed him a smile. 'Where's your sense of adventure?'

Matthew used to say that to her all the time – *Where's your sense of adventure, Ava?* Usually it was just before he dared her to do something she shouldn't, like climbing a tree or stealing the treacle tart Mother was saving for supper. She was too cautious, Matthew had always said. She needed to learn to take risks. When had that changed? Had it been when their parents fell ill, or maybe at the funeral when Matthew suddenly seemed to understand he was head of the family? Or when he'd realized exactly how much money they owed?

Or was it her fault? Matthew could have got by far more easily on his own. As a young, single gentleman, even without money, he could have taken a job anywhere he pleased. A young sister in tow made everything twice as difficult. As he said, he couldn't

afford to be choosy any more.

Ava leaned out of the carriage. 'Excuse me,' she called to the driver. 'Can we stop here a moment?'

The driver glanced back at them and scowled, but he pulled on the reins, stopping the horses.

'What are you doing?' Matthew asked.

'I want to have a look around. Are you coming?'

She slipped out of the carriage before Matthew could stop her.

The protesters were still chanting behind her. Ava was careful not to look in case they thought she was interested in joining them. She crossed the road to a shop with a gold sign that flashed on and off.

Wyse Emporium of Souvenirs, Mirrors and Magical Goods.

Underneath the main sign, a smaller one, written on paper said: *Breakages must be paid for. Fairy magic is illusion only. It does not change reality. It is not permanent and will fade with use. No refunds.*

The shelves in the window were crowded with miniature silver mirrors, china tea sets and cheap-looking jewellery, all hazy with fairy enchantments.

'Are these the kind of enchantments Father used to order?' Ava asked as Matthew joined her.

'He supplied some of the shops,' Matthew said. 'The shopkeepers used to bring their lists to the house and Father would go into his room and order everything through the mirror.' He sighed, remembering. 'And

then the goods would appear in his room, all neatly packed.'

'And then he decided to stop. Just like that?'

'So he said.' Matthew tilted his hat back and rubbed a hand over his face. He looked far too pale in his mourning clothes. He'd spent so much time looking after her that he'd forgotten to look after himself, Ava reflected, and again the unwanted thought crept in: He'd be better off without her.

She slipped her hand through his arm. 'Never mind. Shall we go inside?'

A bell jingled as Matthew opened the shop door. Ava edged round a shelf, holding her skirt out of the way. A few tourists were browsing through the goods on display and the shopkeeper watched from behind a silver counter. *More like cheap wood enchanted to look like silver*, Ava thought, noticing patches of plain brown beneath the haze. She felt the shopkeeper's gaze skim over her, resting slightly too long on the mark on her cheek.

'I have a beautifying enchantment that will get rid of that for you,' he said.

Ava stared straight at him. 'Get rid of what?' She smiled when he flushed and looked away.

Matthew picked up a mirror. '*A present from Wyse*,' he said, reading the inscription on the back. 'I thought they came from the Unworld.'

The shopkeeper's moustache bristled. 'Our mirrors

are very popular. A reminder of your holiday perhaps?'

'We're not on holiday.' Matthew put the mirror back and raised his hat. 'Matthew Harcourt. My family used to live here.'

The shopkeeper stood up straight. 'You're Harcourt's son? So you're going to be working for Lord Skinner. He's a fine gentleman. My youngest son has been trying to get a job at Waning Crescent for years.'

He made it sound like an accusation, as if Matthew had deliberately stolen his son's job.

'And she must be the girl,' the shopkeeper added, staring at Ava.

Ava tugged at her skirt, the black crepe suddenly feeling tight and too hot. She picked up another mirror. This one had a poem on the bottom.

When you're angry, when you're sad,
Put it in the mirror and you won't feel so bad.

'What's that supposed to mean?' she asked.

'It's a nursery rhyme,' the shopkeeper said. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

'It finishes, *Let the mirror take your pain and you will be quite happy again*,' Matthew added. 'I remember it from when I was a child.'

Ava wished she could put all her bad feeling into a mirror. She stared into the cheap glass, tilting it this way and that.

‘You don’t want to look too long into mirrors around here,’ the shopkeeper said. ‘You never know what you might see.’ He smirked as Ava jumped and set the mirror down. ‘Just kidding. There’s a fairy enchantment on it to make it glow a bit but underneath it’s common glass. Two shillings, if you want to buy it.’

