



BEHIND His MASK

THE FIRST SPELL BOOK

STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

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Behind His Mask
The First Spell Book

By Stephanie Van Orman

Dedicated to Andrew, who lets me be Emi, and Christopher, who lets me be whatever I want.

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Chapter One

The Boy Next Door

I was riding the bus. I wanted to wear headphones like all the other teenagers my age, but I didn't have any, so I looked out the window at the inner-city streets and daydreamed... not about having an MP3 player, but about what *could* happen later that day.

My first daydream had a chance of being realized in about two blocks. I liked to pretend Evander Cheney would come out of the Stanley Milner library and get on the bus I was riding. We were going in the same direction. We were getting off at the same stop. Both those things were true almost any day. It was the timing that was pretend. Usually, he was later than me and I missed him. In my mind, he'd board the bus, he'd see me, notice the seat next to me was empty, and then sit there. It was pathetic, but in my daydream, I didn't have anything planned after that. He wouldn't have to do more than sit beside me to turn me into a puddle of bliss.

If the bus zoomed by the library without picking him up, then I had a second fantasy all ready. We were going to the same place because I was going to his house. He lived with his Uncle Vincent and Aunt Emi. I babysat their daughter every Tuesday and Thursday evening. Sometimes Evander was there, but it wasn't his job to watch the baby. It was his job to hole up in the basement and avoid human contact as much as possible. Enter my second fantasy. I wished he would come out and say something to me. I'd say something back, and soon we'd be talking. In my dream, we had everything in common, and in thirty minutes of conversation, we would instinctively know we were made for each other. He'd ask me on a date.

Then I had a collection of smaller little interchanges all worked out. For instance, I wanted him to be the one to answer the phone when I called his house, or I wanted him to walk me home after it got dark, or I wanted to accidentally see him somewhere—anywhere—and talk for one minute. You'd think that at least some of those things would have been possible, but he didn't talk much.

The bus was about to pass the library. By that point, I felt stupid about my harmless daydreams and I cracked open my book. We passed the library and I waited until the end of the chapter to look up.

I was stunned. There he was, standing not five feet away from me, holding a metal support rod. He had his Skull Candy on and he was staring out the glass doors like he saw something incredible. He might not have seen me.

I wasn't shy so I tapped him on the shoulder. "Do you want to sit here?" I asked, and pointed to the seat next to me.

He looked at me, smiled, hooked his headphones around his neck, and said, "What did you say?"

The way he looked at me was weird, almost like he had no idea who I was. Ruffled, my eyebrows came together and I repeated what I had said.

"No thanks," he said kindly. He put his headphones back on and continued staring into oblivion, slamming an invisible door in my face.

I scratched the back of my neck. My pathetic fantasy had come true, but the happy part was missing, like always. All I wanted him to do was sit next to me and it was too much for him. That's how things were whenever we met.

We got off the bus at the same stop, since we were both going to his house. He got off the bus seconds before me and walked five or six steps ahead of me all the way. The only consideration

he offered me is that he left the door open when we got there. The only reason he remembered to do that much was because of one time when he closed the door on me and almost broke my nose. He was apologetic, which was only right of him. I had been coming to his house every Tuesday and Thursday for months.

If you examined Evander carefully, he looked like a complete snob. He had blond hair that grew in loose curls that always looked a little sun-bleached. He had lean cheeks that tanned easily and a wide chin that was flat without a dimple or a cleft. His eyes were brown like toffee. Unlike most guys his age, his clothes looked like they had been meticulously chosen to emulate a more classic style, almost like he was about to go boating in a glossy magazine. The guys I knew wore T-shirts adorned with skulls and snakes.

I didn't even choose *my* clothes that carefully, and I was a girl. When I stood in front of my closet, I chose what didn't make me feel ugly, which was a hard lottery to win, considering I shared a closet with my mother.

Anyway, he held the door open for me, but not in a romantic way. It was more like he left the door open for me. He had his back to me the whole time we walked. Our eyes didn't even meet once.

That night, Emi was in a hurry and she shouted three instructions to me before scooting out the backdoor. Paisley was already asleep, but she could be up any minute, and there were strained peas in the fridge for her when she woke up. So I waved to Emi from the kitchen window and then went back into the living room to wait for Emi's baby to awaken.

Sitting in the living room of the Cheney household was always the place where I felt the class distinction between us the strongest. There was a photograph of Emi that was larger than a flat-screen TV over the fireplace. Emi had dark brown hair that hung in long, curled tendrils and fell in a blunt line across her back and across her forehead. In the picture, she was wearing deep raspberry lipstick and holding a dark red rose. Apparently, Vincent took it. Even though the photograph was in color, she still looked like a movie star from the forties.

Across the room, there was a magnificently framed picture of Vincent. I'd never met him in person. He worked all the time and when he didn't work, Emi usually went somewhere to meet him and I watched Paisley. Evander looked a lot like Vincent—only Vincent was an older, darker, less snobby, more respectable version. He was less snobby because of his smile.

And there were sweet little pictures of Paisley everywhere. In some, she had angel wings. Others were extreme close-ups of her soft, pink, face. There were all sorts.

If you walked into the room when the sun hung at just the right angle, the light reflected through the chandelier and against the glass in all the frames and for a moment it seemed like you were walking into a room of mirrors. It was a really lavish place.

As I sat there, my stomach did a ripple flip to let me know I needed an after-school snack. Usually, Emi told me what I could munch on before she left. Since she forgot and wouldn't be home until close to ten, I peeked in the fridge, but I didn't see anything that screamed, "Emi left me for you!"

So, I got an impish idea to go ask Evander what I should eat. I tiptoed down the stairs, found his door, and with my heart up in my throat, I gave the door a little tap.

No answer.

I knocked again—louder.

No answer.

I tried again—even louder.

That time I got his attention and he opened the door a crack. It was dark inside and the only

thing I could see was the flashing light of either a TV or a computer screen.

“What is it?” he asked like he could hardly be bothered.

“I was just wondering what there is to eat,” I asked hesitantly. Crap, I was losing my nerve.

He looked at me like I was the stupidest thing he had ever seen. “How should I know? Find something. Anything.” He shut the door in my face.

I trudged back upstairs, but I was lucky because when I got there I could hear Paisley crying. I went and got her.

The evening went on like it usually did. I played peek-a-boo with Paisley and fed her dinner. Then I took her out to the backyard and played with her in the evening air. The weather was getting colder since summer was disappearing. It was easier to babysit during the summertime. It would be harder when it was too cold to go outside. After the outside exertion, the baby was tired and I changed her diaper and put her back to bed. Babies her age were so easy to take care of. They're just learning to walk; haven't had their first birthday yet. It was a breeze.

After I sang her a lullaby and put her in her crib, I went to the bathroom. As I was washing my hands I looked at myself in the mirror.

My hair wasn't the right color. It should have been dark or light but instead, it was neither—totally blah. It wasn't that I didn't have the money to fix it—I did. I had money from all the babysitting I did, but I was terrified. What if the dye job didn't turn out? What if I couldn't get my money back? What if it took two hundred years to grow out again? Or what if it looked fabulous and I had to come up with the money to keep it fabulous? Like Evander...

Facing facts, I was a little obsessed with the difference between my looks and Evander's. Somewhere in my little brain, I thought that the difference in our looks was the reason he didn't want to talk to me. To make matters worse, it wasn't just my hair that gave me an inferiority complex, my eyes were green and not a pretty green. They looked like pale green grapes that had been cut down the middle. And I didn't tan. I was scary-white—reflective white. My clothes were all wrong and I didn't know how to pluck my eyebrows.

I shuddered and went out of the bathroom. I dropped myself on the couch and read my book. Normally, I would have gone downstairs and told Evander that Paisley would sleep until Emi got home, but that night, I didn't have the courage to speak to him. I'd already embarrassed myself enough.

About ten minutes later Evander came upstairs. Usually, when he came up, it was either to get something to eat or to leave the house. That night, he came into the living room and stopped to talk to me. Was one of my fantasies coming true?

“Is Paisley asleep?” he asked quietly.

I nodded.

“Then why don't you go home?”

Surprisingly, that moment reminded me why I had the deepest crush on him in the world. It wasn't because he was ridiculously hot, it was because, at that moment, he didn't seem snobby. His voice wasn't snobby. His expression wasn't snobby. Everything about him was gentle, rather than arrogant. It didn't even sound like he was trying to get rid of me. It sounded like he was trying to be a real gentleman and even though it didn't last, I knew it wasn't all in my head. I loved it. Hardly anybody treated me with consideration.

“She was fussing,” I lied. “I just put her down, but she might wake up any second.”

He nodded and went back into the kitchen. Then he made himself a peanut butter sandwich and went back downstairs.

That was it. That was all there was to our interaction, except he'd shown me what to eat and I

copied it.

When Emi came home I was still reading on the couch, secretly glancing at the door every two minutes wishing Evander would come upstairs again, but Emi didn't need to know that.

"How did it go, Sarah?" she asked, as she dropped her purse on the stairs.

I told her about the evening as she propped her white-toed boots on an ottoman and untied the black lace scarf from around her neck. Emi always looked like she was auditioning for the part of *the witch*. After knowing her for four months, I could tell that something wasn't quite right with her. She was a young, wealthy mother (not over thirty), and even though she constantly wore black, her apparel never dipped into the realms of the vampire fads. Instead, she dressed classically, like the artist she was. That was where she went on Tuesday and Thursday nights—to the city art gallery.

In short, she dressed like she was mourning for a dead husband, but acted like the sun was always rising. She was very cheerful.

"Did Evander show you his book?" she asked casually.

"No. Did he write a book?"

"Hm. He really didn't talk to you about it? He's been writing it for years and he submitted it to two publishing houses. Unfortunately, he got rejected. He was really discouraged, so I decided I would get it printed and bound for him myself. You know, to give to him as a present."

"You're so sweet, Emi."

"No. I'm not. I just wanted to show him that if all he wanted was a shiny cover with his name on it, then it's not expensive to buy. He needs to figure out what his motivation for writing really is, and I think this the quickest way. I thought he might mention it to you because I had to order a lot of copies for the printing house to do it for me. If he hasn't offered you one, then you might as well take a copy. I know how you like to read."

She got up and fetched me a brown, hardcover edition. There was no cover art and there was only the title in gold lettering with Evander's name underneath. It read: *Behind His Mask*, by Evander Cheney. I felt like I had just been given the world.

"Thanks, Emi," I cheered. "You're the best!"

"I know," she said with a wink. "But please, don't tell him I gave you this. If he was too shy to mention it then he might not be comfortable with you reading it."

"Is he shy?" I asked, unknowingly. Sometimes I felt sure his silence was not shyness, but discrimination.

Emi raised her eyebrows in shock. "Teenagers must live their lives with blinders on. They're so self-conscious; they can't even notice what's going on in another teen's life. Evander is not shy. He's reclusive. He's the type who will do whatever he wants, but he's also the type who doesn't want to share himself—another stumbling block he's going to have to conquer if he wants to be a novelist. Just promise me you won't tell him I gave you a copy."

"Kay, I won't tell him," I promised.

"And don't read it when you're over here," she continued.

"Okay."

She grinned and gave me a little pat on the shoulder. "Enjoy it, little girl. Now, hide it in your bag."

She walked me to the door and looking outside, commented on how dark it was getting now that summer was over. "Why don't I call Evander up to walk you home?"

I glowed. I got my shoes and coat on and tucked the book in my bag. She was orchestrating a new fantasy for me. Evander was going to walk me home!

He took forever coming up the stairs and while I waited, I couldn't help thinking about what Emi said. Wasn't she being a trifle over-anxious? Surely it couldn't bother Evander too much to see me reading his book. Nah, he was a huge snob and she was just trying to protect me from the uglier side of his moodiness.

Evander came up the stairs and got ready to walk me out. Emi waved good-bye to us on the stairs and we were soon on the sidewalk.

We walked by a few houses before I thought of an adequate conversation topic. Forgive me for my insipidness, but when I was around him, I got rattled and my brain didn't work at full capacity, so my ideas were less than astounding. That night, they were quite stupid.

"Do you think it's really necessary to walk me home?" I asked. "It's not very dark yet."

"It's no trouble," he drawled.

It was another one of those moments I liked best.

"The neighborhood's not the best, but I've never had anything bad happen before when I walked home from babysitting jobs."

He was silent for a second before he spoke up. "You've walked home alone from other jobs?"

"Well, yeah. A lot of the other moms I work for are single and they don't have a nephew handy to send home with me."

"No, I guess not," he said slowly.

Then we were at my door. I whipped out my keys and slid them into the lock. "Thanks, Evander. See you next Tuesday."

"Yeah, see you." He waited until I was in the second door before he turned to go back down the apartment building steps.

I turned and watched his back for a second. I was sort of hoping he would ask me to call him the next time I had to walk home alone from babysitting. It was very natural that he didn't. That was one of my thoughts that fell into the daydream category.

Going up the stairs, I walked past the bloodstain. A few months ago someone had been stabbed just inside the building and no one had bothered to deep clean the carpet to get rid of the bloodstain. That was the kind of place I lived. Two landings up, there was a pee stain where an adult had literally taken a wiz on the carpet. No one had bothered to clean that up either.

It was strange that the hyper cheap apartments and the ritzy houses should be within walking distance of each other, but that was Edmonton for you. One second you're standing in front of a skyscraper reflecting the sky as clear as water and the next you're walking past an unkempt peepshow theater. It was the same in the residential areas. One minute you're walking by the cheapest apartments the city has to offer and the next you're passing a house that sold for over a million dollars because of the gorgeous view of the river valley.

The apartment where I lived with my mom was a one-bedroom. We slept on two bunk beds in the same room with blankets put up around our bottom bunks like bed curtains. Why bunk beds? I had two older sisters who didn't live with us anymore, but just in case they stopped by, my mom wanted to have a place for them to sleep.

Where was my dad? Who knew. My mom had been through the process of dating (when she had daughters) enough times that she had grown tired of it. She hadn't brought a man home since I was seven. So, unless one of my sisters showed up, then it was just the two of us.

I said before that it was the living room in Evander's house that made me feel so unworthy of him. That was because it was so different from the living room in my apartment. The family pictures on my living room walls were half-sized school pictures. My mom couldn't afford to get them done every year, so they were all up on the wall – even the ones from when I was in the

second grade. I look scruffy. No one bothered to make sure my hair was smooth or that my face was clean. It wasn't just me either, my sisters looked the same.

As for my sisters, there was Rachel. She moved out when she was seventeen. Since then, she worked in an overpriced, low-class restaurant that dressed their waitresses up like hookers for their male oil-rigger clientele. I despised her for not aiming for something better, but she made major money in tips. And she had a secret. The truth was her head was shaved and she wore a beautiful blonde wig to work. That proved there was a tiny spark of rebellion in her and I knew that one day she would make enough money to do something better with her life.

My other sister, Carly, ran away from home six months before. My mother made the police treat her disappearance like a missing-person case, but I knew she ran away and we wouldn't find her until she came back on her own. Maybe that was her idea of a prank to drive all of us nuts, or maybe she outright hated us. Who could tell exactly what she thought?

By that point in my unnecessary and painful comparison of living rooms, I wasn't feeling too excited to read Evander's book. I left it in my school bag and brushed my teeth instead.

Chapter Two

The Lord of the Capricorns

It was Friday and I hated everybody. I was in the first semester of grade eleven and I hated everybody. My teacher? Yeah, I hated him. He was telling us why we had to study like we'd never studied before if we wanted to do well on the midterm. The lunch lady? Yeah, I hated her, too. I had to buy my lunch that day and the prices were so high. The kid who had the locker next to me? Yeah, I hated him, too. We hadn't even had our lockers for two months yet and something inside his was starting to smell. The girl who texted me in the middle of math class? Yep, I utterly despised her.

I only had one spare that day and it was during the second to last period. It wasn't until then that I got a chance to crack open Evander's book. I went to the library, found a cozy spot in the corner on one of the couches, and pulled it out of my bag. The book itself smelled great. It looked great too, just like one of those beautifully bound books on the shelf of a nineteenth-century library. I was excited as I flipped open the cover and found the title of the first part. It was called *The Lord of the Capricorns*.

Insert girlish scream—which was immediately squelched by the grouchy librarian's glare.

I started reading.

Once upon a time, there was a land of greenness unlike any other. It bordered no seashore, no desert, and no mountains. It was a land touched by the grace of the goddess of rain. There, the sun shone golden, covering the land in light and beauty. It was a place of peace where the fields had not absorbed the blood of war and where dead warriors were not buried. Flowers were as valuable as gemstones. Images reflected on a clear lake's surface were more prized than those on foreign mirrors.

The kingdom was known as Lilikeen. In the center of all gracefulness and goodness was their greatest prize, Princess Sarafina. Her beauty caused aches of longing throughout all the neighboring countries. Her head was blessed with soft, sunlit, curls that fell in voluminous waves to her slender waist. When she wore rings on her fingers, the rings seemed enormous and made her fingers more elegant. Her eyes were green like the green that unfolds in the curve of a newborn leaf.

Love for her was inevitable.

Reading it made me hate Evander, too. Of course, he liked that kind of girl. It sounded like a female version of him, except for the green eyes. But even after having my fears about him confirmed, my disgust didn't negate my interest in what he had to say, so I kept reading.

At the age of fourteen, she stood in her personal library. It was a beautiful room designed with enormous panels of glass in the ceiling to let in the light for the weightless vines that clung to the bookshelves, adding color and freshness. She was meant to entertain a prince, but not just any prince. The youth invited was the second prince of the Kingdom of Bellique—a country with a strong political hold on Lilikeen.

Bellique lay to the south. It was a great arching country that covered the entire continental coast and cradled a multitude of small kingdoms in its arc. It was the shape of a crescent moon and Lilikeen was like a star dangling from the top corner of it. Bellique sat in a rather difficult position, for it was constantly under invasion from the countries across the sea. It was stained in blood until the earth was red, and if Lilikeen and her neighbors wished to keep their lands pure

from warfare, they had to pay a heavy tribute. The money kept Bellique's soldiers paid, their weapons sharp, and their boats afloat. Each and every citizen of Lilikeen paid some of their income to keep Bellique's war machine ticking.

The morning Sarafina entertained Prince Murmur of Bellique, the Queen of Lilikeen watched with great interest from a balcony above.

Murmur entered. Sarafina stood by an empty fireplace with nothing on her mind particularly. She had already learned she did not need to exert herself, particularly when dealing with prospective suitors. She did not need to think of witty conversation. They were happy enough to talk about themselves and the time would soon pass.

For Murmur, the effect of her beauty was devastating. Because she did not speak much, she opened his imagination up for what she could be instead of exactly what she was, which was bored, underdeveloped, and childish. He didn't know this. The combination of her obvious acceptance of him and her outward perfection made him believe, even though he was too young to marry her then, that he could have no one else as his wife.

The next day he was carried away back to Bellique's impenetrable capital, but two months later a very royal missive was received by the King and Queen of Lilikeen. It was an official request for a betrothal. An excellent offer it was too, for it offered to have the tribute sent to Bellique reduced by half during each year Sarafina was married to Murmur. However, the King and Queen did not accept it. The Queen knew what their kingdom had—they had a daughter capable of mystifying a prince in one afternoon. From that moment on, the Queen began plotting for a better marriage for Sarafina. What good was Prince Murmur? He was not the Crown Prince. He would never be a king. Instead, she set her heart on his older brother, Prince Tremor.

Tremor was a legend. It was not Murmur who protected the entire continent from the threat across the sea, but the Crown Prince. If Sarafina could have the tribute halved by marrying a prince who would never be a king, how much could she have it reduced if she married the man who would be? Tremor was an unmarried soldier, a general, and a prince who would be a king.

The Queen wrote a letter inviting Tremor to Lilikeen. There was no response for over six months and when the epistle was received, it was opened to uncover his refusal. He could not leave his fortress at Sealoch to go courting. To the Queen, it was a minor setback. This was a different kind of warfare, one for which a queen was well equipped. She would have her daughter married to the Lord of Sealoch!

I sat back and thought about that for a second. If the story were a window into Evander's life—did he fear his aunt and uncle would tell him who to marry? Or could he not have the girl he wanted? I tapped my toe thoughtfully when the rustling of my skirt caught my attention. I stopped, stunned, I hadn't worn a skirt to school that day.

Taking my eyes off Evander's book, I saw I was wearing a yellow gown and I was not in the school library anymore. Getting up, I realized I was standing in a round room with stone walls. Going to a window, I stared out at a breathtaking green prairie that seemed to stretch forever. A castle spread out beneath me too, just like the dress had. I was standing in a turret room. I could see other towers, courtyards inside the gates, people walking about in fine apparel, stone archways, and beauty everywhere.

Looking around the room, I saw a bed with the curtains tied back, a huge armoire, a dressing table with silver brushes, and a mirror propped up on it. Moving closer, I saw my reflection in it. I looked like the girl in the story. It wasn't that my face was different. It was the same, but my hair was vibrant blonde with glorious curls. In the sunlight, my face had radiant color—something I never saw when I did my makeup in the cheap fluorescent light in my

bathroom back home. Was it really me?

A second later there was a tap on the door and a young girl around twelve years old came in. “I’ve come to get you ready, Princess Sarafina,” she chirped.

I stood there for a second. My name was Sarah, not Sarafina. “Excuse me,” I said kindly. “What’s your name?”

“Tripsy.”

“Okay, Tripsy. How did I get here?”

She looked around the room like she didn’t understand.

Then I said, “I’m not from this place. I was reading a book in my school library.”

She froze completely, like a statue. She had stopped breathing. Every muscle in her body seemed paralyzed.

I went up to her and waved my hand in front of her eyes, but she didn’t even blink. Then I yelled at her, “Wake up, Tripsy!”

She came to life again. “What would you like to wear to the ball tonight?” she asked, opening two of the armoire doors. She started pulling out gowns of all different colors and varieties. I had never seen anything like it in my life—not even when I skulked into bridal shops to peek at what the girls who had money bought.

Even though it would have been fun to simply put on a dress and run downstairs to a ball, everything was too weird. Wasn’t I in the library at school? Wasn’t everything I saw and felt a fantasy my brain cooked up to go along with Evander’s story? What if the castle was in my brain and my body was still at school? If that were the case, I couldn’t just take my clothes off and start putting on imaginary ones. I was already going to be sent to the funny farm for talking out loud to make-believe Tripsy with everyone in the library hearing me.

I grabbed the back of the chair, hoping it was really the couch in the library and I was plum crazy. I looked around for Evander’s book, but it was nowhere to be seen. Did I set it down? I looked all over the room, but it was gone.

Tripsy was holding a ball gown in each hand, waiting for me to make a decision.

Getting desperate, I pinched myself. It hurt, but nothing happened. Crap! What was I supposed to do? Listen to a puffed-up personification of my imagination and strip? I closed my eyes, wound up, and slapped myself across the cheek. It hurt, but when I opened my eyes again, nothing had changed.

Tripsy’s expression didn’t seem to register that anything was weird with my behavior. Somehow for her, it looked like everything was normal.

So at the risk of sounding crazy, I tried another tactic. I started screaming. Well, not really screaming, but calling out with a bit of volume to the air around me. “Whoever is watching me make a fool of myself, please stop me. Take me to the office. I’m not feeling well. Give me a ride home. I need to rest. But please don’t smack me across the cheek. I already tried that and it didn’t do anything. Help me. Please!”

Nothing happened.

I tried yelling again. “Really! I’m crazy! I need professional help!”

That time Tripsy came over and touched my arm. “Why don’t you rest a minute, Your Highness? You can tell me which ones you like from where you’re sitting.”

I frowned miserably. I felt like I was about to play a make-believe princess game in front of half of my school. If only I could keep my public transgression to talking in my sleep. That wouldn’t be so bad, except, I didn’t feel like I was dreaming. Besides, I never fell asleep anywhere other than my bed. The vision in front of me had more clarity and detail than any

dream I'd had before. The only other conclusion I could draw was that I was completely nuts. Delusions! And if that were true, then it would be better if I were found out sooner, so that someone could get me some help! For the time being, I let my overactive imagination take the reins.

I looked at the dresses Tripsy was presenting. At least, it was a good fantasy so far (although if I were going to fantasize in public I would not have chosen a princess theme). The dresses were interesting. I'd never seen a dress show before. There were pink silky ones, navy ones with jewels sewn all over them, orange ones with embroidered flowers, coral-colored ones with thousands of beads sewn on, purple ones with long transparent overlays. I was at a complete loss of which one to choose or what to do.

"Which one would you like to wear tonight?" Tripsy asked again. "They're expecting you downstairs in half an hour."

"Well, they'll have to wait," I said, as I picked up the coral colored one. "I'm not sure which one to choose. As soon as I start stripping in the library, I'm sure to get hauled off to the loony bin."

Tripsy didn't remark. She didn't hear me.

It was at that moment that the Queen paraded in. She had to be the Queen. She couldn't be anyone else with a three-tiered crown on her head. She was a vision. Her dress was black with green fringes running down the side and across the bodice. She looked like the Queen of Hearts. No, she looked more like the Queen of Shamrocks, since she was wearing green.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at me. "Didn't I tell you Prince Murmur is attending tonight? You're supposed to be downstairs. Tripsy, get out. I'll finish getting the Princess ready myself."

Tripsy ran for her life and shut the door behind her.

"You can't wear that!" The monarch scoffed at the yellow dress I had been so hesitant to take off.

"Why not?" I asked, as I suddenly felt that was a brilliant defense. Then I wouldn't have to change into anything.

She scowled at me. "I'm not in the mood for jokes," she pronounced noisily. "Choose a gown at once."

I grabbed a white one.

"No," the Queen said, and snatched it out of my hand. "That's for your wedding."

"All right," I said and reached for a pink one.

"No. Not that one either. Really, darling, where did your sense go? This one," she said, as she pulled one from the bottom of the pile.

The dress had a tight white bodice and a spring green skirt that flared out to infinity. The bodice had a pattern of beautifully arranged beads. Stepping into it, I wondered if princesses felt like they were going to die of embarrassment when they changed outfits. I thought I could feel the eyes of thirty invisible teenage boys staring at me in the library. If only I could wake up.

"Of course you couldn't wear pink," the Queen huffed. "This is a national celebration."

"What are we celebrating?" I asked. She tightened the corset strings. I yelped.

She didn't skip a beat. "Your letter from Tremor, of course. Finally, after all these years of waiting, he's agreed to marry you. Just thinking about it fills me with triumph. Mind you don't flirt with Murmur tonight, dear. If you do, he won't like to see you as his sister-in-law and the future queen of Bellique. He'll be miserable."

"I'm going to marry Prince Tremor, then?" I asked uneasily as I remembered the opening

paragraphs of Evander's book.

"Of course."

"Is Tremor downstairs, too?"

"Of course not! He's with the soldiers in Sealoch. Why would he be here? You'll go to him tomorrow. I can just imagine you, standing on the balcony of the castle at Sealoch." She shoved me into a chair and started pinning my hair into an elaborate up-do. "You'll wear red then, the color of Bellique, and all the soldiers will salute you and think of your beauty as they throw their bodies into the fray for your sake."

"My sake!" I gasped.

"For the sake of us all," she corrected. "And after the battles, you'll go down to the encampment with a flock of servants and see to the medical needs of the brave men that fight for our freedom. It will be glorious and you, my love, will be the most famous beauty in history."

I thought about that. "Lowly teenager from a one-bedroom apartment becomes *The Most Famous Beauty in History*." I'd never imagined being like Cleopatra or Pocahontas. It didn't seem possible. I'd only wanted to stop being so wretchedly inferior to Evander. The most I'd ever wished was for him to like me.

Then something occurred to me. "Does Prince Tremor love me?"

"Love you? He's never even met you, but that doesn't matter. The fame of your beauty has reached his ears," she said as she corrected the direction I was looking with both her hands on either side of my head. "He must be very interested in you to declare that he wants to marry you. Don't worry about his stipulations and go right ahead."

"Stipulations? What stipulations?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, sticking a final sparkling adornment in my hair. "Nothing. He just wants you to take a boat down the river to Sealoch. It'll be easy, just a little ferry ride. My brave princess can easily manage it."

"Right," I said as the Queen pronounced me ready and elegantly hauled me down the curving stairway.

We descended the tower stairs and down a long hallway onto a balcony that overlooked the ballroom. It was a lovely room with tall, graceful, archways, and six crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There were beautiful wooden beams put together in a jigsaw pattern on the ceiling with the centers of each pattern like a rose painted green. There were cream and emerald tiles on the floor. At one end, harpists were playing. At the other end, people danced.

Everyone stopped what they were doing when the Queen and I came in and immediately a man dressed in a strange green and yellow coat stepped into place next to me. From there he announced, "Queen Rosary the Fourth and Princess Sarafina."

I felt kind of important despite my awkwardness as everyone else in the room bowed. Then the Queen led me down another staircase and onto the ballroom floor. Upon my arrival, at least a dozen people moved to speak to me, either to offer their congratulations or to tell me how much they would miss me after I went to Sealoch. Then suddenly, the crowd parted and made way for one man.

At first, I didn't know who he was. He was older, had a thick beard, and wore a gold ring around his head. Then it became clear to me. It was the King—Sarafina's father.

He took my hand in a firm grip and kissed both my cheeks. Unfortunately, I took a step backward. I had played along with my incredibly vivid daydream, but I couldn't act normal in that situation. He had a beard. I'd never been kissed by a man or a boy and starting me off with kissing an older man with hair on his face was a little much for me. Luckily, he didn't seem put

off by it. Actually, he seemed amused and grabbed my elbow to help me steady myself.

"I knew my darling girl would secure our country's future," he said joyfully. His eyes were wet and droplets of water settled in his eyelashes.

I was horrified. "Why are you crying?"

He wiped his face with the heel of his hand and said, "Sealoch is a faraway land and Tremor has been very specific that we are never to travel to the battlefield. If you marry him, you'll have to stay there with him unless he permits you to go to the capital. I don't know when we will meet again."

I stared. That was another stipulation, I supposed. I was about to pipe up with, "Then why send me?" when I remembered what I read in the book. It said they were hoping to lower the tribute Lilikeen had to pay to Bellique to keep their army in place on the seaside. Well, if you compared the two, keeping your daughter at home with you instead of lowering every citizen's taxes did seem incredibly selfish for a monarch. I smiled at him. I couldn't believe I was watching someone other than my mother get worked up over the thought of never seeing me again.

The next thing I knew, another man was approaching me. He looked closer to my age. His hair was dark and straight. It fell over his forehead and into his brown eyes. For a second I thought he looked a little like Evander, but the feeling departed when he started talking. He was nothing like Evander.

"Do you remember me?" he asked angrily, as he ground his lower lip into his teeth with his hand.

I didn't know what to say. How was I supposed to know who he was? But then I remembered the Queen said Prince Murmur was waiting downstairs—my future brother-in-law. I took a stab in the dark and tried to sound like the Queen. "Of course I remember you, Murmur. How long has it been?"

"About three years," he said crossly.

I remembered reading that he wanted to marry Sarafina. He looked fit to be tied, or rather; he ought to have been tied. He was going to start a fight, and I shouldn't have thought it was incredibly amusing, but I did. The idea of any guy eating his heart out over me was totally enjoyable. I had to give it to Evander. He really knew how to write a book.

"I remember," I said in my prettiest voice, enjoying the situation. Maybe he would relax if I paid some attention to him. Except, the Queen told me not to flirt.

"Do you know what a capricorn is?" he asked, his words coming out quickly.

"No," I answered hurriedly in an effort to keep up with him. "Isn't it a sign of the zodiac? But I wouldn't know. My sign is—"

"They're monsters of the sea," he interrupted in a louder voice. "Lilikeen is landlocked. It's no wonder you haven't heard of them."

I cleared my throat and asked. "Are there many of them in the water around Sealoch?"

"Thousands of them!" he exclaimed, breathing a little boozy breath on me. "Some of them grow to be five times as tall as a man and they have eyes as big as serving plates. Yellow."

"What's yellow?"

"Their eyes. Monsters, I tell you—monsters. And they're all up the river."

"What?"

"The river Tremor is having you travel by tomorrow; they have *nests* all the way up." The way he said it had a distinctly nasty edge. "Mostly just the little ones still live in the river, but sometimes you meet a mother. She might think you're invading her territory just by being there."

Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and forced me to look him in the eye. "You shouldn't go. You should refuse him." He paused for effect. "And marry me instead. I'll make sure you get the tax reduction your people need. Trust me."

With one glance at Murmur, I could tell he wasn't the hero of the story. Sarafina wasn't supposed to marry him and move to the capital of Bellique where she could see her parents more often. She was supposed to meet Tremor. He was the hero.

I shook him off, flipped open my fan, and quipped. "Someday I may be a widow."

After Murmur had processed that, I heard someone shouting, "Sarah Reagan! Sarah Reagan!"

Thank goodness! I turned my head and before I realized what was going on, I was sitting back in the school library. One of the librarians was standing over me saying, "Are you supposed to sleep through the last two periods of school? If you're going to do that, then you might as well go home."

I gazed up at her like she was an angel of mercy. "Thank you so much for waking me up!" Then I whispered, "Did I do anything funny while I was asleep?"

She narrowed her eyes quizzically. "Like what?"

"Talking? Walking? Make a ruckus?"

"No," she said matter-of-factly. Then she did a double-take. "There's drool on your chin."

I wiped it away with ease. It could have been so much worse. Thank heaven I didn't take my clothes off in public! But if I didn't, then that must mean that his book was a story where I could play one of the characters instead of just read. It was a lot to absorb, but I was the sort of person who never forgot where she was supposed to be.

The clock on the wall said school only had ten minutes left. I followed the librarian to the checkout desk. "Why didn't you wake me up sooner?"

"Do I look like an alarm clock to you? Don't you sleep at night?"

"I do. This was the first time I have ever fallen asleep at school."

"It's too late to bother about excuses now. Which class were you supposed to be in? I'll call your teacher and tell them you were here."

"Thanks," I said to the librarian as I flipped open Evander's book to see how far I had gotten.

I had finished chapter one. The last thing written on the page was:

Sarafina opened her white lace fan with a snap. Looking Murmur in the eye she said evenly, "Someday I may be a widow."

I didn't understand, but at least I didn't do anything embarrassing in the library.

I glanced at chapter two and saw a mass of text. There was still a lot more to read and from the width of the spine, I hadn't gotten very far in at all. I put a bookmark between the pages and closed the book. What just happened was probably a one-time deal. I probably fell asleep after finishing the chapter and made up all that extra nonsense. All the same, Evander's book was going to be more interesting than anything I'd ever experienced.

Chapter Three

The River to Sealoch

It was a Friday, and I had no babysitting job arranged for that night, so as I got on the bus to go home, I pulled out my latest blank notebook. I went to a fresh page and started writing out my plans for the day.

I wrote down my plans for the afternoon. First, I'd make myself a snack of popcorn and chocolate milk when I got home. Then I planned to curl up in bed and read Evander's book.

That was as far as I got before I slipped back into thinking about what happened in the school library. I was still battling the idea that what happened was a hallucination. It didn't feel like I'd fallen asleep—though it looked that way to the librarian. Then when I reread the last line of chapter one, I was positive it had been my own idea to make that comment about becoming a widow. Evander's book had to be magical. Maybe it was bad, an evil book that would turn out like a horror movie with me running away from a maniac with a knife. Maybe I shouldn't read the second chapter. I didn't know enough about what happened when my consciousness entered the book, but I *really* wanted to find out what happened next.

Back at home, I pulled my pitiful little bed curtains closed, shoved a handful of popcorn in my mouth, and started reading. Chapter two began with a letter.

My Dearest Princess,

On the evening of the thirteenth of Millend, there will be a boat docked at the river Uliss. Onboard is everything you will need to travel freely and lightly down the river to where it empties—Sealoch. As the craft is not designed to carry much weight, please do not over-pack. I assure you I have made meticulous preparations for your journey and once you arrive, you will want for nothing. Please do not fear because I have asked you to travel alone to meet me. It is my belief that if a princess cannot handle the journey to Sealoch, she cannot handle life on the battlefield. Nevertheless, the boat will be watched and if you should decide that the unpleasantness of the voyage makes marrying me less desirable, simply call out. You will immediately be met, escorted to civilization and my offer of marriage shall be retracted.

I look forward to meeting you in person and hearing you recount your voyage since it will likely be an eventful one.

Your Loving Fiancé,

Tremor Halfheart

Looking up from the book, I thought about the letter. It sounded like something Evander would write—short and threatening. It was as if he was daring me to ride the boat alone.

As I looked around my bed, I saw I hadn't gone anywhere, so I took a swig of chocolate milk and reached for the popcorn.

It was then that I heard a man's voice outside my bed curtains. A shiver ran up my spine. He sounded like he was standing right beside my bed. Totally paralyzed, I sat still and listened.

"He wants her to do this on her own?" a low voice asked. "Is Prince Tremor trying to kill her? Doesn't he know that she was practically raised in a glass box? There's no way she can go down the length of the river by herself. She'll die."

The skin on the back of my neck prickled. It sounded like dialogue from the book. I opened the curtain and didn't see the bedroom, but a stretching prairie dotted with leafy trees. Then the bed started bumping and swaying. My legs fell through the bed and my feet hit the floor. The bed

became a bench. Suddenly, I was in a padded carriage that was being led by two white horses. There was a coachman driving my carriage and there were two other men in green and black army tunics riding alongside on brown mounts.

Somehow I was inside Evander's book and I was Princess Sarafina again. That meant it must have been one of the army men I heard whispering about me. I felt cross at the man I heard talking about me. A glass box! Well, maybe Princess Sarafina had grown up in a glass box, but I hadn't. I could handle a little boat ride. Thinking about the bloodstain in my apartment building, I knew I could.

I leaned back, forgetting momentarily about the impending trial, and immediately started praising whoever invented shocks in modern vehicles. Not even Edmonton city buses bumped as much as the carriage did. I didn't even realize the irony of placing those two thoughts right beside each other. I could handle anything—except ancient carriages with no shocks.

Then I saw the sparkling river and the boat that had been sent for me. It looked like an oversized canoe with a white tent on it. When I got closer, I saw that it had runners that extended on either side to make it more stable. No matter how wild the river water got, it probably wouldn't capsize. There was no mast, no sails, and from what I could see—no paddles. It looked to have enough room for a person to lie down in it. Other than that, the boat was empty. Whoever Tremor had sent to watch me, I wasn't going to get to meet them before setting out.

As I got out of the carriage with my one little bag, I was met by as many people as had been at the ball. The King and Queen stood tall off to one side in their green attire and watched the crowd. One of the Lilikeen soldiers got on board the little boat to check it. When he came back his report was gloomy. “There's enough food and water for you to make the trip, my Princess, but nothing to steer the boat with. There are no weapons, no compass, and no anchor. The only thing I found was this note.”

I took it. It read; “You can still marry Murmur if you want to—Tremor.” I crumpled it up angrily in my fist and straightened my back. Who would want to marry Murmur? He might look kind of like Evander, but from my meeting with him, I could already tell his insides were rotten. Not only that, but he had told me all that garbage about monsters in the river. Then it dawned on me, he had called the monsters capricorns and the story was called *The Lord of the Capricorns*. Crap! What Murmur said was probably true and I didn't know how to stop reading.

Looking into the river, I knew I was unprepared for whatever lay ahead. I had always lived in a city where you simply looked at the river, you didn't swim in it or sail on it. I was trying to be tough, but I didn't know what to do. I couldn't stop reading the book, and I couldn't go back to the castle or back to my room. There was only one thing I could do. I had to banish my fears and get aboard the boat.

With the dignity of a princess, I stepped into the boat. The bottom swayed under my feet. It was more like a canoe than I thought. One of the soldiers hefted my bag to me and I nearly fell in the water trying to catch it. Then with remarkable little ceremony, they untied the rope and sent me on my way.

“How long will it take to get there?” I called to the soldier who then threw me the rope.

He shook his head like there was a weight attached to his chin. “We don't know exactly, Highness. None of us has ever gone that far down the river before.”

I waved goodbye to the tense cluster of citizens that had come to see me on my way. The King covered his eyes with his hand in pain and the Queen stroked the side of his arm, comforting him. Triumph glowed in her face. She waved to me and shook her fist once. I supposed that was her cheering for me in her own way. I watched them all pack up and leave

with not even one soul staying until I drifted out of sight. When I saw how quickly they all left, I had to do something to pick myself up, otherwise, I might have started to cry.

I sat down and started pawing through my bag for something more appropriate to wear. I was dressed in princess finery similar to the yellow gown I had found myself wearing when I came into the book before. The dress I was wearing was light green, but I couldn't move around in it. In my bag, I found three more dresses (one of them was clearly my wedding gown), two nightgowns, and some unfortunate looking underclothes. What was there looked the same as what I was wearing, so I opted to spoil the dress I already had on, closed the bag, and set it inside the tent.

The weather was quite nice, and I watched the water and the lush green prairie slip by on either side of the boat.

Then I started thinking about what Tremor said in his letter. If a princess couldn't handle the journey, then she couldn't handle life there... or something like that. What was life there going to be like? I suddenly got the shivers. It was clearly a fantasy novel Evander had written. Who knew what sorts of monsters and evils lurked under that quiet facade of his? To start with, there was a war waging in Sealoch. Was I going to the front? I shivered. Who knew what kinds of inhumanity I might witness when I got there? After all, the novel seemed pretty real. There could be fields of blood-soaked men and stinking hospitals. Those fears were more real to me than what Murmur said about sea creatures.

I shook my head. I wasn't going to think about capricorns or monsters, and instead I went to see what food Tremor had sent me. The packages were really simple. I looked inside the first bundle. It had a small loaf of bread and three smoked fish with the bones still inside. I counted out three meals for each day and saw that he had sent me enough food to last five days.

Was the voyage really going to take five days? I was shocked. Was I really supposed to stay passed out on my bed for five days! I had a babysitting job the next day, and I really needed the money. If I didn't show up, I might not get hired again.

I thought about screaming out, but if I did that, Sarafina might lose her chance to marry Tremor and screaming hadn't worked to get me out of the book the last time.

I told myself to calm down. I just needed to think about it logically. Argh! Why had I jumped back into the book again so recklessly? Stop. Logically. Think logically. The last time I woke up when the librarian woke me, so all I needed was for my mother to wake me up in the morning, which she would probably do. I just needed to calm down.

I picked a strip of meat off one of the fishes and gave it a taste. Wow. Not bad. Practicing eating around the bones was a good exercise... in calming down.

I ate the bread, drank some water, and watched the sunset. It was pretty in Evander's book. The sky was bright orange and the sun shone through the river grasses and cattails. I waited until the last second to close the tent flaps, work my way out of my corset, and settle down for the night. It was getting cold, but Tremor had left me a softish mattress to rest on and plenty of blankets.

I let myself get rocked to sleep to the swaying beat of the river.

When I woke up in the morning, I expected to wake up in my bedroom awake and alert and ready to watch someone's kids, but I was still in Evander's book. Couldn't my mom wake me up?

I pulled back the tent flap and looked out at the world. I had traveled a long way during the night. I woke up in a completely different place. The river ran through a forest, except there were no leaves or needles on the trees. There were only burnt skeletons of trees. It looked like a forest

fire had ruined the place ages ago and nothing had been able to grow since.

Later that morning I passed a city. The buildings were made of logs and mud, and looked quite different from the castle. The greenness of Lilikeen had disappeared overnight and been replaced with only the occasional patch of grass and wild clusters of trees.

That whole day, I sat nibbling on loaves of bread and wondering what would happen if no one woke me up in my room. What if they couldn't wake me up? What if my mother had tried and tried and eventually she hadn't known what to do, so she called for an ambulance and I was in some rarely visited wing of the hospital on life support because I was actually in a coma?

What if my mom woke up, but didn't look in on me and just went about her day thinking I had already gone to my job?

I didn't know and I drove myself crazy until the sun went down for the second time.

That time, however, when I was poking around in the supplies Tremor had left me, I found a different looking package with Sarafina's name on it. I opened it up and found a dress. It was white with a drawstring neckline, short sleeves, a light billowing skirt, and what looked like half a corset sewn into the dress, but it allowed me to do it up in the front. The weave of the fabric was like one of those ancient flour sacks my mother still used to mop up spills. I pried myself out of my dress and replaced it with Tremor's gift. It was far more practical since it was getting hotter as I traveled further south.

Then I remembered what the Queen had said about men saluting me while I wore a black and red gown. Life in Sealoch probably wasn't anything like she imagined. No one from Lilikeen had been there before. Most likely, she had no idea to what circumstances she was sending her daughter.

On the third day, I saw only one person and he motioned for me not to go any further. The whole exchange really freaked me out—no exaggeration.

The man paddled up to me in his rowboat and said, "Girl, don't go that way. There is nothing that way. Come with me. I will guide you to shore."

I felt like caving in and going with him, but I had to stick with the plan. That was how the story went. "I can't," I said regretfully.

"You must. That way only leads to Sealoch, the water monsters, and the war. Come with me."

"That's where I'm going," I insisted.

He didn't listen to me and prepared to throw a rope over to my helm when something under the water caught his attention. "Don't move! A capricorn is under your boat."

I wanted to dispel my ignorance as quickly as possible since the monsters could be like sea lions or something else I understood. I closed my eyes for a moment in preparation. Then I opened them up again and stuck my head over the water even though I was afraid. I didn't see anything at all.

"What's a monster like that doing this far north?" the man gasped. "It's not natural."

"I don't see anything," I said, staring into the water.

"You see the black?" the man questioned.

"It all looks black to me," I scoffed. I still couldn't see anything. I gave the man a dirty look, withdrew into the tent, and closed the flap.

"Girl, catch my rope!" I heard the man yell.

"I'm going to see Prince Tremor. Leave me alone."

After I said that, I didn't hear anything else. I guessed the man was leaving me alone since I didn't stick my head out of the tent again that day. I was hungry because I was bored and lying in the rocking boat made me sleepy.

I thought of my body in the hospital. Surely I wouldn't get fired from a babysitting job for being in a coma. That thought cheered me up and soon I was sleeping again.

The day after that, the river and the land were different yet again. The river was wider and the land even more desolate. There were only rocks and odd stretches of bare yellow earth on the river banks. The sun was hotter too, and I became grateful for the tent that shielded me from the heat.

I couldn't help thinking about what the man had said the day before, but I didn't know what to make of it. It was a temptation to keep my curtain shut all day so that I wouldn't see the depressing landscape, or catch a glimpse of anything that might be in the water. That was what I wanted to do, but I didn't because the heat was oppressive, and if there was a breeze I wanted to catch it.

In the end, my curiosity got the better of me and I found myself staring over the edge of the boat from time to time. The river moved slowly and sometimes I dared to stick my fingers or toes in the water just to cool down. The water seemed really deep, not like it had where I picked up the boat. There it seemed little more than a stream. It had become green and black. Its depth seemed fathomless. Yet, when I stared directly down, I thought I saw tiny yellow lights under the surface. It was almost like the sunlight was reflecting on bits of metal. Maybe they were shells. I sighed. Actually, I just wanted to jump in. I was a good swimmer, but I was too scared. What if I lost the boat? I had to content myself with dipping my feet in.

I put my foot in the water and suddenly I saw an eye. All at once all the ease and boredom I had been experiencing vanished. It was just as Murmur had described. I saw a huge yellow eye looking at me from just under the surface of the water. At first, I thought it was a piece of garbage that had floated downstream, but as I reached out to see if I could grab it, it blinked. I recoiled in absolute horror. Its pupil wasn't round, but long and round like a frog's. Then I saw its hide flutter the water's surface as it swam past me. Its skin was onyx black. For a moment I thought I saw sticky strands of hair, but when I looked again, I clearly saw scales. Then the monster dove further beneath the water and I couldn't tell where its body ended.

