

NEVER AFTER  
THE FAYLIN CHRONICLES,  
VOLUME ONE



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## FOREWORD

I hope you love this book. I hope you'll consider telling your friends about this book.

I hope you'll resist the urge to upload this file to piracy sites. It is not yours to distribute illegally.

And if the legality issue doesn't give you pause, let me pose this:

If *you'd* spent hundreds of hours in your life into creating a story and writing a book, how would *you* feel if it were stolen?

If that *still* doesn't give you pause, and you choose to steal my work and pirate my book, there's not much I can do to stop you at this moment. But please be aware that I've hired a service to remove pirated copies of my book from the Internet, and upon any discovery of culpability, will press charges.

Does that make me a hardass? Maybe.

It also makes me someone who believes in right and wrong, and will happily fight to protect my property and the rights of authors everywhere.

Now. Let's get onto the fun stuff.

lauren layne



*For everyone who believes in happy endings.*



## CHAPTER 1



The day my sister wraps our convertible around a palm tree and then promptly disappears starts pretty out much like any other:

Pure teenage hell.

"Ari? Arianna, open up!" I pound on my sister's bedroom door.

"Just a minute."

"Now!"

The door swings open, revealing my sister in all of her nauseating perfection.

She greets me with a wide smile and perfect teeth, wearing a blue and white cheerleading uniform.

*My cheerleading uniform.*

"Give it back."

"Give what back?" she asks, tilting her head so that the tip of her ponytail just brushes her shoulder. Consider me not impressed. I've *definitely* seen her practice that one in the mirror a time or twelve, usually while hogging the bathroom.

Let me put it this way:

Arianna is *that* girl. The one from the after-school TV

special where you're like, "Girls like that don't really exist. The popular girls aren't *really* like that."

Um, yeah they are.

Sister dearest is proof. She's all long, shiny hair that's never frizzy, but never limp either. Her eyes are wide-set with thick, dark lashes that don't *really* require mascara, but she wears it anyway which means she basically always looks like some sort of sexy doll. Which sounds creepy, but trust me, she somehow pulls it off.

"That's *mine*, Ari," I say, pointing at the uniform.

"Is it?" she tilts her head the other way and blinks at me.

"Well, let's see," I say, putting my finger to my chin and pretending to contemplate our dilemma. "Considering that last night, it was hanging in my closet, and now you're wearing it ... um yeah, jury says it's mine."

She smooths a hand over her slim hip and sighs. "Harper, honestly. There are two uniforms in this house. The other one will turn up."

I snort. "Yeah, I'm sure it will. Probably rumpled and dirty at the bottom of your cheer bag."

Arianna gives the tiniest flutter of her nostrils. "I'm pretty sure this one is mine," she says.

My eyes narrow on the small rip on the pleated skirt. "Really? How'd you get that tear?"

A couple weeks ago, my skirt snagged on the rough corner of our silverware drawer. I know it. And Ari knows it. I fold my arms and wait.

Out of excuses, she slips from "Baffled Arianna" to "Charming Arianna" in less than a second.

"C'mon Harper," she pleads, grabbing my hand and squeezing. "They're going to announce Homecoming Queen today during the assembly, and I don't want to look like all gross."



"Then you should have washed your own uniform," I grumble.

But already, I feel my resolve weakening. Honestly? I don't really care what state my cheerleading uniform is in. I'm on the team mainly to keep my mom off my back.

Cheer for Arianna, on the other hand, is her life, and I confess I *kind* of understand why she wants to look her best when Mr. Barnsteen puts those stupid plastic tiaras on her and Adam McRoy's heads at the assembly.

Again with the clichés, right? The pretty sister as Homecoming Queen and cheer captain, and the other sister, well just ...

Average.

But clichés have to come from somewhere. Might as well be right here in sunny San Diego.

*Don't give in*, I pep talk myself. *Be the heroine in your own life*. It's a mantra I've been trying out lately, ever since seeing it printed on a fancy journal I saw at the bookstore the other day.

But I suck at pep talks, both for myself and other people, and I feel myself caving. My sense of dignity is *forever* making a plea for me to stand up for myself, but I rarely listen.

That's how it is with Arianna. Even when you know you're being played, you let it happen. It's like my sister *literally* crawled out of the freaking womb with people turning a blind eye to any potential imperfections. Case in point: when Ari was born, her labor lasted thirty-seven hours and required *four* doctors. To this day, my mother has yet to utter a single complaint about the ordeal.

Meanwhile, *my* labor had taken a mere forty-two minutes, had zero complications, and still I can't pass a single birthday without Mom reminding me that I came early and made her miss her favorite show.

Story of my life.

It's a wonder I'm not all rebellious and goth, but that would mean I'd have to care enough to rebel. I mean I *care*. Just not about high school drama. Not beyond getting good enough grades to get a scholarship when I graduate next year, and then, *bye, bye Southern California, hello Harvard or somewhere far far away*.

"Please, Harper?" Ari asks with pleading eyes. "Next year I'll be at college, and you can have your uniform all to yourself."

Ugh. *That* card. It kills me that my sister is a year older and will get to college first. I love school, and I genuinely can't wait for the challenge of college classes.

Ari, on the other hand, has been building her dream team of universities based on their Greek program and how attractive the student giving the campus tour is.

"Fine, where's your uniform?" I ask on a sigh. I won't have time to wash it before school, but I can probably iron out the worst of it.

She squeals and gives me a little hug before pulling her uniform out of her duffle bag. I accept the ball of blue and white wrinkles with an eye roll and head to the laundry room to try and salvage it.

Pathetic. I know.

But adoring Arianna is not a choice. It's compulsion. Even when I want to strangle her.

"Harper, breakfast!" It's my mother.

Wonderful. So that's a *no* on ironing the damn thing.

I slip on the rumpled cheer uniform, grateful that Ari and I roughly the same size, and pluck a piece of fuzz off the logo.

I groan as I realize I still haven't done my hair or makeup. My mother will be having *none* of that, especially on a game day.

Not in the mood for a fight, I sprint back up the stairs, already pulling my blah brown hair into a messy ponytail.

I dump my makeup bag onto the bathroom, line my hazel eyes, and swipe on a coat of mascara. I glance at myself in the mirror and shrug. Not Ari, but not horrible either.

"Harper! Breakfast! Now!"

I close my eyes in dismay. She isn't hollering for Ari yet, which means she wants to talk to me specifically.

*My nightmare.*

I trudge down the stairs into our immaculate white kitchen. While our home is solidly lower-middle-class, it's never less than spotless, thanks to twice-weekly cleanings by the housekeeper that we really can't afford.

"Where's Ari?" I ask as I slip into my usual spot at the small round table.

"Arianna is finishing getting ready for school," my mother says, dropping a plate in front of me.

She hates it when I call my sister Ari. Says it sounds, "low-brow and trashy."

Yup. Direct quote.

Ari always wonders why mother doesn't have more friends. *I* always wonder if Ari ever actually listens to the things that came out of Meredith's mouth.

I dig into my bowl of cereal, bracing myself for whatever improvement plan my mother had in mind for me this time. Pilates? Eye-brow wax? Veganism?

"I ran into Mrs. Wilkins the other day at the grocery store," she says, crossing both arms and looking at me.

"Yeah?" I say, shoving another bite of cereal into my mouth.

"She says Gabe asked you to the Homecoming Dance."

Oh *crap*.

Gabe Wilkins and I have gone to school together since forever, and our moms our friends back from whenever

they were field trip chaperones, or wherever it is parents meet.

Gabe's a good guy, he really is, but he's gotten weird lately, all hormonal and awkward. And I hate hurting his feelings, but I know if I'd said yes, he'll get the wrong idea, and then it will be even *more* embarrassing for him when I had to explain that I don't like him like that.

"You said no?" my mom asks, sounding scandalized.

This is how it is with my mom. Arianna can come home with straight Cs, and not a word of chastisement is uttered.

I say no to a boy asking me to a dance, and it's like the Spanish Inquisition up in here.

I fiddle with my spoon. "I already told you. I'm going to the dance with some friends."

My mom sighs. "Harper—"

Arianna prances into the room, giving me a temporary reprieve, although my mother's sharp look promises that we aren't done with The Discussion.

"Arianna dear, you look lovely," Mom says, giving my sister an approving once-over.

Ari air-kisses my mother's cheek before sitting between us. "You look nice today too, Mom."

*Oh barf.*

"Harper," my mother is saying, "It looks like you washed your uniform in a bird bath. Honestly, you're never going to get elected captain next year if you don't look the part."

Draining the last of my orange juice, I set my glass down with a thud and give Arianna a bland look. She meets my eyes guiltily, but doesn't fess up.

*Whatever.*

"Sorry Mer," I say.

She calmly sets down her coffee mug, but her eyes are annoyed. "I've asked you girls to start calling me 'mom!'"

"Yeah? For how long?" I ask.

I stand and push the rest of my soggy cereal down the garbage disposal with more force than necessary.

When I was in junior high, my mother declared we should start calling her Meredith. One of her stupid *modern parenting* magazines suggested that it would facilitate open conversations between mother and daughters.

Somewhere along the line, it seemed to dawn on her we weren't exactly all *oh-gosh-guess-what-happened-at-school-today-Mer!* and she insisted we revert to the more respectful, "Mom."

Ari easily adapted. Me, not so much.

"Ari, you ready?" I ask Ari. "Coach Liu asked us to stop by the gym before first period and help hang the rest of the posters."

"Yeah, I'm ready." My sister takes a few more tiny bites of cereal before grabbing her book bag.

"Have a nice day, girls," my mother is saying. "Harper, if you see Gabe—"

I let the garage door slam, cutting off the rest of Meredith's special brand of motherly concern. Arianna, as usual, can't find her keys, so I toss her my set and climb into the passenger seat of the second-hand yellow convertible.

"What was that about?" Arianna asks as she slides behind the wheel. "There was all sorts of tension when I walked in."

"Oh, the usual," I mutter. "She takes it as a personal affront that I don't have a boyfriend."

"She means well," Ari says distractedly.

"Yeah okay. Because you handle her *sooo* well. Tell me, exactly how long did it take to hand-wash and press your cheer skirt?"

She doesn't respond, the click of her seat belt the only thing breaking the tense silence. "What's your deal this morning?" she asks, looking at me.

For a second, I almost tell her.

I want to tell her that sometimes I get I'm sick of playing backup to the Arianna show. Or rather, I'd just like someone to notice that the Harper show's just as good, if not exactly as flashy.

I want to tell her that our mother's obvious preference for her older daughter stings. That it's not *my* fault that Arianna's father was the love of Meredith's life, while mine was some one-night stand that she can't remember.

But I can't figure out how to say any of that in a way that doesn't scream pity-party, so instead I say nothing.

"Just tired," I say. "I was up late studying for my biology test."

"Ugh, I hate science," Ari says, as she backs the car out.

"But you just *love* all the other classes?" I ask, giving her a wide, toothy grin.

"Shut up," she laughs. "You're way too hot to be such a nerd."

"Welcome to the future," I say. "Where big brains *can* in fact, come in short skirts."

"Hey, hand me my purse," she says, tilting down the rearview mirror to check out her makeup.

"Um, that'd be a no," I say, looking out the window. "You'll either want your cell or your lip gloss, and you can barely keep the car on the road as it is."

"Harps, don't be a bitch. Just get me—"

The car swerves sharply to the left, and I snap my head around, ready to yell at her for reaching for her purse herself, except she's not.

Both of her hands are on the wheel, and her eyes are straight ahead.

"What the hell was that?" I ask.

The car jerks again, this time to the right, and my heart thumps. I reach over to straighten it. "Knock it off Ari. I'll get your stupid purse."

She still doesn't respond, and she starts to twist the wheel again, except this time it's in more of a distracted, zoned-out kind of way.

My heart thuds faster. Is she trying to kill us?!

I tighten my grip, struggling to keep the car straight as she accelerates. "Stop, you're going too fast!"

Ari can't hear me. I know it as soon as I see her eyes—wide, staring, and vacant.

*Ohmigod, ohmigod.*

Is she having a stroke? Some sort of brain aneurysm?

We swerve again, and several cars honk. "Ari, wake up! Snap out of it!"

I try to pull her white knuckles off the steering wheel so I can take control, but her grip is too tight, as though all of her muscles have seized.

My breath hitches in panic. A traffic light is up ahead, and Ari shows no signs of slowing down.

*We're going to die.*

Dead at seventeen. Maybe I *should* have said yes to Gabe Wilkins. At least then I'd get a good kiss in before I go.

"Ari!" I scream.

The car picks up speed until we are going more than twice the speed limit. I try to lean down to pull her leg off the accelerator, but her legs are just as locked as her hands.

I start to unbuckle my seat-belt to get better leverage, but then I remember that's how people end up smeared all over the pavement.

*Instead of just mangled in a crumpled up car.*

No. No way. I'm not going out this way. Not in a rumpled cheer uniform. I'm not even wearing good underwear. The autopsy guy's going to be all, "Oh yuck," when he sees, them, and if you can gross out an autopsy guy, you know your life sucks.

Sucked. Past tense.

Wait, do autopsy guys even see your underwear? Or are you naked by the time you get to them?

*Crap.*

The traffic light in front of us is turning yellow. A scream echoes in my ears, and I realize it's mine, as I take in the steady stream of rush hour traffic that we're about to T-bone.

I briefly consider the emergency break, but I hadn't paid enough attention in Driver's Ed to know what would happen if I pull it while going nearly fifty miles per hour.

The only other options are swerving into oncoming traffic on our left, or into a cluster of palm trees on the right.

There's no way to avoid hitting *something*, but at least I can control what we crash into. I take a deep breath and pull the steering wheel as hard as I can to the right.

Even though I'm bracing for it, the crunch of metal and the punch of the airbag takes my breath away as the car slams into a tree.

*So.*

*Much.*

*Pain.*

I use the last of my energy to turn my head towards Arianna.

"You okay?" I ask, my voice coming out a whisper.

The driver's seat's empty.

My sister is just ... gone.

And then the world goes black.



## CHAPTER 2



“Tell us one more time what you saw, Miss Reed.”  
I wrap my hands around the paper cup they’d given me an hour ago.

I haven’t touched the coffee beyond a first rancid sip, but it’s something to hold onto. Something to think about other than the fact that the chair’s uncomfortable, the florescent lights are hurting my pounding head, and the room smells like stale fried food.

And ... oh yeah. *That my sister has been freaking missing for three days.*

I glance wearily at the friendlier of the two cops. There’ve been two of them handling Arianna’s disappearance. Officer Diaz is the nice one. He’s got friendly, coffee-colored eyes, and unlike my mother and Officer Krantz, *he* doesn’t seem to be blaming me for not providing better answers to their repetitive questions.

Officer Krantz is a different story. She’s clearly accustomed to playing “bad cop” in their duo, and does so with power-trippy pride. Her dark red hair is obviously from a

bottle, and she wears it parted down the middle, which doesn't suit her wide face at all.

Like Diaz, she has brown eyes, but instead of being dark and soft, they're yellowish and hard.

I don't like her.

"Waiting on you, Harper," Krantz asks in a bored tone, tapping a pen against her notebook.

Here we go. *Again*. "I've told you," I say with what I think is impressive patience. "One minute Arianna is having some weird, zoned-out episode. The next second, our car crashes and she is gone."

Office Krantz sucks in her cheeks. She hasn't come right out and said it, but I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm holding out on them.

"Gone," Krantz repeats. "And how do you suggest that happened? Because according to the report from the first on the scene, the car was locked from the *inside* when they approached, and the windshield was completely intact. Only the passenger side window was broken. *Yours*."

*Oh really?* I want to ask. *The passenger side window was broken? I had no idea. That must explain the million cuts all over my face and chest!*

I start to self-consciously reach up and touch the rows of stitches that cover some of the worst cuts, but then my hand drops. Vanity in this situation feels, well...*vain*.

I'm the lucky one. A couple cracked ribs, a broken nose, a bunch of superficial cuts and an ugly seat-belt bruise are a hell of a lot better than dead.

*Or missing.*

"Has your sister been unhappy? Or ever talked to you about running away? Is there anyone who might have wanted to hurt her?"

"No!" I slam my palm on the table. The two police officers don't flinch, but my mother jolts in the chair next to me.

"Harper please," Meredith says in a hoarse voice. "Please cooperate with them."

"I *am* cooperating. I've told them everything I know!"

The officers exchange a glance. "We know you're trying to help your sister, but 'vanishing into thin air' isn't a lot to work with."

I tug at my limp hair in frustration. Despite the massive amounts of painkillers I've continued to take as prescribed since the accident, everything from my skin down to my bones *aches*.

The harder I try to remember details about that day, the more sure I am that I don't have anything else to tell.

I don't remember them cutting me out of the car. I don't remember the ambulance ride to the hospital.

I *do* remember waking up yelling for Arianna in the hospital bed. I'd had to be sedated, right along with my hysterical mother. When I'd come out of it several hours later, the cops had been waiting to ask me questions.

Here we are, three days later in the precinct office. And I'm still being asked the *same.stupid.questions*.

They're the *wrong* questions, but I don't know how to explain it. Whatever happened to Arianna, it's not...normal. People don't just vanish into thin air, I *know* that, and yet that's what happened.

"I've told you all I know. I'm sorry," I whisper.

Don't they *get* it? If anyone wants answers, it's *me*.

Office Diaz smiles reassuringly. "Nobody's blaming you, Harper. You were in a pretty serious car accident. It's not surprising that you're not remembering things clearly."

I bite my lip to keep from retorting that I'm remembering everything just fine.

"Let's focus on the moments leading up to the crash," Officer Krantz says, continuing to tap her pen.

*Good idea. Because we haven't been over that a million times already.*

My eyes catch on Meredith's ravaged face, and I let out a slow breath. My mother and I aren't exactly close, but I hate seeing her like this. She's been halfway catatonic ever since she arrived at the hospital and found out that she only had one daughter to visit.

It's for her that I close my eyes resignedly, and tell the story all over again, starting from when we were bickering over Ari's purse, describing how she went all weird, and then...*crash*.

I can tell when I open my eyes that they're exasperated. Even friendly Officer Diaz looks a bit annoyed, although he covers it with a smile.

Folding his hands, he sets them on the table and leans towards me. "What do *you* think happened to your sister, Harper?"

"I have no idea," I whisper. "None of this makes sense. I know that."

"You said you were fighting," he continues gently. "Did the argument ... escalate?"

It takes me a few moments to register what he's saying, and my mouth drops open. "Wait. Do you seriously think I had something to do with this?"

I look around the table, shocked to see that they're all looking at me. Accusing.

Even my mother.

"Harper," she says, her voice ravaged. "I know you two didn't always get along, you were always a little jealous—"

I push back from the table, my chair clattering noisily to the ground as my coffee dumps all over Officer Krantz's notebook.

"I would *never* hurt her," I say, my eyes watering. "She's my *sister*."

“Harper—“

“No,” I say, holding up a hand to stop my mom’s words. “Just stop. You seriously think I would do something to her? And then lie about it?”

My mom looks away, and I turn my anger towards the two police officers. “What’s the favored theory?” I ask, my voice cracking. “Maybe I hired a hitman? Stuffed her body in a trunk somewhere? Sold her to some creep?”

“Ms. Reed, calm down, nobody is suggesting—”

“I’m not going to calm down,” I snap. “Not until you do your job and *find* her.”

Knowing I’m about thirty seconds away from a complete break down, I turn on my heel and walk as fast as my sore body will allow me to get out of the station.

I need air. I need space.

*I need to find my sister.*

## CHAPTER 3



I burst out of the police station, relieved when nobody seems to want to stop me.

I drove to the station with my mom, and the keys are still in her purse, so my escape options are limited.

My eyes scan until I settle on what seems to be a small park across from the police station. Not exactly the best hiding spot, but at least it'll give me a spot to clear my head.

It's a gorgeous sunny day, the way it almost always is in San Diego, and all of the park benches are taken.

Since my legs are shaking, I settle for sharing it with the one least occupied.

I'm relieved when the man sitting at the other side of the bench doesn't seem to even register my presence.

I clench my hands on the wooden bench on either side of my knees, eyes locked on the ground in front of me, bracing for the tears to come, a little surprised when they don't.

I just feel...frustrated. And maybe a little angry.

*Ari, where are you?*

"They won't find her, you know."

My head snaps up, thinking someone from the police

station must have followed me, but my stomach twists in shock and fear when I realize it's the man beside me who's spoken.

It's as though he can read my thoughts. Or did I speak out loud?

No. I didn't. I *know* I didn't.

I study him more closely, trying to figure out if I recognize—or perhaps more importantly, how *he* seems to recognize *me*.

But nothing about him is familiar.

He's staring straight ahead, a pleasant, almost bored expression on his face, his hand resting on a black leather book.

He's good-looking. Maybe mid-thirties, blond hair that's a little longish, tan skin.

He turns his head then, and looks at me, and I jolt a little as our eyes meet. I'm still almost positive I've never seen him before, but he seems somehow familiar to me. Classic California aging surfer maybe. There are a lot of them around here.

Then he smiles, and it's a little brilliant, a lot dazzling. "Hello, Harper."

I jolt at my name. *Holy crap.*

I'm a smart girl, and I know full-well I should walk, no *run*, like, *now*. If this was just about me, I would. But the man had said they won't find *her*.

He knows something about Arianna.

"How do you know me?" I ask defiantly. "And how do you that my sister is missing?"

He shifts his body to face me more fully. "It's been all over the news, has it not?"

*Huh.* He's got me there. A pretty cheerleader gone missing on her way to school in an uppity suburb is front page local news.

And yet ...

"You said they won't find her," I say. "You know where she is?"

"I do."

My world tilts for a second. "Where? *Who* are you? What have you done with her?"

"I assure you most readily, Harper, that I had nothing to do with her disappearance."

"Who are you?" I ask again.

Instead of answering, he taps his fingers against the book and studies me. "You want to find her."

"Of course I want to find her. Is she hurt?"

I can't bring myself to ask if she's dead.

"She's quite well, all things considered."

He has a vague, almost singsong way of talking, and I want to shake him for answers.

"You need to tell them what you know," I say, pointing towards the police station. "We need to—"

"The police can't help your sister, Harper. To that point, neither can I, I'm afraid. But *you* can."

This guy's really starting to creep me out.

I stand, intending to run for Officer Diaz, or even the hideous Officer Krantz.

Or at least, I try to stand. But my lower body doesn't budge.

I stare down at my legs in panic. I try again to move them, and nothing happens. What the hell is this? A delayed side effect from the accident? Am I paralyzed?

"Calm down," he says. "It's but a light charm, quite temporary."

"A light *charm*?" My voice is both incredulous and freaked out.

He laughs. "No matter how many times I cross over, it



never ceases to surprise me just how detached this world's become from magic. Quite tragic, actually."

*Magic.*

My heart sinks as I realize that the man's delusional. He seems to think he's a wizard or sorcerer or something. He's probably just a local weirdo who read about Arianna's disappearance and cooked up some crazy story about it.

And yet ... there's the fact that I truly can't move my legs.

The man sighs. "I come all this way, and get only skepticism. Very well. Your name is Harper Reed. Seventeen. Half-sister to Arianna, who vanished into thin air, only nobody believes you. You love your sister, and you hate that you're prone to jealousy and resentment of her."

"I'm not—"

"It's okay," he says, his voice strangely earnest. "Don't fight those feelings, Harper. They're real, and nobody can take away what's real."

My eyes water. "I love my sister."

"Of course you do. You just want to be the heroine in your own life."

I suck in a breath, as his words hit far too close for comfort.

How does he know? It may be a coincidence, and yet an eerie sense of calm is settling over me as I realize whatever's happening here isn't going to have a logical answer. At all.

"Please tell me what's going on," I whisper.

"Do you believe in fairy tales, Harper?"

*Dude, what?*

"What do you mean do I believe in them?" I ask. "I mean, I've read the stories, sure. What do they have to do with my sister?"

"What if I told you that they were more than stories?" he says, leaning towards me slightly.

"I suppose I'd be willing to believe that some part of the fairy tales might be *loosely* based on some true event."

"You're a cynic," he says with a quick smile.

"Look, I really don't have time—"

He hands me the black book. "Open this."

I hesitantly accept the book and look up at him questioningly.

He smiles in encouragement. "Open it."

I open to a random spot at the middle, seeing nothing but crisp white pages.

"It's blank."

He laughs. "Well of course it is, we're at the beginning of the story, now, aren't we?"

I frown, but I flip to the front of the book, finding the very first page.

At first I think that too is blank, but then all of a sudden

...

It's not.

I let out a tiny gasp as I watch a letter appear, as though an invisible hand is writing it in front of my very eyes.

An **O** appears in blank ink, an old-timey script type of letter. I watch as an **n** appears beside it.

"How are you doing this?" I ask.

He laughs again. "Afraid I can't quite take credit for this one. That magic's far older than me."

The man reaches out, gently pries the book from my fingers, just as I see a **c** appear beside the **n**.

"What is it?" I ask. "What book is that?"

"That's your story, my dear," he says closing the book. "What happens next will be up to you."

"What happens next is that I find my sister."

He studies me. "Whatever it takes?"

I nod.

"I can get you to where she is," he says. "Finding her will be up to you."

"How can it be both?" I ask. "You either know where she is, or you don't. You mean, like you can get me to the city, but not the house where she's being held, or ..."

"You aren't getting it," he says, his voice turning a touch impatient. "You're still thinking like a Logosian."

"A what?"

"Your sister's no longer of this world, Harper. To find her, you too must leave this world for another."

*Annnnnnd*, there it is. The point where my disbelief wins.

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head. "This is getting too crazy for me."

Again I try to stand, again my legs don't move, and I inhale a long breath, trying not to panic. "I don't know how you're doing this, *but let me go*."

"I'm afraid we're too far past that. The story began the second you sat on this park bench," he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small silver object.

"I didn't seek you out," I say distractedly, my eyes locked on the object. It's a ring. A very thin band of metal, unlike any I've seen before.

It's...glittering. At first I think it's just the way the sunlight is hitting it, but no...it's *actually* shimmering.

He holds it up for me, and I reach for it, but he pulls it back. "If I give you this, you will find your sister, Harper. I can promise you that."

I meet his bright blue eyes. "Why do I get the feeling there's a catch?"

His smile is sharp and fleeting. "Two, actually."

I reach again for the ring. *I want it*. Again, he pulls it back.

"The first," he says. "When you get to where you're going, you'll have millions of questions, and you'll be asked nearly as many, the most vital of which will be how did you get

here. You're to answer that you came through a portal. A mirror should do the trick. Under no circumstances are you to tell a single soul about me. You understand?"

"How can I? I don't even know your name."

He continues to hold my gaze. "I'm afraid this is quite crucial, Harper. I need your word that you won't mention ever having met me, or anyone like me. Not where you got the ring. Nothing. Break that promise, and your sister will be lost to you forever."

I swallow, his intensity making me truly nervous for the first time since sitting down. *Am I making a deal with the devil?*

And even if I am...do I really have a choice?

"I promise," I whisper.

"Excellent," he says, his voice just a little bit cold. "Now for the second part of our arrangement."

He brings the ring closer, holding it in front of my face. "You must keep this on."

"Or what?" I ask, looking back at him.

He laughs a little. "I do like you, Harper. This ring is a portal. If you ever want to get back to this world—your world, you'll need it. It will work only once, and if you give it up, you'll never return to this world. Never see your mother again."

I frown. "Why would I ever give it up if it's my ticket back? How does it work?" I ask. "Once I find my sister, I mean, how do I get home? Click my heels? Spin in a circle? Make a wish?"

"I'm afraid that it'll be a good deal more difficult than that, but the ring is your best chance."

"What do you mean my best *chance*?" I ask. "You mean there's a chance I won't be able to get back? That I can't? My *life* is here. My mom, my friends, school ..."

"Then stay," he says simply, the ring vanishing into his palm. "It's Arianna or them."

“That’s not fair,” I whisper.

His voice grows stormier. “Few things ever are. But there’s always a choice, Harper, even when both options have dire consequences. You’ll do well to remember that in Faylin.”

“Faylin?” I blink rapidly as I ask the question, because I could have sworn I just saw this guy fade. As in...he went slightly transparent for a moment.

“I’m afraid we’re out of time,” he says with a sigh, the ring appearing once more. “It’s time for that choice, Harper. Find your sister...or don’t.”

He’s right, both options suck.

But in the end, there’s no choice. Not really.

I reach out and take the ring.

And just like the day of the car accident, the entire world goes black.

## CHAPTER 4



*I* register the snow first.

I know it seems odd, but I've never actually seen snow. Not until this moment.

Growing up in a city that rarely dropped below fifty degrees with a mother who didn't exactly believe in family vacations, means I've never had a chance to experience it.

Needless to say, I never expected that my first snow experience would involve lying flat on my back surrounded by trees made of tiny lights with what appears to be a baby deer peering down at me.

But here I am.

It takes several moments for everything to catch up with me.

*Arianna. The weird guy on the park bench.*

*The ring.*

I sit upright, the deer startling at my sudden motion, fumbling frantically in the snow for the ring—my only way back—when I realize that I'm wearing it on the middle finger of my right hand. It's not shimmering now, just a slim band of silver.

I twist it on my finger, finding it snug, but not uncomfortably so. I breathe a little sigh of relief, and only then do I realize that I'm no longer wearing my jeans and hoodie, but a dress. And not a particularly pretty one.

It's long and light brown, made of sort of a rough burlap-like texture. Somewhere between that park bench in San Diego and here—wherever here is—I'd undergone a wardrobe change.

Just one more item of weird in a day that's been chalk full of it.

I climb slowly to my feet, waiting for the now familiar twinges of pain, courtesy of the car accident, but nothing hurts. My fingers lift to my face, searching for the raised stitches, waiting for the sting of the cuts. Nothing. I poke gently at my collar bone, expecting the tenderness from my seat-belt bruise, but that pain too is gone.

I blow out a long breath and order myself not to freak out at the impossibility of it all.

I seem to be in the middle of the forest. I listen for noise, and at first there's nothing. Just the silently falling snow.

But then I hear it.

The faintest sound of music.

Music means people. People mean answers.

*Ari.*

I start moving in the direction of the sound, the music growing louder as the trees begin to thin out.

Eventually I register laughter, along with music. The high pitched giggle of a little kid.

I skid to a halt when I come abruptly to the edge of a forest and am nearly run over by a stampede of small children chasing each other around the perimeter of an enormous town-square.

I draw back, hiding behind a tree trunk, heart pounding. I slowly allow one eye to peek around the side of the trunk.

My breath catches in my chest at the sheer spectacle in front of me.

When I was in grade school, Meredith had insisted that Arianna and I take piano lessons. Our teacher, Mrs. Gable, had been a strict old bat most of the time, but she was a sucker for all things Christmas, and I used to actually look forward to piano lessons in December when her entire living room had been taken over by tiny, whimsical winter villages.

The scene before me now is like that village come to life.

There are people everywhere, all ages, and all smiling like life is one big holiday party, although I don't see anything overtly Christmas

In the middle of the bustling square is an enormous, crackling bonfire, surrounded with cozy couches as well as tables of what look like colored marshmallows for roasting.

The fire is bright orange, exactly as it should be, yet there isn't the faintest scent or wisp of smoke.

I drag my eyes away from the compelling glow of the fire and take in the rest of the scene.

The music is coming from a small band of what had to be elves or gnomes or some such. Next to the band is a group of people dancing, the ladies' rainbow of dresses swishing in perfect harmony, reminding me of a whimsical music box.

In another section is a woman dressed as a fairy, or hell, maybe she *is* a fairy, reading aloud to a cluster of children.

A more adult group is surrounding an enormous bar made entirely of ice, drinking something that I imagine is warm and steaming and wonderful out of shimmering silver mugs.

"Where am I?" I whisper to nobody.

I pinch myself. A little cliché, but I have to be sure.

Nope, everything's still there. Not a dream then.

My eyes close, and I take a deep breath.

Whenever I have watched movies or read books about



someone going to a mystical land, I have always wondered why they didn't freak out more. I mean, they're in another world that life experience has told them should absolutely *not* exist. They're experiencing all the things that everyone's always told them are *impossible*.

Shouldn't they be pulling their hair out or screaming at the sky, or punching everybody in the face until they get answers?

That's what I had always *thought* I would do.

And yet now that I am actually here. I get it.

Is my mind racing with denial? Sure.

Do I want to keep pinching myself until I wake up? Yes.

And yet I am experiencing the impossible. I'm *in* it.

So I can either sit here huddled in the snow waiting for my magic ring to sparkle and take me home, or...I can adapt.

Once again, I have a choice, and once again, I make the crazy one.

I step out from behind the trees, onto the white cobblestone.

## CHAPTER 5



As I step further onto the cobblestone square, I'm braced for everyone to start yelling that I don't belong. I figure best case scenario, everyone will stop and stare.

I barely cause a ripple.

I get a few curious glances, but I'm hardly the instant spectacle I'd imagined myself to be.

Biting my lip, I approach a group of prettily dressed young women. They give me a puzzled look, but it's not unfriendly.

"Yes?" one of them says with a small smile.

"Um, hi," I say, feeling very much like an amateur actor who'd been shoved on stage without being told her lines. "I was wondering, if you could tell me where I am? What this place is called?"

A couple of them exchange looks. "You mean Winterscape?"

*Winterscape*. Well, at least I have a name. Not one I recognize though. "Where is it, like on a map?"

They're *really* staring at me now, and I watch as their

gazes drift over me, not quite unkind, but they're definitely noting that I'm not one of them.

Maybe back when the blonde guy in the park was making his demands, I should have made a few of my own.

*Better dress. More direction. An explanation of any kind.*

"What's your assignment, sweetie?" asks a black-haired woman in a gorgeous emerald dress.

"My assignment?"

They exchange another of those looks. Again, they don't seem unkind, but they're pitting now, and that's almost worse.

"Maybe one of the other servants can help you?" a red-head asks gently.

Another servant ...

*Ohhhh.*

Everything clicks into place.

- a) this land has servants
- b) my dress indicates that I'm one of them
- c) these ladies are not

*Adapt, Harper.*

I force a smile. "Right. Of course. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"No problem," the red-head replies in a sing-song voice.

I back away as they go back to their chatting without paying me any more attention. Belatedly, I note that despite the cloaks draped over their shoulders, they're hardly decked out in snow gear to protect them from winter weather. *Weird.*

I glance up at the snow, then do a double take. There is no snow. I mean there is, but not falling directly on us here in the square. And yet ... I glance over my shoulder to the forest a few feet away where it *is* snowing. It's almost as though there's a precise line in the precipitation, which makes ...

*Exactly zero sense.*

Par for the course, though, right?

I begin weaving my way through the crowd, my eyes scanning for someone dressed like me. I don't know what I'm going to say when I find one, but there's obviously some sort of class system at work here.

"Excuse me, miss. Do you think you could fetch more of the green mallows?"

I glance down to see a boy of about twelve holding out an empty silver tray to me.

"The green...mallows?"

He gives me a curious smile before tilting his head back towards the bonfire. "For roasting. There's plenty of the pink and yellow, but everyone knows the green are the best. There's none left."

He extends the silver tray even further towards me, starting to look puzzled at my non-response.

*Adapt.*

"Right," I say, accepting the tray. "I'll get some."

The boy's already darting away. I have no idea where one would find "green mallows" but the tray helps with my disguise. Not that anyone's giving me a second look, anyways.

I reel back a little bit as a group of laughing guys all but mow me over. A guy with dark auburn hair grabs my arm, steadying me. "Careful there, little one," he says, smiling down at me with a wink.

Little one? For real?

Still, I find myself smiling back, because he's super cute, and more than a little charming. He reminds me a bit of Adam, Ari's latest boyfriend, except instead of a football uniform, he's wearing a dark gray sweater and black pants. I realize all the guys in his group are dressed mostly the same, dark pants, with sweaters in various colors. Not servants

though, I'm guessing. The sweaters look like cashmere, and the way these guys carry themselves smacks of entitlement.

The guy gives me a lingering, considering look, walking backwards as he studies me before turning and rejoining his group of friends.

For a moment, I consider going after him. He seems friendly enough, maybe he could at least point me towards another servant, or tell me where to get the green mallows, or heck, even explain how—

I start after him, but I only make it one step before a strong hand closes over my forearm, pulling me around.

I slam into a hard male chest, the tray clattering to the ground as I make a small sound of surprise.

"Who are you?" comes a rough male growl.

I glance up, a little taken aback by the intensity in the guy's face.

He too is about my age, with dark hair falling across his forehead and unfriendly dark eyes. He's frowning down at me, and there's plenty of anger there, but something else, too. Something like panic.

I wrench myself free and lean down to pick up the tray, but he doesn't release my arm, shaking me. "*Who are you?*"

The second I meet his eyes, I see the panic there, and I realize why.

He might not know who I am.

But he knows *what* I am.

And he knows that I don't belong.

## CHAPTER 6



I'm about to tell this grumpy looking guy to go to hell when I register his clothing. He's wearing a white shirt that, while clean enough, is a rough, ragged looking material. There's an ugly brown leather vest over it, and his pants fit tighter than anything a guy from my world would be caught dead wearing. They're tucked into scuffed black boots.

He's a servant.

Before I can figure out what to say, he's dragging me through the crowd. I don't realize where we're going until I feel the crunch of snow beneath my feet, feeling the cool, but not unpleasant sensation of snowflakes on my face once more.

He pulls me into the trees, turning back around to face me, but still not releasing my arm, as though expecting me to bolt.

I try to jerk it away, but his fingers only tighten.

"Let me go," I say, speaking for the first time.

His eyes narrow, but slowly his fingers relax, and he crosses his arms.

“Your name.”

“*Your* name,” I counter, crossing my arms and mimicking his posture and the bossy command of his voice.

He continues to glare, and I glare right back, registering through my irritation that he’d actually be kind of hot if he wasn’t so intense. But he *is* intense. His black hair curls just slightly onto his forehead and does absolutely nothing to soften the piercing darkness of his eyes.

To my surprise, it’s he who relents first. He doesn’t give me his name, but he at least speaks.

“You’re a servant,” he says quietly. “But I don’t know you.”

I roll my eyes. “And I suppose you know every servant in...Winterscape.”

“Yes.”

*Huh.* He seems deadly serious. Maybe this guy *can* give me some actual answers, and yet I feel oddly resentful that it’s *him* I’ll have to make nice with in order to get them.

I take a deep breath. “My name is Harper.”

“Where are you from?”

“Um no,” I say, holding up a finger. “Here’s how we’ll be doing things. One question for one answer. Both ways.”

“No.”

“Fine then, I’ll just—”

He grabs my elbow and pulls me back around. “Fine,” he snarls. “What’s your question.”

“Your name,” I say, batting my eyelashes.

“Aramax. Where are you from?”

“Aramax,” I say, testing the word. “No nickname?”

“Where are you from?”

“God, you’re like a dog with a bone,” I mutter. “I’m from...somewhere else. But you seem to know that already.”

His eyes close, and I see him swallow. “You’re a Logosian.”  
*Logosian.*

The word's familiar. The man in the park had said *I was still thinking like a Logosian*.

"I think so," I whisper.

His gaze sharpens at that. "What do you mean, you *think* so?"

"My turn for the question. If I'm a Logosian, what are you?"

He rubs both hands over his face. "This is happening. It's really happening."

"What are you? What is this place? Where am I?"

His smile is fleeting, and does nothing to soften his features. "That's a lot of questions, Miss *Let's-Take-Turns*."

"Yeah, well, it's been a rough day," I say, annoyed to realize my voice sounds dangerously close to cracking.

Aramax doesn't soften. "When did you get here?"

"Just now. I was in the forest, and I tried talking to a few people—"

His gaze sharpens. "You spoke to someone? Before me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I supposed to wait with bated breath for you to come drag me around?"

His jaw moves. "You're not at all what I thought you'd be."

"It seems you were...expecting me," I say slowly.

"Being prepared is not the same as expectation."

I roll my eyes. "Cryptic. Girls *love* that."

"You said you spoke to someone. What did you say?"

"I just asked a few women where I was. They looked at me like I was a moron."

His eyes rake over me. "You arrived wearing that?"

"Nope, picked it out myself. Got it at the mall," I say, pulling the dress to the side. "Pretty, right?"

He says nothing.

"Yes," I relent. "I arrived wearing this."

"You're to be a servant then," he murmurs. "Interesting."



“Why’s that interesting? Also, do all the guy servants wear tights?”

He blinks. “What?”

I gesture vaguely at his lower body. “Tights. Man tights, but still...tights.”

“This is my uniform,” he says stiffly. “And I’m not familiar with *tights*.”

“Okay, so that’s irrelevant,” I say with a wave of my hand. “I want a do-over on my question.”

“No, we need—”

“Have there been any other Logosians?” I ask.

“Yes of course.”

I perk up a little in hope. “Really? What about a girl named Arianna? About my age, super pretty, dark hair, brown eyes. She would have gotten here about a week ago—”

“Impossible,” he interrupts. “Logosians are...rare. One hasn’t arrived in Faylin in quite some time.”

My heart sinks. “But my sister. She’s here.”

His eyes narrow. “Says who?”

I open my mouth, and then remember my promise to the man in the park that I wouldn’t mention speaking with him.

“She has to be,” I whisper.

Aramax is shaking his head. “She’s not. I’ve never heard of two crossing at the same time.”

“But you’ve heard of *one* crossing over?” I ask. “Like this is just a thing that happens?”

“You have questions,” he says. “I get that. I’m not sure I’m the person to answer them.”

“Oh, but you’ve been *so* helpful so far.”

He takes an angry step forward. “You’re mighty sarcastic for a girl so far from home.”

I step forward, refusing to be intimidated. “And you’re awfully rude for a guy who understands how far from home I am.”

His teeth clench. "We need to get you inside."

I slump a little in relief. "So there is an inside?"

"The castle," he says, gesturing with a hand back in the direction of the square.

I turn, following the direction he's indicated, noticing for the first time, a couple of towers peeking above the tree line.

"Of course there would be a castle," I mutter.

He grabs my wrist again and starts to propel me forward when the sky seems to erupt with a million tiny, multi-colored birds, all singing the same bright tune.

"Is *anything* less than one-hundred percent happy in this place?" I ask, my eyes locked on the sky.

"I am," he says darkly.

"Oh yeah? I didn't notice."

He doesn't respond to my sarcasm, his eyes locked on the birds overhead. "Damn it. Now we'll have to wait until after."

"After what?"

But Aramax is already tugging me back. Everyone else is moving, too, shifting towards the sides, so that there's a wide open space in the middle of the square.

I blink in surprise as the huge crackling bonfire disappears without so much as an ash left behind.

"What's with the birds?" I whisper.

"They're heralding birds," Aramax replies distractedly, his eyes scanning the crowd as though looking for someone.

"What are they heralding?" I ask, feeling quite proud that I knew the definition of the old-fashioned word.

"The Royals."

The crowd's excited chattering dims to a slow murmur, and I hear the distinct clip-clop of horses approaching.

He tugs sharply on my wrist, downward this time, and I glare at him as I fall painfully to my knees. But he misses my annoyance, because his head is bowed. *Everybody's* head is bowed.

*Oh jeez.*

Not wanting to stand out, I follow suit, kneeling on the cold, hard ground until the click of the horses' hooves comes to a stop.

"You may rise!" came a tinkling, feminine voice.

I climb awkwardly to my feet since Aramax is apparently plenty adept at dragging me around, but not so much about helping me *up*. I dust off my knees as I peer around the tall man in front of me to hear the source of the voice.

"Good afternoon and happiest, wonderful greetings to *all* of Winterscape," the melodious voice continues. "I am *so* pleased to offer a day of good cheer, good times, and good friends."

My eyebrows shoot sky high.

A male voice joins the girlish one. "Welcome to our State of the Kingdom Address! Princess Bianca and I are most pleased to announce our special surprise for the mid-autumn festival."

The crowd is leaning forward, eagerly awaiting the mid-autumn treat, and I can't resist the eye roll, even though nobody is paying attention to me.

The Princess's voice rises up again. "We have a new flavor of Snow Powder! Orange Blossom!"

You'd think she announced world-peace because the crowd goes *wild*.

I sneak a glance at Aramax, feeling slightly mollified to see that he's looking stony as ever. At least *someone* isn't falling into raptures about orange blossom snow-whatever.

"And that concludes our State of the Kingdom Address. Snow Powder for everyone!"

My jaw drops open. *That* was the State of the Kingdom? Where was the substance? What was the *point*?

The crowd parts, and I catch a glimpse of the Prince and Princess as they prance away on pristine white horses.

I can't help it. I gasp. If everybody in this weird place has been exceptionally attractive lovely, the royal couple is positively stunning. The Prince may as well be a cartoon, all broad shoulders and white teeth, and Princess Bianca is even more startling.

Her hair is the darkest shade of black I've ever seen, made even more dramatic by her white complexion and deep, dark red lips.

"Does she always dress up like Snow White?" I whisper to Aramax.

His brown eyes drill into mine, and he doesn't answer. "We've got to go."

"Go where?"

But once again, his fingers are looped around my wrist as he weaves through the masses of ecstatic people. Apparently, the Snow Powder is some sort of cotton-candy like treat, because everywhere I look, there are people grinning wildly over pale orange puffs of something.

I let Aramax drag me along, sensing that I'm about to get some answers.

Finally, we make it to the other side of the square. The music starts up again, but Aramax continues to lead me back into the forest, on the other side now, and I feel the now familiar sensation of snowflakes on my face.

"Why does it do this?" I ask him, holding a palm up to the sky. "Why does it snow over the trees and not over the square?"

He gives me an irritated look over his shoulder. "Why would it snow on the square?"

"Right," I say. "Because that would be inconvenient."

And then I stop thinking all about snow powder and real snow and irritating, grumpy boys because I'm standing in front of the biggest building I've ever seen.

"It really is an honest to God castle," I say, my voice slightly awed.

Another of those wary side-long glances. "They don't have castles in Logosia?"

"Assuming Logosia is the place I know as home, no, they don't. Not like this. Not in a long time. Maybe ever."

He gives a slow nod, as though taking this in. And then he's pulling me forward, rougher this time, and I barely have time to register that I am walking over a real-life drawbridge.

