

Chapter 1

"I'll never forget you!" The words echoed through Emberlynn's head.

She regained consciousness and her hands fumbled in the dark for the familiar object around her neck. She had spent countless hours running her hands over it, hoping she could remember what it meant if only she tried hard enough. Alas, the cold metal key resting in her pale hands was only a distant and clouded memory. But those words had run through her head nearly every waking moment, and had even found their way into the secrets of her dreams.

"What is so special about this?" she thought as she tucked it safely back inside her nightgown.

She didn't know what part the object played in her past, but it was a part she desperately wanted to remember. It seemed that so many years had passed since the carefree days of her childhood and she didn't know if she could ever find the memory so deeply buried in the corners of her mind. But, for the moment, she had more important matters to deal with, so she took a deep breath to clear her mind and reluctantly rolled out of bed. Just then, she heard a soft knock on the door.

"Miss Emberlynn! Princess!" came a voice from outside.

"Come in Katye, I'm awake," She replied.

"And it's a good thing, Your Highness," said her maidservant, hesitantly opening the door and entering the room. "Your father is growing impatient. You know he has plans for you to meet more suitors today and he likes to get an early start."

Emberlynn groaned. "I don't want to meet any more of my father's absurd suitors!" she pouted. "I am seventeen years old and my father is forcing me to choose someone to marry whom I don't even know. This is so unfair, not to mention ridiculous! I'm not ready to get married!"

"I'm sorry, Princess. I'd change it if I could, but I can't do anything."

"I don't like any of them and I certainly don't love any of them!" Princess Emberlynn exclaimed.

"Calm down now, Miss, and let me help you get dressed."

Reluctantly Emberlynn crossed the room and allowed Katye to help her into her dress. It fit perfectly over her slim figure and her long, blonde hair flowed delicately down her back. The deep blue color of the dress brought out the sapphire color of her piercing eyes.

"Another day in the life of royalty," she sighed.

Emberlynn's father, King Edric, ruled the kingdom of Ardia, which lay between the Banwen Mountains on the West and the Plains of Ginneroth on the East. It was the largest and most

influential kingdom in the land. Maybe its influence related in part to the fact that, of all the rulers, King Edric was the most loved by his people. He often walked in the villages that neighbored the castle complex, accompanied by the head of his guard. There he spoke with the citizens, keeping him in touch with their views and feelings, and making them feel valued. The princess, however, was rarely allowed to leave the palace grounds. Her father claimed that it was for her safety, and though Emberlynn was sure he meant well, she felt like a bird locked in a very small cage, yearning to fly.

The palace of Ardia was, admittedly, quite grand and beautiful. Perched on a small rise just on the edge of the capital city of Eiladuèn, it could be seen for miles. Its white stone towers rose to greet the sun on a cloudless day and the Ardian flag flew high in the morning breeze, proudly displaying the kingdom's crest. The flag was a deep, rich green upon which lay the gold crest, with two ivory stallions rearing up toward each other. They looked free, as if they would gallop away at any moment. Emberlynn wished she could climb upon one and ride away, but this was real life.

She spent much of her time poring over old books in the library, or curling up with them in odd corners of the palace where people rarely went. Nothing exciting ever happened at the palace. Yes, there were balls and parties, but after a few dozen, they start to lose their allure. All she really wanted was to experience something new and exciting – but she wasn't holding her breath.

"Sweetie, so nice of you to join us," said King Edric as his daughter sat down at the breakfast table.

"Morning Father, morning Mother," Emberlynn said, forcing a smile on her porcelain face.

"I need you, ready to go, in the throne room by 9:00," said her father sharply. "So hurry up and finish your breakfast."

"Finish!? I haven't even started!" protested Emberlynn.

"Well then you'd better eat quickly, because it's 8:15 already."

Emberlynn forced down a few bites of her breakfast. Although the food at the palace was wonderful, she was not hungry. The thought of arrogant, thirty-something-year-old noblemen competing for access to her wealth and title made her stomach turn. It made her feel like a prime piece of property instead of a person who deserved happiness.

"Mother, may I please be excused?" the princess asked, after a few minutes.

"Why Darling, you've barely touched your food!" said the queen.

"I'm not hungry this morning," she replied flatly.

"Alright," said her mother slowly. "But you have less than forty minutes until your father wants you in the throne room."

"All right, Mother," she said through a forced, sweet smile; but "as she turned around it transformed into a scowl. *"I hate my life!" she thought coldly. "Being a princess is certainly not all it's cracked up to be."*

As much as she hated the thought of another day of being accosted by suitors, Emberlynn knew she had no choice; she had to obey her father. So she ascended the stairs as slowly as possible, dragging her feet the entire way.

