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MARY WINSTON THE NIGHT OF THE WHISPERING CAT

Chapter 1

“G eorge, please be a dear and stoke the fire a bit, it’s failing, and I so love the mood.”

George quietly folded the paper he was reading, removed his glasses and laid them on the coffee table and smiled across at Mary.

“I would like nothing more than to keep your mood in the fire, Mary Winston. I’ve been watching you. You have a faraway glow in your eyes. You’re not leaving me for one of those daftly dream vacations are you?”

Mary grabbed the pillow she was leaning against and threw it across the room at George as he put up his arms to ward off the attack.

“What was that for?” George asked, amusingly.

“How do you know what glow is in my eyes? You’ve been hiding behind newsprint for the last hour. My mood is not in the fire, George, and I don’t have daftly dreams,” she said with feigned hurt. “It’s simply drawing on the atmosphere of the room; the smell of smoke, the crackling flames, the head and legs growing out of the top and bottom of that newspaper... it all adds much pleasure to a day off, don’t you think?”

“Indeed, if you would like, I can move a wee bit closer so that you can read the back side,” George said.

“How absolutely clever of you, dear, perhaps I could use my side of the paper to stoke the fire. Or better, perhaps I can bring the fire closer to you,” Mary retorted

“Careful, Mary Winston, you don’t want to cause yourself a nightmare this time participating in the ghastly death of an old bloke.” He held up his arms again in anticipation of another projectile and covered his face with his hands. George then spread his fingers to peer out at her. “Is it safe?”

“Stop it, George. You are mocking me. It’s just that my dreams can sometimes feel very real, very different. The doctor said I was strongly influenced by the stress in my day, and that I’m simply working out the details of unfinished business. It’s not necessarily a dream but more a dream state.”

“Well it certainly isn’t an insult if it were, my dear. I was merely pointing out an observation. Feel free to work on any details of business you want. I will be glad

to light up the fire for you. And if you have no unfinished business to dream about, I will hope for a new dream with many romantic details dear Mary.”

Mary Winston let out a “HA!” and added with a coquettish look: “The romance wouldn’t include you if I did,” teasing him back.

“Oh, Mary Winston, you stab at my heart!” George grasped his heart and swooned backward lowering his eyes with mock hurt.

“So dramatic!” Mary said rolling her eyes.

“And who’s mocking now?”

“Oh, get on with it, George, fix my fire or remain useless and leave the room. So what if I dream a bit more or less realistically than most. It makes my days and my nights equally interesting.” She was playfully agitated. “And I suppose you don’t dream at all. Is that it?”

“Not at all, Mary Winston, I dream quite well, quite well indeed. In fact, I can even still fly, which the doctors say only pre-adolescent children and that Pan fellow can simulate in their dreams.”

“Figures,” said Mary

“Now, now, Mary, we don’t want to show our jealousies too quickly.”

“I have no jealousy for your flying, George,” she said with a serious tone. “You have always been a *Pan*, and I have always found you enthusiastic for fantasy. In fact, I see no need for you to dream at all. Your game is to flirt with the pretense of reality while everyone else’s

reality tickles your senses, which keeps you amused for hours with fantastic melodramas all your own.”

“That’s because I tickle back,” George said, challenging back. “My melodramas are the very richness of your dreams. Without me, your dreams would simply drop you from cliffs and wake you up before you reach the bottom, but because of my tickling, you fall deeply into greatly exaggerated complex stories, stories that are rich with... well, fantasy.”

“I’m certainly fascinated by you, George, but not jealous. If I were jealous, I would want to *be* you. I quite like being dreamy old Mary Winston. And whether I hit the bottom or not hasn’t a lick to do with your suggestions.”

“I was not intending to upset you in any way, dear.”

“I’m not upset; merely pointing out that fantasy is very different than the purity of random dreaming. Dreams are solutions to daily difficulties. In some cases, there are no difficulties, and a dream is a reward for having a good day. Either way, they are not invented fantasies like you’ve gone off to the movies for the night.”

“Mary, Mary, you cannot deny that I have influenced you in the past—contributed to the theme a bit, no?” George was now taunting her. “Fantasies are the improbable realities—complete inventions of time, place and event. If I remember, you were once in the village of Dunmore with Leprechauns. Very improbable, I would say, and more fantasy than dream.”