"This isn't supposed to happen," he says, more to himself than to me.

"Okay, hold up," I say, pulling my hand back and stopping. "Let's be clear, Aramax, I don't want to be here any more than you want me to be, and I'll be leaving just the first chance I get. You get me?"

His eyes are bleak as they bore into mine. "Yeah. I *get* you. And you leaving is exactly what I'm afraid of."

## CHAPTER 7



He turns on his booted heel and continues towards the enormous gate, and I stare at his back, trying to make sense of any of this.

What does he mean, *that's what he's afraid of?*

How can he both not want me here, *and* be worried that I'll leave?

"Get moving, Harper," he says, not looking back at me.

*Adapt.*

I swallow nervously, and then hurry to catch up with him.

He reaches for my wrist again, but I balk.

"You don't have to drag me around like a stubborn donkey," I snap. "Have I given *any* indication that I wasn't going to follow you?"

His mouth twists in irritation, but after holding my gaze for several stormy seconds, he slowly eases pressure of his fingers on my arm. I instinctively rub my wrist as we both take in the angry red finger prints there. He looks away, not seeming fazed, much less apologetic.

We've stopped in an enormous, windowless stone room

that seems to rise up endlessly around us. It must be at least five stories high, made of pristine white stone.

It isn't glamorous, it's not even pretty, but it is *beautiful* in a foreboding kind of way. And despite being exposed to the outdoors, it's impeccably clean. I suppose that makes sense. A world that doesn't allow for snow to be cold, certainly would have no patience for a little thing like *dirt*.

Clean or not, the structure is imposing and intense. Sort of like the guy staring down at me.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"The barbican. One of them."

I give him a look. "Remember that bit where I mentioned we don't have castles where I'm from?"

His brown eyes flick over me briefly. "Right. A barbican is part of the castle's outer defense system. Completely impenetrable."

"Completely?" Now, that just seems cocky.

He lets out the smallest of sighs. "Honestly, I don't know. It's never been tested. Can we go?"

I hold up my palms innocently. "*You're* the one who stopped here."

And go *where*? There's no exit from the stone room that I can see.

He pulls out a tiny brown book from his pocket, looking like he wants to open it, but instead he taps it against his palm. "I'm trying to decide what to do with you."

"I'd love a shower," I say, trying to keep my tone pleasant. Then I remember where I am. Showers seem a bit...modern. "Bath?" I amend. "I'd kill for a bath."

I think I hear him snort, but it's hard to tell because he's on the move again, heading towards a corner of the stone room. No, the *barbican*. He runs his fingers along something in the wall, and a portion vanishes to reveal a small archway leading somewhere narrow and dark.

"You coming?" he asks.

I reluctantly walk towards the unwelcoming doorway. "I guess that's a no on the bath then?"

In response, he pushes me through the doorway. "Up."

As if there's any choice.

The archway leads directly into a narrow, spiraling, ascending staircase that's dimly lit by a few scattered candles several feet above our heads.

I'm kind of...disappointed. Everything else about this place has been so picturesque and grand, I was kind of hoping for the entrance to be a little more impressive.

"This is how you get into the castle?" I ask, as I began tentatively making my way up the stairs.

"It's how servants do. Hurry up."

"For the record, I don't like you," I mutter, relishing the immature jab.

"For the record, I don't like you either."

"*Shooooooooot*," I say. "Does that mean that's a no-go on me getting a pair of your ugly tights?"

He doesn't respond beyond a grunt, and we climb the rest of the way in silence. Finally, when my legs are burning and refusing to climb another step, he touches my arm to stop me.

"Wait."

I turn around, wondering if I've missed a doorway somewhere, but just like before, he simply slides his hand along a section of wall until another arched doorway appears.

"How do you know where all the latches or magic buttons are?" I ask.

"You just know. Probably the same way you open doors in Logosia."

*Um, no. Probably not.*

He starts to reach for my wrist again, but drops his arm when I lift a warning finger.



He gives a mocking bow, indicating that I should go through the doorway ahead of him.

"You're learning," I mutter, as I tentatively walk through.

I don't know what I'm expecting, but it's not the normal hallway we've just stepped into.

Well, *mostly* normal, except for the small nooks carved into the walls at regular intervals, each housing its own crackling little fire, with a rounded bench surrounding it.

"What are these paintings of?" I ask, gesturing at the art on the walls.

Aramax shrugs. "Just landscapes of the other kingdoms."

My footsteps falter. "Other kingdoms. You mean beyond Winterscape?"

"Yes, of course," he says impatiently.

This time it's my turn to grab his arm, pulling him to a stop. "Let's get something clear. There's no *of course* for me. This is all new. This is all weird. I'm not even sure it's *real*. All I want is to find my sister, who you're telling me isn't here, and if she's not, I just want to go home—"

He steps closer, giving a nervous look around. "Keep your voice down. And if you want to *get something clear*, it'll be this: *this is real*. Every bit as real as your Logosia, it's just different. And as far as going home..." He shakes his head. "Just wait until you have all the information."

"All of the information? How about *any* of the information," I snap. "Whenever you're ready, really. Hit me."

He blinks. "Hit you?"

I roll my eyes. "You know. Tell me."

He shakes his head, and turns away.

I hiss out a small sigh of frustration.

"These other lands," I try again. "Are they nearby?"

"They're called kingdoms, and no, they're not close. Here," he says, pausing in front of the enormous wooden doors.

"You still haven't told me where we're going," I say as I

follow him into the room. "And why haven't we seen any more people in the castle?"

"They're at the festival. It's actually worked in our favor that you chose today, of all days to show up. Everyone is distracted with their day off. It'll make the Assimilation easier."

I want to snap that I didn't choose today to arrive. I didn't *choose* any of this.

Except, I guess I sort of did. A strange man gave me the chance to find my sister, and I took it.

Although it's looking like I might have been wrong to trust him.

I'm about to pester Aramax with a million more questions, but the words die on my lips when I realize we're no longer alone.

A woman is sitting at a large wooden desk at the end of the long, rectangular room. The room itself is unremarkable. It seems to be an office or storage room of some kind, every surface covered with stacks of papers and books. The woman, however, is beautiful.

Her eyes flick up at Aramax briefly as we approach. "Why aren't you at the festival?"

He doesn't respond. He just stops a couple feet in front of the desk and stands waiting.

I follow suit, sensing a strange tension between Aramax and the woman. Her dark hair is piled haphazardly on top of her head, and though she's not as dazzling as the women I saw out in the square, the plain dress and messy hair doesn't diminish the classic beauty of her strong features.

"Max," she says with a sigh, "I know you think these servant-holidays are condescending—"

*Max*. So he does have a nickname.

"Supercilious," Max says. "Supercilious was the word I used."

"Annnnnnnnd that is why you have no friends," I mutter under my breath.

The woman's eyebrows shoot up, and she seems to notice me for the first time.

At first she looks merely curious, but the longer she stares at me, the paler she goes. The quill flutters to the desk (Seriously. A quill.), and she stands slowly, palms flat on the desk.

"Who are you?" she whispers.

I swallow, and look at Aramax for help, even though I don't expect it.

He surprises me by answering the woman. "She was just...*there*. Roaming about the square."

The woman hasn't looked away from me, but slowly she moves, coming around to the front of the desk. Even in her pallor, the woman moves confidently. As though she's someone in power.

I'm struck by the thought that she'd make a hell of a lot more commanding head of state than that ditzzy princess.

"How?" she whispers.

"It's not supposed to be like this," Aramax growls. "There's been no warning, no sign, no chance to prepare."

"You usually *know* when this is going to happen?" I ask.

Neither respond, and Max looks back to the woman. "Do you think Moira knows? She *has* to."

"I can't believe she wouldn't have said something, but then, Moira does like her secrets."

"What are we supposed to do with her?" Max growls.

"Hey, I'm right here," I snap.

"Yes, you are," the woman says, coming closer to study me, "And we'll figure this out. You need not to panic."

I'm not sure if she's talking to me or to Max, but I feel a tiny sense of relief that someone's taking charge. That someone knows what to do next, even if my appearance is unexpected.

"I'm Isadora," she says. "Head housekeeper."

"Harper."

"Harper," she says, as though trying to place the name and can't.

"You came in those clothes?" she asks, repeating Max's question from earlier. "Or is this Logosian attire?"

I can't help the little laugh about what they'd think if they could see actual the Logosian attire of jeans, hoodies, and flip flops.

I nod. "I was dressed in this when I...crossed over."

"Interesting," she says, circling me. "It's my understanding that there hasn't been a servant assignment in quite some time."

"What do you mean, assignment?"

Isadora looks at Aramax. "How much have you told her?"

"Um, that would be nothing," I say, before he can reply.

He shoots me an annoyed look. "How was I supposed to know a Logosian was going to just show up in the middle of the stupid festival?"

"Because that's what you're trained to do," she snaps. "It's our purpose."

"Not one that I asked for."

"None of us on the Council ask for the responsibility, it's an honor—"

"Are you serious right now?" he interrupts, incredulous. "You expect me to be grateful that she's here? That she could turn all of our lives upside down?"

"Woah, hey," I say, holding up both hands. "I really just want to find my sister and get out of here. No interest in turning anyone's life upside down."

Isadora's attention snaps back to me. "Your sister?"

"Yeah, that's another surprise," Max grumbles. "Apparently there are two of them."

“Impossible,” Isadora says crisply. “There’s never been two.”

I bite my tongue to retort that there’s a first time for everything.

“She disappeared about a week ago. Just..vanished, no warning, no clue.”

“And you think she crossed? Why?”

Belatedly, I’m realizing how inconvenient the guy on the park bench’s deal is. I consider breaking my promise, but if there’s even the slightest chance that doing so will leave me stuck here forever...

“I don’t know,” I say quietly.

They exchange a look.

“Well, I guess we’ll tackle that if and when your sister shows up,” Isadora says. “In the mean time, we need to get you Assimilated. It’s absolutely vital that only those on the Council know of your Logosian status.”

I laugh. “Wait, you expect me to blend in here? As one of the people down at the square?”

“As a servant, specifically. Every Logosian that crosses over arrives in the garb of his or her designated status.”

“And I crossed over as a servant.” I’m careful to keep my dismay on that out of my voice, but not careful enough, because Max shoots me an angry look.

“Too lowly for you, Harper?”

“Cool your jets, Aramax. I’m just trying to wrap my head around this. How would you feel if you woke up in my world?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t work that way.”

“Well up until a couple hours ago, I didn’t know it worked *any way*,” I say, my voice rising. “So why don’t you give me a freaking break.”

“A break? You want a break. You drop in here,

announced, destined to wreak havoc on all of us, and we're supposed to—“

“Max!” Isadora says. “Enough. That’s enough from both of you.”

Her censure feels almost motherly, and all of a sudden I think of my own mother.

I haven't let myself until now. Haven't let myself think what it'll be like for Meredith with two daughters gone. She doesn't adore me like she does Ari. I know that. But I'm still her daughter, and me just up and leaving ...

I lift a hand to swipe at my tears before they can fall, but I don't catch them in time. Isadora's face softens slightly, and Max looks away.

I sniffle and roll my eyes upward to stop the tears, grateful when the door behind us opens noisily, distracting Isadora and Max from my breakdown.

We all turn as a tall, black-haired girl with gorgeously smooth brown skin enters the room. She takes several steps forward before she froze. “Oh I'm so sorry, Miss Donovan. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was looking for Max.”

*Why?* I want to ask. Why would anyone seek out his company?

“It's alright, Keely. It's good you're here,” Isadora says, gesturing the girl forward.

Keely and I study each other curiously as she comes closer.

I've seen plenty of guys my age, but this is the first girl. She looks maybe a couple years older than me, at the most, and she's *beautiful*. She has model-high high cheekbones, a wide, serious mouth and candid, straight forward black eyes. She's thin, but in a fit, muscular sort of way.

She looks strong.

Keely comes to stand beside Max. I watch as he looks down at her, and my jaw nearly drops open at the soft

expression in his eyes. Her pinky reaches out and brushes his hand.

So it was like *that* with them then. Poor girl.

“Who is she?” Keely asks softly.

Max glances at Isadora who nods. “Go ahead. One of the benefits of you courting a Council member.”

He steps forward. “That is *not* why I’m with Keely.”

Keely reaches out and touches her fingers to his arm. “Max.”

He stills, but continues to glare at Isadora before cutting his eyes over to me.

“She’s a Logosian.”

Keely gasps softly, her head whipping around to me, studying me more closely this time, and not nearly as friendly.

“Take it all in,” I say, spreading my hands to the side. “I’m getting used to you people gaping.”

“Which is why the Assimilation is so important,” Isadora says in a take-charge voice. “The first thing you need to understand Harper, is the rules. The most important of which is that only Council members can know your status. That’s crucial.”

“Why?”

“For your safety. There are a number of people and creatures that would happily kill you in an instant.”

My head snaps back a little at that, and for the first time since waking up in the snow, I feel fear. Not just the confused panic of the past hours, but true, bone-chilling fear.

“Who’d want to kill me? And why?”

“I’ll start,” Max mutters.

“This is no laughing matter, Max. You know the importance of this,” Isadora says. “You and Keely both do.”

“How will I know who’s on the Council and who’s not?” I ask.

"You won't," she says. "Not at first. It's lucky Max found you when he did."

I snort. *Lucky's* not a word I'd use to describe it.

She gives a small smile. "You and my son don't get along."

My eyebrows go up at that. Isadora is Max's *mom*. Interesting.

"Let's just say he has a penchant for dragging me around," I say, not looking at him.

"Hmm," she says, seeming to lose interest in the topic. "You know, I think we have it lucky that you're a servant. Easier to explain your appearance, with new staff coming in from the Outer Banks so frequently. You'll need a placement."

"There's a spot in the Kitchen," Keely says, seeming glad to have a purpose. "Several, actually, especially with all the upcoming festivals and balls."

Isadora shakes her head. "There are no Council members in the Kitchens. We could reassign someone, I suppose, but the less change the better if we're to keep this quiet."

"So what do we do with her?" Max asks.

"You could just lock me in a closet?" I volunteer. "Or maybe put a rope around my neck and drag me around. You're *fantastic* at that."

Max opens his mouth to retort, but Isadora holds up a commanding hand. "I know. Declan."

Max freezes. "You're joking."

Keely shifts nervously. "It makes sense, Max. He's a Council member with an open valet spot. It's rather perfect actually."

Max points at me. "But she's a girl."

I pretend to swoon. "He noticed!"

I think I hear a little laugh from Isadora, but her face is unreadable when I glance back at her.

"Who's Declan?"



"The Duke of Claymore," Isadora says, picking up a strand of my limp hair. "He's currently without a valet, and although putting a female in the position is unconventional, it'll serve our purposes quite nicely. He'll be able to provide constant protection."

I resist the urge to bat her hand away as she loops my soggy strand of hair on top of my head experimentally as though I am a doll. "What exactly is the Council?" I ask.

"We'll explain once we get you situated. But the short version is that the Council of Arlen is a secret society honor-bound to protect and acclimate Logosians."

"Protect me from what? You said people would want to kill me. *Why?*"

It's Keely who speaks up. "That's the other part of the rule you should know. We're here to keep you safe, to get you Assimilated, but there are things we can't say."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't," Max cuts in. "Not without risking banishment."

"Banishment to where?"

"Logosia," Keely says, as though this is obvious.

I laugh, but there's no joy in it. "Let me see if I have this straight. You can tell me just enough to get me situated in your world, but not enough to actually *tell* me what's going on, because you're all too scared *you'll* be sent to *my* world?"

"I know it's difficult," Isadora says.

"No, you don't know," I shout. "This isn't *fair*. What choice do I have in any of this?"

"You little brat," Max snarls. "Don't talk to *us* about choice. You're the one who will—"

"Aramax!" Isadora's voice is furious, but her eyes are scared.

As are Keely's as she tugs Max back. "Don't," she whispers. "Please."

"They wouldn't banish me for that," Max mutters. But even he looks shaken by his outburst.

Isadora steps back, looking lost in thought.

"You two take her to the duke's room," Isadora says distractedly. "I'll summon Az. Perhaps he'll be able to track down Moira. She'll want to know about this straight away."

Too disoriented and overwhelmed to protest, I find myself following after Max and Keely, my mind racing with so many questions that I can't even figure out where to begin.

Even if I could, I doubt I'll get answers.

"Aramax," Isadora calls. "Use the wall passages."

"Yes, *Mother*."

I almost smile at his tone. I *know* that tone. It's one I've used a thousand times with Meredith.

My chest constricts at the thought of my mother coming home to find my empty bedroom. I push the thought aside. Sniveling won't get me home any faster.

The wall passage Isadora mentioned turns out to be another one of those narrow winding secret passages like Max and I came up in.

At first I try to keep track of direction. Two rights, a left, three rights, two more lefts.

But I'm bone-tired, mentally exhausted, and barely managing to put one foot in front of the other. The adrenaline from the surrealism of the situation is starting to wear off.

I want to find my sister and go home, and the magnitude of that task is threatening to choke me.

Max and Keely walk several feet ahead of me, whispering. Keely glances over her shoulder every now and then to give me an encouraging smile, but Max charges resolutely ahead, his pace fast and angry.

Finally they pause, and Keely opens another of those

magic doors, exiting into a lighted hallway. Max gestures that I should follow her, but he grabs my arm before I could walk through the doorway.

“Don't look at anyone. Don't stand out,” he whispers.

“Might be easier if you don't look like you want to kill me,” I shoot back. “Also, a hairbrush wouldn't be unwelcome.”

“Keely's off to work on improving your appearance,” he replies. “In the mean time, try to be unobtrusive.”

*Unobtrusive.* Just a few days ago, *unobtrusive* was a specialty of mine. I'm a pro at not standing out. Even when I'd joined the cheer squad at Meredith's insistence, I ensured I was solidly in the middle of the pyramid. Ariana had been at the top, obviously.

And though my course schedule at school leaned heavily towards the 'brainy' category, I avoid raising my hand in class. I don't know why exactly. Lack of confidence, I suppose. Or maybe just lack of caring.

Max apparently doesn't trust me not to cause a scene, because as we start making our way down the hallway, he crowds me as close to the wall as possible.

Even if I hadn't known we were going to a 'duke's' room, it's clear we're entering a very different part of the castle. The carpet is a dark red velvet, rich and soft. There are no windows, but the corridor is still bright thanks to dozens of chandeliers with what seem to be real candles.

Just as in the servant's wing, there are cozy fire place nooks every few feet, but these ones are bigger, surrounded by velvet couches, and bookshelves lined with leather bound books all the way to the ceiling.

Two elaborately dressed women approach, and Max gives me a warning glance.

He bows as we pass, but they don't seem to register our

presence. It's a little uncomfortable, just how invisible servants seem to be here.

Max stops in front of a dark wooden door. I stare at the gold plaque on the door.

**The Duke of Claymore.**

My tiredness is replaced with nerves. A duke? Seriously? And what exactly does a valet do? It better be limited to fetching the old guy's slippers or walking his dog..

"Whatever you do, do *not* swoon," Max says out of the corner of his mouth as he knocks.

"Oh, gosh, I'll sure try, Aramax. It'll be hard though, what with swooning being such a big hobby of mine."

And then the door opens, and my breath whooshes.

I'm standing face to face with the hottest guy I've ever seen.

## CHAPTER 8



I understand now, why Max warned me.  
If I *were* to ever swoon, it would be over this guy.

He has close-cut dark blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and I'm pretty sure you could sharpen a knife on his jaw line.

That, and he has just about the best looking shoulders I'd ever seen on a guy. *Ever*.

Max mutters something under his breath, but the other guy smiles pleasantly as he peers at me.

"What's this?" he asks Max, gesturing in my direction.

"Your new valet," Max says, shoving his way into the room.

I start to follow Max, but gorgeous guy has braced his hand on the door jam, stopping my entrance. I try to duck under, but misjudge and slam my face into his very firm forearm.

He gives me an amused smile before dropping his arm so I can pass.

And oh, God, he has dimples.

And then Max's words register. *Your new valet*.

*This* is the Duke of Claymore.

Not an old dude. Not by a long shot.

"I don't need a new valet, Max," the duke says. "My old one was a pain in the ass. And a girl? Is there some boy shortage in the servant class I haven't heard about?"

Max glowers. "Trust me, not my idea. Don't like it, take it on up to the top of the Council."

The duke frowns, folding his arms. "The Council. What the hell do they care about my valet?"

Max says nothing, and I know the second the truth slams into the duke, and I'm oddly disappointed, because now he's looking at me in horror rather than amusement.

"*She's* a Logosian?" he asks, eyes drifting over me.

He's hardly the first person to give me a once over today, but he's definitely the first one to give me goosebumps.

"Yeah. Found her wandering around the Square."

The duke looks nearly as irritated by my very existence as Max. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

"The same thing the rest of us swore to do," Max says. "Shield her. Protect her."

At that, I finally find my voice. "Okay, enough. First of all, my name is *Harper*, not *her*. I've been dragged all over a castle, and I've been very tolerant of all of this cryptic babbling about protection, but so far I haven't seen so much as a mouse in this place. Frankly, the most threatening thing I've seen is this guy," I say, pointing at Max.

The duke's lips quirk into a surprised smile, some of the anger fading. "Feisty."

Max rolls his eyes.

But the duke and I both ignore him, and the duke steps forward, hand extended. "I'm Declan."

"And you absolutely shouldn't call him that," Max butts in quickly. "The appropriate address is *Your Grace*."

"Oh come on, Max. She's not *really* a servant," Declan says.

"Yeah, but the rest of the castle won't know that."

The duke's hand is still extended, and I force myself to shake it even though I know my hands were ice cold and more than a little clammy.

His fingers close around mine, and I suck in a breath.

I should have been prepared for it, but I'm not. His palm against mine is electric. Declan's previously impersonal smile slips slightly, and his gaze turns puzzled before he yanks his hand back.

For a second, nobody speaks.

I want to think that he'd felt it too, whatever *it* had been, but if he had, he doesn't look the least bit pleased about it.

*His Grace* lowers himself to one of the chairs. "This is...not ideal."

"Why, is having a servant girl traipse after you going to cramp your romantic pursuits?" Max asks.

*Servant girl?*

Declan gives a tired sigh. "Would you quit it with that? You've got your girl, what do you care if I try to find mine?"

I'm saved the embarrassment of volunteering for the part of being *his girl* by a flash of brilliant light.

I barely bite back a shriek as a man appears in the center of the room.

It takes a second for the smoke to clear, and I wonder for a moment if this is the threat Max had referred to, but both he and Declan look more annoyed than concerned.

My first impression of the newcomer is...*orange*.

He's tall and lanky, with slicked-down black hair, a rather long nose and a violently orange robe that looked like it was made out of something crinkly and shiny.

The man's eyes lock on me immediately. "I am Azuther!"

he announces in a booming voice. “Great Sorcerer of Winterscape and Apprentice to Moira.”

He holds up his hands grandly and closes his eyes as though awaiting applause. I glance at Declan for guidance, and he rolls his eyes and winks at me before standing. “Hey Az.”

The tall man opens one eye to take in the scene and deflates when he realizes nobody looks impressed with his entrance. “Your Grace,” he says with the barest nod of his head. He glanced at Max. “Aramax.”

Max inclines his head. “Az.”

“And you!” Az says, whipping his head around to me. “Are Harper. The Logosian.”

He hisses the last word dramatically and begins to walk in wide circles around me.

“Did you know anything about this, Az? Did you see it?” Declan asks.

Az sniffs. “No. Only because I’ve been busy with other things, of course.” He turns to me. “As one of the few magic people left in the kingdom, I have been bestowed upon the gift of sight.”

“So, um...you’re like a wizard?” I ask. This is promising. Weird, but promising. If he’s capable of appearing out of thin air, maybe he has some weird trick up his orange sleeve that can help me find Ari.

“Barely a wizard,” one of the guys whispers.

Az either ignores or doesn’t hear the slight. “I prefer the word *sorcerer*.”

This preference is unfortunate, because the man has a slight lisp, and *sorcerer* isn’t really the best word choice for him.

“So Az. What’s the story?” Declan asks impatiently. “She’s here by mistake, right?”

The sorcerer flaps his cape behind him self-importantly



before extending a hand to me and leading me to a couch in the middle of the room.

He settles into the chair beside mine with a flourish.

“Your Grace,” Az says with a condescending look at Declan. “There are no mistakes when it comes to The Cross-over. You know this.”

“Then why weren't there any signs?” Max says, sitting on the couch across from me.

Az shakes his head, looking frustrated and slightly baffled. “There should have been. But Moira would have told me.”

“Who's Moira?” I ask. Isadora had mentioned her name too.

“Faylin's head sorceress,” Declan answers, sitting beside me on the couch. “She's also the head of the Council of Arlen.”

“I thought Isadora was head.”

“Isadora's only head of the Winterscape branch. Every kingdom has their own Arlenian Council. The Logosians rarely show up in the same kingdom twice. We need to be prepared. All of us.”

“So my sister might have ended up in one of these other kingdoms.”

Az leads forward. “Sister?”

Max groans. “Not this again.”

I ignore him, and fill in Az and Declan on Arianna's disappearance and my theory that she might be here.

“I'm afraid I don't see how that's possible,” Az says kindly. “There has never been two.”

My shoulders slump, and I feel Declan's hand touch my shoulder. “Hey. I'm sure wherever she is, she's safe.”

I give him an appreciative smile. It's the first bit of kindness all day, and I feel my eyes watering, but I blink back the tears.

Declan's hand squeezes before he removes it.

"Max said these other kingdoms are far away," I say, determined to get some answers. "How far?"

"Don't even think about it," Max says, before anyone else can answer.

"Think about what?" Declan asks. "You a mind reader, Max?"

Max doesn't break his warning eye contact with me. "She thinks she's going to find her sister in one of these other kingdoms."

"Oh no, you *really* mustn't do that," Az says in a worried voice.

I narrow my eyes at Max, irritated at him exposing my plan before I can fully hatch it, and I switch gears.

"Okay, can you at least tell me how this world...Faylin, relates to my world? Logosia? Or will that get you *banished*."

I put the last word in air quotes, but nobody looks amused.

"Moira could answer better," Az replies at last. "But my understanding is that the worlds simply co-exist."

"But there's a Crossover," I say. "How is it that there's a Crossover, but nobody from my world knows about this one?"

*Almost* nobody, I mentally amend, thinking about the man in the park.

"There are exceptions," Az says. "But I don't know how any of it works. Truly."

"That's not good enough," I say, frustrated. "Someone must know."

"Moira knows more than most," Declan says gently. "But she could be anywhere and it could take Az days to track her down. In the meantime, we have bigger things to worry about."

"Like?"

“We need to figure out how to pass you off as one of us,” Max says.

“And I’d cooperate with that, because...why? This mysterious threat?”

Declan reaches for my hand. I glance up at him sharply, but he seems as surprised as me by the contact. As though he hadn’t meant to reach for the hand of a girl that he’s just met.

He recovers quickly, giving me a quick smile before squeezing my fingers in comfort. “That’s what the Council is for,” he says. “We’ll protect you.”

“Well,” Max says darkly. “At least we’ll try to.”

## CHAPTER 9



So here's a part of the valet role that nobody bothered to mention until now.

Me and Declan? The guy I don't even know, but seem to be crushing on, *hard*?

We're going to be roommates.

Sort of.

"Wait, so I sleep here?" I ask, looking around the small room Declan shows me.

"I know. It's small," Declan says, misunderstanding the reason for my dismay. "But feel free to spend as much time out in the main chambers as you'd like."

*Uh huh.* I don't know that I'll be sticking around this world long enough to be spending much time anywhere.

Still, my room's not terrible. Small and unremarkable compared to the main ducal chambers perhaps, but it's actually bigger than my room at home. The bed looks freshly made with white linens, there's a small desk beneath an arched window, and there's a chair in the corner that begs for a good book.

The room itself isn't the problem. The problem is that my

room is connected to Declan's room by a flimsy looking door. No lock.

"So, Harper, what part of Logosia are you from?" he asks, rocking back on his heels as he studies me.

"California?" I say with a shrug, suspecting it won't mean anything to him.

He nods in acknowledgement, but there's no flicker of understanding in his gaze. I guess the Council of Arlen members don't have to study countries and states.

"Did you leave family behind?"

I glance at him in surprise. He's the first person I've seen who's bothered to care about this.

"Just my mom," I say, looking down at my shoes.

He reaches out his hand, but it drops before it touches me, and I wonder if he's thinking about our touch from earlier. The electricity of it.

"In all the studying we've done for the arrival of a Logosian, I never thought about that part," he says quietly. "We focus so much on how to get you to adjust to here, that we never think much about what you left behind."

I blink back the tears and I stare at him. "But why am I here?" I ask. "Why do the Logosians come?"

"I don't know," he says.

"Don't know, or don't want to be banished by telling me?" I counter.

He winces, and shoves his hands into the pockets of his black pants. He's wearing the same simple attire as the guys I saw in the square. Dark pants, boots, and a blue sweater that perfectly matches his eyes.

"I truly don't know the why," he says. "It's just always been this way."

"And it's important somehow," I say, watching his face. "My arrival impacts your world?"

His jaw moves, and I think he's not going to respond, but finally he nods. "Yes."

"Max hates that I'm here."

Declan laughs. "Max hates most everyone except Keely. Don't mind him."

"But other people must hate that I'm here too," I say. "If they'd want to hurt me."

His face goes blank. "Nobody will hurt you."

"But they might want to?" I press.

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. "Fairies, but you're persistent. Okay, *yes*. There are people who resent the Logosians role in our world. People who want to be free of your curse."

"My curse?"

"Not yours," he says. "Just...your people. I really can't say more."

I cross my arms. "Convenient, this whole sworn to secrecy thing. You can tell me just enough, but nothing actually useful."

"There's nothing convenient about the threat of being banished to Logosia," he snaps.

"Tell it to someone who wasn't yanked out of her world," I snap back. "What makes you think Faylin is so much better than Logosia?"

Declan sighs. "I'm here to help you, Harper. Don't take my head off."

"Help me find my sister. Help me get *home*."

For a second, he looks stricken. "Afraid I can't do that."

Disappointment burns my throat.

"Fine. Then get out."

"Harper—"

"Actually, forget it," I say, brushing past him. "I'll leave."

He grabs my arm before I can leave, his grip just as

commanding as Max's has been, although his touch seems to burn right through my skin.

I gasp, and he releases me as though he too felt the burn.

Declan shakes his head as though trying to clear it. "I know you're scared. I know you're mad. But I can't let you leave."

"You can't *let* me?"

He runs both hands through his hair and laughs, almost to himself. "All that training, and they never mentioned how difficult this would be."

"This training," I say slowly. "Only the Council receives it? And only on the off-chance a Logosian might show up in their lifetime, in their kingdom?"

He shrugs. "Basically, yes."

"And everybody hopes it won't be them. Their lifetime, *their* kingdom."

Declan's gaze locks on mine, and he doesn't lie to me. "Right. It's...a duty."

I look away, annoyed to realize I don't want to be a duty. Not in his eyes.

*Get it together, Harper. You've known him for all of an hour.*

And yet there's no denying the pull. I've spent my entire life waiting to feel this. Wanting to experience what Ari and my friends experience when they like a guy.

I haven't understood until now. Almost as though I've just been waiting. For *him*.

"Just give us a chance to get oriented," Declan says quietly. "This is new for us, too."

I don't respond, because I'm distracted by movement in the mirror over his shoulder.

At first I think someone else has entered the room, but when I whip my head around, it's just us.

"You okay?" he asks with a little laugh.

I look back at the mirror. "I could have sworn I saw something—someone in the mirror."

"Hmm," he says, turning to glance at the mirror, his eyes meeting mine in the reflection. "Well that's the funny thing about mirrors, Harper. That was *you*," he says in a loud, teasing whisper.

I shove at his shoulder. "Yeah, they work that way in Logosia, too. But it *wasn't* me. It was a...woman, I thought."

He gives me an amused looks and I sigh. "Yeah. Okay, maybe I'm just tired."

"Hopefully not too tired," a female voice says, as Keely knocks on the door and enters the small room. "I've got some stuff for you."

I glance down at the pile of clothes in her arms, feeling a little stab of relief at the hairbrush. The mirror's confirmed that my hair's even worse than I thought.

I start to move to take the stuff from her, but Declan moves at the same time towards the door, and we bump awkwardly.

I freeze, as does he, just for a second before he gives the slightest shake of his head and slips out the door without glancing back.

Keely follows his departure with a surprised look. "What's up with him?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, accepting the pile of stuff from her and dropping it on the bed.

"He's usually a bit more charming than that."

I bite my tongue to keep from saying that I thought he was *plenty* charming. "Ah. Ladies' man?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

She snorts. "Understatement. I don't know that there's a girl in Faylin not in love with him."

"Except for you?" I ask.



She smiles. "Yeah. I'm afraid there's only one guy from me."

"How long have you and Max been a thing?"

She smiles as she picks up one of the dresses from my bed and hangs it in the small wardrobe. "Forever, it seems like."

"He's the one, huh?"

Her smile slips. "I hope so. We'll have each other for as long as we're allowed."

"Whoa," I say, glancing up. "Allowed? You have to get permission to like, marry, or whatever?"

Keely looks stricken, her hands on her lips. "I shouldn't have—please don't say anything."

I give her a puzzled smile. "Honestly, I'm not even sure what I would say."

The poor girl still looks ready to puke, and I pick up a pair of pants from the pile. "What are these for? We're allowed to wear pants instead of the dresses?"

"Oh," she says, rolling her eyes, and seeming to relax slightly. "Those are from Max. Said something about tights?"

I laugh a little in surprise, because apparently Mr. Stick-Up-the-Butt has a sense of humor in there somewhere.

"But for real, I can wear them?" I ask her.

"Well...you shouldn't," she says, biting her lip. "Girls are allowed to wear them for riding, but ladies' maids are expected to wear dresses the rest of the time."

"But I'm not a lady's maid. I'm a valet. Right?"

She chews the inside of her cheek. "I guess."

"And what do valets wear?"

Keely sighs. "I can already tell you're going to wear them no matter what I say, so just get it over with."

I grin and kick off my shoes, pulling the pants on under my dress before searching around the pile for a shirt.

I find a white one that looks a lot like the one Max was wearing, except smaller.

"I believe he grabbed it from one of the smaller boys," Keely says. "And I absolutely *don't* think he expected you to wear it. He was being sarcastic."

"Yeah, well, it'll be a nice surprise for him then, won't it?" I ask as I turn my back and trade the dress for the shirt, tucking it in as I turn back around.

Keely is studying me. "You're really not what I expected."

"Yeah, I'm getting that I seem to be a surprise," I say grimly. "What exactly do you guys expect from Logosians? Have you ever met any others?"

"I really can't say."

"Can't or won't?"

She smiles. "The first one."

"Yeah, I figured," I mutter.

She motions for me to sit as she picks up the hairbrush. "If you're going to dress like a boy, we at least need to get your hair looking like a girl."

I comply, only because it gives me a chance to question her further as she begins brushing out my tangled damp hair.

"So what does a valet do?" I ask as she begins braiding a piece of hair along my temple.

"Similar to what a lady's maid does, I guess. Although I suppose you'll spend a lot less time fetching coordinated ribbons."

The irritation in her voice is plain, and I try to imagine what my life would have been like if I'd grown up here. Instead of filling my time with extra-curriculars and dreaming about college, planning my life, I'd have been serving someone else.

"How does one end up a lady's maid?" I ask.

She meets my eyes in the mirror, and I see she knows what I'm really asking. "You mean why are some people servants and others members of the gentry?"

I nod.

She turns her attention back to my hair. "We're born into it, mostly. Some of the elders like to throw around the word 'destiny,' although most of us sort of resent the implication that we have no control over our futures."

"Why not flee some place where you're not a servant? One of those other kingdoms everyone else keeps talking about."

Keely is quiet for a moment as she finishes the braid and starts another matching one on the other side. "The kingdoms aren't all connected. There are stories about how they used to be. How one ran right into the next. But now they're all divided."

"By...?"

"Black Forest."

"Seriously?" I ask

"You sound skeptical."

"It's just a bit...cliché. There's a black forest in *every* story, it seems like."

"And where do you think those stories come from?"

I open my mouth, only to shut it again when I realize I don't have a response. *Good point.*

"So this black forest...you can't cross it," I say slowly.

Keely hesitates, as though wondering how much she's supposed to tell. "Well, you *can*. But hardly anyone ever does. And only when Moira's sure the forest is relatively quiet, and then it's with large envoys that bring visiting royalty from kingdom to kingdom. It's a risk, but Isadora always says it's good for morale. People like to be reminded that Faylin is bigger than their own kingdom."

I feel the first real sense of hope since I arrived here. "So if my sister is in one of the other kingdoms, she's reachable. Technically."

"Don't even think about it, Harper. Seriously. When people *do* brave the forest, they do so with dozens of knights

and magical guidance. You'd never make it alone. None of us would."

I crack my knuckles in frustration. "Okay, what about the Council? How does one get appointed to it? How big is it? Who's on it?"

She pulls the top half of my hair into a pony, before repeating the same process with the lower half of my hair, creating a double ponytail thing, that is surprisingly pretty.

"The Council is kept small. No more than twenty-five people per kingdom. The small size ensures the best chance of secrecy."

"But the rest of the people. They know about Logosians."

"They know *of* them. They know the lore. But only about half the rumors are true."

"Isn't it a dead giveaway when a new girl shows up, that she might be a Logosian?"

Keely shakes her head. "Not really. Winterscape is huge. Far larger than the castle. There are people coming in all the time from the Outers. Servants, visiting tours, the wealthy who are invited to the Royal's dinner parties, balls, and so on. A new valet is hardly going to get a second look."

"Even a girl valet?"

She smiles. "Yes well, people will assume Declan is sweet on you and wants to keep you close."

I look away from the mirror then, because her words make me feel uncomfortably warm.

"You will have to learn to fit in, though," Keely says, meeting my eyes in the mirror as she experimental winds the top half of my ponytail into a bun. "Isadora's worried about it."

"About me not fitting in?"

"You're not quite what the books tell us to expect," she says slowly, as she pulls a hair pin out of the pocket of her dress and begins to loop pieces of my hair on top of m head.

“What am I supposed to be?”

“More...I don’t know,” she says, frowning. “You’re very independent. Females Logosians in the past have been more ...”

“Damsel in distress?”

She smiles. “I suppose.”

“How can they afford to be what with the people trying to kill them, or whatever?”

“That’s what the Council’s for. And not everyone in Faylin is out to kill Logosians. Mostly we’re good people. *Kind* people.”

“Who holds Logosians captive?”

She jabs a pin against my scalp with more force than necessary. “For what it’s worth, even if we wanted you to leave, we wouldn’t know how to make it possible.”

I search her face in the mirrors for signs that she’s lying, trying to appease me, but I see nothing but determination to get my stupid hairstyle just right.

She’s an odd dichotomy. She looks strong, maybe a bit tomboy, but she’s also impossibly pretty, and the way she’s frowning makes me think she’s annoyed that she can’t make me as pretty as her.

I get what Max sees in her.

The other way around, not so much.

At the thought of Max, another question pops into mind. “If there are only twenty-five people in the Council, isn’t it a bit of a coincidence that it was Max of all people that found me? There must be what, dozens of servants?”

“Hundreds. But it’s not so odd, really,” she says, winding the last piece of hair into an elaborate up-do that rivals anything I’d seen in any prom picture. “Max’s mom is the head of housekeeping, and Max helps her keep the books. He’d spot an outsider when nobody else would.”

“Lucky me,” I mutter.

"He's not what you think, you know. He's sweet, really. Kind."

"Mmm hmm," I say noncommittally. "What's the deal with him and the duke? Tension much?"

"Oh that," Keely says, flopping down on the bed. "Typical guy stuff. Max and Declan were friends as kids, but as they got older, their social status caused more and more rifts. Then Max got assigned as Declan's most recent valet, and things really got tense."

"How come he's not anymore?"

"He requested reassignment."

"You can do that?"

"Most of the gentry wouldn't allow it," she concedes. "But by that point, Declan was as fed up with Max as Max was with him. He couldn't sign the release form soon enough."

"What's Max's assignment now?"

"Nothing yet. He's mostly just helping out his mother with administrative stuff, which he hates. But then, Max doesn't do well with any of his assignments. Doesn't do well with authority."

"Well now, that's shocking."

"I bet Declan will be relieved to have you instead of Max though. You won't get in his way."

"Get in his way...?"

Keely eyes dance as she leans forward slightly. The expression is so familiar I nearly smile. Every female past the age of twelve knows that look. It screams *gossip*.

"Let's just say Declan's lady-killing ways didn't sit well with Max. It was their biggest point of contention."

"He can't have *that* many girlfriends," I say, a bit sourly.

"Can't he?" she says with a wink. "You've seen him. And he's very aware of his appeal."

*Oh. So he's like that then.*

I swallow my disappointment.

She gives me a knowing look. “Don’t even bother with the coy, disinterested routine. The guy’s gorgeous. I adore Max and even *I* can see it.”

“There’s never been anyone truly special? To the duke, I mean?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Lately? Lady Rowena. She’s my boss. But next month...who knows?”

There’s an impatient knock at the door, and I’m unsurprised to hear Max’s voice. “Keels, you done, or what?”

“Nice beau,” I say blandly.

“He’ll grow on you.” Keely stands and hooks her arm in mine. “You ready for a crash course in all things Faylin?”

“Today? I’d assumed we’d start fresh tomorrow.”

I want a chance to gather my thoughts. To come up with a plan.

Keely lifts a shoulder. “It’s early yet. Hardly mid-day.”

Declan isn’t there when we emerge from the servant quarters, but Max is. He looks critically up and down, frowning at my attire.

“You can’t wear that.”

“*You* sent them up.”

“For riding.”

“I’m a valet,” I say sweetly. “This is what we wear, is it not?”

I can actually see him chafe at my use of the word *we*.

His eyes move back up to my head. “Her hair’s falling down,” he says, shifting his irritability to Keely.

“It’s the best I could do,” Keely replies with admirable patience. “It’s too short to do anything with.”

Short? My hair is nearly halfway down my back. And I admit I’m disappointed by Max’s assessment. I’d actually thought I was starting to look the part of Faylinian, or whatever.

Not as breathtakingly gorgeous as the rest of them of

course, but between the shirt, and the braids, and the boots, I feel decidedly medieval.

Although, it's got me wondering ...

"Why is everyone here so beautiful?" I blurt out.

I don't look at Max as I say it. Don't want him to think I'm complimenting him, even if the guy is good-looking in a brooding sort of way.

"Surely everyone in Faylin doesn't look like a magazine ad," I press, when neither answer me.

"Well," Keely says slowly. "I'm not sure what a magazine ad is, but as far as the people you've seen...it's sort of...well, no, not everyone in Faylin is ..."

She blushes, as though trying to figure out how to explain her own beauty.

"Princess Bianca likes pretty people," Max says impatiently. "Everyone from the court on down to the servant is selected based mainly on looks."

My mouth drops open. "That's...that's..."

"The way it is," Max snaps.

"What happens if someone pretty has a not-so-pretty kid," I challenge. "Are they kicked out? Chased to the burbs?"

They're both staring at me. "What?"

"Never mind," I mutter.

Then a thought occurs. What if I'm not pretty enough? What if that's the reason I was assigned as a servant instead of a duchess, or whatever.

I'm cute on a good day, plain on an average day. Hardly the type to compete with leggy, curvy Keely, or the pristine princess, or the flawless Lady Rowena...

Max gives me a last dismissive look before turning to Keely. "I need to check in with Isadora, find out when the Council's meeting. You can show her around the castle?"

"I can show her the basics, but you'll need to be the one to train her. There are valet duties that I know nothing about."



“Declan can address anything that you can't cover as she gets used to it. Or have Bender help.”

Keely wrinkles her nose. “Bender's an idiot.”

“Exactly. He's unlikely to catch onto her Logosian status, which means he'll be good practice.”

“You're still the better option,” Keely persists.

My stomach grumbles loudly, an effective end to their argument.

Keely gives Max one last disapproving look before smiling at me. “I'm thinking we start your tour with the dining wing?”

“That sounds great,” I say gratefully.

We're almost to the door when Max calls my name. I turn back, and he's glaring at my pants.

“Harper. Change into a dress.”

The way I slam the door behind me as I follow Keely lets him know exactly what I think of *that* suggestion.

## CHAPTER 10



Getting around the castle is a good deal more pleasant when we can use the main hallways instead of the hidden servant stairwells.

“Why are they even there if you don’t have to use them?” I ask Keely about the passageways.

She shrugs. “Servants used to be expected to stay more hidden. Things are less formal now, and the hidden passages are hardly used. Not for any official purpose,” she says with a wink.

I yelp as something bright and colorful whizzes by my ear.

“What the heck was that?” I ask, patting at my hair to make sure the insect isn’t stuck in the pile of braids and curls.

Keely laughs. “It’s just a couple of messenger pixies. They’re mischievous, but harmless.”

Pixies. *Of course.*

“Okay so up here on the right are the two doors you *definitely* need to remember,” Keely says. “The first is the Earl of Beaufort. Declan’s best friend, and the master of Bender, who we mentioned earlier.” She points to the other door.

“And this, is Lady Rowena's, who's *my* mistress. Don't be surprised if you spend a lot of time delivering messages to these two chambers.”

“Got it,” I say, even though I had no intention of playing post office for some spoiled 'gentry.'

I continue to search the walls for signs of secret escape routes, barely listening to Keely.

Next up is the servant kitchen and dining hall. There are set meal times, and now isn't one of them, but there are bread and various sandwich toppings for in-between meals.

I'm a little disappointed. Here I am in a land with pixies and tricked-out snowfall and sorcerers, and I'm expected to make my own ham sandwich?

I eat and walk as Keely babbles about the other crucial parts of the castle.

There are the gardens, where servants aren't allowed without explicit permission. There's the ballroom, where we aren't allowed unless at the request of our master.

And then there's the Grand Hall, where we aren't allowed at all. *Ever*.

“Why not?” I ask, eyeing the massive doors guarded by two burly looking dudes in such old-school armor.