He held his hand out for the money. Ava shook her head and turned away. She felt the shopkeeper still staring at her until one of the other customers asked to buy a milk jug. Ava shut her eyes and let out a breath. She wished she hadn’t come in now.

Matthew dug in his pocket for a calling card and set it on the counter. ‘We’ll be living at number eight, Primrose Hill. We’re looking forward to making the acquaintance of our neighbours.’

‘I’m sure you are,’ the shopkeeper said, ignoring Matthew’s card. ‘Well, no doubt you have many things to do today. Good day to you both.’

‘He was horrible,’ Ava said as they climbed back into the carriage. She didn’t feel like going into any of the other shops. The horses started off with a jolt that threw her back into her seat. ‘Did you see how he looked at me?’

Matthew threw a glance behind. ‘He’s cross because I got a job with Lord Skinner and his son didn’t. Don’t let one rude man spoil things for you.’

For a moment he sounded more like his old self and Ava allowed herself a cautious smile. Maybe coming back to Wyse would be good for them after all.

The carriage moved on, past the row of shops, and up a hill, where the driver stopped about halfway up.

'This is it,' he said. 'Number eight.'

The house didn't look too bad. The garden was overgrown, but there were apple trees and probably a vegetable patch under the weeds. Dark tendrils of ivy swarmed up the front of the house and on to the roof where they appeared to be attempting to strangle the chimney.

The coachman grunted and jumped down. 'You'll have to carry your bags in from here.'

He didn't offer to help and Ava didn't ask. No point causing extra work for him when they could manage on their own. She grabbed two of the smaller bags and hauled them along the path.

Inside the house, the hallway smelled of damp. Patches of grey mould stained one wall, and an old rug lay in a dirty heap to one side. Each room was the same: grimy, damp and musty. On the other hand, they were large, and the whole house was theirs. Ava felt a stirring of excitement.

'It's not too bad,' Ava said, running her finger across the dirt on a window. Everything would need cleaning, but they could drag the carpets outside and beat them, and if they opened all the windows,

the smell would soon go.

The kitchen had an old stove that looked like it might work, and a table and four chairs. And, propped up on the table, against a covered milk jug, was a letter.

Dear Mr and Miss Harcourt,
Welcome to your new home. I hope you will be comfortable here. I am sorry I was not able to greet you on arrival. However, I would like to invite you both to dine with me at Waning Crescent this evening. I shall expect you at seven o'clock.
Yours sincerely,
Lord Skinner

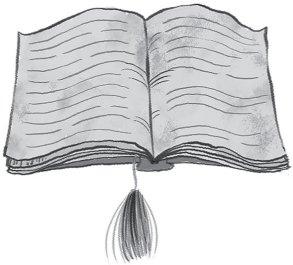
The paper was plain, heavyweight, unenchanted, and the letter itself was written in a strong hand with no excess flourishes. It was handwriting you could trust.

Don't trust Lord Skinner, her father had said. Reading the letter again, Ava felt suffocated.

'We should have bought food while we were in town,' Matthew said, coming into the kitchen. 'Tomorrow's Sunday and everything will be shut. Do you want to run back and get some supplies while I start unpacking?' He noticed the piece of paper in Ava's hand. 'What's that?'

She handed it to him, her hand trembling a little. 'An invitation, I think – or a summons.'

CHAPTER 2



When you're angry, when you're sad,
Put it in the mirror and you won't feel so bad.
Let your reflection take your pain
And you will be quite happy again.
You shouldn't say things like that to children.
Children will believe anything.

(Yes, I know the last two lines don't rhyme. I'm not a poetry book, all right?)

The Book

Wyse's high street was quieter when Ava walked back along it, looking for the bakery. The protesters in front of the theatre had dispersed, leaving a scattering of crumpled leaflets on the ground. Ava kicked one aside, her bag bumping heavily over her shoulder as she walked. She kept her head down, pretending not to notice when people turned to watch her walk past.

'That's her,' she heard one man say. 'The one who . . . You know.'

But when Ava turned to ask what he meant, the whole group was hurrying away.

'Excuse me,' Ava called after them loudly. They turned back, looking at each other and the pavement, anywhere except at Ava. She smiled sweetly at them. 'Could you tell me the way to the baker's, please?'

The relief that flooded their faces as they pointed down a side road was so intense that Ava had to bite her lip to stop herself giggling.

Turning on to the road, she spotted the baker's shop halfway along. It looked empty, but the door opened when she pushed it.

'Hello, are you open? My brother and I have just moved here, and . . .'