Once in her room, she closed the door and sank into the comfy chair in front of her mirror. She pulled the key from her dress and let her fingers explore it once more. Emberlynn lost all track of time as she stared at her impassive reflection in the mirror, holding the mysterious trinket that haunted her dreams. As she let her mind wander, visions from her past crept slowly into her mind. They were independent images and disconnected thoughts; a garden full of roses, a pale pink dress, the moon, the stars, the sea.... They flashed through her mind one at a time. She didn't know when or where, but she knew she'd seen all of them before. They were pieces of separate and unspecific memories. She was comforted by these images. They seemed safe and familiar, even if she couldn't name the time or place.

It must have been long ago and so far from here...

The next thing she knew, her mother was banging on her bedroom door.

"Emberlynn, dear!" she called. "You are ten minutes late and the first suitor is already here! Your father will be furious if you keep him waiting any longer, so you had better hurry!"

Emberlynn pulled herself back to reality. She tucked the key safely away under her dress, and took a moment to calm herself, before pasting that fake smile on her face that she'd become so accustomed to. Then she opened the door.

"Sorry, Mother. I just wanted to make sure I looked my absolute best for the suitors," she lied.

Her mother gave her a look that showed she didn't believe her, but wasn't going to push the matter.

They walked briskly to the throne room and Emberlynn entered gracefully. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Father," she said lightly as she crossed the room and ascended the steps to her throne. "I...I couldn't decide how I wanted to wear my hair today," she said slowly. It was a lame excuse, she knew, but it was the first thing she thought of and her father and suitor both seemed to accept it. No harm done.

"Ah, Sire!" exclaimed the suitor, a slender man with black hair and a narrow mustache. "Your daughter is even more beautiful than I imagined!" He bowed to Emberlynn, took her petite hand, and kissed it.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, standing up straight. "I am Sir Reginald, Lord of Idiers." With these words the pompous air that surrounded him seemed to grow.

"How lovely," she thought. "Another rich, arrogant fool. More like Reginald, Lord of the Idiots," she mused. "Such a pity, too; he's not half bad looking." For the next two hours Emberlynn pretended to listen with interest to all Reginald said. She didn't catch more than a few words, though, as she was too busy trying not to be sick at the thought of spending an entire afternoon with a whole series of Reginalds. They were all the same, these suitors. She had never met a single one she could even tolerate. Her father didn't seem to understand that, because he kept bringing her more of the same. And this, she knew, was her destiny: to refuse suitor after suitor,

until her father either gave up (unlikely) or grew tired of her obstinance and forced her to marry a man she could never care for.

"Well it was lovely to see you again, Reggie," Emberlynn heard her father say, finally. This pulled her back to the present. "I do hope you will be attending our ball in a few months."

"Of course, Sire!" was the enthusiastic reply. With that, Reginald bowed to Emberlynn again and exited the room.

"Ball?" questioned Emberlynn, after a moment's pause.

"Yes," her father replied.

"What ball?"

"The one your mother and I are throwing in two months, to celebrate your eighteenth birthday," he said, unable to suppress a mischievous smile.

"Oh no!" she protested; she knew that look. "You mean to tell me you and Mother are throwing a ball and inviting all the eligible males in the kingdom, because you want me to choose a suitor to marry?!" she asked angrily, already knowing the answer.

"Of course not..." he said slyly. "We're only inviting the ones with titles."

She was speechless in disbelief.

"Look Emberlynn, I know you aren't thrilled with the idea, but you're almost eighteen and it's time you found a husband," he stated, firmly. Then he sighed. "You know, I'm not trying to be mean; I'm doing this because I care about you. I want what's best for you and although I know you don't like the way it appears, it's best that you finally settle on a suitor."

"Father, has it ever crossed your mind that I don't like any of your suitors?! And they certainly don't like me!" she retorted. "They're only after my money and title, and they're all much too old for me anyway! I know you love me, but don't you think I should have some say in my life?" She paused for a moment before adding, "The least you could do is find a suitor I might actually like for a change, but it seems there's not a single man like that in our entire kingdom! Not in all of Ardia." She let out a deep sigh.

Then something completely unexpected happened: the king smiled.

"What...?" his daughter asked slowly, surprised.

"I see," he said, with a mysterious grin toying at the corners of his mouth. "Well, if that's how you feel..."

If the king's reaction had shocked Emberlynn, it was nothing compared to what happened next.

The king turned around and, without another word, walked to the door of the throne room and opened it.

Emberlynn sat on the throne with a puzzled look on her face. Then her father stepped aside, and she saw him. She had never seen anyone quite like him before. He was a head taller than her father, with blonde hair that was cut short and ice blue eyes. "He can't be more than twenty," she thought, in disbelief. "Is he a squire bringing a message to my father?" She was able to tear

her eyes away from his handsome face long enough to notice his clothes. He was dressed far too elegantly to be a squire. "Okay, *that rules out that possibility. No...he couldn't possibly be....he doesn't look anything at all like a suitor.*

But...." Then she noticed the ring on his finger. The crest was one of Lemethian nobility. She let out a gasp, too quiet for anyone but herself to hear. Had her father finally brought her a decent suitor? She glanced over at the king, and the smile on his face gave the welcome answer.