“The Grand Hall is the only way in and out of the Royal Chambers, the Magic Wing and the Library,” Keely says, lowering her voice as she tugs me out of sight. “Nobody goes in but the prince, princess, Az, and Moira when she's here. And their servants, but a simple silence charm prevents them from gossiping about what happens behind those walls.”

My eyes linger on the enormous metal bar that falls across the huge wooden doors. I take in the swords sheathed at the hips of the guards.

It's the first sign I'd seen that not everything in Winterscape is all giggles and fluff.

If there's something worthwhile to know about this place, I'm guessing that's where I'll find it.

A good-looking brown-haired guy with mischievous green eyes bounds up and purposefully bumps into Keely. I hide a smile. Male/female dynamics in the castle aren't so different from San Diego Prep, at least among the servants.

And this guy is a servant, I note, taking in the attire that matches Max's attire exactly. And my own.

"Great," she drawls. "Bender. *Just* the fool I'm looking for."

"Who's your friend?" Bender asks curiously, staring at me.

"This is Harper. The Duke of Claymore's new valet."

He laughs. "Claymore *would* have a girl valet. I'm Bender," he says, extending a hand. "Beaufort's valet. Since our employers are friends, we'll be spending a lot of time together."

"Lucky her," Keely mutters.

"Bold choice on the pants," he says, looking me over, more curious than admiring.

"It's the uniform, no?" I say with a cheeky smile.

He smiles back. "I haven't seen you around. Where have you been assigned?"

"She's from the Outer Banks. She's been caring for her relatives, so she's new to the castle." Keely tells the lie too quickly, but Bender doesn't seem to notice.

"Nice. Let me know when Crusty Keely here is done with you, Harper, "Then I'll show you the *real* valet's life."

"Fantastic idea, Benji, I'm sure Harper can't *wait* to join you and the rest of the guys in picking your nose and rolling around in the mud."

"Aw, Keels, if you wanted to roll around in the mud, too, you could have just asked."

Keely rolls her eyes. "Come on, Harper."

"Bye," I say, finding myself returning Bender's easy grin.

"Don't smile, it'll only encourage him," Keely hisses.

Sure enough, Bender gives me a bold wink. I wink back, just because he's so darn likable, especially after the intensity of Max, and...whatever it was that Declan was.

Keely and I have just made it back to the residential part of the castle, when a tall, thin, and impossibly beautiful blonde spots Keely.

I expect her to ignore us, the way all of the other non-servants have, but her gaze narrows, and she starts waking towards us.

Keely makes a sound of distress.

The woman's dress is mint green and absolutely nothing like Keely's dress or the one I'd been wearing earlier.

There are layers upon layers of silk, and lace, and pearls. How the heck she manages to glide so easily under all that fabric is beyond me.

Keely drops into a graceful curtsy, and I try to do the same, although it feels more like an awkward squat.

"Lady Rowena, this is Harper, the Duke of Claymore's new valet."

*Lady Rowena.*

*This* is the woman Declan is supposedly chasing. I'm oddly disappointed in his choice. I expected her to be beautiful, and of course she is, but she also has a vapid, self-absorbed vibe.

She's older than I expected. Older than Declan, definitely, by a couple years, I'd guess.

I can tell she's all set to dismiss me, but her gaze snaps back to me when she hears my title.

Her wide blue eyes narrow, and she looks me over, lingering on the pants. "What do you mean, she's his new valet? Surely she won't be living in his servant chambers. That isn't proper."

"Harper is a servant, my lady," Keely says nervously. "It's unusual, but not untoward."

Lady Rowena's nostrils flutter as she turns back to me, taking in every single one of my unremarkable facial features, the hair that's slipped out of the bun, and is now falling around my face.

She apparently decides that I'm a non-threat, because she refrains from the hissy fit I'm braced for. "Whatever. She won't last. I need you, Keely. Lady Katarmarina is hosting a social tonight, and I want to wear my blue silk dress."

"That's currently being laundered, my lady. You asked me to take it down yesterday."

"Yes, and now I'll need you to bring it up today, okay?" she asks sweetly.

Keely looks frustrated but resigned. She turns to me, clearly torn between her secret duties for the Council and appeasing Lady Rowena.

I give her a reassuring smile. "I'll get back to His Grace. I'm sure he needs me."

I choose my words purposely, letting my gaze meet Lady Rowena's just long enough to see the speculative look in her eyes, before dropping my head and pretending to look meek and abiding.

"You know how to get back to his chambers?" Keely whispers under her breath, as Rowena turns on her heel with a curt order for Keely to hurry up.

"Definitely," I say, shooing her away with a wave.

Truth? I don't have the faintest clue how to get back to Declan's room.

But I *do* remember how to get back to the Grand Hall.

The real question is, how did I get *in*?

## CHAPTER 11



I'm almost disappointed how easy it is to get into the Grand Hall.

Keely made it sound like an impossible feat, but now I'm wondering if anyone's ever even tried, because I manage to make it inside in under five minutes.

Just a few heart-pounding moments of sweet-talking the guards, explaining that I'm Az's new assistant and that he's asked me to come fetch his orange robe for laundering.

I mentally thank Lady Rowena for the idea.

The guards had exchanged a surprise look, but the bigger one merely lifted his shoulder in disinterest, and the other went through the slow, elaborate process of moving the various bars and locks.

I nearly roll my eyes at the ease of it.

I'm becoming increasingly certain that all the dire warnings about death threats to Logosians is a bunch of crap to keep me in line.

Nobody seems to care who I am, or what I am, and nobody in the castle seems to be even remotely braced for one of the dangerous Crossovers.

And it's not like I'm out to cause them harm, I'm really not. I just want to find this Moira person, because if anyone knows where my sister is, I'm guessing it's her.

The guards finally finish unlocking the elaborate security stymie, before stepping aside, rigid as they each hold a door open so that I can pass.

I hold my breath just a little, ready with a litany of excuses for why I'm in a place that I shouldn't be.

But as the doors close noisily behind me, I'm surprised and disappointed to find myself alone in an empty room.

My disappointment doesn't last long, because it's the most amazing room I've ever seen.

Just when I think I'm over the shock of this strange world, Faylin goes and one ups itself.

The Grand Hall is...there are no words, honestly.

Huge pillars shoot into the air, seeming to go on forever before fading into a massive chandelier that lights the entire room with a soft golden glow.

I rest my hand along the columns with a gasp more closely at the columns and realized that there are thousands, maybe *millions* of shimmering butterflies encased within them.

Instead of a wall to my right, there's a sparkling blue waterfall. I can feel the spray, and hear the rushing water, but the pond that the fall crashes into is perfectly tranquil, not even a ripple in the perfectly turquoise water.

The wall in front of me is even more impressive—it's made entirely of white lilies, and I watch as a small winged creature waves at me from one of the buds.

It's the wall to left that I find myself looking at the most. In what must be an homage to the kingdom itself, the entire wall is a perfectly pristine moment of winter. Huge white snowflakes drift gently to the ground, although there's no



snow accumulation. It's as though the snow vanishes when it hits the sparkling gold marble.

I'm so charmed by the whole thing, that it takes me a minute to realize what I'm seeing amid the bare winter trees.

Two brown eyes peering back at me.

I jump back, but then I register that I know those eyes.

"Damn it, Harper, get in here. *Now.*"

Max.

*Wonderful.*

I stepped cautiously towards the forest image, trying to figure out how he's *in* there. "How...?"

"You idiot," he snaps, "Where's Keely? How'd you get in here? How dumb can you be?"

"How are you in there?" I ask, ignoring his furious questions.

The sound of voices has me whirling around, just as fingers wrap around my arm, yanking me forward *into* the painting.

I try to shake my arm free, but he turns me around, slamming a hand over my mouth as he drags me back further, pulling me against his chest as we back further into the painting.

I bite his palm, and he responds by wrapping his other arm across me and pinching my arm hard in warning.

"Don't. Move," he whispers, his breath hot against my ear.

It's the urgency in his voice that has me obeying more than the order itself. I've heard a lot of things from Max, but this is the first time he's seemed panicked. I nod once to indicate I understand, but he doesn't remove his hand.

I hear what sounds like a door opening, and I gasp against his hand as the waterfall parts like a cascading curtain.

I turn my head slightly so I can better see the two people who enter. Max presses my arm warningly, but the

newcomers seem completely unaware of two servants hiding in the wall.

I recognize the prince and princess immediately. Up close, the woman's resemblance to Snow White is even more pronounced, almost comical. The prince whispered something in her ear, and she giggled softly, girlishly, and tilted her face up to his for a lingering kiss

"Let's go," Max whispers in my ear.

I nod in agreement. I feel like a Peeping Tom spying on an intimate moment.

Still, *how* are we supposed to go? We're in a wall.

Before Max or I move, there's a blinding light, and a faint chiming noise like I'd heard the first time I'd met Az.

But it's not Az this time. It's a woman, and one of the most captivating ones I've ever seen.

She isn't classically beautiful like the other women of Faylin, but she's arresting all the same. Her light brown hair isn't bound in tight braids and loops, but down around her shoulders.

Her mist-green eyes are wide-set and almost cat-like, her eyebrows winging upwards into perfect high arches. Her green dress is simpler than Lady Rowena's but it has a shimmering quality to it, reminding me of the ring the guy gave me in the park.

Reaching down, I twist the ring which has long since turned to boring silver on my own finger.

I'm unable to look away from the woman, and I gasp a little against Max's hand as I realize it's not just the dress that's translucent. *She* is. I can see through her.

"Moirra," Max whispers in my ear.

My eyes go wide.

There's another tinkling noise, and Az appears, looking far more subdued than when I'd seen him last.

"You've arrived," he says gratefully, bowing at the sight of Moira.

"She's *sort of* arrived," the princess says petulantly. "Why are you shimmering, Moira? Can't you come in person?"

I frown at the implication of this. So Moira isn't even really here? She's like...a hologram?

"Yes, what's the urgency, Moira? We were just in the middle of planning the End of Autumn Ball," the prince says.

*Liar. You were in the middle of making out.*

"I apologize," Moira says, not sounding the least bit sorry. "But there is news that cannot wait."

"You can't have just sent a messenger pixie?"

Az steps forward, looking affronted at the prince's question. "And risk having this news fall into the hands of those nosey, good-for-nothing wingers?"

"What sort of news?" the prince asks Moira, ignoring Az altogether.

Ax refuses to be ignored. "Trouble. That's what sort of news."

"Trouble!" Bianca's hands flutter nervously at the word.

"I must stress the secrecy, your highnesses. This news mustn't go beyond royals and the Council."

"The Council," the princess says, sounding outraged. "Why would they—"

The prince puts a hand to her back.

"Oh," she says with a gasp. "Has there been a Crossover?"

Her eyes are wide.

"Before I get to that, there's other news," Moira replies. "There's been a Dark Sighting in Muiramooore."

Max tenses slightly behind me, and I tilt my head, question in my eyes, but he ignores me.

The prince frowns in confusion. "But how can that be? Muiramooore Darkness was vanquished with the Sea Witch ages ago."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Christoff," Moira says in a clipped tone.

So that's how the Faylin hierarchy was. I'd assumed, given their titles, that the royalty was top of the pack, but the deferential tone with which everyone refers to Moira says otherwise. Magic trumps royal.

"When did this happen?" Bianca asks tearfully.

"This morning."

"And they saw...what, Purkings? Blitzers?" Az asked, his thick brow furrowed.

"Worse, I'm afraid. Multiple merpeople report seeing Yvanna herself."

The prince and princesses' frowns relax slightly. "Well obviously they're mistaken. Yvanna's been dead for centuries."

Moira remains silent.

"Hasn't she?" Bianca asks, her voice pitching up an octave.

Moira let out a breath. "Yvanna's demise wasn't a typical death. You, of all people know that."

"Well of course not, but we thought at the very least it was final!" the prince says with a raised voice. "They're *all* supposed to be final."

"Moira, surely this isn't not possible. There *must* be another explanation," Bianca says, putting a hand on the Christoff's arm.

"I'm heading to the North Coast at once to investigate further, but I'm sure I don't need to tell you to be watchful."

Watchful for what, I wonder. How could a threat to merpeople be a danger to a kingdom set in perma-winter?

"We'll increase the number of guards," Christoff says. "And I won't let Bianca out of my sight."

Moira nods. "I'll let you know as soon as I've heard something. And remember, this must stay among us. There hasn't been a Sighting on Faylinian soil in over two hundred years.

The last thing we need is rumors that we have one returning from the grave."

Bianca and Christoff nod their agreement.

"Mih-lady, if you need assistance—"

"You'll stay here, Az. Until we know what we're dealing with, there needs to be a sorcerer in every kingdom."

*Good plan, I think, taking in Az's puffed out chest and vacant expression. Perhaps he can just glitter all of these dark forces to death.*

Az swoops into a bow. "It will be my *greatest* of pleasures."

"But why's the Council in on this," the prince asks Moira. "They deal only with Logosian matters."

Moira hesitates, and the princess's eyes narrow. "You think they're related."

"I'm working on that."

"You got my message then," Az whispers conspiratorially.

Moira gives him an impatient look. "I haven't received any messages from anyone. I've been cloaked as I move through the Dark Forest. The pixies wouldn't have been able to find me."

"But you know about the girl."

"I do," Moira says slowly. "But how do *you*?"

Az seems to shrink under Moira's sharp gaze. "I...I saw her."

"How? You've been in Winterscape this entire time."

Az flounders. "Well, yes. That's where the Logosian is."

There's a moment of silence in the Grand Hall, and I hear Max's heart pounding so loudly, I assume everyone else will as well.

Or maybe that's my own heart.

"*Here?*" Moira asks.

Az nods. "The Donovan boy found her in the Square during the festival today."

"A Logosian?" the princess says. "And nobody tells us?"

"We were trying to get in touch with Moira," Az says nervously. "Isadora's gathering the Council."

Moira has gone very still. "Impossible. There can't be two. She must be pretending for some reason."

"Why would anyone *pretend* to be a Logosian," the prince asks. "It's a death sentence more often than not."

My eyes go wide at this as I realize that everyone's dire warnings might have some truth behind them.

"If she was faking, she was good at it," Az replies. "She's quite odd. It will take some work getting her assimilated."

"Where is she now?" Moira asks.

Max tenses behind me, but they seem unaware of our presence.

"Training. She came over in servant garb. We have her as Claymore's valet."

"But she's a girl," the princess says, wrinkling her nose.

"It's a smart strategy," the prince murmurs. "Claymore's in the Council. He can keep her close without anyone thinking a thing of it."

"I wonder at her path," the princess says. "Do you think that Claymore could be—"

"We can't speculate," Az cuts in. "Nor can she be nudged."

"And you say there's another one, Moira?" the prince asks. "How can that be? There's never been two."

"There has," she says. "Once. It did not work out well."

The other three exchange a glance. "We're not familiar with that story."

Moira ignores the unspoken question, fixing that cat-eye gaze on Az. "Did she say anything strange?"

"Everything she said was strange. But come to think of it, she did mention looking for her sister. Seems convinced she's in Faylin. We thought she was crazy, but if there is another Logosian, a girl, then it could be—"

“But it *shouldn't* be,” Moira says, her voice sharp. Frustrated.

“What can we do?” the prince asks, puffing out his chest slightly.

“I want her watched very carefully,” Moira says. “I need to get to Muirmoore without delay, but I will be back to deal with this. In the mean time—”

“We’ll make sure she’s safe,” Az says.

“I’m not so sure she’s the one who needs protecting,” Moira says quietly.

“You think she’s a threat?”

“I think she shouldn’t be here. And that makes her very, very dangerous indeed.”

## CHAPTER 12



“*I* wasn’t done listening to them,” I grumble as I follow Max down a darkened corridor.

“We heard enough. Any longer, we’d risk getting caught.”

“But—”

“Just shut up and let me think,” he says in a frustrated voice.

Max stops, running his hands over his hair before leaning back against the wall, closing his eyes and resting his head against the stone.

“I *told* you my sister was here,” I say quietly, crossing my arms.

He doesn’t respond.

And though I don’t like Max, I do understand what it’s like when you just need a minute to gather your thoughts, so I stay silent.

For about thirty seconds.

“Who is Moira?” I ask. “Or *what* is she?”

His eyes open. “She’s High Sorceress.”

“In Winterscape?”



He shakes his head. “Everywhere. She spends time in all the kingdoms, has chambers in all of them.”

“She’s a bit intense.”

He gives a slight smile. “You should meet her in person.”

I lift my eyebrows. “Are having a moment, Aramax?”

His smile drops. “Tell me about your sister.”

Bitterness ripples through me. Even when she’s not here, Ari manages to command everyone’s attention, and my face grows hot in annoyance.

I take a deep breath and try to banish the toxic thought. Where is it even coming from? The emotion is irrational and fierce, almost as though it’s coming from outside of me.

“She’s a year older,” I say slowly. “And she’s actually my half-sister. We have different dads.”

“What’s she like?”

“Why do you care?”

“I’m trying to figure out if she’ll be a better option than you,” he snaps. “I have to imagine yes.”

“A better option for what?” I ask, ignoring the sting of his words.

“Never mind.”

He starts walking again, but I grab his shirt sleeve. “Max.”

He turns, and though it kills me to ask anything of this jerk, I try to keep my annoyance—and fear—out of my voice.

“I don’t understand any of this. If you could see my world...I don’t think you get how different it is here. How... scary this is.”

It’s a big admission for me, and I see something flicker in his eyes, but his stony expression never wavers.

“It’s bit worrying for us, as well.”

“Because there are two of us?”

He laughs. “I can’t even wrap my head around that. The presence of one Logosian is jarring enough all by itself.”

"I don't see how anything I could do would possibly make more than a ripple."

He sighs. "I know you don't. Believe it or not, I understand that you're frustrated. They're all frustrated when they come, but it'll get easier."

I snort. "Easy for you to say. You're not a zillion miles from home."

"This isn't easy. There's nothing easy about what lies ahead."

I throw my arms up in frustration. "More cryptic answers."

"Yes," he says, his voice urgent. "That's all you're going to get. If you think I'm going to risk banishment, losing Keely, so that you can satisfy your curiosity—"

"Curiosity?" I shout. We're toe to toe now. "That's what you think this is? This is my *life*, Aramax. And you're all acting like I'm a dangerous nuisance and you can't even tell me why."

He leans towards me. "Save it, Harper. I didn't sign up for any of this, either. None of us did, so save the poor-me routine for someone else. Try Claymore, maybe."

He jerks his arm free of my grip.

"What now?" I ask, reluctantly following after him.

"We get you back to your post. Let the duke deal with you."

*Declan.* I feel a little shiver of anticipation at the thought of being alone with him.

"Where are we?" I ask, trailing a hand along the wall since it's too dark to see much more than the outline of his back. It's hard to describe, but it's as though this passage is part stone hallway, part forest. As though it's a transition between the living painting and the castle. The walls are stone, but there's dirt beneath my feet, and there's a damp darkness that's more than a little unnerving.

"Another servant passage," Max says. "An unused one."

"That's how you got into the Grand Hall?"

His footsteps falter for a second, before he continues. "If you could keep that quiet, I'd appreciate it."

I let out a fake gasp. "Was Aramax doing something he shouldn't?"

"Let's just say that to my knowledge, nobody else knows about that entrance into the Grand Hall."

"Not even Keely?" I ask curiously.

"No."

"How'd you find it?"

"*Fairies*," he says, muttering the word like a curse. "You ask a lot of questions."

"Unfortunate, since you only answer about half of them."

He doesn't respond.

"So do you always use this passage to spy on the prince and princess?"

"No," he says. "Honestly, there's never really much to spy on. Bianca and Christoff are all lovey-dovey, and Az's magic is about as powerful and interesting as a chameleon spider's."

I don't ask what a chameleon spider is. I'm not sure I want to know.

"Then why were you there today?"

He shrugs. "You should be glad I was. Kept you from getting caught."

"Yeah, gratefulness is definitely at the top of what I feel for you," I say.

He laughs, and the sound is surprising.

"I think you were there for the same reason I was." I throw the challenge at his back. "I think you wanted information."

"Yes. Trouble is, I don't know what we're supposed to do with that information," he says, more to himself than me.

The darkness is receding slightly, and I realize that we're

back on stone flooring instead of dirt, and the candles lighting the way are more frequent now.

“What did Moira mean about there being a Darkness sighting?” I ask.

Except I ask the question just as he’s opening another of the secret doors, and he slams it shut quickly, crowding me against the wall.

I suck in a little breath at the intensity on his face.

Max is furious.

I know he won’t hurt me—I don’t know how I know, but as much as he hates, he takes the oath to protect me seriously. More seriously than any of them, perhaps. Maybe *that’s* why he can’t stand me.

“Don’t you have *any* sense of when to keep your mouth shut,” he snarls.

And even though I’m not scared, I feel the warning radiating off of him, and because it both scares and annoys, me I push back against his shoulders.

“Or what?” I snap. “There’s been nothing but a lot of ominous talk from you guys, but not even a *hint* of danger. How do I know you’re not just trying to keep me in line—”

I don’t see the shadow until it’s literally upon us, a flash of dark out of the corner of my eye.

My scream gets caught in my throat as I whatever it is isn’t after me. It’s Max who hits the ground, a dull thud followed by a sharp crack as bone hits stone.

I hear a grunt of pain followed by silence, and for a terrible second, I worry Max might be dead. What if he’s hit his head on the stone wall, what if—

The stillness disappears before I can register it, and then the black blur and Max begin fighting in urgency, fists flying as they fight for control.

The shadow is a man. Or at least I’m guessing *guy*, based on the bulky build and the ham-fists that pound Max’s face.

The guy's dark hood comes off, but he's wearing a black mask underneath.

Max is fighting back like hell, but the other guy is deceptively fast for his bulk, and strong. Max's face is a bloody mess, and even still, I feel the moment his brown eyes lock on mine.

"Run," he says, a second before the man's fist collides with his face once more. "Harper, *run*."

I'm appalled to realize that I haven't moved, too paralyzed with shock and fear. It's just that this world's been like some sort of ridiculous fairy tale, and I guess I had let myself forget that every fairy tale has a bad guy, a *darkness*.

Max shifts, taking control of the fight, landing a couple solid thwacks against the mask, before the other guy rolls away, leaping to his feet, hauling Max along with him before shoving him against the wall, a meaty forearm against Max's throat.

Max fights back, but the other guy is bigger, stronger, almost superhuman, choking the air out of his opponent, and it's the brief flare of panic in Max's usual unreadable gaze that finally wiggles through my shock.

This man will kill Max. I can feel it.

I leap before I think, hurling my body at the guy cutting off Max's air supply. My small frame doesn't do much other than catch him off guard, but it's enough. I hear Max let out a gasp of urgent breath as I beat the other guy with my fists.

I took a mandatory self-defense class my sophomore year, but I regret not paying more attention. I remember something about eye balls and insteps and solar plexus and of course, the ol' knee 'em in the balls, but my angle isn't quite right for any of that.

More than that, my brain is blank. I'm acting on instinct, kicking, punching ...

Until I realize he's not hitting back.

I'd assumed this guy was after me, and was angling to take Max out first before turning on me, but though I can feel the anger radiating off him, he's not fighting me, merely lifting his arm to ward off the word of my blows.

Max has his breath back, he charges at the man in black out in a football-style tackle, both of their bodies flying through the air before slamming against the wall.

Once again I hear the crack of bone on stone, but Max hops to his feet immediately after.

The other guy doesn't.

Neither Max nor I move, our breath heavy in the now shockingly silent passageway.

"I told you to run," Max says gruffly, wiping at the blood covering his face.

"Yeah, well, I think we've already established I'm no good at listening to you," I say, surprised by how steady my voice is. Neither of us have looked away from the lump of our attacker on the ground.

"He wasn't after me," I whisper. "He didn't fight me."

Max says nothing. I can practically *hear* him thinking.

"Go back to Claymore's room," he says gruffly.

"What about you?" I glance at him, wincing as I see that he'll have his fair share of bruising.

"I've got to take care of this."

"I'll help."

"No," he says, his voice flat. "You won't."

"You can't tell me—"

"Harper, please."

It's the *please* that gets me. I get the sense it's not a word he's familiar with.

I walk to the doorway, lifting my hand to push it open. My hand drops, and I turn back to him, finding his gaze on me.

"He would have killed you," I whisper.

Max hesitates, then nods, once.

"You," I clarify. "Not me."

"I know whose windpipe was being crushed, Harper."

"Did you piss someone off?"

He shakes his head in confusion, and I realize the Logosian phrase doesn't translate. "Anger someone," I clarify.

Max surprises me by laughing, then winces, raising a hand to his throat as though the laugh hurt. "You think this was about me?"

I shrug. "Like you said. *Your* windpipe."

All traces of humor are gone from his face. "Just because he wasn't trying to kill you doesn't mean this wasn't about you."

"Meaning?"

He looks back at the unmoving form of his attacker. "I don't know."

For some reason, that answer fills me with more dread than any of his dire warnings before. Up until now, I'd gotten the sense that Max and his crew knew what we were up against—knew the risks and how to mitigate them.

Now I'm not so sure.

I shove the door open, when Max says my name.

I turn back, prepared for another dire warning, or a criticism, or—

"Thank you," he says. His voice is raspy, and I don't know if it's from the near strangulation or the resentment that he owes me anything. "For saving my life even though you should have run."

I'm surprised by the unexpected admission, and roll my eyes to cover it. "Worst apology ever, Aramax."

He doesn't respond. He's too busy grabbing the wrists of the prone man, as he begins dragging him in the opposite direction.

“Go to Declan,” Max orders again, not looking at me. “Don’t leave his side.”

I nod, because really, I don’t have a better plan, but I linger just a second, my eyes on the unconscious man who could have snapped me in half but didn’t.

I have the uncomfortable sense that Max is right. Max might have been the one at risk, but this is absolutely about *me*.



## CHAPTER 13



*M*y first thought the next morning is that I'm going to be late for school.

It takes me nearly a full minute to register that the bed feels different. It's softer than my one at home, and the red velvet comforter is a far cry from the plain white bedding I'm used to.

Plus, my bed at home isn't the size of a small yacht.

My eyes open, and I stare at the marbled ceiling. It all comes rushing back. The police station. The weird snow, the beautiful people.

Grumpy Max and beautiful Declan.

The guy who tried to kill Max.

*I'm in Faylin.*

I squeeze my eyes shut once more. So much for yesterday's impossibilities being a dream.

I sit up, a little surprised to find that I'm in the huge ducal bed instead of the smaller room where I was supposed to sleep?

Pushing my hair back, I try to remember how I got here. The last thing I remember from last night is falling asleep on

the couch while waiting for Declan to get back from... wherever he was.

Someone obviously moved me from the couch, but why here instead of the servant's quarters?

No sign of Declan this morning either, but I'm glad to have a second alone to gather my thoughts.

Last night I'd told myself I'd figure out a plan, but the second my butt hit the couch, I'd been *out*.

Unfortunately, I don't have any more of a clue what to do by the light of day than I did last night.

I need to find Arianna, obviously.

But how?

That part's a lot less obvious. Especially since nobody seems willing to help me.

The weirdest part of all this though, is that there's a strange sense of rightness about this place.

*Almost as though I belong here.*

And I don't like that. I don't like that at all.

I push back the covers, crawling out of the massive bed and going to the window to look out at the picturesque winter landscape. The snow's falling so steadily I can't make out much more than woods in the distance.

The same woods I arrived in, I wonder? Or the Dark Forest...the one separating Winterscape from the other kingdoms.

The one separating me from Arianna.

Maybe *that's* where I start. Figuring out more about just what the Dark Forest entails.

But first things first, I want a shower. Or bath, if that's my only option. I'm feeling a little, um, *less than fresh* after yesterday's adventure.

The ducal chambers are made up mainly of a large sleeping area and a couple sitting areas, but there are a few other doors, as well.

I'd found the bathroom yesterday, but it had only a toilet and a sink. I check out the remaining doors, keeping my fingers crossed that there's a private bathing area and not some weird communal baths or something.

I already know the door on the far right leads to the servant chambers, the door on the left is a small office. I try the others, finding two closets, before sighing in relief when I find a bathroom with a huge copper tub.

A minute later, my happiness fades because I can't find a faucet to turn the water on.

There are droplets on the bottom of the tub though, as though it's already been used this morning. Declan?

The thought is awkward. Sharing a bathroom with a guy is oddly intimate.

*Almost as intimate as sleeping in his bed.*

Still, I have bigger problems than my infatuation with the guy, because seriously, how do I turn this stupid thing on?

No faucet, no handles, nothing I can see that would fill the darn thing with, oh you know, *water*.

I glance around looking for a secret button or something, but I see only a pile of fluffy white towels and a bowl of pretty blue bars of soap.

Soap, but no water. Wonderful. I pick up one of the small blue squares. It looks like one of the fancy bath soaps I'd get for Meredith for Christmas.

I sniff it. It doesn't smell like anything, but when I shake it, there seems to be water inside.

Hmm. I glance from the soap to the tub before inspiration strikes.

After all, I *am* in a land where sorcerers and messenger fairies are no big deal, and fire doesn't have smoke.

I throw the blue square into the tub, and smile in satisfaction when the tub immediately begins to fill with hot steamy water.

It seems to know exactly how high to fill, stopping several inches from the rim, and beckoning me.

I peel off the servant's clothes and sink into the warm water, whimpering in relief as I do. *Heaven.*

There's a small shelf to my right with an assortment of bottles. Were they here before? I can't remember. None are labeled, but they all smell delicious. I pick two different options, both smelling vaguely flowery.

By the end of the bath, my hair hasn't fallen out, and my skin doesn't itch, so I must have gotten it right.

I long to linger, but it feels wrong to be taking a scented bubble bath when I *should* be figuring out how to find Ari. To say nothing of the fact that I need to get *home*. I wince when I picture my mom and possibly the entire San Diego police department searching for us.

*Oh, so sorry Officer Diaz, didn't mean to be trouble. Was just taking a nice orange-blossom scented bubble bath.*

I stand and reach for a towel. The second I do, I hear a small chime, and the water begins to drain from the tub, until there's nothing but a few droplets on the bottom.

*Harry Potter, eat your heart out, I think, wrapping a large white towel around me.*

There's a small sink in the corner, along with a mirror, and my enchantment with the bath fades as I feel a fierce stab of longing for my familiar toiletries. It's a silly thing to trigger homesickness, but darn it. I want my electric tooth brush and my volumizing hair spray, and my zit zapping stuff for the pimple I'm pretty sure I feel coming in on my chin.

Still, it could be worse. Someone, probably Keely, left a small basket on one of the shelves with my name on it. There's a wooden toothbrush next to an unmarked tube which I'm assuming is toothpaste, although it smells more herbal than the usual mint.

No luck on the hairspray, but there's a brush, some hair pins, and a few leather hair ties.

After brushing my teeth, I get the worst of the tangles out of my hair, staring at myself in the mirror.

I'm a little dismayed by how ordinary I look. Shouldn't I look different? *I feel* different. But the only thing staring back at me is the same pointed-chin, hazel eyes and limp brown hair.

Disappointing, really, to come to a magic land and not look a little more...special.

I start to look away from the mirror, shaking off the vanity—that's always been Arianna's gig.

But when I look away, I could swear I see someone else. A movement in the opposite direction I'm moving.

I search every inch of the mirror, but I see nothing.

I grab one of the hair ties, ignoring the pins altogether before I realize that in my enthusiasm to take a bath, I'd forgotten to grab clean clothes before getting in the tub.

I wrap the towel more tightly around me, gather my dirty clothes, and open the door to go back to the servant quarters.

I'm halfway across the chambers before I hear a male voice.

"Nice towel."

I squeak, my fingers clenching the towel more tightly. The towel's big enough to cover all the essentials, but I'm all too aware that there's nothing but a single layer of fabric between my naked body and...

I turn towards the voice.

*Declan.*

"Hey, Your Grace," I say, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear, and trying not to look, well...*naked*.

"Hey yourself," he says with a wicked smile as he leans against a wall and takes a bite out of something that looks like a purple peach.

He's wearing the same style of sweater as yesterday, green this time. Same black pants, and black pants.

His eyes are teasing, his smile easy. The very opposite of Aramax, and far more appealing.

Maybe Max was right to suggest Declan as the better option for getting some answers.

*After I get some clothes.*

"I didn't know you were here," I say, taking a step toward the safety of my bedroom.

"Went to get something to eat," he says, gesturing at a tray in the corner.

"I thought I was supposed to do that," I say, oh-so-gradually tugging the towel a bit higher.

"You were." Another flash of dimples. "But you were exhausted. Obviously. And I don't mind."

I glance warily at the tray. "Won't people think it's weird if a duke's fetching his own food?"

"Yep," he says, strolling towards the tray and grabbing a roll that looked so white and fluffy my mouth watered. "That's why *I* didn't fetch it. I had Max do it."

I choke out a horrified laugh at the thought of what must have been Max's murderous reaction at having to do me and Declan a favor. I love it.

Then the rest of what Declan has said catches up with me.

*You were exhausted. Obviously.*

"You put me to bed last night," I blurt.

He spreads butter onto a roll.

"You carried me?" I ask, because he says nothing.

"How do you know you weren't dragged by your hair?" he says around a bite of bread.

I shuffle my feet. "Why not the servant bed?"

"Probably because my bed was closer."

I narrow my eyes, because I'm pretty sure it's not the full answer. Or the real one. I'm no dainty feather, but Declan's a

big guy. I'm guessing carrying me the extra few steps to my bed wouldn't have been a hardship.

"Where'd you sleep?" I ask.

"Let's just say you're a *terrible* cuddler."

My jaw drops, and he laughs. "Relax, Harper. You can trust me. I slept on the sofa."

I'm relieved. And maybe a little disappointed too. Ugh. I don't know whether to swoon or blush, or just get the hell out of here, because my heart is beating like a trumpy little tart at the thought of him carrying me.

Or spooning me.

Or...

"So, I'll just change then?" I say, jerking an awkward thumb over my shoulder.

He lifts a piece of bread in salute. "You do that."

"Is Max okay?" I ask, realizing I should have asked sooner.

He pauses. "Max?"

"Yesterday, he and I were...there was a guy..."

Declan's gaze turns serious. "Taken care of."

"Did you figure out why he was trying to kill Max?"

"Max is fine.

"That's not an answer," I counter.

"Because I don't have one," he says, taking another bite of bread.

I open my mouth, but my thoughts of Max and the attacker scatter as I feel Declan's gaze roam over me once, more, and I realize that this is not a conversation I want to be having in a towel.

I turn to flee to my room, but he stops me.

"Hey Harper..."

I turn.

"That's a good look on you." He gives a wink that my brain knows is meant to be playful and harmless, but I'm not used to guys this good-looking flirting with me.

I don't have a quippy response, so I retreat to my bedroom, shutting the door with a quiet click, before leaning against it, my breath not quite steady.

This has never, ever happened to me before.

Not with my first eight-grade pseudo-boyfriend, not with Zach Treton at ninth grade homecoming, and certainly not with Gabe Wilkins, no matter how much our moms wanted us to go to prom together.

I feel a little wave of sadness that I'm finally feeling what Meredith wants me to feel—a crush.

And she's not around to see it.

And this is *definitely* a crush. A crush on a flirtatious, *can't-have-him* heartbreaker.

I glance down at where I'm clenching the towel, seeing the ugly leather hair tie dangling from it.

It feels like a shield of sorts. A reminder that I'm not here to flirt, but to find my sister.

I open the wardrobe and dresser, relieved to see that someone's stocked it with more of the plain white shirts and pants. There's fresh underwear too. Plain, but clean. I'll take it.

Once dressed, I shove my feet into a pair of suede brown boots, gather my hair into a ponytail with the leather tie, and feel slightly more protected against the blue-eyed, honey-tongued charmer on the other side of the door.

When I open the door again, Declan's reclining on a chair, a big hand cupped around a mug, as he flips through a leather-bound book.

He doesn't look up as I approach, and I pretend not to care as I load up a plate from the cart of food.

Most of it's familiar. Scrambled eggs, ham, roasted potatoes, rolls.

But there are few things that are less familiar. Small green



marshmallow like things. Blue soup. Balloon-like pastries as big as a softball with what seems to be pink sugar on top.

I sit at a small table in the corner of the room, trying to look confident, while all the time not at all sure what I should be doing. What I should be talking about. If I should even be talking at all.

My back is to Declan, but I turn my head slightly as though examining the room, but really I try to sneak a peek at him.

My eyes lock on his blue ones, and I whip my head back to my plate.

*Caught.*

I hear him laugh softly.

“You better clear that plate,” he says casually, as though he hadn’t caught me checking him out. “You’ll need your energy for training.”

“Training?”

“The Council met this morning. We agreed that until we figure out what’s going on in Muiramooore, and what’s going on with the other Logosian—“

“Arianna,” I interrupt. “The other Logosian is my sister.”

“We can’t know that, Harper,” Declan says, his voice gentle as he sets the book aside and comes to join me at the table.

“It’s her,” I say stubbornly.

He studies me. “You don’t seem all that surprised to know about the other Logosian. And you didn’t ask what Muiramooore is.”

I look down at my plate, not quite ready to admit that I was sneaking around the palace, spying on conversations I shouldn’t.

He laughs. “Alright then. Keep your secrets. I suppose it’s fair enough considering how many we have to keep from yours.”

“How’d *you* know about the new developments?” I ask.

“Az,” he says, reaching across the table and pulling a deviled egg off my plate and biting half of it.

I poke my fork at a piece of ham. “What do you think it means? That Arianna and I are both here?”

He sighs. “If it’s Arianna. And honestly, I don’t have a clue. Nobody does. Moira, perhaps, but she’s long gone.”

“What about what’s happening in Muiramoore?”

All traces of levity are gone from his face now. “It can’t be good. There haven’t been traces of Darkness in centuries over there.”

“What do you mean, darkness?” I ask, leaning forward.

“I forget how much you don’t know.” Declan cracks his knuckles. “It’s pretty much what you expect; evil forces who prey on the misery of others. If there’s happiness, they find it. And kill it.”

“So classic bad guys,” I say.

He laughs lightly. “Sure. I guess. And we all know it’s out there, but it’s weak. More or less eradicated for centuries.”

“Eradicated by whom?”

He stares at me.

“Logosians?” I say, guessing.

He taps long fingers against the table before pushing his hair back, going to the cart and coming back with a small pot.

“Coffee?” I ask hopefully.

“Uh—”

“Oh heck no. Tell me you guys have coffee here.”

He lifts the pot with a sheepish grin that I’m sure has sent many a girls deciding they want whatever he’s offering. “How about chocolate?”

I am not many girls. I cross my arms. “I’d prefer coffee.”

He blinks in surprise, and I’m pleased at having caught him off guard.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he says, sitting back down slowly. "What girl doesn't like chocolate?"

"I didn't say I didn't like it. Chocolate's fine...in small doses, in its place. But its place is after dinner, not during breakfast."

"Huh. I'll remember that."

"Except you won't, since *you're* not the servant," I say, taking a bite of eggs.

"Harper."

I meet his eyes.

"You're not *really* my servant. You know that. We need to play the part for everyone else, but not when we're alone."

"And how should we act when we're alone?" I ask.

We both freeze as my words hover between us.

"I hope we'll become friends," he says a little warily.

I take a big bite of roll to keep from having to respond. The bread tastes bitter, and I set it aside.

The awkwardness lingers a second longer, but we're saved by a knock at the door.

Declan looks relieved to have an escape, and goes to answer it.

I glance over my shoulder, turning to see Keely and Max in the doorway.

"Good morning, Harper!" Keely says, smiling.

"Morning."

Max says nothing, his eyes scanning the room critically, lingering on the bed. "You were supposed to make the bed."

It takes me a moment to realize he's talking to me.

"Give her a break," Declan mutters, shutting the door.

"Sorry, I guess I've had more on my mind than making my bed," I snap, pushing my plate away and standing.

Max's eyebrows lift. "*Your* bed?"

"Leave it alone, Aramax," Declan says.

"Right, *I'm* the one out of line here," Max snaps.

“Actually you are,” I shoot back. “Love the black eye, by the way.”

He glares at me, although he doesn’t look as bad as I expected him to. Most of the blood must have come from his nose, because other than the black eye, and some bruising along his jawline, he doesn’t look that beat up.

Max opens his mouth as though to snarl at me, but Keely touches his shoulder. “Max.”

As is typical with them, her touch relaxes him, although he still glares at me. “At least you’re dressed appropriately for training.”

“Training for what?” I ask, since Declan never got around to explaining.

“The Council’s assigned the three of us to take point in your assimilation,” Keely explains. “It makes sense, given you already know us, plus we’re closest to your age, so nobody will think anything of us spending time together.”

“How old are most Logosians?” I ask.

“It varies. You’re on the younger end.”

“What do I have to do?” I ask. “Besides learning the tricky, *crucial* task of making a bed.”

I smile prettily at Max, who rolls his eyes.

“Self-defense, mostly. We’ll teach you to shoot—”

“You have guns here?”

Keely tilts her head. “Guns? No. Bow and arrow.”

“Seriously?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around that.

“It’ll be good if you know how to handle a sword,” Declan adds. “And hand-to-hand combat.”

I stare at them. “Um, am I going to war? Killing a dragon?”

“Don’t underestimate what you might be up against. Just because that attacker last night didn’t try to take you out that didn’t mean he didn’t have worse plans for you,” Max says none-too-gently.

The thought is too unnerving to contemplate, so I force my attention back to my main task. Finding Ari.

And, who knows—maybe all this stupid training they want me to take is exactly what I need to get myself through the Dark Forest.

“Yesterday you mentioned riding,” I say to Keely. “You have horses here?”

“Of course.”

*Better and better.* “Will that be part of my training?”

All three of them stare at me. “You don’t know how to ride a horse?” Keely asks.

“Nope. Never even seen one.”

“How do you Logosians get around?” Declan asks.

“Um.” *How to explain cars?*

“Never mind,” Max says impatiently. “Keely, you can teach her to ride?”

“Absolutely,” Keely says with a smile. “I’m the best seat in the kingdom.”

“Most modest, as well,” Declan says.

Keely blows him a kiss.

“The sword training will be easy,” Keely’s saying. “She won’t be doing it for show, she just needs to know enough to handle one.”

“I’ve got that,” Declan says, cracking his knuckles in which I’m noticing to be a habit. “Everyone knows I do it for sport, so it won’t be weird if my valet tags along to the training room. Same goes for shooting.”

“Which leaves hand-to-hand,” Keely says. “I’ll teach her. I’m about her size.”

“Which would be great only if the person attacking her is also her size, Keels,” Declan says. “She needs to train with someone bigger so that she knows how to fight off someone bigger.”

I can't help it. My eyes drift over Declan's tall frame and broad shoulders.

"Great," Max says. "Keely will teach her to ride, Declan everything else—"

"And what will you do?" I ask, annoyed with his usual high-handedness.

"She's right," Declan admits. "I can fit the sword and arrow training into my regular schedule, but much more than that, and we're going to cause a stir."

Max's jaw works, and I groan as I realize where this is going. They want Max to train me. "Pass," I say.

They all ignore me. "You can take her to our clearing in the woods," Keely says to Max. "It's better you train her in hand-to-hand anyway. You're best at it."

"Only because he punches anyone who pisses him off," Declan replies

"Which is mostly just you," Max snaps.

I raise my hand. "And me."

Declan stifles a laugh, and Max's gaze rakes over me. "And you."

"Perfect," I say, giving him a cheeky smile. "Now we have a legit reason to try and kill each other."

He's already turning away, reaching for the door handle. "I'll be here tomorrow at six. Don't wear a dress, keep your hair back."

"Yeah, I think she's got that part down," Declan says in a loud whisper.

Max mutters something and storms out the door. Keely gives me a small smile. "You free now? We can head to the stables, get started right away."

"Sure," I say, eager to start acquiring the skills I'll need to get out of this place. "If you won't get in trouble."

She bites her lower lip. "Lady Rowena *probably* won't miss

me, but she does have a knack of coming up with crap tasks at the most inconvenient times.”

Declan cracks his knuckles again. “I can help with that. Rowena in her chambers?”

“Yes,” Keely says. “I brought her breakfast awhile ago, but she takes her sweet time.”

He smiles. “Perfect.”

Declan heads for the door, turning to look at me. “I’ll see you later? We can start with bow and arrow.”

“Sure.”

He gives an easy smile before walking out the door, whistling as he heads off to charm another girl.

And though I keep my face impassive for Keely’s sake, I’m anything but placid inside.

It’s a new emotion for me, but I know what it is as soon as it hits.

*Jealousy.*

## CHAPTER 14



**B**y noon the next day, my lower body is sore in places I didn't even know I had.

Horseback riding is no joke. Keely spent close to two hours telling me about Mistral, the gorgeous black mare that had been assigned to me before even letting me get astride her.

And even then, I'd been allowed to walk in slow circles. Emphasis on slow.

I don't mind though. I don't need to be a *good* rider.

Just competent.

Still, my body's not used to horseback riding, and I feel it everywhere.

Add in a grueling training with Max this morning where he knocked me on my ass about two dozen times, and grinned every time...

And now this.

"Again," Declan says, circling around me, sword extended.

At least this session's with Declan.

Still, I glare at him as I rub at my sore palm. "You're *sure* you do this for fun?"



He gives me a fleeting smile. "It gets easier. Enjoyable, even."

"Who the heck is going to attack me that I'd need a sword," I mutter.

"We're not as worried about the *whos*. More like the *whats*."

I raise my eyebrows. "Do you mean that to sound as ominous as it does?"

Declan's expression is serious. "Winterscape's a safe place, especially near the castle, but you never know what's going to come out of the Dark Forest. Everyone knows to protect themselves."

"Are we talking...bears? Wolves?"

"Nah, they stick to themselves. Dragons though, they're known aggressors."

I laugh until I realize that he's not joking. "Dragons."

He extends an arm, lifting his sword toward me. "Shall we?"

I sigh and adjust my grip on the sword. I was sort of thinking we'd be dealing with light, fencing swords, but this is the real deal. The silver handle is simple compared to Declan's more ornate gold one, the blade relatively slim, but it's still heavy.

