

Blurb:

On the southern fringes of the Mendip Hills sits the Castle Hamingjur, an abandoned structure most fear haunted. Yet, on the rare occasions when the Hunter's Blue Moon occurs, the Keeper occupies this mysterious castle where he guards the bridge to Alfheim Haven.

Noreen Willshire discovers more than fairytales hidden between the pages of Beletania's diary. She opens the ancient book and finds a pathway to a Faery Realm where all manner of mythical creatures reside. In her naïveté, she summons the Keeper before his scheduled time in the human realm. In that brief moment, the mysterious wizard touches her soul with more than magick. She promises to return the diary during Mefylleth, a time when the barriers between the two realms melt away, but danger stalks her path. Torn between her desire to make a new life for herself in America and her growing love for the Keeper, she must bridge the gap between magick and time to follow her heart.



One

Long Sutton in the Somerset Marshes of England, 1849.

A shocking burst of laughter rang out, shattering the peace and quiet of the library. Noreen Willshire gripped the sides of her chair, her heart pounding. The unopened letter she held floated to the floor. Alone, the massive room seemed larger, more forbidding.

What had she heard?

She swung her head from side to side. "Who's there?"

The hiss and crack of smoldering coals answered.

Did young John's cat prowl the upper halls? She glanced toward the letter, a missive from her sister, Juliette. She'd been so absorbed with the idea of news from abroad, the sound had startled her. She smiled. The cat made a nuisance of itself again. They shouldn't allow him to run free. She uncurled her body from a chair in front of the cozy fireplace and scooped up the letter.

The library presented the perfect setting. She relished the solitude, more comfortable surrounded by books than she was by people. Located on

the second floor of the manor house, the library had become her favorite room. Dark red mahogany paneling and shelves full of books lined the walls. A maid had built a small fire that had burned down to white coals. An ornately carved mahogany ledge framed the fireplace.

On the far corner of the mantelpiece, the gnarled features of her wooden companion peered down. Lord Somerton's prize gnome, a family heirloom, peeked at her, its features pasted into a silly grin as if it guarded a secret. She smiled at the odd creature and stood. Moving to the desk where a lamp provided better light, she tore open the envelope; a letter she'd waited months to receive. Making full use of the lamp's light, she concentrated on each cherished word.

As soon as she began to read, laughter floated across the room, a low rumble of cackling mirth.

Lifting her head, she glanced about the room. That she might not be alone made her wary as to the identity of her visitor. Again, her gaze roamed the rows of books and found nothing to warrant the sound.

She sighed. The shawl slipped from her shoulders, and she readjusted the knitted warmth before wiggling to get comfortable. She often took refuge from her duties as governess by spending free time sequestered in the family library. In the short time she'd been employed by Edward Chauss, Duke of Somerton, she'd become well acquainted with Lord Somerton's extensive collection of books. Today, she had surrounded herself with the aroma of leather and parchment and a need to be alone with her letter from Juliette, but a mystery now claimed her curiosity. Laughter sounded where there should have been none.

Just when she assumed her hearing to be at fault, another burst of laughter rang out in the silent room.

No cat made that sound.

The hairs at her nape bristled. She lowered the letter to her lap, and her gaze swept the empty library more intently, searching each corner. A snicker made her turn toward the fireplace. She blinked, her attention snagged by the lone figure perched upon the mantelpiece. Setting the missive aside, she leaned across the desk for a closer look.

She rose and crept toward the fireplace. Stretching on tiptoe, she stroked the peeling paint at the tip of the gnome's nose. A giggle erupted. She jumped and snatched her hand back. Was it alive? Of course not. It must be some sort of music box with a malfunction, its mechanical insides rusted or broken.

She studied the gnome. Perhaps if she shook it, the strange noise would stop. She poked the wooden creature with her forefinger.

Nothing. No sound, no strange laughter.

Determined to discover the source of the distracting laugh, she tried to pick up the gnome and paused. The carved, wooden figure stuck fast to the mantel. She frowned and pulled it toward her, thinking to loosen it from its tenacious hold. When that failed, she pushed.

A tiny gasp left her lips. The statue tilted off its base, fastened to the surface by a hinge. A loud click sounded, and she whirled toward the noise.

