# Excerpts from Jenni James Faerie Tales

# PETER PAN

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS WHILE HE flew above the rooftops over Kensington Road in London that Peter Pan first spotted the beautiful Wendy Darling in her bright blue ruffles and fetching white lace hat. She was walking with another girl and twirling her dainty parasol to the side and not above her head like she was supposed to.

In fact, in the precisely seventeen and half minutes that Peter had been spying on the girl as she traipsed along the fashionable trail of Hyde Park during the midday stroll, she had nearly hit three unsuspecting men with her twirling, and one old biddy of a grandmother who was all huff and nonsense. The woman was practically poked in her eye by the girl, so of course Peter could understand the growling reprimand associated with such an accident.

However, it was Wendy’s shocked and blushing apologies that caught his attention. For though she was most decidedly sorry for nearly maiming each of her victims, her giggles grew louder with each unintentional attempt once the person was out of earshot.

It was that smile, that unabashed way she tossed her head back and laughed up at the trees that nearly stole his heart. The silly girl could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen at the most, just a year or two younger than him, but my goodness, to see such freedom among the snobbish British aristocracy was so refreshing. Her friend did not share in the humorous situation as much as she did, and so Peter spent little time admiring the companion she was walking with. Instead, he passed another good half an hour inconspicuously bounding and flitting from rooftop to rooftop until she eventually headed toward a side street and then home with her friend. The delightful girl was still chatting and chuckling from time to time.

As he stopped at the house across the road, he watched as she handed her weapon—er, parasol—to the butler, and then his jaw dropped at the beautiful red hair pinned beneath the hat she took off just before stepping inside the fine, stately home.

What was it about a female with ginger hair that made his breathing change?

Peter flew around the house a few times until he located her exact bedroom. It helped when the maid opened the window leading to the little balcony, and he could hear the girl chattering inside.

That’s when he first heard her name.

Wendy.

Except he thought it was “Windy.” And he didn’t know why, but something inside his heart began to glow all warm and fuzzy. The boy who could fly with the wind and a girl called Windy. It was too perfect.

He was destined to like her before they had even met. Now, finding a way to speak with her without anyone being the wiser would be a bit trickier…

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LATER THAT NIGHT, ONCE the darkness fell, he approached her balcony again. This time, Peter flew right up to it and peered inside. It was a mild night and the window was still open, so he stepped over the railing and stood there within the shadows.

The space was only a few feet, just enough to allow the doors to open and maybe someone to step out. But nothing more than that.

In the room, he could make out the faint glow of a gas lamp near a pink-canopied bed. There was definitely someone talking, but it was very methodical, like the person was reading aloud. A faint breeze caught the curtain nearest, bringing it out onto the balcony, and for a moment, Peter was able to see the room quite clearly. There, on a padded chair near the mantled fireplace, sat the girl, with a book in her hand. She was reading to two boys in pajamas sitting on cushions below her. Both were being very quiet and listening with rapt attention.

From what he could tell, it was some sort of adventure story about a treasure and pirates. He grinned. This girl had the makings of the ideal woman. No one could be more suited to him than a female who did not mind a bit of adventure every now and then. He slowly slid down the side of the balcony and listened to as much of the story as he could.

When she stopped in the middle of an exciting bit, he almost protested right along with the boys.

“Wendy! You cannot stop now. We must find out what happens. We must!”

“Hush, John. It is time you went to sleep.”

Another voice popped up with, “We do not want sleep. Not in the middle of such tyranny!”

“Michael, come now—you know Mother and Father will be especially upset if I do not get you into your room before they return this evening. Now, shoo, you two. Hurry along.”

“But what about the pirates?”

Wendy laughed. “This chapter is over. I promise to read the next to you tomorrow night. The same thing I do every night.”

Peter leaned his head against the glass. There was something so intriguing about the girl. Her voice was heavenly, but it was more than that. Perhaps it was her motherly instinct, her patience with her brothers, her kindness in reading to them? She seemed like such a gentle, caring soul. Just these scant minutes with her today, and already he could see she was unlike anyone he had ever met before.

He sighed. Was it normal for an eighteen-year-old to feel the tuggings of belonging like he did? Was that not for dimwitted, sensitive people, to be always lingering about, wishing for more? Peter had been more the type to jump into a battle than to contemplate life and her mysteries and all that he might be missing.

Why should he feel as though *anything* were missing? He simply had the best life that ever could be.

He heard the door shut, and he peeked inside the room once more to see Wendy approaching the window. Gah. He quickly crouched and then sprang away.

He hung above the edge of the roof as he watched her walk outside and glance first one way down the street and then the other.

“It is all right now. You may come out of hiding. The boys are abed,” she said to the air around her.

He heart stopped. Was she speaking to him?

“Boy, I know you are there. You have been following me all day, and now I wish you would at least show yourself so that I may sleep tonight without imagining you to be much more frightful than you are.”

Peter froze. Truthfully. He had never ever been caught. In all the days he had traveled and zipped about London, no one—that he knew of—had ever been any wiser. And yet, in just one short day, this captivating, audacious girl was calling him out.

He watched the top of her head as she sighed and tapped a foot. “I am waiting…”

Where had this enchanting creature been all his life? He could not help himself. He chuckled and then clutched his mouth with his hand to stifle it, but it was too late.

Wendy whipped her head up and gasped as she stared directly at him.

# THE LITTLE MERMAID

CHAPTER ONE

PEARL GIGGLED AS THE rush of bubbles swirled up and around her fins and over her arms and kissed her cheeks. There was nothing more exciting than the Octavian underground sea vents.

"Try this one," Keel shouted from about ten feet to the left of her. "You have never experienced anything like this."

Not needing another moment to decide, she quickly swam over to the handsome prince. He was amidst three streams of bubbles, all coming from the same hole tucked within the shimmering coral beneath them. Each stream sparkled and tickled as it burst around the two merfolk.

He slipped his arms around her waist, his own fin twitching as the persistent air escaped over their bodies.

She snuggled against his chest and grinned. Just then, the tide shifted and the bubbles caught her bright red hair, whisking and dancing with it above them both. It felt so wonderful, as if a million minnows were gently tugging against the strands. Mmm . . . She laid her head back upon him and relished in the sweetness of it all.

He chuckled, his deep voice resonating through his chest. "Did I not tell you this was magical?"

"A hundred times."

“And yet you still resisted coming out here, did you not?"

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hush, you. I can choose to be stubborn if I wish to be."

"Aye. As stubborn as any of the great female tyrants who have ruled the sea."

"Tyrant?" She gasped and pretended to be appalled at his silly declarations, but found that the sensation of being in his embrace and the soft tickling of the bubbles around her was too delicious not to stay exactly where she was for some time more.

He chuckled again. "You sound so upset by my teasing."

"I am," she murmured into him. "And later, you shall pay for being such a brute. Until then, I think I shall remain here a bit longer."

"Only a bit?" She felt his hand slowly work his way up her back. So calm and peaceful.

"Mmm . . . Maybe a bit longer than a bit." She grinned into his chest.

After a few minutes of silence, he murmured against her brow, "Pearl?"

"Yes?" she asked, not moving an inch.

She felt his chest expand as he inhaled a large mass of the glorious sea water in these parts. His hands stilled in their travels along her back and instead came to rest against her shoulders. Slowly, he pushed her resisting form back enough to look deeply into her eyes.

"Keel, what is it?" she asked. Usually he was much more playful. "Why are you so intense all of a sudden?"

"You know there is no one else in this ocean I would rather be with than you."

"Yes, I know. We have so much fun together."

He shook his head, his features looking a bit lost for a moment. "Do you only ever see the fun?"

Pearl blinked, not sure where this conversation was going. "Do you not?"

"No." His fingers reached up and captured her jaw. "No, my dear, I think of so very much more when I am with you."

She trembled when his thumb traced her lip briefly. "What do you imagine when we are together?"

"Everything. The world. The ocean is ours. As if we could truly rule it all together."

"But . . . Keel?" Could he really be saying this to her now? Did he not remember she had vowed never to love him? Why would he even briefly touch on such a subject? He knew her desires to see so very much before she settled down. There was so much more to explore and do and see and become and learn from.

"I know you will believe I am speaking out of turn or whatever nonsense you have convinced yourself of, but Pearl dearest, you are in love with me, and it is time you understood that."

She flinched and was about to push out of his grasp, but Keel was quicker. His mouth found hers. Again. Great reef! Why could she never function after the merman kissed her? Nothing seemed to form even the faintest of coherent thoughts when his perfect mouth decided to remind her once again how much she enjoyed his company.

Sighing, she happily brought her arms around his neck and kissed him for quite a few more minutes before he pulled back.

He smiled smugly and then kissed her cheek before moving to her ear and whispering, "Marry me."

Her heart fluttered for a full ten seconds and she could hardly catch her fluid, it was so difficult to inhale. Yes, she wanted to shout. Yes, the dancing flutterfish in her stomach were enough evidence to tell her there was nothing she could wish for more than to be his wife. His princess. His love.

Gah. She melted into his chest again, her frantic heart racing, her smile so very wide. And then she remembered. Clutching his arms for a moment, she allowed the wave of silliness to leave her. Instead, she focused on the sparkling bubbles around them. The vibrant, skittering domes bobbed and tumbled their way up to the surface.

To that great unknown world.

Oh, to be free like that! To explore and see and have so very many adventures!

She looked back at the dear merman in front of her. Touching his face lightly, she stared into his pretty aqua-colored eyes and then kissed those handsome lips tenderly before declaring, "I cannot. My destiny lies in the world above me. I must go. I must search this amazing place out first. To really live and see and be and do."

Worry etched his chiseled face. "If you do, I cannot imagine you ever returning."