He sees my hesitation and frowns. "Do you need a break?"

"It's just..." I reluctantly wrap my fingers around the handle once more, ignoring the sting of the blisters. "We've been at this for over an hour, and I still can't get it to feel comfortable in my hand. Like, I can't get a good grip."

Declan sheaths his own sword at his hip in what I've learned is called the scabbard, and comes towards me.

He reaches out, wrapping his fingers around my wrist. The second he makes contact, we both go perfectly still, and his eyes flick to mine for a split second before he quickly glances down at my hand.

He brings his other hand up, using it to open my fingers, supporting the weight of the sword as he does so.

Declan makes a grunting noise at the sight of the angry red blisters. "You should have told me."

"What, that I'm a wimp?" I joke.

"Keely's sword is a bit too big for you, and you can't grip it properly. I should have noticed earlier."

I shrug, not looking away from where his long fingers wrap around the sensitive spot of my wrist.

"I'll get you another," he says, looking at me. "Unless you want to stop?"

I lift my eyes. "I don't want to stop."

My palm objects to my words, but my heart beats double time at his smile.

Declan holds my gaze for a second more before releasing my wrist and stepping back, pulling Keely's sword out of my hand as he does so.

He walks to a set of large doors on the other side of the training room where we've been practicing.

"These are practice weapons, so they're not great," he says, opening the doors. "But there should be something that fits you better until we can get you one of your own."

I follow him to the cabinet, marveling at the rows and rows of swords, everything from ones that look nearly as big as me, to short, lethal-looking daggers.

"I hardly think I need my own sword."

"Everyone has one," he murmurs, reaching forward and pulling out a small gold one from its rack. "Rite of passage when we turn twelve. More ceremonial than anything, but even children know how to wield one when necessary."

"How often is it necessary?"

He doesn't respond as he puts back the gold sword, picking up another smaller silver one, hefting it from palm to palm to test its weight before handing it to me.

“Try this one.”

I reluctantly take it, and although it aggravates my blisters, it does feel better in my hand. My fingers are able to wrap all the way around it, its grip aligning better to my palm.

“Good,” he says, nodding in approval and closing the doors. “Again?”

This time when we center ourselves in the middle of the room, I’m committed. The blisters on my palm are still screaming, but if Declan’s even a little bit serious about dragons being in the Dark Forest...

I shake my head a little at the thought. *Dragons*. Seriously.

“Good,” Declan says, his eyes on my feet where I’ve mimicked his stance.

He lifts his sword, and I lift mine to meet it.

Acting on instinct, I move first, and he blinks in surprise. Up until this point, I’ve been sort of half-invested. I’ve done as he’s instructed, but haven’t really throw myself in it, too preoccupied with my sore butt, my blistered hands, and worrying about my sister.

Now, however, I realize that in order to get my sister, I’ll need to take action.

In order to take action, I need skills. *These* skills.

Declan recovers quickly, a quick flick of his wrist knocking the sword out of my hand, easily.

“Better.”

“Again,” I say, picking up my sword.

We go again and again, and each time I last a little bit longer, although I never come even close to winning.

“I think that’s good for today,” Declan says, as my sword clatters once more to the marble floor. We’re both panting, and he wipes the sweat from his forehead as I pull at my shirt where it clings to my damp back.

“One more time,” I say, retrieving my sword.

He gives an incredulous laugh, but lifts his sword. "Don't you ever quit?"

"Not when my sister's life is at stake. Not when my mom is missing two daughters," I say, my voice a little fiercer than I mean it to be.

Declan's smile disappears, and he's forced back a step when I attack with every last bit of my strength.

He recovers quickly, but the way a small line appears between his eyebrows, I get the impression it's the first time he's actually had to *try* all day.

"How often do you practice?" I ask through pants.

"Every day, give or take."

"Who with? The Earl of Beaufort?"

"Someone's been paying attention," he says in an amused voice, evading my attempt to disarm him.

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to do," I say, as I parry a counter thrust. "*Assimilate.*"

"Sure," he says warily. "Although with as recalcitrant as you were yesterday, I'm not sure anyone was expecting you to be easy."

"What about you," I ask. "What were you expecting from me?"

"Honestly. Not a clue. I find you ... surprising," he says. Declan twists his wrist, in what I know is meant to disarm me and end the match, but I see it coming, and manage to maintain my grip and recover, and although there's nothing graceful about it, I feel a surge of satisfaction.

His eyebrows lift. "Very nice, Harper."

"I know," I say cheekily.

For several moments, there's nothing but the clank of metal on metal. I'm dripping sweat now, and one of the blisters on my palm has split, the pain almost excruciating, but still I hold on, absorbing each blow, even landing a couple of my own.

"You can say the word and we'll stop," he says.

"Dream on, Your Grace."

His smile is fleeting. "You're determined to find your sister."

"Yes. You have siblings?"

He shakes his head. "Nope."

"Parents?"

"No." The response is clipped.

I feel a little stab of regret at inadvertently bringing up what is likely to be a painful subject, and we fall silent for a moment.

"You mentioned your mom," Declan says, driving downward with a blow I barely deflect. "That's who you want to go home to?"

I laugh a little, the sound breathless. "Is that not a good enough reason?"

"It is. Just wondered if there was something else. *Someone* else."

My gaze flicks up in understanding, almost dropping the sword. "You asking if I have a boyfriend?"

He meets my eyes as he pushes forward with another blow. "Do you?"

I'm not usually one for games, but for a moment I'm tempted to lie. To tell him that yes, there's absolutely a broad-shouldered football boy who's tearing San Diego apart looking for me.

"No," I say.

Declan doesn't respond, and there's only the clang of metal on metal, slower now. My arm is getting tired, and I suspect he knows it because his pace slows, as though going easy on me.

*No way.*

"What about you?" I ask. "Girlfriend?"

His eyes narrow, this time it's him who falters.

"Oh come on," I say. "That line of questioning doesn't go both ways?"

"I'm not attached to anyone, no."

"Not what I heard. Tell me, how is Lady Rowena?"

"Careful, Harper." He strikes harder. "You're sounding an awful lot like my old valet."

"*Ouch*. Comparing me to Max? I think it'd hurt less if you just plunged that sword into my chest."

Declan laughs. "He's not so bad. Mostly. Tired yet?"

"Yes." But I don't stop.

"Call it?"

"I want to win."

He laughs. "You won't."

"Fine," I say in mock acquiescence. "Just one more question then we can quit."

"Sure."

"How do I get to the Black Forest?"

Declan freezes, only for a split second, but I'm waiting for it, but the moment of hesitation is all I need. I flick my wrist in the way I'd been seeing him do all afternoon, sending his sword clattering to the ground.

I almost drop my own in the process, and the victory is hardly graceful, but it doesn't matter.

I've won.

He holds up his hands, palms out, and I realize my sword is still pointed at his chest.

I drop it, the noise echoing through the chamber as I run my sweaty palm along my pants.

I smile. "Told you I'd—"

Declan steps forward, his face murderous as we go nearly toe-to-toe. He doesn't touch me, but I get the sense he wants to. I get the sense that at this moment, he'd like nothing better than to put his hands around my neck and squeeze.

"You really don't get it," he says, breathing hard. "This

isn't a game, Harper. Faylin's not all sweet princesses and wintertimes festivals. The Black Forest will eat you alive, *literally*."

"Then *help* me," I say, putting my hands on his shoulders and shoving him back. "I'm not here to ruin anyone's life, I came for my sister. Just help me get her."

He shakes his head. "My job is to protect you."

I resist the urge to snarl in frustration. "I don't *need* your protection."

Declan bends down to pick up my sword and holds it out to me. "You will, Harper. You will."

## CHAPTER 15



The next day is another training session with Max. Yay.

I'm not sure what good hand-to-hand combat is going to do when I could have a freaking sword, but I've learned by now that arguing with Max is a waste of breath. I need to save my energy.

Still, I'm a little confused about where the hell he's taking me. We've been climbing for what feels like forever to a part of the castle that definitely wasn't on Keely's tour. The stone staircase is less steep than the one at the entrance into the castle, but no less spiraling. There are a few windows, and I'm surprised to find that they're open to the wintery air, giving the staircase a bitter, deserted feel.

This part of the enormous fortress feels older than the rest of the castle. It was still clean, but less *perfect* somehow.

I like it.

I keep waiting for Max to stop and find one of those magic hidden doors, but we don't stop until we get to the very top. At the top of the stone staircase, I look around curi-



ously. From the big deal Max had made, I'd assumed we were going someplace special.

Everything I've seen in this world is more fantastic than the last, and I'd been prepared for this part of my journey to be the same.

But like the staircase to get here, this wing is quiet. Grand, but in a humble, barren sort of way.

"There's nobody here," I say, my voice echoing in the large, deserted hallway. "Is this why we're going to practice here?"

"We're not training today."

I frown and pause. "We're not?"

He doesn't answer.

"Max."

He sighs and turns around. "There's something the Council wants you to see. Keely and Declan are busy, so..."

He holds out his hands to his sides, as though to say, *We're stuck with each other.*

"Okay," I say slowly. "But what's with the creepy, deserted vibe?" I narrow my eyes suspiciously. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I fantasize about it. But not today." Max glances around. "Hardly anyone comes here. I mean, they *can*. It's open to everybody, but it's out of the way. And most of us don't need a refresher on Faylin's history. It's been bored into our brains since birth."

"History?" I ask, trying not to feel disappointed. Not that I have anything against the subject, but I'd hoped this little hike to a remote part of the castle would be actually useful. *Relevant* to me somehow.

But Faylin's history is not my own, and well, frankly...I don't care.

"I guess I should say it's the history *and* art wing," Max clarifies, sounding like a tired museum curator who's given

the same lecture one too many times and hates his job. "There are books too, in the Royal Library. But most of us only have access to the paintings."

He gestures to the paintings lining each side of the desolate stone walls. I skim my gaze over the paintings. I hadn't really noticed them before. Art's never been my jam.

"You brought me here to see paintings? There's art all over this castle. Why did we have to climb to the nose-bleed section?"

"The stuff you've seen so far is just decorative art," he clarifies.

"Um, is there any other kind?" I ask grumpily.

Still, he has that stubborn look on his face that tells me we're not leaving until I appreciate the *art*, so I decide to pretend to cooperate.

Max moves up behind me as I approach the first painting. It has some sort of shimmering cover in front of it, and I suspect it's the Faylin equivalent of the glass protecting the Mona Lisa.

"These paintings are our history," he says quietly. "Each one depicts one of the great wars."

"You have wars?" I'm having a hard time picturing anyone I'd seen so far going head to head with an enemy. What do they fight over? Who threw a snowball too hard?

"Yes. We have wars, Harper." His voice is sharp.

The first painting looks like an average landscape except the colors are all brighter and more vivid than in real life. Then I mentally correct myself. They're brighter and more vivid than *Logosian* life. Colors really are bright in Faylin.

It takes me only a moment to realize that I'm looking at a scene from the fairy tale, Snow White. It's a winter landscape with an open coffin of some sort. A black-haired woman's asleep, all pretty and peaceful. A male figure in the background is emerging through the mist, although I couldn't see

his face, it's somehow obvious that the oncoming man was her prince, and not some ominous foe.

The tone of the painting is both gentle and haunting, and I have the strange urge to shiver at the pure romance captured. The artist is more skilled than I'd first given credit for. The love and longing of the moment seem to jump at me from the frame.

I stare for a moment longer before moving on to the next one.

Another familiar scene, another fairy tale. I wrack my brain for the name of the story...*Rumpelstiltskin*? No, that was the one with the little man and the gold...

*Rapunzel*? Yeah, that was it. The one with the long hair.

Strange, I'd always pictured Rapunzel as having blond hair, but this picture depicted a long braid of curly red hair trailing down the side of an ivory tower. A beautiful woman's freckled profile framed in a high-up window.

There is no prince or hero shown anywhere that I can see, but this painting has the same sense of hope and romance as the last one. Almost as though the painting is depicting the moment *right* before her prince came for one of his forbidden visits. Of course, *I* as the viewer know they'll still have to face that whole showdown with the evil hag, but Rapunzel clearly isn't thinking about that here.

She's thinking about him.

Thinking about *love*.

I wince at my own whimsy. This sort of sappy sentimentality isn't my thing.

I force myself to move on. I don't linger in front of any one painting, but it doesn't take long to realize that the paintings are all centered around the classic fairy tales. *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Rumpelstiltskin*. There are a couple others that weren't as familiar, but then I'd never really been a big fairy tale buff.

I reach the last painting on the first side of the hallway and gasp in horror.

It takes me less than a second to realize that this painting is from *The Little Mermaid*, but my reaction to this one is almost painful in its intensity.

There is no love here. No happiness.

Ever other painting had shown a *happy* part of the story. But instead of showing the mermaid joyful with her prince, or even *content* among her mermaid sisters, this painting shows the moment when the sea witch came to claim her victory.

The mermaid is in a beautiful castle with glass floors, and a trap-door of sorts that leads down to the water, but the castle is the only thing beautiful about the painting.

A cruel-looking creature whose face is hidden has climbed through the trap door and wrapped gray fingers around the mermaid's delicate wrist.

The witch is dragging her down towards a black, swirling sea. The mermaid's face is tormented, and somehow I just *know* that I'm seeing the moment after she'd been forced through the painful transformation from human back to mermaid.

I can't tear my eyes away from the mermaid.

Her face is full of heartbreaking confusion, as though she'd been happy just moments before and doesn't understand why this is happening.

*She deserves it.*

The thought is vicious and cruel as it rips through my consciousness. I shake my head to clear it.

Nobody deserves what the mermaid is going through.

And yet for a split second...

I glance back at Max, wondering if he heard the voice, but he looks indifferent. He's watching me with an expression

that seems half expectant, half impatient. As though he's waiting for me to realize something.

I narrow my eyes, as a dim buzzing starts from the back of my brain.

I'm missing something. Something important.

The ring around my finger seems to tighten, and I glance down and gasp when I see that it's glowing, the same way it had on that park bench when the man—

My head snaps up.

*Do you believe in fairy tales?*

That's what the man in the park had asked me. And there's been that book. The one that was actually starting to write *Once Upon a Time* before my very eyes ...

My heart beats faster now, and I run back to the first painting, this time ignoring all but the sleeping princess.

She's familiar. I *know* her.

The Snow White in the painting is the spitting image of Princess Bianca of Winterscape.

And then I knew.

Princess Bianca hadn't *looked* like Snow White.

She *is* Snow White.

I spin around to meet Max's eyes. He's been watching me inspect all of the paintings, but he's never moved away from the Snow White painting.

"These paintings...these all actually happened," I say. It isn't a question. "*That's* what you meant when you said it was a history."

He nods.

"But you said they were depictions of Faylin's wars."

"I suppose I should have said these paintings in particular are the aftermath of the wars. But they're meant to commemorate both Faylin's darkest moments and its greatest triumphs."

I ponder this. When I think wars, I think armies, dictators, guns. But this is something else entirely. I mentally run through the gamut of fairy tale villains. Many of them seem like domestic disputes. Who *cared* that Cinderella had a bitchy stepmother? And sure Snow White had battled an evil queen, but the only one directly harmed had been her. At least in the story I knew.

"How did you know that I'd recognize them?" I ask. As far as I could tell, these people knew next to nothing about my world, and yet the Council had seemingly known that these images would mean something to me.

He hesitates. "Other Logosians have been familiar with them in the past, so know that they have some sort of meaning in your world."

My eyes narrow at his vague answer. "Sure, but they're children's stories, mostly. How did *your* history become *our* fairy tales? I thought once people had crossed over they were stuck over here."

"Honestly, Harper, I have no idea. If anyone knows, Moira would, but it's not something the Council is privy to."

I turn back to the painting. I'm disappointed by his answer, but hopeful all the same. Perhaps the Logosia/Faylin connection wasn't as much of a one-way street as I'd feared. If the stories can cross over, then perhaps people can, too.

And then there was the guy in the park. I open my mouth to ask about it, glancing down at my ring, and it seems to tighten, almost as though it's a warning.

"Why is *The Little Mermaid* one different?" I ask, deciding to keep my promise to the strange man. For now.

Max shakes his head in confusion. "Different?"

"Most of these show the happy part of the fairy tale. The happily ever after, or whatever. But that one shows that creepy sea witch *winning*."

Max is already moving towards the painting. "I know that the paintings move from time to time to show different parts

of the story, but they only ever show what *actually* happened. And evil doesn't win."

"Never?" I ask, trotting after him. That seems...odd. And who decided what was evil and what was good?

"Well not in these cases," he says. "When it does, we don't celebrate it. If paintings exist for those wars, you won't find them here."

Max stops in front of *The Little Mermaid* painting, and the color drains from his face. "This isn't right. This isn't the way it happened."

That's an understatement.

I avoid looking at the painting directly. The horror of it is already imprinted on my mind. That, and I don't like the fact that I seem drawn to it, somehow. Drawn to this one in a way I hadn't to the others.

"Are you sure?" I ask hesitantly. "I'm not a fairy tale genius, but I'm pretty sure that some of the original tellings are pretty gruesome. I mean, they made some versions for kids that have a happy ending, but the originals are a little rough."

He waved that away. "Sure, Grimm what's-his-face and the other one...Hans Christian Andersen."

I blinked at the familiar names. "You know about them?"

"Word about them got back here. Just a couple of glory-seekers twisting our history to make good stories. These stories have been passed on from people who actually saw them happen, and I can assure you...this didn't," he says, gesturing at *The Little Mermaid*.

*Well it's happening now. Or it's about to.*

Another thought that comes from nowhere, and I look around to see if there's someone else.

"You alright?" he asks, frowning at me.

I bite my lip. "I keep having thoughts."

He raises his eyebrows. "Thoughts."

"I mean thoughts that aren't mine. Never mind."

And yet I know I'm right about the painting. I know in my gut that something is very, very wrong in Little Mermaid world. And if this is at all connected to what Moira had been talking about, it may be too late.

Max is already moving. "If I get you back to the residential wing, can you find your way to Claymore's chambers? I need to find Isadora."

"Max," I ask, as I try to match his fast pace down the stairs. "Why show me this? I mean, sure it's crazy to think that these stories might have actually happened. But why did the Council insist?"

I wasn't expecting acknowledgement, much less an answer from him, but Max stops mid-stride and turns to face me. I'm two steps above him, giving me a slight height advantage as he stares up at me with his earnest, dark eyes.

"These stories might not be real in your world, but are they important?" he says.

I think about this. *Are* fairy tales important? To six year old girls and screenwriters perhaps. To everyone else...

Max seeds my indecision and runs a hand through his hair in frustration as though desperate to make me see something I couldn't. "Put it this way...what would your world be like without them? Depressing, right?"

He has a point. Even a cynic like me can't deny the occasional yearning for a little Prince Charming action. And I'm pretty sure we *all* want a Happy Ever After, whether or not we admit it.

"I guess fairy tales do provide a certain amount of...hope," I concede quietly.

He nods, looking relieved. "That's what we need you to believe in, Harper. Hope. *Want*."

"I'm not really following," I say, feeling like I'm missing something that he's trying to tell me, and yet for the first



time since I've shown up in this place, I have the strangest sense that I don't want to know. That I'm not ready for whatever it is I'm supposed to understand.

"And what does it mean about the mermaid?" I ask, changing the subject.

*Coward*, the voice whispers.

I ignore it.

"I don't have the faintest idea," he says grimly in response to my question. "But let's keep it to ourselves for now. If news of this gets out..."

He doesn't finish, but I put the pieces together.

This is bad. *Really* bad.

## CHAPTER 16



I absently inspect the bow and arrow Declan's handed me, glancing up as I watch him pull a white handkerchief from his pocket and pin it to the far wall of the ducal chambers using one of the arrows.

"Target," he says, by way of explanation.

"We're practicing in here?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It's not ideal, but a duke spending time at the archery range with his brand new valet will raise eyebrows. Especially if I'm not the one practicing."

"We're not supposed to spend time together?"

His eyes land on mine. "No. We're not. Not like that. And besides, I'm assuming that you've never handled one of these before. Not exactly something we want to advertise. Everyone in Faylin at least knows the proper stance."

"You *all* shoot bows and arrows? For what?"

"For fun, mostly. Almost every festival has a tournament, and there are rankings at every level from lower servants right on up to the gentry."

"What place are you?"

"Second," he grumbles. "For now. Beau's been practicing."

"Beau?"

"Earl of Beaufort."

"Bender's boss," I say to myself, committing the nickname to memory.

Declan gives an easy smile. "Right! See, there you go. You're getting the hang of life here."

"Not much to get the hang of," I say sweetly. "Just trying to figure out who's slave to whom, *Your Grace*."

His smile fades. "Well, when *you* figure out how to have a completely egalitarian society, just let me know."

I raise an eyebrow. So. The Duke of Claymore is definitely more than a pretty face. I'm both relieved and disappointed. The last thing I need is one more reason to be attracted to him.

"So here's the thing with a bow and arrow," he says, ignoring my searching gaze. "If the sword play is all about the feet, this is all about the practice. I'll teach you the posture today, but you'll only ever be as good as the time you put into it."

I watch as he puts the arrow in place against the bow, a process he calls "nocking." His hand draws back slowly and deliberately before he lets it go, sending the arrow neatly into the center of the handkerchief on the other side of the room.

"How do the arrows sink into a stone wall?" I muse to myself.

"They're charmed. They're not *actually* embedded, so much as stuck to it. Az helped. Now watch me again."

I watch him time and time again, taking in his stance, the careful way he lines up the arrow with the target and the smooth, even motion of his arm as he releases.

"You want to try?"

I nod eagerly, wondering if I'd find it as exhilarating I did the sword fighting.

I don't.

I picture myself doing *exactly* what Declan had done, but time and time again I miss, my arrows piercing everything from the floor to the couch cushions. Nothing comes even close to the handkerchief.

Declan patiently retrieves every arrow and hands them to me over and over, each time with a quiet, "Again."

The more I miss, the more determined I get, and it isn't until Declan says my name that I realize my arms are literally shaking with the repeated effort of trying to hold the bow steady.

"Let's take a break," he says quietly.

"I just want to get close," I say, glaring across the room at the elusive target.

He studies me, and then nods, as though understanding my frustration. "It's your release. You're going too fast one time, and then too slow the next. You've got to *feel* it."

"Kinda hard when I don't know what it's supposed to feel like."

He presses his lips together before giving a curt nod, and his eyes went hard and flat as though trying to remove himself emotionally from the room. "Let's try it this way then."

He moves behind me before I can register his intent, his chest pressed to my back, as he uses his arms to steady mine.

"Let my hands guide you. Feel the timing of it."

For the briefest of seconds, I close my eyes, and the only thing I can feel is his breath against my hair and his heartbeat against my shoulder.

I take a breath, and open my eyes and force my gaze to the target. I shift slightly to get better balance, trying to ignore the way my movements bring me closer to Declan.

I think I hear him mutter something under his breath, but

then his hand is pulling mine back and the arrow is flying in a perfect arch.

It lands with a satisfying thud a few inches from the handkerchief.

"I did it!" I say, spinning around to grin up at him.

He shakes his head as though clearing it and then gives me a tiny smile. "Well. You *kind* of did it. I did most of the work, and you still didn't actually hit the target."

"Oh go rain on someone else's parade," I say with a grin, snatching another arrow from the pile. "Let me try again."

There's a heartbeat of silence before I feel him move behind me, his arms going around me more slowly and reluctantly this time. "One more. Then you need a break."

*I need a break? Or you do?*

Speaking softly in my ear, Declan quietly talks me through all the things that had been wrong before. I'd been aiming too high, my shoulders too stiff, my arms too rigid.

I squint harder at the target, forcing myself to block out everything but the small square of white. And then the arrow was flying, soaring.

And then it's *there*, piercing the corner of the handkerchief.

I'd done it.

I turn to grin up at Declan who hasn't moved away from me. I expect his eyes to be relieved, maybe even proud. Instead they're boring hot into mine, and he seems...troubled.

Neither of us move, and my body can't decide if it wants to lean towards him in helpless instinct or move away in self-preservation.

The sound of a loud clearing of throats and the door slamming makes the decision for me.

Declan steps away from me, staring towards the door where Max, Keely, and Isadora stand watching us curiously.

Well, Isadora looks curious. Keely looks mischievous and delighted. And Max looks...not delighted.

"How's it going in here?" Isadora asks, taking in the array of arrows scattered all over the room.

"Good," Declan grunts, turning away and starting to gather the arrows. "She's got a knack for the sword and the arrow."

"Oh *does* she?" Max says, his voice soft and dangerous.

Keely digs an elbow into his side as she holds back a laugh. I want to throw something at Max for turning the triumph of my day into a double innuendo, but decided he wasn't worth the effort.

"Well she can probably use a break," Isadora says softly. "I've requested some food be brought up, and thought she could spend the rest of the day with Keely and Max better understanding her day-to-day duties."

I resist the urge to let my shoulders slump. After the euphoric adrenaline rush of swordplay and bow and arrows, the thought of learning how to carry a food tray and polish boots sounds awful.

No wonder Cinderella had resorted to wearing impractical glass shoes simply to woo a prince. She'd probably been desperate to get out of the servant's life.

"It won't be so bad," Keely says, seeing my expression. "And if we're going to find your sister, convincing people you're one of us is the first crucial step."

I feel my blood run cold as Keely's words sink in. *Find your sister*. Horror settles over me as I realize just how deeply I let myself get drawn into this world in such a short amount of time.

More than half a day has passed, and I haven't once thought of Arianna.

My eyes fall on Declan. I haven't thought of her because I'm thinking of him.

What sort of sister does that make me? What sort of *person*?

I wait for him to glance back, but he doesn't, avoiding my gaze altogether as he heads towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Max asks, blocking Declan's departure.

"Need I remind you you're not my keeper," Declan growls.

"Need I remind *you*—" Max breaks off whatever he is going to say, after glancing in my direction.

"No," Declan says, his voice tense. "You don't need to remind me."

He shoves past Max without a backward glance, leaving me to wonder...

Remind him of *what*?

## CHAPTER 17



*A*t first I think it's a dream.

The hand that slams down over my face is large, so large that thick, harsh fingers block my nostrils as a rough palm closes over my mouth.

My eyes go wide and I buck upwards, hands clawing at the wrist of my attacker.

I can't breathe.

The more I struggle, the harder the hand presses, and all I see are dark brown eyes meeting mine.

"Leave, Logosian," the voice rasps. "You hear me. You *leave*."

My knee comes up as I try to kick him off, but he's too big, too strong.

I scream, but it's muffled by the hand that presses harder, the pressure feeling like it's crushing my face. My eyes water, and yet I'm angry.

I long to tell my attacker that it's not like I want to be here. I'm planning to leave.

Just as soon as I find Arianna.



“The other one belongs here,” he says in a low voice, as though reading my mind. “This is *her* story.”

The other one...Arianna? And what does he mean that this is her story?

I wrap both my hands around the wrist and meet his eyes, silently pleading.

I expect the man’s gaze to be angry, but instead he seems scared. Scared of me, I realize.

I let my arms go limp, bringing my knee down, trying to show him that I don’t mean him, or anyone in Faylin harm.

Instead of releasing me, he pushes harder. “How did you get here? What was your portal?”

I feel the ring burning against my finger. A warning? It doesn’t matter. Even if I wanted to respond, I can’t.

“I’m not supposed to kill you,” he says, his words coming out in an excited rush. “But I *could*. I could say it’s an accident, and nobody but her would ever know. And she might understand.”

I see his eyes flick to my pillow, and he reaches out with his free hand, jerking it out from behind my head before slamming it down once more on top of my face.

I scream again, but the sound is lost against the pillow.

My limbs thrash as I futilely try to get the pillow off my face. I need air now.

But he’s too strong, and the harder I fight, the harder he pushes down.

My vision flickers, my head feels light even as my chest feels like it’s on fire. Panic, raw and fierce settles in.

I’m dying. I’m going to die here in a foreign land without ever finding Ari, and nobody will know what happen to me.

I feel my body start to still as I struggle to hold onto consciousness. Please. *Please*.

But nobody is listening.

Nobody is there.

And just as I send a silent apology to Ari, to my mother, to everyone, the pressure on the pillow eases.

My eyes open once more, and I push it off, my lungs taking big, needy gasps of air.

I struggle into a seated position, my vision clearing as I focus on my attacker who's backing towards the door.

His eyes are locked on the far side of my room, and I turn, expecting to see someone—a protector, but there's nobody there. Only the dresser and ...

The mirror.

I gasp as I see a face in the mirror. The woman is beautiful. Beautiful, and a little cold, and she's staring straight at the man.

She doesn't say a word, but she's driving him away somehow. He stumbles, his eyes flitting towards me at the last second, his expression sheer terror before turning and running.

I mean to run after him, but my body seems to be moving too slow, my limbs heavy and tired and useless.

My gaze swings back to the mirror, and my heart jumps when I realize the woman wasn't a product of an oxygen deprived hallucination.

She's still there.

I look over my shoulder, seeing if there's a real person causing the reflection, even as I sense I'm all alone in the room.

As expected, there's nobody there. I look back at the woman in the mirror.

And somehow the most surprising thing of all isn't that there's a woman living in the mirror. That seems more or less par for the course in Faylin.

It's that she's smiling at me. As though she knows me.

*She saved me.*

“Who are you?” I whisper.

Her smile widens.

And then she’s gone.

## CHAPTER 18



Declan's nowhere to be seen when I burst out of the small servant quarters.

I haven't seen him since our shooting practice in the day. I spent the rest of the evening trailing after Bender, learning the tedious evening routine of a valet, and after an early dinner with the servants, I opted for bed, more tired from the day's activities than I wanted to admit.

*My bed this time, not the much more comfortable, much larger ducal bed.*

Not that it apparently matters. Declan's is empty, and doesn't look like it's been touched.

So much for him being my protector.

I go back into my bedroom to put on some clothes. I'm not exactly excited about roaming around the castle in the dead of night after what just happened, no way am I going to wait here alone like a sitting duck.

It's not until I'm out in the silent hallway that I realize my options are limited. Keely's my first choice, but she's in the servant quarters of Lady Rowena's room.

Declan's my second choice, but he's MIA.

Bender's out, since he's not part of the Council, which leaves ...

Ugh. *Ugh, ugh, ugh.*

Max.

Since the guy's unassigned, he's got a room of his own, a door off the servants wing. Keely told me where it was "for emergencies only."

I'm pretty sure someone trying to kill me qualifies.

The castle's nearly deserted this time of night, with only a couple of sleepy looking servants carrying trays to and from the kitchen.

The servant wing is even more deserted, and dark, and for the first time it's setting in how really truly out of my element I really am here.

Max's door is the third on the right and I count out loud, under my breath, so it's not so deathly silent.

I lift my hand, but hesitate, anticipating just how mad he's likely to be, probably at me.

I knock and take a step back, swallowing nervously.

At first I think he's not going to answer, maybe not even there, but then the door opens, to...

"Keely?" I say in surprise.

"Harper!" Her eyes go wide, and she steps out into the hall, looking both ways nervously before tugging me inside.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as I step into the darkened room.

There's a movement in the corner of the room, and I see Max pulling on a shirt, slowly buttoning it as he glares at me in the darkness.

My gaze swings back to Keely who looks away with an embarrassed smile.

"Oh," I say, pressing my fingers to my forehead, as I realize just what Keely was likely doing in her boyfriend's bedroom. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come, I just—"

“What is it?” Max says, stepping forward. “You’re upset.”

I lift my eyes to his steely gaze. “Someone attacked me.”

“What?” Keely says with a gasp.

Max doesn’t move. “Where. When?”

“Just now. In my bedroom. I was asleep, and then there was this hand over my face, and then he...”

My voice cracks a little, and I look at Keely instead of Max because I’m on the verge of tears and don’t want him to see. “He tried to kill me. He almost succeeded.”

“Oh Harper,” Keely says, stepping forward and putting an arm around my shoulder before leading me to Max’s mattress and encouraging me to sit.

“Where was Claymore during all this?” Max asks.

My shoulders lift. “I don’t know. He’s not in his room. Our room. Whatever.”

Max mutters something under his breath, and Keely rubs my arm. “Tell us everything you know about who attacked you. What he looked like, what he said ...”

“He was wearing a mask. I know that he had brown eyes, but that’s about it. He told me to leave. That I wasn’t supposed to be here, and then he said he could kill me, and nobody would know—”

I drift off as I remember the terror of the moment. I swipe at my cheeks, annoyed to find tears. I’m not much one for crying on most days, and doing it in front of an audience burns.

“You fought him off?” Max asks.

I shake my head. “I couldn’t.”

I stare at the ground, waiting for his outburst. The lecture.

None comes.

“What happened?” Keely asks. “how’d you get away?”

“I’m not sure, exactly. One minute he was pressing a pillow of my face, the next he was running away.”

"Why?" Max asks.

"It's going to sound crazy." I lick my lips nervously. "But there was this woman in the mirror. I think she made him leave somehow."

Keely and Max exchange a puzzled glance. "The mirror?"

Keely drops an arm over my shoulder and squeezes. "You'd nearly been suffocated. Nobody blames you for not seeing straight."

"She was there," I say firmly. "And I think I've seen her before."

"Where?"

"Same place. In my room. It was more of a shadow, the first time. Just a presence. But tonight it was an actual person. A woman. Pretty. Middle-aged ... *Real*," I say with a shrug.

"Even if there was some sort of entity in the mirror," Max says slowly, "How would she have scared away a would-be killer?"

I shrug.

Max reaches for a sword in the corner of the room, belting it around his waist. "Come. I'll take you back to Claymore's."

"I'm not staying there alone."

"You won't be alone." His voice is firm. "Keely, go get Claymore."

She nods and stands.

"Wait," I say, standing with her. "You know where Declan is?"

It's Max that answers. "Yes, and she's the only one that can fetch him, so follow me and hurry up."

"Why are you the only one that can get him?" I ask, my attention still on Keely, sensing I'm missing something.

Keely meets my eyes sympathetically. "Lady Rowena sent me away tonight so that she could be alone. With Declan."

## CHAPTER 19



*I* try not to let Keely's words bother me. Nobody's made any secret of Declan's reputation.

But as I walk back through the hidden corridors with Max, my mind lingers on what he and Lady Rowena were doing alone. Does he kiss her? Touch her?

My fists clench, and I feel something hot and furious rip through me. Something like I've never felt before.

Max gives me an annoyed look. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Just now. It was like you..."

"What?"

"I don't know. There was like a spark coming off you."

I lift my eyebrows. "You flirting, Max?"

He rolls his eyes. "Forget it."

He's walking close to me, his eyes watchful. Guarding me, I realize.

*Like Declan was supposed to.*

"Who would want to kill me?" I say, more to myself than him.

"Right now? I wouldn't mind."



"Well, there's no fixing that. You took an instant dislike to me."

"And you to me," he says.

"True. It was the tights."

He snorts out a laugh. "You're a brat."

I touch his arm, pulling him to a halt. "Seriously though. Who? And why?"

I have no interest in being a threat to anyone. I don't even want to be here."

He stares down at me. "Yes. That's what everyone's afraid of."

"Meaning?"

He looks away.

"Aramax." I squeeze his arm. "Please."

He looks down at me. "Believe it or not, I understand your frustration. But I can't help you."

"Because you'll be banished if you tell me?" I say skeptically. "Has that actually ever happened? Like, for real?"

"There are rumors. I can't risk it."

"Because of Keely."

He nods.

I sigh. "Alright. I get it."

He gives me a hesitant nod. "Thank you."

I return this with a cheeky smile. "Are we having a moment?"

"Shut up," he snaps, turning on his booted heel.

We walk the rest of the way back to my chambers in silence. Every time we hear a noise, Max's hand drops to the hilt of his sword, and I swallow my terror as I realize just how real this threat is.

Someone actually wants to kill me.

I pause as a terrible thought hits for the first time. Are they going to try and kill Arianna, too? The Council exists to

protect all Logosians, so there must be some sort of threat—someone to protect us *from*.

I feel sick at the thought. Ari is used to people adoring her. Taking care of her.

She'd never see a threat coming.

The need to get to her is fierce. I mean, it's been there, lurking. But I realize now I don't have the luxury of time. This place has gone beyond being a dreamlike curiosity.

It's increasingly clear: I need to get my sister and get home.

I want to sleep in my own bed, and see my friends, and do my bio homework, and...

I don't even let myself think of Meredith and what she must be going through.

Max stops at one of the secret doors and looks both ways in the hallway before impatiently motioning for me to follow.

There's nobody in the quiet hallways this time of night, but he walks close to me all the same, practically crowding me against the wall until we get to Declan's room.

He may not like me, but he takes his protection detail very seriously, and maybe just *maybe* I have a little stab of gratitude. The guy may hate my guts, but at least he's committed to keeping me alive.

Unlike Declan.

Max opens the door to Declan's chambers without knocking. Declan and Keely are already there, arguing, judging by the raised voices I hear before they break off at my entrance.

It's obvious Keely's annoyed at Declan, but Max is a good deal beyond annoyed, and before I can register what's happening, Max has walked the few steps towards Declan and promptly drives a fist into his face.

I gasp just as Keely shouts Max's name.

Declan takes a step back, his eyes registering surprise before switching abruptly to outrage. His fist clenches, and he's clearly aiming to take a swing back at Max, but Keely steps between them, a hand on each of their heaving chests.

"What the *hell*," Declan snarls at Max.

"You're not the one who gets to be angry," Max bites right back. "You left her alone, and someone tried to kill her."

Declan's eyes flick to mine for the first time, and he looks tormented.

"I didn't know," he says more quietly, shoving Keely's hand off his chest and stepping back, rubbing his hands through his hair. "I never imagined anyone would be so bold. Who was it?"

"Don't know," Max snapped. "Maybe if you'd been here—"

"It won't happen again."

"Not good enough," Max said. "You know what's at stake here—"

"Does he?" I interrupt, tired of being discussed as though I'm not in the room. "Because I certainly don't."

Neither guy even looks at me. "Tell Lady Rowena you're done."

Declan glowers. "That's far from being your business."

"It's exactly my business. It's Faylin's business. The second Harper became your valet, you knew what was at risk. We all know how this could play out, and you—"

"I didn't ask for that," Declan snaps, stepping around a distraught looking Keely to shove at Max's shoulders. "I don't want her as my valet. That was your and Isadora's idea, and I don't appreciate being the sacrificial lamb."

I gasp a little at his harsh words.

"You've got Keely to hide behind," Declan continues angrily, unaware of my agony at his words. "There's no

chance that *you'll* be the one, so spare me the duty talk. You don't have a clue."

"Lady Rowena shouldn't be used as a shield," Keely says quietly.

"You have a better idea?" Declan asks bleakly.

"Okay for real," I say, stepping forward. "I'm not following any of this."

"You're not supposed to," Max snaps.

"I'm *so* sick of that," I say, frustration making my voice waver.

"Frankly, I could care less what you're sick of," he snaps. "Keely, get Harper out of here. She's already caused enough chaos, turning all of our lives upside down—"

The crack of my palm across Max's cheek echoes in the newly silent chamber.

It's difficult to say who among the four of us is the most shocked.

I think it's me.

I've never struck another person in my life. I wait for the horror of what I've done to sink in, but the only horror comes from the realization that I don't regret it.

I'm so *angry*, and I want to go home, and I'm so tired of people acting like I don't matter.

"You think I want to be here?" I shout. "You think I want any of this? That I want to be killed, that I don't see the way you think I'm worthless and want to get away from you, except I *can't*. I'm stuck here, you with your hate, Declan flirting with anything in a skirt, even you, Keely. Sometimes you just *stare* at me..."

I break off, and none of them say a word.

My eyes water, and I want to look away from Max's angry gaze, but I don't. Nor do I apologize.

"Harper," Keely says finally.

I don't respond, instead lifting the heels of my hands to

my temples and pressing in, wishing I could just make this whole moment disappear.

The silence stretches on and on, terrible, until Declan steps forward and touches my arm. “He deserves your anger,” Declan says quietly, jerking his chin towards Max. “But so do I. More so. I’m sorry for not being here, Harper, I’m sorry about—”

I jerk away, transferring my anger from Max to him. “Save it, Your Grace.”

I head towards my chamber, and Max’s voice follows me. “Where are you going?”

“To bed,” I snarl. “If that’s okay.”

None of them say anything as I continue towards my bed chamber, too angry to be scared about the fact that just an hour ago someone tried to kill me here.

I slam the door, and somehow I’m unsurprised when I see the woman in the mirror. Not censoring. Victorious, somehow, as though my anger pleases her.

I blink, and she’s gone, and I stumble tiredly to the bed. But I don’t sleep. I roll onto my back, stare at the ceiling, and wait for them to pow-wow outside so I can think.

But when I close my eyes, all I can see is Declan with Lady Rowena.

Of all that’s happened tonight, it doesn’t make sense that that’s what I care about, but I do.

And even stranger, the more I think about it, the more jealous I become, the more powerful I become.

My thoughts turn dark and dangerous, my mind automatically shoving visions aside. Visions of what I would do to make Declan look at me.

Even as I drift off to sleep, I wonder...

I wonder if this place is somehow turning me into a monster.

## CHAPTER 20



Things get better. A little.

As it turns out, Keely had been right. Valet duties aren't *so* bad.

It's been three days since I was attacked, since *I* attacked Max, and for the most part, all of us pretend that nothing happened. We've even established a little routine that is starting to feel almost natural. Keely and Max join Declan and I for breakfast each morning to discuss the plan for the day, as well as whether anyone had heard any updates on Arianna.

The answer is always no.

There's been no sign of Moira since Max and I had seen her in the Grand Hall, no more whispers of any "dark forces" at work, or whatever. We *have* received a few self-important lectures from Az on the importance of remaining vigilant, but six days into my surreal adventure, I haven't learned much more than what they'd told me on that first day.

I still don't know why I'm here or why my arrival has everyone on edge. I don't know why Arianna is here or how to find her.

And I *certainly* don't know how to feel about these people who feel almost like... friends. Or at least Keely, Declan, and Bender are friends. Max, not so much, but I do my best to stay out of his way, and we tolerate each other's coexistence.

"Max, are you seriously still worried about your clothes?" Keely mutters around a muffin, as Max tugs his sleeve.

"I feel ridiculous," he growls at Keely.

"You look it," I say.

He glares at me, and I shrug. Now that Max is no longer a valet, he doesn't have the standard valet outfit. Instead Max was given black pants, black boots, and a black shirt.

Truthfully, he looked a good deal better in the all black get-up than the stuffy valet shirt and tights in which I'd originally seen him, but no way am I going to help his ego. He has Keely for that.

Max accepts the cup of hot chocolate Keely gives him with a warm smile, and I watch out of the corner of my eye as he leans down to kiss her cheek.

As soon as his lips touch her skin, his black eyes latch onto mine.

He's caught me staring, and though I blush, and I fascination with my truffle quiche. It's not like I *want* to watch Max and Keely get all grossly romantic. It's mostly just that I can't figure out how someone could find Max, well...*kissable*.

Declan emerges from the bathroom and helps himself to a potato off my plate as he studies Max. "What's with the pirate wench costume?"

Max lets out a low growl, but Keely grabs at his shirt before he can move towards Declan. The two guys *really* don't get along, but other than these daily breakfasts, they don't have to spend much time together.

For that matter, I don't spend a lot of time with Max either. I alternate between practicing sword and bow and

arrow skills from Declan, horseback riding with Keely, valet crap from Bender...

The hand-to-hand training I'm supposed to have with Max hasn't happened since that day in the history wing with the paintings. The only time I have to deal directly with him is when there is a valet-specific task that needs explaining like boots, or sharpening swords, or picking out formal-wear.

I try to go to Bender more often, and when I *am* stuck with Max, we both ensure those little one-on-one lessons go as quickly as possible.

A frantic knock sounds at the door, and we all exchange a slightly-panicked look. A duke sharing a meal with three servants is hardly commonplace, and the only people who know we are here are Isadora and Az. Az wouldn't have done something as non-magical as *knocking*, and Isadora had taken to just letting herself in when she needs us.

"Get into Harper's room," Max says as we all scramble. The knocking increases until it sounds like a small army is banging.

We've only made it a few steps towards the servant quarters before the door bursts open. I blink in stunned surprise at the visitors. Of everything I'd seen so far, the creatures that come spilling into the Declan's chambers are the most startling yet.

"Hey, wait a minute," Declan says, grasping at the small pointy hat of the last intruder. The purple creature scowls and kicks his shin before scurrying to stand in line by the others.

"Holy crap, it's like a rainbow just exploded in here," I breathe.

My first thought is that they're another type of elf I haven't seen before, but they were far stockier than the various serving elves I've seen around the castle. And



whereas the elves look more or less like miniature humans, these creatures, are, well, *colorful*. And not just their clothes. Their skin, their hair, their eye-color...*everything* is vibrantly colored.

"I expected you to be prettier," says the yellow-colored female in the middle of the pack, staring directly at me with irises the color of a banana.

Max snickers, and I jab an elbow back at him.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I say, realizing all of the creatures are candidly studying me.

"Who are you?" I ask, as Declan reluctantly closes the door, apparently resigned to our visitors.

Max pinches my tricep in warning. "*Obviously* you know who they are, Harper."

The orange one, a male, scoffs. "Great. She's dumb *and* plain."

"She's not plain," Declan says quietly.

"Such an effusive compliment," I mutter, still trying to absorb the blur of color moving around me. They're circling now.

"We're the dwarves," says the green female. "*Duh.*"

*Dwarves*. There are dwarves in Snow White's castle. I try to count them, but they're moving too quickly. And I'm pretty sure I know how many I'd find.

Seven.

"Why are you all rainbow colored?" I ask.

"What's a rainbow?" asks the blue one.

"You know, a rainbow," I say, feeling disconcerted. "Like after it rains and the sun comes out. The arch in the sky?"

They've all stopped their frantic movements to study me in total confusion.

"You don't have rainbows here?" I ask weakly.

"This arch in the sky...where does it go?" Blue asks, sounding suspicious.

"Um, it goes...well, I don't really know." I almost mention something about a pot of gold, but think better of it. For all I know, the leprechauns are related to the dwarves and I'd say something offensive about their cousin.