I shut the curtain and tied it. I was rigid and hot with sweat. I had never seen anything like that in my whole life. I was supposed to find the capricorns amusing and beautiful, like a nature film on walruses. Instead, I was trembling from head to foot, praying, and crying. Why couldn't I wake up back home in my own bed? Afterward, I didn't open the curtains again and every time I felt the boat rock a little harder than usual, I imagined I was getting knocked around by a monster under the water.

That night I didn't sleep. The sun went down but I stayed awake in the darkness. Then, in the midnight hours, my boat hit something and with some scary rocking, it stopped moving. I had been praying I would reach Sealoch soon and that Tremor would come and take me away, but no one came on board. Had I made it? Then the stench came. What was that smell? The fear in my heart was incredible, and I couldn't make myself take a look until I figured out what was making that smell. What could it be?

Then something rammed the boat underwater. It was a capricorn!

RAM!

I screamed.

RAM!

I jumped and covered my mouth.

RAM!

I had to shut up and calm down. I was only afraid because I didn't know exactly what was out

there. I crossed myself even though I wasn't Catholic and braced myself. I came out of the tent and onto the bow of the boat. Turning around I nearly tripped and took a nosedive into the giant yellow eye of a decaying capricorn. I glanced down at its body, the flesh around the monster's torso had been eaten away and I could see its ribs and guts shining in the moonlight. I hardly registered the monster's true form. It was too dark. The only thing that I understood was that the capricorn was beached and my boat had snagged itself on its rotting carcass. In my scramble to get away, I fell straight back into the river.

My whole body was immersed in the dark water and I fought against my dress and the current to get my face up to the surface. In those seconds, I had been carried beyond the boat and I couldn't swim back to it. The water was moving too fast for me. I would only be able to make it back to the boat if I was able to get on the shore. Desperately, I tried to fight against the water to make it to the right shore, but even when I got there; the sides of the river were high and rocky. How was I supposed to get up on the rocks and back to the boat?

The water was moving fast and I was getting pulled under when a black slippery thing pushed me waist-high out of the water. I screamed. It felt like there was a wet horse under me. It stayed under me for a few seconds before disappearing, but I got all the breath I needed to last a few more minutes before I was dropped back into the water. I fought hard to keep my head above the surface, but my dress was weighing me down. The water horse came under me again and threw my body up in the air long enough for me to get two breaths. I pulled the tie on the bottom of my bodice and then the drawstring on the neckline. The dress came loose and just fell off me. Then it was easier to stay afloat. When the riverbank smoothed out a fraction, I grabbed hold of a rock and pulled myself onto the shore.

I sat in my underwear, the unflattering, lacy shorts, and button-up-the-front slip shirt, staring at the moonlit water. Looking down the course of the river, I couldn't see my boat or the dead capricorn. I couldn't see anything but the white ripples in the water and what looked like broken sticks floating away. The sparse bear surroundings suddenly looked so peaceful compared to the danger of the water, I was lucky I didn't drown. Unhappily, I was on the wrong side of the river to get to my boat. Even if I could get to it, how could I approach the rotten sea monster to get the craft dislodged? I couldn't do it by myself.

Even though the day had been hot, the night wasn't. I sat on the rocks, my heart rate finally slowing as the cold set in. Then I started to tremble. I pushed myself to walk. If I walked down the riverbank, eventually I would come to Sealoch. Granted, I wasn't supposed to arrive in my underwear, on foot with no shoes, but there was nothing else for it. If I stayed still I would freeze so I had to find help.

I walked all night but saw no towns, no houses—nothing. Eventually, I dried out and felt warmer, but not comfortable.

In my desperation, I acknowledged things could have been worse. The stones underfoot were weather-worn and no worse than walking on smooth pavement. That didn't cure my hunger, or my thirst, or the cold.

When the morning came, I saw something white lying in a curve of the river. I went to inspect it, though I was half afraid it was another animal carcass. As I got closer, I recognized it. It was my dress.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was my dress? How? What was it doing there? I bent down and scooped it up in my hands. It wasn't dry, but there it was. I almost cried, I was so happy. With it, I could at least go to the castle clothed. How excellent!

When the sun got higher that morning, I saw something else—the castle.

The castle at Sealoch was placed on a piece of jutting rock that stretched slightly over the ocean near the mouth of the river. It was made of white square slabs of rock and had one round turret that reached five levels high. However, the floors didn't go one on top of each other like a skyscraper. Instead, each floor was smaller as one traveled upwards. The top of the tower was ridged with archery notches and four tall flagpoles raised the black and red flags. The fourth level had a separate little room that clung to the tower. The lower floors were hidden by walls and foliage.

As I walked closer I saw the winding trail that led upward to the castle and alongside the soldier encampment. There seemed to be thousands of tiny huts sprawled across the land under the castle. The roofs were made of twigs or sod and the walls were made of rock.

I slid my dress on over my head and retied the drawstring and the bodice. The air around me was warm enough that I didn't care that the many folds in the skirt had not yet completely dried. I was just happy to have found an actual road by which I could walk. Hopefully, someone would see me and give me a ride (something I regularly daydreamed about in the city).

It was further than it looked. I marched onward and my soft, city feet took a beating they didn't deserve.

As the sun came down, I found myself at the bottom of the hill with the castle right in front of me. The sun dipped behind its walls and I sat on the ground to rest a bit. It was a relief to me that I would be at the castle before nightfall. I didn't think I could manage another night outside. I was downright exhausted as it was.

Then I saw someone come out of a large black door in the white stone wall. He was half as tall as the door, but he walked with a determination I had never seen in a human being before. I got to my feet to greet him since it didn't seem right to meet someone important crumpled in a sniveling heap on the ground. I would have been more poised, except it wasn't easy to stand up again after I had sat down. I stood up and forced my back to be straight. I *was* a princess after all.

As the man got closer, my breathing and heartbeat became funny. Somewhere in the back of my head, I had been expecting it, but that didn't stop me from being surprised when I actually saw it.

Walking toward me was Evander. His hair was completely straight and tied back in a low ponytail. It was Evander, except that he looked strange. The expression on his face wasn't boredom or mild irritation; it was furious indignation. Toward me? What for? I didn't do anything wrong. I stumbled two steps backward before he stopped in front of me. I grabbed the folds of my skirt and half prepared to curtsy.

He wore a dark brown leather vest, done up with bronze buckles, and dark wool trousers with heavy boots showing under them. His arms were wrapped in bandages that seemed to be made out of the same material as my dress. They covered both his forearms and his left shoulder. His skin was super brown by contrast, but the Evander I knew always had a tan.

He was angry and it seemed to grow with each passing second. That was why I was so surprised by what he said. "I'm Tremor," he said – leaving the 'prince' part out entirely. "And I want you to know that what happened to you was not part of my plan."

"How do you know what happened to me?" I rasped. I couldn't help rasping. My throat was dry.

"I wrote in my letter that I sent someone to follow you. Did you see anyone?"

"No," I whispered. "But someone rescued my dress and brought it back for me. I guess they left though, not wanting to embarrass me by seeing me..." I trailed off. I couldn't finish that sentence.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, suddenly closing in on me. “The real question is whether or not you still want to marry me after all you’ve been through for my sake?”

I stared. If I had known he was the prize at the end of the journey, I would have been willing to go through it again. “I want to,” I said, quietly.

After that he didn’t say another word, he simply swung me into his arms and happily off my aching feet. I rested my head on his chest and closed my eyes as he carried me up that last road to the castle.

Chapter Four

When it's Just a Story

“Sarah! Sarah! Get off your duff and get moving!”

That was my mother. I blinked three times and realized I was finally back in my room. It was morning. I was wearing yesterday’s clothes and I was snuggling yesterday’s empty popcorn bowl. If I’d been asleep for more than one night, surely my mom would have taken the empty bowl away from me, right?

I got out of bed and found my mom brushing her teeth in the bathroom. Hey mom, what day is it?”

“What day is it?” she repeated frostily before spitting a giant glop of minty foam down the drain. “It’s Saturday.”

“Is it? It just feels like I’ve been asleep for days.”

She laughed. “I’m not surprised. You slept like the dead. Do you even remember Rachel coming over?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “She was here?”

“She bought you a bag of clothes. It’s in the corner. Say, what time do you need to be out the door? It’s almost nine.”

Luckily, there was still plenty of time to see what Rachel had brought me. I grabbed the pink plastic bag. Rachel bringing me clothes was the kind of event that was second only to Christmas in my world. I opened the bag. There were three pairs of jeans that didn’t have unfashionable holes in the knees or frayed cuffs. They were still frayed, but not unfashionably. That was the key. There was a black and gray striped sweater, a hopelessly skin-revealing dress of tight shininess I would never have the courage or occasion to wear, and two pairs of ballet shoes. How grateful I was to be the same shoe size as my big sister.

I put on a pair of the jeans and the sweater. It was too exciting to have new clothes not to wear them right away.

I brushed my teeth and ran out the door. I was actually going to be on time for my babysitting gig. Delightful!

All that day, I dealt with screaming children and thought about what happened in the story. There were a few strange ideas ricocheting around in my head. They ricocheted because I didn’t understand them. I thought Evander made Sarafina blonde with ringlets because that was the kind of woman he wanted—a woman who was beautiful because she looked like him. Then when I saw Tremor, that theory became void, because the first thing he changed about himself was his hair. Weird.

Then I thought about the clothes. I had also been harboring the notion that he wanted a girl of the same financial status, which was why he made his heroine a princess. Once again, my theory was blown out of the water. It didn’t seem like he was going to marry her based on whether or not she was a princess, but instead whether or not she was tough enough to manage his life.

The truth was... I didn’t know anything about Evander.

At the end of the day, I had finished six hours of babysitting and made fifty bucks, which was well below minimum wage. I thanked the ragged mother and went out into the hallway of her apartment complex, shoving the bills in my pocket. How was I ever supposed to save up for college with such small wages?

That evening I went to the Stanley Milner library and used one of the computers to look for a part-time job. There were just so many things I couldn't do or wasn't good at. I'd already tried working fast food. The time on my feet was unbearable. It was true. I could walk forever, but asking me to stand still was just too hard. Staring at the screen, I tried to focus on the job postings, but I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do, except one thing, find out what would have happened if I hadn't blacked out when Tremor was carrying me.

As I peeked over the edge of the desk, I could see the spine of Evander's book sitting in my bag. Actually, part of the reason I went to the library in the first place was because I thought that if I read the book there, then the library staff would wake me up at closing time.

Giving in to temptation, I picked up my bag and slid into one of the armchairs at the end of the aisle in full view of everyone.

Tremor carried Princess Sarafina up the winding trail and into the castle yard. She was light as a feather to his arms that were used to lifting the vast bodies of his soldiers. He carried her up flights of stairs, aiming to house her as far away from the basement as possible. His castle had its secrets and he wanted her distant from them.

He placed her head on the pillow of the bed that had been prepared for her and left her with the elderly maid he had invited from the capital to care for her.

After he saw her settled, he stormed down the steps to the barred doors that led to the under-floors. His mind reeled as he removed the barricade. He had seen it himself—the capricorn corpse chained to the shore. Tremor only knew of one person capable of something like that. The problem was, he couldn't believe they'd dared it.

I let my eyes close dreamily for a moment before opening them fully and once again I found myself in the world Evander had created. The armchair gently reclined and the city library melted away leaving me lying on a soft bed. I had been in the real world for a whole day and my real body did not suffer from the effects of having walked barefoot on rock all night and then all day. Once I was back in the book, however, my body didn't feel well. My limbs and feet ached as much as they had by the end of the previous chapter.

Then I heard a sound at the other end of the room and I realized I wasn't alone. The window curtains were drawn and the only view to the outside world came from a door that split in two—the bottom of the door stayed closed and the top let in the evening air. There was a tiny white table on the right side of the bed. On it was a silver candlestick with a flickering candle and a crystal goblet filled with sparkling water. In the corner sat a white wardrobe with beautiful blue roses and vines stenciled down the sides. There were also two gilt chairs with white upholstery. In one of them was an old lady knitting something white.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Hilda. I'll be your lady-in-waiting."

She looked like she was seventy-years-old if she was a day. She was wearing a dress that looked similar to something Queen Elizabeth the First would have worn and her hair was braided into a low coil almost like a bun. Her eyes were sharp as she stared at me from across the room.

"Before coming here, I used to serve the Queen, Tremor's step-mother," the old lady said severely.

"Oh, really? What is she like?"

"Nothing like you," she said darkly. "Coming to the castle barefoot, with no hat—unthinkable. It's exactly the way Tremor's mother used to behave. You're sunburned. Did you know? Just like she always was."

I nodded my head. "Right. Well, she sounds cute. Does she come here often?"

“Never.” The old lady spat something black into a handkerchief. “She’s dead.”

I stared. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something sympathetic, but the fact was that the woman wasn’t actually mourning anyone. Instead, a few silent minutes passed before she spat again and I had to ask, “Are you chewing tobacco?”

She didn’t answer, but instead let out a huff full of haughtiness before getting up and scurrying out of the room, closing the half-door behind her.

It was night, so I stayed still and much to my surprise, I fell asleep between the linen sheets in Evander’s imaginary castle.

When I woke up the next morning still in the book, I was surprised. I thought someone would have come along and woken me up in the real world as soon as there was a decent lull in the story. No one did. Even though it was only yesterday, I had completely forgotten about all those days I lived in the story world while only one night passed in the real world. I smiled. Probably only a couple of minutes had passed in the city library. I had plenty of time.

I noticed a tray beside my bed. The plate was covered with a metal cover. Leaning over, I popped it off. Then I stared. I had never had a salad for breakfast before, but there was one on the tray. It looked like an ordinary green salad except that it had two fried eggs on top. I usually ate Cheerios. There was a little dish of dressing on the tray and I quickly doused the whole thing. When I speared some up and took a bite, my watering mouth was not disappointed—delicious.

I had just finished eating when there was a knock on my door and Tremor came in. He was wearing practically the same clothes as the day before, except for one very noticeable difference. There were a great many more bandages on his arms. He was covered from shoulder to wrist on both sides.

He was carrying a tray. “Good morning.”

I was instantly embarrassed. “They already brought me breakfast.”

He smiled kindly and sat down on a chair next to the bed. “This isn’t food. They’re medical supplies. I came to change your bandages.”

I hadn’t even realized my feet were bandaged. I had to put a hand under the covers to make sure it was true. “You’re going to do it yourself?” I asked cautiously.

“Relax. I’m good at treating injuries. Stick your foot out and I’ll take a look at it.”

The wrappings on his arms recommended him, so I pulled my leg out from under the covers and rested my ankle on his knee.

Gently, he peeled away the bandages on my right foot and started cleaning them with a strong-smelling liquid from a little green bottle. “Before we get married tonight, I need to talk to you.”

“Yes,” I said, looking at my lacerations. The wounds on my foot looked and felt real as his fingers on my less-than-pedicured foot. I wanted to hide it under the covers, but he was already at work, and he was saying something I couldn’t ignore.

“Why do you want to marry me?”

“Huh?” I asked, looking into his eyes. Actually, I had never really looked into Evander’s eyes before. There were black speckles in them. Had he always had those or was it specifically for his story?

Then I realized I was spacing out while he waited for an answer, so I rattled off what I had been told in Lilikeen about how marrying him would help lower the taxes of the people.

A corner of Tremor’s lip curled up in a melancholy half-smile. “You’re a very brave girl. Would you mind if I asked you something direct?”

I shook my head.

“Was a marriage with Murmur impossible for some reason?”

“What do you mean? I met him in Lilikeen. It seemed like he wanted to marry me, but my parents were set on you.”

“Why? You would have been able to get a much better reduction for your people if you married him instead.”

I sat up. “Really? Why?”

He looked a little dumbfounded. Then he put one limp hand in the air for a second and swayed it horizontally like he was cutting the air in half. “Because I will never be king.”

“I don’t understand,” I said quietly. Why was he being robbed of his throne in his own book? “Aren’t you the crown prince?”

“Yes, but it means very little. I live here to guard the shore against the invaders across the sea and it is believed that I will die in the process. However, I understand the general hope of the royal family is that I will father a bastard before I go. You know the type; a child they can use to further the war effort, but without having a legitimate right to be an heir. To put it shortly, they want my blood, but they don’t want to have to pay for it.”

I stared at him with mouth agape. I would never have imagined Evander opening up to me. I realized the problems were imaginary, but my brain computed they represented troubles Evander really had.

Then he looked me in the eye and said, “If you marry me, you will never be queen. Even if we have children together, when I die, the royal family will find some way to make our union illegitimate—like it never happened.”

I started to get angry on his behalf. “Why are they like that?”

He didn’t answer me exactly but continued talking like he had been planning his speech for days and he was finally delivering it without deviation. “I think I didn’t explain the situation properly. Let me try again. If you married Murmur instead of me, not only would you get the adoration of millions and eventually become queen, but you could also get the taxes on your people done away with—maybe forever.”

“Why?”

“He’s the one who has influence in the capital—not me. I’ve never even visited there. I’ve always lived here because my mother wasn’t good enough to crown queen and not foolish enough to go to bed with a king without every legal loophole filled. I wish I could offer you the same protection, but if Murmur wants you for himself, his wrath won’t subside easily, and... you’ll be in trouble when I die.”

“Why are you going to die?” I whispered.

“They may come and kill me themselves once I’ve fathered an heir, which is why I haven’t thus far.”

The atmosphere that surrounded us lay thin and empty like all the fun I was hoping to have was being chased away. It was as if real-life Evander was telling me that being with him wouldn’t be a good time. “So, what exactly is wrong with you in the eyes of the royal family?”

“Dirty blood.”

“Which they want anyway?”

“It’s valuable blood even if it is dirty.” He expertly wrapped my foot and clipped the edge of the bandage down so it wouldn’t unroll. Then he set it on the bed and reached for my other foot.

“Do you still want to marry me?”

I rested my head on my hand and regarded him sideways while he worked on my other foot. “I would be a really selfish person to marry you instead of Murmur, wouldn’t I? The way you

tell it, if I went with him I'd be a hero to the people of Lilikeen and be the golden girl of the continent. After years of intimacy with Murmur and his parents, eventually, I would probably even be in the room when they arranged for your untimely death."

He shrugged. "That's not what I meant. If you go with Murmur, I'll probably live longer because he would have what he wants—you. Some of his motive would be gone."

I rolled my eyes. "Let me ask you. Who would want to marry a guy who would murder his brother for a woman? Unless you're trying to scare me off by making all this up."

"I wouldn't know how to do that."

"Really?" I scoffed. "I bet you do. For example, were you hoping to frighten me by sending me down the river alone?"

He put up his hand. "I already said that your boat getting snagged on that rotting capricorn was not my plan."

I didn't want to fight with him on that ground. I had already read the opening paragraphs of the chapter. I knew he didn't have anything to do with it. So I stared him down and asked clearly, "Do you want me to marry Murmur instead?"

Tremor's expression became thoughtful. Finally, he spoke and when he did, he sent my heart racing. "The idea of having you here with me is extraordinarily enticing. The rumors about you are mere shadows of you, but just because I'm impressed by your looks and the courage you showed on the river doesn't mean I know you."

"You could get to know me," I suggested candidly.

"Indeed. I only mean I cannot force you to make a decision about being my wife when you clearly don't know all the facts. I'm merely telling you the situation so you understand what a union with me will actually be. It will be neither glamorous nor prestigious, and it will have its moments of gore and horror. I would be more than a monster if I didn't tell you the truth before we got married."

"Then tell me the truth. Would you be able to get any sort of tax reduction for the people of Lilikeen?"

He sighed. "I have some sympathizers in the capital. I could get you something, but nothing like what Murmur could get you."

I nodded my head. "I'm satisfied. I'll marry you."

"Tonight?"

"Right now, if you want."

His face was unreadable as he finished the bandage on my other foot. "Not right now. Your boat was untangled from the dead Capricorn and it should be here soon. I need to oversee its delivery. Since I'll be at sea, I'll bring back something wonderful for our wedding feast. It'll be something you've never tasted before."

"That will be nice." I smiled.

He gently placed my foot back on the bed and got to his feet. "Hilda brought you a wedding dress as a gift from my step-mother. I'll see you in time for the ceremony. Probably close to midnight, so be sure to sleep this afternoon when everyone else does." Then he took my hand in his and bending, he kissed it.

I jumped a little from the shock and he rubbed the spot his lips touched with his thumb. He smiled the smile I found irresistible and went out.

Then I melted in the bed. He was mouth-watering. If no one woke me up in the library, then I would be married to him by the end of the day. After I thought about that I couldn't make myself think straight. I'd never even really been kissed before, and if I didn't wake up, I'd get the

complete works of Evander Cheney that night. My innards were tied in knots. I put a hand over my mouth. Maybe Evander's writing was too much for me.

I was on my second attempt to get out of bed when Hilda came in. She carried a long, cloth bag.

"Is that the wedding dress?" I asked.

She nodded and placed it on the bed. Then she unfolded the bag and showed me the gown inside. Upon seeing it, I was a little stunned.

"It's not white," I said.

"No. It's not," she answered briskly.

"It's not pretty," I said.

Hilda pulled her eyebrows together in angry dismay.

"It's not my size," I said.

She puckered her lips unpleasantly. "Do you want me to make adjustments?"

"They couldn't be done in time. I'm marrying Tremor tonight."

"Tonight!" she hissed. "Why so soon?"

I looked her in the eye. "Why wait?"

She averted her eyes hastily and spat into her handkerchief again.

I opened the wardrobe and took a look inside. There was nothing but fifteen or so white dresses. They were the same as the one Tremor left on the boat. "I'll have to wear one of these."

"No," Hilda snapped as she slammed the wardrobe shut. "I'll send for another dress from the capital. Wait until it gets here to get married. Here, I'll measure you." While she spoke, she rooted around in a pouch at her waist and soon she brought out a measuring tape.

I pushed her away as she tried to force the measuring on me. "It isn't important how I dress. If I had been well when I arrived yesterday, I would have married him then."

"So unladylike!" Hilda raged, her pupils became pricks of black in her pale blue irises.

"Who cares if I'm ladylike here? This is a war zone!"

"The Queen would be mortified if she saw you. Wait for another dress to come—whore."

Even though my feet hurt, I made myself stand up straight. "Watch your mouth—hag. Tonight is when Tremor wants me to marry him."

"Then you'll wear that," she shrieked, grabbing the dress off the bed and holding it up against my body.

I pushed the dress away. "That dress wasn't made for a person. It was made for a whale. Even if I weighed three hundred pounds, it would still be too big. What kind of a weird joke is this? Were you given this dress and told to try to stall the wedding using it as an excuse? Well, let me tell you: I would marry him in my underwear, which is a heck of a whole lot more modest than last year's soccer uniforms, so stop it already!"

Without thinking, I put up my hand to flick her between the eyes, and then I realized what I was doing. She cowered like she thought I would hit her. I put my hand down and I rolled my eyes in frustration. "Whatever."

Then, I bent down to scavenge from the drawer in the bottom of the wardrobe. I found sandals and hairpins and out of the corner of my eye I saw Hilda try to make for the door.

"Stop," I said, getting up. "I need a bath. Take me to the bathroom or whatever."

Resigned, she opened the door and beckoned for me to follow her. Outside was a terrace. My room was a little, crescent-shaped room that clung to the curve of the tower. She opened the terrace door and led me down a winding staircase. We went down three revolutions of stairs before she opened another entryway and brought me into the main part of the castle.

I expected to see busy people, but the place was barren.

“So, the closest bathroom is three floors down?” I muttered, keeping close behind her.

“There is a chamber pot under your bed,” she huffed and brought me into a room that was clearly not normally used for bathing. It was the laundry room. There were two women scrubbing away in two enormous tubs.

“Excuse me. This girl wants to bathe,” Hilda announced crossly.

The older of the two women set aside her washing and wiped her hands on her apron. She looked to be about forty. Her hair was dark auburn and her disposition was pleasant. “Hello. My name is Gretchen and I’m the housekeeper. Wonderful news about your boat, wasn’t it? It should be here before dark, so if there’s anything on board that you need for the wedding, it will surely be here by then.”

“Wonderful,” I said appreciatively. I wished I’d realized my things would be delivered to me before I had my dog fight with Hilda.

“You’re much more beautiful than the rumors, Princess,” Gretchen said before showing me to a huge washbasin. “We normally bathe in the hot springs, but we expected that neither you nor your maid would be used to that, so we had this prepared. It takes a long time to heat, I’m afraid, but it’ll be ready soon.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Then without any further explanation, Gretchen went back to her work and left me standing there with Hilda feeling quite stupid. With nothing else to do, I stepped up and looked at the giant tub.

“Can a princess really bathe in such a place?” Hilda asked with her voice all up in her nose like she couldn’t stand to breathe the air.

To me, it looked a good deal nicer than the tub in my apartment. For one thing, it was sparkling clean. For another, it was huge. The only thing that worried me was that Hilda or someone else would want to help me bathe or some other privacy reducing nonsense.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll stay here. Why don’t you go put that dress away and save your arm?”

“You won’t accept the present from her Majesty? Some day you may need it.”

“You say rude stuff like that and *I’m* unladylike? Really! Is Tremor going to feed me until I’m big enough to fit into that?”

She shrunk down and said acidly, “Who knows what may happen out here? We’re on the battlefield.” Then she wobbled to the door.

Then I had a bath with real sunlight reflecting on the bathwater.

It turned out that my trunk from the boat was brought up in time and I retrieved the wedding dresses the Queen of Lilikeen had sent me, which was a huge improvement over any other option. Actually, even if I were getting married in real life, I don’t think I could have done much better for myself. It was an off-the-shoulder with a super-tight bodice and beautiful ivory material sweeping through the skirt. The neckline was decorated with tiny jewels and little gathers of fabric that made flowers.

Hilda did my hair, though she made it clear she hated me more every other minute. “Your hair is so curly,” she said distastefully. “To give it some order, we’ll have to braid it.”

“Okay.” I held up a hand mirror and looked at my reflection. “I should really dye my hair blonde when I get home. This looks great.”

Hilda didn't say anything about the oddness of my sentence. Whenever I mentioned the real world, everyone acted like I hadn't said anything.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Start by doing a tiny braid with this section and then do another one with this section."

"Ugly," she rasped.

I stuck out my tongue halfway. "I don't care what you think. Then let this part fall over my forehead. Pin these braids over my left ear. Leave a couple tendrils free on either side and then pin the rest of the curls behind my head—artfully."

She had no enthusiasm, but with curls as good as mine, she couldn't deliberately spoil it and by the time I was due to go downstairs, it looked exactly how I wanted it.

There was no chapel for the wedding. It was going to take place in the front hall. I had to walk down a zillion steps to get there with Hilda padding morosely behind me holding my train. When we finally stood at the top of the steps that swept down to the front hall, I saw Tremor standing in the midst of a small procession of people. There were three women and I counted thirty men standing in three tiers with Tremor and a priest standing at the top. It was a sad-looking group. The only one who looked remotely happy was Tremor. Everyone else gritted their teeth like they were attending a funeral and I was the murderer. They thought I'd be his undoing for sure.

As I got closer, I saw how beautiful Tremor looked. He wore a white long-sleeved shirt, with a dark brown leather vest that came up to a high collar. His pants were leather of the same color and on his head was a golden crown. He wore no flower on his breast, but the red military badge of Bellique. He was the most handsome man in the world.

Hilda whispered in my ear. "It's not too late to wait. We could have this wedding next week with a few members of the court in attendance."

I shot her a dirty look. "I don't care about that."

"You should."

I shook my head and finished descending the stairs with the most grace I could summon. Once I reached the floor, someone began playing the flute and I made my way through the ranks to Tremor's side.

Right there and then, he married me in front of all those people without the slightest hesitation. His expression was devoid of worry and his speech was clear as a bell as he promised to love only me until the day he died. The wedding ring he put on my finger was a wide band of white gold with diamonds scattered all over it. It looked like stars forming a constellation.

"It was my mother's," he said softly. "The one the King gave her. It's the only thing I can give you to help you prove you married the Crown Prince."

When it was over, he kissed me on the lips and I tried not to act completely swept off my feet in front of all those people. Actually, my knees felt like they were going to buckle under me, but I wouldn't have fallen because he held on to me.

Then, he led the entire company into the dining room where we were served crab, which was something I had never tasted before. He dipped it in garlic butter for me and I thought I was in heaven. It worried me that he didn't talk much. It was clear he had no regrets, but it seemed like he was uncomfortable in his own skin, for lack of a better description. He kept scratching his wrist. He was still bandaged. I could see them peeking out of his sleeves.

"What happened?" I asked, touching the edge of one.

"Nothing," he whispered and moved his hand out of my reach.

Afterward, he led me to the foot of the stairs, bid everyone a good night, and lifted me up in his arms. He started to climb the stairs and soon the bumping up and down made me feel ill.

“Hey, can you put me down, please?”

He didn’t answer.

“I’m getting sick. I can walk up by myself, so you don’t have to carry me.”

“There is no way on God’s green earth that I am going to carry you, missy. Get up!” That wasn’t Tremor’s voice.

I shook my head and the fluorescent lights entered my awareness. I was back in the city library and a security guard was frowning down at me and pointing his thumb toward the exit.

“Was I asleep?” I asked him as I numbly got my things together.

“Asleep? Were you asleep? It looked to me like you were just reading and ignoring me.” He gave me a disapproving stare and went on his way.

I felt like cursing and stomping as I made my way to the exit. Why did I have to get kicked out just at that second? Really? Just when it was getting really good?

I stepped out onto the early October street and looked to see if there was a bus coming. Then I saw him. There, standing by the curb, was Evander. I went up to him, but he had his headphones on and was staring at his cell phone screen. I stood one step away from him and looked at him unwaveringly, hoping he would notice me.

I mean, in the book, he had sworn he would love only me. That felt like five minutes ago and before that, he had praised me, saying how brave I was. In the light of reality, I seemed no more important to him than a stranger. Well, maybe he really hadn’t noticed me, so I had to pluck up some courage and let him know.

“Hey Evander,” I said, smacking him lightly on the back of his legs with my bookbag.

“Hi,” he said. Then he turned his back to me and continued what he was doing.

That was it, then. I was just reading a story that had nothing to do with real-life at all. He didn’t care about me. It was just part of the story. I was sure that anyone who read the book would get sucked in like I did and get carried up the stairs by him. I nodded my head like I was in a trance and repeated, “It’s just a story. It’s just a story.”

Chapter Five

The Chains Across the Door

After seeing Evander at the bus stop, I clued in to why the impending love scene got cut off in his book. He didn't love me so I had no right to experience what he was actually like in bed or what his body looked like below the belt or anything. He was already showing so much; intentionally seeking any more seemed unpardonably intrusive, so I accepted what he was willing to show the reader. After all, the book wasn't written especially for me.

However, that conclusion didn't stop me from feeling weird. When I picked up the book, I remembered the blank, bored look Evander gave me whenever he saw me. Contrariwise, when I went to Emi's to babysit Paisley I saw him and remembered how light his fingers felt on the soles of my feet, a sick feeling spread through me. The side of him that wrote the book was none of my business.

I felt like giving the book back to Emi, but a tiny, nagging part of me said that wasn't what I needed. I kept hearing the word 'closure' in my head until I realized I had to finish the story before I could let my crush on Evander go. After all, he could never love me in real life. I was nothing more than hired help.

I broke down on Wednesday night and started reading within the curtains of my bed.

Morning broke, and sunlight came in slender streams across the bedding of the bridal chamber. Prince Tremor had not slumbered as a spent groom should have and instead spent the night watching his bride sleep. Her delicate features were unlined by worry. He had managed to keep his secret from her, leaving the crucial one untold. With so much unsaid, Sarafina had opened her heart to him, given him everything, but he had kept his truth locked tightly away from her.

Running his fingertips down her bare arm and tracing the bones on the back of her hand, he reflected how much she must trust him. But why? When had there been time to win her over? Why had her love been ready for him? It had been immediate upon their meeting and filled a hole inside him he knew was gaping. How much he had wanted love and it had come to him!

In the morning light, he saw the black returning to his arm. It was a relief to let the skin stay black without worrying about how it looked.

The tan of his arm had returned by the time she awoke, a smile in her eyes and a perfumed kiss on her lips.

An hour later, Tremor sat with Sarafina at the grand breakfast table. She sat at the table with the rest of the occupants of the castle and ate like she had eaten her meals there all her life. He was so pleased, just to look at her. She ate what was offered without complaint and with an appetite. She wore the same type of dress the other women around the table wore and chatted to the housekeeper. She belonged.

Tremor's back stiffened. The muscles in his wrist were getting tired. He put his hands under the table. Then, without looking, he tugged a clean bandage from his pocket and tied his wrist—anywhere that felt weak—until his black scaly forearm was covered in white. He sighed. He felt weak more often than not.

Glancing at Sarafina, he felt sorry. He wanted to acquaint her with his reality, but necessity forced him back to the sea. He'd already sent several of his soldiers to the site where Sarafina's boat had been stuck, but they hadn't been able to get the dead capricorn back into the water.

Tremor had deduced what had happened, but he didn't know how to fight it. Maybe he didn't need to fight it. Sarafina was his wife, so perhaps it was already too late.

Then I smelled the aroma of grilled salmon. It was so delicious that I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply to get a better sample of it. When I opened my eyes, I was sitting at Tremor's right hand at the long dining room table. Hilda sat next to me and Gretchen sat beside her.

"I'll take you on a tour of the castle today. We don't want you to get lost." Gretchen's eyes twinkled knowingly. "Don't worry, it won't take long. You'll be back with Tremor in no time."

It was a jibe about our honeymoon phase and it made me uncomfortable. I shifted my position uneasily while Tremor interrupted, "Take all the time you like. I have to go to sea for at least a week."

"You won't be back for supper?" Gretchen asked.

"No," he said morosely. "I should already be on my way."

Then I focused on the bandages on his arm. He had been wearing them since he first came to meet me. What exactly was he hiding under them?

After breakfast, Gretchen took me through the castle. There were five levels to the castle. The main level contained the front hall, the dining room, the kitchens, the laundry room, and two private meeting rooms. The only major point of interest was the archway containing two large doors that had nothing to do with the exits outside. There were two heavy chains wrapped around the long steel handles.

"Where does this door lead?"

"Under-floors," Gretchen replied.

"What's down there?"

"I don't know," she said breezily, straightening a few picture frames that didn't need straightening. "Only Tremor goes down there."

Something else occurred to me. "You don't call him 'Prince Tremor?' Just Tremor?"

"I'm sorry if it offends you. It just takes too long to be that formal all the time. I've known him since he was born. We don't call the Generals by their titles either."

"It's all right. I understand."

Afterward, she hustled me away from the doors and took me to the second floor. It was where the high ranking military men slept. The third floor was considerably smaller and it was occupied by the servants like Gretchen and Hilda. The fourth floor was my room and then the tower spiraled upwards.

"Where does Tremor normally sleep?" I asked, thinking that the room I slept in could hardly be his. It was decorated to suit a woman.

"Under-floors," she said like she didn't want to admit it. Then she took me outside.

Surrounding the castle, I saw hundreds of little houses. After all, Sealoch was a military encampment, so there should have been soldiers, but I didn't see any. Finally, after we passed five huts that seemed completely deserted, I got up the nerve to ask why.

Gretchen looked at the ground nervously. "Bellique hasn't repelled an invasion in four and a half years."

"So, there's no army stationed here?" I asked, astonished.

"The army comes in the summer to train. They're coming in five weeks. It's our busiest time of year."

"So, what you mean to tell me is that Lilikeen pays taxes to defend a coast that hasn't been attacked for almost five years? We're being swindled!"

"Calm down, dearie," she said easily. "The fact is that Tremor keeps the enemy fleet at bay all

by himself. If he dies, then the government will need that money to raise an army immediately. Don't forget, if there is a war, Bellique will suffer the worst during it. And those blood-thirsty cannibals could descend on us at any moment. Try to understand. The protection of this country might become too much for Tremor to bear alone. He needs to know that if something happens to him, then the country will go on. It's his duty as the prince."

I shook my head, and she left me to think whatever I wanted to as she led me down to the water.

The castle itself stood on a jutting cliff, but there were pathways that led downward to the rocky shore. We walked along and she spoke about points of interest like a tour guide, showing me where famous invasions had taken place and how many of the enemy men had been drowned at sea.

"The animals in the water have tasted human blood for centuries," she explained in hushed tones.

"Like the capricorn?"

"Yes. They have been known to kill humans if they smell blood in the water. I have to warn you not to go into the water if you are bleeding. You probably wouldn't get attacked if you did, but it's better not to take the chance. Some of them come dangerously close to the land. Sometimes, they even get beached."

"You don't let them die, do you? I mean, soldiers come and push them back into the water, right?"

She nodded and exhaled sharply. "I'm so glad to hear you have that point of view. I wasn't sure how you would feel after your encounter with one. New people who come here don't always understand why we need to do that. The first time the Queen came, one was beached on the rocks and she wondered why we didn't carve it up and eat it at a banquet that night."

I thought about that. The Queen's perspective seemed brutal, but the story was set in another time, so maybe it wasn't as wicked as I thought... just a different perspective from someone who was used to pretty much every kind of animal being on the endangered species list. "May I see a picture of a capricorn, please? The only capricorn I saw clearly was the one that..." I trailed off. Seeing that monster in my head was almost too much for me. It was terrifying, but I knew I would relax once I learned more about them. After all, ordinary people even liked to watch sharks by locking themselves in cages, didn't they?

Gretchen nodded and led me back into the castle. "I'm afraid I can't show you them myself, but I understand Tremor has such things among his personal belongings. And if he can't find them, I'm sure he can tell you a lot about them himself. He has seen them many times at sea."

As we made our way up the shore road, Gretchen stopped and pointed. There were horses, thundering toward the castle. The horses were galloping, but at that distance, they seemed to move at an incredibly slow pace.

"It's Murmur," Gretchen said.

"What's he doing here? I thought no one from the royal family would come after the wedding."

Gretchen snorted. "How are they supposed to know you were married last night? It is unfortunate Tremor is gone, but we'll do the best we can. We'll go to the hall and greet him. Do you want to change your clothes into something a little more formal? I can stall him."

"Should I?"

She looked at me quizzically. "You should look your best in front of Prince Murmur, so he doesn't make any strange assumptions."

So I was hurried up the stairs to change into another of the dresses I was beginning to think of as ‘ridiculously restrictive evening wear’ regardless of their beauty. That day's dress was buttercream yellow adorned with black flowers, leaves, and vines. My favorite part of the dress was the incredibly shiny black sash that I tied at the side of my waist. Hilda was nowhere to be found, so I had to do my best with my braids and curls leftover from the wedding.

I thought I was pitifully slow getting dolled up *again*, but when I went out onto the terrace, I saw that the party on horseback was still not at the castle gates.

“Man, horses are slow.” I tucked a curl behind my ear and headed down the stairs fuming. “If they were driving cars, they would already have been waiting for me for half an hour.”

Maybe they weren’t as far away as I thought because just then I heard Murmur stomping through the front door before I saw him.

“Brother, I’ve come to see you.” Murmur’s voice rang through the rafters.

I rounded the corner. There he was—dripping with sweat and taut with fatigue. As I alighted at the bottom of the stairs I had a sensation that he was a wolf salivating over his prey; he had traveled hundreds of miles for a meal and I was it. I shivered. In the real world, I had never been the basis of anyone’s lust.

He approached and I gave a little curtsy.

“Princess Sarafina, how was your trip down the river? Interesting? Scary?”

I narrowed my eyes. In the parts of the book I read before I came into the book, Tremor had said that the dead capricorn I nearly fell onto was chained to the shore. Was that Murmur’s doing? Was he trying to sabotage Tremor’s test? I gawked at him distastefully for a second before I got a grip on myself and opted not to say anything insulting. *Pig!*

“I’m fine. It’s so nice of my brother-in-law to be so worried about me.” My voice was sticky sweet.

“You’re not my sister-in-law yet.”

“Oh, yes I am. Tremor and I were married last night.” I flipped my hand and showed him my wedding ring.

He snatched up my hand and stared at the ring. “You mean to tell me that after that hellish trip and finding yourself in the middle of nowhere with no one here for company, other than my shrieking brother and those damn water demons, you decided to get married immediately without waiting for anything?”

“There was nothing to wait for,” I said, deliberately insulting.

His exhale displayed bitter disappointment. He pushed my hand away. Then he turned his back to me. “And you know *all* about Tremor and you still want him?”

“I don’t know *all* about him,” I scoffed. “Some things are just right. It’s instinctive.”

“Instinctive? Has he told you about that?” Murmur pointed to the door to the basement with the chains across it.

“Not yet.”

“You don’t think he’s hiding something from you?”

“I have only been here for two days. A person needs time to reveal themselves slowly to another person. You know, like when you pull a flower apart petal by petal and eventually you get to the center.”

“With an attitude like that, you’ll be the flower that is pulled apart and when all the petals are gone, there will be no way for you to come back to me. I won’t want you. He’ll have turned you into a husk!”

I took a step back. It was absolutely unrealistic to see a man losing his mind over me. I was

having trouble keeping up. Then for a split second, I saw my reflection in the shaded window. What was I thinking of? From what I saw, I was exactly the kind of woman who would drive a man insane. I couldn't help smiling. Evander wrote good books.

Murmur reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out a key.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a key to my brother's lair. Don't you want to see inside?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure he'll show me when he's ready."

"It's better not to wait." Murmur stood before the chained door and picking through several metal strands, he found the huge lock that hung at the bottom. "Let's just see what he's hiding, shall we?"

"Don't open it."

"After you see this maybe I'll let you get your marriage annulled, but only if you beg me."

"You can't get it annulled."

Murmur slid the key into the lock, but it wouldn't budge. Then he turned to me fuming. "What do you mean you can't get it annulled? Are you saying you..."

I looked away. *Awkward.*

From the other end of the room, Tremor approached. "Murmur!" he barked jovially. "What are you doing here during my honeymoon?"

My heart jumped up in my chest. I tried to hide my relief, but it was impossible. I could feel myself glowing.

"I didn't know the wedding would be over," Murmur said roughly.

Tremor stood beside me and took my hand. He kissed the back of it. Then he seemed to realize that Murmur actually had a key in the lock of his door. "That won't work. I've changed the lock." He was smooth as silk as he continued. "By the way, I don't have room to house you and your men. I saw them outside with the horses. Tonight your men will have to make do with the huts outdoors. Since Sarafina and Hilda came, I only have one room left to offer you on the second floor and it's hardly for guests. I hope you remember I don't have servants to attend to you. Try to enjoy your visit."

"Who's in the state guestroom?"

"Sarafina."

"Why isn't she below floors with you?" Murmur grumbled.

Tremor laughed and pulled my hand so that I was right in front of the door. "Because you're standing in the way. Aren't you here to wish us well and now you're standing between us and my bedroom?"

Murmur shuddered. "So you'll rub it in my face by having her right in front of me?"

Tremor's gaze sharpened. "I didn't invite *you* downstairs. Get out of the way."

Murmur obliged and stepped aside. Tremor undid the lock with his own key and opened the door. He lifted the chains from around the handle and laid them inside the door. Then he took my hand and led me into the darkness. Once inside, he closed the door and barred it shut. We were plunged into complete blackness.

"Don't move," he whispered.

The first thing I noticed was the moisture in the air. It was very humid and warm like I had just stepped into a room with a pool. Then he struck a match and lit five candles of a candelabra. In the flickering light, I could see I was standing at the top of a long staircase that wound around the outside of a spacious cavern. If he hadn't warned me, I would have fallen down the stairs.

"Are you scared?" he asked tenderly.

“No.” My gaze lingered on his bandages. “Please tell me what happened to your arm.”

“Nothing happened to it. Sometimes it's like this. I'm not bleeding,” he reassured me. “I'm just built a little differently than other people.”

When we got to the bottom of the stairs we came around a corner and we stood in front of a huge aquarium; or rather, a window to the sea. Sunlight shone through the water and illuminated seaweed, blackfish, and fish greener than the green sea.

“This is your room?” I asked, looking around at my surroundings. When my eyes adjusted to the light, slowly, slowly, I was able to see a barred door that led to an underwater exit like a dark tunnel going nowhere. The rest of the room was a nook that contained quite normal bedroom-like things. There was a bed. It was shaped strangely, like a giant eye cut into the floor, with at least a dozen pillows covering it. There were a few chests stacked and a couple of wardrobe-like cupboards standing side by side.

Tremor kicked off his boots and he reached for me and pulled me onto the bed. I got nervous. Why was he pulling me onto his bed if his book had parameters? What was going to happen? I couldn't help feeling a little scared. I fell down on top of him and he laughed and moved me aside. From that position, he helped me take my shoes off, and then he placed me next to him in the crook of his arm facing the sea.

I looked at him rather expectantly.

“What?” he asked roguishly. “You told Gretchen you wanted to see what a capricorn looks like. True, I have pictures, but why bother with any of that when you can just see the show from here. One will probably swim by any minute.”

“Really?”

We sat there and watched the veins of light reflecting on the cavern walls and through the water. At first, I wasn't comfortable. Even if he was supposed to be Tremor, I couldn't stop thinking of him as a version of Evander. Sitting beside him made my belly ache. I'd never had my stomach tied up in so many knots. My blood was pounding in my ears. I couldn't even think.

He tried to make small talk with me to thin the air out. “Do you like to eat fish?”

“I don't know.”

“Have you ever had roe?”

“Probably not. I have no idea what that even is.”

His tanned Adam's apple moved as he breathed in and spoke. It was mesmerizing. “They're fish eggs.”

Suddenly I was saying, “Do you know how much I like you?”

He stopped and turned his brown eyes toward me.

I said it so bravely, but there was a part of me that didn't think he would hear me. I was mostly talking about Evander and whenever I mentioned anything from the real world the character in the story simply wouldn't hear what I said.

“Why would you like me? I still don't understand why you would want to marry me. I thought you'd opt for Murmur. Obviously, he thought so too and that's why he's here now. He probably planned to take you home to the capital with him today. Doubtless, he's furious. Even still, I reasoned that if you didn't want him, then I'd have to send you home to Lilikeen. Didn't the dead capricorn scare you? Why do you want to live in a place where they breed like rabbits and where your husband is practically one of them?”

“How are you practically one of them?”

“Let's wait for one of them to appear before we have that conversation.”

I sat there and tried to feel the rhythm of his body over the sound of my heartbeat pulsing

noisily up to my brain. At that moment, I wasn't interested in the story, I wanted to talk to Evander when he would actually listen to me. "I don't know why I like you. You cut yourself off from me more than any other person I have ever met. Your aloofness doesn't make me stop liking you. If you would only let me in a little bit—"

"I'm *trying* to let you in. Look, there's a capricorn!" He pointed and I saw one swim directly toward us.

Looking at the creature through the glass, it was no longer difficult to describe, just hard to believe. It looked like a chimera of two creatures I was already familiar with—a goat and a fish. It had the upper body of a goat, but much larger. Its fur was white and long and not as dense as a mountain goat. Instead, it waved in the current like mermaid hair. I could see its veins through the fur going in strange little blue lines down its front legs and up its muscular neck. The horns on its brow were long and curved slightly backward. Behind the horns was a longish mane that curled in waves and went all the way down the capricorn's back. The mane even continued past its fur and into the part of its body covered in scales—around the middle. The scales were gray and white by turns. Obviously, the animal had only front legs and instead of hind legs, the remainder of its body ended in a powerful tail with a long white fin.

It was majestic if you didn't look carefully at the animal's face. The capricorn had a beard of white hair that hung down and swayed. Its mouth was shockingly wide and when it was opened, I could see it wasn't filled with flat herbivore teeth, but sharp meat-eating fangs. Two of its bottom teeth were even too long for its mouth and they stuck out like a warthog's. Its eyes were the part that was really unsettling. The pupils were not circular but long and flat like a minus sign or a frog's eyes. The irises were bright yellow.

