

13

SECRETS

Michelle Harrison



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Summary: Now living at Elvedsen Manor under her real name of Rowan, Red attempts to put her past behind her, while fairy messengers try to convince her to participate once more in the changeling trade and she is haunted by dreams of an old enemy who is determined to exact his revenge.

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Rowan Fox hovered by the school gate, scanning the yard as pupils spilled out, jostling in their eagerness to begin the summer holiday. There was no sign of Fabian's fair head in the crowd, and so, impatiently, she headed over to the shop opposite the gate. Jangling some loose change left over from her lunch money, she went in and bought two bars of chocolate. When she came out most of the crowd had gone, and the melody of someone playing a guitar had begun nearby.

Fabian was still nowhere to be seen. She wondered if he had walked to the bus stop without her for some reason. Tucking one of the chocolate bars into her bag, she held on to the other and began to walk. Then she saw the girl—the player of the guitar.

She sat cross-legged in the doorway of an empty

shop two down from the sweet shop, leaning back against the door as her fingers swept over the guitar strings. Her straggly white-blond hair was in need of a wash. Next to her, a tattered knapsack rested on a grubby sleeping bag.

As Rowan drew near she paused by the girl's open guitar case, lying on the pavement. It contained pitifully few coins. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her last few pennies and added them to the meager pile. Then, looking down at the chocolate bar in her hand, she threw that in too, and continued on her way.

"Thanks," the girl called.

Rowan turned back. The girl had stopped playing and was staring at her. "I was starting to think I was invisible. You're the first person to give me anything all afternoon."

Rowan's eyes moved to the coins already in the case.

"Mine," the girl said. "I just put them there to... well, never mind."

Rowan came over and put her schoolbag on the ground. "You put the coins in to make it look like you weren't being ignored," she finished.

"Right." The girl gave a little laugh and stood her guitar against the shop door. Reaching for the chocolate bar, she tore the wrapper off and took a huge bite, closing her eyes in pleasure.

"Not the friendliest of places, this," she said, between munches. "Don't think I'll stay."

“Probably best not to,” Rowan answered, eyeing the girl sympathetically. It was difficult to put an age to her, but she looked older than Rowan—eighteen, perhaps. “You’d be better off somewhere bigger. Busier, with more people.”

“You sound like you’re talking from experience,” the girl said. She licked chocolate from her thumb and trained her eyes on Rowan.

“That’s because I am,” Rowan muttered. “It’s the reason I stopped—” She broke off and met the girl’s eyes. “I was on the streets for over a year. I know what it’s like.”

“Really? What happened to you?”

“My parents died in a car crash, and me and my little brother were put into care. But my brother . . . he went missing. So I ran away to look for him.”

“Did you find him?” the girl asked.

Rowan hesitated before answering carefully. “I never got him back, no.”

“So what did you do?”

Rowan shrugged. “I was lucky. Met some people who . . . cared. I live with them now.”

“Lucky,” the girl echoed. She eyed Rowan’s neat school uniform with envy. “It certainly looks like you’re doing all right now.”

“What are *you* doing here, anyway?” said Rowan. “Tickey End isn’t the place to be if you want to stay unnoticed. I mean, people will act like they don’t see you, but they don’t miss a thing around here.”

“I’ll be gone before the day’s out,” the girl

answered quietly. “I wasn’t planning on staying long.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Just long enough to deliver a message, after finding the right person.”

“Message? To who?”

“To you, Red.”

Rowan’s breath caught in her throat. “What did you just say?”

“Red. That’s what you used to call yourself, isn’t it?”

Rowan dragged her schoolbag closer to her feet. “Who are you? What do you mean you have a message? From *who*?”

“From the Coven.”

Rowan stood up. “Leave me alone.”

“Wait!”

She turned back. “Who sent you?”

“Sparrow,” the girl said in a low voice.

“Why didn’t he come to give me the message himself if he knew where to find me?”