"It's not an *actual* arch," I say. "It's more like an, um, spectrum of light that gives the appearance of an arch. It has to do with the way the light refracts off the raindrops..."

"Harper."

I glance over at Declan who is giving me a piercing look over the dwarves' heads. Very subtly he shakes his head.

"Not really a Faylinian concept," Keely mutters in my ear.

"Right," I say, realizing that I'd lost the attention of the dwarves who are now wandering curiously around the room, shoving books onto the floor and bouncing all over the bed.

"Hey!" My amusement fades as Purple begins helping himself to my muffin. "I was eating that."

"We don't have to listen to you," the red one says as she climbs into the chair next to me. "Bianca lets us do whatever we want."

"Of course she does," I mutter.

"We knew her before she was a princess," Orange says self-importantly.

"Yeah, we *helped* her," says Purple. "We let her live with us, now she lets us live with her!"

"And how very lucky for *all* of us," Max mutters under his breath.

Declan, Keely, and Max stand still and resigned as the dwarves swarm around our room like a rainbow tornado, upsetting everything they touch.

"Seriously?" I whisper to Keely. "We have to let them do this?"

"They're the seven dwarves," she said quietly. "They practically own the place."

"But why are they all multi-colored? How did their skin get like that?"

I apparently hadn't kept my voice low enough, because the red one skids to a halt to stare up at me, her scarlet pigtails go bouncing. "Nobody knows. We were just born like this."

"You're related?"

"Brothers and sisters."

Something else clicked into place. "Wait, sisters? There weren't any females among the seven dwarves."

"I beg your pardon," huffs Yellow, winding a blonde curl around her finger.

"Sorry, Yellow," I mutter.

"My name is not Yellow," she says, putting tiny hands on tiny hips. "It's Yasmine."

"What are the rest of your names?"

Red speaks first, her mouth full of the rest of my muffin that she snatched from Purple. "I'm Rory. And this is Olaf, Yasmine, Gertie, Binky, Igor, and Vander."

"What was wrong with your parents?" I say, not quite quietly enough.

"What do you mean?" Green asks. No, not Green. *Gertie*.

"Your names all start with the same letter as your color. The colors of the rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet."

"Oh our parents didn't name us," Olaf says. "Bianca did."

As though knowing she is a topic of discussion and not wanting to miss a moment of it, there's a soft knock at the door, and Snow White sweeps in. I feel a whoosh as everyone falls into a low bow. I follow suit, hoping that the princess hadn't noted the delay.

The princess. *Snow White*.

I hear a low hissing noise followed by a low laugh, and I glanced around in confusion.

Where did that noise come from?

But everyone else seems oblivious. Probably because they're still hunched over in a deep bow.

"Oh please, stand up. This is a casual visit," the princess says in her high, sing-songy voice.

I swallow nervously and glance at Declan for guidance, but his expression is as stunned as I feel. I'm pretty sure there isn't such a thing as a *casual visit* from the princess, even in Faylin.

The dwarves immediately lose all interest in me as they scramble towards Bianca, shoving each other out of the way as they grasp at the silk ruffles of her white skirt.

"Hello my little darlings," she says, clasping her hands together in delight at their adoration. "I *knew* I'd find you here!"

"You mean you came looking for us? You haven't been to see us in forever," says Igor, looking vaguely sulky.

Her smile slips slightly. "Well of course I've *wanted* to, I've just been *ever* so busy!"

"You're always busy," Igor mutters.

I hide a smile. I'm rapidly warming towards the dark blue little dwarf. *Finally* someone that doesn't seem smitten with the princess.

"She's just as plain as you said," Yasmine says, tugging on Bianca's skirt and pointing in my direction. Snow White looks up, and we lock gazes.

I freeze. The princess knows who I am? And how? How had she even *seen* me to know I was plain?

To her credit, Bianca doesn't flinch or break eye contact with me, despite her minion's unkind words. "Now Yazy, that isn't kind."

"But you said..."

"Yes, but we don't say those things *to* people. Just *about* them," Snow White says, in a kindergarten teacher voice.

"Yes, Yasmine," I chime in. "Discussing people behind their backs is *ever* so kind."

I hear Keely make a choking sound and Declan gives me an exasperated warning look before making a slashing motion across his throat. *Knock it off.*

I return Bianca's bland smile, and her eyes narrow before she floats over to Declan. I watch as her shrewd expression transforms into the picture of welcoming kindness.

"It's been awhile since I've seen you, your Grace," she trills, coming forward with hands outstretched. Declan awkwardly accepts her hands, and she gives a breathy laugh at the contact. "Whomever are you courting these days?"

"Not much time for courting, your highness," he says, slowly pulling his hands away.

"Ah, right. Protecting the Logosian." She sets a hand on his arm and leans closer with a wide smile. "I'm sorry about that. It must be tedious. It's unfortunate she had to be placed as a servant, but I suppose it's just as well. Fitting."

Keely blushes and looks at the floor. Max's expression betrays nothing, but his jaw looks tenser than usual. And suddenly I want to smack this prima-donna princess. She's talking to Declan as though the rest of us aren't even in the room. As though we're invisible.

My dislike for her up to this point has admittedly been a bit unfounded. It sounds nuts, but from the moment I laid eyes on her that first day, even from afar, I'd just despised her. As though I was meant to.

But now I actually have a reason. Princess Bianca is the type of person that treats some people as lesser than others. It pisses me off.

Declan seems to know what I'm thinking because I feel his eyes on me, as though forcing me to look at him. When I do, he gives me a warm smile. *Let it go.*

Yasmine and Gertie flank Bianca on either side, and were

carefully mimicking her fluttering eyelashes and pouty lips. I frown and look around. Hasn't there been another female dwarf? Why wasn't *she* panting after Declan like the other two?

Ah, she is. The red one...Rory?...was sitting cross-legged on Declan's bed, nose buried in a book. I smile. Common sense is so refreshing.

"Is there something I can help you with, your highness?" Declan asks, his voice honey-smooth with a touch of rasp.

Bianca's eyelashes flutter, and I suspect that despite all evidence pointing to her being completely smitten with her prince, even *she* isn't immune to the force that is the Duke of Claymore.

"Just wanted to check in. See how things are going?"

The line between Declan's eyebrows says it all. The princess "checking in" is not standard protocol. She is here because of me. So much for keeping me protected. I knew from that first day in the Grand Hall that Az had told the royals about a new Logosian, but I was under the impression that nobody was to know *who* the Logosian was.

Apparently the royals are exempt.

I resist the urge to take a step back as Bianca turns back to me. Her wide blue eyes are the perfect picture of sweetness, and yet I *feel* her assessment all the same. She stops a foot in front of me, and I'm annoyed to see that there isn't a single thing wrong with her, even up close.

Every aspect of her appearance is more perfect than the last, from the black hair that is the darkest thing I've ever seen to the perfectly round blue eyes. Don't even get me started on her skin. Does the woman even *have* pores?

"How has it been for you?" she asks softly, almost as though the question is for my ears only. "You're adjusting?"

"Yes, your highness," I say.

"Good." She reaches out and gently takes my hand, giving

it a reassuring squeeze. "It will get easier. You have a sturdy look about you."

*How do you know it will get easier? And then I remember.*

The fairy tales.

They all involve a Logosian. I meet her understanding eyes.

The truth hits me hard.

*Oh my god. Snow White was from my world.*

From a different time, obviously. Fairy tale legends go back *centuries* in our world, which means she must be...old. Way too old for this dewy, creamy skin. Abruptly I realize something I should have noticed long ago. If these really are the fairy tale characters I know about, then they haven't aged. At least not much.

"You look good for your age," I say casually, my eyes intentionally hovering at the corner of her eyes where the worst of Meredith's age has shown.

Princess Bianca doesn't have wrinkles. Not a single one.

Her eyes narrow ever so slightly, acknowledging the barb before she squeezes my hand, harder this time before letting out another of those laughs that sounds vaguely like sleigh bells. "Well of course we haven't aged, darling."

My mouth drops open, and I glance around. "None of you? None of you age?"

Max and Keely glance warily at each other, as though nervous to speak in front of Princess Bianca. "It's complicated. We do age, but time is different here."

"Different how?"

"We don't really know," Declan admits. "But our understanding is that time here moves at a fraction of the time it does in your world. It's not day for day."

I'm shouting now, and nobody quite seems what to say.

I dig the heels of my hands into my temples as my brain

scrambles to absorb what this means. I'd been here, what, five days?

That means, five years have passed back home.

I can't breathe.

Before I realize it, I've sunk slowly to my knees. "Five years. Nobody will even be looking for us anymore. We'd simply be that cold case of two sisters disappearing on *Date-line*, or whatever.

And then there's...

"My mom," I whisper. "We've been gone for five years of her life?"

Keely slowly sinks down so she's crouched down beside me. Her hand rubs my back, and she looks genuinely miserable on my behalf.

"I have to get back," I whisper.

"Harper." Max's voice is sharp.

"What?" I snap back. "Everyone in the room knows exactly who I am."

"You have to be careful."

"Or what," I say, shoving back to my feet. "What can you possibly threaten me with? This place has stolen my life."

I shift my attention to the princess. "How did you bear it? Why did you tolerate it?"

"Don't talk to the princess that way," Yasmine says, stepping forward angrily.

The princess sets a hand on the little yellow dwarf's head to calm her, and I'm surprised that Bianca doesn't seem the least bit affronted or upset by my question. Merely thoughtful. "I get to spend every day with the one I love more than everything. It's hard for me to feel resentful."

Her words are sickly sweet and straight out of a soap opera script, and yet...I can't mock her, not even in my mind. It's the most candor she's shown since she walked into the room.



Whatever she is...whomever she *was* before she came here, she genuinely cares about Prince Christoff. I give her the slightest nod of acknowledgement. *Respect.*

Bianca nods back.

I catch Declan and Max exchanging a puzzled look in a rare moment of camaraderie, while Keely just gives me a knowing, approving smile. Not all females will find Snow White has with her prince, but most of us understand the *possibility* of it. The dream of it.

There's a loud crash in the corner of the room, and seven rainbow faces look over their shoulders, some guilty, some pleased.

Princess Bianca lets out the daintiest of sighs, and the moment has passed. "My destructive little darlings. I'll get them out of here. I just wanted to meet our resident heroine in person and say your secret's safe with me, dear."

"Thanks," I say. I take a deep breath and ask the question I'm probably not supposed to ask. "So no new updates then, your highness?" On Moira, or...anything else?"

I glance at Max as I say this, making sure I'm not overstepping. In a rare moment of agreement, we decide not to tell anyone else about the conversation we overheard in the Great Hall.

Princess Bianca's full red lips clamp together. "Nothing new I'm afraid. I haven't received an update since Az got word that there's a new countess in Codladha that's previously unheard of before."

"Meaning?"

Princess Bianca pauses in fixing one of Gertie's pigtails as she gives me a puzzled look. "Meaning, of course, that new countesses are *highly* irregular. It's almost for certain that we're dealing with the appearance of another Logosian."

I hear sound whooshing through my ears as I take a step back. Arianna is here. She *must* be.

And now I know where. *Codladha*.

"When did you find out?" I ask hoarsely, stepping towards the princess and extending a pleading hand. *Tell me more. There has to be more!*

A tiny frown forms between her perfect brows. "A couple days ago. Az got a messenger pixie from Moira, but there weren't any details. It's too dangerous to send specifics after...well, we need to be cautious."

"A couple *days* ago?" I say, my voice going high and squeaky. "How come I didn't know?"

Princess Bianca's eyes scan the room in confusion, and I feel white hot anger spread from my chest all the way through my fingertips.

*They knew.* Dylan. Keely. Max. They all knew. And they didn't tell me.

I slowly turn to face my newfound "friends," as a wary-looking Bianca claps her hands at the dwarves and makes a hasty exit. The other three drop into a low bow as she retreats, but I don't even bother to turn around, much less fall to my knees.

They all stay bent down a heartbeat too long after the door closes, avoiding my eyes. "You *knew*," I say, my voice little more than a whisper. "That she was here."

"We didn't want to excite you until we knew more," Keely says, giving me a placating smile.

"Harper, look, it wasn't—" Declan reaches out a hand towards me, but I snatch my arm back before he can make contact. His arm falls to his side, and a flash of hurt surprise crosses his face before it goes perfectly blank again.

"Harper," Max says, his voice firm and unapologetic.

I meet his dark eyes, knowing my own are blazing back at him. "I know better than to think *you'd* apologize."

"It was my decision not to tell you," he says quietly, not looking away. "The other two wanted to."

The tension around my heart eases, just slightly. At least I have *two* friends. Not courageous ones, apparently, if they wouldn't stand up to Max, but at least all three hadn't been conspiring against me.

"Why?" I demand.

"It's as Keely said. We don't know anything yet. I didn't want you to do something rash."

I nod slowly as though I understand. I *might* have done something rash if they'd told me what they know.

But knowing that they were hiding something from me?

Now I'm *definitely* going to do something rash.

I picture the past several days of utter uselessness. Learning how to sew buttons. Learning how to re-sole a riding boot. Shooting an arrow at a freaking handkerchief.

And all that time, they'd known perfectly well where Arianna was likely to be.

I feel the beginnings of a desperate plan forming in my head.

I should have known better than to think that these people would be wanting to help anyone but themselves. They don't care about reuniting me with my sister, or me ever seeing my home again. They're protecting their *own* sappy happy endings.

Well, they can do it on their own.

Because I'm going to find Arianna on *my* own.

## CHAPTER 21



Without a doubt, the worst part of being assigned to this world's "servant class" is the major crimp it makes in potential escape plans.

My most obvious option is to slip away in the dead of night, and though that's my initial plan, after I calm down, I realize doing so would mean somehow sneaking past Declan's bed. Considering the guy is likely to be watching me like a hawk after what happened, I realize I'll need to wait.

But I can't maneuver through the crucial parts of the castle in the middle of the day without being seen.

Which is how, the day after I meet the Seven Dwarves, the day after I find out *everyone's been lying to me*, I find myself huddled in the stables waiting for night to fall.

You know how there are all those little girls out there who just loooove horses? Yeah. I was so not one of them.

At least I find an empty stall to hide in, but the smell is starting to get to me. I'm about to stand up, thinking the coast is clear, when an unfamiliar male voice has me crouching once again in the far dark corner.

I cross the fingers of both hands that he won't come in

here. So far the human noises have been minimal, but this guy is definitely close.

I listen for another voice, a sign of a second person, but hear nothing. It takes me a second to realize he is talking to the horses. A lot.

"Hey pretty, pretty, pretty girl. You want a carrot? Yeah? Another?"

I roll my eyes and pull the leather bag I found in Declan's closet more tightly against my chest and wait for this guy to finish sweet-talking the horses so I can get out of here.

Although as much as I don't love horses, I'm pretty sure I'll like where I am going a lot less if Bender's information is even remotely reliable.

And thank goodness for Bender. Keely, Max, and Declan stay clear of me all day, apparently settling for watching me from afar. Probably afraid I will tantrum it up again. But the unexpected freedom gives me the chance to cozy up to loose-lipped Bender. He doesn't know I'm a Logosian, and I'm realizing how much that ignorance works in my favor.

The Earl's valet has been a wealth of information when it came to understanding the layout of Winterscape. Bender hadn't known the location of any of the other kingdoms—hadn't seemed to care, really. But he'd at least explained the way the Black Forest surrounded the land. He'd *also* warned me away from the direction in which the border of the forest came closest to the castle.

It was exactly the information I'd needed. And exactly the direction I'm heading.

I slipped out shortly after bringing Declan his dinner. The duke had been insisting on eating together every night since I slapped Max, but tonight's meal had been stony.

I'm in a world not my own, with a missing sister and some potential bad guys on the loose. If I am going to rely on anyone else, it has to be people I can trust.

And Max, Keely, and Declan had neatly crossed themselves off the trust-worthy list.

Not to mention, Declan had promised to my face that first day to do everything he could to help me find my sister.

*Liar.*

A pretty liar.

Still, a liar.

As I listen to the stable boy's voice drift down to the next corridor of stalls, I let myself think of Declan as I'd seen him last at dinner. His mouth grim and brooding, his eyes smoky and watchful. At least he hadn't been showing up at every corner the way Max had been to "make sure I wasn't doing anything stupid."

What does he think, that I *want* to get killed? Although honestly, a part of me wonders if I didn't imagine my attack from a few nights before.

It's been quiet ever since. I'll admit to even *enjoying* myself a couple of times with the other servants. There's something enchanting about Winterscape, and everyone always seems so dang happy. Well, except for Max. I'll never admit it out loud, but there are almost moments where I feel like I'm supposed to stay.

But I can't stay. Arianna needs me. Our mother needs us. Hell, if I wait much longer, Meredith won't even be around.

My eyes water at the thought. We may have never gotten along, but it's not right that she may never know what happened to her daughters.

I have to do this.

The only thing I don't like about this plan is that it will give Max the chance to be right about me. That I'm trouble.

Well, okay, that isn't the *only* thing I dislike about my plan.

I'm also not a fan of the fact that I'll have to ride one of these horses to get to the forest. I'm not a fan that the only

food I've been able to scrounge up for the journey has been a couple rolls, some dried meat, and as much fruit as I could fit in the bag, which wasn't much.

I'm unsure, too, about my clothing. I doubled up on my dress and helped myself to a fur-lined cloak from Keely's wardrobe, but I have the distinct feeling that the magical, harmless snow of Winterscape may not apply past its borders.

Then again, based on everything I've heard about the Black Forest, perhaps starving or freezing to death would be a blessing.

Do I know what I'm doing? Nope. Is it smart? Nope.

I only know that I'm not going to find my sister in Winterscape, locked up behind the walls and at the whim of the "Council."

If I want answers, I have to find them myself.

The stable boy's voice has faded completely now, and I quietly slip out into the darkened stable, making my way to a row of saddles Keely had pointed out during my one and only riding lesson (I refused any more "lessons" from any of them, lest they get wise to my plan. Plus Declan's sword coaching hadn't done a darn thing to protect me from my shadowy attacker.)

The saddle is awkward to carry, and I waddle my way down the silent row until I find the stall I want.

"Hey, Mandy," I whisper softly to the cream-colored horse. "You up for an adventure?"

The horse snorts and stomps a hoof as I slip inside, but doesn't seem to mind the pet on the nose or the carrot that I offer with an open palm the way I'd been shown.

Awkwardly, I manage to get the saddle onto the horse's back and carefully replay Keely's explanation in my head as I fasten the buckle.

I give the horse a reassuring pat. Keely assured me that

Mandy is the sweetest pony in the stable, and I'm really counting on her remembering my slow walk in the training ring fondly, because I'm about to lead her down a far, far less pleasant path.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as I pull the bridle off the hook on the wall and slip it over her head, pausing to stroke the soft white stripe down her forehead.

Okay, so maybe horses aren't so bad.

At least she's warm. At least she doesn't distrust me. Or flirt with lady Rowena.

But what if I'm leading her to her death?

The terror that's been sitting like a knot in my stomach all day bubbles up into tears, and I lean into Mandy's warm neck and let her absorb the worst of the shaking sobs.

I know what I'm doing is foolish and reckless. A death-wish even, if rumors about the forest haven't been exaggerated. I feel a little like that idiot character in books and movies where you watch her do something brainless and want to scream that anyone with half a brain wouldn't do that.

Yeah. That's me.

But I can't help but wonder if those people you see doing incredibly stupid things also had incredibly limited options. Because I've never felt so utterly stuck between a bad decision and a worse one.

The *safe* choice is sticking around the cushy castle, learning how to flirt with Declan while pretending to learn how to fight. I could stick around and find new ways to provoke Max, and develop a friendship with Keely who I suspect could be a pretty kick-ass girlfriend, even if she does have spectacularly awful taste in guys.

But the safe choice means never finding Arianna. Never going home.

I shove the heels of my hands into my wet eyes and take a



shuddering breath. Firmly stamping the fear out of my mind, I grab the bridle and lead Mandy as quietly as I can out of the stable and into the crisp winter air. It's snowing, as usual, but it isn't cold, and Mandy seems completely immune to the weather.

I secure the bag of food and water as best I can against my chest, careful not to let the sword at my hip graze the horse as I swing myself clumsily into the saddle. Mandy gives me a disdainful look over her shoulder, and I give her an apologetic pat on the neck before gently squeezing my heels.

I am to face Mandy in the general direction Bender had pointed me before climbing onto the saddle, since I'm still a little hazy on the whole "steering of the large beast." Straight lines are about all I can manage. The horse sets off at a slow pace, and not for the first time, I wonder if I shouldn't have waited until my riding skills were a *bit* more up to snuff.

This whole thing would be a lot more practical if I could get out of Winterscape at a gallop, or at the very least, a trot.

But I can't let myself go down the path of "things I should have waited for before leaving." The list is endless.

*Wait until you're better with the sword.*

*Wait until Moira gets back with more information.*

*Wait until Declan cares enough about you to to make the journey with you.*

I push the last one out of my mind. If I waited for that, I'd be in the castle forever. Or at least until he tires of Lady Rowena.

The minutes tick by slowly at our painfully slow gait, and it feels like hours before we finally make it to the end of the fence bordering the castle. I take a deep breath.

This is it.

Bender told me to stay to the left at this point—because heading to the right was a direct path towards the forest.

I slowly, gently pull Mandy to the right.

She seems to slightly pick up her pace after we clear the immaculately maintained gardens. Not that we're exactly in the wild, even now. The trees here are more sporadic, the bushes less orderly, but it's a perfectly peaceful night snow scene.

Hard to believe that something so pretty has ever faced evil. And by evil, I mean a poison apple, or comb, or whatever Snow White got herself into trouble with. Not exactly apocalypse stuff.

The thought makes me angry. How dare they try to keep me in the dark in hopes that they could solve their petty little problems when I have big ones of my own to deal with?

I hunch my shoulders against the cold, relieved to see that Mandy at least seems invigorated with her late night outing, even if I'm scared out of my mind.

I keep my eyes open for a landmark of any kind, or a sign that the landscape might be changing, but it's all more of the same. I wish I'd pestered Bender for more details, but I hadn't wanted to seem like I was fishing for information.

He'd already thought it strange that I wasn't familiar with my own kingdom, and I'd had to sell him some crap story about my uncle forbidding me to go beyond the Outer Banks.

I don't know how long Mandy and I trudged along on our silent journey, with only the crunch of the snow beneath her hooves and the occasional call of some kind of night bird.

And then I see it. I don't even know what I was looking for, but I know it when I see it.

The ground is changing. Before, it was snow-covered and smooth with the occasional root or snow-colored flowers, but the dirt is uglier here. Not the pristine, uniform brown of the rest of the kingdom, but a mushy, greenish kind of mulch, as though it had been mixed with garbage.

I frown in confusion at how soon I've gotten here. Bender hadn't given me an exact timeline or anything, but I was under the impression that you had to get seriously *lost* to end up here.

I'd been counting on it taking several hours, but I don't think I'd been gone longer than an hour, maybe two at the most.

I feel Mandy slow slightly. Something is seriously different here. Even the smell is wrong. The crisp, fresh scent I've come to identify as freshly fallen snow is overpowered by something faintly putrid, sort of like when we hadn't used our salad greens fast enough, and they'd turned soggy and brown in the fridge.

I urge Mandy forward, my body on high alert now as she picks her way around ugly fallen branches and rotting leaves. I see something gross and slimy rustle near her hoof, and I shudder. Even the snow is ugly here, all gray, and yellow, and uneven instead of a smooth, untarnished white.

"Okay, it's nasty, but it's not exactly a nightmare," I whisper to Mandy. "*This* is the forest that they refuse to cross?"

It's snowing harder now, although the snow doesn't seem to be sticking to the ground. There's no layer of pretty fresh snow on top of the gross brown slush.

I hold out my hand and realize that it's not the same white fluffy snow as before, but more of a rainy/snow mix.

Being a California girl, I'm no winter-weather expert, but I paid attention in science class.

It's colder here. Slightly above freezing, maybe. *That's* why the snow's turning to slush. I give a grim smile. At least I can check freezing to death off the list. The damp chill isn't exactly comfortable, but it's not cold enough to kill me.

Mandy is all but moving at a crawl now, and I have to squint to see what is up ahead through the sleet.

"Oh great," I mutter. "*Fog*. Perfect."

As though she hears me, Mandy stops.

I squeeze with my heels and make an imploring clicking noise, but she only stands there, her head dropped low.

"Are you tired, girl?" I ask, patting her neck. But I know that's not it. She'd been moving just fine until we got to the icky part.

A wet gust of wind blows my hood back, and I wince as the cold sleet hits the side of my face.

That's the least of my problems. The wind causes a brief gap in the fog, and I let out a tiny screech at what lies ahead.

This ugly, swampy part wasn't part of the Black Forest at all. It was merely a path leading up to it.

*That* is the Black Forest.

## CHAPTER 22



*I* squint through the thick air, trying to better see what I'm dealing with. The forest was aptly named. The trees are black and crooked, and so close together that not a single ray of light seems to emerge.

In other words, it is exactly the sort of thing that sane girls don't willingly walk into.

But then, *sane* girls don't usually touch a magic ring and end up in freaking fairy tale land.

Turning back would be safe, but I'm done with safe.

I just want to go home. Going home means finding Arianna.

Finding Arianna means crossing through the Black Forest.

My heart feels like it's beating at half-speed, and my body is sluggish as I slide off Mandy.

I wince as my boots sink into the smelly muck.

"Keely said all the horses had been charmed to find their way back to the castle," I say softly as I rub her nose. "You think you can do that?"

Her big brown eyes stare at me, and I find myself wishing

that animals could talk the way they do in my versions of the fairy tales.

My heart hurts at the thought of sending this poor horse out on her own, but I know I can't bring her with me.

Even if I was willing to risk her life for my foolish plan, she wouldn't fit among those trees. The Black Forest had definitely not been intended for horses.

*What had it been intended for then? Or who?*

"Go now," I say, tugging her reins to the side and pointing at the castle. "Go home."

She leaves me a little easier than I would have liked, and I stare after her through damp eyes until I can no longer see the swish of her white tail.

I take a deep breath and turn to face the woods, telling myself that it isn't really *that* bad. They're just dark, is all. *Anything* would look foreboding in the dead of night.

My hand grips the sword handle as I move steadily forward, the trees growing denser and more crooked with each step.

I somehow expected there to be a distinct line between Winterscape and the forest, but it's a definitely a more gradual approach.

The further I walk, the more I begin to wonder at what point I left Winterscape and entered the forest.

I move slightly to the left where the path seems a bit wider, and I freeze as I see a neon red snake winding up a black, rotting tree trunk. I hear a rustle beneath my feet, and something fat and furry runs over my foot. I bite hard on my lip to hold back a scream.

*You can do this, you can do this*, I silently chant to myself as I move forward. The creatures don't look the least bit interested in me, and even if they were, I can fight off something small and creepy off with my sword.

I continue my slow trek through the forest, seeing more

glowing green and red eyes than is comforting, but not feeling *particularly* threatened.

Perhaps this has all just been one big scare tactic—a way of keeping everyone in their proper place.

Probably that dodgy Moira devising this as a way of maintaining control. I move more surely now, *almost* with confidence, and I swear the branches are moving to help me pass easier.

The trees are closer together now, but that's okay too, as it gives me something to grab onto when I lose my balance on the uneven ground.

I pause for a second, wondering if there's a right way and a wrong way to the other end of the forest.

It all looks the same.

My heel sinks into a hole in the ground, and my arm flails to the side to grab the nearest branch.

The branch moves.

I snatch my hand back too quickly and lose my balance.

The sword makes my fall even more awkward, and my butt and hands sink into the foul, soggy ground.

The branch isn't a branch at all.

I open my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out as the biggest cockroach I've ever seen ambles down the tree.

I just grabbed a cockroach leg.

I gag.

I wouldn't say I have any specific phobias. I've always been able to handle bees, bats, spiders...all the usual offenders.

But cockroaches? Sort of a problem for me.

Hell, they are sort of a problem for everyone, right?

And *this* one is the size of a Labrador retriever and staring at me with bulging red eyes.

It starts making a horrible clicking noise and moving

towards me, and now its front legs are on my boot. Antennae flick across my cheek, and I scream for real.

I scream and scream, and try to scramble to my feet, but the muck covering my hands makes me clumsy. I frantically try to shake it off, but then I realize the muck isn't *just* on my hands. It is moving steadily up my arms.

As though it's alive.

I tear my eyes away from the cockroach long enough to glance down at my hands. And then I scream, louder, harder. Hundreds, no thousands of green ants are crawling over me. Covering every part of my arms and moving steadily upwards, their tiny squirming bodies moving in and out of my fingers.

I scramble backwards, half-screaming, half-sobbing, as the cockroach follows me slowly, tauntingly. *Toying* with me.

The clicking noise grows louder, and in the distant part of my brain, the part that isn't completely flipping out, I faintly hear *two* clicking noises.

One from the cockroach and one from...

A raccoon.

My scream catches in my throat as a black ball of fur and sharp teeth shoot out of the dark, lunging at the cockroach. There's a horrible screeching noise, and I see a spurt of ugly green liquid as the raccoon lands a swipe across the cockroach's ugly flat face.

The raccoon's mouth is open wide, a harsh hissing noise coming from his mouth as he takes another swipe at the cockroach. The cockroach strikes back, hard, and the raccoon makes a whimpering noise.

I frantically rub at my hands to remove as many disgusting ants as possible, and before I realize what I'm doing, I'm reaching for the raccoon, wanting to save him.

It sounds weird, but something tells me this animal is trying to protect me.



I don't know how I know it.

But I do.

I won't let him die for me. I try to snatch the raccoon into my arms before the cockroach can attack again, but to my surprise, the cockroach merely makes an outraged noise and begins to back away.

"Oh my god," I breathe, scrambling to my knees, my eyes scanning over the raccoon for any signs of injury.

He looks at me, but far from looking relieved that the giant cockroach is gone, he clicks his claws together, and moves his head agitatedly.

"He's gone," I say soothingly as I stand. "And I don't suppose you know about these ants...do they bite, or are they just gross?"

The raccoon's increasing agitation finally pierces my shell-shocked mind, and I slowly lift my head.

Everywhere I look, there are *eyes*.

Purple eyes, green eyes, red eyes, yellow eyes...hundreds of them glowing among the trees.

Okay so *this* is the point where the stupid girl would have kept going.

Me? I'm turning back.

Acting on instinct, I grab the raccoon, like he's some sort of sweet house cat, and start to turn back the way I came.

With horror, I realize I'm too late.

The eyes have surrounded me, and they're drawing closer. Something makes a feral noise, and I feel the whoosh of something *huge* jump from a nearby branch to stand in front of me.

I'd always pictured jaguars as being elegant, majestic creatures.

They aren't.

Especially not when they're staring at you with blood-shot humanlike eyes, and looking at you like you're dinner.

I very slowly set the raccoon down behind me and draw my sword as I crouch into the defensive stance Declan taught me.

Except Declan assumed I'd be up against a human, not a big-ass cat. I have no idea what my next move should be.

The thought of slitting the animal's throat makes me queasy, but so does dying.

I make a quick dart forward, my blade swinging towards the animal's neck, but it prances away before I even move my feet. I feel the warmth of the raccoon press close to my ankles, oddly comforting, as yet another creature emerges from the woods to stand beside the jaguar. I don't even have a name for this one. It's like part bear, part spider, part...bat?

Even as I sink back into my defensive position and try to determine the animal's attack, realization is sinking in.

I'm going to die here.

And my poor little raccoon friend is probably going to die with me. For some reason *that* thought makes me cry more than anything else.

"Thanks for helping me, guy," I say softly. He huddles even closer, I let the tears fall.

I take a deep bracing breath, and hear the now familiar thud of other animals dropping to the ground around me. Surrounding me.

But before I can do so much as make a last-ditch effort to do some damage before I die, several of the eyes turn away from me, back towards the entrance of the forest.

"Harper? Harper!"

*Declan.*

"I'm here!" I croak, my voice hoarse from screaming. Crying. Whatever. I clear my throat and try again. "Declan!"

I hear the frantic thrash of trees and see the glint of his sword before I watch as he neatly cuts the head off of...something.

Then I see two more glints. Two more swords.

There's the high-pitched wail of an animal going down, followed by a feminine sounding war cry.

*Keely.*

A rough hand grabs my arm, and for the first time since I arrived in Faylin, being man-handled by Max is a welcome occurrence.

"Go. *Run!*" he pants.

"But you guys...I can help..."

"We're right behind you. *Go.*"

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I try to scoop up the raccoon, but he darts out of reach and races ahead of me towards the edge of forest, his little striped tail a beacon showing me the way.

I run and I run, refusing to picture that jaguar coming out of nowhere to pounce, or that bear *thing* taking me down with one swipe of its huge claw.

Finally, the trees begin to thin out, and the air is crisp again.

Still, I don't stop until I'm out of the slushy grime and onto the familiar white snow.

I fall to my hands and feet, panting for air as I call for the raccoon to stop. He halts and comes to huddle beside me like a scared pet.

I turn, expecting to see my three friends behind me, but there's nothing. My heart stops.

"Declan! Max! Keely!"

Then I see movement through the mist, and Max emerges from the fog, barely out of breath. "Where are the others?" he asks, his eyes wild.

"I thought they were with you," I say, scrambling to my feet and heading back towards the forest. "We have to get them."

He grabs my elbow, his eyes murderous. "As if you could

do anybody any good. You're the *last* thing any of us need right now. Or ever."

His words are so sharp, so *angry*, I suck in a breath, but I don't snap back. Not this time. Not when he's so right, and when I've so thoroughly earned his loathing.

Max starts to move back towards the trees when I see them. "Wait. Over there."

Two people rush towards us. One is carrying the other.

"Oh god," I whimpered as I started to run. *Keely*.

"She's not dead," Declan says, as soon as we reach him, holding up a hand to calm Max as he gently sets Keely on the ground. "But she's hurt. Badly."

I cover my mouth with my hand, biting back a sob as I take in Keely's blood soaked body.

Her face is so swollen. I barely recognize her. Max's hands move over her body, quickly identifying a wound on her thigh as the source of most of the blood. He swears softly as he pats at her cheek gently.

"Keely? Keels can you hear me? You have to stay with me?" The sound of Max's voice cracking rips at me.

Declan moves quickly, pulling a scarf off his neck and pulling it tightly above the gaping wound. "It was one of the Bresarites. He swiped her as we were running out."

Max's hand stilled briefly. "A Bresarite? They're extinct."

"Not this one. And Max...the forest..."

"I know," Max said roughly as he scooped Keely into his arms. "It shouldn't be here. There shouldn't even be a sign of it for another three hours, at least."

Declan's face is white beneath the scattered scratches on his face. "Meaning what...it's growing?"

Max shakes his head. "I don't know. We can figure it out later. We have to get Keely back."

It's as though they'd forgotten I'm there, but I can't bring myself to care. I deserve it.

"What can I do? I want to help," I say softly. Pleadingly.

Declan won't look at me as he rises to his feet and cleans his sword with snow. Snow that turns red with blood.

But Max does at me, and as long as I live, I hope I'd never see that expression in someone's eyes again.

*Hate.*

"Your help isn't worth dirt around here. We've done nothing but try to keep you safe, and you pull this?"

"I know," I whisper, my eyes filling with tears.

"Anything happens to her, I'll throw you into that forest myself, you get me, Logosian? And don't think for one second anyone here will care what happens to you," Max says, his voice a low growl.

"Max." Declan shoots him a warning glance, but Max ignores the duke, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I get it," I say, refusing to look away from Max. And I do get it.

Because what I just saw in there? That was more than just a poison apple or a mean stepmother. That was dark and dangerous and *real*.

If I could help fight it, I would.

But I can't shake the feeling that maybe I can't fight it.

And worse.

Maybe I caused it.

## CHAPTER 23



"*Y*ou're shuffling again, Harper. You want to glide."

Actually, I *don't* want to glide. I want to be anywhere other than the castle ballroom learning how to do the Caterwhirl, which as far as I can tell, is just an excuse for people to hold hands and spin in circles.

"Don't they dance in Logosia?" Keely calls curiously from where she sits at the piano bench in the corner.

"Not like this," I mutter as Isadora does that spinning motion with her finger that meant 'repeat.' From the beginning.

I breathe in deeply through my nose and resist the urge to beg for a break. I'm hardly in a place to be asking for favors from these people. My eyes flit to Keely's leg which is propped up in front of her like a wounded appendage.

Oh wait, it is a wounded appendage.

She's threatened to punch me if I apologize one more time, but I can't help it.

Every time I look at her, my heart hurts. I'd nearly gotten her killed. Nearly gotten them *all* killed.

Despite Max's protests, I was at Keely's bedside when she regained consciousness the day after my flawed escape plan, and she forgave me almost immediately and refused to listen to more than thirty seconds of my groveling.

I glance at Declan as we move towards the far end of the ballroom to start the dance again. He too, has forgiven me, although there's a slight frost there.

And as for Max...well he won't even look at me. I don't blame him.

"You're not enjoying this," Declan says quietly as we take our spots at the end of a long hallway, and put our hands on our respective hips for the start of the dance.

"I just don't see how dancing is going to help...anyone." I'm careful not to mention Arianna specifically. In the few days since my failed escape, I've been careful not to mention her name.

With Keely barely walking and the two guys scratched up and bruised, I've been faced with the hard reality that one life is not worth that of many.

Not that I'm content to roll over and be their pawn, but I've promised to cooperate, for now. And I'm determined to keep that promise.

"Everyone in Faylin knows these dances," Declan says simply. "And there's a festival coming up for gentry *and* servants. You'll be expected to know how to dance."

"Yeah, if someone asks me," I mutter.

"Someone will."

His voice is confident and a little sharp. I glance up, but Declan doesn't meet my eyes.

"Ready?" Isadora calls from the piano, her fingers poised over the keys.

"The woman's like a drill sergeant," I mutter as the music starts.

"She used to be the dance instructor before she was

promoted to head housekeeper. It's lucky we have her, actually. Even with two good legs, Keely dances like a tin man, and Max and I don't know the female moves."

"I'd be shocked if Max knew the *guy* role. I can't exactly picture him dancing," I say, not bothering to glance over to where I feel Max's glower from his sentry near the door. He'd been hovering over Keely, adjusting her skirt and her hurt leg every ten seconds before she'd snapped at him to give her some space and banished him to the corner.

Every now and then, I feel his eyes boring into my back, and I know that he wants *me* to be the one glued to a chair and broken instead of Keely.

"He didn't mean what he said, you know," Declan says quietly as we begin moving through the elaborate foot and hand motions that make up the hyper Caterwhirl.

I let out a short laugh, slipping my hand into Declan's as we move into a double turn. "Um, yeah. He did. One more misstep from me, and I'm pretty sure he'll feed me to the giant cockroach himself."

Declan doesn't respond, and I concentrate on getting all the hand motions right under Isadora's perfectionist hawk-eye. It isn't *that* hard, once I start concentrating. It is really no different than my cheer routines back home, except that I have a partner.

A partner who will barely look me in the eyes.

"Declan," I say quietly. "You know how sorry I am, right?"

His blue eyes flick to me. "I know. And I believe you won't do it again, even if Max doesn't."

"Then why are things...different. With us, I mean."

His fingers tighten briefly around my fingers as he stares at a distant point over my shoulder. "We barely got to the forest in time, Harper. Do you have any idea what those creatures would have done to you?"

My heart thuds, although I don't know if it is from the



memory of those dark seconds in the forest when I thought I was going to die, or from the realization that Declan isn't moody because he's mad.

He's moody because he cares.

"Good!" Isadora calls, breaking the moment. "Now keep in mind that there will be people on either side of you during the actual dance, so you'll have to mind your timing. But you've picked it up nicely, Harper."

I try not to feel pleased at the praise. I'm not sure I *want* to "do nicely" here. A part of me still resents that I have to play by their rules.

A flash of black streaks into the room, and Keely giggles in delight as a fat raccoon curls up in her lap.

Isadora's nostrils flutter slightly. "How much longer will this creature be staying with us?"

I wander over to the piano and stroke a finger under the raccoon's little chin. "Charming's here to stay," I say quietly.

Not only did I bring the raccoon follow us home from the forest, I brought him inside the castle and named him.

Charming, of course is a nod to Prince Charming. As in, the raccoon is as close to my prince as I'll get.

I barely remember carrying the raccoon into the castle that night, but when I set him on my bed after determining that Keely would be okay, he'd curled up near my pillow like a content house cat, and I knew there was no way I'd be throwing him out.

To Declan's credit, he'd only flinched slightly at the sight of our new roommate.

"It is strange that a raccoon would be so content as a pet," Keely says as she strokes his long tail. "They're usually so solitary."

"Yes, well...lucky us," Isadora says with a visible shudder. But still, neither she or even Max had thrown a fit about Charming's constant presence. Almost as though they're

hoping that by tolerating him, they'll ward off any more crazy Harper behavior.

Like, *Hey, we can't reunite you with your sister, but here's a nice raccoon to make up for it.*

Declan comes to my side, and I stifle a laugh as Charming launches himself at the duke. Charming *loves* Declan. Smart little raccoon.

"Hi, Charming," Declan grumbles as he gently dislodges the raccoon from his chest and drops him back into Keely's lap.

Charming makes an annoyed chattering noise, and Declan gives him an uncomfortable pat on the head.

"I've gotta get going, Isadora," Declan says, shooting Max's mom one of those winning smiles. "Beau and I are going hunting today. I can't blow him off again. He's starting to think something's up."

Isadora gives a small sigh, and runs a palm over her perfect bun. "Of course. There's more for Harper to learn, but we don't want to call any attention to us, especially with people raising eyebrows over Keely's unusual injury."

I quickly stare at my boots, feeling the now familiar feeling of guilt rush over my cheeks. Declan and Max were able to blame their injuries on a fight with each other. Nobody had second-guessed *that*.

But explaining away Keely's leg and scratched face has been more difficult. Max had settled for a horse riding accident which, considering Keely rode like she'd been born in the freaking saddle, was far-fetched.

"That's okay," I say quickly to Isadora. "I feel good about all the dances."

"But you haven't learned *all* the dances," Keely says. "We haven't even started on the Flitz yet, and that's the most difficult to get right."

There's another dance? How many did these people have?

"Maybe she could just sit out the Flitz tomorrow," Declan said quietly.

"I bet Bender will ask her," Keely says knowingly. "Everyone knows he's got a thing for her."

Declan stares at Keely. "No, everybody does not know that." He glances at me. "Did you know?"

I lift a shoulder. I suspected it. You don't make it through junior high without developing a sixth sense for when a boy has a crush.

"I can just say no," I volunteer. "If Bender asks, I mean."

Keely pouts. "Come on, you deserve some fun."

Max makes a sour noise of disagreement from the door, but we all ignore him.

"Can't you stay a minute longer?" Isadora asks with a raised eyebrow at Declan.

I try not to wince at his too-long silence. Is dancing with me really that bad?

"Ten minutes," he says. "Beau's always running late anyway. But we won't be able to get much more than the basics. I still think she should say no to Bender. He's sure to realize she's not familiar with it."

"Oh is *that* why she should say no to Bender?" Keely asks in a bland tone.

I cut her a quick glance and see her tongue rolling mischievously in her cheek as though amused by her own trouble-making.

Declan doesn't rise to the bait.

"Okay, then, let's not waste anymore time." Isadora claps her hands and walks to the middle of the ballroom. Declan and I follow her.

She positions Declan and I so we're facing each other as with every dance.

Then, *unlike* other dances, she places a palm on each of our backs, nudging us closer together. "Now every other

dance you've learned so far is what we call a Hopper Dance. They're casual, peppy, meant to excite the crowd. But the Flitz...it's different. Slower. More...personal."

My eyes fly up to hers, then Declan's. Her description tickles my memory from watching old-timey movies.

"The Flitz...is that like the waltz?"

Isadora shakes her head impatiently. "The waltz?"

"Yeah, you know...harmless by today's standards but totally *scandalous* in its day."

*Scandalous because it involved touching.*

"The Flitz is still considered scandalous by the older set," Keely calls.

Isadora shoots her an annoyed look.

"Some of the older set," Keely amends quickly.

"It is considered a bit...forward," Isadora confirms slowly. "But the prince and the princess have become big fans of it, so you can pretty much be guaranteed that you'll need to know it. In a Grand Ball, there will be as many as three, but tomorrow's just a Festival, so you'll likely only have to make it through one."

"If at all," Declan says quickly.

I resist the urge to kick his shin. It's on the tip of my tongue to suggest that *he* dance it with me to prevent anyone else from recognizing my clumsiness. But I know better than to suggest it.

Dukes do not dance with their valets.

Especially when they have Lady Rowena.

"The dance is simpler than the others you've learned," Isadora says.

"I thought Keely said it was the hardest to get right," I interrupt.

The older woman hesitates. "Well, that's the trick. The steps themselves are simple, but it's not about the steps. It's about the movement. The partnership."

*Greaaaaat.*

"Harper, your right hand goes in Declan's left, and your left hand goes on his shoulder."

Declan lifts his left hand dutifully, staring at a spot somewhere above my head, and I hesitantly slip my hand into his as my other comes to rest lightly on his shoulder. I've been holding his hand all day, but we haven't been so...close.

"Now Declan—"

But he already knows what to do, of course, and his other arm comes around me, hesitating for a fraction of a second before it presses against the middle of my back.

I swallow dryly. Yep. This is definitely like the waltz.

"Good," Isadora says, as she circles around us and moves our clasped hands an inch higher so they're level with Declan's shoulders. "Now it'll be in three-quarters time. Harper, you're familiar?"

"Sure," I say quietly, trying to recall my childhood piano lessons. Somehow though, I suspect that playing three-quarters time on a keyboard is a good deal different than moving in sync with the Duke of Claymore.

"The trick is to let the leader lead, and the follower follow. Declan can't be hesitant, and *you* can't be independent. Some of the more...headstrong females struggle with that."

"It's why Keely's never been very good at it," Declan whispers loudly.

"Heard that!" Keely calls. "And I'm great at the Flitz!"

"She's not," Declan says with a small smile.