A head popped up from behind the counter. Ava blinked. 'And we need bread,' she finished. 'I saw you before. You gave me a leaflet.'

The boy grinned, his round face dimpling. 'Yes, I did.' He wiped his hands on his shirt and held one out over the counter to shake. 'Charles Brunel. Of Brunel and Son's Bakery – that's my father and me. My mother runs Freedom for Fair Folk.'

He stared hard at her as they shook hands, his gaze taking in the smudges on her dress, then flicking up to her face. Ava saw him notice her measles mark, but he didn't react to it with the usual curiosity or embarrassment; he just gave it a quick look and went on to study the rest of her.

‘It’s actually quite rude to stare,’ Ava said, drawing her hand back.

‘Sorry. I don’t get much chance to practise.’

‘You practise staring?’ She shook her head. She could feel herself getting drawn into a conversation she didn’t want right now. ‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Can I just have some bread?’

Charles turned and started pushing bread rolls into a paper bag. ‘Everyone’s talking about you,’ he said. ‘Matthew and Ava Harcourt. They’re wondering what you’re doing back here. They think your brother must have bribed Lord Skinner into offering you work – either that or you cast an enchantment on him.’ He spun the bag to seal it, watching Ava out of the corner of his eye.

She raised her chin and glared at him. ‘My parents died of typhoid fever,’ she said stiffly, ‘then Matthew and I ran out of money and we had to move. Lord Skinner offered Matthew a job so we came here. If we could have afforded a bribe we wouldn’t have needed to come. As for casting an enchantment, do I *look* like a conjuror?’

Charles set the bag down and rested his arms on the counter. ‘No, but you should never judge by appearances. That’s the first thing you learn if you’re a policeman.’

‘A policeman?’ Ava looked about at the flour-dusted shelves. ‘I thought this was a bakery.’

'It is. I'm helping out here for now, but I'm going to be a policeman when I grow up. We just got our first constable in Wyse and it's amazing. You get to wear a uniform and help solve crimes. Is it true you nearly died of measles once?'

Ava put a hand involuntarily to her cheek. 'I *had* measles when I was two. I don't know about nearly dying. I should go. We're having dinner with Lord Skinner this evening.'

'Really?' Charles's smile faltered and quickly recovered. 'I'm sure you'll like him. Everyone does.'

'You don't sound like you do,' Ava said.

Charles shrugged. 'I don't really know him. But being a policeman is all about noticing the details.' He handed her the bag of bread rolls. 'Everyone says Lord Skinner is a fine gentleman – but they say exactly that, like they've learned the words or something. And there's this funny smell sometimes.'

'A smell?'

'You'll see what I mean. Watch for the things other people might miss. The truth is in the detail. There's no charge for the bread. Welcome to Wyse.'

Charles's words echoed in Ava's mind as she paused at the entrance to Waning Crescent later that evening. A pair of iron gates stood open, leading to a wide, curved avenue with a semicircle of lawn surrounded by tall, white houses. None of the street lamps were lit

yet, except a pair halfway along, which burned with a flickering, pale green light.

'Fairy lights,' Matthew said. 'I remember them.' He looked less sure of himself now that he was standing outside his new employer's house.

Ava shivered as a breeze tugged at her best dress. She wrapped her shawl closer.

'I could tell Lord Skinner you're ill if you don't want to come,' Matthew said.

Ava shook her head. She couldn't let Matthew face Lord Skinner on his own. Besides, after what Charles had said, she was curious to see him.

They walked along the crescent until they came to the fairy lights, which stood either side of a vast pair of doors.

'Here goes,' Matthew said, and tugged the bell pull.

The doors opened so quickly that Lord Skinner must have been waiting behind them. Ava stepped back in surprise.

Matthew had said Lord Skinner was large, but the man who opened the door wasn't just large – he was enormous. His jacket flapped around him, big enough to fit twenty people inside it, and his blue velvet waistcoat strained over his vast stomach. Rolls of fat drooped from his chin and wobbled when he moved his head. Even his feet were fat, overflowing out of shiny, black shoes.

'Mr Harcourt,' he said, holding out a hand

to Matthew. 'Welcome. I am Lord Skinner. My condolences for your loss.'

Surely lords didn't open their own doors? Ava realized she'd been staring and curtsied quickly, her face burning.