“Yes, you have indeed influenced me—at times.” Mary conceded. “But I’m on to you now, George. Your impish pleasures no longer surprise me. I can see them coming a mile away.”

“Can you now?” George said. “Is that a challenge?”

“Of course not, dear, challenges are for school boys, and there is only one school boy present.”

“Well then, Mary Winston. Let the school boy stoke this fire a bit more for you. Are you quite comfortable, dear?” He asked with mock concern. “Is the mood good? Close your eyes, dear, and let yourself randomly flutter about for a while.”

“George, what are you up to?”

“Nothing at all, nothing you wouldn’t see coming a mile away.”

“George Winston!”

“Now, now, Mary, don’t get your dream maker in an uproar.”

George was now wearing a rather large suspended smile of contentment. He was fully engaged in his playfulness and aware of the agitation he was causing Mary. But a challenge was a challenge, and he was not about to shy away from one.

“They say,” George began, “that fantasy begins with a thought that reality refuses.”

“Is that so? And who are ‘they,’ George?” asked Mary suspiciously, “are you one of them?”

“Well, I suppose those that utter such thoughts,” George said. “Last I checked... yes, I was one of them. It is a humbling experience to be invited into the club.”

“You are making very little sense, and I’m no longer amused.” Mary was restless and wary of George’s teasing. “Please stop your torment.”

“And they say,” he added, “that dreams are the thoughts that heaven discards.”

“I’ve never heard such suggestions.” Mary pulled a throw over her and shifted away from George uncomfortably in her chair.

“So you see, Mary, there is a definite connection between fantasy and dreams,” he said ignoring her comment.

“You’re making this all up, George, just to stir up trouble, and I don’t appreciate it much, besides, ‘they’ say that good husbands don’t make their wives an object of play. Now, be a good husband, and stop this indulgent teasing of your dear, tired wife.

“Very well, Mary, if you don’t believe me, I suppose I will have to convince you.”

“Convince me? How?” By asking the question, she was momentarily drawn into his game. She held up her hand. “Never mind, George, I don’t want to know. This is a silly challenge, and an even sillier argument, and you are being a silly man—silly me for listening to you.”

“It’s the weekend, dear. If silliness were to prevail upon us, it should be on the weekend, don’t you think

so? And, if you are so confident that your dreams and my fantasies don’t have a thing in common, then why not have a challenge of it? Do play along, Mary.”

“Why don’t you get us something warm and friendly to drink?” Mary was falling into his spell having never shied away from a challenge, and having no small desire to prove him wrong. *Besides, if she could get rid of him, maybe she could rest peaceably*, she thought. “Then, perhaps I will listen to what you have in mind.”

“That’s the spirit, old girl!”

George leaped to his feet in a spry mood and disappeared into the kitchen. Mary threw off her blanket contemplating the game she was about to engage in. She could hear George humming happily in the kitchen opening and closing pantry doors, mixing things and even taking a sip of whatever the concoction was that he had made.

“Ummm... very good,” he said loud enough for Mary to hear, “Very good indeed.”

Mary folded her arms and stared at the fire shifting again in her chair. She felt herself getting tense. *I must not let him win the game*, she thought. *For heaven’s sakes, I don’t even know what the game is, what am I doing?*

Meanwhile, George had returned with a deliciously frothy Irish coffee. “Here you are, mum, a bit of whisky to soothe the throat, a dip of honey to sweeten your dreams and cream to put you to sleep.”

“My, it looks delicious, but there is only one.” Mary reached for the tall creamy dessert. “That’s exactly what I had in mind. Aren’t you joining me, George?”

“I don’t want to inhibit you, Mary Winston.”

“Inhibit me from what?” Mary asked.

“Sleeping, dreaming, fantasizing,” George said.

“You have much ground to cover, dear Mary, but when you return I will be here to collect my dividend.”

Mary was indignant with how childishly out-of-hand this whole petty argument had become. She placed her drink on the end table and attempted to get up. George leaned down and held Mary down lightly by the shoulder.

“Dear Mary, I have stoked your fire, made your hot toddy and tried to create a proper mood for you. Now it is your turn to relax and enjoy the atmosphere. Can I get you a good book to read, rub your shoulders, and tell you a bedtime story?”

“First, George Winston,” Mary spoke defiantly, “I shall not be falling asleep or paying you a dividend or any more attention for that matter. Your childish behavior is discomforting and you have completely ruined the mood!”

“Shhhh!”