“He said you wouldn’t listen if it was him. That I’d have a better chance of . . . getting your attention, making you listen—”

“He was wrong.”

“Just hear me out. All he wanted was for you to listen.”

“What’s in it for you?”

The girl flushed.

“Of course. You’re not homeless at all, are you? You’re one of them.”

She nodded. "He was certain you'd stop to talk to me, and he was right. But even then I had to be sure . . . it wasn't until you mentioned your brother . . ."

"Just give me the message."

"There's a meeting coming up, on the thirteenth."

"I know," Rowan answered. "There's always a meeting on the thirteenth."

"They want you there this time. No excuses."

Rowan nodded, eyes downcast.

"He said they need to let you know where it is, but to do that you have to let them in. That's it. That's the message." The girl stared down at the chocolate wrapper in her hands.

"And if I don't go?"

The girl opened her mouth to answer, but then looked past her. Rowan turned. Fabian approached, his face twisted into a scowl. He stopped next to her, loosening his tie and muttering under his breath.

"Where have you been?" Rowan asked him.

"Detention," he said sourly.

"For what?"

Fabian nudged a pebble with his toe. "Fighting."

"*Fighting?* With who?"

Before Fabian could reply, Rowan noticed that the girl was packing up her things. She stood up, slung her guitar case over one shoulder and her sleeping bag and knapsack over the other, and nodded good-bye.

"See you, Red," she said quietly, then moved off.

“Fighting with some of the boys in my class,” Fabian said distractedly, staring after the girl. His scowl softened to a frown. “Who was that?”

“No one,” said Rowan. “Just a beggar. I gave her some spare change.”

Fabian’s frown deepened. “You don’t know her?”

“No.”

“Well, she knew you,” Fabian said suspiciously. “She called you Red. No one calls you that anymore, not since you’ve been living with us.”

Rowan watched the girl’s figure getting smaller until she vanished around a corner into one of the many crooked side streets of Tickey End.

“I spoke to her once or twice when I was on the streets,” she lied, mentally reminding herself never to underestimate Fabian’s powers of observation. “It was ages ago. I don’t even remember her name—I’m surprised she remembered mine.”

“Oh,” said Fabian, rubbing at his cheek. “Funny how she ended up here, of all places.”

“Coincidence,” said Rowan, keen to change the subject. They began to walk. “So what was the fight about?” She checked him for cuts and bruises. “You must have got the upper hand—there’s not a mark on you.”

“It got split up as soon as it started,” Fabian said. “And it started the same reason it always does—they were saying things, rotten things, about Amos. They said... they said they’re going up to the churchyard to mess up his grave. One of them said he’d write

things on the headstone. I lost my temper and walloped him.”

“I don’t blame you for losing your temper,” said Rowan. “But they won’t really do anything, Fabian. If they were thinking of it, then you’d be the last person they’d admit it to. They’re just saying it to hurt you.”

“Well, it worked. Why can’t they just leave him alone? Even now that he’s gone they won’t let him rest!”

Rowan sighed. “You’ve got to ignore them. The more you keep rising to the bait, the more they’ll keep on at you.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Fabian said hotly. “*You* don’t have to put up with the whispers and the pointing. How would you like it if people thought *your* grandfather murdered someone?”

Rowan went silent as she pondered the dark history of Elvesden Manor, the old house she and Fabian both lived in. During Fabian’s grandfather’s term as the groundskeeper, a local girl named Morwenna Bloom had vanished in the nearby woods. Unfortunately, Fabian’s grandfather had been the last person to be seen with her, prompting accusations that he had been involved in the disappearance. The rumors had followed him throughout his life, and now, it seemed, beyond his death two months ago as well.

“Of course I wouldn’t like it,” Rowan said eventually. “But I could bear it if I knew it wasn’t true. And you know it isn’t, Fabian. Everyone who really

matters knows Amos was innocent. Remember that.” She reached into her schoolbag. “Here. I bought you some chocolate. It’s a bit soft now.”

