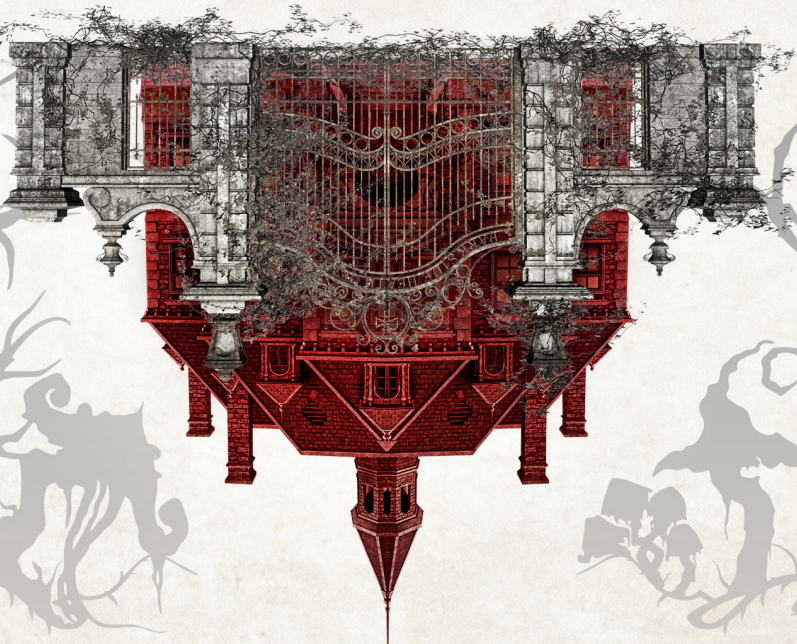


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GALLANT





Rain drums its fingers on the garden shed. They call it a garden shed, but in truth there is no garden on the grounds of Merilance, and the shed is barely even that. It sags to one side, like a wilting plant, made of cheap metal and moldering wood. The floor is littered with abandoned tools and shards of broken pots and the stubs of stolen cigarettes, and Olivia Prior stands among them in the rusted dark, wishing she could scream.

Wishing she could turn the pain of the fresh red welt on her hand into noise, overturn the shed the way she did the pot in the kitchen when it burned her, strike the walls as she longed to strike Clara for leaving the stove on and having the nerve to snicker when Olivia gasped and let go. The white-hot pain, the red-hot anger, the cook's annoyance at the ruined mash, and Clara's pursed lips as she said, "It couldn't have hurt that much, she didn't make a sound."

Olivia would have wrapped her hands around the other girl's throat right there if her palm weren't singing, if the cook weren't there to haul her off, if the gesture would have gained her more

than a moment's pleasure and a week's punishment. So she'd done the next best thing: stormed out of the stuffy tomb, the cook bellowing in her wake.

And now she's in the garden shed, wishing she could make as much noise as the rain on the low tin roof, take up one of the neglected spades and beat it against the thin metal walls, just to hear them ring. But someone else would hear, would come and find her, in this small and stolen place, and then she'd have nowhere to get away. Away from the girls. Away from the matrons. Away from the school.

She holds her breath and presses her burned hand against the cool metal shed, waiting for the ache in her skin to quiet.

The shed itself is not a secret.

It sits behind the school, across the gravel drive, at the back of the grounds. Over the years, a handful of girls have tried to claim it as their own, to smoke or drink or kiss, but they come once and never come back. It gives them the creeps, they say. Damp soil and spiderwebs, and something else, an eerie feeling that makes the hair stand up on their necks, though they don't know why.

But Olivia knows.

It is the dead thing in the corner.

Or what's left of it. Not a *ghost*, exactly, just a bit of tattered cloth, a handful of teeth, and a single, sleepy eye floating in the dark. It moves like a silverfish at the edge of Olivia's sight, darting away every time she looks. But if she stays very still and keeps her gaze ahead, it might grow a cheekbone, a throat. It might drift closer, might blink and smile and sigh against her, weightless as a shadow.

She has wondered, of course, who it was, back when it had

bones and skin. The eye hovers, higher than her own, and once she caught the edge of a bonnet, the fraying hem of a skirt, and thought, perhaps, it was a matron. Not that it matters. Now, it is only a ghoul, lurking at her back.

Go away, she thinks, and perhaps it can hear her thoughts, because it flinches and draws back into the dark again, leaving her alone in the grim little shed.

Olivia leans back against the wall.

When she was younger, she liked to pretend that *this* was her house, not Merilance. That her mother and father had just stepped out and left her to clean up. They would be coming back, of course.

Once the house was ready.

Back then, she'd sweep away the dust and cobwebs, stack the pot shards and make order of the shelves. But no matter how tidy she tried to make the little shed, it was never clean enough to bring them back.