Lord Skinner offered her his hand too. His hands were surprisingly thin compared to the rest of him, his slender fingers as dry as old paper, and he gripped Ava so hard that it hurt. So far everything about him felt solid and reassuringly real, not a single hint of fairy enchantments. She guessed he was about forty or fifty but it was hard to tell. His hair was greying, but only around his ears. He smelled quite normal too – Charles must have been making that up to tease her.

'Come along in,' Lord Skinner said, releasing her. 'Time and supper wait for no man.'

Ava glanced at Matthew. He seemed different, happier. Some of the worry lines had faded from his face, making him look younger. He already liked Lord Skinner, Ava thought, and why shouldn't he when Lord Skinner seemed perfectly fine? Father and Charles had both been wrong, and she was glad – glad to see Matthew smiling again.

Eagerly she followed Matthew through the doors into Waning Crescent.

There, she stopped dead.

The hall was full of mirrors. A jumble of different-sized silver frames hung from floor to ceiling.

Chandeliers swayed overhead and the reflected candlelight blazed so that Ava almost felt as if she was stepping into a fire – except for the cold. Even the warmth of all the candles couldn't mask the chill. She turned slowly, seeing her face everywhere, the pale mark on her cheek standing out.

'Waning Crescent used to be a museum of fairy magic,' Lord Skinner said, smiling at her confusion. 'These are all old magic mirrors, their magic long dead. When I moved back to Wyse, I decided to keep them all as reminders of the past.'

Look for the details, Charles had said. Looking about, Ava noticed marks on the wall where several mirrors looked as if they had been rearranged. She ran her fingers across one of them, wondering what magic glass felt like. It felt just like ordinary glass, but then the mirror no longer worked. Perhaps an active one would feel different.

'You won't be seeing any fairies in them, I'm afraid,' Lord Skinner said, smiling. He paused to the side of the mirror. 'Are you interested in fairy magic, Miss Harcourt?'

Ava jerked her hand away from the glass, embarrassed he'd caught her looking.

'My sister is at the age where she's interested in everything,' Matthew said drily. 'My apologies.'

'Not at all. Curiosity should be encouraged in the young.'

Ava shot a triumphant smile at Matthew. Lord Skinner didn't seem so bad, after all.

'Do you know why the mirrors stopped working, Lord Skinner?' she asked.

Lord Skinner walked on down the hall. 'No one does. There are various theories – the Industrial Revolution meant we no longer needed magic and so it dwindled through lack of use. Or maybe the mirrors were never meant to last forever. We have six working mirrors in Wyse now – that's all. Six conjurors who supply all the souvenir shops and ensure the town appears suitably magical for the holidaymakers. I oversee the legal and taxation side of things and make sure the conjurors follow proper health and safety requirements.'

He didn't look at any of the mirrors as he walked past them, Ava noticed, but led them on annoyingly quickly when she wanted to linger and look at them all. Only six working mirrors left, out of hundreds.

'What will happen if the last mirrors stop working?' Ava asked.

Lord Skinner spread his hands in a helpless shrug. 'Then Wyse will be just an ordinary town, and I . . .' His gaze drifted. 'Well, the mirrors have lasted so far. Let's hope they continue to do so. Now, I'm sure you're both hungry. This way.'

A pair of servants opened the doors at the end of the hallway and stood aside to let them through. Ava stole

a glance at one of them, an old man. He stood stiffly to attention, not even looking at her as she walked past.

'This is the banqueting hall,' Lord Skinner said. 'I normally reserve it for government functions, but I thought we'd eat here tonight.'

Ava shivered as she looked around. The room was vast and, although the fireplace was almost as tall as she was, the warmth from the fire barely reached her. Arched windows overlooked the lawns outside and a table stretched the length of the room, but there were only three places set, at the end closest to the fire.

'Please do sit down,' Lord Skinner said, squeezing himself into the chair at the head of the table. Most of himself, anyway.

More servants appeared through a door at the corner of the room, so quietly they might have come out of thin air. Ava watched as one poured water into glasses and another placed a soup plate in front of her.

He's not what he seems, Father had said. It didn't matter to Ava whether Charles was wrong or not, but could Father have been wrong as well?

Lord Skinner took a big gulp from his spoon, swallowing noisily. 'You'll find Wyse a friendly town once people get to know you,' he said. 'By the way, Miss Harcourt, you will be pleased to know that I have secured you a position as housemaid with Mr Edmund Footer, your cousin, and his mother.'

Ava dropped her spoon with a clatter. She bent to

retrieve it and found one of the servants was already there.

'Sorry. Mr Footer and his mother? Didn't they buy Father's house?'

