

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN

CHAPTER ONE

1856 Texas

They call it Queens Court Acres. A prestigious name considering its ill-repair.

Phebe Whiteside stared at the imposing architecture, craned her neck to inspect the twin turrets above—and blinked. A face peered through a lace curtain from the sky-parlor above. She blinked again.

It was gone.

Imagination?

Not one to fall prey to illusions, she shook off the odd sensation and focused on the task at hand.

A lion's head brass knocker adorned the mammoth door, which she lifted and let drop. The reverberation echoed through the old house.

She waited.

A week ago, a letter of acceptance for the position of governess to the Powell's three children arrived by post. "A day for new beginnings," she sighed.

Most women her age were already married. Phebe's dreams, loftier than most, carried her in a different direction much to her parent's chagrin.

Mr. Whiteside, a printer by trade, found it difficult to say no to his golden-haired precocious daughter and gave permission sans his wife's approval.

At nineteen, she took employment with a prosperous family in the city and taught there until the children became adults.

Now thirty-seven, she was forced to start anew.

The door opened. A tall, very erect gentleman in a white linen coat, black tie, and gray trousers greeted her, his tone crisp, "Ms. Whiteside? My name is Winston. Come in. Mr. and Mrs. Powell await you in the study."

His voice suited the pinched, disapproving look on his face.

Her wide eyes took in the butler from the top of his white hair to the tip of his shiny black shoes. *He is a proper one.*

A quick wave and confident smile was all she gave her father as she stepped inside.

"Is that your father?" Winston asked.

"Yes."

"You don't want him to accompany you for the interview?"

“No, I can manage on my own.”

The opulent foyer took her breath away. Elegance abounded with high ceilings, dark intricate woodwork, a sweeping staircase, and the focal point—a gleaming glass chandelier.

Like stepping into a storybook.

“No time to dawdle. This way.” Winston pursed his lips, knit his eyebrows, and tapped an impatient foot on the black and white tile floor.

Air re-entered her lungs with a gasp. “Yes, pardon me. It’s only…”

He swept across the room to another imposing door. “In here.”

Her footsteps sounded like the rat-a-tat of a woodpecker as she hastened to catch up. She smoothed her rumpled gray skirt, removed her dark blue travel bonnet, and announced, “I’m ready.”

His churlish demeanor softened, “Are you sure you don’t want your father to accompany you?”

She squared her shoulders. “No need.”

The perfunctory statement produced a tiny quiver at the corner of his mouth.

A sign of his approval?

His face returned to its former pugnacious mask. “As you wish.” He opened the door. “May I present Ms. Phebe Whiteside.”

Soft murmurs inside the room subsided.

The butler stepped aside and gestured she enter the room.

Large paned windows filtered the outside light and made it hard to see the faces of her employers.

She fluttered her eyelids until vision returned.

A stout, middle-aged man sat in a wingback chair behind a Cherrywood desk. His hair was dark brown, but thinning. A cigar rested between his fingers, unlit.

A slim woman perched on a chaise lounge next to a stone fireplace. “Welcome, Ms. Whiteside,” she said.

Phebe curtsayed. “Thank you.”

Emma Powell spoke again, “Please come closer so we can see you better.”

She complied. “Yes, ma’am.”

Phebe saw a hint of a smile on the pleasant, round face of Mrs. Powell, who sat straight with both hands in her lap. Faded blonde hair, tamed by a French twist, complimented the muted blue of her long dress with its high collar.

Charles Powell projected a more severe look. Black suit, no smile.

“Are you sure you can handle three lively children? I’m their mother and I find it difficult, at times.”

“Why yes, I’m the youngest of seven siblings. The bustle of children, house-keeping, and cooking is normal in my household. And of course, there’s my previous employment. Two lively boys for almost fifteen years.”

The Powell’s exchanged glances.

“You may be qualified at that,” Mr. Powell smiled, transforming the dour look, revealing plump cheeks and a twinkle in his dark eyes. He flicked at the fallow cigar.

“We’ve gone through several governesses lately. They babble on about a noise in the attic. I hope you aren’t scared off by a few rattling timbers in this old house.” Mrs. Powell’s bright blue eyes clouded; the smile disappeared.

“Creaking boards won’t bother me.”

Mr. Powell stood. “Good. The letter of recommendation from your parson and previous employer impressed us. We hope this arrangement works for all of us. Winston will show you to your quarters and introduce you to the children. You’ll start promptly at seven in the morning in the children’s breakfast room. Winston will give you the itinerary. Good day, Ms. Whiteside.”