Beside the fireplace, a mahogany wood panel stood ajar, and a soft breeze whistled through the opening.

A hidden passageway.

Footsteps crescendoed outside the library. She closed the panel and hurried to sit at the desk, grabbing the letter just before the maid entered with tea.

"Here yer are, Miss Willshire." The maid set the tray down, causing the fragile porcelain cup to rattle against its saucer. "Will yer be needing anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

"Do yer 'ave tidings from 'ome?"

Home? Where family surrounded a person with love and happiness and a sense of belonging? She no longer had a real home, but she hoped to remedy the situation soon.

She lifted her eyes from the flowery cursive and grinned. "A letter from my sister in Boston."

"Ah. Yer should be right anxious ter see wot it says. I'll leave yer ter enjoy yor letter."

Anxious? She'd been very anxious until something more compelling tugged at her interest. She glanced at the gnome, impatient for Mildred to leave. The diligent maid bustled about, taking her sweet time. Noreen fidgeted in her seat and nibbled a buttery croissant, her appetite dulled by an overactive imagination. Her gaze darted often to the mysterious gnome.

After what seemed like a decade, Mildred exited. No sooner had the door closed, the gnome chortled. Noreen glared at the wooden creature. Did some evil possess the gnome? Some dark magic, perhaps? Had it sought her notice on purpose?

Setting the letter down, she crept toward the mantel. She hesitated then reached to work the locking mechanism. A soft click sounded and once more, the panel gaped open. Her heart thumped against her tight corset. What would she find hidden behind the walls of Somerton manor? The mystery proved too enticing to ignore.

Without further hesitation, she slid the panel wide and peered inside.

The small opening lead to an endless pool of mystery; a dark and forbidding tunnel. Excitement tugged at her. She pulled a lantern from the mantel and lit it. Holding the lamp aloft, she took a tentative step into the unknown. A damp chill touched her skin. She faltered, poised on the brink of discovery, her curiosity aroused beyond good sense. Dare she investigate further? To do so was clearly a trespass against Lord Somerton, yet even as the thought entered her mind, the thrill of adventure urged her forward. With Lord Somerton tending estate business and his wife napping upstairs, she should enjoy this rare opportunity to explore without risking the master's disapproval.

After pushing her misgivings aside, she took another step into the passageway. A spider scurried across the timbered wall, and she suppressed a squeal. Remnants of a web clung to her sleeve. Merciful heavens, she hated spiders. With one hand holding the lantern high and the other

clutching her skirts as close to her body as the hooped crinoline would allow, she navigated the musty pathway.

The tunnel opened into a room no larger than a pantry. The space was devoid of furniture save one small table. Upon the table rested a large book. For what purpose did they hide this lone item? Had Lord Somerton placed the book here for safekeeping or had some past ancestor seen to the deed? She set the lantern on the table and leaned forward for a closer look.

Beletania's Book of Faery Tales and Other Stories.

Behind her, a muffled giggle erupted. Did the gnome think it all a huge jest?

She ignored the sound and ran gentle hands over the artistically crafted, leather binding, tracing the delicate image of a fairy-like creature. A current of sensation flowed from the book to her fingertips, tickling the tender pads with feather strokes. She jerked her hand away and stared at her tingling skin. Wary, she stroked the book again with just a forefinger. Again, the book vibrated beneath her touch, intensifying her wish to learn more.

She picked up the bound volume. An energizing force swept through her body. She arched her back, clutching the book to her breast and absorbed the rush of emotion. A thirst to know more took hold, a need to discover why the book pulsated with life. She opened it to the front page. Beneath the title, the author had written a short paragraph. Excited, she pulled the light closer.

Let it be known to all that read the following passages, I have strived to give a true accounting of the creation of Alfheim Haven. Because every story must begin, I have chosen to chronicle my own life and the lives of those who have touched my heart. They are the beginning. They are the fey creatures of my childhood. They are Alfheim Haven. May Freyr bless its creation and the lives of all who reside within the safety of the Faery Realm.

A diary? Just a diary? Or was it more?