“Thanks.” Fabian cheered up a little as he took it, and began eating messily as they walked through the town square toward the bus stop.

“Anyway,” Rowan continued. “I *do* know what it’s like to be whispered about and pointed at. I’m the new girl, aren’t I? And everyone knows I live at Elveden Manor now too. So, like you, I’m guilty by association.”

“I suppose,” Fabian said, through chocolate-coated teeth. “So how do you react to it all?”

“I don’t say anything,” Rowan replied. “I imagine their faces if they were to be told the truth. If we actually came out with it—that Morwenna Bloom willingly vanished into the fairy realm. Just think of what they’d say.”

“They’d think we’re even crazier than they do already,” said Fabian, cramming the last of the melting chocolate into his mouth, but his expression was lighter as they boarded the bus.

Rowan led the way to the back and sat down as the bus lurched away, rattling through the streets of Tickey End and on down the country lanes of Essex. Fifteen minutes later they stepped off the bus and began walking, passing acres of land that, in places, was still boggy and damaged from the terrible flooding of the past winter and spring.

Soon they passed under the watchful gaze of two

ferocious stone gargoyles, which were mounted on their own pillars on either side of a great set of iron gates. Beyond the gates, across a graveled forecourt, stood the imposing ivy-wreathed mansion called Elveden Manor. As they crunched through the gravel to the front door, Rowan stared up at the house.

“I still can’t believe I actually live here.”

“You say that every time we come up the path,” said Fabian.

“That’s because I think it every time.”

She inhaled deeply as they went through the front door. The hallway was dark and musty-smelling—the kind of smell that would never leave a place, no matter how well it was cleaned. Moving toward the back of the house, they passed the huge old staircase where, on the first landing, a grandfather clock stood mutely, its hands frozen in place. From inside it, Rowan heard the telltale scuffles of its inhabitants and, further up the stairs, the monotone of a vacuum cleaner filtered down.

In the kitchen a shrill screech greeted them.

“Young whippersnapper! Off with his head!”

Rowan winced at the piercing sound, while Fabian glared at the speaker: a gray parrot with gleaming yellow eyes perched in a tall silver cage.

“Good afternoon to you too, General Carver,” Fabian muttered sarcastically.

The bird narrowed its eyes, then started as the back door opened and Fabian’s father, Warwick, stepped in.

“All finished for the holidays now, then?” he said, closing the door and filling the kettle at the sink. After leaving it to boil, he took off his long overcoat and hung it on the back door. The iron knife tucked into the belt of the coat thunked softly as it hit the wood.

Fabian grinned and nodded. “No more school for six whole weeks!”

“Well, don’t start bickering with each other when you get bored.”

Fabian snorted. “We won’t get bored. And anyway, even if we did, you could take us on patrol with you in the woods—that’s never boring!”

Warwick raised an eyebrow at the suggestion. He opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted as a thin, white-haired woman in her mid-sixties entered the kitchen, followed by a slightly younger woman, who was stouter and short of breath.

“I tell you, Florence,” the stout woman wheezed. “That girl has problems, up there”—she tapped a finger to her head—“you know. I dread to think what kind of state her room’s in. Youngsters shouldn’t be allowed keys to their own doors, it’s just not—” She broke off as she caught sight of Rowan and scratched at her mop of untidy brown hair.

“You know why I lock my door,” Rowan said quietly.

“We’ve discussed this, Nell,” said Florence briskly, but as she looked at Rowan her gray eyes were kind.

“As long as the room is kept tidy, then Rowan may keep it locked if she wishes.”

“All the same,” Nell continued. “I haven’t been able to get into it to clean it for weeks now. It must be a bleedin’ mess!”

“How many more times?” Rowan said in exasperation. “It’s clean! And if you hadn’t kept *moving* things I wouldn’t need to lock the door! Don’t you understand? Things need to be kept the way they are . . . the way I leave them . . . for a reason!”

“Well, if you insist,” Nell said huffily.