I smile back, grateful to have the slight lightening of mood as Isadora goes to the piano. "Declan, you'll walk her through it as I play?" Isadora asks.

"Sure," he answers. "Remember though, ten minutes, then I've gotta go."

"In a hurry to escape?" I ask under my breath, unsure why I'm pressing, but wanting to hear him admit...something.

He ignores the question as the music begins, and he quietly begins to count *one-two-three, one-two-three* under his breath as we begin to move in a wide circle.

I see immediately what Isadora and Keely mean about it being difficult. After the fast, driving precision of the previous dances, it is difficult to blindly be lead around.

Despite my best efforts to follow Declan's movements, we move in fitful starts and stops instead of the gentle glide we're aiming for.

"It's easier on the balls of your feet, Harper," Keely calls.

I shift some of the weight off my heels, and although the change in position does make me feel lighter, I still have to concentrate to match Declan's easy movements.

"It's easier if you relax," Declan mutters in-between counts.

"I'm *trying*," I say through clenched teeth.

"Think about something else. Try to forget that you're dancing."

I blow out a breath and try to take my mind off the movement of my feet and my awareness of Declan's fingers burning through the fabric of my dress.

"My hand's sweaty," I say, glancing at our joined fingers.

His footsteps falter slightly as he laughs. "It's because you're nervous about dancing."

"I don't think that's why I'm nervous," I say boldly, risking a glance up at him.

His gaze is fixed above my head, but he glances down at my words.

"No?" he asks softly.

"No," I say just as quietly.

His eyes glow warm, and I see his Adam's apple bounce as he swallows. "You wanted to know why I was in a hurry to leave?"

"Yeah?" My voice is a whisper now.

"I think you already know why. This is...dangerous. For all of us."

Now it's my turn to stumble, and I tear my eyes away from his, once again fixing my gaze on his collar-bone as I try to focus on the soft rhythm of the music.

As far as admissions go, his could mean anything. Maybe he really is just trying to get away from me.

Or maybe he doesn't trust himself—doesn't want to show what dancing with me might reveal.

His fingers shift, moving me imperceptibly closer, and my eyes close.

*It's the second one.*

Whatever strange attraction I have to him goes both ways.

The question now is whether either of us will act on it.

"Harper," he says softly.

I force myself to glance up, letting myself forget about my feet, the fact that we have an audience and the fact that I'm here to find a new boyfriend.

All that matters in this moment is him.

This time, the pressure on my back is more insistent, and I let my feet bring me closer to him without missing a step, until the inches separating us become centimeters.

Declan's head tilts down, and mine tilts up, and he's so close.

We're so close to—

"Claymore!"

Max's harsh voice has both of us stumbling, and I see Declan shake his head as though snapping out of a trance. I quickly pull my hand back, moving several feet away as I face myself to look at Max.

But Max isn't looking at me. Instead, he's glaring at Declan, his stance anything but friendly. I expect Declan to get the usual fighting light in his eyes whenever Max chal-

lenges him, but instead he looks vaguely chagrined. Embarrassed even.

Of *course* he is embarrassed, I think bitterly. He nearly kissed the help.

"You said you had somewhere to be?" Max says in a low voice.

Declan gives a short nod. "I do. Excuse me."

I silently beg him to *look* at me, to reassure me that the moment hadn't been all in my imagination. But he walks away without so much as a glance in my direction, the click of his boots echoing in the cavernous ballroom.

I sneak a glance at the piano where Isadora's fingers remain poised over the keys as though she's frozen mid-song. I wonder at what point she had stopped playing, and my cheeks flush realizing that for all I know, that entire moment with Declan could have been without music.

Keely is watching me with a mixture of delight and worry, and Isadora's attention turns back to her sheet music, but from the tension around her mouth, I don't think she's thrilled by the turn of events.

No doubt the Council of Arlen has some rule about their members not falling for the Logosian.

Not that Declan is *falling*.

But I definitely am. Hard.

"We're done here," Max barks, his voice so sharp I wince.

"Are you kidding?" Keely asks. "She's not even *close* to having the Flitz down. Declan looks like he is dragging her around the dance floor before they got all—"

Her voice trails off, and Max's jaw tightens. I wonder just how many times he'd seen this sort of thing happen as Declan's valet.

How many girls had he watched fall for Declan's gorgeous eyes and slow smiles?

"Well then, I guess we'll just have to do without the plea-



sure of watching the Logosian trod around the dance floor tomorrow," he says snidely, heading towards Keely.

"Max, everyone's already watching the four of us too closely now. It'll be weird if neither she nor I are dancing tomorrow."

"Well if she hadn't pulled such a selfish, idiot stunt the other night, then *you* would at least be dancing," Max says, still not looking at me.

"Aramax," Isadora interrupts. "Enough. Harper's apologized, and Keely's healing nicely."

"But—"

"Let it go, Max," Keely says with an encouraging smile.

"Or at least keep it to yourself," Isadora retorts, resettling herself at the piano. "Now we need to get Harper through one tolerable round of the Flitz so we can return to our duties."

I jolt out of my almost-kiss daze. "Wait, what? I thought Declan was busy."

"He is busy," Isadora agrees. "But Max isn't."

Max and I both freeze. I wait for him to shoot that idea down, and he doesn't disappoint me.

"No," he says through clenched teeth. "No way."

"Max, honestly," Keely sighs, sounding annoyed. "One dance isn't going to kill you."

"If it's with her, it might."

"One can hope," I say for his ears only. He cuts me a rough glance, and as expected, he takes it as a challenge.

"Fine," he snaps, turning on his heel and marching to the center of the room. He immediately moves into the Flitz position, looking like a soldier going to his death.

I let out a weary sigh and slide into position. My fingers close around his warm ones, and he stiffens before reluctantly closing his hand around mine, as though the very contact burns him.

"Remember, one dance," he calls to the others over my shoulder.

I laugh. "Gosh, this makes me feel *so* self-confident. *Both* dance partners ensuring the short duration of the experience before the music's even started."

And then the music does start, and Max's hand presses stiffly against my back as he begins to move. He doesn't count like Declan, merely leads me with sure, strong movements. If Declan had been trying to *coax* me into submission, Max merely demands it.

To my surprise, I actually find myself matching his movements. It's easier when there's no other choice. A misstep is not an option when one dances with Max, I realize.

I brave a glance at his face, but his gaze seems to be fixed on my left ear.

"I am sorry, you know," I say quietly.

"Sorry won't fix Keely's leg."

I absorb that for a second, knowing he's right to be angry and bitter. And yet...

"You would have done the same," I say, careful to keep my voice down.

His fingers tighten briefly around mine. "What?"

"If Keely or your mother disappeared from your life and you knew there was a *chance* they were out there, possibly needing you, you would have done the same. You'd have gone after them."

Having said my piece, I let myself fade into the music, basking in the feel of effortless spinning as we move in perfect sync.

"You're right," he says, so quietly I think I've misheard. "I would have done the same."

My first instinct is to gloat. This gruff admission is *quite* the victory when dealing with Max. Instead, I give the smallest nod of acknowledgement, sensing that on this, at

least, we understand each other. Maybe even have something in common.

The hand at my back relaxes slightly, shifting upwards, and I begin to wonder how long this Flitz is supposed to last.

"He'll hurt you, you know," Max whispers. "He'll make you think you're special, but you're not. Not to him."

My footsteps could falter, but Max won't allow it as he continues his strong, uncompromising lead.

"You don't know that," I reply. "*Someone* has to matter to him."

"Maybe. Some day. But it won't be you."

And just when I'd started thinking I could tolerate this guy, he had to go and say something like that.

"And why not me?" I ask. "You've found happiness with Keely. Why can't that be an option for me and Declan?"

I see his eyes move towards the piano where Keely is sitting with my pet raccoon on her lap, watching her boyfriend dance with the girl who had nearly gotten her killed.

"It's different with Keely and me. Keely's just...she's always been there."

I free my right hand for a few seconds and pretend to fan myself. "Whoa. Easy with the romance. That's heady stuff."

His lips twist together as though holding back either a smile or a snarl, and I stifle a sigh. Maybe I'd never been the queen of popularity like Arianna, but never had anyone genuinely dislike me as much as this guy does.

"Max, I know I'm never going to be your favorite person, but since we seem to be stuck together, you by your duty to the council, and me because...well, because I'm out of options...what do you think about trying to be friends?"

*Or at least civil*, I silently add.

His eyes move over my face in a cool assessment before

he resumes staring at my earlobe. I resist the urge to touch my ear and make sure he hasn't burned a hole in it.

Max doesn't say anything else as the music slows to a stop, pulling me to a surprisingly graceful stop on the last note.

He pulls his hand away from my back before the last echo of music fades.

"So that's a no on the friend thing?" I say quietly as I take a step back.

Max meets my eyes. "That's a no."

## CHAPTER 24



"It's like you've never seen a festival before," Bender says, as he hands me our shared bag of Pleezies, which as far as I can tell, are marshmallows stuffed with chocolate wrapped in graham cracker crumbs, and almost painfully delicious.

"It's been awhile," I lie, as I make a mental note to stop gaping at everything.

"Yeah, I guess it's a trek from the Outer Banks. I know the whole kingdom's always invited, but I suppose there are lots that don't make it."

I stuff another Pleezie in my mouth even though I wasn't done chewing the last one, to avoid responding beyond, *mm hmm*.

Declan shoots me a wary look which I ignore. I'm doing my best not to wear my "new girl" status like a bandana around my forehead, but it's a little hard not to gawk.

The sheer spectacle in front of me makes the little gathering I'd seen that first day in Faylin seem like a two-year old's poorly attended birthday party.

*This* is like the Olympics on steroids. I had no idea that Winterscape had so many *people*.

Being the valet of a duke has its advantages, and we'd been given an elevated box seat near the Royals. Our box is one of dozens, from what I can see.

It offers a perfect vantage point of the hoards of brightly attired people roaming on the ground below.

Bender nudges me and points across the open courtyard at one of the purple velvet tents on the other side. I see Keely waving wildly at us with a big grin. For once, I'm relieved she's a lady's maid, because it means she has a chair to rest on, instead of having to battle the crowd with a broken leg.

I wave back, before continuing trying to take it all in. Multiple bonfires flicker in every direction, each far larger than the one I'd seen on that first day.

I can't even begin to count how many groups of dancers are below. I'd thought at first that *this* was the dancing I'd practiced for, but Keely informed me that the *actual* ball comes later. In other words, I had to wait all day before figuring out if my dancing skills would pass muster.

I try to ignore the constant intrusion of male voices interrupting my observations, but Declan and Beau have been arguing all day about Declan's triumph in the archery tournament earlier that day.

"It's because you got to go last. You always do best when you shoot last," Beau says, his eyes following the outline of one of the ladies in the box next to us.

"And you don't?" Declan shoots back good-naturedly. "How do you think you beat me at the last one?"

"Skill. Raw, unmatched skill," Beau says with a slow, shark smile. "Isn't that right, Harpie?"

I jump a little when I realize that the earl is addressing me. The guy is hopelessly handsome, and so dang confident he unnerved me. Beau is pretty much the epitome of tall,

dark, and handsome, and the combination of his and Declan's good looks side-by-side is a little overwhelming. I've *almost* gotten used to the number of "accidental drop-bys" from well-dressed girls when the two of them are together.

"Harper, you up for the servant's archery challenge?" Bender asks, rolling up the bag of Pleezies before I am done.

"Ehhh..."

"You should," Beau says, overhearing his valet. "In fact, Declan and I will put money on it. Give Bender a chance to win back what Declan weaseled away from me this morning."

"Oh I don't think—" I glance at Declan for direction. On one hand, I'd already gotten the impression that these archery tournaments are a really big deal. For all I know, declining to participate is a major red flag. But on the other hand, my archery skills had hardly improved since that first disastrous day in Declan's chambers. Losing to Bender is pretty much a foregone conclusion.

But instead of helping me find a graceful out, Declan doesn't even glance in my direction. He pushes away from the railing overlooking the courtyard and gives a wide, care-less grin at his friend. "By all means, Beau, if you want your valet to fight your battles for you, I'll play along."

The earl gives Declan a long, assessing look before shrugging and heading out of the curtain with a gesture for Bender to follow. Bender does follow, but not before he gives me one of those age-old *you're going down* charade gestures.

I bug my eyes out at Declan as we slowly head after them. "Seriously?" I hiss.

"I had to. Beau was already ribbing me this morning about being too protective of you."

I stop in my tracks, surprised. "Protective of me how?"

I know that Declan and the others are protecting me as

part of the *Council*, but as far as I can see, he treats me normally in public. Not too unlike how Beau treats Bender and Lady Rowena treats Keely. Not *quite* like a servant, but not exactly like an equal either.

"How exactly have you been protecting me?" I press.

Outside of the box, the crowds are massive, and I have to trot to keep up.

He raises an eyebrow at my question and gives me a look.

"Well, other than the whole riding into the Black Forest to save me thing, I mean," I whisper.

"Oh yeah, we'll just overlook that minor detail," he says under his breath. "Look, forget I said anything. It's just that a female valet is a novelty. And let's say that some of the other valets, and some of the other nobles, well...they're not exactly blind to you."

I stop short, unsure whether I am flattered or horrified. I've been so busy trying to fit in and not fall all over Declan that I haven't really paid much attention to any other guys. Well, other than Max, but he and I are barely speaking after our little dance fiasco.

"What does that have to do with you protecting me?"

Declan rotates his shoulders irritably. "Just play along and aim a couple arrows at the target, will you?"

"You know I'll lose," I say softly as we approach a crowd of people all facing a row of targets in the distance.

"Perhaps. But you're better than you think."

Declan accepts a bow from one of the organizers and hands it to me. Our fingers brush. And linger.

And for the life of me, I don't know whether that brief contact makes me shoot better or worse, but in the end it doesn't matter, because I still lose to Bender.

I don't come in dead-last though, and that is something of a pleasant surprise. I'm third in my particular round, and



can't bother to hide a smile when I wind up fifth out of the servant class. Sure, Bender placed second, but still. *Fifth!*

Beau dragged Bender away for some sort of celebratory drink I've never heard of, and I'm relieved to have a break from Bender's somewhat dotting attentions. I can't tell for sure that he's interested *like that*, but if he is, I don't want to have to explain that it's not mutual.

"Not bad for someone who has been only been doing this this for couple weeks," Declan says. "You do seem to have a strange aptitude for fighting."

My smile slips. Not *exactly* what every girl longs to hear. "Please. Stop. I'm blushing."

And then it gets worse, because he gives me one of those guy-to-guy punches on the shoulder like I am one of the dudes, before running to catch up to Lady Rowena. She looks stunning as always, dressed in a pure white fur-lined concoction lined in pearls.

I've followed Keely's instructions to wear one of my more formal gowns for the festival, but formal in servant world apparently means the dress has two colors of ribbons as accents instead of just one. I look like I'm not fit to polish Lady Rowena's boots.

My eyes scan the crowd, figuring that Keely must be nearby if Lady Rowena is here. My gaze catches a tall, blond man. He seems older, maybe forties, and looks so familiar although I am pretty sure he isn't in Declan's circle of acquaintances. Maybe one of Isadora's friends? They seem about the same age.

The crowd shifts, and I move to the right to keep him in my sights. I know that I know him, I just can't remember—

The guy from the park.

He starts to move in the other direction, and I call after him before I can stop to think about caution. "Wait!"

His shoulders stiffen, and I'm pretty sure he hears me, but

then he keeps moving, weaving in and out of the brightly colored crowd until I'm practically shoving people out of the way to catch up to him. Of course, this being Faylin, nobody seems to do anything other than smile at my rude manners, nor is anyone particularly helpful.

I think I see him, but just like that, he vanishes. And I don't mean, gets lost in the crowd, I mean he just seems to *disappear*.

"Excuse me," I say, grabbing the sleeve of an older lady who is eating an enormous purple ice-cream cone. "Did you see that man that just passed you? Blond hair, blue eyes...really handsome?"

The woman looked startled at being interrupted from her ice-cream, but then she let out a wide smile. "Honey, take a look around. What do you see?"

I glance in the circle she's indicated with a wave of her hand and let out a sigh of frustration when I realize her point. Half the people around me are men. And half of *those* are blond, blue-eyed, and hopelessly good looking.

It's just like when I'd been searching for Arianna that first day. Beauty simply isn't a useful qualifier in this world.

"Thanks anyway," I say, as I uselessly begin searching the crowds again. He's gone. I'm not even sure it was him in the first place.

I turn on my heel and begin making my way to the place I'd last seen Declan and Lady Rowena, but they must have moved on. The crowd is getting even more rowdy, and I start to catch snippets of conversation about, "Princess Bianca's surprise."

"Boy, can't wait to see what *that* is," I mutter to myself, heading back towards the duke's box. "Probably something sugar-coated."

"House of mirrors, my lady?" An elderly elf pops in front

of me, gesturing enthusiastically to a structure that does indeed seem to be a structure built entirely of mirrors.

"No thanks," I say, feeling vaguely sorry for him. Although Faylin doesn't seem particular about their type of carnival-like entertainment, he hardly has anyone, being tucked away behind the noblemen's tents like this. "Sorry, I would, I just... I need to find someone."

"Not to worry," he says, bowing deeply although it's obvious I am not a servant. "Enjoy the festival. Rumor has it the Prince and Princess have something extra special planned."

*Yuck.* I smile at the elf and start to move on, when my gaze catches on one of the mirrors. A beautiful woman is staring back at me. The same woman from the mirror in my bedroom.

She winks, and I glance over my shoulder.

There's nobody there.

The foot traffic is minimal here, with most of the nobles in their tents, or joining in the festivities, so she can't have disappeared in the crowd.

I turn around to face the mirror, and I'm unsurprised to see that she's still there. She meets my eyes steadily, giving a friendly smile. She's *in* the mirror.

"Hey wait!" I call after the dwarf, who's toddling towards a group of children.

He turns.

"That mirror," I say, gesturing at the woman. "It's not an actual mirror. What is it? How does it work? Who's that woman?"

For all I know it is simply some sort of animated Faylin painting, but it feels like she is watching me. *Me* specifically.

He glances in the direction of my finger and shrugs. "They're all just mirrors," he says. "One the same as the last."

"But who is she?"

"Who?"

"Her," I say, dragging him next to me so he can get a better look at the mirror.

But there's nobody there.

The dwarf pats my shoulder. "Too many sweets, dear?"

*No, not too many damned sweets*, my brain screams. I saw two familiar people in the span of five minutes, and I know in my very bones that it's important.

Bender, Beau and Declan are already back at the box when I return.

"There you are!" Bender says. "It's about to start!"

He grabs my hand and pulls me towards the railing. I feel Declan and Beau's eyes on our joined hands, and for some perverse reason I don't pull away.

"Where's Lady Rowena?" I ask loudly enough for Declan to hear.

"Who cares," Bender says as he releases my hand and leans over the side.

"Look! The royal birds!"

I watch the now familiar routine as the birds sing their sickly sweet chorus, and look on as the crowd parts for Princess Bianca and Prince Christoff, who have a long, drawn-out approach through the crowd, blowing kisses and throwing coins at the ecstatic people.

*Finally* they make it through the throngs of admirers and come to the edge of the royal tent. Prince Christoff raises his hands for silence, and I brace myself for another thrilling State of the Kingdom address.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Nobles and Servants, Magical and Non-Magical people! I am thrilled to announce the arrival of two of our best friends."

I see Declan and Beau exchange a puzzled glance.

"The Prince and Princess of Codeladha!"

*Codeladha*. My blood freezes. That's one of the other king-

doms. The kingdom where the mysterious countess had shown up.

*Arianna.*

In a daze, I mimic Bender's posture, leaning over the railing so I can see the approaching caravan.

"How'd they get through the Black Forest?" Bender yells in my ear.

I shrug. I'd like to know that myself. I've seen firsthand just how impassable it is. If someone braved it, the reason must be important. I turn towards the Royal Tent and suck in a breath when I see that Princess Bianca is staring right at me. And then very slowly, she nods.

Does that mean...had she found Arianna?

The Prince and Princess of Codladha approach, and the crowd, though still excited, is slightly more deferential. More awed.

"This doesn't happen often, right?" I ask Bender, knowing I'm risking exposing myself, but desperate to understand what's going on.

He shakes his head. "Hardly ever. Only if Moira can conjure enough magic people to charm a portion of the forest for passing, and I thought that only happened on really special occasions."

*Special occasions...like...one too many Logosians showing up at once?*

I subtly catch Declan's eye, but he looks every bit as baffled as I am.

"She's so beautiful," Bender says, his eyes locked on the newcomer princess.

I follow his gaze. She really is beautiful. Her blonde hair is so fair it's almost white, and it falls to her waist in perfectly uniform curls. Princess Bianca's dresses are generally crisp, bright colors, but this princess wears a soft mint-colored gown and a delicate leaf-like crown. She's like spring to

Bianca's winter, but her prince is every bit as handsome as Prince Christoff. He has the same strong chin. His hair is darker and he is slightly taller and leaner than our prince.

*Our prince.* Since when had I started thinking of Prince Christoff and Princess Bianca as mine? Blech.

The prince and princess's horses finally move out of view, presumably so they can join Snow White and have some sort of air-kissing princess party, but the crowds haven't quieted.

"What's going on now?"

"Their entourage," Bender yells in excitement. "They'll have brought some of their people with them."

Their people. *Arianna.*

My heart in my throat, I begin to carefully inspect each horse-drawn open carriage that goes by. There seems to be an endless string of beautiful men and women, all wearing the same soft, dreamy colors I'd seen on the Codladha princess.

I feel my fingers clench around Bender's arm as I watch in a state of almost painful anticipation. She has to be among them. She *has* to be.

And yet although there are plenty of gorgeously dressed brunette women and girls, I don't see my sister anywhere.

Could I have been wrong? Did the new countess have nothing to do with my sister?

I tear my eyes away from the now dwindling stream of carriages to look at Declan, but unlike usual when he seemed to sense my gaze, his eyes remain locked on the oncoming Codladha carriages.

As though he's waiting for something.

Beau says something and elbows him, but Declan still doesn't move. I tilt my head and frown in concern at the expression I've never seen before on his face. He's usually so easygoing and adaptable, as though nothing can phase him.

But now he looks like he's in a trance.

Puzzled by his strange reaction, I turn and follow his gaze.

I feel blood rush from my head to my toes, and the Pleezies twist violently around in my stomach.

"Look at that one," Bender says with awe, pointing at the girl in the second to last carriage in the line. "She's *beautiful*."

*Isn't she always?* I think bitterly.

Because there, beaming a painfully familiar smile, is my sister.

## CHAPTER 25



"I can't believe you're here!" Arianna says for the hundredth time, giving me another breath-stealing hug.

"You really didn't suspect? That I was in Faylin, I mean?" I ask.

"How could I? I told you, the last thing I remember is driving to school, and then I was inside the castle, and Moira was there to explain everything."

I frown. "She didn't say anything about me?"

Ari shakes her head sadly. "No. I asked, of course. But she said that your destiny wasn't tied up in Faylin like mine was. I assumed you were still back in Logosia."

I tug with frustration at the ends of my hair. "And you just bought it? Went along with the whole thing?"

My sister gives me a censorious look. "I argued, of course. You think I didn't beg to go home? Beg to see you? But she just kept saying over and over that everyone's lives depended on me cooperating."

Arianna folds her legs beneath her to face as me as we sit cross-legged on the bed chambers she'd been assigned for the



duration of her stay at Winterscape. I almost smile at the familiarity of this moment. We'd done this a million times at home. Of course, back then we'd been in matching cheer skirts, and now there is absolutely no similarities between what we're wearing.

Her dress is a robin egg blue confection with tiny iridescent pearls around the neckline and waist. She's even more stunning than Lady Rowena, and rivals Princess Bianca, and the Codladhan princess (whose name I learned is Aurelia) in her perfect beauty.

I'd been mistaken in thinking Arianna's prettiness would get lost in the run-of-the-mill good looks of the people of Faylin. Somehow she's even more beautiful here than she was back in our world.

But I was too glad to see her to be jealous. *Mostly.*

"You seriously came through a mirror?" she asks.

I open my mouth. If I tell anyone the truth about the man in the park, it should be her, but...I don't. Until I figure out who he was, what he wanted ...

"I wanted to find you," I say softly. "I'd have walked through a lot worse than that."

*Like a forest with enormous cock-roaches and even bigger cats.*

But I hadn't yet told Ari about *that* part of my experience in Faylin. I want this moment to be about celebration, and yet oddly I don't feel celebratory.

I feel funny.

Off.

*Angry.*

Arianna's eyes fill with tears, looking for the first time like a teenage girl who had been ripped away from her family and friends instead of a countess very sure of her place in fairy tale land. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Which of course I wouldn't let happen," I say, shoving my weird emotions aside, as I grab her hand.

Neither of us mention Meredith. Not yet. It's too painful. Confirmation that we are both in Faylin means that Meredith is unavoidably alone back home.

"So who all knows about you?" I ask.

"Well, all of the Council of Arlen, of course. But they stay out of my way. Mostly I just see Piper, who's part of the council and my lady's maid."

Arianna stands and wanders to the mirror to check her hair. The mass of curls and flowers suits her every bit as well as her cheerleader ponytail. I resist the urge to fiddle with my own hair, which I'd thrown back in a scraggly braid that morning.

After Max and Keely had shown me to Arianna's room, they'd gone off to meet with the Codladha branch of the Council of Arlen to exchange information. I'm all but certain now that the Codladha visit is about me and Arianna, not about the prince and princess being besties with Bianca.

"Why are you wearing that ugly dress?" Ari asks, tilting her head and studying me.

I gazed back at her blandly. "I'm a valet. What did you think I'd be wearing, diamonds?"

"Oh right," she muses. "That's too bad that they couldn't find a better spot for you. The princess had the whole kingdom buzzing about my arrival. She told everyone I was a visiting a Countess from some place called Amphalia. Doesn't that sound *so* much better than San Diego?"

I stifle a surge of panic. Arianna is *waaaay* too enamored with this world and her role in it. I may have gotten distracted a couple times, but I'd never lost sight of where I'd come from. But Arianna almost seems...like one of them?

"I hope you don't have to be a servant to some dumpy old guy," she says, wrinkling her nose.

"He's not old," I say flatly.

"Well that's good." She either misses or chooses to ignore

my curt tone. "When do you think they're coming back, I'm simply *dying* to get down to the picnic. I hope we haven't missed everything already!"

I blanch. "The picnic? You mean you actually want to continue to play along with the charade?"

"Charade?"

*Oh Ari.*

"This isn't our home, Arianna. We don't belong here. We belong in *our* world. With our mother. Now that we've found each other, we need to figure out how to get back home."

Her eyes cloud over for a moment before she gets a stubborn tilt to her head. "But what if we have a destiny here, Harper? There, I'll just be yet another pretty face, but here I'm *important*."

"Did anyone explain what your destiny is? About the fairy tales?"

"Of course I know about the fairy tales," she says, her tone just a touch testy. "And honestly, why would I want to go back to being head cheerleader when my destiny could be the next Cinderella?"

"It's not all about Prince Charming," I say quietly. "Didn't they warn you about the dangers? Dark magical forces, or whatever?"

Her face lights up. "Of course, and that reminds me! I almost forgot to tell you..."

She waltzes over to one of her many trunks and removes something long and slender covered in a blue gauzy material. She gently unwraps the package and removes a white wand.

"Harpie, I have *magic*."

I stare at the wand. "Magic? How? Up until two weeks ago you didn't know that magic existed."

"I know, right? Moira says she's never seen a Logosian with the gift before. And mine is a *small* gift. Basic charms,

and such. But it'll be more than enough to protect me from anything bad!"

Protect *herself*. Not protect *Faylin*.

I'm still reeling from the fact that I was gifted with the oh-so-glamorous knack for wielding a heavy sword, and my darling big sister had been graced with *magic*. Incredibly rare, even in this world.

I flick my eyes at the ceiling. Seriously? Is there no end to the gifts bestowed on her?

Of course, the magic isn't the gift I'm jealous of.

That has more to do with the fact that she managed to enchant Declan without a single word exchanged.

A soft knock at the door interrupts my sulk, and I raise an eyebrow when Arianna doesn't move from her chair in front of the vanity. "Aren't you going to get that?" I ask.

"Hmm? Oh, I guess I could. Usually Piper gets the door for me."

We make awkward eye contact for a half-second before we both lunge for the door, neither wanting to acknowledge that we'd inadvertently just blurred the line between sisters and servant/noble.

I beat her to the door and open it to a red-haired girl about my height with wide-blue eyes, and a smattering of too-cute freckles. She doesn't bother to disguise the fact that she is inspecting me.

"You must be Harper," she says finally. "I'm Piper."

I blink for a half-second in surprise at her unusually husky voice. It's so unlike most of the usual sing-song voices around this place that I nearly hug her.

"Come on in," I say, standing aside.

"Everyone else is here, too," she says, as she steps in.

Keely gives my hand an excited squeeze as she limps into the room, Max ignores me altogether (shocker), and Declan...he meets my eyes for the briefest of seconds before

giving me a quiet smile. I swallow in relief. I haven't been able to get his visible reaction to my sister out of my mind.

But we hadn't had a chance to talk about it. Seconds after we saw Arianna pass by in her carriage, Max slipped into Declan's tent and nodded for us to follow.

According to Isadora, even the royals didn't know about the Codladhans until minutes before their arrival. The whole thing was orchestrated by Moira, and if everyone's expression was any indication, this was *not* a good thing.

But despite all of the hurried conversations, and everyone's cooperation to get me to see my sister as soon as possible, Declan hadn't said a word.

"Hi," I say quietly, holding his gaze.

"Hey."

I move aside, and Declan steps into the room, closing the door behind him.

"You guys are it?" I ask. "Where's the rest of the Council?"

"Still meeting," Max says.

"Or arguing," Keely amends.

"That too. Seems nobody knows quite knows what to do now that we have two Logosians on our hands, and absolutely no concrete idea of why."

A quiet throat clearing comes from the corner of the room, and everyone turns to stare at Arianna, who gracefully rises from her vanity stool and lightly taps her wand against her hip.

"Right, introductions," I mutter.

"Um, Arianna, these are my...friends." I see Max roll his eyes at the word, I but ignore him. "Keely, Max, and Declan."

I do my best not to let my voice go up on Declan's name, really I do, but Max gives me a sharp look, and I suspect my voice gave me away after all.

Not that Arianna or Declan would have noticed one way or the other.

My heart feels like it's being put through a garbage disposal at the look on their faces. If Declan were by Arianna from a distance, he's positively catatonic at the sight of her up close.

"You're not a servant," Arianna tells him with a shy smile. My heart twists even further when I see the same stunned wonder on her face as I'd seen on his.

"Here we go again," Max mutters under his breath. "At least we know the sisters have something in common."

Flames rush over my cheeks at his obvious insinuation, but luckily Declan and Arianna seem too busy gazing into each other's eyes to notice.

"Yoo hoo," Piper says loudly. "Other people in the room."

That almost makes me smile. Almost.

I'm relieved to see that my sister's lady's maid isn't a push-over.

Still, Arianna's casual dismissal of everyone but Declan sets my teeth on edge, and not just because I'm a little bit jealous. Okay, a *lot* jealous.

It is more the way I saw Ari's gaze skim over Max and Keely's servant uniforms, essentially registering the two of them as invisible.

"Ari," I say sharply. "Max is the one who found me after I crossed over. He practically saved my life."

Max glares. "Leave me out of this."

But Arianna seems to register my tone, because she tears her eyes away from Declan long enough to bestow one of her beauty-queen smiles on Max. "Thanks for helping my little sister. You must be *very* brave."

We all stare at her for a second, and I wonder when my sister started talking like Princess Bianca.

"Whatever," Max mutters.

"So what happened at the meeting?" I ask, even as my sister asks, "So, the picnic?" at the exact same time.

"Ari," I say quietly, "I hardly think it's time for a picnic."

"Well what time *is* it then?"

"Don't you want to know why you two are here?" Keely asks, staring at my sister in confusion.

"Do you know?" Arianna asks, giving Keely a cool look.

"Well, not exactly, but—"

"Then I'm sure I'll be updated when there's something important," Arianna says in her best cheer-captain tone.

"We should at least make a showing at the picnic," Declan says quietly. "Our absence will be noticed, especially after we tore out of the tent before the Prince and Princess had even made their formal address."

"He's right," Keely grumbles. "Lady Rowena will throw a fit if I don't bring her kid-glove slippers."

"Kid-glove in the snow?" Arianna asks, appalled.

"Well there's no snow at the picnic site of course," Keely replies.

"Harper?" Arianna asks, ignoring Keely. She comes towards me and squeezes my hand. "What do you think? If you think we should stay here and wait, we'll stay."

And just like that, I soften. She may be a little self-absorbed and vain, but at heart she's good. And she's my sister. And the truth is, I have *no* idea what our next move should be. The picnic will buy me some time to think.

As we begin making our way from the visitor quarters of the castle to the Ice Courtyard, the group pairs off in twos. Declan offers his arm to Ari after pointing out that it is proper etiquette.

He's right, of course. A hosting duke *should* escort the visiting countess while the servants dutifully follow.

But it doesn't mean I have to enjoy watching the way his blond head dips down to listen to everything she says as she smiles up at him.

Making matters worse, Keely and Piper are busy

discussing differences in lady's maid uniforms between the two kingdoms.

Which leaves me with Max.

We've barely spoken since that day in the ballroom when he'd shot down my friendship request, but for once I'm glad for his sullen silence. It means I don't have to make idle chatter when I'm trying to gather my thoughts.

Thoughts that seem increasingly dark.

"You'll try to find a way to leave now, won't you?" he says, as we approach the crowds of people spread out over enormous fur rugs on the grass. I'm the least bit surprised to see that every blanket has its own perfectly contained bonfire to keep the picnic guests from freezing.

"Wouldn't you?" I ask, keeping my voice low. "If you were sent to Logosia, wouldn't you try to find a way back to Keely?"

"Do you have a *Keely* back home? I mean, someone important...like that," he finishes awkwardly.

"Awfully personal question for someone who's not a friend, but no...there's nobody."

He doesn't say anything, only nods, his eyes glued to Declan's back. "Your sister's pretty."

I laugh at the simple statement. "Yes. She is."

"Declan likes her."

My laugh fades. "So it seems."

"He likes you, too."

I frown. What is this about? "And?"

Max shrugs. "It's interesting that he'd be interested in two people so different."

I don't like the way he emphasizes our differences so soon after saying that Arianna is pretty, but I get his point. What I *don't* get is why a guy who doesn't want to be my friend is even making the point.



"Aren't you the one who says Declan is a lady's man?" I ask. "How is this a surprise?"

He lets out a small sigh and lifts his eyes to the sky. "Just a feeling. I just can't imagine what Moira is thinking, bringing her here."

"Oh gosh, I don't know, maybe that we want to be reunited?"

Max glances at me, his expression uneasy. "I don't think it's that. Moira is...she's not altruistic."

I glance up in surprise. I'd always thought Moira was a goddess of sorts.

"She's on the good side," he's quick to amend. "It's just that she wouldn't have brought your sister here just to facilitate a family reunion. And yet for the life of me, I don't understand her motives."

"But this can't be a bad thing, right?" I say. "Nothing's changed, really."

"It is if you both decide you want to go home," he says.

"Why shouldn't I want to go home?" I say, grabbing his arm and turning him around. "I know you and Isadora don't always see eye to eye, but do you have any idea what it's like, knowing your mom is aging all alone?"

I expect him to snap back, but he seems almost gentle in the way he looks at me. "Look, Harper. Despite us not getting along, I'm not immune to your plight. It's just...I have this feeling—"

"Well, take your *feeling* and shove it somewhere warm and cozy," I say, pushing by him and letting my shoulder roughly bump his arm.

"Harper, come sit!" Arianna calls.

I give her a small wave, but don't move towards the blanket where she, Declan, and Piper are unpacking one of the supplied picnic baskets. "I think I'm actually going to go

compete in the last archery tournament," I call. "That okay with you, boss?"

Declan glances up at me, and he looks...confused? Guilty? Indifferent? I can't tell. I'm suddenly not sure I care.

Oh hell, of *course* I care.

"Sure, go for it. Good luck," he says, his lips tilting into a slow, private smile.

I don't smile back. Before Arianna's arrival, he would have come with me. I know he would have. But now, he doesn't move a muscle.

Arianna touches his arm, saying something to make him laugh, and I jerk my gaze away.

Bender, at least is happy to see me, and I accept the tournament bow with a calm resolve as I watch him take his turn. He does well. *Really* well.

He hits all ten targets, and gets eight out of ten bull's-eyes. It puts him ahead of Prince Christoff, who'd previously been in first place. I don't have a chance in hell of beating him.

Not unless I get ten bull's-eyes.

The majority of the crowds ignore me as they surround Bender, but I step up to the line anyway, watching the facilitator until I get the nod that it is my turn.

Despite the fact that my mind is racing with Arianna, and Declan, and Moira, and the royals, and even Max, I force myself to find the calm spot inside my mind. I push everything else away until there is only silence. Angry, vicious, silent, a quiet power simmers through me.

I channel it all towards one thing: the bull's-eye.

My first arrow lands in the exact center of the target.

So does my second.

As do my third and my sixth, until I have only one more bulls-eye to get. One more perfect shot until I'm in first place. The crowd is definitely paying attention now, and I

dimly hear a mixture of encouragement and heckling from the growing group of spectators.

Even Beau is there, looking oddly pleased by my success despite the fact that I'm one bull's-eye away from beating his own valet. He meets my eye and winks.

Beau, who I am pretty sure doesn't even *like* me, winks.

And Declan, who I am pretty sure *had* liked me, is nowhere to be found.

The anger inside me becomes even more potent. More powerful.

This time when the arrow flies, it isn't with focus, or calm or peace of mind. It's with darkness.

And while I am not *quite* crazy enough to *actually* picture the target as Declan or Arianna, I have the oddest sense that my anger towards them somehow makes my aim more true.

As though I can't miss so long as I hold onto it.

I drop the bow. I just landed ten perfect bull's-eyes.

Something not done by a servant in generations and never by a female servant, the moderator shouts.

I let the crowd's enthusiasm rush over me, even let Beau give me a hug that lingers a little too long, and accept a kiss on the cheek from a forlorn but somewhat proud Bender.

My eyes scan the crowd, meeting a familiar dark gaze, and I give a start. Even *Max* came to watch. He nods once. Not praise, exactly. But acknowledgement, and from Max, that's definitely something.

There's no *way* Declan could have missed it. He's here somewhere, waiting to congratulate me. He has to be.

But when I fight my way back through the crowd with a lame excuse that I need to check on the duke, I see that he *did* miss it.

He missed it because he was too busy tilting his head towards Arianna, their eyes all but melding together while

Piper sits staring into the distance, looking vaguely nauseous.

They don't see me until I my shadow interrupts their *moment*.

"Harper!" Arianna says in surprise. "We saved you some food! Where have you been?"

"Oh you know. Just winning the archery tournament. Ten bull's-eyes."

She blinks slowly, as though to say *who cares*, but it doesn't matter, because I wasn't talking to her. I meet Declan's eyes, not caring if he sees my sense of betrayal...not caring if he sees my hurt.

"Good! That's great, Harp!" he says.

But instead of getting up to hug me, or even dashing over to rub it in Beau's face, he merely gives me a pacifying smile and turns back to Arianna. "So anyway, it's as I was saying..."

Rage pours through me, so fierce and frightening, I think it might consume me.

I try to take deep breaths, but the more I try to calm down, the angrier I become. And the angrier I get, the more powerful I feel. I don't know how to explain it, except that I somehow feel that I could destroy everything in my path right now if I wanted to.

"What's that?" Piper says with a frown, pointing over my shoulder at the sky.

Her interruption takes the edge off my strange breakdown, and I turn to see what's going on.

Piper isn't the only one to notice that something's wrong. Happy chattering turns to nervous whispers as everyone turns to stare at the sky.

I follow their gaze, totally baffled as to what the big deal is.

"I don't get it—all this fuss about a storm cloud?" Ari says, echoing my thoughts.

Keely and Max materialize at our sides, their stance wary and protective. "Winterscape doesn't *do* storm clouds," Keely says. "Especially not on a designated festival day."

"Oh come on," I say, with a little laugh. "So we get snowed on. Everyone's pretty much used to that by now."

"You don't get it, Harper," Keely says quietly. "The prince and princess have access to magic that helps control the weather. It keeps the snow from being too cold, and keeps the snow from falling at all when they don't want it to...there's no way they would have planned this."

As if punctuating her statement, a bitter wind rips through the courtyard.

Declan climbs to his feet, his eyes locked on the elevated platform where Princess Bianca and Christoff are hosting Princess Aurelia and Prince Leon. "They *didn't* plan this. Look at them. They look every bit as baffled as the rest of us."

I look up at the approaching clouds and shiver. They do seem to be moving faster than typical clouds should. And they're a muddy gray color, not the usual silvery color I've come to recognize as Winterscape's snow-clouds.

The wind rips through again, and one-by-one the cozy bonfires snuff out into a wisp of dark smoke. That too, is unusual. Winterscape's fires have never had smoke before.

The carefree mood of the picnic is completely gone now, people rushing to scoop up blankets and children and rush towards the castle. I watch as the clouds continue to move towards us, settling over the picnic as though summoned there.

Something cold and wet brushes my cheek, and I realize that despite the other's assertion that there wouldn't be snow at the picnic, there is definitely some of the fluffy white stuff falling from the sky.

No not falling. *Dumping*. In a matter of seconds, the air

has gone from clear, to a few flakes, to a near sheet of white as a vicious wind blows the snow in all directions.

"Harper, come on!" I turn at Piper's distinctive low voice as she clutches the picnic basket to her chest and gestures towards the castle before turning and darting through the snow. As if in a daze, I watch as Max protectively wraps an arm around Keely whose limp will make it difficult to trudge back through the fierce wind and snow that's now piling up on the ground. He shoots a quick glance over his shoulder, and I give him a nod to indicate I'll follow.

I squint through the storm, just barely making out the figure of Declan and my sister. Declan is using the blanket to shield her from the worst of the storm as they too begin making their way to shelter.

Neither look back.

For a brief second I feel even more frozen inside than I do outside, as though something cold and sad is numbing my heart the same way it is numbing my fingers. Different than my anger before, but no less potent.

I don't know how long I stand there, fighting to get control over my own emotions. These sort of overdramatic ups and downs aren't like me.

By the time my irrational reaction finally starts to recede, the snow is up to my knees and the wind is whipping so fiercely that my cheeks are stinging.

The area that just minutes before had been a happy, care-free scene is now a full-on blizzard. I'm alone in the courtyard, and yet, not totally.

I feel someone watching, and I slowly turn in a circle, squinting through the blur of flakes.

*There.*

On the evacuated perch where the royals had been, I make out the outline of a woman, her long brown hair whipping in the wind, seemingly impervious to the cold. I can't

see her expression from this distance, but there's no doubt in my mind that she's watching me. Has been watching me for quite some time.

I don't consider approaching. Every instinct tells me *not* to.

Instead, I pick up my skirts and begin running as quickly as I can back towards the castle.

Moira is back in Winterscape.

And she is not an ally.

## CHAPTER 26



The castle is in total uproar when I make it back, people hovering around makeshift fires, talking about an Uncontrollable, which, as far as I can tell, is their word for a blizzard.

I know I should go back to the ducal chambers, or Arianna's room, heck, even Lady Rowena's to find Keely, but I don't. I want—*need*—to be anonymous...

I've calmed down considerably since the uncontrollable emotion I felt out in the storm.

My footsteps falter as I realize my own word choice. Uncontrollable. The same word they're using to describe the blizzard.

*A coincidence.* It's not like my uncontrollable anger could have caused the uncontrollable weather...

Right?

I roam aimlessly among the hoards of people for awhile, keeping a watchful eye out for anyone I know, but all I can see is Declan and Arianna together, a bitter loop inside my head, and I realize I don't just want to be anonymous. I want to be alone.



I go to the only place I can think of where nobody will think to look for me. I make about eight wrong turns, and four wrong doors before I find what I'm looking for.

It's the deserted servant's path that leads to the Grand Hall painting. For a second I even think of going to the Grand Hall, but for the first time since coming to Faylin, I don't want any new information. I can barely process the information I have.

I don't know how to explain it. It's as though I'm missing an important piece of information that I know will destroy me. Destroy *everyone*.

*Melodramatic much, Harper?*

Instead, I walk and I walk until the air seems thinner, the silence wonderfully deafening.

I encounter a small curved nook in the wall, and I rest there, my back sliding down the cool wall until my butt hits the ground. I wrap my arms around my legs, chin resting on my knees like a little kid, as I close my eyes and let myself relax.

Had it really been just earlier today that Arianna had shown up?

It feels like it's been days. Weeks.

In just a few short hours, my sister's managed to change everything, but then, that's par for the course. My life has always been about Arianna, really. I've always been Ari's sister. The little sister. The junior cheerleader, the not-as-pretty one, the quiet one, that plain one, always relative to her.

I've never cared much. I mean I *have*...

But not until Declan has it hurt. Never has it burned so much to come in second place to my sister.

The most annoying thing about all of this...I'm not that girl. Or at least I didn't used to be. I'm not crazy. I've never defined myself by whether or not a guy wants me.

But I want Declan to want me. I want him to want me like I want him. A little desperately.

I lose track of how long I sit there, my thoughts a swirl of misery and anger. But I don't cry. I want to. I feel like I need to. But the tears don't come.

I try to formulate a plan for what's next. Arianna and I need to get home, obviously. Especially now that I understand the time difference in Faylin and Logosia. Every day we're here is a *year* to Meredith.

I wonder if Arianna knows about that.

I wonder if she'd care if she did.

Maybe that's not fair. Arianna loves our mother; heck, she likes Meredith a lot more than I do.

But would she walk away from her role as Countess?

Would she walk away from Declan?

I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

There's only a single tiny window in this hallway, and the blizzard is so intense, I don't really have a sense of time, or when day turns into night, but what feels like hours later, I realize that the sharp cold of before has turned downright bitter.

I lift my head, realizing just how dark it is.