Lord Skinner nodded, apparently oblivious to the storm of anxiety inside her. 'The house, the furnishings and your father's magic mirror, of course. I did wonder whether you might mind going to your old home as a maid, but then I reasoned you probably wouldn't remember it. You were so young when you left.' He broke a bread roll in two and reached for the butter dish. 'Better to work within the family if possible, I thought.'

Something sharpened in his eyes – something cold and hungry. At the same moment, a waft of strange scent surrounded her – damp ground and old leaves and something Ava couldn't identify, though she was sure she'd smelled it many times before. Her chest tightened.

Then a servant slipped a clean soup spoon beside Ava's hand and as she moved to pick it up the scent faded. She'd probably imagined it, she thought. What did it matter where she went to work? As Lord Skinner said, better to be with family than strangers.

'That sounds perfect,' she said. 'Thank you.'

Lord Skinner sat back. 'Excellent. You are to start work there on Monday morning. Tomorrow, you may wish to attend church, but if you prefer to stay home

and settle yourselves in I'm sure no one will think any the less of you. Now, tell me about yourself, Mr Harcourt. Your parents settled in Cambridgeshire – that's a long way from Wyse.'

The conversation continued. The soup bowls were quietly collected and fish appeared, then a whole side of roast beef. Lord Skinner carved it himself into thick slices that oozed red juices. The servants cleared their plates and set down trays of blancmange and sponge cake.

Ava sat quietly. She didn't know why Charles had warned her about Lord Skinner. He was a fine gentleman. She caught herself. *A fine gentleman. They say it like they've learned the words or something.*

She realized Lord Skinner had spoken to her and she jerked her head up. 'I'm sorry, I . . .'

'I was telling Mr Harcourt about the theatre,' Lord Skinner said. He put a forkful of chocolate sponge cake into his mouth. 'You should go to see a conjuring show when you have the opportunity. I'm sure you'd find it interesting.'

His faded blue eyes sharpened again. Had he guessed she dreamed of conjuring? Ava shifted in her seat. 'Mirrors are handed down through families, aren't they? Is that why Mr Footer is able to use Father's – because he's his nephew?'

Matthew coughed pointedly, but Lord Skinner didn't seem to mind the question. If anything, he looked

pleased at Ava's interest. 'That's right. Mirrors are usually passed down from father to son, but they don't have to be. It is said that the original conjurors had some fairy blood in them, which was why they could use the mirrors, and that ability runs through families.'

Through families? Then that meant . . .

Lord Skinner nodded as if guessing her thoughts. 'Your father was a conjuror, Miss Harcourt, and that means you have fairy blood in you. What do you think about that?'

Matthew laughed. 'By your reasoning, I have fairy blood too, and anyone who's descended from a conjuror. That's probably half of Wyse, at least. You may even have fairy blood yourself, Lord Skinner. We could all use magic mirrors if we wanted to.'

Ava scowled. Trust Matthew to make the whole thing sound ordinary. That odd smell came back, just for a moment, and she stifled a yawn, suddenly exhausted, as if all the rich food she'd eaten was weighing her down.

'Do forgive me,' Lord Skinner said. 'As I said, my interest is merely administrative. I'm happy to leave magic to the conjurors.' He stood up. 'Well, it's late and you've had a long journey today. I'll have my carriage take you home.'

Ava's head swam as she climbed into the waiting carriage and it wasn't just because of the rich meal.

She couldn't decide what she thought about Lord Skinner at all. He seemed nice, perfectly normal, not somebody to beware of. And yet . . .

'He's a fine gentleman,' Matthew murmured.

Ava stiffened. 'What did you say?'

'Lord Skinner. He's a fine gentleman, don't you think?'

Ava did think it. The words lodged in her head as if she'd memorized them, just like Charles had said. She folded her arms, trying to think of something else. 'I don't believe he's not interested in magic. Waning Crescent is practically a museum of magic with all those mirrors. He's supposed to be the minister in charge of magic. If you're in charge of something, you should be interested in it.'

'Not if you're in the government,' Matthew said drily.

'Be serious. Father said not to trust him. Are you saying we should ignore Father?'

'No, I'm saying . . . I don't know. Lord Skinner seemed perfectly reasonable to me. Let's give him a chance, all right?'

Ava nodded reluctantly. They were stuck here for now, and they had to make the best of things.

Beyond the iron gates, all the street lights were burning now with a green-golden glow that made the whole crescent appear like something out of another world.