Home is a choice. Those four words sit alone on a page in her mother's book, surrounded by so much white space they feel like a riddle. In truth, everything her mother wrote feels like a riddle, waiting to be solved.

By now, the rain has slowed from pounding fists to the soft, infrequent tapping of bored fingers, and Olivia sighs and abandons the shed.

Outside, everything is gray.

The gray day is beginning to melt into a gray night, thin gray light lapping against the gray gravel path that surrounds the gray stone walls of Merilance School for Independent Girls.

The word "school" conjures images of neat wooden desks

and scratching pencils. Of learning. They do learn, but it is a perfunctory education, spent on the practical. How to clean a fireplace. How to shape a loaf of bread. How to mend someone else's clothes. How to exist in a world that does not want you. How to be a ghost in someone else's home.

Merilance may call itself a school, but in truth, it is an asylum for the young and the feral and the fortuneless. The orphaned and unwanted. The dull gray building juts up like a tombstone, surrounded not by parks or rolling greens but the gaunt and sagging faces of the other structures at the city's edge, chimneys wheezing smoke. There are no walls around the place, no iron gates, only a vacant arch, as if to say, You're free to leave, if you have somewhere else to go. But if you go—and now and then, girls do—you will not be welcomed back. Once a year, sometimes more, a girl pounds at the door, desperate to get back in, and that is how the others learn that it's well and good to dream of happy lives and welcome homes, but even a grim tombstone of a place is better than the street.

And yet, some days Olivia is still tempted.

Some days, she eyes the arch, yawning like a mouth at the gravel's edge, and thinks, *what if*, thinks, *I could*, thinks, *one day I will*.

One night, she will break into the matrons' rooms and take whatever she can find and be gone. She will become a vagabond, a train robber, a cat burglar, or a con artist, like the men in the penny dreadfuls Charlotte always seems to have, tokens from a boy she meets at the edge of the gravel moat each week. Olivia plans a hundred different futures, but every night, she is still there, climbing into the narrow bed in the crowded room in the house

that is not, and will never be, a home. And every morning she wakes up in the same place.

Olivia shuffles back across the yard, her shoes sliding over the gravel, with a steady *shh, shh, shh*. She keeps her eyes on the ground, searching for color. Now and then, after a good hard rain, a few green blades will force their way up between the pebbles, or a stubborn sheen of moss will latch onto a cobblestone, but these defiant colors never last. The only flowers she sees are in the head matron's office, and even those are fake and faded, silk petals long gone gray with dust.

And yet, as she rounds the school, heading for the side door she left ajar, Olivia sees a dash of yellow. A little weedy bloom, jutting up between the stones. She kneels, ignoring the way the pebbles bite into her knees, and brushes a careful thumb over the tiny flower. She's just about to pluck it when she hears the stomp of shoes on gravel, the familiar rustle and sigh of skirts that signal a matron.

They look the same, the matrons, in their once-white dresses with their once-white belts. But they're not. There's Matron Jessamine, with her tight little smile, as if she's sucking on a lemon, and Matron Beth, with her deep-set eyes and the bags beneath, and Matron Lara, with a voice as high and whining as a kettle.

And then, there's Matron Agatha.

"Olivia Prior!" she booms, in a breathless huff. "What are you doing?"

Olivia lifts her hands, even though she knows it's futile. Matron Sarah taught her how to sign, which was well and good until Matron Sarah left and none of the others bothered to learn.

Now it doesn't matter what Olivia says. No one knows how to listen.

Agatha stares at her as she shapes *planning my escape*, but she's only halfway through when the matron flaps her own hands, impatient.

"Where—is—your—chalkboard?" she asks, speaking loud and slow, as if Olivia is hard of hearing. She is not. As for the chalkboard, it's wedged behind a row of jam jars in the cellar, where it has been since it was first bestowed upon her, complete with a little rope to go around her neck.

"Well?" demands the matron.

Olivia shakes her head and picks the simplest sign for rain, repeating the gesture several times so the matron has a chance to see, but Agatha just *tsks* and grabs her wrist and hauls her back inside.

"You were supposed to be in the kitchen," says the matron, marching Olivia down the hall. "Now it's time for dinner, which you have not helped to make." *And yet, by some miracle*, thinks Olivia, judging by the scent wafting toward them, *it is ready*.

They reach the dining room, where girls' voices pile high, but the matron pushes her on, past the doors.

"Those who do not give, do not partake," she says, as if this is a Merilance motto and not something she's just thought up. She gives a curt little nod, pleased with herself, and Olivia pictures her stitching the words onto a pillow.

They reach the dormitory, where there are two dozen small shelves beside two dozen beds, thin and white as matchsticks, all of them empty.

"To bed," says the matron, though it isn't even dark. "Perhaps," she adds, "you can use this time to reflect on what it means to be a Merilance girl."

