

Dark Mirror Excerpt

M. J. Putney

p. 1



Chapter 1

England, 1803

Lady Victoria Mansfield flew high, high over her family's estate. Arms and legs outstretched, long skirts fluttering around her knees as she gloried in her freedom and in the soft, scented wind.

She laughed with delight as she saw the familiar Somersetshire hills from above. Here was the vast stone length of her home, Fairmount Hall, there the beautiful gardens that ran to the bluffs. Waves crashed far below and gulls soared at Tory's height, their cries haunting.

She swooped down to investigate the round stone dovecote. Doves squawked in

protest when she flew inside. Startled, she almost plunged to the ground.

Concentrate on staying aloft. *With a giddy rush, Tory swooped up again, soaring through the door of the dovecote and into the sky. Perhaps she should fly to the nearby estate of the Harford family. The Honorable Edmund Harford was the eldest son and heir to his father's title and property.*

She'd always admired Edmund. He was back from university for the summer and she wanted him to see that she had grown. Perhaps he'd think she was almost as pretty as her older sister, Sarah.

Tory banked into the wind and turned east toward the Harford estate.

A horrified cry shocked her awake.

Jolted from sleep, Tory realized she was floating a yard above her rumpled bed, terrifyingly unsupported. Her mother, the Countess of Fairmont, stood in the door, her expression horrified. "Victoria," she breathed. "Oh, please, *no!*"

Tory glanced up into the canopy above her head. A spider had spun a web in the corner, and the ugly creature was looking right at her.

She shrieked and crashed down on the bed, her breath whooshing out as she flopped onto her stomach. Shaken and afraid, she pushed herself up with her arms. She couldn't really have been flying! "What...what happened?"

"You were flying." Her mother closed the door, her white-knuckled hand locked around the knob. "Don't ever do that again!" she said, voice shaking. "You know how society feels about mages. How...how your father feels about them."

“I can’t be a mage!” Tory gasped, shocked by the impossibility of her mother’s words. “I’m a Mansfield. We’re not magical!”

At least, not that Tory had ever heard. Seeing the countess’s guilty expression caused her to ask incredulously, “Mama, have there been mages in our family?”

Such a thing wasn’t possible. It just *wasn’t!* Magic corrupted, and she wasn’t corrupt. Yes, she’d felt herself changing as she grew to womanhood. Strange dreams, new desires. But those were just growing pains. Not *magic!*

Tory refused to believe her mother could be a mage. Lady Fairmount was considered the greatest lady in the county, an example to all well-born young ladies.

And yet... guilt was written plain as day on the countess’s lovely face. When she refused to reply, Tory’s world began to crack beneath her.

“Do *you* have magical ability?” she said, shocked and desperately unwilling to believe such a thing. Yet looking back... “You always knew what we were doing. Geoff and Sarah and I thought you had eyes in the back of your head.”

“There were rumors,” her mother whispered, tears shining in her eyes. “About my Russian grandmother, Viktoria Ivanova. The one you’re named for. She died when I was very small so I didn’t really know her, but...it’s possible she brought mage blood into the family.”

Tory’s namesake had poisoned the blue-blooded Mansfield family with magic? And Tory might suffer for that? It wasn’t *fair!*

Feeling utterly betrayed, she cried, “How could you not warn me? If I’d known I might have magic, I could have guarded against it!”

“I thought you children had escaped the taint! I have very little power. Scarcely any at all. It seemed better not to worry you about what such an unlikely possibility.”

Lady Fairmount was literally wringing her hands. “But...you look rather like Viktoria Ivanova. You must have inherited some of her talent.”

Tory wanted to howl. Voice breaking, she said, “I’ve never floated like this before. It’s just a freak, something that will never happen again, I swear it!”

The countess looked deeply sad. “Magic appears when boys and girls grow to adulthood. It’s hard to suppress, but you must try, Victoria. If your father finds out, he’ll certainly send you to Lackland.”

Tory gasped in disbelief. Though children of the nobility who had magic were often sent to the prison-like school called Lackland Abbey, surely *she* wouldn’t be forced to leave her friends and family! “You’ve managed to hide your power from everyone, and so can I. I’m another whole generation away from Viktoria Ivanova,” Tory drew a shaky breath. “No one will ever know about me, either.”

“The ability to fly is not minor magic,” her mother said, expression worried. “You may find it harder to hide your abilities than I have.”

“I wasn’t flying!” Tory protested. “I always toss and turn when I’m sleeping.” Knowing how feeble that sounded, she continued, “If I am cursed with magic, I’ll learn to control it. You always said I was more stubborn than Geoffrey and Sarah put together.”