The chime from the mantel clock echoed in the room, a muted reminder her free time had ended. She closed the book. Beneath her fingers, the thick cover trembled. Her hand rested upon its surface. A steady beat, like that of a bird's heart, fluttered to life. She held the book close.

Beletania's book must not be left behind amid dust and darkness. Stories were meant to be read and cherished.

With book and lantern in hand, she retraced her steps to the library. A fleeting touch of conscience told her she would suffer for the theft of the diary. But she hadn't stolen it; she'd merely borrowed it for the master's son. Young John would enjoy the fairytales.

As if some magical force manipulated her actions, she held the book to her body and hurried from the secret room. She slid the panel closed and tipped the statue back into place. As her hand rested upon the gnome's head, she paused, wondering anew if she'd imagined his laughter or if some magical force enticed her to find the hidden room and the treasure within.

She gave the strange little man a searching look before hurrying away. The diary would find a better home in the nursery where her young charge could enjoy the fairytales within. John still slept from an afternoon nap, his

small hands curled around a corner of his blanket. A stray lock slid across his brow, and she swept it out of the way. A wistful longing touched her heart at the sight. What she wouldn't give for a family of her own, but obstacles clouded the vision. She touched the bulge of coins she kept in a pouch hidden beneath her heavy skirts. Soon. One day soon, she'd have the funds to escape to America.

An unreasonable need to read from the book made it difficult for her to resume her afternoon duties. She forced herself to set it upon a bedside table. Dragging her fingers across its sculpted spine, she vowed to come back later. With one last look at Beletania's diary, she closed the door behind her.

Downstairs, a commotion in the front hallway caught her attention. Jarvis, the family footman, brushed past her, his steps heavy on the stairway with the burden he carried. At the last step, a huge trunk slid off his shoulder and landed with a loud thunk.

The front door stood ajar. The family brougham waited outside, fitted for travel. "Jarvis, is His Grace planning a trip?"

"Aye, Miss Willshire. He came in from his tour of the estate a short while ago and announced his intent. He's headed for Bristol on a bit of business."

Mr. Vesters, the coachman, sauntered in. Together, he and Jarvis lugged the trunk out of the foyer and onto the top of the brougham.

Lord Somerton rushed down the stairway soon after, yanking on gloves over pudgy hands. The cut of his coat stretched taut against his rotund figure. A black derby hat sat upon his balding head.

"Ah, Miss Willshire. I hope I can trust you to pay greater heed to your duties in my absence."

"You'll have no cause to doubt my abilities, Your Grace."

"See that I don't. I would hate to come home to a repeat of last week's performance."

She flinched. "I only meant to..."

"I am well aware of your curious nature, but you put my son at risk when the two of you explored that abandoned cottage."

"I'll strive to be more careful in the future."

"Strive? I dare say you'll do more than strive, Miss Willshire. Your last escapade gave my wife vapors for days. You were lucky no harm came to John. While in my employ, you'll curb your desire for adventure, Miss Willshire."

Her skin grew warm. He often took delight in reprimanding her for the smallest of grievances. She worried a loose thread at her waist. Her discovery of the secret room would not be appreciated. She hated the circumstances that forced her to accept her role as governess, but she hated more the demeaning nature of the position. How much longer would she have to cope before she saved enough funds to escape?

She forced a smile. "Will you be gone long?"

"A week, perhaps two."

"John will miss you."

The hard tilt of his mouth lifted in a slight curve. "I trust you will soften my absence with plenty of work for the young lad."

"I'll endeavor to keep him busy."

His thick brows gathered in a frown, and he pressed his lips together.

"Truly, Your Grace. John will be well cared for. Rest your worries."

She watched the man leave with a mixture of anxiety and relief.

Though he had an abrupt way of dealing with her, she could find no fault with the way he treated his son.

Later that same evening, she remembered her words to Lord Somerton when she tried to calm his restless offspring. The boy wriggled atop the bed like a puppy with a new toy.

She sat back in the rocker and pulled the heavy book onto her lap. Again a surge of energy flowed from the book, making her impatient to begin. Careful of its fragile age, she opened it and perused the contents. As she'd first suspected, the book appeared to be a collection of stories reflecting Beletania's life. She smiled at some of the more creative titles for the author's chapters. The woman had quite an imagination. More likely, the book contained a recollection of dreams, something Noreen could relate to.