And how dangerous.

I've been self-indulgent long enough, and I push to my feet, knowing that with whatever's going on in this world, being alone at night isn't smart, especially now.

I walk back, hesitating before I open the door back into the main residential wing, wondering where I should go.

I *should* go back to my room. To Declan's room. But if Arianna's there...I suck in a breath. I don't think I'd be able to handle it.

I chew my lip nervously, before slipping out of the servant passageway, and heading towards the last place I want to go, and yet the only way I can go.

The castle's not as quiet as it usually is this time of night, but there are more people moving around than usual, most of them talking in tense whispers.

If everyone had seemed excited before, they're more nervous now, as though it's sunk in that something is going on. Something nobody understands.

Something *bad*.

Nobody pays attention as I move from the main residential wing until I get to the near deserted wing.

I don't hesitate before I knock on the door, more sure than ever that this is the only place I can be safe right now.

The door opens, and I'm expecting Max to be angry, and he is, but something else crosses his face first. Relief.

He closes his eyes, and rests his forehead just briefly on the hand he has braced on the door jam. "Harper. Damn it."

I swallow. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

His eyes open, and I can tell he's surprised by the preemptive apology. "Where the *hell* have you been?"

"I needed to be alone. I couldn't. I can't—"

To my horror, my eyes are watering now, in front of the last person I'd ever want to cry in front of, and I spin on my heel to run away.

He grabs my arm before I can move. "Don't even think about it," he growls. "I'm not wasting one more hour looking for you."

I wipe angrily at my cheeks. "You've been looking for me?"

"We all have," he says angrily, lifting his hands towards my throat. "I swear to Fairies, Harper, one of these days I'm going to give into my fantasy of wrapping my hands around your neck and—"

I laugh a little in spite of myself. "You do realize, right, that you can't be both my protector and my biggest threat?"

He sighs, his hands dropping. "Give me a sec to change

my clothes into something warmer. Then I'll walk you back to Claymore's."

"No," I say sharply, stepping forward.

He lifts his eyebrows, resting both of his arms on the doorway now, studying me.

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't go there tonight. I *can't*."

"It's late, Harper. You need some sleep so we can figure out...well hell, I don't know what we need to figure out. But tomorrow's going to be a rough one."

I swallow. "Can I sleep here?"

He stares at me.

"I'll sleep on the floor and be perfectly quiet," I rush to explain. "I don't need a pillow or a blanket, I just...I don't want to see him," I finish with a whisper.

The silence stretches on and on, and I resign myself to the fact that I'll probably have to be dealing with Keely and Lady Rowena for the evening—my back-up plan.

But then Max drops his arm and steps aside. "Fine. Come in."

My shoulders slump in relief as I step into the dimly lit room. It's as tidy as the first time I came. Tidier, actually, as the bed's not mussed.

Of course it's not. He's been out everywhere looking for me, and he and Keely hadn't exactly had the opportunity to...

I push the thought out of my mind.

Neither of us moves as he shuts the door, enclosing us in the small space.

"You must think I'm an idiot," I whisper. "You warned me. Warned that he'd never want me. That he'd move on when someone prettier showed up. I didn't listen."

"No. You didn't."

I don't flinch at his words. I expect them. "I didn't think it would hurt so much."

Crap. I hadn't meant to say that out loud. Being vulnerable around Max feels...suicidal.

To my surprise, he doesn't mock. He moves around me, careful not to make any physical contact.

"You can take the bed."

"No way."

"Harper—"

I hold up a hand. "I don't want to owe you anything, Max."

He lifts his eyebrows.

"Okay," I amend. "I don't want to owe you anything *more*."

He shakes his head. "You make me crazy. Fine. But you're taking my pillow, at least."

He plucks it off the bed and shoves it at my chest. I accept, only because I don't want to push any more of his cranky buttons.

"What will you use?" I ask, standing there, pillow clutched to my chest.

"I can roll up some clothes," he mutters, going to the small chest of drawers.

I lower myself to the floor, sitting cross-legged. "Some of your beloved tights?"

To my surprise, Max lets out a startled laugh, a real laugh, and I find myself laughing with him as I set the pillow down and stretch out on floor. It feels good to smile.

The floor's as cold and hard as I expect, but I'm more tired than I realize, because my eyelids feel heavy.

"Your pillow smells like boy," I say, more to myself than him.

The rustling of clothes stops for a second, before it resumes. "Close your eyes."

"Why?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes, his hands lifting to the hem of his shirt. "Suit yourself."

And then Max starts to peel his shirt over his head, and I squeak, throwing my arms over my face.

“Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I *did*.”

I roll onto my side away from him, squeezing my eyes shut. Somehow I didn’t picture this feeling quite so...intimate.

Belatedly I think of Keely, how she’ll feel about the fact that Max slept with another girl.

I mean not *slept* with, but...*oh dear*.

The candle goes out, and I hear the creak of the mattress as Max climbs onto the bed, although neither of us says anything to break the dark tension.

But actually, that’s not right. Its not tense. It’s just...it’s something.

Comforting, somehow.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I think he’s not going to respond, but then the mattress shifts again, and I feel his eyes on me even through the darkness. “For what?”

I shrug, even though he probably can’t see. “For letting me stay here. For keeping me safe. It’s above and beyond. Especially for someone who doesn’t even want to be my friend.”

I hold my breath, thinking—hoping—that maybe he’ll change his mind on that. That he’ll tell me that I’m not just a duty to him, that he’s not only allowing me to sleep here because he’s duty bound by the council.

He doesn’t. He doesn’t say a word, and I swallow my disappointment.

But just as I’m drifting off, I feel something thin and soft flutter over me. Blankets.

Max has just used the blankets from his own bed to cover me.

Funny how that little bit of kindness is the first thing to  
make me truly smile in hours.

## CHAPTER 27



When I wake up, there's no sign of Max. There is, however, a pile of clean, folded clothes sitting neatly on the bed—boy clothes, too small for Max, which means he, or maybe Keely, brought them for me.

I eagerly change out of yesterday's dress. Just twenty-four hours ago, I felt almost *pretty* in this dress. Now I realize just how drab and dumpy it is.

Then again, I don't know that the dress is the problem. I mean, there's got to be a reason that one of us is a countess and the other a servant, right?

You could put Ari in this dress, and she'd still capture the attention of every person in the room.

Including Declan.

I take a deep breath, and although I feel a stab of the now-familiar jealousy, I'm relieved to realize I feel more in control than I did yesterday. Maybe I was just tired.

Max's room is on the inside of the castle, so there's no window to determine whether or not it's still stormy.

I open the door slowly, not really sure what I'm looking out for, but relieved all the same to find this wing is quiet.



I cross the hallway to the large arched window, dismayed but not surprised to see that it still looks like an all-out blizzard. There's next to no visibility. I can't see trees, sky... nothing but the gray blur of constant snow being whipped around.

My stomach growls, and I realize I haven't had anything to eat since the Pleezies I'd eaten with Bender yesterday.

I don't know why, but when I step into the dining hall, I somehow expect everyone to turn and stare at me. To blame me for the storm.

Which is ridiculous. Objectively, I know I have zero control over the weather, and yet I can't shake the strange combination of guilt and...satisfaction?

I shake my head. Definitely time to get some food in me.

The dining hall is almost all servants this time of day, some of them crowded around the long wooden tables in the back, wolfing down their own breakfast before taking trays up to their masters.

I contemplate joining them, only to realize I'm tired of putting off the inevitable. I need to see Declan, if anything else to close the door on this stupid, one-sided crush. I grab one of the fancy trays and begin loading a plate for myself and a plate for him.

"Morning."

I turn, recognizing the distinctive voice immediately. "Hey, Piper."

The pretty red-head looks exhausted, and the look she's giving me isn't quite friendly. "Do you have any idea how long we looked for you yesterday?" she whispers.

I feel a little stab of guilt. "I'm sorry. I needed to be alone. I didn't...I didn't think."

"No, you didn't," she agrees as she puts a couple pieces of fruit on a plate. "But...I think I understand."

I give her a sharp look. "You do?"

Her wide blue eyes meet mine, and she studies me. “Your sister has been worried,” she says, instead of answering my question.

The knife of guilt digs a little deeper. “I know. I’ll go see her.”

I pick up tongs and put a couple pieces of sausage on Declan’s plate. “Is she in her room?”

Piper hesitates in answering, and I suspect she knows what I really want to know. *Is she with Declan?*

“She is. There’s a Council meeting later,” Piper lowers her voice even further and glances around. “They want you and Lady Arianna in attendance.”

I snort. “Oh, you mean they want to talk to us instead of about us for once? No thanks.”

She touches my arm. “I know you’re frustrated. But you have to understand. We’re scared.”

“Why? No one’s after *you*.”

“I heard about your attack.”

“I take it nothing like that’s happened to Arianna?”

Piper shakes her head. “No. It’s been quiet since she arrived. Too quiet.”

I frown. “Too quiet? Shouldn’t the fact that a Logosian isn’t in danger be a good thing.”

“Sure,” she says slowly. “But it’s almost as though...” She bites her lip nervously as she sets a bit of deviled egg on the plate. “It’s almost as though Faylin’s been waiting.”

“For?” I ask, trying to keep my voice casual, even though I feel closer to getting actual information than I have since I got here. There’s a candor in Piper that I haven’t encountered in the others.

She stares down at the long table of food in front of us for a long moment. “Does your sister like ham? I always forget.”

“Arianna doesn’t like anything with calories,” I say impa-

tiently, turning to face Piper completely. “What’s Faylin been waiting for? How can a *place* wait for something?”

Piper meets my eyes. “It meant it’s as though Faylin’s been waiting for her and Declan to meet.”

It feels like she’s punched me in the stomach, even though I knew somehow that it was coming. “Why would that matter?” I ask, my voice coming out a little raspy.

To her credit, she looks genuinely sorry. “I can’t, Harper. I’m sorry.”

“Right, the whole banishment thing,” I say on a sigh.

But *slowly*, I feel like I’m getting more of the pieces. They don’t fit together yet, but there are more of them than ever before. Whatever it is Logosians are supposed to do in Faylin, it must have to do with...love. Or romance. Or whatever. It would explain why everyone’s acted so weird about me and Declan, seeming both hopeful and terrified that I’d fall for him.

“What does the Council want with us?” I ask, trying once more for a bit more information.

She shrugs, dropping a small piece of ham on the plate. “Same thing any of us want. To know what’s going on. Why there are two of you. What it means. If it’s somehow responsible for what’s happened in Muirmoore, and the Uncontrollable—”

“You think I caused the storm?” I interrupt.

“Well, no,” she says with a frown. “Why would you think that? I just mean that there’s clearly some instability. Something’s broken, and until we know why, we don’t know how to fix it.”

I say nothing as I add a roll to the plate for myself.

“Don’t worry.” She nudges me. “Moirá’s here now. We have two different branches of the Councils putting their heads together. We’ll figure it out, and everything will be right again.”

"You mean everything will be right for you," I say, raising my voice. "You mean you need to fix your precious world. What's right for me, for Arianna, is to go home."

"That may be what you want," Piper says gently. "Are you sure it's what Lady Arianna wants?"

"Lady Arianna is my sister," I snap. "I think I know her better than you."

"Perhaps." Piper shrugs. "But I've spent every day with her since she's arrived, and while I don't doubt that she's missed you and your mother, she fit in almost immediately."

*Unlike me.*

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Arianna belongs here," she says quietly. "She knows it, the Council knows it, and I suspect you know it."

I don't respond as I pick up one of the ready pots of hot chocolate on the tray and turn away without responding.

"Harper."

I turn back and meet Piper's gaze which is both apologetic and frank. "What?"

"The Duke of Claymore. He knows that Lady Arianna belongs here, too."

I blink against the sheen of tears blurring my gaze.

I nod once, understanding immediately what she's too kind to say.

Declan knows that Ari belongs here. *With him.*

## CHAPTER 28



**B**y the time I get back to the ducal chambers, I have my tears under control, although I swear, if I open this door and see Arianna in here... They barely even *know* each other for God's sake. You'd think they could control their insta-love for at least a day.

*Like you did?*

I ignore the thought.

I've taken to wearing the key Declan gave me around my neck, and I struggle to balance the huge tray while I pull the leather string up and over my head.

Taking a deep breath, I shove the key into the lock and push open the door. The same breath comes out on a whoosh of relief when I realize the chambers are silent.

And empty.

I kick the door closed behind me, but I've taken only a couple steps towards the table when movement out of the corner of my eye has me crying out, a split second before my shaking hands let the breakfast tray go crashing to the ground.

I reach to my hip for the sword that isn't there, even as my brain registers that it's not a threat—it's Declan.

But it's Declan as I've never seen him.

His hair's a mess, he's wearing yesterday's shirt, and he's angry. His gaze is fierce and angry as he quietly walks towards me.

He doesn't pounce. Doesn't lunge. But the slow, purposeful approach sends my heart beating into overdrive.

I start to kneel to pick up the food and broken glass, but he reaches out, grabbing my wrist and yanking me back to my feet with an unexpectedness that has me gasping in surprise.

"Your Grace—"

He shakes me. "*Your Grace?* Are you kidding me right now, Harper?"

I open my mouth, only to realize I don't know what I'm supposed to say.

He shakes my arm harder. "Where have you been?"

"I was getting you breakfast."

"Don't play dumb with me," he says, tugging me forward so I am inches from him.

It strikes me then that I don't know this Declan. There's an intensity rolling off him in waves, and I'm both thrilled and terrified.

"Do you know how long I've been looking for you?" he says, his voice a little hoarse, a little desperate. "You disappeared, and there was the Uncontrollable, and you were nowhere. I thought—I thought—"

I lift a hand to his chest. "I'm okay. I got...I got sort of distracted after everything that happened, but I was fine, and I thought Max would tell you—"

He blinks and steps backwards, my hand sliding away from him as he drops my arm. "Max?"

I lick my lips nervously. “I knew you guys would be worried, so I went there last night, and . . .”

“And?” His voice is low and dangerous.

“I slept there,” I say with a shrug. “Just on the floor, it was no big deal.”

He laughs, and turns in a circle as he runs both hands through his mussed hair. “No big deal. I spent all night long looking for you, and you were curled up with Max.”

“No!” I say, feeling my own anger coming back. “It wasn’t like that, it’s *Max*, and even if it *were* like that, you don’t get to do to this.”

He stills, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t get to do what?”

I lift my chin and go for broke. “You don’t get to be jealous.”

He barks out a laugh. “Jealous? Don’t be ridiculous, I just—”

*Ouch.* I’m pretty sure he’s lying, but it hurts that he can’t even admit that there’s something between us, even if it’s not a starry-eyed fairy tale like whatever he and Arianna had after about five minutes.

My footsteps stall as my own thoughts sink in. A fairy tale. Is that what this is all about?

*Are Declan and Arianna supposed to be some sort of fairy tale?*

*It feels right.* Everything I know about this place, the absurd lovey-dovey ridiculousness of Bianca and Christoff.

*But then what about me?* If they’re the fairy tale, what am I?

My mind is spinning as I try to focus on that day in the park, trying to remember everything the blond man had told me about Faylin and fairy tales. And there had been that book. A book whose contents seemed to be determined by me.

Did that mean I was somehow a part of a fairy tale, too?

But if both Arianna and I were, and we both had our eye on the same guy...

I shake my head. No. This is nuts. This place has officially messed with my head.

“Harper.”

I ignore Declan, and walk into my room.

“Harper!” he says again, as I start to shut the door.

Then the door is shoved back open, and he’s standing in the doorway, breathing hard.

“What?” I snap. “What do you want from me, Your Grace? I’ll go get you more breakfast in a minute, I just—”

“Breakfast?” he gives an incredulous laugh. “You think I want you to go get me *breakfast*?”

I hold my hands out to my sides and shake my head. “Honestly, I don’t have the faintest clue what you want. I don’t know if it’s Lady Rowena, or my sister, or...” *Me*. “I don’t know if you just like your games, or if you’re confused—”

He steps towards me slowly, still angry, but more in control than he was when I first came into the room.

And yet, somehow my heart is beating even harder than when he’d looked ready to kill me.

He doesn’t look like he wants to kill me now.

He looks like...

Declan’s breath is coming in shallow pants as he stops in front of me, his intent expression turning bewildered as he slowly lifts a hand to my face, as though he doesn’t mean to touch me, but can’t help himself.

His other hand lifts, and his hands are cupping my face now, holding my head gently as he moves closer.

“Your Grace,” I whisper, self-preservation demanding that I make one last attempt at protecting myself—at protecting my *heart*.



“Declan,” he says softly, so close that I can feel his breath on my face. “My name is Declan.”

He lifts my face all the way to his, his head dips down. I hold my breath. I’ve never wanted anything like I want this kiss.

“Declan,” I whisper.

His lips touch mine. The kiss is gentle at first, and we both freeze at the electricity of the moment—at the sheer rightness with which our lips fit against each other’s.

He eases even closer, his lips coaxing mine apart as he tilts his head to deepen the kiss. My hands have been helplessly at my sides, but I lift them now, resting tentatively at his waist, before I tangle my fingers into his shirt with more sureness, reaching shyly for his tongue with mine.

Declan freezes. It’s as though the whole world goes still, a half second before it turns wild. His hands are in my hair now, his fingers tangled in my messy braid, my hands digging into his back at his back as he kisses me again and again, alternating between deep and lingering and fast and desperate, but all of it’s hungry.

I’ve never felt anything like this before—I’m terrified I’ll never feel anything like it again.

*He wants me*, I realize joyously as he tilts my head back even further to take his kiss. It’s as though he can’t help himself around me, and fairies knows I don’t want him to.

I want him crazy for me like I am for him, I want him so lost in kissing me that he doesn’t have a spare brain cell to think about—

***Pound. Pound. Pound.***

Declan and I both freeze before jumping apart as the sound of someone knocking at the door breaks through the haze of *want*.

Our eyes lock and hold for seconds that feel like eons, and he looks as stunned and confused as I feel.

There are kisses, and then there's...whatever that was.

He swears softly, running a hand over the back of his neck before shaking his head and turning to exit the tiny servant quarters.

I follow him, and the second he opens the door, I know something is dreadfully, horribly wrong.

## CHAPTER 29



Isadora's on the other side of the door.

Her already pale complexion is a deathly white, her dark red hair loose around her shoulders instead of up in its usual bun as she steps into the room.

"Your door was locked. I was worried," she says, with an accusatory glare at Declan.

He raises his hands innocently as though he and I weren't just doing something that very much warranted the locked door.

"Wasn't me," he says, holding up his hands.

"Sorry," I mutter, re-braiding my hair as I walk toward them. "People always lock doors back at home. And since being attacked, I'm sort of on edge."

"Right," Isadora says in a crisp tone. "Is that why you disappeared for hours yesterday?"

I open my mouth to apologize, only to realize I'm done apologizing. For all their talk about protecting me, I'm definitely starting to get the impression the lot of them are protecting themselves.

They don't like that I'm unpredictable, and I get that, but I

can't become someone's lap dog just because they don't know what's going on in their own back yard.

Isadora's gaze lands on the broken dishes and breakfast spilled all over the floor, and though her frown deepens, she surprises me by not mentioning it.

"Dress in something warmer," Isadora orders. "You're needed in the East Garden. Both of you."

"Now?" Declan asks, glancing over his shoulder at the window. "It's still snowing."

"I realize it's still snowing," Isadora replies icily. "That's part of the problem, now isn't it?"

"How is that a problem in a place called Winterscape?" I ask. "Why does everyone keep talking about an Uncontrollable. What does that mean?"

Declan and Isadora exchange a look.

"Let's just say there haven't been enough of them on record for us to understand their trigger, but I can tell you this. Uncontrollables have always signaled trouble. This time's no different."

I study her, realize she's more than tense. She's terrified. "Something's happened," I say.

"You'll want a cloak," Isadora says, turning away from the ice-crusted window. "As quickly as possible. East Garden."

Declan and I stare after her as she closes the door with a snap behind her.

"What was that about?" I ask.

Declan isn't paying attention, and stares distractedly out the window for a moment longer before turning and frowning. "Does it feel cold in here to you?"

I shrug, but then I register that he's right. It is cold. Usually the ever-burning fire keeps the entire castle mostly toasty, but this morning there's an angry nip in the air. As though the fires are fighting a losing battle against the cold.

But I don't want to talk about the cold. I don't want to go to the East Garden.

I want to talk about that kiss.

I want him to kiss me again, and to hold me and tell me that we're the fairy tale, and that everything will be fine, and—

"We should go," he says in a flat voice as he crosses to the wardrobe and pulls out a cloak. "Do you need to borrow something warmer?"

I swallow at the reserve in his voice. "No, I have something."

I go into my chambers, pulling out the same drab cloak I wore into the black forest, forcing my mind away from the kiss with Declan and on to what could have gotten the usually controlled Isadora all worked up.

I wonder if Arianna received a similar summon, or if the countess is too delicate to go to the gardens in a freaking blizzard.

I head back into Declan's chambers. He's standing in front of the fire, cloak held loose in one hand, but he's made no move to put it on.

"Yo, Your Grace. Get dressed," I say.

He turns his head to look at me, but doesn't otherwise move. "We should talk."

I walk towards him. "About the kiss."

He looks away. "About yesterday. About Arianna."

If the room was cold before, it's positively frigid now. I stop dead in my tracks, hoping I've heard him wrong.

"What about her?" I ask, hating the wobble of my voice.

He goes towards the mantle and rests an elbow there before rubbing his forehead tiredly. "I know what you must think. That I'm as fickle as Max is always saying, falling all over myself at the next pretty girl that crosses my path."

I force myself to shrug casually. "I'm kind of used to it."

Arianna's always gotten most of the attention. She's beautiful. Friendly. Sweet."

"No—I mean, yes, she is...but it's more than that." He runs an agitated hand through his. "It's like I'm *drawn* to her."

I close my eyes, both at his words and at the mystified agony in his voice.

I open my mouth, knowing I'm supposed to say something, but not knowing what, because I don't even know what I feel.

No, that's not right.

I do know.

I'm miserable. Not angry like I was yesterday, not even jealous. Just utterly, painfully *hurting*.

"We should get going," I say softly.

"Harper, wait." I don't even realize he's moved until my back is against his wall and his face is just inches away from mine.

"Don't do this to me, Your Grace," I whisper, trying to maneuver away. "Don't play with me.

He cages me in. "I wasn't done explaining. It's like I'm *supposed* to be drawn to her. As though she and me together is...fate"

"Honestly, I don't know how that's not supposed to make me throw up all over the carpet, Declan."

He barks out a small laugh. "I know. Believe, me, I do. But here's the thing, Harper. I'm also drawn to you."

I go still and look up at him.

His gaze is locked on the wall above my head for a long moment before he looks down and looks into my eyes. "Since that first day, and every day that's passed."

I swallow, my heart racing, and my mind completely blanking on words.

"And I don't think I'm *supposed* to be drawn to you. When

I'm with you, it's like...it's like I can't look away, can't *stay* away, and yet some instinct tells me that it's wrong."

I want to look around for a sword. If there's one nearby, maybe he can just plunge it into my heart.

It would probably hurt less.

"That sounds like...complete garbage," I say, pushing past him. My sharp words do nothing to stop the tears.

"Harper, listen."

I pull my hand free of his grip and turn to face him, even as I'm careful to keep my distance.

"No, *you* listen. You liked me because I was new and different. And now you want to upgrade to the newer, fancier model. I get it. Believe me. But for God's sake, don't insult me by trying to *romanticize* the fact that you want her more."

"That's not—"

"It's fine," I say harshly. "It's better this way. You're very charming, Your Grace, but you're not *that* charming."

"Don't," he says through gritted teeth. "Don't pretend that kiss wasn't—"

"Average?" I say, adopting my best bored voice. "A little blah?"

His chin snaps back, and I feel a little thrill of satisfaction. *Bull's-eye.*

His eyes narrow, and he steps towards me, and I know he means to kiss me again. To call my bluff, and the thing is, he will make a liar out of me, but I can't...

Not after what he's just said about Ari.

I step back, but I needn't bother. Another round of knocking interrupts the charged moment. Declan makes a snarling noise and stomps towards the door. "Since when has my bedroom been the hub for saving the damned world?"

He flings it open, clearly ready to pick a fight with whomever's on the other side.

It's Arianna, looking like some sort of princess in her white, fur-lined cloak and suede boots.

She gives Declan a puzzled look. "Why aren't you dressed? You'll freeze. Isadora says we're to—"

Ari breaks off as she sees me out of the corner of her eye. "Oh Harper, there you are. Why are you wearing that ugly cloak? Do you want to borrow something of mine? They gave me a whole trunk full of warm cloaks when they knew I'd have to come to Winterscape."

My lips part in hurt surprise, but before I can respond, Declan does it for me.

"Countess. Your sister has been missing for the better part of a day."

Her eyes widen, and she lifts a hand to her mouth a second before her eyes fill with tears. "Oh Harper. Are you okay? We looked everywhere. The only reason I wasn't surprised to see you is because Piper said she saw you, so I knew you were okay."

I shake my head wearily. "It's fine. I'm fine. We should get going."

Ari doesn't even seem to register my acceptance of her apology. She's too busy looking around curiously, her eyes flicking to the big bed a second before they flit to the door to my room, which is just a few feet from said bed.

You don't grow up in the same house with somebody and not learn how to read them. And I see the exact *second* that Arianna puts the pieces together.

"You both sleep here," she says softly.

I jerk my thumb at the servant's quarters. "Not really. I'm in the outhouse."

But Arianna doesn't buy my easy dismissal, and her eyes turn speculative.

*That's right, sister. I sleep right next door to your new*



*boyfriend*. The thought pops unbidden into my mind, and I immediately flush with guilt.

The only reason I'm *in* this crazy place is to rescue my sister. I certainly don't want to have a cat fight over a guy.

Not that Ari even considers me competition.

Instead of looking worried, she meets my eyes, and she looks almost sorry for me.

Somehow that's so, *so* much worse than if she'd been competitive. Her conclusion is written all over her face.

*Poor little Harper fell for the boy out of her league.*

She isn't entirely wrong.

Because he isn't *supposed* to be drawn to me. Isn't that how he phrased it?

And sorry, but what kind of crap is that?

"I'll get you a warmer cloak from my room," she murmurs.

"Never mind, she can wear one of mine," Declan says, tossing the one in his hand at me before he pulls another one from the wardrobe. "Enough talking. Let's go."

He opens the door, gesturing for Arianna to precede him. I don't bother to notice whether they're waiting for me. Instead, I run back into my room and grab the sword I've been keeping next to my bed like some sort of sociopathic security blanket.

Declan lifts his eyebrows when he sees it, but doesn't say a word.

Arianna tries to make small talk on the way to the gardens, but neither Declan nor I manage much more than a couple grunts.

"What's with you two?" she asks finally.

I don't respond. It's Declan's issue. And I wouldn't want to rob Ari of hearing Declan's whole, *I'm so drawn to you* speech first hand. A real treat, that.

Our footsteps slow as we approach the door to the East

Garden. The door is closed, obviously, but it's not doing much to keep out the cold. "We have to go out there?" Ari asks, giving a delicate shiver beneath her stunning cloak.

I sigh, and out of habit, start to shrug off my borrowed cloak. I'll freeze, but it's a heck of a lot better than her whining. Declan stops my motion with a hand on my shoulder.

"She can use mine," he says gruffly, tugging off his maroon cloak and draping it over Ari's shoulders.

I bite my tongue to ask whether he is doing it for her sake or mine. Instead, I take a deep breath and push open the heavy doors.

For all the fuss Isadora made, I'd expected half the kingdom to be awake and in the gardens, but the group is small.

Alarmingly so.

Piper immediately comes over to Ari with a mug full of something hot and steaming. Max and Keely, Isadora. Both sets of royals, and a handful of people I don't recognize, but who I figured must be the remaining members of the Council of Arlen.

"So what are we looking at?" Ari asks, shivering, even beneath Declan's coat and taking a sip out of the copper mug.

To my surprise, it's Bianca who lifts a shaky finger to the tree in front of us. I hear Declan swear softly, but Ari and I exchange baffled glances.

The tree is...average.

I'd barely even noticed it when we'd come out. *This* is why we're all standing out here in the cold.

"An apple tree?" Ari asks, glancing around for confirmation.

The very word sends a visible shudder through Bianca who buries her face in Christoff's shoulder.

Very slowly, the pieces snap together in my mind.

*Apples.*

*Snow White.*

*Rumors of darkness on the rise.*

All in all, not a good combination.

"There aren't any apple trees in Winterscape," Declan explains softly. "There aren't any apple anythings."

"But why not? They're not my favorite fruit, but they're harmless," Ari says.

Several people in the group wince at Arianna's clueless comment, and I move to her side to stop any more incriminating remarks. "This is Snow White's realm, Ari," I say quietly. "Think about it."

Her hand flies immediately over her mouth in horror as she seeks out Bianca. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness. I'm new, I didn't realize..."

Prince Christoff gives a small nod of acceptance of her apology, but nobody's face grows any less grim.

"I'm confused," I say slowly. "If apple trees don't grow in Winterscape, what's it doing here?"

"Well they *used* to grow in Winterscape," Az says, dressed for once in subdued navy instead of neon orange. "But they've been banned. There hasn't been an apple on Winterscape soil in centuries."

As if on cue, a green apple falls from the tree into the ever increasing pile of snow, and we all stare at it.

"So it just...appeared?" Declan asks.

"One of the gardeners noticed this morning when trying to protect the other plants from this freak blizzard," Christoff explains. "He claims there was no sign of it yesterday."

"So it *literally* popped up over night?" Piper asks.

"It seems that way. The more important question is *why*," Isadora says, her eyes never leaving the fallen red apple becoming slowly covered by the falling snow.

I don't have to look up to know that everyone's eyes are on me and Arianna.

"Why is everyone staring at us?" she whispers quietly.

"I think because the apple tree is bad news. And they think we caused it," I say, not really bothering to keep my voice down

"Oh I would never! Darn, If only I'd brought my wand ..."

I nearly smile. Only Arianna could look at all of these horrified, hopeless faces and think that she and her fledgling magic tricks could fix it.

"So why not cut it down?" I ask, refusing to let them put their issues on a couple of newcomers. "I mean, if it's a threat, let's remove it."

"That's not the point," Az says stiffly. "We need to know *why* it's here. It was a very strong magic that removed the apple trees from the kingdom in the first place. It has to be strong magic that reversed that spell. Very strong magic," he finished softly.

*Reversal of magic.*

I find my eyes going to the last person I'd ever thought I'd look to in a crisis. He's already staring back at me, and I know he's thinking what I'm thinking.

Reversal of magic isn't a new concept. Not to me and Max. It's exactly what we feared from The Little Mermaid painting—not that there was a new threat that had taken her. But an old one, resurrected somehow.

"Perhaps we should all get some rest until we decide next steps," Max says, tearing his eyes from mine. "We're not going to solve anything in the middle of an Uncontrollable."

He's probably right. We've been outside only a couple of minutes, and already the apple is now completely covered with new snow.

Something very wrong is happening here.

We all shuffle inside, and Ari automatically reaches for

my hand. I squeeze her fingers briefly before releasing her hand and pushing her gently towards Piper. "Go rest. I think it's going to be a long day."

"Where are you going?" she asks, frowning slightly, her gaze flicking to Declan.

*Not with him.*

"I'm starving, I'm just going to swing by the kitchen," I lie.

"Okay," she says, behind a yawn. "Come by later."

"I will." I watch until Piper and my sister disappear, lingering until the rest of the group had scattered before I turn.

And run smack into Declan.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?" he asks, his voice low and dangerous.

"What what was about?"

He takes a step closer. "You and Max. You have a secret."

"Jealous?" I ask, taunting.

His hand slips around the back of my neck, his thumb nudging my chin up so I'm forced to meet his blazing eyes. "Tell me."

## CHAPTER 30



Declan escorts (and by escorts, I mean drags) me back to the ducal chambers, Max following close behind.

Max reluctantly fills him in on what we'd seen, but Declan barely has a chance to absorb any of it before a small silver pixie enters the room through the keyhole, fluttering patiently near Declan's shoulder until Declan opens his palm so it can sit.

"The Royals of Faylin request your immediate presence in the Grand Hall," the pixie says, as soon as its tiny feet touch Declan's palm. "It's of utmost importance."

Max and I are immediately on the move when the pixie loudly clears its throat. "There is, however. Time to change. Appearances are important, even in war time."

*War time?* That seems a bit...much.

"I'll change," Declan says quietly, already pulling out a white shirt with the fussy looking collar.

"*Seriously?*" I say. "We're doing this?"

"The girl should change, too," the pixie says primly. "Her best servant dress would be acceptable. No boy clothes."

"Do you have a fly swatter?" I whisper to the guys.

Max plants a palm between my shoulder blades and pushes me towards the bedroom. "Just get it over with."

"Do I even *have* a best servant dress?" I mutter.

I grumpily look through the available dresses and pull out a cream-colored one with a maroon ribbon I hadn't worn before. Not exactly glamorous, but the fabric does seem *slightly* less rough and potato-baggish than my other options.

After I change, all three of us pretend not to hear the pixie's moaning about my hair as we race towards to the Grand Hall.

The same group from the gardens is already there, but there's also a newcomer.

Moira.

Come to think of it, odd that she wasn't there this morning at the apple tree.

I brace myself for her searing gaze, but although her eyes sweep over all three of us as we enter, she doesn't seem particularly interested in me. A slight trickle of relief ripples down my spine.

I'm so focused on the sorceress that it takes me a second to realize that Arianna's eyes are red-rimmed, and that even the usually lively Piper looks pale and withdrawn.

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Where are the prince and princess?" Declan asks at the same time.

My eyes fly around the room, but neither the prince nor princess are there.

Moira's eyes remain steady as she gazes back at Declan. "The princess is...asleep. An eternal sleep, as with before. His highness is gone."

"Gone?"

The Sorceress raises an eyebrow. "You don't seem surprised by the princess's fate."

"We already knew it was coming," Max says.

For the first time since we'd entered, Moira looks uneasy. "You *knew*? It happened only minutes ago."

In a monotone voice, Max explains what we'd seen in the painting in the art wing, and Moira's expression turns thoughtful.

"Clever to consider the paintings. Perhaps they can give us insight into which kingdom is next."

"Wait," Piper says with panic. "This isn't limited to Winterscape?"

"I'm afraid not. I've spent the last few weeks in Muiramoore exploring the rumors of a sea witch. Unfortunately, whatever's happening was already set in motion, and I was unable to stop the reversal."

"Reversal?" Ari asks.

"The fairy tales," I say quietly. "The happy endings are coming undone."

Moira nods in agreement, and Az begins to quickly flutter a hand in front of his face as though to ward off a crying fit. Judging from his puffy eyes and red nose, it won't be his first of the day.

"How is that even possible?" Piper asks. "The Dark Forces in Winterscape and Muiramoore...they were defeated, right. Killed?"

Moira holds up a finger. "Not technically killed, no. Most of their magic is far too strong for that. But through the presence of Logosians, they can be banished. Their souls become locked up, bound by Good."

"Obviously not locked up well enough," Piper mutters under her breath.

"Obviously not," Moira replies crisply.

Piper blushes at being overheard, but she doesn't apologize.

"But *why*, Moira. Why now?" Princess Aurelia asks,



looking shaken. I can't blame her. For all we knew, she and Prince Leon could be next.

Moira says nothing, but I feel everyone's eyes flick to Arianna and myself.

"Because of us," I say.

"Oh surely not," Arianna says, clutching her wand. "We'd never want that."

"We're not saying you wanted it," Moira says in a surprisingly gentle voice. "But we're forced to consider that the anomaly of there being two of you is causing some sort of... ripple. And it's not just that there are two of you. Everything is different.

"How?"

"These aren't new Dark Forces," Ax chimes in. "They're *previous* enemies. It would reason that the same Logosians who defeated them the first time around would do it again, and yet things aren't happening exactly the way they did before."

"The differences are subtle, but crucial. I don't think this is a simple matter of going back in time," Moira says thoughtfully. "For example, Bianca's sleep isn't as peaceful as it was before. She looks...tortured. As though enduring a never-ending stream of nightmares."

"Where is she now?" Arianna asks quietly.

"We moved her to the bedroom after finding her on the floor of the private dining room this morning. It must have happened at breakfast. I'm having the kitchen inspect the food now for any signs of apple."

"What about the prince?" I ask.

"Christoff is nowhere to be found," Moira replies. "If we *are* dealing with some sort of time reversal here, then I suspect he may be in his home kingdom of Glondale."

"Glondale!" Prince Leon says, taking a step forward.

"That's on the far edge. There's no way he could reach us in a month's time, even if it weren't for the forest."

"Well the forest isn't as bad now, right?" Ari says. "We came through it."

Moira nods. "I suspect you were *meant* to pass through it. It was far easier than I expected. I suspect someone wanted you here."

Princess Aurelia frowns. "In Winterscape? What for? If they want to reverse the wars, wouldn't the culprit want Leon and I back home?"

"I don't think you were the primary focus, Your Highness. I think someone wanted *Arianna* in Winterscape."

Arianna hugs herself, clearly uncomfortable with the idea that she might be responsible for something bad.

"So how do we stop it?" Declan asks.

"I don't know," Moria replies, her serene expression never faltering, even as she delivers the verbal blow. "This is unlike anything I'd ever thought possible."

"Is the rest of Faylin in danger?" Prince Leon asks. "Or is it only the key players in the wars that we need to worry about?"

Moira sighs. "I can't be sure. But my hunch is that this magic, while strong, is limited. I suspect that whatever dark force is at work is able to conjure up past magic, but not expand beyond that. Yet."

"Then it has to be Mala. Who else would have reason to do this?" Princess Aurelia asked.

"Mala?" I asked.

"Malassandra," Az says. "She was queen of Winterscape before Princess Bianca and Christoff married."

"The evil queen," Piper clarifies.

"She was a formidable force, yes," Moira says. "And *if* this is her magic at work, we'll need to find her quickly before she finds a way to gain power."

"But how?" Arianna asks.

The only answer is a long snuffle from Az.

It's Isadora that finally breaks the silence. "Perhaps we should all resume our duties for the time being. The last thing we need is the rest of the castle knowing what's going on."

"A good idea," Moira says. "I've sent messenger pixies to the other royals letting them know what we're dealing with. They'll need to be cautious. As will you," she says, with a pointed look at Aurelia and Leon.

"We will," Leon replies, sliding an arm around his anxious wife.

The subdued group begins filing out of the Great Hall, and a nervous Arianna links arms with mine. "Harper, they don't really expect us to know what to do, do they? I mean we've only been here a few weeks, and this isn't like anything we've ever experienced before."

I give a quick glance over my shoulder and am completely unsurprised to see Moira watching us. I turn back around, feeling an odd sense of knowing rush through me.

Arianna might not know where to start.

But something they said has me thinking.

I have a pretty good idea who's behind what's happening in Winterscape.

And I know exactly how to find her.

## CHAPTER 31



"Where are you headed?" Declan asks, pausing in the process of taking off his boots.

"Just going to check on Arianna," I lie.

"Alone?"

I give him a look. "We've already established that the evil queen's magic is limited to her previous shenanigans. And since I wasn't around last time, I think I'm pretty safe."

"But if it is Malassandra we're dealing with, she has to know that her best chance of being defeated is by a Logosian."

"And what, you think she's going to roll into town with the storm?"

"I'll go with you," he insists stubbornly.

I blow out a small sigh. "I'll be fine. I need some space."

That last part at least is true. Ever since the meeting in the Grand Hall today, everyone's been fluttering around me and Arianna like a pack of watch-dogs.

I don't know if they're watching us to protect us, or because they're worried we'll try to slip away, but either way, it's been a suffocating afternoon.

All of that is made worse by my conviction that my theory is *right*. That I've known exactly where to find Malasandra all along.

A part of me really, *really* hopes I'm wrong.

We lock eyes in a silent battle of wills until he finally shakes his head. "Fine. Be careful."

"I will," I say, hoping I mean it.

"Harper."

I pause.

"About our conversation this morning...things with Arianna—they're not...I mean I just met her."

"You don't owe me any explanations," I say, trying to dig as deep as I could for the 'bigger person' I know is somewhere inside me. It isn't fair to begrudge either of them their happiness. I've survived being second best to Arianna for seventeen years. I can survive this, too.

"I know you just met," I continue. "But you two seem really right together, somehow."

"Yeah," he says, almost to himself. "Yeah we do."

I let that one hit me in the chest before giving him a small smile and a wave. "Don't wait up. Girl talk can take a while."

"That can't be good."

"Not for you it can't," I say with a wink.

I pause on the other side of the door, listening to make sure he won't change his mind and follow me. The castle is unusually silent, even for the late hour.

The constant storm seems to have sucked the joyful life out of everyone, and other than a couple subdued boys reading near one of the fires, everything is deserted.

For the second time in a day, I find myself in front of Max's door.

I knock softly, more terrified than I've ever been of being discovered, but there's no answer.

My hand goes to the door knob. *Please don't let Keely be in here, please don't let this be awwwkward.*

Thank goodness for Faylin's disregard for locks on doors, because the knob turns easily, and I slip into the room.

There's only one person in the bed, thank God.

I approach quietly, slowly kneeling down, not wanting to freak him out by having someone hovering above him. Although I'll probably freak him out anyway.

Gently, I set a hand on his arm.

"Max," I whisper.

He shifts and turns away with a grumble.

"Max," I say louder. Nothing.

I grab his shoulder shake him. "Max!"

His body goes rigid before he slowly turns over to face me. "What. The. Hell."

"Hey," I say needlessly.

He pulls his arm away from my hand and scoots into a sitting position. "God, Harper. What?"

For a second I'm a little...flustered.

I hadn't pictured Max as the type to sleep without a shirt. He hadn't last night, at least.

Nor had I expected him to be the type to be so, um built. But I'm wrong on both accounts.

I force my eyes away from his impressively sculpted chest. "I think I have an idea," I say, still whispering.

"You have an idea," he repeats in a flat tone.

"Yeah. About how to find the queen."

He presses a thumb and forefinger into eyes. "Let's hear it."

I breathe a sigh of relief and move to sit beside him on the bed. Not too close. Because, ya know...we aren't *friends*.

"Okay, so Moira said that the evil queen is limited by the magic and tricks she had at her disposal before she was last banished or whatever, right?"

"Correct."

"Well, I don't have a clue about how she managed to *unbanish* herself, but we do know that she seems to be the one at work here, which means she has to have access to the castle somehow, right? She can't do all of that from afar?"

Max blows out a breath. "I honestly don't know, Harper. I don't know all that much about magic, but if I had to guess, I'd say that yes, she has to be somewhere in Winterscape if she was able to reverse the happy ending."

"So I think I know where."

"What?"

"Well I have a guess," I amend. "See, in Logosia, one of the most well-known elements of the Snow White story is the magic mirror. And I was thinking..."

"You think Malassandra somehow entered the castle through a mirror."

"Well, specifically I was thinking *the* mirror. You know, like the *mirror, mirror on the wall* one? Assuming it still exists."

He continues to stare at me, and I press on. "I was thinking...that *if* the original mirror is still in existence that if anyone knew where it was, it would be you?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I think you know everything about this castle," I say simply. "About everyone."

Max stares at me.

"I also think you know exactly what's going on here," I say quietly.

He shakes his head.

I give a small smile. "I think you why I'm here. Why there are two of us."

"Harper."

I turn and face him. "Arianna and Declan are meant to be together. Right?"

He looks away.

“Max. Please.”

He rubs his forehead. “There are other paintings,” he says hoarsely. “Ones Logosians aren’t to see.”

“What kind of paintings?”

He stares at his hands. “The ones you saw are the ones that events have happened.”

“And the others?”

He looks at me. “Events that will happen. The...happy endings, that will happen.”

To his credit, he doesn’t look away, but it doesn’t make the confirmation of my suspicions any less painful.

“And I’m not in those paintings.”

He shakes his head slowly.

“Ari is? And Declan?”

He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to.

“How come people don’t just say that,” I whisper.

“I don’t know that anyone besides Moira knows.”

“And Moira confided in you?”

He gives a crooked smile. “Well...let’s just say that I’ve discovered *all* the secret passageways. Ones I really shouldn’t.”

“Ah. You weren’t supposed to see the paintings. The *other* collection.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I blow out a breath and lean back against the wall behind his bed. “Max. Am I the bad guy in this story?”

He scratches behind his ear, looking uncomfortable. “I don’t know.”

I give him a look. “Guess.”

“It’s never been that way before,” he says slowly. “Logosians are...we need them. To make the *right* choice.”

“What choice?”

“I can’t say that. You know I can’t. It would sway you, and then...”



I roll my eyes. Stupid banishment laws.

Then I sit up straighter. "Wait, but if I'm not the star of the show, if I'm not the princess, or whatever, then what does it matter if you tell me. Faylin's fate doesn't rely on us, it relies on Ari."

"God help us," he mutters.

I can't help but smile a little at that. I hate to say it, but it's nice to meet someone who doesn't fall all over my sister.

"So tell me," I say desperately. "Tell me how this works. Why we're important, and why you're so terrified of us."

He opens his mouth, and my heart is in my throat, thinking that maybe, finally...

"I can't," he says finally. "If it weren't for Keely...I can't risk banishment. I can't."

I sigh in disappointment, but I understand. I hate that I understand. But I do.

"Okay," I say quietly. "But about my mirror idea..."

He leans back against the wall, mimicking my position. "It's a long shot, Harper. What's the plan when you get there?"

I feel a little thrill of victory. He *does* know where the mirror is.

Holy crap. *The* magic mirror from *Snow White*. He knows where it is.

"Nobody has any other better ideas," I say.

There's another beat of silence before he gives a small grunt and pushes off the bed, careful to hold the sheet at his waist. "I know where the mirror is. I can get you there. But I don't think we should go alone. At the very least, we need Moira."

I've been afraid of this.

I don't know how to explain the suspicion that I thought Moira would try to stop me. She doesn't seem to like me, and the feeling is mutual. I guess now I know why.

I'm the...villain?

The thought is almost laughable. If only they knew just how tame I am to my very core.

