

THE EIGHTH WITCH

Chapter One

The young woman held the dress up to her slender body and stared at the reflection in the full-length mirror attached to the wardrobe door. Her cold blue eyes narrowed critically and she shook her head, her shock of long, blond curls drifting over her shoulders like a yellow cloud. No, it wasn't right.

The evening dress was purple silk, long enough to touch the floor, with thin shoulder straps and a swooping neckline. It was much too old for her, too sophisticated. She closed her eyes and concentrated. When she opened her eyes again the person that stared back at her from the mirror was older. The blond curls had been replaced by an elegant, dark brown, chin-length bob that shone in the electric light. The haircut framed an older face—haunting chestnut eyes and a thin, aquiline nose above a full-lipped mouth.

That was better.

The body in the reflection was different too. It fitted the dress perfectly. Maybe she'd take the dress with her when she left the house, after she'd done what she'd come here to do. Maybe not. She hadn't come here to steal.

As she pulled open the wardrobe again to replace the dress, her eye was drawn to a cashmere sweater folded neatly on the shelf above the hanging space. It was a rich shade of burgundy and would really enhance her new eye color. As she reached up to slide it from the shelf, her sleeve caught an empty wooden coat hanger and dislodged it, sending it clattering to the floor of the wardrobe. She froze in mid-stretch, listening hard, waiting to see if the noise had attracted the attention of the one other person in the house.

There was no sound of feet climbing the stairs, no sounds at all apart from the low rumble of Leonard Cohen's velvet-bass vocals issuing from the stereo speakers in the lounge.

It was as well because she wasn't ready yet. She still had another wardrobe to search through before the act, as she liked to call it. She thought briefly about what she was going to do and flicked a hungry tongue across her full lips.

There was a small, delicious knot of anticipation in the pit of her stomach that never changed, never varied, no matter how many times she performed the act, and in whatever form it took. The sense of anticipation and the accompanying excitement remained constant...and she loved it.

Sophie Gillespie lifted her head and stared at the ceiling. She was sure she'd heard something—a rattling sound of wood falling against wood, as if someone had dropped an armful of kindling on a parquet floor. She listened hard, her hand reaching for the remote and reducing Leonard Cohen to a low grumble.

Not for the first time she had the feeling she wasn't alone in the house, but there was never any evidence to show she was right. She thought maybe she should go upstairs and investigate, but the truth was the house frightened her, always had. From the moment she and Mark moved in two years ago she'd been beset by misgivings. Not that she ever voiced them to her husband. Much to her dismay, he'd set his heart on the place from the first moment he'd seen it.

In her opinion the house was much too old, too big, too dilapidated and too spooky. Too everything. He'd brought in a team of builders and decorators to completely gut and renovate the place, and while it was now a smart and elegant home Sophie held on to her reservations. It was still too old and too bloody spooky.

Location, location, location. It was her father's favorite phrase when he got onto the topic of houses and, more importantly, buying them. For him, where it was located was much more important than what the house actually was.

"Houses can be fixed, Sophie. They can be redesigned, renovated, extended. Damn it, if you don't like it that much you can always pull the bloody thing down and build it again. But where it is, where it sits...that's the crux, the nub, the heart of the matter. That's something you can't change."

She could still hear his voice in her mind. Her father had approved of the location of this house almost as much as he'd approved of Mark and their marriage.

"He's got a good head on his shoulders, that one. He'll be a millionaire by the time he's forty." His enthusiasm for Mark was palpable. "Snap him up, Sophie, before somebody else does."

So far her father had been proved right. Mark still had four years to go before he reached forty, but he was already over halfway towards his first million and Sophie was sure that her husband would justify her father's high opinion of him. As for the house, in many ways, her father was right again.

Set deep down in Yorkshire's Calder Valley in the north of England, surrounded by lush, tree-clad hills, it was the grandest house in the town of Ravensbridge. The walls were Yorkshire stone, the color of clotted cream, and the tiled roof was a rich slate gray. It was a picture postcard type of house, the type that, as a teenager and through into her early twenties, she would stare at for hours in the pages of glossy magazines and dream of owning. It was a bitter pill to swallow knowing that her dreams and aspirations bore little resemblance to the reality of actually living in one.

She pressed another button on the remote and switched discs. Maybe it was Leonard Cohen that was making her feel so gloomy. Cohen's bass tones were replaced by the mellow soul crooning of Marvin Gaye. *Better*, she thought. She leaned back on the sumptuous leather cushions of the couch and closed her eyes, letting the music transport her back to happier times.

The idyll lasted no longer than thirty seconds before the splintering sound of crashing glass made her jerk her head and stare hard at the ceiling.

The blond curls were back. They were much more suited to the Armani suit she was holding against her. Taupe. That was the color. It was elegantly cut and she could imagine slipping into the expensive fabric and letting it hug her body. That would feel good.

With a sigh she put the suit back on the rail and went across to the bed.

It was nearly time.