I tensed in Tremor's arms. "Well, that is about the creepiest thing I've ever seen." I laughed to shake off my fear, but when I turned to Tremor his expression was vacant.

"You think it's creepy?"

"Well, it's huge," I said defensively. "Look at the size of those jaws. That guy could swallow me whole. Gretchen told me they eat people."

He scoffed angrily. "So what if they eat people? They're just another link in the food chain. They have things that hunt them, too."

"There's something bigger than them in the ocean? I am *never* going out on a boat!"

"No, there isn't any animal around here that would dare hunt an adult capricorn, but the babies and the elderly get pecked off easily enough by smaller meat-eaters. I'm thinking of the enemy across the sea. They hunt them and eat them as often as they can."

I felt deflated. Of course, Man had to be the capricorn's largest threat. I didn't know what I was thinking. "Sorry. I've never seen anything like that. It seems larger than life. And that dead one I almost fell into has left me a little bit shaken."

His arm came tightly around me. "But you feel safe with me?"

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

His eyes were deep and penetrating. "Because I'm a monster."

The moment stretched out while I thought up a response for him. Thinking was hard when he looked at me like that. Finally, I said, "You can't stop my feelings for you by saying things like that."

He didn't answer me.

"Do you still think I'm brave, or have you decided I'm stupid?"

He chuckled. "Probably a little bit of both. Here, I'll take you back upstairs. Unfortunately, I won't be able to spend the night with you above floors. I still haven't gone out to sea. Gretchen

caught me before I left, but I'll be back in the morning to make sure you're safe from my fiendish brother. No doubt he's already made havoc up there. Let's go assess the damage."

Once we were back in the front hall, Gretchen and Hilda saw us and came across the floor to us hastily.

"What happened?" Tremor asked.

Gretchen pointed an angry finger at Hilda. "She didn't even try to stop him. He told her what he wanted and she just went ahead and did it."

"Did what?"

"Repacked all of Princess Sarafina's clothes and emptied the wardrobe."

Tremor stuck his tongue in his cheek. "Why did Murmur order that?"

"He says he wants to stay in the state guest room and since you are married to her now, there's no reason for her not to move downstairs with you right away," Gretchen reported shrilly.

Tremor listened patiently and scratched his collarbone. "Sarafina, he's doing this to make you uncomfortable. What would you like me to do? If you want Murmur out of the guestroom, I'll certainly see that he gets thrown out. I already told him to stay on the second floor."

"Leave him where he is. I'll stay downstairs."

Tremor did a double-take. "Really?" He put his mouth close to my ear and whispered privately, "Are you sure you want to do that? My room is quite different at night and I won't be there."

"It's fine," I reassured him.

His eyes sparkled with excitement and my breath caught in my throat. At that moment, it was incredibly fun to be partners in crime with him. I never wanted to wake up.

"What's fine?" a voice in my ear asked noisily.

I winced at the sound and when I opened my eyes again I was in my bedroom and my mother was making fun of me and my 'sleep-talking.'

I rubbed my forehead painfully. I had a headache and I couldn't even find the voice to describe how much I didn't want to face a day at school. When I went to the mirror, I looked like I had been up most of the night and was still wearing yesterday's clothes. I had to read in smaller increments. I splashed my face with water and tried to cheer myself. After all, the next time I read Evander's book, I would be sleeping in his bed.

Chapter Six

Under Floors

Math class was boring. Social studies was the worst. Partway through that class, I took Evander's book out of my bookbag and put it on my lap. I had no intention of opening it, but at the same time, just touching it practically made me squeal with anticipation. After social studies, I had another two classes before lunch and it seemed like the clock ticked backward.

When the lunch bell finally rang, I didn't even bother with food. Who cared? Instead, I went to the library and found a cozy spot. If I fell asleep during the afternoon classes like I did before, I couldn't have cared less. I sat down on the couch humming and found the beginning of the next chapter.

Tremor carried Sarafina's bag down the stairs to the lowest level and sighed. In his first letter to her, he had requested that she travel light. Her bag was so weightless, it felt empty.

He leaned against the stone wall and let Sarafina's packed clothes fall to the floor. A pain shot through his heart. It was pain that was not due to come yet, but he knew it must arrive speedily. In all his life as a prince, he had never been allowed to feel joy. The Queen or Murmur were always there to snatch any good feeling he might have had before it sprouted.

He felt a perfect fool. The wedding with Sarafina was not sanctioned by the Queen. The Queen would now want his head on a pike, or perhaps his body hanging from a tree, or his legs and arms in different corners of the castle courtyard. Such would be her wrath for taking Murmur's would-be wife for himself.

The Queen's fury had not come down to Sealoach yet. Only Murmur had come and Tremor knew something of the not-so intricate methods of his half-brother's mind. His pride was paramount. Before involving the King or Queen, he would try to find a way to untangle Sarafina's union with Tremor.

Murmur had to be kicking himself for the way things had turned in Tremor's favor.

Tremor had put the pieces of the puzzle together. The first piece was the King and Queen of Lilikeen. For years, they had requested a marriage between him and Sarafina. Tremor didn't understand why any request for him as a marriage partner was being brought up. Even though he was technically a member of the royal family, he knew his father was not planning on using him as a tool to create an alliance with a neighboring country. He wanted to keep the credit of defending the shoreline for himself which meant not involving other nations. The second piece was a visit Tremor had from Murmur. Tremor was surprised when Murmur came to him and said he ought to give Sarafina a test to see if she was a fit wife for a man who lived on the front lines. The second prince was the one who suggested she go down the river and when she failed, Tremor could send her home. Tremor had done as Murmur wanted, not only to get his wicked half-brother out of his castle but also because he was curious. The plan had the Queen's consent. Perhaps that was the third piece of the puzzle. It all led to one truth. Murmur was the one who had chained the dead capricorn to the shore because he believed it would scare Sarafina witless. Under such a threat, she would gladly change her target from Tremor to Murmur and marry him instead.

Tremor reached down to recover her bag. In the dark, he missed the straps and pulled up a piece of her clothing, soft and perfumed.

Murmur's plan had failed. Sarafina had been afraid on the river. Tremor could still recall the

timber of her screams. He rubbed the cloth in his hand between his fingers. She was made of stronger stuff, but was it enough for what he had not revealed to her about himself?

The situation felt impossible to him, like a dream he had once while sleeping in the sea. He shoved the thoughts away. The Princess didn't really know what she'd promised herself to. Murmur's plan to end their marriage might work once she'd slept under the stairs.

Tremor tightened the bandages covering his arm, retrieved her bag, and slid further into the darkness.

The timing was excellent. I woke up sitting at the dining room table, with a beautiful plate of grilled fish covered in hot nectarine slices and herbs. And I was going to have reheated pizza from the school cafeteria? Ha! Not today. I tucked in and mentally thanked Evander for knowing something about food.

Then I realized I was sitting across from Murmur and he was watching me devour my meal with his nose wrinkled in disdain. "There's more in the kitchen. Haven't they been feeding you?"

I laughed at him openly. If only he would stop liking me, then I was sure the story would go more smoothly. Also, we were the only ones at the table, so I reasoned it was okay to act like myself, which probably didn't even border his ideas on proper conduct. The real me didn't attract men anyway. "Doesn't the sea air make you hungry? Doesn't it make things taste better?" I asked before I shoveled in another mouthful dripping with butter.

"Nothing tastes good," he said mournfully as he looked away from me and took the barest of sips from his goblet.

"Why not?"

He glared at me. "You know why. I just don't fathom why you, the most beautiful princess in the world, can be content living here now that you've seen what it's like. This place is not romantic. The food is revolting. It's a military training ground. You belong in the capital with beauty and art and... Bloody Hell! What are you doing here?" He raked his hands through his hair. "Tremor is an outcast."

"You should maybe let the rest of the world know that. My parents thought he was the crown prince."

"He is."

"But that doesn't really mean anything, does it?"

"I'm going to be king," Murmur said firmly.

"Yes, I know," I said, talking down to him and trying my best to be infuriating. Actually, I didn't even know I could be infuriating. I must have been naturally good at it all along. "It's just that when I look at the bigger picture, sure, going with you and being queen seems to make the most sense within the confines of *this* story."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tremor already explained everything to me, about how you could give my people a better tax cut than him—et cetera, et cetera—but I'm not interested in making the Queen and King of Lilikeen happy. Their approval or disapproval doesn't mean anything to me. The citizens whose taxes I would lower are just a blur in my head. They aren't real people."

Murmur stared at me like I was insane.

"Even you don't seem real to me," I continued. "To me, the only thing real here is Tremor, and you have no idea how much I like him."

"What?" Murmur exploded.

"It's true. I like him."

"Why him and not me?"

"You're not real," I answered him levelly. "This is just a game and I'd rather play with him."

Murmur slammed his napkin down and got up from the table. "I've had it. Tonight I am going to make you beg me to approve your divorce from Tremor. Beg!"

As he said *beg*, a little speck of spit flew across the space between us and landed on my face. I wiped it away and said, "Gross."

He threw his hands up in the air and stalked across the hall toward the staircase with the demeanor of an angry giant who was just a few feet too small.

I didn't care. It was a relief to eat without him. When I finished the fish, Gretchen came in with a blackberry tart and I couldn't have been happier.

"Wow," I cheered. "It looks delicious."

The serving woman looked worried. "Actually, I'm supposed to get you to eat it in Tremor's room. He's anxious to get away and, since Murmur stormed off, he wants to get you inside before he barricades the door."

"Okay," I said. As we walked across the hall I asked conversationally, "What does he do when he goes out to sea?"

Gretchen looked uncomfortable. Finally, she answered with the words, "Not be here."

"Is that all? Is being here that unpleasant for him?"

"Well, the troops that are trained here are not prepared for marine battles. If we were attacked, then the first line of defense would be entirely up to Tremor. We would only need the soldiers if the enemy got past him to shore, so he has a lot of work to do at sea to keep the first line of defense at the ready."

"I don't get it. How can he do all that by himself?"

Gretchen smiled stiffly. She knocked twice and then opened the door to the basement for me. "He manages." She handed me the tart and walked away.

I watched her go. Then I took that first step into the cavern. The darkness was so intense that when the door swung shut behind me, I couldn't see a thing.

"Sarafina, put your hand on my shoulder and I'll help you down the stairs," Tremor said as he swung the locks into place.

"I can't see your shoulder," I said, reaching into the void. My hand fell on his back... or was it his chest?

"It's a little further up." He laughed.

I felt my way to his shoulder. I had grabbed his chest. "Why is it so dark in here, anyway?"

"Are you scared?"

"Not of anything worse than falling down the stairs."

I could feel the warmth of his hand on the small of my back. "Don't worry. I won't let you fall."

He didn't talk as we felt our way through the blackness.

At the bottom of the stairs, he said warmly, "Someday you'll have to tell me exactly why you were willing to go through with this. Here's the bed."

"I can't see a thing," I complained. "How am I supposed to eat this? Or change into my pajamas or even find them? Can we light a candle?"

"Not yet," he said softly.

"Why not?"

He didn't answer me. "Let me take that from you." The plate came out of my hand and he helped me lower myself onto the bed.

"Tremor," I said seriously, feeling my cheeks change color with the awkwardness of what I

had to say. Luckily, he couldn't see me turn red in the dark. "I can't sleep in this outfit. The corset stays are murdering me. If we can't turn on the light, can you at least get me out of this thing?"

"Uh," he said hesitantly. "I can't do that either. I'm going to go out the gate to the sea cavern entrance. Once I'm out there, I'll get a light set up for you. Can you please wait for me?"

I was shocked. I had just given him permission to undress me and he was going to leave? Something had to be wrong, but I had no idea what. "Why do you have to leave before turning on the light? What happened to the candles you lit before?"

"They're still here. I'm going now." He bent and kissed me on the cheek. "Goodnight." His kiss felt funny.

Then he was gone. I heard his footsteps move away from me. Then a clank sounded as he unlocked the gate. I heard the echo of him moving down the cavern, and then the slam of another set of gates.

I tried to stay calm during the time I waited for him to turn on the lights, but it was tiring. I tried counting to make myself feel better and to measure the time. I got to around one hundred and sixty before my saliva stuck in my throat and I lost count. I waited a minute, hoping he would come before I started counting again. The second time, I only got to about eighty. Then I found his blanket and pulled it over my thighs. The quiet was grating and he was taking forever.

In the next second, a light flickered on above the glass window that looked into the sea. The light traveled in a direct line along the top of the glass and was inexplicably blue in color. It would have been a relief, but there was a black capricorn just on the other side of the glass and it was close. I nearly screamed when I saw it since Tremor wasn't there to hold me. Instead, I put a hand to my chest and ordered myself to calm down. They were just sea creatures. Sharks sometimes attacked people, but that didn't mean they didn't have a place in the world. Besides, there was nothing to be afraid of. The monster was on the other side. It couldn't get to me.

I stood up, but the capricorn didn't go. Its weird eyes followed me as I moved across the room to the trunk my things were in. Its yellow eyes were huge as it watched me. I leafed through my luggage until I found a nightgown. I turned my back to it and worked my way out of my dress and corset, hoping it would get bored of the pretty blue light and leave.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I finally did turn around and there were two more of them floating on the other side of the window. One looked like the white one I had seen earlier. The other one was mostly white, but it had a few gray stripes on its face and down its sides. It looked ferocious, except it wasn't scarier than the black one since I couldn't see its features well—only its yellow eyes.

To calm down, I rolled my knotted shoulders on my way to the bed, picked up my tart, and crawled in under Tremor's blankets.

If only the capricorns would leave. I was supposed to be in the book, skipping school and enjoying the fact that I had the chance to sprawl out on Evander's... I mean... Tremor's bed. Instead, I felt like I had accidentally flipped a page of National Geographic too fast and got a full spread of a scorpion. It wasn't their bodies that made the capricorns terrifying, it was their huge expressionless eyes—like fish—unblinking all the time. Weren't manatee eyes the size of marbles? Why were the creature's eyes so big? Plus, it looked like they might be strong enough to break through the window in front of me if they had half a mind to do it. Their horns looked like excellent battering rams and their muscles rippled.

So I munched on the best dessert I had ever eaten, sat in the bed of my crush, and watched the unearthly monsters stare at me with no possible way of turning the light off. Two more

capricorns even arrived while I was eating and pushed their eyes up against the glass.

I didn't understand what was happening. How did the situation apply in the real world? Some of the other things that had happened made sense, but this?

I put the dish down on the floor and pulled Tremor's blankets up to my chin. Then I shifted onto my side and faced the wall. The sheets smelled like sea salt and citrus. If it wasn't for the capricorns on the other side of the window—I would have been in heaven.

When I woke up, I expected to be back in the school library with some grouchy teacher quizzing me on why I had fallen asleep at school and missed my afternoon classes. Instead, I woke up in the blueness of Tremor's room with strong hands gripping my waist.

"Tremor?" I asked. My voice was ragged and uneasy.

"No, sweetie. I'm not your husband."

In the blue light, I could see Murmur maneuvering the blankets behind me.

I jumped out of the bed as fast as I could and sprinted toward the staircase. "How did you get in here?"

"The big door with the chains isn't the only portal to Hell," he said evenly. "Tremor just didn't think I'd be crazy enough to take the other route."

"Which is?"

"An iron pole that runs down a shaft from the top tower. See?" he said, pointing to what I had dismissed as a bathroom door. "It stops there."

"Are you crazy? From the top that must be six levels high. What if you fell?"

Murmur scoffed. "Tremor takes it all the time. You really must *not* think I'm as good as my brother."

"Well, he doesn't freak the hell out of me by jumping on me in the middle of the night."

"He doesn't? His loss, I'm sure." Murmur gave me a dirty look before prowling over to my trunk and pulling out one of my coats.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"I'm here to show you why I'm better than he is. You seem to have deluded yourself into believing he's the pick of the litter and I'm here to show you why he isn't. Now, are you going to come with me, or am I going to have to make you?"

I shuddered and started at a dead run up the stairs. "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

I thought I had a good head start, but Murmur was fast like a demon and I didn't even make it up the first turn of the steps before he had my hair in a death grip and he was hauling me back down the stairs like a mangy kitten.

"Put that coat on," he ordered, throwing me to the floor.

I tried to make another break for it, but he caught me and threw me to the floor painfully.

"It's for your own good," he said heartlessly. "It's going to be cold out there."

I glared at him before I picked up the coat and tossed it over my shoulders. He waited while I did up all the buttons.

"Put on some shoes too."

When I was dressed to his satisfaction. He went up to the first gate and pulled out his royal key ring. I was surprised when his key worked. Cruelly, he yanked me by my hair all the way down toward the second gate.

"Tremor's not what you think he is," Murmur hissed angrily as he dragged me up the passage

that led above sea level. There was plenty of time for him to say whatever he wanted, right in my ear. "He's a monster," Murmur spat. "He's a wicked creature of the sea. He's the leader of an army of capricorns and whenever the lunatics on the other side of the water make a plan to try to invade us, his capricorns stop them from landing here by drowning them, or worse—eating them. No doubt he's fed you some pitiful story about how he's the poor disinherited prince who no one ever cared about. He's feasted on human flesh. You would dishonor me and take that monster to be your husband? Foolish girl!"

To all that, I couldn't even answer. All I could do was yelp and bawl as he lurched my head around for his pleasure. Once we were through the second gate, he took my wrists and bound them behind my back. It was still night time and the gloom and spray of the sea were so penetrating, it felt like it was crawling under my hair.

"That way," he muttered, pushing me toward the water.

It was a minute before I saw it, but there was a small sailboat tied there. Murmur shoved me on board, pushing my face painfully on the deck of the boat. I couldn't get myself up for a minute and he used that minute to board and untie the rope. Finally, I was sitting at the prow of the boat, spitting out strands of my blonde curly hair while Murmur unfurled the sail.

I looked up into the sky. It was the same sky that hung overhead when I went down the river. Something about the two situations was the same. Maybe I would be in Evander's world for days before finally waking up.

Well, one thing was clear. Murmur was trying to scare me. There was just one problem. There was nothing he could do to make me change my mind about Tremor. Tremor was like Evander, but better. He was Evander without the walls of reservation. It didn't matter what Murmur did. I wouldn't give up on Tremor.

Chapter Seven

With a Drop of Blood

I had never been on a sailboat before and I was surprised at the speed with which Murmur got us away from the shoreline. Even though I couldn't stand the second prince, I was kind of impressed that he knew how to operate a boat that required more than firing an ignition switch. I had no idea what the different ropes did when you pulled them or loosened them or anything.

When we boarded the boat, the sky was black, but as we sped across the water, the sky brightened into a curious mixture of gray and yellow. Murmur took us into the shadow of the castle and furled the sails, so that instead of moving steadily in a straight line with the wind, he allowed the waves to knock us gently around the bay.

I should have been afraid. After what happened when I went down the river, I should have known that Evander's dream world definitely had its dangers, but whenever I went back to reality, I sort of forgot the intensity of what happened the last time. The thing was, I didn't think Murmur would do anything that would put me in my grave.

I even had the pluck to start talking to him on a friendly level. "How did you learn to sail? I thought you were so proud to be a castle brat, you wouldn't know how to handle a boat."

Murmur rolled his eyes and looked pained. "If you ever went to the capital yourself, you would see the King's castle is built on the edge of a crystal lake. Every member of the court who has any style knows how to do at least this much. The capital city is beautiful. It's a shame you'll never see it."

His voice was menacing, but I didn't let it frighten me. Instead, I teased him. "Why not? Are you planning on drowning me, here and now?"

"Maybe," he said. He took a black leather case out of his pocket and drew a golden blade out of it.

I gazed at him seriously. "Just throwing me over isn't enough?"

"Turn around," he said tolerantly. "I'll cut your bonds."

I accommodated him, but the second my hands were free, he took my right hand in a death grip and cut across my palm.

I screamed.

"Not so funny now?" he asked fiendishly as he forced me to the side of the boat and held my bleeding hand over the water.

I saw the drops of my blood dissipate into the green water. Something under the surface swelled, like muscle straining from under the sea.

"Murmur, are you sure you know what you're doing?" I sputtered. "Provoking the capricorns can't be a good idea. Have you seen their horns? Besides, if they can capsize an enemy ship, what makes you think they won't topple this one? Especially if they smell blood and think they'll get fed."

"This ship is fine," Murmur said arrogantly. "It was built by us, so it's strong enough to withstand a few little capricorns, but you..."

Just then the tip of a horn came above the surface. It reminded me of a shark fin. My arm was still hanging over the edge of the boat.

"Let go of me!" I screamed. I hit him over the head with my free hand, but my struggles were just as useless as they had been on the floor of Tremor's bedroom. "They're going to bite my

arm off!”

“Say it!” he bellowed as he refused to be fazed by my blows.

“Say what?”

“Say you want to divorce Tremor.”

I gasped. “No. Even if this is just a book Evander wrote... No! *Especially* if this is just a book Evander wrote, I’m not going to betray him.”

“Really?”

I looked into his eyes. It was weird. He should have paused and looked at me blankly when I said something about the outside world. Instead, he answered me rationally. What was going on?

Murmur turned his attention back to the sea. A nose came out of the water and a drop of my blood fell directly into its gray nostril.

“No!” I screamed.

The thing leaped.

Murmur pulled my arm into the safety of the boat at the last second as we both were sprayed by the beast breaching the water.

“Let’s try again,” Murmur said as he grabbed my waist and wrestled me back to the edge of the boat.

“No!”

The boat rocked desperately on the heavy waves the capricorn made, but neither that nor my kicking and screaming changed the fact that a minute later I was forced back to the edge with my arm hanging over the side of the boat. Murmur hollered in my ear, “Say you want a divorce!”

I could see more horns over the edge of the boat. I counted them. Since each capricorn had two then there were at least five circling the craft.

Tears streaked my cheeks and snot ran down my face, but I still struggled against his grip. It didn’t do any good. He held me still and didn’t budge. My jaw was tight as I braced against the pain. I didn’t think I could avoid what would happen next—which would be my arm getting torn from its socket.

“Say you want to marry me and I’ll take the boat back to shore,” he hissed so venomously in my ear it felt like he had stuck his tongue in.

I took a deep breath and screamed as loud as I could out to sea, “Tremor!”

Murmur covered my mouth, but it was too late. A deep sound like a whale’s song echoed so loudly through the water that it made the boat tremble.

“What have you done?” Murmur said, pulling me in.

I fell backward and held my bloody hand tightly. “Is he really a monster then? Was it him who answered me?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve got to turn this boat around.” Murmur got the boat pointed toward the castle and adjusted the sails.

CRASH!

The boat reeled off to one side. A capricorn had rammed us and the side of the boat was splintered. No water came in yet, but I couldn’t believe the strength of the capricorn. We were almost knocked upside down.

“Murmur!” I screamed. “We’re not going to make it to shore. We’re going to die!”

His face was grim as he corrected his steering. He didn’t say anything, but in the next second we were hit again and both of us were reeling.

I saw him correct his balance. After a moment of deliberating, he was beside me. “You’re right. There’s no way that both of us can make it to shore.” His eyes were hateful as he said,

“You should have married me.” He swiftly picked me up like a princess and dumped me over the side.

The water was cold and smelly and once again I was weighed down by my clothes. I got my head above water and tried to work my way out of my coat. Then I had an idea and dunked my head under the waves to scream with a full breath, “Tremor!” The bubbles spewed out of my mouth and then a blast of water went up my nose.

I got my head up and choked and sputtered before sucking in one final breath before I felt massive jaws tighten around my leg to drag me under. The pain was unreal and there were so many bubbles that even if I opened my eyes underwater I could scarcely see anything. In a break through the curtain of froth, I saw the black capricorn coming toward us—fast. I was about to become a cord in a game of tug-of-war.

Then the black capricorn sang. The sound was so intense I had to cover my ears even though I was underwater and running out of breath quickly.

The capricorn biting me loosened its jaws, but once I was free, I couldn’t swim upwards easily. The leg that had been bitten was bleeding profusely. That leg was completely useless against the weight of my nightdress and coat. My arms and my useful leg weren’t holding up well.

The black capricorn swam underneath me and heaved me to the surface. It had to be Tremor. Once above water, I mounted his back and crawled to his shoulders, where I could hold onto his horns.

I sputtered for breath and then saw the scene ahead of me. Murmur’s boat was surrounded by horns. I had thought there were five before. They had more than doubled their numbers. Tremor saved me from them.

Tremor gave one last look toward his brother before he left him to his fate and carried me to the rocky shore. Craning my neck to look behind me, I saw the ship’s mast tip and fall into the water. Once we made it to the cliffs where Murmur’s boat had been docked, I dropped myself onto the rocks. In the distance, I could hear Murmur shouting curses and screaming for Tremor to come back for him. Tremor stayed in the water next to me, his nose just above the water. Then the ship seemed to crumble in on itself and shortly afterward, the noise stopped.

I tried to feel sorrowful for Murmur, but I was not going to break my heart over the antagonist. Instead, I focused on myself. Hiking my nightgown up, I had a look at my leg. There were teeth marks in my thigh and in my calf. It was disturbing how much it bled. I felt faint.

A black hoof came out of the water and Tremor’s two capricorn legs lifted the goat half of his body out of the water. He was huge, much larger than a horse. If my leg hadn’t been mutilated, I would have done something to retreat, but I couldn’t move at all. I gasped at the sight of him instead.

Then I saw his black hoof become a black hand that gripped the sand-colored rocks in front of me. He was shrinking. His head changed shape and he went from being a goat-face to the prince I knew. The skin on his abdomen was already tan and the color was spreading with speed over his whole body—except not on his arms for some reason. His arms remained black and slightly furry with one or two scales. That must be why he kept covering his arms with bandages, to cover the black. It was because it hinted that he wasn’t completely human.

Standing on the rock in front of me, he tugged his slipping waistband tight and knelt at my feet to have a look at my wound.

“Looks bad,” he whispered tightly.

“Well, it’s not as bad as it looks,” I said, swooning.

He caught me in his capricorn-skinned arms. “Come on. I’ll get you inside. You’re going to bleed to death.”

“Would you really let me bleed to death in your book, Evander?” I mumbled as he lifted me up and carried me to the castle.

“I would never let you bleed to death.”

“But it’s okay if Murmur bleeds to death?” I questioned hazily.

He scoffed. “What was I supposed to do? He shouldn’t have spilled your blood into the water. Once that was done, there was nothing I could do for him. One of you was going to lose your life. I told the capricorn they could have Murmur instead.”

“That’s why there was no point going back?”

“Exactly. Capricorns are trained to eat humans. He knew that.”

I smiled, thinking about the perfect happily-ever-after. “Does this mean that you’ll be king now?”

I was smiling, but Tremor’s expression didn’t change. “My father isn’t too old of a man. Forget the Queen. If she can’t mother another heir, he’ll just find a woman who can. He’s very resourceful, and I will never be king. Why? Don’t you want to be married to the perpetual crown prince?”

“Who needs a prince?”

His laugh was sarcastic. “What are you saying?”

“I’d like you even if you weren’t a prince,” I confessed dreamily. It was easier to say that kind of thing to Tremor than to Evander because I could say it without backlash or even embarrassment. “I like you so much.”

He didn’t look at me but instead kept his eyes fixed steadily ahead of him. “Even with these arms? Most of the time I can’t keep them the color of my skin.”

“It’s no worse than a tattoo.”

“Even if you’re ridiculed by Hilda or the Queen for being married to a man the size of a whale?”

I thought about the wedding dress the Queen sent me. I hadn’t even realized there was a double meaning behind it. “Spiteful hags,” I muttered.

He opened the gate that led into the basement and his bedroom. Then he took me to the bed and sat me down. It wasn’t until that second that he really looked into my eyes.

But I was a teenage girl and I couldn’t let him talk. *I* had to be the one to talk. “And you were the capricorn that saved me on the river, weren’t you?”

He nodded.

“I like you.”

Tremor looked at me evenly and said, “I trust you.” He kissed my mouth with parted lips and it was perfect—sweet, warm, salty, and lucky.

And then... I passed out.

I blinked myself awake and was actually surprised when I didn’t wake up in the basement of Tremor’s castle. Instead, I was lying on a hospital gurney and clearly in an emergency room in present-day Edmonton.

My mom was standing outside the curtain talking to the doctor. I could hear her. Privacy in that sort of place must be a complete illusion.

“Has this sort of thing ever happened before?” the doctor asked.

“Of course not.”

“When she wakes up in the morning, she hasn't had difficulty waking up?”

“No more so than any other teenager.”

I was about to interrupt them and tell them I was awake when I thought about my leg. I wanted to check it, so I pulled up my jeans and saw my unbroken skin. That was good to see. I put my feet on the floor and realized I was hooked up to a couple of different things—an I.V. and something was clipped to my finger. Fun. I took the finger one off. Then I tried to walk.

I fell on the floor. “Dang.” My leg was like jelly.

The doctor flicked back the curtain and came in with my mom. They stared at me on the floor in horror.

“Sarah! How did you fall off?” my mother exclaimed.

“Uh, I tried to walk and it didn't work so well.”

My mom and the doctor helped me back on the gurney.

Then the doctor introduced himself. “Hi Sarah, I'm Dr. Harvester. You were brought in via ambulance when you were found passed out in the school library. It was the librarian, Ms. Preet, who called. She said that you came in during the lunch hour and slept all afternoon. She left you alone, but ended up calling for an ambulance when she couldn't wake you up after school was over.”

“What time is it?”

“Close to seven,” my mom supplied.

My brain convulsed. It was Thursday! I was supposed to be at Emi's. “Did anyone call Emi and tell her I couldn't come?”

My Mom pursed her lips in a way that let me know my right to make choices had been rescinded. “No one called her, but I will as soon as we're finished.”

Effectively silenced, I let the doctor examine me and ask all those adorable, infuriating questions doctors liked to ask. He wrapped up by saying, “You know, I'd let you go in a second if it weren't for the leg issue you're describing. Would you mind trying to walk on it again?”

I tried, but it was just as useless as before.

“See, I can't let you go home like that. We'll admit you, run a few tests, and keep you overnight for observation. A nurse will be in to complete your paperwork in a second. Don't go anywhere.” He smiled at his lame joke and exited the curtained room.

“Like I could,” I mumbled after him.

Once we were alone, my mom leaned forward and said in a whisper that was barely audible, “Sarah, do you have any idea why you passed out? Was there a reason you didn't want to tell the doctor?”

“Like what?” I huffed.

“Like... did you overdo it on energy drinks?”

Scoffing, I said, “Are you serious? I hate those things. They give me a headache and cost a fortune.”

“Or,” she continued in an even lower voice, “did one of your friends give you something?”

I smirked and went along with it for kicks. “Actually, one of my friends did give me something.”

“What was it?”

“Is my school bag here? I'll show you.”

She handed me a white plastic hospital bag that contained everything I had been brought to

the hospital with and, sure enough, all my books were there. Shifting through it, I found Evander's book and handed it to my mom.

"What's this?" She flipped it open. The way she did it made it seem like she was expecting the pages to be hollowed so someone could hide something inside. "There's nothing here. It's just a book."

"That's where you're wrong. It's not just any book. Look at the cover."

She turned to the front. "*Behind His Mask* by Evander Cheney." Then she bonked me on the head with it.

I shrieked and rubbed the sore spot with my palm. "What was that for?"

"How many nights have you stayed up all night to read this? I knew you had a crush on Evander, but letting your schoolwork suffer, falling asleep in school, and finally ending up in the emergency room. You little..."

Apparently, the sounds we were producing caught the attention of the medical staff, and the doctor came back. "What's going on?" he interrupted.

"She was reading!" my mom accused me. "She's been reading all night, every night. That's why she fainted at school."

The doctor looked at the book my mother was brandishing, then at me, and then back to my mother. "Ms. Reagan, put the book down. Your daughter is not the first kid to over-read. Regardless of how she ended up here, we still need to keep her because of her leg."

"Fine," she conceded. She confiscated Evander's book by depositing it in her purse. Then she planted a kiss on my head. "I've got to go to work. Call me when you're discharged and I'll escort you home."

"You're going to call Emi for me?" I pleaded.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Thanks."

Then she left. The nurse came, filled out my forms and I was wheeled into another not-so-private room. They planned to do my tests (the scans) in the morning, but they had no problem taking my blood pressure for the trillionth time and commenting on how strange the numbers were, or taking vial upon vial of my blood. By the sixth stab, it hurt more than when Murmur cut me.

Finally, they left me alone and I got to enjoy the fact that I had a window in my corner of the room that let in some of the city lights.

Just after eight o'clock, Emi came in.

"Wow," I said when I saw her. "You didn't have to come all the way down here."

She stared at me in horror. "Sorry. I had to see it for myself. Your mom said you fell asleep in the library and they couldn't wake you up because you were reading that book I gave you." Emi made a strange motion with her head, pointing toward the door.

I mouthed, "Is Evander outside?"

She nodded and then continued talking. "I didn't know you started reading it. How far into it are you?"

"I made it to the part where Murmur tries to kill Sarafina and Tremor saves her."

She lowered herself onto the bed by my feet and gripped the railing. "Really? That must be the end of the first part. The next section you'll read is a completely different story."

"I hadn't even read the title. What's that one called?"

"*The Witch and the Fool*."

"It sounds good, but why did Evander come here?" I whispered.

“Well, he was the one who talked to your mother—she didn’t tell him the name of the book—thank goodness. Anyway, he volunteered to watch Paisley for me when you didn’t turn up. He called me at work to tell me what happened, so I left work and came here with him. I was impressed. He really wanted to make sure you were okay. That’s really rare of Evander.”

“Yeah, amazing,” I mumbled. It was then that I started to wonder if Evander knew what was happening when I was in the book. It would make sense for him to be worried since I almost got my leg bitten off inside his book and then outside the book I was having trouble using it in the real world. “Does he want to come in?”

She shook her head negatively. “No. He’s watching Paisley.”

“Thank him for me.”

“Sure. Is there anything I can bring you to make you more comfortable? I mean, do you want me to get you something from the food court downstairs or something?”

“No. I’m fine,” I quickly reassured her. I couldn’t think of letting Emi (or anybody) spend money on me.

“It’s okay if you want something. You missed dinner, didn’t you?”

“I’m not hungry,” I said, even though I hadn’t had lunch.

Emi turned on her black high heels and pointed herself toward the door. “Well, even if you’re not hungry, I’ll pick up something for you anyway. Who knows? Maybe you’ll want a midnight snack.”

I shook my head and settled into my pillows as she click-clacked on her heels out the door. Emi was really too kind. Then I heard a male tenor voice say, “Knock, knock,” outside my curtain.

“Yeah,” I called.

Two fingers came around the fabric and brushed it aside. Evander parted it and waited until he had made eye-contact with me before he came in.

“Hi,” he said. “Emi and Paisley went downstairs and I thought it would be sad to leave you alone. It’s boring to stay in the hospital even if it’s just for one night.”

“Is it? This is my first time.” I was blushing. I wanted my face to chill out, but I couldn’t help it. One of my fantasies was coming true.

“Yeah. It’s really boring. Here,” he said, pulling out a gold iPod and a set of headphones. “You can borrow this and give it back to me when you come to babysit next time.”

I stared as he placed it on the bed by my knees.

“I don’t know if you’ll like my playlist, but trust me, even if you don’t, having this will be a lot better than nothing come one o’clock.”

“Thank you,” I said immediately.

Then he smiled at me and everything was beyond perfect.

After he and Emi left, I sat and listened to the songs he had lined up. There was one that was pure magic. I wiggled my toes and let the words soak into me. Actually, we had the exact same taste in music.

Chapter Eight

My Big Mouth

The next day, the doctor signed my release papers around three in the afternoon. They ran all the tests they could think of, but none of them could explain why my leg wouldn't work. In the end, the doctor gave me a crutch and sent me on my way with a strict reminder that I needed to make an appointment to see my family doctor as soon as possible.

I closed my curtains, undid my hospital gown, and got dressed. Hopping around the room, I got my things together into the white plastic bag they gave me. There was just one problem. I couldn't find Evander's iPod anywhere. I looked everywhere—with a vengeance—but in the end, I had to conclude gravely that it had been stolen. Someone must have taken it while I was out of the room having my tests done.

I rang the call button. When the nurse came in, I told her, my iPod was missing.

She looked up from her clipboard long enough to point her pen at a sign posted on the wall that read; "The hospital is not responsible for lost or damaged property. Please send valuables home during your stay. Thank you!"

I felt like dying.

Hobbling to the front desk, I signed the discharge forms and talked to the nurse there about my stolen iPod. She gave me a lost item report form to fill out, but she didn't look hopeful it would be found.

Afterward, I went to the courtesy phone to call my mom to come get me. Someone was using it. A woman who looked like she was ninety was making arrangements for her own funeral—literally. I didn't wait for her to finish. After all, it sounded like she was expecting the procession to the graveyard to begin once she finished with the phone. I turned on my crutch and left her to her business.

I got out of the hospital and made my slow, sloppy way to the bus stop. What was I going to do about Evander's lost iPod? First off, I had to tell him it had been stolen. That would be unspeakably embarrassing. Whatever he said, I had to replace it. That would cost an arm and a leg. Luckily, I had a not-so-useful limb to spare, but still! The whole thing was too awkward for words. The guy talked to me once and BOOM! Misfortune strikes him! *Expensive* misfortune at that.

When I got home, Rachel was there with my mom. While my mother was cutting up vegetables for supper, Rachel sat on the couch and read her highlights from Evander's book. I heard her nasal voice as soon as I came in the door.

"He was so pleased, just looking at her," Rachel quoted. Then she heard me coming in. "Sarah's back."

My mom glanced up at me and my walking stick. "If it ended up like this, then why didn't you call me?"

"Not even a quarter to my name and the courtesy phone was backed up. Don't worry about it. I'm young and sprightly. Besides, the bus is cheaper than a taxi."

Rachel put her shaved head around the corner and asked, "So, did they figure out what was wrong with your leg?"

I showed her my crutch. "Not really, but I'll be okay."

"Great. Come on in and listen. I just know we're almost at the good part." She started quoting

his book again, “He sighed. He felt weak more often than not. Glancing at Sarafina, he felt sorry. He wanted to acquaint her with his reality.” Rachel squealed. “This is what the guy you like wrote? He sounds super fun. When do I get to meet him?”

“Never,” I said as I seized the book.

“Aw!” she bawled, half pretending to cry. “His writing isn’t that corny. He’s pretty romantic. Did he write it for you?”

I nearly choked on some saliva that somehow got lodged in my throat. “For me? That’s rich,” I fumed. “What makes you think it’s for me?”

“The heroine’s name is Sarafina. Your name is Sarah. Surely you noticed the similarity.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Really? The girl in the second part’s name is Serissa. Still think it’s a coincidence?”

“Evander never thought anything about me. He barely talks to me.”

“Still waters run deep,” Rachel countered.

I turned to my mom who was still chopping away at a cutting board scattered with vegetable carcasses. “Mom, what do you think of all this?”

She eyed me carefully and began speaking in a level tone. “Well, I think Sarah is a fairly common name. He probably knows half a dozen girls called the same thing. Normally, no, I wouldn’t think his writing had anything to do with you, but from what Rachel read, it doesn’t sound like just anyone. It sounds like you.” She started laughing jovially. “And let me tell you, baby girl, he’s really got you figured out.”

I stormed out of the room. “Idiots!” I yelled back at the women. It wasn’t written like that because Evander liked me. The book recorded the time I spent inside just the way I made it happen.

But why didn’t Rachel get sucked into the book the same way I did?

For the rest of that week, I didn’t read Evander’s book for two reasons. The first reason was because I didn’t have time. The second reason was directly related to the first reason. I would have had time if I hadn’t been hobbling around on a leg that wouldn’t work. It began bending on command again by Saturday, so I could resume my babysitting jobs—much to the relief of the single moms I worked for.

By Saturday night I was beat. I wandered into the apartment, looked at the black sky out the kitchen window, and opened the fridge. I should have known what would happen. It was the usual cycle. My mom got all homey and cooked for an entire day. Rachel realized there was food and somehow, before I could eat my fill, every last scrap of my mom’s cooking was gone. All that was left in the fridge was one pathetic looking carrot, a box of baking soda, and a collection of nondescript salad dressings that probably should have been thrown out.

I was about to take my measly twenty-five bucks to the grocery store to replenish the kitchen when the phone rang. I was feeling spunky, so I didn’t look at the caller ID and with no preliminaries said into the receiver, “Can I ask you something?”

“Okay,” said a male voice.

Who the heck could be calling us? But I didn’t back down. “How do you call a girl and ask her out on a date?”

The voice on the line said, “Uh, I’m not sure.”

“Bad! Call me back and try again.” I clicked the *end* button. Thirty seconds later the phone

rang again and I picked it up. "Hello," I said cheerfully.

"Uh, hi, this is Evander."

And my face turned the color of fake blood running down the drain in a slasher flick. "Yeah. Sorry about that. It's... uh..."

"I was calling to tell you Emi doesn't need you to babysit this Tuesday—"

"And you want your iPod back," I interrupted.

"Not really. I was wondering if you wanted to go to the movies with me instead of babysitting. Interested?"

I stared around my kitchen stupidly. I had no idea Evander could be that smooth. He didn't even sound embarrassed.

"Unless you were expecting a call from one of your other boyfriends," he added.

"I don't have any boyfriends." I paused. "Sure," I finally stuttered.

"Okay. Can you meet me at the city library at, say, five o'clock on Tuesday?"

"Sounds perfect."

"Then, I'll see you there. And by the way, that little prank of yours was cute. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

We both hung up and I fell into a happy puddle on the floor before I remembered that I still had to tell him about his stolen iPod.

After school on Monday, I popped into an electronic boutique before heading home and looked at the MP3 players. I wanted to curl up into a hole and die! Not only was an iPod going to set me back three Saturday's worth of babysitting jobs, but the one he had lent me was too old to be for sale. I snagged one of the store employees and asked him if they had any of the last generation. No such luck! So, I had to buy him the newest one in orange, which was the closest I could find to his gold one.

Then on my way home, I felt even sicker because I realized that as a modern woman (even though I was only sixteen) I was going to have to pay for my movie ticket and my share of snacks.

I slouched and shuffled my feet. There was no way I could afford to be anyone's girlfriend; let alone Evander's. He probably had expensive taste in other things besides electronics.

The next day, I went to the city library to meet him. My spirits hadn't risen. More than anything, that was the fault of my outfit. When I went through my closet that morning, I didn't have anything to wear that I hadn't already worn to babysit at Evander's and I didn't have time to ask Rachel to help me. Besides, she didn't have anything to wear other than clubwear or second-hand, safety-pinned, punk clothes. It was hopeless. In the end, I had to wear what I normally would have worn. I looked really drab.

I was sitting at the front when Evander came in. He wore a couple of hoodies, layered. The top one had thick, green horizontal stripes and his backpack was yellow and orange. He waved to me and sat down in the chair across from mine.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi." I gave him my most lady-like smile. "I should tell you something."

"Shoot."

"At the hospital, you were so kind as to lend me your iPod and stupidly, I left it in the room when I was out getting some tests—"

“And it got stolen,” he supplied. It was strange. He didn’t look remotely mad. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No. I got you this,” I said as I handed him the bag. “I know I lost all your data. Sorry, I can’t replace that. I really enjoyed the songs on it though.”

Evander looked confused as he took the bag from me and emptied it. The receipt came out too and he picked that up and examined it. “There must be some mistake.”

“I know. It’s the wrong one. I... uh... couldn’t get you the same one that you lent me. It was too old.” I scratched the back of my head, flustered. “And they only had orange.”

“No,” he said. “That’s not what’s wrong. The iPod I lent you at the hospital wasn’t mine.” He pulled a green one out of his pocket that looked exactly the same as the one I had lost. “I picked that one up at a pawn shop a week ago. I loaded it up with songs, and I was giving it to you as a present.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve never seen you with headphones on, and I don’t know... you seemed like you wanted some. I saw an iPod for cheap and thought of you. I didn’t explain the situation very well back at the hospital, but it was my plan to give it to you the night you were supposed to babysit. When you didn’t show up and I heard you were in the hospital... I decided to bring it to you there... I didn’t actually give it to you because of your hospital stay.”

I stared. That explanation didn’t seem normal. Real-life Evander was talking to me and he sounded so much like Tremor my heart was skipping. “But why did you tell me it was on loan if it was a gift?”

He frowned. “I was planning on using it as an excuse to talk to you. You know... like my ridiculous phone call on Saturday, that you stopped from being ridiculous. But you know this iPod is a lot nicer than the one I got you. Want me to load it up with songs for you?”

“No!” I said, snatching the whole bag from him—receipt and all. “That’s okay.”

His jaw hardened as he watched me stow it away in my backpack. “You’re going to take it back to the store, aren’t you?”

“Ah, yeah. I gotta think about college tuition. I can’t skim off the top if my savings are going to amount to anything. Thank you though for the lovely gift. I had no idea you were thinking about me. You’re really wonderful. I’ve been sick to my stomach that I lost it,” I said, starting to tear up.

For a second, it felt like he was glaring at me. Then he seemed to pick himself up. “Want to go?”

“Sure.”

He took me down the block to the mall. Edmonton was weird. There was the mall, city hall, library, art gallery, courthouse, and all within a block of each other.

“There’s a pub on the top floor next to the theaters. Why don’t we stop there and have a bite to eat?”

“I’m underage,” I protested.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s really more like a restaurant and I won’t order any drinks.”

And it was. I’d passed it before on my way to the movies, but I’d never sat on their little pretend patio eating before. I just about squealed with delight when the hostess put us at one of those tables.

As we sat scanning the menu, a group of college kids walked past. I didn’t take much notice until one of them did a double-take and turned around to talk to Evander. “Hey, it’s Cheney,” the guy said, looking straight at Evander. “Is that your sister?”

“No,” Evander said levelly without elaborating.

The guy looked over at me. “Ick. You’re right. Sweetie,” he said, flipping his hands in mock effeminate style. “That hair color is all wrong. Streaks! Streaks!” He snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Or have you never heard of them?”

“Cut it out, Rick,” Evander said without even looking up.

“And when was the last time you plucked your eyebrows, love?” The fake British accent made him sound more disdainful than ever.

And I couldn’t think of anything to say back to him. I just sat there and looked at him like he was a slimy toad—which he seemed to be with all that gunk in his hair. It wasn’t even shiny. Then I thought of it. “And you, Vaseline is not a hair care product.”

He stepped back and said in a normal voice, “It’s hair wax.”

“Looks like Vaseline.”

It looked like Rick was scrambling for a comeback.

“Stop it,” Evander said, still not looking up. “Isn’t someone waiting for you?”

“Yeah, well, see you around Cheney.” He strutted back to his friends.

“Is he your friend?” I asked Evander.

“Not really. I do know him though, so I can’t pretend I don’t. What would you like to eat?”

I pursed my lips and didn’t answer him. Instead, I brought up something that was bothering me. “He’s right, you know.”

Evander gazed at me over his menu, finally looking up. “How could that guy be right about anything?”

“I’m a mess. My hair does need to be dyed. I have no idea how to shape my eyebrows. My clothes are ugly, and I can’t afford an iPod.”

“He didn’t say your clothes were ugly and they’re not. They’re just clothes. I didn’t think you’d be so hung up on that stuff.”

After that, I felt too ashamed to say anything else. I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu—a soup. Evander and I didn’t talk. We ate. He paid the bill.

At the movie theater, he offered to buy me popcorn at the concession, which I refused. He didn’t get anything either. The movie was a thriller I didn’t find particularly thrilling. In the darkness of the theater, I studied him more than the movie. It was a miracle he didn’t notice. When the movie was over he took me home.

