

IT'S EXTRAORDINARY, MY DEAR WINIFRED

BY:

MISS MAE

It's Extraordinary, My Dear Winifred

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For information, contact Miss Mae at MissMaeSite@gmail.com

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Chapter One

She slumped against the wall, sucking down gulps of air. Leaning back, Winifred swallowed hard, her throat constricting. No sound reached her but the echo of her thundering heart vibrating against her eardrums.

Where am I? What is this place?

She forced herself to scan the narrow hallway from whence she'd come. Two small lamps anchored in garish wrought iron sconces warred to dispel elongated shadows. She looked in the other direction and saw the same view. Except at the very end of the murky corridor, a flash of gold color glinted off a brass doorknob.

Winifred pushed away from the wall. Her footfalls, though light and careful, amplified in the tunnel-like closeness. She paused and cast a wary look across her shoulder. Halfway expecting to glimpse a pursuer, she saw nothing but the length of the dimly lit passageway behind.

Fingers tightening round the brass knob, she flung the door wide. A windowless, unfurnished room lay before her, lit only by one hissing gas lamp. A repetitive ticking drew her attention to the far wall. About six feet above the floor hung a nondescript clock. Like all the rooms she'd already visited, it alone provided the only adornment.

“Am I going in circles?” she whispered under her breath. “Everything is the same. Halls that lead nowhere, empty rooms that contain nothing but this mindless, endless drone.” She looked again at the clock, slapping her hands over her ears to shut out its continual voice.

Get hold of yourself. Think logically.

A low growl whined from beneath her feet. Floorboards rattled. She leaped back, latching onto the wall to steady herself. The room door swung shut with a loud slam and the hall lamps flickered like an invisible gust of wind sought to extinguish them.

But I felt no breeze.

Before she could ferret out an explanation for the bizarre moment, the noise stopped as suddenly as it'd come. The floor's vibration calmed and the lamps returned to their original low flames. She furrowed her forehead in thought.

Another question with no answer.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she drummed her fingers against her left elbow. Should she return back the way she'd come? But she already knew what lay behind. No option presented itself except to go forward. With a slight shrug, she reached again for the doorknob, halting in the open threshold. She blinked, narrowing her vision for a closer look at the wall clock.

I say. I'm positive that had a blue case. So why is it now green?

Frowning, she surveyed the room. Only a moment ago, it stood empty. Now, a pair of drapes covered a section of the far wall. Without hesitation, she crossed over and parted them. Her brow arched in critical speculation.

Curtains that conceal a doorway? As dear Alice in Wonderland would say, 'Curiouser and curiouser.'

“Obviously, I’m supposed to go through here.” She gave a decisive nod. “So be it.” No sooner did she touch the knob than the door snapped open with an explosive pop. A man filled the frame, staring at her from a pair of the most beautiful eyes she’d ever seen.

“At last!” His voice jolted her with its distinctive deepness. Before she had time to wonder if maybe her corset’s tight lacing had burst a seam, he spoke again. “There’s a real human in this lunatic house.” His head lowered as he leaned swiftly toward her, his eyes—aqua blue, accented with the blackest of pupils—peering intently into her face. “Or am I meeting my abductor?”

Stepping back, she drew herself up to her best height that barely topped his broad shoulders. She tilted her head to look up at him. “Not at all, sir. By your exclamation, I’m led to believe you’ve been wandering these endless hallways for perhaps as long as I.”

He entered the room and glanced at the clock. “For an hour, yes. I woke up at half past six.”

“Woke up? As in *drugged to sleep*?”

He spun on his booted heel to throw her a hard stare. “And how do you know that?”

She gave a faint smile. “Thirty minutes ago I, too, woke up.”

“Ah.” Comprehension slid across his rugged features. “You’ve also been apprehended.”

“I have. The whole experience has left me with a distasteful bit of nausea, I might add.”