There was a water carafe on the cabinet next to the bed. She picked it up and turned it over in her hands, letting it slip through her fingers and smash on the antique oak floor. "Whoops!" she said quietly, and then sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

Sophie switched off the stereo and listened to the crushing, pregnant silence. She felt sick. She tried hard to rationalize what she'd just heard, telling herself that maybe a cat had gotten into the house and knocked something from a shelf, but she knew that wasn't the case, and she knew she'd have to go upstairs and investigate. She glanced at her watch. Three hours before Mark was due home. She couldn't even wait it out.

She sat for a moment more in a quagmire of indecision and then suddenly sprung to her feet. "Right!" she said, her voice loud, steady with resolve. "Let's do this."

She took a heavy, wrought-iron poker from the hearth and started to climb the stairs. As she climbed she strained every sense, listening, watching, even sniffing the air, trying to detect anything that was in any way out of place.

Nothing.

She reached the landing and stopped, her breath coming in quick, startled-hare gasps. The noise of breaking glass had come from the room directly above the lounge. The master bedroom, the room she shared with Mark. If only he were here. As she'd climbed the stairs she'd felt her resolve draining away, slowly, like water down a blocked drain. Now she struggled to get it back, to reclaim it as her own. She hefted the poker in her hand and stared hard at the bedroom door.

Her fingers tightened around the brass doorknob and she twisted it gently, twisted it until it stopped turning, and then, taking a deep breath, she hurled the door open and stepped into the room with an incoherent cry, the poker raised above her head.

The young woman with the blond curls was sitting on the bed, staring at her impassively. Her gaze travelled from Sophie's face, to the poker and then back again, locking on Sophie's wild eyes. "Hello, Sophie," she said in a lilting, almost musical voice.

Sophie's gaze took in the broken carafe at the young woman's feet. Her arm was beginning to ache with tension and with the effort of holding the heavy poker aloft, but she kept it steady. "Who are you?" she said, immediately infuriated by the pitch of her voice. She sounded like a frightened schoolgirl. She made an effort to adjust it. "What are you doing in my house?" Better – deeper, more mature.

The blond woman's eyes widened slightly. "Your house? Well that's an interesting concept. Your house." She said the words again, seeming to mull them over, to digest them. Finally she said, "How long have you lived here, Sophie? Oh, and you'd better put the poker down. It's very hot."

Sophie glanced at the poker. She'd pulled it cold from the hearth and carried it up the stairs, comforted by the icy metal in her hand. So why was the tip now glowing red and the conducted heat from the poker scorching her palm? She cried out and dropped it, letting it clatter to the floor.

"You were saying," the young woman continued. "Something about this being your house?"

"It is my house. Mine and Mark's. We've lived here two years now."

"And the people before you, the people before them and before them. They all thought it was their house too." She looked about the room. "Strange, I remember this house being built and I remember hating it because it was my house they pulled down to make way for it. Oh, it wasn't much, my house. A hovel. We used to bring the animals inside in the winter to keep them warm...to keep us warm too." She laughed, a harsh, brittle sound. "Christ, it stank!" The laughter ceased abruptly. "But it was home. This land, the land now occupied by this...this monstrosity, was our land, me and my family's. We still have rights. We still belong here."

There was a fervent light in the young woman's eyes as she spoke.

Mad, Sophie thought. Absolutely barking mad. A small thrill of fear shuddered through her. How was she going to get the woman out of her house?

"Oh, I'll leave in my own sweet time," the woman said, reading her thoughts. "But first we're going to have some fun. Would you like that, Sophie, some fun?"

Sophie nodded slowly, deciding to humor her. "Yes," she said. "I'd like that."

The young woman's gaze swept the floor, alighting on a shard of glass from the carafe. It was about four inches long, curved and wickedly sharp. "Perfect," she said and picked it up.

In that second, when the young woman was distracted, Sophie could have run, turned and dashed down the stairs and out of the house. But the moment passed and instead she watched, captivated as the woman retrieved the shard of glass from the floor and held it to the light, making it glint and glisten.

"Now, Sophie, I want you to do something for me."

"What?" Sophie said.

"Take off your clothes. All of them."

"Don't be ridiculous," Sophie said, but at the same time her fingers were fumbling with the button on her jeans. She popped the button and slid the denims down over her thighs, letting them drop to the floor.

“Good girl.” The young woman smiled encouragingly. “That’s good. And now the rest of them.”

As Sophie pulled her shirt over her head, her mind was crying, *I don't want to do this!* But there wasn't a damned thing she could do to stop herself.

The young woman moved towards her, the glass shard clasped tightly in her hand, so tightly it had sliced through her palm and fingers. She seemed oblivious to the blood that dribbled from her hand and dripped to the floor where the oak floorboards were sucking it in.

Once Sophie was completely naked and standing shivering, cold and vulnerable, the young woman moved closer still.

Sophie cried out at the first cut, but after that she was silent, unable to do anything but accept her fate.