Pearl bit her lip and then shrugged slightly. There was nothing to be said about such a declaration. "And I cannot promise to return. There is hope and happiness and beauty here. But what of my desire to know what is best for me? What of my longing to see what might be out there? If it is my destiny to return, I shall, but with this tugging within me, I cannot imagine there being anything here that will make up for the glories I will find."

The words were out before she realized the true sting of them.

His open, trusting eyes distanced themselves in that instant, as if an unseen barrier came between them and he hardened the friendship he had with her. "Go, then. Go and see your world. Live your dreams." He kicked his fins and swam a few paces away. Instantly, she felt bereft without his arms about her. "Go. The rest of us will stay here and do what we have promised to do."

"You say it like I am betraying my family or something."

"Are you not?" The coldness about him shocked her.

A surge of irritation flashed through her small frame as she flipped her fins. "You may believe what you wish, Prince Keel, but I know my place is not of this ocean yet! I must learn and grow first. Think me selfish if you must. But a true friend, a true man who loved me, would want what is best for me. I refuse to be tied down to this tedious sea life. There is nothing about this that makes me happy."

All at once, Keel seemed harrowed by a shot of pain. His eyes darkened, his perfect mouth turned down, and he simply shook his head. "Forgive me for my proposal. May the great waves be with you. I wish you well." With that, he swam away, leaving her alone in the joyous Octavian underground sea vents.

# RAPUNZEL

CHAPTER ONE

“RAPUNZEL, RAPUNZEL, LET DOWN your hair, that I may climb your golden stair!”

The twelve-year-old girl giggled as she looked down from the fairy house her father, the king, had the gardeners build for her on her eighth birthday. The small home was high in the tree so she could feel like she was flying, just like a fairy. There were two ladders made of rope that led up to the charming wooden abode, but Prince Jonathan liked to tease her. Her hair reached past her feet, and he would say that if she braided it and hung it over the edge, he could climb it instead of the ladders.

“Never! Come up like a true gentleman, or do not come up at all!” she called down to him.

“You are such a spoilsport.” He grinned as he clutched the nearest rope and began to climb up.

“’Tis a good thing you decided to show yourself. I have pastries from Cook up here.” She taunted him with one as she took a large bite, crumbs tumbling to the ground past him. Some even landed on his head, putting chunks of white in his brown hair.

“Princess Rapunzel, I will now eat two for such boorish behavior,” he called up.

“With as slow as you are, they will be all gone before you get here.” She took another bite and quickly ducked inside when he increased his speed up the fifteen rungs or so of the ladder. Opening the small door to the house, she beamed a smile at him as he climbed onto the porch. “Welcome!”

“Ha!” Jonathan brushed his hands upon his trousers. “So, where is mine?” he asked as he looked pointedly at the pastry in her hand.

“Right here.” She took another bite and then giggled when he chased her inside the little place. It was about six feet by eight feet. It had just enough room for two small chairs and a table, a fine old rug, and a collection of older pillows. On the table was the basket with the pastries.

He dug in and began chewing on one while holding up another. “See?” he said around a mouthful. “They are both mine. You cannot claim them.”

“I can, if you continue to drop as many crumbs as this upon my newly cleaned floor!”

“You sound like a fishwife!” He took another bite and plopped down on a cozy section of pillows.

“Me? A fishwife?” She pretended to act scandalized as she sat down next to him, her white skirts spread prettily around her.

“Whot?” He grinned. “Do you not think royalty can act like commoners, then?”

She rolled her eyes. “I do not think the two should ever be compared.”

“Fine.” In an odd moment of seriousness, he straightened his features and said, “Forgive me.”

She waited for the coming quip. Something about him being mistaken—she was not a fishwife, she was more of an ogre—but it never came. Her smile fell and she leaned back, looking into his darkened eyes. “What is it, Jonathan? Is something wrong?”

He shook his head slightly and sighed. “When is anything wrong with me?” He did not look away.

“Never. You are always in perfect spirits.”

“Precisely. So why do you assume something is bothering me now?”

“What is it? Tell me, please.”

He blinked and looked away.

“Jonathan?”

“Would you like another pastry?” he asked.

“No. I would like you to speak to me. Jonathan, ’tis not fair. I share all my secrets with you.”

His gaze met hers and he stared at her for what felt like several minutes. She waited. For once in her chattering existence, she wanted to know, really know, what he had to say. And she did not dare ruin the moment by speaking over him.

Finally, she was rewarded for her persistence.

“I have to go away to school.”

“What?” She felt as though a load of rocks had fallen upon her chest. “When? Why? For how long?”

“I have one week before I am sent off.”

“Jonathan!” She reached for his hand, something she had never done before. She could not bear losing him.

He squeezed her fingers. “I had to come and tell you. I made Father bring us here so I could say good-bye properly.”

“How long will you be gone?”

He looked away then. “I do not know, exactly. It could be years before I see you again.”

She shook her head. “No. No! What about my coming-out ball? You promised me you would be there!”

He glanced back and chuckled. Reaching up, he brushed a lock of her long hair out of her face. “Rapunzel, that is years away. You are only twelve, and I am merely thirteen. It will be fine.”

“Will you be back once I turn sixteen, then? Do you give your word you will dance with me?”

“I hope so.”

Hope. He could only hope. Possibly four years without him? Without his laughter? His wisdom? His larks? What would she do without him?

“You are crying. You cannot cry,” he said gently. “It is good for me to go away to school.”

“No. I wish you to remain stupid and stubborn and all things horrid so that I may have you near me!”

“Listen to yourself. You do not mean it!”

She brushed at the tears. “You are correct. I cannot mean it. I wish you the best. I always have. I guess I should have realized they would send you away sooner or later. I just did not think about it.”

“I wish I could stay, or take you with me. But I cannot.”

They had been playmates and the best of friends since she was four and he nearly five. They had been inseparable and visited one another as much as possible. They had long wondered if there was some sort of understanding between the two royal families when it came to them, if they were betrothed to one another. But neither of them cared; there was no one else they would wish to be with anyway.

“I have something for you,” he said. “Something to remember me by.”

She did not want a token—she wanted him. But when he pulled out a pretty gold chain with a sapphire butterfly pendant, she gasped. “It is beautiful.”

“Come here so I can put it around you.”

She turned, scooted closer, and held up her long hair. She felt his hands secure the necklace in place.

“Rapunzel?” he asked as she released the mass of curls.

“Yes?”

“We have often wondered if our parents planned for us to marry. And I know this is very sudden and soon . . .” His voice trailed off.

She turned slowly toward him, her heart beginning to lighten and beat strangely within her. “What are you saying?”

He gulped and closed his eyes. “Will you wait for me?”

“Of course.”

“Truly?” He peeked one eye open.

“Yes, I will wait for you.”

A huge burst of air released from him, and he smiled. “Good.”

She grinned. “Good.”

All at once, he leaned forward and kissed her swiftly upon the lips before jumping up. He dashed out of the little house and worked his way down the ladder.

She touched her mouth, marveling at the tingly way her lips felt, before leaping to her own feet and leaning out the window.

He was already to the ground when she called out.

“Jonathan, don’t you dare forget me! You better come back—do you hear?”

He looked up at her. “Even if you were a thousand miles away from here, I would still come back for you. I would find you. You have the Balligryn pendant, after all. And I cannot become king without it!”

“Wait. What?” She held the necklace out. “This?”

He grinned. “Do not ever lose it. My father would slay me.”

And then he ran away, Rapunzel’s heart twisting and jolting and beating like it never had before.

# THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES

CHAPTER ONE

“HELLO!”

Aleck looked up from snipping at the ornamental hedges in the palace garden to see Princess Cascadia coming toward him. He immediately dropped his shears and lowered into a bow. “Your Highness,” he said as he came back up to face the pretty, dark-haired young woman. She looked exceptionally fetching today in pale blue ribbons and a matching gown.

She smiled and stopped right in front of him. “Hello,” she said again, her fingers slowly twirling the handle of the white lace parasol that shaded her head.

He waited a moment for her to say something while his stomach did flip-flops. How many days had he watched the beautiful princess and wished for opportunities like this, to get to know her and speak with her? And yet, when they seemed to come, he had nothing to say. But how did a simple gardener go about speaking with royalty?

She continued to twirl and wait, her grin growing.

*Say something, you dolt!* He swallowed nervously and asked, “Would you like a flower?”

“A flower?” She looked at the hedge he had been pruning.

“No. Not from here.” He pointed behind him. “We could pick one from the queen’s garden, if you would like. I know of some lovely roses that have just bloomed.”

“Oh! Yes, please.”

“If you follow me, I will show you just where they are.” He began to walk, but when he noticed she was not with him, he turned around. Princess Cascadia stood in the exact same spot. Confused, he asked, “Would you rather I went without you and brought back a couple?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Good heavens, how was a man supposed to know what a woman wanted? “Then you would not like to follow me?”

She chuckled, her laugh floating about her like tinkling fairy bells. “No, Aleck. I wish for you to lend me your arm so that we may go together.”

How could he be so thoughtless? “Of course.” He rushed to her side. “Forgive me.” Being so close to her, close enough to smell the lavender soap she used, caused his breathing to become quite erratic. He glanced down at her side, and then slowly raised his arm out. He willed himself to act natural as she daintily wrapped her elbow around his shirtsleeve and placed the top of her gloved hand upon his. He gazed into those sky-blue eyes a moment, reminding himself to breathe.

He was holding her arm. Her hand was upon his, her waist mere inches from him. They were together—truly together for the very first time. A warmth spread through him he had never known before, sending a concentrated group of tingles at their touching limbs. He grinned at her and watched in amazement as she inhaled sharply.

This overwhelming feeling affected her as well! She could feel it.

Those eyes sparkled back at him. He was lost. Utterly and foolishly lost.

Could she possibly think of him as he thought of her? Could the princess actually wish to be with a mere gardener?