“I do,” Rowan retorted. “And if Florence doesn’t mind then I don’t see why you should—it’s *her* house.” She turned her back on the silent kitchen and left, running up the stairs. No one followed, not even Fabian. She was glad. She paused outside a door on the left, her breath coming in angry hisses, and pulled an old key out of her bag. Fitting it into the lock, she opened the door and went in, throwing her bag into the corner. Then she sat down at the dressing table and stared into the mirror.

Her reflection stared back: slanted green eyes in a pointed, pale face dotted with freckles. Her hair had been jaw-length when she first came to live at the manor. Now, five months later, a smooth sweep of auburn reached nearly to her shoulders. She picked at a strand.

Red. That’s what they used to call you, isn’t it?

“Red,” she whispered to herself, looking around the room. She hadn’t lied when she told Nell it was

clean. The room was immaculate; nothing out of place. After such a long time of sleeping out on the streets, of belonging nowhere, having her own warm, safe room was something she would not take for granted in a hurry.

Safe.

Her eyes swept the room. It was a nice room, decorated just after she'd moved in. The walls were painted a vibrant crimson, making it appear warm and snug, and the worn furniture made it seem cozy, like she had been there for years. On the surface, apart from the tidiness, it was everything an ordinary fifteen-year-old girl's bedroom should be.

But Rowan was no ordinary fifteen-year-old girl. She got up from the dressing table and performed the same ritualistic checks that she performed every time she entered the room. Starting at the door, she knelt and rolled back the shabby rug to reveal the floorboards. A thin line of a white, grainy substance reached from one side of the door to the other.

Satisfied, she put the rug back in its place and checked the windowsill. Along the ledge, a matching line of white ran unbroken along its length. Pressing her finger to it, she lifted her hand and allowed a sprinkle of the granules to fall onto her tongue. The sharp bitterness confirmed it was salt.

Next she checked the grate, where, below the chimney opening, a wreath of dark green leaves and dried red-brown berries sat, sealing off another potential entrance to the room.

Finally, she crossed to the bed and slipped her fingers beneath the pillow. The coldness of the dagger there reassured her, and at last she allowed herself to relax.

The girl in Tickey End had worried her. Moving to the window, she stared out, beyond the walls of the garden and toward Hangman's Wood. But she did not see the trees, or the little brook that ran past the edge of the forest. Nor did she see the tiny church that stood in the distance. Instead, her mind's eye saw a cold, damp cellar beneath a stone cottage, where an iron manacle imprisoned a wrist with burned skin. Bitter words replayed in her head.

You'll regret this, girl. . . . I'll track you down and make you pay for this. . . .

A sudden thud at the window made her gasp. Shaking herself from her thoughts, she peered through the glass, squinting in the afternoon sun. On the outside window ledge a small, winged creature scabbled at the glass. It was about the size of a bird, and at a glance could be mistaken for one, for it wore garments of feathers and leaves. It was, however, a tiny man with sharp features and something square and white clamped between his teeth. She watched him, her face expressionless. The window had been left open a crack to ventilate the room. The gap was wide enough for the fairy to squeeze through, but even if he tried, she knew he would be unable to cross the salt barrier. It was a deterrent to fairies, just like all the other barriers she had set in place.

As the fey man stopped scrabbling, about to give up as he always did, Rowan relented and brushed away some of the salt, creating a small opening. The fairy blinked in surprise, then darted through the window, releasing the thing in his mouth, which fell to the floor.

“About time too!” he grumbled in a nasal voice. Then he took flight and was gone, leaving Rowan hurrying to sweep the salt back into an unbroken line again.

She knelt and collected the thing the fairy had dropped. It was a plain envelope with a single word printed on the front: RED. She stared at it, the name she had gone by for so long. The name she had tried to forget she’d ever had.

She was sick of pretending. Sick of hiding. Sliding her thumbnail under the lip of the envelope, she tore it open.

It was time to face her past.