At the door, I said, “Do you want to come inside?”

He gave me a half-smile and said with more honesty than most people can take, “Haven’t we already had enough fun?”

“No. I really want you to come inside. There’s no way you can understand why my sensitive side ruined tonight while you’re standing out here.”

He looked dubious.

“I won’t make you stay longer than ten minutes. I just want to show you my apartment.”

Evander shrugged his shoulders. “All right.”

We went in.

“What’s that?” he asked as we passed the bloodstain.

“Blood. Someone was stabbed there.”

“Seriously?” he questioned—aghast.

“It was on the news.”

Then we passed the pee stain. “Do I want to know?”

I stopped and looked at it. “A homeless person peed in the hall. No one has cleaned that up

either.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Come on.” I took him down the hall and into my apartment. I opened the door and we stood on the entryway rug. “This is the kitchen. This is the living room and there’s the dining room. That’s the storage room and down the hall is the bathroom. And that last room is the one I share with my mom.”

He jerked his head toward me. “You share a room with your mom?”

“She’s at work right now.” I dropped my school bag on the floor and took off my shoes. I could have shown him the whole place without him making him step off the entryway rug. I hung my coat in the closet and went into the kitchen to start on the dishes.

“Don’t you have a dishwasher?” His voice was softer.

“You’re looking at her.” There was a pause before I went on. “You don’t have to stay. I just wanted to show you why I was so sensitive before. If I thought there was any hope of hiding where I lived, I’d try, but you’ve already been to the building half a dozen times. I understand if you don’t—“

“It’s okay, Sarah. I get it. Just so you know; my father is not as rich as Vincent. This doesn’t scare me off. I’ll see you on Thursday.” He smiled at me and his eyes had that same kind quality that always made me fall for him.

“Yeah. I’ll see you on Thursday.”

He left but I felt kind of cozy inside, even after he was gone.

Chapter Nine

The Witch and the Fool

After the emergency room and the dead-weight leg, I made a promise to myself: no more reading Evander's book outside my apartment. I told myself I could only read it right before I went to bed, so then I started the part called *The Witch and the Fool* on Thursday night.

Serissa lived in a glade in the woods. The trees arched around the clearing that was her home and provided shade as well as a cover for her thatched roof and timber walls. It looked exactly like the home of a runaway princess in a fairy tale. Though Serissa's story was not a happy chronicle, because of one unmistakable element: the house was surrounded by a labyrinth of twisted lengths of thorny red roses. There was a small windmill erected next to the house that acted as a watchtower, where anyone who stepped into the prickly maze could easily be spied upon from the safety of the yard. In the woods, the windmill was purely decorative since the trees shielded the area from any possible breeze. Its purpose became known when poor travelers became lost in the paths of thorns, for getting to the house was almost impossible. When such an occasion arose, Serissa or her mother would sit on top of the windmill by the motionless blades and guide the person safely off their land by shouting to them which way to go.

Serissa's mother had been a witch and not just any witch, but one branded with a title from the high king of the land—King Author. She was known as the Red Thorn Witch. The story was told that the King thought she needed rescuing back when he was a lowly knight and had sought to free her from her prison... only to be lost in the maze and guided out by the tiny witch laughing herself sick from atop the windmill. In his humiliation, he dubbed her the Red Thorn Witch.

In fact, Serissa's mother's real name was Surrey and she wasn't the least bit terrifying. The roses were there for their protection. Surrey was a powerful witch because she had been able to coax even the weakest stems to grow thick with deep perseverance.

As her daughter and protege, Serissa was an utter failure. Surrey schooled her and trained her, but Serissa seemed incapable in every form of magic she tried. She could cook, but even if her bread rose to perfection, her potions were about as effective as water. Her thumbs were black instead of green and the rose bushes meant to protect her hated her (sometimes secretly, sometimes openly). The future was a dim fog to her. When she tried to divine anything, the only answer she got from the tea leaves was, "Wait and see." Pathetic! Surrey encouraged her to try stargazing, but that was a dismal road for Serissa to walk. The stars didn't look like two-headed goats or unicorns with elephant feet. They just looked like stars.

In the end, when Surrey's life had almost wasted away, she decided not to trust her rose bushes to protect her daughter. They were losing their life-force as quickly as she was. In her desperation, she tried a different kind of magic on her child. She made her ugly.

In the weeks that followed Surrey's burial, Serissa waited. First, she waited for the rose bushes to die, and second, she waited for someone to come who would inevitably take her away.

I shouldn't have been surprised when I found myself sitting outside, but I was. The weather in Edmonton had been dreary because winter was coming, but suddenly I was sitting in the shade of a tree taking refuge from the hot summer sun. I smiled. I was going to enjoy the story. It was going to be like going on a vacation to Mexico during one of the worst parts of the year.

Wait... except if I was playing the part of the daughter, wasn't I supposed to be ugly? The girl

in the story's name was Serissa and I was sitting in a small yard surrounded by a little wooden fence. On the other side, there were rose bushes. I was undoubtedly Serissa, but how was I ugly?

Since I couldn't see myself, I got up and went into the house, which was only marginally better than an old shed in Emi's yard used for sheltering tools. Well, the introduction I read made it sound like I wouldn't be staying in the hut for very long. I went in. There was a washbasin on a stand, a hammock strung across the room, and another one lying idly by the wall. There was a chest, which I opened only to find it full of books, quilts, and hideous clothes—not unlike the nun-like pinafore I was wearing. There was a cupboard in the corner that was full of pots for stewing and hooks and knives I assumed were either for cooking or for trimming back the rose bushes. In another corner, there was a barrel full of cornmeal and another one full of oats. Other than those things, the place was practically empty. How had anyone managed to live in such a place? I didn't know how to cook straight cornmeal.

I couldn't find a mirror. I went back outside.

The yard was a relatively simple affair. There was the windmill mentioned in the introduction, a small vegetable garden with a huge raspberry bush taking over everything close to the roses, the house, and a well. I supposed that was the closest thing I was going to get to a mirror. I picked up the bucket and dropped it in.

As I pulled up the bucket, I wondered why I never realized drawing water would be hard work. Wooden buckets were heavy. Water was heavy, too. One would think I hadn't hauled four-liter jugs of milk up three flights of stairs all my life.

I set the water down and waited for it to settle. When it finally did, I was shocked to see what Evander meant by ugly. For starters, every scrap of my flaming red hair was tied up in the most hideous knots ever devised. Secondly, my face was covered in warts. Touching my face, I squished one between my fingers to see what it was like. It went flat and I could feel it detaching from my skin. Nervously, I pulled it off. It was clear and it felt like jelly. I tried to stick it back on my face and it stuck. Then I realized that there were a few down my neck also. Ew! But not uncomfortable. If I didn't touch myself, I couldn't even feel they were there. I moved my face and made all kinds of strange contortions, but the warts just moved and did whatever my face did.

In the end, I left them alone. They were obviously part of my character in the story and I didn't want to ruin it.

I looked down at my nun habit. It was clearly another part of the plan to make me ugly. No curves could be seen through the thick black pinafore hanging over my front and my back. What a pity! I had such pretty dresses in the last story.

It was then that I heard a sound—loud and long—coming from the midst of the rosebush labyrinth. It wasn't exactly a scream. It sounded more like a groan with a heavy dose of pain in it.

Rather than run into the bushes, I did what the introduction said Surrey did and climbed up the windmill. From that somewhat precarious vantage point, I could see someone struggling through the passages throughout the rose bushes.

"Want me to guide you out?" I called.

"I'm quite all right," a low voice replied cheerfully.

I could see thrashing within an overgrown part of the path and little bits of underbrush flying into the air. The man had cleared that hedge and was in an open passage. Looking at the distance he had to go, I could see he had a pretty good chance of actually making into the yard, unlike the old king. As I looked out, I was confused. Why did Surrey even make a path for anyone to enter

into the yard? Wouldn't it have been easier to leave the prisoners of the maze hunting through it forever with no way in?

A second later, the young man looked upwards and I saw why he needed to be able to get in. It was Evander... with a few subtle changes. His hair was not tied back at all. It was ash brown and fell straight to a blunt cut that was slightly shorter in the back than in the front. He had sideburns that went all the way to his jaw. A swell of happiness rose inside me at the sight of him, but then I realized he wasn't properly equipped to take on the maze. For starters, he didn't have any shoes on. He was wearing a pair of heavily worn, roughly-woven trousers. They were rolled up to just below the knee and he wore a plain cotton shirt that was probably once white but turned gray through wear. The fastenings were done up to his collarbone. I looked closer and saw that he didn't just have scratches on his feet, but up his legs and arms. On his neck, there was a cut that had bled onto his shirt.

But even with all that, he grinned broadly at me as I climbed down the windmill and approached him.

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"I'm a magician," he explained, suddenly showering himself with a handful of gold dust. The dust fell on his nose, in his hair and eyebrows. It clung to the moisture around his lips and the sweat on his face. "So I know how to do things like that."

"Get through a labyrinth?" I asked as I tried to stop laughing. He looked adorable.

"It's easy. Whenever you come to a cross-way, you always go left."

I dropped my shoulders. I should have known that.

"I'm Kalavan," he said, suddenly stepping forward and taking my hand.

"And I'm Serissa," I volunteered as I invariably stepped backward. He was staring at me. The warts were probably repulsive and my face was turning red under his scrutiny.

He didn't miss a beat. "You're a witch? I came because I was told a witch lives here and I want to know if you have any wares or spells you can sell me."

Since it was Evander and it was his story I'd trust him with anything. If the story was going to be another romance, I wanted to take any shortcut to fall in love with him. Giving in to his query seemed like the quickest way to winning him over. I thought about the books in the shed... house. "I suppose you can have a look through my mother's spell books."

He looked around edgily. "Will she mind? Is she easily angered?"

"She's dead," I said blankly.

He gawked. "The Red Thorn is dead? Pity," he said sadly. Then he brightened. "And you're going to let me look at her spell books? Wonderful!"

I took him into the broken down, old house, but I didn't feel as self-conscious as when I had him tour my apartment back home. After all, he had created the house, and he obviously thought that it was nothing to be ashamed of. He wasn't the snob I imagined him to be.

I opened the trunk for him and observed him thumbing through the books. I turned my back to him for one minute and by the time I had turned back he was lying in my hammock reading one of the books.

"Do you understand any of this?" he asked, showing me a page.

"No," I said, glancing at the foreign writing. "Do you?"

"Your roses are wilting," he said suddenly.

"Are you telling me to go tend them?"

"Yes. Your walking around the room is making me nervous. I can't concentrate."

My mouth fell open. We had only been in the house a total of two and a half minutes and

already he'd made himself at home and told me—the shack... *homeowner*—to get lost. Not only that, but I'd walked the length of the room once. Once.

I set my mouth in an ugly line, picked up one of the books, and got into the other hammock, which was surprisingly comfortable. Then I stuck my tongue out at Kalavan and hid my head in the book.

I tried to look just as engrossed in the volume as he did, but it was arduous. Looking at the words and the illustrations, I had no idea what the book was about. One would think that pictures would be a universal language, but the pictures didn't look like anything. I turned the book upside down and then to either side, but I couldn't see anything.

"That's a good idea," he said, copying me.

"It didn't do me any good."

"No? Me neither."

"Do you even know what your book is about?" I asked cautiously.

"It's hard to say."

"Like 'nihilism?'"

"You're funny. Nihilism is not hard to pronounce. I say it all the time," he frowned. At that second, his face was exactly like Tremor's. Was that Evander's true self? Kalavan dropped the book on the floor, exasperated, and turned on his side to look at me. "This book is boring. You're a far more fascinating piece of magic. Those bumps on your face are truly remarkable. When I first saw you, I thought they were real."

"And you still wanted to talk to me?" I exclaimed.

"It only took me a minute to figure out their falsehood. I'm good at seeing through glamor. It's my specialty. The substance that makes those warts is so thin it's transparent and if the light hits one just right, you can see an almost yellow liquid oozing around inside like it's ready to pop."

"That can't happen," I snapped, covering my face with the book. "And don't talk to me about things oozing. I'm gonna puke." When he didn't say anything I got up the courage to ask from behind the pages, "Am I really ugly then?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But you shouldn't let that get you down. I can *almost* see through it."

"Almost?" I repeated in anguish lifting the book off my face. "I don't want to be ugly."

He looked at me speculatively. "And what happens when everyone realizes you're not?"

For some reason, I couldn't think within the confines of the story. Instead, I could only think of what it would be like to be ugly, so ugly in real life you were practically deformed and that was how I answered him. What would it be like to be beautiful? "People would treat me like I was special."

He scoffed, "Like you were special? Wake up! You are special. And you would make everyone realize it if you had the courage to be yourself completely without relying on a pretty face."

"I don't care about what the whole world thinks of me," I groaned. "I only want the attention of the person I like."

"And he might have thirty beauties to choose from. What would set you apart from them?"

I sighed. "So I can't win?"

A moment passed and then another... and then another. Finally, he said, "You can only win if your heart is more beautiful than your face. That doesn't just include qualities like kindness or sympathy. It's more than that. You have to be courageous, fearless, with a clear compass pointing which way you're going."

My nasal cavities were filling up. I was going to cry in a second. My poor self-esteem was exposed. What he said made me feel hopeless, because even though he made a list of attributes, I didn't know how to make myself beautiful on the inside.

He graciously pretended to ignore my little crying fit, and when I was finished he casually said, "I don't think I can read any of this without my crystal ball, which I didn't bring with me. Will you sell me a few of these?"

I bit my lip. What would happen in the story if I sold him a few books and let him leave? The introduction Evander wrote seemed to imply that someone, an unknown entity, was coming to lead me out into the world. Obviously, that was Kalavan, but it didn't sound like he had any intention of inviting me anywhere.

"How many would you need to take me with you?" I asked quietly.

"Take you where?" he mocked.

"Wherever you're going."

"Wherever I'm going? Well, in that case, I should tell you that I'm going to the capital."

"Where is that?"

He took a deep breath and sighed. "You've never been there? You don't know anything about it?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it's a kingdom that was a dukedom until about twelve years ago. Until then they were under the reign of King Author to the south. Contact broke and the Duke Pevinore crowned himself King Pevinore. Now it's called Chellot and it's a wild place lacking the sort of enlightenment a person like you requires."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that they kill witches and burn them at the stake—all the time."

"Are you just saying that so you can leave me behind?" I asked skeptically.

"No," he said, lifting another volume with the tips of his fingers. "I'm quite serious. You wouldn't be safe there."

"What about you? You're a magic-user. Why haven't you been burned?"

He didn't answer me and instead inspected the cover with a pleasant expression like he didn't hear me.

"I can't do any magic." I continued trying to convince him. "The Red Thorn tried and tried, but I can't do anything right. I can't do star readings, I can't do divination, make potions or even cultivate the rose bushes. I'm useless. If I can't actually do any magic then I should be safe from suspicion. Right?"

"One would think, but those aren't the only forms of magic. I told you—I'm an expert in glamor. You liked me as soon as you saw me, didn't you?"

I was hesitant to say.

"It's all right. You can admit it. It's because of that gold dust. It's not made of anything special. It's just something that sparkles in sunlight or candlelight, but it makes every woman take an instant liking to me. Something that simple may not seem like much, but it's a kind of magic." He paused and looked at my face. "Don't feel like a fool because you fell for it. Everyone does."

I straightened my back and rebelled. "I don't feel like a fool. I would have liked you without the dust."

"If you say so," he said sardonically, still maintaining that unconcerned expression.

Maybe he wasn't being unreasonable, but I didn't care. "I won't let you have any of the books

if you don't take me with you."

He groaned. "Then don't."

The moon rose high in the sky that night and Kalavan stretched out in the hammock next to me. It was enthralling to think of Evander with all these different personality traits. Kalavan didn't feel very much like Tremor. Tremor was not cheerful, or particularly playful. Kalavan was very entertaining. Come to think of it, I had never seen Evander show himself to be entertaining either. Yet, there had to be some part of him that was.

The moon was very full. I could see it through a break in the roof—a spot intended to be used as a chimney. The bright orb shone a heady white light onto my face. Women were always supposed to look beautiful in the moonlight. I looked like the plague.

Quietly, I whispered, "Is there some other reason you don't want me to come with you?"

I wasn't sure if he heard me. In truth, I didn't really care if he did. Even if I looked ugly and he was holding it against me, I still just liked being with him.

However, he did hear me and he answered. "Do you think I want to leave you behind because you're ugly?" he asked, revealing his insight. "Truthfully, I would feel better about taking you with me if I knew what you were under that disguise. I have no idea what kind of enchantment you are held by. The types of magic you listed before are only a few. You're forgetting all about necromancy, elemental magic, simple trickery, summoning... The list is endless. And right now I don't have the time to put your puzzle together. I have to leave tomorrow. I'm only allowed so many days away from the castle and even if I start back first thing tomorrow, it'll be cutting it. Forget about coming with me."

"Don't you want my books?"

"More than anything and I have no doubt I'd be able to read them with my crystal ball."

"I'd like to read them, too. But tell me, what's so special about a crystal ball? It doesn't change the form and shape of what you're looking at."

"Not normally," he agreed, "but mine is different. It's got three great flaws that branch out from the center, almost like a flower with three petals. Each one has its own angle and when you look at something through it; it joins lines on paper that didn't meet before. There are different ways to hold it and different ways to drag it across the page. Figuring out the right angles would take forever, but it would be well worth it."

"Could you teach me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not taking you or your books with me."

After that, he was silent again, and something inside me said he wouldn't speak again that night. I was right.

I fell asleep listening to the sound of Kalavan breathing. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, but maybe he had sprinkled some weird dust on me when it was time for annoying, talkative girls to pass out. In any case, I slept like a log—a warm, happy log.

Chapter Ten

Following a Fool

If Kalavan had given me something to help me fall asleep, it mustn't have been part of the story for him to leave my shack without me noticing, because I heard the door close as he left the next morning.

As soon as he was gone I sprung from my hammock and threw a few things together in a knapsack I made out of my hammock. I knew it was strange, but it felt like the thing was just *made* for that. By day, it was a useful bag and by night, it was a handy place to sleep. The first thing I packed was each and every one of Surrey's books. No worry about the weight of my pack. They were very much like tiny paperback books. Beyond that, there wasn't any prepared food in the house, so I scampered after Kalavan and hoped he could scrounge something for us to eat later on. With some luck, he wouldn't mind me eating off his plate.

By the time I got into the yard, he was already partway through the maze. He said he came in by turning left every time he met a crossroad. Well, I would bet my britches he would go back through by choosing right each time because that would take him back down the same path he had already walked when he came in. So that's what I did, wishing that I'd been smarter and paid better attention to the maze when I was sitting on top of the windmill. I could have memorized a quicker way out.

The morning mist hung over the roses. Each rose transformed into a floating crimson jewel rising betwixt the leaves of green. Over them, I saw Kalavan's head as he moved on ahead of me. It was a strange moment. I wasn't normally given to fantasizing about anything more intimate than holding hands, despite the happenings after my wedding to Tremor in the last story, but the setting was too romantic. It was like a dream, but when I became the cameraman filming the scene, I didn't like what I saw. There was the beautiful young man, gold dust lingering in the air around him, striding easily through the passage—he even began whistling a melody that spoke of deep longing. But once the camera pulled away from him and focused on me, I felt like running back to my shed. I may have been young, but I looked and felt like the bent old witch that trapped Rapunzel and kept her hostage for envy.

I was so angry, I picked off five of the bumps on my face and dropped them in the grass. That wasn't even half of them. They were all over me. And they were supposed to protect me? From what?

After exiting the beauty of the rose garden, Kalavan took the dusty road that led to the northwest through forested hills. Walking on those roads, it was easy for me to stay out of sight if he should have happened to turn around. There were so many turns and so many blind spots that a six-headed monster could have been walking forty paces behind me and I wouldn't have noticed.

After a few hours, we came to a town and I decided it was about time I made my presence known. If I didn't, I feared I wouldn't get any breakfast. Kalavan came to an inn and went in the front door. I followed him but lingered at the threshold. He dropped his bag on a table by the fire and asked the barmaid for cider.

I was about to approach his table when abruptly, someone grabbed my collar from behind and pulled me back onto the street.

"Let me go!" I wailed, my feet dangling slightly like a kitten held by the scruff of her neck.

Suddenly, I came face to face with a man as tall as he was wide, and he was tall enough to glare down at me when my feet were off the ground. “We don’t have a table for you,” he said gruffly. “Someone might get sick.” With that, he dropped me in the street and went into the inn himself.

I was outraged and hurt. I pulled another three warts off my face and threw them on the ground. Then I moved along down the street until I came to a bakery. By that point, I was famished, so I went inside hoping I would be able to barter for something edible.

In the bakery, the baker was counting dried apple slices and staring at the door in expectation. He looked disappointed when I came in. “No bread today,” he said crossly. “It’s all got to go up to the Duke’s this evening.”

“I’m not looking for anything fancy,” I said softly. “Yesterday’s crusts will do.”

The baker shook his head and leaned forward. “Y’know anything about the visiting chivalry?” “No,” I answered meekly.

“They’re strong men—strong. I’m not sure any one of them has looked at a woman before, but if any of them bothered to look at you, they’d see a witch. Do you know what they do to witches here?”

“I’m not a witch,” I said stubbornly. “I realize you’re trying to be kind, but I’ve already been warned. I have nowhere else to go.”

“Then you should figure something out before they find you.”

“Before who finds whom?” asked a haughty sounding voice coming from the door.

All the skin prickled up on the back of my neck. I had not heard anyone follow me in and from the expression on the baker’s face, neither had he. I turned and saw a knight clad completely in armor that shone like dark pewter. Seeing the owner of the voice shouldn’t have lessened my fear, but it did. I couldn’t help it. He was a few inches shorter than me and I could see down his breastplate with ease. It was too big for him. I averted my eyes like the baker but not before the knight had seen my crucial mistake—underestimating him.

“And who is this?” he asked, trying to point his chin down at me while speaking to the baker. It was quite impossible unless I got down on my knees.

“Don’t know. She just came begging in here. I didn’t give her nothing,” the baker scoffed.

I did a tiny curtsy, hoping it would help to make amends for looking down at him.

“Are you a witch?” he asked just in time for several other men who came in the bakery to hear.

“No,” I said easily. “But a witch cast a spell on me.”

“She’s lying,” one of the new entrances said. “I saw her. The barman wouldn’t let her in, so she took some of those warts off and threw them at his door. She cast a curse on him.”

“No. That’s not what happened. I mean... that is sort of what happened. The innkeeper did refuse to let me in and I was angry because a witch put these on me, and I knew that was why he wouldn’t let me come in, so I started to pull them off. They’re not cursed though. I mean, I wasn’t casting a curse on him,” I sputtered idiotically.

No one was listening.

“She’s a witch,” someone hissed into the ear of the knight.

“A witch?” the knight intoned.

I winced.

The knight unsheathed his sword and used the butt end of it to tip my chin up, so he could ‘apparently’ get a better look at my face. “I’m curious to see what kind of magic she can perform.”

“Excuse me, sir... knight. I don’t perform magic. I already told you—I’m not a witch.”

“That’s a lie,” another villager said. “She’s the daughter of the Red Thorn. I’ve seen her up on that windmill laughing and laughing when folk got caught in her trap. I saw her leave that forsaken rose-labyrinth this morning.”

I was stunned. Someone had seen me?

“I don’t believe you.” The knight laughed and turned his head toward the speaker. “How could a thing as repulsive as this girl be the daughter of the Red Thorn? The Red Thorn was a famous seductress. How could this thing be her daughter? Show me!”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or the person in the crowd, so I took a couple of steps toward the door. Maybe I could get away, and get help from Kalavan. I ducked my head and since it seemed like no one wanted to touch me, the crowd made way for me to exit.

On the street, I knew I had hardly escaped my accusers. I had to do something. Maybe I could just run away, but as I started down the dirt road that pointed the way I had come, the dumpy little knight came out of the bakery and called to a few of his fellow knights loitering in the street to stop me.

“Grab that girl!”

They weren’t as squeamish as the townsmen in the bakery and they came at me instantly. I tried to run away, but before I knew it the short knight was joined by taller comrades and they had me surrounded. The men weren’t afraid of my skin as their hands were covered in gauntlets. They wasted no time and dragged me into the town square to make sport of me in front of everyone.

The short knight came toward me as another one held my arms tight from behind. “See, pet,” he said gloatingly. “Let’s see how beautiful you can be without those hideous warts on your face. They’re disgusting.” He approached me and though I didn’t expect it to hurt, it did. He pinched me brutally with his chain-mail fingers as he pulled one off. Much to his surprise and my misery—it came off easily. “What is this?” he asked, sniffing it.

“A wart?” I replied unhelpfully. Then, I gained courage and threatened. “And you’ll get a thousand warts all over your hide if you don’t leave me alone. There’s a spell on them you see.”

He glared at me and then, much to my amazement, he licked it. “Pet,” he said slowly. “I think it’s made of flour and ground-up pig hoof.” Then he started to laugh, and I scowled. “What kind of magic is that?” He picked off the rest of the make-believe warts on my face one by one and with each grab it felt like he cut my skin. Then he threw them down on the dirt road like trash and I wondered how long it had taken Surrey to make them. My heart hurt. They were supposed to protect me, but I had not protected them.

“Let me go!” I suddenly cried.

But the knight persisted. “I wonder about this hair, too. Do you think it too is made of flour?”

“Pull the knots out!” one of the knights observing called out cheerfully like it was a game.

I couldn’t move. The knight behind me hadn’t loosened his grip on my arms during all that time. I tried to squirm out of his grip, but it was no use. He was strong and my arms felt powerless against his. Within seconds, my red hair fell and I could feel the spell Surrey had cast on me breaking. I had never seen myself with my hair down. Looking at it, I saw it hung long and vibrant red with an intense shine. I stared. From my perspective, it was the kind of hair that was the envy of all women. The entire village knew it too and a strange silence gripped the air.

“Was she enchanted?” a woman’s voice whispered.

“Is that even the same girl?” another voice asked.

Then it was the short knight’s turn to speak. “She really is a witch!” He grabbed me by the

front of my hair and said darkly, “Do you know what we do with witches in the capital?”

“And do you know what knights do to their squires who cannot follow directions?” a deep piercing voice rang out from behind the crowd.

My heart nearly stopped beating. Was that Kalavan? Had he come to rescue me?

Immediately, everyone stepped aside. I looked at him, too. Sitting atop of a beautiful black stallion was a knight clad entirely in black armor. His visor was pulled down over his face and a glorious blue feather protruded from the top of his helmet.

So it wasn't Kalavan after all! Or maybe it was. Wasn't he the kind of guy who could trick anyone in the world? I wouldn't know that until I saw the man's face.

“Welvinton,” he said clearly through his visor. “If you cannot wear my second set of armor with more dignity than this, not only will I not allow you to wear it, but I shall dismiss you without hesitation. This is your last reprimand. What trouble are you rousing now? This is the smallest town surrounding the capital, but that does not give you leave to forget your place. What are you doing, Tracton?”

The knight who had been holding my arms looked distinctly uncomfortable, but he looked freer to do what he wanted than my short accuser. He stepped forward and sought to explain himself. “She’s a witch. We just saw her transform from the most hideous hag to the beauty that stands before you. She’s a changeling for certain. Sir, we must oversee her burning.”

My heart beat heavily as I watched his visored face turn toward me, but my tongue was completely frozen. I couldn't speak.

“Has she anyone to be her champion?”

I had heard something about champions in medieval times. Since they had no way of proving whether or not I had done wrong, I would need a champion to fight for me against a knight who fought for my execution. If my knight lost the joust and hand-to-hand combat, I would die. But worse than that if I had no one to act as my champion, I would die without anything being done in my defense.

I looked around the crowd frantically to see if there was anyone who appeared even a little friendly toward me. Remarkably, I saw Kalavan. So he wasn't the knight after all! He was standing among the spectators with his face set in hard lines, but he didn't look remotely inclined to speak. When our eyes met, he looked away. Why wouldn't he do something? It was *his* story. Couldn't he *write* his own victory?

“We’ve not inquired,” came the speedy reply from the knight.

“Then I’ll champion her myself,” the black knight replied. “Who shall I joust?”

The silence was heavy.

I sucked in my breath. If no one chose to back up their accusation with a willingness for combat then the charge would be dropped and I would go free.

“No one, my lord,” the knight said quietly. “If you choose to champion her, then her innocence is assured.”

Then the black knight brought his horse around and trotted up to my side. Without moving from his position in the saddle, he lowered his black gauntlet to me in invitation. I knew what was happening. If the black knight had not interfered, his squire and the knights with him would have burned me at the stake. The black knight's extended hand was the only way out because if I refused to go with him, he would withdraw his protection. I didn't like it. If I went with him, I would be taken away from Kalavan and that wasn't the way the story was supposed to go.

In my fury, I didn't debate within myself for longer than a minute. I made up my mind. I didn't look at Kalavan, but reached out and took the black knight's offer.

In a moment, I was pulled up onto the horse in front of its rider, with my feet dangling over one side. His metal armor bit into me as he secured his reins and moved the beast away from the detestable townsfolk. I let my eyes linger over his shoulder and spotted Kalavan standing in the crowd, looking as though his soul was being split in two. Well, why should it? If it was his story, why did he let the girl get dragged off by someone else?

I settled in with the black knight. He rode us out of the village and onto a grass path. I had no idea where we were going. He did not speak but pressed forward with purpose. Bobbing up and down with his mount wasn't the most comfortable position I could have imagined and I would have liked to ask him where we were going, but I found I didn't have the courage. Even up close, I could not see his face through the gaps in his helmet. There was only shadow. Nor was it comfortable to crane my neck to try to discern his features, so I set my eyes forward and let the silence stretch out as far as the road ahead of us.

There was a hill before us and as we came to the top, in the distance I could see a city with a castle rising from its center. To my surprise, it was nothing like the castle in the previous story. It looked more traditional in its design since it was squarish, and it was five or six times bigger. I could see at least five turrets; narrow spires that reached to the sky like swords. The stone working that made up the walls looked thick and impenetrable, but since it was nestled in the mountains instead of by the seashore, it looked cold and foreboding. Was that where we were going?

It took less time to get there than I imagined. There was no moat, but we passed through an unbelievably high archway to enter the courtyard. Once there, a servant boy ran to us to tend the black knight's horse.

The boy helped me down and though my legs were both cramping, I behaved as though nothing was wrong. The knight leaped down. Wasting no time, he took me by the hand, hauled me past noblewomen, courtiers, servants, and even other knights. Without saying a word, he dragged me into the main fortress and up an incredibly wide staircase. Up and up we went until my legs ached and I felt like we must be almost at the roof when abruptly he changed direction and led me down a hallway and into a bedroom.

It was simply decorated. There was a bed with four posts and a canopy... except the canopy was made of wood, with bed curtains. A chest sat at the foot of the bed. I spotted a chamber pot by a stand with a washbasin on it. A red and yellow stained glass window bathed the room in a strange kaleidoscope of colored lights.

The fact that he took me to a bedroom before any other place put me on edge, but as I turned to see if he planned to ravage me there and then, I saw I could relax.

The knight left the door open and at long last, he removed his helmet. His hair was black and curly. It was tied in a low ponytail, but it was clearly grown past his shoulders. His eyes were yellow tinged with orange, but his face was like someone I knew. It was yet another version of Evander, like Murmur in the last story, but he wasn't Murmur. The man in front of me had a wider face and a sharper nose and chin. Actually, he wouldn't have looked anything like Evander if it weren't for the shape of his eyes. They gave it away. However, his expression was completely foreign to me.

"My name is Valance Marr," he said, his tone distinct and strange, almost like he wasn't used to speaking. "There are clothes in the chest. Pick and take whatever you want. This will be your room. In this kingdom, you will be a lady. Whatever witchcraft you know, abandon it straightway. I won't tolerate it. Do what I say and I will protect you."

I knew my eyes were huge as I looked up at him. I couldn't help it. I felt like a bug being

pinned to a board.

“Tonight there is a feast to celebrate one of my victories. You will be there... with me.”

“All because you *think* I’m beautiful?” I asked, my voice trembling to a warble.

His expression was perplexed. “Don’t you know what you look like?”

I shook my head.

From off his back, Valance took his shield and handed it to me. It was oval-shaped with a cross in the middle. In two adjacent corners, the metal was black, like his armor, but in the two opposite corners, the metal was clear and unspotted—like a mirror. I looked at myself.

“What has Evander thought up this time?” I said out loud. Valance didn’t seem to notice, like some of the characters in the other story whenever I spoke of reality.

I’d already seen my marvelous red hair, but without the blotches on my face, I seemed to have been gifted different skin. It was pale with cherry kisses coloring my cheeks. My lips were scarlet, and as I pressed them together I saw and felt that the shade was natural. My eyes were my own color, but with that hair and skin with those arched eyebrows over-top, I looked like a completely different creature.

And suddenly, I got what Evander was trying to say. When I was so pretty on the outside, it didn’t matter to Valance what I was like on the inside. He only wanted me because of that creamy skin and that rapturous hair. He probably wouldn’t even bother to talk to me. As long as I did what he said, he didn’t even need me to think. Just be pretty. Could any woman of spirit stand to live that way?

“Thank you,” I whispered politely and gave the shield back to Valance.

He took it from me with a strong arm and shouldered it. “Get dressed.”

Yeah, I understood him.

I turned around to open the chest and found myself back in my own room in my shabby apartment. The moment when I got back to reality was always a shock to me. In my mind, I had been gone for two days. According to the red digital clock propped up beside my bed, it had only been about two hours.

Chapter Eleven

He Wore Bells

The next day was Friday and I got a special call from Emi asking if I could watch Paisley that night. Apparently, Vincent was flying in and since she hadn't seen him in weeks, she wanted me to babysit so she could have a date with him. So, I found myself sitting at their kitchen table at ten-thirty that night looking at my math homework with dismay and waiting anxiously for either Emi and Vincent or Evander to get home.

Eleven o'clock chimed on the clock. No one had come and I still didn't understand my homework. I was about to close my textbooks when Evander came sauntering in.

"Thank Heaven," I said weakly when he strode through the door.

For a second, it looked like he didn't understand why I was there and then he suddenly seemed to clue in. "Emi's not home. Paisley's asleep and you're waiting for me so you can go home," he deduced like he was Sherlock Holmes.

"Brilliant deduction," I said as I heaved my backpack onto the table.

He picked up my math textbook. "I remember this one. Are you getting good grades?"

I stuck out my tongue, took it away from him, and stowed it in my bag. "Not so much."

"I did well in that class. Do you want me to help you?" he suddenly volunteered.

I hesitated. My brain felt like tapioca and he wanted to turn it into a functioning circuit board? It seemed impossible.

"Besides," he continued. "It would be better to wait for Vincent and Emi to get home anyway. Then I could drive you."

I didn't feel like doing any more homework. I wouldn't be able to understand two words he spoke together if one of them was hypotenuse, but whatever. Even if I ended up looking stupid, one of my fantasies had come true. I nodded. I set my books back on the table and he started going over the problems I had struggled with, which had been pretty much all of them.

I wanted to get through his tutoring by smiling and nodding and saying, "Oh, that's how that works?" But he wouldn't let me. He made me pay attention. He asked me questions and explained it sensibly until even my fried brain cells were forced to comply.

When we had finished four problems, he stopped and said, "Let's take a break. You look exhausted."

"I am. I already worked on this stuff for hours before you rescued me. You're really good at it. What are you taking in college?"

He got up and took one of Emi's flavored water drinks out of the fridge. He offered me one and opened the lid of his. "I'm not taking anything."

"Really? I thought you were."

"I'm enrolled in classes, if that's what you mean, and I go. If I keep going, I'll end up an architect."

"So enthusiastic!" I beamed sarcastically.

He favored me with a half-smile. "I know. I just haven't figured out what life has to offer me."

I stared at him. "What does that mean?"

He looked at me wistfully, "Have you ever heard the expression, 'start with the end in mind?'"

"It's all over my high school."

“Yeah. I can’t get it out of my head. I like to write and whenever I write a story, the ending is the most important part. At every moment of the story, I’m driving toward the endpoint—the final moment. The problem is when I think of my own life and make myself the protagonist, I can’t figure out where I want to go.” He laughed. “I can’t even imagine myself being old. What about you? Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Like what?”

“I think I’d like to go to a foreign country like Korea or Japan and teach English. Then there’s a big part of me that would like to take cooking and learn to make buttery pastries, but in the back of my mind, I think I’ll never break away from wiping runny noses. I can always get a job in a daycare.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Not as much as you’d think. I like getting hugs and it makes me feel good to be the one who cares about a kid when they’re having trouble getting love.”

His face fell.

Did I say something wrong? Surprisingly, I didn’t feel like asking. Instead, I just pretended I didn’t notice something was bothering him. “What high school did you go to? Maybe I’m going to the same one?”

“No,” Evander said quickly. “I grew up in Vancouver.”

“You must have really wanted to come to Edmonton for school then. The weather here is crappy compared to the coast.”

He exhaled impatiently. “I don’t care about any of that. Actually, Emi and Vincent came for my high school graduation and after the ceremony, Emi asked me about my plans. I told her and she was so... infuriated with me that she basically kidnapped me.”

“What?” I gasped. “That sounds—”

“Unbelievable. I know.”

“I was going to say, it sounds like her. What were your plans?”

His eyes were steady and his voice bland as he answered. “To get drunk off my ass and drive my car into the harbor.”

I didn’t move a muscle. He wasn’t joking. I gulped in my breath and asked bravely, “You couldn’t think of one thing that was worth living for?”

“No. I still can’t.”

“But you’re so smart and...” I stammered. It sounded inadequate.

He put up his hand. “Spare me. Emi tries to pump me up like that all the time. I’m so smart. I’m so handsome. I’m such a nice guy. Those kinds of things don’t make the dagger that hangs over my head disappear. The truth is I’m demented. Can’t you tell? And if you can, then why on earth did you agree to go on a date with me?”

I got up from the table and with slow even steps, I brought myself beside him. “I wanted to go with you.”

“Right,” he snorted, turning his head away. “You didn’t know it was me calling that night you accidentally teased me. When you found out it *was* me, you must have felt like you would be out of a job if you refused.”

“I didn’t feel like that.”

He scoffed, “Sure you didn’t.”

I felt like a bomb was fizzing in my stomach and either the fuse would fizzle or there would be an explosion in my gut. Could I let the moment go? Sorely tempted, though I was, I could just

prattle off the same things Emi did. That would be the easy way out, but if I wanted to take the easy way out then why did I keep reading his book when it put me in the emergency room? It was easier in the book. There I could say anything. But what was the difference? In the *real* world, I could say anything. That was the truth.

My heart beat like furiously beating wings and I let the words loose like a cage full of doves—they would go where they were meant to go. “You know, I’m not less attracted to you because of what you’ve told me tonight.”

“You should be. Self-destructive guys shouldn’t be attractive to you. You should know better than that.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed his shoulder. “I didn’t say I was *more* attracted to you. If you think it’s a big secret that you’re depressed, you’re wrong. I already knew.”

He shook off my hand and walked away.

I turned my back to him and put my hands on the edge of the kitchen sink. I took the stainless steel edge in my hand and stretched my back. Had I made a mistake? It had taken such courage to say what I said and there was no reward. Shouldn’t we have bonded? I felt further away from him than before. What had I done wrong?

I stood up straight and looked into the backyard. Then I felt something brush my ear and something pressed into the back pocket of my jeans. Evander’s lips were by my ear and he was whispering. “Take this,” he said. “I really want you to have it.”

Then, for the briefest of seconds, he wrapped his arm around my waist and rested his cheek on the back of my head. My heart fluttered and then he pulled away. I heard him on the stairs, going back down to his lair.

From my back pocket, I retrieved Evander’s green iPod and out the back window, the garage light came on. Emi and Vincent were back.

Kalavan pressed tirelessly through the woods in pursuit. He knew how fast Valance liked to ride and keeping pace on foot through the foliage was quite a task. Kalavan anathematized himself every step of the way. Why hadn’t he realized Serissa was following him when he left the hut? Standing beside her was like standing in the midst of the rose maze enigma. She was scented like a rose. Her mother hadn’t sought to alienate her by making her smell like stink-weed, probably because it was impossible. And him? Ha! He thought he had seen through her mother’s spells and seen the mystery behind them. He had seen nothing. He only saw that glamor was there. He hadn’t even envisioned what she would be like if it were gone—totally vulnerable. Beautiful? Yes... but fragile like spun glass. And he hadn’t protected her!

*Crystal ball, in my hand
Whose love will I demand?
Whose love will be most grand?
Whose got red in every strand?
Who no charm can withstand?
Who armies cannot command
And disappear like blowing sand.*

Kalavan finally understood what the charm he had recited to gain focus really meant. The

poem had a hint about his reward if he pursued his fate without fault. The poem had so few hints as to where to find her, but there was the color red. The daughter of the Red Thorn. She was a woman who couldn't be won by a crown, or military might, who was precious and elusive. He had foolishly left her because he believed her fate in the capital would be too difficult for her to bear. All he thought as he slipped away that morning was that he would return for her when everything was finished, but he realized he had been tricked. She was his love—his reward if he embraced his destiny fearlessly. And he had let her slip through his grasp like falling sand.

He ran after them and watched her red hair like a flag to lead him onward, through the sharp branches and across the uneven ground.

The capital loomed ahead. Everything was clear, Valance planned to take her to the feast that night. Kalavan winced. His performance was obligatory. Conquest always required him and his mouth was full of poison, but he could not spit it out. The time wasn't right.

I paused. What did he mean? His mouth was full of poison? That man had better mean metaphorically, or else! Wait. I suddenly realized that pausing in my reading always took me away from the printed page and into the story.

I was suddenly striding down a corridor filled with many women dressed in their finest robes. I noticed a distinct contrast between what they were wearing and what I was wearing. Their clothes were white linen that had been decorated in brightly colored floss and ribbon. Mine was deep red, such a deep wine color that it was almost purple. I stared down at it. Did they even have dye to make purple in the dark ages? On my head was a metal circlet with jewels stringing down and mingling with my hair. And on my middle finger was one of the hugest and shiniest gemstones I had ever seen. It was even heavy.

Within a moment I was walking into the courtyard and into the midst of an outdoor feast. Valance found me immediately and though he was not wearing full armor any longer, he still wore a black breastplate and a sword at his side. Upon my arrival, he grasped my waist and crushed me to his side. Then I was indiscreetly manhandled and placed at a seat of obvious importance by Valance's side with only him between me and the King. I tried to remember what Kalavan had told me about King Pevinore. He wasn't the real one. He was only a Duke who had been left unsupervised so long he started calling himself King. Valance sat at his right side. He must be his most honored knight or his son. I didn't know.

The chair I sat in was high-backed and beautifully carved out of dark wood. I allowed myself to sink into it and catch my breath. It was then I realized everyone had their eyes fixed on me. Everyone at my table stared at me. In fact, everyone was staring at me: people speaking in tight knots, those lingering behind tables, those occupying lines of tables below, even servants dashing left and right. All of them were staring at me. Instantly, I straightened my back.

Valance was speaking to the King and I overheard him say, "Can you believe they were going to burn her as a witch?"

The King looked at me. I was appalled at the way his eyes lingered primarily on my chest, which I noticed (to my horror) wasn't covered as I would have liked. "Would have been a shame," he said, practically licking his lips.

I felt like retching, but I realized something about him and the distraction helped me tame my gag reflex. He had dark brown hair. He had a beard that was quite long and the crown on his head had jewels in it the size of Easter eggs, but under it all—he looked strikingly like Vincent and Evander together. He was older. His face looked worn and slightly haggard, but there it was.

At his side, I saw a woman. She had stringy blonde hair, faded blue eyes, and zillions of pucker marks around her mouth like she'd been smoking since she was eight. Her skin was gray

and her expression was a mixture of fatigue and boredom. She didn't acknowledge King Pevinore's lustful gaze in my direction, though I was sure she had noticed his indiscretion. Instead, she ordered around the serving boys and instructed lamps lit and fires nourished. Then I saw something strange. She spat something black into a white cloth. That was what Hilda had done in the last story.

Kalavan said his mouth was full of poison, but he couldn't spit it out yet. Were the two things related?

Food was served shortly thereafter. Valance was served a goose drumstick that appeared to have been smothered and roasted in fat. I was served one too, but it looked undercooked with blood leaking onto the plate. I took a pear from a large serving bowl and started eating while Valance tore his meat from the bone. A gob of fatty skin got stuck to his stubbly cheek and gravity worked on it until it had almost fallen off the edge of his chin.

Disgusted, I wondered if that was the best entertainment they had in the dark ages, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kalavan. He was sitting on the edge of the largest of the bonfires, tuning a lute. He wore the oddest outfit. A diamond pattern crossed his chest and arms. It was green and gold and very tight. So tight, you could see every contour of his calf and thigh muscles. He wore a tunic over-top that went mid-thigh, which was lucky because I didn't think his tights could have concealed much. His arms were covered with that same green and gold check. It was a jester costume. His hair was long in the front and the caramel strands fell down his cheek to his chin cutting across his eyes, so his nose and mouth peeked out of the curtain of his hair. I never realized Evander had such a beautiful nose. It almost tilted up at the end. I wondered too how I had never noticed how handsome his lips were. They were slightly open for breath, soft and supplicating above his freshly shaven chin.

A woman should not be attracted to a jester rather than a knight—understandably. Women have been famous for wanting men with power, but after witnessing the glutton beside me, Kalavan looked positively civilized and not like a fool at all. Once he started to perform my opinion would probably change. I didn't like it when people did self-deprecating things. It either made me feel sorry for them or it made me want to slap them and force them to salvage their pride.

I noticed his eyes on me. Our eyes met and locked. For a second I wondered if he were using magic like he had with the gold dust. A longing for him was growing in the base of my stomach and I knew my fantasies could no longer consist of him sitting next to me on the bus. Evander's book was warping my mind.

He didn't break eye contact, but he set down his instrument and put on his hat. It was made of donkey hide, and in a second I realized that it had three donkey ears. Each one had a bell on the end and dangled over his face. When he got up I saw he had more bells jangling on his ankles and another set in a loop hanging from his belt. He came before the King to perform.

I was positively bewildered when he started to sing nursery rhymes and even more lost when Valance beside me started to tap his foot and sing along between mouthfuls of meat. They were singing *A Song of Sixpence*. He went on for about a dozen songs before the King got up and silenced Kalavan. He turned to me and practically roared, "Don't you like our songs?"

I sputtered. "They're wonderful."

"Then why do you have that look on your face?"

"I... uh... I ..."

"Are you a songstress as well as a witch?"

I glanced at the knight beside me to see if he would defend me. He showed no such

inclination. My eyes sought out Kalavan, but to my surprise, he was picking berries off someone's plate and throwing them up in the air to catch them in his mouth. Such was the lot of a jester! He didn't even stop to listen to the King and from everyone's expressions, it didn't even look like he was expected to.

"My apologies if I seemed bored," I said with more pluck than was possible in the real world. "I was raised on these tunes. They are old fashioned to me."

"My jester wrote that one last autumn," King Pevinore barked.

I smirked. Like hell he did.

"Fine, little witch. Impress me. Join the fool and entertain us. Sing something we've never heard before. If you can, I'll give you this jewel," he said, taking a ring off the pinky finger of his own wife and tossing it on the table.

"And if I can't?"

"We'll try you for witchcraft," he threatened.

I got up and went to the middle of the floor and stood by Kalavan. "What's a witchcraft trial like?" I hissed as quietly as possible.

"I can't tell you," he murmured.

"Why not?" I asked, pretending to buy time by rearranging the folds of my skirt.

"It would ruin your performance. Sing well. I'll try to accompany you."