"John, you must be quiet if I'm to read this fanciful tale."

The five-year-old gave her a baleful look. He'd lost a front tooth, and the gap made him that much more adorable.

"Will it be scary?"

John's large tabby, Sir Mews, jumped on the bed and settled at John's feet.

Noreen tilted her chin and lowered her voice. "Trolls are always scary."

"Oh good. I'll be really quiet unless I have to scream." He giggled.

She ruffled his thick, blond curls and tucked the covers about his chest. "Trolls like it when you scream. It makes them feel more powerful."

"You're just saying that."

She turned to the first story. "This appears to be a story about a troll and a fairy elf. Once upon a time..."

John tugged at her sleeve. "Why do all stories begin with once upon a time?"

She stared at the words, anxious to read. "Because most fairytales have no assigned time. Now, sit back and refrain from moving about. You do want to hear about trolls and fairies, don't you?"

John nodded, and a tuft of hair fell across his brow. She smiled and returned to the story. "Once upon a time, King Jadestone, a mighty king troll, ordered Sir Horatio Villdemore to find a human bride. Sir Villdemore wasn't your average troll. He'd once been a man, an Earl with lands of his own. He had no intentions of following the king's orders."

"Why?" John wiggled under the sheets. "I thought everyone had to follow the king."

"Let's see. Ah, it says here that he didn't want to subject another human to the same fate he'd suffered. Now, be good and let me continue."

Noreen read aloud for several minutes. Intrigued, she became absorbed in the story of Sir Villdemore and Siphinea, a beautiful fairy elf.

Siphinea had run away from a terrible fate and stumbled down a hole. She landed in the troll's den where Sir Villdemore found her. He became smitten, but he loved her so much, he didn't want to make her his bride. As his bride, she would be trapped inside the caves forever. "King Jadestone beamed. He loved the idea of Sir Villdemore claiming Siphinea as a bride even if she wasn't human. Sir Villdemore had other ideas. He..."

John tugged hard on Noreen's arm. Sir Mews sprang off the bed. Noreen glanced up from the passage, her concentration broken by John's insistent bid for attention. She frowned. She'd become so engrossed in the story she'd almost forgotten she read to an active five-year-old.

"What is it John? Don't you want to know what happens to Siphinea?"

He shook his head.

She glanced down at the hand printed parchment and scanned the next few paragraphs. The story became more seductive as the relationship between troll and elf developed. Perhaps it was a good thing John had stopped her. Clearly, this wasn't a fairytale meant for children. She'd read the rest to herself later.

"I imagine you're tired. You did have a big day."

He shook his head again.

"Then what monster has hold of your tongue that you can't tell me what ails you?"

He locked innocent eyes upon hers and pulled the covers up against his neck, his chubby hands trembling.

"What does a troll look like, Miss Willshire?"

"You weren't paying very close attention to the story, were you?" She winked at him.

John nodded, and a head full of sandy blond curls bounced with each movement. His eyes widened with youthful pride, and he lowered the covers just a little. "Oh, yes. He's big, hairy. His eyes are enormous, and he has sharp teeth and long fingernails. And he's sort of brown and green with a mane like those lions we studied. Did I get it right?"

She laughed and leaned over the large book cradled in her lap. The rocking chair squeaked with her shift in weight. "I think that sums it up very nicely."

"Then, is—is that a troll behind you?" His green eyes riveted to a point somewhere behind her, the sheet clutched once more between pudgy fingers.

"What a fanciful imagination you have, young sir. Trolls aren't real."

"But he looks real." He wrinkled his nose. "He smells real, like overcooked turnips, and he looks a bit scared, like—like he's lost."

She sniffed. Cook must have burned something. "Indeed. Next you'll be seeing gnomes and fairies." She reached out and ran her fingers through his silky locks. How she longed for a child of her own to spoil.

"I do see a fairy! There's a very pretty lady standing beside the troll, and she's dressed just like the fairy from the story. She's got a white gown and pretty flowers in her hair."

She gave him her sternest look, one meant to dissuade him from further imaginings. "Calm down, John. You mustn't..."

A board creaked behind her.