“Hmm.” After a slight hesitation, the man raised his hat, flourishing it in a gentlemanly bow. “Allow me to introduce myself. Remington Hawthorne at your service.”

The ease and grace that he exhibited, along with the sight of his attractive, closely cropped, sandy blond hair captured her undivided attention. Attributing her unexpected rush of faintness to the lingering effects of her drugged state, she lowered her lids and covertly studied his lean frame. The tailored cut of his black suede frock coat outlined the shape of his broad chest and the charcoal gray trousers fit snugly down a pair of long, well-formed legs.

He’s certainly up to date on fashion and shows manners characteristic of good breeding.

Settling his hat at a cocky angle over his right brow, Remington sketched an amused smile. “And you are?”

“Winifred Merryweather,” she said, narrowing her eyes in annoyance. *And he apparently believes he’s the devil of a charmer.*

“Why the frown? You find your own name displeasing?”

“Quite the opposite, sir. The truth is, I fail to see what you are smirking about.”

“Did I smirk?” He shrugged one shoulder. “Forgive me. No, this”—he waved a hand to indicate their surroundings—“incident is most puzzling.”

“I agree and suggest we find our way out of here.”

“And how are we to do that? I woke up in a room with only one door. I went through it down a hallway to another room with one door. That, too, led down a singular hallway to another room. This repeated for an hour until I came here. So, there’s no need to go the way I came because there’s no exit.”

Winifred tapped an index finger against her cheek in a musing gesture. “The same happened with me. I followed all the hallways to here. Everything remained the same except for that brief moment of the odd noise.”

Remington looked at her. “Noise? I didn’t hear any noise.”

“Yes. A peculiar kind of growling whine sounded from beneath the floor. When I re-entered this room, I noted how the color of the clock changed and the curtained doorway appeared.”

Remington twisted around to peer at the clock. His smooth forehead creased in thought. “I’ve also noticed a differently colored clock in each room. Why are they present, I wonder?”

“Why they’re the sole occupants in this bizarre place is another question without an answer. However, in our ordered world, clocks are used to count time so we’ll remain punctual for our appointed schedules.”

“Schedules?” A flash of surprised delight lit Remington’s eyes as he bared his teeth in a wide grin.

“Miss Winifred, you might possess a high degree of deductive logic for I believe you’re probably right. These clocks are clues, letting us know a schedule has been arranged. Perhaps we’re allotted only a specific amount of time to find our escape route.”

“I *might* possess some logic, sir?” Winifred’s chin lifted in defiance. “That astonishes you that a woman *might* be intelligent?”

“Don’t take offense. I meant it as a compliment, Miss Winifred.”

“That is Miss Merryweather to you, sir. Just because we are absent from polite society doesn’t mean you are allowed intimate privileges.”

“Intimate?” Remington’s lips twitched as though he fought against a smile. “I haven’t even begun.”

Winifred had no time to comment. The floor beneath her feet abruptly vibrated and a thud, followed by the same low growl she heard before, shook the air. Remington directed his gaze at the wall lamp, watching the flame as it flickered unsteadily.

“This is the noise of which you spoke?”

“Yes.” Winifred glanced at the drapes. They trembled as if invisible hands pulled at their strings. “I don’t believe it will last long.”

The light in the lamp flashed off and then back on as the flame fought to survive. Remington whipped his head toward her, his expression calm but serious. “Forgive my intimacy, Miss Merryweather, but I don’t wish us to become separated.” He reached out and latched onto her forearms a second before the room plunged into total darkness.

She didn’t protest his touch. Rather, the strength that flowed from his grip surged warmth through her veins and she found it strangely comforting.

As she predicted, the noise ended quickly. All vibrations stopped and a reassuring light glowed from the wall lamp. However, Winifred discovered that, in the moment of darkness, she somehow moved nearer to Remington. She blinked at the close-up view of his cravat’s attractive knot that now rested just a couple of inches from her nose.