I stood there for a second and thought hard. I didn't know any songs that might appeal to the crowd. I was sure they would curse me for singing anything with a hip hop beat, and if I sang almost anything contemporary the sensual undertones would sound like an open invitation to any man who was listening. Those men didn't seem to possess a great deal of self-control in my view. Then out of the dark recesses of my brain, I remembered the score to *The Last Unicorn*. Granted that was more seventies-style than anything else, but the lyrics might lend some appeal. So I hummed a little to get the melody and then I started singing the title track.

The King and the others looked mystified. My voice bounced around on the stone walls of the castle and vibrated down into the heart of everyone who listened. I could tell I was a great success. Kalavan brushed the strings of his instrument in time and though it didn't sound the same as the movie soundtrack, it sounded excellent. I let the last note linger and then abruptly cut my voice. Then I stood perfectly still and waited for the King's answer.

"Fool," he called. "Take her the ring and put it on her finger."

The Queen looked mildly annoyed, but possessing great internal strength, she turned and spat into her handkerchief. Then it came to me. She didn't care what he did. She was dying and she knew it.

Kalavan took the ring and bounced like he was made of rubber to my side where he clutched my hand and whispered in my ear, "Don't wear this ring and don't let Pevinore see you barehanded. Cover your hands with your sleeves each time you see him."

I nodded and stuffed my hands up my sleeves with the ring pressed into my left palm. Then I went back to Valance's side.

"Are you sure you're not a witch?" Valance said bending toward me and practically sticking his tongue in my ear.

"I'm not a witch," I answered calmly, stifling the urge to dry my ear. Truly, the knight was nauseating and my only ray of light was a fool.

The rest of Kalavan's performance was more interesting than the first half. Once people finished eating, they began drinking and Kalavan had changed his costume. Now he wore a black fitted outfit that was very much like his green and gold one, but with one marked difference. The

new one had a section attached to the back that he could pull over his head and around his waist in two swift movements. The first movement pulled a wig over his head and the next gave him a skirt. With his costume, he played both the male and the female lead of a one-act play. For the woman's character, he raised the pitch of this voice a couple of octaves and twirled his wig. For the male character, he acted exactly like Valance, which I thought should have earned him jail time (mocking a knight so), but he was only laughed at. When what I thought was a comedy ended in tragedy (his wig and skirt lay "dying" on one side of the hall and he on the other side, dying his own death and grieving over his dead love), the King rocked with laughter and was first to lead the applause.

Then Valance leaned over to me again and said, "Tomorrow the friar will marry us."

I winced. Why would he want to marry me? I could be burned as a witch at any moment. But I refused to be stupid. He didn't care if I died. He had rescued me simply to blackmail me into having a sexual relationship with him and if I died some unspecified time after the wedding, it was no skin off his nose. As long as he got to haul me off to his bed, he didn't care what happened afterward.

I turned to him and said shyly, "I need tomorrow to get rid of my mother's things."

"What *things*?" he asked rudely.

"You told me to abandon my mother's things relating to witchcraft. Give me tomorrow to do it."

He nodded and then said, "Don't burn them in your room. Find somewhere else to do it."

"I will."

I leaned back in my chair and wondered if I would be safe in my room that night. Valance might leave me alone until after the wedding, which I planned never to attend, but I had an icky feeling that the King wouldn't. According to Valance, there was only one night where I would be sleeping alone, so it was the perfect chance for the King to make his move. Since I couldn't exit the book anytime I wanted, I had to come up with a plan.

When I was taken back to my room, I bolted the door as carefully as possible, but who knew if it would hold if Pevinore wanted entrance. He might know another way into the room, or perhaps he knew a trick to unlatch the bolt. I felt unsafe just standing there. After thinking it over for a while, I took two of the blankets and a pillow off the bed and climbed the bedpost until I was on top. My guess was right. The canopy of the bed was solid wood and definitely strong enough to support my weight. I pulled the bed curtains shut from the top to make it look like I was asleep inside, and then settled myself somewhat uncomfortably in the alcove. The edges of the canopy were tall enough to hide me. Hopefully, it would be enough.

I tried to wind down and sleep. I kept telling myself over and over again that nothing could be as bad as the night I tried to sleep on the boat with the dead capricorn rotting outside. I groaned. Who was I kidding? The wooden canopy was like a bike rack, with bikes in it, and I was lying on top.

I had no idea what time it was when I heard stone scratched against stone. I peeked over the side in the darkness. The light from the window illuminated the door. It hadn't moved. From the darkness, in the corner of my room, the King came creeping. I put my head down. I thought I could hear him licking his lips again. He parted the bed curtain.

My heartbeat and breath seemed so loud, especially the blood gushing in and out of my ears. I had to steady myself. He couldn't hear them.

"Serissa," his voice came. "Where are you?" He sounded like one of those nursery rhymes. When the bed was empty, he stamped his foot and flew into a rage. "Where are you?" he howled.

He checked the chest at the end of my bed. He tore my bed to pieces, making a mess of the bedclothes until I saw white feathers rise up into the air. Then he scrambled to the corner where my washing stand was. Angry, he disappeared back down the hole he crawled up from.

I didn't leave my perch, and when I woke up, I was in the real world.

Chapter Twelve

Path of Empty Roses

That Sunday, Rachel came over. She was wearing a short ash blonde wig with bangs and a little upturn in the back. In actuality, it looked more like her own hair than anything I'd seen her wear since she left home.

I walked in and put my hand on her head. "Can I try it on?"

She flicked my hand away and turned the page of her magazine. "Next time. I only got it yesterday."

I sat on the couch beside her feet and looked at the cover of what she was reading. It was a magazine on crocheting hats and the only price I could see on it was listed in British pounds. "Do you know how to do that?" I asked.

"Nope, but I'm gonna learn."

Mom came into the living room and collected her keys and purse. "I'm going to work," she said as she waved to us. "Bye."

As soon as she was gone and the sound of her footsteps faded, Rachel closed her magazine and announced, "I got a phone call from Carly."

I gasped. We hadn't heard from her in months. "Is she okay?"

"I'm not sure. She told me she's staying in Vancouver and she wants me to gather some of her stuff together and send it to her on the Greyhound."

"Don't send her anything!" I shrieked. "Tell her to come home."

"I already tried that. She won't budge. She says she's in love."

I groaned. "With who?"

Rachel set her jaw. "Sarah, you can't tell mom any of this. Not even that Carly is in Vancouver. You promise you won't tell her a thing?"

"Yeah, but why?"

"I think the guy is married. From the sounds of it, he's old enough to have a kid older than you."

I gasped again.

"So, *I'm* going to Vancouver," she continued. "I'm getting on a bus this afternoon, and I'm going to bring her back—kicking and screaming—whatever."

"Why don't you want me to tell mom?"

"Because," Rachel said, "she'd want to come, but I think having her there would just make things worse. But even if I'm going to go do this by myself, I still want someone to know where I'm going and what I'm doing in case I have any trouble. I should be able to meet her at the bus station when she goes to pick up her package. I'll have my cell phone with me."

"Okay." I nodded.

"Get her bed ready. I'm bringing her back." Rachel got up and put her shoes on.

I stood there, stunned. No one in our family had ever done anything remotely brave before. My mom had never gone hunting for Carly when she didn't come home. At least, not any further than going to 118 Avenue to stop her from acting like a streetwalker. Rachel was going to a province she'd never been to before, to a city she'd never been to before, just to pick her up.

I hugged my oldest sister tightly and said goodbye. "Phone me a lot."

"I will. Promise to put your book down when I call. When you read that thing, you're like a

zombie.”

“I’ll only read after ten o’clock,” I promised, thinking of the dangers of being comatose when Rachel called with news.

She nodded and left. I couldn’t get over how impressed I was with her. I wanted to be like that too. What would it be like to be the kind of person who would put themselves out on a limb for a person they loved? What would that be like? Could I ever be like that?

After my mother got home and I was confident I had the time to spare, I picked up the book to read again.

Word spread that Valance Marr was going to wed Serissa Red Thorn. Kalavan felt melancholy and sickly as he donned his ridiculous costume for the day. The only fortunate outcome he could latch onto was the fact that Valance wouldn’t give King Pevinore access to his wife, so in that way, she would be safe, but in another way, she would be in more danger. How could being that bloody knight’s wife be an improvement to her situation? It was lust that inspired Valance and what would happen when that lust was quenched? She would burn as a witch.

Kalavan should have stayed in her house with her in the midst of those rose bushes. He should have stayed with her and abandoned his quest—his right. The taunting cry ‘bastard’ didn’t even sound in his ears anymore. It was only when faced with the reality of losing Serissa, did past ridicule lose its sting.

Kalavan looked at himself in his mirror. His face was gray because he felt ill. He didn’t want to show his face to anyone that day. Beside his mirror was a piece of gnarled wood that had foreign branches grafted in. Different varieties of branches stuck into the main trunk that had been stripped of its bark ages before. Protruding from it was a birch branch, an oak branch, a poplar branch, a beech branch, one that had been cut from an apple tree, and another one that had been cut from a tree Kalavan did not know. From each of them hung a different mask. Three were white. One smiled, one frowned, and the last one had a beak. Another one was a facade made to impersonate a knight’s visor. Yet another one was painted half gold and half white with red lips. He used it sometimes to make himself into a woman when he performed. But the last one was his favorite. It was metallic red with cardinal feathers. It was for playing Mephisto—the Devil. But he hadn’t used it, yet. The performance to which it belonged hadn’t happened and thus far it had never been seen by the court. It hung from the unknown branch.

Understanding his mood, Kalavan took the white smiling face. To him, it smiled so broadly it was grotesque. Nevertheless, he tied it on so that the strap hung on his ears, put on his hat, grabbed his lute, and went out to find his master. At least when he played the fool he could hide his face.

I woke up on top of the bed frame achy and uncomfortable. The morning sun shone through the stained glass window. What was beautiful yesterday was disconcerting today. I let myself down the bedpost. When I had my feet on the floor, I went to the chest and lifted the lid. Searching, I found a dress that seemed less conspicuous than the one I had unwittingly worn the night before. It was plain black velvet with a golden rope for the belt. I put it on but found myself distinctly uncomfortable in the clothes. Why were they even available? Were they just sitting in the guest room, waiting for Valance to choose a bride? I shook off the thought, picked up my hammock, and went out of the room in search of Kalavan.

There weren't many people mingling in the corridors that morning, and I found myself almost entirely alone making my way through the castle. I went down the main staircase, where I had already walked three times, but since I didn't find Kalavan, I had to keep looking. I went down a hallway and then down another and found myself in a private garden. It was empty. I moved on. Then I scaled up one staircase and then thundered down another one. Before half an hour was up, I was desperately lost.

But then, I spotted someone. Sitting on a strange stone ledge on the far side of a sunken garden full of orange rose bushes was a man dressed in ridiculous mustard-colored trousers. Turning my head, I saw the rest of his outfit. It had to be him. If only I could get to him, but there weren't any entrances, and even though I could see him all the time across the courtyard, I couldn't get there. I found myself a floor up, but no closer to him. I looked down at him from the gallery above.

Finally, I lost my cool and shouted, "Kalavan, how do I get to you?"

His face jerked up, and I saw he was still wearing the white smiling mask.

He didn't reply, but instead, put his hands up like a mime. He made a crazy sign beside his head with his fingers and then made a little walking gesture on his palm. He didn't need to talk. According to him, I was crazy and all I needed to do was walk to him.

"Don't mime at me in that tone of voice!" I yelled.

He made signs as if to say, "Come over here and we'll fight about it."

I was getting frustrated and after a minute of walking, I found myself exactly where I was when I found him the first time. He was still sitting in the exact same place picking out a tune on the strings of his lute like he didn't care about anything, especially time. I had had enough.

Looking down at the courtyard, I could easily see it wasn't a place where people walked or where they were meant to go. It didn't even look like the dirt the plants were growing in was on the ground. Instead, it looked like the castle had been built and someone brought in the dirt to turn a tiny break in the turrets into a big flower pot or window box. What was growing in it wasn't overly pleasant either. It looked like it was built with exactly the kind of magic Surrey would have liked. There were no footpaths. Mazes of thorny apricot-colored roses grew and reached toward heaven. In the center of the thick bushes was a fountain that spread out like a flower with five points. Rising up from the middle was the statue of a man. It was only his torso and arms; his head was gone. In one hand was a golden trumpet. I stared. Somehow the horn looked significant because it didn't match the stone of the carving.

I shook my head. It didn't matter. I dropped my bag on the granite floor and threw my leg over the balcony. I could get through the rose bushes. It was the only way I could get to Kalavan.

When he finally took notice of what I was doing, I had already got my other leg over and was about to jump feet first into the thorny mess. Immediately, he took off his mask and broke his silence. "What do you think you're doing?"

"None of your business," I snapped. "You wouldn't help me when I asked. Now I'll do things my way."

"But it's enchanted," he pointed out stupidly. At least I thought he sounded stupid.

"Yeah, and being the daughter of a witch who specialized in this sort of thing wouldn't help me in the least?" I dropped down and he lost sight of me, but I could still see him perfectly through the thorny stems.

He was freaking out. It was really adorable to watch. I had fallen through a clearing and hadn't even snagged my dress, but he was pacing back and forth like a madman. Within a minute he was raking at his hair. Then I realized something I hadn't before. I thought that his hair was

intentionally cut in a wedge. He had done nothing of the sort. His hair had been long and tied into a low ponytail, like Tremor's in the last story. It looked like he had taken a knife to it and cut it off close to his neck. It seemed more like an act of self-mutilation than an actual haircut.

I shook my head. It was another symptom of how depressed Evander was. He couldn't live like that in reality—butcher his hair. It would raise attention he didn't want, so instead of acting out in real life, he wrote it out in his book. I had to change his mind. I had to figure out what was bothering him and help him.

Reaching out, I touched one of the silky blossoms. Men hated flowers as gifts, but there was nothing else nearby to give him to show him my sincerity. I broke one off at the stem and the stem broke instantly when I picked the rose. There were thorns, but I didn't feel them. Stepping forward, I picked another one and another one. Somehow there was enough room for me to step forward again and again, even though the bushes appeared too dense. It was magic.

The thorny stalks arched over my head and covered me from Kalavan's view. I could still see him, but it was obvious from the way his eyes searched that he couldn't see me.

"Are you really all right down there?" he called expectantly.

"I'm fine," I called back, trying hard to make my voice sound merry. "So, tell me. Why did you cut your hair?"

He gawked in disbelief. "You're asking me about that now?"

"Why not now?"

"It doesn't seem right." He wrung his hands. "Do you even know where you are?"

"I'm in the rose garden."

"If only it were that simple. You are in the midst of the King's private rose garden. It's forbidden for anyone to come here. That is why there is no way in and it's too overgrown for a person to walk through. I can't believe you are actually making progress. Are you bleeding?"

"Not yet. Why is it forbidden?"

"Because our King is not really the King. This Kingdom is a Dukedom and the lands technically belong to King Author. We are meant to be ruled by him, but our Duke was greedy and when there was a lapse in communication, he took over and crowned himself King Pevinore."

"That doesn't explain why this place is off-limits." I had so many blossoms in my hand at that point, it was hard to hold them all.

"The trumpet the statue holds is Duke Pevinore's method of communication with King Author. It was fashioned by the Great Wizard Berlin himself. If someone were to blow that, the King's armies would come instantly."

"So, the trumpet is protected from use by these magical roses?"

"Exactly."

"Hmmm..." I said as I suddenly found myself at the half-way point through the courtyard and standing exactly in front of the fountain and the statue. "Should I blow it?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Maybe if I called King Author's whole army and told him what the traitorous Duke Pevinore is doing, he'll reward me and I won't have to marry Valance. Do you think that will work?"

"No," Kalavan said frankly. "I don't."

"Why not?"

He hesitated, and even though there was a clearing in the bushes and he could see me, he wasn't looking at me. Then his eyes met mine across the distance. His expression was miserable and his lips were dry. "Because even if he would save you from Valance... the King... the King

Author has no queen.”

I wanted to answer him and say something self-deprecating about how King Author wouldn't want me, but it wouldn't work. Kalavan wouldn't laugh. He wouldn't add a faint insult to mine by saying there was no accounting for taste or even make an unrelated joke to diffuse the tension. He believed that every man who saw me would want me and if he rigged this world to operate that way, I just had to take it as part of the story. So, I didn't degrade myself but only looked at him intently, taking everything he said seriously.

He continued. “Don't blow the horn. If you don't want to marry Valance, I'll figure out a way to stop it from happening.”

“How?” I asked as I added another rose to my bouquet and took another step closer to him.

He shook his head wearily. “I'll think of something.”

It was quiet as I continued through the thicket of thatched thorns. Then I thought I would try again. “Did you cut your own hair or did someone do it for you?”

I watched him as he let his head fall back against the stone pillar in a gesture of pure misery. Then his lethargic hand stopped its strumming and he pulled his ghoulishly smiling mask over his face, but I heard his voice clearly. “Someone else cut it the first time. I have done it myself since then. I wouldn't want to be mistaken for someone else.”

“I would,” I said candidly.

He didn't move. “Then I'll dress you up like someone else and take you out of the castle.”

“Where will you take me?” I asked as I took the final step up to the wall to stand directly beneath him.

Kalavan turned and let his hand fall down as if to help me up. “Back where you came from.”

I withdrew my hand. “I don't want to go back there.”

“Would you rather marry Valance?”

“No, but...”

“There aren't a lot of choices here,” he said dryly. He turned and looked at me. I could see his eyes through the slits in the porcelain. They were shrouded in darkness.

“This was more fun when you were in love with me,” I said wickedly. “What happened?”

His mouth stalled, but his eyes regarded me gravely. When he finally did speak, his words made his breathing become ragged. “When haven't I been in love with you? I'm just not free to act on it.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled him clean off the wall and into the rose bushes with me. He fell with a thud. The grass didn't grow thick since the roses blocked the sun. We both went tumbling down in the black dirt. When we were finally still, I had his head on my lap, which was quite soft with all my petticoats. He gazed upward at the canopy of roses. I didn't take off his mask, but instead brought his head close to mine and whispered in his ear. “Who cut your hair?”

With the mask on his inhibitions withered away and he answered me. “Valance.”

“Why?”

“He did it the day he had me declared a bastard. Eventually, his mother became the new Duchess. Fat lot of good it will do him though. His mother is dying.”

I hesitated. It sounded an awful lot like the situation from the last story. “Your mother was the Duchess?”

“Yes, and now I am nothing.” He crushed the material of my skirt in his fist. “Cloth like this isn't common here. How do you like my mother's dress?”

“This belonged to her?” I cried, pulling the mask off his face.

He was wroth. “Who else has clothes like these?”

“How should I know? I didn’t know it belonged to her. Here, I’ll take it off.” I reached for one of the ties when he put his hand on mine.

“You don’t need to go that far. Your feelings are enough.” He sat up. His fingers touched my neck and collarbone for a moment before he brought his lips down on mine.

At that moment, a bell went off that at first sounded like an alarm bell, like Kalavan and I had been caught in the forbidden garden. Then I realized he didn’t hear it. His lips kissed mine fast like he had to kiss every bit of my mouth. The sound was from the real world. In the next second, I was in my own bed listening to the phone ring beside my ear. For some reason, the ringing hadn’t woken my mother, but it woke me. I snatched it up.

It was Rachel. “Sarah, it’s me.”

“Thank goodness. Is everything okay?”

“Sort of. I made it to Vancouver safely and all that, and Carly came to get her package just like she was supposed to. She’s staying in a hostel, so I’m going to sleep there tonight. There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

Rachel’s voice sounded scratchy on the other end of the line. “She says she won’t come home.”

Chapter Thirteen

Behind His Mask

After that, I didn't have much chance to read. My schoolwork was suffering and for once, I couldn't blame my inability to pay attention entirely on Evander. I was tied up in knots thinking about Rachel in Vancouver. It wasn't that I hadn't been worried about Carly before, because no matter what mess she used to make for herself, she was always invincible. Bullets used to bounce off her.

Carly was three years older than me and would have graduated from high school the same year as Evander. When I was a kid, I looked up to her. It was easy to look up to her. She was courageous, beautiful, powerful, and completely unstoppable. It was a blow when I finally figured out she was crazy and help was the last thing she wanted. Sometimes she slept on soggy mattresses completely unsheltered in the river valley in the summer. Once in a while, she even wheeled a grocery cart around the city like a homeless person. She had friends who looked and acted even crazier than she did. I didn't understand her relationship with those people. Were they her friends? Were they her drug dealers? I wouldn't have put anything past Carly. She would try anything and have the nerve to laugh about it afterward like everything was a joke—even if she got burned.

Then she disappeared. In some ways, it was easier to have her gone. When Carly lived with us she fought with my mom on repeat about the same things over and over again until I felt like my brain would explode just listening. There wasn't anywhere to hide in a single bedroom apartment.

"Finish high school!" my mom would scream.

"It's boring," Carly would answer, before taking a drag on her smoke.

My mom would snatch the cigarette out of her mouth and smother it in a nearby supper dish.

Carly got some kind of buzz from arguing with mom. It wasn't like it did her any good. It wasn't like mom had unreasonable rules or set unreachable standards. She even didn't care if Carly smoked as long as it was outside the apartment. It was like Carly wanted to break herself against a wall and the truth was my mother didn't have the energy to be the barrier that held her in.

"I don't care what you do anymore," mom said weakly after a fight that lasted until three in the morning.

A week later Carly disappeared. We told the police. It was on the news a few times before one of Carly's friends got in touch with us (not to tell us where she went) but to tell us that she wasn't dead. She just didn't want to talk to us. I thought it was because she was secretly disappointed mom gave in.

And me? I worried Rachel would be forced to leave Vancouver without her because she might. If Rachel stayed too long, she could lose her job. Rachel was a saint for going to save her, but her sacrifice did not mean Carly would realize her error. Rachel might get bit, and like a dog, Carly would come home when she was ready.

One night when I was babysitting Paisley, I couldn't calm her down. I sat in her room rocking her back and forth until I thought my job required earplugs when Evander came in. He noticed there was a problem when the crying wouldn't stop. He called Emi, asked her what to do, and came bearing Tylenol. A half an hour later, Paisley fell asleep, so I watched TV with Evander

until Emi came home.

On Thursday night, he asked me for a date for that Saturday. Then he helped me with my math homework. I was in heaven.

That Friday night, I finally got a chance to read again.

Kalavan took Serissa's hand and together they walked back through the bushes to the place where Serissa had fallen into the garden. He heaved her up on his shoulders and put her back up on the wall. It had been his intent to go back to collect his lute from his perch, but as he turned toward the bushes, the path was completely sealed up. There was no parting in the vines for him to pass through. Since he had no choice, he turned back to Serissa and took her extended hand, preparing for all that would follow. The consequences might be unbearable, but he would stand by her. He even wished there would be no escape, if only they could be together.

Once he was on the wall he hefted her hammock-bag on his shoulder and the secret roses inside scratched him with their thorns through the loose weave. Then he took her hand and led her through strange concealed corridors to fetch his lute. He showed her that without his help, she never would have made it to him through the castle without passing through the forbidden rose garden. Lute retrieved, they traversed the long path to his chamber. He had no idea where else to take her. She said she needed to be rid of her mother's books. Well, he knew what to do with those.

Inside his room, they didn't talk. She lay down on his bed and seemed to fall asleep almost immediately. The previous night could not have been easy for her if she could sleep like that. Had someone kept her awake? He wondered.

He turned his back to her. With his crystal ball in one hand and one of the Red Thorn's texts in the other, he set to work.

I didn't mean to stop paying attention. I always liked the chapter openers where I got a peek into Evander's character, but I was happy as I found my eyes fluttering open in the late afternoon light. The bed was soft and my frame was light resting on it. The mattress felt like it was made entirely from feathers, like a giant pillow. The linen under me was coarse but clean and comfortable. Sleep rested heavy on my eyes, but I blinked them in search of Kalavan.

Lying on my back, I looked at the room. It was much like the one I had been given, except smaller with clothing strewn all over the place. I saw the mask tree Evander had described earlier. That wasn't all he had for costumes: there were hats and wigs thrown randomly around the room, even dangling off the bedposts. Against the wall, there were many shelves with dozens of tiny bottles and jars lined up of every color. Some were made of glass and you could see the variegated colored liquids contained inside. There were pewter jars and silver tubs of unknown substances. It was intriguing. I longed to ask Kalavan about them, but when I saw him, he seemed foreign to me.

He sat with his back to me, bent over a table with his hair in his eyes. He was studying with such intensity it seemed like he had gone mad.

"What's wrong?" I asked quietly.

He swung around but his eyes refused to focus on me. His breath stirred without rhythm like he was in the middle of a panic attack. "She lied," he finally gasped.

Feeling desperately helpless, I waited for a moment for him to continue, but instead, he held a fist to his chest like he was being strangled.

"Who lied?" I tried, quietly.

He fell to his knees and put his head and shoulders on the bed beside me. For a time, he rested there wordlessly and merely breathed. I put my hand on his head and tried to smooth his hair off

his forehead. At length, he spoke. "Long ago, I went to a fortune teller to inquire about my crossed fate. The wizard Berlin warned me not to go. His words on the subject of my future were this; 'Death is an end you cannot bear.' He always talks in riddles. Death is an end no one can bear, so how could that be specific advice meant only for me? One of the pagan soothsayers seemed to be more reliable, so I went to one of them. The woman gave me a rhyme and I believed the words meant that if I accomplished the desires of my heart—Valance and the Duke's demise—then not only would I avenge my wailing ghost of a mother, but I would also be victorious in another way."

"What way? The crown? Do you want to take the Duke's place?"

"No," Kalavan whispered. "I gave that up long ago. No. All I wanted was a life after revenge. I wanted something sweet to drink after the cup of wrath. With my glass, I can read the Red Thorn's writings. She says the opposite of my soothsayer. She says my reward after the end of my war will be robbed from me."

"What?"

"It says that if I take my revenge, there will be no sweet cup to drink afterward," he said bleakly.

I grabbed his shoulders. "Then don't take revenge. Forget about the Duke and Valance. Leave!" I paused before I added, "I'll come with you."

"But what if nothing tastes sweet again because of the poison festering on my tongue? The injustice I must swallow daily ruins everything."

His eyes were desperate, but I had nothing to say. Finally, I conjured up some words. I was about to ask him what he would be giving up when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Without a word, Kalavan put one arm into the middle of the bed and pushed down on me with his free hand. Much to my surprise, I somehow fell through the bed and onto another mattress underneath. Looking up through the hole, I saw Kalavan had his index finger to his lips. I covered my mouth with my hands and he dropped the flap, hiding me.

I studied where I was. I had been on his bed. He had opened a trap door in the mattress, and then he pushed me through it. Under his bed, there was another bed made up, so I had landed on a second mattress. The bed frame went to the floor. No one could look under the bed without beating in the bed frame. The air was stale and the mattress was musty. The stained-glass window beside his bed was very tall and went all the way to the floor. There was a small hinge attached to one of the facets in the glass and I realized it flipped open to allow the occupant of the bed to breathe fresh air. It opened noiselessly and my lungs filled with sweet mountain air.

In the room, I heard Kalavan open the door and invite the intruder inside.

"Did you hear what happened, Fool?" came the gruff voice of the King Pevinore.

"I hear many things, but sometimes I cannot hear a whisper," Kalavan jested mildly.

"Valance's bride disappeared," the King's booming voice sounded. "That witch! I think she left sometime during the night. Maybe right after the feast."

"The dream worm glows in the night, takes miraculous form, and with the breaking sun—sudden flight," Kalavan commented.

The King laughed and clapped his hand on Kalavan's shoulder. "You must know the type. Well, Valance isn't easily put down. He's already arranged for another bride. It's that noblewoman who has been visiting from the high court. She's dressing now. I want you to perform something impressive in her honor."

"Lord, the time is late, the case too great. Wouldn't it be better to stuff it with cake?"

"Come now, Kalavan. You knew yesterday there would be a wedding tonight. What does it

matter which woman happens to be the bride? Get your act together and get downstairs.”

Those last words stung me like nettles. Why did he have to rub in Kalavan’s fall from nobility in that cutting way? Monster.

The door slammed shut.

Silence hung for ten full seconds before Kalavan whispered, “You can come out now.”

I closed the little window and pushed the trap door up with my knees. “So, Valance found someone else to marry? What a relief!”

“Hardly,” Kalavan said bitterly. “If they find you, they’ll burn you.”

“Can’t you disguise me?”

“What?”

“Can’t you disguise me so no one will recognize me like my mother did?”

“I could,” he mumbled as he scoured the recesses of his brain. “But I can’t make you look the way your mother made you look with bumps all over you. I will have to take a different approach.”

I kept my mouth shut as he got up and scoured his cabinet. He looked at one bottle and then another. He scratched his head. Then he turned to me and said, “Would you like to perform with me tonight?”

“At the wedding?” I gasped.

“Yes. I need the help and absolutely no one would guess it was you. What do you say?”

I nodded vigorously. “Yeah.”

First, he sat me down in a chair then he took a pair of scissors and cut off a lock of my hair.

“What’s that for?”

He took the long strand of red hair between two fingers and placed it on his table. “I’m going to make your eyebrows thicker. Yours are too thin.”

“Thicker eyebrows? Are you crazy?”

“No. I’m going to make you look like a man and for that disguise to work, I need to thicken your eyebrows.”

It made sense. Girls weren’t performers in those days. If I was going to perform with him, even if I was playing a girl, I needed to look like a boy.

I watched Kalavan cut my hair into smaller lengths like someone cutting macaroni noodles. I had to sit ridiculously still while he glued them to my face. Then he trimmed them.

“What next?” I asked, looking at the colorful caterpillars above my eyes in the mirror.

“You’re going to get freckles. How can you be a redhead and have no spots whatsoever on your nose? It looks unnatural.”

He dabbed a strange smelling orange liquid on my face with an applicator finer than the liquid eyeliner I used at home. Then he painted my lips a flesh color and powdered my whole face to tone down the freckles. When he was done, I had to admit that aside from my hair, I looked remarkably non-feminine. Actually, it kind of hurt my feelings. I had no idea I was so close to looking like a not-so-cute boy.

“What are we going to do with my hair?”

“Chop it off,” he replied, getting the scissors.

I pulled back. “You’ve got to be joking. I can’t cut this hair off. Even my mother didn’t include hacking my hair off as part of my disguise.”

He drew his eyebrows together. “Do you want to be burned as a witch?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“Then let me do it.”

In real life, I would have resisted such an action. Back when Rachel and Carly lived at home, they used to play hairdresser. They cut my hair twice without my permission before I got wise to their tricks. But then again, Evander's story was not real life. It wasn't my real hair, and my hesitation was gumming up the works.

I closed my eyes and sunk deep into the chair he had done my makeup in. I heard the scissors open and then felt them close on that beautiful red hair. CHOMP! My stomach rolled over. What a sickening sound!

Then suddenly, I was smacked in the face with my own ponytail. I opened my eyes and saw the handful of hair Kalavan was holding.

"Are you done?" I asked.

"Yes."

I looked in the mirror. My hair was cut in a shoulder-length bob. For some reason, I had expected him to cut off all my hair, but then I realized that hardly any of the men I had seen in town or in the castle had short hair.

Abruptly, he gathered all my hair together and put it into a miniature ponytail at the nape of my neck.

"Now, do you think you can get dressed on your own? I'm dressing you as a bride tonight, so you don't have to do anything to hide your figure. Everyone will just think I put padding on you anyway. Here's the dress. It's ridiculously modest. Here are the boots. Here are the gloves, the wig, and the mask."

"If I'm going to wear a mask and a wig then why did you bother painting my face cutting off my hair?"

"What if someone pulls them off? Then where would we be?"

He gathered his own things together and went off behind the wardrobe to get changed. "Oh and by the way, if someone asks you, your name is Windrin."

I put a forbidden orange rose in my teeth and looked in Kalavan's slanted mirror. Could that person really be me? I took the rose out of my mouth and stroked the side of my cheek with the bloom. I supposed I could remember to answer to a fourth name, especially if Evander could.

When Kalavan told me what he planned to do for the performance after the wedding, I thought he had more audacity than sense.

"So, let me get this straight," I said walking at an easy pace behind him toward the central courtyard where the wedding feast was being held. "You want me to pull my veil over my face like a gentle virgin and then when your back is turned, you want me to pinch your butt?"

"Ass," he corrected.

"That seems awfully rude," I said since that wasn't the only thing he'd asked me to do. That was only the beginning.

"It's because we can't make fun of Valance tonight," Kalavan explained. "The Du...King won't stand for it. Valance is too angry about your jilting him to put up with my taunting tonight. Jesters are almost never punished, no matter what they do, but I have a bad feeling tonight would be the exception. But I have to make fun of someone important. The court expects it and thinks higher of the nobility and royalty that can handle it."

"So we're going to make sport of the over-anxious bride?"

"We have no other choice. Just remember, whatever you do, don't take off my shield. I'm

hiding a prop inside it.”

“Got it,” I said as we stepped out into the middle of the room and both bowed to the head table.

They all clapped and cheered for us as we acted out the opening part of the courtship. He was dressed like a knight while I was dressed like a bride. He wore his knight mask and I wore his lady mask. He knelt to propose to me and I acted delighted. We did a pretend wedding march and faked kneeling in front of the friar. Then his mask kissed each of my hands and then we delicately tapped the mouth shapes of our masks together in a slightly ridiculous kiss.

In that second we were so close I whispered, “Is it always this hot behind a mask?”

“It’s about to get hotter.”

Then we went about blowing kisses to the court while they threw scraps and bones at us, not exactly in mockery, but like rice or flower petals as a couple leaves a church. Anyway, they seemed pretty happy about it.

I walked up to the real bride and gave her a flower—one of the roses from the forbidden garden. She took it and looked remarkably happy. I had to do something nice for her before Kalavan and I ruined her wedding feast.

While I was near King Pevinore at the head table, I noticed something strange. The queen was not there and in her place sat a girl. She was scarcely older than me. I was dumbfounded. She looked exactly like Carly. I walked around the table to get a better look at her, sauntering and taking my sweet time, but it didn’t matter what angle I looked at her, she still looked like Carly. What was she doing in Evander’s book?

By that time, I knew Kalavan wanted to get on with the next portion of the performance. I went to the middle of the courtyard and stood next to him. He waved to the head table. I waved too and then smacked his bum. I couldn’t believe how high he jumped. He took my offending hand and turned me toward the guest tables. Then he let go of it to wave to them and I smacked his bum again. He jumped again. I couldn’t believe my hand had actually touched Kalavan’s butt. I wanted to die, but it was only going to get worse.

He held my hands together and scolded me using hugely exaggerated finger-wagging. I freed myself from his grasp and unbuckled the belt around his waist that held his sword and scabbard. Clenching them to my chest, I ran away and he chased me.

The crowd found us intensely amusing and rocked with laughter until some of them cried. The chase went on and on until Kalavan signaled to proceed with the next part of the play. Behind a pillar, down one of the hallways, I placed the belt and the sword where Kalavan instructed me to hide the props. Then I went back to the courtyard where Kalavan was scratching his helmeted head.

Like he wanted, he still had his shield. The next piece of clothing I was to get from him was another belt. It was the one that kept his tunic in place. I snatched it while he was pretending to get his imaginary horse ready and a similar scene ensued.

When I came back to the courtyard, Valance’s new bride looked a good deal less happy than earlier. Beside her, Carly’s doppelganger was sitting on the King’s lap.

Off came Kalavan’s tunic after that. It was while he pretended to take a nap next to a pillar. I hadn’t left much on him. He wore his mask, helmet, chain mail, tunic, gauntlets, leggings, and boots. His shield was still clamped to his forearm. The crowd laughed till their sides were sore as I outwitted him out of all his clothes except his mask, his shield, and his last layer of underwear.

The last thing I was supposed to remove from him was his undershirt. By that point, sweat was pouring down my sides and I felt like the makeup Kalavan had put on my face must have

rubbed on the inside of the mask. I licked my lips. They were salty and caked in powder. It was the last thing he wanted me to do. I couldn't do it, but I had to. It was absolutely the last thing. He told me he would take care of the rest of the performance from there and I only had to react to whatever he did. He promised me if I just stood there, that would be enough.

He wanted me to rip his shirt down the middle—an open display of lust—to mock the bride. The shirt was a loose white weave like cheesecloth. It would be easy to tear, but my nerves were failing me. I crept up behind him. Then it occurred to me that he didn't say which middle he wanted me to rip down. I didn't have to rip down the front. I could rip down the back. That would be much easier for me.

I grasped his collar from behind and pulled it as hard as I could. It ripped and the sound pierced the night. Everyone was silent. Kalavan's shoulders fell and his whole torso bent forward like he was going to fall to his knees. CLATTER! The mask he was wearing fell to the ground. The shield fell and landed with a BANG! His shirt slid off his arms and landed between the mask and the shield.

Then slowly, like a marionette on strings, he turned around to face me. He was wearing the red mask—Mephisto—the Devil.

The courtyard was as quiet as a crypt.

I screamed. I didn't scream because I was afraid. I screamed because he hadn't backed down from taking his revenge. He had decided to poke at Valance after all and he had used the red mask as his tool, saying Valance was nothing more than a devil.

I wound up and slapped his face. The mask went flying and when it hit cobblestones, it shattered. He said I could react any way I wanted.

For a moment, his features were set. Then as the moment passed, he bent and picked up his discarded knight mask. He put it on. Then he drew me into his arms and put our masks together like we were kissing.

I heard him whisper, "Very well done. Bow."

We broke apart and bowed to the crowd. The applause was so loud, it was almost deafening. I glanced at the bride, who looked touched instead of embarrassed. I was so relieved to know Kalavan's style of entertainment was acceptable to her in the end.

We must have bowed fifteen times each before Kalavan picked up his props, even putting his ruined shirt back on and we left the courtyard with the blessing of the King (which I was surprised to get). We picked up the pieces of his costume I had hidden and sauntered back to his room.

"You can take your mask off," he said. "No one will follow us."

I slid it off my face. "Does my makeup still look good?"

"Of course it does. I did it. It's perfect, but I'll have to remove it tonight before you go to sleep. My magic isn't as good as your mother's and mine will give you real bumps if you leave it on too long."

"So, does that mean we're done for the night?"

"You are. I'm taking you back to put you to bed."

"Am I a little girl?"

"Certainly not!" he exclaimed, glancing over his shoulder like someone might be listening to us. "I have to return to the feast and do a juggling act and a few tumbling routines for them. Most of them aren't even drunk yet. We didn't entertain them for longer than an hour and the party will go on until halfway through the night, but there's no reason to keep you up that long. Will you sit awake listlessly after your nap this afternoon?"

“No, I’ll sleep.”

Back in his room, he sat me down again, and with water, he dissolved the glue that kept my extra eyebrows on. It was a relief we hadn’t needed the second disguise. He wiped my freckles off before he went behind the wardrobe while I stripped to my underwear (once again it was unbelievably modest). I wasn’t sure if he would have made the pretense of giving me privacy if he hadn’t been changing back into his green diamond uniform. Then he gave me a pillow and a blanket and opened the secret bed for me to get inside.

“Who else have you hidden in here?” I asked playfully as I slunk inside with my face beaming.

“No one else but me. I sometimes hide here when I don’t want to perform, so you see, no one knows about it but the two of us. It’s our secret.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He put on his donkey hat with the bells and they tinkled, but it seemed to me that their tinkling was abnormally loud.

It was a second before I realized it was the ringing of a phone in the real world. I picked it up. It was Rachel.

“Hey Sarah,” she said huskily. She sounded exhausted.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I finally made some progress. I’m bringing Carly back tomorrow. She ran out of money and so did I. I’ve got to make it back by for my shift the night after tomorrow night anyway or I’ll lose my job, so we’re coming.”

“That’s great,” I said, expelling a sigh of relief.

“If only that were the whole story. I can’t get her to promise to stay with you and mom. She’ll only come back with me if she can stay with me in my apartment.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Not really. I can take her. That’s really not what I’m worried about. You know my place is like a dry bone. There’s nothing to steal. What’s the worst trouble she could get into there? All she can do is empty the fridge and it would be a relief. You should see her. She’s totally anorexic. I’m worried because I think she has a reason why she wants to come back and I don’t think I’m going to like it.”

“Does it have to do with the guy she’s seeing?” I asked, thinking of her strange appearance in Evander’s story.

“I think so.”

“Can I tell mom that she’s coming?”

“Not yet. That’s another condition. She doesn’t want mom to know until she shows up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t talk. Sheesh. I’ll come see you when we get back to Edmonton.”

“Thanks.”

“All right. See ya when I get there.”

“Bye.”

Chapter Fourteen

My Aching Feet

On Saturday morning, I got a phone call from Emi. I had a date with Evander that evening and was happily humming about it as I put my toast in the toaster.

“Hi, Sarah. I was wondering if it would be possible for you to babysit for me next Saturday afternoon.” Emi’s voice was always so cute. “Can you do it? I know you’re always swamped on Saturdays.”

“Well, I’m not swamped today. The lady I usually babysit for has the flu and next Saturday is her day off, so I’m available. Why? Is Vincent going to be in town?”

“Yes, but that isn’t why I want you to come.” Emi explained that Evander’s family had not come to Edmonton to visit him since he had moved. Apparently, they had been scheduled to come a few times and it had always fallen through. They had missed Thanksgiving and now Emi was having them for Remembrance Day. She said she was making a Thanksgiving dinner for them, but wanted me to come to look after Paisley while she prepared it.

I agreed to do it, but I found the whole situation kind of weird. Wouldn’t there be other people there to care for Paisley? Didn’t Evander’s family like babies? In my family, everyone loved babies. I even had to swat away Carly, who also wanted to hold any baby who might be visiting.

We made the final arrangements. Then I sat back and thought about what Emi’s offer meant. I would get to meet Evander’s family. I couldn’t help being curious, especially after reading what he wrote about his family in his stories. The brothers he wrote about were awful and the way he portrayed his father was flat out disgusting. I took a contemplative breath. I was going to meet the real thing. Would they be anything like the families he wrote about?

I had my toast and then a shower. After I dried and straightened my hair, I braided a little strand from behind my bangs and pinned it. Picking clothes was always annoying, so I put on a classic white shirt and jeans. Simple is best. Then I did my makeup.

Actually, Evander had asked me to go on a date with him that night, hence the white shirt. White shirts didn’t last long in my world. They always got stained, so wearing one on a date was a double treat for me.

When I was finished getting ready, it was still the middle of the afternoon and I wasn’t expecting Evander until dinner time, so I went to my bed and got out his book. Surely I would pop out of it before he rang the bell. Besides, I always came out when there was a bell. At least, I had so far...

I opened the book and began to read.

Kalavan returned to his chamber after a hard night of entertaining and wearily tugged off his tights by the light of the moon. His muscles ached as he worked off the rest of his clothing and pulled on a nightshirt that fell to his knees. As he crawled onto his unmade bed, he thought about the girl sleeping under his mattress. He didn’t want to wake Serissa, but a tiny part of his mind panicked at the thought that if he lifted the flap in his bed, she might be gone. He tried to set his concerns aside, but it was impossible. He knew that his heart wouldn’t stop racing until he found out for sure. Cautiously, he lifted the flap. She was directly beneath him. All he could see was her delicate wrist and hand that lay carelessly splayed out to her side.

He sighed contentedly as he closed the flap. Then he pulled a blanket over himself and tried to sleep. He thought his heart would set an even pace if he confirmed she slept under his bead, but

a secret pleasure burned in his chest. She was there and he couldn't untie the knots she put him in.

He wasn't even aware of the evil she had done.

I gawked. What evil had I done?

I suddenly sat up straight and hit my forehead on the underside of Kalavan's bed. I had forgotten that I was in a bunk bed that was much lower than the one I slept in at home. I rubbed my face.

What had I done wrong? I couldn't think. I hadn't done anything wrong.

Kalavan knocked on the sideboard beside my head and asked, "All right down there?"

"I'm fine. I'm just stupid."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

"No. Yes. Something like that."

His voice was quiet, but I could still hear him through the boards and feathers that blocked the way between us. "What did you dream about?" he asked.

"I dreamed I made a mistake."

"What kind?"

"I don't know. It was vague."

"Want me to do a card reading for you?" he offered.

Just at that moment, a knock came at the door. Kalavan didn't even get a chance to answer it before I heard the door swing open and slam against the wall.

"Valance," Kalavan said stonily. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Do you know what this is?" the knight spat.

There was a moment before Kalavan answered. "Is this a trick question? It's a rose. A very pretty one."

"What the devil is *that*?" Valance exclaimed. "You've got a whole bouquet in here?"

"So? What of it?"

"No one can pick those roses. I mean... no one."

"Oh! So that's what the problem is. Well, I'm a magician. I did it."

"What for?"

"For... fun." He answered lamely.

"Really?" Valance asked disbelievingly. "Get up. The King wants to see you."

"Where?" Kalavan asked. I felt his weight rise off the bed.

"In the rose garden. If you really picked those, the King will want to see you do it again."

I heard Kalavan rummage around the room, presumably searching for clothes to wear. Two minutes later, the door shut and I knew I was alone in the room. I lifted the flap and tried to figure out what to do. This was all my fault. I should not have given Valance's bride one of the apricot roses. Should I put on a disguise and follow them? I didn't know if Kalavan would be able to pick the roses. When we were in the rose garden, the path didn't open for him.

Then from down the hallway, I heard footsteps racing back toward the room. I jumped into the bed and shut the flap with an unfortunate bang.

"Serissa," Kalavan's voice hissed as he shut the door behind him.

"What?" I whispered. "You're in trouble because of the rose I gave that woman, aren't you?"

"Don't worry about that. Listen. Get dressed in my clothes and meet me by the front gate. Wear one of my masks if you can't do a convincing makeup job. I might be with King Pevinore all day, but when I am free, I'll meet you there and take you away from here."

"Back to my mother's?"

“Anywhere.”

I popped open the flap and looked into his eyes. They were desperate, excited even. “Aren’t you worried about what the King will do?”

“He won’t do anything much. I’m his son.”

I nodded.

He put his hands on the mattress and bent down to kiss me. His kiss was so like Tremor’s like that love had suddenly reappeared and become part of the love affair I was having now. Once again there was that same spice of exhilaration that made it impossible for me to think. I had just gotten into the kiss when he pulled away.

“Valance is waiting for me.”

“Don’t let them keep you long.”

“Then get dressed quickly.”

He picked up the bouquet of forbidden roses, ran out the door, closed it gently behind him, and shouted down the hallway to his brother, “Keep your gauntlets on.”

I got out of the bed and found an outfit of Kalavan’s that would do. I put on a pair of his black tights and then a tunic that came halfway down my thigh. It was half white and half black. Then I tied a black belt around my waist and put on a pair of his white shoes. They were thin, but there was nothing better to wear. To disguise my hair, I tied it in a low ponytail like I had the night before. I chose one of his masks, the one with the beak, and tied it behind my head. I finished the look by pulling the hood of the tunic over my head.

I wanted to hurry to the front gate, so I picked up his lute and my hammock bag and set out.

Instead of worrying about speed, I should have worried about sense. I didn’t know how to get where I was going. I went around corners, down staircases, and through dramatic archways. I got lost three times before I found my way to the front hall. Even then, I was only a third of the way to our meeting place. Crossing the main hall was difficult at best. I planned to play a mime, like Kalavan had, whenever someone stopped me. I imagined the jester wasn’t bothered much by the courtiers. After all, he was the private entertainer of the King, wasn’t he?

I was wrong.

I took one step into the courtyard when suddenly a man passing me threw an apple at me. It hit me in the chest and fell to the ground.

“Oi, what are you doing?” the man said grouchy, “letting good fruit fall.”

I winced. He had expected me to catch it. Trying to play the part, I bowed, picked up the apple, polished it on my sleeve, and gave it back to the man.

He took it from me and shook his head.