“Don’t shush me, George!” Mary said, truly annoyed this time.

“Someone must shush you, Mary, or you will never find the whispering cat.” George smiled broadly. Mary grew quiet for a moment; and the impish George, and

the challenged Mary, stared for a long second at each other as if the “dare” had been released from the cage.

“The whispering what..? Oh George, stop this right now. I am not going to rush off and dream your silly old dream just because you think you have influenced me.”

“We shall see,” He said confidently, “Besides, if you don’t, then at the very least I have made you comfortable and left you to relax.”

“Why are you leaving me?”

“I don’t want to blemish your dream,” he said. Then, George picked up her drink and handed it to her once again while gently pushing her back into her chair. He then placed the blanket over her feet and legs, kissed her on the cheek and said softly: “Leave no business unfinished Mary. Find the cat.” He then left her to the crackling fire and escaped through the kitchen, prancing as if he were a cat that was just running off with its toy.

Chapter 2

Mary looked across the glen as the sun added a rose tint to the moisture on the grass and noticed a fox on the prowl. It trotted a few yards then stopped to look back making sure it was safe to proceed. He turned into the thicket to hide and wait for opportunity to cross its path. She then turned back to eye the polo match. As thunderous hooves kicked up mud and mallets swung wildly propelling an angry force at a

helpless ball, both victim and agitation, rolling hazily across the field, she wondered if her fox was on the run or on the prowl.

Would her villain be chased down or was he circling the crowded fence line blending in to the thicket of people waiting to strike first? Rather than standing paralyzed like a nervous rabbit, she decided to do a little blending of her own. She headed directly into the crowd with cheeks full of charm:

“Hello, so good to see you.”

“The ponies are delightful to watch aren’t they?”

“Excuse me...”

“Oh, I love your hat, Mrs. Morgan.”

“Yes, wonderful, wonderful!”

“You look absolutely glowing Mrs. Reedy.”

After she had made her presence known as one of the many spectators, she deliberately headed down toward the stables.

Her client was impatient and desperate to find the missing items. Mary was sworn to secrecy and discretion in her inquiries. To the best of her understanding, there were four missing items of similar value. He would not say what the items were but that they were arranged in a sealed, shatter proof, secure, small, black case marked in gold: *EffM*. No clue was offered as to the meaning of the letters but that it was utterly important to have the case returned.

Even her client’s name was withheld having been contacted by messenger with a description of the

missing case, instructions and a retainer of five thousand pounds up front and a promise of five thousand more if successful. The instructions were brief. As she read them, she felt strangeness as if the author of the note were speaking directly to her:

Mary,

Glendale Polo Fields tonight. Find the whispering cat. Possible danger, stay alert. Let no one know!

G.

Hardly much of a clue, she thought. Perhaps it was a matter of trust and “G” would expose himself at a later time in her investigation

As Mary reached the stable, the sounds of the polo match and the polite cheers were distant and muted. The sun was dropping but still above the horizon with enough light to finish the match but barely enough to illuminate the stables. She could hear the wind rumbling through the vast archway and into the interior. A few horses were in the stable and stood uneasily, whinnying for the intrusion. *It was possible, she thought, that the stables held nothing more than upper crust charm, but more likely, the relic she searched for. After all, this was the most likely place to find a cat, whispering or not*

She ventured deeper walking in her soft soles across the cement stable floor. Bridles, brushes, leather whips and a variety of other equestrian paraphernalia hung

on the walls. Buckets, hoses, large enclosed feed barrels and occasional loose straw near the stalls. Nothing appeared out of the normal. It was a substantially large stable and Mary walked through to the other end having passed twelve stalls on each side. An owner's office appeared at this end of the stable, but there was no light on and the door was locked. No cat, or evidence of a cat, appeared along her way. *Not even a feeding dish... unusual for a barn to not have a mouser around*, she thought.

She knew that she did not have enough to go on and that it was a long shot that she would find the item but the five thousand was a significant enough seduction to investigate the mystery. Mary would go back to the polo grounds and have a further look around, perhaps even attempt to peek into the main residence. The *Glens* owned the polo fields and the estate. They were nice people. She was sure that offering a pretense to use the washroom would grant enough time for an observant glimpse for the missing cat or any hint that one existed.