A hound barked some distance away and snapped him back to the present. “Come, and we shall find the most enchanting roses for you.”

He took a step forward, and then another, half expecting her to turn around and run the other way, but she did not. Instead, she quite happily followed him.

Nothing had ever felt more right and wonderful than this moment.

“Aleck?” she asked as they slowly made their way to the flower garden.

“Yes?”

“I know this is highly improper, and I will most likely get scolded if I am caught walking with you, but thank you for doing so.”

His gaze met hers again. “It is my pleasure.”

She nodded and glanced away, a faint blush stealing across her cheeks. All at once, the parasol began to twirl twice as fast as it had before. “Sir, you flatter me.”

“I do not mean to flatter, Princess,” he said with a grin, loving this new game of theirs. “Indeed, I only mean to speak the absolute truth. This is by far the most enjoyable moment of my day.”

She gasped and glanced at him before biting her lip and looking away again.

He could not believe his eyes. If he did not know better, she would seem to be genuine in her response to him. “Why did you ask to hold my arm?” he brazenly asked, curious as to how she would reply.

She kept her profile to him as they continued to walk. “Because I knew you would never think to do so, and so I asked myself.”

“Because?”

“Because I wanted to,” she replied.

“Fair enough.” He let the subject drop. “And have you had any news to impart? Any reason for us to be thus engaged?”

“News?”

“Yes. For when your father asks why you have been traipsing the grounds with a lowly gardener, you will have a much better reply to give him than because you wanted to.”

She blushed again and then shook her head. “You are incorrigible.”

“I know. I think it is why you like me.” He said the last looking straight at her.

She gasped in shock. “I have said no such thing!”

He stopped, his back toward the many windows of the castle. Stepping forward and hiding her for a brief moment, he said, “You did not have to say anything to me. I can tell by your actions.” His heart grew a bit heavy. “Princess, as much as I wish to keep you near me to learn every possible secret of yours and gain your trust, I also fear this.”

“I have come outside every single day for the past several months in hopes of …” She trailed off.

To speak with him. “Aye. I think I understand. But it will not do. I am simply a gardener. And as much as you would be scolded for doing such a thing, I would be dismissed from my post completely if this were to continue.”

“No.” Her breathing became labored. She looked distraught over this declaration.

Did she honestly have no idea that such things were frowned upon? “What is it?”

“’Tis not fair,” she said after a few moments. “I—I do not know how to express myself, or why. It does not make sense to me. But there is something about you that calls to me. Something I cannot dismiss.”

She *did* feel it too! He clutched her hand. “Princess Cascadia!”

“Please, call me Casey. I have despised that name my whole life. Casey is what I prefer.”

“I cannot. I do not dare. You know the help is not allowed to speak so casually of you,” he whispered as he glanced around, making certain they were alone.

She squeezed his fingers. “Please?”

How could he deny her anything? He took a deep breath.

“Please?”

“Casey.” The name as he said it was so profound, it was as if it echoed between them for several seconds.

And then she smiled. Her whole face lit up. “Thank you.”

At that moment, he saw the head gardener walking toward them. “Give me a reason to be standing here with you. Tell me something important so that I may continue working here.”

Her eyes frantically searched his before they lit up and she said, “I have it! There is a great secret happening in the house. And who knows, perhaps you will be the one to solve the mystery.” She grinned. “Yes! Father is to send out a proclamation within a week asking for brave men to solve the puzzle of the princesses’ dancing slippers.”

He blinked. “Your what?”

“Every morning, when we awake, our shoes are completely worn through, as if we had been dancing all night. But none of us can remember leaving our beds. Indeed, it is frightening to see the state of the slippers. And our feet! Sometimes they are swollen and blistered. And yet, we were asleep.”

“This happens to all twelve of you?”

“Yes. Oh!” She laughed out loud, causing the head gardener to speed up his walk toward them. “It is perfect!” she said, clasping his hand tighter. “For whoever is able to solve the mystery, Father has said he will allow him to choose one of his daughters to wed!”

Aleck felt as though he had been punched in the chest. *My word!* Could it be true? Could this actually be happening to him? Was there a way to have this angel near his side permanently?

“Aleck? Aleck? Are you well?”

He glanced at her. “I believe so.”

“Then will you try to solve the riddle?”

The gardener glared at him, but remained silent as he passed the princess. Aleck knew this would be horrendous for them both. His eyes searched Casey’s, and he nodded. “Yes, I will try my best to solve the mystery of the dancing princesses.”

# RUMPLESTILTSKIN

CHAPTER ONE

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS FREDERICO Baldrich Layton’s little legs ran fast—faster than they had ever traveled before. Soon he would be at the meadow, the pretty one with the magic pond. If he could just get there before Nurse Crabtree did, he knew he could collect the strange, small rocks and stuff them into his pockets and she would never know.

She did not let him bring the pebbles back yesterday when they had played at the magic pond. It was now or never, while she was sipping her tea and talking to the Reverend Townesend. Now was the time to dash to the pond and bring back those stones.

He could hardly wait to show his baby brother. Marcus was only three, but he sure did love rocks, especially strange rocks.

Frederico rounded the corner past the old willow tree and skidded to a halt. Glancing back through the hanging branches, he saw Nurse Crabtree all the way across the field, still talking with the reverend.

“Good!” She had not even noticed he was missing yet. Without another thought, he rushed past the blackberry bushes, over to the pond, to the special spot where he had been told to set the stones down. “They are still here!” Quickly, he collected all six of the odd, shiny black-and-blue striped rocks and stuffed them into his coat pocket. Then, just as he was about to rush back to Nurse Crabtree, he heard a shuffling in the bushes. Turning toward the sound, he was surprised to see a crooked old lady step out of them.

“Do you live in there?” he asked before remembering it was not polite to speak until spoken to.

“No, I do not,” barked the old woman as she glanced around. “Where do you live, young man? And how old are you? You do not look old enough to be scampering about alone.”

Prince Frederico stood to his full height, his little chest puffed out like he had seen his father, the king, do many times, and said, “I am five, and I live in the castle over there.” He pointed to the large fortress.

“Do you?” The old woman seemed very interested. “Whose castle is it?”

“My father, King Albert’s, of course.”

The old woman’s eyes snapped to his and she looked long and hard at the young boy before asking, “Are you certain King Albert lives there?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you his heir, then?”

“Yes, I am!” he stated proudly.

She surprised him by spitting on the ground. Some of the spittle landed upon his shiny kid-leather boots. Frederico backed a few paces away.

“Well, it is a sad day indeed. You seem like a nice, hardy lad—however, your family is pure evil and I will not stand to have this land ruined. Just twenty years ago, your grandfather ruled with kindness as a perfect example to all, but now your father and mother have nearly brought the kingdom to its knees with their selfish taxes and uncaring practices. Therefore, I am sorry to say, they must be taught a lesson, and it will be through you that I choose to do it.”

“Through me?” asked Frederico, not quite certain what she was speaking about.

“Yes, boy. Come here quickly, before they find you missing and come after their little jewel.”

“I—”

“Come, lad. Now.” She held her hand out and grasped his tiny fingers, pulling him sharply behind the bush. Before he even knew what was happening, she mumbled several incoherent words over him and watched, satisfied, as his face contorted with pain. “It is for your own good, my boy, for the good of us all. You will see.”

And that was that.

She shoved him out from under the bushes and disappeared in a poof of smoke.

Confused, the young prince attempted to head back to his nurse. He was hurting. His fingers were all twisted and bent, and so was his body. One foot would not even move anymore. All he wanted was to return home and feel better again.

As quickly as his crippled body could take him, dragging his unusable foot the whole way, he burst into the garden and interrupted tea time with the reverend.

Nurse Crabtree screamed and shattered her cup upon the table as she jumped up to get away from him.

Reverend Townesend placed an arm over her and another out toward the young boy. “Do not come another step closer, do you hear? Do not do it.”

Big tears began to build within Frederico. He had been so brave until now, but when Nurse screamed, it frightened him. “Help me.” He tried to walk closer, but she only moved farther away. “Help me.”

“You—you are cursed! You will make us all cursed!” Nurse Crabtree shouted.

“Help me please.”

“Stay right there until I send someone for you.” The reverend took the nurse by the hand and walked toward the castle. On his way, he hollered at a maidservant who was just exiting with her arms full of new refreshments for their tea. “Get the prince and take him to his room. Do not let anyone see him. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” The maid curtsied and scurried over to Frederico.

He would never forget the terror in her eyes or the scream she let out when she first beheld his crippled form. The boy had no idea how awful he looked, but it made him cry so much more to see her fear.

She stepped back a pace and pointed. “What happened to you? Your skin is all rumpled and stilted.”

“A woman hurt me. I do not know why—I did not do anything to her.”

“A woman?” She came forward. “A woman did this to you? Was she on the grounds? Where was she?”

“Over by the lake. I came as fast as I could.”

“Just a few moments ago?”

“Yes.”

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“I WILL BE BACK. Wait right here—no one can see you like this!” The maid gathered her skirts and ran as fast as she could to the head gardener and told him she had seen a strange woman walking the grounds who needed to be caught and brought to the king. When she got back, little Frederico was sitting upon the ground, his head in his bent hands, staring at the grass.

“Come on, little one. Let us get you back to the palace and washed up.”

Frederico rubbed his eyes with a crooked fist, sniffled, and looked up at the maid. She flinched a little, but did not scream again. It looked like he had become a little less scared as he scrambled to his feet. “When can I get better?”

“Soon. Very soon. But first, we must get you all cleaned up. I am sure the king and queen will want to see what has happened to you.” The maid was afraid of the curse, but the little boy’s wet eyes checked her. Hesitantly, she reached out her hand for him to hold and prayed nothing bad would happen to her.

Frederico smiled a crooked smile and clasped her hand tight.