I tried to let the incident slide off me, but in less than a minute, I was confronted by two little boys carrying tomatoes. Just like the man, they threw them at me. One hit me on the white half of my tunic and left a gory stain and the other hit me in the side of the head. Both the fruits were ruined as they slid off my body.

I tried to just continue on my way, but one of them jumped on my back like I was supposed to carry him. “Why didn’t you catch them? Are you feeling sick today, Jester?”

What if it got too rough and my mask fell off? Or what if I couldn’t do the things Kalavan could and they realized something was wrong with me? I had to get the kid off me.

I sunk to my knees and let the boy put his feet on the ground. Then I turned to them and tried my mime routine. Silently, I rubbed my stomach and held my head like I was in pain. As I stood up, I got an onion in the back of the head. The rotten vegetable made a sickening sound.

THUNK! I turned around.

“Kalavan!” someone below my beak bellowed. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be with the King. Trying to make a run for it? Scoundrel! Come with me.”

I tilted my head so I could see who was speaking through the slits in the mask. It was the short knight... squire—Welvinton. In an instant, my elbow was taken in a death grip and I was marched back into the confines of the castle. I tried to struggle as soon as we were away from the crowd, but it didn’t do me any good. He was strong even if he was half a foot shorter than me. Not to mention I never had any arm muscles to begin with. But still, I kept quiet and waited for my chance to escape.

Five minutes later we stood on the edge of the inner courtyard I had visited with Kalavan the day before. Welvinton and I stood aloof at the edge of the scene. The King and Queen peered down at Kalavan who had evidently been thrown into the rose garden. He had landed unharmed, which had impressed the King. I was surprised Carly was not on his arm. Where was she? Had I really seen her at the wedding banquet?

“Now take a rose,” King Pevinore ordered.

I could just see the tip of Kalavan’s head through the leaves and petals. Welvinton was looking too, apparently unsure of whether or not he should interrupt. So instead of making a fuss, he kept his hold on my arm and miraculously held his tongue at the same time.

Below, in the garden, I could hear Kalavan trying to pick a rose. It wasn’t working. I could hear him try to break a stem, but instead of the snap, I heard him suck in his breath in response to an angry thorn. He wasn’t going to be able to do it as I had. Did he have a plan?

“I’m waiting!” Pevinore bellowed after several minutes had passed.

“I’ll have one in a moment, my Lord King,” said Kalavan’s strained voice.

“Pull him out of there,” Valance interrupted. “He didn’t pick those roses. He doesn’t have the power. He’s just a trickster. There’s only one person who could have picked those flowers.”

“Who?” asked the Queen.

“Who else could it be other than that witch? Wasn’t this garden planted by the Red Thorn herself, by order of King Author?”

The monarch stroked his chin thoughtfully. “It could have been Serissa, but where is she that we can accuse her? I thought she disappeared.”

“Your majesty, if we think about this logically, the roses were in Kalavan’s room. The rose was presented to my wife by the person who assisted Kalavan in his performance last night. Wouldn’t they be the same person?”

It was at that moment that both Valance and King Pevinore seemed to notice Welvinton and me standing by the corner of the rose garden.

Welvinton seemed to gather their meaning as well, and slowly, he reached to pull the mask off my face. In the same instant, my face became visible, the foolish squire let go of my arm. I slammed my body into him and he went flying over the railing, smack on the rose bushes.

“Kalavan! Run!” I hollered.

The roses, thorns, and vines together immediately parted and made a straight path for him to the other side where I had met him the day before. His hands were bloody. The cuts ran all the way up to his shoulders, but he took to his feet and ran right for the fountain, where he jumped up and pulled the horn out of the statue’s hand.

Fingers clasped around my forearms and I was taken down.

But even though my view was completely blocked, I heard Pevinore scream, “Stop!” and the sound of the horn was so loud it felt like the very stone of the castle would crack. My captors let go of me to cover their ears. They fell to their knees. Amid the confusion, I got up and fled

several feet away from the fallen guards.

I stopped at the doorway just in time to see the horn shot out of Kalavan's hand by one of Valance's arrows. Kalavan cried out in anguish.

I tried to jump over the railing myself, but Valance's voice stopped me. "I wouldn't do that if I were you." His arrow was pointed directly at my heart. In the second I hesitated, the King's guard caught hold of me and I was once again powerless.

The King and knight approached me. "Time for a trial," the King said pleasantly, rubbing his hands together.

"Don't try her!" Kalavan screamed, lowering himself from the fountain.

"Burn her!" the Queen blurted, suddenly coming forward. "We all saw her work her witchcraft in front of our very eyes. Burn her tonight. Nay, burn her now."

King Pevinore looked troubled, but soon his expression cleared as he settled on a course. "Take him," he said, pointing to his oldest son, "to the dungeon. I'll forgive him his minor trespasses after he's spent a few weeks in chains. As for this witch..." His voice lingered on the word 'witch' unpleasantly. "Have her stripped and searched for the mark."

I felt sick. That was what Kalavan meant when he said he couldn't tell me what they did to witches. It was too horrible for him to say because they degraded the woman by stripping off her clothing in public searching for the mark before they burned her. It was just a cruel technicality. Every woman had a mole or a scar or a birthmark they could call 'a mark' and probably so did everyone observing. It was just an excuse to humiliate and abuse her for their own amusement.

"No," the Queen interrupted. She moved to my side and crossed herself. "We already saw her work her infernal enchantment and according to the law of the church, there is no need for further witness against her. She will be burnt and that is all."

The King looked truly disappointed, but he waved his hand in assent. "Have the pyre prepared!"

Then I was hauled off.

Kalavan was carried five steps behind me down innumerable stairs until it felt like we were further down into the earth than where the capricorns had lived. There were no windows and the air smelled of sweat and piss. I was gagged and chained. Kalavan was nearby. From my cell, I could not see his face, but I could see his scratched arms that he stretched through the bars of his cell and hear his breath that came in ragged huffs. The guards evidently had to go prepare my pyre, so they left us alone in one corner of the sickeningly damp, stone hell.

Once we were alone, he explained, "They don't want you whispering any spells. That's why you're gagged."

I couldn't answer him so and the time ticked by unaided by the tension.

Finally, Kalavan's tongue loosened and he began to talk. "Wasn't that amazing of the Queen? I can't explain my surprise. I suppose she's grown a conscience since she's realized foul play doesn't actually get you what you want."

After that, Kalavan didn't care to distract me further with single-sided dialogue, but the guards were quick, and just before midday, they came to loose me. I was unshackled and hauled up the stairs out into the courtyard, where a tall spike was erected with kindling stacked around its base. I was forced up the top and tied with vicious cords to the stake.

Truly, I hadn't been very worried until that moment. Then I started to panic. I remembered my leg that had suddenly stopped working when I left the last story. What would happen if I died in Evander's world? And how had the story turned so wrong? If the story was a choose-your-own-adventure, what turn did I take that brought me to the bad ending? I couldn't

pick a defining moment. It felt like I had been threatened with a burning since the opening no matter what they said about the rose on the banquet table.

Valance strode up to the pyre. He was about fifty meters ahead of the royal party, who were actually going to sit in a stand on thrones and cushions like my burning was entertainment. He climbed the ladder up to me and took the gag out of my mouth.

“You know, I was always going to offer you a way out. There’s something about watching your creamy skin burn that rubs me the wrong way. Nothing as beautiful as you should die like this, but then you pushed Welvington into the rose bushes, and... he’s not all right. The priest has been with him since you attacked him. They say he’s going to die.”

My gag was gone. I could have said something if I wanted to, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. I had no regret for what I had done to Welvington, so I couldn’t even apologize, and I didn’t have anything I could trade with Valance for my freedom and even if the option to marry him was still open, I didn’t want it.

There wasn’t much ceremony, other than the stand that was set up to hold the royal family and the church officials. A priest approached me and began reading my last rights. I could barely hear him, but I saw Kalavan coming toward me across the cobblestones as clear as day.

I should have known he would do something to save me. After all, it was his book.

As he walked he was approached by a guard, Kalavan stuck his hand out as fast as lightning and jabbed the man in the throat. The guard desperately sucked in for breath, while Kalavan walked on like nothing had happened.

The next guard opposed Kalavan with a spear in hand. Kalavan relieved him of it with hardly any effort, knocking him over the head and stepping over his fallen body.

Valance was the next person to try to stop him. “Stop it. She’s a witch. She has to be burned.”

“Move. I want to talk to my father.”

“He’s not your father,” Valance said smugly. “Didn’t you know your mother was a whore?”

Kalavan glanced at the Queen like he wanted to make a similar remark about Valance’s mother, but he kept his jaw wired shut and instead tried to pass Valance. The knight drew his sword. I stared at Kalavan. His grip on the spear was weak. It was slick from his blood. The cuts from the rose bushes seeped and fell in droplets on the rocks.

Kalavan’s eye twitched. Neither of them had struck a blow yet. “I want to take her place on the pyre. If you must burn someone, burn me instead of her.”

Valance barked out a scornful laugh. “You must be joking. Why?”

“She hasn’t done anything wrong. I disobeyed the law. I blew the horn. Burn me.”

“Preposterous!”

Suddenly, King Pevinore rose and shouted, “Valance, put down your sword. Both of you come here.” Kalavan and Valance went forward, both of them falling to one knee in front of the King. “Kalavan, though that horn is a treasure given to us as a gift by the High King Author, I do not believe it actually works, so there is no crime done. His army will not come and you have done no wrong.”

Kalavan took in a deep painful breath. It seemed like his brain was breaking, when he snapped, “Why don’t you let her go? Banish her! She doesn’t want to be here. She only ended up being picked up by Valance in that little town because she was following me.”

“Is that what she told you?” Valance scoffed.

“It’s no lie. I went to the house of the Red Thorn to learn her magic. I wanted to cross the rose garden to get the horn.”

“Treason!” Valance shouted.

“The punishment for treason isn’t fire. It’s hanging,” the King said loftily.

“Then he must be hanged!” Valance bellowed, getting to his feet. “He plotted against your majesty. He aided a witch, escaped from prison, and felled two of your personal guards just now. He is not to be forgiven. Hang him!”

The King shrugged his shoulders heartlessly. “Then I suppose I must. I thought it was enough to disinherit him and make him my fool. There are some people who just can’t learn their place. Hang him.”

“Will you let Serissa go?”

“Of course not,” the King replied scornfully.

Kalavan stood up, and without missing a beat thrust his spear into Valance’s ankle. The knight fell. Then the fool broke into a run and his feet beat the ground until he came to the ladder laid up against my pyre.

“Light it!” the King commanded frantically and one of the guards standing by immediately threw his torch into the kindling.

Kalavan’s hands were at my bonds and he was tearing ferociously at the ones around my feet. The smoke rose up in white clouds at first and then as the wood began to burn, it turned black. My feet were free, but the heat beneath them was so intense, it was terrible! I panicked and screamed. Kalavan supported himself on the top rung of the ladder and lifted my body up until the knots came clear over the stake. He threw me off the pyre onto the courtyard stones and I landed with a thud on my side. One of the guards laughed and pulled the ladder away. Kalavan lost his balance and fell into the bonfire.

Valance screamed for the guards. “Surround the fire. Don’t let the traitor out!”

For a moment, everyone had forgotten about me. I pulled the bonds off my hands and dropped the ropes on the stones. I should have run. No one was watching me. I should have escaped, but there was nowhere to go. I stared at the fire transfixed. Something about the whole thing, the water that swallowed Murmur and the fire that surrounded Kalavan, was real. It represented something real, and even if it was only in Evander's mind that he burned, I couldn't leave him to burn alone.

I pushed between the guards and stepped onto a burning log. Kalavan’s thin-soled boots on my feet caught fire. Sweat poured down my neck as I tried to distract myself from the pain by looking at Kalavan. I could hardly see his shape through the smoke.

“What are you doing?” one of the guards shrieked. He tried to pull me back, but I evaded his grasp by taking another two quick, excruciating steps into the fire.

Kalavan was at the center, trying to hold onto the stake to keep himself up and breathing hard through the dense smoke. It was making me cough. I reached out my hand and touched the crisping flesh on his shoulder. When he felt my touch, he let go of the stake and instead held onto me for support. With his head cradled next to my chest, I heard him say, “I trust you.”

And the world disappeared.

I should have guessed things would be the same as when I woke up from the last story, except with different injuries. I immediately felt that my feet were horribly burnt, especially my soles. Examining them, they were charred. They hurt too much to walk, so I crawled to the bathroom and filled up the tub with cold water. As soon as it was deep enough to cover my feet, I turned off the tap and put my feet in. It was unbelievably painful. I had to bite my lip to stop myself

from howling until slowly the water made my burns hurt less. Finally, I could breathe normally and dry the tears that somehow came down my cheeks.

I had been sitting there for probably fifteen minutes when the apartment buzzer went off. Who could be at my door? My mom was at work. Rachel and Carly couldn't have made it back yet. It was too early for Evander to pick me up for our date, so I wasn't expecting him either. Well, whoever it was, they couldn't be more important than my feet. I ignored it.

But the buzzer kept ringing.

Eventually, I pulled my feet out of the water, and immediately, they started hurting violently. I crawled on my knees to the buzzer and from a kneeling position, I answered the buzz.

"Who is it?" I croaked.

"It's me. Evander."

I buzzed him in and unlocked the door. Why had he come at that exact moment? I didn't care. I couldn't stand the pain any longer and crawled back to the bathtub. That was where he found me when he came in.

"What are you doing?" he asked, staring at me curiously from the bathroom doorway.

I didn't know what to say. I groaned internally and stayed silent, but he could see the panic on my red face.

"You're hurt, aren't you?" he said, coming toward me and looking in the bathwater. "What have you done to your feet?"

I looked at them in the water. They were red, but it didn't look like the skin was coming off and the pain wasn't so bad that I was still crying, so I figured I was okay. "It's nothing," I said. "I just need to keep them in the water for an hour or so and then I'll be ready to go on our date."

He spoke like he hadn't heard me. "What were you doing?"

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Let me take a look."

I pulled out my foot and showed it to him.

"It looks like you were walking on hot coals. You've got a few blisters coming. I knew something bad had happened to you."

"Is that why you came early?" I asked as I immersed my foot in the water again.

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

"Oh, please don't. I'm fine. It hurts a lot, but I'd be better off just to keep them in the water here. If you want to help, please just keep me company."

"No. You need to go to the hospital. If you won't take your feet out of the water, I'll get a bucket and put it in the passenger seat."

"It'll soak your car."

"I don't care about my car."

Without my permission, he found a square Rubbermaid container in the kitchen, emptied whatever was in it, filled it up with water, and took it down to the street. Then he came into the bathroom and wrapped my winter coat around my shoulders.

"This is a dumb idea," I said to him as he literally shoved my arms through the holes. "I'm fine."

"Okay then, tell me what happened. How did you end up like this? If it's no big deal then how come you won't tell me what you were doing?"

I couldn't answer him.

"Were you walking on the stove?"

I shook my head.

“What ridiculous thing were you doing that you don’t want to admit to?”

I twitched.

“Why can’t you tell me?”

“Because what happened is unbelievable.”

“Try me,” he said stiffly.

“I was reading in my room and I happened to fall asleep and when I woke up, my feet were burnt.”

“Did your heating pad go berserk or something?”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t thought of a lie like that. “Whoa, look at that. You did understand.”

“Well, that’s not too unbelievable. Let’s go to the hospital just in case and you should throw away that heating pad.”

“Will do!” I promised heartily.

But that still didn’t stop him from carrying me down to his car like a princess.

Chapter Fifteen

One Place Setting Too Many

Evander and I spent our date in the emergency room. It wasn't as awful as I was expecting. For starters, *he* explained to the nurse what happened, sparing me the trouble. She gave him a funny look, but that was all before putting me on the fast track to see a doctor. It did take forever, as visits to the emergency room always do in a city on a Saturday night, but Evander made it the most pleasant ER stay I have ever had. He bought me snacks and let me play with his smartphone. The visit ended with the nurse putting ointment on the bottom of my feet and bandaging them.

By then, Evander had abandoned the idea of going out on a date, and instead, we watched a movie back at my apartment on our old tube TV. He was still there when my mom got home from work. She was intrigued to see him but made no comment before she got in the shower.

When the movie was over, he turned to me and asked if I was hungry.

I sat up. "Say, that reminds me. Did you know Emi asked me over to your place to look after Paisley on Remembrance Day?"

He did a double-take. "Really?"

"Does it bother you?"

"No," he said flatly.

"That's a relief. I was worried you might be uncomfortable."

"It wouldn't be *you* that would make me uncomfortable," he said, turning his face away from me. "Actually, I should go home. You probably want to go to bed early or something." He turned around and kissed the top of my head. "Goodnight."

I peered curiously at the forced smile he gave me before leaving.

Emi had me show up several hours before the dinner was set to begin. Luckily, my burns were much better by then, so I walked over. As soon as I arrived, I perched on a kitchen chair and fed Paisley with a spoon while Emi worked in the kitchen. I had never seen anyone so ambitious. She made pie crust from scratch, diced tomatoes, peeled sweet potatoes, and all the while the turkey roasted in the oven.

The most surprising thing was the fact that no one was helping her. Was she really doing all that on her own? Two minutes later, I realized she wasn't doing it completely by herself. There was a man helping her. I recognized him from the pictures. It was Vincent.

He came into the kitchen with two giant bags of ice and noticed me immediately. "I'm back," he said. Then turning to me he said politely, "You must be Sarah. Great job with..." I expected him to say 'Paisley' after he paused to put the ice in the freezer, but he finished with, "Evander. I thought we'd never get him out of his room. Come over anytime. I give you exclusive rights to pry him from his cage whenever you want."

"Thanks," I said, completely unable to keep my flush in check.

A minute later, Vincent was followed by another man. He looked about a decade older, but nothing could trick my eyes. He was the king from *The Witch and the Fool*. He looked exactly the same minus the beard. So he really was Evander's dad!

Emi introduced him. "Sarah, this is Reg Cheney."

I smiled and nodded, but it was all phony. Actually, I was so repelled and scared I could hardly keep my face from showing it. My brain blocked out everything I knew and I was left with only the memory of his voice hissing the name 'Serissa' in the dark. The skin on the back of my neck crawled. I was so flustered I dropped a spoonful of apple sauce on the floor. Vincent got a cloth and cleaned it up for me. I thanked him and got a new spoon.

A minute later, the blonde Queen from the second story wandered into the kitchen. Reg was the spitting image of the King, but the woman looked worse for wear compared to the story. Her hair was weak and faded and her skin gray and sickly, I wondered if she really were dying.

"This is Sarah," Emi said sweetly as she placed her pie crust in the pan. "Sarah, this is Laurie."

I knew better than to think she was Evander's mother. From the way the story went, it was his step-mother, but where was his real mother? Was she really dead?

Laurie acknowledged me but didn't pay any more attention. Instead, she moved beside Emi and examined the counter like she was interested in what Emi was doing. "This looks delicious. I'm sorry I can't be much help to you," she apologized. "My head has been aching since we landed yesterday. It must be jet lag."

"It could be a migraine," Vincent cut in. "Does the light bother you?"

"I think so," Laurie said blankly as she looked at the wintry light filtering through the window.

"Why don't you go lie down?" Reg suggested unpleasantly, as he took a seat at the kitchen table across from me.

She agreed and plodded from the room.

Just then Reg's cell phone rang. He slid from his seat and went into the living room to take the call.

"Jet lag my foot," Vincent hooted.

Emi gave him a dirty look and refused to comment.

"Sarah," she said to me, "when Paisley's done eating, why don't you put her down for her nap and go see Evander downstairs? His family came all this way to see him. Do you think you could convince him to eat with us?"

"He won't even come up to eat?" I exclaimed.

"Well, he might not want to. He and Reg had a little fight last night and well... Why don't you go see how he's doing?"

"Okay," I said.

"He should suck it up," Vincent interjected. "It'll be less than an hour."

Emi sighed and went about her work.

I didn't say anything either and went on feeding Paisley until the apple sauce was gone. Then I placed her in her crib and pulled the door shut with a click.

At that moment, I passed by the living room, I heard Reg talking on the phone. The conversation was one-sided and hushed, but it sounded like his side went something like, "I can't get away right now. I probably won't be able to see you until late tonight. Yeah, I know. This visit was the reason you came back here, but I can't disappoint my brother." There was a pause. "She says she has a headache. I can come up with an excuse." Then he noticed me standing stupidly in the doorway. "I'll call you later," he said into the receiver and then slipped the phone into his pocket.

Caught in the act, I pretended I hadn't heard anything and turned to go down the hall.

“Sarah,” he called, but to my ears, it sounded exactly like the way his voice had said 'Serissa' in the book. I kept walking and luckily, he didn't follow me.

I went down the stairs.

In the family room downstairs, I saw two boys watching a football game on TV. I knew they were Evander's half-brothers. I was stunned to see that the older boy was Valance and the younger boy was Murmur.

I wasn't usually bold, but I couldn't hold back. “Hi,” I said, preparing to introduce myself.

I was cut off. “He's in his room,” the older one said briskly.

“I know,” I stammered. “I...”

“Don't be rude, boys,” Vincent said, coming from the storage room with a bag of frozen cranberries under his arm. “This is Sebastian.” Vincent pointed to the older boy. “That's Brody. This is Sarah. Be nice to her.”

I stared at them. In Evander's stories, he had allowed Brody to be eaten alive by monsters and he had stabbed Sebastian through the ankle himself with no hesitation.

I looked at them intently, but neither of them bothered more than a glance in my direction. They were absorbed in the TV or themselves and didn't look away from the glowing panel.

I turned my back on them and went to Evander's room. I knocked on the door twice, but there was no answer. I went in anyway.

Evander's room was nothing like what I expected. It was in the basement, so there were two windows rather high up on the north side. They didn't let in much light. The walls were painted a dark color, but with not much light to go on, I couldn't tell if they were blue, or black, or gray, or green. The bed was in the corner and completely disheveled. Evander was stretched out on it with a book tented over his face.

He didn't even move when I came into the room. Clothes littered the floor between us. On one side of the room there was a computer desk and on the other side, was a mural that covered the whole wall. It was a re-creation of a mural that was painted on the side of a pawn shop downtown. It was called The Mos-eye-ic. The wall was broken down into a grid and in each square was painted an eye in a different style by a different artist, but none of the eyes painted by Evander were exact copies of the ones on the mural downtown. Each painting was entirely original.

I stopped to look more closely. Some of them were beautiful. Some of them were hideous and crude. Some of them probably took weeks to paint and it looked like others had only taken a moment. I got caught up in Evander's work the same way I got caught up in the original community painting. Which one was my favorite?

I didn't realize it, but I had ventured quite far into the room seeking the answer to my question when suddenly Evander's hand shot out and he grabbed my wrist.

I jumped, but I didn't pull my arm back.

“Did you meet them?” he asked quietly, resting his book on his chest.

“Yes.”

“What did you think of them?”

I didn't know how to answer. “I saw them.”

“But you should know something,” he persisted. “First impressions and all that. What did you think of them?”

“I think the same thing you think of them,” I said, realizing I was completely blinded by the perspective given in his stories.

“And how do you know what I think of them?”

I sat down on his bed and he let go of my wrist. "I think your father is unfaithful."

"Even a blind woman could see that," he scoffed. "What do you think of the others?"

"Your step-mother seems disenchanted with her bargain. From my perspective, it's hard to tell what else is lurking there. Sebastian seemed like he was the type to scratch you just for fun and Brody seemed just as spiteful."

Evander's chest deflated as he let out all his air. "Do you know everything about me?"

"Huh?"

"Did you come here to save me?"

I stared and swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Even if you didn't, you have to find a way," he breathed, looking into my eyes intently.

"There is no one else in my life, but you. There is no one else I can picture in my stories now."

It was new for me, having this sort of moment with a man, but I kept looking into his eyes—his brown eyes. I couldn't find the words. I slid my hand into his. He felt cold, like the room. "Have you ever held hands with a girl before?"

"No. I was too busy being depressed. Have you ever held a guy's hand before?"

"Yeah, but it didn't feel like this. I didn't like that guy the way I like you. I really like you."

"Want to be my girlfriend?"

"Aren't I already?" I whispered, turning a little pink.

He sat up and his arms came around me. His hands had been cold, but his body felt warm. Then he kissed my temple. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. My nerves needed a lot of steadying, but I managed to force my way forward. I kissed his cheek. Then he kissed my mouth. It was breathy and fleeting, but it was real.

It was real.

Dinner was a hellish experience. Laurie acted like she was on the brink of death, just to get out of helping with the dishes. It only seemed that way because she kept apologizing to Emi for being unable to help. Sebastian and Brody had their own private discussion about football that was either above my head or beneath my radar. I couldn't figure out which. I fed Paisley again. It was a mushy cereal she didn't like and spat up repeatedly. Emi looked like a queen. I didn't know how she managed it. Besides all the work she had done on the meal itself, she had also decorated the table like a page out of a housekeeping magazine and dressed herself like a knitting edition of *Vogue*. Vincent and Reg talked. Being brothers, they seemed to have a lot of things to say to keep the conversation going. Mostly, Evander and I were completely ignored, until his father finally sought him out.

"So, Evan, you haven't told me much about your classes. What are your grades like?"

Sebastian and Brody quieted down to listen. They seemed to expect drama. Laurie also perked up.

"They're fine. Good even," Evander answered briefly.

"Great. If you've got that under control, then maybe you can spare a little time for yourself. For instance, when are you planning to get your own apartment? You can't stay here with Vincent and Emi forever. After all, they have a baby!" He said the word 'baby' like babies were repellent things, like mice or bed bugs.

Emi spoke up. "He can stay here forever if he wants to."

Reg glared at her. "I suppose you don't mind a freeloader then."

She wasn't deflated. "Are you kidding? I love Evander. He helps me keep the best babysitter in the city to myself. Besides, I like a full house."

"Does that mean you're planning on having ten children?" Reg asked mockingly.

"Maybe even eleven. What do you think, darling?" she sweetly asked Vincent.

He smiled. "We can fill the house up to the rafters if you want."

"Whatever," Reg snarled. "You can do whatever you want, Emi, but please don't stop my son from growing up. He needs to get a place of his own."

"I'm waiting for an apartment to open up in Sarah's building," Evander suddenly spoke up before Emi had the chance to get mad again. "It seems like a nice place to live."

I remembered the blood and pee stains in the hallway of my building. He had to be joking.

His dad glanced at me and for a second I thought his expression matched that of the King in *The Witch and the Fool*. He was thinking about what fun Evander would have, living in the same building as me and having easy access. I felt sick. "It's fine with me if you want to live there," he finally said. "What about a job? Have you got any idea of what you want to do for money?"

"Whatever is open," Evander said crossly.

"Do you plan to come back to Vancouver for the summer?" Laurie asked, trying to be tactful.

"No."

"Why not?" she asked, sounding much less evil than I expected. "You can have free rent at our house as well as here."

Evander cleared his throat. "You're pulling in the opposite direction as dad. Do you want me to freeload off you instead of Vincent and Emi or do you want me to get my own place?"

"But you could get a place of your own in Vancouver," Laurie suggested.

"Nah, I like it here better."

"Why? It's bloody freezing," Reg injected.

Laurie ignored him. "What about Christmas then? Will you come home for Christmas?"

"Once again, you're pulling in the opposite direction as dad. He wants me to get a job. If I'm going to get one, wouldn't it be better to work here during the holidays?"

Laurie stopped talking to Evander and suddenly directed her conversation toward me. "So, Sarah, what are you taking at the college?"

I was obligated to answer truthfully. "I'm still in high school."

Laurie looked distinctly uncomfortable like she had been happy Evander was with me until she heard that. "Really? What grade are you in?"

"Eleven." I had just made it worse. She wanted to hear twelve.

"So you're seventeen?"

"Sixteen. My birthday is in December." I just kept digging the hole deeper.

After hearing that, Laurie lost interest in me completely. Like she recognized that I was only going to be a temporary installment in Evander's life, so it wasn't worth the trouble to learn about me. She focused on her plate.

Something bothered me. Every time I looked at Reg, I kept seeing Carly sitting on his lap in the story. Actually, I hadn't seen Carly since she got back. She was avoiding my mother, so consequently, that meant me too. Regardless, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong and I couldn't help wondering if it had been Carly that he had been talking to on the phone. I was about to be eaten alive by curiosity, so when I got up to rinse off Paisley's plate, I got up the nerve to ask. "You know Mr. Cheney..."

"Call me Reg. I'm not your school teacher."

"Right. So, Reg. One of my older sisters was living in Vancouver until recently and I

wondered if you had met her.”

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know. Her name is Carly Reagan. Does that ring any bells?”

His face looked like granite, but Laurie suddenly looked like she really did want to die—and quickly. He answered without skipping a beat. “No. I didn’t meet her. It’s a big city.”

“Of course,” I said, letting his lie slide.

Emi, Vincent, and the boys seemed oblivious, but the pieces lined up perfectly. Rachel told me Carly was seeing a married man. Rachel was able to convince her to come back to the city because Reg told her he was coming to Edmonton soon. And the girl he had been talking to on the phone was her. She wanted to meet him tonight. Even Laurie knew about it, which probably accounted for why she looked so sick.

I took Paisley down from her chair and took a seat at the table next to Evander so I could eat. He took her from me immediately and with his free hand, he even started to dish up my plate.

Emi tolerated the situation for about two bites before she broke down and took Paisley from Evander and excused herself from the table.

Then Vincent took charge of the conversation and got Sebastian and Brody to talk about their lives—as charming as they were. They both sounded like bullies as they retold stories of how they set different people straight when they didn’t see things their way.

Before the meal was done, Brody was begging Laurie to take them to the mall and Sebastian wasn’t far behind them. “It won’t be closed early. It’s not a really important holiday. It’s just Remembrance Day. Come on! Can we go?”

“Go ahead and take them,” Reg advised. “I have somewhere to go, too.”

Laurie glared at him. Then she turned to the boys and said brightly. “Go get your stuff, I’ll take you.” Once they left the room she turned to Reg and fumed, “You know, you’re not fooling anybody.”

Then she disappeared into the hallway. Reg followed her, calling, “Laurie, don’t be like this. I’ll keep my promise.”

“Sure, you will,” she bellowed back.

Then they were gone.

Vincent shrugged his shoulders and put down his napkin. “Sorry about all this, Sarah. In my family, we try to love each other even though we know we’re screwed up. We also fight in public if we feel like it. Hiding what’s really going on is nearly impossible for us. Sorry for putting you in an uncomfortable situation.”

“I could say the same thing,” I said quietly, thinking about what I said about Carly. “Thanks for having me, but if it’s all the same, I’d like to go home now.”

“Sure,” Vincent said kindly.

I finished the last thing on my plate and went to get my coat on. Evander went downstairs and Vincent started clearing the dishes. I was standing in the entryway putting on my shoes when I saw a box sitting on the end table by the couch. It was a box full of books. What caught my attention was that they all seemed to be the same book. I flipped open the box flaps and saw what it was.

It was a blue, soft-covered book with black lettering and a picture of a melancholy young man sitting on a castle turret on the cover. The title read *Three Fairy Tales* by Evander Chaney. I opened the cover. The first one was *The Lord of the Capricorns*. The second one was *The Witch and the Fool*, and the last one was *Light Face, Dark Face*. Why was the main title different? I opened the flap and started reading, but as I got along, I saw that the story didn’t unfold the way

it had when I read it.

A second later, I walked around the corner and back into the kitchen. I held the book out to Vincent. "What's this?" I asked.

"It's Evander's book." Vincent looked around and then he whispered secretively, "Didn't Emi give you a copy?"

"Yeah, but the copy she gave me was a hardcover."

He looked at me strangely. "There weren't any hardcovers printed."

Chapter Sixteen

The Way the Spell Works

“There weren’t any hardcovers printed,” Vincent repeated as he turned his back to me. “You must be mistaken.”

I went back to the entryway and slid off my shoes. Where was Emi? I stalked through the house to the baby’s room. The nursery door was open a crack and she was standing with her back to the door. I stared at her. A moment later she must have felt my burning intent and turned around to face me. I showed her the book. She put Paisley down and tiptoed out of the room.

She beckoned for me to follow her. She took me up a half flight of stairs and into her bedroom. A tall, arching ceiling paneled in real cedar greeted me, and unless I was mistaken—it was bigger and grander than the living room. The woodwork of the furniture was exquisite, especially on the headboard of the bed. The pillows were made of purple satin. The crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling was extremely clean, so the sunlight hit the prisms and cast tiny rainbows everywhere.

Emi sat down on a tiny gilded chair and rubbed one of her feet through her gossamer-thin stockings. She beckoned for me to sit on the chair opposite hers. Her voice was pleasant and frank when she spoke. “Honestly, I expected you to talk to me after you were dragged into the book the first time. After a while, I began to think you didn’t really like Evander and weren’t reading his book at all. Imagine my surprise when you ended up in the Emergency Room.”

“Not just once, but twice,” I growled and Emi regarded me with her huge, dark eyes. Of course, she was right. I should have come to her about it. “Can you tell me what’s going on *now*? Where did the book come from?”

“I made it,” she answered without hesitation. “A long time ago, I belonged to a coven of witches.”

I gasped, but it made sense. She looked the part and acted like the Good Witch of the North. She always looked like a spindle of black lace with raspberry lips and butterfly eyes. Besides, I had already experienced her magic within the pages of Evander’s book, so it was impossible not to believe.

She sighed and carried on. “I can’t go into detail about my past with the witches, except to say I broke away from them to be with Vincent. Ever since I was expelled from the order, I’ve been bound to silence and I have refused to practice magic. In the life I lead now, I don’t really need it. But, for Evander, I broke the rules of my old coven and the rules I made myself and created the book for you.”

“Will you be punished?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t know. Try not to think about it. Even if I am, I regret nothing. Evander needed help and it wasn’t a kind I could give him. Even with my magic, by myself, I am not enough. I needed another person to help and as soon as I saw you, I knew you were the one.”

“Why?”

“You’ll understand. I want to explain some things. I met Autiny, Evander’s mother, when I was still a teenager. Vincent and I were already an established couple. That was eight years ago. Autiny and Reg were still together. Back then, it seemed like nothing was wrong. They were a happy family with one child. She’s where Evander gets his strange, blond, curly hair. There’s nothing like that in Vincent’s family.” She took a breath. “The happy family thing ended the next

year. I wasn't aware of what was going on during those years, but Reg had stopped being faithful to Autiny immediately after their wedding. He may have even been cheating on her before they got married, which was probably why she didn't notice a difference in his behavior after the vows were made."

"What a creep!" I shrieked, a heartbeat away from confessing what I suspected was going on with Carly.

"I don't know how many women there were, but I do know he fathered at least two children prior to the split up. After all, you've met them. They were here for dinner. I also don't know how long he kept Laurie as his mistress before he got her pregnant with Sebastian."

Her saying that deflated me.

"It's been said in the family, Reg never would have left Autiny, if it wasn't for Sebastian. You see, Reg was living a double life; one with Autiny and Evander and one with Laurie, Sebastian, and eventually Brody. Even though Reg doesn't possess a soft spot for a woman's feelings, he couldn't stand to see Sebastian cry. You've seen Sebastian. He looks shockingly like Reg—much more than Evander ever did. He felt he had a connection with Sebastian that he had never experienced, like Sebastian was the son he never had, forgetting all about Evander. I heard that Sebastian had to beg his daddy not to leave for a hundred days before Reg had heard enough and left Autiny and Evander.

"Of course it was impossible to hide the truth," Emi continued. "When Autiny discovered the depth of Reg's betrayal, she was sick for months. She lost her job. And Evander... realized his father loved Sebastian and Brody much better than he loved him. Autiny took Evander and went home to live with her mother, which was good because a year later it was discovered she had stomach cancer."

"What?" I gasped.

"When she died, Evander was sixteen. He lived with his grandmother for as long as he could, but eventually, her health wasn't good enough to maintain a household, so he had to move back to the house his mother abandoned. For you see, Reg moved his new family into the exact same house Autiny had fled. Evander was given the same room he had when he was an infant, with all the memories of a life gone wrong that came with it. By the time I saw Evander at his high school graduation, he was like a corpse. I have never seen anyone with nothing wrong with them so unhealthy. So, I brought him here. No one approves. I don't care. He needs help. Anyway, I had to agree to let those people come for this little visit if I was going to get him away from them. Make sense?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath and took the blue book out of my hand. "Now for the matter of the book. Evander did write a book and I did get it published. This is it. If you read it, you'll see the scenarios are the same as the book you've been experiencing. The differences are in the characters you play. Sarafina and Serissa behave much differently than you do. They behave in the only way Evander could imagine a girl behaving. Maybe it's because of the similarity in your name, but when I read it, I kept getting angry. I kept thinking, 'Sarah wouldn't act like this. She wouldn't do this.' So, I decided to make the book to prove to him that if you were in those situations, you wouldn't do what he predetermined. As you go through the stories and make more positive decisions than his original characters, you are not only making his outlook less gloomy, but actually earning his love."

"How? Is he living the story through his role, too?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. Instead, the possibility of more loyal behavior on the part

of a woman enters his head. He didn't tell me, but I know what happened last Saturday. He was editing the last chapter of *The Witch and the Fool* and he suddenly got the idea you would have gone into the fire with him. Then he got a terrible premonition and went to you immediately to see if you were okay. The whole thing still doesn't make sense to him."

"I get that, but why does he have a grudge against girls if the person who betrayed him was his father?"

"He doesn't trust anyone. He believes his family would skin him alive if they had the chance. After all, when your own family will double-cross you, who is left to trust? But you are *so* close to finishing what I started, Sarah. I'm really sorry about what happened with your leg and later when you burned your feet, but the reality of those consequences is what is winning him. Just one more story and he's yours... if you can make it."

"You don't think I can?"

"It's not that I don't think you can. It's that I think the last story is a more difficult challenge. I mean, in the first two stories, you had to choose between Evander and someone that was completely repellent. This will be harder."

I clicked my heels together like Dorothy, but I didn't go home and nothing felt better. "Can I read that book?"

"Absolutely," she said, suddenly pulling out a pair of scissors from a sewing box on the floor. "I really shouldn't do this." She found the page in the book where *The Witch and the Fool* ended and cut the book right down the spine. Then she handed me the first half. "That was so bad for a pair of fabric scissors. I've probably ruined them. Oh well."

"Why can't I have that half?"

"Because that would be cheating. If you read the last story the way Evander wrote it, you would know how to avoid his traps and void the experience. Good luck, Sarah."

I went home and set up camp in my bed. With nothing to hold me back, I finished all of Evander's original versions of *The Lord of the Capricorns* and *The Witch and the Fool* before it was time to go to bed. At first, I was pleased with myself for missing the traps Evander had set, but after a while, my feelings changed to indignation. He really had disgusting notions of female behavior. I watched Sarafina dump Tremor for Murmur long before Murmur kidnapped her and put her on the boat. She was set on leaving Tremor after the dead capricorn incident, her fear quenched completely by her greed. She even flirted with Murmur when she met him at the farewell party, which her mother specifically warned her not to do. She was such an opportunist. Well, that all would have been fine and I wouldn't have suffered too much, but in the story, Tremor falls madly in love with her and does everything he conceivably can before she runs off with his younger brother regardless. I was in agony. In the end, he was all alone and expected to remain alone for the rest of his life.

The Witch and the Fool was worse. In that one, Kalavan sought to take a less prominent role in Serissa's life. He just wanted to protect her, but her behavior was sickening. Instead of choosing his brother, she chooses to have an affair with his father. That girl didn't hide on top of her bed. She expected the King to come to her room and she welcomed him. In the end, Kalavan tried to stop Valance from murdering her in a fit of rage. He was victorious, but only temporarily as Valance had her successfully tried for witchcraft. She didn't burn though—Kalavan was burned in her place. The story ends with her alternating between King's bed and Valance's as a

regular thing. It was so messy.

I tapped the halved book on my recovering foot and thought about what Evander was trying to say with his stories. In the first story, he was a monster. In the second story, he was a fool. And Emi had said the third story would be harder than for me to finish. I had already been voluntarily burnt at the stake. How much worse could it get?

I picked up the hardcover version and opened the pages at my bookmark. I looked at the section heading. The words were all alone on a single page: *Light Face, Dark Face*.

I curled my toes. They still hurt a bit.

Half of me wanted to start reading right away, but I couldn't make myself flip the page over. The other half was in charge. I closed the book and put it on the floor. It would keep until the next night. It had to. I had to rest my aching feet and prepare myself for whatever Evander needed me to do.

I picked up the phone and dialed Emi's house. She picked up. "Hi, Emi, can I talk to Evander?"

"Of course," came the sound of her never-ruffled voice.

After the sound of Emi's bumping down the stairs came the sound of a knock at the door. "Sarah's on the phone for you."

For the first time in my life, I heard the sound of a man tripping over himself to get to the phone... for me. But when he answered it, his voice sounded cool. "Hey, Sarah."

"Hi," I said, but for some reason, I couldn't make myself say more than that. After a few seconds had passed, I said it again, "Hi."

"Hi," he said, waiting.

"I hope you don't mind. I just called because... I wanted to hear your voice."

"You can do that any time you want. After all, this is the first time you've called me."

"I know. I've been kind of wrapped up with a project."

"What project?"

I struggled. I was desperately tempted to reveal what it was I had been doing, but Emi had warned me not to tell him, so I bit my tongue and feigned. "I think I'll be able to talk about it more after it's finished."

"Is it an art project?"

By that point, I'd sort of figured out he was big on art, symmetry, and expression. "Sort of, but maybe it's more like an Olympic sport. It's hard to say."

"Sounds interesting."

"Has your family left yet?"

"No. They're flying out tomorrow afternoon. I wish it were sooner."

"Evander, did you know my sister is having an affair with your dad?" I whispered.

"Sorry Sarah, I didn't know it was your sister, but I did know he was meeting some girl who was about my age. I didn't think it would last this long."

"Why does Laurie put up with it?"

"I don't know. Why does your sister? She knows he's married." The way he said it made it sound like he knew exactly why.

"Did you ever meet her?" I suddenly wanted to know. Was that the reason I saw her on the King's lap? Did Evander know her well enough to base a character on her?

"She came to the house once. I answered the door, so I saw her, but I didn't talk to her. My dad pushed me back into the house and shut the door on me before I could blink. That was all."

I was unconvinced. "Did you think she was pretty?"

He sounded affronted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's a nineteen-year-old girl with clear skin and an infectious smile. Did you think she was pretty?"

"Sarah, she wasn't smiling. If she had clear skin, it wasn't showing. She had mascara running all the way down to her chin. How was I supposed to tell whether she was pretty or not? And why are you feeling threatened by her? She had an affair with my father. Why the hell would I be interested in her? I'm interested in *you*."

I couldn't answer. He took my breath away.

"Why? Are you anything like your sister? Is this fair warning?"

"No!" I screamed, finding my voice. "Honestly, this is bad behavior... even for her. I don't know how it happened."

"Really? I do."

"Then how?"

"How it happens with every woman he meets. The creep goes to the bar and picks up women. He's married and he still does that. Every game night, whether it's the Canucks or the Lions playing, it doesn't matter. He goes out and does whatever he wants claiming he's going to see the game. If he wants to see a woman more than once, he starts paying for things. You should be able to guess: dinners, fancy hotel rooms, presents. I told you my dad's house isn't that nice, right? That's because he spends his bucks elsewhere."

"And you hate him?"

"More than that. I hate every woman who can't see through his sickening facade. Why can't they tell he's a liar? Why can't they tell he's a cheater who will play them the wrong way? Why do they give themselves to a man who can hardly get his pants on before finding someone new?"

That was it. That was what his problem was (at least one of them). He couldn't find it within himself to trust a woman who was the same as the ones who would pair themselves up with his dad. He didn't want to live his life alone, so he needed reassurance that the woman he chose was different.

"I'm not like that, and I'm going to prove it to you," I said firmly.

"Huh?" he breathed, breaking out of his tirade.

"You heard me."

"Sarah, I'm not accusing you of being the same as his girlfriends."

"I know, but still—I know you need proof. And I'm going to give it to you."

"How are you going to do that?"

"You'll figure it out. I'll see you on Tuesday. I love you. I'm hanging up now," I said in a rush.

"Okay. Goodnight. Wait! You love me?" he said, sounding anxious.

Then I hung up. I was ready to read.

Chapter Seventeen

Light Face, Dark Face

Serena Madelle stood in the great hall of Thistle Comb. The hall was grand with a high arched ceiling and tall thin windows, but it remained undecorated and bare. The most resplendent thing there was Serena herself. She was waiting to be met by a butler but instead was left unmet and curious about her surroundings. The two sets of eyes who watched her thought she looked very curious. One set worried she was afraid and wondered how to protect her. Her red lips might have indicated a level of knowledge and maturity, or it may have just been the style women wore their lips whether it was their first time meeting a man alone or their hundredth. The second set of eyes were owned by a man who felt an emptiness inside at the very sight of her. Thirst and hunger he had not previously known shook him. How he wanted her! She should not have come to the house. She should not be there at all, but since something had drawn her there, why not see it out to the conclusion?

Serena was visiting Thistle Comb with hopes of interviewing the owner. The mansion was owned by a man known as Mr. Loring Fallwin. He was a famous lunatic, for his mansion had been under construction since he became the owner. Speculation on the subject was hard-edged and recurring by anyone who had an opinion to vent. Why was he wasting his inherited fortune on expanding an already oversized home? Only he lived in it. The space was mostly unused because he always moved into the newest portion of the house. When questioned about it by neighbors the answers were hard to discern. Finally, a newspaper editor heard of the situation and sent one of his reporters to uncover the truth, but would Serena be able to discover the reason for the continued construction from the owner himself?

A different person should have been sent, both the watching figures separately agreed. Yet, neither one of them intended to send her away.

Then I was the one in Thistle Comb waiting for Mr. Fallwin. The first thing I looked at was my body. I wore a strange knitted cloak with a pencil skirt, polished black boots, and a short-brimmed hat set at an angle so as not to disturb my French knot. I was also carrying a bag. When I opened it up I saw I was carrying a notepad enclosed in a brown leather cover, pens, and a few extra clothes.

When I finished taking stock of myself, I examined the hall. The introduction to the story did not do the place justice. The room itself was octagonal with a huge staircase spiraling up one side of it. It led to a second floor that was so high I couldn't see any details from where I stood. There were two large doors in front of me that led to the rest of the main level, but they were closed. The floor was made of white marble. There was a wide circular rug directly beneath the skylight, but other than the splendor of the railing on the staircase, there was nothing else in the room though there were obvious places for paintings, tables, and other furniture.

At that moment, I heard footsteps from the floor above. Instead of making me wait, he appeared right away. Coming down the stairs was Evander. He looked more like himself than any of his other manifestations did. In this story, his hair was as blond and as wavy as it was in real life. On closer inspection, it was styled in a way that was popular in the twenties. He looked like Ronald Colman. His suit was light gray and he wore a white vest with a gold watch chain showing.

He joined me on the main floor and shook my hand pleasantly. "Allow me to introduce

myself. I'm Loring Fallwin. Please excuse me for keeping you waiting. I've been talking to my architect about the new wing I'm building onto the west side of the house. I'm afraid I've been so busy that I must have missed your card. I wasn't expecting anyone today."

"I'm Miss Serena Madelle," I said, trying to remember the name I was given in the introduction. "I'm here to interview you about your home for the newspaper."

"About my house? What the devil for?" he laughed.

"I heard a rumor you've been continuously adding to it for many years. How long has it been since you started construction?"

He shrugged. "I can't remember."

"Why do you add to it?" I asked gently.

"It just seems like the natural thing to do."

"Why?"

"Because," he scoffed. "The oldest parts of this house are completely unlivable, so I had to construct new wings so there would be suitable places to live."