Mary returned back through the main stable foyer and felt an uneasy chill up her spine. She thought she saw a shadow move through the now darkened corridor. The last of the sun shone through the other end creating a halo effect casting a shadow on most every object in the stable. It affected her unprotected eyes causing her to squint and put her hand up to her forehead like a hat brim. If she could have whinnied like

the others, she would have. She could now hear the horses moving about in their stalls with nervous energy, knocking against the walls and pounding a hoof or two on the floor in an agitated state.

"Who's there?" she yelled out. "I was just having a lookaround the stable."

No one replied.

She began to move swiftly but carefully toward the remaining sunlight.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

As she approached the entrance again, she looked down at the feed bin she had passed moments ago on her way through the stable and noticed a helmet and goggles. Mary was sure that they were not there when she entered. The goggles were full of fresh mud and dust and the helmet was full of warm sweat. She stiffened in fear, turning three hundred and sixty degrees to quickly assess the immediate danger. Looking up on the wall, she grabbed the leather horseman's whip that was hanging there and stood defiantly ready to defend herself. *Danger, stay alert*, she remembered from the letter. *Yes, she was definitely alert, but what now?* She thought.

"Show yourself!" she yelled.

Then she heard a stall door open behind her and suddenly a large galloping beastly shadow was running noisily toward her with menacing brute force. Mary Winston instinctively threw her back up against the wooden stall walls, snapping the horseman's whip

as hard as she could in front of the threat causing the shadow to stop and rise up on its hind quarters. She snapped her whip again and screamed, "HURRAW!" and the shadow fell back to the ground and ran safely around her into the outside. She could hear the hooves galloping away behind her as she readied herself for another assault from inside the stable. Then she heard footsteps coming toward her from down the corridor stopping in front of the stall where the shadow had emerged. There was not much light now.

"Stop!" Who are you? What is your business here?" Mary said with a shaky confidence.

"One would ask of you the same question." The footsteps answered.

"I, I was attending the polo match," she said.

"It would have been hard to see from here," the voice said. "You must have magnificent eyes.

"I only came to admire the stables and pet the horses," she feigned.

"You were frightening the horses. I came to investigate," the voice said.

"That is no reason to nearly off me with a stampeding beast! I take exception to your methods sir. Who are you, I say again?"

The voice began walking toward her again.

"Stay back!" Mary said with determination. "I have a whip!"

Then the large overhead lights came on and illuminated the two of them.

"Mr. Glen! It's you!" Mary was shocked to see Mr. Glen, the owner standing before her with his hands on both hips. She was standing in a most unflattering pose like a martial arts fighter holding the whip in her right hand ready to thrash him.

"Who did you expect?" Mr. Glen asked with furrowed brows. "You look like your expect'n a kung fu fight or a bull Ms Winston."

"I was not expecting you Mr. Glen," she said as she changed her pose to resemble a humiliated, embarrassed, uninvited intruder.

"The last I checked, Ms. Winston, I am the holder of the Glenmore deed. I was down in my office taking a siesta on my couch when I heard the commotion. That horse you let escape better not be harmed or this polo match that you were down in my stables watching could be quite a bit more expensive than the one we were having up on the polo field, if you catch my drift. What do you want with my horse anyway? She's an old mare not worth breeding anymore." Mr. Glen's eyes shifted about looking for the supposed 'other' intruder.

"Mr. Glen, I did not let your horse go. Someone deliberately let her out of the stall. She nearly killed me and... well, he got away," Mary said.

"He?" quizzed Mr. Glen.

"Yes, the person who let her out."

"Well, Ms Winston, you found your way down here so I guess you can find your way back. Right now, I'm

gonna' get to finding old Milly. She's old but I got a history with her, if you catch my drift." He paused for a moment, but not so that she could respond. Then he started out the archway.

"Mr. Glen?"

He stopped but didn't turn around.

"Can I ask you one question?" Mary asked.

He looked half way over his shoulder.

"Do you own a cat?" Mary asked.

"No. No cats! Don't like 'em." Then he left.

Chapter 3

Mary Winston was now perfectly discomfited in knowing that she was so close to the thief but no closer to answering the mystery or finding the items she had been hired to find. In fact, she felt further away than when she had started. Mr. Glen was terribly upset with her, and her heart was still pounding rapidly from the near miss with old Milly. There was nothing to do but to return home and reconsider the assignment.