Her eyes were wide, but she put a brave grin on her face as she began to walk back with the little prince. “Do not look at anyone right now. And be sure to walk as straight as possible. Try not to make a scene. We will head through the back door and up the servants’ entrance. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes. I think so.”

She could tell he tried to walk normally, but a rolling gait was all he could accomplish. Thankfully, they made it into the castle without anyone noticing.

Once they were in his room, it was just a few minutes to get the little boy undressed and in the bath. The maid pressed her lips together many a time and tried desperately not to sob at the sight of the ruined little body. He had been so beautiful before, so lively and handsome. Now his whole person was deformed, rumpled and crippled. She closed her eyes to the protruding, awkward bones that formed his crooked back and hummed a small song instead as she poured bathwater over his head.

*Bathing the baby.*

*Bathing the boy.*

*Bathing the master’s dog*

*And its toy.*

*Soon they will be all clean as a whistle*

*Ready to scamper about in the thistle.*

*Bathing the baby.*

*Bathing the boy.*

*Bathing the master’s dog.*

*What a joy!*

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FREDERICO LIKED THAT SONG. He hummed along with the maid the whole rest of the time it took to get dried off and dressed with socks and boots on. She was very nice. When she was brushing out his hair, he asked her, “What is your name?”

Surprised, she looked down at his distorted features. “Why do you ask?”

“Mamma always calls you ‘maid.’ Do you have a name?”

“Of course I have a name, Your Highness! Everyone has a name!”

“Do you know my name?”

She chuckled. “Yes! Everyone better know your name if they knows what’s good for ‘em.”

“Then what is yours? I want to know yours.”

She looked at him a very long time and then said, “Tilly, my little Rumple-stilt-skin. My name is Tilly.”

# THE FROG PRINCE

CHAPTER ONE

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCE Nolan turned to his mother, Queen Bethany of Hollene Court, and announced, “I have decided to do it!” He threw the missive from his intended, Princess Blythe McKenna, upon the small end table near the settee in the formal drawing room where his mother preferred to take her tea.

“You decided to do what, dear?” his mother asked as she sipped at her cup.

“I have decided to visit Blythe in disguise.” He sighed and sat down across from her in a green-and-white-striped overstuffed chair. “I must meet her in person. I cannot ascertain from her letters what she is truly like. It is a great muddle, and it is time I decided once and for all if I will indeed offer my hand or not.”

“But you are already promised to each other!” She set her cup upon the saucer and placed them both on the end table. “What is this nonsense?”

“Mother, it is not nonsense. Betrothing me as an infant is not something I can accept, especially when I am quite unsure whether my bride-to-be is a spoiled child or a blessed saint.”

She gasped. “Nolan! Watch your tongue.” She never did enjoy his mention of saints as general cant.

Nolan sighed. “Forgive me. But there is something so self-possessed about her letters that quite causes me to scowl. I have got to sort this out for myself before any royal announcements are made. It is time I approached this differently, visited her as an uninvited guest, and saw how she would treat me.”

“My goodness!” The queen’s hand flew to her prominent bosom, the plum ruffles of her gown doing much to make her appear rounder and plumper than she actually was. “What do you plan to do, Nolan? Disguise yourself as a pauper or some such?” She looked truly scandalized.

He chuckled to himself. Perhaps it was the mischief-maker in him, or perhaps he enjoyed unsettling her feathers, but whatever the reason, he took pleasure in watching his mother’s reactions. At times they were simply invaluable. “No, not a pauper. I have decided to take it a step further than that.”

“How shall you disguise yourself, then?”

“Perhaps … as an animal?”

“I beg your pardon?” Her arms swung out, one violently upsetting the tea things upon the end table so they came crashing down upon the floor and shattering. One fragment skittered across the marble flooring to nudge his shiny boot. Normally his mother would be aghast at the mess and insist it be cleaned immediately. However, this time it was as if she did not know it had happened. “Why in all the great heavens would you decide to take on the form of some animal? You, Prince Nolan! One of the handsomest men who has ever walked the halls of this great court—you now wish to present yourself to your betrothed as an … an …” Her voice trickled off as she began to sway.

“Mother, do not swoon. It does not become you,” he said languidly as he slowly leaned forward, ready to assist if need be.

Bethany sat up. “I do not swoon! I have never swooned.”

“Just so.”

“But why must you appear as an animal? What will they think of us? Nolan, this cannot be right. You must consider a less ludicrous scheme.”

He laughed. “No. It is perfect—how else will I be able to learn what this girl is really like? If I come to her dashing and princely, she will no doubt be quite smitten, as they all are. But if I come to her as, say, a dog or something, she is bound to show her true character.”

“A dog! My son, a *dog*. I cannot bear it. I cannot even think such a thing. It is not the right animal at all!”

“Perhaps you are correct.” He thought about it for a few moments. “A dog might be a little too easy. Far too many people love dogs.”

“Well, it is good to know you are finally speaking some sense!”

“No, I must plan on something much more hideous.”

“More hideous? Nolan!”

He folded his arms. “Yes, something all girls detest and run screaming from.”

“You would not dare! This is all some hoax, is it not? You are merely jesting your mother, like you and Sariah did when you were children, constantly pulling those maddening pranks upon me. Tell me this is one of your larks. Tell me.”

“I am afraid not, Mother.” He stood and walked toward her.

“Then why? I do not understand,” she said. “What are your plans? Will you simply put on a costume, or—”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “No. I will not wear a costume. I plan to ask the village herb woman to put a charm over me.”

“Nolan!”

“Not for long, perhaps thirty days or so. But I need to know for myself if Blythe is indeed the woman of my dreams, or if my instincts are correct and she will prove to be more of a handful than I am willing to take on.”

“But you cannot back out of your betrothal now!” the queen exclaimed.

“I cannot back out of anything that I was not asked to be a part of. The design was yours and Queen Mary Elizabeth’s, not mine.” When she gasped once more, he quickly added, “I promise not to break anything off hastily. I will wait the full thirty days before doing so.”

“Nolan, you are out of your wits!”

“No, Mother, I feel for the first time in my life that I am finally doing something especially intelligent. If Princess Blythe can prove me wrong and is indeed the woman I desire, she will want for nothing in all the land. I intend to treat my wife with the utmost of courtesy and devote all my life to creating a magical existence with her. However, she must pass this small test first, because as spoiled as she seems to be, it is better to know that I would indeed be marrying a princess and not a harpy!”

“Nolan, I will never, ever understand you as long as I live.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Then my work here is done.”

His mother paused before saying, “Do you mean to tell me that you shall turn yourself into an animal for thirty days?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“And you will look just like this animal.”

“Yes.”

“And poor Blythe McKenna has thirty days to treat you kindly, and then once she does, you will turn back into a prince and offer your hand to her?”

“Hmm … I do see some flaws there.” He sat back down upon the striped chair. “Perhaps if she does something sooner that would prove her kind heart—perhaps I would have the charm bring me back to my princely form earlier.”

Bethany shook her head as if he were completely foolish. “What would you have her do?”

All at once Nolan smiled. “I have it! Princess Blythe must kiss me!”

“Kiss an animal?” She fluttered her hand. “You are mad!”

“Oh, I hope so. This will only be entertaining if I do have some touch of madness in me.” He winked.

“My word.” She sighed. “What animal have you decided to become?”

“The most revolting, un-kiss-worthy creature I can think of.”

“And that is?”

“A frog.” He chuckled at her appalled face. “Yes, I shall be a frog prince.”

# BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

CHAPTER ONE

“ARRRRUUUGHHHHHH!”

The prince half sobbed, half howled into the night air as his feeble skin ripped, agonizingly making way for the tormented form to escape. He was nearly doubled over, never having known such excruciating pain before, and yet the old woman continued to laugh at him.

Her unmerciful cackles pierced his ears louder than his tearing skin.

He was sickened and dazed as the transformation ended with a jolt, leaving a deep-rooted, throbbing ache throughout his whole form. Everything stung with the awareness of newly stretched and swollen limbs. Taking a ginger step, he practically fell over from the searing of nerve endings as the pain shot up from the soles of his feet to his legs and back. Tender, singed, and unprotected new flesh covered his whole form.

He was so preoccupied with trying to cope, he did not hear the woman until she said, “You will be sore for quite some time, so you had better get used to it.” Her laughter grated again.

“Why?” gasped the prince. “Why me? Why now?” He tried to straighten and turn to meet her gaze more fully, but while attempting it, he stumbled and collapsed. Fire surged through every bone as his raw nerves met the harsh ground. The pain was more unbearable than the transformation. Dizziness flooded into his pounding skull and his nauseated stomach threatened to spew out his throat and onto the ground if he did not hold as still as possible.

He felt her cane grind into his hip, but he was too weak to acknowledge it.

“You, boy, needed to be taught a lesson.” She jabbed him with the sharp stick and continued, “Now you will forever know what it feels like to be ugly. Your eyes are too hazy at the moment to see the figure you have become.” She moved the cane to his inflamed, disjointed knee and dug deep into the taut tissue. He flinched and writhed in agony, his howls filling the darkened forest. “But when you awaken, and you *will* awaken, you may wish you were dead. However, that is not the purpose of such a transformation. You will live through this—it will be several days until you are healed enough to make it back to your castle, *Prince*.” She hissed his title as if it were the true curse. “At that point, when you are able to crawl up the stately stairs to your fine room, I want you to haul yourself up upon your chiseled table and peer into the looking glass. Take in every inch of your deranged form.

“That will be the day you accept what has truly happened to you and the day you realize what it means to be a hideous beast forever.”

“No!” he yelled as her cane lashed at his swollen twisted spine. “Please…” His body convulsed. Nausea swam in dizzying circles until he could no longer focus on anything but the bile rising, aching to relieve itself, as the cane pounded again and again.