"Is it because they got dirty and rather than clean them, you'd rather just make more rooms?"

One corner of his mouth tugged upward. "If only that were the case."

"What's the reason?"

"You're not going to believe me, but even if you don't believe me, please come in. Have tea with me and I'll try to answer your questions."

He led me through the two giant doors and into a sitting room. The room was simply furnished with a white plush couch and white lacquered coffee table. The arrangement looked like an excellent start to decorating the place, but as it was, there was nothing else in the room and it looked hideously bare.

When Loring brought out the tea set, the cups had no decoration on them. There was not even the tiniest embellishment on the side. They were blank. Then stranger than that, he poured no tea inside them but gave me the cup like it was already full. He put his own cup to his lips and pretended to drink from it. There was nothing in his cup either.

After he had a few good drinks of air, he let out a contented breath and set down his cup. "The fact of the matter is, this house is haunted."

"By ghosts?"

"I'm afraid there are many things that haunt. Some of them might be ghosts. Some of them might be demons. I know one roams and stomps and shouts in areas of the house I abandoned long ago. That one never leaves."

The pitch of Loring's voice was giving me shivers from my ankles to my skull. Why did he have to do that?

"I keep building the house," he continued, "because the new parts of the house are never haunted."

"If it's that difficult to live here, then why don't you leave? It sounds like you have enough money. Why not abandon this house or tear it down and build a new one?"

"I can't do that!" he exclaimed, aghast. "This house was left to me by my parents. I can't forsake their gift to me."

I couldn't argue with that, so instead, I pretended to drink my tea and then I asked him, "Can you take me for a tour?"

"There's not much to see. Most of the house is blocked off."

"Why do you block it off? Because of the ghosts?"

He nodded gravely. "Every room in this house is built with two special doors. The back one

lets you into a room. The front one leads you out just in case you're stuck in the room when it falls."

I took out my notebook and pen. "How do you know when a room has fallen?"

"It falls into shadow."

"How does that happen?"

His lips were dry as he explained. "First, the lights won't work anymore."

"Is it pitch-black?"

"I haven't stayed in those rooms for long enough to find out exactly what they are like, but I know they aren't pitch-black. It's easy enough to go through the door and lock it behind you. I'm not sure where the little light that's there comes from." He took out his handkerchief and blotted the sweat forming on his forehead.

"Are you uncomfortable with my questions?" I asked as sweetly as I could.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Then why don't you tell me to go away?"

"Because you're the first person who's ever come here. It's been so long since I have seen another person; my nerves are coming undone just talking to you."

I was confused. "Didn't you just say you were talking to the architect?"

"Did I?"

"Yes," I persisted.

Loring looked like he didn't understand for a moment, and then he started nodding like he remembered something. "Oh, him? He doesn't count. He's here to work, not to have conversations."

I was about to ask why when suddenly a clap of thunder sounded over our heads. It was so loud I thought it was a plane crash in the yard and jumped in the air.

Loring leaped up and caught me in his arms. For a few breathless moments, he held me and explained, "It was thunder. Can't you hear the rain on the roof?"

I could hear it, pattering away.

"You should stay here tonight. It would be dangerous to travel. The roads here are impassable when it rains, and I wouldn't be able to help you if your car got stuck. I have a guest room constantly prepared for a guest. Would you like to stay?"

When he said he had a room constantly prepared for a guest I thought I would break down in tears of pity. He said no one *ever* came, so he had kept something ready when no one was likely to come. He clearly hoped someone would.

"I'll stay," I volunteered. "I'm very interested in your house."

He let go of me. I clutched my notebook to my chest while he picked up my bag and carried it back through the great hall and up the winding staircase. It seemed a shame to have that much space with no decorations in it: no art, no sculpture, no color at all (not even beige).

Down another hallway and up a tiny set of stairs he stopped in front of a white door. "This is the guest room. Please enjoy your stay here. I hope you stay forever." He opened the door for me. His gaze was intense. His loneliness imprinted on his face. Finally, he stepped away to give me space, then disappeared back down the stairs.

Inside was the plainest bedroom I had ever seen. The bed was boring with white sheets, pillows, and a fluffy duvet. There was a walk-in closet with nothing in it and the two doors Loring had mentioned each room possessed. The only point of interest in the room was a fireplace. However, it looked like it had never been used. There was not even a speck of ash. Why did he bother building a fireplace if he wasn't going to light a fire? Well, that wasn't the

weirdest thing about the house.

I wasn't tired, so I dropped my bag by the bed and decided to go exploring. I ducked out of my room. There were so many doors. I tried them all, but not one of them gave way to my handle-turning.

Finally, I got this spunky idea to go back through the house myself and go outside. From there I could look at the house from the outside, and besides, he said I had a car. I crept down the staircase. I tried the doorknob, and it gave. Thence I found myself on the front steps.

The front entrance was extremely grand. The stairs leading up to the mansion were white marble and very wide. I expected to see a driveway or something, but beyond the stairs, there was absolutely nothing to see. It was amazing. After the bottom step, the world abruptly ended and became black like outer space without the stars. I could hear the rain on the roof, but there was no rain falling. Not only that, but I could not see any part of the house other than the entrance. I backed up to the second-to-last step and tried to get a perspective on the structure before me, but there was nothing. There were no outlines of the roof or chimneys against the sky. There were no windows. There was nothing.

It was like we were on a starship in the middle of a void. And I realized I couldn't leave, even if I wanted to. Emi was right. The third story was different from the others. The other stories had other characters, other people to give me leads, and a world outside to interact with. The third story gave me nothing, but I couldn't stop going forward. It was obvious Loring desperately needed me.

I took two steps forward, and my stomach growled. The air-like tea Loring had given me gave me an idea of where to go next.

I went back into the house and searched for a kitchen. There wasn't one. I wandered around for a little while and knocked on a few of the closed doors, calling quietly, "Mr. Fallwin, are you there?"

I must have knocked on at least ten different doors before he emerged and stormed up to me. His eyes were dark with anger. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I was looking for you. You didn't say what room you'd be in."

"Do you have any idea how dangerous wandering around is? You never know when a room or a hallway might fall into shadow. The room I gave you is safe. You should have stayed there. I beg you, listen to me," he whispered painfully.

"Why? Have any of the doors ever opened in the past and let the ghosts into the light part of your house?"

"No, and I pray they never do." He backed away from me like he needed to take a breather. He smoothed his hair and started walking away from me, going back the way he came.

I followed him. "Is there anything to eat?" I asked.

He turned around sharply. "Didn't you eat enough when I served you tea?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say something about the lack of tea, but I felt again that it would be a mistake. "I guess not," I mumbled.

"The servants have all gone home for the night," he said simply. "I cannot serve you anything except what I already have. If you had come earlier, we could have dined together," he said longingly.

I smiled at that. He did seem like a much more wistful version of himself. "Well, where's the kitchen? I'll make something for myself."

"The kitchen?" he stuttered. "I have no idea. I never go there. The servants take care of all that. I'm sorry. You'll have to wait until morning."

Then he escorted me back to my room. On the way, he started coughing. He put a hand to his mouth and when he couldn't stop wheezing, he reached into his pocket and brought out a white handkerchief. To my surprise, he bent and coughed something into the handkerchief. He tried to cover it and not let me see what had happened, but he couldn't keep it a secret. He spat up something black just like Hilda in the first story and the Queen in the second. Why was he spitting? I didn't get it.

Loring bade me goodnight in the most dignified manner and then closed the door between us. I figured I might as well go to sleep, so I started getting ready, but it was kind of hard. After he left, I realized he hadn't shown me where the bathroom was and so I couldn't wash my face or use the toilet or anything. I found a squashed white cotton nightgown in the bottom of my bag, so I got undressed and pulled that over my head. It was very wrinkly and non-sexy. I hoped Loring wouldn't see me in it.

Then I started prowling the room, looking for the light switch. It was an odd thing, but I couldn't find one. The light coming from a white panel in the ceiling was almost fluorescent, except I couldn't see tubes under the glass. It was just white light. I guessed if the light went out that would constitute the room falling into shadow and becoming part of the unusable portion of the house.

I got into bed, but there was no way I could sleep with that unforgiving light over my head. I took an extra pillow and put it over my face. Maybe I would be able to fall asleep that way.

I tossed and turned, and eventually felt drowsy.

I slept.

I woke up. I wasn't used to sleeping with a pillow over my head and I was half smothered. I moved the pillow and for a moment I thought I was back in my room at home since it was dark in the room, but then I heard a fire crackling and popping in the grate. I was still in Thistle Comb and what was more than that, the guest room had been taken over by shadow.

Chapter Eighteen

White Room, Black Room

I grabbed my sheets. Had I made a mistake? I was sure I'd gone to sleep in a bed with white linen and a feather duvet. My hands were clutching fur. The light from the fire was dim, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw an animal skin on my bed. It was huge. Was it a bearskin? Maybe I wasn't in the same room.

I put my feet on the floor, and I instantly realized the bedding wasn't the only thing that was different. I was wearing a black silk nightgown with an equally flimsy housecoat over it. Had someone pulled me out of bed, changed my clothes while I was unconscious, and moved me to another room?

I had the shivers, but the more I explored the room and felt the heat of the fire, the more confident I became that it was the same room I had gone to sleep in. Size and symmetry were the same even if color and texture had changed. Was that what happened when the room was taken over by shadow?

Looking around, I saw the two doors Loring had cautioned me about. There was the door I came in and then there was the door that supposedly led to shadow. Was that door locked like the other doors had been?

I tried it. The knob turned easily.

I caught my breath. Wasn't it what I was searching for? Didn't I want to find a way into the dark side of the mansion? Didn't I want to find out if the mansion was really haunted like Loring said? I let the handle turn back to its original position. For a moment, I was frozen by indecision. I couldn't stop thinking about my unusable leg and my burnt feet. Was I entering the underworld? I asked myself again. Could I die in real life if I died in the story?

I was terrified. How could I get control of myself? I knew—I'd just open the door a crack and take a peek. If I didn't like what I saw, I could slam the door shut and run to the other door that led into the light, couldn't I?

My teeth were chattering. I was so stiff and scared I couldn't make up my mind.

I grabbed the handle and opted to take a little look. Fighting my fear, I turned the handle and opened the door an inch.

"What are you doing back there?" came a voice from the other side.

I stiffened. I knew that voice. I opened the door all the way before thinking another thought.

There he was, sitting in a brown leather armchair by the fire, his ankle resting on his knee. He was smoking a cigarette and whacking the heel of his boot with a riding whip. His hair was dark brown—tangled—and hung in loose tendrils past his shoulders. His vest and shirt were those of impeccable taste, the top buttons undone. His expression was different. The curve of his smile was completely foreign to me. Honestly, he looked possessed. If his voice hadn't been a perfect match I would have doubted whether he was even the same person, but at that point in the game, I knew I couldn't make mistakes. It was Evander, and for the first time, I saw how much he could resemble his father.

"Get in here and close the door." He threw his head back and blew a stream of smoke over his head.

What was he smoking? It didn't smell like tobacco. In fact, it didn't smell like anything. Then I realized I couldn't smell the tiniest whiff of smoke from the fireplace either.

I clenched my jaw and obeyed him. I walked right up to him, contemplating what my first question ought to be, when he suddenly threw his cigarette into the fire, grabbed my hand, and pulled me onto his lap.

"Ack!" I screamed.

"Settle down," he said, putting his arms around me so tightly that even though I fought him, it made no difference. His arms were as unyielding as steel.

"Who *are* you?" I demanded.

He didn't answer me, but instead, let go of me with one of his hands and touched my chin with his fore and middle fingers. Lightly, he pushed my chin, making my whole head move for his viewing pleasure.

"That's a funny way to introduce yourself. Instead of lashing out at me, you should be explaining. How did you get into that room?"

"I'm Mr. Fallwin's guest," I said stubbornly, wondering why I was still in his lap.

"Nonsense," he quipped. "That guy never has guests. Better tell me who you are, what you were doing there, and why you're dressed like this."

I looked away angrily. "And if I do, will you answer my questions?"

"I'll answer a question for a question."

"I'm Serena Madelle."

"I'm Darach Craven."

"I'm a journalist who's doing a story on the constant construction of his house."

"Huh," he huffed. "I'm a ghost hunter who's trying to rid this house of ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts," I said stiffly.

"Really. I must be wasting my time then and so must Mr. Fallwin. Did he tell you why he keeps the construction going?"

"Because of the ghosts?"

"That's not the half of it. If he stops building extensions onto this house, do you know what will happen?"

"What?" I snorted. I didn't believe Darach had any new information whatsoever. He was just baiting me to keep me talking.

"He'll die."

I stopped breathing. I looked into Darach's dark eyes to see if he was lying or teasing me. For such a whorish guy, he seemed sincere. "For real?"

"Of course."

"So, were you hired by him? It sounded like he never visits this portion of the house."

"He doesn't, but I have answered enough of your questions. It's time for you to answer a few of mine. Why are you dressed like that?" He licked his lips.

Even though I liked Evander, I did not like the side he was showing me. Where was the Evander who had never held a girl's hand? Darach was angling his head so he could look down my neckline.

I covered myself up to my collarbone and answered. "I woke up like this."

"Well, this house is full of surprises. Frankly, it's nice to see anything that isn't dead."

"Did Mr. Fallwin hire you?" I asked, persisting with my earlier question.

Darach rolled his eyes. "No."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I hunt ghosts and this place is full of them. Seriously, woman, you're not playing by the rules. Wait for me to ask you a question before you launch another question at me. Why

didn't you stay in the light part of the house if you're a guest?"

"I wanted to see for myself what Loring was afraid of."

"It's 'Loring' now, is it? You're that close with him?"

"What?" I stammered.

"Tell me, which of us do you think is better looking? Him or me?"

I rolled my eyes. "This is unbelievable. I'm not answering that. It's my turn to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Is there any food here?" My stomach cramped with hunger.

"Sure, but it's old."

"As long as it's edible."

He shook his head and pushed me off his lap, getting ready to stand up. "It might not be. Wait here. I'll see if I can scrounge something up."

He left the room and he came back bearing a plate. He was holding it so high above my head on his fingertips that I couldn't see what was on it. "Sorry," he said as he brought the contents into view. "I couldn't find anything else."

The food on it was half-eaten and it had obviously been sitting out for half a day if not longer. There were two slices of mutilated tomato and some wilted lettuce shavings. "I can't eat that," I said frostily.

"Of course you can't, but I'm afraid there's nothing else." He looked truly apologetic.

"So, what do you eat?"

He shrugged his shoulders and scraped the plate off into the burning fire. "It looks like you're going to have to wait until morning."

I got up. I couldn't stand it. I had to find something to eat. The kitchen couldn't be far. I was going to die of hunger if I didn't get something. I brushed past Darach and opened the door that led even further into the shadow.

The passage led me into another great hall. It was a lot like the one I had first found myself in, except that it had two staircases going up and it was decorated with carpet and wallpaper.

I went to the front door. "Where does this lead?"

"Out, I suppose," Darach said, leaning nonchalantly against the door frame of the room I'd just vacated.

"Can I go out there?"

"I don't know. I've never tried that door."

"This isn't how you came in?" I persisted.

He laughed. "You sure ask a lot of strange questions. I already told you. This place is haunted. Aren't you afraid of what could jump out at you if you open a strange door?"

He had a point. I had been shaking with fear outside the door that led into Darach's study. But something about the mansion suggested symmetry. Since I opened the entryway door on the white side of the house and found darkness, wouldn't it make sense if I opened the door on the dark side I would find light? I tugged on it, and it gave way.

Outside, it was snowing. It was night. The wind blew my housecoat open and caught my hair. I stepped onto the door frame. I couldn't see any houses or anything to indicate civilization, or a world beyond, except the orange sky. I caught my breath. I loved the light pollution in Edmonton. It made the sky pinkish-orange on cold winter nights. The snow fell in huge clusters and the wind swirled it in tiny tornadoes on the front step. The weather was like Edmonton in November.

When I closed the door, Darach sauntered over and blew a puff of air at me to blow the snowflakes out of my hair.

“Question,” I suddenly said.

“You never stop asking them.”

“What do I look like? I haven’t seen a mirror since I got here.”

He looked slightly ruffled. “What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t you know what you look like?”

“Is there a mirror I could borrow?”

“No.”

“There are no mirrors in the bathrooms?” I exclaimed.

He looked at me sideways. “There aren’t any bathrooms.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer and started walking away.

I ran after him and put myself directly in front of him. “Can’t you just tell me what I look like?”

His eyes suddenly sparkled, like he had caught hold of a devilish idea. Then it occurred to me. Was Darach the demon that Loring said never left the house? Was that possible?

“Well,” he began. His tongue was visible on just the other side of his bottom lip as he began walking toward me at a leisurely pace. “Your eyes are green. Rather, they seem gray with hints of green in them. It really comes out when the yellow of the firelight flickers across them.”

I backed away from him and found myself getting closer and closer to the wall. What would happen if I let him go on?

“Your shadow is purple,” he continued.

My shadow? What? I turned around and looked at the floor. There was a shadow there, and, strangely enough, against the warm red carpet, it was purple.

His fingers encircled my wrist. He used the moment when I twisted myself around to catch me off-guard. With his other hand, he took a lock of my hair in his hand so I could see it. To my surprise, it was the same length, color, and texture as my real hair, but that wasn’t how he described it. “So soft,” he said, taking it to his lips and kissing it.

Normally in a romance novel, the girl being seduced would be practically hypnotized by that point. He was so sexually suggestive from the look in his eye down to the way he slightly turned his hips that I wanted to push him away.

I tried to pull my wrist out of his grasp, but he pulled it back even harder. His expression was serious. “I haven’t finished describing you yet,” he insisted.

“Fine, finish, but then let me go.”

“Calm down,” he said, putting his hand on my head like I had suddenly become a puppy he was trying to pet. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“It’s hard to trust you,” I gasped.

“Why? I’m trying to do what you wanted.”

“This doesn’t feel like the real you.”

“What should I be like?”

“Aloof. Detached. I have had to fight so hard just for you to say ‘hello’ to me. It feels entirely wrong to have you breathing down my neck, pulling me onto your lap, forcing me against the wall, or...” I ran out of breath and he completed my sentence.

“Or telling you how beautiful you are?” he said evenly, making his brown eyes so warm you could practically wrap yourself up in them.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“You’re going to need to get over that.”

I felt my back up against the wall. I squirmed.

“Stop that,” he said, clearly noticing my discomfort. “I just have a couple more things to tell you.”

“Then say them! And stop cornering me. You’re freaking me out!”

He laughed. “You’re much more like a frightened rabbit than when I first saw you standing at my door. Wearing black silk and you were trembling? Those things don’t match. You need space. I get it, but please, calm down and let me finish. This,” he said as he tapped a spot on my head just above my hairline.

“What about it?” I asked, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“It’s a little blonder there than the rest of your head. Did you know?” He exclaimed it like he had just uncovered a great mystery about me and was extremely proud of himself.

I was a bit shaken. “No. I didn’t.”

“It’s very cute, but there’s something else. You’re letting color ruin form. It’s not your colors that make you beautiful. It’s your shape. Your nose tilts up slightly and the point of your chin aligns with it perfectly. The corners of your eyes slant slightly upwards. It makes you look mysterious, like a cat.”

I was choking on something. The words he used, though flattering, actually did describe me—the me that really existed outside the book. “I didn’t know you could talk like that,” I said, as though I were speaking to Evander.

His eyes were inches from mine as he suddenly said something that was almost impossible for a character in the book to say, as in it resembled reality. “You’ve got some strange ideas about me. We only met tonight, but you said something that troubles me. You said I ought to be aloof. Why? Because that makes you feel safer? If I’m not saying I desire you, I must not desire you? Is that what you think? That a man who stays silent has no mind to ravish you in the dark?”

I was flushed and so hot I felt like a furnace. “Yeah, maybe,” I huffed, turning my head and trying unsuccessfully to get away.

“Don’t be a fool. It’s not only me who wants you. Don’t be tricked by the man who’s not saying what he wants. If he’s standing beside you instead of by someone else, it’s you he wants.” He let go of my wrist and gave me the space he said I needed. Then he turned his back to me and said, “It’s very late. Get back to bed. I’m sure I’ll see you in the morning... if it ever comes.” Then he disappeared into a different part of the house.

I was rattled, but I made my way back to the room Loring had given me. When I got there, I recognized I wouldn’t be able to sleep unless I locked both doors. Darach was saying there was no proof Loring was honorable just because he acted like it during our brief meeting. It didn’t matter whether the doors led into the light or the shadow. Perhaps I wasn’t safe either way.

Chapter Nineteen

Brown Book, Blue Book

The following Tuesday, I babysat Paisley again. Evander's family had gone back to Vancouver, but he was nowhere to be found. Emi was her usual self when she said good-bye to me. It honestly felt like the conversation we had in her room hadn't happened. Even though she didn't do anything out of the ordinary, as soon as the door shut behind her, my brain became completely contaminated.

Contaminated? How so?

A little gremlin inside my head wanted to find a complete copy of Evander's blue paperback. Emi had given me a copy, but she had cut off the whole story of *Light Face, Dark Face*. I didn't want to go against what Emi said, but the gremlin in my head wouldn't shut up.

"You want it, don't you?" it said.

I turned my head and pretended I didn't hear it.

But it surfaced from the depths of my brain a second time. I could hear its creaking voice sputter, "You want to know how to get rid of Darach and find your happily-ever-after with Loring, don't you? There's a whole box of those books somewhere around here. No one would notice if you took just one."

"I can't look," I said out loud. "Emi said it would ruin the test."

At that moment, I looked at Paisley. She was crawling and she had found her way to a shelving unit that contained a collection of wicker baskets. She grabbed onto the second shelf and pulled herself into a standing position. Then she took hold of one of the baskets and tugged it out of its place. To my possible undoing, the basket was filled to the brim with copies of Evander's blue book.

I grabbed Paisley and shoved the basket back into its place. Paisley didn't like being picked up once she found something she wanted to play with so she started to cry. Over the sound of her yowling, I could hear the gremlin. "Now you don't even have to look. They're right there. You don't even have to take one home with you. You could just read the important parts here and put it back when you're finished. No one will ever know."

I didn't acknowledge it. Instead, I said to Paisley, "How about some apple sauce? It's almost time for your supper anyway and... I need a distraction."

I took her into the kitchen and sat her in her high chair. Actually, for as long as I needed to feed her, I was quite distracted. It was when I started scraping the bottom of the bowl that I started wondering what I would do when she was finished. She would play for another hour before bed, but what would I do after she went to sleep? I was about to root around in Emi's movie collection when I heard someone at the front door.

It was Evander. He came in with a smile and a couple of brown paper bags. He looked terrific wearing a black and gray striped toque with a black brim on it. Little blond curls peeked out from underneath. His smile was so broad, he gave himself a dimple on one side.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked cheerfully.

"No."

"Great. I brought you dinner. Are you hungry?"

"Starving!"

He put down the bags on the table and pulled out hamburgers and fries from a drive-through.

He went to the cupboard and got plates and glasses. He poured each of us a glass of pop from the fridge. Then I bore witness to him doing the strangest thing. He unwrapped his hamburger and put it on the plate. Then he opened the bun and took out a handful of shredded lettuce and two thin slices of tomato. I looked at his plate. His leftovers looked exactly like the ones Darach brought me in the story. Why?

“Do you normally do that to your hamburger?” I asked.

“Always. Why? Is it weird?”

I shook my head, but I felt a little queasy.

“So, how is your project coming along?” he asked pleasantly.

I swallowed uncomfortably. “Not very well right now. I’m at a crossroad and I don’t know what to do.”

“And you don’t want to tell me about it?”

“No.”

“Is it about your sister?”

I frowned. Actually, I hadn’t even thought about Carly. When it came to her, my stance flip-flopped between being willing to die for her and wanting to let her dig her own grave. Ever since I found out about her and Reg, I realized I just didn’t have the brain room to deal with Carly’s problems, so I couldn’t even think about her. It wasn’t like she was going to listen to me. I was just her stupid little sister who was just going to high school and doing all the pointless normal things she refused to do.

I shook my head. “It’s not that.”

His mouth became a set line. “Got another guy on the brain?”

“As if. You’re complicated enough. My brain is completely taken over by you. Who told you that you were allowed to drive me crazy?”

“What did I do?” He laughed.

I might not be able to read the original story in his book, but maybe I could pump him for information. “You’re not talking enough. You should tell me more,” I said.

“More about what?”

“A-about everything,” I stuttered. “You’re tortured. Can’t you tell me what’s bothering you with your dad?”

Evander shook his head like I was asking him to cut off his arm. Then he got up and disappeared into the living room. I felt like he had just slammed a door in my face, when suddenly he came back, holding one of the forbidden blue books.

“Why don’t you take this and give it a read?”

“What is it?” I asked, dumbfounded. He was giving it to me?

“It’s a book I wrote to try to work out some of my mental problems. Once I thought I’d like to get it published, so Emi went ahead and printed it for me without my permission. You just can’t say no to that lady. So, here’s a copy, unsold and rotting. You might as well take it and see what I have to say about my dad. This is how I feel. I think I express myself incredibly well—especially in the last section.”

I took it and flipped over the front cover, pretending I’d never seen it before. “You wrote this? Why are you going to school to be an architect? You should be a novelist.”

“Hardly. Read it, though I don’t think you’ll like it. Emi didn’t like it much.”

“She must have if she had it printed.”

“It’s frustrating when you don’t have anyone impartial to share your work with. It’s not the book she loves, it’s me, and so that’s how she acts. It’s hard to forgive her for feeling like that,

but impossible not to.”

“Thanks. I’ll read it.”

“You probably won’t like it,” he reiterated.

“Nah.” I smiled, got up, and gave him a hug. “It’s a wonderful present. I’ll read it right away and I’ll probably fall in love with you over and over again.”

He kissed me. It was a cute little kiss that could have been measured in fractions of a second, so brief it was. But I couldn’t get the last thing Darach said out of my mind. It was one thing to hear something like ‘what guys say and what they think are two different things’ from some uninvolved third-party, but it was entirely another thing to hear Evander say that himself. What exactly did he mean? What exactly was he feeling? Was he secretly a seething furnace of lust? It couldn’t be as simple as it seemed. It was never simple with him.

I ate with him. Then I put Paisley to bed and made up an excuse to leave. Except that it wasn’t much of an excuse since I was telling the truth. I told him that I wanted to go home to read his book. He didn’t complain. He seemed eager to hear what I thought of it and I walked home alone in the cold November night.

When I got there, the apartment was empty. The rooms were dark. I left the light on in the entryway and wandered into the living room to look out the windows. There was that sky—orange and pink. The scene could be enjoyed so much better from inside, looking out at the weather from heated rooms. But the snow was beautiful whether I looked at it inside or outside. It was only that inside, my nose didn’t drip.

I shrugged off my winter coat and pulled Evander’s book from my bag. I had his real book with the hidden section. He’d given it to me. I didn’t steal it. Would that affect the magic?

I struggled with it. The decision wasn’t easy. Of course, I wanted to pass the test within the confines of the story, and getting hints as to how to do that would make me less anxious for my personal safety. If I cheated, I’d come out of the book all right, but would I still win Evander? I didn’t know.

I got up and paced. Finally, I threw the book across the room and heard it bang against the wall. Then I snatched up the brown hardcover book and took the high road. Flipping open the pages, I started the next chapter.

Serena turned over and over between her sheets before she finally awoke in the bedroom taken over by shadow. Before that moment, silence permeated the manor house. The only sounds she had heard were the voices of the two men she’d met. In the dark side of the house, there were multiple footsteps, clanking, and words said into the walls. Some of them were muffled and she couldn’t hear what they were. Some of them were loud and she could understand them easily through the walls. “You’ve got to be joking!” a woman shrieked.

Then I heard the voice for myself. The words were ringing through the house. “You’ve got to be joking! I hate you! I hate you!”

I sat up in bed, in the bedroom in Thistle Comb. The scream belonged to a woman. Was there another woman in the house? I jumped out of bed and raced toward the door that led to Darach. I reached for the handle when I suddenly realized I was still wearing that ridiculous black nightgown and wrap. I had to put on different clothes.

The charcoal suit and the pencil skirt I had worn before were gone. Instead, I was left with a pair of black tights and a dark red sweater dress. When I first picked it up, I was afraid that it would be reminiscent of the red dress I wore in *The Witch and the Fool*, but it was quite different. For starters, it was very modest. It had a band of animal fur that ran around my chest and arms almost like an off-the-shoulder dress. It had very tight sleeves, but they were long and

covered my knuckles. It also came all the way down to my knees and flared slightly. I liked it. It was warm and I needed something warm. After all, I was about to explore a haunted house. I put the entire outfit on with ease.

There were no mirrors, so I could only run my fingers through my hair before I opened the door that led into shadow.

It didn't feel like morning as I entered the room where I met Darach the night before. The fire still crackled in the grate and only night could be seen through the windows. The same ambiance hung in the air, like no time had passed since I left.

I walked around the room slowly. Without Darach filling the room to its maximum with his overwhelming presence, I could take a minute to look around. Unlike the other side of the house, the room was decorated. There were pictures on the walls. The first painting I noticed was of the moon. It was full and beautiful and then with a jolt, I realized it was the same moon I had seen through the ceiling of Serissa's shack when I slept there with Kalavan. Someone may as well have used my eyes as a camera and painted the picture. It was the same.

The next picture was of the sea. It was the view from the window in the guest room when I stayed in the castle in *The Lord of the Capricorns*.

I walked along and pondered the meaning of the pictures. They were all things that had happened to me in the book. One was of Murmur's boat going down. Another was my foot stepping into the burning pyre. The next one was an underwater view of a capricorn with a blackberry tart in the foreground. Then there was one of Kalavan's bleeding fingers as he tried to pick a rose.

All of the pictures made sense in their places until I saw the last one. It was of me sitting alone on a bus. My eyes were pointed forward and my chin was resting in my palm. Evander was standing on the curb outside, looking at me. His expression entranced me. It seemed like he was looking at me longingly. How was that possible? Wasn't I the one suffering from a one-sided love for him, and not the other way around?

Before I saw that painting, I thought the pictures made sense. It was easy to understand. They were memories, but what about the last picture? It couldn't be a memory. Evander hadn't liked me... had he?

I sat down and thought about it, but my head hurt.

That was when Darach made his entry. He looked surprised to see me. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be sitting down to victuals with the lord of the manor right about now," he mocked. "Why are you here?"

My stomach growled at his mention of food. "Speaking of which, do you have anything to eat?"

He rubbed his slightly scruffy chin. "I don't think there's anything fancier than what I offered you yesterday. Do you want that?"

"No." I stuck my tongue out in disgust, thinking of day-old hamburger scraps. "What did you eat?"

He chuckled. "That's in the past. I can live off food eaten a year ago—five years ago. It's strange to me that you always want to eat."

His dialogue was too cryptic for me. I got up and left the room. The first thing I did was head outside onto the front steps. Out there the world looked exactly the same as it had the night before—orange and foggy.

"Is it night or day?" I asked Darach as I came back into the house.

"I guess it depends on how you remember it."

"This doesn't make any sense." I rubbed my temple where a headache was growing. "This house doesn't make any sense. You don't make any sense."

"I'm like any other man," he said, pushing tobacco into a black pipe and looking at me suggestively.

It was really unnerving to see Evander act like that. Was there really a part of his personality that seethed with desire? Where exactly in the depths of him was it lurking? Because whenever I was with Evander, I didn't see it. I didn't feel it. He didn't set off any virginal self-protection instincts in me. Whenever I was with the real Evander, I felt completely safe. Darach's similarity to Reg made my skin crawl.

He made his way over to me. "So, would you like a tour of the dark side of the house?"

My eyebrows went up. "Yes."

"Great," he said, putting his hot arm around my shoulder. "Let's start with upstairs."

I allowed myself to be led to the bottom of the staircase, but I brushed off his arm, which didn't last. In the next second, he had an arm around my waist.

"Let go of me," I whined. "I can't walk straight with you pulling on me like that."

He let go. "Would you rather I—"

"Don't you dare touch my butt!" I suddenly snapped. My instincts had kicked in.

"I wasn't going to," he said, but his hand hovered dangerously as he lingered a few steps behind me.

At the top of the stairs, a long corridor stretched out ahead of us. There was one door on the left side of the hallway and many doors on the right side. The first door on the right was labeled with the roman numeral VII—seven. The numbers counted down to one. I walked down the corridor and looked at the different doors. Some of them looked like they belonged in the house, but others were strange. The fourth room door was made of metal and had windows like it was the outside door to a house. Doors numbered one, two, three, and six all looked the same, except six looked a little worse for wear. They were all stained dark wood, but five was dingy gray and seven was sparkling white. It was weird.

"Where do these doors lead?" I asked.

"Into rooms," he answered sardonically.

I sighed. "Can't you be a little more helpful?"

"Don't bother with those. Come into this room," he offered, pointing with his chin toward the only door on the left-hand side.

"Is that your room?"

"It's the demon's room."

"And these rooms belong to the ghosts?"

He smirked. "Or something like that. Come here. I want to show you inside the demon's room."

I withdrew. "I don't want to."

"You have to see this room first. That way you will know not to waste your time with those ghosts." He had a lustful look in his eyes. Except I didn't feel that way in return. I felt scared, the same way I felt when the King had come looking for Serissa. I hid then and everything had worked out. I had to do it again.

I backed up against the door marked one like I saw something frightening. I looked behind Darach, pointed, and screamed, "It's a demon!"

He turned for a second and in that second, I turned the doorknob to room one, made my escape, and slammed it behind me. I turned the knob tight and locked it. With the door locked,

all sound from the hallway was completely blocked out. If Darach was having a king-sized tantrum on the other side, I couldn't hear him. It was silent in the room for a moment. Then I heard a sound, something quiet, but it made my skin crawl like marching ants. Someone behind me was singing.

Chapter Twenty

The Ghosts Wouldn't Rest

“Under the birch branch, brushing the oak leaves, popping up behind the poplar, lying flat on a felled beech tree, and eating happily from the apple tree,” the woman’s voice sang. I brought my head around slowly to see the singer, but when I opened my eyes full on the room, I saw no one.

I was in a nursery.

A white crib was pushed up against one wall and a white rocking chair sat in the corner. It was the rocking chair that frightened me. It was rocking like there was a person sitting in it, but it was vacant and the room was empty. There was no place for a person to hide. No one could have ducked behind the three-drawer dresser or squirreled themselves under the change table. Yet, the chair still rocked and the songstress kept singing.

The words to the song came again. “Under the birch branch, brushing the oak leaves, popping up behind the poplar, lying flat on a felled beech tree, and eating happily from the apple tree.”

It sounded like it was coming from the rocking chair.

I had the shivers, but something in my mind worked rationally. What was it about the song?

“And the last branch I give to you is from the first tree grown—from an unknown tree I’ve never known. The tree is the one you grow on your own.”

Then it triggered. The types of trees the voice was singing about were the same trees that held Kalavan’s masks in the last story. The tree you grow on your own? That had to be the branch that held his Mephisto mask.

Then the voice abruptly stopped and the rocking chair gave a heavy heave. The crib creaked and the blankets inside moved. I backed up against the door in panic. The house really was haunted! I couldn't see anyone.

“Good night Evander,” the voice whispered. “May angels guard you through the night and stay by your side for the rest of your life.”

The door behind me creaked and opened even though my back was pressed up against it. I heard Darach on the other side. “Serena! Get out of there!” he growled. I saw him through the crack. His hand was pressed up to his mouth and he was coughing. Black ooze seeped through his fingers. Was he dying too? His mouth was full of poison. He didn’t come in after me and the door fell shut again. Darach had not opened the door. It had to be the ghost-woman who was singing. Had that been Evander’s mother?

Once alone, I approached the crib. I could see the bedding quivering slightly, like a baby inside the blankets was breathing. There was nothing there, not even when I reached in and tried to pick up the infant. I felt air and when I tried to move the blanket, it wouldn’t budge.

I looked around in wonder. It was Evander’s room when he was a baby. Being there was unprecedented. He didn’t talk about his real life when he wrote a story. I thought he only wrote about the spirit of how he felt and not the actual events.

And what was I going to do since mama had left and the baby was napping? I wasn’t afraid anymore once I understood what was going on. All the same, I couldn’t hang out in the nursery endlessly, yet I didn’t want to go out and deal with Darach. I wanted to sit, but I felt weird about sitting in the same chair as Evander’s mother, Autiny. Instead, I sat down on the floor. It was then that I saw it. There was a shiny golden doorknob hidden just under the raised pad on the

change table. It was just like Loring said. The house was built with two doors in every room. I crept closer and looked at the situation. The door was covered in drywall. When I looked closely I saw metal hinges. I also noticed that the door handle had a Roman numeral II on it. This door led into the room marked II in the hallway. I pulled on the handle and it opened smoothly. In another moment, I was in room two.

The second room was the same room as the first, with some considerable changes. The crib was gone and in its place was a toddler bed with Winnie the Pooh painted on the little wooden headboard. The dresser was the same as the rocking chair. The change table had been replaced by a toy box. Blocks and cars littered the rug.

It must have been Evander's room when he was a toddler.

It was deadly quiet in room two. The singing was over. The rocking chair didn't creak. The shadow of toddler Evander wasn't on the floor playing. Everything was quiet. I waited a few minutes to see if anyone would show up. Nothing happened, so I tried to find the door that led into the next room. When I found it, its knob had a III marked on it. This room had three doors. I opened it and stepped into room III.

It was the same room, but it looked smaller because it was cramped. The teeny weeny toddler bed had been changed for a twin bed. The rocker was long gone. There were dirty clothes, toys, and even dirty dishes littered all over the floor. Everything had been so orderly in the first two rooms.

I was alone in the room too, until I heard a noise that nearly made me jump out of my skin. BANG! Someone had entered the room and slammed the door. I didn't see anyone, but the blankets on the bed moved. Someone (probably Evander) was pulling the blankets over his head.

Outside the room, I heard another door slam. A man snarled noisily, "What's his problem?"

A woman's voice responded, "Did you forget? You were supposed to be at his school yesterday for his Christmas concert. He had a speaking role and you didn't even come home last night."

"I had to work," the male voice retorted.

The woman's voice was strained. "The point is that he waited for you to come home and the first thing you do when you get here is bawl him out for being disappointed that you didn't bring him a present from your trip. I told him you would bring him one to make up for the missed concert."

"I didn't have time. Besides, you shouldn't have said I would do something I wouldn't."

"You jerk," she gasped. "I bought him one. It's in the closet."

"Well, you should have told me!"

"I would have, if you called me back just once for the ten times I called you!"

"I didn't get the message. My secretary doesn't like passing on pointless messages. She stopped writing yours down months ago."

"Liar. I know your secretary. I had lunch with her last week."

"Why are you wasting my money on lunches out? As if I don't have to stretch my money to the limit to pay for this house."

She sighed furiously. "She paid. I've told you before, Reg, we don't have to live here if it's too expensive. We can go back to a two-bedroom apartment if you like, but I need money to pay for food."

"Make do with the budget I give you," he said coldly. "Besides, we need this big place. Can you imagine hunkering down in a two-bedroom apartment? I can't. Besides, the budget is a hint for you to slim down."

Autiny seemed to be choking down the tears. Then I heard Evander crying under his pillow. I still couldn't see anything, but I heard him, and my heart felt ripped in half.

"Which reminds me, where did you get the money to pay for a present for Evan?"

"I saved it, and it didn't cost much. Could you please take it to him? Tell him you were teasing and didn't mean to hurt his feelings."

"Okay," the man said.

The yelling outside the door stopped. I sat down on the bed and tried to put my arms around the bulge under the covers, but I knew by the way his little body heaved that he didn't feel my touch. The horrible day had happened in the past and I wasn't really there. That's what Loring meant by 'ghosts.'

The door opened and I heard the footsteps of the visitor. "Sorry kiddo," Reg said. "I was just kidding. I brought you a present. Here it is. Come on. Get your head out from under there and see what I got you."

The bedding moved slightly. Evander must have taken the present.

"What do you say?" his father asked gruffly.

"Thank you, Daddy," Evander's little boy voice said.

"Well, now that that's sorted, I'm gonna have a shower." The door moved again and Reg left the room.

He didn't ask about Evander's concert or anything. My eyes welled up with tears. I'd had a lot of those types of disappointments myself. I knew what they felt like.

A dent surfaced in Evander's pillow. He put his head down and cried. I tried again to wrap my arm around him, to comfort him. I saw the fabric on his pillow spontaneously darken with tears, but when I touched it, I didn't feel anything. It was no use. Everything I saw was something that had already happened. Unable to help, I got up to find the door to the next room.

The trouble was, I couldn't find the way out. I looked and looked for that golden handle. All the time I searched I heard Evander crying his eyes out. I felt like my soul was being wrung out as I searched his closet in my attempt to find a way out. Was I going to have to use the door that led out into the hallway? And it didn't matter how much time passed—five minutes—ten minutes—twenty minutes—Evander still wept like the damned, and he didn't sound older than seven.

Finally, I went to the window to see if I could see something more from it than the front door of the mansion. There was nothing. In the vague darkness, I found the IV doorknob under the windowsill. The panes of glass were different than the ones on the fourth door, but when I opened it, the underside was exactly like the IV door I saw in the hallway, and I was entering a completely different world.

I closed the door and shut out the sound of Evander bawling. It was a relief, but only momentarily as I came to terms with where I was. I was in another bedroom, except it wasn't a bedroom. It was a porch, an entryway, and Evander's bed was in it! It looked like it had originally been a mudroom and circumstances were such that it was being used for something dramatically against its nature.

There was something else. It was cold. I put my hand in front of my mouth and exhaled. I couldn't see my breath, but without a doubt, the room was too cold for a person to sleep comfortably. The unbearable bickering outside had stopped, but the atmosphere was far from happy. It stank. I couldn't smell Darach's cigarette, but here it smelled moldy and soaked with sweat.

Why did Evander have to live in this room? Then it clicked. Autiny had left Reg and what I

saw was where they moved. My throat constricted. And I had thought Evander was a rich snob...

Stupidly, I stood there and waited for Evander to come, but he didn't. Like room two, the room was empty. I easily found the door linked to room five and moved into the next room.

Room five was a proper bedroom, but it didn't look right. The blanket on the bed had a wide white lace border on it. The sheets had flowers on them. On the dresser, there were bottles and bottles of pills. Was Evander taking those? I took a closer look. The label read 'Autiny Chaney.' They were his mother's. The pills weren't the only thing that belonged to her. I peeked in the closet and her clothes hung there. Evander's were there, too. Were circumstances so bad that they had to share a room at one point?

As if to answer my question, the door opened and a cardboard box floated in. It trembled in the air before tumbling to the carpet. The dresses fell off their hangers and dropped sloppily into the open box. Then someone else entered the room. They spoke, "What are you doing?" It was Evander's voice, just a little higher pitched than what I was used to.

"I thought we'd make some room in your closet, unless you're planning on wearing them," a haggard voice replied.

"I want to keep them, Grandma," Evander said. A dress was pulled out of the box, put back on its hanger, and hung in the closet.

I almost expected to see an invisible tug-of-war, but the dress stayed where Evander put it. Even so, the old lady had a few things to say about it. "I know this is hard. Harder for you than it is for me."

"She was *your* only child!"

"I know I seem heartless to you, but I'll see her sooner than you will. I feel worse today than I did yesterday and I felt worse yesterday than I did the day before that. I'm dying, kid. And what's going to happen to you when I can't take care of you anymore?" She waited for his answer, but he didn't say anything. "Are you going to spend your time rearranging a dead woman's clothes? Stop it!" Her voice was scornful.

Evander folded. "Fine! I'll throw them away. Just give me a few days, or weeks, to do it."

"Days, honey. She's already been gone for three months. And I'll bring you up some new sheets."

"I can't even have those? She didn't die on the ones I kept."

"I know, but it doesn't matter. You can keep the photographs, the books, and the jewelry, but the rest has to go—especially her bedpan. A thing like that doesn't belong in a healthy teenager's room. Smarten up."

The door didn't slam when his grandma left. Instead, it hung ajar. I heard Evander's footsteps. He closed it himself. Then he crumpled on the bed and pulled the pillows and comforter into his arms.

"I don't want to say good-bye," he moaned.

It was just like room three, where he couldn't stop crying. As a boy, he cried openly. As a teenager, he stuffed his face into the pillow and kept quiet, but he couldn't hide his tears from someone standing over the bed. Again I tried to touch him, but it was impossible. I tried to talk to him.

"Evander, I'm here and I love you." But the unseen Evander couldn't hear me.

I found the door out and came into room six. I was stunned. It was room one, two, and three, except decorated differently. No, it wasn't decorated. Evander's nursery, where his mother had sung him lullabies, was mutilated. Someone had taken a black sharpie and written all over the walls in permanent ink. As I looked around, I saw pictures interspersed with the text. With a

single glance, I could tell it was Evander's work. His Mos-eye-ic in Emi and Vincent's house proved that. Except that was artistic. This looked more like the inside of a public toilet that had been vandalized.

I picked a spot on the wall and started reading. "Where were you last night? You think I don't know what you're doing? Even if you're not coming back you should at least call to say so." Another spot said, "She was eighteen. That's old enough."

I didn't get it. Why was he writing such things?

Then I heard the voices from outside the room. "Who was at the door?" a woman asked.

The letters started to appear on the wall beside my head. The sharpie seemed to be moving by itself, but I knew Evander was there. He was writing, "Who was at the door?"

"No one. A security system salesman," came the nonchalant response. It was Reg.

"Don't lie. I saw a girl come up the drive," Laurie snapped, probably louder than she'd meant to. "Is she your latest thing? I don't know who she's fooling in those fishnet stockings and lipstick, except that isn't even the color that came out in the laundry."

I felt like dying. Maybe they were talking about Carly and if they weren't, it was someone like her. During it all, there was Evander steadily writing every word they said on his wall.

"Shut up. If you don't like it here, leave."

She hesitated. "Sebastian would..."

"Like it better here without you."

"He loves me!" came the half-strangled scream.

The fight was escalating and I couldn't stand it. I had to get out. Room six felt how my apartment felt when my mom and Carly would fight, and I couldn't stand it if I didn't have to.

Emi warned me all about this the day she told me she was a witch. Technically, I understood it all, but the reality didn't hit home until I saw it with my own eyes. You can say someone had a tough childhood all you want, but it doesn't mean anything until you hear him cry like a lost soul, or until you hear him poked at to improve when he is already doing his best, or until you hear his step-mom and dad fight about the teenage mistress at an ear-splitting pitch.

I had to get out, but I didn't want to go without Evander. I put my hand on the sharpie, but I couldn't make it stop. I let go. My compassion was making me stupid. For the last time, I reminded myself I couldn't change the past. Those things already happened.

I found the door and went into the next room. It was the last room—room seven—and already I knew what it was going to look like.

Chapter Twenty One

Sleep in One Place, Wake up in Another

I barreled headfirst into Evander's room in Emi's basement. The windows let in so much light, it made the place sparkle. I was in the white part of Thistle Comb again. It was obvious when I saw Loring lying peacefully on the bed, but his presence wasn't the only thing that was different from the other bedrooms I'd been in thus far. For one thing, clothes weren't strewn all over the carpet. There was no dust on the bookshelves and the mos-eye-ic was different. The whole thing had been done over in white and gray. Since the eyes had fewer colors than a black and white photo the whole piece felt lifeless. Somehow, it wasn't Evander's room; just a poorly constructed copy. But it represented a real place. When would it be taken over by shadow? Would it be when Evander moved out of Emi's house?