The young man entered the room and walked, ever so slowly, toward her. Then he did something no other suitor had ever done before: he looked her straight in the eye. He didn't give her an appraising look, as the others had. He didn't immediately speak and try to flatter her. He just stood there at the base of the steps and stared into her eyes. Emberlynn held his gaze. Then a sweet, soft and charming smile formed on his lips. There was something about his smile that made her feel as though she had known him her entire life. The strangest feeling stirred in the pit of her stomach.

Her father hurried over to them. "Allow me to introduce my daughter, Emberlynn."

The young suitor bowed slightly, but remained silent.

"Emberlynn, this is Banning," her father said softly. "He is the son of Theron, Duke of Kingston."

"Kingston?" Emberlynn asked her father quietly, finally finding the courage to speak. "Isn't that in Uncle Thomas' kingdom?"

"Yes, Dear," he replied. "It's in the kingdom of Lemeth."

So she had been right about the ring. Lemeth was the kingdom just south of Ardia, bordering the Tavys River. King Thomas was brother to Queen Gwyneira, who had married Edric when he became King, and moved to Ardia. Emberlynn and her parents visited occasionally, and these trips were the only time she was allowed to leave the palace. She loved Lemeth, and was always looking to hear stories of places outside the palace walls.

"This suitor could be exactly the excitement I'm looking for," the princess thought. She turned to him and smiled - not a fake, imitation smile like she usually did, but a genuine one. She couldn't remember the last time she'd truly smiled; the kind that lights up your entire face and radiates in your eyes, but that is what she did now. Then she stood and curtsied before saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Banning."

"You as well, Your Highness," he replied.

His voice was gentle and smooth. He radiated charm and her heart began to beat a little faster.

"Please," she replied, a little surprised, "Call me Emberlynn."

"Emberlynn..." he said slowly, smiling again.

After a moment's silence gazing into those hypnotizing ice blue eyes, Emberlynn managed to speak again. "So tell me, what's it like living in Lemeth? I've been a few times to visit my uncle and his family, but it's been so long I hardly remember a thing about it."

"It's beautiful there. We live only five miles from the castle, at the base of the most picturesque

mountains you've ever seen. They're topped with snow all year round."

He was speaking only when spoken to; answering her questions fully yet succinctly. There was something incredibly refreshing about that after listening to countless suitors brag about themselves for hours on end. Banning seemed different - reserved, almost shy. Or perhaps he was just respectful. Either way, she found him intriguing.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. "Tell me more..."

"Well," he continued. "The people there are wonderful - always so friendly. Your uncle, King Thomas, is a close friend of my father, so we spend lots of time at the palace."

"And what is the palace like?"

Banning hesitated for a moment, obviously thinking carefully about his next words.

"Enchanting...." He replied, finally. "As, forgive my bluntness...", he added quietly, "...are you."

This was so very much unlike the flattery she was constantly bombarded with. It seemed...sincere.

Emberlynn's heart melted at these words. She blushed furiously but smiled and said, "And you as well."

The king took advantage of the silence that followed and asked Banning if he would like to join them for an early lunch.

"I'd love to. Thank you, Sir," was his reply.

"Emberlynn..." he said, holding out an arm for her.

She beamed and took it, and Banning escorted her out of the throne room and into the dining hall.

"Please cancel all other suitor appointments for today," the king instructed his counselor quietly as they passed on the way to the dining hall.

Emberlynn picked at her food through the entire meal, much more interested in what Banning was saying. He told her about growing up in Lemeth, and recounted several of the adventures he and his father had been part of. She sat there wistfully, wishing she could relate to these tales of daring and excitement; most of her life had been lived inside the palace walls. Before she knew it they were being called for the evening meal and it was time for Banning to leave.

"I do hope to see more of you before you return home," said Emberlynn.

"Of course! I'm staying just a short distance from here, in the charming estate of Westin Abbey. And I won't be leaving until after the ball, which His Majesty was so kind to mention during lunch."

"How delightful!" replied the princess.

"Perhaps you'd like to join me for an afternoon ride tomorrow?" he questioned. "I hear Ardia has the finest horses of all the great kingdoms."

"Well I certainly think so. I'm quite partial to my own mare - a purebred Arabian and black as

night.”

“I’d love to see her. Does this mean I can count on you tomorrow?”

“I suppose,” she replied, coyly, hiding her enthusiasm.

“I look forward to it. Shall I meet you at the castle gate around 2 o’clock?”

“I’ll be there.”