"I don't really want to drag her around the castle on one of my whims," I say, trying to keep my voice casual. "If we do find something, *then* you can go fetch Moira, 'kay?"

He holds my gaze for several seconds before giving one of his trademark Max-sighs.

"Turn around," he grumbles, still clutching the sheet.

"You sleep naked?" I ask, pivoting away from him as I slap my palms over my eyes like a six-year old who'd seen her parents kissing.

"Well it's not like I expect midnight visitors, Harper."

"Not even Keely?" I say, keeping my hands firmly in place as I hear the sound of fabric rustling.

"Not recently," he mutters.

"Because of the leg?" I ask, feeling slightly guilty.

"Something like that. Okay, I'm dressed. You can look now."

I wait while he pulls on his boots.

"So where'd you get this idea about the mirror, anyway?" he asks. "I'll grant that it's more than anyone else has come up with, but where is this coming from?"

Ah, yes. The question I'd kind of hoped he wouldn't ask. Because if I was wrong about this, then it meant that I'd been seeing and hearing someone that wasn't there.

"That person in the mirror I keep bringing up. I'm pretty sure that's the evil queen."

"Harper..."

"I know," I interrupt. "I know it sounds nuts. I just...I know, Max."

"And she talked to you? You said you heard her?"

"I mean we don't have like long chats over coffee or anything, but I've heard what sounds like a woman's voice

when I'm around a mirror sometimes. Nothing distinct, but it's like she's trying to communicate over a long distance or something. That's what makes me think that it can't be any mirror. It has to be the mirror. Her mirror."

"You should have told us."

"I did! I've mentioned seeing someone in the mirror, and you all just roll your eyes."

"Well you should have pushed," he snaps.

"Push whom?" I snap back. "Who would I tell? Keely's been distracted with her injury, Declan's been distracted with my sister, and you...well you haven't exactly been encouraging cozy fireside chats."

He gives a harsh laugh. "Touché."

"So you'll take me to the mirror?"

"I'll take you, but it's not a pretty path. Most people in the castle don't even know it still exists. They'd probably flip out if they knew it were buried beneath them for all this time."

"Why wasn't it destroyed?"

"Rumor has it they tried. Couldn't."

"Not even Moira?"

"Not even her." He looks at me. "You really want to do this."

I nod.

"Fine. Keep up."

It's strange how natural, even *normal* it feels to be sneaking through darkened corridors and passageways with Max. I'm half-hoping we'd pop in through a painting somewhere and take a path nobody else knew about, but mostly it's just a lot of random doors, dingy halls that led to more dingy halls until we finally end up in what seems to be a small feminine sitting room.

The walls are a soft lavender, with large dripping candles on every table surface. An antique looking tea set sits on one of the tables beside a small pile of books, and the fire crackles

cheerfully in the corner. It's one of the few in the castle giving off actual warmth these days.

"What are we doing here?" I whisper, thinking Max might have gotten lost.

"This is it," he says.

"Here?" I don't see a mirror anywhere, and it definitely isn't the cold, dark dungeon I'd imagined.

"Nope. *Here*," he says walking to the tea pot and pouring it into a very chipped looking cup. As soon as the fluid in the tea pot hits the cup, I feel a very subtle rumbling and gasp as the stone floor parts to reveal a dark hole in the floor.

Frigid air drifts up from below, making my fingers numb and causing the fire to flicker.

"Still sure you don't want to wait for Moira?" he says.

I lean closer, seeing the start of a narrow descending stair case. "It's just a mirror," I say for my own benefit.

"A mirror *you* think contains one of the most vile creatures Faylin's ever seen."

"So dramatic," I say, trying to keep the mood light.

I take a deep breath and look around for a candle to take with me.

"Don't bother," Max says. "There's enough dark magic coming out of there to snuff out any light."

"Awesome," I say under my breath.

I start to take a step down when Max grabs my arm. "I'll go first," he says.

He pushes me aside and begins to step down, but before he can even start to lower his weight, he's blown backwards as though by an invisible hand.

"What was that?" he asks, sounding shaken.

"Maybe it's been charmed? To stop people from going down?"

"Well I should hope so, but most good charms would just

*prevent* us from stepping down, it wouldn't have acted like a cannon."

Acting on instinct, I put my own foot towards the first step, my entire body braced to be blown back the way Max had been.

It doesn't happen. I have one foot resting quite solidly on a stone step. I step another step, both feet in the hole now.

"Harper, don't," Max says, coming towards me with an outstretched hand. "This is insane. Why can you get through, and I can't?"

I give him a sad smile. "I'm not sure either of us even wants the answer to that question."

His face flinches slightly, and there is an expression I haven't seen before. "But it shouldn't be like this."

I shrug, taking another step down. "Every story's different."

"Why are you so calm about this? Here, take this."

He disappears for a second, and I pause, glancing below me.

There's nothing but a dry cold and a slow swirling fog that I hadn't noticed before. Basically the universal sign for bad news in every horror movie ever written.

A blade appears out of nowhere as Max hands a sword down, handle end first. Luckily, a sword is allowed through, even if Max isn't, and I accept it gratefully.

It won't be much good against a woman in a mirror, but it makes me feel better all the same.

"Where'd you get this?" I ask.

"I have my ways."

I glance briefly down at the glinting blade. "Well I guess this answers the question of what you've had shoved up your butt all this time."

And then it happens.

Aramax Donovan smiles at me. Just a little one. More of a twitch, really. But it's real, and...wonderful.

"I stole it from one of the statues in the other hall," he says, his face turning serious again.

"Well, thanks," I say, starting to take another step. Needing to get this descent over with before I completely lose my nerve.

"Harper," Max says. "Be careful."

"Definitely."

And then I take another step, and then another, until Max's face is little more than a grim shadow.

"Harper!"

Then he disappears from view altogether, and I'm really truly in a dark tunnel all by myself. If I thought galavanting into the dark woods was an idiot move, this was on a whole other level of stupidity.

Still, I'm not as scared as I should be.

*Because I belong here.*

I continue slowly down the steps, holding the sword out in front of me.

I don't know how long I walk, but the path seems endless. I'm used to long walks on narrow stairs in the castle by now, but this is different. The path grows increasingly narrow, and the air grows even more frigid. Someone must have been *really* worried about the magic mirror to banish it this far underground.

I hear a dull clank, and as the tip of my sword runs into a wall, I realize I have come to a fork in the stairs. I feel my first real surge of alarm.

*Which way?*

I try to peer down each path, but the fog grows increasingly thicker, forming a film over each opening. Then the film changes, somehow. It becomes a canvas of sorts, and I take a wary step back as images form to my right and my left.

I prepare myself for something horrible to appear. Maybe the sea-witch, or another of Faylin's monsters.

But the images aren't horrible.

To my right is an image of a smiling Piper. To my left, Keely.

*What* is this? A test? And if so, what is it testing? Who I like better? Who I *know* better?

I've known Keely longer, but Piper and I clicked almost instantly. Both girls are kind, helpful...good. So which one do I choose?

I do the briefest of *eenie meanie* in my head before getting fed up with the whole situation and turning to the left, closing my eyes as I walk through the layer of fog towards Keely. The image of Keely disappears with a soft swish, and I glance behind me to see that Piper's image has faded as well.

I continue down the passage to the left when I come to yet another fork.

This time it's an image of Keely and Max blocking either path. I choose Keely again, hoping I'll get points for consistency. Again and again, I face decisions. Beau vs. Declan, Bender vs. Beau, Bender vs. Piper.

I act on instinct, mostly random.

And then I come to a choice that has me letting out a low keening cry.

It's my mother.

*I have to choose between Meredith and Arianna.*

My mother looks as bitter and unsmiling as I remember, and yet the sight of her face tears the breath out of me. She's my *mom*. If I don't go through that path does that somehow mean I'll never see her again? Or if I *do* go that path, does that mean giving up Ari?

"I hate this place," I whisper futilely.

I walk to my right. Towards Arianna.

The walkway is less steep now, the stairs further and

further apart so that I am mostly walking on a flat surface with only the occasional step down.

I hoped the Arianna/Meredith choice would be the last of them, but another awaited.

Declan vs. Max.

This one gives more pause than I would have expected. After all, Max hates my guts, and Declan...Declan is special.

And yet Max was the one to get me here. The one I'd been able to count on, despite all of his protests of friendship...

*Act on instinct.*

I choose Declan.

The floor is completely even now, and I see light up ahead. *Finally.* I speed up, only to be confronted with one final choice.

Arianna.

Or...

Declan.

Somehow I knew it would come to this, and I think I'd been mulling the choice in my head the entire time.

Every instinct in my body says Declan, and I frown.

Arianna is my sister. What the heck is happening to me that I'm even considering choosing a boy I just met?

But there's no denying the pull. Declan feels like my destiny. My fate.

And yet I am not his.

It's the thought that has me stopping before I walk to Declan's image.

I may be pulled to Declan.

*But Declan is pulled to Arianna.*

This whole thing is all sorts of messed up.

It feels like it takes all of my energy to do so, but I choose the only real option.

I choose my sister.



As I step to Arianna, I realize I'm right. This has all been a test, and Declan vs. Ariana was the final question.

Well, not the final question.

I guess *that* would be whether I passed or failed.

And the person doing the deciding?

The mirror.

Or rather, the woman staring straight out of it.

## CHAPTER 32



"Hello, Harper."

"Hello." My voice is surprisingly calm. "Are you...?"

"Malassandra? The wicked queen who ruined the life of the poor little princess? That's me."

She says all this with the slightest of eye rolls. She doesn't seem evil. Or mean. Or even vindictive. Instead, she strikes me as a woman used to getting what she wants who has been *highly* inconvenienced.

Still, there's a half-dead princess upstairs and a missing prince. That didn't happen by accident.

"I've been waiting for you," she says conversationally, studying her nails. She really is a striking woman. If the story versions I heard were true, I could understand how she was most beautiful in the land before Princess Bianca.

She has dark brown hair that she wears down in loose waves and wide, assessing brown eyes. She reminds me of the sexy matriarch on the soap operas Meredith sometimes watched.

"Have you?" I say, taking a step closer, and adjusting my

grip on my sword. She hasn't even seemed to notice the weapon. That, or it isn't a threat to her, seeing as she is two-dimensional.

"Oh don't play coy, darling," she says with a little laugh. "You're not as good at it as your sister."

I feel a little squeeze around my heart at the mention of Arianna, but don't let my face show it. She apparently wants to play games, and although I don't know the rules, I sense that any strong reactions on my part would give her an upper hand.

"What did you do to Princess Bianca?"

The woman gives a dainty snort. "Please. Is she still trying to pull off that 'Bianca' nonsense?"

"That's her name."

"Not when I met her. I can still see her pasty little face the day Moira came and said that there was a Logosian and that I was to pretend she was my daughter."

That catches me off-guard. I'd known that Bianca was a Logosian, but I hadn't stopped to think it strange that she'd been assigned the role of a *princess*.

"They placed her as your daughter? How did they expect anyone to buy that?"

"The Council of Arlen is clever. Annoying. But clever. I was new to the kingdom—on the verge of marrying the Winterscape king. Nobody knew anything about me, only that the king had met me on a tour of one of the outer kingdoms and had gotten himself smitten with me, blah, blah, blah. All the council had to do was claim I was a widow and gave me an ingratiating little daughter named Blanche.

"Snow White's real name is Blanche?"

"She changed it to Bianca around the same time she set her eyes on my crown."

"And the king was okay with a step-daughter?"

"Knew? He reveled in it. He always wanted a child, and he got it in his head that she was perfect."

"You hated her."

"Not really," she says giving a wave. "I mean her voice, yes. It was like having a songbird at the dinner table nightly. Horrible headaches, that voice gave me. But hate her, no. I merely wanted to maintain the crown I'd rightfully earned."

"All you had to do was marry a king—you didn't really earn anything."

Mala gave me a condescending look. "Now Harper, you of all people should know the sheer amount of effort that goes into making someone fall in love with you. Making them think that you're the one."

Declan's face flames briefly before my eyes, and I push the thought aside. *Don't give her anything to work with.*

"So you didn't poison her way back then?" I ask.

"Oh no, I *definitely* did that. To make her sleep. But I didn't *kill* her. Everyone seems to forget that part," she muses.

"So what's happened to her now?" I ask, stepping even closer.

"Oh? Is she taking another one of her naps?" Mala lets out a sinister little giggle before covering her mouth with her hand, her eyes glowing with sham regret.

"How do we bring her back?" I press.

"Well..." she taps her lips with a finger. "I would say to bring that hunky prince of hers around, but oops! Seems like he skipped out on her. Never trust a man," she whispers, leaning toward me only to be stopped by the glass.

"You're stuck in there," I say in a goading tone, hoping to throw her off balance.

"Not entirely. I can move among other mirrors. Briefly."

"Have you been here the whole time? In the mirrors?"

"Of course not. If I had, I certainly wouldn't have waited so long to put my plan in action."

"Where have you been then?"

Her eyes go hard and flat. "The darkest place you can imagine. The same place all of us who are run over by the Logosians get sent. A soulless place of banishment that Moira dreamed up with her little crystal ball."

"You know Moira?"

"Of course I know Moira," she spits. "I even thought us friends once. It's why I agreed to harbor Blanche. I thought it was for the good of Faylin. But Moira..."

She breaks off and studies me. "There are two sides to every story, Harper. Who's good and who's bad is only ever a matter of perspective."

Her words feel so right, so true, so *important* that I shiver.

"So you're trying to say Moira's the culprit, and your hands are clean?" I ask with fake bravado.

"No," she says in a bored tone, absently tapping her nails against the glass of the mirror. "Only that everything you've been told about 'good' having to win out over 'bad' is a bunch of nonsense."

"Explain," I say, spinning the tip of my sword on the ground and letting my expression go bored.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you that there's only light and dark, black and white, good and bad? No gray? No in-between?"

It *does* strike me as odd, but I remain silent.

"You want to know why the prince and princess can't die? Why Logosians get stuck here? Why most everyone seems to have a perma-smile on their face and no sense of purpose? Faylin is *broken*, Harper. It's been increasingly out of balance for some time."

"But people are *happy* here. You think it'd be a better place if queens killed their adopted daughters to maintain their crowns?"

Her face goes dark and angry. "Tell it to someone who

hasn't spent two hundred years of torture with no hope, no light, not even an end to look forward to. Tell me, why is it that what happens to us 'dark ones' is deserved, while the 'heroes' can do whatever they want without reproach? I wanted to be queen and so did Blanche. Explain to me the difference."

Her point makes sense, and I *hate* that it makes sense.

"You still haven't explained how you got here," I say. "How did you get out of wherever you were and into the mirrors?"

"Oh darling. You're smart, from what I've seen. Surely you can figure that out."

"It has something to do with Moira, doesn't it?"

Malassandra's head snaps back slightly in surprise. "Moira? What's that old hag got to do with anything? You can't imagine my delight at watching her wring her hands in all of this. For once she's completely ineffectual, and she knows it."

I frown in confusion. I'd been so sure. The way Moira had been glaring at me in that blizzard. The way she'd helped Arianna through the mirror but not me. The way she is conveniently out of answers about what is going on. She's up to something. I *know* it.

"What were those tests when I came down the stairs?" I ask suddenly, my brain scrambling to put everything together, but feeling like I am hopelessly missing something crucial.

"Oh. Those. Simply practice. And you didn't do as well as I'd hoped. It would have made it easier if you'd chosen differently."

"Easier for whom?"

"Me, of course. It would have expedited me getting out of this mirror."

"So you *can* get out?"

"Yes. With your help."

I don't bother to soften my laugh. "I can't imagine a scenario where I would do that. Or even how."

"It's an exchange, darling. A trade."

"A trade of what?"

"Your ring."

*The ring?"*

I feel something warm tighten around my finger. Of course. *The ring.*

The ring that the man on the park bench gave me is glowing once again, burning now against my cold finger.

"Yes," she says in a reverent tone.

I take a step back. I remember what the man said. The ring is my best chance of getting home. There's no way I'll give it up.

Malassandra's eyes narrow, as though reading my thoughts, and she slowly fades from the mirror, and the image turns into my bedroom at home. It's so familiar I gasp in pain.

My cheer bag is where I'd left it, discarded on the ground. I search for my mom. As if on cue, the image shifts again to our kitchen table where Meredith sits smoking a cigarette in her sweat pants. My mother doesn't smoke. And she wouldn't be caught dead in sweat pants, even at home.

But then that had been before her entire family disappeared.

"Mom," I say, my voice small, as I move to within inches of the mirror.

Malassandra returns quickly and so close that I jump back, my sword falling to the ground.

"I can stop her pain," she says, her voice soft. Almost sweet. "I can make her forget you're gone. That you existed..."

My stomach lurches. "I don't want her to forget."

"Don't be selfish, Harper. It will be better for her."

What would be better for my mom, is if she had her daughters back, and for that, I need the ring. I clench my fist tighter.

“Perhaps you’d prefer a different trade. I could send you home...”

The queen fades again, followed by a picture of a university. It zooms out, and I see a school crest.

*Harvard.*

My stomach twits in longing. If what they say about the time difference in Faylin to Logosia is true, I’m well past being able to graduate with my high school class, but there’s no reason I can’t go to Harvard...

The image shifts again. There’s a new car. A wedding. *My* wedding. A baby in my arms.

My eyes fill with tears. She’s showing me what will my life would be if I go home.

And I want it.

*I want it so badly.*

I take an unthinking step forward before I catch the frustrated bewilderment in Malassandra’s eyes, almost as though she hadn’t meant to show me any of that.

“Give me the ring, Harper. I’m the only one who can make your mother stop hurting. A simple charm to banish the agony of having her daughters ripped from her.”

I swallow, tempted for a moment. What if the man in the park was wrong about the ring being the only way home? What if she could send me back?

Can I risk it?

The mirror changes again, Malassandra fading as Declan and Arianna come into view. I recognize the blue velvet of the couch in Declan’s sitting room—*our* sitting room—behind them. They’re just inches apart.

Arianna is talking, waving her hands around frantically. Declan reaches for her hands. Holds her hands between his



own, and brings them to his lips tenderly, before pulling her closer.

Ari drops her head to his shoulder as Declan's arms go around her.

"Stop." I turn away from the image. My jealousy is petty—especially now when so much is at stake, but it comes anyway, hot and furious.

"She *stole* him," Mala hisses, her brown eyes wide and sympathetic, as she changes tactics. Why, I don't know, but it's working. I feel my emotions veering out of control again.

"Ari didn't know I liked him," I say weakly. "I never told her."

"She never even once considered that he might be interested in you," Malassandra taunts. "See, Arianna and Declan are bound by something far deeper than you can understand, my dear. Their lives are intertwined in the way Blanche's and her prince's are. Like Leon and Aurelia. In the way all the great love stories have been. Surely you want to escape this."

"How do I wake up Princess Bianca?" I ask loudly, struggling to stay focused.

"Well," she says twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "I can't do much from here. It was hard enough to reinstate the old magic from the mirror. No way can I go about undoing it from behind glass."

"Oh great, so all I have to do is free you, and you'll fix everything? Somehow I don't think that ploy would work on a five-year old."

She drops the lock of hair. "What happens to Princess Bianca doesn't have to concern you, Harper. I can promise I won't kill her. Is that what you want?"

"I'm not the bad guy," I whisper.

"There are no bad guys," she says gently. "The people here are too stuffed with Moira's light versus dark babble to learn how to fight their own fights or think for themselves. They

don't think at *all*. Why do you think your land is the one called Logosia and ours is named after the bloody *fairies*?"

"I won't leave them," I say, taking several steps backwards as though to convince myself. "I didn't come here to bargain with you."

"Give me the ring."

"No!"

"Alright then," she says calmly. "Let's play this differently."

The image of Declan and Ari embracing comes back, and I almost look away when I see Declan thrown back from Ari as though pushed by an invisible force.

Then he disappears altogether.

I take a step towards the mirror. "What did you do to him?"

"Harper?" It's Declan's voice.

My eyes scan the mirror, skimming Ari's bewildered, terrified face, looking for Declan. I can hear him, but I can't *see* him.

"Harper, what the hell is going on? Where are we?"

I freeze as I realize the voice is coming from behind me. Declan is in the corner of the circular room with me, held in place by what seems to be a shimmering gold cage. He looks more like an enraged hawk than a docile canary, but he's *definitely* stuck.

Malassandra laughs in glee.

"Who the hell are you?" Declan says, staring in horror at the mirror.

"I thought you couldn't do *new* magic," I say to Malassandra, my eyes still locked on Declan straining against the gold wall. "How did you bring him here?"

"I lied. I can do fun little tricks like this putting the pretty boy in the pretty cage."

I try to move towards him, but I can't move. My legs are stuck.

"You're familiar with this charm, aren't you darling?" she says pleasantly. "From the park?"

"How do you know I came from a park?" I ask slowly, turning to face her.

Her face goes bored and innocent. Too innocent.

The man. She knows about the man. *She has answers.*

And I think I understand some of them.

"*He sent me here,*" I say. "He knew all of this would happen. He wanted it to."

Her smile slips. "He doesn't concern you, Harper. This isn't your fight. Give me the ring, and I promise not to hurt the boy. Maybe you can even win him, although I suspect your sister will be the victor in that."

"Harper, no. Whatever she wants, you can't give it to her." Declan's voice is fainter as though the substance surrounding him is growing thicker.

I twist the ring on my finger.

"No," I force myself to say. "I'm staying. And I *will* find a way to bring Princess Bianca back, with or without your help. Oh, and by the way? Nobody is going to let you out of that mirror."

A stunned look of betrayal courses over Malassandra's face at my words, and I blink in surprise. She'd *really* thought she and I were on the same side. But why?

"Okay then," she says matter-of-factly. "We'll do this the hard way."

The gold film surrounding Declan disappears, and at first I'm relieved, until I see his face.

He's turning blue. Literally.

"Declan." I run to his side, rolling him onto his back, my fingers scratching at the buttons on his neck, but it isn't the shirt that is choking him. It's like an invisible force is crushing his windpipe. It's very Darth Vader. And very scary.

I whip around to see Malassandra looking on with a

bored expression. She lifts her finger and begins making an idle twirling motion, and immediately the previously still room becomes a wind-tunnel, the air rushing by my ears so quickly I can't even hear myself scream.

Declan lets out a low cry, and I turn to see his contorted body reaching for an apple.

*An apple.*

"Don't eat that, idiot," I scream, crawling back to him to try and get the apple out of his hand.

His blue eyes meet mine in resigned horror even as he gasps for breath, and I realize he doesn't *want* to eat the apple. But there's no choice.

*Just like it probably wasn't a choice for Snow White.*

"Sure you don't want to do things the easy way, Harper?" Mala asks, still looking completely unperturbed by the near-tornado and dying boy in front of her eyes. "As you can see, there's plenty we can control. You can *make* him love you. All I need is the ring."

A bolt of lightning flashes above our heads.

"Wow, you are just pulling out all the stops," I mutter, still trying to wrestle the slippery apple from Declan's death-grip.

Another flash of lightning, and it glints off something to my right.

My sword.

My eyes lock on it at the same time that Malassandra's do, and her finger falters, just for the briefest second so that the wind dies down before picking up again with even greater howling intensity.

I look at the sword and then at the mirror.

"You won't do it," she says. Her voice has gone sharp. "The mirror is the only way home, and you won't destroy it. Not to save the boy who loves your sister."

She doesn't know. She doesn't know that the ring can get me home. I know it with certainty then. Malassandra's not

holding the strings here. She's a puppet, and she hasn't been given all the information.

My fingers close around the sword as I lunge to my feet.

Then Malassandra gives me a smug smile and plays her last card.

Meredith reappears in the mirror.

She's still at the kitchen table, head lowered to folded arms as her shoulders shake with ripping sobs. I feel my arm weaken, my eyes locked on my mother.

Declan gives another gasping breath, and I turn to see that the apple is less than an inch from his mouth, his arm shaking with the effort of trying to keep it away.

His eyes locked on mine, and he nods once.

*It's okay.*

But it isn't. It isn't okay. None of this is okay.

I wrap both hands around the handle of the sword as I run towards the mirror and swing with all my might.

I hear the glass shatter a split second before I shoot backwards, my head rapping hard against the stone floor.

Even through the pain in my skull, I can feel the much sharper pain on my shoulders and cheeks as pieces of glass fall all around me.

I almost smile.

How fitting that my journey would end the way it started, with broken glass flying at my face.

And just like that day of the car accident, the world goes black.

## CHAPTER 33



When I wake up, the bed's not familiar. But the faces staring down at me are, and that's all that matters.

"You're awake," Ari says, pouncing on my hand with both of hers and squeezing hard.

"How long have I been asleep?" My voice is croaky.

"Two days. Almost three."

I hear a familiar clicking noise and find Charming the raccoon just inches from my face.

"That raccoon totally gives me the creeps, but everyone insisted you'd want him here," Ari says with a wary glance at Charming.

"Yeah. I want him here," I say, grinning at my creepy pet.

I rub my free hand along the sheets beneath me. They're softer than my bed in the servant's quarters. Softer than my bed back home.

*Home.*

Everything comes rushing back, causing the dull throb in my head to become almost unbearable.

"I saw Meredith," I say, my eyes watering.

Arianna's own eyes fill. "I know. Declan told us what happened."

I lick my dry lips. "He's okay?"

"His voice is a little raspy from whatever it was that was choking him, but otherwise he's great. Unless you count the fact that he's been almost as anxious about you as I have. He even insisted that you take his bed because it's more comfortable."

"Way more comfortable," I agree, struggling to keep my tone light. Declan is alive. I'd given up the chance of going home to save him. I wait for a wave of regret. It doesn't come.

There's a commotion at the door, and I turn my head to see Max and Declan trying to push an enormous food cart through, arguing the entire time, even as Piper and Keely hiss at them to not spill the chocolate.

"We've all been eating every meal in here," Ari said. "Everyone's been worried about you."

"Everyone?" I ask. I have a pretty good idea that Max will be furious with me. After all, he'd been right about me facing the queen alone being a bad idea.

"She's awake," Arianna calls out, halting the heated whispers. Four pairs of eyes shoot towards me, and I give a weak smile.

Piper gives a loud whoop and launches herself on all fours onto the bed, jostling my aching body, but I welcome it.

I've been asleep for two days?! I don't even know where to start with my questions.

"Princess Bianca?" I ask.

Arianna squeezes my fingers as everyone else comes to crowd around the bed. "She's awake. Prince Christoff is back. Thanks to you."

"How?"

Declan clears his throat. "Best we can tell, the queen and

her spells were destroyed when you smashed that mirror. The princess woke up, the prince returned, and the blizzard ceased almost immediately."

Ari's right. His voice is all raspy.

"So it's all okay?" I ask, holding his gaze.

"Yes. The only near-casualty was you," Keely says, sitting beside Ari on the bed.

"It was that simple? Just destroying the mirror?"

"There was nothing simple about it." The new voice has us all turning in the direction of the door, but the newcomer hasn't come through the door. She simply *appeared*.

"Hello, Harper."

"Moira."

She joins the others around my bed, her eyes scanning my face. "The cuts are better."

"Moira healed you after Declan carried you up the stairs from the dungeon," Ari explains

My eyes fly to Declan. He carried me? He'd been in no shape to carry a kitten, much less a teenage girl. He meets my eyes steadily, but I can't read the expression there.

"I did the best I could," Moira is saying. "It's not the modern medicine you're used to, but we're able to do limited amounts of healing with magic."

"She says your face won't scar," Ari says with an encouraging smile. I smile back. It is such an Arianna thing to say.

"But the evil queen?"

"She's gone, at least for now," Moira says. "I must say, I'm impressed. It never occurred to me to check the mirror. It should have."

"How *did* you think of the mirror?" Piper asks.

"Just a hunch. Outsider's perspective maybe."

I don't mention the fact that I'd been seeing and hearing the queen, and although I don't look at him, I silently plead with Max not to reveal my secret.



He remains silent, but I'm not sure it matters. Something about the look on Moira's face makes me think that she knows. Knows I'd somehow been connected to the queen in a way the others hadn't.

"Destroying the mirror was very brave, Harper. Declan told us about the choice you had to make. It couldn't have been easy."

"It wasn't." I reflexively squeezed Ari's fingers. "The queen...Malassandra...she said that mirror it was our only way back. Was that true?"

"The Logosian/Faylin crossover is complicated," Moira says quietly. "More complicated than even I knew, it would seem. The best I can tell you is that for now, you are... stuck here."

"But some day..."

"That some day will be up to you," she says. "I'm afraid none of us can control the how or when."

"Well that's...crap," I mutter.

"Moira..."

Moira turns to face a somber looking Max. "Yes?"

He frowns. "Why isn't this over? If Harper chose..."

She lifts a hand, a little flare of panic in her eyes. "Quiet."

Max, Keely, and Declan exchange a confused look. "We can be banished? Even now?"

Moira's face is blank as she turns back to study me and Arianna. "I don't know what this incident was with the mirror, but it's not...it wasn't the moment."

"What moment?" Arianna asks.

I push myself onto my elbows, wanting to know the answer to that myself. I'd defeated the bad guy. Max was right. If this is some sort of fairy tale, shouldn't we be at the end?

Moira turns to stare out the window for several moments. "I suspect by now you know that we've veered very far from

convention. I'm not sure what the game is, but the rules have changed. That's all I can tell you until I know more."

"That's it?" I say, my voice angry. "I risk my life for you guys, and that's all you can give me?"

When Moira turns back to me, her expression is sharp. "Angry. You may have risked your life, but you didn't risk it *all*, did you Harper?"

Slowly her hand drops to my hand, where the ring lies dormant, quiet and plain against my finger.

She knows.

She knows that I held onto the ring; I held onto my chance to go home, even through all that.

And that matters somehow.

My eyes flit over to Max, Declan, and Keely, but they look as confused as I feel.

Moira gives a small sigh. "What's done is done. And you're right. You did save the duke's life, and as a thank you, I can offer something. I believe I might be able to get a letter to your mother."

"How can you get a letter through, and not us?" Arianna asks. She keeps her voice calm, but I don't miss the subtle accusation. It surprises me. Perhaps the countess isn't as settled in Faylin as she wants everyone to believe.

"It's complicated. Our magic has a sort of...sense about where people belong. I believe that even if I can somehow create another portal, it wouldn't let you through. If you were able to Crossover, it must be for a reason."

"But it would let you through? To deliver the message?"

She hedges. "I believe so, yes. I've been able to pass stories through to your world for centuries. Perhaps because your world *needs* the stories. My hope is that this gate between the two worlds will also sense your and your mother's need for closure."

That sounds like a bunch of BS to me. "But this magic 'gate' doesn't sense our need to go home?"

"Perhaps you need to rethink your definition of home," she says, not unkindly.

*Wouldn't that be convenient for you.*

And yet, even as the uncharitable thought passes through, I realize she's right.

Lying here, with these people...I don't feel out of place.

That moment when I'd woken up and seen Ari...when I'd seen the rest of the group coming into the room...

It felt *right*.

As though I'm exactly where I am supposed to be.

"Harper," Moira says, almost hesitantly. "In your conversation with the queen, did she explain how she'd managed to get into the mirror in the first place?"

I mentally replayed that night back in my head, trying to muddle through the fuzzy details. "I don't think she ever said. I know I asked, but I don't think she ever explained. She tended to answer questions with questions. As though she was playing with me."

Moira gives a small smile. "Yes, Malassandra is good at that."

"You speak of her in the present tense," Max growls, speaking up for the first time.

"Yes," Moira says, her eyes going vaguely foggy. "I don't believe we've seen the last of her. I think Harper destroyed her portal into the castle, not her essence."

"But things are okay now?" Keely asks nervously.

Moira gives a reassuring smile. "In Winterscape, yes. Things are fine."

I stare hard at her, knowing there's more she isn't sharing, but knowing she won't confide anything now. Not here. Not to me.

"Oh Harper, I forgot to tell you...the princess is throwing a ball in your honor," Arianna says gleefully.

"A ball."

That sounds terrible.

"A fancy one. Of course, nobody will know it's in your honor. That would be weird. A ball for a valet? Weird, right?"

"Weird," I concede.

"But the *Council* will know it's for you. And the princess even consented to have a dress made just for you."

"Just for me!" I say with mock enthusiasm.

Declan hides a smile behind his hand, but Ari is too busy rhapsodizing about the lace and the ribbons to notice my sarcasm.

"When is this ball?" I ask, pulling myself into a sitting situation.

"Tonight," Keely says, her voice almost as excited as Arianna's.

"Tonight?" I say on a laugh. "Convenient that I woke up in time for my own ball."

"Totally," Arianna agrees.

Declan catches my eye and winks, and suddenly everything is okay.

Even though my head hurts, and I'm not sure I remember all the crucial Faylinian dances, and even though my dreams of a high school diploma and Harvard are pretty much dust, I'm okay.

Moira might even be right.

I might be *home*.

## CHAPTER 34



Okay fine. *Fine*. I'll admit it. I don't hate the ball gown.

The dress is a rich blue with hundreds of tiny sparkles sewn into it. I feel like a little piece of the night sky, not that I would tell anyone that.

Ever.

Princess Bianca has even sent one of her lady's maids up to do my hair.

I refused the girl's insistence on dopey curls, instead opting to have it simply pulled back in a tidy high ponytail. In Logosia, a high ponytail meant workout or errands, but in Faylin, its simplicity is a novelty. It stands out from everyone in their elaborate up-dos.

And for once, I find I'm okay with standing out.

"Coach Liu would be so proud," Ari says, joining me in the corner of the ballroom and giving my ponytail a playful tug.

"You look great," I say, meaning it. Her dress is a delicate pink that perfectly compliments her dark hair which is laced with tiny strands of pearls.

"Do you think Declan will like it?" she asks.

I study Arianna's nervous profile for a second, taking in the giddy anticipation in her eyes and the fidgeting way she smooths out her skirts.

"You really like him, don't you?" I say after a moment.

"I do," she says quietly. "It's weird, you know? I mean I've just met him and yet..."

"It's like you're supposed to be together."

"Yes! You see it, too?"

"Yeah, Ari. Yeah, I see it."

"You guys are friends. Does he ever...talk about me?"

I can't help the laugh that sneaks out. "Ari, we are so not having this conversation."

"Why not?" she demands. "We've always talked about boys before."

"Just...not this time, okay?"

She gives me a long assessing look, as though trying to determine if there's something I'm keeping from her.

There is, and there will continue to be.

Declan has a choice to make, but I'm not going to be the one to force it. That's not how I want him.

A giggling fair-haired woman drifts over to Arianna, handing over a glass of something blue and sparkly. I can tell from her dress that she's aristocracy, not a servant, and they begin giggling about some private joke.

I drift back to give them space and to take in the scene.

One side of the ballroom is entirely open to the outdoors, and I smile at the comforting sight of gently swirling snowflakes. The Uncontrollable died along with the queen.

The other three walls are covered in tiny lights, and I let myself revel in the fairy-tale beauty of it.

"You look...wonderful."

I take a small breath and turn to face Declan. We haven't been alone since that night in the dungeon.

"Thanks," I whisper.

He gives a short awkward nod, and then swallows, before meeting my eyes. "So, I haven't thanked you—"

"You don't have to. I would have done the same for anyone."

The question in his gaze is plain. *Would you have?*

"Still. I'd be dead if it weren't for you," he says gruffly.

"Well you'd never even have been at risk if it wasn't for me, so it all evens out."

"Harper, when we were down there, you looked...haunted. There was no easy choice for you, was there?"

*Not one that wouldn't have ripped my heart out.*

I settle for a simpler answer, but a truthful one. "I saw you, Declan. I saw you and Arianna. Together. And it's okay."

He shakes his head. "When? What are you talking about?"

"That night, right before you were pulled into the dungeon. The queen showed me the two of you...hugging. Embracing."

He falls silent for a moment before he gently touches my arm. "We were worried about you, Harper. She was crying, thinking you were gone. *I* was thinking you were gone."

"So you turned to each other," I say bluntly.

"Yes, but dammit—"

He breaks off, and I could have sworn I heard him grinding his teeth. "This isn't easy for me, you know."

"Yeah, a gorgeous countess is crazy for you. Must be hard."

This time he *definitely* grinds his teeth. "Dance with me. Please. I need...I need to touch you. Hold you. At least if we do it while dancing, it'll be appropriate."

My head snaps up, my heart pounding.

"Harper!" Before I can respond, Princess Bianca floats—yes, floats—towards us with a wide smile.

"Harper, the dress is *wonderful*," she gushes. "As for the

hair...well, it took me awhile to let go of my Logosian habits, too," she whispers.

"I bet it did...*Blanche*." I lower my voice so only she can hear, and her eyes go wide, and her jaw gapes for just a few seconds before she regains her composure. "Yes, well...our little secret?"

"Sure." We share a small smile, and I see Declan tilt his head in confusion. I'm still not sure I *like* Princess Bianca, and I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual. But I think we understand each other. Mostly.

"Your Grace, you simply *must* dance with the Countess DeLoria," Bianca says.

"Who?" I'm pretty sure I'd never heard of her.

"Your sister," Bianca says with a little trill. "To the rest of the kingdom, she's Countess DeLoria."

Declan's mouth goes tense. "I was just about to dance with—"

"Come now, Your Grace, the brown of your shirt perfectly complements Arianna's dress. I just *love* pink and brown together, don't you?"

"Absolutely," Max says, appearing out of nowhere. "I was actually *just* thinking about how much joy the unity of those two colors brought me."

Bianca narrows her eyes as though trying to assess his level of sarcasm, before deciding that a mere servant isn't worth the effort of getting upset.

"Yoo hoo, Countess! Arianna!" the princess calls. "Come over here a minute, darling."

"You and Declan simply *must* dance the first Flitz of the evening," she says, once Ari has joined us. "I do believe it's the very next dance!"

"I'd love to." Arianna looks nervously at Declan. The current song has ended, signaling the beginning of the dance.



Declan's hand hesitates only a fraction of a second before extending to my sister.

Her entire face glows in happiness as she puts her hand in his. Declan meets my eyes before they walk away.

*We're not done*, his eyes say silently.

*Whatever*, mine answer back. And then I smile to soften the blow. It's the best I can manage.

Bianca drifts away to find Christoff, leaving me standing with Max as we both watch Declan and Arianna join the group of dancers.

"Isadora talked to Moira this morning," Max says quietly. "The mermaid and her prince are still missing. And the Black Forest has continued to grow."

"That's what I like about you, Max," I say, not taking my eyes off the dancers. "You're always a beacon of light and good news."

"I just thought you should know. Whatever's happening here, it's not over."

"I know that."

I knew even as I smashed the mirror, that I had barely scratched the surface of whatever was happening in Faylin.

There are too many things left unanswered. Like who'd freed Malassandra and the Sea Witch, and what they were trying to accomplish. Who attacked me that night? And what had the queen meant by Faylin being out of balance? Bugging me most of all, why hasn't my ring stopped glowing since that night in the dungeon?

Who was the guy on the park bench?

So many questions.

But for now? For *tonight*? I don't want to deal with any of it.

"Hey, Max?" I say, not taking my eyes off the dance floor. "Tonight, can I just be a girl at a dance? Especially since it looks like I won't be getting a prom."

"Prom?"

I let out a tiny sigh. "Never mind."

The orchestra returns from their short break, and the squeak of instruments indicates the dance is about to start. The crowd bustles excitedly.

"You know when I told you I didn't want to be friends?" he says suddenly.

"Well, it's hard to keep track of your moments of rudeness, but that one does *kind* of stand out, so yeah."

"I changed my mind."

I glance at his profile. "Why, because I destroyed a mirror?"

"That. And mostly I figure I'm stuck with you. Might as well make the best of it."

"That's lovely, Max. I hope my heart doesn't explode from the sentimentality," I say, turning back to watch the start of the dance.

He doesn't respond, but I feel him watching me. "Do you want to?"

"Want to what, Max? Be friends? Not particularly."

He rolls his eyes. "Fine. Pass on the friends thing. But dance with me."

I stare at him. "You want to dance. Together?"

"Yes, Harper. Together."

"What about Keely?"

"Lady Rowena's dress tore, and she dragged Keely off to fix it."

"Oh. Will Keely mind?"

His jaw tenses. "Do you want to dance, or not?"

*Hmm.*

Honestly?

I'm not really sure. Dancing with Max had been a little strange last time we'd tried.

But then again, this ball *was* supposed to be in my honor, and I suppose I could use all the dance practice I can get.

"Sure," I say with a little shrug.

He doesn't offer his hand, and we walk shoulder to shoulder to the edge of the dancers.

Nobody gives us a second glance.

Servants dancing with servants is to be expected, apparently.

I slip my right hand into his left, and I let out a breathless laugh as he slides his hand behind my back and pulls me into the crush of dancers without warning. It's wonderful, really, being among dozens of people moving in perfect unison.

"You enjoy this," he says, watching my face as his feet move in easy confident movements.

"Yeah. I really do," I say, my eyes taking in the blur of color and smiles around me.

"But you'd be enjoying it more if you were dancing with Declan."

My smile slips a bit, and I struggle to think of a suitable response without hurting his feelings, even as I try not to look around the room for the boy smitten with my sister.

"What do you see in him?" he asks, pulling me a touch closer to keep me from getting trampled by a heavy-set couple next to us.

"It's just...there's something *there*. Haven't you ever felt that? Like there was one person that was meant to be yours? Isn't it like that with Keely?"

His eyes go dark, and he doesn't answer. "So Declan didn't even have to do *anything*? You just fell for him on first sight?"

"Sort of, yeah. But I learned pretty quickly that he's also a good guy."

"Yeah. I bet," Max grumbles.

I think back to my first days with Declan, trying to figure

out how to make Max see him in a light other than his pain-in-the-ass previous employer.

"He is! You know that first night I arrived? I was dead tired, and I passed out on his couch while I was waiting for my food. Declan carried me to his bed so I wouldn't have to sleep on the couch. Where I'm from, guys don't do things like that for girls. And I guess ...I don't know, I knew then. He was one of the good ones, you know? The kind from the fairy tales."

I blush at the girlish admission, and as expected, Max doesn't say anything. He merely stares at me, his expression unreadable. "You fell in love with a guy because he didn't want your snoring Logosian body sprawled all over his sitting room sofa as you whispered for someone named Meredith over and over, like a crazy person?"

"Forget it." I tense, regretting that I'd agreed to this dance. Being a wallflower is preferable to being berated on the dance floor by my new *friend*. I try to pull away, but his fingers tighten, and his hand presses even more firmly around his back.

For a second Max's mask drops, and I think I see something both fierce and soft pass his usually blank face.

Then it's gone.

We dance in silence for several moments, and I feel my anger fade as I once again get wrapped up in the sheer wonder that this world has to offer.

I was right when I told the evil queen that people are happy here. They love their lives.

And for the first time, I begin to suspect that I could love my life.

I hear a familiar laugh and turn to see Arianna and Declan a few feet away, Ari's head tips back as she laughs at something he says.

It hurts. Their happiness physically *hurts*.

My heart lurches, and I stumble. Max catches me before I can make a total fool of myself.

"You okay?" he asks quietly.

But I don't respond. I don't know what to say.

He quietly leads me to the side of the ballroom, easing me into a chair. "I'll get you something to drink," he says, touching my shoulder briefly.

I reach up, grabbing his hand before he can move away. "Max."

He freezes. "What?"

I meet his eyes. "What happens next? Where do we go from here?"

He doesn't look away. He doesn't lie to me. "I'm not sure, Harper. But I'm guessing whatever comes next, it won't happen here in Winterscape."

"Meaning?"

Max shrugs, though his eyes are worried. "Meaning, I hope you like journeys."

"Journeys? As in, like, epic quests? *Pass*."

He gives an irritated sign and turns away, watching the crowd dance. "You saw what I saw."

I feel a rush of cold rip through me as I realize what he's talking about. "You're talking about the mermaid. From the painting."

"She needs our help. Whomever, *whatever* we're fighting—it's not done."

"*Our* help?" I murmur, almost automatically, "I just want to go home."

He glances down at me once more. "Do you?"

Max holds my gaze a moment longer, then walks away without waiting for my answer. Which is a good thing, because I don't know that I have one.

I think about what he's said. About whatever we're up

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against not being done, and I want to help. I *do*. But I can't shake the sense that I'm missing something.

That I'm not defeating the villains at all.

That maybe, I'm slowly, *somehow*, turning into the biggest villain of them all.

## EPILOGUE



*M*ilwaukee, Wisconsin

The blond man watched as the careful, swirling script slows to a halt, and then stopped altogether, no new words appearing on the page.

He closed the leather bound book carefully, before sitting back in the ugly motel room chair and tapping his fingers thoughtfully against the cover.

Everything was going according to plan.

Malassandra would be angry, certainly, at the way things played out. If she'd even survived.

He felt no remorse either way. Every war required soldiers. Soldiers made sacrifices.

Regardless...

The girl was even more marvelous than he'd expected.

A bit reluctant about her destiny, of course, but that too, would serve. The more hesitant she appeared to others now, the less chance they'd see it coming when she betrayed them in the end.

And she *would* betray them.

The man turned the book in his hands so that the spine is

facing down. Slowly, carefully he flipped through the pages, even though he knew every word, from the automobile accident, to the incident in the forest, to the kiss with the boy, to the mirror.

Slowly, the inked storybook pages turned, until the inked pages were no more, revealing dozens and dozens of blank pages.

The man gave a small smile. Already, everything was going so well.

And Harper Reed's story was only beginning.

—The End—



UNTITLED

*for now*



## UNTITLED

### *A note from the author*



I so hope you enjoyed reading the first installment of the Faylin Chronicles!

This book is truly the story of my heart, the tale that

stuck with me for *years*, and wouldn't let go until I'd put it on paper and released it into the world.

And as you probably guessed from that ending ...

The story is just beginning!

To see what happens next to Harper, Declan, Max, Arianna and the rest of the crew, be sure to sign up for my newsletter to stay up-to-date, or follow me on Instagram.

If you think a friend may enjoy this book, please send them to [laurenlayne.com/never-after](http://laurenlayne.com/never-after), and thank you for sharing!

Until then, happy reading, and may you find your own fairy tale!

xo.

lauren layne