“I hope you succeed,” her mother said sadly. “If your ability becomes known, I don’t think I’ll be able to save you from Lackland Abbey. God keep you, my child.”

Silent tears fell unchecked as she backed from the room, closing the door behind her.

Leaving her daughter alone in a shattered world.

Tory struggled not to panic. She *couldn't* go to Lackland Abbey. Even when students were cured and sent home, they were considered tainted, like the madmen at Bedlam Hospital.

Uneasily she remembered a story whispered by her best friend, Louisa Fisk. The daughter of a baron from nearby Devon been sent to Lackland after her family discovered she was a mageling. The girl had been betrothed from birth to the son of a family friend, but the betrothal had been broken immediately.

When the girl finally left Lackland, she'd been forced to become a governess. A year later, she walked off a cliff.

Tory's bedside candle cast enough light to reveal her dim reflection in the mirror opposite her bed. The rest of the family was tall and blond, while Tory was petite and dark-haired. The countess always said her dark hair, slim build, and slightly tilted eyes had come from her Russian grandmother. Tory rather liked her slightly exotic looks. It was horrible to know they might have come with despicable magical ability.

But the magic didn't show. With her wide eyes and a glossy night braid falling over the shoulder of her lace-trimmed white nightgown, she looked like any normal, harmless schoolroom girl.

Her gaze traveled around her bedroom. Her beautiful, grownup room, redecorated as a present for her sixteenth birthday because Mama had said she was a young lady, and a lady's room might make her less of a tomboy.

Tory loved the rich moldings, the elegant rose patterned brocade upholstery, the

carved walnut posts that supported the matching brocade canopy of her bed. It was the bedroom of a young lady who would soon be presented to society and would have her pick of the most eligible young men in England.

Her mother had given her this beautiful room, but failed to warn her that she might be cursed with magic. It was *damnable!*

Tory shivered, wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed and pull the covers over her head. But she must discover if she truly did carry the taint of magic.

She sat on the edge of her bed and imagined herself flying as she had in her dream. She felt a fluttering in her midriff, but to her relief, nothing happened. She remained solidly on the bed.

But was she trying hard enough? She closed her eyes and thought of herself floating in the air. She concentrated so hard that her head began to ache. Still nothing.

She wasn't a mage, it was some kind of misunderstanding!

Then the inner fluttering stabilized with a silent click. Dizziness—and Tory shrieked as her head bumped a yielding surface. Her eyes snapped open and she saw that her head was pushing into the bed's brocade canopy.

Shocked, she fell, bouncing from the edge of the mattress onto the soft Chinese carpet. Knees bruised, she got to her feet and tested herself again. This time she kept her eyes open as she consciously sought that inner change.

Click! She rose from the carpet with alarming speed. Too fast!

With the thought, her movement slowed and she floated gently up to the ceiling. She felt light and no longer afraid as the air supported her softly as a feather mattress.

For an instant, excitement blazed through her. She could fly!

Her pleasure vanished instantly. Wielding magic was vulgar. Dishonorable, even. Noble families like Tory's were the descendents of kings and warriors. Mages were mere tradesmen like blacksmiths and seamstresses. A Mansfield would rather starve than go into trade.

Yet the pulse of magic that held her in the air felt so *good*. How could it be evil?

Her lips tightened. Teachers and vicars invariably said that feeling good was the mark of sin. She must never fly like this again.

But before she put magic away forever, Tory wanted to explore her amazing, appalling new ability. She tried to swoop across the room as she'd done in her dream, but the best she could manage was drifting a little faster.

She looked down onto the top of her bed's canopy. Ugh! Dead bugs. She'd tell a maid to take the canopy down for cleaning.

Tory drifted along a wall until she reached one of the carved angels set in each corner of the room. This close, she saw patches where the gilding had peeled away from the wood. The bare spots weren't visible from floor level.

She wasn't really flying, she decided. Not like a bird, not like a Turk on a flying carpet. But she could float safely and control her direction and speed if she concentrated.

Her new ability wasn't very useful, apart from being able to get books from the top shelves in her father's library. Tiring fast, Tory descended too fast and banged hard on the carpet.

She winced as she rubbed the stinging sole of her right foot. She must take more

Dark Mirror Excerpt

M. J. Putney

p. 1

care in the future....

No! She would never fly—float—again. Doing so was *wrong*, and exhausting as well. Tory could barely manage to climb the steps up into her bed.

Tory rolled into a ball under the covers, shivering despite the warm night. It was impossible to deny the truth. She, Lady Victoria Mansfield, youngest of the Earl of Fairmount's three children, had been cursed with magic from her unknown great grandmother.

But she wouldn't let it ruin her life. She *wouldn't!*

Dark Mirror Copyright 2011 by M. J. Putney