Olivia would rather eat glass, but she just nods and does her best to look contrite. She even curtsies once, bobbing her head low, but it is only so the matron cannot see the twist of her lips, the small, defiant smile. Let the old bat assume that she is sorry.

People assume a lot of things about Olivia.

Most of them are wrong.

The matron shuffles away, clearly not wanting to miss dinner, and Olivia steps into the dorm. She lingers at the foot of the first bed, listening to the rustle of receding skirts. As soon as Agatha has gone, she emerges again, slipping down the hall and around the corner to the matrons' quarters.

Each of the matrons has her own room. The doors are locked, but the locks are old and simple, the teeth on the keys little more than simple peaks.

Olivia draws a bit of sturdy wire from her pocket, remembering the shape of Agatha's key, the teeth a capital E. It takes a bit of fussing, but then the lock clicks, and the door swings open onto a neat little bedroom cluttered with pillows, little mantras embroidered across their fronts.

Here by the grace of God.

A place for all things, and all things in their place.

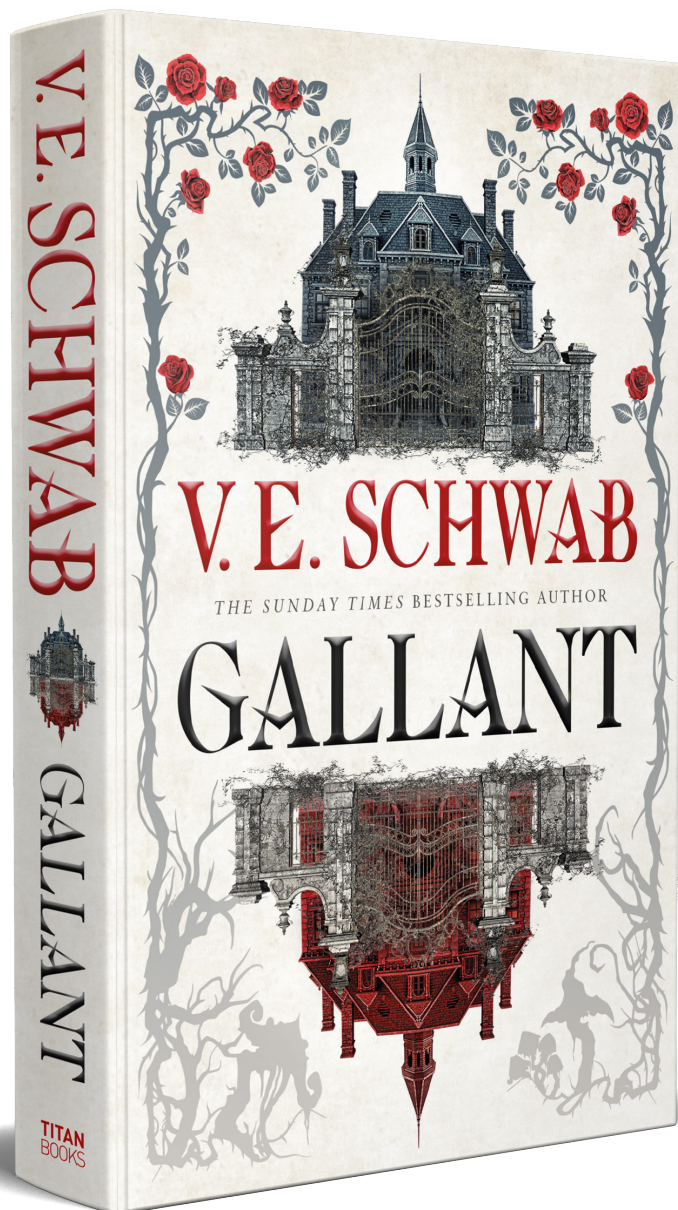
A house in order is a mind at peace.

Olivia's fingers trail over the words as she rounds the bed. A little mirror sits on the windowsill, and as she passes, she catches a glimpse of charcoal hair and a sallow cheek, and startles. But it is just her own reflection. Pale. Colorless. The ghost of Merilance. That's what the other girls call her. Yet there is a satisfying hitch in their voices, a hint of fear. Olivia looks at herself in the mirror. And smiles.

She kneels before the ash wood cabinet beside Agatha's bed. The matrons have their vices. Lara has cigarettes, and Jessamine has lemon drops, and Beth has penny dreadfuls. And Agatha? Well. She has *several*. A bottle of brandy sloshes in the top drawer, and beneath that, Olivia finds a tin of cookies, iced with sugar, and a paper bag of clementines, bright as tiny sunsets. She takes three of the iced cookies and one piece of fruit, and retreats, silently, to the empty dorm to enjoy her dinner.



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