She curtsied again. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Powell rang a small china bell.

Winston appeared.

“Please show Ms. Whiteside her quarters and introduce her to the children with the schedule for the week.” She turned back to Phebe. “A tray will be brought to your room for dinner. You should rest. Tomorrow’s activities will, no doubt, tax your strength.”

“Yes, ma’am. Oh, may I introduce you to my father, first? He’s waiting in the carriage. It’ll be a comfort for him to see I’m in good hands.

“Why yes, Mr. Powell and I would love to meet him. Winston, show him in please.”

Winston nodded curtly and left.

A few minutes later, he ushered her father into the library.

“May I present Mr. Whiteside.”

Mr. Powell came around the desk with hand extended. “Good to meet you, sir. We’re pleased to welcome your daughter into our employ.”

“She’ll work hard and give you no trouble.” Whiteside smiled and shook hands with vigor.

“No doubt. May we offer you a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you. I must go. My wife is poorly. I must attend her.” He reached out to shake hands with Phebe. “Do us proud, my dear. Write when you can.”

“Oh Papa!” She ignored the formal handshake and threw her arms around him. “I love you so much. Don’t worry. Please tell mama I love her.”

Whiteside cleared his throat and gently removed her arms. "Yes. Now, Phebe, you settle in and attend to your work. I'll be going." He wiped his eyes.

She remained in the study as he waved goodbye, her smile brave, but precarious. Life just changed again. Among strangers once more, she faltered and took a step forward.

Winston closed the door.

"He loves you very much, my dear," Mrs. Powell said softly.

Tears threatened to erode her well-crafted resolve. She could only nod at her new mistress.

Winston stepped forward. "This way, Ms. Phebe."

The slight moment of weakness waned at the kindness in his voice. She followed him down a narrow hall to the kitchen.

"This is the servant's access to the children's quarters." He looked back at her. "Be sure you use only this stairway, not the main one."

"Certainly." She followed him up the dark, wooden staircase and made a mental note to carry a candle during the night hours.

I wonder if I'm allowed downstairs after dark. It might be a good idea to make a list of questions to ask. One does not upset pre-established protocol. She smiled at her assessment of the situation. I think I'll fit in exceptionally well in this household.

A wide hallway opened at the landing. Identical ivory doors lined each side as far as she could see. The house, quite large from what she observed outside, came into perspective inside and revealed the true scope of its expanse.

I hope I don't get lost up here.

"The first door on the right is the breakfast room. The children always eat their first meal here. Lunch is on the veranda with their parents, if weather permits, otherwise they'll revert to this room. Dinner is served in the dining room with Mr. and Mrs. Powell, unless they're entertaining. Again, they'll eat here in that case." Winston stated the schedule of meals matter-of-factly, didn't repeat it, nor ask if she understood.

"Where are the children now?"

For a moment, she saw another crack in his armor. His eyes flickered, his lips parted. A fleeting look of fear crossed his countenance, but dissolved quickly.

"They're in the school room with Cook."

"She is teaching them?"

"There's been no one else since the last governess. Cook's twenty years with the Powell's left her no choice but to agree when they asked."

"Oh."

"The school room is at the end of the hall. Your bedroom and the children's rooms are in between. Would you like to see your room before you meet the children?"

“I’d love to meet the children first. I’m sure Cook will want to get back to the kitchen.”

Winston nodded. “This way.”

She passed each door and wondered which room was hers, but excitement of meeting the children overruled curiosity.

He stopped at the last one on the left. Even in the hallway, chaos sounded through the classroom door. Children screaming, a woman’s voice pleading for them to stop.

Winston squared his shoulders and opened the door.

Immediate silence greeted them.

Cook stood behind the teacher’s desk trying to coax down a little girl of about five. One boy, older than the girl, tugged at Cook’s skirt, screaming to let her alone. A second boy rifled through the teacher’s desk. They froze like mannequins at a general store when the door opened.

Cook found her voice first, while tucking disheveled strands of white hair back under her cockeyed cap, face flushed like a young maiden. “Please tell me this is the new governess.”

Winston gave his signature curt nod. “Yes, Ms. Phebe Whiteside.”

The two boys rushed forward. The girl jumped from the desk and joined her brothers; all asking questions and tugging at her skirt.

Phebe nearly toppled over under the onslaught. “Wait, please, one at a time. Ladies first.” She focused on the girl. “Tell me your name.”

The girl gazed wide-eyed at Phebe. “Have you come to help us find the ghost?”