The old woman wheezed, and thankfully the whacking stopped. She coughed for some time before weakly sputtering out the rest of the curse. “You will be forced to stay this way forever—half man, half beast—unless you find some poor, pitiful female to embrace, accept, and love you for the monster you are.”

Her breathing became more labored. “You h—have one year to achieve that impossible feat. O—one year from today to ch—change your spoilt habits and become a man. If you do not succeed, you will be forced to roam the earth in your gruesome form, terrorizing all who meet you, c—causing them to escape in fear from your presence. Though I must warn you—”

She wheezed again, a huge, snarling inhale, which forced a series of bone-rattling hacks from her. They became larger and more pronounced with each cough—precious air forcing its way into her battered lungs.

The prince felt the space around him shift before he heard the thud of her collapse and the silence that followed.

It was several minutes before he was able to slowly scrape his body against the earth in painful strides enough to flip over and see her, and another several minutes before he could move enough to see that she was indeed dead.

He smiled then, a bitter hate-filled smile.

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CECELIA’S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN and she stretched to the glorious sunshine trickling through her window. The day was warm and welcoming—her toes wiggled in excitement under the patchwork quilt her grandmother had designed especially for her. Today she would cast off being Miss Cecelia Hammerstein-Smythe and instead, become the girl promised to Lord Charles David Willington, the most perfect man in existence.

She hopped from the bed, her black braid swaying with her. Within minutes, she had washed in the hand basin and, without waiting for her maid, dressed in a pretty white morning frock with a lavender sash and adornments. Whirling around like a little girl, she watched the dress fan out above her stockings and smiled.

The world was a wonderful place. And she, Miss Hammerstein-Smythe, was very grateful indeed to be a part of it.

With a curtsy to no one in particular and a jaunty half-minuet step, she made her way to the wardrobe and fetched her lavender slippers before heading lightly down the stairs into her mother’s breakfast parlor to greet Sanford’s impassive countenance.

“Good morning to you too!” she trilled out as she brushed past the butler into the waiting room. “Cook has outdone herself this morning, has she not?” The platters loaded on the sideboard were all of her most favorite breakfast foods, and when she turned, she saw a huge bowl upon the middle of the table. “Look at that fruit! How could I ever eat half so much food?”

“Well, you know how Mrs. Parnel dotes on you. We’re all fortunate she hadn’t the time to go shopping, or we would be looking at twice as much food.” The butler grinned at his mild humor before schooling his features into a more appropriate look and announcing rather grandly, “I have received word from Jenkins that we are to expect your special visitor around two this afternoon, when he would like to take you driving in his carriage, if you are so inclined.”

Cecelia eyed over the plate she was filling from the sideboard. “I am very much inclined, as you well know.”

“I will be sure to see that your reply of acceptance is sent immediately.” Sanford poured her a cup of tea and set it upon the saucer on the table while a young footman held a chair for her and pushed it in as she sat down.

It only took her a few minutes to eat, but another half hour to decide on the very best outfit to be seen wearing in the open carriage with Lord Willington. After she had seen her maid lay out the dress to be worn later, Cecelia grabbed her pelisse, buttoned it over her white-and-lavender morning gown, and made her way outside before her mother or William, her stuffy older brother, could persuade her otherwise. She was just tying the bow to her bonnet at a rakish angle as she entered the pathway that led to the cheerful brook not quite a mile from the great house.

She loved the water, and any time she had a few minutes free, she would find herself sneaking off to enjoy a cool moment of refreshing solitude where no one would bother her.

Once she had made it to the brook, it was no time at all before her slippers and stockings were off and stuffed safely into the crook of a tree branch. Her bonnet and pelisse were soon to follow, hanging from the stub just below her shoes.

With a sigh, Cecelia sank onto her favorite rock and carelessly trailed her bare feet and ankles in the water. She made sure her gown was tucked away from the water’s edge or there would be no excuse for the scolding she would receive from her mother for ruining yet another frock.

She took a deep breath and leaned back against the large angled stone, enjoying the peaceful smell of grass and wildflowers, her ears rejoicing over the soft babble of the little stream beneath her. This was exactly what an ideal day should be. There was no need for anything more enjoyable than such faultlessness. In fact, she was positive that with the soon-to-be proposal from Lord Willington and the glorious peace-filled morning before her, there had never been a more perfect day during the whole of her existence.

And nothing, absolutely nothing, could ruin it.

Prince Alexander halted in his tracks at the lovely girl before him. He could just make out her profile with her back to the rock like that. Her hair was in wild abandon, with its long curls escaping the bun that was now quite forgotten and rather disheveled-looking. His eyes skimmed past her pert nose down her sweet lips, then on to the hand that was softly trailing over the grass beneath it. Her legs moved then and he quickly looked away when he noticed they were uncovered.

His heart began to beat fast.

What if he were caught?

Prince Alexander knew it would be highly uncomfortable for them both—she in her state of undress and he, the chosen prince of the land, escaping his castle. He had been roaming farther and wider from the palace than normal as of late. Escaping the confines of the monstrous place, he needed to be outdoors. Just last night, transformed into the beast, he had come across this exact brook and had been eager to see what it looked like in the daylight. He came as soon as he had awakened from his adventures and become his usual self again. What had seemed like a good idea earlier now all of a sudden seemed very bad indeed.

# SLEEPING BEAUTY

CHAPTER ONE

QUEEN ALEYNA’S EYES FLUTTERED open and she smiled at the sunlight which streamed through her bedroom curtains. Another beautifully perfect day. She stretched and wiggled her toes under the navy-blue crushed velvet duvet and slipped out of the golden sheets to pad across the floor to her window.

The world beneath her castle tower was bathed in a sea of greens and yellows and glorious multicolored blossoming bushes and trees. Her village was nestled among rolling hills and streams and winding cobblestone paths that jutted out all around the lower portion of the mountain, where her castle was happily situated, and spread to the valley below. Many homesteads and farms and fields of bounteous crops covered the great landscape as far as the eye could see.

Indeed, Aleyna’s kingdom was one of the most sought-after and desired realms in all the world. She could not believe her good fortune in having such a prosperous and superior land. Her subjects were also known to be quite magnificent in their own way as well, and to reward them for their kindness and diligence, she guaranteed they were treated above those under the care of the other monarchies and rulers around.

Her people were given several holidays each year, and multiple gifts of food, household supplies, adornments, and even many frivolous items would find their way into their homes from their dear queen. How she loved them. How she loved her land, her people, her life.

It was undeniably faultless.

An enchanted kingdom to be loved by all.

Aleyna sighed in contentment as she rested her head against the smoothly plastered stone wall and looked out the windowpane. The birds chattered and chirped and flew in delightful winging dances in the sky as they popped in and out of wispy clouds. Here was joy. Here was life at its best, and she could never imagine desiring anything more.

And yet, if one could step back and see the tragedy behind her contentment, one would know that all she witnessed below her, all she imagined above, all her hopes and dreams were were just that—dreams.

An illusion.

Queen Aleyna’s life was so desperately heartrending, so tragically sorrowful, that one needed to enchant the beautiful queen and all those surrounding her, all her dear subjects, into a state of never-ending bliss.

She had to sleep through this horror to allow her to heal from the pain, to be kept from all those memories that would threaten to own her—she had to be kept in such a state until one who was worthy could come along and teach her, hold her, comfort her, release the spell surrounding her contentment, and more importantly, kiss her awake to the true being that was hers.

Until one such worthy man came into her life and bravely fought those demons who sought to destroy her, Queen Aleyna’s existence was perpetually on hold.

And she was forever trapped within a state of no progression, wrapped in a bubble of peace, almost like a ghost, and eternally asleep to the harsh realities awaiting her. Ignorant to all but what she knew and could remember, she would be forever known as the Sleeping Queen…

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PRINCE DARIÉN LAUGHED AS he dodged another wayward thrust of the king’s sword. At this rate, he and Michael, the king of Alemade, would be at it all night. He hooted as his friend lunged forward again, and as Darién quickly sidestepped the attack, he could not help but taunt, “Is this the greatest you’ve got within you? How can you hope to defend yourself, let alone a whole kingdom?”

The king grunted and swung his sword, missing the prince by a good six inches. “Perhaps if you held still long enough, I could show you how good my maneuvers are!”

Darién chuckled and took a step back, his foot slipping slightly on the wet grass of the castle lawn, before deftly lifting his sword and blocking two more wild attempts from Michael. “Admit defeat, old man, and I may let you live to see another day.” It was the same thing he said to the king each week as they practiced, and true to form, his friend was quick to respond in kind.

“If you were not such a coward and could fight like a real man, I would blacken your lights instantly.”

“Ah, yes, but we are not using fisticuffs, now are we? In fact, we are—”

“And another thing! I am *not* an old man.” The king huffed as he haphazardly sliced his blade through the air. “I—” he stepped forward, “—am only—” steel smacked against steel, “—five years older than you.” Michael wiped his brow. “And the last time I checked, you were twenty-four years old.”

“Yes, but twenty-four is still much younger than you!” Darién took two steps forward, arching his blade in the air and popping Michael’s sword right out of his hand. It flew gracefully, allowing the handle to be caught up by the prince, signifying the game was at an end.

Michael was drenched in sweat, while Darién looked as though he had merely taken a leisurely stroll upon the grounds. “One of these days, I am going to learn your secret,” said the king after he wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve.

“My secret?” Darién walked over to the bush where they had hung their royal coats twenty minutes earlier. “And what secret is this?” He raised a brow as he handed Michael’s bright green coat back to him.

The king shook the garment and waved off the servant who had run up to help, slipping his arms into the sleeves. “Your ability to look so dashed cool and unaffected—so debonair—whilst in the midst of dueling, no less.”