He released her, stretching an arm to point at the clock. “Look. It’s a different color now.”

Clearing her throat, she hastened to follow his bidding. “Yes. The case is brown.” *It’s the strangeness of this place that’s making me so breathless, isn’t it?*

He strode to the curtains and parted them, then sent a satisfied glance over his shoulder. “See? The door I used to enter this room no longer remains. It’s disappeared.”

“You’re right.” She went to stand beside him, running her hands over the solid wall. “This is most curious. First, the door was here and now it isn’t? How can that be?”

“It’s obvious.” Remington walked back to the clock and stared at its face. “This is a different room than

the one we stood in only moments before. That noise we heard must be gears that rotate rooms.”

“Changing rooms?” Winifred gasped in confusion. “Like they do at a carnival?”

“Except I don’t consider this amusement, do you? Come. There’s only one door to exit and I suggest we take it.”

They walked into another shadowy corridor that stretched before them. Remington said, “What strikes me is, why? Why has our abductor chosen you and me, specifically, to be here? We’re strangers.”

Winifred gave him a covert glance. The sight of his distinctive profile weakened her ankles, causing her to misstep. Hurrying to mask her slight fumble, she said, “I’ve been puzzling that question myself.”

“Tell me of your location where you were seized.”

“I’d just left London’s city library and was on my way home.” She answered his inquiring look with, “I’m a teacher at a parish school.”

“And where were you nabbed? At a street corner?”

She nodded. “I remember, before I stepped off the curb, my attention was diverted by a noise in the near alley. It sounded like a couple of boys exchanging fisticuffs and I thought of intervening. As I hesitated, I was grabbed from behind and a cloth was pressed to my face.” A cold chill shuddered down her back at the memory. “Sickeningly sweet odor.”

“I think two strong men tackled me. I’d just alighted from the coach and was going up my walk when both my arms were gripped from either side and wrenched behind me. Then, as you say, I smelled the cloth with the odor.” Remington paused, removing his hat to rake long fingers through his hair. “You’re a teacher and I’m a writer for *The People*. What connection could there possibly be between us?”

“*The People*?” Winifred repeated. “I assume you’re a reporter?”

“Some people call me that. I’d just come from observing an event in Hyde Park.”

“What event? Was it political in any way? Was there a mob? Or—?”

He grunted. “If you call a half dozen drunks protesting the tax on liquor a mob.” In a dry voice, he added, “As you can see, the paper chooses me for the choicest assignments.”

Winifred decided it best not to comment. They reached the door and Remington gripped the knob in one hand. He gave her a saucy grin.

“Perhaps someone has concluded I should write a major story, so they conjured this whole adventure for me? I must say, when I find the identity of this mysterious person, I’ll have to thank them for including such a lovely young woman to be my partner.”

Guard yourself. He’s obviously a rake. “This is hardly the time to be flirtatious, sir.” Winifred sniffed her disdain.

“When the time comes,” he murmured, “will you alert me?”

“I will not.” Fighting against the sway of his deliberately deepened voice, she managed to glare her disapproval. “I don’t care to be regarded as an object for your amusement.”

He gave a light laugh. “Your red hair suits you, Winifred.”

“*Miss Merryweather*,” she reminded him coldly. “And my hair isn’t red. It’s copper-colored.”

“I stand corrected.” Remington released his hold on the doorknob, relaxing his shoulder against the wood as he crossed his arms over his chest. His gaze slid lazily across her face. “Brilliant green eyes and a tiny mole that accents the corner of a pair of lush, firm lips belong to a woman of copper-colored,

but not red, hair. Do I have my facts accurate, now?"

"Sir, you have crossed the bounds of moral decency." Appalled that his flattering words should flood pinpricks of delight to the very ends of her fingernails, Winifred struggled to maintain her offended composure. "I shan't warn you again."

Securing the knob in her hand, she twisted it and flung the door wide. She gasped aloud. "Countess du Pre!"