I paced over to the bed and looked at Loring. Was he really that different from Evander? I got closer and decided he was. His face was deathly white and his stubble had been shaved off recently. The clothes he wore were different too. He was wearing soft tan pants and his shirt was a white dress shirt. The first two buttons of his shirt were undone as well as the last two. It was untucked and loose. He was so still, he either looked unconscious or dead.

I sat down on the bed half expecting to wake him up, but he didn't move.

I yawned and my eyelids drooped. I sat there for a few minutes thinking things over before I realized how much those past six rooms had tired me out. Drowsiness overtook me and I rested my head on Loring's arm near the edge of the bed. Would he wake up? He didn't move.

Warm and safe, I slept.

And when I woke up, I didn't even have to open my eyes before I knew that the room had been taken over by darkness. Loring's arm was gone. Had he fled the room? I batted my eyelids and forced myself awake. I had to find him and tell him who the ghosts in the dark part of the house were. They were Evander's memories, not dead people haunting an empty house. I had to help him understand that what was happening couldn't hurt him. I turned my head toward the mos-eye-ic and did a double-take. When I saw that the paintings changed and moved in the darkness, I knew I was wrong. Those shadowy memories could hurt him and they squeezed at his heart constantly.

There was an eye on each square of canvas. The first one was bulging with hideous red veins through the whites of the eye. The second one was black, with a dribble of blood crying down the gray face. The eye after that looked like it was gouged out. The next eye was having all of its eyelashes pulled out by a pair of tweezers.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. It was just like all those crazy repetitions he had inscribed on his wall in the last room, only worse. I thought he must have gotten better since he came to live with Emi and Vincent. It was a lie. Evander hadn't healed at all and the painting was one of the symptoms.

I turned around to find the second door that led into the white part of the house. Every room was supposed to have at least two doors. I could only see one—the one I came in through. I started pawing over the room, looking for that little golden door handle. I couldn't find anything, so I started feeling across the wall by the bed until I came to the corner and there crouched on the ground by the foot of the bed was Loring. His curly blond hair fell over his face in a tangled mop.

"Loring," I said with relief.

He didn't answer me.

"Loring," I tried again. "Wake up! I've got to talk to you!" I put my hand on his shoulder and his figure fell over.

I gasped. When he tumbled over, his limbs disconnected from each other. His body had been made up of objects. His arms and back were made of baseball bats stuffed into a white shirt. His feet were made of footballs and his head had been a pitcher's mitt with a wig perched on top of it.

"What is this?" I shrieked, picking up a golf glove that had been his hand. Pulling the heap apart, I saw nothing human there. Had Loring turned into that heap of objects? Or had he been fake all along?

I got up and searched more carefully for the door handle, but I couldn't find anything. The only door that I could find led me back into the sixth room and I didn't want to go back there. I wanted out of the whole house!

It was then that I got the most curious sensation that someone was watching me. Shivering, I looked over my shoulder and saw that the mos-eye-ic was looking at me. When I moved, the eyes followed me. Some of them blinked. Suddenly, the painting started to sway. The colors began to swirl and change until the background of all the pictures turned black. The remaining lines moved and moved until they came together to form the image of a person—a man. Then Darach's brown eyes appeared and then his scornful smile. His fingers appeared and soon every detail of him came into focus. When he was fully formed, he stepped out onto the carpet and regarded me with fascination.

"Have you figured this place out yet? Have there been enough clues for you?"

I wanted to run, but trembling slightly I held my ground. After all, it was still Evander. "There aren't any ghosts," I said, my mouth incredibly dry. "Those apparitions aren't caused by dead people. They're just memories. They would never attack anyone. They're trapped in their rooms, aren't they?"

"Trapped," Darach agreed.

"Where's Loring?" I asked cautiously.

He regarded the pile of sporting equipment with contempt. "That's him."

"Why?"

He glared at me impatiently. "You *haven't* figured out this place. If that's the case, then you definitely haven't figured *me* out."

He began caressing my cheek. His touch felt as smooth as a snake's skin. His eyes were so dark, they held no reflection, even though the eyes on the wall shimmered and flickered orange and yellow like a fire. My calves were pushed against the edge of the mattress. With one push, I'd be on the bed on my back. That wasn't Evander's style. Darach bent to kiss me.

I piped up even though it felt like I was swallowing the paper Evander's book was printed on. "I know what you are."

"So you know?" he said, smacking his lips centimeters from mine.

I refused to recoil. "Yeah. I know. You're Evander's worst fears about himself! He's afraid he's going to turn out to be like his dad. Evander made you up for the book he wrote. You're not even real." When I finished talking I expected Darach to be paralyzed like almost everyone else I'd ever spoken to about reality while I was in the book. I planned to run off into room six while he stood there like a mannequin. No such luck.

Instead, he stood there with his lips pale as chalk. He spoke as though he was the real Evander and it didn't matter to him if I thought he wasn't real. "No woman can resist my father. If I want

a girlfriend; I have to be just like him.”

“I’m sure some women find Reg repulsive,” I suggested, knowing it to be true. “A girl would have to be crazy to find him attractive...” I stopped, realizing my mistake.

He caught it. His face turned gray. “Like my mother?”

“I didn’t mean that,” I back-peddled.

“Whatever,” he said, dismissing me to stride across the narrow room. “Don’t act like you know everything just because you were intrusive enough to go into my rooms. You don’t understand. You don’t even understand that loser who fell to pieces on the floor,” he said, giving the heap that once was Loring a kick.

Then I figured it out. Like the tick of a clock, I clicked. “You mean you’re living in the past and he was living in the future?”

Darach seemed like a balloon that had just lost its air, but he didn’t deflate the way Loring had turned into baseball bats. I reached out and grabbed him before he fell down. He felt firm in my arms and I held onto him tightly.

“That’s the truth. I know it. That’s why there’s nothing to eat here. You can’t eat anything in the past, because the food is already gone and you don’t eat anything in the future because the future hasn’t happened yet. The rooms are what happened in the past and the pictures in the drawing-room are me and what havoc I’ve wreaked while in your book. And Loring here is ...” I looked at the blond wig. “Gone ...” I stopped, realizing another terrible implication. If Loring was dead, it meant Evander had no future.

Darach turned his head and coughed black ooze into his palm. “I’m sick,” he mumbled, trying to hide his face from me.

“Why?” I hollered, turning him toward me. His hair was still dark, but he was becoming more like the Evander I knew with every passing second. “Why do you have to die?”

“Because there’s no future for me. Every time I look ahead I see myself waiting endlessly for a woman who will never come. No one will ever come for me. Who would want to team up with a whining infant who can’t forgive his father for being a prick, who can’t forget his pathetic mother, and still keeps her favorite dress in his closet like a skeleton? I’m someone with no family. No ambition to make money to impress a woman or keep her comfortable. I have floppy, ugly hair and eyes as brown as a cow’s.” As he said those words the pigment slipped out of his hair like magic. “The only thing for me is to buck up and become another version of my dad or stop trying and die. Both sound like the same death sentence to me. I can’t be like that miserable sack of...”

I grabbed his face in both my hands and brought his eyes to mine. “You’re wrong. I like you and I like you when you act like yourself. All this garbage about your dad is what’s poisoning you. Spit it out. Spit it all out. I’ll be here for you until every drop is out of your system, but you aren’t like him! You’re you. I’ll stay with you and spoil you until the pain goes away.”

He put his hand on mine and pushed it away from his face. “Friendship. That’s what you’re offering me and that’s not what I want. If we’re friends, one day you’ll meet someone like my fool father who sets your blood on fire and I’ll have to watch you walk down my mother’s path. If I accept your kindness, I’ll put myself completely at your mercy and suffer for the rest of my life. After you leave, I won’t be able to put my life back on track by myself. You’ll leave me exactly where I am at this moment. Don’t do me any favors.”

“No. I love you!” I screamed.

“Yeah, like you love your sister. Save it for her. She’s going to need it when Reg is through with her.”

"It's not like that. I am *in* love with you."

He stared at me expectantly. "Then prove it."

My stomach rolled over. What did he want from me?

"Didn't I prove it in the last two stories?"

"You proved you're my friend and I believe it. I wouldn't even be having this conversation with you if I didn't believe that much. You would go far for a friend, wouldn't you?"

I wasn't going to be able to convince him with anything past. I needed to win him over with something new. I crunched my fingers together in a fist. "Though I'm not sure what you had in mind for me to prove to you that I love you. I'm going to show you in my own way. There's time for everything in our new relationship."

He looked at me quizzically.

"There's time for everything we want in our romance. Everything. Everything will come to us in its proper order, even the deep sort of love you want so desperately." I took his hand in mine and thought about what I imagined when I first came to the mansion. I thought I had to save Loring from the demon, who turned out to be Darach. I could see now that Darach was Evander in a way that Loring never was. He was the one who needed saving and more than anything, he needed real love and not the way he was angling to get it.

"Right now," I said, continuing, "I need you to do what you said you would do."

"What's that?" he gawked, clearly remembering nothing of his past promises.

"I need you to trust me," I said clearly, holding his gaze.

He looked uncomfortable.

I insisted and went on talking. "It's time we both had a little more respect for ourselves. I'm going to stop thinking of myself as the poor girl from crack town that doesn't have a damn thing to offer and you are going to stop thinking you have to be a womanizer to get the love and affection you need."

"And how are you going to make those things happen?"

I snatched his hand and dragged him bodily into room six. Room six was the one with the pen marks all over the wall. Once inside, I could see the sharpie moving against the paint and I could hear the yelling still going on outside the door. I pitched my voice loudly and shouted, "Reg, you're a total creep. Can't you be faithful to your wife? Can't you show her a little kindness to make up for the way you treated Autiny? Laurie, kick him out! He deserves it!" Then I got quieter and whispered, "Evander, I would suffer this with you. I would suffer every step of this with you if I could, but instead, I'm going to pull you out!"

"What?" I heard two voices say.

I smiled. One voice was blond Darach and the other was the Evander that was working the sharpie. I saw it stop moving. Then I saw him. He was the seventeen-year-old gray ghost of Evander.

"Come with me!" I invited both of them.

Teenage Evander gazed at me for a moment before he dropped his sharpie and hovering, behind Darach, he seemed inclined to come along. Gaining energy, I moved into room five.

It was the room that used to belong to his mother in his grandma's house. The ghost was hiding under the covers. I didn't let go of Darach's hand, but I dropped myself on the bed and put my palm on what looked like his shoulder, even though I still couldn't see him. "I'm so sorry about what happened to your mother," I said timidly. "I know she loved you. I'm the girl who loves you right now and I would never ask you to forget her or throw out that last dress you keep in your closet. It's not a skeleton. Don't throw it away. Bring it with you and come along with

me.”

Then he appeared. Evander's ghost was younger still and he was holding a pink dress in his arms like a security blanket. His face was streaked in silvery tears, but he stopped crying when he saw me.

I extended to him my free hand. “Come with me.”

He didn't take my hand, but floated free over my head and settled behind the seventeen-year-old Evander from the sixth room. He wiped his tears and gave me a half-smile.

I pushed forward and advanced into room four. It was the bedroom that was really an entryway. It had been empty of ghosts when I came through the first time. I realized I had to find him.

“Where are you?” I whispered, but there was no answer. Checking out the shoes, I wondered if tween Evander had his feet in a pair of them. Then I checked the bed.

“He's not here,” Darach informed me briefly.

“Right. If *this* was your bedroom, would you hang out here? He's probably in the living room. Well, we can't go get him because no part of this room connects to the rest of his grandma's house. Do you have any ideas?”

Darach looked sick. “Don't ask me.”

“Okay.” I scanned my memory and tried to think of something to yell that would make him come back. My first inclination was to invite him in because his mom was with us, but I knew that was wrong. She wasn't with us and tricking him into coming wouldn't win his heart. And at that point in his life, I wasn't anything to him. What could I say?

Then I remembered something Loring had told me. He said he had built rooms in Thistle Comb waiting for someone to visit him, but no one ever did. Had no one come to see Evander when he lived there either?

I brightened up and chirped loudly, “Evander! Your friends are here to see you. They're waiting in your room!”

It worked. I could hear stomping as twelve-year-old feet raced to the door. “Who's here?” he sang. The door swung open and there stood tween Evander panting like he was out of breath. He looked at me strangely.

Better not blow it. “I'm Sarah,” I said. “Do you want to come and play with us?”

He nodded happily and got in line. I exhaled in relief. I never would have guessed it would have been half so simple.

I smiled at them all in a row and went into room three. It was one of the rooms where there was yelling outside the door, just like room six, except it was Autiny fighting with Reg instead of Laurie. Evander was in bed, I could see the lump, but I didn't know what to do. The problems were getting harder as I went on. What could you say to a child who was crushed because his parents constantly argued?

I stood there and scratched my head with one hand and kept a death-grip on Darach with the other. He couldn't help me, and one glance at the group behind me was evidence enough—they couldn't help either.

When I was in room three the first time, I had tried a few things, but I hadn't been able to get through to him. I had to think about the problem. How old was Evander? He was in elementary school. I had to babysit kids that age many times, but I was having a hard time envisioning what distracted them. They liked to talk.

“Evander,” I said shakily, less confident than ever before. “What TV show are you missing right now because your parents are fighting?” I tried to remember what cartoons were on TV

twelve years ago when I was four. “Were you trying to watch Pokemon or Spiderman?”

“Dragon Ball Z!” came a strangled voice.

“Ah, Goku,” I said, having seen the show a few times.

Immediately Evander came into focus. Wow! He was cute. He was the most adorable child I had ever seen. His eyes were huge and his cheeks were pudgy. It was what he looked like right before all his teeth fell out and he got gawky looking. I stared in wonder.

“You must be disappointed. Do you want to play with us instead?”

He nodded emphatically and got in line.

We continued to room two. It was another room I thought to be empty. It belonged to Evander when he was a toddler. As I entered I glanced at Darach. His expression was blank.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“It’s been so long since I saw this room looking like this. I barely remember it, like a dream I woke up from and can’t recall the details. Yeah, it looked exactly like this. That stuffed elephant was there. The wooden letters that spell Evander are on the bookshelf. It’s hard to believe these walls were later viciously vandalized. Was I ever this clean?”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “And walking through these rooms and remembering this part of you is making you cleaner.”

“But no one is here.”

“There will be.”

“How are you going to get him to appear? The Evander in this room is three years old and hardly talks.”

“Even if he doesn’t, I’ll bet he sings.” I took a deep breath in and started singing *You are My Sunshine*, followed by *I’m a Little Teapot*. The door opened and in came strutting the most lovable toddler I had ever seen in my life. My heart ached as he proudly walked up to me and did the motions to make himself into a little mime teapot.

I nearly let go of Darach’s hand to throw both my arms around him, but that little guy wasn’t like the others. He wasn’t in bed with the covers over his head crying. He was brave and strong. He was the kind of little man who wasn’t afraid of the dark and picked up spiders with his bare fingers just to see what they looked like close up. He walked straight to the back of the line and gave the Evander just older than him a high five.

A little tear fell down my face, but I forced myself to pull it together and went into the last room—the first room.

Inside, the rocking chair was creaking and instantly I could see Autiny rocking back and forth holding baby Evander in her arms. The ghosts broke their line and rushed to her shouting, “Mother!” They surrounded her, crowding her feet and hands. Some even stood behind her in order to be closer to her when other places were taken, but Darach did not let go of my hand.

At first, Autiny didn’t seem to notice me. She was looking at each one of the boys, touching their cheeks with her free hand and smiling at them. She was beautiful. That was where Evander got his blond curly hair—from her. Her eyes were hazel and her cheeks shone with the most magical pink glow. I had never seen anyone so happy—like an angel.

Immediately, I forgot myself entirely and asked without shame, “May I see your baby?”

She smiled and turned him for me to see his sleeping face. He was so new, his face was a little mushed, but his cheeks looked softer than silk and his hair was made up of wisps around his forehead.

“You must be a really happy mother,” I said shyly.

“This is the best boy in the world,” she said candidly. “And it breaks my heart to let him go,

but..." she paused, pain crossing her face like an invisible wind crossed it. "That's the nature of babies. They grow up and become men. It's frightening not to be there at the crucial time, but I have faith that someone will be there for him. Maybe someone will be there for the rest of his life." She stood up.

For a moment it seemed like she was going to give me lovely baby Evander, but instead, she suddenly motioned for Darach to take him. He shifted my hand to his elbow and whispered in my ear, "Don't let go." Then he took the baby in his arms like he had always known exactly how to hold an infant.

"This is the most precious thing I have ever possessed. Nothing could ever be more valuable. I love you more than anything." She reached out and brushed the hair out of Darach's eyes.

"Mother I..." he stuttered. "I'm sorry... Reg..."

She turned like she didn't hear him. Then she embraced each of the little ghost Evanders and ushered them toward Darach and me. Blowing us one final kiss, she disappeared. Then each of the Evanders disappeared too, but not into thin air. The teenager from room six looked like he was going to try to hold the baby, but he couldn't pick it up and instead fell forward, melting into Darach. The preteen tried to pull on Darach's other elbow but ended up falling into him as well. The child one hugged his leg and fell inside. The one with the dress had held it firmly and watched his mother until the very last second, then walking backward he ended up backing into Darach and vanishing. That left only the toddler, who turned to smile at me—a big baby tooth smile. He too stepped into Darach and was gone.

"Can I hold him?" I asked Darach.

"Yes," Darach said, pulling the baby into his chest until it too was part of him. At that moment, the character of Darach was gone. The Evander I knew and loved was the only one who was left, and he filled his arms with only me.

Chapter Twenty Two

Orange Sky

Darach was gone.

Evander and I held each other. His hand was on the small of my back and his other hand cradled my neck, but as sweet as the moment was, it couldn't last forever. BANG! A picture fell from the wall. The wooden letters that spelled Evander fell from their places and clattered to the floor. I stretched my neck to see what happened.

"What was that?"

"I don't know," Evander said, shushing me with a finger to his mouth and listening intently.

It was quiet for several moments and then the carpet under my feet moved, like someone had pulled it, but it wasn't a throw rug. There was no one around, other than Evander and me. "Are there really ghosts here?" I whispered.

"I think they're gone," Evander said pleasantly.

There was a snap, and I felt a board crack under my foot through the carpet, like I was about to fall through the floor. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said, leaning his elbow against the wall. As soon as his weight hit the wall, he broke right through the drywall like it was paper. He fell, but I reached out and caught him.

"What's going on?" he yelled as he recovered himself.

"I—"

The door abruptly fell off its hinges and the window on the other side of the room fell backward. I heard the glass shatter as it hit the ground. I ran over to see what was out that window, but all I saw was blank white space with a broken window frame lying flat far below. Being a little scared of heights, I backed up. The shattered glass showed it had fallen a long way. I backed up into what felt like huge jelly worms on my back. I spun around and saw the crib. The bars had lost their form and were falling into a squishy mess.

"The house is collapsing?" Evander asked. His eyes rolled upward and suddenly he pulled me out of the way as the light fixture fell, smashing on the floor where I just stood.

"You saved me," I gasped.

"We have to get out of here," he said as he dragged me out of the room by the hand.

In the hallway, the house looked more stable. The carpet wasn't moving and the banister on the staircase wasn't melting. I thought it was a good sign.

Puzzled, Evander looked around. "How do we get out of here?"

"You don't know?" I gasped in disbelief.

He twitched. "How should I know? This isn't even real. I wrote all this and frankly, I didn't write a scene where the house fell apart. It's just another phony version of my book."

"It's not phony!" I snapped. "This is very real. I've burned myself in your book. I've received severe nerve damage in your book. If the rest of the house falls apart, it could collapse with us in it. We could really die if we don't think of a way to get out of here, but if this is your dream, how do you wake up?"

"Slap me."

SMACK! Wow. I was surprised at myself. I didn't even hesitate. But nothing happened. We were still in the house.

"Kay. That hurt," he muttered as he nursed his wounded cheek.

“But we’re still here.”

“We’ll have to think of another way. How did you get out of the book before?”

“I didn’t. I just came to the end of the story and it let me out on its own.”

“Okay, well is there anything you haven’t finished? That ought to lend you a clue.”

“No. I can’t think of anything. The plot is resolved. The only thing that is still here is the setting,” I breathed. Then I glanced into what was once room one. All that was left through that door was a white space, like the few empty pages at the end of every book left mysteriously empty.

Then a ceiling tile fell on the carpet between our feet.

“Let’s go.” Evander took my hand and we started toward the stairs. “I remember what I was thinking when I wrote this. The entrance on the light side of the house is symbolic of my feelings that there is no future for me, so going out that door would be certain death. Do you think we could die if we went out the wrong door?”

“M-Maybe,” I stuttered. “One of them has to be the way out. If the door on the light side leads to emptiness, where does the one on the dark side lead to?”

Evander took a deep despairing breath. “I think the other one leads to nothing too.”

“It can’t.”

“I’m afraid it does. Think about it. There’s no future going through the past. Out the front door, it’s all black, thus symbolizing the only way out is through death. But what comes before that? What came before my life began? Oblivion?”

“No,” I said excitedly, “the beginning. We need to go back to the start.”

“How can we do that? The things that happened in this side of the house are things that actually happened. We can’t go back in time and change them. This doesn’t make any sense.”

I took his other hand and standing in front of him, I started walking backward and leading him toward the entrance to the dark side—the past. “You’re right. We can’t change the past, but we *can* change how we think about it. This doorway leads into darkness, but it’s not the same as nothing. I think it resembles the night sky in Edmonton during the winter. The streetlights pour yellow light onto the snow and it reflects back up and makes the clouds that hang above the city look orange. You’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

“Of course,” he said weakly as he allowed himself to be led by me.

The house was breaking apart. The pictures had all fallen from the walls; both the ones where I suffered for him and the ones where he suffered alone. The furniture melted like ink dripping from an inkwell into black puddles on the floor. The staircase cracked and splintered like matchsticks. Then the carpet and floor jostled beneath our feet.

Taking the door in one hand, I threw it open and attempted to push Evander through the entrance. At first, he resisted me. “You can’t change the past,” I said. “It happened whether we like it or not, but to deny the past will only make it more frightening.”

“Is it really safe to go through there?” he asked uneasily.

“Is it really safe to stay in here?” I pointed to the inside of the crumbling mansion.

He gave way and stepped onto the terrace.

After one step, he exhaled and his breath turned to curling white vapor. The cold was setting in. He pulled me into a hug to stay warm. “Well, we didn’t die passing through the door. That’s a good sign.”

I smiled. “This terrace probably isn’t going to last after the rest of the house has folded itself up.”

“Folded itself up?” he repeated.

“You know, it's as if the house itself is made up of the pages of a book, now that the story is over, we close the book and put it on the shelf.”

“So, what do you suggest we do? Jump off the edge into oblivion?” he joked.

“Yes,” I whispered, holding his gaze. “Before the terrace caves in. We need to do it now—together.”

He stared at me. “Really? What makes you think that’s what we need to do?”

“The ends of the other stories. In the first story, I chose to let Murmur dangle my bleeding hand over a sea full of blood-hungry capricorns in order to keep your trust. It seemed like certain death, but I made it through, and actually... that was the only way to make it through. It worked the same way in the second story. I was going to be burned at the stake. You saved me, but then I went back into the flames to get you. I’m positive—the one and only way is to jump off the edge of these steps. Now.”

He smiled. “This is only a story.”

“Maybe for you. Ready?”

“See you when I wake up,” he murmured pleasantly, before wrapping his arms around me and putting his right leg over the empty expanse.

I stuck out my foot too, and together—we fell.

It was warm. It was really warm and soft around me. Blankets were covering me like I’d slept all night without loosening the cocoon of covers tucked around me. I woke up in my own room, but suddenly realized I wasn’t alone in my bed. I was so warm because there was someone next to me holding my hand. I jolted awake and opened my eyes.

And there I saw Evander.

Next to me.

Sleeping peacefully.

Everything was all right. I passed the test and as my reward, I got to have him all to myself. But at the moment, his body heat was stifling me and I was thirsty, so I slipped out of the covers.

Outside my bedroom, I got another surprise. Lying on the couch in the living room was none other than Carly. I knew she was there as soon as I stepped into the hallway. I could smell cigarette smoke. She was staring at the ceiling like death personified, knocking her ashes into a tea saucer.

I got a drink of water and joined her in the living room. “Did mom let you in?”

“No. Rachel did,” she answered before picking something off the tip of her tongue and depositing it in the ashtray.

“How come? Weren’t you staying at her place?”

Carly took a shaky drag on her smoke. “She kicked me out. There was an accident.”

“Did you burn a hole in her carpet?”

“Holy!” she exclaimed angrily. “News travels fast.”

I glared at her. “She didn’t tell me anything. I guessed.”

“Snap! When did you get so damn smart?”

Seeing how my older sister had deteriorated, I suffered. Her hair was filthy and completely matted to her skull—she’d probably been too busy partying to wash it. Her skin was gray and there were circles under her eyes. The nails of her hands were unkempt. There was chipped black nail polish on some of them. Others were broken and uneven. She looked like she was about to

spit something black into a handkerchief.

While I studied her, she tried her best to ignore me, but after a minute or so, she lost her nerve. "What are you staring at? I'm not a circus show."

"Clearly," I said patiently. "Tell me, Carly. When did you stop taking care of yourself? Did something bad happen to you?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Were you raped or abused in some way you never told us?"

"And if I was?" she questioned, her expression completely indifferent.

"I'd like to know. You could spare me the gory details, but I'd like to know why you thought it was a good idea to pursue Reg Cheney when he had a wife and kids."

Her head snapped around. "How do you know about that?"

"In the end, I don't think anything can stay secret," I said.

"No. Really? How do you know that?" she screamed rising off the couch in fury.

"I'm dating his son, Evander. He is asleep in the next room, so quiet down," I advised, putting a finger to my lips.

She flopped back on the cushions like a rag doll. "Life is frickin' weird. Do you know that? But why ask me that? If you're dating his son, then you must know his dad is hot stuff. It was animal attraction or whatever."

"Evander's not like his dad. He hates him."

"How could anyone hate him? Hell, the guy is so lovable his own wife forgives him for playing around."

"Don't be so sure," I warned.

"Great. I hope she divorces his ass," Carly chuckled.

I growled. "Don't you care about anyone other than yourself? I realize that two people might have their reasons for getting divorced but why mess with a married man? What if we could have had a father, Carly? Did you ever think of that?"

"Shut up, Sarah. You don't know what you're talking about."

But I couldn't stop. "Is your lust really more important than a child's feelings? You'll get over him, probably very soon. On the other hand, the kids will be scarred for life. Evander isn't Laurie's kid, Carly. Laurie was Reg's mistress when he was married to Evander's mom. And better still, do you honestly think that a guy who cheats on repeat is going to be faithful to you? How stupid can you be? What did you even like about him to begin with? I've met him. He's sleazy."

Carly was staring at me. I wasn't sure if she wanted to rip out my tongue or if she was totally transfixed by my rampage. I had never told her off before. But even if it felt freeing to get all that off my chest, I needed to calm down. I paused and proceeded in a softer tone. "Look, how long do you think it would take you to get over him? A week? A month? A year? A year is nothing in your life. If you break a family apart, granted Reg can do that without your help, it will mess up the kids for their whole lives. Do you really want to do that much damage? What happened to you that makes you think you can do that to someone else?"

"So you think I was raped or something?" she asked slowly, taking a drag.

"Weren't you?"

"Not really," she said vacantly. Then she turned and looked me right in the eye. "No one raped me."

"Then why do you act like this? Like nothing matters and like you're not worth more?"

She looked at me lifelessly. "Stop. You're making me gag. When did you get so forceful and

cheesy? It's weird. What have you been doing lately? Did you join a community outreach program or something? Are you the voice on the other end of the emergency helpline?"

"No."

"Really? Could have fooled me. Shut up."

"What?"

"Shut up and listen! I don't know how you felt growing up like this, living in places like this, but I'll tell you how I felt—like garbage. I wore rags to school. I couldn't make friends with anyone who had any standards because even though you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, everyone does it. The kids who did pot and kept flasks under their desks were nice to me. Fitting in with them was a million times easier than doing things *the right way*. After a while, I think I even fell in love with the idea of being homeless—like a gypsy." Carly squeezed her eyelids shut and noisily spilled the details. "I thought I could live the rest of my life like that if I could only get away from mom. I went out to Vancouver where it's warmer and I found out I couldn't make it work. My friends weren't there, it's expensive and wet. It rains twenty-four/seven. I ran out of money and Reg bailed me out. I didn't know he was married until I found his wedding ring. It fell out of his pocket. I didn't think he'd leave his wife for me. I didn't even want him to. I was planning to be cool about the whole thing... like sex with a stranger couldn't hurt me. It doesn't hurt in the movies." She was crying and the tears were plugging up her nose.

I put my hand out to touch her, but she knocked it away.

"Don't touch me! I hate being touched. And just so you understand, Reg won't see me anymore. And Rachel, my only real friend in the world, is pissed at me. I'm so frigging alone and desperate that I'm spewing out my troubles to a bleeding kid who can't do jack to help me."

Then a voice came from the hallway. "Yes, she can." It was Evander. "She can help you because she has helped me."

"Is that so?" Carly snarled, wiping her tears with her plaid sleeve and lighting a new cigarette.

"Yeah."

She glared at him. "I'm sure she could help a kid her own age, but I'm nineteen. Sorry."

"I'm nineteen, or did Sarah fail to mention it? And in a lot of ways, I'm like you. Let her help you."

"Okay Sarah, what would you do to help me since you've got *everything* figured out?" The condescension in her voice was palpable.

"I'd talk to mom for you."

It was amazing, but Carly actually sighed and said, "That *would* probably help. Rachel swore she wouldn't and I can't get beg mom without someone to hold my hand. It's just disgusting that I have to rely on my kid sister."

"It's not disgusting," I reassured her.

"Whatever. Now you! Boy thunder."

"Boy thunder?" Evander repeated incredulously.

"Yeah, you. Go home. I can't stand your face." Carly flopped over on the couch so she was facing the wall. "The door's over there."

I glanced at Evander. I agreed with Carly. This was a family matter and he shouldn't really be involved in the scenes that would follow. After all, it would be a while before Carly was better, even if my family could find a way to help her heal.

"In a minute. I have to give him something." I got up and grabbed his hand. "Follow me."

Back in my room, I took out the brown book Emi had made for me and the one Evander had written himself. I showed him the brown hardcover book and asked, "Have you ever seen this

before?”

He took it and turned it in his hands. “No. I thought there weren’t any hardcovers printed. Was this a complimentary edition or something?”

“No,” I said. “This is my version of your book. This is the project I told you I was working on. This is what I would have done if I were Sarafina, Serissa, and Serena. I hope it makes you feel better.”

“I haven’t even read it and it already makes me feel better. Thank you, but how did you get it printed like this? Are there more of them?”

I smiled. “You should really ask Emi about that.”

Chapter Twenty Three

After the Story was Over

I sat on Emi's impeccable couch watching the wind swirl snowflakes against the panes of her living room window. Emi was in the kitchen fussing with a tissue for Paisley's runny nose. Evander wasn't home and truth be told, I had no idea what I was doing there. I assumed it was babysitting, but something about the way Emi was dressed said that might not be it. She usually looked like she was on her way to a Victorian funeral. As far as I knew, she didn't own casual clothes. But that evening, she wore yoga pants and an elegant sweater (still black) but comfortable looking. The startling part was the bright orange fluffy slippers she wore peeking out from under the hem of her pants.

After she got Paisley all sorted out, Emi plopped her daughter on the living room carpet, dumped out a basket full of baby toys in front of her, and sat herself cross-legged on the floor.

"Thanks for coming," she said breathlessly. I noticed her lipstick was still flawless. Apparently, some things just couldn't be downgraded.

"I'm not babysitting, am I?"

"No," she said, making her lips a perfect O. "I invited you here to have a good chat while Evander and Vincent are away."

Evander and Vincent had gone to Vancouver. Apparently, Evander was going there to get the remainder of his belongings. He had come to Edmonton with practically nothing; just his clothes and his art supplies. He went back to pick up the rest. He was going to move on with a new and different life.

"I got a call from Vincent and they should be home sometime this evening," Emi continued. "I thought you might like to hang out with me and have the added fun of being here when they get back."

I glared at her playfully. "You just want me to calm Evander down if he's a basket case after seeing Reg."

She smiled. "Nah. He's fine. I talked to him on the phone last night. He was perfectly all right. Vincent said Evander went into his old room and went through all his old possessions. He ended up throwing away most things. Most things don't matter much in the long run anyway. He picked up the family albums and pictures of Autiny which was the whole point of the trip."

"I thought the point of the trip was letting Reg know he wasn't coming back home to live—ever."

"Reg doesn't need to be told. Nothing makes a dent with him anyway and if you say things only to hurt him, you'll be disappointed. So many things that happened to him should have broken him—should have made him hit rock-bottom. But, he likes trapping people. He likes being the rock *and* the hard place that make a person miserable. It doesn't matter if it's his mistress, his wife, or his son. He's perfectly happy making anyone wretched, no matter who they are. That's just the kind of guy he is. Your pain, his pleasure. You know, he didn't even know about Evander's mad scribbles on the wall until after I took Evander away. That's the real reason he brought Laurie and the kids here on Remembrance Day. Reg saw it and suddenly he had to see his son. He likes being where the drama is."

"And he'll never change?" I asked woefully.

"Probably not." Emi picked up a stuffed elephant and gave it to Paisley, who immediately

shoved it in her mouth. "Enough about Reg. The only way to beat him is to forget about him."

I let it go. I didn't want to talk about him either. "So," I said slyly. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You're a witch?"

Emi rolled her eyes. "It's not a big deal."

I bit my tongue and waited for her to elaborate, but the seconds passed and the silence prevailed. Finally, I said what I had been waiting for a chance to say. "I know you told me you've been bound to silence, but is there *anything* you can tell me? Anything at all? It could be tiny. Anything?"

Emi chuckled. "You're adorable, Sarah, but there isn't really anything to say. Miracles happen for people who want miracles, people who think they can happen. Do you know what I'm saying? People perform miracles when they're willing to open their eyes and their hearts and decide it isn't too much trouble trying to make another person's dreams come true. Which means?"

"That the miracle wasn't the book," I said slowly because I could tell Emi expected it.

"Right. The real miracle was that you cared for Evander enough to break his misconceptions. I may have noticed his pain and your love, but I was merely giving you the opportunity to show what you felt. If I had just given you a copy of his blue paperback without any magic, you could have read it, then stormed into his room and told him he was being an idiot. That may have worked just as well as what I did."

"Really? I don't think so," I retorted.

Emi smiled patiently. "What I mean to say is that the next time you're in a bind whether it's with Evander or someone else, you're going to have to figure out a way to solve the problem yourself. I just hope the experience you had within his book will give you the courage to know you can handle anything."

I frowned and said critically, "Emi, I wouldn't expect you to help me with your magic. You didn't bail me out of trouble. You threw me headfirst into trouble."

"Right!" she said enthusiastically. "So remember that magic is a force to be reckoned with. Even when it's doing what it's supposed to; it doesn't make things easier. It's difficult, but don't you feel that in the case of you and Evander the end justified the means?"

"I did suffer a lot, especially my burnt feet, but I never imagined that a man could be as kind to me as Evander. He treats me like a treasure."

"You *are* a treasure," Emi said factually.

"Oh, stop it," I scoffed. "But there is one thing I wanted to ask you about the book. Can anyone else live through it like I did? If another girl picked it up and started reading, would it drag her into it?"

"No. It was meant for you. You were the only person who could live in it and make the book say what you did and how you thought. Even if your sister had picked it up before you read one sentence and gave it a go, nothing would have happened. She would have just read it the way Evander wrote it. Now it's finished! It will always tell your story. That way Evander can go back and read it over and over again."

"Thank you, Emi," I said, choking down my gratitude with teenage awkwardness. She would never know how much it meant to me.

"Why? Were you worried someone else might read it and snatch Evander away from you?"

I scratched my nose. "A bit."

"That's cute," Emi smirked.

“There’s something else,” I said shyly. “Do you think Evander will actually move into my building?”

“No. I think he just said that to Reg to try to freak him out. Of course, it didn’t work. Why are you asking? Does Evander live too far away from you now you’re used to sleeping in his bed, under his bed, or down the hall?” she asked with a laugh.

I colored. I should have realized that Emi knew all about my adventures in Evander’s book. “He’s fine where he is.”

“Good. I like having him around. You know, he’s very helpful.”

“I’m not sure I’ve seen him help,” I grunted.

“Are you kidding? He’s always willing to run to the store for me. I love it.”

“Why does that matter?”

“I hate shopping. More than anything! I hate shopping.”

I was baffled. A beautiful, polished woman hated shopping. There was always something new and weird to discover about everyone.

Vincent and Evander showed up a little after ten that night. I watched Evander come in through the backdoor, letting in the cold air, and carting a huge cardboard box. He shook the fallen snow off his head and shot me the most dazzling smile.

“Hi,” I said shyly. He acted shy, too. Vincent was two steps behind him, dropping bags haphazardly on his way to reach Emi.

For a moment, my meeting with Evander was eclipsed by Vincent and Emi. He did not kiss her, but held her tightly, like she was his life preserver. How did he handle leaving her all the time for business? Then Emi took him by the hand and led him off to their daughter’s room to see Paisley.

It took a minute for Evander and me to get comfortable talking again, but wonder of wonders—Evander took the lead.

“Were you that worried about me? You’ve got lines on your forehead,” he pointed out playfully.

“Yeah, I was pretty worried,” I said as I smoothed them out.

“Don’t be. I’ve got the goods.” He took me into the living room, threw open the box flaps, and showed me what was worth going all the way to Vancouver. There were the photo albums, which I expected, and his mother’s black and pink floral print dress.

“That’s the one that belonged to your mother?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Is it really ugly?”

I picked it up and shook it out. It smelt recently washed with vanilla-scented detergent. I held the fabric into my face and got a good breath. “Did Laurie wash this for you?”

“How did you know?”

“I know everything!” I said cockily.

He chuckled. “Apparently, you do.”

“How is she?”

“She’s sorry. Before I left, she sat me down in the dining room and told me how she ended up with Reg.”

“How?”

“She said when she first started seeing him, she didn’t know he was married. He took her on a

romantic date, apparently with a boat ride and the setting sun, or something equally as impressive to a lonely, isolated girl. She slept with him, woke up alone, and then it's the same old story. He didn't phone her and she tried to get in touch with him, but he wouldn't return her calls until he found out she was pregnant. He didn't believe the baby was his and wouldn't see her or help her. It was then she found out he was married."

"How did they end up together with that kind of story?"

"It's simple. He didn't fall in love with her. He fell in love with Sebastian. Sebastian looks more like him than I do. He has the same daredevil personality. Even now, if Laurie left Reg, Sebastian wouldn't leave with her. He'd stay with his dad."

"They're that attached to each other?"

"Yeah, and when Sebastian was little, Reg would stay over at Laurie's apartment just to see Sebastian in the morning before work. That's how they had Brody. He was practically living with them, so Laurie thought he really would leave his wife... and eventually, he did." He paused. "She cried while she told me this. It was so pathetic, Sarah. She thought he really loved her. She thought his cheating with her was because he'd screwed up his life marrying my mom in the first place and if he got divorced and married her, everything would be made right. And now she knows she was wrong."

"You feel sorry for her?" I asked quietly.

"It was hard to keep in mind that she's almost forty. She cried like a little girl. The truth is, I forgave her ages ago. It would be impossible not to forgive her after seeing her suffer every day when I lived with them."

"That's good of you."

Evander leaned back on the couch and put his hands behind his head. "What about your family and the ones you're supposed to forgive?"

"Huh?"

"Carly."

"Well, she hasn't promised to go back to high school. Instead, she got a job!" I said proudly.

"What's she doing?"

"She's working at a funky clothing store on Whyte Avenue. Doesn't that suit her? I went and saw her in her shop the other day. She looks totally at home and like all her quirks are finally her assets instead of her liabilities."

"Are you taking accounting this semester?" Evander suddenly asked.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Uh... I didn't," he chuckled. "Keep going."

I scoffed, "I don't get what's so funny, but whatever. She's not fighting with my mom and she gave my mom some money for rent."

"What about Rachel? Has she forgiven Carly?"

"I think so. After all, Rachel loved her enough to chase her to the coast when she was being rotten. Think of how easy it is to love her now that she's doing one or two things right."

We sat there for a minute in silence before I grabbed the cardboard box and opened the flaps wide. "What else is in here?"

"Boring stuff. Let's see, art projects from when I was a kid." He pulled out a little white clay figurine that looked like it was supposed to be a snowman, but Evander had carved it into a monster and stuck blue feathers in its side to act as arms. It was endlessly endearing.

"How old were you when you made this?" I turned it over. "It's got a k on the bottom, so I guess that means kindergarten."

“Hey, what do you mean? I made that on the way here.”

I laughed at his joke, but I was stunned. It looked too polished to be made by a five-year-old.

Then he pulled out a mold of his handprint from when he was four. I picked it up and put my hand over the indentation. Little Evander had been so cute!

There were scads of school pictures up until the time when Autiny left Reg. Evander explained they couldn't afford them when she was sick and they lived with his Grandma. Instead, there were plenty of pictures Autiny took of him with an ordinary camera and even a couple of rolls of film that had been shot but never developed.

“There was no money,” Evander said again as he gathered them up.

“Would it bother you to get those pictures developed?” I asked gently.

“I won't know until I see them, but I didn't get them printed before because I was worried about getting my heart ripped open all over again. I don't know, since I met you, I feel stronger. Like I'd like to know more about my mom and how I looked through her eyes. She took a lot of pictures, eh?”

I nodded.

Then he showed me Autiny's jewelry that his grandmother had allowed him to keep. Most of it was costume jewelry that had clearly only been purchased because it was beautiful. They could not have been valuable, because, after all those years, they were chipped, tarnished, and broken.

“This was her wedding ring,” Evander said, liberating it from a black velvet box. It was plain gold with little stars cut in the gold. It looked kind of like the wedding ring Tremor had given me in the first story. I didn't think he was drawing from reality. That ring was supposed to have belonged to Tremor's mother. “She stopped wearing it when I when I was six.”

“Had she already stopped loving your father by then?”

“No. Not being able to wear it made her really sad. She told me her finger had gotten too fat and she couldn't get it on and off without soap. Reg wouldn't pay for her to get it sized.”

“Did he ever think about anyone other than himself?” I snarled.

Evander ran a hand through his hair. “No. He was definitely thinking about himself when I looked him in the eye and told him that if he ever wanted to see me again, he would have to come find me because I would never come to him again.”

“How do you know?”

“I don't know, but I think he thought he would never see me again when my mom left him. He never fought for custody. He's happier with Sebastian and Brody, but I think I might represent something inside him that stings.”

“What?”

“He doesn't care about women. The moment he wins a woman's heart is the moment that matters to him. If he loses it afterward, it doesn't matter. It's a whole different ball game with me. I think he's sorry he didn't try harder, but he'll get over it soon. Besides, I think he's right about something.”

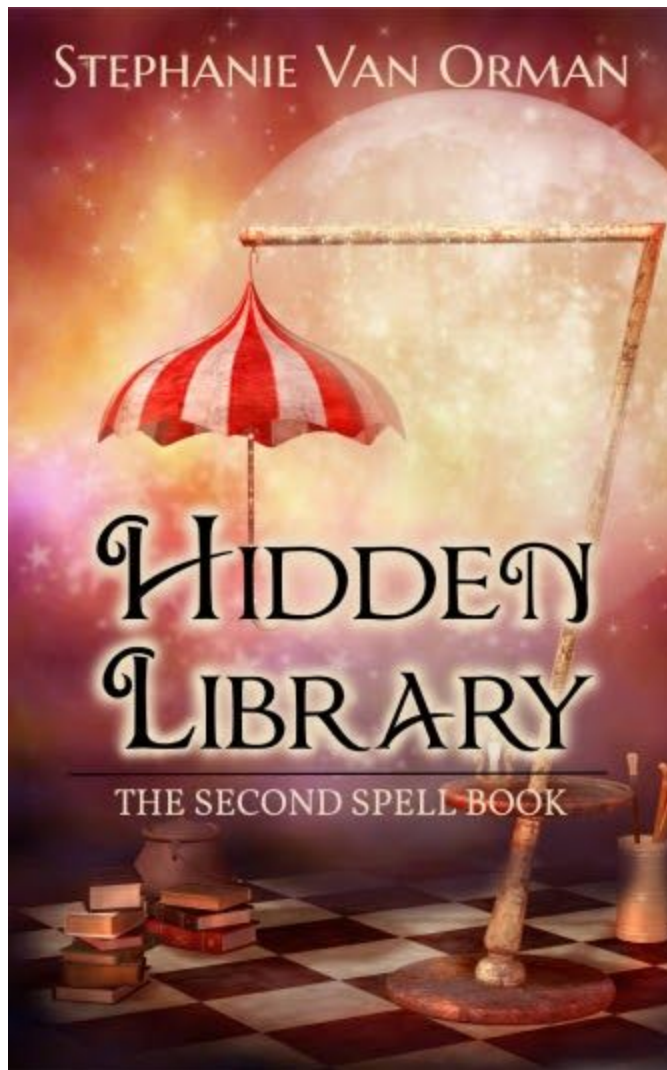
“Really? What?” I gawked.

Evander put his forehead on mine. He closed his eyes and I could feel the fluttering of his breath against my hair. “The moment when you win a woman's heart is very important. Being with you is the best thing that could happen to me. I still can't believe I have someone to share this mess with. Just having you know my past seems to lift a weight off me. Thank you, Sarah.”

“I wouldn't have done it for anybody else,” I whispered.

We kissed. It was a kiss that finally felt like the love both of us had longed for.

The End



Hidden Library: The Second Spell Book by Stephanie Van Orman¶
Look for it where fine ebooks are sold!

Emi's cousin, Veda, is graduating from high school and preparing for a new phase in her life inside her witch's coven. She's making her plans when Salinger arrives with his new spell book that is winning the hearts of her relatives and putting her in an awkward spot. Falling in love with a fellow author was not part of her plan, but she was not counting on Salinger doing so many things to change her mind. How far is he willing to go in the face of danger to prove to her that his love is real?

Excerpt from Veda's perspective:

I crossed the threshold into the school and expected to see bloodshed among them. Instead, each of them had on their best clothes and their best behavior.

I meant to walk by without saying a word, but Salinger called out to me. "Hi!"

I paused. He couldn't possibly mean me, but I turned at the risk of looking like a fool to see if he really was calling me. It would be ruder to walk on and I couldn't do that in a school for decorum.

He *was* calling to me and I got that close-up look at his face I never could have got through my living

room windows. His hair was nearly black, curled slightly, and cut perfectly. The black of his hair and eyelashes made the amber of his eyes all the more startling. He was much paler than I had expected, looking both Asian and Native at the same time. In truth, he had no Asian blood. He was half Inuit and half Caucasian, which lightened his eyes to light brown with black rings. It was the shape of his cheekbones and the upward curve of his lips that reminded me how splendid his bloodlines were. The shapes of his muscles and bones that protruded from under his clothes, spoke of strength and firmness. From head to foot, he was very impressive, the right height and build for a magazine cover. For the first time, I thought that perhaps my cousins had not wasted their time pursuing him.

Knowing he was not just perfect but also exotic, he came toward me with confidence. "You must be June. I'm Salinger."

Pearl cackled while the others exerted more control.

My expression was innocent. "I'm sorry. You have mistaken me for June Borge. Please excuse me," I said coolly, but not too coolly. I remained poised, even though he had mistaken me for a woman forty years older than me who wore her hair in a silver bob. I turned on the heel of my exquisite knee-high boot and continued on my way.

"That's Veda," Clementine explained. "She's younger than me. What made you think she could be June?"

"Where's she going?" Salinger asked.

"Probably to meet her student. She usually has a full day of tutoring on Saturday."

I pumped up the stairs and passed out of earshot.