Darién winked as he put on his coat of navy with silver trimmings. “I must practice these things in the looking glass at home for such an occasion as this. Who is to know whether a stunning female will come by and catch us looking a spectacle.” When the king grunted, he continued, “You have Cassandra, and she is by far everything on this good earth that is praiseworthy indeed. With such a woman at your side and as your queen, you do not have to practice like I do.”

Michael raised his eyes heavenward as he straightened the coat over his tan-colored breeches. “If I believed half the nonsense you sputtered out, I’d be a very foolish man,” he said before walking to the bush, collecting his sword, and sliding it within its sheath.

Darién laughed as he buttoned his coat. “You’d be a very foolish *old* man.”

“I’d watch your crowing if I were you.” The king smirked and turned around. “Remember, boy, I know what truly does put you out of countenance—what you are most afraid of in all the world. So do not keep spouting your old jokes, for I guarantee I can make you squirm and sweat just like the rest of us.”

The prince snorted and walked over to his sword. He tilted his head to the side and grinned as he slid the blade in its scabbard. “There is nothing I’m afraid of on this globe. Nothing at all—so whatever you have against me, remember it is merely a child’s imaginings.”

“Oh-ho! First I am too old, and now I am a child who imagines?”

“That is not what I meant, and you know it.” Darién’s gaze settled on his friend. They were almost brothers—had been raised like brothers—and there was no one he trusted more. The redheaded king was handsome, extremely so, and had a beautiful blonde queen at his side to prove it. They’d begun to have a score of adorable little redheads and blondes of their own, and with the birth of the last one—a little girl all fiery curls and giggles—Darién founding himself longing to settle down as well. If only he could find a woman half as agreeable as Cassandra.

But this sort of thinking would get him nowhere. He cleared his throat and explained, “Whatever you believe me to fear is most likely something you conjured up back when we were boys. So if in reality, I *am* afraid of it—which I highly doubt—then it was something that I’ve long past put behind me.”

The king smiled and patted him on the back. “I’m not discussing spiders or girls here. I’m talking about something much more terrifying. In fact, I know you would change color at this moment if I were to speak of it, so lifeless and cold would you become.”

Darién pulled away, laughing, and began to head back toward the castle. “There is nothing you could say that would frighten me. Nothing.” He glanced back and waited for his friend to catch up to him. “Though, I am very curious what you believe you have got against me. Indeed, this may be the most intriguing thing I’ve come upon all morning.”

“Should I tell you, then?” asked the king as he stepped in stride with the prince.

“Oh, most definitely. You look too sure of yourself; I must take that smirk off your face. So out with it, man—do your best! I dare you to find something that would startle me.”

Michael’s grin grew. Truly, Darién was too easy to bait sometimes. He may be the better swordsman, but his own pride got in the way of rational thinking. Hesitating only a moment or two, he went ahead and satisfied his young friend. It was time the man realized he was not invincible. “Ghosts, Darién. You have and will always be decidedly against the visitations of anything of the spiritual, ghouly, phantom, or specter realm—the realm of the dead.”

The king watched Darién’s face pale as his feet stalled. “No matter how old you or I become, that night of our first haunting will forever ring through my memories. And you, boy, would be a fool to deny such aversions.” His voice grew low and sinister just to guarantee the prince squirmed. “To deny it only warrants their return even more…”

# SNOW WHITE

CHAPTER ONE

 RAVEN LAUGHED AS SHE looked across the ballroom at her new sister, Snow.  They were the best of friends and had been for years—now she could not believe her luck!  Sisters, truly sisters—it seemed like a magical wish come true.  They had imagined and dreamed of it, and it was finally a reality.  Snow’s father had proposed less than four months ago to Raven’s mother, Queen Melantha Flynn, a beautiful, widowed woman with two children.

Not that they were still children. Corlan was nearly twenty-two and Raven and Snow were both in their late teens, but Snow’s father would always consider them children.  Raven watched as her beautiful new sister ran up to her, her long black curls bobbing as she came.  There was not one person in Snow’s kingdom who had not instantly become enamored with the girl.  She had a special quality about her—a naivety and zest for life, an inner joy—something that radiated from her happy smile and wound itself about the hearts of all those who were near her.

“It has finally happened!” Snow exclaimed as she wrapped her arms around Raven and hugged her tightly.

“I know, I know! I cannot believe today has come at last!”

Snow pulled back, her full red lips arching in a pretty smile against her pale skin, her black lashes fluttering briefly over her brilliant blue eyes.  She was a stunning beauty.  If Raven did not love her as much as she did, she would find the green tinges of jealously invading her thoughts, but as it was, she simply could not think ill of the enchanting Snow White. No one could.

“Where is Corlan?” Snow grinned.  “I must hug my new brother as well.”

Raven glanced over to where Corlan stood, watching them intently, his eyes never straying from Snow.  He had been head over heels for the girl since they were children.  Long before their parents had agreed to marry, King Herbert, Snow’s father, had often brought her to play with them, the neighboring royal children, so she could experience friendship.  He worried that without her mother, she would become too sad and lose the finer, elegant qualities needed to turn into a lady and ruler one day.  And so he hoped to bring her out of the melancholy of losing her dear mother and into the warmth of the Flynn court.

“He is over there.” Raven nodded toward her brother.

She grinned at Corlan’s reaction as the stunning girl rushed toward him and threw her arms about his shoulders.  He held her and closed his eyes briefly, no doubt reveling in the feel of her so close to him.

Snow pulled back, and Raven loved the way her brother’s eyes observed that lively face before him, watching each movement, each smile, each word as it came from her lips.

When would he tell her he was in love?  Raven had been asking him for months now, but he would never answer.

Just then, a dashing young man stepped forward and bowed low before the pretty princess in her red-and-gold gown.

“Princess Snow,” Raven heard him say, “will you do me the honor of dancing the first set with me?”

Raven glanced around the grand ballroom.  It would seem indeed that it was time to begin the entertainment her mother had requested.  Several couples already lined the outskirts of the floor, waiting for the king and new queen to begin their nuptial dance.

“Snow is dancing with me for the first set,” Corlan answered.

Raven looked over at her brother.  Bravo.  He stood just a bit taller, with his arm wrapped around Snow’s shoulders.

Snow smiled sweetly at the man.  “I promise to go out on the floor with you during the second.”

The man glanced from Snow to Corlan and then back to Snow again.  He must have liked the smile on her face, for he bowed lower and said, “Your Highness, there is nothing I wish for more.”

She nodded, and then looked up at Corlan.

“Shall we?” he asked.

They really did make an incredible couple.  Corlan was so tall and dashing, with his distinguished brown hair and lightly sun-kissed skin and deep green eyes.  He was a sight to behold.  But Snow, bless her heart, did not ever appear to prefer one man over the other.  She seemed completely oblivious to the male species altogether—enjoying them, of course, and smiling serenely and capturing their hearts one by one.  But every suitor who came to stare and try his hand for the fair princess left with a confused look on his face, for they simply did not know what to make of her.  Did she not like them?  Did they do something wrong?  She seemed happy enough, but pushed away their advances as if they were nothing to her. Again and again, Raven watched princes from all over the continent come and try their best to woo her, but to no avail.

“King Herbert and Queen Melantha will now take the floor,” the herald announced grandly.

Raven watched her mother, a stunning red-haired beauty glorious in pale-gold silk, step into the arms of her beloved Herbert as they began to waltz on the floor of the sparkling chandeliered room.  The guests exclaimed over the couple as they passed by, tittering behind fans and whispering of their happiness for the great king and queen.

They had sent a surge of new hope throughout the land by uniting the two kingdoms.  Raven could feel the excitement and joy buzzing through the air in pings of awareness at the exhilaration this wedding brought to all.

Raven smiled as her mother came near and then dipped and spun away as the music wound down.  Even though she was in her early forties, there was no woman who could claim to have the beauty she still possessed—a vision of loveliness from her shining head of hair to her dainty, nimble feet.

The first set of dances were about to begin.  Raven sighed and looked around the room, her heart clenching slightly within her chest.  So many of the couples were already eagerly waiting to take their places on the dance floor.  She had hoped that by now, a young man would have been inclined to ask for her hand during this particular set, today of all days when it was her mother’s wedding.  But no young man made his way toward her.  Indeed, most of them were across the room, keenly watching Snow and Corlan speak softly and laugh with one another.

It was no use.  There would never be a man who saw her while her dear new sister was in the room.  Taking a deep breath, she blinked back a few tears and attempted to paste on a smile.  She refused to become a silly water pot today, when truly everything she could have wished for came true.  This was the happiest day of her life.

“Excuse me, Princess Raven Flynn?” a dashing young man asked as he walked toward her and then bowed.

Butterflies flurried wildly within her chest.  “Yes?” she replied a little breathlessly.  He was unbelievably handsome, with his blond hair and deep brown eyes.

“Forgive me for being so forward and not waiting for a proper introduction.  I am Prince Terrance from the Sybright court and was pointed in your direction.  I was wondering if you knew if the Princess Snow White was free this set?  I have only just arrived, by invitation of King Herbert, and have been eager to meet this paragon I have heard mentioned.”

“Oh.” Her smile tightened.  “Of course.”  She nodded, reminding herself that someone as attractive as he would only ever wish to be with Snow.  “She is engaged at present,” she said as the dancers began to walk upon the floor. “But if you wait your turn, she is indeed very amiable and would be more than happy to stand up with you.”

“Perfect.”  He smiled, showing off two adorable dimples as he did so.

Raven gasped, and then quickly bit her lip to keep from doing it again.   She had always longed for a man with dimples.

Terrance grinned down at her, those indentations only deepening more.  “Are you perchance free at the moment?” he asked, looking around as if amazed she was still standing with him and not upon the floor.

“Yes, I am.”

“And do you mean to dance?”

“Of course I do.”

He took a pace back and swept another bow.  “Forgive me, princess!  I did not realize.  Please, would you do me the honor of stepping out with me?”