Before turning to leave, her curiosity raged: *Who allowed Milly to escape and who rushed out from the stall and flew the stable without me or Mr. Glen running into them?* Mary walked to Milly's stall, held onto the door frame and peered inside hoping that the light would shine on some clue. Aside from a couple small droppings the stall was clean. The floor was comfortably thick with straw. The hay and oat bins were cleared. The rest was

just empty space, exactly what she felt as she replayed the scene in her mind. There were no clues, no revelations and no cat to be found.

That was the end of it. Mary turned and headed out of the stable toward the polo fields and the parking area where she would find her car and return to her flat and think of the case no more. When the messenger arrives, she would return the retainer and decline any further employment with the matter.

She no sooner stepped a foot outside the stable archway when she heard the whisper: *"Find the whispering cat, Mary Winston."* It was not an audible sound from the mouth but more an internal voice, which made her spin around in a frenzy to see where it was coming from. It was clear as a bell. For a moment she thought God might have been speaking to her. The slight night wind made her shiver a bit then she heard the voice again, *"The answers begin with you, Mary."* Whoever the voice was, it knew her by name *and that could not be good* she thought.

"What do you want of me?" She said out loud.

The voice did not come again. Mary gave one more glance toward everything surrounding her and then started up the path.

"You are still here, Ms. Winston?"

Mary let out with a retreating scream that comes from gulping a large breath of air, stopped dead in her tracks with her right hand bracing her chest.

"Mr. Glen? It's you!" She said excitedly.

He had Milly by the halter and was leading her back to the stable. He spoke in a soft deliberate voice: "This appears to be how we met the first time, Ms. Winston. It seems you are once again surprised to find me on my own property, whereas, I am the one who should be feeling the effects of a surprise encounter with an uninvited guest, if you catch my drift."

"Yes, well, you startled me. I was not yet composed from my last frightening start," Mary offered.

"Perhaps you should find a less frightening place to spend your time."

"Yes indeed," Mary snapped. "I will be leaving then." She curtsied briefly in humiliation and moved to walk around Mr. Glen and Milly.

"Oh," Mr. Glen said as an afterthought. Mary stopped momentarily this time it was she who did not turn completely around but waited for his statement. "I found this attached to Milly's halter when I found her."

Mary turned to see Mr. Glen holding a folded piece of paper. She looked into his face questioning his intent for her to have a look.

"...Makes no sense to me," he said, "Since you're here, you might as well take a look."

Mary took it and opened it. She read it once then looked back at Mr. Glen. "I don't understand."

"Well, that makes three of us." He chuckled, "Milly doesn't understand either."

She looked again and this time read it out loud:

*The horse chomps down without reluctance
easy to lead the horses head. Gladly it follows
with a simple tug, but enough is all that is said.*

"Milly's halter?" She cocked one side of her shoulder and arm with a confused guess.

"I don't think so," Mr. Glen said bluntly. "I don't see what it all has to do with anything." Shirking his shoulders, he continued to walk Milly into the stable. "The polo riders will be bringing their mare's down any moment. I've got to get things prepared in here."

Mary stuffed the note in her pocket and watched him disappear inside with Milly. She could hear Milly's big hooves clapping along the cement corridor so much more politely than her exit. Then Mary asked loudly, "Why?"

"Why what?" came a distant voice.

"Why don't you think it means Milly's halter?" She yelled back.

"'Cause horses don't chomp down on halters, only bridles. I really must be going now Ms. Winston."

Undeterred, Mary shouted back, "Then the note was about a bridle?"

"Nope..." He echoed back.

"Then what?" She asked.

Mary could see several of the other horses and riders coming down the path. As she looked up at the stable entrance, she saw Mr. Glen standing partially outside waving her toward him. She glanced back at the riders, then back at the entrance with a perplex

gaze. He had gone inside again. Mary ventured back inside the stable and there Mr. Glen was holding a dirty white pouch with leather straps.

"It's a feed bag," he said.

"Are you quite sure?" Mary asked.

"A horse sees this and she will follow you to *Timbuktu* to stick her head in here and gladly chomp down when it's full and tied to her snout."

"I wonder," Mary thought out loud.

"I don't. I'm pretty confident that this is the item mentioned in that paper there." He reached inside the feed bag and extracted another note. "This one's addressed to you Ms. Winston." He handed it to her.

The riders had arrived and were parading into the stalls with their horses. Mr. Glen moved Mary gently out of the way. "I really have to be going now but when you figure that note out, I would be interested in what it all means. Good Bye, Ms. Winston."