She giggled.  “I would be delighted,” she said as she placed her hand within his and walked onto the floor.

# JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

CHAPTER ONE

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, she is gone?” Jack asked as he whirled around on his heel, his great brown overcoat flinging about with him. “What has been done to bring her back? Has anyone even attempted to call the authorities?”

The old woman wrung her hands nervously over her pump form. “We have! There was nothing they could do. We sent for you as soon as possible.”

Jack paused his pacing on the worn rug in the main cottage room of his dearest Rachel’s home. “So you mean to tell me that sometime last night, Miss Rachel, *my* Miss Rachel, was taken forcefully from her bedchamber by a great beast of a man, and none of you bothered to wake me up to attend this search of her?” He was livid. He was *more* than livid. He was terrified, heartbroken, worried out of his mind. “Why, it is nearly seven o’clock in the morning! This giant monster is hours ahead of us, and I am just now hearing of it.”

“We are sorry!” cried the man Jack had hoped to call a father one day. “We were not attending properly. All we could hear ringing in our minds was the memory of her screams of fright over and over again as he took her from us.”

Jack was going to be sick. He swallowed and breathed deeply before attempting to speak again. “I understand this house has been under great duress the past few hours, but you must know I love your daughter more than I love my own life. I am frantic with the need to rescue her at this moment. Please, I ask that you forgive my hastiness in chastising you at such a time and instead, give me any bit of information you can so I may bring my fiancée back. Anything at all.” He knelt before the older man and woman, still in their night attire with shawls and slippers. “And I vow to you both that I will not give up my search for your daughter, unlike the authorities. I will not simply hear who has captured her and run in fear. Nay, I am yours, I am hers, and you *will* see her again or I will die trying to attempt the thing.”

“Oh, Jack! What would we do without you?” Mrs. Staheli clutched his hands, tugging him up. “Come and have a cup of tea and we will tell you all we know.”

He shook his head. “No. I would prefer to hear it all now, just as we are, so I may begin this search instantly.”

“Son, it is useless. The monster—the giant—he took her up in the clouds,” her father answered as he ran his hands through his hair.

“I beg your pardon—he took her where? No, wait. Start at the beginning and tell me everything you can of this giant and all that happened. I will see what is to be done.”

Celeste glanced over and shared a look with Hans.

Jack leaned toward the couple and tried his best not to let his growing irritation show upon his face as Hans cleared his throat. Why were these two moving so slowly? Every second wasted was a second he could be using to fetch Rachel back.

“It was quite late—nearly morning—when he came,” Hans started.

“Yes, I know this. Why did he abduct her? Did he say?”

Celeste clutched her shawl. “Yes! Yes, that is definitely something I can answer. He wanted her voice. Apparently, his ears picked up the sound of her humming and singing the other day while she was in the meadow picking those flowers.” She pointed over to a vase of wildflowers on the worn oak dining table. “He decided to bring her back to his castle so she would sing for him.”

“And he also mentioned something about her playing the harp for him,” Hans added.

“The harp?” Jack tried not to smile at the absurdity. “She does not do any such thing.”

“So she told the giant.” Hans folded his arms. “But he would not listen to her.”

“Why did he not take her when he had her alone in the meadow?” Jack asked.

“He did not say.”

 “How did he get here? And you are certain he took her up to the sky?”

“Aye.” Hans unfolded his arms and then clasped his hands together. Jack noticed the slight tremor in her as Celeste hung on to her husband’s elbow. “We heard her shouts for help and came in the room immediately. The giant’s huge head peered into the windows. One long arm snaked in and captured her up in his palm. She tried to make him see reason and not take her from the house. I believe he is a bit dimwitted, as each time Rachel asked him a question, it slowed him down—he would stop and think about it and then answer her. It was a clever ploy and even we joined in until he caught on to what we were doing. Then he swung his arm out and brushed us both down before wrapping his fingers around her and sliding his hand through the window again. It was a tight fit and required precision to get his fist out.”

“What are some of the things he said?”

“Most of it you already know,” Hans said. “He was taking her up to his kingdom in the clouds where she was meant to live in a golden cage and sing for him, or play the harp. And how he had found her in the first place.”

“How did he get back up to his kingdom, and where did he come from? Has anyone heard of this giant before?”

“We had no idea he existed until he came for her.” Celeste brought her hand to her mouth. “So, so terrifying.”

“This is all baffling. No wonder the authorities are useless. Where does one begin? How does one get all the way up into the clouds to rescue her?”

Hans pulled away from his wife. “If you follow me outside, I can show you his tracks and where they lead. When we made it to the window and watched him take her away, it was as if the giant were climbing on something, but we could not make out what it was. Indeed, there was nothing to be seen there at all.”

Jack nodded to Hans. “Let me follow you where the tracks lead. Perhaps I will find something then, something to make sense of all this.”

Hans paused at the door as he pulled on his outer coat. “Celeste, we will be back shortly.”

She shooed them away with her hand. “Yes, go. I could not bear to go out there again anyhow.”

As the men stepped outside, Jack was amazed to see that the giant’s footprints had formed six-foot craters all over the Stahelis’ garden as well as the road and up a small embankment about a half mile away. They did not need to travel that far to see the great indents he left.

“Are you sure that is where they stop, up there?” Jack pointed to the hill.

“Yes.” Hans turned and gestured toward the cottage. “And from that window just there—her bedroom window—we watched him make his way up an invisible rope or ladder of some sort, up into the clouds until they could not be seen anymore. It all happened so fast once he got her out of the house. We rushed to see where he was taking her. I had hopes to follow them, but he had already run here and was climbing up the thing within seconds. I have never seen anyone disappear so fast in my life. We knew it was useless to attempt to go after him.”

Jack placed his hands on his hips and shook his head, his eyes scanning the sky above them.

His father and mother, Hansel and Gretel, had warned him that life was full of adventures and that one day he would meet one that would change everything he had ever believed about himself. He sucked in a long breath of air. It would seem his particular adventure had met him after all.

There was a certain giant out there who needed to be introduced to the wrath of Jack.

# CINDERELLA

CHAPTER ONE

ELLA PICKED UP THE last basket of clothing, her arms strained from attempting to carry the heavy, wet mass the twelve or so feet to the drying line. Thankfully, her stepmother had the gardener place the line closer to the house and in its shade, due to the sun fading her clothes, or Ella would have had to walk even farther from the washing room. Most fine houses used the drying lines inside, but Lady Dashlund preferred to have hers outside on warm days, so making the work twice as hard for Ella.

As Ella shook out the last of the petticoats, she overheard her stepsister Jillian shriek.

Oh, dear. She probably saw a mouse.

Ella sighed and quickly snapped the lacy fabric onto the line. Tossing in the remaining pins, she picked up the basket and ran toward the large manor home. No doubt they would all be in an uproar, and upset if they could not find her.

Another shriek rang out, loud and shrill, as Ella slipped off her outer shoes in the entrance near the servants’ quarters and hung the wet apron to dry on one of the wooden pegs mounted upon the stone wall. She could clearly hear her stepmother shouting by the time she managed to wrap another clean apron around her waist and head up the servants’ stairs.

Brushing and smoothing her dress with her hands as she went, Ella tried to remain calm. That summer, it had been especially difficult to keep the mice population down. The whole kingdom suffered from the vermin, and her stepmother and stepsisters seemed to take the sight of them the hardest. Ella was the only one of the four brave enough to try to catch them, and she had better do so quickly before her stepmother’s temper got the best of her family. That was all she needed—Lady Dashlund in a foul mood. Then the whole house would pay for several days.

As she rounded the corner into the large, immaculate corridor, her feet tread upon the fine, lush carpet her father had chosen. The sumptuous rugs from the Orient lavishly displayed throughout the rooms were one of the final improvements he had made to the house before he passed on a few years back. Her heart lurched. Oh, how she missed that man. How there were days when she truly needed him near her.

Ella approached the drawing room and attempted one last time to make herself presentable before she entered. She was rather surprised to hear joyous sounds coming from within. Taking a step into the room, she beheld Jillian and Lacey laughing quite loudly and dancing about together like small girls.

Finding her stepmother across the way near the rose-colored settee, she walked up and curtsied. “Is there anything I can do for you? I heard the shouting and came as quickly as possible.”

Lady Dashlund shooed her with a wispy white handkerchief, a rather large smile upon her face. “No, no. We are not in need of anything. We are all quite elated. You are welcome to continue with your chores—we will call you when we need you.”

It was then that Ella noticed the small missive in her stepmother’s hand. They must have had some good news. Curious, but not willing to risk Lady Dashlund’s wrath, she simply said, “Yes, milady.” Ella nodded, dipped into a short curtsy, and turned to go.

“No.” Miss Lacey Dashlund halted in mid-twirl and put her foot down to catch her balance. “Ella cannot go just yet. We *do* need her, Mother. *Think—*theduke is coming here in only a few minutes. We need everything to look splendid! He is coming! He is coming! And this time—this time I shall finally secure him.” Lacey squealed and shrieked loudly, and then picked up her sister’s arm and began dancing about again.

“Girls, enough,” scolded Lady Dashlund, though she was smiling. “It is time you freshen up and stop gallivanting around or you will be quite flushed when he comes.”

Miss Dashlund twirled Jillian out in a final spin and then giggled with her as they stopped their play. “Oh, is it not the most glorious day?” She smiled and waltzed her way to the settee, clasping her mother’s hands within her own.

“Yes. It is.” Lady Dashlund grinned at her daughter before turning toward Ella. “Will you please let Cook know to send up tea as soon as the duke arrives, and make sure she adds a little something special—something to make him stay this time.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, and when you are through, please sweep off the front step. We do not want him walking up to the house when it looks such a sight.”

“Yes, milady.” Ella curtsied again and rushed from the room. She would have to be quick to clean off the whole of the front steps before the duke arrived. Lord Gavenston rarely came late. In fact, more often than not, he was early.

She hoped for his sake and Lacey’s that her stepsister would not blunder this meeting like she had previously. Ella winced. Lacey was always incredibly graceful—unless His Grace was around. And then, quite simply, she became a bumbling buffoon and would somehow or another cause great catastrophes. Hopefully, this time all would be well. Ella crossed her fingers for luck just in case. After all, the sooner Miss Dashlund was gone from the house, the fewer chores Ella would have to do for her silly stepsister.

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“OH, NO! YOU ARE not getting me to step foot into that house.” His Royal Highness Prince Anthony chuckled as he drew in the reins on his beautiful horse, causing him to stop in his tracks about a half mile down the road that would eventually lead them to Lady Dashlund’s rather exquisite manor. The manor, he could tolerate. It was the family that made him shudder.

“But you promised,” Lord Gavenston replied, drawing in his rather fine black as well.

Anthony shook his head. “No, I did not. I promised to accompany you on some errands, Cousin. I did not promise to waltz myself into *that* home and be prodded and fawned over like some ninny. Why, those girls could cool the east, lowering the temperature a whole two degrees with their eyelash fluttering alone.” The prince ridiculously fluttered his own lashes. They were on the most glorious of roadways, with fine green hills and rows of delicious apple and sturdy oak trees, some of the greatest lanes in all the kingdom, and here he was—looking the fool instead of enjoying the marvelous countryside.

Zedekiah laughed. “You are quite awful, you know.”

“I kno-ow!” he replied in a singsong voice, the type reserved for pantomimes.

“And you look like a nincompoop.” Zedekiah clicked his tongue and tapped his mount to press onward. “I, for one, would not wish to be seen with you if you are to act this way.”

“I cannot. I simply cannot do it,” Anthony replied as he tapped his horse as well. “My mother would have my head if she knew I had even spoken to them, let alone stepped in their house—and you know it!”

“This is why I had to sneak you away, so you would accompany me.” Zedekiah looked over as Anthony came up. “The queen forces me to run these errands because she and Lady Dashlund were schoolgirls together. She does it to pay particular courtesy to her longtime friend. But she would rather be dead than seen conversing with the woman, which is why I, as the duke, must be her go-between. And honestly, I wish anything—anything—other than this task.”

“I pity you, but I cannot risk it. They would devour me in a heartbeat.”

“Come! You have not been here for ages—a good five years at least. They may have grown since then.”

The prince crowed. “Yes, and this is why you need me to hold your hand. Because they are such proper ladies and behave so well! No, my mother has told me anecdotes about what the family has done to the royal castle alone. I have sheets and sheets written to me of nonsense this Miss Dashlund has done—do you have any idea how much it cost my mother to host them the last time they came? The number of shrubs she had to replace because of that girl’s foolishness?”

“Which is why I need someone with me now. I would rather come out of there in one piece!” Zedekiah begged. “Please?”

Anthony stared at him as their horses rounded the corner of the lane. The great house was about forty feet in front of them. He looked up and then reached over, his hand waving his cousin to a halt. “Who is that on the steps?” he asked quietly as both horses stopped.

“I do not know.” Zedekiah peered at the girl Anthony indicated. “She looks like a maid of some sort. Why?”

“Because I could swear it is Ella.”

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHILD’S CRIES WERE loud and strong—strong enough to be heard through the torrential rain and roaring wind. It had been one of the worst summer storms the region had seen in years—breathtakingly horrid. Adale Waithwrite, a simple farmer, hunched down within his thin, saturated coat and wrapped his useless scarf tighter around his head and mouth. Though it was rain and not snow, it was a fierce, biting rain. A rain that was not forgiving or kind.

It brutally pelted his face and hands, stinging them with every slash of the drops as they flew through the air to cut into his covered flesh. The clouds had come so quickly and forcefully that though it was just past four, you would have believed it to be nigh on midnight, so dark and cold it was.

The farmer heard the shriek again and turned in that direction, skirting the old forest.

“Hello?” he shouted into the sleet and rain. “Hello?”

The answering cries were louder this time and the farmer knew he was very close to the child, who was most likely tucked within the rock crevice. Attempting to climb a large boulder, Adale slipped and banged his knee. No doubt there would be a large bruise in the morning. Mumbling a curse under his breath, the man attempted again to scale the sheer rock, and this time managed to grip well enough to haul his wet body up and onto the ledge. Peering over the other side, he flinched as a great strike of lightning lit up the sky, its jagged lines spearing every which way.

The loud crash of thunder that followed immediately after shook the slick rock wall. When another bolt of light enraged the sky, he looked down and saw the shuddering boy about eight feet below him, right within the crevice as he had assumed.

The boy was drenched, his arms wrapped around himself.

“Come here!” he shouted to the child. “Come! And quickly, too! This lightning is getting dangerously close.”

He held out his hand and the boy stood up just as another crash of thunder exploded all around them. “Hurry!” Adale shouted again. “Grab my hand!” Adale’s fingers were slipping from bracing himself in such an awkward position upon the boulder. “Now, boy!”

The trembling child clutched his gloved fingers just as the farmer began to slide back down the sheer boulder between them. Another flash of lightning tore through the rain as it poured all around them, and then the bang of the thunder immediately descended. In a show of superhuman strength, he hauled the boy up and over the rock as he slid down.

He balanced the small child against the boulder and continued to slip to his feet. Once he regained his footing, he quickly glided the child the last yard or so into his arms.

The sky boomed and lit again as the farmer ran as fast as he dared in such a downpour. He clutched the boy to his chest and thankfully made it the fifty yards or so into the waiting cottage without mishap. His son met him at the door and stared in great shock at the whimpering child in his arms.

“How did you hear him over this storm?” he asked.

“The Gods, son. They led me to him. They must have.” Adale shook his head as he set the boy on the table. “Hansel, will you hang up my coat for me?” He removed his overcoat, handing it to his son. He slipped off his gloves and scarf and tossed them into a bucket near the door. They would need to be wrung out later—his clothes were soaked through. One look at the scared, sopping boy and he knew this would be a rough night.

The child was merely dressed in knee breeches and a simple shirt, with an old wool hat atop his head. His shivers alerted the farmer to the great urgency needed to help him. “Hansel, fetch me a blanket for the lad.” His son was quick to place the coat on the peg by the door and run to the bedroom.

Adale pulled the dripping hat off the child and gasped when a long golden braid plopped out, its end tied with a battered green velvet ribbon.

“You are no boy at all, child! You are a girl.”

She nodded and looked away, her arms going tighter around her trembling legs.

“Where did you come from? How are you out in a storm like this?”

“I …” The little girl opened her mouth to speak and then her eyes darted to Hansel as he came back in the room, carrying a thick blanket.

“Yes?” asked the farmer as he took the blanket from his son and wrapped it tightly around her. “Who are you? How did you come here?”

Her voice stuttered through her shivers, but Adale finally made it out. “My home—it is gone. Th—they took it.”

“Who took it? Who are you? Why was such a small girl left all alone in the woods?”

“Father, let her speak. You ask too many questions at once. Can you not see she is frightened?” Hansel smiled at the girl and asked simply, “Where do you live?”

She took a deep breath and tried again, this time not so unsteadily. “I do not know where it is from here, or I would point it out to you. I became lost.” Her voice had a distinct accent.

The farmer hissed and stepped back. “You are from the Larkein kingdom?”

“Yes.” She smiled, most likely not realizing what danger she put herself in by uttering such words in this house. “Yes. My father was the king.”

“Your father was the—” Hansel gasped and looked at his father. “My word! What have we done?”

“If they knew we had the Larkein princess in this cottage, we would be hanged.”

They both looked at the little girl, and her bright blue eyes blinked back at them. She was a very pretty child, and clearly frightened. Hansel asked, “How old are you?”

She put on a brave smile and sat up straighter. “I am six! How are old are you?”

“Ten.” He turned toward Adale. “What should we do, Pa? We cannot toss her out, surely. She is too young.”

His father stumbled back a few more steps and then slammed his palm forcefully upon the rocking chair. “We cannot keep her here! We cannot! Not with the king’s men invading her home this very day. If they knew … if they knew she was with us—”

“What if they never found out?”

His father nearly fell to the wooden floor. “What? Never found out? Are you mad? How can we keep a child—a female child—with a distinct Larkein voice in our home without anyone being the wiser? Hansel, no. I must take her back into the night and allow the Gods to decide what is best to do with her.”

“Pa, please! I know they are a wicked kingdom, but please! That does not mean the girl will be too. We can hide her—we can. And she can learn how to speak properly. We will say that she is my cousin, an orphan from your sister Claudine. Everyone knows she has just passed on and left a score of children—they will not think anything of it. Please, Father. You cannot send her out there. She will die.”

“It is better that she die than us!” Adale pointed at the girl and she began to cry. “Take her outside this instant.”

“No, I will not, for it is not right. She is a child, Father. She can be trained to be good. Let us keep her, please.”

Adale walked around and collapsed upon the rocking chair. “My heart is too soft,” he muttered into his hand. “It is too soft by far. Now what have we gotten ourselves into?”

“I promise I will take full responsibility for her. I will see that she is safe and teach her our ways. Just do not make her go back out to meet her fate. Perhaps she was meant to come to us. You yourself said it was the Gods who led you to her. It can only be good that she brings.”

His father groaned and hunched over in his chair. “I hope you are right, my son. I hope you are right.” He threw out his arms. “Fine. She may stay. Though it is with great trepidation I agree to this.”

“Thank you, Father.” Hansel walked up to the little girl. He peered into her bright eyes and asked, “What is your name? What do they call you in the castle?”

She smiled big then, showing a missing top tooth. “Gretel. My name is Gretel.”